

FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE ADVERTISING DESIGN IDEATION

Dakyes Samaila Usman

Department of Industrial Design, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria.

and

Akanni Daniel Olatunde

Federal Polytechnic Ibadan.

Abstract

Late capitalism has compelled the global economy to rely inevitably, more than ever before, on advertisement to take products to the doorsteps of potential consumers. Consequently, local and global corporations employ all manner of advertising media to achieve their end. Outdoor media, that have an advantage of large audience, is preferred by most manufacturers. As commonly observed in any area of design, there are roles that guide ideation, encoding and presentation of visual information to target audiences in a way that breaks cultural bounds and communication barriers. The ability of target audiences to decode visual messages depends upon certain factors chief among them are: product display and strong/precise caption. This paper examines the unconventional approach to product advertisement adopted by the British American Tobacco (BAT) Plc in Nigeria wherein caption and product display is eliminated. Juxtaposing the syntheses of the conventional and the unconventional approaches on one hand, and the ability of a target audience whose visual literacy is low on the other, the paper concludes that the adoption of unconventional advertising approach to tobacco products in compliance to the World Health Organisation (WHO) has, to a very large extent, reduced the effectiveness of BAT adverts in Nigeria and other developing countries where visual literacy and the ability to interpret visual metaphor is rather low.

Keywords: Product advertisement, product display/caption, target audience encoding and decoding.

Introduction

The encoding of a print based advert that is targeted at categories of audiences, especially the less literate, is usually full of visual(s). Visuals play significant roles in delivering messages in a precise and concise form for easy decoding. The conceptualisation of advertising design is influenced by factors such as the education level, visual literacy, financial status, culture, and other social factors of the target audience. Markmene (2013) notes that to put aside these factors, is to reduce the message delivery capacity of such adverts. The restriction on tobacco advert by the United Nation (UN) changed the conceptual construct of design ideas. The Framework Convention on Tobacco Control is the first international public health treaty negotiated by the World Health Organisation (WHO). It obligates members to in accordance with its constitutional principles, undertake a comprehensive ban of all tobacco advertising and sponsorship. The treaty suggests a comprehensive ban on advertising, promotion and sponsorship of tobacco products to reduce its consumption. Member countries were required to enact laws to require cigarette manufacturers to cover at least 30 percent of packaging with health warnings. This global policy that ban tobacco advertising and sponsorship have a significant impact on encoding

visual messages of tobacco adverts. It does not allow for design benchmarks to be effectively used in the construction of messages that would break language, visual literacy levels, educational and cultural barriers, which is the trust of this paper. Hitherto the placement of restrictions on the advert of cigarette by the WHO, the major visual elements of cigarette advertisement were the product, package and any other supportive visuals that serves as an attention catcher.

British American Tobacco (BAT), Nigeria (Limited) is an international company that operates in many countries of the world. They operate domestically in Nigeria. BAT poster design advertisements (ads) are internationally inclined; a medium of communication in a multi-cultural environment with symbols and cultural values and conventions. Prior to this time, BAT embraced one of the major graphic principles of advertisement which emphasizes clear display of products for the purpose of identification and brand distinction and ease comprehension of visual messages encoded in the adverts. It is understandable that, BAT has for some time now been battling with controversy as to whether to ban outright cigarette smoking in Nigeria which has subsequently led to the Federal and State Governments filing a law suit against BAT seeking injunction that BAT should bear future cost of treatment of Nigerians with tobacco related illness. Both the Federal and State governments are equally seeking a fine against the companies' advertising and marketing campaign allegedly targeting Nigerian youths and have asked the company to fund an awareness campaign to educate young people about the danger of the product (Shocking Billboard advertisement).

The advent of policies that restrict tobacco product display in adverts constrained BAT to adopt a new approach to product advertisement. The new approach is conceptual, metaphoric, and philosophical thereby requiring high IQ and high visual literacy on the side of the target audience. It is common knowledge that literacy and visual literacy on the African continent is low comparative to advanced nations. The paper analyses the communication gap created by the new approach to product advertisement wherein the product being advertised is completely absent. The question that comes to mind is how well do such adverts communicate their messages to the target audience; in other words, do the target audience able to grasp the messages contained in such adverts? The central aim of product advertisement is to stimulate response and desire for the product and by extension increase sales. BAT cannot claim that the new advertising approach is not targeted at achieving the above aim.

BAT realises the importance of cultural attributes in ads in such a culture sensitive environment like Nigeria, using creativity with symbolic representation to prepare the message that is intended to entice the unsuspected consumers. The visual content of BAT's new ads will no doubt attract one's curiosity to its striking beauty, over simplicity, unique concepts and the use of symbols and Nigerian cultural values in their bid to communicate. Unfortunately, the new approach is not mindful of whether or not the target audience is able to decode the actual message which is the social status of tobacco smoking. Ekerete (2008) observed that, advertisers and advertising agencies employ a variety of values in their bid to attract their target audience. This implies that, advertisers use activities which may include socio-cultural values to attribute meaning to the representation of a product in their bid to communicate or make visual statements about products. As mentioned earlier, BAT cannot claim not promoting tobacco in those adverts as the under listed cooperate objectives of the company include:

1. Have effective and orderly regulation of the tobacco market.

2. Lead the industry through growth, productively and responsibility in promoting our products through the strong needs, and to grow our brands and the value of the business to improve productivity around the globe.
3. Make our branding materials understandable, memorable, attractive, and to catch the attention of the end user as well as present its content in a user friendly fashion.
4. Follow the rules and regulation of advertising agency by applying dos and don'ts in our billboard advertising.

It can be argued that the hidden intention of BAT adverts is product promotion. According to Jeremijenco (2011), the designers have constructed a hi-tech system by which BAT's high-pitched clicks are translated into written English on the digitally illuminated advert. Buttressing the aim of BAT ads which product promotion; Makmanee (2013) argues that, "gone are those days when the company marketed their products by simply showcasing an image of it in a commercial or printed advert". Nowadays advertising agencies have to create more of a concept and message behind a product or idea in order to catch the attention of those passing by. Graphic design practice encompasses, among other things, creation of good design layout with correct pictorial representation, harmonious use of colours, good selection and relevant headlines and simplified design concept for effective communication to aid comprehension and interpretation of the message. The presentation of graphic communication for visual perception and interpretation by the target populace to whom the ad is targeted is usually encoded with target audience in mind. There is no doubt that the poster design ads of BAT certainly catch target audience attention; but how memorable and understandable is the branding materials to the prospective consumers leaves much to be desired.

In making reference to symbolism and cultural values, Obisesan (2008) observes that, designers must understand the vocabulary of graphic design, know their target audience to create effective communication, be aware of the constraints that affect the communication, using creativity to prepare message they want to communicate. To attempt to force messages unto unreceptive audiences will only result in cognitive dissonance leading to resistance from the target audience and subsequent failure of communication.

Graphic communication

The world encyclopaedia perceives graphic communication as drawings, designs, paintings etc. which involves the use of lines or strokes to express or convey ideas in terms of forms. Graphic activities are viewed as being communicated through a medium or channel of communication that is far reaching which include poster design, commercial activity and or even outdoor which in the language of graphics, is understood as exhibition space for visual messages. It encompasses all phases of graphic communication process from origination of idea; design, layout, and typography through production, finishing and distribution of products. The most successful design is those that most effectively communicate their message with understanding and which tend to motivate consumer to act upon the message. Mmitchell and Daniels (2003), Hurwitz and Day (2007) hold that, communication is the major function of written letters made up into words, the pattern of letter forms which allow for artistic expression; independent of verbal meaning. When people communicate, they try to establish commonness with someone or share information, idea or an attitude. Communication relates to the message sent sensitively to the message receiver. Graphic communication, therefore relates to the production of visuals which involves a multiplicity of analytical considerations bound up with theories and principles of learning, perception, symbolism, communication and philosophy. This buttresses the philosophy of Green (2000) which states that, "Win through your action, never through argument". Graphic art is

regarded as that which applies to manual and mechanical technique for production of images and words to improve the visual content of communication materials. Graphic communication in this sense is more than the production of good quality images, since the intent is not only to attract attention but to communicate in such a way that there is a feedback. It requires adequate and clear information which implies understanding of the receivers of the information as well as effectiveness of the appeal. In this context, graphic communication requires finding out about the effect of the message. Are the visuals used to relay the message interacted well enough to be understood?

Barbara et al (2005) are of the opinion that, the fundamental principle governing the process of graphic communication is derived from the mathematical theory of information which establishes that, communication always takes place between those units that transmit information and those that receives it. The process therefore requires explanation, since the transmission of a coded message occurs between man and man; graphic design and visual communication find their natural diffusion through instrument of mass media and at least through the techniques of image reproduction. Hence, visual reproduction should be well presented as well as communicate an idea which when perceived would be meaningful and understood. Alozie, (2005) observes that, the role of ad in a market economy should inform well in other to persuade consumers about the superior quality of products or services being sold. This scholarly argument debunks BAT's new philosophical approach to tobacco adverts wherein the product is not displayed and yet the target audience is expected to derive meaning from the advert and their interest for the faceless product stimulated.

Tobacco Advertisement

Tobacco advertising is the promotion of tobacco patronage through ads. It is one of the most highly regulated forms of marketing strategy but it is banned in many countries. The European Union and World Health Organisation (WHO) have specified that the advertising of tobacco should be controlled because of the inherent health related hazards. The Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) had advocated for a comprehensive ban on tobacco advertisement and promotion. This led to proposition of stringent measures for environmental control on tobacco smoking. These include increased taxes on tobacco products; and bold health warnings to be printed on all tobacco products and campaign channels. According to Oluwafemi (2006) tobacco control campaign received major boost in Nigeria with the success of the FCTC. Consequently, a law banning tobacco advertisements in magazines, newspapers, billboards, on radio and television took effect in Europe on January 1st 2004. By 20th October 2005, Nigeria had ratified the FCTC control laws. Despite what was intended to have been band, BAT continue to use posters with content modification to create more of a concept and message behind a product advertisement to catch the attention of consumers as means to keep the company visible and alive, however with condition that, danger in tobacco intake be inscribed on all their channels of information. No wonder, BAT has adopted the unconventional promotions (non-product) poster design adverts to maintain existing customers and establish new ones. The new approach emphasises culture which is a commonly held standard of what is acceptable or unacceptable, important or unimportant, right or wrong, workable or unworkable in a community or society. These include a people's beliefs, rules of behaviour, language, art, education and technology, styles of dress, religion, social, festivals, political and economic systems (Microsoft Encarta 2004). Cultures surround creation, transmission, reception and interpretation of advertisements (O'Guinn et al 1998). Cultural conventions and values tend to influence every aspect of human behaviour, including consumer behaviour and response to advertising. Therefore an advertiser who incorporates these values into the advertisement of its products or services is

likely to succeed in connecting with the target audience. Askegaard (1991) observes that the importance of culture has become more recognised within the field of advertising. This implies that, advertising as a marketing tool, pay a decisive and special attention to the cultures of consumers in conjunction with product image to secure attention and also to convey message easily and effectively make the message to be grasp with ease. All things been equal, the degree of attraction of a design has to be associated with understanding. Absence of product image tends to hamper understanding and interpretation of the message being conveyed. Product images provide visual, intellectual, psychological and meaning to the advert. Just as culture and cultural values provides people with ways of thinking, ways of seeing and hearing and interpreting the word so do product image makes interpretation easier, simplified, comprehensive and understanding. Any experience or interpretation is preceded by meaning already given within a culturally relative tradition or practices. Advertising studies carried out on culture and product image by Alozie (2005) indicates that advertisements reflecting cultural values in conjunction with product images are more persuasive and meaningful than those that ignore them. These patterns of advert are employed by advertisers to mobilize and persuade the receivers to stimulate consumer behaviour depicted in the advertisements. Advertisers of BAT products in Nigeria probably found it necessary in identifying with only Nigerian cultural values and symbols on poster ads. There is no reference to or link between the adopted pictures and the product image. Figure 1 and figure are typical examples of BAT ads that have no product image on the adverts. The product is not identified to translate social meaning of the ad. The designer deliberately eliminated the product image from the ads to represent social reality of Nigerian cultures. Nigerians take pride in their cultures. Product image and cultural value plays important role in persuasive advertisement. Concepts, objects and ideas are created in a cultural context and conveyed by icons, signs and symbols.

The question is: has the visual content of these poster design adverts communicated effectively? Has the functional effect of the communication element achieved its objectives to capture the target audience to make them patronise BAT products? These are pertinent questions occasioned by BAT's new style to advertising. The poster below is typical of the BAT's new approach.

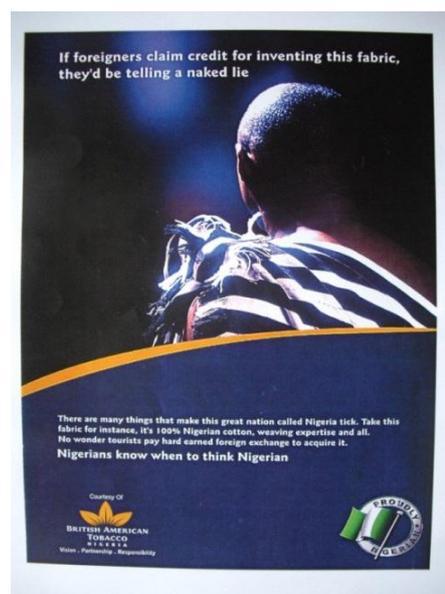


Figure 1: The “Angeer” traditional fabric of Tiv: (BAT, 2012)

The advert though reflect cultural and symbolic values of the Nigerian environment, the absence of the identified variables (product image) and inappropriate headline (text) could make the communication ineffective in terms of message delivery because different interpretation may be ascribed to them without product image and corresponding headline or text. Some of the graphic communications rules of advertisement include: STRONG HEADLINES, STONG VISUALS (image of products) and few SORBODNATING ELEMENTS. These rules have been tested for decades and are found useful to date.

The BAT poster has no product image. The text above the poster reads: “If foreigners claim credit for inventing this fabric they’d be telling a naked lie”. The statement is philosophical, and sound ambiguous. Whether the statement is meant to advertise fabrics or tobacco products, it is a question for the target audience interpretation.

Figure 2 (p. 9) below is another example of BAT poster design ad depicting a multi-image cultural scene with profusion background.

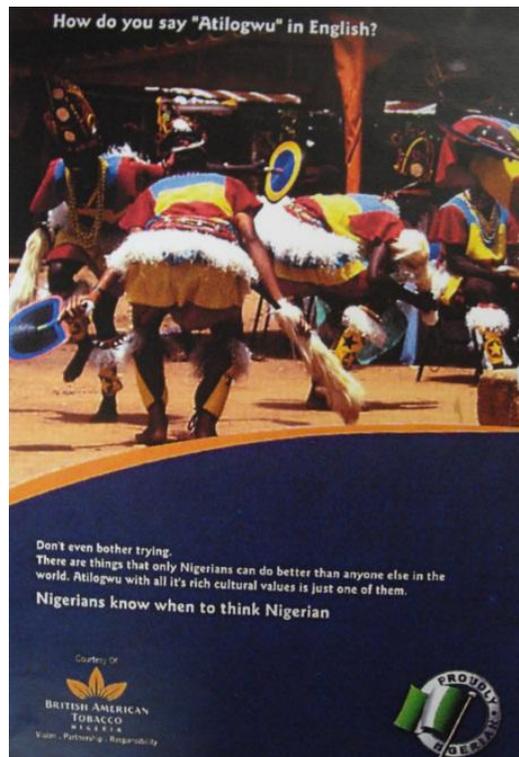


Figure 2: Cultural dance: “How do you say “Atilogwu” in English” (Source: BAT, 2012).

Poster design advertisement

Poster design functions as both an indoor and outdoor media and which has become one of the fastest growing advertising medium in Nigeria over the past decades. In addition to roadside billboards, outdoor advertisement comes in variety of display formats at

various locations such as bus shelters, car and railway stations, airports shopping malls and super markets. Poster design as a medium is purely a visually contextual information exclusively meant to create awareness. It is a purposeful act of creating messages, ideas or awareness of something and or to promote a product or service in a visually creative format.) Advertisement is described as an instrument of business that links buyers and sellers in a vast efficient communication network. It is a non-personal communication of information usually persuasive in nature about product, services or ideas by identified sponsors through various media. Advertising is defined as the technique and practices used to bring goods, services or opinion to public notice towards promoting a good that is for sale. It implies that any form of advert including poster design must have both persuasive and informative qualities, and that, the closer a print media like poster illustration comes to pure information, the closer it comes to pure graphic design.

The principle of attraction states that, “all things being equal, the degree of attraction of a design depends largely on the absence of subordinate elements.” Single or two images without background were more easily understood than multi-image ads. The power of any object to compel attraction depends upon the absence of counter attraction. The statement above the poster “How do you say ‘Atilogwu’ in English?” has no reference to the product either. This explains that, BAT’s approach to graphic communication tends to be more of cultural than product ads. There is no product imaging neither does the adopted text and cultural attribute collaborate each other in terms of meaning.

Whether these observations are generally applicable to other areas of relevance of the ads based on experience or not, the adopted style could have been deliberate or could have emanated from the designer’s experience or lack of it or because of the controversy surrounding tobacco intake. BAT might have got their reason for adopting the “style”.

Effect of product symbolism in adverts

Product symbol is sign in advertising which translates social life of culture and brings about the quality and freshness in the product being advertised. A sign has no intrinsic meaning and becomes meaningful sign only when we invest it with meaning. According to Reschke (2005) “nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign”. Anything can be a sign as long as someone interprets it as “signifying” something or “referring” to or “standing” for something other than itself. We interpret things as sign largely unconsciously by relating them with familiar system of conventions. It is this meaningful use of signs that explains semiotics. Graphic communication has various types of signs which in graphic term are referred to as codes. They determine the message and semiotics is particularly useful in analysing graphic communication. Product image is a sign or code of the product itself (signifier). The signifier compliments the text (signified) in advertisement. What is a signifier or the signified depends entirely on the level at which the analysis operate: a signifier on one level can become a signifier on another level. This is the mechanism by which sign or symbol may seem to signify one thing but are loaded with multiple meanings. The signifier (product) in this context allows the viewer to see and feel the quality in the product. The product image translates the tangible, quality and pure status of the product by inducing an indexical description of the product being advertised. Advertisers cannot underestimate the importance of image of the product in advertising. It gives the end user the first experience of looking at a poster. Plomer (2009) is of the opinion that, “the first experience must be pleasurable and the impact should be one that would make the end receiver want to desire.” He concluded that, “probably that is the reason why consumer often buy product based on experience”. Few worthwhile BAT poster ads in Nigeria could be classified as effective. Most of these poster adverts are just extension of picture plates. This is an age of the visual medium where product images are as important as the design itself. Images have always been very important in ad. It

expresses feelings or conveying a message. Until the consumer has read and translates the written words, he has already interpreted pictorial through his visual contact. Picture communicates quickly and it is a direct way to get the message across with ease. Product images function in symbolisation rather than literary. It also performs the following functions:

1. add to overall attractiveness
2. stimulates desirability
3. explains text in poster
4. replaces words in picture
5. supplement the text

It also creates attraction and stimulates reader's interest. It adds emotional emphasis by supplementing the text with visual images. The effective use of advertising to promote sales could therefore be achieved by incorporating relevant values, themes in product or service advertisements. Values of social and culture product image, as well as text, complement each other for effective communication. They are powerful conceptual tools for effective design. According to the encyclopaedia of the world of Art 1962, text is more closely connected with diagrams and drawings which are designed to meet requirements of a predominantly expository kind. The requirement is that they should be clear and understandable precluding the possession of aesthetic quality.

Metaphors

A metaphor allows consumers to use their imaginations and as well encourage many to positively associate with the product. According to Barbara et al (2008), metaphors may be more effective at influencing consumers' thoughts because busy consumers are not usually prompted to think about ads. Meaning is not "transmitted" to us; we actively create it according to a complex interplay of codes or conventions. Like mythological beliefs, metaphor helps us to make sense of our experiences within a culture. Myth suggests beliefs which are demonstrably false but oftentimes, the term does not suggest this in some cases. Nonetheless, receivers translate messages according to their visual and psychological intelligent. An irrelevant headline or picture gives absolute no information about the article or about the proposition. According to him, ambiguous or misleading headlines often give the reader a feeling of being isolated or being deceived and trapped into reading something he is least interested. In such a situation, the memory value of irrelevant material is usually lost. This implies that, adoption of irrelevant headlines or concepts have no effect and permanent attention value as does a relevant copy.

Communication process

Understanding the vocabulary of communication in design process and effective adoption, and implementation of the components to attract response is a tool for effective creativity in advertising. Advertisement is a marketing tool used in communication process to send a message to receiver who will react or respond to it in a certain manner. According to Bezuidenhout (1998), meaning can only be achieved when the sender and the receiver share a thought or idea. In persuasive advertisements it is assumed that the sender and receiver share this idea. Galante (2003) observes that communication theorists have been moving more towards audience model and are built on the conceptual notion of effectiveness. An effective poster advertisement has three characteristics:

1. Attract attention
2. Communicate message effectively

3. Persuade an audience.

Communication in advertisement involves a number of steps:

1. The advertiser determines the appropriate message for the target audience.
2. The message is encoded usually by graphic encoder. This is done so that the message will be understood clearly in different context.
3. Messages are sent through media channels to the audience who decode and react to the message in various channels including posters.

The early communication flow model structured had three components:

- A sender who is sending the message out
- A channel through which the message is sent out
- A receiver who is supposed to receive and use the message.

The above model formula was slightly expanded by Laswel by the following question (Galante 2003).

- Who?
- Says what?
- In which channel?
- To whom?
- With what effect?

Why and how these communication takes place will better be understood by the model modified by Ejembi (1989). The model was an improvement upon the Lasswell formula. In the modified model, graphic encoder is introduced while feedback replaces effect. It is believed that, graphic encoder's knowledge, attitude and communication skills will play a decisive role in development programmes. According to Ejembi (2008), the introduction of graphic encoder is important as it emphasizes the important role that the graphic encoder plays in the development process.

Visual literacy

Visual awareness precedes visual perception and interpretation. The ability to interpret images meaningfully requires a vital skill to learn through visual literacy. Visual literacy according to Stonehill (1998) is the ability through knowledge of basic visual elements to understand the meaning and components of images. Individual culture is surrounded by their own cultural images either in magazines, posters and newspapers and ability to read them is a skill. Azi (1999) states that, a clear method of relaying successful communication messages for proper perception and comprehension lies in the need to understand the perception and cognition of the message. This implies taking into consideration the level of the visual literacy of all the target audience. Visually literate audience has the ability to see, to understand, to interpret graphic codes. The visually literate viewer perceives an image carefully and critically, and with an eye to interpret the intentions of the image(s) creator of advert, drawing, painting or any of the visual arts. The visual content and ideas and visual literacy allows the viewer to gather all the information contained in the visual plane; place them in context, and determine whether they are authentic or truth. Explaining visual literacy further, Barrett (2003) states that, visual literacy relates to the ability to find meaning, give meaning to imagery and identify simple and complex interpretation on contextual, metaphoric and philosophical levels. This involves a set of skills.

Educationally, Nigerians can be said to be literate based on the data of 1991 census. The data indicates that 57 per cent of Nigerian populace are literate. There had since been an improvement in literacy level. According to Taiwo (2007) Nigerian literacy level has increased to 67 per cent. The percentage has since been described unacceptable by the Federal Government. This percentage is however, still relatively low by world standard. This is why there has been conscious effort on the part of federal and state government to step up the literacy level in the country. For instance, right from the assumption of leadership of Kwara State Governor, in 2011, Ahmed Bolajimade tuition free for all genders from primary school level to senior secondary schools (SSSCE). SSS certificated class students' (final year students) WAEC registration fees have equally been taken over by the state government. This seems to be an attempt to help increase the level of literacy in the country. Visual literacy is the ability to see, to understand, to think and ultimately communicate graphically.

Visual literacy is concerned with practical implications of designing appropriate visual materials in the field of advertising. Different skills are required to design meaningful advert from the variety of images in the contemporary Nigerian society. Some require fewer or simpler or straightforward illustrations than a psychological manipulative advertisement. Some illustrations ask to be understood at face value while others have greater built-in complexity, which includes the possibility of symbolism, implied and mysterious meanings. Therefore the visually literate audience can comprehend on various levels whatever he or she faces visually.

Summary

The foregone analogy of the fundamental theories of graphic communication and specifically product advertisement has brought to bear the importance of product display in an advert. Mitchell and Daniels (2003), hold that the most successful design or advertisement is those that most effectively communicate their messages with understanding and which may motivate consumer to act upon the message. Understanding has also successfully been linked to visual literacy through how signs are logically or symbiotically linked to their object. Semiotics allows us to understand the relationships between signs, what it stands for, and the people who must interpret them. What an advertisement mean is determine through a process of meaning initiated by senders for consumers and determined through social interpretive process. What a text or image means is exclusively up to the reader, hence, a designer must acknowledge who the reader is, in terms of psychological and sociological factors. The review also shows that, though international companies create advertisements through socio-cultural images and events, advertisements reflecting cultural values in conjunction with product images are more persuasive and meaningful than those that ignore them.

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