The Symbolic Meaning of Body Parts in Images: the Case of Hands in Advertisement

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**The Symbolic Meaning of Body Parts In Images: The Case of Hands In Advertisement**
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**ABSTRACT**
This study presents a better understanding of the relevance and the meaning of human body parts, hands in this particular case, in contemporary advertising. To achieve this goal we will explain the importance of the visual aspect in advertising to then provide an in-depth analysis of two images, the Donna Karan perfume ad and the Nokia phone display picture, to then compare them to other images. In the discussion part we try to uncover the meaning of hands to finally indicate a suggestive application of hands in print ads. Our investigations reveal that hands can transfer several meanings, whereas six meanings were predominant: communication, connection, protection, intimacy, identification and status. By showing body parts of people (apart from faces), consumers maybe identify themselves more easily with an advertisement and are more likely influenced by the image.

**INTRODUCTION**
In today’s society advertising is ubiquitous. Especially photography in the form of print ads replaced many blank spaces around us. Walls and roofs of buildings, bus stops, metro stations, vehicles, as well as sides in magazines are covered with ads. Although we might only notice and reflect upon a part of the ads (Schroeder 2002, Kivinen 2004) they play an important role in our everyday life. Advertising mainly exists of and functions through images. Images serve as a stimulus and affect consumers’ cognition, interpretation and preference (Schroeder 2003).

Advertisements include all kinds of images: people, products, objects, nature or events and range from realistic and provocative to idealistic and harmonic. Depending on the product, ads are rather realistic or idealistic and present people in total or close-ups. Body parts are often shown in ads for beauty products, like perfume, cosmetics, designer clothing and accessories. Many studies emphasize the body or the face, while in this study we want to focus on the hands. Hands symbolize different things and communicate on different levels. Whereas sexuality often plays and important role, also other emotions and statements are transported by displaying hands, for example connection or protection.

This study aims at better understanding the meaning of hands in contemporary advertising. To achieve this goal, we will explain the importance of the visual aspect in advertising to then providing an in-depth analysis of hands in (print) advertisements. In the discussion part we try to uncover the meaning of hands to finally indicate a suggestive application of hands in ads.

**THE VISUAL ASPECT**
Besides text, images play an important role in print advertising. First and foremost, we consume advertisements visually, because an ad mostly exists of an image with or without text added to it. As John Berger (1972) remarks: “seeing comes before words, and can never be quite covered by them” (p.8). The consumption of images takes place consciously or unconsciously, that means because of the vast quantity of images in everyday life we can only pay attention to some images. This choice is influenced by our personal preferences but also by our culture (McCracken 1988, Hall 1997).

People of different cultures have different consumption habits and consume different objects with regard to their culture and their social status. Therefore, also “visual images function within a cultural system of meaning influenced by advertising, consumption, marketing, and mass media” (Schroeder 2002, p.3) whereby “their interpretative meanings shift over time, across cultures and between consumers” (Schroeder 2003, p.1-2). This denotes that the image in a print ad could be influential at a certain point of time for a certain culture but at another time and for a different culture it could likely be inappropriate or meaningless. Meaning is constantly in transit, “produced and exchanges in every personal and social interaction in which we take part” (Hall 1997, p.3). Through this system of meaning, images are represented by a common ‘language’. This language does not necessarily have to be verbal but can also be visual or acoustic. This denotes that representation constructs things and is therefore “a critical concept for understanding how advertising produces meaning” (Schroeder and Borgerson 2003, p.68). Accordingly, consumers “buy products not just because of what they do, but because of what they mean” (Solomon 2003). A certain car, for instance, is not only bought because of its speed and space and to get the owner from a to b, but also because of its status (its meaning) that is connected to a certain brand and model.

Semiotics, the science of signs, helps us to better understand how meaning is encoded and decoded in advertising and society in general (van Leeuwen and Jewitt 2001, Schroeder 2002, Baudrillard 1968, Ilstedt Hjelm 2002). A sign can be anything that stands for something else and it consists of two elements: The signifier and the signified (de Saussure [1916][1983]). The signifier is the component/the “thing” and the signified is the concept/the meaning to which the signifier points at (Schroeder 2002). Thus, also images, for example of hands and other body parts, do not just exist but also transport a specific meaning.

The information technology that provides most of the images in advertising is photography. Photography comprises still and motion pictures as well as digital images and enables advertising with its global power and omnipresence. Photographers can construct their pictures in a desired way. By making use of diverse techniques, for instance light, contrast, black & white, filters, etc. their motives are presented in a realistic or idealized way, depending on the photographer’s intention. Therefore photographers’ objects like celebrities and models often look impeccable and thus even more desirable.

Interpretations and even descriptions are always subjective. By describing several aspects in particular and referring to other aspects shortly or even leaving them apart, we bias an image, albeit it sometimes happens unintentionally. We try to explain how these images can mean something, at least for us, instead of claiming an irrevocable analysis of the images. According to Roland Barthes (1977) a text’s or, in this case, an image’s unity “lies not in its origin but in its destination.” Thus, we do not try to uncover the intention of the photographer nor the intention of the fashion company but focus on what we see in the images, while being influenced by our cultural background. That also implicated that our interpretation will not be complete, in the sense that it rather leads to another discussion and reflection.

In this study we will focus on still photography by analyzing the display of hands in two particular print ads and then comparing it with other images of hands. The first image under observation is a perfume advertisement by the fashion house Donna Karan. Some of the images for the comparison are also perfume or fashion ads. One image is a photograph of a famous photographer capturing a
well-known model and another is a commercial poster. Although not all of the images promote perfume, they all show a lot of skin of the people displayed. Mostly, the body parts shown (on which the hands are situated) are intimate. As the skin is the place on which a fragrance is applied on, it denotes an important connection between the different images. The second image that we analyze is a picture in Nokia mobile phones, which always occurs when every Nokia phone is switched on. The images that we compare this picture to are close-ups of the hands part of a well-known religious painting as well as a movie poster. All images have the same general positioning of two people’s hands in common.

THE PERFUME IMAGE

The scent of a perfume, mostly in the form of a light brown to transparent fluid, delivers no specific lifestyle; it is the designed world around the fragrance that creates the desired image. The different lifestyle that fragrances, as every other brand or product communicate, are created by advertising. It does it “by providing the product with an ‘image’” (Williamson 1994, p.24). First by the bottle, which serves as the direct package, for perfume nearly inseparable from the product, and as the objects of recognition in the store, as Thomas Hine (1997) claims that a “package is an indivisible unit of consumption” (p.17). Secondly by ads, which create a visualized world around the scent, whereas celebrities and models often act as endorsers for the products (see also McCracken 1989, Sudjic 1989). Expensive fragrances are offered by many fashion designers, which add perfume to their clothing and accessory collections.

Donna Karan, a successful fashion design company in New York, is one of these fashion, fragrance and accessories designers. For consumers, Donna Karan’s ads represent luxury, success, beauty, business life, and the big city. On the company’s webpage, www.donnakaran.com, the reader learns about Donna Karan products as “strong clothes” which call for “powerful accessories”.

A specific print ad, promoting the release of fragrances by Donna Karan, is the center of our first analysis (figure 1). We chose this particular ad because we consider it to be different from many other fragrance ads concerning theme, style and lighting. The reason is, while beauty ads for cosmetics or hair care products often display a beautiful (female) face smiling in the camera combined with a picture of the product in one corner of the ad, perfume ads offer a wider variety of ideas.

Even though perfume advertisers often use the standardized ad with celebrities as endorsers as well, most perfume ads try to create a special atmosphere in their ads. There exist ads where solely the bottle is displayed and covers the entire ad, as well as ads where the bottle, an important item for the recognition effect in the store, is not shown at all. If people are present, faces are pictured closer, scenes have an erotic or sexual tone, intimate body parts are unveiled, and sometimes body parts are photographed as close-ups.

Description of the “Donna Karan Perfume” Ad

The advertisement under investigation (figure 1) presents a picture of two undressed bodies, probably a female and a male. The bodies are most likely models but faces are neither shown nor any personal characteristics, like scars, tattoos, jewelry or the like. We see the upper body and the hands of a supposed female person. She is embraced by a male person sitting or standing behind her; judging from the hands and the visible hair on the arms, which are the only parts of that person’s body being displayed. The woman’s décolleté and breasts are partly shown, whereas the man’s arms cover the lower part of her breasts and her belly. The lower bodies starting from the wrists do not reside in the picture. Both persons’ hands, more precisely their left hands, dominate the image. They are situated in the center and the front of the close-up photograph. The woman’s hand rests on the man’s hands, all being neat and well manicured without any craggedness or dirt; even the male hands appear smooth. The gesture is intimate, pure, and protecting, whereby the overall display of body parts and the bare skin equally alludes to a sexual situation.

Although the picture is in black & white and the contrast of light & shadow is intense, the persons are probably Caucasian. Their skin looks very soft and without marks or wrinkles thus they are approximately between 20 and 40 years old. The bodies capture nearly the entire picture, thus there is not a lot of background shown, but we assume the picture was taken indoors, perhaps in a studio. Only the right margin offers us a snatch to the location, so that we can guess a wall and the floor.

The ad has nearly no text. There is no headline, no slogan, nor logo, only at the right bottom a text appears: “Introducing Donna Karan New York Parfum. Call 1-800-762-4646 to order this exclusive offering.” This ad promotes Donna Karan perfume in general. There exists maybe a scent for men and for women, however this is not explicitly stated.
It is interesting that there is no bottle shown, which makes it quite difficult for the consumer to recognize the perfume in the store. It does not give the consumer the possibility to connect the scent with a noticeable displayed package. Moreover, the ad does not use a celebrity to promote the scent, as already mentioned, something very common in beauty ads. There are not even beautiful faces shown. In addition to that, the presented parts of the model’s bodies are naked. First of all, Donna Karan produces fashion, thus it would be reasonable to combine the ad for the fragrance with the display of the company’s clothes. Nudity or naked bodies, however, appear much more three-dimensional and round than dressed bodies models, which often seem flat. Stern and Schroeder (1994) describe the ‘partial nudity’, which “reflects the powerful artistic taboo against depicting total male nudity, in contrast with the routine depiction of total female nudity in Western art” (p.126). However in the images presented, we do not even see total female nudes, just parts of the bodies, mostly torsos, and in most cases the intimate parts are covered by hands and arms.

Comparison to Other Images

The subject, a designer fragrance ad, which depicts a naked (and probably) male and female couple in an embrace, is communicated in the form of a black & white photograph. The photograph is realized as a double-page spread ad and published in female lifestyle and fashion magazines. The style of the ad is very aesthetic, as it depicts a harmonic, intimate situation of two well-shaped, good-looking bodies holding each other. Thus the image generates an atmosphere of high-class photography. Comparing the ad with the celebrity pictures of the famous photographer Peter Lindbergh (figure 2), we can observe that they are composed in a similar smooth and contrasted way. Figure 2 shows a picture of the undressed body of the model Nadja Auermann. The photo exposes her body from her belly (below her breasts) to her thighs (above her knees). She holds a cigarette in her skinny left hand, while covering her intimate area with her crossed-over hands. The fact that she holds something with her hands, a cigarette, emphasizes the functional and active role of this body part. Although the background is blurred, she seems to stand on a beach.

Lindbergh’s pictures emphasize the beauty of a person while still being realistic, sometimes even in surreal situations. Often, the photographed people are focused and in the center of the picture, while the background (if there is one) vanishes by being out of focus. For his black & white images he employs diverse composition techniques like contrast and shadow & light. Again the model’s hands form the center of the picture. They are skinny, so that her veins and bones are visible. Although we might not tell from the displayed hands in this single photo that the model in the picture is Nadja Auermann, we may be able to personify these hands in the photo series of Lindbergh. The photographer wants to show a realistic but aesthetic scene, no matter if the model is a smoker or just holds the cigarette for this picture.

The Donna Karan ad fits into the genre of close-up shots; therefore in some aspects it is also comparable to the picture of a man holding a baby in his hands (figure 3). Although definitely having different attempts, these pictures show many similarities.

Figure 3 displays a black & white poster of a picture of a man holding a baby in his arms. Both people appear naked; the tiny and pale baby sleeps restfully in the man’s crossed-over arms. By lying with its head and shoulders in the one hand of the man and having the rest of the body protected by the other hand, the small creature seems to feel totally secure. It sleeps with its left forefinger on its mouth and its legs tightened up upright to its belly. Looking at the man, we only see his upper body, his hairy breast, his tanned crossed-over arms and his hands holding the child. The left palm
carries the baby’s head and shoulders and the right hand holds the lower body. The man’s face as well as his lower body remains invisible.

In our opinion, this poster presents several similarities to the Donna Karan ad. Most obvious are the hands. They seem to play an important part in both pictures because of their position and size. They are centered in the middle of each picture and they are captured closely enough that we can even see the nails, small wrinkles and some veins of the persons. The importance of the hands probably signifies the functional as well as the protection aspect in both images. The strong male hands and arms hold somebody, the woman or the child, thus these persons feel save and protected. Moreover both images are captured in black & white, thus we do not see the real skin color of the people displayed, but we can still tell that all of the bodies are probably Caucasian. Furthermore, the shadow & light-technique is used. In the Donna Karan ad it is used to let the bodies look smooth, nearly without any wrinkles, thus they are more like to be considered as one than being separate. In the man with baby-poster the shadow & light-technique underlines both the strength of the man and the fragileness of the baby through presenting the man’s skin, especially his dark arms.

Instead of the woman, or more precisely her breast, in the first picture the child is displayed in the latter one. Both represent the weaker parts, whereas the women expresses more activity in her behavior than the passive child by also embracing the arms of the man instead of the sleeping baby, which has its hands on its belly and breast. Generally speaking, the Donna Karan picture is filled with more aesthetic meaning. Both pictures illustrate the intimate interaction between two people whereas in figure 1 the aspect of style and artistic value influenced the creation of the picture. Figure 2 appears much more natural and ‘raw’. In addition to that, the man and baby-picture is a poster and hence does not follow the purpose of selling or promoting a certain product with the image. Although the text in the Donna Karan ad provides just one line of written information in a small font, the poster has no letters at all. A feeling of protection and security can be read as the main common aspect of both images, but the “undertone” of the images is very different. Whereas sexuality is a second aspect of the Donna Karan ad, it is none of the man and baby-poster. Here naturalness and liability seem to play a more important role. The baby is displayed very natural: in total, being naked (the same manner when being born) and sleeping restfully. The man, who could be the father, is holding the baby carefully. He seems responsible for the baby, making sure that nobody and nothing harms it. Interpretation

Race and gender are important elements in today’s advertising. Gender is more about social relations than about differences (see Connell 2002, Goffman 1959). No matter if gender roles and race are approached critically, for example at the CK One ad investigated by Schroeder (2002), or supported, for example in the Donna Karan ad, the body and therefore even and even more hands are semiotic signifiers (see also Corrigan 1997). The print ads of the fashion company Benetton who tried to shock the consumers with their critical ads stand in significant contrast to the harmonic Donna Karan ad. Benetton plays with racial and gender roles (figure 4), by portraying a black woman holding a white baby in her hands while feeding it with her left breast. She only wears an unbuttoned, red cardigan so that the right breast is entirely visible to the observer. On the back of her right hand a round scar is visible. The composition of the picture is similar to the Donna Karan ad, pointing out the hands that are also centered in the middle of the photograph. But again the “undertone” of the images is totally different.

The Donna Karan ad’s main purpose is likely to attract attention for Donna Karan and the fact that they also release something stylish, perfume in general, rather than to promote a specific fragrance. Because of that, hands and the three-dimensional appearing naked bodies are displayed in large size and the text nearly vanishes. The observer really has to search for the brand and the item being advertised. The lack of the verbal part puts even more emphasis on the visual. Text “can proceed via congruity (consistency between verbal and pictorial elements) or incongruity (discrepancy between them)” (Stern and Schroeder 1994, p.114), but in this case the missing text makes the picture even more mysterious and un-decodable. The naked bodies, at least the female body, in the Donna Karan ad creates a sexual atmosphere. The man embracing the woman from behind indicates him protecting her in some way, which refers to the archaic gender positions of the strong man and the fragile woman. This image probably works very well, because there are likely to be many consumers adoring the illustrated situation and wanting to get something comparable.

In all of these figures, hands are displayed in the center. Hence they symbolize an important connection between these quite different images. However the pictures do not entirely show hands but mostly upper bodies without heads, where the hands are situated close to the bodies. In comparison to that, an advertising picture form the phone manufacturer Nokia presents two different hands only. Here the expressiveness of hands is made exceedingly evident.
THE MOBILE PHONE IMAGE

Over 1.3 billion people worldwide own and use a mobile phone,¹ a technology that was just invented nearly 50 years ago. The competition in this business is huge, therefore advertising is an important part of the competition battle. As each phone holds mostly the same features, the suppliers try to distinguish themselves from each other by presenting a certain lifestyle and offering a wide range of phone designs. The slogan “Connecting People” of the Finnish company Nokia, the world leader in mobile communications, expresses the ability to bring people closer together by using their cell phones. Every time switching a Nokia phone on, a certain picture appears (figure 5 and 6).

Description of the Nokia Display Picture

The picture (figure 6) shows two hands reaching out for each other but not (yet) touching. On the left side of the picture we see an adult’s left hand, most likely a male person, who holds his palm downwards and his thumb forward, like an extension of his forearm. His forefinger points upwards, his palm is open, as he is just about to grab the other hand. In the right side of the picture there is a right hand, probably of a child, with its palm pointing upwards and its thumb bend up. We see more than just the hand of this person, as it is smaller than the man’s but covers the same amount of space in the image. Therefore, most of this person’s forearm but not the elbow are shown.

Both hands are light-skinned and without any personal characteristics or scars. Although it is difficult to determine the ages of the people, the adult’s age is probably between 20 and 50, as there are no characteristics of a senior adult, for example wrinkles or pigmented lesions. The child’s age is even more difficult to define.

It definitely is no baby but not yet an adult either, thus maybe between five and 15. The background seems unrealistic, but reminds of the sky with blue color emerging from the right upper corner and passing into white in the middle of the picture. One fifth of the image, the bottom part below the hands, is covered by the company’s name Nokia, written in royal-blue bold letters.

Comparison to Other Images

The Nokia Display picture alludes to a detail of the painting “The Creation of Adam” by Michelangelo Buonarroti (figure 7) that shows the image of the fully formed Adam created by God. The Creation of Adam itself belongs to the complete painting of the ceiling of the Sistine chapel in the Vatican, which started in 1508 and was finished in 1512.² The detail we are referring to is the hands part, where God and Adam’s hands nearly meet (figure 8).

In the close-up of Michelangelo’s picture (figure 8) we see Adam’s hand and a part of the forearm on the left side, and God’s hand and forearm on the right side of the picture. Both hands take up the same amount of space within the image. Adam’s palm points downwards, his hands appears weak and passive, as his hand hangs limp on the wrist. Only the forefinger is bend from the other fingers towards God’s forefinger, almost touching it. Adam’s hand seems to be strong and muscular. God’s hand also appears strong and muscular, whereas it is more agile, as the hand is actively reaching for Adam’s. Especially the forefinger points out straightforward to make the connection, whereas his other fingers sag downwards. Both being light-skinned, the skin of God’s hand seems lighter than the one of Adam’s, although this could be caused by the light effect coming from the upper left corner of the picture (figure 7), as the

¹For more information visit http://www.cellular.co.za/stats/stats-main.htm.
²For more information about the painting of the Sistine Chapel see Robin Richmond (1995) or visit www.michelangelo.com/buon/bio-index2.html.
positioning of the shadows tells. It could also be a cause of the time, as this painting is nearly 500 years old, and colors faded and changed over the years. Even though the background has a beige-brown color it could be considered as the sky, due to the fact that Adam is lying on a stone in the foreground and God is hovering on a shell or cloud-like cloth.

Comparing the Nokia picture with the hands detail of Michelangelo’s painting presents several similarities: the overall positioning of the hands, their near-touching, their skin color, the more active and the more passive hand, the opposed characters of the hands and the somehow artificial background. However, the two images have several differences: the exact way the hands are hold, the age and identity of the persons and the different color of the background.

In addition to that, a poster for the movie “Bruce Almighty” (figure 9) alluded to Michelangelo’s painting and therefore also to the Nokia display picture. The poster displays the image of the actor Jim Carrey lying (as far as we can see) naked on a cloud and looking up to the upper right corner of the picture. He is holding his left arm up, actively reaching out and almost touching another hand, which can be anticipated as the one of God. We can expect it to be God’s hand because it is exactly the same as in Michelangelo’s painting and the text in the poster “If you could be GOD for one week, what would you do?” also indicates this. However the actor Morgan Freeman, who plays God in the movie, has dark skin. The differences in the movie poster to the other images (figure 6 and 8) is that here the near-touching of the hands in overemphasized by a glow between them, as well as the entire body of the actor (as an allusion to Adam) is shown, thus he captures nearly the entire space in the image. God’s hand, without the forearm, just appears in the upper right corner of the poster.

**Interpretation**

All pictures emphasize a connection between two hands, if it is the bonding or exchange aspect between two people in the Nokia picture or the transferring aspect in the painting and the movie poster. There exist several hierarchical dualisms in the images: God and human as well as heaven and earth in the Michelangelo painting and the poster. The Dualism old and young in the Nokia picture, whereas the child’s hand could also be the petite hand of a women, hinting to the dualism of male and female, thus to gender roles. However, it could also symbolize the hand of an angel, therefore referring to the dualism heaven and earth again. In each picture one person is the weaker and passive one (Adam, child, female) and the other the more powerful and active one (God, adult, man). The accurate illustration of the hands in each image in comparison to the unrealistic backgrounds implies the real and fake-dualism.

Whereas the connection between two unequal people by their hands is the common ground of these pictures, they all have a different undertone/a different origin. The Nokia picture is an advertising element appearing every time you switch on the mobile phone. It communicates the connection aspect that Nokia want to establish. Having a Nokia phone means having a possibility to get (closer) connected to the people you care about and the people you work with. It enables the user to reach others easily and being reachable everywhere he or she is. In comparison to that, Michelangelo’s painting has a religious background, being painted on a ceiling of a Vatican church and narrating the lore of the bible. If it advertises something, than it would be the bible. Irrespectively of the painting, the movie poster clearly advertises a film, by using a well-known artwork to play with the analogy and intensifying the marketing effect.

**FIGURE 7 AND 8**

“*The Creation of Adam*” by Michelangelo Buonarroti

**FIGURE 9**

“*Bruce Almighty*” Movie Poster
THE SYMBOLIC MEANING OF HANDS

The presented pictures in this study indicate that the usage of hands is manifold. We use our hands for nearly every action in everyday life. Seldom we actually notice what our hands accomplish. One of these moments is when our hands or one of them hurts or gets injured (Wilson 1998). Our two human hands build a cooperative pair and a primary tool of self-expression. Thus hands cooperate with each other, with persons or objects.

Just as consumption, also the usage of hands is, of course, highly dependent on the culture of a person. Certain actions are welcome in one culture whereas they are taboo in another, like some gestures. There exist countries with a high involvement of hands, like Italy, and countries with much less involvement, like Japan. In this study we try to convey a more or less global meaning of hands and their actions, although it will be influenced by our personal Western European cultural background. Semiotics, the science of signs, can help to encode and decode the meaning of hands in advertisements and even in society. As the pictures presented demonstrate, hands (the signifier) can stand for several meanings (the signified), like communication, connection, protection, intimacy, identification and status.

Hands as Communication

We communicate with our hands in different ways. One important aspect is the action of hand shaking. It shows respect towards and interest in another person. Many times it is the premier physical contact of two people. Hand shaking is of importance in the corporate world as well as the private realm of people. Gestures, which are culturally influenced, can at least be globally interpreted as friendly or angry, as inviting or repelling. The Nokia Display Picture (figure 6) and the hands in Michelangelo’s painting (figure 8) as well as in the “Bruce Almighty”-movie poster (figure 9) are examples for the inviting gesture of two people reaching out to create a connection. Moreover, signals with hands are used in circumstances where speaking is impossible, such as while diving or at the stock exchange. Here, some basic signs determine major decisions and people rely on each other and their ability to use the signs correctly. The more complex version of this is the sign language, which enables deaf-mute people to communicate broadly about any topic. Sign Language is a global language, thus people from different cultures with other spoken languages do not have any restrictions when communicating in sign language. Another communicative aspect of hands is its usage for writing. We capture ideas, stories or information with written words. Writing or nowadays often typing letters, emails, reports, etc. would be difficult without our hands.

Hands as Connection

Hands connect us to other people by communication as demonstrated above, but they also connect us to objects. Nearly every commodity asks for our hands to utilize it; for instance hands even start the physical medium of films (video tape or DVD) or music (CD, record or tape). Vehicles, like cars and bicycles, or phones (also mobile phones) are activated in part with our hands, which then means mobility, thus the Nokia phone (figure 5) is a good example for this.

Hands as Protection

The first thing we do to protect others or us from violence or danger is to raise our arms and protect the face or the body with our hands. The same happens when we stumble or fall. The man in figure 3 holds the baby to protect it from the outside and to let it sleep peacefully. Protection could also mean using our hands to cover body parts, like the face or intimate areas, from unwanted or unpleasant looks, like the model in Peter Lindbergh’s photograph does (figure 2). Even by protecting our ears from noise we automatically use our hands or fingers.

Hands as Intimacy

Far and foremost, we feel other bodies with our hands. We touch and let people touch different areas of the body depending on our relationship to each other. These contacts initiate different emotions: friendship, security and lust, but also constriction and fear. The quite intimate situation in the Donna Karan Perfume Ad (figure 1) is a good example for the display of intimacy. Here the two (presumably) naked people seem to be very close to one another, as they tenderly embrace each other.

Hands as Identification

In former days the fingerprints of our hands constituted our identity best (Napier 1990). Nowadays, we can be identified more precisely by the characteristics of our eyes and our DNA, of course. But the characteristics of hands remain important. Some people claim to have the ability to tell someone’s future by reading the palm. In fact the lines of the hands accompany us our whole life without generally changing. Even without future telling we can vaguely ‘read’ a person’s age and/or occupation by observing the hands. A scar at and the skin color of the hands, as any other publicly visible part of the body, hint to an identification of a person. Both can be found in the Benetton’s “Breastfeeding” Ad (figure 6), as the right dark-skinned hand of the woman shows a scar on the back of the hand.

Hands as Status

Our social status as well as our profession can be derived from our hands. People wear a ring on a specific finger as a symbol for partnership, yet this symbol is detachable. Notice that in all images of the paper no jewelry is shown, no wedding ring or any other ring. Apart from that, medical doctors, musicians, and athletes who are highly dependent on the trouble-free functioning of their hands insure several fingers or whole hands to secure their social status, even if they become unable to fulfill their profession for whatever reason.

However, this reflection on the meaning of hands is far from being complete and just the beginning of a typology of hands. There definitely exist more meanings of hands and even much more examples of the usage of hands. However, these six aspects of meaning can help us to better understand the significance of hands in advertising and to organize them.

CONCLUSION

Images of hands as the focus and dominant object in advertisements are not that common but fulfill a worthwhile purpose in the consumers’ construction of meaning. Hands can symbolize different meanings: communication, connection, protection, intimacy, identification, and status, thus by using hands as a key component in an image, it delivers a certain mood.

The analyzed perfume ad by the fashion company Donna Karan intentionally makes use of gender and race stereotypes by picturing an aesthetic moment. The mood in this ad can be perceived as secure as well as sexually loaded, which is adored by many consumers. Unlike other ads, for example the CK ONE and the Benetton ad (see Schroeder 2002), that attend to distance themselves from stereotypes while in the end just reinforcing them, Donna Karan actually emphasize these roles. Apart from that, the investigated cell phone display picture presents a connection be-
tween two hands by nearly touching each other. The mood in this image is rather one of connection and communication than of sexuality.

In all of the pictures, binary dualisms emerge. The dualisms comprise God versus human, heaven versus earth, old versus young, male versus female, black versus white, weak versus powerful, active versus passive, focused versus out of focus, and real versus fake. Still or especially because of that the images appear somehow mysterious. Who are the persons in the picture and what relationship do they have to each other? How do their faces look like? What happens in the picture exactly? What is it we do not see in the picture? By keeping the images that way a broader range of consumers can identify with the scenes. It cannot even be specified if the people are actually male and female, or if they are of an opposite or equal sex. Therefore, also homosexual oriented persons find themselves connect to the images (see also Stern and Schroeder 1994). Furthermore, by representing only body parts and no faces, the cultural problem of a specific celebrity endorsement is avoided (see McCracken 1989). By showing only parts of the body and no faces, we can identify ourselves more easily with the situation, and we are more likely influenced by the image.

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