Revisiting Symbolic Visual Communication

Lampros Gkiouzepas, A.T.E.I. of Thessaloniki, Greece
Margaret Hogg, University of Lancaster, United Kingdom

This paper questions the dichotomy between resemblance and symbolic theories of visual communication. It suggests that properties in the real world are brought into the decoding of icons in advertising in a highly controllable fashion. The icon/symbol dichotomy is revisited in terms of experiential comparability and conceptual distance.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1017366/volumes/v42/NA-42

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Theories of visual rhetoric have been welcomed as a promising framework for understanding how visual communication works in advertising (McQuarrie and Mick 1999; Scott 1994). However, visual rhetoric has not yet provided a systematic understanding of how visual persuasion operates. One of the assumptions which might inhibit the further development of theories of visual rhetoric is the argument that images do not imitate reality (Scott 1994). The main limitation in the argument against resemblance is that it locates the source of the problem in the nature of the relationship between a sign and its object. The main drawback, however, is that past research might not have considered the misidentification of the relationship between this sign and its object. The main drawback, however, is that past research might not have been limited to the recognition of the visual objects. That is, resemblance was seen as the main purpose of visual representation. Within symbolic theories, advertising images are not seen as mimetic artefacts, but as purposefully crafted messages of a symbolic language that represent by convention in a similar vein to letters and words. Convention is seen as dictating both the relationship between sign and object, as well as to the relationship between sign and interpretation. Images have to be learned and do not necessarily bear any resemblance to the object or concept they convey (Scott 1994). This symbolic approach was trying to challenge the view that images are mere copies of reality. In challenging this view, however, the symbolic approach might have “hyper-corrected” the problem—the icon/symbol distinction might have been wrongly rejected because images form a continuum of cases ranging from icons to symbols (Larsen 2008). Symbolic theory essentially might have replicated the mistake of resemblance theory by extending a type of relationship (i.e. resemblance) between a sign and an object to the relationship between sign and interpreter (i.e. imitation). Our study focuses on the relationship between object and interpreter -what we consider to be the most neglected part of visual representation.

Our argument is that resemblance between visual signs and reality is essential for leveraging consumers’ experiences when they interpret pictorial metaphors in ads. We see no real difficulty in assuming a representation system where visual content can influence signification by pointing to real objects and experiences. Based on this theoretical perspective, we examine the ability of visuals to argue at varying levels of strength by pointing to objects in the physical world. Visual Claim Strength (VCS) is structured based on a framework derived from the categorisation of natural objects (Rosch et al., 1976). We further argue that the relationship between the reader and the object is informing metaphoricity in visual communication. Peirce’s (1931-58.247) basic idea was that signification is not simply by dyadic relationships between signs and objects, but about triadic relationships that involve an interpreting mind (interpretant). We revisit symbolic visual communication by introducing the concepts of experiential comparability and conceptual distance. In particular, we define metaphoricity (claim figurativeness) in terms of a. the conceptual distance between the two domains compared in a visual metaphor (e.g., armchair vs. a life insurance) and b. the extent to which the attribute is comparable (e.g., physical comfort of an armchair vs. psychological comfort of a life insurance).

The findings of three experiments suggest that individuals incorporate their knowledge of the physical world into their interpretation of ad images. Study 1 and 2 reveal that visuals can argue at varying levels of strength by iconically representing objects that have well defined properties in the real world. VCS had a significant and controllable impact on product attribute beliefs. Specifically, as the strength of visual claim increased so the persuasive impact of the ad increased up to a point of diminishing returns. Study 2 and 3 further revealed that visual metaphor research, but they have not attracted much attention in consumer research. Similarly, attribute equivalence points to a rich area of investigation. We strongly argue that visual communication research, as well as theories of visual rhetoric, can only benefit from a reconciliation of the symbolic/iconic distinction. We hope our paper moves researchers a little further in that direction.

REFERENCES


Larsen, Val (2008), “What the Symbol Can’t, the Icon Can: The Indispensable Icon/Symbol Distinction...” in Go Figure! New Directions in Advertising Rhetoric, ed. Edward F. McQuarrie and Barbara J. Phillips, Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 68-84.


