

Interpreting implicit advertising messages: the impact of verbal anchoring.

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Advertising messages are becoming increasingly indirect and implicit and yet research into the impact of this trend in terms of interpretation and comprehension is still limited. This study contributes to our understanding of the impact that verbal anchoring has on the interpretation of visual metaphors by adopting a more qualitative approach than previous studies. It concludes that without the verbal anchoring consumers identify an array of positive attributes but do not necessarily comprehend the intended message. Conversely with verbal anchoring the intended message is communicated more successfully but the range of positive attributes diminishes substantially. The implications of these findings are discussed.

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Background

There is growing recognition that the messages contained in magazine advertisements are becoming increasingly indirect and implicit. This trend was confirmed by Phillips and McQuarrie (2002) who examined advertising from 1954 to 1999 and found that there was a gradual reduction in the amount of explanation provided in advertisements and an increase in the adoption of a rhetorical approach such as puns, metaphors and irony. Such advertisements have been referred to by some as 'post-modern' (Procter, Procter & Pappasolomou, 2005; Bulmer & Buchanan-Oliver, 2004).

One of the most popular forms of indirect advertising is the metaphor. Indeed, metaphors have been identified as “an important tool used by real-life advertisers that warrant specific scholarly attention” (Batra, 2002, p. 264). Metaphors work on the assumption that the reader can identify a similarity between two terms or objects not normally associated together. Readers thereby transfer the attributes of one term or object to another. It is the identification of these attributes, common to both objects that enable the consumer to establish the advertising message. Such attributes are referred to as implicatures or inferences because they are not directly or explicitly communicated. Forceville (1996) classifies such implicatures as either strong or weak. A strong implicature is the most obvious meaning to be taken from the advertisement and probably that intended by the advertiser. A weak implicature is less obvious and may or may not have been intended by the advertiser.

The longitudinal study on magazine advertisements also revealed that there is an increasing emphasis being placed on the visual element of the advertisement and a reduction in the level of verbal content (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2002). However, Morgan and Reichert (1999) also found that the advertisements that were understood most easily were those that utilised both verbal and visual components. This is a surprising result in light of the trend to reduce verbal anchoring. This inconsistency may be explained by the fact that level of understanding in their study was based on the number of pre-selected implicatures that the respondents identified. Weak implicatures that were not predicted were considered invalid even if they were of a positive nature. This would imply that unexpected positive inferences are not considered to be a favourable outcome.

This implication has been questioned in a more recent study by McQuarrie and Phillips (2005), where they argue that visual metaphors are popular and effective precisely because they are completely implicit and thereby result in multiple interpretations which can lead to persuasiveness. They justify their argument by listing a number of ways in which the process of identifying and transferring attributes can be advantageous to the advertiser. Firstly, the inferences are generally positive due to consumers' awareness of the role of advertising. Secondly, the consumer produces few counterarguments because of the number of implicatures that are interpreted. Lastly, this amalgamation of a number of distinct positive implicatures can lead to an overall strong positive communication. Other research has also proposed that the believability of the message can increase because the consumer identifies the inferences independently (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2002) and this processing activity can lead to a positive attitude towards the advertisement (McQuarrie & Mick, 1999).

McQuarrie and Phillips (2005) attempted to clarify the impact of verbal anchoring on visual metaphors in terms of multiple positive inferences. Their results indicate that the highest

number of positive inferences was obtained from the advertisement that contained just a visual metaphor. When a verbal anchoring was introduced the number of positive inferences dropped although the strength of the strong implicature was the same before and after verbal anchoring. They therefore concluded that the advertisement was more effective without the verbal anchoring because of the higher number of positive inferences.

Although these findings seem to fit in more neatly with the present trends of implicitness and abstractness a closer look at the data collection procedure again reveals significant issues which may impinge on the results. The respondents in the McQuarrie and Phillips (2005) study were provided with statements consisting of one strong and three weak implicatures plus some filler statements. They were then asked to indicate whether or not the advertisement had made them think of the association in the statement. It could therefore be argued that firstly, the respondents were provided with some guidance in terms of their interpretation and secondly, that the study was unable to capture the array of perhaps unanticipated and yet positive inferences that may have created in the respondent's mind.

By adopting a more qualitative approach using open-ended questions, both of these issues are addressed in this paper. The respondents are asked to write down their understanding of the advertising message and how they reached that understanding without any assistance. The absence of guidelines or suggested answers means there is no influence on the type or number of inferences that can be captured and enables the following research questions to be answered for the first time:

- What type and how many positive inferences are created when pictorial metaphors are presented without any verbal anchoring?
- What impact does the introduction of verbal anchoring have on the type and quantity of these inferences?

Methodology

The materials used in the study were two full-page colour advertisements. The advertisements were chosen due to their use of pictorial metaphors with verbal anchoring. They were taken from the Radio Times, a general interest magazine in the UK and appeared approximately six months before the experiment was performed. This delay was deliberate to ensure that although the brand names may be familiar to the participants the details of the advertisements, if ever seen, would not be in the short term memory. It was felt important to use real advertisements as recommended by Thorson (1990) to increase the external validity of the research and provide authenticity and applicability to the findings. The chosen advertisements were for a microwave oven and a beer. These products were chosen because they both represent "informational" (Rossiter & Percy, 1997) or "thinking" (Vaughn, 1986) products and thereby would be expected to be processed similarly. They are also both products relevant to the target audience.

The participants in the study were 100 non-advertising business under-graduate students aged between 19 and 22 years old. This size and type of sample is reflected in studies of a similar nature (e.g. Morgan & Reichert, 1999; Phillips, 2000).

In the first stage of the study the advertisements were manipulated by removing all verbal anchoring i.e. both headline and body copy. The participants were able to see the visual and the brand name and were informed of the product category. These visuals were projected to

the informants who were given a self-completed written questionnaire which required them to answer the following questions:

- What do you think the advertiser is trying to communicate through this visual?
- How do you know that?

These questions and procedure were based on a similar study by Phillips (1997). Each visual was projected for two minutes, during which time the subjects were expected to provide individual written responses to these questions. In the second stage of the study the complete advertisements were shown, containing all verbal elements of the advertisements accompanied by the visual. These were projected also projected for two minutes. During this time the participant provided an answer to the following questions:

- What do you **now** think the advertiser is trying to communicate through this advert?
- How do you know that?

While the open ended questions produced raw data that precluded a simple classification method, this approach was necessary to enable all thought processes to be captured. The software package Nvivo 2.0 was therefore employed to enable detailed coding and analysis. The process began by examining whether respondents had identified the secondary subject and then been able to transfer relevant attributes for this subject to the advertised brand. i.e. the primary subject. The inferences for each advertisement were then examined and coded. This process was undertaken before and after the visual anchoring was provided. The subjects' final interpretations were quantified in order to categorise strong and weak implicatures, with a strong implicature being one recognised by over 50% of participants (Phillips, 1997). The responses with verbal anchoring were also categorised into those who had identified the strong, intended message, and those that had not, to see if that had any impact on the results. The intended message was decided upon by examining the advertisement in its entirety. The analysis was undertaken by two coders who discussed and resolved areas of dispute, which were minimal.

Results

Samsung microwave advertisement

In this advertisement a picture of a microwave oven was presented as if it were a buckle on the end of a twisting black leather belt. This type of metaphor has been referred to as 'fusion' as it combines two images (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2004). The subjects were able to see Samsung branding and the strap line "DigiAll Accessories for the home".

The majority of the participants (71%) identified the belt buckle/microwave metaphor. A smaller number thought it was a computer ribbon or a watch strap. Despite this confusion they still managed to identify similar positive inferences from the advertisement. These inferences can be seen in Table 1. When no verbal anchoring was provided six main positive inferences were identified. Inferences that received three or less were placed in the "Others" category. The most popular implicatures were "stylish", "small" and "accessory". However none of these could be identified as strong using the Phillips (1997) criteria of 50%. Seventeen percent of respondents had no idea what the visual represented. Only seven percent identified a link between the belt, waist and healthier eating without the copy.

Table 1: Inferences without and with verbal anchoring for Samsung advertisement

	Without verbal anchoring	With verbal anchoring	
		With intended message	Without intended message
Stylish	20	3	4
Small	20	2	3
Accessory	14	-	1
Easy to use	11	1	3
Technical	13	-	6
Healthy cooking	7	73	-
Others	9	3	11
Tasty	-	8	6
Total of positive inferences	94	90	34
No comprehension	17	-	5

The situation changed drastically with the introduction of the verbal anchoring. The headline “More taste, less waist” caused the majority of subjects (73%) to then realise that the message was about healthy cooking. The result of this understanding was the dismissal, in most cases, of the other positive attributes that had been identified before verbal anchoring. For example references to “Stylish” moved from 20 to 3.

Bombardier Beer advertisement

In this advertisement the beer was presented as the contents of a pie, with a pie pastry sitting on the top of the glass on top of the froth. The only information the participants had without the verbal anchoring were the words “Bombardier English Premium Bitter” which was printed on the glass.

Just over half of the respondents identified the pie pastry. Others suggestions included muffin, Yorkshire pudding and scone. An even smaller number thought the beer was on fire or made to look like a volcano. Again, despite this confusion, similar positive inferences were identified. The main inference was the fact that the beer was English but this was still not a strong inference. In total 91 positive inferences was identified.

Again the introduction of verbal anchoring had a significant impact on interpretation. The inclusion of the headline “Terribly English” resulted in 75% of respondents interpreting the intended message of ‘Englishness’. Other meanings such as ‘flavour’ and ‘like a meal’ were not mentioned. The quote below is an example of the impact of verbal anchoring.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study reveals the impact of verbal anchoring on the interpretation of visual metaphors. By combining the results from the two advertisements it can be seen that verbal anchoring has an impact in two ways. Firstly, it provides assistance in the identification of the intended message. The introduction of verbal anchoring increased the number of subjects who identified the intended messages substantially. These results are inconsistent with McQuarrie and Phillips (2005) who found that a strong inference was communicated both with and without the verbal anchoring. This disparity may well be due to the fact that respondents in the McQuarrie and Phillips (2005) study were asked to agree or disagree with statements

containing possible weak and strong inferences. Such assistance obviously made the interpretation easier and would not be provided in real life.

Table 2: Inferences with and without verbal anchoring for Bombardier advertisement

	Without verbal anchoring	With verbal anchoring	
		With intended message	Without intended message
An English pint	23	75	
Like a meal in itself	11		
Full of flavour	11		1
To be drunk with pies	8	9	2
traditional	11	10	4
elegant	4		
Used in pies	3		
sweet	4		
others	16		
Total of positive inferences	91	94	7
No comprehension	14		13

Secondly, while the results show that verbal anchoring increases the number of positive attributes the range of implicatures decreases. This finding supports the work of McQuarrie and Phillips (2005) who also found that verbal anchoring results in the reduction of inferences due to the adoption of the suggested conclusion provided in the headline and the dismissal of other possibilities.

These findings confirm that a lack of guidance in the interpretation of an advertisement i.e. no verbal anchoring, results in the identification of an array of positive inferences linked to the brand. If, as previous studies suggest, this processing activity leads to an overall strong positive communication, due to the lack of counter arguments and high level of believability, then numerous positive inferences must be considered a positive outcome. Consequently, one could propose that advertisements should be as implicit as possible to give consumers freedom to identify a range of positive messages.

However, a number of issues need to be considered. Firstly, the outcome of the implicit approach can result in a small number of consumers identifying the intended message. If one presumes that this intended message has been chosen in order to differentiate the brand from its competitors and identified as an important attribute in the minds of the consumer, such a small percentage may be of concern to the advertiser. Secondly, a lack of verbal anchoring can result in a small but perhaps significant number of people not identifying any positive messages from the advert. The percentages indicated here are between 15% and 20% but these may well be higher in real life. Furthermore, the qualitative data from this study would suggest that such a lack of comprehension can lead to frustration and a negative feeling towards the advertisement.

The question as to whether these negative outcomes of implicit advertising outweigh the positive outcomes needs to be answered elsewhere. The contribution of this study is to establish that such positive and negative outcomes exist and therefore the level of implicitity in an advertisement needs to be considered with care.

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