A Picture Can be Worth a Thousand Stories: Interpreting Advertising Differently in 10 Countries

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Storytelling is an old human activity which became a well-known marketing tool both for research and communication. The narrative mode deals with the dynamics of human intentions because people seek to explain events by looking at how human actors strive to do things over time. The purpose of this paper is to investigate which stories respondents from different countries can narrate from one simple stimulus such as a print advertisement with no text. Our research draws on Ogden and Richard's Triangle of Meaning (1923), for the analysis of the advertisement and on Greimas' Actantial Model (1983) for the plot.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper we combine two models of communication to unearth consumers' understanding of advertising messages. We believe that such a combination captures the complex characteristics of consumers' perceptions of advertising. We add to the conceptual analysis the results of an exploratory research, which demonstrates that consumers from different countries can give different interpretations to a simple stimulus such as a print advertisement with no text. We present our work in four sections. First we review the literature, discussing narratives as an appropriate projective technique to analyze the qualitative nature of the responses we aim at exploring. From this, we introduce Ogden and Richard's Triangle of Meaning to analyze the advertisement's layout and meaning. Next, we introduce Greimas's actantial model as being an efficient way to understand the plot consumers imagine from the advertisement. Finally, we present excerpts of the different narratives that consumers from 10 different cultures provided after having been exposed to the advertisement, and discuss the relevant managerial implications and we conclude with the limitations of our research.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK
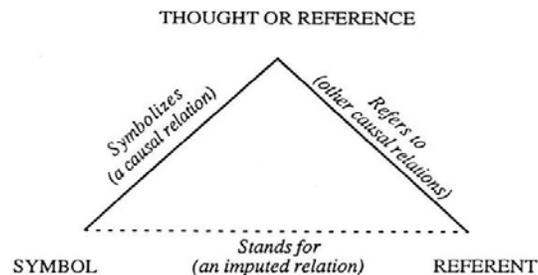
The Meaning of Meaning

Often, when one communicates, he or she does not give any special attention to how he or she communicates. As a result, communication between parties is either diminished or lost altogether. Scholars have spent countless years analyzing human communication and have spent the same amount of time formulating theories that attempt to answer questions pertaining to how we communicate and why we choose the methods we do. By analyzing human communication Ogden and Richards co-formulated a theory known as the Theory of Meaning (1923). Their theory attempts to not only describe the approaches

humans take when communicating, but also to understand how communication is lost when not done correctly.

Meaning is a concept that has been present in communication since the first humans learned to communicate. Communicators are aware that nearly everything that is said has meaning that might not be shared with others. Scholars might argue that for every word, there is a single, correct meaning associated with it but Ogden and Richards counter this claim with their theory of "Proper Meaning Superstition" which states that there is not a single correct meaning associated with each and every word because each word means something different to each person, or more simply, meanings don't reside in words, they reside in people (Erickstad, 1998).

Ogden and Richards categorize meanings in terms of signs and symbols where signs are natural representations of something beyond themselves, such as a sound, whereas symbols are specialized types of signs, such as text (Cahill, 1998). At the heart of their theory is a device called the semantic meaning triangle. Each corner of the triangle corresponds to a component that is integrally involved in the process of meaning: a) REFERENCE - indicates the realm of memory where recollections of past experiences and contexts occur, b) REFERENT- are the objects that are perceived and that create the impression stored in the thought area, and c) SYMBOL - is the word that calls up the referent through the mental processes of the reference. The semantic meaning triangle is represented in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1
SEMANTIC MEANING TRIANGLE

There are relationships between all three factors, represented by the sides of the triangle. The relationship between thought and symbol are causal, meaning that the symbol evokes an attitude or a proposed effect on another person. Similarly, there is a relationship between the thought and the referent, though the relationship can be either direct, such as something we can see in front of us, or indirect, such as an image or idea about something we have seen in another instance. Finally, the relationship between the symbol and the referent is purely indirect in that it is an arbitrary relationship created by someone who wishes the symbol to represent the referent (Ogden and Richards, 1923, p. 11).
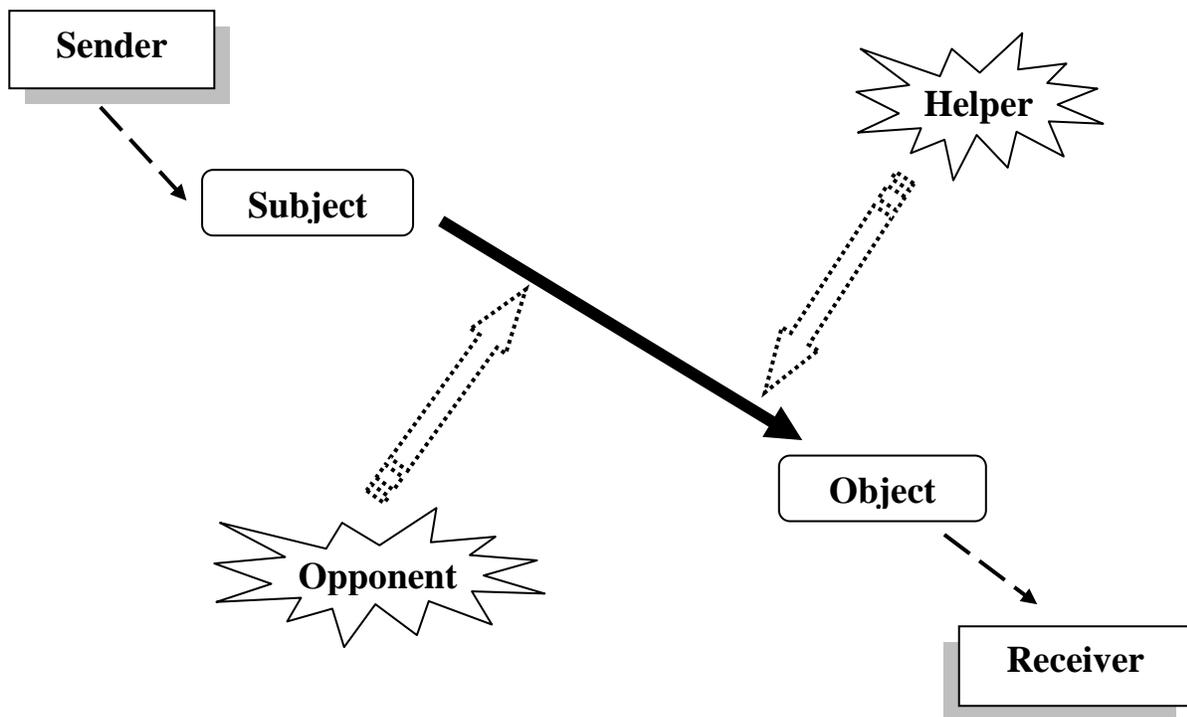
Narratives

When telling about their experience, participants respect the chronological order of happenings and create a sense-making situation as narratives convey experience through reconstituting it (Squire, 2008). Narrative meaning is created by establishing that something is a part of a whole. Narrating is telling a story in the form of a causally-linked set of events, happening and situations that affect human beings. Narratives display the significance that events have for one another (Denning, 2000). People are storytellers as they tell narratives about their experiences and the meanings that these experiences have for their lives. All stories or narratives have a setting in which are evoked vivid associations of particular times and places. Another important element is characters, that is, the players in the action that will experience the situation with the consequences and reactions to these consequences by and for the characters. A story may contain one episode or a sequence of episodes that are more or less interrelated.

Among the qualitative techniques using narratives, the actantial model, developed by A.J. Greimas, is a tool that can theoretically be used to analyze any real or thematized action. In this model, an action can be broken down into six components called actants. Actantial analysis consists in assigning each element of the action being described to one of the actantial classes. Greimas's (1983) Structural Semantics attempts a grand formalization of the narrative content by introducing the notion of "actant" (agents) that are central to the Greimasian approach to narrative. This author studied the role of all agents in a narrative, in relation to their contribution to the plot. After researching a large sample of narratives, he came up with a typology that, since then, has been widely applied. Hence, the actantial model is composed of six actants and three axes, as follows:

- **The axis of desire**: includes a subject and an object. The subject is what is directed toward an object. For example, a fire-fighter is a subject aiming at saving people in a burning house, who are the objects.
- **The axis of power**: comprehends the helper and the opponent. The helper assists the subject in achieving the object of his desire, while the opponent aims to prevent him from reaching it. In our example, the helpers for the subject are everything that the fire-fighter can use to extinguish the fire and to save people: water, ladder, etc. The opponents are the fire itself, the wind and other elements preventing the fire-fighter from accomplishing his mission.
- **The axis of knowledge**: includes the sender and the receiver. The sender is the element requesting the action from the subject and the receiver is the element for which the quest is being undertaken. Continuing with our example, the sender is the fire station and the receivers are the people who were saved, their neighborhood, and the city where the house is located. Figure 2 illustrates Greimas's actantial model.

FIGURE 2
GREIMAS'S ACTANTIAL MODEL

RESEARCH DESIGN

Objectives and Method

Aiming at verifying if consumers from different countries tell the same story from a single print advertisement, we engaged a qualitative research as an exploratory step to analyze advertisement interpretation drawn on Ogden and Richard's model as well as on Greimas's model. Given the limited insights provided by the literature into both models in the analysis of advertisement interpretation, focus groups and in-depth interviews were deemed effective means of exploratory data collection, as relatively little is known about the phenomenon of interest (Shaw et al., 2005). Thereby and in order to explore potential differences in interpretation of advertising across cultures, we chose an exploratory in-depth script, applied to a convenience sample (Malhotra and Birks, 2005).

Our reading was based on the textual data from narratives (Thompson and Tambyah, 1999). No quantitative approach could provide this quality of data. The chosen method was useful to gather specific answers to narrow questions, without searching for a wide variety of data, as recommended by Czinkota and Ronkainen (2001). The sample was composed of 20 participants aged from 25 to 35 years old; 40% were male and 60% were female from ten countries: China, Croatia, Egypt, France, Italy, Mali, Poland, Portugal, Spain, and Morocco.

The stimulus used in the research was a print advertisement for pet food created by Prolam Y&R. The characters depicted in the advertisement are a pilot standing next to a bed where sits a women hiding her face in her hands. On the opposed side of the page is a dog pulling the drapers under which a pair of bare feet is perceptible. The background scenario is a large bedroom decorated with pictures and objects from different parts of the world.

Participants were exposed to the stimulus for 30 seconds and were then asked to tell the story pictured in the advertisement depicted in Figure 3.

FIGURE 3
ADVERTISEMENT USED IN THE RESEARCH

The advertisement was visually structured in accordance with the Semantic Meaning Triangle as described in the works of Ogden and Richard (1923). At the top of the pyramid (Reference) was the pilot standing in the middle of the page. On the lower right extremity of the pyramid (Referent) was the dog and on the opposed side was the pack shot with the product, the brand name and the baseline (Symbol): *Bad food, Bad dog*. The advertisement was solely visual and did not feature any text.

The plot, if drawn on Greimas's model, depicted the dog as the subject, the food as the object, the pilot as the helper and the woman as the opponent. The story intended to be conveyed by the advertisement was that a woman, married to a pilot, was caught in adultery by her husband's unexpected return to home. Her lover hides behind the bedroom's drapers, but the dog pulls them intending to reveal the wife's betrayal to his master, as revenge because she does not feed it with the appropriate food.

Although the story is conveniently stereotypical and, thus, easy to understand and expected to be universal, participants presented very different interpretations of it which are described in the following session.

RESULTS

As a matter of fact, there were several different interpretations of the story conveyed by the advertisement. The following excerpts illustrate some of them:

<u>Interpreted the message as intended by the agency:</u>

The pilot is back home. There is someone behind the curtain. The woman is embarrassed because of such a dead end situation. No escape is possible as her lover is hidden behind the curtains. It is a typical cliché. The woman must be forgiven by the public because her husband is often absent. There are two betrayers in the plot: the woman and the dog. The woman and the lover are the losers and the man and the dog are the winners. China

The woman is being punished twice: revenge of the dog and divorce. The dog is rewarded twice: gets good food and gets rid of the woman. China

The dog is revealing the wife's lover to her husband, who is a pilot. It is revenge. It is his way to tell her that he does not like the way she feeds him. Portugal

A miserable dog makes you miserable. The lights show that there was romance in that room before the husband arrives. Croatia

It is a dramatic situation. The dog reveals the infidelity of the wife towards her husband who comes back from a military mission. The man is surprised and irritated looking at the dog. It is a stereotypical situation. Punishment for bad feeding the dog. Animals are similar to humans and also have feelings. They are able to understand human issues and can act consciously in human lives. Poland

The man is a pilot and the woman is embarrassed because the dog is pooping on the carpet. It is a hotel room and the woman misbehaves (adultery) because she receives bad treatment from her husband, as for the dog. Giving it good food would mean taking care of it. Mali

The man is a pilot and the woman is cheating on him. The message is "give good food and the dog will cover you". Now there is revenge. The dog is paying bad with bad. It is good advertising for men but bad for women. She is shown as a stupid wife who stays at home waiting for the husband and now she cheats on him. Egypt

The woman has done something wrong and is ashamed. The third person hidden behind the curtain means that she was doing something bad. It is a transgression. China

It is a bad dog because it shows the truth. The humans are doing something wrong. Italy

The man is in the Navy and is ready to leave. The couple is desperate because there is no solution for the dog. Morocco

The man is angry at the dog because it awakened the woman. China

The man is a pilot and came back home. The wife can't educate or control the dog. She expects that the man, as being like the father, the authority, will do it. But it is too late; there is nothing to be done about the dog. France

The man is in the Navy or is Military. It is a wealthy couple. But the wife can't educate the dog. She is a superficial woman. The man is disappointed and shocked with the rebel dog. The man is also unable to control the dog. France

The man is a pilot. The couple wants to have sex and the dog creates embarrassing situation. It is a hotel room. Pilots take dogs on planes. The woman is angry. It is a degrading image for the woman because it is about sex with no strings attached. Egypt

The man is a pilot and he looks interrogative. The woman looks tired and desperate. France

The man is a pilot and leaves home in the middle of the night. The woman spends time with the dog and is fed up with its crisis. With good food she would earn a peaceful atmosphere at home again. Portugal

The man is a pilot and the woman is desperate with the dog's attitude. The dog wants to attract the attention of its master. People care about health and weight and it is the same for the dog. France

The man is a pilot and the dog might destroy everything in the room. The man is worried and the woman is helpless. They look like they cannot find a solution to make their dog happy and quiet. Portugal

The couple is the dog's parents. The man is a pilot and the woman is devastated. The dog wants to play and she is tired to fight the dog. She stays alone at home trying to educate it. She is waiting for her husband to punish the dog. Spain

The woman looks desperate and exceeded. The man is a pilot. The dog is in a bad mood and does not let the master sleep. Because the couple gives bad food to their dog, they must face its craziness/badness. France

Analysis

Intrigued by the amount of participants having interpreted differently the story conveyed by the advertisement, the researcher engaged in informal "off-research" conversations with the participants and found out that the ones who had not correctly understood the message had not seen the feet under the curtain, thus they had not guessed the lover behind it. This is an important revelation for researchers and practitioners in marketing communication as it demonstrates that a determinant clue to understand the story could be unperceived. In other words, marketers should make sure that the unavoidable clues will be seen by their target.

The story told by the advertisement perfectly fits in the two models applied to our study. We will first analyze the Triangle of Meaning (Ogden and Richard, 1923). The dog is positioned as the referent, the Pilot as the reference and the product as the symbol in the triangle. The dog aims at attracting his master's attention (causal link) in order to make him feed it with the appropriate food (another causal link). In other words, the dog is creating a stimulus-response process with its Master. It expects a reaction from his Master to its action. The natural outcome would be the dog getting the food it wants. Despite the fact that the main clue (lover's feet) was placed next to the referent, it stayed too discreet, thus unseen, by the majority of the respondents. It looks like the dog took over the most important clue in that advertisement. Although the reasons for that are unknown to us, it would be worth identifying them, might they be linked to the colors used in the advertisement, the lights or the place of such a clue. Considering the amount of investments companies allocate to advertising campaigns every year, it is troubling that the key clue leading to message understanding stays unseen.

When analyzing the advertisement based on Greimas's model, we can see that the plot contains four actants: the dog, the pilot, the woman and the food. In the axis of desire, the dog is the subject, aiming at getting the food, which is the object of its desire. In the axis of power, the woman is the opponent, because she does not buy the right food for it and the pilot is the helper, who will reward it by buying the food it wants. Interestingly, it looks like the lover has no role as an actant in such story, although he is the key clue to understand the message. This could be one explanation why he did not draw participants' attention to himself.

DISCUSSION

The advertisement used in this experiment was deemed to be the perfect international advertisement to run worldwide thanks to several characteristics: a) the story is very stereotypical and well-known across cultures. It reproduces what has often been seen in films, b) there is not text, what eliminates all issues relating to translations, c) the base line is in English and very simple/easy to understand. Despite all the above mentioned features, the advertisement provoked different interpretations and reactions to it.

The findings indicate that not only were there several interpretations of a single stimulus, but also that only nine out of twenty respondents (45%) narrated the story the advertisement was meant to convey. One could argue that being part of the scenario is not enough to be perceived. The referent, the symbol and the thought should have well defined roles as actants in order to have an influent action on the plot.

Another interesting outcome of our research is that more than half of the participants did not feel stimulated to buy the product, although they all had dogs. Indeed, intention of buying was independent on message understanding. Some participants did not understand the message the way they were supposed to, but thought that the dog was "cute" and would be willing to buy the advertised product. On the contrary, some participants having understood the message were not motivated to buy the brand because they did not like the advertisement. Finally, some other respondents liked the advertisement because "it was fun" but had no intentions to buy the product because "there is no information about the product itself".

These results allow us to state that understanding a communication message does not lead to liking it and that liking an advertisement does not always lead to intention to buy the product/brand. This is not a new discussion in marketing communication. However, it is imperative to understand how the models used in this research can help marketers to better secure meaning understanding from their consumer targets.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The research presented here is innovative and original. Most marketers and researchers in marketing are not familiar with Greimas's actantial model although qualitative and projective techniques are often used in marketing research. Despite the fact that Ogden and Richard's meaning triangle is largely used in

semiotics and that semiotics deals with communication, it is surprising that researchers and practitioners do not draw their works on such model.

This paper's originality is twofold: combining two models which are the basis of all human communication: semiotics and storytelling. Advertisements tell stories to consumers by using verbal and non verbal symbols. It seems obvious that both research and practice in marketing communication should draw on well-established models and tools as the ones we presented in this research in order to reach their objectives. Surprisingly, our literature review indicated that this one is the first research demonstrating that such models should be used as the foundation for the conception of advertising messages. Companies would want to increase accuracy in reaching marketing objectives by ensuring appropriate interpretation of the messages they convey to their targets.

The qualitative approach used in this research should be the very first step in pre-testing advertising messages before searching for external validity through quantitative market studies. It is of interest to both marketers and researchers to use appropriate methods to understand meaning interpretations, mainly in international settings. Using methods that allow going deeper in consumers' interpretations and meaning creation provides researchers and practitioners with more accurate information which will be a better basis for adequate decision making in marketing communication.

CONCLUSION

The findings reported here suggest that the use of reliable models for storytelling and meaning creation applied to advertising have several implications. First, it comes out from this study that what can be considered as being a simple message easy to understand might not be as straightforward to several consumers, mainly when they belong to different cultures. Although our findings did not enable us to explain differences due to culture, practitioners should examine the global presence of advertisements under new prisms, as consistency and synergy appear to raise global demands not only in terms of communication but also in terms of product characteristics such as packaging, pricing and other attributes. Academics on the other hand should further investigate the contexts in which consumer-advertising relationships are developed, as well as the commonalities of human and message identities.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The combined use of the two models is innovative and sheds light on a crucial issue for companies and academics, but present some limitations. The first one is its restricted sample. Although the method chosen was qualitative and the research approach was exploratory, a larger sample would have given better understanding of the use of the combined models in message accuracy and would also enlarge the number of cultures. The second limitation is the use of one advertisement. Our interpretation of the results can also be inherent to the stimulus itself and thus testing several stimuli would contribute to avoid such bias. Finally, there was no attempt to explain differences in interpretations due to cultural differences, because it would have been inappropriate with such a small sample. Further research should address this issue.

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