

VISUAL ANALYSIS OF ABSOLUT VODKA: THE CAMPAIGN OF INGENIOUS CREATIVITY

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Abstract

This study examines the advertisement techniques used by alcoholic drinks, especially Absolut Vodka, as this brand presents a unique amalgamation of creativity and the successful execution of their objectives, while carefully considering the culture and social norms of the target audience. The idea is to attract the consumers by applying simple but effectively varied approaches. Here, the study aims at analysing the print media ads, therefore, the use of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as presented by Norman Fairclough, Stuart Hall and Kress & van Leeuwen. Fairclough was more concerned with a 3D model, also Stuart Hall's approach of coding and encoding is used to establish the framework for print ads. The visual analysis tools of Kress and Van Leeuwen will be used. These combined theories helped in devising a working framework to analyse each ad with regards to its position, theme, and discursive message. Finally, this study examines the theoretical elaboration of the impact of message as received by the consumers.

Keywords: *critical discourse analysis, visual analysis, coding, encoding, alcoholic advertisement, consumer*

INTRODUCTION

In these times of rapid developments, people don't even have time to watch an interesting commercials of mere 30 seconds on TV. Therefore, the advertisers have devised interesting and captivating strategies to sell a particular brand. Considering this scenario, alcoholic and cigarette industry are under strict rules and regulations when it comes to displaying their message. So much so that in some countries it is prohibited to display alcohol ads in public places, like train stations. In many European countries sports sponsorship by alcohol companies is banned. Quiet amazingly alcohol industry has used this to their advantage and enjoy the freedom of creativity.

Absolut Vodka has reached and targeted their audience globally, and they have come up with interesting ideas with a special focus on the culture, traditions, beliefs and current issues of various regions. The Absolut Vodka campaign has been running successfully since 1981. In advertising business such a length of time is considered forever. It becomes a daunting task to maintain the line of creative ads which are aesthetically and visually appealing.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What advertising strategies were adopted by the company to maintain their success?

2. To what extent the visually enhanced advertisements affect the audience?
3. How successfully the message is conveyed in visually aesthetic advertisements?

LITERATURE VIEW

Saussure 's work on images and the messages is considered as the landmark. He stated that the main objective of any advertisement is to convince the people to buy a certain product. Successful campaigns end up in convincing their target audience that the particular item will bring a change in their life in some way. "Only a social group can generate signs."(Saussure, 1974)

Catherine Belsey the whole process of ad effects to that of a child's learning process. Exactly in the same way, the advertisers influence the audience and facilitate their discursive minds to differentiate and categorize the qualities of different products. "... child learns a set of differentiating concepts which identify not given entities but not socially constructed signifieds." (Belsey, 1981)

METHODOLOGY

Primarily Critical Discourse Analysis is used to analyze different ads from Absolut Vodka Campaign. CDA aims at clarifying the connection between the discourse practices and social practices that might be invisible to an average person. According to Van Dijk (1988) .CDA analyses the media discourse to bring into light the source of power, dominance and equality with discursivity.

Media discourse is not a simple text which can be easily understood rather apparently seeming simple text carry very complicated and diverse meanings especially in the case of print media. Kress (1990) shed light on the embedded ideological assumptions in discursive social structures. It shows that ideologies are related to the social events, social ideologies and the linguistic choices of news producers' as well as receivers.

Fairclough (2003: 44), emphasized that the process of advertising happens along the lines of social structures. This interdependence is vital for the alcohol advertising agencies to interact with target audience.

Stuart Hall (1980/94: 202), devised communication process as circular and the product is analyzable entity. Visual images have universal meanings and these are coded depending the target audience' cultural or social perception. For the ads analysis, it is vital to focus on these codes because every image has a meaning.

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

Very cleverly the Absolut Vodka company has used the bottle as brand sign and turned it into an iconic symbol, because the bottle is the representative of the prototype of Absolut.

Consequently, this study divides the analysis of ads into four main levels which are interdependent to each other:

- a) The first analysis is between the image (at textual level-Fairclough's perspective)
- b) Second is about the position of producer (process)
- c) Third is the position of receiver (process)
- d) Last is about the placement of the above processes in interdependence to each other and as a whole in social context. (condition of production and interpretation)

The syntactic structure clearly shows that the image is composed of signs in relation to the producer and the receiver, placed in a social circle.

1) Analysis at Surface Level

a. The Visual Ad

All the print ads of Absolut Vodka focus on the bottle and this image stay constant everywhere. The variable items are typography, positioning of bottle and the background. The interconnection of these three elements is important to determine the hidden messages conveyed. The relation of bottle with its background is also variable, where sometimes the background is white space and bottle has different elements and vice versa. Therefore, the participants are bottle or its shape, the background and the placement of the bottle, which in almost all the case 'ideal' and the text is 'real'.

Absolut ads being diverse in nature, it is difficult to put them in a compartment. For example, the Absolut city campaigns are representative of the flavor, culture and diversity of each city. From quiet, leisurely areas to mega cities, everything is part of the campaign.

b. Position of the Producer

The position of producer is difficult to determine clearly in Absolut Vodka campaigns because varied mediums of mass media are used. Mostly not one company or producer is responsible for the successful campaign. Since producer and receiver are separated from each other in time and space, therefore they cannot affect or influence the receiver directly, but through the process of encoding and decoding; producers have achieved their intended target.

In case of Absolut Vodka, the intended part of the message is the symbol of the bottle which is clearly understood. In this regard the producer is successful in delivering one message; which is perceived as it is. But the background and social contexts of the ads subject them to various interpretations by receivers which might not be intended by the producer.

c. The Position of the Receiver

The images can be the representative of social or traditional values. For the receiver the positioning of the image, its closeness or distance determines the effective influence of producer on the discursive nature of the audience. Therefore, the receiver can either closely relate to the product or feel reserved and distant. Positioning effects can also be achieved by placing the image horizontally or vertically. The horizontal angles decide the extent of involvement of the viewer or the detachment from the conveyed message or scenario.

The vertical angle represents a relation of power between participant and viewer. A high angle shows a higher power of the producer and receiver and a lower angle has the same reverse effect. The same height shows the balance in power relations. Kress called these interpretations as signs which are dependent on the interest of social groups. All these techniques of colour saturation, brightness, depth, abstractions, camera angles etc are determinants of how 'real' or 'unreal' the image appears.

The position of the viewer is highly flexible. A receiver is not only positioned by the image but also by his socio-cultural background at any given situation. Thus, receiver always has his own complex framework of codes, knowledge about the surroundings, beliefs and attitude towards the producer.

c. Absolut Ads in Social Context

The producers have also put the central image in the social sphere. As both receiver and producer are dependent on each other therefore the social context determines the nature of power relations.

Absolut has made abnormal but hilariously interesting and entertaining ads that gained them popularity. An Absolut ad can be seen as a new genre on its own, that conditions people in a certain way and make up new conventions.

2) Thematic Analysis

Absolut vodka created a genius series of that has surely stretched the boundaries of imagination as they have beautifully played with the realms of art and design at places the ads are extremely witty and at others pure imagination but every theme the bottle is the central figure.

For the sake of convenience, the ads are divided into some basic themes in which they appeared regularly.

1. The first ad from the campaign 1980



Figure 1



Figure 2

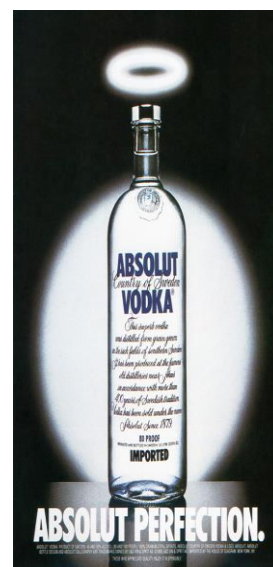


Figure 3

The Composing

The Absolut bottle is placed central with no connection to the background. The bottle gains the absolute importance with the focus of being positioned in the center. It seems to have its own powers. The figure 1, has cobwebs but the position of the bottle maintains its individuality, thus the time and age does not hamper the dynamism of the bottle.

Figure 2 shows the magnetic powers of the bottle. Again the bottle is the centre but magnetic qualities are given to it as it is attracting all the forms and in this case receiver or target audience who can be the intellectuals.

Figure 3, has a halo at the top and spotlight on the bottle. It can be seen as the focus of attention by all and the image stands tall in the world of competition and criticism.

The Positioning

In all the three figures, the bottle is positioned at an eye-level. the close shots can represent the balance of power of between producer and receiver.

The high colour saturation in the three figures symbolizes reality and dream-like quality at the same time. So the image appears as realistic although at the same time it seems to have fantastical, dream-like qualities.

“Absolut Impossibility, Absolut Magnetism and Absolut Perfection” are the captions in the three figures which speaks volumes. These codes can be interpreted as the pride of the producer in their continuous success and popularity, at the same time they can be received as offering the same powerful adjectives to the receivers.

The Conditioning

These simple ads do not offer high level of social decoding. There is not much complication to make the receiver as an intelligent receiver. The messages and images are simple enough to be viewed at their face value.

2. Absolut Tradition

Absolut Vodka is credited to have produced sensational Christmas ads. For example, snow glove magazine inserts, talking Christmas card etc.



Figure 4

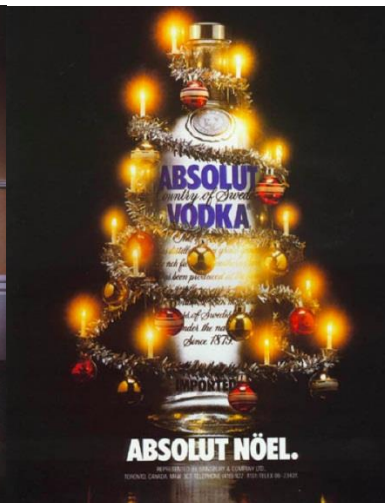


Figure 5



Figure 6

The Composing

Figure 4 does not show the bottle but there a silhouette of the bottle. It is shown in connection to the Christmas tree and Christmas hearth as part of the tradition and celebration. The silhouette of bottle can be seen as part of the celebration and not a main figure in the ad.

In figure 5, the bottle again holds the central, upright proud position with Christmas decorations around it. Again it emphasizes the connection between Vodka and celebrations, as both the objects are central in the figure.

Figure 6 gives the human quality to the bottle. Although the shape of the bottle is central but it is not the focus. The focus is on the female figure in a fashionable attire, out to celebrate Christmas eve.

The Positioning

Figure 4 shows the iconic symbol in relation to the Christmas tree. The viewer is positioned at a high angle to the image of bottle. The image has high modality with the presence of dark

and bright contrast to highlight the celebrations. The image can also be received as a ‘mouse hole’ thus signifying the spirit of sharing.

Figure 5 is shot at eye level angle and creates a balance of power between receiver and producer. The close shot gives the feeling of involvement on part of the receiver. The dark background highlights the brightness and cheerfulness of the bottle and decorations. The higher colour-saturation stresses the modality and the image appears like a dream.

Figure 6 employs a female figure, shot at an eye-level but in contrast to the background. The background highlights the typical image of Christmas eve with snow and shopping. The image has high modality and the use of natural colours make it look real.

The slogans for these three ads are: “Absolut Stirring, Absolut Noel and Absolut 24th”. Each caption is significant for its cultural and historical importance.

The Conditioning

In all the three ads cultural coding is high. The strategic placement of all the elements enhance visual cliché of Christmas items. It’s a diplomatic route to become part and parcel of the celebrations. The images almost feed the receivers with what the Christmas tradition consist of the setting of a home and eve the snow covered street signifies that drinking Absolut is part of the Christmas tradition. The target becomes every individual celebration Christmas.

3. Absolut Sports

Absolut Vodka launched many ads based on Sports, significantly stressing the fact that they care about the sports fans too.

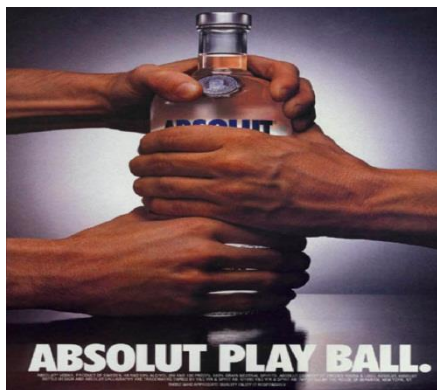


Figure 7

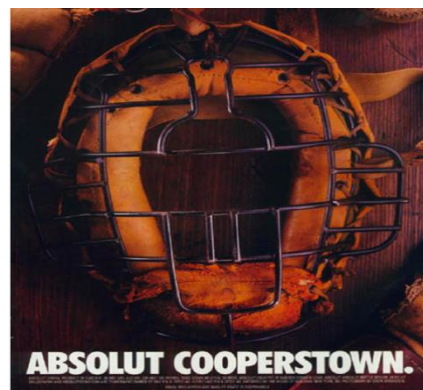


Figure 8

The Composing

As always, the image of the bottle is central in figures 7 and 8 but here it’s a composition of various elements. Figure 7 has the hands of baseball player on the bottle. Figure 8 has the baseball helmet as the main figure with the shape of the bottle on visor. The composition is clearly indicative of the love for baseball by American people.

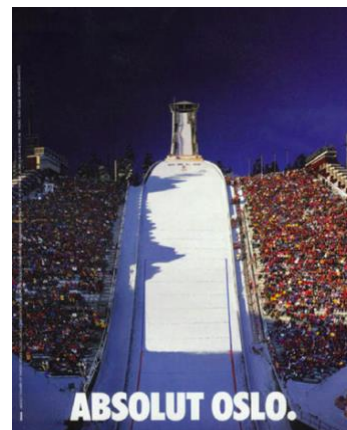
The Positioning

Both the images are close shots and at eye-level, thus exploiting the love of American public for the game. The images invoke the closeness of the receiver to the image. The colours are natural and modality is high with a clear focus on the game and the bottle, which can be received as the love for game or the love of Vodka by the ball game players.

The captions, “Absolut Play Ball and Absolut Cooperstown” are significant as each tells a history, at one level, and encourages the receivers to indulge in the beauty of the game and drink, at another level. the receiver can be imagined as dreamers.

The Conditioning

The cultural and social coding is high in both the ads. Figure 7 was released for the 1995 Major league Baseball and figure 8 has a history attached to it. Cooperstown has the largest Baseball museum in USA. So, in these two ads, the producer targeting and assuming the recipients as intelligent and not just passive receivers of the information.



4. Absolut Cities

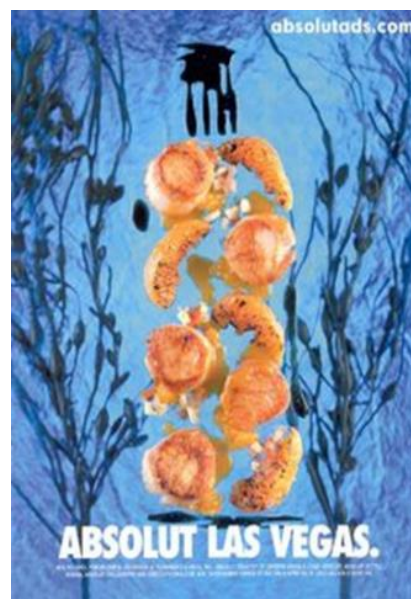
The most popular part of Absolut Vodka campaign is the location ads. These ads are series of cities specified ads.

The Composing

Here the bottle is made up of other elements. It can be seen as communicating all the pleasures that food can offer. Of course the image of the bottle still holds its central position with a very subtle shape, in the form of shrimps and sauce as the cap.

The Positioning

Here the producer is playing with the popular image of Las Vegas and showing that city has more to offer than just being the Casino City. The eye level angle and the medium shot represent the closeness and association it can have with the receivers.



The caption “Absolut Las Vegas” highlights a redeeming feature of a city. This city is all about excess and that extends to shrimps (an exotic food) and probably invokes an elitist attitude.

The Conditioning

The focus on the shrimps with vodka emphasize the fact that mature drinkers always have something to nibble on with a drink, so this visual logic makes sense. Vodka is also famous to spice up the food so the image is justified as a flavor enhancer in the making of shrimps.

This ad maintains the same composition and position as the others. But socially it has a different significance. It is not just about Oslo being a cold city; it signifies the event of Winter Olympics and position of Oslo in holding the winter sports.

This ad has the combination of various elements with the shape of guitar as central figure and bottle can be subtly seen under the chords. The caption “Absolut Madrid” shows the music and festivities associated with the city, thus making it a highly coded cultural ad.

The eye level angle in the “Absolut London” constructs a balance of power between represented and interactive participants. Additionally,



the “bobby” next to the door shows the sense of security rather than power and dominance. The medium shot represents a normal social distance, like at an all-day situation on the street.

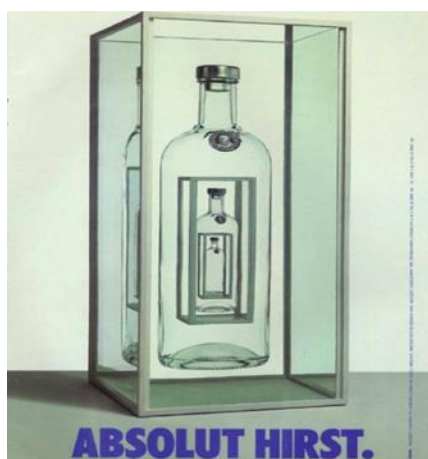
5. Absolut Artist

They did many artist specific ads, which further strengthen their position in the market as art-lovers and art-promoters and not just alcohol-promoters. The following ad is about Hirst, famous British artist who was concerned with the idea of life and death. In this ad on of his sculptures is used to focus on the iconic bottle, hence reversing the concept of life and death, and maybe implicating that Absolut is part of every phase of human life

Absolut Stories

Then they started playing with shapes. Every ad played on some image where the shape of the bottle is always main focus.

The low angle causes a position of lying on the street, what constructs a higher power, respectively a dominance of the depicted participants, gained by symbols like black leather boots, leash and bulldog. The close shot evokes a high involvement – the viewer is “intimate” with the dog, what might represent the feelings of danger and brutality. This picture is rather a demand and the viewer can be seen as a goal of the participant. Low contrast and dark colors evoke a scary atmosphere, which seems to be unreal. All these images play upon some cultural or literary story.



DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Absolut Vodka ad campaigns are undoubtedly the biggest and most successful campaigns in the history of advertisement for more than 20 years. In the beginning the ads were just the symbols of a person in his own world. But now the campaign is all about the world and people in it. This transition is brilliant. Today Absolut is not about America or Sweden; it has reached to the apex where people can relate to it globally. Current ads encompass the larger pictures. It is a world that is today and what we perceive we want it to be like. Another reason for this shift is to say that the world is definitely beyond America. It is to show that there is a homogeneity even in the vast diversity that exist in today's world. As humans of this global village, every human shares some common agendas (homogeneity), which can be either a fight against hunger or diseases or corruption. Continuing on the same lines, Absolut ad campaign addresses certain very universal issues and in that sense it is trying to build a global campaign – an idea of what the Absolut world would be like.

The first problem in completing this work was to select few ads from thousands which could have global interpretations. Secondly randomly chosen ads would not have helped in the analysis or establishing the universality of the campaign.

My first experience of seeing these ads filled me with enthusiasm and admiration, but at the same time many questions popped in my head. Foremost is, why the masses are not affected by the way these ads are designed with a meaning and message?

From a layman's view it can be said that TBWA and the company have successfully brought their product into the limelight; not just in America or Sweden – but all the around the world with localized interpretations but the same idea. Their ambition to globalize the product has reached its peak to exploit the business but there is no effort or ambition to use their power of creativity in any other way. Whether we believe it or not but these ads are working towards the approach of money making with alcoholism, which by no means is a healthy activity for masses. Another view point can be, one can also say that Absolut tries to inject alcohol into every part of social life; they use elements of nature, press them into the shape of bottle and brand it with every intention of selling a beverage which is comparable to drugs. In the same vein it can be said that alcohol can hardly be eliminated from today's society. Furthermore, it is the function of advertising to interest people and by looking at masses of rather annoying ads, Absolut shows a welcome alternation.

Finally, we can conclude by saying that Absolut has employed ingenious advertising techniques which have engaged the producers and receivers into meaning-making and meaning-finding. The focus is on creativity, culture and society, thus making the bottle a cult-object rather than an alcoholic drink. Visual elements as depicted in the ads strongly affect the audience, as they can relate or connect to the product. Certain ads transport them to some happy memories while others create yearning. So we can easily say that the message through these ads is conveyed successfully as an alcoholic drink becomes the part of celebrations, happiness and memories rather than the source of addiction.

discourse (which is indeed the only discourse which offers a reason for publishing their ads) by stressing the meanings of creativity and culture and constructing this way their product as a cult-object, no longer as an alcoholic beverage.

The understanding of how these processes of changing and influencing discourses might be not enough to formulate a clear critique to 'attack' these strategies of advertisement, it stays questionable if it is really possible in this case. But it should show what possible changes of meanings can apply and what dangers are connected to it.

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