

# Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Two Digital Advertising Images from Facebook

Rani Saladri<sup>1</sup>, Mousumi Dash<sup>2</sup>, Smita Dash<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Siksha 'O' Anusandhan Deemed to be University, Bhubaneswar, Odisha

<sup>3</sup>RVS College of Engineering and Technology, Jamshedpur, Jharkhand

E-mail- <sup>2</sup>mousumidash@soa.ac.in, <sup>3</sup>drmousumidash16@gmail.com

## ABSTRACT

Multimodal discourse analysis is an approach that studies communication in all its manifestations. This paper studies two advertising images from Facebook by applying the theory of Kress and Van Leeuwen on visual grammar to demonstrate the semiotic potential of the images. The genres of advertisement to which the images belong have been examined for their representational and interactive dimensions in order to explore their symbolic attributes that contribute to their social representations. It has been elaborated how the identities and relationships between the viewer and participants have the capacity of generating a desire for the products that are being advertised. The higher modality of advertisements create a sense of belief that the attributes of models are real and achievable. The findings support the theory of visual grammar and feature the importance of visual communication in the domain of advertisement

## Keywords

Multimodal discourse, Grammar of visual design, visual semiotics, visual modality, visual language

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## Introduction

Discourse analysis has come a long way since the time it emerged in the 1970's. Earlier the focus was predominantly on language and its forms as opposed to other modes of communication. Today by discourse analysis we not only refer to speech or a written text but also to all other forms of human expressions that mean something. The study of human communication - the way it exists in the world - inevitably includes speech, images, videos, gestures, etc. furthering the gamut of discourse analysis to be known as multimodal discourse analysis. As pioneers in visual semiotic theory, Kress and van Leeuwen have given shape to the study of images through their theory of visual grammar. Images, according to Kress and van Leeuwen are linguistic forms. Just as language is 'verbalized' in the mind similarly, in visual communication an image is 'visualized'. A painting, a photo, a diagram or a map are examples of how visual language is used. The structural elements comprise of the colour, shape, space, angle, proportion, position, pattern, dimension, direction and motion.

## Research Question and Objective

This paper shall analyze two advertising images through the application of visual grammar theoretical framework which Kress and van Leeuwen proposed. The first section of the paper will present a description of the grammar of visual images by examining its constituents. The subsequent part consists of an analysis of the advertisements that has been undertaken on the basis of the following points:

1. Representation of the people in the advertisement.
2. The types of relationships the viewer and the participants are likely to have.
3. In which way could these relationships be of related to the genre of advertisement?

Aforesaid points base themselves on Halliday's systematic functional linguistic theory which basically states that all the means of semiotics and visual design included, has three primary functions. Point number one and two investigate the experiential and interpersonal functions of images while the last point explores their textual function. The upcoming section offers a brief idea on social semiotics by Halliday's social semiotics and its impact on visual grammar, a theory proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen.

The paper attempts to compare two advertising images from Facebook by applying Kress and van Leeuwen's interactive and representational dimensions from their theory of visual grammar. So far such an analysis of such specific nature had not been attempted with Facebook advertisements. This is suggestive of a research gap in the field of multimodal discourse analysis and to address this research gap is the objective of the paper.

## Review of Literature

Kress and van Leeuwen's visual communication has been largely influenced by Michael Halliday's social semiotics. Language, according to Halliday, is an act of meaning which can be understood from two semantic perspectives:

- A general semiotic system - a set of semantic options available to a speaker
  - A specific text - the product of the semiotic system
- In his book 'Language as a Semiotic System', Halliday explicitly states the three purposes or 'meta-functions' of language. The first meta-function is the experiential or ideational function which showcases the speaker's worldly experience. For example, 'grass is green' represents the speaker knowledge about the world and the right way of expressing it. The second meta-function is known as interpersonal function which describes how language is used in social interactions and the individual identities.

Questioning, issuing a command, giving information, requesting something, etc. are all examples of interpersonal function of language. The third meta-function is the textual function which connects the ideas about the world into meaningful and relevant texts. In the words of Jewitt and Oyama, this metafunction “brings together the individual bits of representation and interaction into the kind of wholes we recognize as specific kinds of text or communicative event” (Jewitt & Oyama, 1990, p. 140). Kress and Leeuwen argue that these metafunctions apply to visual modes as much as they apply to other semiotic modes. Hence, their theoretical framework is built on Halliday’s idea of social semiotics. Jewitt and Oyama, however, are of the opinion that the framework single handedly does not “offer all that is needed for the sociological interpretation of images” (Jewitt & Oyama, 1990, p. 154). The sections below summarize the components of the framework.

### Representational Dimension

The representational dimension originates from Halliday’s ideational metafunction which characterizes the relationship between the objects around us have with us. It has two processes in it: the narrative process and the conceptual process. Kress and van Leeuwen have also mentioned two kinds of participants in their framework: representative participants and interactive participants.

**The narrative process.** In this process the participants the image has connect via a line called vector created by the components in the image. Kress and Leeuwen believe “When participants are connected by a vector they are represented as doing something to or for each other” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 56). Vectors indicate directions and since participants are interlinked by the lines that are unseen, the viewer recognises the possibility of an interaction between them. The ‘Actor’ is the one who creates the vector and the receiver of the vector is called the ‘Goal’. Processes have been distinguished as action and reactional based on the vector types along with the number and various types of participants in an image.

**Action processes.** The Actor of an image is the one who creates a vector and thus, invariably causes an Action Process. This process is defined by Kress and van Leeuwen as the one in which “the Actor is the participant from which the vector emanates...or forms the vector” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 63). Any image that has a single participant in it, that participant becomes the Actor by default. Such an image is known as a Non-transactional image. A Non-transactional image lacks a Goal, meaning the vectors are not “aimed at anyone or anything” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 63). In case of the existence of a vector and a Goal in an image, the action becomes an Event. Finally, the process is known as transactional when a Goal and an Actor are linked by means of a vector.

**Reactional processes.** In this process “the vector is formed by an eyeline, by the direction of the glance of one or more of the represented participants” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 67). There is reactor and a phenomena. The one who does the looking is the reactor while “the participant at whom or which the reactor is looking” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 67) is the phenomenon. The reactor

constructs the vector by gazing at the passive participant which is the phenomenon.

**The conceptual process.** Unlike narrative processes, the conceptual representations are fixed as they lack any vectors, have an element of persistence and depict their participants in a very general sense. They represent a fixed concept which is in contrast with narrative process that deals with action. Conceptual process is concerned with the representation of ideas in an image. For example, participants in charts, scientific diagrams and tree structures can be analyzed, classified or defined. This paper concerns itself with two kinds of conceptual processes: analytical and symbolic.

Analytical process portrays a part-whole relationship between the visual elements. The structure is made up of two components namely, ‘Possessive Attributes’ (referring to the segments) and ‘Carrier’ (referring the whole). An example of this is the map of a country where the whole country is the Carrier and the individual states which are labelled in the image or in a caption are the possessive attributes. On the contrary, symbolic process is all about the identity of the participant represented in the image. This process has been divided into symbolic suggestive and symbolic attributive. In a symbolic attributive process, an image can comprise of the two: a ‘Carrier’, the identity or meaning of whom lies in its relation with the ‘Symbolic Attribute’ which gives meaning to the ‘Carrier’. Symbolic Suggestive Process usually has the Carrier as its only participant whose meaning is represented in a different manner. For example, in a symbolic suggestive image the colors can be brightened, subdued or blended in order to form a mood. They do not usually represent a particular instant in time but are rather focused on creating an everlasting feeling.

### The Interactive Dimension

The interpersonal function by Halliday states that the creator of an image and its observer tend to have an interaction. Kress and van Leeuwen are of the view that social meanings are encrypted into the images by their producers by making the represented participant gaze in a certain manner, maintaining the viewer and participant distance and judging the angle from which the viewer would see the participant.

**The gaze.** In images vectors form when the participants look at the viewer and both of them connect at a level that is imaginary. Moreover, such images have ‘demands’ too: “The participant’s gaze demands something from the viewer, demands that the viewer enter into some kind of imaginary relation with him or her” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). The kind of relationship depends on the participant’s gesture or facial expression(s) or (or both). The images wherein the participants represented do not have a direct eye contact with the viewer, are called ‘offer’ images since they offer “the represented participants to the viewer as items of information, objects of contemplation, impersonally, as though they were specimens in a display case” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 119).

**Social distance.** Between the represented participant and the viewer there can be a number of suggestive relationships. Kress and van Leeuwen elaborate these relationships Kress

and van Leeuwen by using Edward T. Hall's theory of 'proxemics' as reference in order to illustrate the manner in which various social relationships are identified by various fields of vision in images. Hall is of the belief that intimacy depends on the proximity the participant and the viewer have. Shorter the distance, more the intimacy.

**Angle.** Angle or point of view is an alternative way of studying the relations that the represented participants and the viewer have. According to Kress and van Leeuwen there are two angles: Horizontal and Vertical. The former is defined as "a function of the relation between the frontal plane of the image-producer and the frontal plane of the represented participants" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Whether or not the image-producer and viewer are engaged with the participants is defined by means of the angle. The front angle suggests association while an oblique angle suggests dissociation. On the other hand, the vertical angle can be linked to power. If the viewer sees the participant from an angle which is high, the viewer is said to be more powerful. If the participant is at a lower angle than the viewer, the former is shown as power holder. However, if the picture is at eye level both of them are considered equal with no power difference whatsoever.

**Modality.** As the fourth structure of interactive dimension, modality is about how viewers access realism in images. Modality judgements have been defined as "social and dependent on what is considered real in a social group for which the representation is primarily intended" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 156). The credibility or truthfulness of an image is identified by modality markers. These include color saturation, color differentiation, color modulation, contextualization, representation, illumination and brightness. The realism of an image, however, depends on its context or perspective. The areas of representation - abstract, scientific, sensory and naturalistic - have their distinct coding orientations and therefore, have several descriptions of high modality. They also give the example of blue prints which in standard domain are considered having low modality, a naturalistic code orientation. In the technological coding orientation, however, they are viewed as having high modality since they are effective for their purposes.

### The Compositional Dimension

The compositional dimension tells the manner in which the representational and interactive components are related and how they are assimilated to form a holistic view. Under this dimension parts can be analyzed based on their salience, information value and framing. In this paper these structures will not be elaborated upon as the advertising images will not be assessed based on this dimension.

## Methods

The advertisements chosen for study are carousel Facebook ads sponsored by a company named 'Jaypore' based in India and its products include jewelry, accessories, home décor, apparel, vintage items and many more. These advertisements appeared in Facebook on 26.10.2019 at 1.30 PM in a series out of which two have been selected for

analysis. Each of the advertisements has a female model decked in jewelry for sale.

An attempt to analyze the advertisements will be carried out based on the following three points: 1) manner(s) in which the participants have been represented; 2) implied relationships between the represented participants and the viewer; 3) and lastly, ways in which these relationships are relevant to the advertisement genre. The analysis of these two points will be as per the Kress and van Leeuwen's interactive and representational dimensions. The last point is going to rely on advertising and communication theory for its analysis.

## Findings

### Participants' Representation

Fig. 1 shows a single represented participant: a female model. She can be seen smiling by looking at her finger ring. The process is narrative since the participant is doing something. The lack of action determines the process as reactional in which "the vector is formed by an eyeline, by the direction of the glance of one or more of the represented participants" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 67). The participant seems to be looking down to her fingers, especially the large antique finger ring and the smile is the reaction to it. The vector emanating from the eye-line goes not the viewer but to the finger ring which can be identified as the Phenomenon. Hence, the represented participant here is the Reactor. In addition, the process is transactional due to the presence of both the Reactor and the Phenomenon.

Fig. 2 also has only represented participant who unlike the previous one does not look at any object. This is also a case of narrative process and this image too shall be considered having a reactional process due to the absence of action. The reactor, a female model, does not form a vector as gaze does not rest upon any object although she is wearing a lot of jewelry. This makes the process non-transactional due to the lack of a phenomenon.

### The Viewer and Participants' Relationship

**The gaze.** In Fig. 1 the gaze of the female model is directed towards the finger ring and not at the viewer. The viewer as per Kress and van Leeuwen becomes a "invisible on looker" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 116). Fig. 1, therefore, can be viewed as an 'offer' image in which the participant offers itself as an item of information (the ring: product available for purchase) as well as a piece of deliberation. The missing eye contact enables the viewer to perceive the participant in a dispassionate manner as someone who is preoccupied in her own world musing over a finger ring.

In Fig. 2 the model makes a direct eye contact with the viewer and 'demands' to get into a fictional relationship with her. With the help of Table 1 we can establish the kind of relation she demands from the viewer. The participant is clearly seen smiling at the viewer and the relationship here is one of social affinity. The image-producer wants the viewer to connect with the participant as someone who is attracted or amused by her.

**Social distance.** The participant in Fig. 1 is at an 'intimate' distance as her face is really close and the rest of her body

parts such as shoulders and torso, relevant to this dimension, are not shown. The background is dark and there no space above or below the participant which implies that viewer and the participant are in an intimate relation. The image producer wants the viewer to observe the participant without any inhibitions and feel what she might be feeling by wearing the ring.

In Fig. 2 the model displays a 'close personal distance' since her shoulders are visible too. By doing so the image producer aims to showcase the types of jewelry the model has been decked up with. The relation here is also 'intimate' except the viewer gets to see more than just the face of the participant and have a better idea about the jewelry products made by the company. The viewer also witnesses an overall look created by the image producer in terms of the right kind of clothing for the jewelry to match.

**Modality.** In both the images the colors are soft and the depth is natural. In the Fig. 1 the representation modality marker is higher than Fig. 2. Illumination and brightness markers are more or less the same in both the images. The marker of contextualization is does not apply as the background is plain. While the lack of contextualization, non-vibrant colors and lesser depth lower the modality of both the images, the markers of representation, illumination and brightness are rather high. As a result, both the images seem to have higher modality thus, fulfilling the intention of the image producer of making the viewers desire to look like the participants.

### The Relevance of the Above Relationships in Advertising

The analysis of images and their relation with their viewers based on the parameters of stated above indicate that the participants are sort of desirable symbolic identities who according to Dyer , "are usually considered to be mythic rather than real" (Dyer, 1982, p. 116). Advertisers promote these attitudes of the models because they strongly believe the models do justice to what Dyer has to say in this regard, "The meaning of one thing is transferred to or made interchangeable with another quality, whose value attaches itself to the product" (Dyer, 1982, pp. 116-117). Many potential customers or buyers identify with these images and the higher modality of advertisements creates a sense of belief that the attributes of models are real and achievable. All these factors taken together lead to higher sales.

### Conclusion

The paper aims to validate the application of the theory of Kress and Leeuwen to study the two advertising images. The advertisements were examined on representational and interactive dimensions and the results state that 1) the participants represented are believed to possess a superior personality with desirable attributes 2) the bonding formed between the viewer and the participants seem to be in favor of the represented identities 3) the identities and relationships implied in the advertisements have the potential to endorse the products displayed.

### Scope and Limitations

The contribution of the paper is largely methodological as it demonstrates the use of multimodal discourse analysis on two Facebook advertisements. It shows how such an analysis can reveal hidden meanings upon examining the multimodal components. It also indicates how the participants in the images come across as ideals of some sort; someone viewers can look up to. The participants in a way urge their viewers to recreate their look. Thus, it may be safe to infer that these advertisements sell a product or products along with a concept.

The paper shares the idea of using multimodal discourse analysis to study Facebook advertisements and the research conducted in the due process lays foundation for future work.

The paper's limitations rest upon the fact that it is focused on demonstrating the process of analysis and how the above framework may be used. It has only taken into account two advertising images from Facebook amongst a plethora of advertisements. Hence, the results of the study may not be universally applicable. Also, it is important to note that the interpretations are subjective in nature since our perceptions as researchers are invariably affected by our social situation and historical background. The same approach when chosen by other researchers may showcase a different perception of multimodality.

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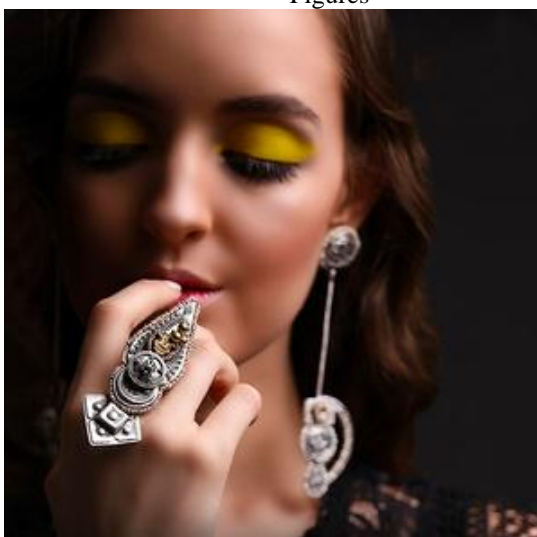
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**Figure 2.** An Advertisement by Jaypore from Facebook. Jaypore is a craft-design based product(s) making company.

Figures



**Figure 1.** An Advertisement by Jaypore from Facebook. Jaypore is a craft-design based product(s) making company