

Implicit communication and cultural symbols in advertising: an applied analysis from the perspective of media semiotics

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Abstract. Implicit communication in advertising goes beyond the mere transmission of product information; it subtly engages the audience's emotions, values, and sense of social identity through the strategic use of cultural symbols, thereby influencing consumer behavior. This paper aims to explore the mechanisms of implicit communication in advertising and its impact on consumer behavior, highlighting the critical role of cultural symbols in the communication process. By analyzing how advertisements skillfully employ symbols to resonate with the audience's emotions, values, and sense of belonging, this study reveals that advertising is not merely a vehicle for information dissemination but also a form of deep cultural and social exchange. Drawing on the theoretical framework of media semiotics, the paper provides analytical support for uncovering the hidden cultural meanings behind advertisements, offering insights into how symbols construct emotional resonance and social identity, ultimately shaping consumer decision-making.

Keywords: implicit communication, cultural symbols, applied analysis

1. Introduction

As a crucial tool of modern social communication, advertising primarily aims to persuade consumers to purchase products or services. However, its role extends far beyond this functional purpose. Through the construction and transmission of symbols, advertising exerts a profound influence on audience perceptions of consumption, values, and cultural identity. Traditional advertising often employs explicit communication—directly conveying product functions, features, and pricing. Yet, with the continual advancement of media technologies, advertising has evolved from a solely explicit mode to incorporate implicit communication. Unlike explicit communication, implicit communication does not directly showcase the product. Instead, it subtly influences the audience through symbols, emotions, and underlying cultural values [1].

Implicit communication leverages covert symbols, latent information, and cultural connotations that infiltrate the audience's cognition and emotions in imperceptible ways. These symbols represent not only the functional aspects of the product but also embody social and cultural meanings and values. For instance, advertisements often use specific visual and linguistic symbols to convey cultural messages that go beyond the product itself. Although these symbols may not be directly related to the product's performance, they align with the audience's emotions and cultural background, triggering latent needs and a sense of identity, and thereby subtly shaping consumer decisions [2].

In this process, cultural symbols serve as vital carriers of implicit communication. These symbols encapsulate the values, emotional tones, and identity systems of specific social groups. In advertising, such symbols can reach into the inner world of the audience, evoking aspirations for particular lifestyles, social status, or cultural belonging. For example, a luxury brand advertisement that features elegant urban landscapes and refined character portrayals as background symbols can implicitly convey cultural messages of exclusivity, success, and distinction, thus shaping a sense of social identity [3].

This paper seeks to examine how implicit communication in advertising influences audience psychology and behavior through the use of cultural symbols. Employing the theoretical framework of media semiotics, this study analyzes how advertisements skillfully integrate multiple symbolic layers—visual, linguistic, and emotional—to conduct deep-level implicit communication. These symbols not only affect consumers' purchasing decisions but also shape their brand perception, emotional attachment, and cultural affiliation, thereby maximizing the effectiveness of advertising [4].

2. The application of media semiotics in advertising analysis

2.1. Theoretical foundations of media semiotics

Semiotics, as a discipline, originates from linguistics. Its core focus lies in the function and mechanisms of signs, revealing how signs act as carriers of meaning in the process of communication. Ferdinand de Saussure proposed that a sign consists of two components: the signifier (the physical form of the sign, such as words or images) and the signified (the meaning represented by the sign). Roland Barthes further developed this theory by asserting that signs not only carry literal meanings but also embed cultural meanings. The interpretation of a sign is not confined to its surface form; rather, it is closely linked to cultural context and social structures [5].

One of the key concepts in Barthes' semiotic theory is the duality of signs. The denotative meaning of a sign is direct and explicit, typically referring to tangible, perceivable objects or information. In contrast, the connotative or cultural meaning represents the implicit, deeper significance transmitted through cultural context and social identity. For example, the depiction of a luxury brand wristwatch in an advertisement may literally show the time, but culturally, it connotes symbols of wealth, success, and refined taste. Advertising precisely relies on this transmission of implicit cultural symbols to influence the audience's latent emotions and behavior [6].

Media semiotics does not merely focus on the superficial forms of signs; it places particular emphasis on the social and cultural background, as well as the ideological systems embedded in signs. The scope of semiotic analysis has extended far beyond linguistics and now plays a critical role in decoding the communicative functions and mechanisms of signs in media such as advertising, film, news, and popular culture [7].

2.2. Implicit communication in advertising

Implicit communication is a key strategy in advertising. Rather than conveying product features and functions through direct description, it relies on subtle cultural symbols, emotional undertones, and latent messages to influence the audience's perception and behavior. In such advertising, consumers are not explicitly told, "Purchasing this product will elevate your social status." Instead, this message is implicitly communicated through cultural symbols and emotional resonance [8]. For instance, a luxury automobile commercial may not detail the car's technical specifications, but instead showcases the confident demeanor of the driver in elite settings and presents narratives centered around a luxurious lifestyle, thereby indirectly signaling the vehicle's premium status.

The defining characteristics of implicit communication lie in its indirectness and latency. It constructs scenarios that align with the audience's cultural identity through symbolic representation, thereby evoking emotional responses—often at the subconscious level. Examples include family scenes, gatherings of friends, or romantic atmospheres in advertisements, which resonate with the viewers' emotional needs for belonging, friendship, or love. Through such implicit messaging, advertising not only stimulates consumer desire but also subtly shapes their values, social identity, and even lifestyle choices [9].

2.3. The application of media semiotics in advertising analysis

Media semiotics offers a powerful theoretical framework for advertising analysis. Through semiotic analysis, researchers can explore how cultural symbols in advertising interact with the audience's cultural background, emotional needs, and social cognition, thereby revealing how implicit communication influences consumer perception and behavior. This analytical approach emphasizes that every detail in an advertisement is meaningful—not only in terms of conveying functional product information, but more importantly in terms of the deeper social and cultural meanings embedded within [10].

The symbols used in advertising are not merely tools for information delivery. They often fulfill deeper roles, such as shaping cultural identity, forging emotional connections, and constructing social relationships. Through the multifaceted functions of symbols, advertising elevates the consumer-product relationship to the level of emotional and cultural identification. For example, a luxury brand advertisement may not simply promote a handbag; by portraying a successful woman, it conveys cultural symbols such as "taste," "independence," and "social status," thereby eliciting consumers' identification with and aspiration toward a particular social identity [11].

3. Analysis of implicit communication and cultural symbol application in advertising

3.1. Mechanisms of implicit communication in advertising

Symbolic Metaphors and Representational Meanings: Advertising often employs metaphorical symbols to associate a product or brand with specific socio-cultural connotations, thereby generating strong emotional resonance. For instance, certain brands incorporate natural landscapes (such as forests and lakes) or culturally charged symbols (such as Eastern motifs or Western notions of freedom) to implicitly link themselves with values like "nature," "health," and "environmental sustainability" [12]. The use of

such symbols not only refines the way information is conveyed but also subconsciously fosters brand identification among audiences. For example, a brand might use lush green mountains and clear waters as the backdrop to symbolically express its commitment to ecological and health-related values, prompting consumers to associate the product with these positive ideals during the decision-making process [13].

Emotional Communication: Emotional communication is a strategy that appeals to consumers' psychology through implicit emotional symbols. Scenes and situations depicted in advertisements—such as family reunions, joyful moments, or friendly gatherings—convey emotional messages of “warmth,” “intimacy,” and “togetherness,” establishing subconscious emotional bonds between viewers and the brand [14]. This emotional connection can enhance brand recognition and foster consumer loyalty. For example, an advertisement featuring a cozy family gathering may evoke the viewer's own cherished family memories, thereby creating emotional dependency and identification with the brand, which ultimately facilitates purchasing decisions [15].

Use of Social Identity Symbols: Brands often construct specific social identity symbols to implicitly communicate their values and status. By showcasing attributes like “success,” “freedom,” “independence” and “individuality,” many brands aim to resonate with the aspirations of their target audiences. These symbols frequently represent idealized lifestyles or social classes, and through them, advertisements build subconscious loyalty to the brand [16]. For instance, a brand might portray a dynamic young professional, subtly positioning the product as a symbol of success, thereby appealing to consumers with similar life goals and strengthening the brand's allure through identity-based resonance [17].

3.2. Construction and use of cultural symbols

Cultural Meanings of Visual Symbols: Visual elements in advertising serve as primary carriers of cultural symbols. Colors, character design, clothing, and scene settings in advertisements all convey rich cultural meanings. Specific colors and images can trigger associations with particular social strata or lifestyles. For example, luxury brand advertisements often employ noble golds, classic blacks, and exquisite design features to signify “social status” and “success.” Through refined settings and detailed costume design, such advertisements not only project a sense of material luxury but also construct a symbolic “high-end lifestyle.” These visual cues foster subconscious admiration and aspiration among consumers, ultimately influencing their consumption decisions [18].

Cultural Implications of Linguistic Symbols: Language in advertising goes beyond the delivery of basic product information. Through tone, vocabulary selection, and stylistic choices, it conveys particular cultural values and lifestyle attitudes. For instance, contemporary and fashionable advertisements tend to use concise, powerful language with a vibrant tone, thereby expressing a spirit of innovation and modernity. Technology-oriented ads often include technical jargon and data analysis, emphasizing not only product functionality but also projecting a “professional” and “high-tech” cultural identity. By employing linguistic symbols in this way, advertisements not only shape perceptions of modernity or sophistication but also subtly influence consumer attitudes toward the brand and product. As an essential part of the symbolic system, language plays a significant role in constructing cultural identity and brand image.

3.3. Case studies

3.3.1. Case 1: cultural symbolism in automotive advertising

An analysis of a well-known automobile brand's commercial reveals how it utilizes symbols such as “speed,” “freedom,” and “power” to align with modern urban lifestyles through implicit communication. Scenes of fast-moving cars, sweeping roads, and open, unrestrained environments tap into urban audiences' desires for freedom and independence. This form of implicit communication highlights not only the vehicle's functionality but also the lifestyle and social identity associated with ownership, thereby capturing consumer interest and motivating purchasing behavior [19].

3.3.2. Case 2: emotional symbols in beverage advertising

In a beverage commercial, the brand constructs an emotional atmosphere by depicting symbols of family, friendship, and celebration. The close interactions among family members and gatherings of friends revolve around the consumption of the brand's product. These scenes convey messages of “sharing” and “warmth”, touching on the viewers' emotional needs. When consumers watch such advertisements, they may recall fond memories with loved ones and, as a result, develop emotional attachment to the brand. This approach not only enhances brand intimacy but also subtly promotes consumer identification and purchasing behavior [20].

3.3.3. Case 3: social identity symbols in luxury advertising

Luxury advertisements provide another classic example of how high-end scenes, exquisite design, and class-based symbolism communicate brand values and social status. Through detailed product displays and luxurious settings, such ads not only convey

product quality but also symbolically suggest cultural values such as taste and prestige. Symbols of social hierarchy—such as elite events or celebrity endorsements—further strengthen consumer identification with the brand’s status. This method of implicit communication stimulates consumer desire while also constructing a high-end brand image, making the product a symbol of social recognition [16].

4. Conclusion

Implicit communication in advertising goes far beyond the simple transmission of product information. Through the strategic use of cultural symbols, advertisements engage deeply with audiences’ emotions, values, and sense of social identity, thereby influencing their consumption behaviors. Beyond showcasing product features, advertisements convey profound socio-cultural meanings through subtle symbolic messaging. Emotional symbols—such as family, friendship, and love—appeal to core emotional needs, while social identity symbols help consumers reinforce their societal roles through brand affiliation.

Media semiotics provides an effective theoretical tool for analyzing the deeper communicative mechanisms of advertising. From a semiotic perspective, it becomes possible to decode the multiple layers of meaning embedded in advertisements and to explore how these meanings intersect with cultural backgrounds and social contexts to convey specific messages. Media semiotics not only aids in understanding the cultural dimensions underlying advertising but also helps identify the aims and effects of implicit communication strategies. By applying this analytical framework, we gain a clearer view of advertising’s communicative logic and its latent socio-cultural impact, thus enabling a more precise interpretation of how advertisements plant the seeds of consumption in the minds of audiences.

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