

Visual Rhetoric, Ads, and the Society's Radiograph

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Abstract. *The visual elements that belong to a brand's identity represent more than just a simple illustration of a designer's vision. They communicate messages, they structure and present profound data to the public about that certain brand (product, company, institution, etc.), but also about the society in general. Through this paper, we propose to make an analysis of the visual language used by some companies on the Romanian market, in different time frames: the interwar period, the World War II period, and the communist and post-communist periods. The research undertaking shall take shape through the "parsing" of the ads present in magazines issued in the periods subjected to the analysis. The visual rhetoric, as a means of reading images, will guide us in discovering the way a brand's personality is conceived, as well as the way in which the society as a whole is X-rayed, through the decipherment of this communication unit. Our study is an attempt of mapping the Romanian society, underlining the ideological changes, from an advertising perspective.*

Keywords: Visual language; Visual rhetoric; Images; Ads.

“The visual language unleashed the whole power of communication”
(Robert Horn, 1998)

Literature review

“Advertising is not just business expense attained in the hopes of moving the merchandizing off the shelves, but more of an integral part of modern culture. The advertising creation implies stringing and transforming a large gamut of symbols and ideas” (Leiss *et al.*, 1990).

Several theoreticians from visual domains launched the idea of the visual culture’s contribution to the emergence of new cognitive capacities (Horn 1998; Chabris and Kosslyn 2005). Robert Horn affirms that visual language has the potential of growing the “bandwidth” between people, the capacity of understanding and of synthesizing more efficiently large quantities of new information. It has this capacity over individuals, groups, and organizations (Horn 2001). Images build mental maps for social, economical, and cultural realities. This is the idea presented by Lima (2011) in the *Visual Complexity: Mapping Patterns of Information* book.

Worth mentioning is the idea according to which the reality exclusively presented through advertising images is evaluated more positively, compared to the situation in which the advertising message is presented only through words (Andrews 2011). Andrews is referring to an empirical study made by Hung and Wyer, in 2008. The results of the study were published in the *The impact of implicit theories on responses to problem-solving print advertisements* volume.

The literature sheds light on the way the public interprets and assigns significance to the images from the ads. Callow and Schiffman (2004) argue that, when in front of an advertising message presented in a visual form, the public uses contextual information to develop meanings for the message. These meanings are extracted from: a) the explicit information contained in the advertisement (the copy or the natural interpretation of the message); b) the implicit information derived from situational factors (the category to which the product belongs, the brand, the type of magazine where the ads appear; c) the implicit information internalized by the person who sees the message (personal and cultural factors).

Viewing the phenomenon of advertising rhetoric from a diachronic perspective, McGuire (2000) affirms that, for most of the 20th century, rhetoric was somewhat stigmatized by social sciences researchers, being considered nothing more than a cheap trick to catch the audience’s attention. However, in the same time period, rhetoric became increasingly more popular in print ads, especially those in visual format (Andrews 2001).

Phillips and McQuarrie (2002) examined the continuity and change in the advertisements style in three renowned magazines from USA, *Sports Illustrated*,

Time, and *Good Housekeeping*, between 1954 and 1999. Based on this study, the two authors reached the conclusion that the analyzed period is characterized by the central presence of the discourse produced in the mass-media texts. The content evaluation showed that rhetoric figures were present in the advertisements during the whole time frame, and in all three magazines.

Historically speaking, the year 1919 marks the beginning of the interwar, as well as the beginning of the Bauhaus movement in Europe. Architect Walter Gropius founded the Bauhaus school, with the goal of connecting the arts to the industry (Bergstörn 2008). The Bauhaus school made the ads design to be functional, simple, lacking decorative elements. The school was disbanded when the Nazis took over Germany, and the teachers were either imprisoned or moving across the ocean.

The beginning of the Second World War, in 1940, also brought some changes to the advertising industry. Propaganda was used to control all communication means, from radio to posters, including printed ads. The Axis used a minimalistic style in their prints, specific fonts, and they relied on images (Adams 2014).

Adams (2014) classifies the period between 1946 and 1960 as the Post War Optimism. Europe found itself in ruins after war, but the American industry was flourishing, turning America into the world's dominating economic power. They gave the standards in terms of graphic style used in creative industries, and Europe had adapted to it.

In Romania, the year 1948 represented a crossroads, because that was the moment when everything turned into a systematic policy of "communizing" the society, under the appearance of legitimacy of the new legislative forum, and of the communist laws. From that moment on, the communist regime triggered the action of nationalizing the economic industries and of agriculture collectivization, and the political and cultural fields faced a savage repression against the representatives of political and intellectual elite, along with a program of Soviet culture implementation (Georgiu 2007).

The new wave design, as well as the rise of the Japanese design, occurred during 1961 and 1989. Both of them changed printed ad design from post war to simple design and structure, dominated by written content (Adams 2014).

Georgiu (2007) affirms in *The history of modern Romanian culture* that the period after the Great Union from 1918 was characterized by a boost of the cultural, economic, and social life in Romania. This period led to two movements in the art and creative industry, namely Digital Revolution and Minimalism (Adams 2014). The new technical possibilities allowed the creative industry to explore new design ideas and create new layout styles for printed ads, by also increasing the quality of the ads.

Methodology

Phillips and McQuarrie (2002), argue that most of the researches that refer to the changes and the evolution of the print ad, in time, neglected the diachronic dimension of advertising. The synchronic perspectives were predominant, which underlines either the timeless aspects of the ads, or the cross-sectional comparisons between cultures and media vehicles.

When we watch print ads, in historical evolution, the analysis can focus on the content, style, or both aspects (Messaris 1997).

In our research process, we subjected 300 ads to analysis, from 30 Romanian magazines that were issued between 1919 and 2000, in Romania. The 81 years of analysis contain four distinct periods from the Romanian history, the interwar epoch (1919-1938), World War II period (1939-1945), the communist epoch (1946-1989) and the post-communist period (1990-2000). The chosen timeline is considering the available print technology, historical events, and the artistic movement that were happening in each selected period.

The research questions that lay at the foundation of our analysis are:

- Q1. Are there common visual elements in the print ads from the four analyzed periods?
- Q2. Are there elements that differentiate print ads in the analyzed periods?
- Q3. What type of products and services were promoted?
- Q4. Which are the graphical elements that characterize each analyzed period?
- Q5. Which are the main characteristics of the images displayed in the analyzed ads between 1919 and 2000?

Research design

To find an answer to the research questions listed above, and in order to validate or invalidate our research hypothesis, we will use content analysis as a qualitative research method.

We are analyzing a number of 300 ads from 30 Romanian periodic publications issued between 1929 and 2000. In order to find a pattern regarding the way that these ads were created, we chose to group them in five periods of time: The interwar (1919-1939), the Second World War – WW2 – (1939-1945), the first half of the communist period (1946-1960), its second half (1961-1989), and post-communism (1990-2000). Taking into consideration that advertising plays a great part in influencing and shaping a nation's culture, identity, image, and message (Albakry, 2014), we believe that splitting the main period into smaller segments of time will facilitate access to synchronous elements, as well as diachronic aspects.

The four time frames under analysis overlap with distinctive political, economical, and social instances in Romanian history. Without claiming to carry out an exhaustive study, this research represents a context-oriented anatomy of Romanian

advertising. Before implementing the research, we ran a pretest to identify available resources. We conceived a list of magazines available in libraries' archives, and we selected titles with the longest – i.e. at least 10 years – time span. We have not found any magazines to have issued continuously throughout the time frame under analysis. Out of the whole archive, only 50 magazines satisfied the criterion of time. Out of these, however, only 30 had consecutive editions available in the archives. These 30 titles were, thus, included as research material for this research. In these magazines, during the time frames investigated, we have identified 300 different print layouts, which we converted into units of analysis.

We are going to use the analysis grid, the default instrument of our research method, to collect the necessary information. The proposed grid aims to provide both general information about the brand, product or service that is promoted, and visual identity, structure, the written content and typography, and elements related to the images and the overall atmosphere of the ads. We are also interested in finding out the category of products and services advertised back then in order to understand the lifestyle of the individuals of the society of each period, to know which were their needs and how they are changing from one period to another.

Regarding the visual identity, we want to analyze the presence of logos and their structure in the ads. The presence of branded products and their evolution in the print advertising in Romania is also relevant to our study. Also, the logo structure is another point of interest in our research.

The structure of an ad is an important part of the analysis grid. According to Adir *et al.* (2012), the elements that make an ad are divided into two large categories: special symbols (signs, symbols, icons) and images (pictures, photographs, colors). In our study, we are interested to find if the ads contain one or more of the following elements: image, title, text, graphics, and contact details. We are defining photos and illustrations as images. We are also taking into consideration any kind of writing in the ads, except for the typeface used in the logos. We are considering *the title* any piece of text that stands out by larger font size and color from the other written elements, including the logo. Text layout is considered to be any written content that is not part of the title or logo. Graphic elements are considered to be all the elements that help highlight the title or other elements composing the layout of the ads. The research does not consider that these elements are part of the image in the ad. We are also interested in the presence of any form of contact details (address, phone, fax, email, website, or other forms of call to action).

The written content and typography will also be under observation in our analysis, as we want to learn which font category they used in the ads. We classify fonts into four categories: serif, sans serif, script, and artistic. To analyze the proportion of text in every analyzed ad, we have built a grid (Figure 1). The grid is used to split layouts in 20 equal parts, each part representing 5 percent of the ad.

To generate the percentage of each text layouts, we will add parts containing text, except for the parts that contain the logo and its typeface. The grid can be used on any image, regardless of the size or orientation (portrait or landscape).

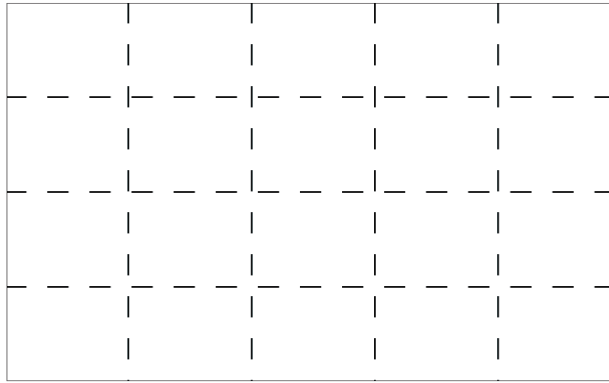


Figure 1. The grid used to measure the proportion of text from one ad

For the Image analysis of the ads, we focused on the image type, the colors used, and the symbols. If the ad presents an image, we determine whether it is a photograph (shot from a photographic camera) or an illustrating (drawing, traditional or digital) or a combination. We will analyze the number of colors in each ad, considering only the colors in the color spectrum, not the tones and hues that derive from them. With the help of an online application¹ we will establish the dominant color in each ad. To analyze the graphic elements used in the ads, observing if these are symbols, geometric shapes, lines, decorative or representative signs. According to a study, the signs refer to linguistic signs or icons, and the symbol is a way of identifying a name, product or service through a graphic (J. C. R. Silva P. *et al.*, 2015).

Another point of focus is the atmosphere of the ads. We are analyzing the subject of the image and the nature of its action. We believe that the subject can be represented by persons, animals, objects or landscapes. We code images where the subject is engaged in an activity as dynamic, and those where the subject is not engaged into an activity as static.

We will be tracking general aspects, as well, such as the presence of a slogan, contact details or the number of mentions of the brand name or the product / service within the same ad.

¹ Available on <http://lokeshdhakar.com/projects/color-thief/> accessed on September 16, 2016.

Results

During the Interwar (1920-1939) we observed the lack of brands, the grid revealing that few ads showcase the logo. However, we see that the name of the promoted entity is present in all ads and highlighted by font or type size. This period was promoting tailoring and clothing services, stores, restaurants, cosmetic services, and real estate. Very few ads had images in their structure, and these were either photographs or illustrations. Noteworthy is that all ads were printed in black and white. The text uses a large proportion of the ad. According to our grid, the majority of the titles were written using a sans-serif font. Most of the text layouts in the ads were written in fonts with serifs. On average, an ad has 2.3 fonts and the proportion of occupied space is 61% of written content. All analyzed ads present graphics. These elements are geometric shapes, decorative lines and elements of nature. Contact details are present in more than half of the models, displaying addresses, phone numbers, and landmarks. The ads showcase no slogan, and few repetitions of brand names or product type.

During the World War II period (1939-1945), we noticed the presence of foreign brands in Romanian ads, but still no branding elements regarding Romanian products or companies. Ads in this period display cars, pharmaceuticals, cosmetics, and food and beverage products. During this period the ads are black and white, most of them presenting illustrations. All the ads have titles and they use both serif and sans-serif fonts. Text layout body is present only in half of the analyzed ads, and the font used for this is no serifs. On average, an ad is made up of 2.8 fonts and the proportion of occupied space is 37% of written content. We can observe a minor increased number of fonts and a decreased number for the space occupied by text compared to the interwar period. In this period, we find the graphic elements in half of the models, and these are decorative lines, shapes and frames. Contact details are present in few ads, representing the address, phone number or a landmark. The ads in this period have images with objects as the main subject, very few ads displaying persons. We can see a more static kind of action from the subjects in the ads. A slogan is present in very few analyzed ads.

During the first part of communism (1946-1960), the ads were promoting shops, restaurants, footwear and clothing, banking services, industrial goods, and appliances. Logos are only present in very few ads, but comparing this to the previous periods, we noticed that all the ads have images, titles, and text in their structure. The predominant font type used is sans-serif, but they also used serif and script. On average, an ad has 3.2 fonts and text proportion of occupied space is 34% of written content. Unlike the ads from the Second World War period, the percentage of text has dropped and the number of fonts used in every ad has increased in the first part of the communism period. The graphic elements are present on half of the ads, elements such as decorative lines, borders, and geometrical shapes. Re-

garding the images, most of the ads display illustrations and few of them display photos or a combination of the two. This period is marked by the usage of color in the ads. The predominant color is red, and on average, the ads use two colors. The subject of the picture is the people (50% of the ads) and objects (50% of the ads), and the action is mainly static. During this period, few ads had slogans, repetitions of the product name or contact details.

The ads from the second part of communism period (1961-1989) promoted restaurants, food and beverage goods, electro-domestic products, clothing and hand-crafted products, bookstores, and wood products. Few were the ads in which the product had a brand name or logo. The ads had more illustrations, the photos and half were black and white, and the other half were printed in color. The predominant color is red, and red is also, on average, the color used in the ads. Most of the ads had titles, written on fonts that are sans-serif, script, or artistic. Body text layout is used for most of the ads, and the fonts used for this are sans-serifs. On average, an ad has 3.5 fonts and text proportion of occupied space is 15% of written content. We once again observe an increase in the number of fonts and a consistent decrease in the percentage of text in an ad compared to the previous periods. All the analyzed ads show graphic elements, such as decorative lines, Romanian traditional elements, geometrical shapes, elements of nature, and arrows. The pictures show animals, people, and objects, and most of the action is static. This period brings few ads with contact details or slogans, but we can observe an increase in the number of ads where the brand name is repeated several times.

In the post-communism (1990-2000), we observed that the ads were starting to display brand elements, logos. The product name is present in all ads, promoted and highlighted by font or type size. The ads promote cars, mobile phones, alcoholic beverages, and radio stations. In terms of structure, all the analyzed ads display images containing mostly photographs, but also illustrations and an ensemble of the two. Our analysis shows that 80% of the ads have a title that is written in serifs, and the text layout is written in sans-serif. On average, an ad has 3.1 fonts and text proportion of occupied space is 38%. The average number of colors used in an ad is 2 colors. It's the first time we can observe an increase in the percentage of area covered by the text and a decrease in the number of fonts compared to the previous periods. This period also brought more colors into the ads. Regarding the colors, yellow is the predominant color, followed by red and blue. Graphic elements such as decorative lines, stars, puzzle pieces, and frames are displayed in most of the ads. Contact details are present in most of the ads, consisting in addresses, phone numbers, frequency, and landmarks. The slogan is present in half of the analyzed ads. The images represent people and items whilst the action in the ads is dynamic.

Discussion and conclusion

Summarizing all the collected information, we can conclude the following aspects. In the **1920-1939** period, the ads were promoting tailoring services, clothing, cosmetic services, and restaurants. All the ads displayed graphic elements, although this was a rather difficult thing to do at that time from a technical standpoint. We consider that this period brought empowerment and aesthetic concerns. We found that this period can be marked by the fact that the ads have no images, with an emphasis on written content, which, at that time, was covering most of the space of an ad. All the ads were printed in black and white, and they used small number of fonts whilst most of the fonts had serifs.

The **1940-1945** period shows a consistent presence of foreign brands in the Romanian publications. Ads were promoting cars, pharmaceuticals, and food and beverage goods.

This is the period that brings the slogan and the product name repetition in ads. Unlike the interwar period, we notice the presence of images, illustrations and graphic elements which are transposed from traditional media to digital. The fonts used in this period are both serif and sans-serif.

In the years following the Second World War (**1946-1960**), ads were promoting stores, footwear and apparel, industrial products and appliances. Colorful layouts start to rise and the predominant color is red.

The color red used in Romanian ads is turning into a standard (**1961-1989**). All the ads contain images and they are displaying home appliances, clothing, and food and beverage goods. We can easily observe a sharp decline in the percentage of written content and the repeated mention of the advertised product. Another aspect that makes this period different from the previous periods is the usage of various font types (serif, sans serif, artistic or script), and the text component started to develop a decorative role.

The years **1990-2000** brought the rise of brand logos in print advertising. Product name is displayed in all the ads and it's highlighted by font or type size. All ads that contain images are displaying people rather than objects. For the first time, most images in the ads are color photographs, and the action is mainly dynamic.

There is a transition from the orientation towards the producer to the orientation towards the consumer. The passage from merchandizing and services selling to experience selling is made.

There are more and more images in the ads. The literature (Pine and Gilmore, 1998) brings forth the idea that more images in advertising shall determine a higher emotional, intellectual, and even spiritual engagement (implication) from the consumer. The same two authors bring into discussion the idea of factual images versus experiential images, defining the two concepts according to the way the product is presented. Factual images describe the products without accentuating

something in particular, while the experiential images are noted through the presence of people, objects or animals in ads and through the trial of psychological “engagement” of the consumer from whom an emotional response is expected.

In our analysis, we note a factual approach before 1990 and an experiential one in post-communist advertising.

Without claiming to have undertaken exhaustive approach, through the present research we tried, starting with the ads, to look, through a view finder, at the whole society.

The diversity of products and services that were promoted through ads and the preoccupation for aesthetics are elements that confirm this vision.

The communist period of advertising, on the other hand, is very well characterized by the transmission of the concrete, by the raw explanation of things, by the lack of subtlety of the message.

A certain creative opening can be traced in the advertising productions of the 1964-1974 period, a period that coincides with liberalization at the level of the entire society.

The period after 1974 – until the fall of the communist regime in 1989 – is characterized by the hardening of censorship, the appearance of information in magazines being strictly supervised. It is the period of simplicity in thinking and lack of creative presence.

The social transformations, the economic and cultural opening after 1990, can all be noticed in ads, as well. Logo, color, brands abundance are the characteristics of the several years of post-communist analysis.

Limitations

For this research, we only analyzed a number of 30 magazines, thus results cannot be generalized to the whole advertising industry developed in the time frames under the present analysis. Also, results cannot be extended to the whole period between 1919 and 2000, but rather the precise years undergoing systematic investigation, namely the four distinctive time frames presented in the design. One limitation to our study thus consists in an incomplete sampling. Future research on this topic could put under a lens a wider range of magazines over the 81 years, extending the width of advertising representation for both ads and audience.

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