

Paul Messaris (1997)

Visual persuasion: the role of images in advertising.

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There are a great many studies on the subject of advertising. Most of these studies are focussed on the verbal strategies employed in persuasive communication. The visual part of advertising has received much less attention, although it seems as if this part has become an increasingly important one. Messaris' book is one of the few studies that tries to answer the question: What is the distinctive contribution that visual images make to persuasive communication?

Three aspects of images are important in this respect. First, images are iconic signs. That is, they represent some aspect of reality. In doing so, they can draw the public's attention and evoke certain emotions. A beautiful person or a dangerous animal attract our attention and evoke erotic feelings or fear. Pictures of that person or animal can do the same (although to a lesser degree). Second, images are indexical signs. That is, they function as proof that the represented situation actually did happen. For instance, a picture of an unhappy bald man followed by a picture of the same man, but now smiling and with lots of hair 'proves' that the hair growth lotion works. The third aspect has to do with the interpretation of a series of images. Compared to language, the syntax of images is indetermined. Messaris gives as an example the opening sequence of a political video used in Ronald Reagan's 1984 re-election

campaign. In this sequence, shots of Reagan's first-term inauguration are intercut with images of people going to work. The parallel editing can be interpreted as a comparison (just like other people, Reagan has to work hard), but it can be interpreted as a cause and effect chain as well (Reagan's achievements during his first term has put people back to work). Both interpretations are possible and plausible, and it is impossible to derive the intended meaning from the sequence of images alone.

Messaris has divided his book into three parts that correspond to these three aspects of images. The first part, 'Image as simulated reality', deals with the iconicity aspect of images. In Chapter 1, he addresses one of the major problems of advertisements: the fact that they are ignored by most people. Messaris discusses several visual strategies capable of attracting the public's attention, amongst others, slight violations of reality, visual metaphors, and direct eye gaze. Next, he turns to the ways in which images can evoke emotions, for instance, how the camera angle can evoke feelings of power or nurturance, or how sexual feelings are elicited. Chapter 2 is devoted to the extent to which colors and forms can function as symbols. Curved lines, for instance, suggest softness, whereas squares evoke thoughts of strength. Next he discusses the topic of subliminal advertising, and whether different styles are used to influence different constituencies (e.g., men versus women, young versus old). In the third chapter, the extent to which pictures are universally understood is at stake.

The second part, 'Image as evidence, consists of only one chapter. First, the role of photographic evidence in commercial advertising, political campaigns, and social issue campaigns is discussed. Photographs are used as proof that a certain washing detergent is indeed better than its competitors, that a political candidate is very popular, or that the beauty of a certain area is indeed worthy of becoming a national parc. Next, Messaris discusses several techniques that can be employed to visually deceive the public. He ends with a survey showing that the public is aware of the existence of these techniques, and actually believes that these techniques are often used. Based on the results, he poses the question whether photographs will lose their evidence function in the near future. In the middle ages, drawings of heaven and hell served as proof that these places indeed did exist. In our age, drawings are no longer accepted as proof. In future times, the same may hold for photographs.

The third part, 'Image as implied selling proposition', concentrates on the way in which series of images can imply a certain meaning through editing and montage. According to Messaris, causal as well as comparison relations can be expressed

through image sequences. In a series of experiments, he shows that people are capable of recognizing these different relations. In the last chapter, Messaris shows how these relations can be used to imply propositions, that would have created commotion had they been expressed explicitly, for instance, smoking our cigarettes makes you healthy, popular, and happy.

Visual persuasion is an interesting book on a topic that has received less attention than it should have. Messaris presents a clear picture of the functions of images in advertising, and even discusses some topics outside that scope (e.g., whether pictures can improve intergroup attitudes). Some of his claims, however, lack empirical support. Especially in the section on images on implied selling propositions, it is unclear to which extent people actually draw these implied conclusions. That does not imply that this book is without value. Rather, it may serve as a research agenda for a topic that has been neglected by many communication researchers.

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