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Textual and Visual Catalyzers/Distractors in Advertising

Abstract

The contribution of this study is expressed in the following research question: is it possible to identify some implicit-explicit textual or visual elements that catalyze or distract audience attention on or from the advertised product? An analysis of a corpus of advertisements taken from the Instagram pages of the major companies operating in the US food and beverage market reveals that attracting or distracting attention on or from a product's use or function is a frequent strategy. These elements may contribute to changing scripts in advertising and mental patterns in consumer perceptions. The items that signal the distraction or the catalyzation of consumer attention in the advertising message have been identified via the ARCO model (St.Amant forth., St.Amant 2022), based upon the concept of usability of products, which helps decode the process of recognition of a product in the consumer's brain. Results are promising, as this theory may help advertisers make more effective moves in the dual, cooperative relationship with consumers and review promotional strategies to engage the audience in advertising communication.

Keywords: *catalyzers, distractors, multimodal analysis, advertising discourse, usability and design*

1. Introduction

The scientific basis of this paper rests upon the capacity of advertisements to engage consumers in receiving or even co-creating marketing messages (van Niekerk 2018). Pictorial content, visual communication and creative advertising often convey implicit promotional messages that consumers need to interpret. In particular, this study aims to identify any possible element that may help draw attention to or away from an advertised product and its function or use. These factors seem to exist and may be used to inform, guide and direct audience attention and behavior. The ultimate aim of this paper is to define these factors as *catalyzers* or *distractors*, identifying the patterns, elements and signals that are necessary to identify them. Section 1.1 presents the background for this article, the research questions and a small repertoire of examples. Section 2 provides the reader with a literature review, which is useful for the investigation on catalyzers/distractors. Section 3, instead, describes the corpus and its construction. In Section 4, the methodology and the investigation

tools are presented. Section 5 is designed to contain the discussion on the systemic analysis of the selected advertisements, as well as the definitions of *catalyzers* and *distractors*, and concluding remarks.

1.1 Preliminary empirical observation and research questions

This study stems from a research project on the possibility of applying script theory to advertising (St.Amant and Giordano forth.; St.Amant 2017; 2015). This application includes the investigation of several forms of advertising to detect any alien items or alterations in the context which may be capable of affecting the script within which a product is framed. The change of the script generates, of course, a shift in the advertising message, and especially in a prototypical product representation (e.g., mineral water is often represented, in advertising, as a sports supplement or a medical remedy) (St.Amant and Giordano forth.). This study aims to study the characteristics of these alien elements, to see whether they arouse curiosity, draw attention to—or move engagement away from—the product itself, its function, and its use. This idea stemmed from some examples (displayed hereafter) incidentally found during the collection of the corpora for the above-mentioned main research project.

The promotional message in advertising is usually related to a product (or to a brand). In this case, elements like pictures, headlines, captions, and textual descriptions of the product are connected or interconnected in order to bring the product to the attention of the audience (Wernick 1991, 27). Such elements tend to refer explicitly and unambiguously to the use or function of the product itself. Cook (1992, 8) defines these as *prototypical advertisements*.

This preliminary empirical observation led me to identify some items that, on the other hand, had been added to the advertisements, creatively and deliberately, to enhance the effectiveness of the advertising message. At first glance, without referring to any scientific evidence, alien elements seem to be:

1. Pictorial: in Fig. 1, a corkscrew is added to the advertised bottle of Evian mineral water so as to add value to the product, casting mineral water in the domain of oenology; in Fig. 2, a paintbrush is dipped into coffee as if it were valuable paint about to be used to create a masterpiece;
2. Textual: in Fig. 4 an onomatopoeic text is shown, drawing attention away from Starbucks's coffee and leading the addressee to the brand ethics expressed in the caption, which is compliant with the rules to contrast the COVID-19 pandemic;
3. Paratextual: Fig. 5 and Fig. 6, as the advertising message is immediately conveyed as the addressee manages to read the small fonts.

4. Cultural: as in Fig. 3, where the tassel of the typical Turkish *fez* draws the attention of the readers to the text, which informs them about the new KFC Chicken Kebab.



Fig. 1: Evian mineral water¹



Fig. 2: Lavazza coffee²



Fig. 3: KFC Chicken Kebab³



Fig. 4: Starbucks coffee⁴

¹ <https://adspot.me/media/prints/evian-mineral-water-evian-cork-screw-f884d4f7c020>. Last visited 04/01/2022.

² <https://www.instagram.com/p/CFEQuCJBYJu/>. Last visited 30/12/2021.

³ <https://www.behance.net/gallery/33940314/Shake-Shack-Print-Ad>. Last visited 04/01/2022.

⁴ <https://www.adsoftheworld.com/campaigns/thank-you-for-wearing-a-mask-in-store>. Last visited 30/12/2021.

The advertised product is absent in Fig. 7 and Fig. 8, as it is represented and recontextualized in a completely disconnected and different domain. Furthermore, the products are quite often present, partially or entirely represented, and mainly foregrounded. The alien elements seem to be complementary to the brand or the product in the construction of the promotional message: they would have no meaning if standing alone, as would the products. In fact, in Fig. 7, the absence of the brand in the bottom right corner would make the advertisement unintelligible; with no textual element, advertisements in Fig. 5 and Fig. 6 would be just representations of a can or a bottle of Coca Cola, with no sensorial engagement.



Fig. 5: Coca Cola⁵

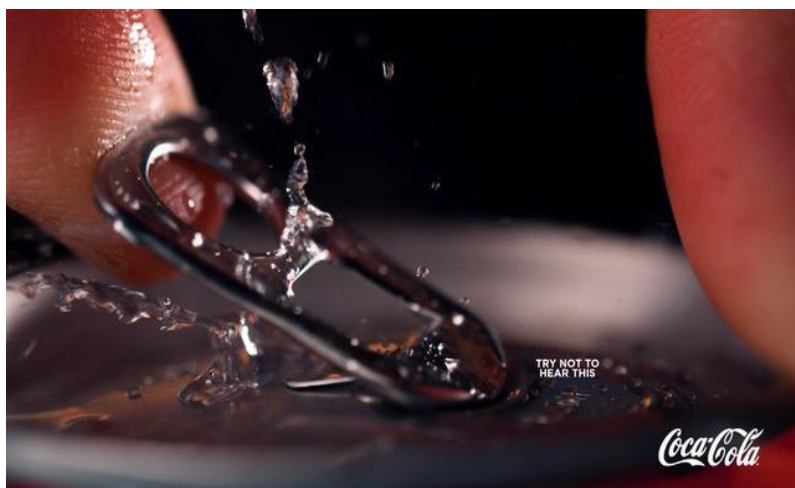


Fig. 6: Coca Cola⁶

⁵https://www.adsoftheworld.com/media/print/cocacola_cocacola_messes_with_your_head_with_visual_campaign. Last visited 30/12/2021.

⁶https://www.adsoftheworld.com/media/print/cocacola_cocacola_messes_with_your_head_with_visual_campaign. Last visited 30/12/2021.

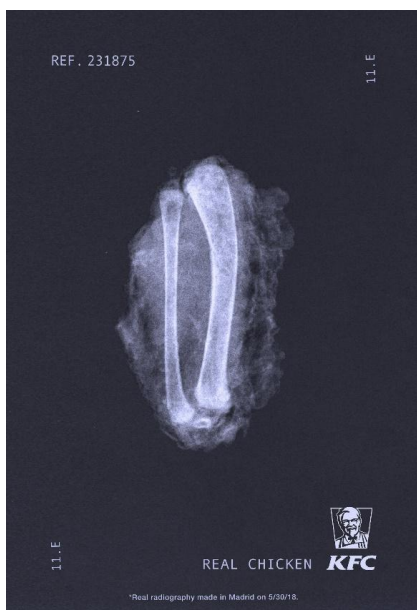


Fig. 7: KFC Fried Chicken⁷



Fig. 8: Burger King⁸

From these preliminary observations, the following research questions can be formulated: is it possible to identify some elements, of a different nature, that can either catalyze attention on a brand or product, or divert attention from them? Is it possible to construct a systemic investigation pattern to identify these elements? To provide an answer to these questions, this investigation starts from the review of a part of the extensive existing literature on advertising discourse, promotional strategies and visual communication, to determine a basis on which to build, if possible, a definition of distractors and catalyzers.

2. Literature review

Discourse in advertising has long been studied and dissected by a huge number of scholars (e.g., Jaworska 2020; Simon and Stoian 2020; Danesi 2015; van Dijk 2011; Hidalgo Downing 2000; Cook 1992; Leiss, Kline and Jhally 1986; Vestergaard and Schroeder 1985, just to name a few). As regards the linguistic strategies to engage the audience and attract attention, Al-Subhi (2022, 25) concentrates on the role of both visual and linguistic metadiscourse in social media advertisements, as they are the basis for strategies intended to engage potential customers, thus establishing a contact between brands and consumers; on the same stream of metadiscourse investigation, Fuertes-Oliveira et al. (2001, 1295) focus on the crucial roles of

⁷ https://www.adsoftheworld.com/media/outdoor/kfc_chicken_xrays. Last visited 30/12/2021.

⁸ https://www.adsoftheworld.com/media/integrated/burger_king_vitamin_bk. Last visited 04/01/2022.

copywriter and addressee: the former needs to strike a balance between informative and persuasive functions (by means of interpersonal metadiscourse, using tools such as intertextuality, endophoric markers, person markers, etc.), while the latter decodes and interprets the advertisement, accepting or rejecting the persuasive message, depending on whether it matches their expectations. Martinez-Camino and Pérez-Saiz (2012, 455) define the advertiser/consumer relationship as an interlocutory act, where they perform the roles of requester-donor, or of donor-adopter of products and information. In the attempt to outline the main functions of advertising (i.e., creating a desirable context, recalling emotions in the consumers so that they desire to own the product), Lazovic (2014, 89), reconsiders the AIDA model, which is a chain of connected steps, attracting Attention, raising Interest, establishing Desire and initiating Action. The links of the chain are the mental processes that ignite as a consumer sees an advertisement (Lazovic 2014, 89).

Ungerer (2004, 308) states that the elements of the AIDA principles are somehow blurred in modern advertisements, where Attention and Interest stand out prominently, while Desire is very often indirectly stimulated and Action boils down to a phone number only. The latter has changed over the last few years, as phone numbers have been replaced by social media icons.

Van Niekerk (2020, 185) affirms that advertising can attract attention in a number of ways: among others, linguistic devices, like metaphors, wordplays, puns and neologisms. The creative language used in this kind of advertising, often, does not follow the grammar rules of standard language. Vestergaard and Schroeder (1985), in this regard, provide a number of possible ways of attracting attention, and emphasize the work of advertisers to arouse interest.

Advertising produces effects on the audience due to different kinds of stimuli. These effects can be produced either by product information strategies, which generate analytic cognition, or by arbitrary advertising based on arbitrary strategies, connected to the consumer personal judgment, which generates affective cognition (Chaudhuri and Buck 1995, 423). On the same track, Bhatia claims that emotional components that lead customers to make their purchase decisions are unconsciously driven by language. Thus, emotions are rooted in language: linguistic markers may help single out the emotional experience in advertising (Bhatia 2019, 435-437).

However, most of these effects are ignited by visual advertisements. Many scholars have argued that picture-based advertisements are vital for an effective promotional communication, as they attract long-lasting consumer attention. McQuarrie and Philips (2008) demonstrated in a diachronic analysis of print advertisements that pictorial advertisements draw significant attention away from the text. Furthermore, all the separate textual information blends into a

single pictorial framework. In particular, the brand itself migrates from the textual form into the visual portion of the advertisement. The scholars' results indicate that consumers tend to take a quick glance at the advertisement without reading the text. Thus, the expression of the brand in the form of text, in words, is less effective than visual representation (McQuarrie and Phillips 2008, 104). Kim and Jang (2019, 6) confirm that advertisements with a prevalent visual content rather than textual tend not only to draw consumer attention, but also to yield more favorable consensus from the audience, helping build brand image. Other scholars focus on the visual component, as it is a fundamental element in consumer persuasion: Eldesouki (2011, 514-515) discusses the use of abstract images at the basis of cognitive strategies (which aim to rationalize the selling point of a particular product), affective message strategies (directed to create an emotional link between the consumer and the brand), conative strategies (meant to offer discounts and gifts to attract customers attention) and brand building strategies (aimed at enhancing brand image). On this subject, Fox, Nakhata and Deitz (2019, 455) focus on social media marketing, and claim that the effectiveness of company advertising campaigns must rely on both verbal and non-verbal systems contributing to cognition, considering that consumers process information in three different ways: 1. verbal and non-verbal information is independent (representational); 2. verbal systems come from visual messages (referential); 3. pictures and text generate mental process of interpretation (associative). Pérez Sobrino, Littlemore and Houghton (2019, 985) investigate the role of metonymy and metaphors in multimodal formats. They identify some complex figurative operations, metaphonomies, metonymic chains and metaphoric complexes (three different forms of figurative interaction between metonymy and metaphors in visual format), and demonstrate that consumers process such complex metaphor-metonymy combinations faster than simple visual metaphors, and especially they appreciate complex advertisements, finding them more convincing. Yi (1990, 282) claims that audiences are made up of active interpreters, who respond to visual stimuli in advertisements, generate inference on attributes, beliefs, and make associations. This aspect is particularly interesting, as both complex visual-textual advertisements and the addition of alien elements, as well as the absence of text, can arouse consumers' curiosity and stimulate their capability of interpretation and implication. In another study, van Niekerk points out that the audience must be involved in the communicative act of advertising, to co-create meaning. To do so, signs and symbols, along with images and words, should work together to deliver the marketing message (van Niekerk 2018, 110). Signs and symbols cannot be restricted to marketers' meaning, but meaning itself has to be negotiated with the intended target audience. The creative use of signs, symbols, layout and fonts triggers an intellectual game involving both the audience and the brand owner

to construct an implied marketing message (van Niekerk 2018, 121).

The literature provided paves the way to the investigation of this study, as it is mainly based upon the visual predominance, the presence of symbols, signs and implicit messages.

3. Corpus construction

In order to investigate advertisements to find a scientific connection and a verification of my preliminary observation, a representative corpus had to be collected. I decided to set parameters that can be systemic and easily replicable: I considered the lists of Fortune500 and I took the first 10 holdings by revenue in the category of “Food, beverage and Tobacco” in the USA in 2021 (Tab. 1). I estimated that the first ten market players in one of the most representative categories (Food and Beverage) might provide a sufficiently significant sample.

Companies	2021 Revenues (\$M)
PEPSICO	\$ 70,372
ARCHER DANIELS	\$64.355
TYSON FOODS	\$ 43.185
COCA COLA	\$ 33.014
PHILIP MORRIS INT.	\$ 28.694
CHS	\$ 28.406
MONDELEZ	\$ 26.581
KRAFT HEINZ	\$ 26.185
ALTRIA GROUP	\$ 20,841
GENERAL MILLS	\$ 17.626

Tab. 1: Top ten US-based players in the “Food, Beverage and Tobacco” industry in 2021⁹

Each holding group encompasses several brands. I analyzed the US Instagram (IG) pages of all the holdings’ brands, due to the highly visual nature of Instagram posts. CHS, Altria Group, Archer Daniels Midland and Philip Morris Int. are mostly committed to wholesale and B2B activities. Consequently, they either have no Instagram pages or their profiles have little

⁹ Selected data (companies ranked by Revenues) from <https://fortune.com/fortune500/2021/search?sector=Food%2C%20Beverages%20%26%20Tobacco>. Last visited 17/12/2022.

significance in terms of advertising presence. In the category I analyzed, “Food, Beverage and Tobacco,” only one company operates the tobacco business, namely Philip Morris Int., the only advertised brand is IQUOS, with as little as 4 advertisements. As regards the remaining brands in the considered sample, some of them do not have an Instagram profile, or are outdated, or they present a prevalence of pictures that cannot be considered as advertising, but recipes, community pictures, announcements, games, celebration pictures, etc.

I counted the pictures on Instagram profiles in 2021 and selected those that could be intended as advertisements (Table 2).

	2021 IG PHOTOS	2021 IG ADS
PEPSICO	889	161
ARCHER DANIELS	N.A	N.A
TYSON FOODS	123	56
COCA COLA	720	186
PHILIP MORRIS INT.	4	0
CHS	N.A	N.A
MONDELEZ	1367	229
KRAFT HEINZ	1241	268
ALTRIA GROUP	N.A	N.A
GENERAL MILLS	1130	242
TOTAL	5474	1142

Tab. 2: Instagram photos and advertisements for each player

To identify advertisements, I followed Vestergaard and Schroeder’s classification (1985, 50). According to them, a prototypical advertisement should contain an illustration (a pictorial element, showing the product), a headline (a title, a sentence, or a single word), a body copy (a description), a signature (the name of the product or the brand) and a slogan (a buzz, a payoff related to the product itself). Yet, the constraints to consider some of the investigated pictures as advertisements were applied in a loose manner, as the world is changing fast and so are promotional strategies. For example, in many advertisements, the product is either not represented in the illustration or only implicitly recognizable. The body copy as well can be present or not: in some cases, the body copy is very short, or in some cases is absent. The brand’s

logo or references to the name of the product are always present. To sum up, the main characteristics of the advertisements I have detected are the presence of the logo, the presence (implicit or explicit) of the product, a caption, or the promotional text (if any).

The total repertoire amounts to 5,474 pictures, of which 1,142 can be considered as the corpus of advertisements, following Vestergaard and Schroeder's classification. These advertisements were then scanned carefully to select those containing alien elements, implicit messages, unusual settings, decontextualized scenarios, absence of the product, and many other unconventional and creative features.

4. Methodology

The research question formulated at the beginning of this paper needs a systemic methodology to design a theory model to possibly identify catalyzers and distractors. A potential approach comes from the concept of usability of the product. Academic researchers and industry practitioners who study professional and promotional communication have increasingly examined the role of cognitive processes in creating content (i.e., text and images used to convey information to an audience) (see, for example, St.Amant 2022; 2018; Melonçon 2017; 2016). In many instances, such examinations have focused on evaluating the usability of texts, visuals, and other kinds of content. These reviews have focused on how violating certain cognitive factors can cause confusion and affect the way individuals use different *communiques* (e.g., images, interfaces, and text layouts). Addressing these dynamics first involves an understanding of how cognitive factors (i.e., how the brain processes information) affect communication. It also involves developing an approach that allows individuals to study these processes systematically. According to St.Amant (2022, 32), when humans first encounter a *communique*—be it in written, visual, or multimedia format—their minds perform four different processes in a specific sequence. First, the mind actualizes the item—or determines—what aspect of the item to focus their attention on (including the item itself) (Wolfe 2007; 1994). Next, the mind needs to recognize—or identify—what has captured an individual's attention. Then, the mind categorizes that identified thing by determining what it can do or what is used for (i.e., to what category or kind of object it belongs). Finally, the mind operationalizes that information by determining which of the potential uses of the item are appropriate for the context in which the item is used. The four steps in this process are connected to a series of subconscious activities the brain performs based on an individual's prior experiences. As these actions are driven essentially by reflex, individuals are often not aware of when they perform them. Within this context, anything

that impedes a step in this process—or the ability to transition from step to step in the process—can affect attitudes and behaviors (St.Amant 2022; 2018).

4.1 The ARCO approach to usability and design

The systematic process of examining these four, interconnected cognitive elements was first proposed by St.Amant in its main structure in 2022 as an analytical tool (St.Amant 2022, 31-35) and later, the same author named it as ARCO model in a forthcoming study. The scholar claims that the method focuses on identifying the cognitive dynamics of each interconnected element of the overall process humans use when interacting with items (St.Amant forth.). Hereafter, I will refer to this analytical model as the ARCO model. It stands for:

- Actualization: What individuals focus their attention on (or realize/actualize)
- Recognize: How individuals identify the item that attracted their attention
- Categorize: How individuals determine the use or the function of an item
- Operationalize: How individuals identify the specific use of the item in the context where it is used

Through this approach, communication researchers identify an audience's expectations related to each cognitive process as noted by the model. They then use the results of this systematic analysis to create content, technologies, and products that the audience can easily use (St.Amant forth.). The ARCO approach focuses on creating messages that are easy for individuals to understand with little or no thought. Accordingly, anything that violates one or more steps in the ARCO framework would render the related item of limited or no use to individuals. When applied to marketing, for example, the ARCO model could be used to identify the requirements for an effective advertisement. The review, or reading, of texts—be they verbal, visual, or multimedia—is subject to the dynamics of the ARCO model. As such, an application of ARCO parameters can help researchers understand how different kinds of communications seek to address these core cognitive processes to influence behavior. This situation is particularly evident in advertising where the creators of advertisements often seek to guide attention toward perceptions or processes that favor their associated product or service (St.Amant forth.; St.Amant 2022).

4.2 Analyzing advertising

While many advertisements contain text and images, it is often the visual nature of an ad that is central to conveying information—particularly, information related to attitudes and

perceptions of a product. Accordingly, the interplay of verbal and visual elements in advertisements is useful when communicating a core idea about a product or service. It is the analysis of these interactions that helps understand how manipulations of the ARCO processes can influence attitudes and perceptions.

In advertising, the ARCO model works as follows:

1. Actualization: addressee focuses attention on visuals or text that generate a contrast, being it background/foreground, colors, chromatic contrast, unfamiliar images, context;
2. Recognition: addressee correctly identifies the product or cannot determine what the product is;
3. Categorization: addressee categorizes or is helped determine the use or the function of the product;
4. Operationalization: addressee identifies one or more specific uses of the product in the context presented in the advertisement.

At this point, the issue becomes what methods researchers can use to examine these dynamics in a systematic way. My suggestion is to draw on Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) approach to reading images as related to how the eye scans across a page when reading a text. I assume that the reading direction of images, proposed by these authors (left to right and top to bottom), fits the ARCO framework. Specifically, by causing a divergence at a key point in the ARCO processes, advertisers can direct audiences to move across the page in an expected way (left to right/top to bottom), to seek out something that re-orientates the associated processes. Channeling attention in this way, advertisers can influence the information (visual and/or verbal) audiences encounter and attempt to influence how they perceive a topic or product. It goes without saying that subjectivity on how different audiences perceive the message may exist. Consequently, statements, in this investigation, should be considered with a certain degree of caution.

4.3 Systemic analysis

Once the methodological sequence has been formulated, it is possible to apply it systematically to the advertisements selected for discussion in this paper. The search for unusual, alien elements is not a new issue. Gambetti exemplifies that, especially in ambient communication, some effective strategies make use of unexpected objects that are placed in unusual and displaced contexts in order to be used as advertising tools (Gambetti 2010, 36), attracting attention and stimulating mental processes. I am applying the ARCO process to a small sample

of advertisements from the corpus, and exemplify some of them in the following paragraphs. The four ARCO model related questions are:

1. Is there any high contrast?
2. Is the product immediately recognizable?
3. Do readers find a category of use or function of the product by themselves or do advertisers need to clarify that category?¹⁰
4. Is the product usable in its standard functions or not?

The analysis is then carried out on the following, representative advertisements.



Fig. 9: Cheetos advertisement¹¹



Fig. 10: Smartwater advertisement¹²

In Fig. 9, the high contrast is in the colors of the background and of the Cheetos chip (Actualization stage). It is also in the visual message, as the chip is not presented as plain, but

¹⁰ In the scope of the research project I am carrying out with Kirk St.Amant, which this present investigation falls into, we considered the probable subjectivity of consumer categorization. Here, the interpretations of the examples reported correspond mainly to the opinion of a pilot sample of consumers, surveyed and observed empirically and informally on the application of the ARCO model. One of the next targets of our research project is to test these consumer perceptions in a more formalized way, with the goal of systematizing and forecasting consumer preferences to categorize the message, and consequently the product they encounter.

¹¹ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CN3L2hHLcWC/>. Last visited 23/02/2022.

¹² <https://www.instagram.com/p/CTmukzyrA9R/>. Last visited 25/02/2022.

wrapped in flames. Nonetheless, the product is recognizable as a Cheetos chip, so the second step (Recognition) in the ARCO model is fulfilled. The third step is about Categorization: the consumer has to expand the potential use of Cheetos, from simply being plain salty chips to include them also as a spicy snack. Flames are the element that helps categorize the product as a spicy one and usable in this function. To do so, thanks to Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) methodology, it is possible to imply that the consumer looks for information from top to bottom, confirming their categorization of the product. The information in this case is textual—"hottest ever"—and visual—a chili pepper in the background of the bag and flames at the lower edge of the advertisement.

In Fig. 10, the contrast is definitely in the colors and in the setting, a bottle in front of a mirror. The product is easily recognizable, but at the stage of categorization, some observations are necessary. The possibility of attributing meanings comes from the textual headline "You are Smart" along with the position of the bottle: the sentence may refer both to the water and to the magic mirror in the Snow White fairy tale. In this interpretation, the mirror calls the water by its name "Smart," giving back an aura of immaterial, magic perception of this mineral water. In another interpretation, the sentence is assertive: "You are Smart" is then referred to the consumer, who is "smart" for the consumption of this particular water. In this interpretation, the bottle is then personified, as the sentence is referred to a person, and the mirroring action elicits self-esteem and well-being. The third step of the ARCO model, here, needs a decoding by the consumer, in their mental process, leading to the Operationalization stage, when the reader is able to say that Smart Water is usable as water.

Fig. 11 refers to a creative PEPSI advertisement, where the contrast is given by the setting (Halloween spooky scene, bones, snake, etc.) and by the old design of the PEPSI can. The second ARCO step (Recognition) is fulfilled, as the product is clearly recognizable, even though it is represented in its old design. The categorization stage is the one where it is necessary to decode the advertisement. The scenario tells clearly that the PEPSI is framed at a Halloween party, but the meaning is given by the advertiser, not in the picture, but in the post. The viewer needs then to look for information, following the "left-right" pattern indicated by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), and finds it in the posts, where it becomes clear that the can is "dressed up as a 90s icon." This foray into the past might be interpreted as a statement of iconicity and identity, to say that regardless of time going by, PEPSI is still recognizable. The operationalization stage needs no interpretation, as the product is usable in its standard function.

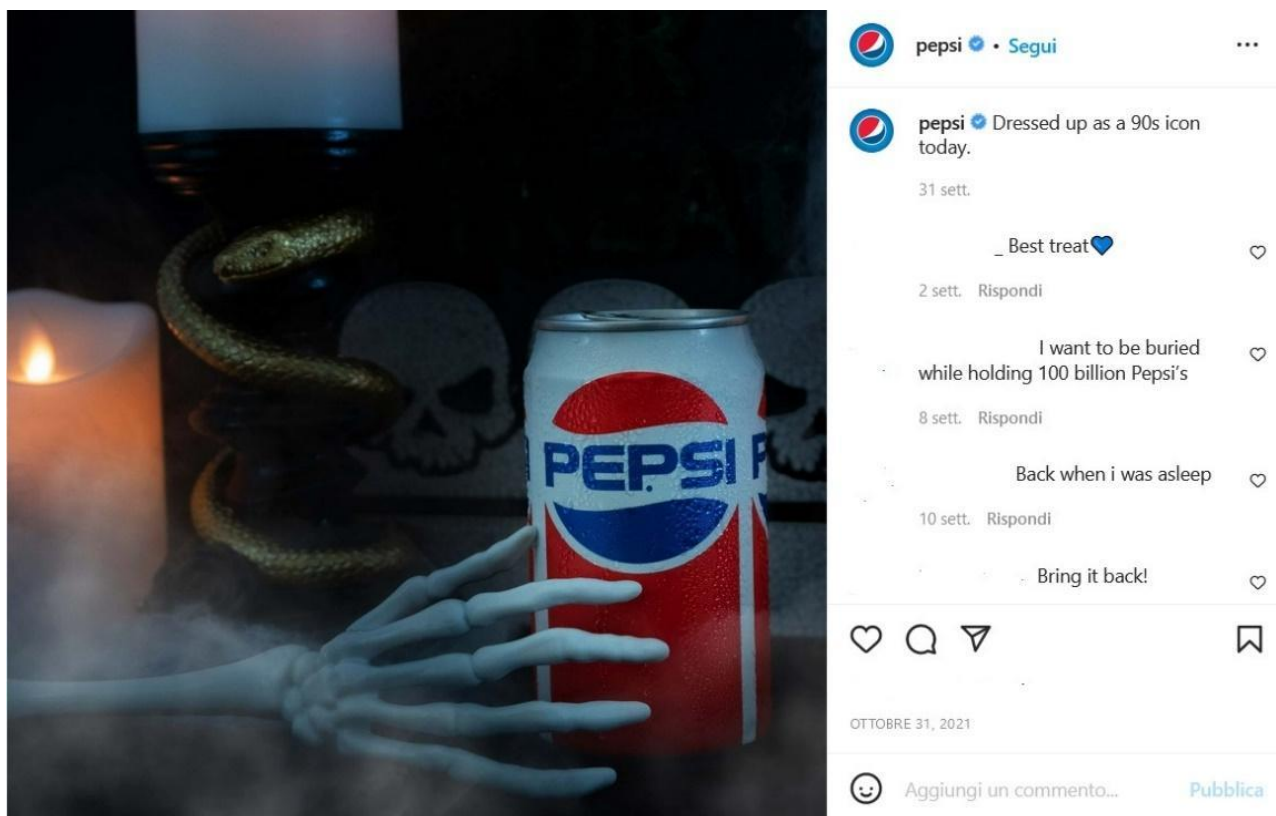


Fig. 11: Pepsi advertisement¹³

Fig. 12 represents another interesting creative OREO advertisement. The first two steps in the ARCO model are fulfilled, as the contrast is given by colors, as it is very common and by the eight remaining combinations of OREO cookies and cream. The product is recognizable, as it is not only represented, but also named, by the first caption. The categorization stage needs interpretation, so the reader scans the image going from left to right, from top to bottom. The designer does not provide any explicit textual or visual link but helps the reader's mind to find the key. It attributes, as in mathematics formulae, a "color" to O, and a "color" to RE, in the word OREO. Thus, many combinations are possible. Again, different interpretations are possible: the first one is maybe a graphic representation of mathematics with parts of cookies. But a more interesting one can be the display of all the possible ways people may like to eat OREO cookies: standard way, cream only, black cookie only, two parts of cream and one of cookie, etc. this interpretation leads to the operationalization stage, that, as said, makes the product usable in many different ways.

Fig. 13 is a CLASSICO advertisement, a US condiment maker. In this advertisement, the

¹³ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CVs1qBMtaX9/>. Last visited 25/02/2022.

contrast is detectable especially at two levels: first, colors, as the white dish contrasts with the green background; second, as the contrast is in the assembled Italian word in the headline. The product is recognizable, it is a sauce, something related to pasta as it is displayed. The third ring of the chain in the ARCO model is Categorization. Here, the category is not just a sauce, but the consumer has to reformulate its idea of condiment, because the text and the top-down scanning tells the reader it is an Italian style condiment. In some American cultural view, any Italian touch in food means adding a sophisticated character to the dish. At the categorization stage, then, the information provided helps the consumer decode the product and operationalize it, as it is usable in the new function of Italian condiment. This consideration is even reinforced by the caption that restricts the use to some special events “date nights and dinner parties.” This latter recalls cultural stereotypes where Italian products (coffee, pasta, etc.) are often related to romance (Di Ferrante, Giordano and Pizziconi 2016).

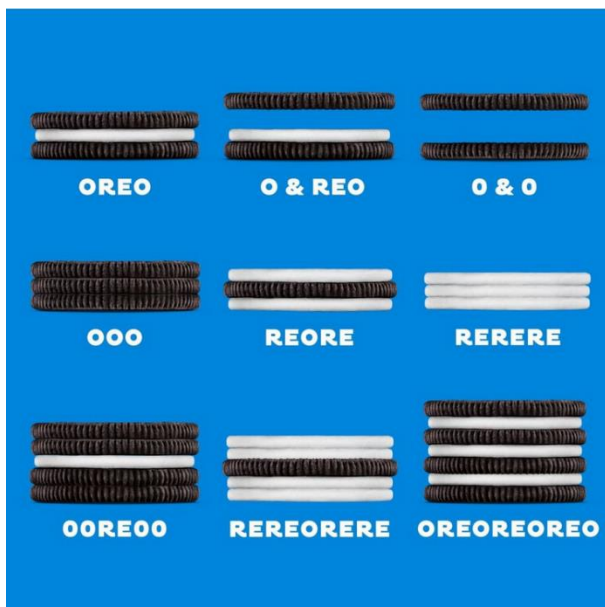


Fig 12: Oreo advertisement¹⁴

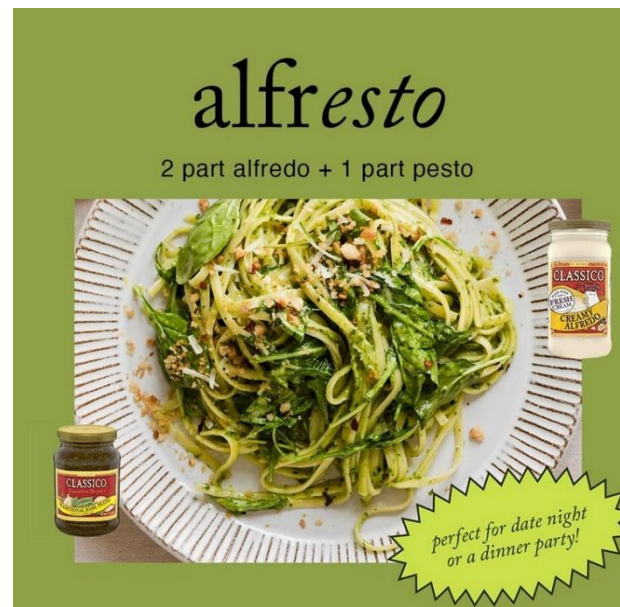


Fig. 13: Classico advertisement¹⁵

The common aspect that is possible to detect from the advertisements investigated so far is that all of them present a break in the ARCO process at the third stage (Categorization), when the reader needs to interpret the message, look for further information in the advertisement and decode it, either alone or with the help of the advertising designer. This process leads to increased concentration on the product. The element that triggers this interpretation helps

¹⁴ https://www.instagram.com/p/CVDhPG_Nelb/. Last visited 24/02/2022.

¹⁵ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CVs1qBMtaX9/>. Last visited 23/02/2022.

catalyze the attention and the engagement of the reader to find and explore new possible uses and functions of the product. The interruption of the ARCO chain at the third stage seems deliberate, as the visual and textual elements lead the readers strategically in the direction of elaborating the usability of the product. On the basis of such considerations, I can categorize these advertisements as *catalyzers*.

In Fig. 14, Heinz advertises ketchup. The first stage (Actualization) of the ARCO process is again accomplished, as the contrast of colors is striking for the bright red background and the white of the headline. Furthermore, the contrast is also ensured by the atypical context of the setting, the “waiting wheel” of computer programs and applications loading. At first sight the Recognition stage does not occur here: the product and its functions are not immediately recognizable, as the foreground, in the upper central part, is occupied by the “waiting wheel.” Its meaning is confusing until the scanning, following Kress and van Leeuwen’s suggested top-down pattern for the analysis of the image, is performed. Thus, in the Categorization step, where the advertiser tells the reader that “if you have to wait, it has to be” followed by the picture of Heinz ketchup, the contextual situation is clarified. The initial distraction from the product, the creative metaphor of the waiting, along with the hint given by the designer, lead to an unambiguous determination of the product. This third ring of the ARCO chain triggers the interpretation towards the quality of the ketchup, implying it is less fluid and tasty (viscosity is one of Heinz’s strategic selling points). Only at this stage is the consumer able to operationalize Heinz ketchup as its usual and standard function. The contribution of the designer in orientating the addressee is fundamental: without the logo and its caption, a consumer would never understand this advertisement as ketchup advertising.¹⁶

The Doritos advertisement in Fig. 15 is also interesting in terms of interpretation. Performing the usual application of the ARCO model, it is possible to see that the contrast is present especially in the representation of the visual: an object blending a wristwatch and a potato chip, which make a striking contrast together. The Recognition step is hard to be completed as well. The product is not immediately recognizable, as the chip is placed in a decontextualized setting. It represents the pin of a meridian, decontextualized itself as being a “wrist sundial.” The third stage, Categorization, becomes then necessary to recontextualize the product. In the proposed representation, Doritos are the “alarm clock” of lunch time (the Dorito chip is placed at noon position, even though in a sundial it should show the time by the shadow). Doritos become then

¹⁶ <https://www.heinz.com/heinz-timeline>; <https://www.famouscampaigns.com/2021/06/test/>; <https://www.marketingdive.com/news/heinz-asks-fans-to-wait-57-minutes-for-website-to-load-in-latest-endurance/595785/>. Last visited 24/02/2022.

the perfect snack as soon as hunger arrives. The interpretation is again driven by the designer information, and again it follows the Kress and van Leeuwen pattern, from top to bottom. The information is the logo: without the logo, a consumer would probably scarcely recognize this as a Doritos advertisement.



Fig. 14: Heinz advertisement¹⁷



Fig. 15: Doritos advertisement¹⁸

Fig. 16 replicates an advertisement of MIO, a vitamin supplement. In the application of the systemic chain of the ARCO model, the first step is realized as the contrast is present in this advertisement, both from a chromatic point of view, and from a contextual one. The IV bag, in fact, is generally used in hospitals or for liquid drug infusion and has little connection with the product function. The second step, Recognition, is difficult to accomplish here, as the product is not immediately recognizable. At first glance, this advertisement may represent a drug, and it might be recognized as such. The ARCO model consequential chain is then broken at the second stage and in the visual analysis pattern—in this case, the top-down scan—the advertiser provides the necessary information to convey the nature of the product and its Categorization (third stage). The logo is then displayed in the lower part of the advertisement so as to provide the reader with a lead to identify the product and find out its use and function. This is realized at the fourth stage, Operationalization. Thus, again, even though the product is not recognized

¹⁷ https://www.instagram.com/p/CLt_VInJZuG/. Last visited 24/02/2022.

¹⁸ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CMNUWFRFFVO/>. Last visited 24/02/2022.

in the first place, it is possible to collocate it in its standard function, in this case, a vitamin supplement.



Fig. 16: Mio advertisement¹⁹

In Fig. 17 PEPSI provides a creative advertisement, of a wrinkle in the paper bag of a famous recognizable fast-food brand, Burger King. Applying the ARCO model sequence, it is possible to detect the contrast at first glance, both in the vivid colors and in the confusion on which brand is being advertised. Consequently, the product is impossible to recognize. The foreground is focused on the paper bag and on the wrinkle. The caption says “Better with,” and adds no information as to what product or brand is being advertised. The Categorization is fulfilled by referring to the presentation post in the chat box (scanning the image from left to right), where the reader understands that the brand being advertised is PEPSI, recognizing now the logo and its colors in the small circle captioned in the advertisement. Once the brand is recognized, the operationalization step comes smoothly, as it is clear to the reader that any Burger King meal is better with PEPSI. The product can be then considered in its standard use and function, soft drink accompanying food. The implicit message in the visual part of this advertisement would be quite difficult to be decoded, the company comment is a switch to light on the recognition of the product and its consequent categorization and operationalization. This advertisement is a part of a series of similar advertisements, posted the same day, using Mc Donald’s and Wendy’s logos.

¹⁹ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CQqyeYrbmN/>. Last visited 23/02/2022.



Fig. 17: Pepsi advertisement²⁰

In fig. 18 the advertisement of Velveeta, a cream cheese, is displayed. The contrast is given by the golden letters over a brilliant black setting. Yet, the strongest contrastive element is the decontextualization of Velveeta cream into a cosmetic advertisement. Velveeta in fact is displayed as a skincare product and a daily moisturizer. Consumers are not able to relate the famous cheese cream brand to the sector of cosmetics. For this reason, the product is impossible to recognize. Thus, the recognition stage fails, as consumers can recognize the brand, but they cannot link it to the usual product. The skincare cream is not recognized, and the attention is distracted from the Velveeta cream cheese. The scanning of the product, in search for information that may clarify the discrepancy between brand awareness and the reality depicted, produces no result. It is then necessary to pay attention to the posts in the chat box to imply that the company has advertised its cheese cream on March 30th, in a completely different domain as an April Fool's joke. From an analytical point of view, this advertisement is peculiar as it eventually follows the pattern of the previous advertisements, getting to the categorization stage after having researched information and received it. After decoding the implicit message of the joke, the product is recognizable and can perfectly perform its standard function. In this advertisement, the information does not come from the company but from a user of the

²⁰ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CPVdtmHHTZV/>. Last visited 23/02/2022.

community of followers. Which means that the company aimed to use distraction from the product as a promotional strategy to create a buzz around the media campaign.



Fig. 18: Velveeta advertisement²¹

The last advertisements examined here reveal a common pattern: the consequential chain of the ARCO model breaks at the second stage, Recognition. The advertiser's strategy to make the product or the brand unintelligible, by a decontextualized setting, not displaying the product and hiding it, aims to *distract* from the advertised product, directing it towards the set of information useful to recontextualize and decodify the product as performer of its standard and peculiar function. The information provided by the company to categorize the product seem to work as the leads of an investigation game, generating a grade of interactivity that engages the audience in the promotional process. On the basis of such considerations, I can categorize these advertisements as *distractors*.

²¹ <https://www.instagram.com/p/CNDf6YXFShW/>. Last visited 25/02/2022.

5. Defining catalyzers and distractors and concluding remarks

This study set two initial research questions: Is it possible to identify some elements, of a different nature, able to catalyze attention on a brand or product, or also distract attention from them? It is possible to construe a systemic investigation pattern to identify these elements? It has been demonstrated, in this study, that some catalyzing or distracting elements exist in advertising, although of a different nature. It is interesting to see that the examples reported are mainly visual but also some textual ones are present. Such catalyzers and distractors have been identified thanks to a systemic methodology of investigation, based upon an analytical tool, the ARCO model, integrated with Kress and van Leeuwen's analytical approach. Such combination of instrument and approach has provided the steps to investigate the corpus. Based on this review, the advertisements examined here seem to be violating the ARCO processes in a systematic way designed to address reader attention in accordance with Kress and van Leeuwen's notions of how individuals read visual texts in a set pattern. The pattern, moreover, seems to take place in two distinct ways, or categories, both of which occur after the A (actualization) part of the overall process:

1. **Catalyzers:** These violations occur at the Categorization stage where, after individuals have recognized or identified an item (Recognition stage), the advertisement presents the product as having a different or new use from what many consumers already associate with that product. In this case, the new property of the item is emphasized as part of the settings (Operationalization stage) in which individuals use that product in new ways in previously recognized contexts. Catalyzers can be then defined as textual, pictorial, paratextual and cultural implicit or explicit elements that help catalyze readers' attention on the product or brand by providing emotional response, suggesting new usability of the advertised product.
2. **Distractors:** These violations occur at the second stage, Recognition, where individuals have to identify the product. In these violations, the design of the ad shifts the audience's attention away from identifying the product for what it is. Such distractive elements present the product as a completely different item within the context of the advertisement, causing initial confusion, as the individual tries to determine what the subject of the advertisement is. Distraction prompts individuals to scan the advertisement—according to the left-to-right and top-to-bottom reading patterns identified by Kress and van Leeuwen—in order to identify or recognize (Recognition stage) what product the advertisement is promoting. In these instances, by strategically

positioning explanatory text in alignment with how individuals read, the advertiser identifies the item for the individual. The resulting realization prompts an emotional response in the form of a sort of investigation game (amusement) and then allows the individual to proceed with the other steps of the ARCO process based upon this recognition. The emotional response created by the use of distractors in halting the ARCO process could, perhaps, create a favorable impression (based on humor and interactivity) of the product in the eyes of the individual.

Distractors can then be defined as a combination of decontextualized messages and settings, pictorial, cultural and textual, implicit or explicit, elements that may distract readers' attention from the advertised product, generating a decoding game and resulting in the unambiguous identification of the standard use and function of the product itself.

Recognition plays a fundamental role, as it is intimately connected to the usability of the product. If the advertisers can address attention, by catalyzers or distractors, they can also point out the way attention should be focused. Recognizing brands or products and connecting reflexively to primary or new functions and uses (usability) paves the way to effective promotional messages. Further research is committed to the identification of catalyzers and distractors in other forms of advertising, from printed advertisements to commercials, integrating and comparing these results with those of previous or concurrent research projects. Furthermore, another research thread focuses on narrative business texts, i.e., Annual Reports and Letters to Shareholders, as well as political speeches, to detect possible strategies to address audience attention towards selected information.

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