

Advertising Analysis Guide

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Consider the context of the advertisement.

- Why is the ad located where it is?
- Why are you looking at the images in this context? Info? Purchase?
- How does the context effect your impressions?
- What background knowledge might be necessary to understand the ad?
- Who is the ad directed at? Who is the intended audience?
- How is the ad distributed? Targeted audiences or general public?

Look at the ad in its entirety.

- What are your initial impressions?
- What do you notice first? What seems to stand out for you?
- What are the contents of the ad (image, text)?
- Where is the “product” positioned in the ad?
- What is the catch or hook for this ad? What aspect of the targeted audience does the ad appeal to (fear, vanity, needs)?
- What intertextual connections are you reminded of?

Analyzing the Contents and Composition of the Advertisement

Media

- What materials are used to create the ad? Paintings, photos, collage?
- What artistic styles are used to create ad? Pop art? Folk art? Surrealism?
- What fonts are used in the text? Different fonts? What does this suggest?
- Is the ad single of multi-media? How is text and image related? Sound?

Portrayal

- Who is portrayed in the ad? Who is not portrayed?
- What are the various actors doing?
- Who is doing what to whom?
- Where are the actors located in the ad?
- Are the actors looking at each other, away from the audience or at the audience? What does this suggest? (Demand or Offer)
- Consider the viewers point of view. Are the characters close up or distanced? How does point of view add to relationships with the characters?
- Are there borders separating actors and text, actors and product?

Images of People

Bodies:

- Age – innocence, wisdom, youth, success
- Gender – tough vs caring
- Race – who likes / does what
- Body Style – slim, fat, hair
- Looks – hair, culture, time, clothes

Manner:

- Expressions – happy, sad, excited etc
- Eye contact (offer / demand)
- Pose – seductive, confident

Activity:

- Touch – who touches who
- Movement – active / passive
- Positional Communication – spatial arrangement, closeness, distance

Props / Setting:

- Props – glasses, drinks, toys, tools
- Settings – natural, exotic, everyday, fantastical

Basic Elements of Design

- Consider the colors used. What impressions do you get from the dominant colors? Are colors intense or subdued? Is the image black & white? If so, why might that be used?
- Are vertical, horizontal or diagonal lines used? What might these suggest?
- Are there any shapes that dominate the image?
- Consider size and scale. What is large? Why are certain elements larger than others? Does this add to meanings of position, power, or control?

Framing / Composition

- Are the text or images bordered or framed? Do the frames suggest anything on their own? Are there thick borders or faded edges?
- How is text and image combined? Where is the text located?
- Are the images contextualized or in an abstract space? How is white space used?

Visual Grammar

- Contact, Distance, Point of View, Information Value, Saliency, Modality
- What is located on the left, right or center? (old and new) What is on the top or bottom of the ad? (real & ideal)
- Are there any recurring patterns, symbols or motifs in the images?
- What is the “reality value” or level of abstraction? Are the images life-like or stick figures?
- Consider narrative structures (action, reaction, transaction) or conceptual structures (analyze, classify).

Saliency

- Consider the “path” your eyes follow as you approach the image. What catches your eye first? Why is that element salient?
- What is the ad trying to get you to look at through leading lines, colors, contrast, gestures, lighting?
- What is in focus or out of focus? How does effect what you notice and consider significant?
- Are there any anomalous elements? Things that stick out, or seem out of place? Are these important to consider?

Finding Ads' Hidden Messages

There's more to advertising's message than meets the casual eye. An effective ad, like other forms of communication, works best when it strikes a chord in the needs and desires of the receiving consumer -- a connection that can be both intuitive and highly calculated. The following questions can help foster an awareness of this process. Use them for class or group discussions or your own individual analysis of ads or commercials.:

1. What is the general ambience of the advertisement? What mood does it create? How does it do this?
2. What is the relationship between pictorial elements and written material and what does this tell us?
3. What is the use of space in the advertisement? Is there a lot of "white space" or is it full of graphic and written elements?
4. What signs and symbols do we find? What role do they play in the ad's impact?
5. If there are figures (men, women, children, animals) what are they like? What can be said about their facial expressions, poses, hairstyle, age, sex, hair color, ethnicity, education, occupation, relationships (of one to the other)?
6. What does the background tell us? Where is the advertisement taking place and what significance does this background have?
7. What action is taking place in the advertisement and what significance does it have? (This might be described as the ad's "plot.")
8. What theme or themes do we find in the advertisement? What is it about? What about the language used? Does it essentially provide information or does it try to generate some kind of emotional response? Or both? What techniques are used by the copywriter: humor, alliteration, definitions" of life, comparisons, sexual innuendo, and so on?
9. What is the item being advertised and what role does it play in American culture and society?
10. If the advertisement is a photograph, what kind of a shot is it? What significance do long shots, medium shots, close-up shots have? What about the lighting, use of color, angle of the shot?