

*Original Research Article*

# Selling Points and Promotional Strategies in Advertising: A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of a Burger King's Print Advertisement

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**Abstract:** Gone were the days when communication among people can only be achieved by language, the popularization of computers and the soaring development of multimedia technology have brought tremendous changes to the way people communicate with each other. There is little doubt that language is the most important, but never the only, means by which we communicate and create meaning (Han, 2015, p. 415), resources for representing meaning like sound, image, color, motion and other non-verbal communication approaches are significant as well. While most of the studies prefer a content analysis way to find out the semiotic meaning in a certain advertisement, this article, however, would apply a multimodal discourse analysis approach to demonstrate how business enterprises externalize their selling points and promotional strategies in advertisements.

**Keywords:** Multimodal Discourse Analysis; Burger King; Print Advertisement; Gender

**Method:** The multimodal discourse analysis was first brought to public by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) in their book *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. In this book, they come up with a three-fold meanings structure of visual grammar: the representational meaning, the interactive meaning and the compositional meaning. The analysis part of this article will follow the structure put forward by Kress and Van Leeuwen to find out how sex and gender could be used as selling points for King Burger and, to some extent, seek out its significance.

**Analysis**

**Sample:** The ever-growing pace of modern life hastened the revolution in the food industry and created a branch called the fast-food industry. Years of development and prosperity of fast-food industry couldn't do without numerous food enterprises, namely, KFC (Kentucky Fried Chicken), McDonald's, Pizza Hut, etc. Burger King, as one of the fast-food giants with a sales revenue of approximately 1.58 U.S. dollars in 2018, is a very typical and representative brand in this industry. Therefore, this article chooses a print advertisement of Burger King (see Figure 1) to illustrate the visual grammar theory by multimodal discourse analysis.

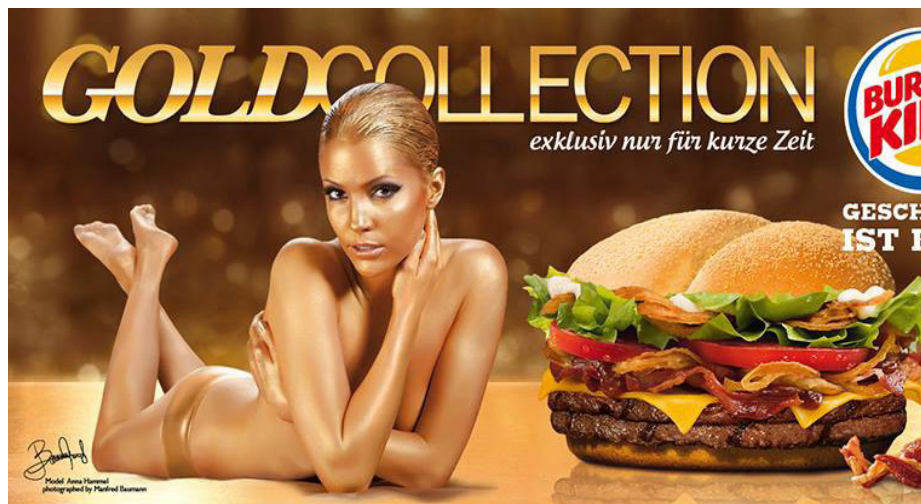


Figure 1. Print advertisement of burger king. Source: meghancorte (2014).

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## 1. The representational meaning

According to Kress and Van Leeuwen, characters as well as the backgrounds constitutes a lot to the representational meaning of the image. And they divided an image into narrative image and conceptual image when explaining the representational meaning. Due to their sex and gender characteristics, female bodies have long been used to represent mystery and beauty in advertisements. Establishing certain connections between products and female figures is the common trick played by designers in advertisements in order to grab the attention of potential customers. One of the examples is the naked female image in the Burger King's print advertisement above.

### 1.1 The narrative image

The process of forming the narrative image is called the action process. Relationships among participants are established by mutual functions in this process. Vector is the sign of narrative image, which was achieved by structuring diagonal lines, especially intense ones. The action process can be further divided into two parts: the operation process, in which vector is sent out by its actor and received by what is called an objective, and the reaction process, in which the vector is constituted solely by the gaze of the actor. In the print advertisement of Burger King, the model folds her arms and legs upon her curved body, which forms several intensive diagonals. The model itself becomes the actor in the operation process and through the vector, her seductive gaze, the audiences become the objectives and the reaction process is achieved. The model wants to grab the audiences' attention through her gaze and the audiences want to enjoy her beauty and thus the mutual function is established. The narrative image is based on the two processes and what the Burger King really wants to narrate through the sexy image is that their hamburger can fulfill the customers' demand just like the model, but in a different aspect, which is, to fulfill their need of satiety.

### 1.2 The conceptual image

The process of forming the conceptual image is called the conceptual process, which can be reflected by the nature, category and characteristics of participants. This process can be further divided into three parts: classificational, analytical and symbolic processes. The Burger King's advertisement shows the symbolic process: the sexy figure of the female model symbolizes the hamburger. They have the similar golden color and the same characteristic – to fulfill the demand of people, each by means of the beauty and the ability to make people feel satiety.

## 2. The interactive meaning

The interactive meaning reveals the relationship between participants and the audiences of the image. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen, this meaning can be achieved through the following four processes.

### 2.1 Gaze

Gaze here refers to a broader concept, much similar to having contact with someone. However, this contact is built mainly by a long steady look of the participants in the image, and the look is commonly recognized as a gaze. When the participants in the image is gazing, it always seems like they want something from the audiences. This type of image is called demanding image by Kress and Van Leeuwen. The participants (the female model) in the print advertisement of Burger King gazes directly at the front, thus establishing a potential contact (namely, gaze) with the audiences (Burger King's potential customers). She transmits a visual demand through her gaze, that is, in this print advertisement, to grab the attention of the audiences and lure them to get into the nearest Burger King and purchase its products.

### 2.2 Social distance

How close the relationship between the participants and the audiences depends on the social distance of the image and it is normally connected to the three types of view frame sizes: close-up, medium and long shot. In Kress and Van Leeuwen's words, the close-up shot suggests personal closeness, the medium shot suggests the distance of public business interactions and lastly the long shot correlates with impersonal distance. In terms of Burger King's print advertisement, it shows the medium shot which creates an atmosphere for public business interactions. The whole body of the model and the hamburger is presented along with a blurring background at a moderate distance for audiences. This distance on the one hand enables the audiences to get involved in the interactive process while on the other hand avoids the audiences' putting too much attention on the sexy model solely since the product image, the logo and the slogan in the background are big enough to gain the equivalent attention from the audiences. By applying the medium shot, the correlation between the model and the product becomes even stronger and the moderate social distance between this advertisement and its audiences can serves well for its business promotional purpose.

### 2.3 Attitude

According to Kress and Van Leeuwen, attitude in advertisement can be reflected through angles and perspectives. Attitudes can be divided into two kinds: the horizontal attitude and the vertical attitude. Different attitude may represent different relationship between the participants and the audiences. For instance, the print advertisement of Burger King applies the horizontal attitude which means the participants in the image and its audiences are equal, and it would become easier for the audience to absorb more information in the image. In this way, the informative and objective principal of a print advertisement can be achieved both in the same image.

### 2.4 Modality

As one of the most significant constituents of the interactive meaning, modality refers to the authenticity and the credibility of the image. Here, Kress and Van Leeuwen list eight modality makers to judge visual modality: color saturation, color differentiation, color modulation, background, details, depth, tone, illumination. The Burger King's advertisement uses high saturated colors and

color differentiation –yellow and gold, a blurring golden background to echo with the image of the model, a reduced details, a total absence of the depth and tone and a normal representation of the light and shade in terms of illumination. These parts correlated well with each other to make the advertisement more attractive in a fairly objective way by maximizing the perfection of the hamburger through high modality.

### 3. The compositional meaning

Different from other art forms, the design of print advertisements needs to be concise and clear, enabling audiences to grasp the main selling point at a short instance even they're at a long distance. Kress and Van Leeuwen think that the compositional meaning consists of three resources: informative value, framing and salience.

#### 3.1 Informative value

The informative value of a print advertisement was decided by the placement of its constituents. The placements can be classified into three kinds: left and right, top and bottom as well as centre and margin. This print advertisement chooses the left and right placement with the model on the left side and the product on the right side. When audiences' attention was grabbed by the sexy model, it's quite easy for them to move on to the product – the hamburger – since this type of placement give the two constituents the equivalent status in structuring the image.

#### 3.2 Framing

Framing means to use framing devices to connect or disconnect the visual elements in certain visual compositions. In Burger King's print advertisement, the designer wants to achieve the maximum connection between product and its brand value. It puts the product in the right position and make a comparison between the delicious hamburger and the attractive female figure to show the product's high quality and that it is delicious enough to become the beauty of the fast-food industry.

#### 3.3 Salience

Salience means how noticeable and prominent the image could be. In Kress and Van Leeuwen's view, the greater the weight of an element, the greater salience is. For this print advertisement, although seemingly the model and the hamburger may take the same amount of space, however, they're not in proportion to each other at a normal standard. This means the hamburger is amplified deliberately to take the conceptual biggest space. With a bigger size, the hamburger constructs a great salience. And the contrast of color also constructs the great salience. The hamburger has some bright colors in it, which is in contrast with the sole golden color of other elements and the background. The great salience makes the hamburger prominent as well.

### 4. Conclusion

This article uses the methodology of multimodal discourse analysis first put forward by Kress and Van Leeuwen to analyze a controversial print advertisement of the fast-food giant – Burger King. Through the three-fold meanings structure of visual grammar, the product feature and brand value of Burger King can be easily displayed. What is more, by using a seductive female image as the selling point, the designer of this Burger King's print advertisement correlates the two main participants (the model and the hamburger) well enough to enhance the attraction of the product. This method has served as a profitable promotional strategy and brought in considerable revenue for Burger King.

But recently, certain disputes have occurred stating that this advertisement, which analogizes women to hamburgers, is in essence a discrimination towards females, and this view was supported by numerous feminists. However, women are never the only victims when it comes to using sex and gender as selling points to promote certain products or services in advertisements. Male figures representing violence and masculinity and sometimes even evil can be seen in some advertisements as well. So when using sound, image, color, motion and other non-verbal communication approaches to communicate, especially in business world, certain social implications should also be taken into consideration.

### References

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