

Visual Communication Messages in TV Advertising: Semiotic Analysis of Maroc Telecom Commercial

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Abstract

This article is an academic reaction to the powerful domination of advertising images, specifically TV commercials as visually intensive forms of mass communication. These images draw their importance and prominence from the central position they occupy in the mass communication sign system. To investigate the production of meanings from visuals using semiotics as a theoretical basis, the present paper studies an advertising slot that was broadcast on Moroccan television channels. It revolves around the ad's visual communication messages that advertisers mainly convey through pictures and other communicative forms.

Key words: visual communication, semiotics, sign system, commercial slot, visuals.

Introduction

Mass communicators very frequently transmit their messages visually. In a mass communication activity, both senders and receivers exclusively exploit all types of visuals to produce, generate and interpret meaning, which does not lie in the pictures themselves, “but rather in what we bring to them” (Moriarty, 1995, p. 5). Members of a given audience heavily link the pictures’ visual information to the deeply held and widely diffused ways of interpreting the world. Hence, studies that deal with meaning in any visual text have usually evolved from semiotics. In fact, advertising images draw their importance and prominence from the central position they occupy in the mass communication sign system. An awareness of the way in which TV commercials structure and present their picture of reality can pave the way to understand how society works. Thus, an insight into advertising visuals is worth considering since ads can “focus and redefine ideas about language, discourse, art, and society” (Cook, 1992, p. 230). On this basis, the present paper aims to track a Moroccan TV commercial’s production of meanings from visuals using semiotics as a tool for analysis. It revolves around the ad’s visual communication messages mainly conveyed through pictures. Hence, a brief introduction to visual communication theory is indispensable for a better understanding.

Visual communication theory

The theory is concerned with how visual messages “interact with people in order to produce meanings” (Fiske, 1990, p. 2). It is a matter of clear seeing which includes a combination of how much the viewer knows and how he feels at any particular moment. Accounting for the way meaning is produced visually, semiotics is a useful methodological tool “because the thinking processes it proposes are parallel to the interpretive processes used in creating and understanding visuals” (Moriarty, 1994, p. 8). Its aim is to establish widely applicable principles while its main concern is to explain “how communication works, with the systems of language and culture, and particularly with the structural relationship of semiotic system, culture and reality” (Fiske, 1990, p. 135). Visual communication theory clusters in the areas of visual literacy, visual thinking, visual imagery, and visual perception. As a start, let us see what visual literacy means and how it relates to the scope of this paper.

Visual literacy

Visual communication skills are largely self-taught and happen through our natural perceptual processes that govern much of our visual learning. We understand film images “not through learning a code but by transferring real world interpretational processes that we use in everyday perception” (Moriarty, 1994, p. 8). Messari (1994) argues that we become visually literate through a process that is basically perceptual and innate rather than learned as is language. His premise is that visual literacy is a normal human condition. TV provides us with repetitive and familiar images that use codes “which are closely related to those by which we perceive reality itself” (Fiske & Hartley, 1978, p. 17). Consequently, the more experienced we are in making connections and accurately retaining images, the more literate we become in the televisual codes governing the medium. Visual literacy overlaps with the viewers’ cultural context. In practical terms, people, who have been reading the language of TV, may “fail to attach any meaning to a programme that has not been produced within their own culture” (Harris, 2002, p. 4). So, how does the human brain process visual information?

Visual thinking

Visual thinking is a free mental process that involves no vocabulary of picturing. People can sometimes visualize their thoughts without feeling the need to verbalize them. Although visual thinking may involve both pictorial and semantic elements, we can best describe it as a conceptual process that moves beyond both words and images and that leads to “an abstract meaning-based format or platform for managing ideational relationships” (Moriarty, 1994, p. 7). Being an inferential interpretation process, semiotic analysis is a useful tool to grasp the make-up and workings of visual thinking. The interpretative method of semiotics basically introduces abduction, inference, and observation which all put researchers closely aligned with the way human beings process information visually.

Abductive reasoning

Abductive reasoning is based on hypothesis building from clues in the natural environment. It is the “statistical inference, which relies more on hypothesis testing or

educated guessing than rules of logic” (Hoopes, 1991, p. 85). Peirce (1955) describes the formation of an abductive hypothesis as an act of insight. Advertisers refer to that flash of insight as visualization which means that they make “an idea come to life by expressing it in a visual form, which can include words as well as graphics” (Moriarty, 1996, p. 13). Likewise, the way we make sense of TV is similar to Peirce’s abduction because “we do not tend to turn television on and watch through a program. Instead, we watch it in fits and starts and we get bits and pieces of all sorts of messages that we put together to create our own picture of reality” (Becker, 1978, p. 42). Educated guessing begins with observation and then proceeds in a back and forth process of developing hypotheses and comparing observations with information known and filed in memory. According to Peirce (1955), this type of search for meaning is infinite since every signifier can be translated into other signifiers and interpretants via “an endless process of inference chaining” (Moriarty, 1994, p. 6).

Observation and inference

Visual communication is grounded in observation which leads to hypotheses about meanings. It takes repeated observations for the individual to make sense of the patterns around him. His perception interacts with cognition via “the process of recognition, organization, and discrimination” (Moriarty, 1996, p. 6). The observer’s past experiences moderate the things he understands in reality. He combines the internally derived information learned from experience with externally based conventions. This fact puts more demands on the individual who plays an important role in his subjective interpretation of open texts in that he has to observe clues in the visual perception and move to a conclusion by hypothesizing relationships and patterns. As a case in point, meanings are not stated explicitly anywhere in ads. The viewer will observe distinct “cues which bring forth information and associations from his own mental filing cabinet and he will develop hypotheses about how these various details relate until the ideas come together to mean something” (Ibid, p. 13). Concerning inference, Peirce’s “primary contribution to cognition and only incidentally to communication was his proposition that all thinking is the inferential interpretation of signs” (Hoopes, 1991, p. 11). This means that all individuals engage in a thinking process based on inference which results in the interpretation of signs. For instance, TV viewers deconstruct the program’s signs as visual cues and infer the different types and levels of meaning contained in the link between cues. Yet, Eco (1979) claims that audience members do not merely decode a text, but

they also go through a process of synthetic inference. In other words, the involved audience, that actively synthesizes information, extends and decodes the meaning as two parts of the interpretation activity, known as denotation and connotation. Within the scope of visual imagery, these and other related concepts are at stake.

Visual imagery

To adequately analyse visual communication messages, semiotics has focused on representational images, which specialists understand through terms like signs, codes, paradigms, syntagms, denotation, connotation, metaphor, and metonymy. These terms constitute the area of visual imagery, which plays a tremendous role in the highly developing body of visual communication theory. Signs and codes have attracted a lot of importance within the area of visual imagery.

Signs and codes

Peirce (1955) focuses on the logic of meaning and the philosophy of knowledge by catering for what signs mean and how they relate to one another. He points out that

a sign is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. The sign which it creates I call the interpretant of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its object (Peirce, 1955, cited in Fiske, 1990, p. 42).

Explicitly, the image or word sign, which refers to something other than itself, stands for some other object or concept. It is a signifying construct that people can understand only in terms of the uses they put it to. This means that the sign has “a proper significate effect, that is the interpretant, produced both by the sign and by the user’s experiences of the object” (Fiske, 1990, p. 42). By interpretant, Peirce (1955) means the mental concept to which the sign gives rise. In fact, every interpretant, which translates the immediate content of the sign, increases people’s understanding of it in new ways. The user of the sign can be either the encoder, like an image creator, or decoder, like a viewer.

Formulating three different sorts of signs, Peirce (1955) states that

every sign is determined by its object, either first, by partaking in the character of the object, when I call the sign an icon; secondly, by being really and in its individual existence connected with the individual object, when I call the sign an index; thirdly, by more or less approximate certainty that it will be interpreted as denoting the object in consequence of a habit ... when I call the sign a symbol (Peirce, 1955, cited in Fiske, 1990, p. 47).

It is a tripartite system for analyzing visual signs, which include iconic, indexical and symbolic categories of meaning. An icon for Peirce is similar to its subject. It is a representation such as a picture where resemblance is a determining characteristic. In Peirce's citation, an index is physically connected to its object as an indication that something exists or has occurred like smoke which means that there is fire. Peirce refers to a symbol as the most abstract and arbitrary sign that has no logical or representational connection with its object. The three varieties of signs are not mutually exclusive in the sense that "any picture often has all three types represented at the same time" (Lester, 2003, p. 54). They are particularly useful in analyses of advertising. For example, a TV ad is an index of the existence and availability of a product or service. The ad's motion pictures are both icons that look like their signified in some respects and symbols that usually evoke a strong emotional response from viewers. The system that organizes these signs is a code which is an agreed upon set of rules that holds patterns of meaning together. In a given culture, these rules determine "how and in what contexts these signs are used and how they can be combined to form more complex messages" (Fiske, 1990, p. 19). Lester (2003) stresses the importance and usefulness of condensed codes in visual communication. They consist of "several signs that combine to form a new, composite sign" (Lester, 2003, p. 55). TV ads inspired by televised music videos make use of the condensed code. It provides them with the unique and relevant meaning for the target audience that receives the signs of music, editing techniques, graphics, colours, and multiple images in an unexpected, complex message. Furthermore, if the ad that exploits the condensed code is outside the culture of its viewers, "the images often are confusing, random and without purpose" (Ibid, p. 56). This fact proves the importance of the culture within which codes and signs operate. In the same vein, Fiske (1990) introduces the broadcast code that members of a mass audience share and that caters for a degree of heterogeneity. It is "community-oriented, appealing to what people have in common and tending to link them to their society" (Fiske, 1990, p. 73). Advertisers, who exploit condensed and broadcast codes, aim to make their images more memorable and lead their viewer to create the meaning of the

visual cues by bringing to them his own experience, attitudes, and emotions. Broadcast and condensed codes share two basic features. First, they “have a number of units from which a selection is made. This is the paradigmatic dimension. Second, these units may be combined by rules or conventions. This is the syntagmatic dimension” (Ibid, p. 64). Thus, what do the notions of paradigm and syntagm mean and how do they relate to visual imagery?

Paradigm and syntagm

There are two ways of organizing signs into meaningful codes. The first is the paradigm where we choose a specific sign to create meaning by virtue of its relationship to other signs. It is a vertical set of signs from which we select the required one. The second is the syntagm which is the horizontal chain where signs make a meaningful whole via their relationships to the signs before or after them according to agreed rules and conventions. In a paradigm, the units of signs are different and separate from each other, but when we combine them into a syntagm, we can modify them according to their relationship with other units. For Fiske and Hartley (1978), a unit in a paradigm has two dimensions of meaning. The first one concerns its relationship with and at the same time distinctiveness from its fellow units. In the second dimension, we define a unit's meaning in opposition to others in its paradigm, and “we therefore understand a sign by contrasting it with what it is not” (Fiske & Hartley, 1978, p. 51). People can gain the meanings inferred in ads from the paradigms and syntagms of visual signs. Barthes (1977) argues that we create these meanings through our arbitrary semiotic paradigmatic choice and syntagmatic ordering. This fact shows us the potential range of alternatives from which the advertiser has made his selection to give us the full significance of the advert as it finally emerges. No one here denies the determining role of denotation and connotation in the meaning of signs.

Denotation and connotation

Denotation, which belongs to the first order of signification, is the simple, common-sense and obvious meaning of a sign. It frequently refers to the image content in that we carefully look at the image details and describe what they are. Connotation, which lies in the second order of signification, is largely arbitrary and specific to one culture because “it describes the interaction that occurs when the sign meets the feelings or emotions of the users

and the values of their culture” (Barthes, 1977, p. 85). Connotation is about image meaning, which results from personal and cultural associations and experiences members of the same community more or less share. Generally speaking, denotation caters for covert messages while connotation seeks the overt ones. In advertising, connotation is the result of human intervention in the process of selecting what to include in the advert such as camera distance and angle, focus, and effects. In this context, connotation is expressive and involves subjective rather than objective experience. It is essentially the way in which the advertiser “transmits his feelings or judgement about the subject of the message” (Fiske & Hartley, 1978, p. 44). In TV ads, “the literal image is denoted and the symbolic image connoted” (Barthes, 1977, p. 196). The process of symbolization is broad and guides much of our meaning production both visually and verbally. Other significant concepts in this symbolic imagery are metaphor and metonymy.

Metaphor and metonymy

Metaphor and metonymy are “two fundamental modes by means of which the meanings of signs are conveyed” (Fiske & Hartley, 1978, p. 48). Derived from symbolic communication, metaphor points out similarities between two things. It evokes meaning by transferring qualities from a referent or signified to a new object or signifier through implied comparison. We assert rather than apply this metaphor literally or conventionally so that it may then itself become conventional. Fiske and Hartley (1978) refer to visual communication that uses analogical thinking as visual metaphors that we do not assert but construct. They argue that this type of metaphor involves “a transposition or displacement from signified to signifier, together with the recognition that such a transposition implies an equivalence between these two elements of signs” (Ibid). Visual metaphors on TV typically use a concrete form such as buildings, people, and possessions to represent abstract ideas like freedom, change, and hope. For Fiske (1990), a metonym basically makes a part that stands for the whole. It is a part of reality for which it stands indexically. It is different from the natural indexes in the sense that it involves a highly arbitrary selection that we often disguise or at least ignore so that the metonym can appear a natural index and may, therefore, acquire “the status of the real, the not to be questioned” (Fiske, 1990, p. 96). Metaphors and metonyms are important meaning carriers in TV commercials. For instance, metaphor is the most convenient form for transferring abstract qualities like durability to products. In addition, advertising

signs can work at almost the same time in both the metaphoric and metonymic modes. Advertisers are particularly “adept at exploiting both metaphoric and metonymic modes in order to cram as much meaning as possible into a thirty second slot” (Fiske & Hartley, 1978, p. 50). The last but not least area of visual communication theory is visual perception.

Visual perception

Fiske (1990) defines visual perception as follows:

The perception of reality is itself an encoding process. Perception involves making sense of the data before us: it involves identifying significant differences and thus identifying units- what we are perceiving. It then involves the perception of the relationship between these units, so that we see them as a whole. In other words, it involves creating paradigms and syntagms. Our perception and understanding of reality is as specific to our culture as our language is. It is in this sense that we talk of reality as a social construct (Fiske, 1990, p. 66).

The first issue Fiske (1990) raises is that our process of perception internalizes the meaning of signs we encounter in our everyday life. Visual perception occurs when our senses intersect with reality-based data, which we take as information from the perceived world. We generate meaning through both encoding and decoding. This relationship of sign production and reception is the essence of the process of interpretation. Lester (2003) argues that “a viewer actively arrives at a conclusion about the perception through mental operations” (Lester, 2003, p. 56). He maintains that memory is the most important mental activity that links our visual repertoire with newly perceived images. The second issue that Fiske (1990) mentions above is the socio-cultural context of perception. We see “the world in terms of our cultural heritage and capacity of our perceptual organs to deliver culturally predetermined messages to us” (Highwater, 1981, cited in Chandler, 1995, p. 262). Fiske (1990) also talks about reality as a social construct. Chandler (1995) supports this idea by claiming that “the world is to some extent constructed in the process of perception” (Ibid, p. 262). The individual detects and constructs the surrounding world using both his personal observation and individual experience, which refers to his values, attitudes and habits. It is probably argued that visual perception is the basis of TV commercials which stimulate the individual’s perceptual system into action via the appropriate use of signs and symbols. Advertisers encode the commercial slot, which the target audience decodes by means of motion pictures,

music, and words. The screen supplies signs, codes, metaphors, and metonyms so that the audience will make them meaningful. This encoding process has two major traits clarified as follows.

Encoding

Meaning is a matter of encoding and decoding. Encoding can be broadcast and aberrant. For Fiske (1990), a broadcast encoder caters for three important areas, the content, form, and development of his message. Content means that broadcast encoding involves matters of general concern so that the audience can widely receive and understand the message easily and successfully. A proficient encoder is “the one who is in tune with the feelings and concerns of society at large” (Fiske, 1990, p. 74). His broadcast message accounts for the patterns of values embedded in the target culture. The form of the broadcast message means that mass communicators encode “new versions of old structures. The audience has certain expectations based on a cultural experience shared with the broadcasters” (Ibid, p. 74). Aberrant encoding becomes important when a heterogeneous audience requires different codes so that mass communicators can “fit the message into the varieties of convention or cultural experience of the mass audience” (Ibid, p. 82). This is a common trait of TV communication which makes sure that the encoders’ messages “are in touch with the central meaning systems of the culture and that the codes in which the message is transmitted are widely available” (Fiske & Hartley, 1978, p. 81). This idea shows that message meaning also depends on the decoder who indulges in complex interpretation processes.

Decoding

Meaning is not an absolute and static concept that we can find neatly parcelled up in the message. It mostly relates to the decoder, who creates, generates, and even negotiates the meaning of various messages. This negotiation is a give-and-take relationship that prioritizes the decoder’s individual interpretation of the message, which is an open text. Fiske (1990) believes that every decoder brings his preferred reading of an open text, which can be visual such as an image. He also suggests that this concept is very fruitful since “it gives us a model that enables us to link the negotiated meanings of a message with the social structure within which both message and reader operate” (Fiske, 1990, p. 111). Chandler (1995) labels the

same phenomenon as perceptual set, which he defines as a “pre-disposition to perceive something in relation to prior perceptual experiences” (Chandler, 1995, p. 263). The individual’s perceptual experiences may include his cultural and social background, age, gender, and so forth. The decoder establishes a sort of negotiation between his own discourses that derive from his distinct social grouping and the discourse implied in the text. TV ads are good examples of these open texts which allow for aberrant decoding since they cater for the numerous subcultures of their mass audience. A TV ad “is made idiosyncratic by the time it is decoded by its viewers; each family audience will negotiate its own stance towards the message and so modify its meaning” (Fiske & Hartley, 1978, p. 110). Thus, audience members link their understanding of reality to that of a TV commercial simply because “television reduces cultural experience to another form of reality” (Ibid, p. 67). It is a mediated reality people keep in touch with via regular TV viewing. Here, I should note that the basic aim behind clarifying some major concepts of visual communication theory is to pave the way for a semiotic analysis of a Moroccan TV commercial.

Semiotic analysis of *Maroc Telecom commercial*

I have chosen an advert that Maroc Telecom broadcast on the Moroccan channels. The TV commercial aroused my interest because of its category that combines the modes of music, pictures and sung languages. I based my selection on the fact that the advertising slot easily exploits the persuasive impact of TV, which relies on the content of its visual messages, its mass audience, its penetration in people’s homes, and its “mass repetition and reinforcement of such messages” (Dumbleby & Burton, 1985, p. 159). I will consider this commercial as a semiotic system whose “visual content takes the form of paralinguistic signs” (Fiske & Hartley, 1978, p. 83). They are visual signs that basically denote people, artefacts, colours, light, costumes, make-up, and physical background and that connote a whole cultural and social heritage. As a start, let us analyze the commercial’s type and components.

Analysing the TV commercial

Maroc Telecom devised a thirty-second TV commercial that has specific traits. First, it belongs to display advertising which basically relies on images “to attract attention to the content of the ad and ... the services offered” (Lester, 2003, p. 73). Second, the ad is factual

in the sense that it involves “objective claims that are clearly verifiable by reference to the external world” (Jackson, 1994, p. 80). That is to say, its images depict scenes and objects that viewers may easily encounter in reality. Last but not least, the commercial, which aims to persuade Moroccan customers to buy Maroc Telecom’s products and services in a less direct way, is institutional. This means that the ad’s basic goal is not “selling as such but rather image building” (Ibid, p. 81). This type of advertising seeks to associate the corporation with lovely images and to foster “beliefs that here is a company that really cares [for its customers]” (Defleur & Dennis, 2002, p. 307). Its advertisers created powerful and complex messages through three major components, namely motion pictures, music, and sung languages. Taken from the Moroccan social and cultural context, the pictures “attract attention, arouse interest, stimulate desire, create an opinion, and move the viewer to a specific action, to buy [the company’s services and products]” (Lester, 2003, p. 73). The ad’s music, which is both orchestral and acoustic, takes its roots from Moroccan folk music. The sung languages, which overlap with music, are both Moroccan Arabic and Berber. The choice of the Moroccan folk singer Najat Aatabou as the addresser who sings about the company’s qualities is very clever. She is a famous widely admired artist who can, in this context, easily influence a wide range of Moroccan viewers. If they identify with the folk singer, they may unconsciously change their attitude towards Maroc Telecom and, then, shape their behaviour, that is to purchase the company’s services. To sum up, the TV commercial combines images, music and sung languages which all create an idea that fits in “with the audience’s existing beliefs and values” (Dimbleby & Burton, 1985, p. 153). Because of the power and persuasive impact of images in TV ads, I will primarily focus on the visuals of the target slot in terms their nature, meaning, and interpretation.

The nature of the commercial’s visuals

The commercial’s visuals are motion pictures that contain three major types of visual signs, namely iconic, indexical, and symbolic. These sign categories intersect in order to communicate the image’s highly condensed and complex meanings. In this respect, Fiske and Hartley (1978) point out that television icons, indices, and symbols convey meaning on two different levels or orders of signification. In TV ads, iconic and indexical signs, which belong to the first order of signification, are self-contained in the sense that the simple motivated meanings derive from the sign itself. However, when the visual sign is symbolic, it meets a

whole range of cultural meanings that originate from “the way the society uses and values both the signifier and the signified” (Fiske & Hartley, 1978, p. 41). For instance, when our ad’s iconic or indexical sign, which basically denotes representational meanings, carries a socio-cultural dimension, it moves to the second level of signification and, consequently, becomes symbolic. Moreover, the commercial’s visual signs rely on the strategy of cueing because the brief advertising time and space do not allow for elaborated message development. A visual cue, which helps advertisers elicit the associated meanings, is a signal or reminder of something. Moriarty (1991) maintains that cues bring to mind “something from past knowledge or previous experience that provides a framework of meaning that can be used to interpret the sign” (Moriarty, 1991, p. 1). The visual cues contained in Maroc Telecom’s commercial are of three main categories, iconic, indexical, and symbolic.

Iconic cues

In the ad’s pictures that I have included in the appendix below, the iconic cues, which operate on the first order of signification, plainly stand for the various sorts of people, objects, and scenes that may exist in reality. The fact that these icons closely resemble their signified has an undeniable communicative power. They serve the advertisers’ purpose, which is to foster a determined meaning about both the selling message and the company’s services and products. For instance, some shots in the commercial are icons that denote the Moroccan celebrity Najat Aatabou. The camera focuses on her make-up, dancing, and traditional costume which are iconic signals that add something to the general meaning of the singer’s picture. Other pictures in the advertising slot represent different types of people that can be categorized in terms of age, gender, profession, and social class. The advertising shots contain iconic cues that remind us of what Maroc Telecom can do for its customers in order to make their life easier and more comfortable. For example, pictures showing families, clerks, young women, teenagers, children, and businessmen in different contexts are plain icons that provide a framework of meaning about the telecommunication company, its services and products. Indexical cues also bring new dimensions to the constructed advertising message.

Indexical cues

Indexical cues, which also work on the first level of signification, help viewers interpret the commercial's visual signs and elicit the associated meanings. Particularly, the ad's strategy to present a folk artist like Najat Aatabou wearing a traditional costume and singing in both Moroccan Arabic and Berber is a strong index of a dominating Moroccan popular culture, which may effectively serve the company's selling message. In addition, the various types of consumers depicted by the ad's visuals represent another index of the social, economic, and cultural change that has occurred in Morocco. More specifically, one of the ad's shots, which shows an urban nucleus family using the Internet, indexically draws our attention to the existence of a Moroccan middle class. Likewise, another shot, which presents a group of clerks working in their office, indexically refers to a developing Moroccan economy that is modernizing through the use of the new communication technologies offered by Maroc Telecom. The last visual presented in the commercial discloses Maroc Telecom's logo, which is a powerful index of the company's presence in the telecommunication's market. The whole commercial slot, which celebrates the company's success by means of visuals, music, and sung languages, is a clear index of an existing Moroccan culture, society, and economy. The ad's symbolic cues give more room for meaning interpretation, which is in terms of the complexity and richness of the visual signs as well as in relation to the viewer's experience and cultural background.

Symbolic cues

Visual cues that belong to the second order of signification are necessarily symbolic. They trigger meanings that viewers interpret according to social and cultural considerations. In an advertising slot like the one under study, people, objects and scenes are symbols that mean different things to different viewers. For instance, the visual that portrays teens using Maroc Telecom's mobiles includes several symbolic cues, which establish a feeling that the company's products and services are cheap, fashionable, and modern and that they increasingly attract teens' interest. Moreover, another advertising shot which locates children gathered around a personal computer and surfing the Internet symbolizes the outset of a new era where Maroc Telecom has opened wide horizons for the new Moroccan generation to have a promising access to technology, information and knowledge. Those who created these images know very well that their commercial should target all types of consumers. On this basis, they symbolically exploited Berber culture and language, which the folk singer Najat

Aatabou stands for, to build a positive image about the company. They, therefore, aim to foster the idea that Maroc Telecom gives special care to all aspects of Moroccan culture and particularly to ethnic groups. For all consumers, the company should symbolize modernity and tradition. To fulfil its commercial purposes, the TV ad operates within Moroccan norms, beliefs and values. Two other pictures denote a popular barber in his shop and an apprentice repairing a bike. The fact that both of them use Maroc Telecom's services is very symbolic in the sense that the company belongs to all Moroccans no matter who they are, what they do, where they are, and how much they own. This idea is symbolically clearer via another shot that depicts three young women who live in the countryside where Maroc Telecom could provide them with home telephone that might change their daily lives overnight. The visual signs I have been analyzing and categorizing so far are not wholly iconic or indexical or symbolic for the sole reason that most, if not all, of them combine all three so that the advertising slot can offer viewers and analysts a wider range of meaning and interpretation.

Meaning and interpretation of the commercial's visuals

Looking like a story, the slot is a consciously planned visual presentation. It begins with an opening, where brief shots introduce a folk artist who starts singing. It, then, develops its own ideas and messages in its main part, where several visuals depict archetypical and diverse Maroc Telecom's customers who use the company's services and products. Finally, the TV ad concludes with a punch line, a whole picture denoting the company's logo. The latter is an animation that makes the selling message memorable and that anchors or pins down the ad's general meaning. Furthermore, the ad's image designers exploited lighting, camera focus, and music in order to direct the viewer's attention towards a certain object, person or scene. During the whole slot, the pictures, folk music, and the sung languages all combine to evoke a cheerful mood and to help create specific connotations such as celebrating the company's pioneering and positive impact on both the Moroccan economy and people's lifestyles. Some of these motion pictures primarily focus on signifying objects like computers, mobiles, and home telephones, which indexically and symbolically refer to Maroc Telecom. Moreover, the commercial uses TV as a powerful visual medium that can offer multiple codes of communication. It specifically relies on both condensed and broadcast codes. The ad's condensed code stems from its subliminal nature since it shows "images so quickly on a screen that the conscious mind does not notice them, yet the unconscious mind ... does"

(Lester, 2003, p. 74). It also involves a broadcast code which enables its visuals to target each Moroccan viewer who is “aware both of his individuality and of his membership of a large group” (Fiske & Hartley, 1978, p. 109). Accordingly, the ad’s visuals present models that include all types of people, who may be children, parents, teens, men, women, businessmen, sportsmen, and so forth. For Jackson (1994), these types of codes invite viewers “to infer beyond the information stated and thus construct a stronger interpretation” (Jackson, 1994, p. 81). Most of the commercial’s shots offer direct models for its viewers so that they can construct a meaning that is favourable to the advertisers’ ends. Thus, every viewer can see what he could look like, how he could behave and how he could relate to others. The ad’s designers were skilful at exploiting the pictures’ metaphoric and metonymic power. In other words, they knew how to work on the images’ capacity “to stand for a larger world outside the frame and suggest a larger narrative that embraces the moment of exposure” (Mitchell, 1994, p. 3). For example, the quick shots that denote a cyber club filled with modern computers is a plain metaphor that refers to Maroc Telecom and to the fact that the company is a reliable Internet provider in the Moroccan telecommunication’s market. Moreover, the picture, which depicts a woman together with her daughter using a public phone, is a metonym that leads the viewer to build the unknown remainder of street life. This type of metonym is a strong conveyor of reality since it indexically refers to Maroc Telecom’s services and products which are available everywhere. More importantly, the advertisers’ ultimate goal is to cram as much meaning as possible into the thirty-four second advertising slot. In fact, it is a mass communication that involves the negotiation of meaning between the commercial’s mediated reality, which codes organize into paradigms and syntagms, and the viewer’s perceptual reality, which appears to be the natural way of seeing the world. As a result, the advertising images, which carefully select their readers, build up a visual communication strategy that takes into account the type of the advertised service or product and the nature of the potential customers. For Bengrad (2002), this selection goes beyond the company’s commercial ends. Maroc Telecom, which believes in specific pre-conceptions, categorizes its customers on the basis of their culture, social class and education rather than in terms of their purchasing power. In the same vein, Aamar (2002) argues that Moroccan TV ads try to establish new consumption values that insert the advertised products within the social traditions and beliefs of the target audience. This idea fits in what the target ad attempts to do with its viewers, who should be visually literate in the language and norms of TV advertising. Such a visual literacy would enhance their critical thinking and increase their

immunity against the commercials' visual illusions and manipulations. Thus, an evaluation of this ad's visuals may bring to light their dominant and influential impact on TV viewers.

General Evaluation of the commercial's visuals

In Morocco, TV ads have acquired a paramount importance in the country's audio-visual scenery because of different reasons. First, Moroccans have increasingly become a visually mediated society since the end of the 1980's (Moroccan audio-visual press statistics). Moroccan viewers make sense of the world around them mostly by reading TV images. The visuals' influence stems from the fact that TV viewers make "less mental processing" (Lester, 2003, p. 390). Second, advertising images in Morocco have become more fascinating, influential, tangible, and intentional. Image creators exploit the visuals' persuasive power as well as the target audience's socio-cultural background in order to achieve their commercial purposes. Third, As Aamar (2002) points out, the status and production of advertising images in Morocco have tremendously improved. In fact, Moroccan advertising agencies have greatly developed the quality and type of their visuals. For instance, the commercials' motion pictures have increasingly become short, simultaneous, and very fast. More specifically, the skill and effort that go into the creation of the target slot, the complexity of its discourse, and the impression it undoubtedly makes on its viewers are enough to make it worth an evaluation that will mainly revolve around the strengths and weaknesses of the commercial's visuals.

Strengths

Some of the ad's visuals that introduce the folk singer Najat Aatabou transmit a powerful message to the target audience. This well-known figure offers a personal pitch for the company's services. That is to say, Moroccan customers are more likely to be persuaded by this famous folk singer though she has no particular expertise in the area of telecommunication. By implication, the ad's viewers may tend to trust Najat Aatabou more, and the positive associations and feelings they may have about her can easily be transferred in part to Maroc Telecom's services and products. Another strong and striking characteristic about the commercial's pictures is that their creators took the Moroccan socio-cultural heritage as their source of inspiration and innovation of new ideas. The well-crafted images draw the viewers' attention and interest via day-to-day and familiar scenes, contexts,

costumes, archetypes, and objects, which originate in Moroccan culture and social reality. The ad's designers also made good use of the art of photography and filming in order to transform the advertising slot into an influential, complex piece of visual art that remarkably creates a prominent coherence and harmony among its motion pictures, folk music, and sung languages. Hence, the ad features some filming techniques such as montage of multiple images, anachronistic assemblage of specific visuals, and editing of diverse scenes. All these visual means serve one ultimate end, to persuade Moroccan customers to purchase Maroc Telecom's services and products. According to Fiske and Hartley (1978), most advertising images exploit TV as "a need gratification medium" (Fiske & Hartley, 1978, p. 71). On this basis, the commercial's pictures are very significant to individual viewers who constitute a highly fragmented audience. The advertising slot speaks to parents, children, teens, men, women, businessmen, craftsmen, and so forth. This one-to-one relationship between the commercial and the individual customer assumes that each viewer cherishes certain psychological needs which he takes to the TV screen and which advertisers attempt to gratify by means of meaningful images. Thus, the viewers' repetitious exposure to the ad's visuals reinforces the company's selling message and reshapes the audience's attitude towards Maroc Telecom. However, the commercial also suffers from certain weaknesses that may hamper the successful achievement of its commercial purposes.

Weaknesses

Maroc Telecom's advert may run the risk of creating confusing visual messages in the sense that the competing formats of music, sung languages, and multiple, brief images may all fail to hold the recipients' concentration. It is obvious that the commercial slot comes in a short burst which may easily exist on the periphery of the receivers' attention. Though the ad's song can momentarily amuse viewers and fix the company's name with positive associations, the quick visual shots may attract the audience's attention only briefly. Moreover, this advertising campaign depends on repeated, forced presentations to reinforce its selling message. Yet, the visuals' unsolicited intrusiveness, which means that they appear too often embedded within other TV programmes, may cause the audience's dislike and even rejection of the whole commercial due to over exposure. Although the commercial slot is attractive in terms of its well-crafted images and music, it remains a peripheral artistic creation since its designers consider it as a means rather than an end in itself. In other words,

the advertisers' basic purpose is to exploit the arts of photography, filming, and music to sell Maroc Telecom's services and products. Moroccan TV executives who allowed the advertising agency to launch this campaign did not sell the ad to their audience. Instead, they sold their viewers to Maroc Telecom. Advertising is often believed "to be manipulative and deceptive – indirectly teaching us that people are objects to be manipulated and deceived" (Defleur & Dennis, 2002, p. 316). In this sense, the ad's image creators know very well that they can manipulate and deceive Moroccan viewers who are frequently vulnerable and visually illiterate. The fact that they selected and arranged specific visuals in a given form clearly denotes that they provided their recipients with the commercial they deserve. It means that they produced an ad which receivers surely respond to.

Conclusion

Thus far, I have tried to interpret and analyze visuals of a Moroccan TV commercial. As a participant, I relied on my background knowledge, personal experience and membership of the ad's target audience while I was interpreting the advertising images. As an analyst, I adopted visual communication theory and semiotic tools in order to study the ad's visual cues and, thus, to achieve a more developed reading and scrutiny of the commercial's pictures. I proceeded from a general presentation of the theoretical framework of my investigation to the case study of the Moroccan TV ad. First, I briefly defined visual communication. Then, I tackled visual communication theory by outlining its major areas, namely visual literacy, visual thinking, visual imagery, and visual perception. In visual thinking, I focused on three major components, which consist of abductive reasoning, inference, and observation. In visual imagery, I clarified important concepts such as signs, codes, paradigm, syntagm, denotation, connotation, metaphor, and metonymy. In visual perception, I introduced two main processes namely encoding and decoding. All these concepts helped me study and analyze the Moroccan TV commercial, in which I focused on visual cues to spot meaning construction and interpretation. I concluded my analysis with an evaluation of the whole TV ad, highlighting its strong and weak points. As a member of the commercial's audience, I referred to my socio-cultural knowledge to compensate for the theory's shortcomings and to better understand and interpret the ad's meanings and connotations.

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Appendix







اتصالات المغرب
Maroc Telecom

