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When Images Hurt: A Closer Look at the Role of Negatively-Valenced Images in Advertising

Abstract: This article addresses a set of fresh questions about print advertisements which evoke negative emotions such as fear or disgust. Current accounts tend to oversimplify the role of such images by placing them in the all-encompassing category of tactics aimed at capturing the audience’s attention. The first part of the paper takes a step back and asks whether there is something particular to negatively-valenced stimuli that has the power to gain attention. I sketch out an answer by drawing on some ideas borrowed from evolutionary psychology. The second part of the paper is an attempt to give a larger scope to the discussion concerning the function of this type of images within advertising discourse. Apart from their ability to draw the audience’s attention, negatively-valenced images can also play other significant roles in conveying the meaning intended by the advertiser. I look at the several distinct modes in which the negatively-valenced images can relate to the object of persuasion within the advertising visual discourse.

Keywords: visual discourse; negatively-valenced images; visual rhetorical figures; visual pun; visual metonymy; visual hyperbole; advertising persuasion; grotesque imagery; *pathos* in advertising.

1. The narrow eye of the beholder

Advertising is most often accused by cultural critics of promoting idealized pictures which make people slaves to hedonism and tireless seekers of new material goods to open their road to beauty, happiness,

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comfort and social prestige. Through the systematic display of gorgeous people in expensive clothes placed in heavenly settings, advertising is thought to feed unrealistic expectations and to perpetuate a sense of constant frustration for all those who cannot live up to the utopian scenario on offer (Belk 2001, Brune 2003, Cathelat 2005, Lindner 2004).

While I agree that there is still a lot to be said about the role of the exaggeratedly sweetened stimuli promoted by most ads, I feel there is another issue which is (at least) equally pressing, but is given considerably less attention: the use of negatively-valenced images in advertising, images which are depicting frightening or disgusting states of affairs, states of affairs which are far from being desirable.

This class of images is usually brought up in the context of managerial concerns regarding „attention-grabbing” tactics and they are seen mainly as „tools” used to capture the audience’s eye (see for example Young 2006, Öhman, Flykt and Esteves 2001). This sort of account is particularly narrow and it closes off a lot of exciting avenues for further research by severely restraining the scope of the questions which can be asked about the effects of negatively-valenced images. Even one of the more sophisticated attempts to explain grotesque imagery published recently (Phillips and McQuarrie 2010) does not break with the cynical tradition of asking questions about „what works” in motivating the reader to engage an ad. The authors wonder how „a skewer to the throat can be used to sell a woman’s handbag costing many hundreds of dollars” (Phillips and McQuarrie 2010, 368). Their answer, stating that negative cues can make the reader engage the ad in a different mode and even be transported into the storyworld of the ad, is at best incomplete. What exactly motivates a higher engagement on the part of the reader? Is it the incongruity of the stimuli or the fact that they are negatively-charged? How is this entertaining experience linked to the brand meaning which is supposed to be conveyed by the ad? What about the side-effects that such images have upon the publics who engage this ad? Is their use motivated? Using violent images to convince people to stop drinking may be justified, but using them to advertise handbags is doubtfully so. These are just some examples of the questions which are worth exploring in more depth when it comes to negatively-valenced imagery.

My hope is that this article will enlarge the background picture we have in mind when analysing negatively-valenced images and will motivate researchers to look more closely at the role played by these images within the advertising discourse.

2. Explaining the appeal of negative cues

To begin with, I would like to take a step back and ask: if negatively-valenced images are indeed able to capture the reader's attention more than other types of stimuli, what is the cause of this attraction? Do the negatively-valenced images stand out only because they create a powerful contrast to the majority of ads which employ cloying, idealized images or is there something more to them? In other words, is there some characteristic feature of negatively-valenced stimuli that has the power to draw consumers' attention, something more than their being an incongruous set of stimuli?

One possible answer to this question might be borrowed from evolutionary psychology, where it is thought that increased attention to negative input is a feature developed as a means of survival. Negative stimuli are more likely to put our life in danger than positive ones and they usually require a prompt reaction of defense, so the brain has developed structures of automatic alert when it encounters them. This theory was used to explain the particular appeal of negatively-valenced broadcast media (Shoemaker 1996).

Another more far-fetched explanation is based on some parallels which can be drawn between the human inclination to engage in negatively-charged entertainment experiences and the games played by rhesus monkeys. Rhesus monkeys are known to use peaceful times to put up pretense fights with their fellow-players, in the course of which they develop important strategic skills which are to be used in their subsequent real fights with their opponents (Steen 2005). Humans' pleasure to attend different forms of „pretense play” which stage negative experiences can be thought to be reminiscent of this type of game. The ability to enjoy horror movies or heartbreaking dramas has puzzled researchers who have proposed all sorts of explanations regarding this apparent paradox of our emotional life (Bartsch, Appel and Storch 2010; Tan 2008). One common idea which comes out from these studies is that positive emotions such as enjoyment are in fact „meta-emotions” which emerge from the simultaneous perception of the frightening/disgusting/tragic stimulus and the awareness that this stimulus is not „for real”. Movies, as a contemporary form of „pretense play”, give us the chance to experience high levels of mental and emotional arousal without our having to take the accompanying risks entailed in the real equivalent of the experience. While the same areas of the mind are activated when we run or when we watch somebody running in a movie, at another level we process the regulatory information which distinguishes

between what is real and what is „just pretense”. It is on this level that the pleasure of watching a negatively-charged movie is thought to occur.

In other words, we sometimes *love* being frightened or disgusted or heart-broken, given that we are safely kept away from any real risk, because we know that it is just a form of experimenting with our own feelings. Perhaps, in a sense, it may be based on an unconscious wish to practise, to prepare ourselves in case we will have to face that sort of situation, to gain a sense of control on our feelings. But the joys of empathy may have a say in it, too, as well as our background in aesthetic theory. Anyway, whether or not the pleasure derived from exposure to negatively-charged entertainment has its roots in the rhesus monkeys’ play is in fact not essential to the purposes of the present discussion. What is important to retain is this. There is a certain pleasure (some) people genuinely experience when exposed to negatively-valenced images and this pleasure often takes the form of a „meta-emotion” which coexists with the rest of the negative emotions caused by the content of the message itself. Moreover, this pleasure might motivate the initial engagement with an ad which employs negatively-valenced images and may occasionally mediate the effects of the ad on its audience.

In making the transition to the realm of advertising, we must be careful about the way in which we apply the concept of „meta-emotion”. We must distinguish between the thrills caused by the content of an ad image and the emotions which can be subsequently associated with the object of persuasion, namely the advertised brand or the social cause in question. Sometimes, advertisers employ images which connote danger, with the intention to lend an air of excitement to a brand. In other cases, the frightening or disgusting images are evoked in order to create the picture of a pressing problem, so that the brand can appear as the ideal solution. A similar persuasive route is often used by social-cause campaigns, which are meant to shock the audience so as to convince them of the necessity to take urgent measures. Finally, there are situations where the evoked negative emotions have the function of visual puns, creating a certain level of tension only to release it in the next moment, in the hope that the aesthetic pleasure so provoked will make the message more memorable.

In what follows, I will look more closely at the several different ways in which negatively-valenced images relate to the object of persuasion within the advertising discourse. In doing so, I will shed light on the additional functions these images play apart from being „attention-catchers”.

3. Further exploration of the role of negatively-valenced images: analysis of print ads

Before proceeding with my analysis, I wish to make a few conceptual clarifications. I will use the term „diegetic content” to describe the elements which make up the storyworld depicted in the ad image: characters, objects, background setting, as well as the narrative plot around which the scenario of the image is built. „Diegesis” is a quasi-technical term used in literary studies to describe the entities which compose the narrative world. Although in advertising the diegetic content is only a vehicle by means of which a brand or a social cause are ascribed a new meaning, it sometimes happens for the diegetic content to have powerful semantical articulations of its own which go far beyond the object of persuasion itself (as it happens in the case of Benetton ads, see Sugden 2012).

A basic condition of adequacy of any account regarding the effects of advertising is to separate carefully the intended effects of the diegetic content from the intended effects of the ad as a whole. This requirement will prove particularly important in the cases when the diegetic content is purposely created to evoke negative emotions. „How are these negative emotions supposed to be related to the object of persuasion, namely the brand or the promoted social cause?” will be the guiding question as I develop my analysis of the selected print ads.

The first print ad I would like to discuss promotes a service from Airtel which offers a fairly pragmatic benefit to its subscribers. In case their mobile is lost, stolen or destroyed, the essential information contained in it is made available to its owner, being retrieved from a secured database. This is not particularly the kind of benefit which would need major rhetorical moves to be conveyed. One might expect a rather straightforward message stating the brand promise and the conditions under which one can become a subscriber to the service. Indeed, one would not expect the image of a crowd lying dead in a parking space. Yet, this is exactly what the print ad shows (Figure 1). Just imagine turning the pages of a magazine and encountering this ad. What happened there? Why are these people lying dead? Have they fallen from a building? Was there an earthquake? Or perhaps a terrorist attack? The reader’s involvement with the depicted events is increased by the angle of the shot: the reader feels as if he sees everything from a balcony, with the back of a woman’s head being very close, as if she, too, were trying to grasp the immediate consequences of a tragedy that had just occurred. The tension built by the image dissolves when encountering the text: „Don’t lose your contacts when you drop your phone”. So the

catastrophic image was just a visual pun. „Dropping” your „contacts” was represented in a concrete manner, playing on the contextually-created polysemy of the two terms.



Figure 1. Print ad for Airtel mobile phone backup

What did the advertisers achieve with this approach? In terms of the perlocutionary effects of the diegetic content, it is clear that the image would definitely draw attention and most likely frighten the audience. But, as mentioned before, the diagnosis of a negatively-valenced image cannot stop at this sort of platitude. We need to see how this image relates to the object of persuasion and then discuss whether the frightening effect is further transformed into a positive attitude towards the ad as a whole and towards the brand.

The negative feelings evoked by the image, followed by sudden dissolution of the tension, can be interpreted as reflecting the type of feelings one would experience when losing the mobile phone. Worrying about the dimension of the „disaster” is quite a common feeling among

people who realize they have just lost important data. In such moments, the sudden reminder of an existing backup plan would definitely bring a sense of relief. It is this feeling of relief that the advertiser wants us to associate with the promoted service from Airtel.

All solved by Airtel, indeed. But also all *staged* by Airtel. The double status of the brand as author and as object of a commercial comes in here. Apart from its merit of making a clear connection between „Airtel” and „relief”, the (perceived) author may be sanctioned by the public for the disturbing character of the ad’s diegetic content. „Too much”, the public might say with good reason. The disproportion between the catastrophic air of the image and the smallness of the service advertised is undeniable. Yet, given the nature of the service, we might assume that once the message gets to its audience, it is highly unlikely that the appreciation of the service will be itself affected by the attitude towards the ad.

Speaking of disproportions between the character of the image and the nature of the advertised product, let us move our attention to another print ad meant to advertise an online flower shop, 123fleurs.com (Figure 2). In this case, too, the negatively-valenced image is supposed to be a dramatic demonstration of the need for the advertised service. This time, the disadvantages of the competing options available on the market are hyperbolized. The image shows an old lady with a fixed gaze, her hand gripping her heart, her entire body seemingly iced in a heart-attack position. A „jack-in-the-box” smiles carelessly from a table next to her. The „Happy Birthday!” sign he displays receives a painful connotation, as we understand what happened here: the surprise caused by her opening the birthday present was more than her heart could take at the moment. The text, written in a joyful font, says: „Flowers would have been a better idea”.

Let us examine in more detail the function of the negative elements of the image. Of course, we will begin with the obvious intention of the makers to create a startling ad which would be hard to miss if encountered in a magazine. Seeing a person in the moment of their having a heart-attack is not precisely the most common sight for most of us.



Fig.2 Print ad for an online flowershop called 123fleurs.com

Aforementioned explanations borrowed from evolutionary psychology might be of use here. Our mind is hard-wired for a high receptivity to negative stimuli of this sort, making us prone to quick reactions. Similarly to the case of Airtel, it might be assumed that the reader's brain is by default programmed to release the question: what would I do if it was me in this situation? How would I react if I was a witness? What if I were the victim? Yet, unlike Airtel, the general air of the flower shop commercial points to the ludic key in which the message is to be read. The overall joy conveyed by the choice of graphic elements suggests an implicit wink inviting the reader not to take the message seriously.

Another function of this image is to highlight by opposition the fact that all other gifts involve more risks than flowers do. The core benefit of flowers being a „safe” gift is taking centre-stage here. While other options may involve certain risks, flowers have greater chances of being well-suited for any person at any time. Of course, if we think at the relationship between the diegetic content and the real contexts of product usage, we must say that the risks in real life are more likely to emerge from the differences

in taste between buyer and receiver than from this type of unintended effect. Most of the times, the risk is that the receiver might not like it, not that he will die because of it.

A closer connection between the diegetic content and the real disadvantages caused by the absence of the product is exemplified by an ad for Sanzer, a sanitary hand gel (Figure 3). This ad is based on a visual metonymy replacing the press buttons of a public telephone with the fingers of all those who touched it, some of which are disgustingly filthy. The audience are reminded of their lack of control over the hygiene of the public items they touch during a day. The solution is promptly suggested by the image of the advertised product.

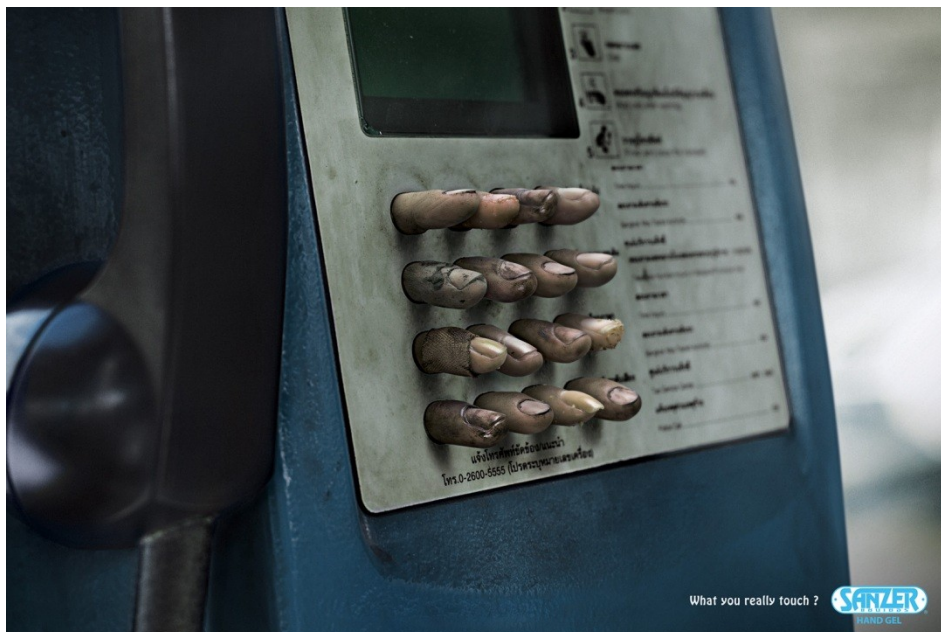


Figure 3. Print ad for Sanzer, a hand sanitizer

Unlike the other two print ads, whose discourse included a twist towards a ludic key, this one invites serious consideration of the

consequences suggested by the diegetic content. Although a certain degree of hyperbolization may be said to exist here, too, the negatively-valenced impact of the image is not attenuated by some playful voice saying „just kidding!” and giving a new dimension to the gravity of the situation. In this case, the negatively-valenced cues are supposed to disgust the reader „for real” so as to make him acutely aware of the need for the product. This difference is worth keeping in mind for further study of negatively-valenced images in order to avoid oversimplified diagnoses about their discursive architecture. The Airtel ad points figuratively (by means of a visual pun) to „dropping” one’s phone and together with it, one’s contacts. The ad for the flower shop points figuratively (by means of a hyperbole) to the risks involved in buying other (non-flower) gifts. The Santzer ad also points figuratively (by means of a metonymy) to the possible lack of hygiene of public items. But the three cases are radically different if we look at the relation between the diegetic content and reality, on the one hand, and at the relation between the diegetic content and the meaning to be conveyed, on the other. These two dimensions should be kept in mind if we want an accurate rhetorical analysis of ad images.

What these three ads have in common is the fact that the negatively-valenced elements point to situations which justify the need for the advertised brand. There is a congruence of valence between the negative elements and the argumentative route of the ads. The typical underlying structure of these ads is fairly simple. In order to consolidate the relationship between a brand X and a desirable feature/benefit Y, they show how the absence of X is equivalent to some unwanted states of affairs. The peace of mind promised by the Airtel service is placed in a powerful contrast with the panic provoked by the image, which in turn is supposed to point figuratively to the panic caused by losing important data. The „safe option” benefit promised by the online flowershop is contrasted with hyperbolized risks of other products. Finally, the cleanliness promised by the Sanzer gel is placed in opposition with the dirt on the fingers in the image.

This is also the typical route to persuasion in social campaigns. A powerful image evoking negative emotions is used to consolidate consumers’ desire to avoid such situations (see, for example, Figure 4). It must be said here that most social campaigns are more likely to resemble

the seriousness of the Santzer ad than the playfulness entailed in the discursive architecture of the Airtel or the flowershop ads. Most social ads which employ negatively-valenced cues are meant to leave the audience with a sense of anxiety, of guilt, of worry. These feelings are supposed to feed their desire to change their behaviour in a given respect, to engage in concrete action towards positive change or to refrain from dangerous actions – as is the case with the campaign reproduced here, which tries to convince people of the harm they can cause if they talk on the phone with somebody who is driving. This is why the use of negatively-valenced images in social campaigns is considered to be morally justified. However, the same justifications do not necessarily apply to the world of commercial communication. If the audience needs to be scared in order to understand the consequences of talking while driving, then scary ads are the way to go. Yet, the audience probably does not *need* to be scared nor disgusted in order to understand and evaluate the use of an online flower shop, nor the utility of a backup plan in case they lose their mobile phone.



Fig.4 Social campaign: „Don't talk while he drives”

The legitimacy of using negatively-charged images is even more questionable when the negative cues are meant to form part of the brand meaning, not to connote the absence of the brand. For a relevant example of this type of ads, let us take a look at Figure 5. The print ad shows a naked man with blood on his body, who looks as if he is yelling out in pain. A closer look at the image reveals an umbilical cord hanging out of his body, a detail which, together with his fetal position and the headline saying „Reborn”, sheds a ray of light on the image. Maybe his bleeding is not the result of a deadly wound, maybe his yelling is not caused by unbearable pain, maybe it is not despair that we are seeing. The text says: „ We push you to the limit so you can feel alive again. Magali's Workout System”. So his pain was in fact caused by intense physical exercise, while the blood and the umbilical cord were only symbolic marks of his being brought to new life.



Fig.5. Print ad for Magali's workout system

Magali's workout system is indeed based on difficult and extremely intense training techniques, so one might agree that they needed a powerful ad to stand out and deliver this distinctive brand promise. But I believe they went too far with the explicitly negative cues of the diegetic content such as the blood covering his body, his clenched fists, the painful expression on his face. The ad was displayed publicly in Barcelona during the entire summer of 2010, and all sorts of indirect stakeholders might have been negatively affected by the powerful negativeness it conveys at first sight.

Attempts to invest a brand with negatively-valenced connotations are also frequently met in the realm of fashion advertising. The „femme-fatale” or „bad girl” motif has led to a proliferation of print ads depicting scenes of violence against men or against other women (some relevant

examples are discussed by Phillips and McQuarrie 2010, 374-377, as well as Stevens and Maclaran 2007, 37-38). Unfortunately, in the academic arena, their psychosocial effects seldom come into question. For example, Phillips and McQuarrie's sample of analyzed print ads includes the image of a girl wanting to stab another for wearing a Dolce&Gabbana purse and another image of a woman ignoring a man who lies dead in a pool, while she is focused on getting a JimmyChoo handbag out of the water. Yet, the authors focus largely on the possibility for such grotesque stimuli to attain the marketing objectives of a campaign, without questioning the ethical status of such „ingredients”. I emphasize the need to address this simple question on a regular basis: is the use of negative cues motivated or not? Were there other more light-hearted ways do convey the same benefit? And, having arrived at this point, what is the nature of the „benefit” to be conveyed? If the negative valence extends from the diegetic content to the brand meaning itself, one must pose further questions regarding the legitimacy of such brand promises inside the public discourse.

4. Concluding thoughts

When looking beyond the overused diagnosis that negatively-valenced images are effective tools used to capture the audience's attention, we find a vast amount of uncharted research territory. My hope is that this article managed to place some signposts to this territory. As I have made clear throughout the article, I believe a more accurate parsing of our research questions is a sound beginning in this exploration. Distinguishing between the valence of the elements composing the diegetic content itself and the valence of the brand meaning they convey is a key-component of any competent discussion concerning the effects of negatively-charged ads. Once that is properly done, the next necessary step is to build a unifying conceptual framework for the systematic study of the ways in which negative stimuli can help constitute the meaning of a commercial or a social message. For a complete account, we also need a better bridge between the strands of research which regard ethical aspects of advertising and those concerned with advertising's efficiency in market-related terms.

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