

Socio-Cultural Appropriation of Sex-Sell Billboard Ads: A Multimodal Study on the Grammar of Sexually Implicit Advertising Text and Images

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In the Philippines, “sex-sell” advertisements (ads), particularly the 2011 billboard by Bench featuring the Volcano Philippine Rugby Team, have been controversial. Community leaders view the ads as being offensive to the socio-cultural values of the community in which the ad is distributed. In response, producers of the ads contend that their works are merely creative options within the frames of the law. This paper approaches the arguments by investigating the linguistic functions of sex-sell ads through the grammatical analysis of its visual syntax. Using the framework of multimodal discourse analysis in visual semiotics, the paper demonstrates how grammar in visual language is compatible with the systemic functional language of Halliday (1985) as applied in the visual design theories of Kress (2006) and van Leeuwen (2005). The multimodal approach to the analysis of the linguistic functions of sexually implicit billboard ads seek to demonstrate the social semiotic perspective in the construction of meaning in print ads, how ambiguous visual lexicon can occur, and how a dissonant visual assemblage invites resistant reading. Through this discursive analysis, the paper hopes to promote a critical awareness among the passive interpreters of texts (i.e. general public information consumers) and the institutions (e.g. education, creative industry) that actively participate in the discourse, design, production, and distribution of meaning in advertising texts and images.

Keywords: visual language, multimodality, semiotics, advertising, visual communication

Introduction

This paper is built on the author’s academic interest in the configuration of visual language and its use by visual communicators in the creative industry. This interest is spurred by the author’s exposure to multimedia production where gaze, posture, sound, gesture, and the elements of color, lighting, space, and spatial orientation are enmeshed in a complex grammatical construction in visual language. This enmeshing is exemplified in visual design and particularly by print advertisements (ads). As this paper’s material of investigation (i.e. corpus), print ads embody the nuances of visual language—its grammar and linguistic configuration. Particular to the specific selection of the corpus are billboards that invoke sex-sell techniques: displaying the human body with suggestive, subliminal, or provocative effect in order to entice, influence, and persuade a target audience (Sugget, 2016).

The “sex-sell” technique in persuasive communication is one of the most powerful tools employed in the crafting of advertisements, including

billboards. The sexual and erotic messages that sexually implicit billboard ads impart have more than enough power to fuel buzz and controversy, marketing to gain higher audience attention and media mileage. However, the ads' proponents have yet to categorically admit that using such provocative ads is marketing strategy to call attention by intriguing the target audience. Nonetheless, in a relatively conservative culture such as the Philippines, billboard ads that utilize sexual overtones have generated controversies. Despite endless tensions among community leaders, the censors, creative designers, and advertisers, sex-sell ads are here to stay as long as sex remains a natural human attraction (Suggett, 2016).

Though there is nothing illegal about sex-sell ads, some of them have become more daring to the point of abuse (Fromowitz, 2014). The trend is further aggravated by the ever-rising demands of aggressive marketing. In an interview conducted for this paper, Y&R Chief Creative Director Jennifer Legaspi Nadong (Personal Communication, June 14, 2015) said that advertisers are aware of the impending controversy their sexually charged ads could cause, the kind of controversy that would risk the ire of the authorities and some sectors of society to generate more than enough market stickiness to justify its enormous production and distribution cost, if only for less than two weeks. Consequently, such ads have called the attention of community leaders who are keen to defend morality and safeguard traditional community values. Community leaders censured ad exposure in public places based on the explicit sexual tones of the images (Cruz, 2011).

Given that sexually implicit ads are part of a marketing strategy meant to achieve greater mileage through the projected intrigue and controversy that may arise from audience response, advertising proponents of sex-sell ads have yet to categorically admit to their conscious intention to produce and distribute controversial and memorable ads to earn extra mileage in the psyche of their target audience, which is more valuable than billboards visibility. In the aftermath of a controversy, proponents of these ads argue that community leaders simply capitulated to arbitrary censorship based simply on personal taste, moral prejudices, and cultural bias. In their defense, designers insist that the choice to feature sexually implicit images were not intended to affect the traditional values and cultural sensibilities of the community. Instead, these images were advertising devices executed within the confines of the law as a tasteful creative option and part of a marketing strategy (Moral, 2011).

As one advertising analyst said, "Often, clients and agencies defend them as 'edgy' fantasy scenarios" (Fromowitz, 2014, para. 10). Such fantasy scenario in advertising is mostly linked to alcohol, fashion, cosmetics, and car

products (Sugget, 2016). The Fashion Industry, particularly undergarment ads, is the most likely suspect for sexually provocative ads. Products produced by this industry are associated with enhancing the desirability of the human body. In an interview with an advertising practitioner, Vince Torres (Personal Communication, June 8, 2015) of Brandworks said that a semi-naked body is an imperative feature of an undergarment ad. He was quick to clarify that such semi-nakedness does not necessarily have to be sexually provocative. In a layout for some print ads, he recognizes the design ambiguity between the visual representation of a product that suggests a preferred brand for the athletic person and the visual representations that rather suggest the sexual desirability of the human body. Such ambiguity in visual syntax is a subject matter that is at the core of this paper's study on the grammar of sexually implicit advertising text and images.

Objectives

The parallelism between visual and verbal language is a basic notion in visual communication, whether static (e.g. graphic design, painting) or kinetic (e.g. film, video). However, such parallelism poses a problem with identifying the meaning potential (i.e. possible definition, affordance) of a semiotic resource (e.g. image, visual) without a definitive visual lexical inventory. Considering the lack of a universally acceptable lexical inventory for visual vocabulary, the linguistic parallelism between the verbal and visual text is merely metaphorical and not strictly identical.

This paper endeavors to explore the linguistic functions of print visual design. Although the impact of visual communication to linguistic study and vice versa is historically evident, the need for language and media scholars to revisit the converging principles between language and visual design has become even more necessary at a time when multimedia technology is rapidly reshaping the production and consumption of information (Scollon & LeVine, 2004).

Outside the academy, creative industry practitioners must find it beneficial to produce communication materials that are linguistically functional and consciously less (if not completely) ambiguous. The discursive analysis of the corpus also attempts to unveil design strategies for the production of communication materials that facilitate socio-culturally appropriated interpretations to combat resistant reading of the advertising text that results in controversy and censure. This does not mean that industry practitioners have to be always logical and academic in their work. However: according to this study, creative industry practitioners can *mean what they say and say what they mean*, if only they are informed by the linguistic power of visual design and communication.

In this endeavor, the paper attempts to answer the following questions: (a) how does visual design function as language? (b) What is gained by implementing the grammatical features of print visual design to both the industry practice and the academic instruction of visual communication?

In probing the first question, the paper attempts to establish the linguistic character of a print ad and broadly describe its interplay, as a semiotics resource, with the semiotic hegemony participated upon by information producers and consumers. The second question explores the practical issues that arise from controversial ads in the contexts of visual communication as a practice of inscription and interpretation, its discourse, design, production, and dissemination.

Within the parameters of these two questions, this paper unveils in the following manner: first, the corpus of this study, a print ad, will be investigated through the introduction of social semiotics to the multimodal analysis; second, the notion of print visual design as language is applied to the analysis of Bench's 2011 Volcano Rugby Team Billboard along EDSA. In this second part, the systemic grammar of the subject billboard will be explored to reveal the effect of visual language in the practice and instruction of visual communication.

Theoretical Framework

This paper draws from the frameworks set by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (2006), two leading visual literacy and multimodality proponents who borrowed from Michael Halliday's (1978) propositions on systemic functional language. A print ad (a semiotic mode), specifically a billboard (a semiotic medium), functions as a full system of communication because it caters to a number of representational and communicational situations (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Multimodality in visual literacy is based on M.A.K. Halliday's (1985) Systemic Functional Grammar. According to this notion, grammar is not about prescriptive rules of correct sentence construction, rather, grammar is a set of linguistic habits that are constantly reconstituted and negotiated by a group of language users. This descriptivist view of grammar shows how the mind works, and the syntagmatic and paradigmatic ways in which language users reconstruct their notions of the world (Halliday, 1978). In other words, grammar is a resource for meaning-making.

According to Halliday's (1978) systemic functional grammar, there are four types of meaning-making: (a) experimental meaning, in which experience is constructed; (b) logical meaning, in which logical relations are established; (c) interpersonal meaning, in which social relations are enacted; and (d) textual meaning, in which message is organized. Following

this concept, Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) adapted the idea of language's metafunction: (a) ideational, (b) interpersonal, and (c) textual. For a semiotic mode to linguistically function, it must be able to represent the realities of the world according to human experience, establish interpersonal relationships among participants in a given communication situation, and be decipherable as text.

Critical to Systemic Functional Grammar is social semiotics. Social semiotics deals with "the way people use semiotic 'resources' both to produce communicative artifacts and events and to interpret them...in the context of specific social situations and practices" (van Leeuwen, 2005, Preface). Multimodal analysis is the method of analysis since it "describes approaches that understand communication and representation to be more than about language, which attends to the full range of communicational forms people use—image, gesture, gaze, posture, and so on—and the relationships between them" (Jewitt, 2009, p. 14). Modes are the succinct dimension where print ads and its design elements can be broken down and analyzed according to social context. As Kress puts it, "Mode is socially shaped and culturally given semiotic resource for making meaning" (Kress, 2010, p. 84).

In contrast to other modes of communication (e.g. prose, sketch), a billboard is a medium assembled from several modes (e.g. written words, images, gesture, gaze) each with its own affordance of meaning; each a semiotic resource by itself (Kress, 2010); each with its own meaning potential in the syntagm-paradigm language system of structural semiotics (Chandler, 2007). In other words, as an assemblage of several modes, the billboard is a multimodal semiotic construct. The assemblage has the systemic linguistic function compatible with Hallidayan functional grammar. Similar to a sentence, modes in an assemblage that connect with each other systematically and functionally as a verb connects a subject to the rest of the words in the predicate or as an adjective modifies a noun, and so on.

Modes can have a lexical distinction in a multimodal semiotic construct (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). However, unlike a lexicon, which exists in an inventory of words (i.e. dictionary, thesaurus), there is no existing universally accepted inventory of visual modes and their meaning. Members of a social or cultural circle determine their meaning potential within a given communication situation (Halliday, 1978). Thus, their meaning varies from articulation to interpretation (van Leeuwen, 2005). This is one reason they are no longer designated as signifiers according to structural semiotics (or Saussurian semiology) but are instead considered a semiotic resource in social semiotics. Visual and verbal language, as modes both having linguistic functions, are not entirely similar, "yet the two approaches are compatible" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 2).

Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) also illustrated four domains of semiotic practice that sets the stage for meaning-making to develop. These strata show the relationships between visual language and Hallidayan functional linguistics. These domains are discourse, design, production, and distribution.

Discourse is knowledge of reality that is socially constructed. Knowledge is developed in a context specific to a given society. Discourse can be broad in contexts, such as oriental or occidental beliefs, or specific, such as discourse in the point of view of the destitute or the empowered. Discourse can also be explicitly institutional, such as a report from a scientific journal or discourse on political preferences shared during dinner conversations. Discourse is a venue to shape a concept that needs to be expressed.

Design stands between content and expression as the conceptual side of expression and the expression phase of conception. As such, materials conceived at this stratum are considered a semiotic resource. It is meant to realize discourse within the context of a given communication situation (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). However, design does more by revealing how the communication situation has the potential to change discourse (socially constructed knowledge) into social interaction. For example: designers may reinterpret the discourse on “corrupt politicians” into an animated film for children. For this particular audience to react, designers consider the elements of entertainment relative to children’s interest.

Production refers to the actual materialization of a semiotic event or semiotic artifact. Various skills are involved in production. These skills are related to semiotic media (e.g. oil paint, clay, the humming of a flute) rather than semiotic modes (e.g. dance choreography, music). Sometimes, design and production, mode and medium, are coupled with each other. Thus, design and production are not hierarchical and uncoupling these strata is never absolute (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001).

Distribution tends not to be semiotic (not adding any meaning). Distribution facilitates preservation and dissemination. Nonetheless, distribution’s role in meaning-making is introduced in the kind of technology and materiality utilized in the dissemination of the message. For example, from the original performance of music in a concert hall to its recorded version played in the living room, the acoustic impact of the music may change its message as received by an audience depending on the location and the mediating equipment on which it was played.

This paper examines communication as following the definition of Kress and Leeuwen (2001): one that occurs where there are articulation and interpretation. In this level, design and discourse play their role, “though a given interaction may be experienced differently, and a given discourse

interpreted differently, from the way it was intended” (p. 8). Whatever discourse interpreters or users may draw on a semiotic product (e.g. painting, poem) or event (e.g. wedding, concert) may have bearing depending on their social and cultural stand (i.e. interest or habit). This also may affect content on the level of design and production. Thus, the level at which interpretation and intention matches bears in context. Distribution may also affect this match between interpretation and intention. For example, the meaning of a red cross is universally understood in its pragmatic place on an ambulance, but its meaning shifts significantly if the red cross appears framed in an art gallery (Crow, 2010).

Review of Related Literature

As components of visual language, modes are layers of grammatical elements in a semiotic assemblage. The analyses of modes—a.k.a. multimodal analysis (Kress, 2010), multimodal critical analysis (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002), and systemic functional multi-modal analysis (O’Halloran, 2013), among others—have gained traction most recently as visual images become major features in informational and cultural dissemination in the age of multimedia. Multimodal analysis figures across the spectrum of critical discourse as it allows for an investigation characterized by the interdisciplinary convergence of varying pursuits of academic inquiry. In Podaslov and O’Halloran’s (2011) analysis of digital technology, the visualization of abstract concepts in mathematics and science stands at the center of the discourse. Podlasov and O’Halloran (2013) collaborated to apply multimodal analysis to the study of fashion in Japanese socio-cultural trends and patterns among the Japanese youths. Andrew Burn (2013) applies multimodal analysis to moving images in films, video, and animation. He coined the term “kineiconic mode”: the multimodality of moving images. Multimodality was applied to the study of pedagogical spaces (Bezemer, Diamantopoulou, & Jewitt, 2012).

In advertising, multimodal analysis played a major role in deciphering the linguistic features of print ads.

Dhezeng (2011) combines the social semiotic positions of Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) with Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) theory of conceptual metaphor. Dhezeng elaborates on cognitive spatial ideologies in his multimodal study of car print ads. In his exploration of the experiential basis of mapping between spatial orientations of language-image layout, Dhezeng found that visual designers build up product power and image-viewer power. Designers make cars look desirable, attainable, or superior by positioning the product relative to the camera along the vertical axis in a print ad layout.

Multimodality as a practice is not new in coding and decoding advertisements (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). As far back the Middle Ages, images take on the major role of communicating power and ideology in emblems, royal crests, guilds, and signage that announce services (e.g. inns, taverns, smiths). Though he never used the term multimodal, Barthes (1977) decrypted the linguistic values of advertisements in his analysis of Panzani print ads where the "anchoring" and "relay" of meaning between verbal and visual texts is at the center of his semiology. In contrast, multimodal study approaches advertising texts by looking at verbal and visual texts as separate modes, each with its own unique linguistic function.

In his ten theses discussing why linguists must pay attention to visual communication, van Leeuwen (2004) elaborated on how visual elements in an assembly of images become compatible with speech acts. Referring to them as "image acts" (p.7) his textual analysis of the Kitchener Poster pointed to gestures and salience as linguistic features:

The pointing finger and the look at the viewer realize a visual demand...and the other features (the imperious nature of the look, and the uniform and Prussian mustache, both symbols of authority) modulate this demand into a very direct, maximally authoritative visual summons. (p. 7)

Though separately endowed with meaning, they can be read in syntagmatic combinations that come together to tell a single message, allowing for the syntactic function of these different modes to unfold, as one would decipher discrete linguistic units in a sentence. Van Leeuwen (2004) elaborates:

Imagine an actual uniformed man addressing us in this way. Clearly we would experience this as a single, multilayered, multimodal communicative act, whose illocutionary force comes about through the fusion of all the component semiotic modalities: dress, grooming, facial expression, gaze, gesture. Perhaps we should view posters and similar texts (e.g., display advertisements) in the same way – as single, multimodal communicative acts, especially inasmuch as the cohesion between the verbal and the visual is usually enhanced by some form of stylistic unity between the image, the typography and the layout. (p. 7)

The syntagmatic relationships between images in a visual assemblage are exemplified in the textual analysis of 19th Century advertisements for

Liebig Extract of Meat. Rennie (2015) deconstructs the layout of the ads by establishing parallels between discrete visual and verbal linguistic units:

The ideational meanings of an image are expressed by means of the visual equivalent of clauses, whose three basic elements are *Processes* (represented actions and events—roughly equivalent to verbs); *Participants* (the people, objects or other represented entities that take part in the Processes, in verbal language expressed in nominal clusters as subjects or objects); and *Circumstances* (the setting against which they take place in verbal language traditionally expressed in adverbial clusters). (Para. 24)

Multimodal analysis, as a study, is sustained by the inter-semiosis between disciplines engaged in the configuration of visual and media literacy, such as principles of design.

Face-Ism Ratio is “the ratio of face to the body in an image that influences the way a person in the image is perceived” (Lidwell, Holden, & Butler, 2010, p. 88). According to this principle, the face taking up most of the image is measured in ratio with the rest of the body. Low face-ism ratio means that the body takes up most of the image; higher face-ism ratio means the face taking much of the image. An image of only a face has a ratio of 100, while an image of only the body is 0. In this framing, men are viewed as authoritative, and representative of confidence and power while women are always presented as sexual/sensual attractions. However: the low face-ism ratio among images of men is now becoming popular among advertisers due to the rising objectification of the male body (Baylosis, 2017).

The analysis on proxemics by Edward Hall (1966) modifies Face-ism Ratio as it applies to social distance. A person’s territorial boundaries describe their level of comfortable physical distance. “Close distance” allows intimacy, while “far personal distance” allows professional interaction. In the multimodal study of visual design, Hall’s definition of proxemics can be tied up with the concept of Face-ism Ratio. High ratio establishes higher social distance with the viewer; lower ratio establishes a closer relationship with the viewer as the viewer interacts with the image at close range. Kress’s and Van Leeuwen’s (2006) reflection on long shots (wide framing) as objectifying the subject demonstrates the association between Face-ism Ratio and Hall’s proxemics.

Corpus and Methodology

The corpus of this study is Bench’s 2011 Volcano Rugby Team billboards along EDSA, Philippines, which features the Philippine rugby team clad

in Bench underwear. Further details of the corpus are discussed in the contextualization and analysis section of this paper.

This paper adapts Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) multimodal discourse analysis (MDA), an analysis informed by Halliday's (1985) systemic functional linguistics (SFL). Following this thread of analysis, this study develops in the following phases: context, textual analysis, and discussion. The first phase will contextualize the corpus according to its socio-cultural and industrial narratives. The textual analysis phase involves probing the corpus under the lens of visual grammar in order to ascertain how the designer of the corpus, as a semiotic resource, construes its meaning potentials.

As a type of critical discourse analysis, MDA must also account for the skills and biases of the discourse analyst in interpreting the subject because interpretation is a cultural product by itself (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). This principle in discourse analysis accounts for including Hallidayan SFL (Halliday, 1985). Hallidayan SFL offers a systemic descriptive foundation for the researcher as the base referent in probing texts under a wide range of modalities. The encoding of multimodal texts, therefore, is broken down to the ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunction of language.

The discussion phase of this study will synthesize the first two phases and reveal how both the producers and consumers of the information provided in the corpus negotiate meaning in a semiotic regime. This is accomplished by plotting the development of the corpus according to the four strata of meaning-making: discourse, design, production, and distribution. Finally, based on the insights gleaned from these phases, the conclusion will discuss the implication of "writing" and "reading" the corpus in the practice and instruction of visual communication.

This paper took the theoretical route in the analysis of the corpus for the purpose of brevity and narrowing down its scope of inquiry. It would be more beneficial to its discipline if follow-up research extends the methodology to include an activity that engages (e.g. KII, FGD, survey) the target market (i.e. viewers, audience, the public) in order to unravel the epistemic problem of how members of a society acquire and assign meaning to its environment. Succeeding studies on the epistemology and psychology behind social semiotics, which this paper challenges by forwarding the notion of a semiotic regime participated upon by members of a society who negotiate meaning according to their collective experience.

Socio-Cultural and Industry Contextualization

The author's interest in examining the issue on sex-sell ads began when Bench billboards along Epifanio Delos Santos Avenue (EDSA), a major thoroughfare in Metro Manila, Philippines, became controversial (Fig. 1).

Bench is a local fashion retail brand that provides an array of clothing and fashion merchandise, including: ready-to-wear garments (RTW); cosmetics; fashion accessories; and undergarments for both male and female. Their marketing communication mix includes both traditional and many controversial below-the-line campaigns, such as their annual underwear fashion shows marketed in provocative print ads. In 2015, their billboard featuring a gay couple became the center of gendered discourse after the couple's clasped hands were intentionally concealed by the advertiser (Dabu & Takumi, 2015).



Figure 1. Bench Volcano Rugby Team Billboard that was placed along EDSA and Pasig River, Mandaluyong City ("Philippine Rugby Team Volcanoes," 2011).

In 2011, Bench released an undergarment billboard targeting the male market. It featured the Philippine Volcano Rugby Team in scantily clad poses. These billboards were part of a campaign to raise awareness among Filipinos about the national rugby team. Being an English sport, rugby is locally far less popular than basketball, an all-time favorite in Philippine sports.

Bench's 2011 Volcano Rugby Team billboard is neither the only billboard along EDSA featuring models in undergarments, nor the only ad with sexual undertones. The highway—the busiest and densest in terms of vehicular traffic—cuts through several major cities from north to south of Metropolitan Manila. Hundreds and thousands of commuters pass EDSA throughout the day, making it a coveted prime location for media spots. Various brands and products vie for a place along this route with all sorts of advertising appeals

and techniques. Underwear brands have established their presence along the highway, but Bench's 2011 Volcano Rugby Team billboards were by far the most controversial. A global news agency, Agence France-Presse (2011), syndicated a report about the 2011 Philippine Volcanoes billboards. Local dailies and international blogging sites reported Philippine authorities' reference to the billboard as being racy (Miller, 2011) with "images [that] were 'offensive' and 'inappropriate'" (Moral, 2011, Paragraph 5).

There were four of these enormous billboards, almost taller than a two-storey house (See Figure 1). Glenn Cruz (Personal Communication, August 8, 2011), a media-relations officer for the Department of Health (DOH), referred to the billboards and the images as "too big". The quantity of the billboards was also the subject of a Twitter post by a concerned citizen saying, "[there] was something provoking [sic] about those billboards of briefs along EDSA. I think what's wrong is that 6 [sic] billboards are just too many" (Bongbong, 2011).

Within two weeks after its set-up, Bench's Philippine Volcanoes billboards were pulled down upon the request of the Mayor of Mandaluyong City allegedly due to complaints from certain community groups and the Caloocan City Mayor who complained about having to cover his nephew's eyes every time their vehicle drove by the area (Cruz, 2011). Those who enjoyed the ad pointed out other undergarment billboards along EDSA, targeting both male and female markets, that remained along the avenue until the expiration of their media placement contract (Lardizabal-Dado, 2011). In the aftermath of the censorship, Moral's (2011) report echoed mixed sentiments from the advertising, marketing, and fashion industries. According to George Siy (as cited by Moral, 2011) of Marie France, the censorship was an "unfair" imposition of a new policy, if ever there was one, "without giving all concerned parties time to adjust to said policy... Unless [the billboards] post [physical] risks and they're dangerous, it's inappropriate to just go ahead [and take them down]" (Para. 13).

On the other hand, Ronald Pineda (as cited by Moral, 2011) of Folded & Hung suggested that it was necessary for Bench to yield to the requests to take down the billboards as "it was done for the good of the majority" (Para. 15). Nonetheless, Mr. Pineda believes that the authorities must be objective and understanding in reviewing ads: "For as long as the message is aligned with the product being endorsed, I don't see any problem there. You wouldn't put a half-naked man in skimpy underwear for a pizza ad, right?" (Para. 16). The authorities and the billboard producers misunderstood both the rationale behind the "request" to remove the billboards and its choice of images.

Finally, in the same online report, Ben Chan (as cited by Moral, 2011), the owner of Bench, clarified the stand of the brand:

For years, the Bench Body billboards have been conceived and shot in a tasteful manner. It's not meant to be vulgar. Its visual execution, tone and mood are appealing and sexy. We are not known for exploiting our talents or for producing literally obscene ads just to get attention or to sell our products. Bench prides itself in having creative ads. Proof of this [sic] are the numerous advertising awards we have received from local and international award-giving bodies. We create our ads within the confines of what is permissible by the ad standard council. The basic guideline we set for the company is to be true to our message and our products. (Para. 9-10)

Textual Analysis

The corpus is divided into four billboard panels of different widths depending on the number of models within each billboard. Combined in one seamless layout, the main verbal text (i.e. copy) divided among the panels reads: "Throw your support behind the Philippine Volcanoes" (See Figure 2). This paper will not dwell on the role and characteristics of the copy as the focus of this paper is on visual texts and images.



Figure 2. Artist's graphical layout of the Bench 2011 Volcano Billboard (16th Entry - Philippine BOLDcanoes, 2011).

Basically, the layout can be broken down according to Process, the represented action and/or event (construed as verbs in visual grammar); Participants, the subject of the composition (e.g. people, objects); and Circumstances as the setting (i.e. time and/or space) (Rennie, 2015). According to Jewitt and Oyama (2008), a Process featuring dynamic action is a narrative process. On the other hand, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) characterize the conceptual process as abstract patterns where the participants are represented "in terms of their more generalized and more or less stable and timeless essence, in terms of class, or structure or meaning" (p. 79).

Within the compositional structure of the layout, the participants are identified as the members of the Philippine Volcanoes rugby team. The first and last panels portray a narrative process: the image of a man in the middle of ring exercises. The last panel features a man in the process of holding a rugby ball in the dynamic stance of an athlete at play. In contrast, the second and third panels are illustrations of the conceptual process: men sit or stand holding a ball, an essential accessory symbolic of athletes. The conceptual process of the second and third panel features poses that evoke firm attitude and assertiveness reinforced by above-average physique.

Because of the variance of the processes in these panels, there is no anchoring between the verbal and the visual texts; the latter has multiple transactional meaning, while the former carries a singular meaning. A relay between the verbal and the visual texts can be established as the former talks about athletes in essence; the visual confirms it and vice-versa. Based on the visual grammar set by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) the images engage in a transactional stance as they gaze towards the viewers. The gaze resembles a demand in visual grammar as if the “doer” of the demand (delivered via gaze directed towards the viewer) expects a response (i.e. agreement, reaction, acceptance) of either “yes” or “no”. A transactional demand carries an ideological and cognitive effect (Jewitt & Oyama, 2008) as it draws the viewer into a participatory role. On this level, the participants in the visual assemblage are represented participants (RP), while the audience—drawn into the picture through their “agreement” to the RP’s demand—are interactive participants (IP).

When the focus of analysis is the subject-object operative between an RP and its object, the RP is a participant actor (PA). The PA’s object is known as participant goals (PG). The PA establishes contact and relationships with the PG through vectors that, in some visual imagery, are represented by lines, gazes, gestures, etc. In the fourth panel of the billboard, the athlete (PA) establishes his relationship with the ball (PG) by holding (vector) the ball. However, the PA has another goal—the viewer. While tackling the ball, the PA subtly gazes at the viewer supposedly behind him.

In the second and third panels, the RPs do not seem to have a goal. The models are simply sitting or standing as they gaze at the viewer. The goal of the RPs are the viewers as established by the vector (gaze). Though ‘goal-less’ within the visual assemblage, they are still considered PAs. In this instance, the connection between PA and PG is transactional. The communication situation draws the viewer into a participatory role in the construction of the message of the billboard. At this level, the message becomes personal to the viewers (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001).

This oscillating interaction between RP and IP (PA and PG) further demonstrates the interpersonal metafunction of visual language.

At the compositional level, texture and salience play major roles in the composition of the corpus. Salience refers to the elements (participant as well as representational and interacting syntagms) "...made to attract viewer's attention to different degrees, as realized by such factors as placement in the foreground or background, relative size, contrasts in tonal value (or color), differences in sharpness, etc" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 177). Salience is a visual detail constructed to have a modifying (i.e. adjectival, adverbial) function in language. All the panels of the billboard were rendered with a cloudy sky as background to evoke the Rugby field. However: instead of a bright, sunny, blue sky, the clouds are dark and thick. This renders the circumstantial space unusual because rugby is an outdoor sport fully enjoyed under a bright, clear sky. Nonetheless, the dark, thick clouds could be a creative choice. The modality of the clouds matches the modality of the skin tone of the participants, another creative choice to represent a body subjected to athletic rigors. The weak (darkened) tone of lighting on the participants renders their skin shiny, a necessary tonality to highlight the sheen of sweat after rigorous activity.

Technically, the dark skies also enabled the designer to emblazon the center panels with the brand logo. A bright sky could have rendered the watermark almost indecipherable. The watermark that runs across the upper portion of the third and second panels completes the branding coherence in all four panels: the first panel carries the orange logo of Bench/body on the upper left corner, while the fourth panel features the website URL on its upper right-hand corner.

The latter three panels also feature what seem to be fences and white solid structures, reminiscent of a track and field. The ball, the suspended rings, the gesture of holding the ball and the poise to throw or tackle it, the fences, and the white structures are discrete linguistic units that together demonstrate the ideational metafunction of language—visual language mimicking the world (Halliday, 1978).

Framing introduces another factor in the textuality of the corpus in reference to the interpersonal relationship between RP and IP (PA and PG, whichever the case may be). It results in sexual affect on the viewer's cognition of the visual assemblage. With a low Face-Ism Ratio—the body takes up more space than the face—the RP's sexual appeal is highlighted rather than his intellect or personality (Lidwell, Holden, & Butler, 2010). Added to this sexual appeal is sexual tension created by close proxemics between the IP and the RP. Proximal distance is the gestalt effect created by the RP's size and position relative to the IP who looks up at the billboards

from a minute physical and locational standpoint (worm's eye-view). The RP appears imposing and overpowering, an effect consistent with the proxemics of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006). This effect is consistent with the advertiser's branding and Moral's (2011) report: "[the billboard is] often larger-than-life so the message is loud, clear, and easily conveyed" (Para. 20), "[it] literally becomes part of one's visual experience when you take to the street in your vehicle or in public transport" (Para. 19).

Discussion: Billboards as Language

The creative development of a billboard is a semiotic practice, an exercise in meaning-making. This practice can be broken down according to the semiotic stratification of Kress and van Leeuwen (2001), as follows:

Discourse

The ad is a product of a well-defined, deterministic, and purposive discourse. Commercial billboards present a product to the public: the underwear for the athletic man. As a product of institutional discourse governed by commercial goals, corporate marketing directs its visual grammar. Thus, communicating the product entails communicating the brand and vice versa.

In terms of its economic and marketing purpose, the discourse is similar to any other underwear ads regardless of brand and make, except in its communication design. Designers of the Volcano-Bench billboard refined its message to communicate an underwear brand that supports the Philippine Rugby Team while remaining aligned with the marketing communication goals of the brand (Moral, 2011). Its discourse revolves around a product marketed as an athletic apparel with the intention to appeal to men's athletic aspirations.

For billboard producers, the principles governing the creation of the ad are clear: it must make the brand credible while "...needing only a short statement that encapsulates what you want to say" (Moral, 2011, Para. 18). The producers are aware of the cultural impact of their billboard as a societal influencer: "...part of youth and street culture" (Moral, 2011, Para. 20). Though the billboard's sexual appeal plays a part in its marketing communication, the producers did not categorically articulate that actors were half-nude to provoke their audience. However, some sectors interpreted the ad as communicating sexual imagery rather than legitimate athletic representation.

Design and Production

The stratification proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen is not hierarchical: sometimes two strata combine or occur simultaneously as meaning takes

shape through articulation and interpretation (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). While designing a print ad, production may occur simultaneously. Various factors influence the possibility of combining the two strata. As (1) interpretation and (2) articulation occur during interpretation, certain meaning potentials (i.e. meaning variables) occur either during interpretation or articulation. Limitations in design necessitate adjustments. Depending on the proponent's (e.g. designers, advertiser) interest and habits, the message content configured in the discourse may dissipate along stratal progression. For example, the models were oiled specifically to give the impression that they had just stepped into the locker room after a rigorous training session. However, an oily body may also be interpreted as being the result of sexual activity instead of athletic exertion.

The signification of an oily body changes as the context of the visual changes. Context changes when, say, dark lighting, combined with the sharp stare of the model, and so on, reinforces the meaning potential of the "oily body." The context in visual design sets the semantics of the messaging language. Any alteration changes the message of the print ad (Dzanic, 2013). While the producer may be unconscious of the changes that visual meaning undergoes, context enters from the audience's point of view or the designer's (van Leeuwen, 2005). Through provenance or the participants' experiential meaning potential context defines the "oily bodies" as either athletic or sensual. The billboard transforms from mode of communication (the concept of a message) to medium of communication (material expression of the message).

Distribution

The distribution stratum presents another dimension of meaning-making. The billboard, a mode in the discourse stratum as a semiotic product, becomes a medium in the design and production strata. Its placement and design are consistent with the principles of branding communication in urban spaces (Mikoleit & Purkhauer, 2011): an enormous tarpaulin illuminated by powered lights towers two storeys above its viewers in the center of a busy metro.

The size and enormity of the billboard add meaning to the interpersonal relationship between viewer and image, participant actor and participant goal respectively. While a close-up eliminates distance between viewer and image, the billboard's size brings the image closer to the viewer and creates intimacy. This reflects Hall's proxemics and the Face-ism Ratio. Positioning a half-naked, scantily clad subject high above the viewer creates a sexually-charged, powerful image. The effect is reinforced by other elements of visual grammar, such as size and framing.

Intimacy need not necessarily be sensual (Giddens, 1992). Text must be contextualized relative to the individual (or community) that views it (Halliday, 1978) to gain meaning. In verbal language, a man in his underwear does not carry necessarily sexual connotations. Verbal language simply says: “a man in underwear stands next to me.” According to Lidwell, Holden, and Butler (2010), in reference to cultural respect and sensibility, design principles suggest “culturally appropriate augmentation” (p. 32). Certain embellishments in the model’s appearance, countenance, and circumstances may connote sexual tensions with certain syntagmatic values (e.g. sweat, dark lighting, skimpy underwear, bulges). In verbal language: “a sweaty man of fine musculature is standing next to me in scant underwear.” When translated into visual language, the sexual overtones are apparent.

Three systems combine in a composition (i.e. layout), two of which were previously discussed. In visual grammar, Framing plays a major orthographic function in the composition of a multimodal text. Though framing can be analyzed separately, the multimodal analysis of a billboard calls for the investigation of meaning as the sum of the meanings of its parts. After all, a billboard—both as mode and medium—is a semiotic construct, a semiotic assemblage, and a linguistic composite.

The power of salience in a semiotic construct can determine the syntagmatic configuration in meaning-making, and can initiate the transmutation of meaning potentials. As visual vocabularies, salience can be subtle (e.g. slight gaze, hand in a pocket, shades of light) or obvious (e.g. ball, trees, river, urban edifices). In syntactic combination, they become part of a grammatical construction that can be read as text. Salience enhances the sexual tones in the form of gaze as vectors. The PAs in the third panel pulls down the garter of his underwear using his thumb, thereby allowing him to show more skin—a sexually-charged act of invitation (i.e. demand).

During an interview, Dr. Oscar Campomanes (Personal Communication, June 12, 2015) of the Ateneo de Manila University views the gaze of one model as an invitation to “come get me.” Dr. Campomanes occupies the participatory role of the viewer in the visual assemblage. As a participant, he becomes a participant goal who connects with the gaze. He interacts with the image. In Dr. Campomanes’s personal interaction with the participant actors, context affects meaning through the viewer’s habits and interpretation.

Conclusion

This paper began by contextualizing its corpus according to industry trends and the socio-cultural milieu to which the corpus belongs. Though producers of the corpus did not admit that the visual images were meant

to be sexually provocative, the billboard's content is consistent with its discourse as an underwear ad for the athletic man. The ad met with controversy as authorities requested to remove the billboard, an act of censorship. Succeeding online exchanges between industry practitioners reveal moral sensibilities and cultural norms: viewers are conservative but arguably progressive, observant and opinionated, empowered information consumers, and active participants in the shaping of the local media culture. According to Adel Tuazon (Personal Communication, June 15, 2015), a strategic planning director of a multinational media agency, exposure to the Internet and current communication technologies have elevated media literacy. Viewers' spontaneous reaction to media exposures cannot be underestimated. An assertive and mature creative industry should be willing to negotiate its positions according to the rules of engagement set by authorities and by social standards. Proponents of the industry know what they are doing and are knowledgeable regarding their viewers' level of socio-cultural connectedness.

This paper analyzed the corpus as a form of language. The study exposed the textuality of visual images and their assemblage as a semiotic construct governed by visual grammar. As in written language, each image has a lexical value, is connected by vectors, and modified by salience. However, visual grammar describes language interpretation as an effect of habits constantly reconstituted and negotiated by members of a social group. Visual grammar ideates the world, establishes interactions, and is organized textually. The corpus functions as language as defined by Halliday (1985): it is endowed with the ideational, interactive, and textual metafunction.

At one end of the spectrum, the corpus embodies the meaning formulated by its producers upon its design and production while the viewer affords the corpus with meaning collected from societal experience and cultural habits. Meaning is produced and negotiated when the metafunctional interaction occurs between image and viewer. This interaction affects the socio-cultural discourse governing the viewer's sensibility, which is—in this specific semiotic regime—relatively conservative, arguably progressive, and resistant to the transactional negotiation.

In the analysis of the paper, the images in the corpus were broken down to their lexical granularity and recognized as semiotic resources in meaning-making. Design, affected the meaning potential of a particular visual image as supplied by viewer perception, which in turn affects the message of the corpus. During design and production—the stratal progression of meaning-making—the visual lexicon becomes ambiguous. Design added elements alter meaning from discourse to distribution.

From the perspective of semiotic hegemony, the negotiation between information producer and information consumer shows that meaning-making is not the monopoly of information producers. The resistant reading towards the corpus is a display of the information consumer's role in meaning-making in a semiotic regime. Through the social semiotic feature of visual grammar, information consumers have the power to dictate meaning.

If visual language is a language with all its linguistic dexterity, with grammar determined by the semiotic hegemony between information producer and information consumer, what can be gained from establishing and using the linguistic features of print visual design in industry practices and in the academic instruction of visual communication?

The practice and instruction of visual design and communication have overemphasized the aesthetics of creative communication at the expense of semiotic modes and visual grammar. Studying the linguistic function of visual design has been relegated to a mere theoretical exercise restricted to the academe. Professionals leave linguistics when they engage in industry practice post-academic training. The disregard (though unintentional) for the linguistic power of visual design was disastrous.

Billboards featuring sensitive subjects—like sex and violence—are a popular medium, being a prominent and intrusive fixture in urban culture. Billboards are surrounded by varying cultural frames that respond to communal language and thought. The failure to communicate with proper visual grammar can have a grievous effect on the regulatory policies formulated by the authorities for public communication. This was apparent in the aftermath of the controversy where the owner of the billboard “feels that what happened will set a precedent across all industries that advertise via billboards. In fact, he says, the ad standard council has already released a circular stating ‘stricter measures on ads showing skin’” (Moral, 2011, Para. 22).

The multimodal analysis of visual grammar introduces a new perspective in reading and writing visual language. It refocuses academic attention to the century-old grammar of visual inscription by integrating analyses involving frames of perspectives, visual laminates, design configuration using semiotic technologies (e.g. Photoshop, FinalCut), and contextualization. Most significantly, it benefits the instruction of visual design and communication by moving from text to context and enabling visual designers and their viewers who are now also producers of visual texts (due to the accessibility of semiotic technologies) to arrive at a certain agreement on the lexical content of visual texts. By incorporating perspectives in multimodal analysis in studying visual design and communication, the dissonance between the

expression and interpretation can be replaced by consonance in thought and understanding. As one industry proponent said, “The value of billboards, like any media, is in their market and influence... Some might go overboard. We need to adjust to each other” (Moral, 2011, Para. 27).

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