

Conference Paper

Curiosity as an Effective In-stream Advertising Appeal: Visual and Textual Study of Levi's Circles Ad

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Abstract

This paper discusses the appeal to curiosity that advertisers use attract viewers of online in-stream video ads and explores whether this appeal is effective from the visual and textual perspectives. In-stream videos are unique to online platforms such as YouTube, for which viewers are shown an interruptive ad before, during, or after their on-demand video. Using the case study of Levi's "Circles" ad, which is one of the most-watched ads on YouTube in 2017, this paper examines the conceptual, interactive, and compositional meanings of visual elements of the ad drawing from the grammar of visual design—which are found to be adequately effective in using visual elements to appeal to viewers' curiosity and enticing viewers to continue watching the ad until the end. The textual elements of ad is subsequently analysed using critical discourse analysis, which finds the message in the ad to support the three objectives of advertising: to provide information about or sell a product, to build or maintain a certain brand image, and to express social values or promote social change.

Keywords: advertising, in-stream, curiosity, visual grammar, critical discourse analysis

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1. Introduction

In today's digital age, advertising still functions as a cost-effective way for firms and organizations to sell their products, build or sustain a certain brand image, and to give commentary on certain social discourse or even to promote social change to broad range of audiences. The advertisers' challenge is to be creative in their use of visual, narrative, and textual media to effectively relay their marketing message to the targeted market segments. Ad creators use a combination of various appeals to convey meaning, given the space and time limitations that advertisement have, namely using humour, sex, music, fear, rationality, scarcity, emotion, and curiosity to peak the audience's interest

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(Clow & Baack, 2010). As advertising is an integral part of a brand's marketing communication efforts, it must strike a balance between *what* is being communicated as *how* it is being communicated (Väre, 2014).

In the digital platform, advertising is still largely holds its initial definition as an impersonal, paid or sponsored, one-way communication from the sender (company) to the receiver (audience) that aims to inform and persuade the audience on the product or idea being advertised (Kotler & Armstrong, 2010). However, the digital platform, particularly social media, has allowed viewers to not only passively view the advertising, but also to actively engage with advertising to an extent through liking, commenting, sharing, or even starting a campaign against an ad deemed inappropriate or insensitive. An example of the interactive power of social media on advertising is the backlash of Pepsi's 2017 ad featuring Kendall Jenner that drew controversy and backlash as it was accused of trivializing the "Black Lives Matter" movement that was at its height at the time. The ad was posted on YouTube on 4 April 2017, quickly drew intense criticisms on social media, and subsequently pulled by Pepsi the following day (Victor, 2017).

Among all other social media platforms, YouTube has emerged as the leader in online broadcast advertising particularly in-stream advertising. By definition, in-stream video ads disrupt viewers before, during, or after their on-demand video streaming, upon which viewers then have the option whether to continue watching the in-stream ads after the first five seconds or to skip to their intended content (Guo et al., 2018). While on one hand, in-stream advertising videos can be intrusive, on the other hand it can serve as an effective teaser depending on how the advertisers package the five-second teaser of their ads. Some ads can function as effective in-stream teaser ads, in part due to their use of curiosity appeal by quickly catching the viewers' attention, peaking their interests, and giving them strong enough reason to continue watching.

Curiosity as an advertising appeal when utilized in broadcast advertising is unique as it teases viewers with images, narratives, or texts, but leaves them with a considerable gap, particularly about which brand is being advertised, until the very end of the advertisement itself. Fazio, Herr, and Powell (1992) even suggested that "mystery ads" that keep the main information about the name of the brands unrevealed until the very end could be more effective in building memorable connection between the brand and product category, although the effect may be limited to viewers initially unfamiliar with the brand being advertised. Loewenstein (1994) considers this "information gap" as the key to curiosity, which he defines as the need and desire for information. When information gap exists, curious consumers can feel discomfort that can only be mitigated by gathering the information to bridge the gap, complete the missing information, and

thus reduce their discomfort (Berlyne in Chou & Lien, 2014). In the case of in-stream ads using the appeal to curiosity, creating the information gap by only revealing the information regarding the main message and the brand name itself at the end of the ads could be an effective way to get more viewers to view the ads until the end—at which the most important information would be revealed.

This paper aims to discuss the appeal to curiosity in online in-stream video ads and explores whether this appeal is effective from visual and textual perspectives, using a particular case study of Levi's Jeans "Circles" ad (2017). The Levi's ad was chosen because it utilizes the appeal to curiosity, and as it is one of the most popular ads on YouTube worldwide, listed as one of the top ten most watched ads on YouTube in 2017 with 22.3 million views by year-end (Nudd, 2017).

2. Method

In discussing the effectiveness of the use of curiosity appeal for in-stream advertising, this paper analyses Levi's "Circles" ad as the case study using two tools of descriptive qualitative analysis, namely the grammar of visual design and critical discourse analysis. Using the grammar of visual design (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), this paper examines the semantic metafunctions of the "Circles" ad's sequence of images, particularly as the sequence of images take on: (1) representational meaning, i.e. the way the world is represented through spatial, narrative, and conceptual patterns, (2) interactive meaning, i.e. the use of contact, distance, and point of view to create relationships between the consumers and the product being depicted, and (3) compositional meaning, i.e. the information value as it relates to the placement, framing, and salience of the imageries (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Using critical discourse analysis (CDA) to analyse the textual elements of the ad, the paper aims to use Fairclough's three dimensions to (1) describe the text found in the "Circles" ad, (2) interpret its discursive practice, and (3) explain its social practice (Fairclough, 2001). With CDA, the paper aims to draw parallel between Fairclough's three dimensions the three general objectives of advertising, i.e. to provide information about or sell a product, to build or maintain a certain brand image, and to express social values or promote social change (Boltz & Seyer in Rosul, 2011).

3. Findings and Discussion

"Circles" is a 90-second broadcast advertisement run in 2017 by the internationally renowned clothing company Levi Strauss. It was first published on YouTube on 18

August 2017. The ad opens up its five-second teaser with a sequence of a turntable being started and playing vinyl record on a turntable, which can be simultaneously seen as something nostalgic and current. This is in line with the assertion that vinyl record is making a comeback in the form of commemoration, connoisseurship of a cultural movement (Long, 2017). Then the sequence continues with an Afro-influenced dance beat in the background followed by an image of a middle-aged woman standing against the wall (Figure 1).



Figure 1: First five-second teaser of Levi's "Circle" (2017).

The composition of this teaser scene seems to take a more narrative meaning, as the woman is represented as what she does rather than who she is. She is seemingly being moved by the rhythm as she begins to subtly move her shoulders to the beat, as she is gazing into a goal that is not yet in frame. This creates an information or knowledge gap, and thus incites curiosity. On interactive meaning, this first sequence does not establish contact between the participant in the frame and the viewers, but instead contact between the participant and the goal that is out of frame but the viewers can see through the reflection in the woman's eyes. In terms of interaction, this sequence can be considered as *offer picture*, as the participant is not looking directly at the viewers (Väre, 2014). In this first sequence, the viewers are presented with an image of the participant at a *close up* level, signifying that the ad is trying to establish a close relationship with the viewers and engaging the viewers to watch more of what is to come. When it comes to composition, the initial sequence of the ad seems to engage viewers by presenting something new as the participant is placed on the right portion of the frame, which Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) suggested as a place for something new and not yet known. This novelty further entices curiosity. In the frame, the participant and an object in the form of a music stereo are placed on the bottom portion, which according to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) represent something real, relatable, and down-to-earth. Additionally, the first sequence is able to establish *saliency* by the use of colour in its composition, i.e. the woman is wearing a white shirt with floral patterns to make her stand out from the background.

As the viewers are purposefully made curious to see what the woman is about to do next, the sequence cuts abruptly to show a scene featuring a young, tall, Caucasian man wearing a denim jacket walking down a flat of stairs and heading into something or somewhere, which the audience is yet to find out. Then the sequence cuts abruptly again to show a scene from a Bar Mitzvah and a bearded Jewish man in his 20s or 30s walking towards the front of the crowd. At this point, the sequence continues with several scenes of a person in different settings seen walking towards a group already forming a circle that can be described as celebratory, jovial, or fun. After 17 seconds of teasing the viewers with the concept of a ‘dance circle’, the sequence continues with a scene of the woman from the first sequence pushing her way through a crowd and beginning to dance in the centre of the circle, first by herself and then with a middle-aged man wearing a white hat. Following this scene, the ad continues with several sequence showing people dancing in circles with one or several individuals dancing in the centre. The groups shown in the dance circles are diverse in terms of gender, race, culture, age, scene, appearance, dance style—yet they all share one thing in common, i.e. they are dancing merrily and they all seem to be having a great time (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Follow up scenes from Levi's "Circle" (2017).

The sequence continues for 81 seconds without any text or any clear indication of the product or brand being advertised. Only at the last 9 seconds of the ad does it reveal its message and the brand behind it. The last 9 seconds of the ad sequence states consecutively in capital letters, one sentence per frame: "MEN. WOMEN. YOUNG. OLD. RICH. POOR. GAY. STRAIGHT. LET'S LIVE HOW WE DANCE." Then the ad ends with the caption: "LIVE IN LEVI'S" (Figure 3).

When analysed based on the ad's semantic metafunction using the grammar of visual design, the follow up and the ending sequence of Levi's "Circles" ad seem to continue what has been established by the teaser sequence. The compositional meaning of the visual aspect of the ad maintains its narrative meaning, as the participants in all of the scenes are represented as what they do rather than who they are. What they do is dance—expressing themselves freely and being celebrated for it. In fact, their diverse

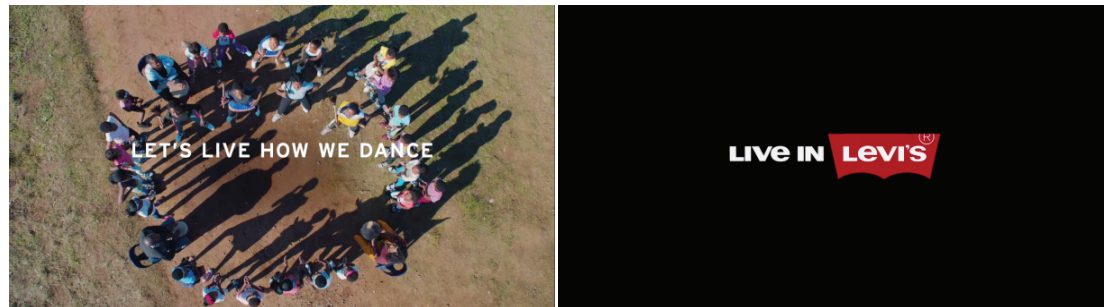


Figure 3: Ending sequence from Levi's "Circle" (2017).

cultural, geographic, and demographic backgrounds as well as their individuality seen in their dancing styles and appearance serve as a background that seems to suggest that those differences matter less than being able to express themselves through dancing.

The interactive meaning in this ad is established more between the participants in each scene rather than directly between the participants and viewers. This is apparent because none of the scenes shows participants making direct eye contact with the viewers. Instead, the viewers are invited to watch several glimpses on how diverse groups of people in dance circles can freely express themselves while wearing Levi's products, even though the products themselves are never the centre of the attention. The interaction is consistently between and among the participants not between the participants and the product as an object. The 90-second ad shows different angles and point of views for interaction: some close ups, some medium shots, and some long shots. The points of views also change. In some sequence, the viewers are looking up at the participants, watching at horizontal level in some scenes, and looking down from above the circles in others. This is also to further the idea of diversity and beauty in distinctiveness.

In terms of compositional meaning, the emphasis on the *informational value* is always placed in the centre of the circle, as the circles signify inclusion and those dancing in its centre represent individuality. By placing the most important individual and information in the centre of the frame, core representation of the visual elements can be expressed by binding together the informational value at the centre and the background information at the margin of the frames (Väre, 2014). Saliency is maintained throughout by the use of colour, size, focus, and tonal contrast to highlight the informational value typically placed at the centre of the frames.

The appeal to curiosity is aptly maintained throughout the ad, as viewers are kept wondering which brand this ad is representing. The visual elements, which changes rapidly from one scene to the next, also keeps the viewers interested to see what would come next. At the end, the message is revealed. The textual nature of the message

warrants for a critical discourse analysis (CDA), which is an important tool of analysing texts that deal with real-world issues and problems, such as diversity and inclusion as well as power struggles in society (Fairclough, 2001).

Using Fairclough's three dimensional framework (1995), the text found at the ending sequence of Levi's "Circles" ad can be analysed at the micro- level, meso- level, and macro-level. At the micro level, a description can be made on the text contains a list of words that have opposite meanings to one another: 'men' is the antonym of 'women'; 'young' is the antonym of 'old'; 'rich' is the antonym of 'poor'; and 'gay' is the antonym of 'straight.' Then the text continues with: "Let's live how we dance. Live in Levi's." At the micro level, it seems as if Levi's is showing that people from all walks of lives can wear Levi's, and that Levi's jeans are comfortable, strong, and flexible enough to wear dancing. It also suggests consumers to live in Levi's, which is a step further from wearing Levi's. One wears her jeans, but it can also be said one 'lives' in it, if the comfort level and sense of belonging is high.

At the meso-level, a discursive interpretation of why the group of antonyms are chosen is inevitable. With all the antonyms, at first glance they are seemingly dichotomous, but upon further analysis the groups of words with opposite meanings are chosen to represent spectrums. For instance, young is the opposite of old, while poor is the opposite of rich. Yet, there is a spectrum of young-ness and old-ness, same as there is a wide spectrum of poorness and richness. Thus, Levi's attempts to embrace all these spectrums as the company provides products for all age groups and also offer products at different price ranges. Additionally, gender identity and sexuality are even more complex as they are multi-dimensional. With the opposite words chosen here: 'men' v. 'women' and 'gay' v. 'straight', Levi's is signifying its company values that it is open to people from all dimensions. Through this ad, Levi Strauss & Co. is attempting to build a brand image that is inclusive as well as expressive.

At the macro-level, the social issue confronted by the ad can be explained by the objective of some advertising efforts to comment on prevailing socio-cultural problems or to promote social change. In this case, the ad is a critical reflection of the power struggle in American society, a country and society in which the Levi Strauss & Co. is based: between nationalist identity and diversity, between xenophobic tendencies and inclusion. As the rise of nationalistic populism and racism are on the rise, this ad suggests that Levi Strauss & Co. as one of the quintessentially and historically American company (joining the group of companies such as Coca Cola and Harley Davidson) is showing its social discourse by standing up for diversity, inclusion, individual expression, and the celebration of individuality. Moreover, the choice of song used as the soundtrack of

this ad is also symbolic. The song is “Makeba” by French singer-songwriter Jain, which is in direct reference to Miriam Makeba—a South African singer, United Nations goodwill ambassador, and civil-rights activist in the apartheid era. This reference supports the concept of the ad of inclusiveness and celebrating individual differences, free from oppression in expressing individuality or even self-indulgence.

4. Conclusion

The advertisement “Circles” by Levi Strauss & Co. illustrates the use of curiosity as an advertising appeal, particularly in broadcast advertising. The ad is effective in its use of visual elements to grab the viewers’ attention and entice their interest to keep watching beyond the teaser period. All three elements of the semantic metafunctions of visual grammar are well-utilized in this ad: from its conceptual meaning, its interactive meaning, to its compositional meaning. After a series of effectively composed sequence of images, with a rich soundtrack providing the auditory background of the visuals, the ad ends with a powerful message and the grand reveal of the brand being advertised. Upon critical discourse analysis, the message is able to take on the three dimensional framework of CDA and simultaneously drawing parallel to the objectives of advertising: at the micro-level, the ad is able to signify that Levi’s jeans fit diverse groups of people with various socio-demographic backgrounds; at the meso-level, the ad conveys the company’s value in welcoming diversity and in its inclusivity of people from all walks of life; and at the macro-level, the ad confronts the societal problems of nationalistic populism and xenophobic tendencies by promoting diversity, inclusion, and celebration of individuality.

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