

CITY UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG
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Photographs or Illustrations?
Visual Concreteness and Psychological Distance Effects in
Print Advertising

攝影或插畫？

平面廣告的圖像具體性與心理距離感的效果

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ABSTRACT

Visual imagery plays an increasingly dominant role in creating consumer desires for advertising communications (Mitchell 1995). However, the psychological processes involved are only partially understood. In recent years, the use of illustrations in advertising has increased (Dara 2012) and they have been found to be an effective visual persuasion strategy in print advertising (Heiser, Sierra, and Torres 2008). The global spending on print advertising in 2015 amounted to 121.2 billion US dollars (Statista 2015) and the print medium accounts for 42.7% of the total expenditure on advertising in Hong Kong (AdmanGo 2014). Therefore, the factors that contribute to the effectiveness of illustrations in print advertising are worth studying.

The goal of this dissertation is to provide an understanding of the use of visuals, particularly illustrations, in advertising. It will discuss questions like: What are the differences between photographs and illustrations? What do these differences tell us? How should we best use photographs and illustrations? This dissertation does not necessarily dictate the best visual means to solve a problem, but rather looks for broader implications. I will examine the phenomenon from three different perspectives: the generic features/basic components of visual imagery, the emotions elicited and the effects on viewers. I will then test and support the arguments made using various methodologies. The first study presented is a survey of the current advertising practices using the content analysis method. It aims to find out which sector or product category is currently using illustrations more frequently and the purposes and contexts for which illustrations are most commonly used. The second study examines the consumer psychology regarding the degree of pictorial concreteness through experimentation. Two different sets of visual stimuli are created in order to test the attitudinal effects on

subjects. This aims to provide an in-depth look at illustrations and lays out a basis for making the best use of illustrations in advertising.

The first content analysis study uncovered a very interesting finding: amongst all product categories and sectors, the government sector tops the chart for its heavy use of pure illustrations, closely followed by the toy market. Findings also indicated that illustrations in advertising are also more likely to include generic characters, and that illustrations are more often used to depict complex, abstract concepts and imaginary scenarios. An increase in the usage rate of illustrations in advertising was found since the last related study.

The second study focuses on the effects of visual concreteness and psychological distance on the audiences' attitudinal response within the context of public services advertising. The theoretical framework proposed in this study is based on Construal Level Theory, aiming to understand the relationship between psychological distance and the degree of concreteness in visual representation, and examining the effects on viewers' behavioral intentions and attitudes towards the ad. To my knowledge, only limited empirical research has explicitly analyzed the roles of construal and pictorial concreteness in shaping attitudinal response, thus this research attempts to address this gap in extant literature. Hypotheses are made by establishing variables and utilizing the proposed research framework. Experiments are utilized, as they are the most appropriate method for measuring the effects of visuals and the casual relationships between visual style and consumer responses.

Results indicated that illustrations, having a low degree of concreteness, can induce psychological distance and generate more favorable ad attitudes and behavioral intentions when the content invokes strong negative feelings. Psychological distance, in particular the hypothetical dimension, is found to be the mediator of the communication,

revealing the mechanism governing the effectiveness of visuals in advertising. Implications for the optimal use of illustrations are discussed and suggestions for academics and practitioners are made.