

# Visual Communication in Corporate Brands: A Semiological Discourse Analysis of car Brochures

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## **Abstract**

*The process of marketization has greatly been accelerated by the use of visual communication. The companies publish brochures using various semiotic modes to promote their products and cope with the product promotion rivalry. Brochures let your product speak for itself and communicate with the consumers and attract their attention. The present study attempts to explore the semiotic features in car brochures as they play an important part in business communication in convincing people towards a specific communicative goal. It also aims to analyze the brochures 'images and how these images are used to establish relations with the costumers. The study, as such, is essentially qualitative in nature and placed within interpretive paradigm. Following purposive sampling, two brochures of Toyota (2014) and Honda (2017) have been selected and analyzed using the model of Kress & Leeuwen's "Semiotic Analysis" (2006). The results of this study indicate that a complex set of relationship is established between the image and their viewers through visuals. The companies use specific visual strategies including contextualization, illumination and representation effectively to enhance the content. Moreover, different color composition and texts are used to achieve their marketing goals; the popularity of the brand and to establish seller-buyer relationship successfully. It was revealed that use of high modulation in the setting create reliability and credibility of the product. Finally, the Findings also revealed how discourses influence society The present study will be helpful in enhancing the comprehension of how different companies use visuals as strategic tool to establish corporate identity in general and the semiotic organization and underlying meaning structure in the brochures of Honda and Corolla car in particular. It will also contribute in providing useful insights to the market researchers*

**Keywords:** Semiotics, Car Brochures, Customers, Sellers, Visual communication, Contextualization, High modality, Persuasion.

## **I. Introduction**

Old tradition of meaning making was limited to reading and writing, nowadays it got a new turn. Visual literacy is considered more significant in the process of meaning making particularly in media literacy. Now in recent times it becomes easier for writers to manipulate or to infuse essential desired meanings and focus on significant information that they want to convey. In modern marketing field, visuals are constructed to gain huge financial benefits and establish the identity of the corporate companies worldwide. Car companies are a

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lucrative industry where challenging competition exists. They need to promote and publicize their products using brochures for which they use various semiotic modes. The process of marketization in various fields of engineering, technology, medicine, newspapers and magazines has greatly been escalated by the use of impressive visual images. These images are used to transfer their ideas to the people, to make their message more clear, productive and evident for their audience and more specifically to establish seller-buyer relationship. Every brand adopts certain strategic tools to advertise their products promotion for customers and brochures are considered as the most important communicative medium for this purpose. Oswald (2015) expressed the same view that consumers are greatly influenced by the symbolic system of the brand and they internalize, recall and relate to the brand's symbolic system which is not only related to the academic interest but has a direct financial impact on the performance of the company, even on the value of its shares.

Budiarti & Soerjowardhana (2013) argue that communication should include three facets including sender, message and the receiver. Communicative purpose cannot be achieved without any of the above stated aspect of communication for which linguistic choices as well as visuals are used to enhance the message in marketization. The present study attempts to reveal how companies use specific visuals as a strategic tool for establishing and creating some kind of corporate identity towards their audience. It will also describe the semiotic organization in visuals of car brochures. It is presumed that the research of car brochures regarding the lens of semiotics will enhance the understanding of how writers choose particular visual strategies to achieve their "communicative purpose" within the imposed constraints. To the best of our knowledge no study so far has been carried out on car brochures of Toyota and Honda from this perspective. So the researchers have tried to fulfill this gap by taking up this area and contributing in the research world.

### **1.1 Research Problems**

Some major areas need to be addressed by doing analysis of car brochures including the exploration of semiotic features, and their arrangements in car brochures and a critical evaluation of the rhetorical aspects present in the visuals of car brochures.

### **1.2 Research Questions**

To examine the above mentioned research problem and to reach the desired objectives, the following questions were formulated:

1. What types of visual strategies and tactics are used in car brochures to persuade people to buy the product?
2. How companies formulate or choose visual to make seller-buyer relationship?

## **II. Literature Review**

The origin of semiotics can be traced back to Plato, Aristotle, Locke and Leibniz since everyone had discussed sign, symbol and communication in their writings. But it was not before the 20th century and also the work of the Swiss linguist Saussure (1916) and the American philosopher Peirce (1839-1914) that semiotics reached its identity. Semiotics is generally the most used term, but some use the term semiology when talking about signs. Bignell (2002) underlines the origin of semiology in his book by stating that "semiotics and semiology derive from the ancient Greek word" *semeion* "which means sign" (p.68). He further elaborates that

"semiotics is a way of analyzing meanings by observing signs (such as words, images, symbols, etc.) that communicate meaning" (p.68).

Peirce (1839, 1914) as one of the creators in the field of semiotics worked on the cognitive process of acquiring knowledge. He claims that this process is a model of communicative activity and has linked the acquisition of knowledge to the structure of communication. Peirce (1958) also elaborated that the signs are incorporated into society and can be found everywhere, furthermore we can say that it is applicable to the business world and also has a wave of signs. Barthes (1977) defined in his essay "Rhetoric of the image" that the meanings of visual objects are always interconnected with the verbal text and that language always supports and saves towards visual meanings. The research area of advertising marketing communication assumes semiotics a fundamental part in deciding the achievement or failure of business. Through the effective use of writing in combination of visual elements, the company's producers can certainly strengthen their reach to their customers.

Eco (1976) believes that "semiotics" is the study of how the message could be transmitted, generated and transferred through heterogeneous modalities such as "signs" and "symbols" and these modalities are considered as an essential aspect of our social and cultural life. It means that meanings are transferred not only through written or printed text, but also through the specific use of signs and symbols that meet the defined criteria of the situation and these signs are considered the part of the community that used them. But each culture takes those signs differently and perceives them differently.

Kress & Leeuwen (2006) showed their focus on sign making rather than sign boards. They presented an opinion that the signs are not arbitrary; they argued that the relationship between signifier and meaning is motivated and conventional. They see signs as motivated conjunctions of signifier and signified. According to them (ibidem) motivation in semiology is not related to the act of creating the sign while presenting a vision, rather it means that an intrinsic relationship between the signifier and the meaning. They also argue (ibid) that "writing in one's self is also a form of visual communication" (p. 17).

Holman's (1977, 1983) work is considered a great reference in semiotic organization. He studied the syntactic and semantic levels of consumer semiotics from a pure and applied perspective by examining the clothing system as a code. Kress's study (1993) describes that "no sign is innocent", therefore not a single writing is expected to be free from ideologies (p. 174).

Parmentier (1994) argues that the concept of semiotic can be studied in two stages. The first level includes the distinction between the element of functioning as a "signifier" and an element of functioning as a "meaning". As regards the second level, it consists of the relationship between complete signs.

In this modern era, semiotics has been used as one of the main tools by the business world to make products or articles more effective and convey meanings to buyers through these signs and images. Companies promote their products by uploading information to official websites that are considered a communication channel in the business world. They communicate with buyers through several ways and the brochure is one of them. The most demanding use of these brochures is communication with the target group and specifically attracting users to the corporate brand. Tosotra, Janson and Kacmanovic (2004) consider semiotics as a powerful enough tool to reveal the potential meanings of Internet marketing.

Advertisers on the Internet have specific end goals to influence social awareness and meanings, so they manage to achieve this with a wide use of images. Semiotics is an extremely workable and effective device for interpretation of any kind and promotes an understanding of the reality through which humans create meaning that they are usually unaware of. constantly trying to deliberately encourage the implications that contribute to brand images, buying probabilities and contentment. The works of Kress & Leeuwen (1996/2006) are based on the ideas of previous research and theories of the sign. Semiotic analysis is used to understand what kind of meaning is created in any type of paper and electronic support through visual elements and which producers intend to communicate in any kind with the use of visual. Kress & Leeuwen (2006) presented the idea that "Expressed meanings of speakers, writers, engravers, photographers, designers, painters and sculptors are first of all social meanings" (p.20). Ramachandran, (2005) conducted a study with the aim of unveiling the potential meanings projected in tourist brochures through semiotic analysis by adopting a four-step research process based on the design principle, data elicitation, analysis and on the interest of knowledge. The study results revealed the underlying meaning structures in Malaysia's target images from the media perspective.

After examining the literature on the field of semiotic analysis, it can be said that semiotics is a vast term that deals with the construction of meanings and realities in any field. The purpose of this document is to explore the dimensions in which marketing researchers can obtain insights and awareness in their works to understand semiotics both in contexts of consumer-buyer thinking.

## **2.1 Theoretical Framework**

In this field of semiotics the work of Kress & Leeuwen (1996, 2006) on signs and sign-making is remarkable for visual analysis as both the theorists did talk about forms (signifiers) along with the mode in which these signifiers are used to interpret signified in the process of sign making. Their conception of sign differs from Saussure (1857–1913) and Peirce (1839–1914) as Kress & Leeuwen (2006) state that the focus is on sign making in which the signifier and the signified are independent to each other relatively by the time they are brought together to form a new sign by the sign-maker who use form appropriate to express their meaning 'in any medium in which they can make sign' (ibid, p.8).

According to Saussure (1974), signs are arbitrary and conventional but on the other hand Kress & Leeuwen (2006) are of the view that signs are always motivated and conventional. Moreover, semiotic modes are always shaped according to the social norm, cultural or ethical values and economic realities. Kress & Leeuwen (1994, 2006) have developed and build a more organized method for exploration, interpretation and illustration of visuals. Their model of semiotic analysis answers to the question; how and in what way different image elements are joined to make meaningful whole. They have presented the view that texts do not make sense only through linguistic modes but visuals and images are significant in process of meaning making. Leeuwen (2005) is of the view that multimodality is a "combination of different semiotic modes — for example, language and music — in a communicative artifact or event." (p. 28). Halliday (1978) believes that language fulfils three meta-functions simultaneously; ideational, interpersonal and textual and Kress & Leeuwen (2006) theory of semiotic analysis is based on these three meta-functions. Both Kress & Leeuwen (1996,2006) have proposed the concept of grammar of visual design and have extended Halliday's metafunctions to:

- i. Representational function (Narrative process; action, reactional, speech, mental, conversion)
- ii. Interactive function (image act, social distance, point of view or perspective, modality)
- iii. Compositional function (information value, framing, salience)

They have assumed that the visual modes like; image, color, music, typography along with other elements of this category do have similarities with language and linguistic elements in terms of fulfilling particular functions. Kress & Leeuwen (2006) consider images as highly ideological and Images articulate ideological positions “neither power nor its uses has disappeared, it has only become more difficult to locate and trace” (p. 14).

In present study researcher has adapted three modes of visual communication from the model of semiotic analysis for the visual analysis of car brochures.

- i. Modality Markers
- ii. Composition
- iii. Communicative function of colors

The main objective of semiotic analysis is to disclose or highlight ground realities, hidden norms, resemblance, agendas and variations at different levels of meanings. The researchers have taken ‘Semiotic’ theory as a framework to analyze brochures’ images, colors and motive of car companies behind image selection.

### **III. Methods and Procedures**

The present research is qualitative in nature and purposive sampling is employed for a variety of consideration, such as limitation of time, effort and space. The researchers have selected these samples based on specific goals. Moreover, these selected brochures contain attractive images and specific visual choices as well as more eye-catching for the researchers.

The present study is directed by utilizing qualitative techniques in which semiotic considerations are analyzed subjectively. In the present study researcher’s own point-of-view regarding brochures’ visuals and marketing strategies is combined which makes it very easy to draw solid unquestionable conclusions. Researchers have collected the data from the websites and by visiting the showrooms of the both companies Toyota and Honda from which two of the brochures are analyzed. To sum up research on brochures’ visuals is rather a new area of research.

#### **3.1 Data Analysis**

The present study is directed using qualitative techniques in which semiotic considerations are subjectively analyzed. In the present study, the researcher's point of view is combined with regard to the views of the brochures and marketing strategies, which makes it very easy to draw solid indisputable conclusions. The researchers collected data from websites or by visiting the showrooms of the two companies Toyota and Honda in Multan Pakistan and out of six two of the brochures were analyzed. Summarizing the research on booklet graphics is quite a new research area.

The researchers have critically analysed and evaluated the visuals by using the model by Kress & Leeuwen’s (2006) to uncover the complex set of relation between seller and buyer through images and to

answer the problem of this research. The semiotic features, modality, composition and colours have been explored by the researchers by selecting brochures of two car companies' Toyota Corolla(2014) and Honda BRV (2017).

### 3.1.1 Semiotic Analysis of Toyota Corolla 2014

The major issue related to any image is the reliability and truthfulness of that image for which Kress & Leeuwen (2006) have introduced some elements of composition, modality markers, and role of colours.

### 3.1.2 Modality Markers

The setting, form, composition, characters, and theme in itself in the image (fig 1.1) answer the question of credibility and reliability. The writers of brochures attach the reliability with certain stories and create a sense of association with the buyer. Yet, as members of a business world, consumers have to be able to make decisions on the basis of the information they receive from such brochures.

With the use of modality markers, the consumers are attracted and forced to act. The buyers have to trust on the visual cues provided on the brochures and the image creators try to demonstrate the front cover as real and authentic. The addition of character in the image is done to make it more real as shown in the image (figure 1.1) a girl and two boys have been added to make is attractive and more life-like. The background and setting of the image is quite crystal clear and show highest modality



Fig 1.1

### Color Saturation/Modulation

Kress & Leeuwen (2006) have given a modality scale for colour saturation



(Kress & Leeuwen, 2006: 160)

Reality is defined by a specific social group and evaluated through the eye of that group whether they are politicians, merchandisers or media persons. As visuals are an instance of semiotic realization they also serve as a form of exchange in business communication. As apparent in the front cover of the brochures that colors are highly modulated and have positive impact on the readers due to the combination and are used to make communication more effective for the viewers

As shown in the color modulation scale, a transition from none to extreme saturation of colors exists but the color saturation in this image is highly modulated.

### **Colours(primary & secondary)**

An excessive use of colours always lowers down the modality of the image. As the color of the product in the present image is primary (dark), it catches the attention at first sight whereas the colors used in the background are quite naturalistic and a housing colony is portrayed behind the car to give it more natural and authentic look.

The primary colors of the trees and secondary color of houses are evoking a soothing effect as these brown and green primary colors are considered pure colors as pointed out by (Kress & Leeuwen, 2006:234). Colors in these visuals, also play the role of signifiers to achieve some communicative purpose.

### **Contextualization**

The opening scene in brochure (figure 1.1) represents high modulation because of background images and setting which consist of two houses and presence of three characters busy in real life like conversation with a naturalistic view of day. All these things are highly contextualized and contribute to the credibility and reliability of the image.

These signs are used by the marketers to communicate their message effectively as argued by Leeuwen (2005) that sign is the fundamental concept of semiotics and these resources are not limited to writing, speech or visual construction rather everything can be represented in different ways representing cultural and social meanings.

In the image (figure 1.1), naturalistic setting and inclusion of characters in this image represents a sense of connectedness by a specific source of illumination and absence of this setting, as pointed out by Kress & Leeuwen (2006) lowers modality. The characters, in this image, have not been directed to the audience and they have no eye contact with the audience and every detail presented in the image including characters, their dress, colors and style of the house are conveying meanings.

### **Representation**

The marketers also portray business-like representation making it more close to reality depicting business related environment. In this regard, focus is not on characters but on the model of car and representation of business class is another strategic tool used by the producers to attract the related social group. Sometimes, they include the characters in the image giving equal importance to both, car model and the characters that create high modality. Introducing natural setting creates smooth impact persuading the buyers to buy the luxurious item.

### **Illumination**

The illumination is another strategic tool and modality marker used by the producers. Kress & Leeuwen (2006) state that naturalistic depiction in the visual gives the impression as participants in the visuals are affected by a particular source of illumination. as introduced in (figure 1.1), the setting is illuminated. The object is directly illuminated from the background to highlight it, may it be external or interior part of car by adding salience to the focused part. The background is not blurred and building with rich colors are shown to create a natural impact and foregrounding the product.

### **Brightness**

Brightness is another modality marker used to attract the attention of the buyers. Use of illumination and brightness add paradigm of naturalism in visuals creating brighter and clearer image

### **Depth**

Depth is another modality marker that is used to highlight the desired part. The visual makers foreground the interior or external part of the car so that the consumer may see his comfort in the car.

### **Composition& Communicative function of colours**

Kress and Leeuwen (2006) have introduced three levels to evaluate the composition in any image including salience, framing and informative value. The left right margin, placement of product and participants are composed to convey a specific communicative message. The producers try to achieve their communicative goals by persuading the target audience of particular class and field. The physical structure of the car is given more importance than the participants adding glamour to it.

### **3.2 Semiotic analysis of Honda BRV (2017)**

In visual analysis of Honda BR-V (2017), 7 Seater SUV the semiotic modes by Kress & Leeuwen (2006) are applied.

### **Colours**

Half of the game is won, if the advertisement impresses the buyers and that effect is used with the help of colors used in the visuals In the image (figure 1.2) brown colour is used in the background which reflects the natural theme.



The color scheme, setting, background and participants create a great impact making the content more appealing, logical and reliable. The big image of the car and a natural scene behind it conveys the message that the producer has tried to make car individual and perfect. Both, primary and secondary colors are used in order to establish a connection with the promise of the product. In (fig 1.2) consists of different shades of brown and yellow revealing complete unity, coherence and harmony in terms of light and dark shades of colors that reflects calmness.





Fig 1.3

### Modality

Credibility is the prime objective of any communicative message. For this purpose, natural background scenery is used to create natural impact on the audience and create credibility. Similarly, the producers of this brand have used landscaped background in the brochure to show reliability and that it is real and not the part of any fiction. As far as this image of Honda BR-V is concerned, the setting is shown more realistic and natural. In internal pages, various modality cues are used. These are signs companies and producers use to invoke the interest of different social groups. In the starting pages of the brochures, a modulation in colors is used which Kress & Leeuwen call a scale of color saturation. "Truth is a construct of semiosis, and as such the truth of a particular social group arises from the values and beliefs of that group" (Kress & Leeuwen, 2006: 154-155).

A complete and happy family theme is presented in the image and a picnic environment is created by the producer. A seven-seater car is a perfect choice for a family to travel in. This car has enough space for the family to travel. The environment depicted in the image conveys that happiness is related with the car directly or indirectly. Kress & Leeuwen (2006) state that reality is what perceived by the beholder. It depends on the particular social class to define reality. This image (fig.1.3) in the internal pages reflects a good story, emotions and feeling.

### Representation/ contextualization

In the next image (figure 1.3) multiple colors are used to show reliability and modality in the image or message. In this image of the brochure the producers showed a happy family with three participants; mother, father and son. It seems that they have come to the beach for a picnic and that their movement to put their bags out of the car can be seen. The manufacturers are mainly interested in highlighting the rear internal structure of

the car. A large amount of luggage can be checked in the car, including the adjustable children's chair, the bathtub, the food basket and other baskets used to carry picnic-related material. The pictorial representation of the naturalistic point of view is indicated to convince and attract readers. The car was shown on the left half of the image, while the participants and setting are shown on the right of the image. In this image liveliness and happiness are highly visualized and the loading space of the car is shown to highlight the family's life needs.

### **Depth**

Another modality marker which is of depth can be visually identified in the next image of Honda BR-V 7 Seater SUV (Appendices 2.1). The image is giving a deep view of inside and outside the car. The interior structure of the car is deeply visualized as the steering, dash board and audio video system of the car can clearly be seen by considering as one is sitting on the driving seat of the car. The reason to show the interior depth is to tell customers how one can feel sitting in the car. The hills can be viewed from inside the car and image makers have not totally blurred the outside view just to make it more real as possible.

### **Illumination/ Brightness**

Visual makers use the extra light impact to illuminate or brighten the model of the car. It is shown big, clearer and sharper; moreover its visual representation using a bright or clear background atmosphere is giving it a sharper and brighter look. The road at which car is supposed to run is also shown clearer and brighter. The natural light is use to illuminate and highlight the physical structure of the car. The extra impact of sun rays is making Honda BR-V brighter and illuminating.

### **Composition& communicative function of colours**

The composition in front cover of Honda BR-V is analyzed in term of salience, information value and framing. In construction of internal pages the writer has shown the element of feeling & emotions, full of story and family theme. Its detailed information is placed by showing its technical specifications and it is strengthen by giving description of its all parts and at the end colors availability is also mentioned.

At the beginning of the internal pages, starting image reflects that producers of the brochure firstly want to realize the acceptance of the product from readers' side. The image of the car is shown as big and background is blurred that reveals that producer of Honda car brochures wants to highlight their product (car). Car is for-grounded and more salience is given to it. Side view of car shown in this image and its overall features are evident as gate, wheels and roof railing is this image. Linguistic Choices are also prescribed on this page shows that company's main aim is to show product quality using both modes; visually and linguistically. The background is blurred as the model of the car is the fore-grounded element in the image. In the background rhyming in colours is used to make the car more individual and salient.

In this image producers have strengthened this model of car with a use of modulated colours and give whole information of the model by associating it with a family theme.

### **Salience / Framing/ informative value**

By placing the product in the centre of the picture, the producer wants to give it more salience. As the fundamental purpose of composition is produce coherence in visual and to put significance into a complete whole. As far as framing is concerned, all the elements are connected to each other framing is stronger as the image is presented as a separate unit of information. By not blurring the background, the producers convey the message that they want to create a naturalistic look because it more attracting and persuading for audience

towards such naturalistic and soothing backgrounds. If the background is blurred and the product is foregrounded, it reveals that more importance is given to product (car).

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Marketing is one of the areas where competition always exists among companies and organizations. Customers visit the companies to buy products, to get information and other services associated with the item. In addition to these, advertising and promotion is needed for the development of a company. The potential buyer has to be given reasons why this product is better, instead of other. As a result, car advertising is an increasingly important part of the car industry for promoting new models. Car brochures are produced by the car companies to offer perspectives on how the representation of the car has changed over time.

Analysis of the Toyota Corolla (2014) and BRV (2017) brochures shows that in order to show the specifications of the product, companies use visual models with the help of captivating and attractive images. The semiotic analysis of Toyota Corolla 2014 reveals the pictorial and visual representation of this model. For the pictorial representation, the participants and the background setting have priority. All the methods of semiotic analysis are evident and are used as a strategic tool to create sociological and psychological effects on readers. The visual analysis reveals that sellers have targeted, attracted and persuaded only one class of people, i.e. business class and younger and adults. Brochure makers infused their message among readers with persuasive and rhetorical visual identities.

Analysis of this Honda BR-V SUV (2017) brochure revealed that the company used a highly rich and complex combination of signs in the brochure. To attract the attention of the buyer towards the pictorial representation of the product of three generations (young, adults and old) and natural images are used. The customer-buyer relationship is well prescribed with the help of specific visual strings. Participants and the addition of natural scenery played a catalyst role in enhancing its appeal and attracting the viewer's attention. The analysis also revealed that there is a presence of pressure tactics, in order to create product promise, together with the use of colors in a completely good way to create unity and consistency in both companies' brochures.

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