

# **The Photographic Message: Common people Images in Contemporary Ads**

**Mirza Džanić**

*University of Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina*

## **Abstract:**

The use of common people and objects as persuasive tools is an advertising strategy focuses on the assumption that common man can easily be identified with the masses i.e. target group for an advertiser. The ads feature people who appear to be average and typical and thus lead the reader to believe that the product is for everyone (Howe and Edelstein 2000: 24). As Goddard (2005: 81-82) points out, 'symbolic representation can be a powerful source of meaning in texts of all kinds. Symbols are much more about associations of ideas than about any literal or straightforward equation, and much more about group convention than about individual personalized meaning'. Accordingly, the semiotic analysis in this paper contains what Barthes (1977: 33) explained as follows: '...if the image contains signs, we can be sure that in advertising these signs are full, formed with a view to the optimum reading: the advertising image is frank or at least emphatic'.

**Keywords:** semiotics, images, ads, common people, denotation, connotation.

## **1. Introduction**

As an attention-drawing tool, advertisers exploit people's desires, fears, wishes, guilts and other motions and needs in general. In doing so, they encourage consumers to think that particular products can satisfy their desires (whatever they may be: for social status, belonging, sexual attractiveness etc.), alleviate their fears and calm their guilt. This strategy produces results despite the fact that people mostly know, on a conscious level, that most of products advertised will not satisfy their needs to such an extent. Companies, which spend a lot on advertising, count on the assumption that people are 'subconsciously more susceptible than they would like to admit' (Solomon 2001: 47). Advertisers presume that people have a number of unfulfilled urges and motives in their minds. As Fowles (2001: 62) points out, 'mental forces such as lust, ambition, tenderness, vulnerabilities are constantly bubbling up, seeking resolution. Kress and Leuween (2006: 175) emphasize that 'images represent the relations between the people, places and things they depict, and the complex set of relations that can exist between images and their viewers'. Each image contains a number of representational relations. In a consumer society common objects are transformed into signs of all the things that people covet most. In other words, special brands convey special status that one is striving for. From a semiotic point of view, these special brands send a signal which is a sign of some sort of power. A typical example of that power i.e. social distinction is 'owning a country estate and enjoying the peace and privacy that attend it' (Solomon 2001: 50). Accordingly, ads for cars such as Mercedes-Benz or Jaguar usually feature drivers

‘motoring quietly along a country road, presumably on their way to or from their country houses’ (Solomon 2001: 50).

Any ad is placed within a circuit of a certain culture, as Matheson (2005: 44) puts it, and people are identifying meaning within it. In other words, ‘communication works because it draws on shared cultural resources in familiar social situations - something which becomes apparent when people who speak the same language but live in different cultures manage to misunderstand each other’ (Gumperz; cited in Matheson 2005: 35).

## **2. Plain Folks Advertising**

What is most noticeable in these examples is the phenomenon called plain folks advertising. (Howe and Edelstein 2000: 24) The use of common people as a persuasive tool is an advertising strategy, which, unlike the one exploiting the images of celebrities, focuses on the assumption that common man can easily be identified with the masses (i.e. target group for an advertiser, in this context). The ads feature people who appear to be average and typical and thus lead the reader to believe that the product is for everyone (Howe and Edelstein 2000: 24).

Furthermore, the appeal to the need for autonomy is characterized by the use of the second person pronoun - you. It is the individuality of the reader i.e. a potential customer that is in focus here: possibilities are made for you - you need to think of them and you must decide which one suits you best. Generally, what the examples below say is that ‘You can have it the way you want it’ as Fowles (2001: 71) puts it. As for the common objects exploited in the ads, the reader is challenged to decode the message, taking connoted meaning into consideration in order to comprehend what message the advertiser is conveying by, for example, employing illumination of the green light in the ad. Such examples illustrate the importance of connoted message in the process of decoding a message.

As Goddard (2005: 81-82) points out, ‘symbolic representation can be a powerful source of meaning in texts of all kinds. Symbols are much more about associations of ideas than about any literal or straightforward equation, and much more about group convention than about individual personalized meaning’.

## **3. Analysis**

The messages these ads convey deal with common human problems as well, whether they are considered as the most fundamental such as the issues of health, employment, life insurance, or more consumerist issues (which, on the other hand, for some people are fundamental ones) such as how to afford to buy a new car etc. In other words, everything that makes one’s life miserable if not properly (and in time) taken care of. Accordingly, the faces and gestures of common people in question suggest the problem (directly stated or implied, enhanced by the textual part of the message), while the advertised product or service promise to solve the problem in question, just as it happens to common people shown in the picture.

### *3.1. Example 1*

**Helping Mary, Bill and Stan live their American Dream**

Everybody has a dream. Theirs happens to be crawling on their hands and knees through flames and heat approaching 200 degrees.

For over 50 years, our retirement and savings products have helped those who worked in the not-for-profit world turn their dreams into reality.

Individuals and groups, companies and partnerships – big and small – receive the same quality service and care. The same freedom of choice. The same retirement and savings products offering a variety of investment options. All without front-end charges, withdrawal fees or transfer charges, from a local salaried consultant you get to know by name and who has a personal and professional interest in the financial well-being of those we serve. For more information call us at 1-800-468-3785 or visit our web site at [www.mutualofamerica.com](http://www.mutualofamerica.com)

People like Mary, Bill and Stan work hard for us, the least we can do is the same for them.

**MUTUAL OF AMERICA**  
The spirit of America

©2004 Mutual of America, New York, NY 10022-6029. 1-800-468-3785. www.mutualofamerica.com. Mutual of America Life Insurance Company is a Registered Broker/Dealer. For complete information on our variable annuities, equity products, a list of all charges and expenses, please refer to the applicable prospectus, which can be obtained from Mutual of America by calling 1-800-468-3785 and should be read carefully before investing.

Figure 1

The key persuasive element in the textual part of this ad is the notion of the American dream, which can be justified as follows. The American way of life or the way of doing business upholds the individual and their right to make their own decisions autonomously. Therefore, they are more or less ‘going it alone in their lives’ (Fowles 2001: 66), trying to achieve the American dream of rising above the crowd, ‘of attaining a social summit beyond the reach of ordinary citizens’ (Solomon 2001: 47).

In addition, the need for advertisers to use affiliation as an appeal presents something contrary to that deeply-funded stereotype, which probably occurs because people privately lack something. As a result, such a situation makes a fertile ground for advertisers to send the messages like this one. The promotion of solitary way of the American life, which stands for a virtue in terms of achieving the American dream on one’s own, often shows its contradictory nature. Namely, such a way of life has led to developing an estranged society with many categories of citizens (e.g. senior citizens, the sick, the poor etc.) ending up alone and helpless. The focus of this appeal is on what people lack, miss or look forward to. This is why the companies advertised usually do not mention their performances or qualities as being the best, fastest or whatever by which they outperform the competition. Instead of that, the reader is offered the phrases like: *there before you need us, caring more about you, most friendly airline, a smile in the sky, friendliness, the smiling faces of our friendly staff, smiles that are unmistakable*. Affiliation as a need used as the main persuasive and manipulative tool in the language of advertising stands for the human need to be looked after, as far as advertisers are concerned and as far as they assume what the reader’s need is. What we have in this message in particular is a story of three firefighters who work hard for us so they need to be appropriately awarded via proper retirement plans and life insurance once they are retired. Pragmatically analyzed, from this notion, an implicature can be drawn that the consulting company advertised needs to be hired in order to get such quality service and care, otherwise there is no American dream fulfilled.

As for the pictorial part of the ad, i.e. the semiotic part of the analysis, the three firefighters in the picture symbolize gender and race equality (featuring a white man, a black man and a woman), by which the advertiser sends the message that anyone is capable of achieving the American dream, regardless of their sex or race. Connotative meaning of

heroism is also involved here as a persuasive tool, as firefighters are generally perceived in the public as heroes. Thus everyone admires them and is ready to support them because, among other things, they are crawling on their hands and knees through flames and heat approaching 200 degrees. From the above, it can be noted that the advertiser here exploits an empathy-based persuasive technique, placing the emphasis on the image rather than on the textual part of the message.

According to Barthes (qtd. in Beasley and Danesi 2002: 45), ‘the notion of connotation is of great importance for the study of advertisements because it constitutes a fund of knowledge of a particular culture into which a sign taps’. Therefore, as we have to take any ad within the appropriate social, historical and cultural setting, the picture of firefighters is ultimately iconic, especially in the USA after the September 11 attacks, even though the cult of firemen as heroes dates back to the 19th century. The images of firefighters in all possible situations have become commonplace in mass media and frequently exploited by advertisers.

What is additionally employed here is the necessity for those heroes to be taken care of when they retire. Naturally, it applies to all other profession. The firefighters in the picture are only a sign that even superheroes need what, as the advertiser puts it, individuals and groups, companies and partnerships need: ...the same quality service and care. Again, equality is implicated here again this time through the means of a presupposition. The advertiser’s message is that everyone, being offered the same freedom of choice, can achieve the American dream.

Finally, this image contains is what Barthes (1977: 33) explained as follows: ‘...if the image contains signs, we can be sure that in advertising these signs are full, formed with a view to the optimum reading: the advertising image is frank or at least emphatic’.

### 3.2. Example 2

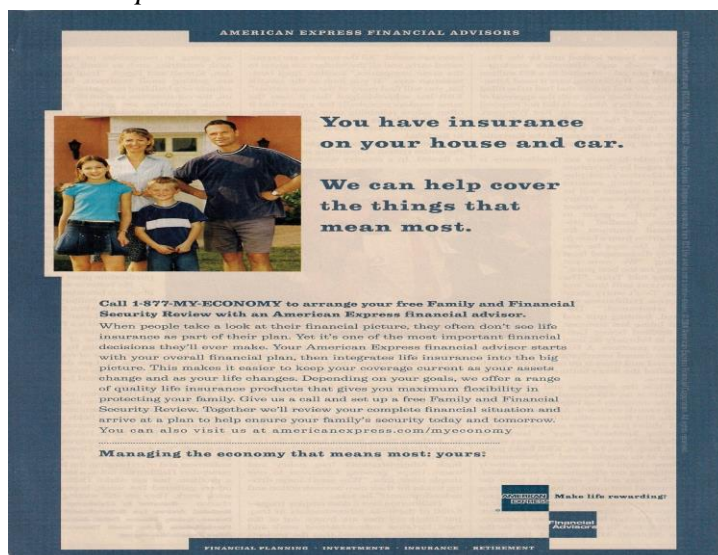


Figure 2

What characterizes this ad is the look of the people in it, they appear happy and content, which has a calming effect on a potential customer and serves as a persuasive tool. In this light, this advertising message is similar to the message conveyed in the previous example in

the sense of using the stereotypical image of a happy family as a persuasive tool. Accordingly, the similar iconicity is exploited here.

Therefore, in this example we have an image and the accompanying text that underline the above mentioned notion as, apart from the fact that *you have insurance on your house and car*, what really matters is *we can help cover the things that mean most*. Pragmatically seen, it is presupposed that most people insure their houses and cars. However, it is their own lives and the lives of their dearest ones that seem to be neglected in this context. By the phrase *We can help cover the things that mean most* it is implicated that our *lives are* above everything else (*...the economy that means most: yours!*). Accordingly, the linguistic message is complemented by the image of a typical family, looking happy and satisfied. This image is a sign that works as a signifier for the concept of *what means most*. By employing such an image, the advertiser makes sure that the phrase *what means most* is not misinterpreted or misunderstood, as it could have been, provided that there is no pictorial element involved.

#### **4. Conclusion**

According to Jhally (2003: 251), advertising does not work by ‘creating values and attitudes out of nothing but by drawing upon and rechanneling concerns that the target audience (and the culture) already shares’. In addition, affiliation as a need used as the main persuasive and manipulative tool in the language of advertising stands for the human need to be looked after, as far as advertisers are concerned and as far as they assume what the reader’s needs are. Here it is the need to feel secure and safe, and the desired feeling can only be satisfied if the advertised service is used.

Among the things that make people happy, and this is what advertisers use a lot when appealing to human emotions, are a happy family life, loving relations, control of your own life, friendship etc. In a word, what matters, as the core of perceived happiness, is something that is rather social life than material possessions. Therefore, according to most quality of life surveys that ask people what they are seeking in life, commodities are ‘only weakly related to these sources of satisfaction’ (Jhally 2003: 251). However, what advertisers do in such cases is connecting goods, which are not the locus of perceived happiness, with the things that are perceived to bring us satisfaction.

#### **References:**

- Barthes, R. (1977). *Image Music Text*. London: Fontana Press.
- Fowles, J. (2001). Advertising’s Fifteen Basic Appeals. In Petracca, M. and M. Sorapure (eds.), *Common Culture*. 3rd Edition. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Goddard, A. (2005). *The Language of Advertising*. London: Routledge.
- Howe, K. and J. Edelstein (2000). *Understanding Advertising: History, Persuasion, Techniques, Mass Media, Target Audiences, Ad Creation*. San Luis Obispo, CA: Dandy Lion Publications.

- Jhally, S. (2003). Image-Based Culture: Advertising and Popular Culture. In *Gender, Race, and Class in Media*. London: Sage Publications.
- Kress, G. and T. van Leeuwen (2006). *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. London: Routledge.
- Matheson, D. (2005). *Media Discourses*. New York: Open University Press.
- Petracca, M. and M. Sorapure (eds.) (2001). *Common Culture*. 3rd Edition. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Solomon, J. (2001). Masters of Desire. In Petracca, M. and M. Sorapure (eds.), *Common Culture*. 3rd Edition. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.