



The hidden message of unethical advertising: A comprehensive framework from Malaysian television commercials

*Noor Hanan Mohd Jafar
Taylor's University, Malaysia
Hanan.Jafar@taylors.edu.my

Zainuddin Ibrahim
Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

The article examines the underlying features of visual language used by advertisers to manipulate audiences, as well as the absence of a comprehensive framework for characterising the hidden message employed in unethical advertising. The study aims to improve the comprehension of advertisers' persuasive strategies and the influence of visual communication on audience perception, ultimately advocating for responsible and ethical advertising practices. The study used a qualitative technique to analyse the visual features of two commercials: *Pucuk Harumnita* Juice and Shopee Blackpink. It applied the semiotic theory to assess the micro- and macro-level ethical judgements while examining figurative elements such as expression, appearance, gesture, dialogue, and position. The findings reveal a pattern of gender stereotypes and superiority where women are frequently depicted in subordinate positions and men take control of the situation, reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies. In conclusion, this study provides a comprehensive framework for analysing unethical advertising, offering insights into the manipulation of visual language in commercials. The article emphasises the need for advertising practices to take into account ethical responsibilities and cultural considerations in order to prevent the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes and misinformation.

Keywords: ***Advertising ethics, gender stereotype, visual semiotic***

INTRODUCTION

Understanding the role of advertising ethics that guide the social and professional practices in the current media is critical to monitor the marketing activities aimed at attracting customers while sustaining success in the competitive marketplace. Most existing studies focus on particular issues, such as celebrity endorsement (Febrian & Fadly, 2021; Hussain et al., 2020; Yang, 2018), images of thin and ideal body (Danthinne et al., 2022; Selensky & Carels, 2021), persuasive techniques to promote high sugar food to children and adolescents (Kelly et al., 2019; Mahaletchumy et al., 2019; Signal et al., 2017) and unfair commercial practices (Chaouachi & Rached, 2012; Hopley, 2020; Khan et al., 2020). Although these studies discussed issues regarding specific aspects of persuasive advertising within different ethical contexts, the existing literature lacks a comprehensive framework for defining the hidden language used in unethical advertising messages.

The analysis of visual materials is frequently overlooked due to the absence of guidelines and a defined approach for systematic analysis (Basiron et al., 2019; Bulmer & Buchanan-Oliver, 2006; Habidin et al., 2023; Ryoo et al., 2020). Therefore, these messages often lead to misunderstandings among consumers and, in some cases, have negative social consequences for audiences. In a nutshell, visual advertisements often convey subjective messages that may vary based on the audience experiences and cultural background. Nevertheless, studies continue to investigate the context or information that may resolve the grey area between implicit and explicit messages in various visual materials (Basiron et al., 2019; Bulmer & Buchanan-Oliver, 2006; Habidin et al., 2023; Ryoo et al., 2020).

In this respect, the present study attempts to fill a significant gap in both theoretical and practical research by investigating the following two research questions:

1. What are the explicit and implicit characteristics of visual language employed by advertising experts in manipulating audiences?
2. What factors should be considered when studying visual meaning in the ethical context?

Specifically, this research aims to strategically define the context and concept of analysing visual meaning on ethical lies and to integrate them into a comprehensive framework. This study illustrates the practical application of the systematic visual meaning framework using examples from their own research, specifically to analyse unethical advertisement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Advertising ethics in aesthetic judgment

In marketing strategies, advertising drives visual argumentation and aesthetic decision-making. Advertising objectives are defined as the relationship between market analysis and targeted audience and are further refined in the form of a positioning statement. A positioning statement specifies the position that a brand or product should have in the eyes of customers. In a strategy focusing on what products have to offer, positioning might be based on concrete or intangible benefits (Cheng & Toung, 2024; Garachkovska et al., 2021). However, several studies have documented that the majority of advertising is considered exploitative, vulgar, debasing and stereotypical (Bermúdez-González et al., 2022; Rona, 2023; Shamim & Hassim, 2021; Verhoff & Chan, 2023).

Similarly, Passarini et al. (2017) mentioned that companies may employ deceptive advertising to increase customer attractiveness or to generate confusion, hence increasing

consumption; in certain circumstances, businesses may simply omit or misrepresent facts. They further argued that unfair commercial techniques and deceptive advertising might temporarily increase sales. The desire to increase sales may be particularly strong during tough times, when customers are usually spending less, or following a market trend (Passarini et al., 2017). While advertisements are insignificant forms of entertainment, the advertising culture has been used as a metaphor for a widespread moral decline in the post-modern period. Advertisements confuse us because they are a novel and unfamiliar mode of expressive discourse that we struggle to categorise ethically.

Immanuel Kant, a German philosopher in the 18th century, believed that aesthetic judgement is substantially related to the conventional theoretical perception of nature and that aesthetic judgement has a strong resemblance to moral judgement (Wahed et al., 2019). For these two reasons, Kant asserted that he is capable of demonstrating that the physical and moral universes — as well as the philosophies and modes of mind that portray them — are not only compatible, but also united (Haig, 2023).

Historically, Kant established that judgment occurs when a specific thing is put under a concept (universal), and that reason leads to assumptions (Wahed et al., 2019). When identifying the difference between determinate and reflective judgments, Kant found aesthetic judgments as one of the most interesting types. According to Kant's Categorical Imperative formula, one must make a very clear distinction between things and people, stressing the need to respect people for who they are and not just what they can do for us (Spence & Van Heekeren, 2005). Kant suggests the only morally acceptable activities are those motivated by a desire to uphold moral standards. He asserted that morality is a reasonable course of action that should not be influenced by other considerations such as emotions or the anticipation of specific outcomes.

Notably, the majority of contemporary philosophers split moral standards into two categories: those that prioritise self-interest, and those that prioritise the welfare of others. For instance, self-benefit standards include self-control, morality, temperance, and prudence, whilst norms pertaining to others include honesty, generosity, trustworthiness, and compassion (Christians et al., 2016). Both types of norms are motivated by distinct factors. For instance, self-benefit standards are useful because they benefit us; in other words, individuals are motivated to act morally because it would result in positive outcomes. On the other hand, norms toward others are motivated by empathy and sentiments; individuals believe they are doing the right thing because it makes them feel good. Kant claimed, in essence, that morality emerges from pure reason and that one must be moral since it is immoral not to be moral. He said that being good or moral is the sensible and proper way of behaving, and that it should originate from a good heart.

Like Kant, Wittgenstein stated that ethics and aesthetics are one, and that when people show what is important in their lives through aesthetics and art, they show what is truly important (Pignocchi, 2023). Pignocchi (2023), in his book, demonstrated how studying Wittgenstein sheds light not only on the link between ethics and aesthetics, but also on the value of art and our lives. As a result, we can better appreciate the moral significance of both abstract and conventional art.

Plato, another Greek Philosopher, explained and discussed problems regarding the utility of art and the artist's obligation; however, such concerns are addressed together with other philosophical inquiries. According to Plato, all art has a moral aspect by virtue of the fact that it influences the way we see and react to the world (Schellekens, 2007). It accomplishes this by guiding our sympathies and emotions, which are believed to be a necessary component of our greater morality in certain circles.

In a comprehensive discussion of the relationships between aesthetic, ethics and media art by Haig (2023), artwork can be judged as aesthetic because it can help people think about themselves and others. Understanding how compositional choices and aesthetic judgements lead to ethical consequences may enable artists and audiences to have a greater role in the propagation of ethical principles, that is, the concepts that help us decide which acts are acceptable and which are not. If someone is unaware of this, they can use aesthetic judgments to advocate for any value (Ritter, 2008). It is good to be aware of the effects and consequences of making aesthetic judgements because it allows one to promote certain values with one's actions.

In general, creative content providers, either through conventional or digital media, need to deliver some form of creative content based on cultural, business, or political responsibilities. Siraj Jalil, President of the Malaysian Cyber Users Association (MCCA), stated that when producing innovative films, every content producer should take responsibility, including ethics (Hassan, 2022). Siraj Jalil further said that certain content providers are more likely to obtain popularity by offering innovative films with sexy ladies in order to increase the number of views. However, the misuse of this platform in terms of breaking advertising ethics as well as disregarding our society's culture should not be compromised or allowed to continue.

The current issues of advertising ethics

In the realms of marketing, advertising is widely criticised not only for the role it plays in persuading consumers but also, for the way it manipulates audiences with misleading tactics. Advertising, as one of the most influential forms of media control, has the ability to negatively affect an individual's self-perception and adherence to purchasing habits at all life stages. Misleading advertising is characterised by exaggerated graphics, unrealistic claims, false impressions and inaccurate facts. In particular, various social and cultural media messages prescribe ethical responsibilities of beauty and attractiveness from infancy through adolescence to adulthood. Body image perception has a major effect on one's self-esteem and mental health (Bessenoff, 2006). A skincare commercial, for instance, displaying a model with beautiful skin, asserting that the highlighted product is the only source of such beauty. The image may be substantially modified, concealing breakdowns, and establishing an unrealistic beauty standard. Subsequently, consumers who trust these images may feel let down if the real product does not meet the expected outcomes.

Another prevalent tactic in misleading advertising involves manipulation of children as adolescents. Children-targeted advertisements often promote energy-dense and nutrient-poor food and beverages that has contributed to the prevalence of overweight and obesity in Malaysia. It was found that non-core foods dominated food advertising in Malaysian TV channels, and the frequencies were higher during school holidays (Ng et al., 2015). Global Nutrition Report (2021) stated that 59.9% of Malaysian children aged 5 to 19 years old were overweight and 29.6% were obese in 2019. According to a research conducted by University Malaya Specialist Centre (UMSC), by 2025, 1.65 million Malaysian children are predicted to be overweight or obese, with 28,000 suffering from Type 2 diabetes, and 191,000 suffering from high blood pressure ("Childhood obesity", 2019). It is possible that continual exposure to food advertisements may lead to excessive calorie intake and poor nutritional choices as a result of excessive consumption of unhealthy foods.

Furthermore, sexual appeals are frequently attention-getting, arousing, inciting, and memorable in nature (Jafar et al., 2022; Vargas-Bianchi & Mensa, 2020). Several studies on sex appeals have found that implicit messages in advertising may lead to undesirable effects

such as sexual assault and animosity against women, but these results are less probable in reactions to viewing non-violent eroticism (Bushman & Bonacci, 2002; Gould, 1994). A study by Choi et al. (2022) showed that sexual appeal in social media ads can increase engagement but the effectiveness is questioned and can lead to higher ad avoidance.

According to Wirtz et al. (2018), advertisements often display implicit sexual behaviours including male and female dressed in revealing clothing, couples kissing, and simulations of sexual touching. In his research, Wirtz et al. (2018) demonstrated the sexual appeal used by Burger King via implicit words and images which required the audience to acknowledge the advertisement's sexual meaning in order for it to be successful. The advertisement depicted a woman holding an oblong sandwich to her mouth and headlined as "It'll blow your mind away". In conjunction with the headline, the model's stance might be read as an allusion to oral sex.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilised a qualitative methodology, specifically examining the interrelated visual elements encompassing verbal, non-verbal, and technological aspects of two television commercials: *Pucuk Harumnita* Juice and Shopee Blackpink. To gain a comprehensive grasp of advertising ethics related to unethical messages, these samples were selected to highlight different moral and ethical issues that reflect the realities of life and culture in Malaysia. Nevertheless, the findings of this research correspond to the cultural context of Malaysia where the majority of the population is Muslim. Consequently, ethical considerations may be perceived differently in diverse cultural environments.

To analyse ethical judgements in Malaysian television advertising, the researcher extensively collected screenshots of the commercials and documented the conversations in the textual format. The chosen shots, visual text, figurative elements, and dialogues were analysed based on the semiotic theory elucidated by Rose's (2018) and Goffman's (1976) gender display pattern. Rose's semiotic principles offer valuable insights into the functioning of signs within a text, facilitating the comprehension of explicit or implicit meanings, ranging from scientific to common sense, and spanning the spectrum between truth and fantasy.

To describe the hidden language, the researcher considered them under two broad categories: the micro level and macro level. At the micro level, figurative elements including expression, appearance, gesture, dialogue, and position have been described in narrative and conceptual techniques to get more extensive evidence of ethical representation in selected scenes. At the macro level, the ideological and mythological view is derived through micro textual analysis and vice versa. The findings were recorded in a template shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Visual semiotic methodologies based on Rose (2018) and Goffman (1976)

	At the production level	At the image level	At the audience level
Expression			
Appearance			
Gesture			
Dialogue			
Position			

FINDINGS

In the *Pucuk Harumnita* television commercial (TVC), women are presented as unattractive, unappealing, and removed from social situations. This commercial matches the traditional discourse of women being obsessed with beauty and attractiveness. On the other hand, the male models are depicted as having power and control of the situation.

Table 2. Three-layer meaning of Scenes 2 and 3 of *Pucuk Hamunita* TVC

	At the production level	At the image level	At the audience level
Gesture	Male model in action	Hands pointing to the female model, hand on hips	Angry, pride, dominance
Expression	Facial expression	Medium close-up shot of woman with dull face, sad eyes, compressed lips	Feeling of degradation and sadness
Position	Women in lower position	Medium shot of woman in lower position	Lower self-esteem, subordinate

At the image level, Scenes 2 and 3 depict the man scolding the woman, with his left hand pointing to the woman's face and his right hand resting on his hips. Scene 2 is a close-up shot of his left and right hands pointing at the woman, while she demonstrates her sadness. The man also appears to be very angry, signifying the typical behaviour of pride and dominance, while the woman appears to be frustrated and pleading to her partner. The storyline demonstrates how a male will degrade an unattractive woman.

Scenes 2 and 3 are consistent with Gillian Rose's critical visual analysis representing gender superiority and inferiority. In Scene 3, the woman slightly lowers her position to plead to her partner. The man also turns his face from the woman suggesting her subordinate status and his control of the situation.

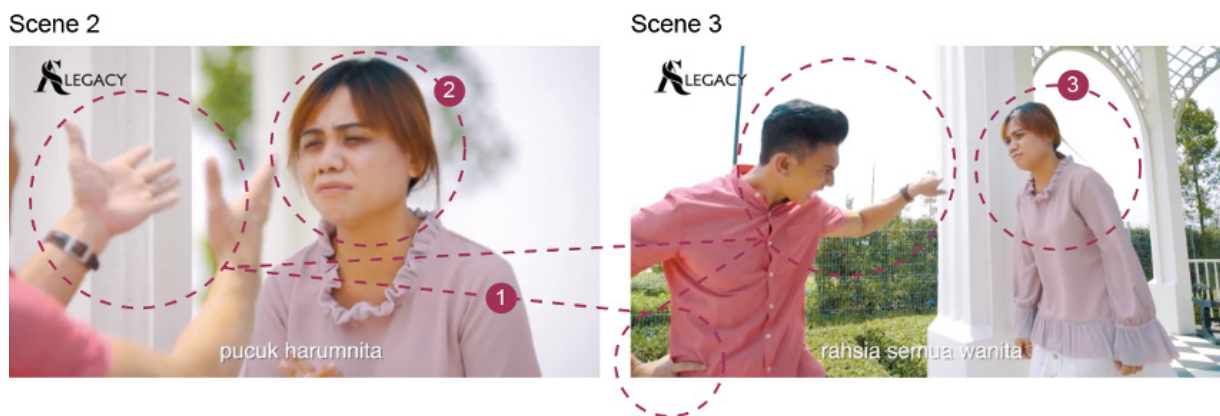


Figure 1. Scenes 2 and 3 from the *Pucuk Harumnita* TVC

Furthermore, the medium close-up shot is utilised to emphasise the subject's feelings. At the image level, Scene 2 visualises the woman's frustration after being humiliated by her partner. The shot shows her sad eyes, dark under-eye circles, and compressed lips. At the audience level, the gestures and body language could be associated with sadness, degradation and feeling of dislike. In Scene 3, the woman continues to show her sadness, being in a lower position that personifies her low self-esteem and inferior status.

Scene 12



Scene 14



Figure 2. Scenes 12 and 14 from the *Pucuk Harumnita* TVC

Table 2. Three-layer meaning of Scenes 12 and 14 of the *Pucuk Hamunita* TVC

	At the production level	At the image level	At the audience level
Gesture	Image of husband and wife.	Medium shot of a husband reading a newspaper while his wife is gardening	Man presented as having power with the role of executor
Position	Women in a lower position	A wife presented in spatially lower position and squatting on the ground doing household chores	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The representation of gender inequality and function ranking 2. Under the physical care and protection of a man
Dialogue	Advertising copy	<i>Kekal tenaga, cerdas sentiasa</i> (Stay energetic, always smart)	Advertising copy gives a misleading message to the audience

Scenes 12 and 14 continues to manifest the degradation of women, and the depiction that men have more power than women. At the image level, Scenes 12 and 14 show a medium shot of a husband reading a newspaper while his wife is gardening. The husband is shown in a dominant position, wearing a vibrant yellow shirt with the background of a huge white house which directs attention to his personality. This advertisement also presents the use of height, space, and colour to display social status. These elements emerge from the representation of the husband and wife's composition, the arch, and the flowerpot.

At the audience level, the image of a husband in Scenes 12 and 14 can be associated with the authority and role of an executor, signifying that the husband is superior to his wife. According to Goffman, men are traditionally cast as the executor while women as the subordinate or in a supporting role. When a woman carries out a traditionally "feminine" duty, like cleaning or cooking, her partner is typically shown as doing nothing at all. According to the idea of traditional gender roles, in which males hold a superior position over women, the male model is depicted as having a higher status than the female model. The relative size category which argues that men normally have a higher status than women is an example supporting Goffman's gender display pattern. These results are in line with that of other research which found that men are often portrayed in high-ranking positions, holding the role of a decision-maker, being serious, and uninvolved in household chores (Cerrato & Cifre, 2018; Jha et al., 2017; Permana & Muktiono, 2015).

At the image level, Scenes 12 and 14 connote the image of a woman in a spatially lower position squatting on the ground. These frames reaffirm Goffman's gender display pattern, notably the ritualisation of subordination where women are presented in inferior positions and poses. At the audience level, these frames demonstrate that women are also

frequently depicted to be in need of a man's protection. According to the idea of traditional gender roles, in which males have more dominant roles than women, it might be argued that the male models in these situations have a higher social rank than the female models. In accordance with Goffman's theory, the figures in the scenes reflect the notion that men deserve a better status than women. Female models are often shown to be inferior to male models to maintain the former's subordination.

Scenes 12 and 14 also signify the wife in a smaller image doing household chores. Within these frames, the woman is presented as being responsible for the home, with the primary role of being a good wife. At the audience level, the image of the wife doing household chores symbolises gender inequality and function ranking. These findings provide additional evidence for the third pattern of Goffman's gender advertisement, that is, function ranking, in which men are demonstrated to be in control over women. In the same frame, the advertiser is showing that the man holds the dominating power in his household. The setting also reinforces the perception of the woman's subordination or powerlessness.

The advertising copy stating *kekal tenaga, cerdas sentiasa* (stay energetic, always smart) is intended to communicate the message about the benefits of the product, namely how it can provide vitality and intelligence. The meaning of *cerdas sentiasa* is obscure to viewers based on their meaning. According to Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, *cerdas* is a term used to refer to someone who is smart or clever. At the audience level, the narratives of *Pucuk Harumnita's* promotional song demonstrate that this product has a variety of ingredients that can help its users overcome exhaustion and improve their fitness level. The term *smart* can lead to misinterpretations and misleading messages. It should be replaced by the term *active*, which alludes to an energetic body. For this reason, consumers are being deceived by the unrealistic and false advertising copy.

In the Shopee Blackpink TVC, the Blackpink all-girl group is provocatively dressed: short pants or skirt with exposed waist and shoulders. Slits, patchwork, seductive and avant-garde imageries are among the many fashion design characteristics displayed by Blackpink's apparel. Scene 3 features all the Blackpink members dancing on stage in various outfits, with the background of a black stage that is in contrast with the orange-coloured Shopee logo. The Shopee logo is prominently displayed on the stage's backdrop, which is lighted to emphasise the brand's e-commerce presence. Orange has a strong attraction and is said to be capable of stimulating emotions, thus dominates the backdrop and is intended to attract the audience.

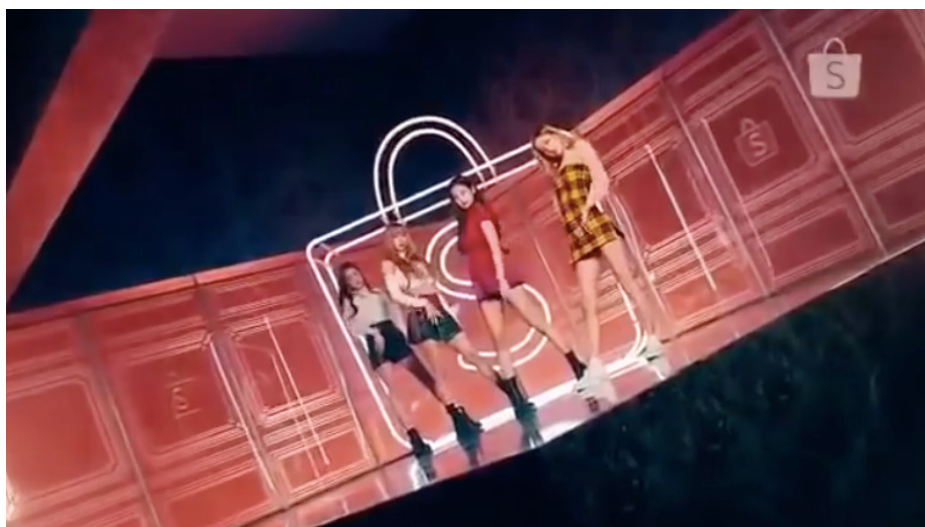


Figure 3. Scene 3 from the Shopee Blackpink TVC

Table 3. Three-layer meaning of Scene 3 of Shopee Blackpink TVC

	At the production level	At the image level	At the audience level
Appearance	Blackpink on stage	Blackpink in sexy dresses on stage	Degradation of women, morally and culturally inappropriate

At the audience level, Blackpink's apparel is deemed as degrading and immoral especially in the context of the Malaysian culture, where the majority of the people adhere to Islamic values. The advertisement is intended to serve as a bridge between global commercialism and Malaysia's multiracial culture, ensuring that the visuals used in commercials align with the values and belief of the audience. However, the Shopee advertisement does not reflect the culture of the Malaysian community. Instead, it presents a visual language that challenges the traditional and religious values embedded in the Malaysian society, undermining the cultural standards of self-expression.

In Scene 7, one of the group members, Lisa, is seen standing in front of a luxury car with her eyes following the camera as it pans from left to right. She is wearing a black mini dress exposing her shoulders and half of her body.

**Figure 4.** Scene 7 of the Shopee Blackpink TVC**Table 4.** Three-layer meaning of Scene 7 of the Shopee Blackpink TVC

	At the production level	At the image level	At the audience level
Appearance and gesture	Lisa and a luxury car.	Lisa standing in front of a luxury car with her eyes following the camera's movement. She is wearing a black mini dress exposing her shoulders.	Eye movement and mini dress signify seductive appeal. Luxury car and black dress signify elegance.

With the expansion of semiology, Lisa's eye movement and mini dress signify a seductive appeal in the advertisement. At the audience level, the use of the luxury car and black mini dress is associated with social class, modernity and elegance. Commonly, a black mini dress signals seduction. Hence, the Shopee Blackpink commercial seems to objectify women and conform to gender stereotypes. The extent to which these portrayals maintain an "ideal" femininity and thus, affect the female audience's self-esteem and shopping behaviour would need further empirical study.

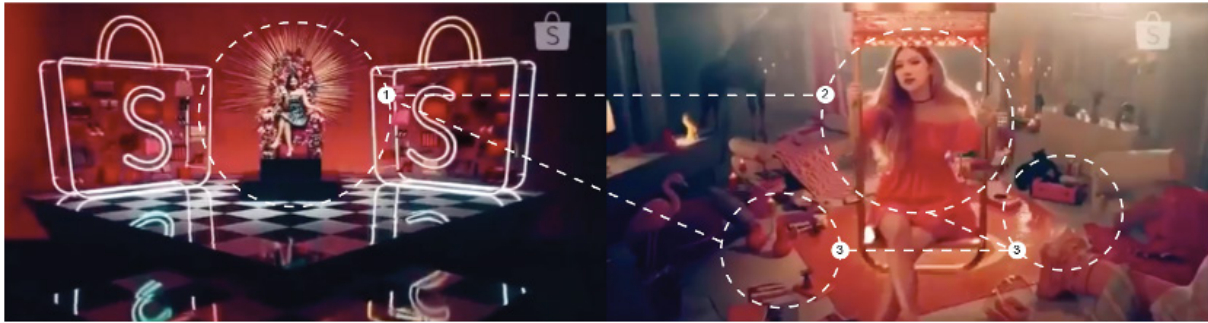


Figure 5. Scenes 6 and 10 of the Shopee Blackpink TVC

Table 5. Three-layer meaning of Scenes 6 and 10 of the Shopee Blackpink TVC

	At the production level	At the image level	At the audience level
Appearance and gesture	Jennie sitting on a chair	Jennie sitting cross-legged on a chair on stage, wearing a very short dress with exposed shoulders, long flowy hair, and surrounded by a collection of bags.	To look wealthy and materially successful.
	Rose sitting on a high swing	Rose sitting cross-legged on a high swing, wearing an orange mini dress. In this scene, Rose looks at the camera with her head slightly raised. The space in this scene is messy with a lot of scattered things.	Pornographic images. Hedonism culture.

Similarly, the visual language of the Shopee Blackpink commercial governs the representation of women in Scenes 6 and 10 (Figure 5). Upon detailed analytical reading, Scene 6 portrays Jennie sitting cross-legged on a chair on stage, wearing a very short dress with exposed shoulders, long hair flowing, and surrounded by a collection of bags. Comparably, Scene 10 portrays Rose sitting cross-legged on a high swing, wearing an orange mini dress, where she looks at the camera with her head slightly raised. Throughout these scenes, the advertiser used camera angles and deep focus, suggesting intimacy with the sexily-dressed group members.

These technical and social codes manifest the ideological encoding of plural interpretations. Several theories have established that social realities such as appearances, dresses, make-up, gestures, camera, music, and narratives generate and interrelate in a network of meanings that constitute our cultural world (Fiske, 2010; Goffman, 1976). In particular, Scenes 6 and 10 portray multiple ideologies shaped from a rule-governed system of signs. The first social reality is Jennie sitting like a queen on a chair on stage. At the audience level, Jennie is perceived as a strong and wealthy woman. Likewise, Rose's position can be perceived as signifying wealth, hedonism, and social class ideology.

The second social reality is the way Jennie and Rose are provocatively dressed. Based on the signs, interpretations, and social codes present in the Blackpink Shopee advertisement, it can be said that the dance movements and sexy clothing are indicative of pornography depicted in television commercials. Previous studies on sexual appeal revealed that provocatively dressed models evoke a sexual response in the audience (Reichert & Ramirez, 2000). In the same vein, Ananda and Pramonojati (2019) pointed out that there are indicators of pornography in the nine images of the Shopee Blackpink commercial,

specifically in the dance motions, dressing, body curves, and glances that conform to the definition of pornography.

According to M. Syam and Ustin (2020), the Indonesian Broadcasting Commission (KPI) had issued a warning to several television stations to ban the Blackpink Shopee advertisement. The KPI's Commissioner for Broadcast Content remarked that the advertisement violated the modesty standards that the Indonesian public adheres to and that it was excessively obscene, especially when shown during children's airtime (Ananda & Pramonojati, 2019; M. Syam & Ustin, 2020). However, in Malaysia, the Shopee Blackpink advertisement was not banned even though Malaysia and Indonesia share significant similarities in terms of culture and religion. This goes against the Malaysian Code of Advertising Practice which clearly states that advertisers are prohibited from projecting images that violate public norms, as well as are indecent and morally wrong.

Finally, the third social reality is the culture of hedonism presented by the visual elements in this commercial. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, hedonism is an ethical ideology or theory indicating pleasure as the highest level of goodness or the ultimate purpose of an action. According to Zulkifli (1997), hedonism is an ideology that is primarily concerned with pleasure and luxury in life, even if it goes against religion and life ethics. Pleasure is defined broadly to include all pleasant feelings or experiences such as satisfaction, joy, and peace. K-pop is perceived poorly in Malaysia because it is built upon hedonistic cultural norms, which are at odds with the Malaysian culture, where the majority of the people conform to Islamic beliefs (Hamzah et al., 2021). This scenario has significant effects on social and cultural development, interfering with youth behaviour development.

In the context of commerce, hedonism is portrayed in the image of the Blackpink members being surrounded by branded products such as luxury cars, fashion fads, and accessories. Marketers and retailers create various advertising techniques to exploit consumers' impulsive buying behaviour (Dhurup, 2014). In her review of the role of hedonism and buying behaviour, Dhurup (2014) showed that hedonism positively influences the buying behaviour of teenagers. Colucci and Scarpi (2013) also affirmed that generation Y is more susceptible to hedonism, uses more word-of-mouth, is more eager to experiment with novelty, is less concerned about price, purchases more costly products, and spends more money than any previous generations.

Cultural absorption is also all-pervasive for anyone who has access to the Internet network. The media is a powerful tool for spreading culture and connecting marketers with customers. In the cultural context, globalisation has long been associated with Western countries' domination. However, in the age of globalisation, the new phenomenon of K-pop culture has contributed significantly to the development of the hedonistic culture (Sitanggang et al., 2021). The geographical boundary of a country becomes distorted in the globalisation process, threatening the existence of a nation's culture since other cultures may readily penetrate it.

The advertisers in this instance, prominently emphasise on cultural and religious prejudice. According to the Advertising Standards Malaysia (ASA) (2021), advertisement contents should not harbour any elements that has the potential to offend a religion or culture. Thus, advertisers and marketers should be cognisant of cultural propagation, which is inappropriate for Malaysia's multiracial society, even if it benefits a company or brand.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, there seems to be some evidence to indicate that when advertising loses its informative function and becomes commercial propaganda without highlighting social

responsibility, ethical predicaments arise. In the context of ethical dilemmas, this study contributes to the understanding of the mental process that can generate ethical advertising while excluding misinformation. As a result, this study presents three distinct concepts in conveying persuasive messages and thus providing meaning to an advertisement text. The concepts are worldview of the advertisers, visual strategy, and interpretation of the audiences. The framework illustrated in Figure 6 intends to provide an interrelated overview, supported by evidence from the evaluation of findings and literatures on how the establishment of ethical meaning in visual advertisements influences the interpretation of audiences from diverse backgrounds.

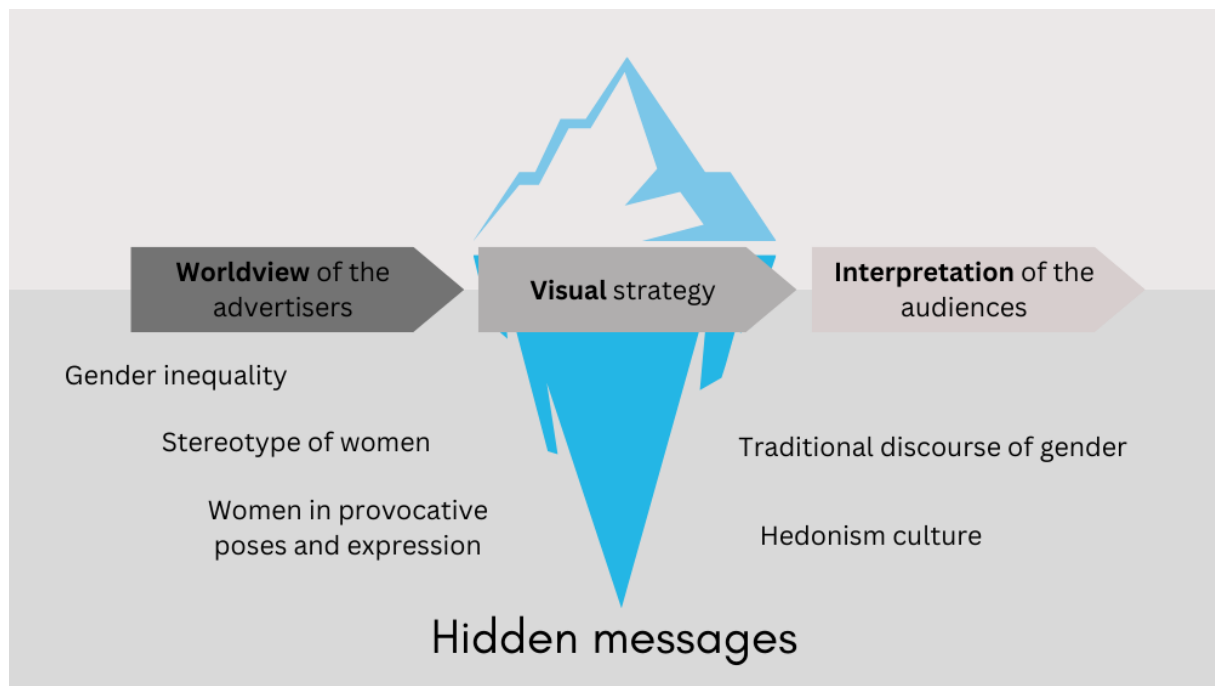


Figure 6. The framework of making meaning of visual advertisement

The first node is the worldview of the advertisers which refers to the moral beliefs that advertisers have. The worldview of the advertisers will determine the quality or nature of behaviour based on the principle of what is considered right and wrong. A good worldview is associated with responsibility, fairness, honesty, and benevolence. Social responsibility has been regarded as a critical predictor for positive outcomes of advertising and branding (Bachnik & Nowacki, 2018). To conclude, every advertiser has his or her own view of the world that acts as a filter in the decision to adopt a particular advertising strategy for television commercials.

The second node is visual strategy which is a strategic action for promoting a product or service and how the advertisers use a series of strategies to achieve the objectives of brands and businesses. The broad interplay also exists between the worldview of the advertisers and parameters of advertisement creativity. Creativity in delivering advertising information changes depending on the worldview concept held by advertisers. The presentation of visual elements is extremely important, affecting how the argument is perceived: How are light and colour used? How are elements placed on the persuasive visual? Is any information highlighted? As Kant argued, to philosophise about beauty is also to reflect on our wider epistemology, philosophy of mind, metaphysics and moral theory (Schellekens, 2007).

Through Kant's Theory of Taste, he explained that beauty is the symbol of morality, and that the consideration of this relationship is a duty (Wang, 2018). Therefore, highly ethical advertisers will likely not arouse negative emotions and will not breach ethical values shared by audiences.

The third node is the content of the advertisement presented which is then interpreted by the audience and evokes a response. Despite the importance of the persuasive nature of visual media, there is a scarcity of visual approaches for understanding the meaning of the advertisement. Without a systematic approach for analysing the meaning, the interpretation of the persuasive image of the advertisement will be flawed.

As this study focuses on television commercials, the analysis should be extended to include online media such as YouTube ads to explore a wider ethical trend and understanding. In addition, the analysis should also include more Asian countries in order to dissect and understand multiple cultural factors constructing the ethical meaning. The findings also suggest that the ability to automatically understand the hidden text of persuasive communication is important. At the very least, understanding the hidden messages in a more strategic way will benefit the creative team in measuring consumers' specific interpretation more accurately.

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Noor Hanan Mohd Jafar

earned her doctorate from Universiti Malaya, focusing on advertising ethics. Her research interests include brand management and marketing, strategic communication, and visual language. Currently, she is a lecturer at Taylor's University.

Zainuddin Ibrahim

is an associate professor at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), where he teaches at the Game Design Department. His research interests encompass a range of topics, including advertising and media, e-learning, and special needs education.
