Images with Messages
A Semiotic Approach to Identifying and Decoding Strategic Visual Communication

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Strategic communication is the “purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission” (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2007, p. 4). It provides particular information, influences desired attitudes, and encourages specific behaviors. This chapter focuses on how one can identify strategic approaches in an organization’s visual communication and decode it from a critical perspective. Visual theory offers ways to recognize and understand how strategic intent may influence construction of a visual image’s form and content, embedding it with a dominant ideology and guiding receivers toward a preferred reading. This essay will review theories that help explain the various ways a visual image might be designed and experienced. It will then apply one theory, semiotics, to analyze a specific artifact located in public common areas of Abu Dhabi city, the capital of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Here government-influenced signage reinforcing Emirati identity is integrated into people’s everyday patterns of living. Particular contexts of the UAE as a 40-year-old fast-developing nation bounded by Islam, authoritarian rule, tribal cultural norms, and a majority expatriate population are considered. Applying semiotics to visual communication as a sense-making tool offers a way to look at how an image structures thought, and how it moves the viewer to find some unity and meaning.

Privilege of the visual

This chapter considers the visual as an important mode of strategic communication because we live in an image-dominated culture—image in the sense of pictorial representation of the ‘real,’ and dominated in the sense of both plentiful and powerful. The force of the visual is greater now than ever before due to the intensity of visual stimulation in our lives. More than fifteen years ago, visual culture theorist Mitchell announced that the “pictorial turn” had supplanted the “linguistic turn” in the study of culture (1994, p. 15). The subsequent explosion of digital technologies that invite easy manipulation and fast, global dissemination through the Internet has greatly elevated the role of the visual. Thus the ease of image-making and sending now makes the viewer more reliant than ever before on an ability to critically engage and interpret visual messages. If not, we are forced to rely on the credibility of the producers, their standards and institutional merits, and to accept that their interpretive frames are honest.

While visual communication has experienced a cultural resurgence, the power of the visual is an old story. Beginning with the sixteenth century invention of the camera obscura and continuing through the nineteenth century stereoscope and first Kodak, Crary (1992) cites the developing
technology’s gradual imposition of a normative vision on the observer. By the mid-nineteenth century, reality was understood to be images. Society preferred the image to the thing, copy to original, representation to reality, and appearance to being. Crary writes, and society was aware of this. The chief activity of society became producing and consuming images. As technology developed in the twentieth century, semiotician Roland Barthes and historian Daniel Boorstin echoed concerns about the “dangers of a society saturated with pseudo-images,” (Barnhurst, Vari, & Rodriguez, 2004). Wariness of the ‘real,’ its intent, and its creator became rooted in the cultural landscape.

“Every image embodies a way of seeing,” proclaimed Berger (J. Berger, 1972, p. 10) in his seminal book inspired by the television series Ways of Seeing: “. . . the photographer select(s) that sight from an infinity of other possible sights,” choosing subject and frame among other determinants. The photographic image is rhetorical and compelling, engaging the spectator. Visuals are more emotive and as heuristics are more easily and quickly ‘read.’ As Langer (1942) explained, presentational or pictorial symbols are often better equipped than discursive symbols for expressing sentiment because the mind is able to read them in a flash and preserve them in a disposition or an attitude. Sontag (1977) locates this flash in the power of the camera: “Images that have virtually unlimited authority today are mainly photographic images” (p. 153).

As a trace or reflection of the real, the photographic image immediately lures the beholder. Barthes (1977) also noted the powerful role of the visual image as a transparent window into unsullied fact, playing a key role in shaping cultural perceptions (Stein, 2001). Decades later, despite technological advances in photo manipulation that obfuscate the real, Brugioni (1999) deemed photos to be instruments of powerful believability. Barbatis (2005) noted that while the photographic quality of images so transparently appears to merely record and represent the real, viewers are challenged to explain how it makes sense of raw experience and how it structures thought to so powerfully constitute reality.

If the photograph is always potentially a means of control as a rhetorical construction of reality, the development of mass mediated film, television, Internet communication, and digital technologies have heralded myriad ways to influence the viewer. As the twenty-first century began, Gitlin (2002) expressed concern about the immensity of our media experience, or rather media torrent, which imposes its super-saturation on society. Noting the present age as one of cybernetic technology and electronic reproduction, Mitchell (1994) cautions that “a culture totally dominated by images has now become a real technical possibility on a global scale” (p. 16). The need for critique of visual culture seems inescapable.

**Understanding the visual**

Among the many ways to understand visual messages, established theories of Gestalt, cognition, and semiology help to explain how creators might encode, and receivers might decode an image. Before demonstrating one specific method—semiotic analysis—a brief overview of a few theories helps to provide a foundation for understanding the breadth of visual analysis.

Gestalt theories involve groupings of elements in a composition. The Gestalt concept comes from Wertheimer’s conclusion that the whole is different from the sum of its parts (Zakia, 2007, p. 28–29). In other words, meaning results from a combination of sensations and not of individual sensations. The principle of similarity causes the viewer to concentrate on the simplest, most stable grouping of similar forms, i.e. they appear as a single unit amid disparate shapes. The principle of proximity induces the eye to more closely associate objects that are near to each other more so than it does objects that are set apart. The continuation principle recognizes that the eye prefers smooth line continuity over sudden or unusual changes in direction. The law of common fate causes a viewer to mentally group items that appear to point in the same direction. Applying these various Gestalts through purposeful design prompts the viewer to become a participant in meaning construction, a strategy common in advertising to shift ownership of a message to the receiver (Williamson, 1978/1987). The Gestalt principle of closure involves content with missing parts—parts that rest within the viewer who is then called to draw upon memory, latent knowledge, or impressions or desires collected from cultural
experiences to complete the idea or image. A simple example might be a face with missing features, violating everyday reality and summoning the viewer to ‘see’ the mouth and draw conclusions about the meaning of its absence (Figure 20.1).

Figure 20.1  Seeking Closure

Moving on from Gestalt, cognitive theories require the viewer to assign a more complex meaning to what is seen. With the cognitive approach, viewers actively arrive at conclusions. For example, contradictions and abnormalities will stimulate attention and encourage comprehension because they violate familiar expectations. Also, stimuli that are salient to certain viewers will carry more meaning, as in the cricket game that excites Indian fans of the sport and leaves American baseball fans confused. Lester (2011, p. 62–66) provides good explanations of how cognitive visual theories work. Memory is a very important mental activity involved in accurate visual perception. People have long used pictures as memory aids to help them recall certain events. Projection comes into play when a person’s mental state of mind is ‘projected’ onto an inanimate object. This is the principle behind the Rorschach inkblot test in psychology (Lester, 2011). Expectation is the cognitive theory that explains how preconceived expectations (for example, how one’s old neighborhood should look) often lead to false or missed visual perceptions. Selectivity explains how people unconsciously process a complicated visual experience. With large numbers of images, or multi-element images, the mind focuses only on significant details within a scene. For example, if you are trying to locate a friend sitting in the packed bleachers, all the other unknown faces in the crowd will have little significance. Habituation allows the mind to protect itself from over-stimulation and unnecessary pictures; as with selectivity, the mind tends to ignore visual stimuli that are a part of a person’s every day habitual activities. Lester suggests that one way not to become ambivalent about the habitual barrage of imagery is to constantly search out new ways to think about familiar objects. Dissonance theory helps us to understand the difficulty when trying to read with a television or stereo loudly playing in the same room. The mind really can concentrate on only one activity or the other. Visual messages become more focused in contexts without competing formats. Cultural and historical manifestations will be more meaningful to those who identify with a specific culture or past. Envision a photo of the Souk (marketplace) at Central Market, Abu Dhabi, taken in
1962 when the city’s population was estimated at less than 4,000. While an Emirati grandmother might study the image intently, looking back in time to remember the moment and perhaps to identify some of the indistinct faces, feeling sad her world has changed so much (Bristol-Rhys, 2010, p. 2–3), her granddaughter might just say, “Cool, a vintage photo!”

Following Gestalt and cognitive theory, the third theoretical perspective is semiology; it considers all texts (visual images, music, words) as signs with meanings below the surface that the receiver must work to grasp (Leiss, Kline, and Jhally, 1990, p. 201–2). Through this process, the receiver is led toward realizing a predetermined message. Often it is a heuristic process. The texts appear to be the ordinary representing of day-to-day cultural experiences. The field of British cultural studies identified culture as ideological—the “taken-for-granted realities of everyday life” (Burgin, 1982, p. 46) that reinforce a dominant worldview. Ideology is generally defined as a body of beliefs and representations that sustain and legitimate current power relationships; it promotes the values and interests of dominant groups within society (Eagleton, 1991, p. 5–6).

A semiotic analysis begins with the understanding that there are no neutral signs; they function to persuade as well as to refer, yet their ideology is often masked in naturalized framings of the common-sense ‘way things are’ of the dominant societal coalition. Thus, if signs do not merely reflect reality but are involved in constructing and reinforcing it, then those who control the sign systems control the construction of reality (Chandler, n.d.). Semiotic analysis questions how a text is organized to construct meaning. The analyst searches for what is hidden beneath the obvious and can lead to insights on whose view of reality is being privileged and what may be challenged.

While semiology stems from various theorists, including Saussure, Pierce, Eco, Barthes, Hall, and Hartley, the following analysis is guided by Barthes (1983/1967, 1972). A sign consists of a signifier (image) and what’s signified (meaning), which carry both denotation (literal meaning) and connotation (subjective meaning). Barthes’s early work offered guidelines for semiotic analysis from a perspective of inherent meaning—cultural, mythological, or ideological. In Mythologies (1972), he demonstrated the relationship between image and ideology, analyzing the front cover of an issue of the magazine Paris Match—an explanation now considered a classic example of semiotic analysis. It pictured a young Black soldier in a French uniform, appearing to salute the French flag. Through a socio-historical reading Barthes identified the image as a sign for French imperialism.

Public signage in Abu Dhabi

The above semiotic analysis approach will now be applied to a visual campaign in Abu Dhabi city, a site of complex historical and socio-cultural conditions. An undeveloped coastal encampment with illiterate and impoverished occupants only 50 years ago, today it is the capital of the UAE, located in the wealthiest oil-rich state of the seven emirates. While its grandmothers remember the hard and spare conditions of their upbringing, due to the dispersal of oil wealth among UAE citizens their daughters and granddaughters know only lives lived in lavish family compounds with maids, cooks, personal drivers, and unlimited consumption of luxury material goods. Exponentially accelerated modernization has attracted millions of expatriate workers to the UAE, many in low-skilled service and construction jobs, resulting in a population in 2012 that is only 11% Emirati.

The rapid growth and changes are viewed by some indigenous people as a threat to Emirati social and religious identity in this very conservative country. Although personal wealth has fast-tracked them into the modernity of the material world, family and tribal traditions with strict Islamic interpretations often have a firm hold on their worldviews and behaviors. Alongside these deeply ingrained codes of personal behaviors, the government retains absolute control over all public order and policy in this generous welfare state.

Abu Dhabi now is leading a mission toward Emiratization, an effort both to recapture the nation from the professional expatriate workforce and to reaffirm Emirati national identity. Educational
reforms, hiring quotas, and public image campaigns proliferate. Under the direction of the ruling Al Nayhan tribe, whose leader Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan led the country for 38 years until his death in 2004, the Abu Dhabi government reinforces national identity through outdoor signage communicating UAE political heritage and its hierarchal paternalistic society that privileges the male.

The following examples of value-laden public signage are prominently displayed in central Abu Dhabi city. Figure 20.2, depicting the founding sheikhs at the old fort Al Hosn, appears on a barrier around the old fort currently undergoing renovation as a cultural center. In the same location are poetry and praise for the patrilineal succession of Abu Dhabi’s rulers (Figure 20.3). Along the city’s main road, a government building features portraits of current UAE rulers (Figure 20.4). In a

![Figure 20.2 Al Hosn](image1)

![Figure 20.3 Zayed Poetry](image2)
promotional campaign for the government-owned cable TV/Internet utility, Etisalat, an idealized Emirati son, appears in various poses (Figure 20.5, Figure 20.6). A bank displays a typical representation of the Emirati family: parents with son (Figure 20.7); and a rare representation of just the Emirati female—and son—is located in a city park (Figure 20.8).

Outdoor advertising surrounds the Souk situated in one of Abu Dhabi city’s most historic commercial locations, once known as the Central Market and now branded as the World Trade Center Abu Dhabi. To illustrate how visual communication functions strategically in an applied situation, this article analyzes one of these public signs (Figure 20.9). Aldar Properties, an Arab real estate company founded and supported by the Abu Dhabi government, is developing this significant site that for many decades before oil was the one major trading area. This analysis considers the ideological meanings behind public images in the contexts of contemporary Abu Dhabi. It is a fast-emerging economy controlled by an autocratic ruling family. It has an indigenous population that is economically privileged yet dominated by tribal inequalities and suppression of women’s rights. Abu Dhabi also lacks any tangible democratic developments: an elected parliament, voting rights, an open press, freedom of speech, or freedom to publically assemble.

Barthes suggests beginning by making explicit the meanings of apparently neutral objects and then moving on to consider the social and historical conditions they obscure. A defining feature of signs is that they ‘stand for’ or represent other things, so this analysis ultimately asks what concepts

Figure 20.4 UAE Rulers
the composition stands for. It is particularly useful to critically analyze photographic images in that they are typically judged to be the most ‘realistic’ of images. This realism helps to naturalize the underlying symbolic message. The following section considers the composition of the image through content and form, the possible relationships between the elements, and their associations with cultural/historical knowledge. It responds to the basic questions in semiotic analysis.

Visual Analysis

The Significance of Choosing This Image

This public sign (Figure 20.9) is placed in an important site of cultural heritage for Emiratis, the old Souk at the Central Market, which the government is refashioning into a global center for trade.

Figure 20.7 Bank Poster
Figure 20.8  Public Park Image

Figure 20.9  Souk Outdoor Ad
and tourism. Its display during site renovations allowed the signage to stand in place of the Souk for many months. It remains, now that the Souk is open. On the surface it is just an ad for the Souk, yet considering its content, considering it is government-sponsored communication, and considering the cultural gender norms in the UAE, its imagery suggests layers of possible meaning beyond mere retail promotion. Past research reveals advertising texts as decidedly visual expressions of culture and society, often having a superficial transparency that cloak persuasive suggestion (Messaris, 1996; A. A. Berger, 2008; Lester, 2011). Most ads feature a product, however there is no product here; rather, a female Emirati mystique appears to be the offer.

**The Denoted Elements in the Sign (Literally What We See)**

The elements include an attractive Emirati woman likely in her twenties wearing the traditional *sheilah* (black head cover), two Emirati men wearing the traditional *kandoura* (white body cover) and the *ghutra* headcloth, and one or two golden chandeliers. The color scheme is black, browns, whites, and gold. The background has vague architectural elements. There are no words.

**What is Dominant?**

The woman’s eyes dominate the image, gazing toward the left of the image, in which the two men are standing, after which we notice her mouth that is full-lipped and slightly open. The Arabian woman’s eyes are iconic for expressiveness because in very traditional dress, the *niqab* (face veil) reveals only the eyes (Figure 20.10).

![Woman with Niqab](image-url)
**What is of Secondary Importance?**

Of secondary importance are the two men—as the viewer follows her gaze to them. They both have their backs turned to her and appear to be outside, with sun shadows reflecting on their kandouras. She appears to be inside with a beaded curtain drawn back from her face.

**What is the Significance of the Clothing?**

Although a deeply stratified society, the UAE is visually homogenous due to a universal adoption of national dress. Along with the floor-length black *abayah* covering, Emirati women wear the *sheilah* to cover their hair and neckline. Both clothing items are often adorned with decorative embroidery, fabric, or jeweled trim to make a statement on personal style or wealth. Men wear a long neatly tailored white kandoura along with a ghutra and *ogal* (black rope) that secures it to the head. The ogal is purposefully iconic of the rope used to tie down a camel. This national dress was adopted by Emiratis to distinguish themselves from the many foreign Arabs living in the UAE ‘after oil.’ The dress is not traditional. Pre-oil, keeping this costume would have been impossible without running water, washing machines, irons, and so forth. Typical dress for men then came in browns and black. While the *abayah* did exist back then, women were hardly ever in public view so it was not worn frequently (Bristol-Rhys, 2010, pp. 111—112). Now, the *abayah* makes young women feel powerful—it represents wealth and commands respect and privileged service.

**What are the Connoted Messages (Drawing from Common Cultural Knowledge to Decode or Unpack Values)?**

The *sheilah*, *kandouras*, and *ogals* connote Emirati nationality, wealth, pride, and general Islamic values. Chandeliers connote luxury and elegance. The woman’s sophisticated face suggests modernity. In fact, the magnification of the woman’s face, commanding all other elements in the ad, also suggests privilege, importance, power, pride, and exposure, whereas the remote positioning of the men, with their faces turned away, connotes the unknown and unknowing, the detached and inaccessible. As simply an ad, it appears to indicate that women identify with the Souk; men, far less so.

Through form perspectives, distance is established between the men and the woman, yet her gaze is directed toward the left of the image, in which the two men are standing. She appears motionless, trapped in a moment of desire, hesitation, or anticipation? Moving about freely in public is often rigidly curtailed for many Emirati women from conservative families. In permissible situations (shopping or dining), she typically must be accompanied by a personal assistant or male relative. At the university, female students are segregated from males and must swipe ID cards in and out through security gates, leaving campus only when their drivers are waiting to chauffeur them home. She is very rarely in public alone. Here, she is.

While her motives remain unknown, she is the picture of a perfect Arabian princess, evoking the admiration of viewers. If this advertising is well targeted, it is deliberative and effective, and the Emirati female will see herself in the model. The aesthetic for young Emirati women is an ideal of luxury, beauty, stylishness, and modesty. It can be assumed then that young Emirati women may be attracted to and admire this female ideal. While she is not seen by the Emirati men appearing in the image, she is fully and intimately disclosed to all pedestrians and seems to have deliberately revealed herself (sweep of bead curtain) to be objectified by the viewer’s gaze. As an ad exposed to all publics passing by, the many Westerners might understand the Souk as a place to see exotic Emiratis in their national costume. It also promises Western eyes a close *look* at the very private Emirati. Her representation functions as both a *reveal* and a lure into the Souk.

The black and brown-toned colors communicate ‘Arabness,’ yet due to their darkness and shadows, also a sense of mystery. While the colors are calming—in stark contrast to the restlessness of Abu Dhabi with its congested traffic and booming construction—the darkness combined with the
imagery also suggests a tease of wariness. In this tension of unknowing, something is hidden, unrevealed, yet pulls the viewer toward some resolution. As an ad, it promises that the fulfillment and solution of the mystery is at the Souk, where the woman in the ad may satisfy her gaze on desirable and totally permissible material goods.

**What Story does this Scene Suggest?**

Without accompanying words, there is a dramatic tension in the image. Something significant must be coming. Curiosity is invoked, along with a desire for that Gestalt concept of *closure*, for the scene to be completed. The flawless beauty of the model has a powerful halo effect, helping to suggest a noble Emirati woman with a strong character. Her prominent eyes, the image’s focal point, evoke clairvoyance. Yet this perfect being chooses to hide herself and her beauty from unknown men. The beaded curtain alludes to the Arabic word *hijab*, meaning curtain or cover: in wider definitions it refers to any type of modest dressing that covers the entire body except the face and hands while in public. The hijab also has a deeper meaning of privacy, morality and modesty in Islam. For young Emirati women, it is an affirmation of cultural expectations: to aspire toward a combination of modesty and morality with elegance, beauty, and ‘stylish’ tradition. In these, she is ‘free’ to be.

**Does the Composition Evoke Any Other Images?**

The staging of the photo evokes ads targeting women throughout various media products. The vast majority of the images of women found in Arab media (TV, movies, ads) are negative (Allam, 2008), mainly using their bodies “as sexual commodities or a vehicle for sexual arousal” (p. 3). Similar advertising in the Middle East sells fashion, makeup, or styling services through appeals to idealized self-image: beauty, boldness, desire, availability, and so forth. The images in other outdoor ads surrounding the Souk echo these appeals (Figures 20.11, 20.12, and 20.13). The text which accompanies the image in Figure 20.11 translates to “Center of Your World.” The other two appear on the website for the World Trade Center Abu Dhabi alongside the words “enchanted” and “distinct”. This series of Souk promotional photos also might evoke a scene from a television drama or music video, as advertising often relies on these popular culture frames of reference. These associations help invite the viewer to engage in the visual image to understand its message and take away its proposition.

**Conclusion**

Past scholarship recognizes that images of Arab women, sometimes controversial, sometimes liberating, frequently market the Middle East to the world—as well as influence native identity (Al Jenaibi, 2011; Gökariksel and McLarney, 2010; Allam, 2008). In present-day Abu Dhabi, where tradition is often contested by modernity, Islamic values mix with Western representations as Muslim identities are constructed through commodities and consumer capitalism, according to Gökariksel and McLarney (2010). The marketing of Arab images to reflect the territory as a welcoming and exotic tourist destination is common—and Arab women are central to this branding (Al Jenaibi, 2011). Like much Western advertising that fetishizes the female body (Reichert, 2003) and constructs women as consumers (Lancaster, 1995), ad images of woman in fast-evolving Abu Dhabi sometimes function on these levels, as shown here, but critical analysis uncovers more.

The Souk ad image (Figure 20.9), while on the surface a somewhat common, provocative appeal to multiple viewers, also carries a bipolar message to the Emirati woman. It challenges her to uncover her beauty, reveal her power, and unleash her desire to interact more freely with men and engage more boldly in society. However, taking into consideration the sum of its denotations
and connotations, the overall proposition of the image reinforces the dominant culture of female suppression. The Emirati woman is honored for her femininity, beauty, respect for tradition, and staying ‘in place.’ It is stylish to be traditional. Modernity must be tempered by tradition. Figure 20.9 emphasizes the agency women have to make the culturally prescribed ‘right’ choice of covering,
and to find self-actualization in their appearance and in material consumption. The Emirati woman personifies the Souk experience as one of luxury, mystery, intimacy, ‘trendy’ tradition, and freedom.

The ideological meaning establishes the Emirati woman as an object of beauty, mystique, and desire, with freedoms that fall within narrow societal norms. She may satisfy her needs at the new Souk. The representations in this sign legitimize the current power relationships in Emirati society that dictate women will dishonor their families if they uncover in public or socially interact with men outside their family. Yet the sign also tells of the paradox of modern times, when the government is promoting real opportunities for women to educate and infiltrate the workforce, while their families continue to frown on and even forbid change due to tribal traditions. With this deeper understanding of the cross-currents within the UAE today, we can judge this sign as possibly an attempt by the state to promote more liberal conditions for women, yet as it struggles with the ingrained tribal constraints, the ‘safe’ and acceptable (and economically valuable) message is for women to continue to locate themselves and their freedoms in the marketplace. Gökariksel and McLarney write, “a Muslim woman is constantly negotiated, defined and redefined through or in reaction to the images, narratives, and knowledges about Muslim womanhood constructed in the marketplace” (2010, p. 2).

Strategic visual communication lets culturally recognized frames work for it. If these frames work to influence, what ideology are they promoting in the process? This reading suggests the cultural meaning of outdoor ad signage in Abu Dhabi and how it constructs its audiences within specific contexts.
Although advertising’s primary function is to sell, Williamson’s (1978/1987) seminal study *Decoding Advertisements* asserts that ads also create structures of meaning in which they are selling us ourselves (p. 13). In an autocracy where legal and societal norms are interlinked with the fundamentals of Islam, the state-controlled communication that pervades the public sphere is designed to reinforce its ideology.

Semiotic analysis reveals that this particular public image communicates a strategic imposition of prescribed values into the collective national identity. While this chapter only presents the analysis of a single ad, the examples of other public signs support a highly visible and widely coordinated strategy of message enforcement. They function to legitimate and sustain the cultural identity of the marginalized female within a society of uneven power relationships. The analysis demonstrates the power of strategic communication in applied situations and underscores the need for visual literacy to critically decode pictorial messages and respond with acceptance, negotiation, or rejection.

References


