

Content Analysis of Advertising Visuals in the Magazine Advertisements: The Roaring Twenties and the Great Depression

Daechun An

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Abstract

This content analysis of a sample of advertising from *Time*, *New Yorker*, and *Saturday Evening Post* during the 1920s and 1930s examined the impact of the national economic conditions on advertising and its visuals. This study suggests that the impact of national economic conditions in the 1920s and 1930s on the use of ad visuals in the mainstream magazine advertisements seemed visible. Photographs were more prevalent in the 1930s. Also, the use of literal visuals was dominant in the 1930s. The difference in the use of advertising visuals was statistically significant between the two periods of time in the early twentieth century. This study supports cultural historian's argument that advertising is viewed as mirrors of society, being influenced and shaped by the culture and society.

Introduction

Advertising visual and its graphical components have long been the target of studies since marketers began to adopt full-scale marketing activities in the late nineteenth century. The important theme was how the visual appeal could be translated into an effective selling message.¹ The role of advertising visuals includes obtaining attention, creating impact, and stimulating interest from an indifferent

audience through conveying a main selling point of products or brands.² Advertising visuals perform two main functions - literal and symbolic.³ Literal visuals provide factual information on products or services, and symbolic visuals perform an indirect role to connect the images of products or services with the meanings that are appropriately assigned to them.

Advertising is part of the changing social, economic, and cultural environment, and its visuals might have been created in a way that could reflect those changes that people would want to adjust themselves to.⁴ Another way of linking advertising and its visuals to society and culture is the cultural approach to advertising. Cultural historians argue that advertising is an important window through which different aspects of society and culture can be explained.⁵ But also, the advertising itself can be explained to determine how it might have been shaped by society. This approach recognizes advertising not only as a window to culture but also a mirror that reflects the culture, or the cultures.⁶

For any specific period of time, this approach viewed that prevailing social and cultural values could have dictated how advertising and its visuals evolved around them. Based on this approach, the two economically contrasting periods, the ♦Roaring Twenties♦ and the ♦Great Depression♦ were compared through a content analysis of visual forms in the magazine advertisements to see if the ads and its visuals had reflected the underlying economic conditions in them.

Literature Review

Visuals in Advertising. Visual appeal always had a prominent place in advertising. The old saying is that a picture is worth a thousand words, so many advertisers usually try to visually communicate messages, rather than bog down the receiver in heavy text. Hecker & Stewart state:⁷

Visual recall is becoming increasingly important, and corporate symbols and advertising will need to be stronger and eye-catching to capture consumer attention. Nonverbal communication will not only become a means for drawing attention to a verbal message, but it will also become the message itself in many instances ♦ The use of imagery, visual associations, drawings and paintings, models, visual memory devices, product and corporate symbols ♦ are pervasive in advertising.

Visual imagery is used to command attention, stimulate curiosity, demonstrate product features and benefits, establish a personality for a product, associate the product with certain symbols and lifestyles, and anchor the brand identity in the minds of the target audience.⁸ Additionally, advertisers use visual imagery to enhance or strengthen the message about their product. For instance, when something neutral (the product) is paired with something that elicits a positive affective reaction (a visual), the

neutral stimulus may come to evoke a positive response to the ad.⁹ In other words, visuals can add meaning (and subsequently a positive response) to something that is basically neutral (the product).

Rossiter & Percy¹⁰ divided visual communication in advertising into two categories of stimuli ♦ static and dynamic. The three elements that determine static stimuli are picture size, exposure duration and number of exposures. An increase in any of these variables has been shown to increase recognition, encoding of details and development of denotative images among viewers. Although the attributes of static stimuli do not fit perfectly in measuring dynamic stimuli, this latter type also has resulted in high viewer response.

Communication by visual image is easily the most important dimension of an advertising message. Even in a medium like radio, the images produced by the listener still carry an important function.¹¹ Visual imagery also can have an effect on textual components in advertisements, which affects brand awareness or liking. Edell & Staelin¹² found that very different processing occurs depending on pictorial and verbal message congruencies in advertisements. Advertisements were more effective when the picture ♦agreed♦ with the textual message.

In 1987, Moriarty offered an effective typology of visuals in a content analysis of magazine advertising. The first category of visuals determines whether a visual is photographic or an illustration. At the next level (the crux of the current study), it is determined if visuals are literal or symbolic. If literal, they can be further subcategorized into identification (brand, logo, package), description (what it looks like, parts attributes, schematics), comparison (between two competitors, before and after) or demonstration (how to do, make, use, etc.). Symbolic visuals can use association (lifestyle, typical person, situation), association with a character or celebrity, metaphor, storytelling or aesthetics. (See Table 1)



In general, literal visuals are used to communicate factual information, so their role is to identify, describe and report details of a product. Symbols communicate through meaning. They present concepts through the use of abstract associations.

Cultural approach to the history of advertising. While much of the early history written about advertising has supported one side or another in the dispute over the direct effects of advertising on consumers, cultural history has tended to say more about American culture than advertising per se.¹³ In this approach, advertising is viewed as mirrors of society, being influenced and shaped by the culture and society. Technological developments, social, economic, and political conditions influence the society and, as a consequence, impact what is contained in advertising. For example, economic conditions have been regarded as important historic forces that have influenced society, industry, educational system, politics and religion.

America has symbolized economic abundance during the last three centuries, and that force has helped shape the American society through an institution of modern advertising.¹⁴ Potter stated, in his landmark work on cultural history of advertising, *People of Plenty: Economic Abundance and the American Character*:

Advertising should be recognized as an important social influence and should be identified with one of the most pervasive forces in American life, the force of economic abundance. The most critical point on the functioning of society shifts from production to consumption. So, the culture must be reoriented to convert the producer's culture into consumer's culture. Advertising appeals primarily to consumer's desires.

This is what he called the social effect of advertising, which is, in parallel but broader sense, to make the individual like what he gets to enforce already existing attitudes, to diminish the range and variety of choices, and, in terms of abundance, to exalt the materialistic virtues of consumption. He argues that advertising should be directed to the stimulation or even the exploitation of materialistic drives and then to the standardization of these drives as accepted criteria of social value. In other words, advertising is part of the social, cultural and business milieu, and its achievement depends on the ability of the advertiser to predict and react to a changing society.¹⁵

Advertisements contained in the media respond in similar ways to external circumstances, so the content of advertising reflects how advertisers delivered their audiences to the world.¹⁶ As such, advertising can be an important window through which different aspects of American society can be explained. But also, the advertising itself can be explained to determine how it might have been shaped by American society. This approach, called cultural history, recognizes advertising not only as a window to culture but also a mirror that reflects the culture, or the cultures.

In summary, advertising is part of the changing social, cultural and business environment, and its success depends on the ability of the advertisers to predict and to react to a changing society. In this sense, advertising reflects the society's economic and political conditions,¹⁷ so its visuals would be created in a way that could appeal to consumers who were concerned with and affected by those societal variables.

Advertising and its visuals in the early twentieth century. Stimulated by the automobile industry, the American economy took off on a period of prosperity in the 1920s. Factory assembly lines multiplied, the stock market soared, and industrial production nearly doubled between 1921 and 1929. Americans enjoyed the prosperity, and this affluence led the emergence of mass market over a decade. Faced with a robust economy and relaxed regulation, advertising would never again have so positive a climate in which to operate. The total volume of advertising expenditures reached up to \$3.4 billion in 1929 and this was almost 60% increase from that of 1919.¹⁸

During the decade, people showed an evangelical fervor in advertising appeals.¹⁹ Trend showed greater emphasis on image projection in regard to copy style and visual approach, and the common theme of advertising in this era revolved around issues of lifestyle and image.²⁰ Particularly, the Art Deco movement had a significant impact on advertising style and visuals and diversity of advertising styles became identified with this movement. Advertising visuals in this period, by and large, comprehended lifestyles of people and images of products to create impact.

The end of the ♦Roaring Twenties♦ was signaled by the stock market collapse of October 29, 1929, a day known as ♦Black Tuesday.♦ Even though few Americans had stock market holdings, most of them were greatly affected by the Great Depression that followed.²¹ Between 1929 and 1933 the Gross National Product (the sum of all goods and services produced in the U.S.) fell from \$103 billion to \$55.7 billion. Also, the advertising budgets fell from \$3.4 billion to \$1.3 billion, a drop of 62%. Banks failed, factories closed, railroads went bankrupt, farmers fell into desperate straits, and the white-collar group was deeply impacted. Advertising was considered a tyranny of waste from top to bottom, especially intolerable in this era when everybody was going to tighten his belt.²²

The Depression affected people and the society in many ways. It caused higher rate of unemployment and, in turn, low disposable income. The hardest hit was that the Depression threatened American beliefs in the future of the country and the capitalist economic system.²³ Even though many advertising agencies and corporate advertising departments increasingly engaged in a struggle for survival after the market crash, even steeper declines in advertising expenditures and revenues were brought in this era.

The look and content of advertising in the early 1930s were affected by economic and professional concerns.²⁴ Advertisers eventually replaced color and illustrations with extensive text in a multiple of typefaces to grab attention. Louder headlines, strident hard-sell copy, and gross exaggerations appeared as pseudoscientific arguments and appeals to emotion. Advertising capitalized on consumers♦ intensified economic and personal insecurities with this hard-sell approach. Ads looked depressed compared to lavish, colorful, and imaginative ads of previous decade. This trend had been prevailing until World War II, which ended the Depression.

The criticism argues that creative leaders in the 1920s pursued their own nonrepresentative tastes, and they often made the mistake of trying to escalate the public♦s taste of using artistic language that was too toney and abstract for their audience. However, it seems that advertising creative had employed some generalizable visual strategies in their advertisements to create impact on the audiences. Similarly, in the 1930s, which can be represented as the time of depression, it is suggested that economic and professional concerns largely affected the style and content of advertising.²⁵

Research Questions

A consideration of the function of advertising visuals in conjunction with the social and economic changes during the 1920s and the 1930s suggests several research questions about the types and functions of visuals in print advertisements in the 1920s and the 1930s, the following research questions are suggested:

RQ #1. What were the main categories of products advertised with visuals during these periods?

RQ #2. What type of advertising visuals (photographs or illustrations) dominated these periods?

RQ #3. What were the important functions of advertising visuals in the 1920s and the 1930s?

RQ #4. Was there any relationship between the type of visuals and their functions?

RQ #5. In each category of the function, what were the prominent uses of visuals? (e.g. for literal visuals, identification or demonstration, and for symbolic visuals, association or metaphor)

It is hypothesized that the economic and social conditions that prevailed in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s will be reflected in the visuals used in magazine advertising. Specifically, advertisements in the 1920s are expected to perform more symbolic functions while those in the 1930s did more literal functions. Consequently, the use of visuals for each of the two categories, symbolic and literal, is expected to be significantly different between two eras, 1920s and 1930s. The literal functions, such as identification, description, comparison, and demonstration, are expected to be the focus of advertising visuals in the 1930s, while the 1920s advertising visuals performed more of such symbolic functions as association, metaphor, storytelling, and aesthetics.

Methodology

To study the most interesting and challenging research problems, which are those about the causes and effects of communication, content analysis, a research tool for making inferences about the meaning of communication messages, is a powerful device to assess the average of a culture or a social system in general.²⁶ Berg²⁷ also suggests that content analysis may focus on either quantitative or qualitative

aspects of communication messages. Especially for the study of advertising, a quantitative content analysis can move beyond counting to deal with the meanings that advertising attaches to prevalent culture by including latent variables such as contextual and societal variables that are not physically present and countable.²⁸In this regard, quantitative content analysis may be one of the appropriate approaches to assessment of the cultural impact of the societal changes on advertising.

This study applied content analysis to chart functions of visuals in magazine advertisements of the 1920s and 1930s. The goal of developing sampling frames was to select magazines that would represent a wide range of readership and demographic categories. Three mainstream magazines were, therefore, selected; *Time*, *New Yorker*, and *Saturday Evening Post* (See Table 2 for the most recent target audience, circulation and editorial content of these magazines).



Time, which Henry Luce and Briton Hadden started in March 1923, was chosen for the study, because it was felt that it was a ♦mainstream♦ publication that was extant almost 80 years ago and still on newsstand today. Because of the change in frequency of publication by *Saturday Evening Post* from a weekly to a bi-monthly in recent years, it was not at first considered. However, this problem was outweighed by the fact that *Saturday Evening Post* was probably the strongest weekly magazine²⁹ and was almost symbol of the country itself.³⁰ Also, *New Yorker* was examined for this study, because it was felt that ♦it is a magazine avowedly published for a metropolitan audience and thereby will escape an influence which hampers most national publications. It expects a considerable national circulation, but this will come from persons who have a metropolitan interest.♦³¹

To analyze approximately the same number of advertisements from each magazine, we employed a quota sampling procedure. Four issues of each magazine from the years 1927, 1928, 1929, 1935, 1937, and 1939 were selected for a total of seventy-two issues. Since *Time* and *New Yorker* did not deliver enough advertisements until the latter years of the 1920s, advertisements appeared in the 1927, 1928, and 1929 were collected to represent the 1920s. For ensuring enough time difference between the two periods, years of 1935, 1937, and 1939 became the sampling frame years of the issues for the 1930s. Beginning with a random selection of January, February, or March, the first issue of every third month was systematically included in the sample. Similarly, every fourth full or double-page display advertisement was included, counting from a randomly chosen starting point. A total of 334 advertisements was collected.

Advertising visuals were grouped together in three ways: by product category, by its execution type (photograph or illustration), and by function in advertising. In order to sort them by types of product, we established nine segments of product categories: auto or auto-related (including tire, gasoline, and motor oil), financial service (including bank, insurance, and other financial services), home electronics, food, beverages (including beer and other liquors), cigarette, clothing, household miscellaneous goods

and others (including personal care, furniture, travel, etc.). Illustration and photograph were the two main categories of visual type while some of them used a combination of illustrations and photographs. The functions of visuals were divided into two broad categories: literal and symbolic. Literal visuals were divided into identification, description, comparison, and demonstration. Symbolic visuals included association, association with a character or celebrity, metaphor, storytelling, and aesthetic. The author of this paper, who had worked as an advertising manager for several years, coded all ads. For checking coder reliability, we used Scott's pi. Twenty-five ads that were not included in this study were coded twice to get the Scott's pi. The coder reliability of each coding category ranged from 78% to 87% (i.e. 87% for functions of visuals, 82% for type of visuals, and 78% for sub-function items).

Results and Discussion

Advertising both in the 1920s and the 1930s was led mainly by automobile industry. Table 3 summarizes types of product categories examined in this study.



Automobile ads, combined with tire, battery, and motor oil ads, accounted for about 31% of all advertised products in three magazines in the 1920s and the 1930s. Auto or auto-related ads were seen on every other page of magazines in this era. Ads of Plymouth, Chevrolet, Chrysler, Cadillac, and other brands frequently appeared in a classical style along with Kelly Springfield tire ads, which was one of the outstanding tire campaigns that ran from 1918 to 1931. The second most frequent product type was insurance and financial services. Particularly, in the 1930s, when people suffered substantially from shortage of disposable income, several types of financial services often appealed to those who needed financial aids.

In response to dramatic increase of demand for radio and refrigerator, home electronics business owners became one of the dominant advertisers in this period, as were food marketers. Of course, our indispensable necessities for everyday life, such as clothing, food, and drinks, which were not much sensitive to the changes of economic condition, followed home electronics. As with the financial service industry, a significant change in advertising volume between the 1920s and the 1930s was identified in the category of household miscellaneous goods, such as chair, desk, furniture, heater, watch, clock, lamp, carpet, and the like. The ad frequency within this category radically dropped from 16% to 9% of the total volumes. As disparity in wealth became severe problem, the relative poor had to reduce their consumption of goods or services that were not always required for their everyday lives. Interestingly, the liquor ads increased from 5% to 16% (moving from tied for last to second) during this period, indicating a considerable shift in the type of products advertised between these two periods (Spearman's $r = .39, p < .20$). This might reflect a desperate affective state, which could be explained by the surge of financial crisis in the 1930s.

Table 4 and Table 5 crosstabulates the two periods of time with types of ad visuals used.



There was a significant difference in the use of photographs and illustrations during the 1920s and 1930s (Chi-square=17.295, d.f.=1, $p < .000$). The percentage of ads that contained photographs rose during this period. In the 1920s, photographs appeared in only 28% of all ads while illustrations were used in 72% of ads. But the ratio changed to 50 to 50 in the 1930s.

Two factors, at least in part, may explain to this ratio change: the increase in importance of realistic impression and spread of the use of photographs in ads. In the 1930s, advertising capitalized on consumers' intensified economic and personal insecurities with hard-sell approach, which emphasized louder headlines, strident hard-sell copy, and identification and description of the product.³² The result was a dramatic increase in the use of photographs rather than illustrations because the focus shifted to real impressions of the product rather than depiction of product personality or image. Another factor contributing to the increased use of photographs could have been an effort to reduce production costs because illustrations would usually take more time and labor, and, in turn, more cost than photographs. A recent study shows that almost 97% of print ads used photography rather than illustrations for realistic description of impressions of products or brands.³³ The percentage change in the use of illustration in Saturday Evening Post was tremendous, declining from 83% in the 1920s to 38% in the 1930s.

Typical uses of photographs and illustrations in the 1920s can be seen in the Chrysler ad in the May 7th 1928 issue of Time and the Plymouth ad in the July 10th 1937 issue of Time. Chrysler tried to appeal to consumers' feeling, showing its '72 Sport Roadstar in an artistic illustration, while Plymouth wanted to demonstrate the actual scene of an inspector's careful scrutiny of all door pulls and window-lift handles.



Table 6 shows that there was a significant difference in the role of visuals between the 1920s and the 1930s (Chi-square = 12.704, d.f. = 1, $p < .000$). A two-step comparison attempted to determine the difference in the use of literal and symbolic visuals in the 1920s and the 1930s (See Table 6). First, in the 1920s, literal visuals only accounted for 43% while symbolic visuals made up 57%. In the 1930s, literal visuals increased to 59% while symbolic visuals decreased to 41%. The other way is to compare

among segments of role of the ad visuals. Association took the first rank with its usage level of 28% of the total visual ads in the 1920s. It decreased to 12% in the 1930s. On the contrary, in the 1930s, description increased to be involved in 33% of the total ads examined in this study although it only made up 22% of total ads in the 1920s.

In addition, Table 7 shows that the percentage of illustrations used in literal advertisements was less than those used in symbolic advertisements. This suggests that illustrations were more appropriate visual type for symbolic functions. A Chi-square analysis of the difference in the use of illustrations and photographs for literal and symbolic visuals found that there was a statistically significant difference between literal and symbolic visuals (Chi-square = 3.954, d.f. = 1, $p < .049$).



The association function of the visual represents an effort to relate the product with consumers' lifestyle, typical person's character, and everyday use situation. It is an indirect way of identification or description of the product to persuade consumers to try their products. It never wants to directly describe or identify product characteristics or its usage, but it usually entices consumers to try the product through indirect explanation of potential consumers' lifestyle and situations in which the product is certainly tried. In the 1920s, when a typical person had disposable money, the advertisers could not successfully persuade them to buy only with direct explanation or description of the product. Rather, they needed to appeal to their consumers with much more sophisticated use of language or visuals. Hard copy or big headline was never better than soft copy and artistic visuals because consumers were fully supplied with various kinds of products, with which they could enlarge their choices of decision.

An illustrative example using association function of visuals is the Camel ad in the first December issue of Time magazine in 1927. This ad tried to associate Camel with a group of people who were enjoying the beautiful rural scenery in the winter season. It was stingy in using copy and never tried to use all the space reserved for visuals and copies. Rather, it just tried to maximize the effect of minimal use of copy and picturesque illustration.

The soft sell approach, however, faded when the stock market collapsed in 1929. In the 1930s, demonstration and identification became the two main functions of advertising visuals in part because consumers might have considered product characteristic and price more than anything. This may be due to their lack of money to buy, time spent on decision and enthusiasm toward search for upscale and sophisticatedly advertised products. Advertisers wanted to give a direct message. They had to identify what their products were, describe as many advantages as possible, and distinguish the features of their products from competitor's products.

In the 1930s, advertising creative directors became more concerned with literal roles of visuals such as identification, description, comparison and demonstration. Table 8 shows this point very well. Out of 157 visuals, sampled from the 1930s ads, almost two thirds contained literal visuals.



Such hard-sell approach dominating advertising space in the 1930s can be exemplified by the Plymouth De Luxe Four-Door Touring Sedan ad, which appeared in *Time*, in the second week of May 1939. The visual of this ad was primarily used to show advantages of lower mileage, space advantage and low price, using hard copy and actual photographic description.

When advertisers thought that they needed to appeal to consumers' rationality, they used literal visuals, and, conversely, when they thought that they needed to appeal to consumers' emotions they used more symbolic visuals. This is how the contrasting application of two conflicting role of ad visuals looks like. When this result is connected to the types of ad visuals, photograph vs. illustration, it becomes evident that the rational approach employed more photographs while the emotional approach embraced illustrations more. In other words, in the 1920s, when advertisers felt that it was better to make mostly emotional appeals to consumers, symbolic visuals using illustration could accomplish the goal better. On the contrary, in the 1930s, literal visuals using photographs better served advertisers' goal to make rational appeals to more practical.

Conclusion

This study suggests that the impact of national economic conditions in the 1920s and 1930s on the use of ad visuals in the mainstream magazine advertisements seemed visible. As expected, photographs were more prevalent in the 1930s than the 1920s. Also, the use of literal visuals was dominant in the 1930s, when advertisers wanted to speak in detail about the product advertised to persuade the obstinate consumers. In particular, rather than providing image or feeling associated with products, extra efforts had been made to identify and describe their product and their characteristics. All these were found significantly different between the two contrasting periods of time in the early twentieth century. Presumably, one of the fine indicators of social condition, the economic condition dictated how advertising uses its visuals to persuade consumers. This was particularly predictable during the period of prosperity in the Roaring Twenties or the nationwide economic crisis, the Great Depression.

One of the key arguments of the cultural history of advertising contends that advertising should be viewed as mirrors of society, because it is influenced and shaped by the culture and society.³⁴ The society is influenced by technological developments as well as social, economic, and political conditions and, in turn, the societal change is reflected in advertising. In line with the arguments from the cultural

history viewpoint, this study supports the thesis that the influence of the economic conditions was reflected in mainstream advertising. The increase in the use of literal visuals and illustrations in the 1930s suggests that advertising reflected the changing need of consumers and society during the national economic crisis. This result was also supported by comparison of the two periods.

However, interpretation of the results of this type of content analysis always requires a special caution. Rarely are there single-cause phenomena. Obviously, there would be some other factors that might explain the changes in the use of visuals in advertising. New movement of design might have contributed to this trend in that they emphasized simple forms, quality materials, sound construction and, importantly, adding colorful decoration only to satisfy prevailing tastes in the 1930s. Technological development and new social values would also be considered as important variables.

While this study could not completely attribute the changes in the use of visuals exclusively to the economic conditions, nevertheless it appears reasonable to conclude that at least part of the changes were attributable to them. The function of advertising can be explained in two ways: economic effect and social effect.³⁵ As far as the latter is concerned, the changes in nationwide economic status are worth considering as historical forces that would have affected the society and, as a result, altered what had been contained in advertising.

Daechun An is an assistant professor of Journalism at the University of North Texas. Note: This paper has been presented to the Magazine Division of the 2002 AEJMC National Conference in Miami Beach.