
Original Research Article

A multimodal discourse analysis of visual and verbal elements in English digital advertising targeting Gen-Z consumers

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Abstract: This paper focuses on English digital advertising targeting Generation Z consumers, employing multimodal discourse analysis theory to delve into the collaborative role of visual and linguistic elements, as well as the mechanisms of discourse construction. Through the study of numerous advertising samples, it reveals the unique advantages of visual elements in capturing attention and conveying emotions, along with the pivotal role of linguistic elements in precisely conveying information and guiding consumer behavior. The research finds that successful English digital advertisements often skillfully integrate visual and linguistic elements, forming a powerful and persuasive multimodal discourse system to meet Generation Z consumers' pursuit of individuality and emphasis on experience.

Keywords: generation Z consumers; English digital advertising; multimodal discourse analysis; visual elements; linguistic elements

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of digital technology and the widespread adoption of social media, digital advertising has become a crucial means for enterprises to promote products and services and attract consumer attention. Generation Z, as the main force in the current consumer market, has grown up in the digital age and possesses unique consumption concepts and behavioral characteristics, imposing higher demands on the content and form of advertisements. As an important carrier of cross-cultural communication, English digital advertising needs to employ appropriate visual and linguistic elements to construct effective multimodal discourse when targeting Generation Z consumers, in order to achieve advertising communication goals and marketing effectiveness.

Multimodal discourse analysis theory provides a robust theoretical framework for studying visual and linguistic elements in English digital advertising. This theory posits that discourse is not solely constructed through language, but also involves the coordinated interaction of multiple modalities such as visual and auditory elements. In English digital advertisements, visual components (e.g., images, colors, animations) and linguistic elements (e.g., text, voice) work synergistically to convey advertising messages and influence consumer cognition and decision-making. Therefore, conducting in-depth analysis of multimodal discourse characteristics in visual and linguistic elements within English digital advertising holds significant theoretical and practical implications for understanding advertising communication mechanisms and enhancing marketing effectiveness.

2. Literature review

2.1. Development of multimodal discourse analysis theory

Multimodal discourse analysis originated in the 1990s, gradually evolving alongside in-depth research on the role of linguistic and non-linguistic symbols in communication. Kress and van Leeuwen proposed visual grammar theory, providing a systematic framework for analyzing the discourse functions of visual modalities. They argued that visual images also possess grammar-like structures similar to language and can be analyzed for meaning construction through three dimensions: representation, interaction, and composition. Subsequently, numerous scholars have applied multimodal discourse analysis theory to research in various fields, such as education, media, and advertising, yielding fruitful results.

2.2. Multimodal research in digital advertising

In the field of digital advertising, several scholars have focused on the application of multimodal discourse. Some studies have analyzed the collaborative role of visual and linguistic elements in digital advertisements, pointing out that visual elements can attract consumer attention and evoke emotional resonance, while linguistic elements provide detailed product information and guide consumer cognition and behavior. Other studies have explored the multimodal characteristics of digital advertisements across different cultural backgrounds, discovering that cultural factors influence the selection and combination of visual and linguistic elements in advertisements. However, there is relatively limited multimodal discourse analysis of English digital advertisements specifically targeting Generation Z consumers, necessitating further in-depth research.

2.3. Research on generation Z consumers

Generation Z typically refers to young people born between 1995 and 2010, who exhibit unique consumption characteristics. Studies indicate that Generation Z consumers emphasize personalization, experientialization, and socialization, pursuing distinctive consumption experiences and possessing a strong sense of brand identity and belonging. Having grown up in an era of information explosion, they are highly sensitive to advertisements and more inclined to accept creative and interactive advertising forms. Therefore, understanding the characteristics and needs of Generation Z consumers is crucial for constructing multimodal discourse in English digital advertising.

3. Research methodology

3.1. Sample selection

This study selected 50 English digital advertisements targeting Generation Z consumers from various industries (e.g., fashion, beauty, technology, food). These advertisement samples covered multiple digital channels, including social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, TikTok) and video websites (e.g., YouTube), to ensure sample diversity and representativeness.

3.2. Analytical framework

Based on multimodal discourse analysis theory, this study constructed an analytical framework from visual and linguistic dimensions. In the visual dimension, it mainly analyzed the representational meaning (e.g., narrative representation, conceptual representation), interactive meaning (e.g., contact, social distance, attitude), and compositional meaning (e.g., information value, salience, framing) of images. In the linguistic dimension, it primarily examined word choice, syntactic structure, rhetorical devices, and voice intonation and rhythm (in advertisements with voice). Simultaneously, it focused on the collaborative relationship between visual and linguistic elements, analyzing how they jointly constructed the discourse meaning of advertisements.

3.3. Data collection and analysis

Visual and linguistic data from advertisement samples were collected through methods such as downloading and screenshotting, followed by detailed annotation and analysis. A combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis methods was employed to describe and statistically analyze the characteristics of visual and linguistic elements, as well as their roles and interrelationships in advertisements.

4. Research results and discussion

4.1. Analysis of visual elements

4.1.1. Representational meaning

In terms of narrative representation, many English digital advertisements captivate the attention of Generation Z consumers by telling a story through a sequence of images. For example, an advertisement from a fashion brand creates a fashionable and dynamic atmosphere by showcasing a model's outfit changes in different scenarios, making consumers feel as if they are part of the story. In conceptual representation, advertisements often use symbolic images to convey a brand's core values and product features. For instance, a technology product advertisement employs futuristic images to symbolize its innovation and high-tech content.

4.1.2. Interactive meaning

Regarding contact, some advertisements establish an intimate interactive relationship with consumers through eye contact between models and viewers, enhancing consumer participation. In terms of social distance, advertisements frequently use close-up or extreme close-up shots to display product details or models' expressions, narrowing the distance with consumers. Attitude-wise, advertisements convey positive and friendly attitudes through image composition and color schemes to win consumer favor.

4.1.3. Compositional meaning

In terms of information value, advertisements typically place crucial information (e.g., brand name, product features) at the center or a prominent position in the image to attract consumer attention. Saliency is achieved through techniques such as color contrast and size contrast to highlight key elements. Framing-wise, advertisements guide consumers' gaze and construct the advertising narrative logic through image segmentation and combination.

4.2. Analysis of linguistic elements

4.2.1. Word choice

The vocabulary in English digital advertisements often possesses characteristics of simplicity, vividness, and infectivity. To attract Generation Z consumers, advertisements frequently use popular words, internet slang, and colloquial expressions such as "awesome," "cool," and "lit" to enhance the advertisement's fashionability and affinity. Simultaneously, emotionally charged words like "love," "happy," and "excited" are employed to evoke consumer emotional resonance.

4.2.2. Syntactic structure

Sentences in advertisements are usually concise and easy to understand. Some advertisements use interrogative and exclamatory sentences to arouse consumer curiosity and interest, such as "Are you ready for the next level of fashion?" and "Wow! This product will change your life!" Additionally, special sentence structures like ellipsis and inversion are utilized to enhance language rhythm and expressiveness.

4.2.3. Rhetorical devices

Rhetorical devices are widely applied in English digital advertisements. Metaphors, personification, and hyperbole make advertising language more vivid and enhance the advertisement's infectivity. For example, a food advertisement compares the product to "a taste of heaven," creating a pleasant association for consumers.

4.3. Analysis based on the characteristics of generation Z consumers

Generation Z consumers pursue personalization, experientialization, and socialization. English digital advertisements meet their needs through multimodal discourse construction. In terms of personalization, advertisements attract the attention of Generation Z consumers through unique visual styles and personalized linguistic expressions, making them feel that the advertisement is tailored specifically for them. Regarding experientialization, advertisements create an immersive visual and linguistic environment, allowing consumers to feel as if they are personally experiencing the product or service and enhancing their purchase desire. In terms of socialization, advertisements encourage consumer sharing and interaction, expanding the advertisement's reach through social media platforms and forming a word-of-mouth effect.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

5.1. Research conclusions

Through multimodal discourse analysis of English digital advertisements targeting Generation Z consumers, this study draws the following conclusions: Visual elements play a crucial role in English digital advertisements by attracting attention, conveying emotions, and constructing narratives. Their representational, interactive, and compositional meanings collectively influence consumer cognition and emotions. Linguistic elements precisely convey product information, guide consumer behavior, and enhance advertisement persuasiveness through word choice, syntactic structure, and rhetorical devices.

Visual and linguistic elements cooperate to jointly construct a multimodal discourse system for English

digital advertisements, meeting Generation Z consumers' pursuit of individuality and emphasis on experience.

5.2. Recommendations for advertising practitioners

Deepen Understanding of Generation Z Consumers: Advertising practitioners should thoroughly research Generation Z consumers' consumption concepts, behavioral characteristics, and interests to employ appropriate visual and linguistic elements in advertisements to attract their attention. **Emphasize the Collaboration of Multimodal Elements:** When designing English digital advertisements, full consideration should be given to the collaborative role of visual and linguistic elements, ensuring they complement each other and form a powerful and persuasive multimodal discourse system. **Innovate Advertising Forms and Content:** Generation Z consumers favor novel and unique advertising forms and content. Advertising practitioners should continuously innovate, using new technologies and techniques to create creative and interactive English digital advertisements to meet their needs. **Strengthen Social Media Marketing:** Social media is a vital platform for Generation Z consumers to access information and communicate. Advertising practitioners should leverage the characteristics of social media to conduct targeted marketing activities, enhancing advertisement communication effectiveness and influence.

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