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Multimodality in the television advertisement of *Raha premium* maize meal

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Abstract

In language and communication, multimodality refers to using various modes of signification to convey meaning. These modes transcend language to engage with audiences at multiple sensory levels. Over time, communication has evolved to reflect a paradigm shift towards a multimodal perspective. This leads to a complex interplay between different modes of shaping interpretations and constructing meaning in discourse, which has attracted little research. This paper explores the concept of multimodality as used in the television advertisement discourse of *Raha premium* maize meal, using the Multimodal Discourse Analysis Theory. The objective is to investigate how viewers interpret and perceive different modes of signification employed in the advertisement. A descriptive research design with a qualitative approach is used in the collection and analysis of data. The findings reveal that each mode of signification has a unique role, some of which television viewers hardly denote their meaning. Further, politics, religion, and culture influence the perception of some modes of signification used in the advertisement. We recommend that the advertisements be tailored with modes of signification that resonate with the expectations of television viewers. The findings of this paper are intended to enrich linguistic theory concerning the analysis of the representation of meaning in a text and perceptions of modes of signification used.

Keywords: Multimodality; Modes of signification; Advertisement; Communication; Interpretation

1. Introduction

Different modes of signification are utilized to create meaning in various forms of communication. This has led to the analysis of content that goes beyond language as the sole mode of communication. This has given rise to the concept of multimodality, which is noticed in the television advertisement of the *Raha premium* maize meal this paper focuses on. *Raha premium* maize meal is one of the popular brands of maize meal produced by Capwel company in Kenya. Advertisements provide information concerning a given product to the targeted consumers in a persuasive way, a marketing strategy employed by advertisers (Jefkins, 1997). These include sound, image, and language, which give support to visualization which this paper investigates as modes of signification. Bezemer (2012) explains that multimodality goes beyond language and incorporates various forms of communication and representation. Images are commonly used in advertisements to grab the attention of the viewers (Goddard, 2002). Kodak (2017) claims that these images serve the interest of the producer. Television advertisement is usually presented in multi-modes fused into a single medium for communication. Television viewers are expected to interpret these multi-modes unambiguously, yet they are not familiar with most of them. This paper investigates how viewers perceive modes of signification in television the advertisement of *Raha premium* maize meal, taking into account potential interpretation difficulties due to other factors such as politics, religion, and culture.

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Multimodality refers to the way people communicate using different modes at the same time (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). This article focuses on a television text constituting verbal and visual modes to achieve communicative functions. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) state that multimodality comprises of multi modes such as digital, visual, spatial, and musical to produce texts with specific meanings. These modes are combined to strengthen the composition of a text. In essence, a text which uses more than one modality is referred to as a multimodal text. The television advertisement of *Raha premium* maize meal this article analyzes is composed using multi-modes hence, is a multimodal text. In the context of the television advertisement of *Raha premium* maize meal, the use of multimodality becomes crucial in conveying the desired message to viewers. The advertisement should utilize various modes of communication, such as visuals, sound, and language, in a way that resonates with the target audience and elicits the desired response. According to Zhiganova (2016), the choice of codes in advertisements should be emotive and persuasive, as advertising language holds a significant influence over viewers. This paper explores the role of modes of signification and how viewers interpret them. Multimodality, as envisaged in the Multimodal Discourse Analysis Theory, highlights the use of different modes to convey meaning. Copywriters of television advertisements intentionally employ multimodality, expecting viewers to interpret the message without considering their understanding of the composition of a multimodal text.

Gee (2003) suggests that every aspect of an advertisement from the placement of images to the organization of content and the delivery method, contributes to the creation of meaning. However, television viewers may be unaware of the various modes present in the advertisement being aired to them. This lack of awareness and understanding of the modes of signification can lead to difficulties in accurately interpreting the intended meaning of the advertisement. Television advertisements, therefore, exist in a precarious landscape where the shift from relying on isolated text as the primary source of communication to the increased use of images in the digital age has created new challenges. The mode of communication in the advertisement may not be accorded the intended meaning by viewers due to their inadequate interpretation of the multimodal text. It is essential to consider how viewers perceive and interpret the various modes of signification used in the advertisement, taking into account potential challenges arising from politics, religion, and culture. Welch (1999) contributes to the study of multimodality and highlights how multimodal texts in television advertisements can address a larger yet more focused and intended audience. However, the use of multimodality may not be fully understood by television viewers. The presence of multimodality in television advertisements can change the way viewers perceive information, as the basic understanding of language is mediated through different modes of communication.

Burn and Parker (2003) argue that multimodal texts alter their meaning by placing words with established meanings into new contexts, such as audio, visual, or digital formats used in television advertisements. This can result in different meanings being created for television viewers. Bezemer and Kress (2008) suggest that people understand information differently when it is presented using multiple modes, such as images or sounds. The use of multimodal texts draws viewers' attention to both the original medium and the medium of recontextualization. In television advertisements, this movement of meaning from one medium to another may require viewers to interpret the message in a multimodal way that may be influenced by their political, religious, and cultural perspectives. This can ultimately lead to a different sense of understanding. In essence, each mode of signification carries its meaning, and multimodality focuses on the interrelationships between different modes of communication. O'Halloran (2011) argues for a shift from studying language alone to studying the integration of language with other resources. Liu (2013) on the other hand highlights the importance of accounting for meaning, arising from multiple semiotic resources in discourse analysis. Building upon this, we investigate viewers' perceptions of the identified modes of signification in the television advertisement of *Raha premium* maize meal, using the Multimodal Discourse Analysis Theory.

This paper adopts the Multimodal Discourse Analysis Theory by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) as its analytical tool. This Theory has three major tenets such as representation and communication, creating and maintaining interaction, and the overall meaning of the complex text that can analyze a multimodal text. It is a theory of reading images that can account for the interpretation of modes of signification in communication. This theory provides a framework for analyzing how different modes of communication, such as language, visuals, sound, gestures, and spatial arrangements, work together to construct meaning in a given discourse. Royce is one of the proponents who have traced its origin and development (Royce, 2007). Multimodal Discourse Analysis Theory also acknowledges that meaning is not solely conveyed through language but is a product of the interaction between multiple modes.

In the context of the television advertisement of *Raha premium* maize meal, creating and maintaining interaction tenet of this theory is used to explore how the various modes of communication in the advertisement contribute to the overall message and influence viewers' perceptions. Additionally, Multimodal Discourse Analysis Theory is used to consider how viewers interpret and make sense of the advertisement by analyzing their response to different modes of communication. By analyzing these responses in light of the different modes at play, the theory helped to gain insight into how the advertisement effectively communicates its intended message to the target audience. This theory further

helped analyze how different modes of communication work together to create meaning in the television advertisement of *Raha premium* maize meal, and how viewers interpret and respond to these modes in shaping their perceptions.

2. Materials and Method

This qualitative study adopted a descriptive research design which was carried out among television viewers and shoppers of *Raha premium* maize meal in Migori County, Kenya. Migori County was chosen due to its socio-political dynamic that may influence advertisement reception and interpretation. This area was adaptable to finding out how context shapes viewers' perceptions of televised advertisements. Further, the County is predominantly rural with pockets of urbanization that support economic activities. Hence, the area sheds light on how the socioeconomic landscape may influence viewers' responses to television advertisements. The research purposively sampled 50 informants to whom the advertisement was administered for interview. This was a sizeable and controllable number that would make the work manageable and practical within the time frame and resources available for the research.

The unstructured interview was conducted in four sessions for two months. The first two sessions handled 13 informants each, whereas the last two sessions handled 12 informants each. Ten television advertisements were downloaded from YouTube for a larger project (Midigo, forthcoming). Only the *Raha premium* maize meal clip was presented to informants. This advertisement was the one relevant and applicable to the objective of this article. With the aid of an interview schedule, informants were asked open-ended questions that took ten minutes to get the required responses. The required responses were interpretation and perception of the modes of signification in the television advertisement of *Raha premium* maize meal to political, cultural, and religious inclination. These responses were audiotaped for further transcription. The responses were examined to find out if the full interpretation of modes of signification was accorded. Data analysis was done using the content analysis method by considering the social meaning of modes of signification used in the advertisement.

Ten interviewees further formed a focus group discussion to elicit more responses. The responses were on the perception of the television viewers on the modes of signification in the television advertisement of *Raha premium* maize meal. This was done in four focus group discussion sessions which took five minutes each. Focus group discussion was meant to find out the opinion of viewers on modes of signification. *Raha premium* maize meal advertisement clip formed a stimulus for the description of multimodal phenomena to collect primary data. The multimodal features for each mode of signification in the advertisement were described to elicit secondary data which formed data for content analysis.

3. Results and Discussion

In this section, we present an analysis of viewers' perceptions of the modes of signification used in the television advertisement of *Raha premium* maize meal. This advertisement is one of several that were examined as part of a larger project (Midigo, forthcoming). We aim to explore how television viewers engage with the advertisement and interpret the different modes of signification employed. The analysis focuses on ten modes of signification that were identified in the advertisement: participants, music, verbal mode, color, dress code, soundtrack, gesture, graphics, lighting, and dance. Below is a sample of a visual image screenshot from a YouTube clip to discuss the presented modes in the television advertisement of *Raha premium* maize meal.

In Figure 1, the advertisement opens with the main participant, seemingly a father and his four children, accompanied by an acoustic guitar, gathered in a lounge setting. This scene serves as the starting point of the advertisement. As the guitar begins playing, the father sings enthusiastically about the superior quality of *Raha premium* maize meal. His four children join in, adding to the harmonious atmosphere by humming the catchy chorus "lalala." This musical introduction sets a positive and joyful tone for the advertisement, fostering a sense of unity and enjoyment among the characters and inviting viewers to engage with the product.

In the interviews, the participants expressed their thoughts on the lyrics and the impact of the music in the advertisement. They described the music as thrilling and said it could motivate them to purchase the advertised product. Additionally, they admired the beautifully decorated lounge, which featured flowers with green leaves that created a cozy atmosphere. However, the interviewees struggled to understand the connection between these elements and the product being advertised. The article utilizes the tenets of the Multimodal Discourse Analysis Theory, specifically the representation and communication meaning, to facilitate the following discussions:



Figure 1 Live band

First, participants in the advertisement of *Raha premium* maize meal serve to represent certain ideologies. In Multimodal Discourse Analysis Theory, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) describe participants as elements and items used as visual works and designs. In the advertisement of *Raha premium maize meal*, participants are identified as people, places, circumstances, and images. The male and female participants are used as celebrities. McCracken (1989) explains that celebrities bring their symbolic meanings to the endorsement process. Through this process, cultural meanings residing in the celebrities pass to the products and consumers. In the advertisement of *Raha premium* maize meal, the female and male participants are famous musicians and they are used as human participants to represent a father and mother figure in a family, who are caring and provide happiness to the family by feeding them a tasty *ugali*. However, some informants faulted the mother figure for licking the cooking stick she used to stir *ugali*. They claimed that licking a cooking stick while cooking may be perceived as unhygienic or inappropriate. Culturally, it is expected that cooks use separate utensils, such as spoons or ladles, to taste the food and make adjustments. This reveals that television viewers can be keen on the actions of the human participants, therefore disgusting behaviors that do not conform to cultural standards can influence negative perceptions of modes of signification in the advertisements. This is in line with Koch (2021) which claims that it is important to note that cultural perceptions and practices can vary greatly. What may be acceptable in one culture may be seen as unacceptable in another

Furthermore, a verbal mode is used in the television advertisement of *Raha premium* maize meal to assert claims and promises in conjunction with other modes of communication including human participants. This allows for creating a relatable context. This finding aligns with the finding in Vine (2004), which emphasizes the importance of considering context when determining the intended meaning behind utterances. The significance of context can be observed in the television advertisement of *Raha premium* maize meal, where the used celebrity delivers statements towards the end of the advertisement, to persuade viewers to consider the advertised product. This finding also supports Unsworth and Wheeler (2002) regarding verbal modes of communication in television advertisements. The two authors propose that copywriters address their target audience, in this case, television viewers, by making statements and posing questions, offering incentives, or calling for specific actions.

Additionally, the claims made by celebrities are intended to persuade viewers. However, social and cultural factors can influence the perception of viewers on verbal modes in the advertisement. The responses from the interviewees reveal that personal experience and cultural background can influence individuals' attitudes toward the language used in the advertisements. For example, informants who had a strong connection to Kiswahili, a language spoken in East Africa, had a positive liking for the Kiswahili-speaking culture. As a result, they perceived the use of Kiswahili codes in the advertisements positively. They felt a sense of connection and familiarity, which enhanced their attitudes towards the advertisements. On the other hand, informants who were not familiar with Kiswahili or the Kiswahili-speaking culture perceived the use of Kiswahili in the advertisements negatively. They felt alienated and disconnected from the language and therefore, had negative attitudes towards the advertisement. These findings highlight the significance of the target

audience's cultural background and familiarity with particular languages used in advertisements. As suggested by Garrett (2010), various factors such as cultural background, exposure to different languages, and personal preferences can influence how individuals perceive and respond to different languages used in the advertisement.

Moreover, graphics are used in this advertisement as modes of signification, to illustrate what participants are demonstrating and communicating. The graphics are in the form of slogans, new information, package descriptions, and ideal messages. The graphics are also used to make linguistic labeling and categorization. This is in line with Dilnoza (2020) which examines the basic features of advertising language. Dilnoza (ibid) explains that advertising language has a special structure, that enables the targeted consumers to perceive specific information. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) on the other hand state in Multimodal Discourse Analysis Theory that, as a result of advances in technology, written language should be presented as new writing. This new writing should be analyzed multimodally via its distinctive typographic features such as weight, expansion, slope, curvature, connectivity, orientation, and regularity. Based on this concept, we perceive in this article that language is used in form of the written text as graphics. This functions as a mode of signification to communicate to targeted consumers.

In the advertisement of *Raha premium* maize meal, the brand is choreographed in the packet of the maize meal in green and maroon color. The font is large and bolded against white background color. This is intended to capture the attention of the viewers. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) in Multimodal Discourse Analysis Theory, posit that any semiotic system should have the capacity to form texts and complexes of signs. These signs should cohere internally with the context in which they were produced. The responses from the informants in the focus group discussion indicated that they were able to equate the colors on the packaging of the *Raha premium* maize meal as a symbol of maize plantation. This visually conveys the natural and wholesome qualities of maize, as well as evokes a sense of freshness and nutritional value. The color of the linguistic label of the brand in *Raha premium* maize meal was perceived by the informants as resembling the leaves of a maize plantation. This reminded them of their agricultural heritage. This is intended to familiarize the viewers with a maize plantation used as a raw material to manufacture the product. As expressed in Hodge and Kress (1988), a text is a larger semiotic unit formed by a set of messages that coexist together since they operate in the same context and the same situation. The green colored text in this advertisement therefore signifies to the viewers an imagination of the food crop, meant for human consumption to satisfy hunger.

Further, music is also used as a mode of signification in this advertisement to appeal to the emotions of the targeted consumers. This mode of signification is intended to illustrate the ideology being represented by the advertisement. The song is used as the advertising message that the participants are narrating. This is intended to make television viewers relate to the lyrics of the song that is describing a familiar experience and circumstances in their social lives. The informants interviewed revealed that music plays a significant role in shaping and reflecting cultural identity. It is often used as a form of self-expression, communication, and storytelling within communities. Music is also meant to lull the mind and seek the attention of the viewer to the item being advertised through amusement and excitement. This is in support of Alpert and Alpert (1990), who claim that musical structure in audio-visual advertisement influences emotional responses towards the product being advertised. Additionally, the soundtrack is used as a mode of signification in the advertisement. This mode of signification is intended to evoke an emotional attachment of the viewer towards the brand being advertised. This is in agreement with the findings of Bruner (1990) which explain that the soundtrack used in advertisements is played in high keys to set moods in advertisements. There is a musical instrument being played in the background as participants are settling into the lounge. There is also a visual technique of zooming the camera to display object participants closer to the screen alongside the soundtrack. The images of *Raha premium* maize meal, a basket, and graphics are being flashed at different positions closer to the screen. This is intended to make interaction with viewers.

The soundtrack blends with the graphics, *Raha premium* maize meal to evoke positive feelings toward the brand. This is in line with Amos et al. (2019) who examine how soundtracks interact with visuals in audio-visual *Coca-Cola* commercials, to create images that are a representation of mediated reality. In the *Raha premium* maize meal, the viewer's attention is drawn to the visual action of cooking *ugali* while the soundtrack is playing in the background.

Subsequently, color is used as a mode of signification to symbolize the advertised product. It is meant to appeal to the consumers and create a pleasant feeling in utilizing the product. This is in support of Marzieh (2013), describing color as a language stating that, 'the audience feels it.' In the advertisement for *Raha premium* maize meal, one female participant is dressed in green and white. This choice of colors is significant as it resembles the leaves of the maize plantation and the grains used in the production of flour. The interviewees associated the green color with food production and agriculture, symbolizing the satisfaction and sustenance of humanity. Berlin and Kay (1996) claim that colors are culture-dependent and different cultures associate certain colors with certain symbolic meanings. In the advertisement of *Raha premium* maize meal, the green leaves on the flowers in the sitting room create a welcoming and

natural atmosphere that appeals to the viewers' senses. This helps enhance the feeling of enjoying a meal made with a *Raha premium* maize meal. However, some interviewees expressed concern about the colors of the attires worn by the participants engaged in singing. These colors were apparent to have religious connotations that might potentially influence the attitudes of television viewers. Religion plays a significant role in shaping individuals' perceptions and interpretations of symbols and colors. In the case of the *Raha premium* maize meal advertisement, the use of white attire is perceived differently by individuals of various faiths. For example, one respondent mentioned that white is associated with holiness and is often worn by priests. This indicates that individuals with a similar belief system may view the white color as symbolizing purity and divine blessings. On the other hand, the use of red attire by the participants in the advertisement was seen as scary by some respondents. This interpretation is rooted in the belief that red symbolizes danger and is often associated with blood and offering sacrifices in certain religious traditions.

Notably, dance is identified as a mode of signification too. This mode of signification is used in the advertisement of *Raha premium* maize meal to create an appeal and seek attention for the advertised product. This is in line with the finding as expressed in Walter (2012) which posits that, dance can produce awe and transcendence, enjoyment, emotional and sensual appeal. It enables the viewers to connect with the behavior and feelings invoked by that dance. This finding further supports the idea of Smyth (1984), which suggests that dance has a powerful effect on those who watch it. In the *Raha premium* maize meal advertisement, one participant is seen dancing and singing while bringing the cooked ugali to the dining table, which was faulted by some informants as not ethical culturally. The camera is at a close shot to magnify this particular event, especially the smiling face. This action is meant to interact with television viewers at a personal level, encouraging them to be good ambassadors of *Raha premium* maize meal (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006). However, there is a notion that dancing while eating is taboo. This was corroborated by some of the respondents interviewed. Advertently, lighting is identified as a mode of signification in the advertisement to visually control the mood of the settings. It is meant to convey time, brighten the place, and show the credibility of the scenes, making them appear natural. This is supported by Halliday (1985) who states that lighting emphasizes the participants and affects their appearance by building a mental picture of reality. Light is electromagnetic radiation that stimulates photoreceptive cells in the retina, hence is visible to human beings as expressed in De Kort and Veitch (2014). The responses from the focus group discussions indicated that light is perceived religiously as a triumph of good against evil. According to Multimodal Discourse Analysis Theory, lighting is used in this advertisement for setting the episodes.

By and large, gesture is also a mode of signification used in the advertisement. It is used as a non-verbal communication with a social message to the viewers. As expressed in Rahmat (2005), nonverbal messages can be grouped as kinesik message that uses body movement. However, in the focus group discussion, responses indicated that cultural perceptions of gender roles can influence the interpretation of gestures in advertisements. Certain gestures, such as body positioning or hand gestures, may convey different messages when performed by men versus women in a particular culture. The gestural message in the advertisement of *Raha premium* maize meal shows the movement of some limbs such as eyes and hands to communicate various meanings. This is confirmed by Anstey and Bull (2010) stating that, a kinesik message consists of movement, speed, and stillness in facial expression and body language. The female participant in the advertisement smells the aroma of the cooking *ugali* with a jovial mood, to signify satisfaction to the viewers. Finally, dress code is identified as a mode of signification, participants forming the narrative images, mostly actors, have attires with the color or logo of the packet or the container of the brand being advertised. According to Kang et al. (2010), clothes are recognized as a visual symbol of identity, a non-verbal communicator. The clothes are used for identity, personality, taste, and preferences besides lifestyle. *Raha premium* television advertisement presents a female participant wearing clothes in color similar to the packet of the flour she is advertising. This act is intended to signify that the product is valued by prominent people and therefore, television viewers should be part of the product users. This finding is in line with the idea argued by Duncan and Sandra (1998). The two authors proclaim that one must know the audience before communicating. This is intended to complement the attractiveness of the *Raha premium* maize meal.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the various modes of signification used in the television advertisement of *Raha premium* maize meal play a crucial role in conveying a persuasive message. The audio and visual elements in particular have deeper figurative meanings that require critical thinking on the part of the viewers to fully grasp the intended meaning. It is important to note that cultural and religious factors can influence the interpretation and perception of these modes. Given the persuasive nature of television advertisements, viewers need to approach them with a critical mindset to avoid misinformation. Additionally, copywriters should strive to effectively utilize modes of signification in their advertisements and avoid ambiguity about cultural, religious, and political views. To facilitate easier interpretation, this article suggests the consideration of interpretive aspects when designing modes of signification in multimodal texts such as television advertisements. By doing so, viewers will be able to understand the intended message more easily.

Recommendation

Given the findings, we suggest that it is essential for advertisers to actively engage in cross-cultural training and education to deepen their understanding of different cultural norms, values, and beliefs. This will enable them to develop advertisements that resonate with consumers from diverse backgrounds. Additionally, advertisers should strive to involve members from different cultural communities in the creation and approval process of advertisements to ensure accurate representation and avoid unintended offense. Further, religious themes in television advertisements should be done in a manner that is respectful and authentic. Advertisers should collaborate with religious organizations to gain insights and guidance on how to effectively communicate with viewers from different religious backgrounds. This partnership can contribute to the creation of advertisements that align with religious values, while also being impactful and engaging.

Concerning political influence on the perception of modes of signification in television advertisements, advertisers need to prioritize fairness, transparency, and unbiased representation. They should avoid taking sides or promoting any specific political agenda. By maintaining a balanced approach, advertisers can ensure that their advertisements are accessible and relatable to viewers with diverse political beliefs. It is crucial to empower viewers to approach television advertisements with critical thinking skills. This can be achieved by promoting media literacy education that encourages individuals to question the intent and message behind advertisements. Viewers should be encouraged to seek information from reliable sources, fact-check claims made in advertisements, and consider different perspectives before making decisions based on advertisements.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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