

Visuals on the Billboards of Automobile Workshops: A Thematic Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the Study: If we accept the term media, the plural of medium, as broadly meant to be all the channels of communication, and any form of information that can influence people, billboard advertising is a significant medium. Three major roles of media include to educate, inform and entertain; and when it comes to billboard advertisements they serve at least the first two purposes that is to educate and inform. Billboards as a means of advertising exploit linguistic and visual resources for meaning making. The current paper examines the visual literacy practices as exhibited on the billboards of auto-mechanic workshops in Pakistan from the thematic perspective.

Methodology: The research is based on the data collected from three localities of Rawalpindi and the surrounding areas within 100 kilometers radius including: 1) Rawalpindi City 2) Murree City, Company Bagh, Murree Expressway 3) and Dinna, and Gujjar Khan. These workshops are representatives of two social classes, the middle-middle class and the lower-middle class. Visuals on the billboards of these workshops are captured and examined to find out what are the thematic threads running across this visual data. While mainly Wang's (2014) framework is adapted, Visual Grammar by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996, 2001, 2006) and Critical Discourse Analysis by Fairclough (1989, 1995) are the conceptual feeding-streams for the analysis in the current research.

Findings: Discursive narrative analysis of the visuals is focused upon for visual interpretation which enables the researcher to identify some broad themes running across the visuals of billboards at micro and macro levels such as claiming authenticity, professional specialization, metaphor of wealth, and modality as a visual literacy practice.

Conclusion: The research provides insights into the literacy practices observed on the billboards of automobile workshops through the use of visuals; and sheds light on the social aspects of these practices.

Keywords: Literacy Practices, Visuals, Billboards, Automobile Workshops.

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Introduction

Background, Significance of the Current Work and Literature Review

Automobile industry in Pakistan is crucial in the sense that it is one of the significant service providers to the masses. With the increasing number of population, and almost non-existent public transport system, the number of cars is increasing on the roads every day, consequently increasing the number of automobile workshops to provide repair and maintenance services for these cars. Whereas modern, high-tech and high-end workshops for the provision of services to the upper class for their luxurious high-end cars are available, majority of these workshops cater for the needs of middle class consumers. However, these automobile workshops that are the providers of services to the masses provide insights into the social fabric of the society in multiple ways. The billboards of these workshops are windows to the aspirations and inspirations of the masses. The language and visuals used on these billboards communicate a lot about the socio-cultural norms, and community affiliations.

The current paper particularly focuses on the visual literacy practices exhibited on these billboards. Visual literacies can be characterized as "the capacity to ascribe significance to the pictures" (Georgis, Johnson, Bonomo, Colbert, & al, 1994). The visuals on these billboards are not random; rather they make meaning in the context of the automobile industry of Pakistan and the socio-cultural practices of the workshop mechanics/ owners and customers/ consumers of the services of these workshops. Ausburn, & Ausburn (1978) argue that this visual communication involves the set of abilities that allow a person to understand and employ visuals for purposeful interaction with others. In fact understanding of the visuals on these billboards involves critical thinking ability on the part of both: the senders and receivers of these visual messages. The process of meaning making involves creating and interpreting the messages at the sender and the receiver's ends by comprehending the social implications of these visual, understanding the collective aspects of the content, and developing a mutual agreement on the purpose of communication.

The common saying that a picture is worth a thousand words proves to be true when it comes to the visuals displayed on the billboards of automobile workshops. Discussing the forms of visuals Brumberger (2011) asserts that not only tables, charts, graphs, photographs etc. are multiple forms of visuals that are employed for meaning making but also the through the selection of size, angle, and color of the visual a crucial difference to the meaning is made.

Research shows that the proportion of words to visuals has significantly increased with the passage of time which is critically linked to the emergence of new types of literacies and literacy practices (Brumberger, 2011). Also Yeh & Cheng, (2010) assert that though throughout human history pictures and images have been used as a means of communication. However, according to Riddle (2009), John Debes for the first time coined the term "visual literacy" in 1969.

Billboard advertisement is a regular feature of the automobile industry. We find these billboards over every mechanic shop; and they rightfully serve the basic two purposes of advertisement: providing information and persuading the potential customers. According to Green (2001) billboard advertising is beneficial because it is useful link between the suppliers of services, and consumers of these services. It is an efficient form of advertisement because it involves low costs on the part of producer and less time consumption on the part of the customer.

When it comes to the automobile workshops the use of visuals on the billboards is a regular literacy practice. In the social context where the mechanics and drivers who bring cars for repair are mostly uneducated, this ever growing use of visuals makes sense as a means of communication. It is therefore significant to understand the nature and visual content of these billboards. However, in the Pakistani context there is a gap in research on visual literacies and literacy practices exhibited on the billboards of mechanic workshops. The current research is an attempt to fill in this gap as it examines the visual literacy practices of Pakistani auto-mechanic workshops to find out the recurrent themes of this visual communication.

Visual literacy as a broad term includes reading, writing, learning, thinking, interpreting, utilizing, and communicating through images and pictures. Researchers like Avgerinou (2001) and Kędra and Źakevičiūtė (2019) have brought visualization, critical viewing, visual reasoning, visual discrimination, and visual association under the umbrella of visual literacy. It is due to the significance of visual literacy and the benefits associated with it that it has emerged as a significant aspect in the domain of education today (Yeh & Lohr, 2010).

Street's (1984) looks at visual literacies from a socio-cultural perspective and asserts that literacy needs to be conceptualized as a social practice and should be understood in a particular context in which it is created and consumed. Street's socio-cultural perspective is quite helpful in providing insights into the ideologies and beliefs working behind the images on the billboards of automobile workshops in Pakistan.

The current research theoretically draws upon Wang's (2014) framework of Critical Visual Analysis, Fairclough (1989, 1995) and Visual Grammar framework as proposed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996, 2001, 2006). Wang (2014) argues that the three-dimensional discursive analysis approach was proposed by Fairclough (1989, 1992, 1995) in his analysis of political discourse. By linking a micro-analysis of the text systemically to the macro-structure of society, Fairclough's three-dimensional model "offers a powerful framework for deconstructing the ideology, power and dominance encoded in verbal texts" (Wang, 2014); and Wang found the same process to be equally susceptible to his analysis of news visuals.

To develop Visual Grammar, Kress and Leeuwen relied on Halliday's tripodal linguistic meta-functions with equivalent roles for visual reading. Based on Kress and van Leeuwen, "visual images perform three meta-functions, just as language does, during the meaning-making process, in that they are representative, interactional and compositional. Within these three meta-functions, delicate classifications exist to make visual grammar applicable to practical visual analysis (Wang, 2014, p. 105). This idea forms a vital part of the concept of Visual Grammar as a rule for examining images and accounting for the different elements instilled in the visual compositions. Based on social semiotics, this tool affords the possibility of exploring the 'representational structure' of the visual data, involving the narrative and conceptual details of the image.

Research Questions

1. What are the recurrent themes in the visual literacy practices exhibited on the billboards of the selected auto-mobile workshops in Pakistan?
2. What are the socio-cultural implications of the recurrence of these themes?

Research Objectives

The study focuses on the following objectives:

1. To examine the recurrent themes found in the visual literacy practices exhibited on the billboards of the selected auto-mobile workshops in Pakistan.
2. To trace the socio context of these visual literacy practices, and examine the socio-cultural implications of the recurrence of these themes.

Research Methodology

This section presents the details of sampling, data collection, nature of research and research framework for the current research.

Sampling and Data Collection for the Current Research

For the current research purposive sampling is used for data collection. This type of sampling is most appropriate for qualitative research when there is a need to identify and select information-rich cases related to the area of research. As far as the tool for data collection is concerned, are suggested by Hamilton (2012), photographs of billboards are captured.

The current paper is a part of a larger research project that explores linguistic and non-linguistic literacy practices exhibited on the billboards. For the sample, the billboards of automobile workshops from three localities of Rawalpindi and the surrounding areas within 100 kilometers radius including: 1) Rawalpindi City 2) Murree City, Company Bagh, Murree Expressway 3) and Dinna, and Gujjar Khan are examined. Out of the total 42 images of billboards that were collected, it is found that only 33 have visuals. Since the focus of this research paper is to examine which themes emerge from the visual data of the billboards of automobile workshops, only those 33 billboards are included in the analysis that have visuals. Resultantly, from Rawalpindi City 17 billboards, Murree City, Company Bagh, Murree Expressway 10 billboards, and from Dinna, and Gujjar Khan 6 billboards respectively make the collective data of 33 billboards for this paper. The sample is taken from two social classes of Pakistan: the middle-middle class and the lower middle class. The areas from where the workshops are selected are identified by the outlook of the area and the knowledge of the researcher of the social classes of Pakistan and the culture of automobile workshops.

Nature of Research

The nature of research is qualitative; and the paper focuses on the qualitative aspects of the visuals presented on the selected billboards.

Practical Framework Adapted for the Current Research

Based on the theoretical underpinnings provided by Wang (2014), Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996, 2001, 2006) and Fairclough (1989, 1995) this section presents the practical framework for the current research by creating the model that is used to analyze the visual literacy practices and images of auto-workshop billboards to see which themes are reoccurring. As it can be seen in the given model discursive narrative analysis of the visuals is focused upon for visual interpretation which enables the researcher to identify some broad themes running across the visuals of billboards at micro and macro levels. While Wang (2014) provides the main practical framework, Visual Grammar by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996, 2001, 2006) and Critical Discourse Analysis by Fairclough (1989, 1995) are the conceptual feeding-streams for the analysis in the current research.

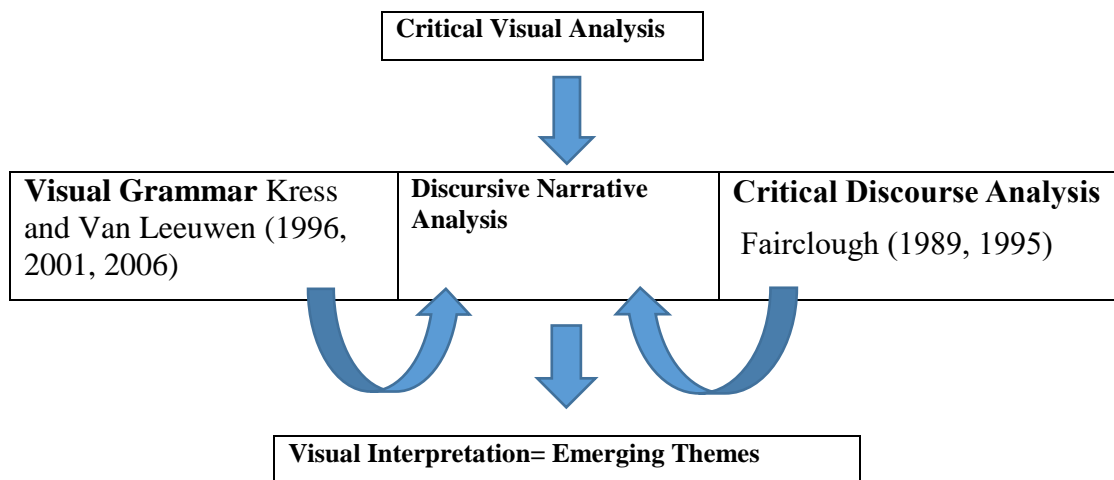


Figure 1: *Practical Framework for the Current Research Created by the Researcher*

Thematic Analysis of Data

The data shows that billboards rely on both linguistic and visual features to advertise; however, the current paper focuses only on visual features exhibited on the selected billboards because the scope of this research paper is limited to only the themes emerging through visuals. The linguistic data is examined

separately under the broader project and the current paper is not concerned with that. As far as the themes found in the data are concerned, following are the recurrent themes:

- a) Claiming Authenticity
- b) Professional Specialization
- c) Metaphor of Wealth
- d) Modality as a Visual Literacy Practice

“Claiming Authenticity” as a Visual Literacy Practice

The first theme that has emerged through the visual narrative analysis of the data exhibited on the billboards of auto-mobile workshops in Pakistan is “Claiming Authenticity”. Yang, S. (2021, P.1) defines authenticity as “capturing and producing photos in a truthful and believable manner within the context. It may involve choosing the appropriate perspective, capturing genuine moments, or creating convincing visual effects”. Dann (1996) also affirms that authenticity means, “producing photos in a truthful and believable manner with in the context”. Being authentic simply means auto-mobile mechanic owners need to stay true to who they are, what they do and what they serve. Authenticity is used as a visual literacy practice in the billboards to attract customers who seek genuine experiences. Authenticity is used to produce visuals in a truthful and believable manner within the context. The authenticity in the billboards creates a convincing visual effect and encourages a client to make a decision to avail the services of the auto-mechanic workshops. Given below are the examples of visuals which claim authenticity as a visual practice:

<p>Example 1: “Claiming authenticity” as a Visual Literacy Practice</p>	<p>Example 2: “Claiming authenticity” as a Visual Literacy Practice</p>
	

Example 1: In this example authenticity is staged to evaluate the genuineness and originality of the objects for the audience. The visuals of all the car brands and logos along with the tools to fix them are staged as authentic. The production of such visuals on the billboards amplifies the fact that the owners/mechanics offer an authentic experience to the target customers. The visuals of the tools encourage the audience to choose this particular workshop to avail the authentic services they offer.

Example 2: In this example instead of creating a visual of a stock photo to persuade the audience the producer has used the authentic photo of a car engine to ensure the credibility of the workshop. The visual on the billboard where mechanics’ hands are shown on the engine of the vehicle reflects the idea of authenticity which makes the experience believable and authentic. This visual on the billboard also contributes to the credibility of the visual branding. Visual content is considered to be the corner stone of

the branding market, thus authenticity as a visual literacy practice persuades the potential customers to be the actual ones.

<p>Example 3: “Claiming authenticity” as a Visual Literacy Practice</p>	<p>Example 4: “Claiming authenticity” as a Visual Literacy Practice</p>
	

The visuals on these two billboard project oils of different brands that stage the authentic experience for the potential customer. The authenticity is staged by producing the images of all the oil brands to ensure the customer that this is the place where they can get what they want. The producer of the visuals has kept the images real instead of using the stock images to persuade the audience. These visuals communicate the authenticity of the service and attract the customers to choose the services.

The examples that are presented from the data under this category show that, on the billboards of Pakistani automobile workshops *authenticity* is claimed as a visual literacy practice that serves as a persuasive marker in making the potential customers to be the real ones.

Professional Specialization

The term *Professional specialization* as used here can be defined as a specialty within a profession. The visuals exhibited on the billboards create the professional specialization of the mechanics. The examples of the visuals found on the billboards indicate that the visuals produced on the billboards support the linguistic claims that are made to persuade the customers by projecting the image of a mechanic as a professional and a specialist.

<p>Example 1: Professional Specialization</p>	<p>Example 2: Professional Specialization</p>	<p>Example 3: Professional Specialization</p>
		

Example 1: In the above example the visual of *Kamani* (leaf spring) is a visual literacy practice that is used to support the linguistic claim that the owner of the workshop is a specialist of making this particular part, leaf spring, of the vehicle. The visuals of logos given at the top left corner co-relate with the image of the leaf spring projecting the professional specialized identity of the mechanic/ owner of the workshop in making and installing leaf spring in certain cars such as Honda, and Suzuki; thus serving as a persuasion for the target audience to choose this place for the service.

Example 2: The visual literacy practice exhibited on this billboard is a visible expression of the creation of professional identity. The image of a digital tool/ device on this billboard creates the identity of the mechanic as a professional specialist in digital examination of the vehicles, and the right person to choose for the EFI services for various kinds of vehicles.



Example 3: The visuals used on this billboard support the linguistic claims made about specialization in computerized wheel alignment and balancing, as well as tyre-changing and steering geometry, They serve as a non- linguistic visual marker to create the mechanic's/ workshop's professional identity as specialization in computerized wheel alignment; and give the target customers a visual message to choose them for the high-end services.

The analysis of examples given in this category confirms that the visual literacy practices employed in creating the billboards serve as markers of the identity of mechanics/ owners as professional specialists consequently persuading the audience/readers/ customers to make a decision on choosing the expert as per their needs.

Metaphor of Wealth

Metaphor of wealth runs as a consistent theme across all the billboards. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) provide an understanding of the dynamics of metaphors. In mapping out metaphors, the two concepts are noted; the 'source domain' and the 'target domain'. The source domain refers to the signifiers and the target domain is what they signify or refer to. A metaphor is persuasive and constructive in representation by reifying, personifying or de-personifying its target concepts. For critical analysis of visual metaphors, Wang (2014) has proposed two levels of reference: identification of the metaphor and analysis of the visual arrangement of the composition. At the identification level visual metaphor of wealth in the images used on the billboards of auto-mechanic workshops in Pakistan can be noted very easily. In the billboards the visual metaphors are socially and psychologically inclined. For examples, the foregrounding of expensive brands such as Land Cruisers and Mercedes on the billboards represents the metaphor of wealth.

Considering the setting of the narrative in the billboards, it is found that the interpretation touches on the social relations that are expressed by the projection of expensive car brands. It shows the social agency of the producer to determine who offers what as expertise, and who gets what as an available service. Visual metaphors operate by persuading the target customers through encoding visual images in the design element of a billboard in terms of the choice of image, the image frame, the angle of the image, size and color etc. The visual metaphors aid the linguistic metaphors so if the language of a billboard claims that the mechanics and owners of a workshop as "specialists" of a high-end brand the image of that car brand aids in creating the metaphor of wealth. At the level of interpretation of the metaphor of wealth, the ideological implication of this metaphor of wealth needs to be seen in the context that the locality selected, for the collection of the sample of these billboards belongs to the lower-middle class and middle- middle class. The use of the metaphor of wealth expresses the desire of the producers (mechanics and owners) to be the part of upper strata of the society. The visual metaphor is further aided by the usage of colors such as white and blue which symbolize tranquility and peace; giving the impression that the said auto mechanic workshop is situated in a peaceful environment where everyone can come and avail the services without any hassle. See for Instance:

Example 1: Metaphor of Wealth	Example 2: Metaphor of Wealth
	

Modality as a Visual Literacy Practice

Modality can be defined as a particular mode or manner in which something exists or is experienced or expressed. When it comes to modality of the visuals on billboards it refers to way they are projected, placed, sized, back-grounded/ foregrounded etc. If we examine the interactive dimension of modality of the images on billboards, we can notice that modality as a visual literacy practice plays a significant role in highlighting the inclination behind the choice to foreground or background an image, or to project an image at the top, bottom or at the sides of a billboard. The images of the cars and vehicles are foregrounded and are given a higher coverage than the tools and services on these billboards. Pictures of expensive high-end cars on the foreground along with the coverage of digital tools serve as the interactive participants and by interacting with the target customers they play a role in persuading them. The type of shot or image framing also contributes to the power relations between the represented participants (owners/ mechanics) and interactive participants (images of vehicles and tools). The interactive process of the linguistic visual communication shows that the images make a direct offer to the target audience and customers to visit the business.

Example 1: Modality as a Visual Literacy Practice	Example 2: Modality as a Visual Literacy Practice	Example 3: Modality as a Visual Literacy Practice
		

All the three images given here clearly show how digital tools are exhibited to communicate certain messages to the target customers. Also, it is important to notice that the logos of different car brands are

foregrounded on the billboards to represent these car brands. See for example the use of logos as persuasive images in the following two billboards:

Example 4: Modality as a Visual Literacy Practice	Example 5: Modality as a Visual Literacy Practice
	

The logos like Nissan, Toyota and Honda imply the idea that the producer wants to target upper class customers. The foregrounding of high-end cars and digital tools implies the ideology that these auto-mechanic workshops are equipped with modern technology and they have the facility to diagnose and repair imported high end cars.

Overall we can say that visual literacy practices are instantiations of socially regulated discourses and ‘the process of production and reception are socially constrained’ (Janks, 1997, P.329). The analysis reveals that the projection modalities in the billboards sever as a visual literacy practice which embeds the social and ideological inclinations. Auto-mobile workshop is the domain which caters the masses from all the social classes; and offer services for cars and vehicles of all brands and varieties. However, in most of the selected billboards, visual of high-end car brands such as Land cruiser, Vigo, Honda, Mercedes etc. are presented that symbolically represent the wealth and status a customer has or aspires to have.

Conclusion

Considering the literacy practices exhibited on the billboards in Pakistan, the billboard advertising of the automobile workshops in Pakistan communicates the social norms, manifests cultural preferences and projects ideologies of the owners/ mechanics and workers of these workshops. The literacy practices used on the billboards are multimodal; where writing combines with the use of symbols, pictures, colors etc. However, the visual aspect of these practices is quite sizeable and very strong when it comes to the communication of messages.

Themes of claiming authenticity, professional specialization, metaphor of wealth, and modality as a visual literacy practice are the major recurring themes found running as a common thread through these visuals. The visuals that are used are quite realistic and claim authenticity of the provision of spare-parts, tools and services as authentic and truthful. Professional specialization is a very frequently recurring theme in the visual data. Through the use of images of specific digital tools, and devices on the billboards the identity of the mechanics as professional specialists for various services such as EFI service, digital examination of the vehicles, making of leaf spring etc. are claimed; and these images reinforce the linguistic claims of being specialists in various areas. As far as the metaphor of wealth is concerned, use of visuals of high-end cars, and logos of high-end vehicle brands makes sense in the socio-cultural context as it indicates the aspirations and inspiration of these lower-middle and middle-middle class

workshop owners/ mechanics to belong to the upper class. Simultaneously they also persuade the potential customers to avail the services of these workshops to be identified as members of the upper class. And, the use of modalities as a visual literacy practice supports this project and persuasion by foregrounding these images, and by selecting certain colours and sizes of these images.

Overall it can be safely concluded that visual literacies exhibited on the billboards of auto-mechanic workshops are not random in nature, selection and projection. In the broader social context they follow certain literacy practices that are tied together through various recurrent themes.

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