ALISA KASIANOVA

University of Pannonia, Hungary
kasianova.alisa@uni-pannon.hu

The pragmatic power of complex visual-verbal code systems in Instagram marketing campaigns of Volkswagen and Škoda

In modern advertising, more attention is paid to motivating customers rather than only persuading them. Moreover, advertisements, especially on social networks, are becoming mostly image-based. Therefore, the purpose of this paper was to analyze the convergence of visual and verbal semiotic codes used in Instagram advertisements and study how it creates the desired pragmatic effect. Rhetorical-semiotic and marketing research methods were applied to analyze semiotic codes of 200 Instagram advertising posts of Volkswagen and Škoda and measure the engagement of the audience. The results demonstrate that the purposeful organization of visual and verbal semiotic codes in advertisements increases customers' participation. Moreover, common ideologies and values underlined in advertisements tend to encourage customers for response. Therefore, the present study proved that modern online advertising can be considered a two-way communication form.

Keywords: advertisement, marketing, semiotic codes, pragmatics, rhetoric

1. Introduction

The language of communication between customers and their audience has always been an important subject of linguistic research (Griffin, 2011; Hanson, 2018; Dyer, 2008). Online advertising can be studied from different perspectives, connecting applied linguistics, communication studies, semiotics, rhetoric, and marketing theories. Even though there is a significant number of works within each discipline, insufficient attention is paid to how both textual and visual elements of an online advertisement create meaningful messages, which is a significant feature of modern advertising (Karpasitis & Varda, 2020). Moreover, social media advertising is a relatively new trend in marketing communications, and there are not many guidelines and recommendations on effective advertising on the Internet. Therefore, the present research aims to focus on social media marketing, and in particular, Instagram advertisements.

1.1. Advertising as a form of communication

Advertising can be viewed as a form of communication between the company and the public. Griffin (2011) defines **communication** as "the relational process of creating and interpreting messages that elicit a response" (Griffin, 2011: 6). Researchers identify several types, or "levels" of communication. According to McQuail (2010), communication can be visualized in the form of a pyramid,

consisting of four major parts: intrapersonal, interpersonal, group, and mass communication, or communication with oneself, with another individual, with a group of people, and with the public respectively. Advertising refers to the last level of the pyramid. Traditionally, this channel of communication provided limited opportunities for feedback (Hanson, 2018). However, the rapid growth of technologies allows using interactive networks of communication.

Griffin (2011: 7) refers to communication as "crossroads discipline" because it involves not only written or spoken texts but also non-verbal messages. This feature is especially evident in Instagram advertisements, since this social network became primarily image-based. The academic terms for describing visual communication were introduced only in the second part of the twentieth century. At that time, the role of electronic technologies significantly increased, making visual communication dominant over print (Newman & Ogle, 2019). This process can be referred to as the pictorial turn (Mitchel, 1994). In the present research, visual communication will be narrowed to visual rhetoric and semiotics.

In order to study rhetorical and semiotic characteristics of online advertisements, it is necessary to understand the exact meaning of advertising. Dibb et al (1994: 386) gives the following definition of advertising:

> *A paid form of non-personal communication about the organization and its products that is transmitted to a target audience through a mass medium, such as television, radio, newspapers, magazines, direct mail, public transport, outdoor displays, or catalogues.*

The present study focuses on social media advertising in particular, which is described as explicit (e.g. banner advertising) and implicit (e.g. fan pages) forms of advertising on social media platforms (Taylor *et al.*, 2011). Social media advertising is characterized by flexibility of combining text and graphic elements, such as pictures and signs, in one advertisement. For example, advertising posts on Instagram allow sharing multiple or singling photographs or videos with or without explanatory text (Fisher, 2019). The effect of an advertisement is defined by the interaction of its visual and verbal elements, one contributing to the meaning of another. This and other functions of the advertising message will be discussed further in the framework of rhetoric.

1.2. Traditional and visual rhetoric in advertising

Rhetoric is one of the most widespread perspectives of studying advertising in terms of its effect on the audience. Aristotle referred to rhetoric as art and defined it as the ability to use available means of persuasion in a particular situation (Griffin, 2011). The functions of rhetoric, however, are not limited to persuasion. For example, Griffin's (2011) "public rhetoric" refers to the speaking context, where the rhetor can observe the audience's response and take it into

consideration. In the context of social media, the company can receive customers' feedback through their engagement, such as the number of "likes."

The present study incorporates the concepts of both traditional and visual rhetoric. Within traditional rhetoric, it is necessary to mention the role of tropes and schemes, which serve for expression and persuasion of the message (Toye, 2013). According to Jasinski (2001: 257), the term "trope" can be defined as "any figure that changes the normal, literal, or conventional meaning of a word or a series of words." Some of the most common tropes include synecdoche (part-to-whole and whole-to-part relationships), hyperbole (exaggeration), irony (the conflict between the tone of the message and the real nature of the situation), and metaphor (implicit comparison) (Enos, 2010). As for schemes, they are used to organize words in a way to enhance their effect, emphasize certain meanings, or even highlight a message visually (Jasinski, 2010). Some of the most common schemes in advertising include alliteration, hyperbole, rhyme, repetition, and rhetorical question (Michalik & Michalska-Suchanek (2016).

Visual rhetoric can be viewed as a branch of traditional rhetoric since it studies the relationship between visual images and persuasion (Aiello & Parry, 2019). It can be referred to as a system of signs like any other type of communication. However, within this discipline, an image must be symbolic and is supposed to be indirectly connected with its signified (Foss, 2005). Visual rhetoric implies any kind of human interaction, such participation of humans in the process of creating an image or interpreting it. Finally, visual elements are arranged by rhetor for the purpose of communication with an audience (Davis & Hunt, 2017). Therefore, visual rhetoric, together with traditional rhetorical concepts, plays an essential role in creating the necessary pragmatic effect of an advertisement.

1.3. Semiotics of advertising

In advertising, it is especially important to create meaningful messages, so that the audience understands the ideas the company suggests, and an advertisement has a desired effect. Meanings and their aspects are studied in the framework of **semiotics**, or the study of signs (Posner *et al.,* 2004; Chandler, 2017). According to Umberto Eco, semiotics "is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign" (Eco, 1976: 7). Moriarty (2005: 227) also emphasizes the role of sign systems, or codes: "semiotics is the study of signs and codes, signs that are used in producing, conveying, and interpreting messages and the codes that govern their use." Therefore, special attention will be paid to how meaning is created through signs and code systems.

Traditionally, semiotics is divided into **syntax, semantics,** and **pragmatics**. Syntax is the branch focusing on the relations between signs (Chandler, 2017). Semantics studies signs in terms of their meaning and approaches meanings out of context, without considering speakers' intentions (Kortmann, 2020). As for

pragmatics, it is defined as "subdiscipline which is concerned with the relationship between signs and their users" (Kortmann, 2020: 173). Pragmatics is focused on both linguistic and non-linguistic context of signs and considers the intentions of an individual creating a message (Oswald, 2020). Consequently, the pragmatic approach would be the most appropriate in studying the effect of advertisements on the public.

A **code** is another fundamental concept in the present paper. Codes can be described as sign systems, ensuring the production and interpretation of a message: they provide "a framework within which signs make sense" (Chandler, 2017: 178). Another definition suggests that a code is "a set of rules (formula, ritual, genre) for usage or behavior, either stated or unstated" (Moriarty, 2005: 235). It is possible to say that codes define the way people perceive signs.

The present research is based on Chandler's (2017) taxonomy of codes because it considers codes from the point of knowledge they represent. First of all, **interpretive codes** are associated with the way people perceive reality. For example, a photograph is a perceptional code, which demonstrates how sensory information is transformed from the real world to digital signs. Ideological interpretive codes, by definition, imply the interpretation of signs from the perspective of certain ideology, such as conservatism or liberalism (Chandler, 2017).

Social codes can be described as sets of conventions regulating the social sphere of life. Verbal language is one of the examples of social codes: for example, by analyzing the lexicon, it can be possible to define if an individual belongs to an upper class or working class of society. Other constructs of social identity may include clothing, hairstyle, work, hobbies, and preferred methods of transportation (Chandler, 2017).

Finally, **representational codes** refer to conventions of form and style of various texts and genres, regardless of their medium. For example, mass media as a representational code may dictate many social norms, referring to class, gender, and age. Other examples of representational codes are genre, which regulates the form and content of a text belonging to it, and aesthetic codes, referring to how art represents reality (Chandler, 2017). This taxonomy of codes will be used as a foundation for rhetorical-semiotic analysis of advertisements.

1.4. Advertising and Marketing Theories

Social media marketing can be considered entire discipline studying effective advertising messages in the context of social media platforms (Maingi, 2014). An important task of marketers is to define what style and content of posts are the most attractive for the audience of different social networks (Koontz & Mon, 2014). Instagram is the bright example of an increasing importance of visual images. Moreover, according to Graham (2019), the degree of the audience's engagement on Instagram is higher, compared to Facebook. Therefore, this social

platform is considered the most appropriate for both start-ups and large companies.

In order to measure the impact of online advertisements, it is possible to use social media metrics. Koontz & Mon (2014) identify two ways of measuring the involvement of users on the Internet: **visibility** and **influence** analysis. Visibility refers to customers' interactions, such as the number of likes, comments, and reshares on Facebook or "tweets" on Twitter (Koontz & Mon, 2014). Influence measures are connected with the extent to which the posted content is reshared or reblogged. Combining these methods together, it is possible to adapt the company's advertising posts to its needs and achieve the desired effect on the audience.

It is possible to notice the connection between all major concepts and theories of linguistics and the sphere of marketing. For example, both syntax and rhetorical schemes deal with structure and organization (Barbatsis, 2005). Semantics, focusing on signs and their meanings, can be associated with rhetorical tropes, which are interpreted through semiotic codes (Jasinski, 2001; Sloan, 2001). Finally, pragmatics of social media advertisements can be related to their rhetorical effect on the audience. The relationship between these concepts is demonstrated by Figure 1.

Figure 1. The relationship between semiotic and rhetorical concepts
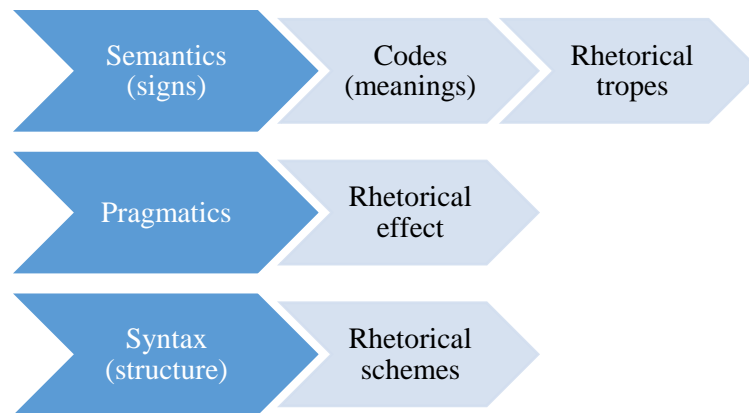
The present study focuses on the convergence of semiotic codes in Instagram advertising posts of two large automobile companies - Volkswagen and Škoda Auto (hereinafter - Škoda). The use of codes will be analyzed based on Chandler's classification (interpretive, social, and representational) and according to their type (visual and verbal). Semiotics of advertising as a research topic became more frequent in the era of new technologies and the development of mass media. For example, Damayanti *et al.* (2021) studied the advertisement of Mentos on the YouTube platform from the point of semiotics. The researchers analyzed how visual and verbal signs create meaning to persuade and influence the audience. According to the results of the study, visual and verbal elements converge to transfer an implicit message to the audience. The authors emphasize that by using

verbal and visual codes, the advertiser draws customers' attention to the advantages of the product, which influences their decision to purchase it (Damayanti *et al*., 2021).

Another research conducted within the areas of communication, semiotics, and rhetoric was aimed at identifying the role of visual metaphors in financial advertising (Bargenda, 2015). The study proved that marketers frequently use both visual and verbal signs to influence the collective sense-making. For example, a verbal metaphor can be enhanced by a visual picture. Moreover, the researcher found that nowadays, bank advertisements are customer-oriented and often depict real-life situations (Bargenda, 2015).

The mentioned studies demonstrated the role of semiotics and rhetorics in advertising and confirmed the increasing significance of visual communication in marketing. However, less attention is paid to the meaning that the code conveys rather than to its visual or verbal representation. Moreover, it is important that modern advertisements are aimed to motivate customers for action rather than only persuade. Therefore, the aim of the present study is to define how the convergence of semiotic codes creates the necessary pragmatic effect of social media advertisements.

The objectives of the research are as follows:
1) To analyze Instagram advertising posts of two automobile companies in terms of the use of interpretive, social, and representational semiotic codes.
2) To analyze the use and organization of visual and verbal elements of advertisements.
3) To study the broader context of the advertising messages.

2. Methodology

2.1. Random Sampling

Random sampling is widely used in quantitative studies: it allows constructing a database of samples, which are selected randomly from the total variety of potential data (Manovich, 2020). The data collection process included selecting and analyzing advertisement posts of two automobile companies: Škoda Auto, based in Czech Republic, and a German company Volkswagen. The posts were chosen randomly, with the frequency of approximately 2 posts per week for each company. It is important to mention that even though Škoda Auto is a separate brand, this company is owned by the Volkswagen Group Corporation. Therefore, the present study can demonstrate if the companies follow similar marketing strategies due to their business connection or if they adhere to individual advertising solutions.

In total, 200 advertising posts (100 advertisements per a company) were taken from the Instagram accounts of Škoda and Volkswagen (https://www.instagram.com/Škodagram/ and https://www.instagram.com/

volkswagen/ respectively). The posts were collected within the period of 13 months, from January 1, 2020 to January 31, 2021, through random sampling.

2.2. Rhetorical-semiotic analysis. Chandler's taxonomy of codes

The selected advertisements of Škoda and Volkswagen were analyzed from the point of semiotics and rhetoric. In this research, Chandler's (2017) taxonomy of codes was used as the basis for analyzing verbal and non-verbal elements of each post. According to his classification, the following types of codes were identified in Instagram campaigns of Volkswagen and Škoda:

1. Interpretive codes: ideological codes, reflecting fundamental ideas and theories. Perceptual codes referring to the medium of perception were excluded from the analysis because they are mostly connected to sensory experiences, which do not play a significant role in creating meaning.

2. Social codes:
   • verbal language (phonological, lexical, and syntactical choices of marketers);
   • bodily codes (appearance, facial expression, gestures, proximity, posture);
   • commodity codes (fashion, cars, clothing);
   • other codes interpreting socially important signs.
   3. Representational codes:
   • scientific codes;
   • aesthetic codes, related to the aesthetics of a photograph;
   • genre and style.

The rhetorical approach includes the analysis of various rhetorical devices used in the advertisements to persuade the public and encourage them for action (Bell *et al.,* 2018). Special attention was paid to textual and visual tropes and schemes.

2.3. Critical discourse analysis

Critical discourse analysis was used as a method of studying the relation of the text to the broader context (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). The definition of discourse was formulated by Tannen *et al.* (2015: 1), who describe it as: "(1) anything beyond the sentence, (2) language use, and (3) a broader range of social practice that includes non-linguistic and non-specific instances of language." This method was connected to the analysis of ideological codes used in advertising campaigns of Škoda and Volkswagen. Each post was evaluated from the point of values and ideas encoded in them and going beyond the context of social media.

2.4. Social Media Metrics

Since the aim of the present research is to identify the pragmatic effects of social media advertisements, social media metrics were used to measure the degree of customers' engagement. Previously, visibility analysis was described as one of the ways to measure the audience's involvement. According to Koontz & Mon

(2014), visibility refers to how active followers demonstrate their engagement through liking and resharing the company's content.

On Instagram, customers' engagement is shown through the number of likes under each post. Liking can be considered sufficient for visibility analysis because it both demonstrates that the post attracted the audience's attention and encourages them to communicate their approval through liking. The number of likes for each of 200 advertising posts was identified and compared. The average number of likes per a post was calculated for each company as a benchmark for evaluating the effectiveness of advertisements.

3. Results and Discussion
3.1. Semiotic codes in Volkswagen's advertising campaign
3.1.1. Interpretive codes

The analysis of Volkswagen's advertising campaign demonstrated that interpretive (ideological) codes have been used in 41 cases, or 41% of the total number of the company's analyzed advertisements. Each randomly chosen post within the specified period was studied in terms of verbal and visual elements referring to social values, beliefs, and philosophies. Special attention was paid to "-isms," as identified in Chandler's taxonomy (such as conservatism, liberalism, etc.). Some posts reflected two different ideologies at the same time. The most common ideologies of Volkswagen are presented by Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. Ideologies of Volkswagen
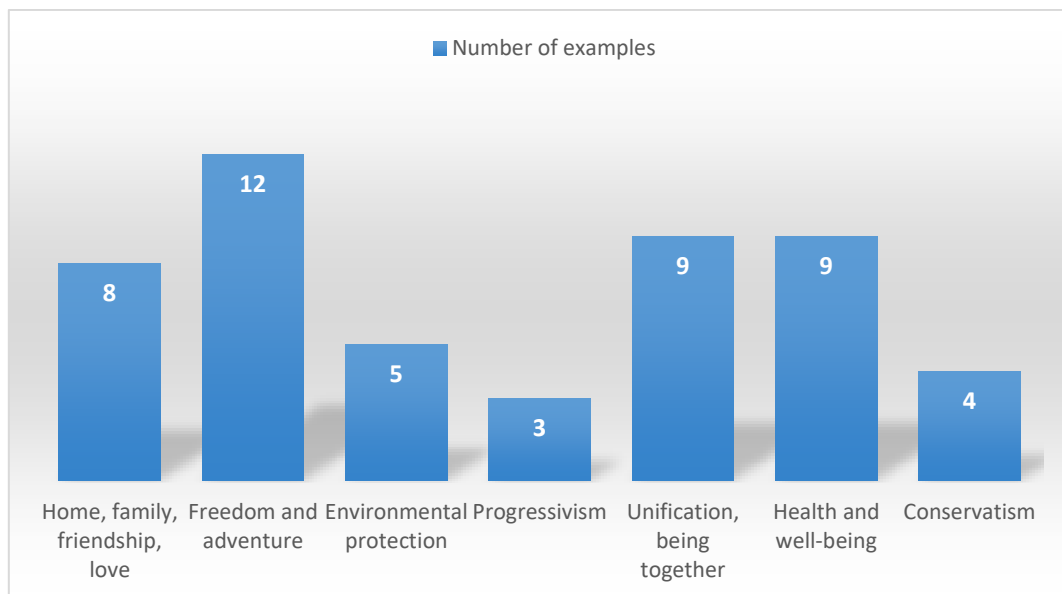
The ideology of freedom and adventure was the most frequent, totaling 12 examples. It can be explained by the fact that an automobile is usually associated with discoveries, being able to travel to different places, drive at high speed and experience positive emotions from fast driving (Pimenta & Piato, 2016). It

explains the frequent use of the following verbal ideological codes: hashtags #colourfullife, #lifestyle, #lights, epithets with a positive connotation, such as "colourful," and the words "freedom," "travel," "new experiences," and "adventure." As for visual elements, photographs often included scenic landscapes and automobiles in motion, signifying freedom and speed. The ideology of freedom is demonstrated by Picture 1.

Picture 1. Ideology of adventure (Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CFw-6bKhLK1/)

By introducing the ideology of family, home, and friendship, Volkswagen implies that these concepts are the priority of the company. The value for family and friendship creates a positive brand image. The most common verbal ideological codes used by marketers included the concepts of love, home, and safety mentioned in the image description (see Picture 2). Moreover, verbal codes, such as hashtags #home, #staysafe, #familymember, #happiness, and #couplegoals signify safety and love as Volkswagen's core values.

Picture 2. Ideology of family and home (Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CJ6TqmzK2Xg/)

The next major ideology can be considered new in advertising, since it is directly connected to the current situation in the world. The outbreak of Covid-19 influenced the marketing strategy of Volkswagen. For a certain period of time, approximately from March to May 2020, the company's advertising posts mostly reflected the ideas of taking care of each other, protecting health, and keeping social distance. For example, the company frequently used hashtags #WeNotMe, #stayhome, #socialdistancing, #takecare, and #keepdistance. An important visual feature of such posts is that automobiles were not shown on the city streets, reflecting the recommendation to stay at home. By attracting users' attention to an essential global problem, the company demonstrates its accountability and concern for the well-being of its audience rather than profit-making (Moon, 2014). In some cases, the company did not use any decorative visual elements in the picture to focus the attention of the audience to the verbal message. For example, one of the posts consisted of the company's logo and a phrase "Thank you for keeping your social distance" on a plain background. In this verbal message visible and clear for the audience, the company underlined the importance of following the healthcare regulations during the pandemic.

Marketing measurements demonstrate that in general, advertisements encoding fundamental concepts and meanings lead to a more active response from the audience. The average number of likes that a Volkswagen's advertisement receives can be estimated at **29875**. Posts reflecting the idea of adventure were liked **31578** times on average, and advertisements related to the pandemic received **35559** likes. On the contrary, advertisements emphasizing family, home, and love as the company's priority values received the average of **25134** likes. These results confirm that current global issues attract attention of the public and lead to their increased involvement.

3.1.2. Social codes

In Chandler's (2017) classification, social codes combine various features and patterns of behavior, including verbal language, commodity codes (such as automobiles, clothes, hairstyles, etc.) and bodily codes (such as proximity, facial expression, and gestures), among others. These attributes shape the social identity of a person and may demonstrate social relationships between people.

Verbal codes are the verbal language used by the company to communicate with customers, convince them, and encourage for action. The feature of Volkswagen was that the company addressed customers directly by using questions or imperative expressions. Picture 3 shows that the company interacts with customers by asking them to "tag" a person they would like to go on a trip with.

Picture 3. Company's interaction with the public (Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CI3Yu8rqtgP/)

All verbal and visual elements underlying the attractiveness of the brand, its style, prestige, and important attributes, were considered commodity codes. For example, verbal codes included hashtags (e.g. #menstyle) and expressive descriptions of the automobile, such as metaphors "classic elegance" and "industrial chick." Among visual codes, there were fashionable and colorful clothes of people depicted in advertisements, which referred to a stylish and vivid lifestyle associated with the brand. The logo of the company was also commonly used to attract the audience's attention to the brand. Finally, bodily codes can be described as facial expressions and poses of people in Volkswagen's posts. For example, the idea of happiness, excitement, and movement could be rendered through the image of a smiling and jumping person.

Social codes, such as language choice, hashtags, bodily codes, and commodity signs, mostly served to emphasize the essential qualities of the brand. Together, they create an image of an automobile as a synonym for style, prestige and movement. Verbal and visual elements of the advertisement, as well as bodily codes of people depicted in the photograph, signify that owning Volkswagen is associated with positive emotions and that this brand stands out among its competitors.

3.1.3. Representational codes

In Chandler's taxonomy of codes, representational codes are described as signs of style, content, and form of any text. They provide an access to reality and help interpret the encoded concepts, beliefs, and values. In the analysis of Volkswagen's posts, all verbal and visual elements related to the settings of the picture, colors, lines, and style of both visual image and its textual description were considered representational codes and were analyzed according to their contribution to the overall meaning of the post.

The analyzed advertisements contained the following verbal codes:

1. Hashtags referring to the settings, atmosphere, and style of the advertisement, such as #streetstyle, #lights, #countdowntochristmas, #winter, #snow, #sunset, #design.
2. Scientific code: the description of the technical characteristics of the automobile, such as fuel consumption, CO_2 emissions, and efficiency rating.
3. Other phrases and descriptions referring to the style and atmosphere of the advertisement: "Street style", "Snow fun", "Winter trip", "City lights."

Many of visual representational codes were connected to the overall style and settings of the post. For example, the company paid special attention to the colors used in photographs. The choice of bright colors may serve for rendering positive emotions associated with owning a Volkswagen car. A significant role of color in conveying meaning can be exemplified through picture 4. Bright colors of the car and people's clothes are associated with the concept of adventure and "going outside," while the grey color of the house signifies the boredom of staying at home.

Picture 4. The role of colors (Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CJtbtlXqAC8/)

Besides color, marketers used unusual alignment and style of an advertisement as representational devices. For example, posts related to Covid did not depict cars, rendering the idea of staying at home. In marketing, this strategy is referred to as corporate social responsibility. It means that during difficult times, the company's commitment to its customers and their health is more important than sales (Ganesan *et al.,* 2019; Moon, 2014). In general, such posts received the biggest number of likes, significantly exceeding the average number.

Other representational techniques included depicting cars in motion to demonstrate speed and emotions. Moreover, the company could use specific focus to highlight different elements of the photograph. In conclusion, in a

combination with interpretive and social codes, representational codes were used to emphasize the essential verbal, visual, and other contextual elements of the advertisement, which are significant for the overall meaning.

3.2. Semiotic codes in Škoda's advertising campaign

3.2.1. Interpretive codes

Analogically to Volkswagen's analyzed posts, Škoda's marketing solutions were studied from the point of semiotic codes and rhetorical tropes. The analysis of interpretive codes aimed to identify ideologies encoded in Škoda's advertising messages. The results demonstrated that only 30% of analyzed advertisements contained values and ideas that could be identified as ideologies. Figure 3 includes the most common ideologies in Škoda's advertising campaign.

Figure 3. Ideologies of Škoda
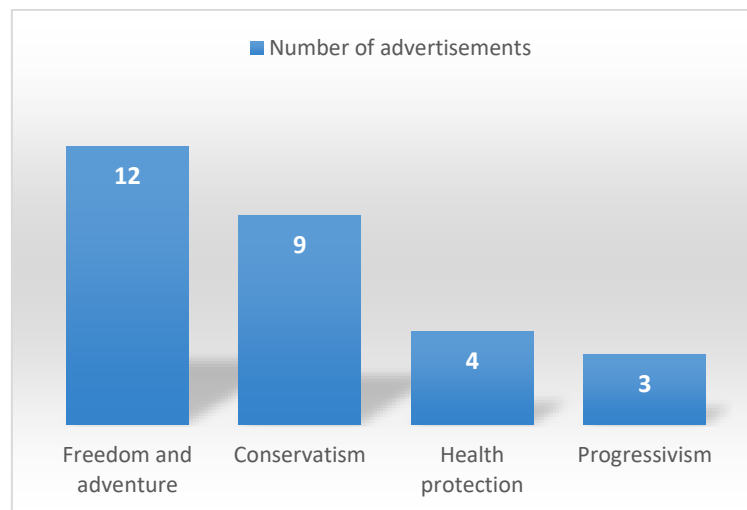
Similarly to Volkswagen, Škoda emphasized freedom and adventure as the attributes of the automobile. Verbal interpretive elements of advertising posts included encouraging phrases and rhetorical questions appealing to the audience, such as "Ready to rock?" and "Go where your curiosity takes you." Visual codes included depicting motion, scenic landscapes, and roads outside the city.

Conservatism became the second major ideology of Škoda and was demonstrated in 9 advertisements. It can be explained by the fact that in 2020, Škoda celebrated its 125th anniversary in the automobile industry. In order to mark this important date, the company frequently posted advertisements depicting vintage models of cars and formatted as 20th century photographs. Such posts were often accompanied by hashtags #125years, #ŠKODA125, #ŠKODAanniversary, #125yearsofŠKODA, and #ŠKODA125years, as well as descriptions, where the company expressed its commitment to its traditions and history.

Similarly to Volkswagen, Škoda could not ignore the challenging pandemic situation that affected different realms of life. In terms of verbal interpretive codes, the company used hashtags #flattenthecurve, #staysafe, #stayhealthy, #stayhome, #inthistogether, #together, #quarantine, #covid19, #coronavirus, and #WeNotMe.

It is interesting to note how the company rendered the idea of health protection through the visual metaphor created with the help of textual codes. Picture 5 demonstrates two automobiles on the road. The textual element "Mind the gap" in the upper middle part of the picture, as well as pandemic-related hashtags, help the audience associate the space between cars to the idea of keeping a social distance. Therefore, Škoda's advertisements related to Covid-19 can also be considered examples of corporate social responsibility.

Picture 5. Ideology of health protection. (Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/B-o3gCSnK3x/)

The analysis of the number of likes showed that advertisements reflecting ideologies and fundamental values received different response from the audience. The average number of likes for Škoda's posts is estimated at **6190**. Table 1 demonstrates that the audience was especially attracted to the idea of adventure as the company's major value and the pandemic situation.

Table 1. Users' reaction to Škoda's ideologies.

Ideology	Average number of likes
Freedom and adventure	6260
Health protection	6233
Conservatism	4649

3.2.2. Social Codes

The verbal language used by the company was analyzed from the point of syntax and lexical choices. The noticeable feature of Škoda's advertising campaign is an active interaction with a customer through questions and motivating expressions. For example, in one of the posts, the company asked users to name the model of Škoda in the picture (see Picture 6). It is possible to notice similarities with some

of Volkswagen's advertisements, where the company also addressed users directly.

Picture 6. Interaction with customers. (Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CEOyUATnjfY/)

Commodity codes used by Škoda referred to the essential attributes and the image of the brand. For example, textual descriptions "Breathe a little color into your life" and "Brighten up your world with something special" refer to the excitement and positive emotions connected to driving. At the same time, this feature of the brand did not result in a significant participation of the audience: the posts received **4449** and **5757** likes respectively. Other attributes underlined in textual descriptions posts were the attractive style of the car (e.g. "what a view") and its technical capacities (e.g. "power, elegance, sustainability," "progressively self-confident"). As for visual commodity codes, the company frequently attracted customers' attention to the brand through its logos.

The photographs posted as a part of advertisements did not depict people (except for several posts); therefore, bodily codes and related sets of signs (for example, fashion) were excluded from the analysis.

3.2.3. Representational codes

The major difference between the analyzed posts of Volkswagen and Škoda is that the latter did not use many hashtags contributing to the settings and style of the whole advertisement. Instead, marketers paid attention to the focus, perspective, colors, alignment of visual images, and other visual elements of a photograph.

Picture 7 demonstrates the effective use of perspective and angle as a tool of visual rhetoric. In the photograph, the car is shown from above, as if the viewer is watching the automobile from the cover. The style of the picture, its textual description, and the frame formed by the tree leaves contribute to the idea that the viewer is secretly admiring the car. Moreover, the phrase "You are not alone" signifies the popularity of this automobile brand.

Picture 7. The use of perspective in an advertisement post. (Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CBqD4sAHfmu/)

Picture 8 can be considered an example of the narrative advertising style as a representational code. The advertisement consists of three photographs in the carousel and refers to the idea of freedom and unlimited opportunities offered by the company. In the first picture, the audience can see an incomplete phrase "The only thing limited…," which is continued in the next picture: "is the edition". Since only the beginning of the phrase is visible, it attracts the attention of the audience and encourages users to swipe to see its continuation.

Picture 8. Narrative advertising style. (Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CHdCfDjHfwR/)
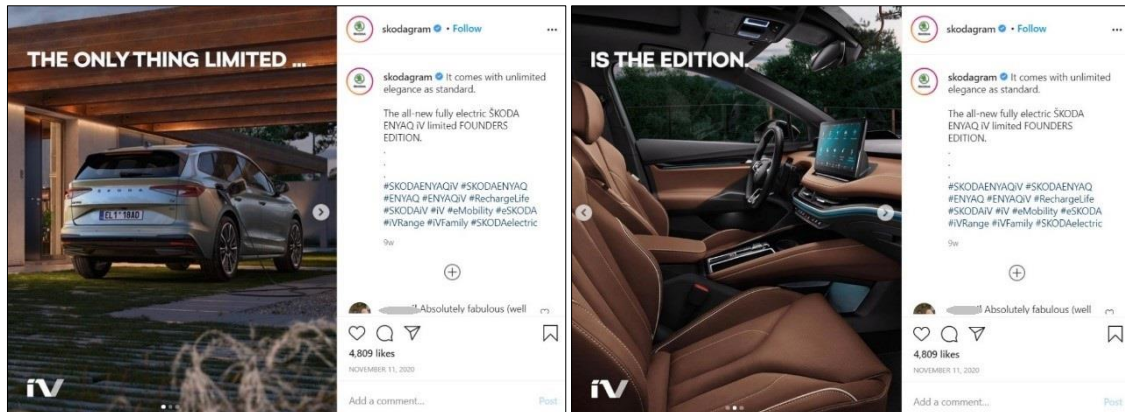
An example of effective alignment can be found in Picture 9. In this post, it is possible to see a row of cars parked in the same position, which, in terms of visual rhetoric, can be called parallelism. The similar direction and model of the cars allow associating them with a column of march; therefore, the metaphor "the full fleet" was used in the post description. This advertisement was liked **7576** times.

Picture 9. The use of alignment. (Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/CDBin6enSIF/)


An important representational feature of Škoda's advertisements is the division of the same photograph into separate pictures in the carousel. Such strategy allows marketers to show the image in more detail and create an impression of the width of the photograph. For example, in the textual description of one of the advertisements, the company addresses the audience asking "Which half do you prefer?" and encourages users to swipe to the next picture. However, the post received a relatively small number of likes (**6082**).

It is possible to conclude that not all visual rhetorical tools could increase customers' involvement. The change of style and narration were the most effective; however, visual metaphors did not increase customers' participation.

3.3. Statistical summary

The analysis of 200 advertisements of Škoda and Volkswagen demonstrated the similar use of the combinations of semiotic codes. In most cases, the companies used social and representational codes together (in 59% of Volkswagen's in 70% of Škoda's analyzed posts). Less frequently, Volkswagen and Škoda advertisements contained all three types of codes (in 28% and 20% of analyzed cases respectively) and the combination of interpretive and representational codes (in 13% and 10% of analyzed cases respectively). Despite these similarities, the companies use different strategies to represent these codes. For example, Volkswagen actively uses hashtags, while Škoda pays more attention to the narrative style and metaphorical language of posts.

Customers' engagement differed according to the combination of semiotic codes used in a post. The average number of likes for each combination was compared to the total number of likes (**6190** for Škoda and **29875** for Volkswagen). The results are demonstrated by Figure 4.

Figure 4. The average number of likes in relation to the combination of semiotic codes
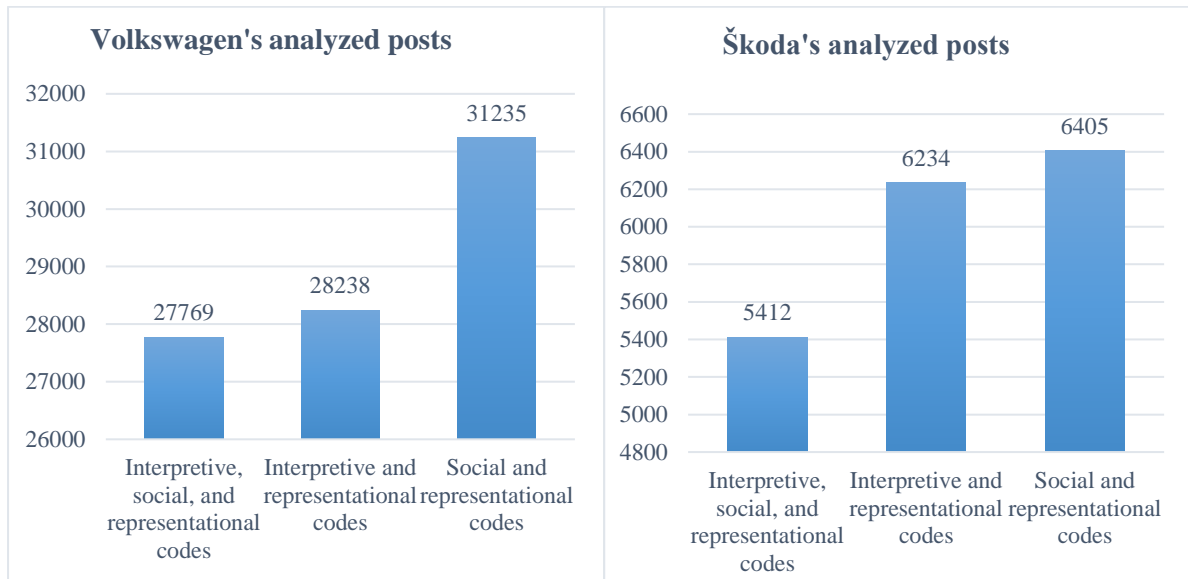
The statistical analysis proves that the presence of ideologies and social values in advertisements significantly increases the audience's participation, which corresponds to the results of some of the previous studies (Bargenda, 2015). Since both companies are global players, it was necessary for them to consider customers' values and desires and respond to the changes happening in the world. According to the theory of corporate social responsibility, this strategy improves the prestige of the company and positively influences customers' decisions, which is crucial in the case of globally known companies (Ganesan *et al.,* 2019). Besides, for car dealers, it is important to emphasize significant attributes and values associated with the automobile (social commodity codes). This is why in many advertisements, the attention was drawn to the style, design, and sustainability of the car, its prestigious image and the status in society it gives its owner.

These findings confirm that the focus of social media advertising is to stimulate the audience for action rather than persuade. The present research illustrated that even small details of an advertisement, such as hashtags and matching colors, may convey a significant message. As it was emphasized in previous research, such as Bargenda's (2015) and Damayanti et al.'s (2021) studies, verbal and visual elements of an advertisement are interconnected in a purposeful manner to create meaning and influence customers' decision-making. Finally, the marketing solutions of the two companies follow a similar pattern, which can be explained by their business connections. However, in terms of specific advertising tools, each enterprise uses its unique ways of increasing customers' engagement.

4. Conclusion

The results show that first of all, both Škoda and Volkswagen tend to pay attention to the broader context. As globally known companies, they need to demonstrate concern for the desires and needs of their customers. By addressing important social issues and values, marketers tried to encourage people for action rather than only persuade them to buy the product. Secondly, the rhetorical-semiotic analysis demonstrated that semiotic codes used in each advertisement cannot be considered separately. Marketers use particular verbal and visual elements of an advertisement on purpose: they exist simultaneously and converge to create meaning. For example, a textual description of the post can help interpret the meaning of a visual image, or vice versa; converging, they can also create rhetorical tropes, such as a metaphor. The message of the company encoded through interpretive, social, and representational codes, is what attracts users and stimulates their involvement.

These findings illustrate that in today's image-based advertising, the most significant effect on the audience is achieved when a company uses different elements of an advertisement in a purposeful way. The meaning created by the convergence of codes, especially if it reflects socially important issues and values, increases customers' participation and contributes to the success of the company's marketing campaign.

References

Aiello, G. & Parry, K. (2019). *Visual communication: Understanding images in media culture.* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Barbatsis, G. (2005). A textual analysis of political television ads. In: Smith, K., Moriarty, S., Barbatsis, G. & Kenney, K. (Eds.) *Handbook of visual communication: Theory, methods, and media.* Mahaw, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates 295–314.

Bargenda, A. (2015). Sense-making in financial communication: Semiotic vectors and iconographic strategies in banking advertising. *Studies in Communication Sciences 15/1*. 93–102. doi:10.1016/j.scoms.2015.01.001

Bell, E., Bryman, A. & Harley, B. (2018). *Business research methods* (5th ed.). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Chandler, D. (2017). *Semiotics: The basics*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Damayanti, N. P. W., Santika, I. D. A. D. M. & Eka, D. P. (2021). Semiotic analysis of Mentos advertisement. *Humanis 25/3*. 259-268.

Davis, M. & Hunt, J. (2017). *Visual communication design: An introduction to design concepts in everyday experience.* New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Dibb, S., Simkin, L., Pride, W. & Ferrell, O. (1994). Marketing: Concepts and strategies (2nd ed.). Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin

Dyer, G. (2008). *Advertising as communication*. London, UK: Routledge.

Eco, U. (1976). *A theory of semiotics*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University.

Enos, T. (Ed, 2010). *Encyclopedia of rhetoric and composition: Communication from ancient times to the information age*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Foss, S.K. (2005). Theory of visual rhetoric. In: Smith, K., Moriarty, S., Barbatsis, G. & Kenney, K. (Eds.) *Handbook of visual communication: Theory, methods, and media*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. 141–152.

Fisher, G. (2019). *Social media marketing mastery*. New York, NY: AC Publishing.

Ganesan, D., Francina, V. J. & Rameshkumaar, V. P. (2019). Effectiveness of corporate responsibility advertising messages of automobile companies among audience perception. *Technology, 10/2.* 934-941.

Graham, M. (2019). *Social media marketing 2019: 30 powerful strategies to become an influencer for billions of people on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn and others.* New York, NY: Vaclav Vrbensky.

Griffin, E. (2011). *A first look at communication theory* (8th ed.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Hanson, R.E. (2018). *Mass communication: Living in a media world.* New York, NY: SAGE.

Jasinski, J. (2001). Sourcebook on rhetoric. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Karpasitis, C. & Varda, C. (Eds, 2020). *ECSM 2020 8th European conference on social media.* Academic Conferences and publishing limited.

Koontz, C. & Mon, L. (2014). *Marketing and social media: A guide for libraries, archives, and museums.* London, UK: Rowman & Littlefield.

Kortmann, B. (2020). *English linguistics: Essentials* (2nd ed.). London, UK: Springer Nature.

Manovich, L. (2020). *Cultural analytics.* London, UK: MIT Press.

McQuail, D. (2010). *McQuail's mass communication theory* (6th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Moon, J. (2014). *Corporate social responsibility: A very short introduction.* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Moriarty, S. (2005). Visual semiotics theory. In: Smith, K. et al. (Eds.) *Handbook of visual communication: Theory, methods, and media*. Mahaw, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. 227-242.

Maingi, K. (2014). *Online Marketing and its critical success factors.* Munich, Germany: GRIN Verlag.

Michalik, U. & Michalska-Suchanek, M. (2016). The persuasive function of rhetoric in advertising slogan. *Journal of Accounting and Management* 6/1. 45–58.

Mitchell W. J. T. (1994). *Picture theory. Essays on verbal and visual representation.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Newman, M. & Ogle, D. (2019). *Visual literacy: Reading, thinking, and communicating with visuals.* Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Oswald, L.R. (2020). *Doing semiotics: A research guide for marketers at the edge of culture.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Pimenta, M. L. & Piato, É. L. (2016). Cognitive relationships between automobile attributes and personal values. *Asia Pacific Journal of Marketing and Logistics 28/5.* 841–861. doi:10.1108/apjml-09-2015-0147

Posner, R., Robering, K. & Sebeok, T.A. (2004). *Semiotics.* Berlin, Germany: Walter de Gruyter.

Sloane, T. (2001). *Encyclopedia of rhetoric.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Smith, K., Moriarty, S., Barbatsis, G. & Kenney, K. (Eds, 2005). *Handbook of visual communication: Theory, methods, and media.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Tannen, D., Hamilton, H. E. & Schiffrin, D. (Eds, 2015). *The handbook of discourse analysis.* Oxford, UK: Wiley Blackwell.

Taylor, D.G., Lewin, J.E. & Strutton, D, (2011). Friends, fans, and followers: Do ads work on social networks? How gender and age shape receptivity. Journal of Advertising Research 51/1. 258–275,

Toye, R. (2013). *Rhetoric: A very short introduction. Oxford*, UK: OUP Oxford.

Wodak, R. & Meyer, M. (Eds, 2009). *Methods for critical discourse analysis (2nd ed.).* Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.