

THE CONCEPT OF FIRE IN CONTEMPORARY ADVERTISING

Alexandra Georgiana Sălcianu

Lecturer, PhD, National University of Science and Technology "Politehnica" Bucharest

Abstract: Due to digital development, which imposed the relocation of ads in the online sphere, competition on the advertising market has grown more and more lately. Therefore, the display of symbols in commercials is one of the techniques advertisers use to gain the public's attention and, eventually, its sympathy. In this paper, one eternal symbol, well known from ancient times and shared by numerous countries over the entire humankind has been chosen – the symbol of fire – to illustrate how it has been and how it is perceived in society and mostly in contemporary advertising. In the paper, its adjoining meanings (past and present) are discussed and exemplified, with a focus on the hats fire wears in nowadays' digital advertising.

Keywords: digital advertising; symbolism; contemporary advertising; commercials; fire symbol

1. Ways of reflecting and using symbols in advertising

In today's world, advertising creators tailor commercials using both visual and linguistic means of communication, which positively affects the message, leading to customers' persuasion and sympathy. According to studies¹, visual communication is usually preferred, as it generates an "aesthetic approach" that catches the public's eye in a faster and more convincing way.

An important element of *visual communication* is represented by *symbols*, which are successfully used in advertising, be it printed or online. According to the study *Aspects of Symbolic Communications in Online Advertising*², symbolic elements can be divided into different categories, such as:

- archetypal (water, fire, air, or earth)
- cultural (traditions and customs)
- religious (representations of the sacred)
- ethical (moral values)
- mythical (cosmogony, theogony)
- social (symbols that are correlated with the values of a community/generation)
- psychological (personality types)
- chromatic
- political
- pertaining to space and time
- concrete symbols (objects, nature) etc.

Each one of the above-mentioned symbols can be perceived in different manners, depending on the culture/area where it is used. As the article³ exemplifies, cultural contextualization is an important vector in deciding the meaning of each symbolic representation.

For instance, while in many cultures black is associated with mourning, thus is the first choice when it comes to clothing for a funeral, in other cultures people consider other colours to be suitable in such a

¹ Bulmer, Sandy & Buchanan-Oliver, Margo. (2006). *Visual Rhetoric and Global Advertising Imagery*. Journal of Marketing Communications. 12. pp. 49-61. 10.1080/13527260500289142.

² Petrovici, Iasmina. (2014). *Aspects of Symbolic Communications in Online Advertising*. Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences. pp. 720. 0.1016/j.sbspro.2014.08.276

³ Id

context: for example, in China, white is the usual choice for funerals (as it symbolizes purity), while in Ghana, colorfulness is the norm.⁴

However, while some colour-related symbols gained universal recognition outside of the cultural context, many of them remain bound to norms. Usually, symbols with universal recognition are widely used in *online advertising*. A proper example of a symbol with global recognition is the colour green, that advertisers use to portray nature, an environmentally friendly approach or health.⁵ To exemplify, the Greenpeace organization has a name that strongly suggests and supports their values and purpose – to fight for the wellbeing of an environment where nature thrives.

Clearly, advertisers utilize symbols to build remarkable commercials that activate certain mental structures in the mind of the audience, helping them make favourable associations. Therefore, in online advertising, symbolic structures are capable of unifying and motivating.⁶

In addition, studies⁷ show how the meaning convention of symbols, although conventional in other instances, in *contemporary advertising* can simply become the result of mutual agreement between the advertiser and the public.

To better illustrate this case, one can think about the multiple meanings a scion can take: while it portrays fragility, it can also suggest freshness or health (also due to its color – green).

With *creativity* being a very important element in constructing new signs/meanings and, implicitly, in advertising, its elements are highly regarded when making commercials. Two of the most valuable elements of creativity considered by advertisers are *novelty* and *utility*⁸, which are used when new relationships are created between unrelated concepts.

A proper illustration of this case is the advertisement for a butchery that used ice-cream as a sign for “special treats”⁹, with the heading “Treat yourself to some A-grade meat”¹⁰. Because there is no logical link between ice-cream and tasty/quality meat, the public is thus pushed to actively involve and construct a reasonable meaning – that meat placed on an ice-cream stick defines its quality and treat-like taste.

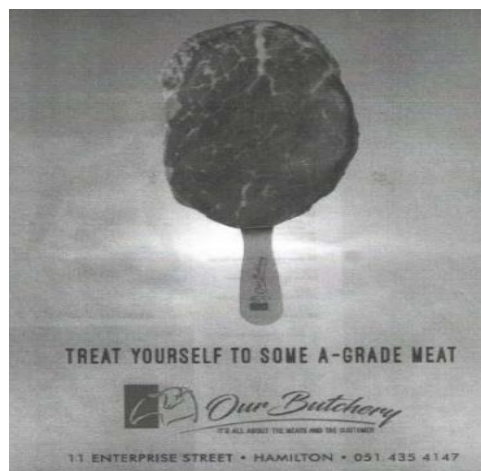


Fig. 1 – *Treat yourself to some A-grade meat*¹¹

⁴ Page, Thomas. (2025). *Photographer shows the secretive, colorful world of Ghanaian funerals*. CNN. <https://edition.cnn.com/style/ghana-funerals-coffin-dancers-regula-tschumi>

⁵ Petrovici, Iasmina. (2014). *Aspects of Symbolic Communications in Online Advertising*. Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences. p. 720. 0.1016/j.sbspro.2014.08.276

⁶ Id

⁷ Angelique van Niekerk. (2018). *The Use of Indexical Signs, Symbols and Icons in Print Advertising Communication*. Communitas Vol. 23. p. 109. <https://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/com/article/view/3723/3483>

⁸ Id

⁹ Id

¹⁰ Id

¹¹ Id

Another suitable example would be the correlation between a light bulb and ideas. While there is no direct connection between this object and inspiration, people often do correlate them.

2. How the symbol of fire is perceived in society

The symbol of fire has been widely discussed, representing a prominent sign used in advertising, movies, or music videos, for that matters. One study¹² shows how *emotions* can be compared with *natural forces*, such as *fire*, *floods*, or *storms*. While fire is usually associated with *desire* (“burning desire”¹³), its meanings go to a larger extent, as follows:

- *death and rebirth* – the ancient Egypt myth of the phoenix presents fire as a mean of ending and beginning another cycle of life¹⁴;
- *destruction* – a lot of land fires destroyed houses and crops in countries such as Greece or Spain;
- *environment refreshment* – fire is used to remove dead trees and shrubs, giving space for new regrowth; in this situation, fire is viewed as *change*, helping in maintaining the environment healthy.¹⁵



Firefighters on the Yosemite fire look on as the Southern Sierra Miwuk engage in a ceremony and traditional methods to ignite a prescribed fire at Yosemite National Park.

NPS photo by Brent Johnson.

Fig 2 – Prescribed fire¹⁶

¹² Charteris-Black, Johnatan. (2017). *All-Consuming Passions: Fire Metaphors in Fiction*. e-Rea [En ligne]. <https://doi.org/10.4000/erea.5992>. <http://journals.openedition.org/erea/5992>

¹³ Idem

¹⁴ (2017). *Wildland Fire: Cultural Interpretations of Fire and Human Use*. Wildland Fire - Learning In Depth. National Park Service. <https://www.nps.gov/articles/wildland-fire-human-use-and-cultural-interpretations.htm>

¹⁵ Id

¹⁶ Id

3. Reevaluation of the symbol of fire in today's advertising (with examples)

In modern advertising, fire symbols have a high level of efficacy, being used to portray dynamism, innovation, transformation or, for tech companies, cutting-edge technology.¹⁷ For example, Ignite Tech and Ember Agency (Figs. 3 and 4) – two tech companies – used the fire theme for their logos to suggest the characteristics mentioned above.



Fig. 3 – Ignite Tech logo¹⁸



Fig. 4- Ember Agency logo¹⁹

However, one of the most unexpected and startling examples of using the symbol of fire in a commercial might be represented by one of Burger King's print campaign. Here, the chain showcases photographs of real Burger King restaurants on fire, in Italy, Pennsylvania and Oregon, while trying to suggest, on an amusing tone, to what extent the restaurant takes the flame-grilling process. hilariously, the pictures representing the fires are accompanied by the message "Flame grilled since 1954"²⁰.

While nobody was seriously injured in those incidents, it is surprising to observe how the fast-food chain turned some negative events that occurred a few years ago into a profitable marketing strategy.



Fig. 5 – Burger King on fire²¹

¹⁷ Master of Business Administration Rangsit University. (2024). *How Fire Symbols Influence Our Perception Today*, <https://mba.rsu.ac.th/how-fire-symbols-influence-our-perception-today/#future>

¹⁸ LinkedIn. Ignite Tech. <https://www.linkedin.com/company/ignite-tech>

¹⁹ LinkedIn. Ember Agency. <https://www.linkedin.com/company/emberagency/>

²⁰ David Miami. (2017). *Burger King: advert-body-2* by David Miami. <https://www.thedrum.com/creative-works/project/david-miami-burger-king-flame-grilled-1954>

²¹ Idem



Fig. 6 – *Burger King on fire* ²²

4. The Future of Fire Symbols in a Digital and Globalized World

As digital culture advances, future generations learn how to both connect and cohabit with fire symbolism. In fact, in today's society and marketing world, the symbol of fire becomes a mix between tradition and contemporaneity, entwining myths and interpretations with modern aesthetics.

As a conclusion, from animated logos to virtual avatars and fragrant pictures, this symbol still preserves its core themes: transformation, energy, passion, rebirth and adaptability.²³

²³ Master of Business Administration Rangsit University. (2024). *How Fire Symbols Influence Our Perception Today*, <https://mba.rsu.ac.th/how-fire-symbols-influence-our-perception-today/#future>

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

1. (2017). Wildland Fire: Cultural Interpretations of Fire and Human Use. Wildland Fire - Learning In Depth. National Park Service. <https://www.nps.gov/articles/wildland-fire-human-use-and-cultural-interpretations.htm>
2. Angelique van Niekerk. (2018). The Use of Indexical Signs, Symbols and Icons in Print Advertising Communication. *Communitas* Vol. 23. p. 109. <https://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/com/article/view/3723/3483>
3. Bulmer, Sandy & Buchanan-Oliver, Margo. (2006). *Visual Rhetoric and Global Advertising Imagery*. *Journal of Marketing Communications*. 12. pp. 49-61. 10.1080/13527260500289142.
4. Charteris-Black, Johnatan. (2017). *All-Consuming Passions: Fire Metaphors in Fiction*. e-Rea [En ligne]. <https://doi.org/10.4000/erea.5992>. <http://journals.openedition.org/erea/5992>
5. David Miami. (2017). *Burger King: advert-body-2 by David Miami*. <https://www.thedrum.com/creative-works/project/david-miami-burger-king-flame-grilled-1954>
6. LinkedIn. Amber Agency. <https://www.linkedin.com/company/emberagency/>
7. LinkedIn. Ignite Tech. <https://www.linkedin.com/company/ignite-tech>
8. Master of Business Administration Rangsit University. (2024). *How Fire Symbols Influence Our Perception Today*, <https://mba.rsu.ac.th/how-fire-symbols-influence-our-perception-today/#future>
9. Page, Thomas. (2025). *Photographer shows the secretive, colorful world of Ghanaian funerals*. CNN. <https://edition.cnn.com/style/ghana-funerals-coffin-dancers-regula-tschumi>
10. Petrovici, Iasmina. (2014). *Aspects of Symbolic Communications in Online Advertising*. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*. pp. 720. 0.1016/j.sbspro.2014.08.276