

CONCEPTUALIZING VISUAL METAPHORS IN HIGH TECH PRODUCTS ADVERTISING: RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS FROM AN EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

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Abstract

The use of visual metaphors is a popular method of advertising nowadays. This paper briefly reviews the theoretical framework of metaphorical expression in advertising, and particularly the use of visual metaphors. It then continues with presenting results and findings from an empirical study on the use of visual metaphors in the ads of high-tech products. Given the nature of metaphors, the analysis is based on both qualitative and quantitative readings of the data, in order to reach more insightful conclusions. Based on the research findings and following the theoretical introduction, the paper concludes with implications and guidelines for the marketing utility of exploring the meaning and other features of visual metaphors.

Keywords: advertising, visual metaphors, abstract metaphors, high tech products, interpretation, understanding, meaning, elicitation, qualitative and quantitative research

The Use of Visual Metaphors in Advertising

The use of visual metaphors in advertising is an essential feature of contemporary marketing (McQuarrie & Mick 1999). This approach of advertising is very popular in a range of industries, including the Fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG), Cosmetics, Information technologies (IT), Automotive and others, representing the largest advertisers in the world (Sakr 2016; Statista 2021). Metaphors have the ability to evoke associations as well as to transfer symbolic meanings to brands (Dehay & Landwehr 2019). Advertisers look for tools that can influence consumers' thoughts, and thus, they use metaphorical advertising as a means of constructing and maintaining desired perceptions (Philips & McQuarrie 2009) and image of the brand. The use of metaphors and above all visual ones is a strong way for consumers to experience the brand scientifically and emotionally. The emotional benefits are those that have a leading influence on consumer's behavior (Min & Kim 2018). The visual metaphor is highly valued for its capabilities to create positive feelings such as enjoyment (Morgan & Reichert 1999), which occur especially at the moment of finding the meaning and making inferences (Dehay & Landwehr 2019). To these theoretical findings we can also add that the visual metaphors primarily attract through their creativity and originality. It is this effect that is the first step to the success of an advertisement.

Some authors define metaphoric advertisement as a bridge in relationships building between the consumer and the brand (Hawkins 1975).

According to Nielsen, a leading company for market research (ESOMAR 2023), as well as other sources that study consumer attitudes and behavior, effective ads should meet the following four critical dimensions: Empathy, Persuasion, Impact and Communication. They jointly make up compose the so-called EPIC model (Nielsen, Putra, and Lisdayanti 2020). What does each dimension stand for?

Empathy: refers to the ability of the ad to create an emotional connection between the consumer and the product, the extent to which the ad makes the consumer to see themselves in the situation or characters depicted.

Persuasion: refers to the change in a consumer's trust, attitude, and desire to act, to ultimately be willing to purchase the advertised product.

Impact: relates to product knowledge, the extent to which advertising supports and enhances consumer knowledge of the product.

Communication: relates to the main message in the advertisement, how well it is understood, remembered, and perceived as a strong message.

Visual metaphors are a strong method of advertising that can influence the high performance of the ad by each of the four critical (as well as other) dimensions of ad effectiveness. The reviewed literature on the topic shows that persuasion as a dimension and pursued effect of the metaphorical advertisement is a very frequent topic of study. Other dimensions, however, are less frequently or secondarily explored.

Metaphors are defined as “particularly persuasive tools” that can influence consumer thinking and communication (Morris & Waldman 2011). The strength of persuasion may depend on the creativeness of the visual design of the latter stimulates the emotional experience among consumers. An effective design provokes curiosity about novelty, about the new phenomenon depicted and interest in decoding what the advertisement says. In order to elicit meaning, imagination needs to be intensified (Morris & Waldman 2011). The result of this mental process suggests that the ad would be remembered (Min & Kim 2018).

Two types of visual metaphors are defined: concrete and abstract. The concrete metaphors are directly connected to the product characteristics, and can therefore be clearly identified by users. In contrast to concrete metaphors, abstract ones create an indirect link to the product characteristics, making them more difficult to identify. The novelty of the visual is contained in the abstract metaphors. Not all metaphorical creations can increase persuasion (Siltanen 1981). Most of all, this is a quality of the truly creative abstract metaphors. Their interpretation and understanding may vary from consumer to consumer (Morgan & Reichert 1999). Also, one consumer may elicit more than one meaning from the new phenomena, which, at the best way, can strengthen curiosity about the product (Min & Kim 2018).

The essence of metaphor is to understand one concept in terms of another. Therefore, abstractions (Lakoff & Johnson 1980), A means B (Min & Kim 2018), and the fact that it may or may not be properly understood, strongly suggest that the process of metaphorical advertising should be accompanied by research. It is highly recommended the ad be studied among target consumers before launch, in order to confirm or reject whether the metaphor is correctly interpreted, understood and well received. It should also be studied after the end of the campaign, in order to account, where necessary, for its effectiveness and impact on commercial results.

2. Findings from an Empirical Research: “Conceptualizing Visual Metaphors in High Tech Product Advertising”

Following are findings from a research project on understanding visual metaphors in High tech products advertising. This project was carried out in July 2023 by a team of graduate students from the South-East European Center for Semiotic Studies (SEECSS) at New Bulgarian University (NBU) for the XXVII EFSS’ 2023 “Conceptualizing Digital Reality Through Metaphors: Semiotic and Interdisciplinary Perspectives”.

2.1. Methodology of the Research Project

This entailed a quantitative survey, conducted through the method of online self-interviewing. Respondents in the study were citizens from Bulgaria, with no requirements in terms of place of residence. We covered males and females from the two generations Z and X, so the target group was represented by young and adult people. The study included two phases: Phase 1 – collection of metaphoric ad visuals from the IT industry, served for selection of ad visuals to be studied, and Phase 2 – the project phase itself. A structured questionnaire was applied composed of open and closed questions. Bearing in mind the subject of study – metaphors, open questions were emphasized. Reached sample size: n=301 completed interviews.

Studied metaphoric ad visuals:



Image 1: From left to right, advertisement on 1. Headphones, 2. Digital security, 3. Bank services, 4. Mobile devices, and 5. Computer technique

The visuals were shown without the marketing messages. They represented different sub-industries: Audio, Cyber security, Financial services, Telecommunications and Computer peripheral. In addition to the different industries, another selection criterion was the level of complexity of the metaphor to provide both simpler and more complex abstractions. Our understanding and hypothesis is that metaphors used in ads for banking services and smartphones would be easier for consumers to interpret and understand than those used in ads for headphones, digital security and computer technique which we define as more abstract.

2.2. Findings

The current analytical approach involves both qualitative and quantitative reading of the data. The qualitative reading is based on the asked open questions, and it aims to explore the diversity and depth of interpreted meanings of visual metaphors. This is implemented through detailed coding of the open-ended questions and visualization of the results, inspired by the ZMET (Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique) mapping and collage creation technique (Zaltman 2008; Zaltman 1997). The quantitative reading is based on closed questions and aims to measure two main aspects: whether or not respondents understand the meaning of the metaphors and ranking of the interpreted meanings. The data were processed with the statistical software SPSS.

Respondents' statement if they understood or not the studied visual metaphors.

Asked directly whether or not they understood each image (showed monadically), significant shares of respondents answered that they did not understand the meaning of the respective visual metaphor. Ranging from 41% for the headphones ads to 64% for the computer technology ads, we find it a worryingly high percentage for the effective performance even for the ad with the lowest share of misunderstanding.

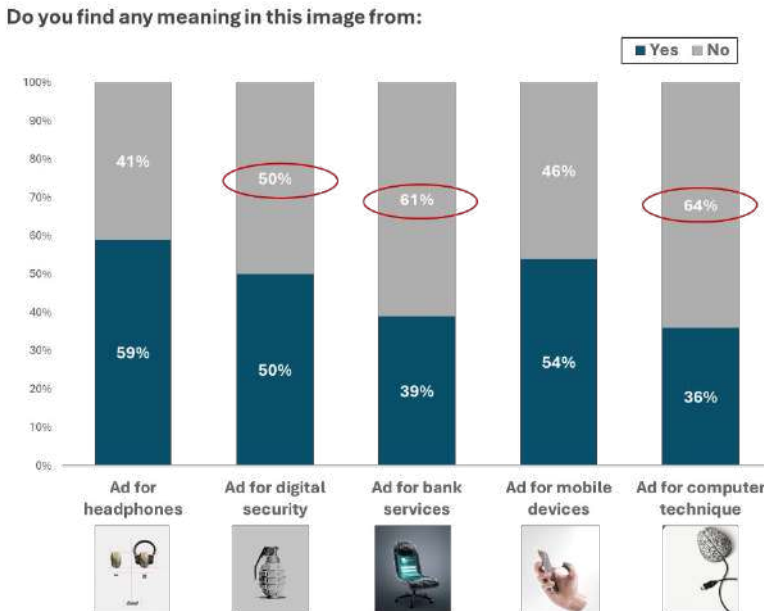
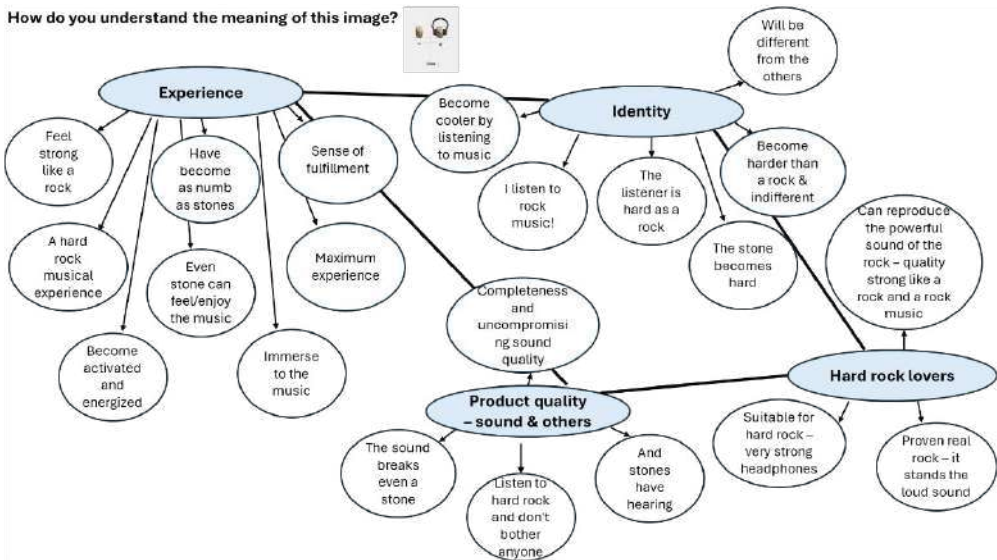


Figure 1: Question answers: Do you find any meaning in this image from ...?

Understanding the meaning of the visual metaphor for the headphones ad

Respondents made a lot of interpretations of the headphone metaphor. The range was spread among the four categories: “Experience”, “Identity”, “Product quality” and “Hard rock lovers”, with the greater variety relating to “Experience” and “Identity”. The elicited meanings include interpretations such as: Feel strong like a rock, Even a stone can feel/ enjoy the music, The listener hard as a rock, The sound breaks even a stone, Headphones for a maximum experience, and Become activated and energized. The measuring of these results reveals that over ½ declare that they find meaning in the studied image. Nevertheless, their answers appear to be rather unrelated or incorrect to the image. Among the remaining respondents and answers, 52% relate the image to Headphones for listening to hard rock music (powerful, don’t bother anyone, for true rock fans), while the next more frequent shares are assigned to High quality headphones with 23% (sturdy, qualitative sound, god bass) and How these headphones make me feel with 14% (strong as a rock, fill a lack in you, energized).



Map 1: Elicited meanings of the visual metaphor for the headphones ad. Based on the question: How do you understand the meaning of this image? Asked of respondents who declared that they found meaning in the image of the headphones ad



Collage 1: Visualization of elicited meanings of the visual metaphor for the headphones ad

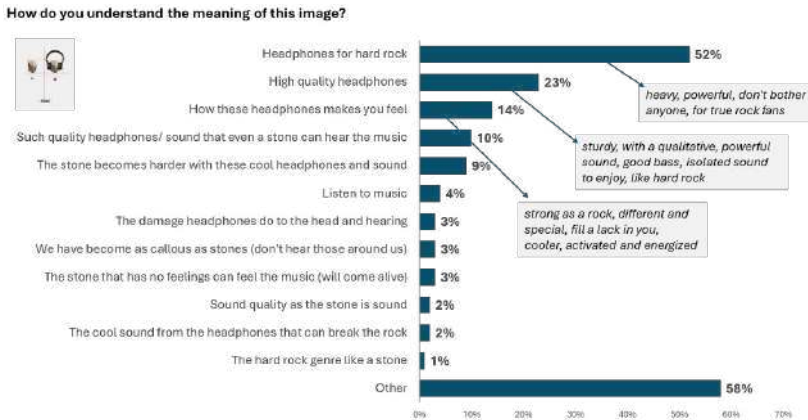
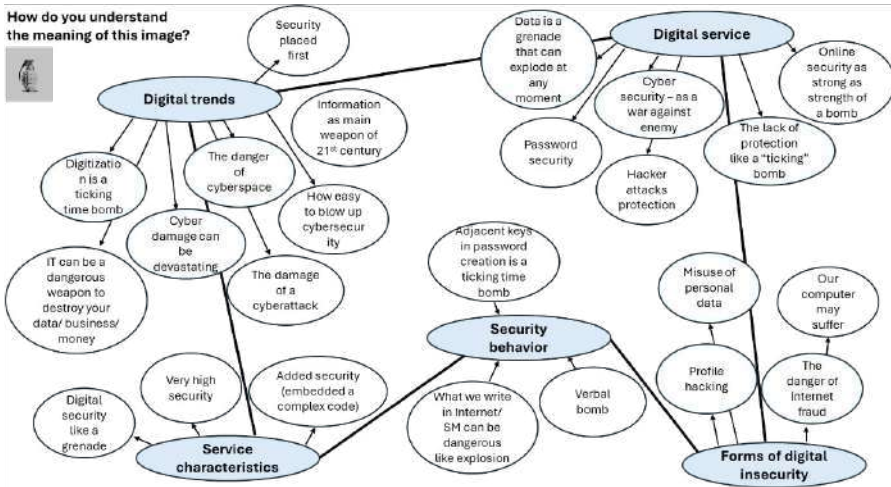


Figure 2: Quantification of elicited meanings of the visual metaphor for the headphones ad

Understanding the meaning of the visual metaphor for the digital security ad

Regarding the metaphor related to digital security visual, the respondents admitted even more interpretations. These can be classified in the four categories: “Digital trends”, “Digital service”, “Service characteristics”, “Security behavior” and “Forms of digital insecurity”. Most of them refer to “Digital trends”, such as Information as a main weapon of 21st century, and examples from the other groups are Digital security like a grenade, The danger of internet fraud, Online security as strength of a bomb. The quantified results show that a very high share of 46% elicit the meaning of

Internet can be dangerous, if we are not cautious (pages we visit, what we speak). Many other interpretations reach appreciable shares, but most of all, these are Cyber security with 33% and Digitalization is like a (ticking time) bomb with 23%.



Map 2: Elicited meanings of the visual metaphor for the digital security ad

Based on the question: How do you understand the meaning of this image? Asked of respondents who declared that they found meaning in the image of the digital security ad.



Collage 2: Visualization of elicited meanings of the visual metaphor for the digital security ad

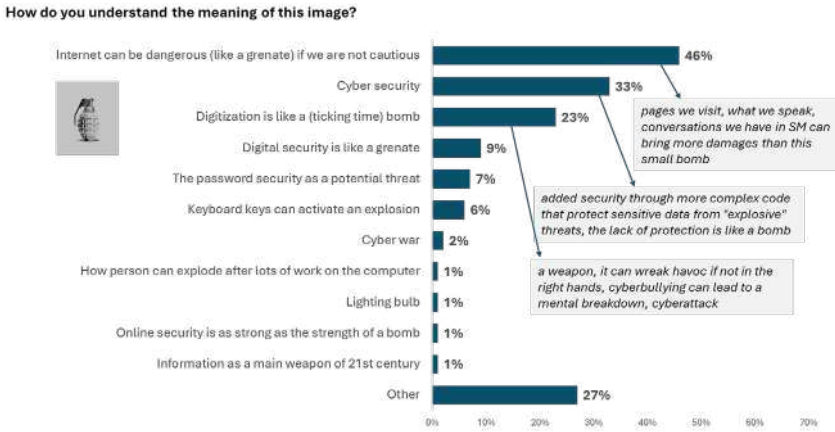
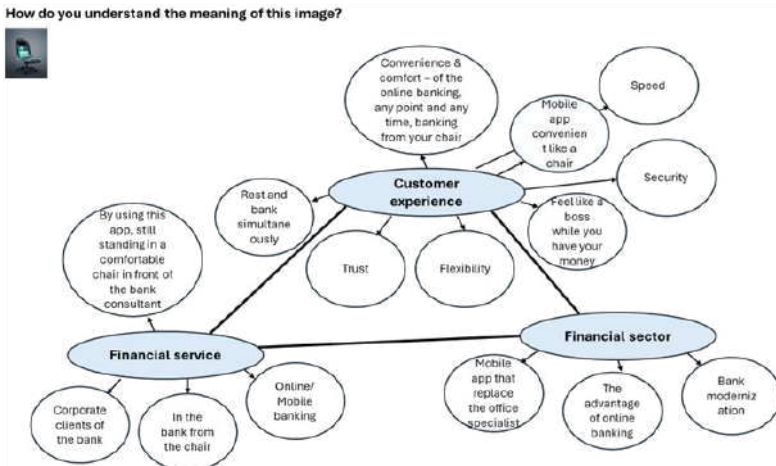


Figure 3: Quantification of elicited meanings of the visual metaphor for the digital security ad

Understanding the meaning of the visual metaphor for bank services ad

For the bank service metaphor, the respondents made relatively fewer elicitations. These can be grouped into three categories: “Customer experience”, “Financial service” and “Financial sector”, with most understandings concentrated in the “Customer experience” category. The meaning of this metaphor is understood as Convenience, Flexibility, Banking from your chair, Resting and banking simultaneously, and others. We find that the quantitative results are consistent with the qualitative, as all 81% elicit the meaning of Convenience of the online banking through a mobile app explained by examples such as banking anytime and from anywhere, while you rest you can bank, no need to go to the bank, and others.



Map 3: Elicited meanings of the visual metaphor for the bank services ad

Based on the question: How do you understand the meaning of this image? Asked of respondents who declared that they found meaning in the image of the bank services ad.



Collage 3: Visualization of elicited meanings of the visual metaphor for the bank services ad

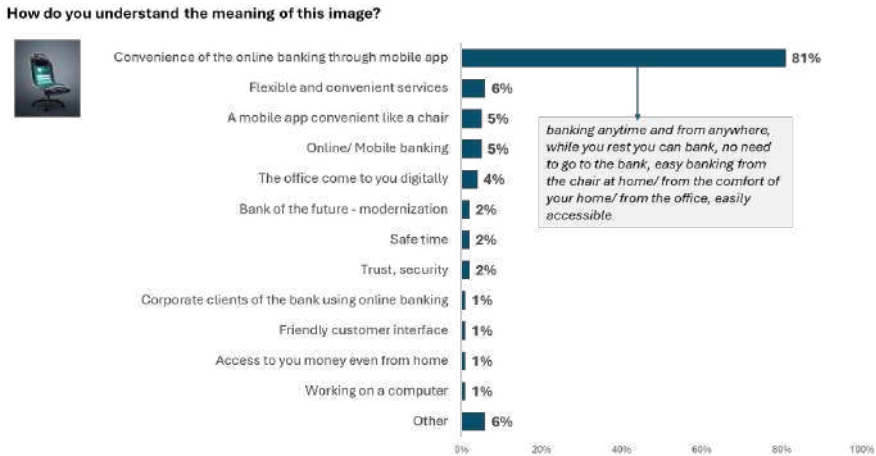
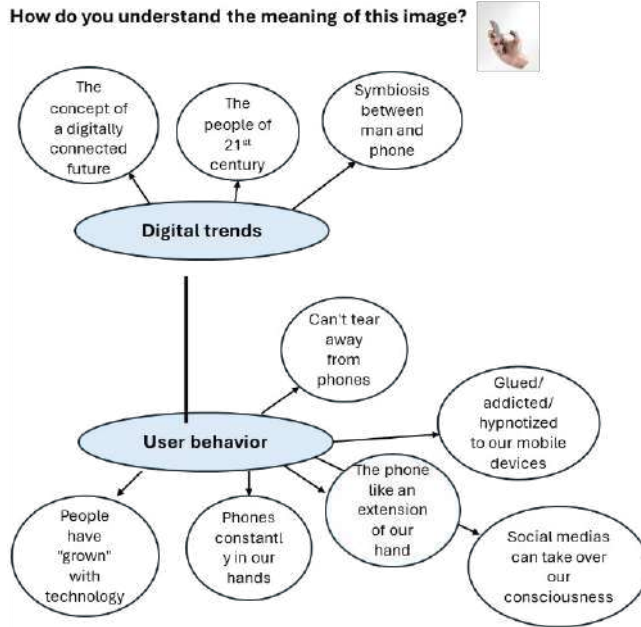


Figure 4: Quantification of elicited meanings of the visual metaphor for the bank services ad

Understanding the meaning of the visual metaphor for mobile devices ad

Compared to the previous metaphor, there are even fewer assumptions about the mobile device metaphor. The only two groups explored are: “Digital trends” and “User behavior”. The meaning, embedded in this metaphor is understood as Addiction, Human-phone symbiosis, The phone like an extension of our hand, and some others. The quantitative dimension of the results shows the same – an extreme concentration in terms of perceptions of being addicted (71%), glued (59%) and also dependent (16%) on smart-phones and offerings such as social media.



Map 4: Elicited meanings of the visual metaphor for the mobile devices ad

Based on the question: How do you understand the meaning of this image? Asked of respondents who declared that they found meaning in the image of the mobile devices ad.



Collage 4: Visualization of elicited meanings of the visual metaphor for the mobile devices ad

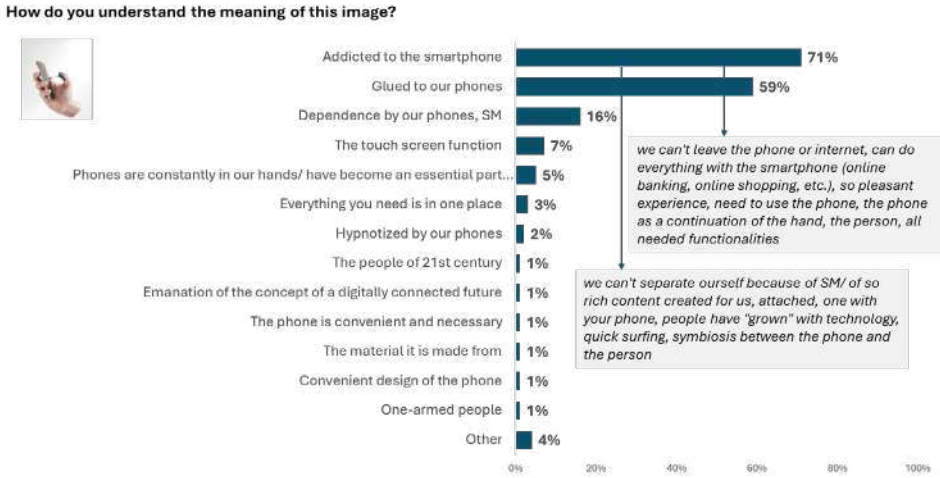
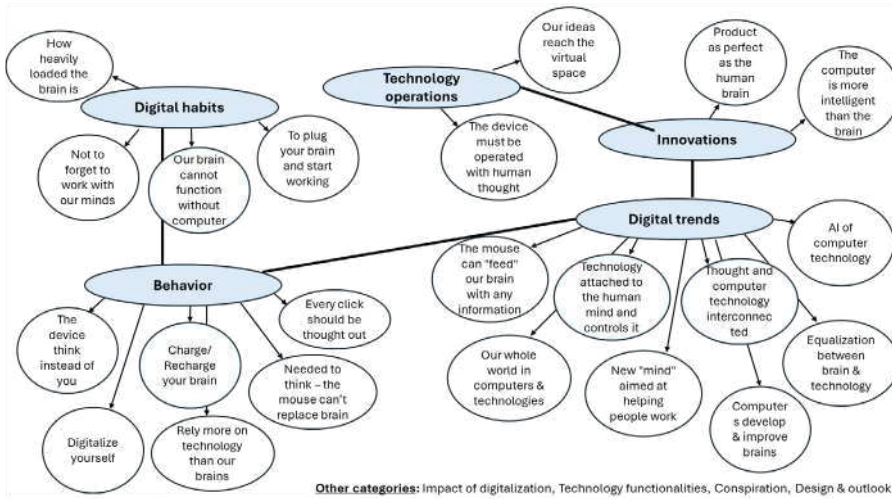


Figure 5: Quantification of elicited meanings of the visual metaphor for the mobile devices ad

Understanding the meaning of the visual metaphor for computer technology ad

Together with the metaphor of digital security, that of computer periphery receives most interpretations of its meaning. The given assumptions are spread over at least five categories: “Digital habits”, “Behavior”, “Technology operations”, “Digital trends”, “Innovations”, and others. A wide range of understandings of “Digital trends” as well as “Behavior” was registered. Some inventive answers are: Let’s plug your brain and start working, Charging thoughts, Product as perfect as the human brain and so on. The quantitative reading of the data points to the most common understandings of this metaphor as Charging brain/thought (25%), which explained by instances such as the opportunity to acquire lots of knowledge from the Internet, computers develop/ enrich our minds and we become part of the net. In line with the diversity of categories and individual interpretations found, three more interpretations of meaning follow with significant shares: Our mind is connected to the technique (16%) – interpreted negatively as controlled, cannot work without it, and depend on technology in order to start working, Digitalization of human’s thoughts (13%) and Smart/ innovative technique (13%).



Map 5: Elicited meanings of the visual metaphor for the computer technique ad

Based on the question: How do you understand the meaning of this image? Asked of respondents who declared that they found meaning in the image of the computer technique ad.



Collage 5: Visualization of elicited meanings of the visual metaphor for the computer technique ad

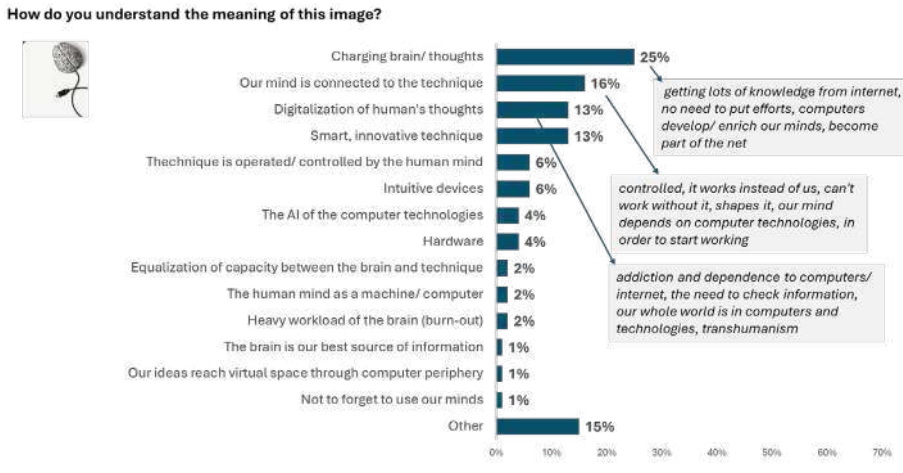


Figure 6: Quantification of elicited meanings of the visual metaphor for the computer technique ad

Conclusions and Directions

Based on the findings of the empirical study and the theoretical introduction on the use of metaphors, we reach the following conclusions:

1. Developing and launching an advertising campaign based on a visual metaphor strictly requires the inclusion of research among target consumers as part of the overall campaign program. In this way, the marketers will have clarity on whether and how consumers understand the embedded metaphor. This is necessary because, on the one hand, the survey indicated that a high proportion of respondents do not understand the relevant metaphor (from 41% to 64% among the different metaphors) while, on the other hand, make multiple interpretations that may not always be correct and coincide with the meaning intended by marketing experts. A comprehensive understanding of advertising can influence its performance across all dimensions of the EPIC model (Empathy, Persuasion, Impact and Communication), as well as other metrics, confirming the usefulness of consumer research.
2. The value of research is especially important for the abstract metaphors which contain more complex creative designs and require more imagination to interpret. The hypothesis that metaphors about headphones, digital security and computer technology would be more difficult to understand was generally confirmed, since these were the visions for which the most categories of meaning were

identified, and the highest proportions of undefined responses were recorded.

3. In fact, research on visual metaphors is proving to be a rich source of brand associations. This is evidenced by the fact that for ads using abstract metaphors, respondents gave numerous suggestions about the meaning of the metaphors. Therefore, findings from this type of study can serve a great deal in building and managing brand personality and positioning in the marketplace.
4. Our survey did not include a direct technique of studying the emotional experience with the brand through its metaphoric explanation. However, based on the great activity of people to provide their understandings of the examined metaphors (for example, some respondents provided detailed answers, although these were not expected), we can infer that the use of metaphors does affect consumers emotionally by creating positive feeling such as curiosity, enthusiasm, and enjoyment.
5. Metaphoric understanding may vary according to the socio-demographic profile of respondents. Although we do not have specific data from the current research to prove it, we believe that understandings may differ depending based on respondents age, place of living, and degree of familiarity with high tech products. In this regard, users of a higher age (45–50 + years) who do not live in cities and are not too familiar with advanced technologies and trends in this industry, would face difficulties in interpreting abstract metaphors. Therefore, and in line with the targeted group, marketers may consider differences based on socio-demographic characteristics.

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