



## The Role of Soundtrack in Audio-Visual Advertisements: A Case of Coca-Cola Commercials

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### Abstract

Audio-visual Coca-Cola commercials are conceptualized as art that falls in the genre of film. They use soundtracks that are in congruence with advertisers' messages. The review of extant literature shows that the frame by frame presentation of images is enhanced by the use of the right melodies that are in form of customized popular music. Following the principles of semiotics, the researcher conducted a content analysis on a sample of twelve audio-visual Coca-Cola commercials, identified through convenience sampling from YouTube. The purpose of this paper was to assess how soundtracks interact with visuals in audio-visual Coca-Cola commercials to create images that are a representation of mediated reality. The findings of this study indicate that the audio-video Coca-Cola advertisements rely on a combination of visual image and sound to create signs (constellations of signifiers) that encourage audiences to identify with characters featured taking Coke drinks, as they exhibit excitement and enthusiasms. The interaction of lyrics and other visual elements enable the audience to interpret created images, assign meanings, and assume the subject positions defined by themes in commercials.

**Key words:** Audio-visual commercials, cinematographers, content analysis, convenience sampling, soundtrack, signs, semiotics,



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## Introduction

Soundtrack is one of the core features of audio-visual advertisements. Cinematographers of Coca-Cola commercials incorporate a variety of soundtracks in their quest to construct affective images that mirror the construction, management and practices of society. The use of soundtracks provides a strong platform for creating moods in Coca-Cola advertisements. They (soundtracks) also help transcend re-styled images in the semblances of cultural realities.

Music, one of the most popular soundtracks in Coca-Cola advertising, is an important element in every society. It is a powerful language that deconstructs certain cultural barriers and brings people together because songs appeal to people at different emotional levels. People relate to lyrics of songs that describe familiar images or ideologies, and emotion. For example, soundtracks used in advertisements are played in higher keys that evoke happier and positive feelings. Additionally, musical components like pitch, texture and tempo are capable of setting the mood in commercials (Bruner, 1990). Advertisers are keen to employ music in their commercials because it relates to each member of the audience's sense of identity and their everyday life (Lusensky, 2010).

An audio-visual advertisement — an area of interest in this study— uses emotional imagery in both visual and audio to catch viewers' attention and establish personal connections with them. This technique can evoke strong emotional attachment of the viewer toward a brand or ideologies passed through images in a commercial. Some of the strategies embedded in soundtracks used in commercials include congruency, context, viewer attention and involvement, and familiarity and associations (Jillson, 2014).

Drawing on research on film studies, it is argued here that soundtrack is an important element and should be viewed as an integrated part of a whole. It interacts with other elements (visuals) in advertisements to create images that act as conveyors of values and reality. The purpose of this study is to assess how soundtracks with other visual elements in audio-visual Coca-Cola commercials to create images that represent mediated reality.

## Theoretical Framework

Useful in this study, is the application of semiotics as the main tool for analyzing data collected. Audio-visual Coca-Cola commercials convey meaning using both visual and audio images which function as a system of signs. Guided by semiotics, soundtracks used in Coca-Cola advertisements were examined and defined into codes, which were grouped into categories to obtain results for the study.

Semiotics refers to a study of a system of signs and symbols and how they are used to represent and interpret them. [Dezeeuw \(2017\)](#) defines semiotic storytelling

as how meaning of semiotics is created through a system of signs understood by society. Semiotics helps advertising in creating images that convey layers of meaning. Charles Sanders Peirce (1977) breaks down the concept of signs into three categories — iconic, symbolic and indexical. Iconic sign according to Peirce is the literal visual representation of their meaning (a thing that is being evoked). For example, an image of a phone is a sign of a gadget used for communication but when used in Coca-Cola commercials may indicate a popular culture among the youth. Coca-Cola displays images of Coca-Cola drinks and logo in their audio-visual advertisements. These images are sometimes accompanied by slogans and soundtracks such as the clinking of glass bottles being opened or removed from a fridge or lyrics that invite the audience to have a taste of the feeling of Coke drink.

Symbolic imagery is a more abstract use of images and their visual representation communicates a concept (Dezeeuw, 2017). A symbol has no direct relation the signifier and the signified other than the fact that we have decided as a society that they should be linked. A good example is how words are used to create catchy phrases that act as call-to-action slogans. Colour and lighting fall in this category of signs.

The third category of systems is an index. Dezeeuw (2017) defines indexical images that have direct connection between the image and concept. For instance, smoke is directly related to fire. That means that fire must happen for smoke to rise. In other words there is a causal link between the presence of smoke and fire.

Semiotic resources (signs) employed in Coca-Cola commercials are tied to cultural constructions of their use to pass ideologies or messages. This study applied semiotics to: define and categorize signs in soundtracks of audio-visual Coca-Cola commercials; assess how soundtracks interact with other elements in audio-visual Coca-Cola commercials to create images in the semblances of reality; and how soundtracks convey themes to viewers.

### Literature Review

Although widely and largely used as an appeal in audio-visual advertisements, soundtrack remains understudied as an aesthetic influence, conveyor of meaning, and shaper of values. Kurpiers (2009), one of a few scholars in this area, sees music as one of the elements or a medium of certain cultural constructions of a created ideal society. Kurpiers' study takes a cue from a study by Taylor (2000), who observes that music contributes to the formation of identities and constellation of values based on global practices bordering on stratified society.

Music is an important part of people's lifestyle and it plays a significant role in shaping perception of images of created reality in advertisements (Hoeberichts, 2012). She observes that music of a smoother rhythm fosters happy feelings, high pitched brings excitement in characters, and fast tempo creates a happy tone, which is in

tandem with commercials' messages. Soundtracks create emotional impact around products and enhance the structure of advertisements (Gilliland, 2018).

Allan (2006) observes that the delivery of advertising message is strong when music with lyrics rather than instrumentals is used in a commercial. Soundtrack is a vital storytelling component and it helps carry the storyline in commercials forward (Gillick & Bamman, 2018). Those that employ the use of music perform better across all key metrics like creativity, empathy, emotive power, and information power, than those without, and then, it is a great inclusion (Hecker, 1984; Park & Young, 1986; Le, 2016; Taylor, 2018).

Gorn's (1982) suggests that music enhances delivery of advertising message when its lyrics describe the activities in a commercial. Taking a cue from Gorn's findings, Kellaris, Cox, & Cox (1993) put forward a concept of music-message congruency and suggest that music enhances advertising message when there is harmony in the lyrics, visuals and the advertising copy. Music catches viewers' attention, plays a significant role in the functionality of advertisements, and helps facilitate easy transfer of advertising values (Morris & Boone, 1998; Yue, 2011).

The relevance of lyrics of music in a commercial is a vital element in achieving advertising objectives, and the use of popular music triggers excitement and favourable nostalgia in the audience (Wagner, 2008; Chou & Lien, 2010). Anisimova & Müllern (2014), on the other hand, declare that advertisers make use of popular songs as a way of connecting with the audience of mass advertising and it is of great importance to get the right melody to use in an advertisement.

Scholars like Friedrich (2002); Ahmed (2006); Brender & Vranca (2010); Bryant (2011); and Fitisova (2015) have analysed strategies and trends in Coca-Cola advertisements in regard to marketing and communication. None of the said studies, however, has attempted to analyse the role of soundtrack in audio-visual Coca-Cola commercials from a literary angle, which is the main focus in this study.

## Methodology

This study adopted a case-study research design to examine the role of soundtrack in audio-visual advertisements. The researcher looked audio-visual Coca-Cola commercials which appear on visual media channels like television, and internet-enabled platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn. Advertisements sponsored by Coca-Cola were suitable for this study because they are made for a wider global audience. The choice of these advertisements was also made in order to provide a consistent institutional background for all commercials selected for this analysis.

The preliminary survey was conducted by searching "Coca-Cola advertisement/ad" in the YouTube video-search engine. The results from the survey indicated that Coca-Cola sponsored about six (6) advertisements per year, translating

to thirty (30) of them between the year 2014 and 2019. Using convenience sampling, the researcher selected twelve (12) commercials (or 40% of the total population of 30) for this study. A content analysis was then conducted in the selected sample, identify the soundtracks used. The soundtracks were transcribed into data for analysis.

### Results and Discussion

For purposes of this study, the researcher developed a coding system for the codes obtained from the analysis of data for this objective as follows:

Category	Focus/description	Number of advertisements
<b>Setting</b>	Soundtrack that describes the scenery in relation to what is seen on screen	4
<b>Emotion</b>	Feelings or emotions exhibited by characters in relation to soundtrack and what is seen on screen	12
<b>Focus on the characters</b>	Activities of the characters in connection to the soundtrack and the spectacle presented on screen	10
<b>Theme in the advertisement</b>	The plot or storyline in the advertisement in connection to the content of the soundtrack.	12
<b>The relationship of characters with the brand/product</b>	The soundtrack reveals the characters' feelings towards the advertised brand or product. The soundtrack has a direct connection with the reactions of the characters in relation to what is seen on the screen.	12
<b>Loose connection</b>	Checking if the soundtrack does not have a connection with the storyline in the commercial.	0
<b>No soundtrack</b>	If there is any commercial that lacked any soundtrack in them.	0

**Tabulation of codes and categories on the role of soundtrack**

#### The Setting

When the soundtrack is used to enhance or reveal the setting of the narrative in the commercial, the lyrics describe not only the geographical location but the makeshift scenery. The description of the setting of a commercial can either be explicit or implicit. Whichever way, the soundtrack does contribute to the general mood in various scenes in a commercial.

Soundtracks in Coca-Cola advertisements that fall in this category, describe real scenes on which action is set. In the advertisement titled, “Tastier Together 2019”, the soundtrack contributes to the visual spectacle in the commercial. The lyrics begin: “I see trees of green, Red roses too...”

The lyrics describe real geographical setting of the actions in the advertisement. The description provided by the lyrics is in congruent with the visuals presented on screen. Camera moves from a long shot to medium and then variations of close-up to capture images of green trees, simultaneously with an old man and a young man roasting meat. They open glass bottles of coke, wearing broad smiles. The phrase “red roses” is used as a signifier of the main colour of the Coca-Cola branding, and green trees indicates beautiful scenes of nature.

In other examples that fall in this category, are the soundtracks of conversations of people and the glass bottles either being wheeled in a cart or the cap being opened for the characters to enjoy. In the advertisement, “Coca-Cola Ramadan 2018”, diegetic sounds in the form of conversations and footsteps of people at the street are heard. These sounds reveal the setting and enhance the delivery of advertisers’ message.

### Focus on Emotions

This study finds that when emotions are used as main drivers of the main arguments in a commercial, soundtracks or lyrics reveal characters’ emotional reactions. They also set the mood and tone, as well as contributing to visual argument in the commercial.

For example, the lovely country music that forms a large part of the soundtrack in the “Brotherly Love advertisement,” creates a warm atmosphere in the commercial. The song contributes to a story of a unique relationship that exists between siblings, a narrative of love and conflict that is part of the family unit. The song offers to downplay the sibling disagreement, as the older brother stands up to defend his younger brother when he is attacked by three bullyboys. The lyrics of the song are as follows:

Hey brother there’s an endless road to re-discover  
Hey brother do you still believe in one another  
Oh if the sky comes falling down for you  
There’s nothing in this world I wouldn’t do  
What if I’m far from home  
Oh brother I will hear you call  
Oh if the sky comes falling down for you  
There’s nothing in this world I wouldn’t do

The lyrics of the song reveal a warm mood and happy tone in the commercial. Even when he is mistreated, the younger brother does not show indication that he is

emotionally broken down. The song reveals that even though conflicts arise in families, such differences should not be allowed to overshadow the family ties as demonstrated by the younger brother in the “Brotherly Love Commercial.”

Another example is the lyrics in the advertisement, “Coca-Cola Emoticons” which reveal characters’ emotions, who are mainly a group of millennials. A lovely rhythm is played along the commercial, accompanied by a song whose lyrics start:

‘I just came to say hello  
..hello..  
...hello...’

The song is complimented by visibly happy youthful characters as they share coke drinks. The commercial uses codes of words such as ‘wink, hello, LOL, naughty, sexy, and love’ that are synonymous with the youth. The song sets the tone and mood in the commercial.

### **Focus on Characters**

The focus on characters reveals that there is a connection between the characters’ activities and the soundtrack in relation to what is seen on screen. The commercials that exemplify this category contain the soundtracks that describe characters’ activities and interactions in relation to the themes conveyed through the images created in advertisements. A good example is the advertisement titled, “Coke Zero Commercial 2018” in which the main character is an old man, called Mr. Hadley who is offered a coke zero drink. He takes a sip, loves its taste and then wonders what else is out there that he has not had a chance to enjoy, probably because his advanced age limits him from doing some certain things. The coke zero rides on the message on diversity.

Incorporated by the song “I want to break free” that plays at the background, Mr. Hadley breaks free, and walks to freedom of enjoying things that come his way. He embarks on a series of adventures. First, he declares his affection for his long-lost lover, Alice. Second, he procures a tattoo on his hand, followed by his dive onto an Olympic-size pool of water. He joins a motorbike competition and then attends a pride’s parade. He looks passionate about what he does.

The song in this commercial enhances the plot and contributes to what is seen on the screen. The lyrics of the song have a firm connection to the actions or activities that the main character indulges in.

### **Thematic Development**

This study reveals that when the soundtrack in a commercial enhances the thematic development in a commercial, the lyrics reflect the energies exhibited by the characters, the activities carried out, and the pathos that drive the main argument in

the advertisement. Other soundtracks made by the elements in a commercial relate directly to the message passed by the advertiser.

The soundtracks used in the Coca-Cola advertisements have a direct connection with the main arguments advanced by the advertiser. The soundtracks are both in form of songs that are popular with the characters and the sounds made by other elements in commercials. The lyrics of one of the most popular songs used by a number of the coded Coca-Cola advertisements are as follows:

It feels good, in my heart, in my soul,  
When you're right here beside me  
I don't ever want this day to end  
No one can stop me when I taste that feeling,  
Nothing could ever bring me down  
No one can stop me when I taste that feeling  
Nothing could ever bring me down

The song is used by the Coca-Cola to celebrate moments that have been inspired and made special by the Coca-Cola brands. The song excites the characters as some are shown singing along the advertisement as the song plays.

It also inspires happiness as people are shown to be more generous, and readily share their happiness through the coke drinks. Other soundtracks include the clinking of the glass bottles when characters touch a bottle of coke drinks. The soundtrack helps the viewer to become more aware of the availability of the Coca-Cola branded glass bottles. The glass bottles are portrayed as being more appealing to the eye and thus their clinking sounds brings to the fore the beauty and simplicity that is associated with the coke drink.

### **Relationships of Characters with Coca-Cola drinks**

When characters depict good feelings after the use of Coca-Cola products in an advertisement, the soundtrack is used to reveal their reactions upon using them. The soundtrack includes the emotional exclamations of characters after sipping coke drinks to signify a good taste in it, the clinking of glass bottles to create awareness of the availability of coke drinks in Coca-Cola branded glass bottles and song that reveals the emotional reactions of the characters towards the drink.

The Coca-Cola commercials that exemplify this category contain soundtracks that enhance the emotional attachments the characters have for the Coca-Cola brands or products. Mr. Hadley, the main character in the “coke zero commercial (2018)”, reacts positively after the first sip of the coke zero drink. He then wonders what else he has not had a chance to enjoy because of advanced age. The advertisement seeks



to tell the viewers that Coca-Cola listens to the needs of people in society and they can enjoy in life, despite their advanced age.

The song that plays at the background, 'I want to break free' reveals that the taste of the Coca-Cola drink that is sugar free, has given a senior citizen another lease of life. Mr. Hadley is clearly in love with the coke zero drink. The advertisement demonstrates that Coca-Cola cares for diversity in the production of their products. The characters in the advertisement titled, "Taste the feeling of summer with Coca-Cola" sing the song that plays at the background:

No one can stop me when I taste that feeling,  
Nothing could ever bring me down  
No one can stop me when I taste that feeling  
Nothing could ever bring me down

This song indicates how excited the characters are after creating special moments with Coca-Cola. Through the song, the characters state that no one can stop the Coca-Cola feeling because it's uplifting.

### Conclusion

The main purpose of this article was to examine how lyrics or soundtracks used in audio-visual Coca-Cola commercials interact with other visuals such as shots of characters, costumes, props, colour, lighting and logo to create images that convey values of created culture to viewers. Soundtracks play in Coca-Cola commercials describing images on screen as captured in cinematic shots that shift in quick succession from establishing shot that reveals setting of narratives, to a close-up of the flagship product. The songs shape how people identify themselves as spectacles of families in get-together meetings enjoy meals with drinks of Coke. These spectacles are enhanced by soundtracks that create warm moods throughout Coca-Cola commercials.

Audio-video Coca-Cola advertisements rely on a combination of visual image and sound to create signs (constellations of signifiers) that encourage audiences to identify with happy and excited characters taking Coke drinks. The interaction of lyrics and other visual elements trigger accurate interpretation of created images, assigning of meanings, and assuming subject positions defined by themes in commercials. The sounds used are associated with enjoying drinking Coke drinks as way inspiring thirst in the audience. Soundtracks like pop sound as Coke bottle-top is opened, and the ice clinking in the glass being filled with Coke drink play as commercials begin, and increase in intensity as shots sequentially shift from a close-up to extreme close-up to capture the flagship product that acts as a sensory moment in a commercial. Soundtracks are therefore a necessary inclusion in Coca-Cola commercials because they invite viewers

into constructions of cultural identities, as advertising has the power to shape social discourse, and audiences participate in meaning-making as they read media texts (Fiske 1987).

Soundtracks used in Coca-Cola commercials enhance capitalist ideologies on cultural constructions — media representation of reality that Jameson (1991) calls a reality through images or sounds that might be familiar to audience members, but isn't based in any reality. In fact, constructions in advertisements are a result of re-creation or repackaging of imagery based on no original referents. They are highly stylized based on non-existent images of original reality in order to appeal to the audience. Through soundtracks in their commercials, Coca-Cola seeks to endear their products to people as a lifestyle as their use solves needs like thirst, act as sources of energy during various activities, and a companion during meals.

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