An Image is Worth a Thousand Words!

A Visual Discourse Analysis of Face Images on Front Book Covers

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This article is the result of investigating ensemble fields. Thanks to all publishing houses for sharing their remarkable skills in designing the front book covers with the customers and the researchers as well to be a rich source for the corpora in the current article and in our thesis on persuasion in book blurbs (In preparation).
We (as Supervisor and MA candidate at the Department of English, College of Arts in the University of Mosul, Iraq) are grateful to the designers without their human images, animal images, and compound images on front book covers focusing on face expressions and inspiring eye gazes this article would not have been possible. The authors’ encyclopedic knowledge in the fields of VDA, semiotics, advertisement, art, psychology, and even medicine, are indispensable with in the practical part of the study. Thank you All…

Abstract
Book cover is a complex collection of signs that can be decoded in a multidisciplinary approach. The current study comes as a perceptive account of signs which may help consumers to interpret messages in the chosen book covers images and meanings matching the book content. To our intuition, the most spectacular images are human face images which are subdivided into real model face images and abstract character face images, animal face images, and compound images. Totally, we analyzed a blend of 10 images in various book covers adopting a visual discourse approach. Three assumptions are worth investigating: (1) the viewers could read basic fragments of the book body via the eyes in the images, (2) it is likely that book titles are indirectly related to the corresponding book covers images, and (3) animal face images in the compound image could connote more evilness about the content, and the sort of the book. Findings revealed that real model face images could decode more about the book than abstract characters images interpreting the publisher’s messages. In compound images, animal face features could connote evil messages more than humans. Eyes remain the most powerful feature reading the book cover.

Keywords: Visual Discourse Analysis; Sign; Human Face Image; Animal Face Image; Front Book Covers

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Introduction

Visual Discourse Analysis (VDA) is "...a general term for an approach to analyze art as a language and its use. It is located within semiotics, discourse analysis, and the grammar of visual design. For specialists in VDA, "... they are ... interested in analyzing visual texts, the marks on visual texts within the constructs of arts as a language system...". As discourse analysis, VDA declaims the discourses that arise within visual text as a communicative event (Albers, 2007, p.:83). The core of VDA is visual persuasion referring to the use of images, illustrations, and graphics to amplify a message in order to motivate the receiver to act in a certain way. A picture by itself is a persuasive way to interact with viewers as a channel for passing contradictory or different messages through the face. Plausibly enough, faces and eyes on front book covers are windows for passing informational and emotional messages to inform the reader some silent hidden details about a book or even the characters.

In the present study, we attempt to investigate the significance of using face images on front book covers by illustrators and publishing houses so as to decoding the various messages, which are possible to pass through the face, and shedding light on both informative and persuasive functions. It is worth considering that we experience the world through our eyes and we are put up to pay more attention to certain visual elements. An image has the ability to add feelings and emotions to book covers and is often fundamental to help get the message across. Visual communication is said to be the most effective way in delivering information to the viewer due to the fact that human mind processes objects and elements in image. The book cover image contributes to distinguishing the book and creating an emotional connection between the reader and the book which essentially becomes more attractive and memorable. It portrays a feeling of suspense for the book content. It is reasonable to say that selecting images on book covers have persuasive messages via specific human features, especially face and eyes. In the literature, it is claimed that these two features attract the attention and catch the reader’s eye.

The main goal of the current article, thus, is to decoding the variety of signs in the facial expressions and eye gaze on book cover images. Such signs could connote a variety of attitudes, feelings or personalities of the individual’s image, whether real or abstract. Likewise, animal face image could be decoded whether in a separate or in the compound images with human.

Key Disciplines

The Prominence of Visual Communication in Book Advertising

Visual communication is as important as the Talks Meetings for communication. People pay more attention when communicating with other people they can see as they concentrate on facial expressions and eyes contact. In book advertising, visual communications have a positive impact in growing the field. As visual communication has more impact in passing information to people; most of the marketing strategies make use of images, graphics, and signs to pass information to the consumers. One surely falls in love with a book on a movie where a handsome actor or a pretty actress images or graphics are on the front book cover. Most evidently, customers fall in love with different products, not only books, depending on how they are advertised using images and graphics. Comparing between images and messages in communication, researchers suggested that images are memorable while messages are forgettable; an image increases a message’s memorability. In the same line of thinking, Allen (2018, p.2) justified the significance of visual communication in the following manner.

➢ Images are emotional, influential, and persuasive.
The human brain is wired to process images quickly.

People look for patterns in their environment to make sense of their surroundings, to help make choices, to understand concepts, and to achieve knowledge.

Visuals simplify communicate and can reach a wider global audience; images cross language barriers.

Images can reflect the uniqueness of a product or service.

Images make the invisible visible creating a visual representation of an intangible service or object.

Visual communication has the potential to build a brand’s image, identity, and equity.

Images are processed faster by the brain than is text-up to 60,000 times faster.

The Discourse of Using Face Images in Advertising

The face is a matter of major importance in our daily lives; it tells us something about the identity of the person we are looking at and provides more information on gender, age, and nationality (Martinez & Du, 2012, p. 1589). The individual’s face reflects the power and complexities of their brain. The essential interest is the production and recognition of facial expressions of emotion which also play a pivotal role in supporting people to express their emotions, feelings, and attitudes perfectly. Advertisers use facial expressions to encode part of the information to the customer. In this respect, some authors believe that human face is among other stimuli which could easily catch consumers’ attention in an image (Bindemann, et al., 2007; Cerf, Frady, & Koch, 2009 cited in Isabella & Vieira, 2019, p. 376). The face is vital in presenting feelings and emotions to attract the viewer’s attention or to create a distinct impression so that viewers later recall some memorable images. However, images like text are capable of presenting a message. Imagery is a form of discourse using images to convey messages, especially in children’s books; they are far strong than those delivered through the texts. Consequently, publishers have concentrated on facial expressions of hero images both human and/or animals in delivering certain messages or passing unsaid information to the reader. Thus, the presented message through the parts of face includes the first impression about the content of the book.

Facial Attraction

Including a face image on a book cover, magazine, web page, and social media has a great effect on the viewer. People usually like and are programmed to look at faces from the first sight. As such, they scan and analyze expressions aiming at reading other people’s nature to know the way to behave towards them. It is not of importance whether the person in the photo is beautiful or not. The face features communicate silent communication cues in visual interaction. Broadly speaking, this suggests that faces have an attentive power so that they are considered as a great way to use the human’s natural process to attract someone’s attention. Therefore, Isabella & Vieira (2019, p.375) assumed that “…the model’s facial expression influenced the product evaluation.” It is amazing to know what we can determine from a face is recognizing someone’s mood, complex emotions; what is even more is reading thoughts from a face. Facial expressions of emotions could also play a pivotal role in human communication. Mothers by nature attract to their infant’s faces with complex emotions of softening heart and melting any aggressive. Jones et al. (1990 cited in Schmidt and Cohn, 2001, p.15) stated that “human infants use facial expression to induce their mothers to pay attention, and mothers typically vocalize or smile in response”.

The nature of attractive faces in advertisement could be divided into two types: (1)
faces with universal expressions as *anger, smile, sad, etc.* (cf. Martinez & Du, 2012, p. 1591), and (2) expressionless (neutral) face“...is a relaxed face without contraction of facial muscles and without facial movements... it is the facial appearance without any dramatic expression” (Tian & Bolle, 2003, p. 1). In advertising, such expressionless faces might transmit different ideological messages like *identity, stability, superiority, dignity, stoicism, prestige, credit,* and *dominance.* Quite precisely, both types have similar ideological purposes as the faces: (1) catch the viewer’s attention making a contact with them, (2) decode certain messages to them, and (3) motivate them to read the content of advertising which is defined by various perspectives.

### The Power of Eyes

Eye contact interaction is one of the most powerful types of non-verbal communication. An image with attractive eyes looking right at the audience is a great instrument to use with visual advertising. When people look straight at us, they are being candid and honest. Showing imagery with eyes looking at the audience helps developing trust and making up the audience’s mind to choose a book and buy. In this respect, an advertisement contains an image of a model making eye contact with customers creates more personal feelings and emotions as if there is a bridge for passing the unsaid complex emotions between the two. The customer gazes longer at the advertisement and is more likely to remember. Images with a model looking away are less catchy since there is a less personal feeling and a missing link with customers according to the nature of the advertisement and what the marketing is trying to convey. Not all advertisements have to have eye contact, though. In other words, if the model is looking away, it conveys and provides other emotions such as *sorrow, shyness, ambiguity, seriousness, fear, confusion, anger,* and *other ranges of emotions.*

It is worth stressing that eye contact cannot be neglected in the genre of advertising. In fact, direct gazes develop models’ ability to change others’ opinions building on the assumption that eye contact always works in favour of growing warm feelings between two people. As Ali, Basori& Sulong (2014: p. 178) indicated that“... [eye] gaze is an important interaction between humans (in real life) and between virtual human characters (in virtual reality)*. This is one reason behind the most powerful charity operations containing an image of a victim gazing into the camera. It promotes feelings of the victim’s suffering and sympathy making the audience feels responsible for the victim.

Vaidya, Jin, & Fellows (2014 cited in Cowan, 2015, p.18) showed that spotting more subtle facial emotions, fixations to the eye-region of the stimuli were the most essential in their research. It was also found that fixations to the eye-region were found greater than for the other key facial regions, for sadness, shame, anger and fear. From another perspective, the model’s gaze can be a channel of happiness, goodness, joy, and shame or a barometer of fear, anger, disgust, sadness, etc. Depending on the advertiser’s intention and the customer’s sensitivity, both are communicated through the model’s eye gaze. This fact reflects the age-old proverb that “eyes are as windows of the soul”. Our eyes give away more about our internal processes than we might like. Eye contact makes it less likely that one gets away with lying or honesty. Ali, Basori, & Sulong (2014, p.171) assumed that “[t]he eye movement is an important part of face to face conversation which carries the nonverbal information and emotional intent”.

### Semiotic Analysis of Facial Expressions

A more pertinent discipline to the study of VDA is semiotics where sign process is its core. A sign is anything that conveys meaning and different signs are able to provide a variety of messages in a better way; this is why it is valid in the marketing process. In other
words, semiotics intends to explain all possible interpretations of visuals including color, texture and/or form. In his Elements of Semiology (1964), Barthes’s structuralism and semiotics were used as a way to analyze advertisements. As such, advertisements are a common topic for semiotic analysis due to their tendency to be interpreted at two levels, viz. denotative level and connotative level, and using a collection of signs values. As to the first level, it is the level where sign is used to create personality for a product whereas the second level reveals the hidden meaning of the used images, texts, and sounds (pp.89-93) (cf. “surface level” and “underlying level” in Sidauruk, Jimmi & Septiani’s typology, 2019, p. 128).

Human face is also a key semiotic genre. The facial expression provides a lot of messages via communication. The certain combinations of positions of facial muscles could be decoded as signifier of different emotions. There is an essential relationship stretch in the signifier and signified in the way that we can utilize certain combination of features to express our emotions and, similarly, understand other’s feelings by analyzing their facial features. It is of significance to magnify that each part of the features contains some information, and the eye is the most central one which stores the variety of information and feelings. All creatures have eyes, yet one can tell their emotions (Lu, 2018, pp.1-3).

Hypotheses
1. It is suggested that eyes might be the most effective and figurative part of human’s and animal’s face on the book cover images.
2. We assume a triple relationship, i.e., three-dimensional and solid connection between the cover image, the title, and the book content.
3. We presume that most animals have an influential and full of evil power eye gaze more than human whether in animal images or compound images book covers.

Purpose
Our main goals in the current article are to (1) examine the interwoven relation between images on front book covers and decoding the unsaid messages about the general impression of the book content via facial features, especially the eyes, to promote the customers, and (2) emphasize that the images on front book covers are never to be just an image; they have both textual and visual components.

Method and Material
Totally, 10 different print book covers images were gathered electronically from the Websites including (6) images of human face (4 model face images and 2 abstract face images), (2) animal face images, and (2) compound face images (both human and animal). The covers were first briefly analyzed individually, and then compared with others to demonstrate the way the face images which construct a book are used to promote completely different ideologies and thus evoke different responses from the viewers.

Research Questions
RQ. 1 What are the various messages which can be conveyed via the face features of human, animal or the compound in the front book cover image?
RQ. 2 Is there any connection between the book cover image and the general characteristics of the book content?

Findings and Results
The Visual Discourse of Human Face Image
Sample No.1 In this particular sample, the human face has more than one sign: attractive and brilliant eyes with catching gaze, dark eyebrows, and thick eyelashes. All of which are the Arabic eyes significations. The headdress or what it is called Ghutra and Iqaal - famous traditional names of Arabic
headdress especially in Arabic Gulf countries or a tribal man’s signification, in general. The designer has produced a symbolic picture with some minor changes as can be shown in the current sample. All these signs are relevant to the book title, viz. Blue Blooded Tribesman as the publisher tries to refer to certain details indirectly. This correlation between the signs, the title, and the content reflects Arabic culture, traditions, and the Arab’s eyes features as well. In designing the model’s attractive direct eye gaze, the designer may convey various messages to the reader such as authority, stability, prestige, self-confidence, and power connoting tribal man’s specifications. The model’s eyes are but tools to attract the reader’s attention increasing personal feelings and emotions and developing trust between the viewer and the image of the model as a real person.

Sample No.1

Sample No.2 It is a symbolic image of an abstract character with half face, more particularly, it is North Asian face features (Japanese, Korean, Chinese, etc.). Here we have a clear evidence that the face features could identify some groups of peoples’ identity. The half face with the pulled eyes and the sharp gaze are considered as some key characteristics of ancient fighters – The Samurai Fighter. Though there is no direct connection between the character’s image and the title of the book, we can decode automatically the identity of the character through the face features and the content of the book which deals with a fighter from one of the North Asian countries.
Sample No.3 In the current book cover image, there seems a full face of a real (model) character with artful and foxy face features. As the character has a great ability to dodge and steal, his focus is on stealing and copying people’s imaginations and memories through the magic that can be conjured up by images of peoples. The viewer could also observe that there is a clear linkage between the title and the character’s face features, as he is magician. The gloomy and murky features are as a mirror reflecting the character owing super natural magic power.

Sample No.4 In this front cover image, odd blue eyes with straight eye gaze are shown on the back cover in addition to a half face of the same model with pretty lady character who appears in the back as shadow. There is that opposing sensation of fear and straight gazes of the lady and the young man, respectively. Even, the lady’s image is in the back which goes hand in hand with the title and the theme of the story. The strange eye color suggests unnatural power and weird events happen in a murky world of shadows.

Sample No.5 The full face of a symbolic young woman model with luminous strange light outgoing from her eyes are distinctive signs. These symbolic features refer to supernatural power, strength and speed beyond human capacity. So, the protagonist’s face features indicate that the events of the story deal with a fantasy character with supernatural powers as it is
exactly indicated in the title; the heroine is not an ordinary woman but an echo one.

Visual Discourse Analysis of Animal Face Image

Sample No.6 The current sample is considered as one of the ambiguous book covers with odd sign. The viewer may wonder about the relationship between the sign of owl on one hand and the title and the content of the book on the other. Since the title of the book refers to seven twisted mysteries or nightmares, horror is expected. This reading may raise the question: Do the owl’s facial features symbolize horror? The answer could not be confirmed with yes or no and it could differ from one person to another. Still, the owl’s nature, as a kind of the few night birds which can see and hunt in the dark clearly, is a clue to relate owl indirectly to nightmares where ghosts usually appear during night to horrify and frighten people. The owl’s odd straight gaze in the cover image may give a general impression to the reader about the horrible events of the stories in the book.

Sample No.7 The sign, in the current sample, is a unique design of face. It gathers a face of animal (wild sheep) with human body. The wild sheep’s head refers to demon deep of human beings. Through this
symbolic picture of the sheep’s head, the maker turns the scales by making a kind of comparison to show the similarity between the feature of wildness and the human’s devil thoughts and actions. The process of changing human’s head with the sheep’s head confirms the assumption that the human-animal relationship is complex yet contains some consistencies. There is no place of rejecting that evil attributes are part of some humans’ nature.

Sample No. 7

Sample No. 8 Mammals, especially cats, though are considered as cute kind of animals but in the current image, they represent the sign of evilness. The publishers make use of the cat’s face on the front book cover in order to communicate some parts of the theme of the story with the reader. The cat’s eyes suggest evilness, horror, fear, supernatural power, and demon deep nature. Our reading supports the assumption that eyes are the most powerful feature in face knowing that the cat’s eyes have a captivating and fascinating power for human beings hence one could convey a variety of messages focusing on the cat’s eyes.
Visual Discourse Analysis of Compound Image (Human and Animal)

**Sample No.9** Publishers combine human images with certain animal images as cat, wolf, fox, owl, hyena, etc. to indicate the animal’s role besides human image. It is worth declaring that animals’ eyes often embody the evil side in the story better than human where the straight gaze of animals suggest evil and horror more than human’s straight gaze. Our reading is built on the fact that hyenas and wolfs, for instance, ever get cast as anything but the bad guys and evil in advertisements.

![Sample No.9](image1.png)

**Sample No.10** This sample shows a different type – a compound image of human face and animal face. The two faces have a strong connection with the book title. Human face, a pretty girl’s face with innocent and charming smile as a case in point, presents all good qualities as goodness, innocence, and peace; that is to say, the good side of human nature. On the contrary, the wolf’s face presents the bad side of humans. The two faces exactly describe people who wear a mask which is far from their real demon deep nature and intention to be able to deceive others by innocent appearance.

![Sample No.10](image2.png)
Conclusion

In order to move the state of art forward by the application of face recognition, the present work comes as an attempt to capture zoomed images of face on front books covers in reading certain messages and information purposefully conveyed to viewers. Throughout these images on covers, concepts and meanings are represented in the facial features of a hero image according to the content requirements and to the intent of the publisher.

Building on our findings, publishers may insert an image for a real character or an abstract one (cartoon or caricature); in some other cases, they provide animals' images to hint at the essential message (theme) of the book content. More impressively, publishers and designers gather both human’s and animal's face in one image to spell out their message. In summary, two points in the findings are worth mentioning:

1. Animal's face features sound to be more powerful and effective in conveying evil power on book covers than human’s due to the fact that the nature of wild animals looks as full of fear and horror for viewers.

2. The eyes are the center of sensations in the face, as if they are a mirror that reflects the nature of creatures. Thus, when we replace the eyes of deer with the eyes of the lion via the Photoshop Program, it becomes clear that the eyes are the source of evil not the body.

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