A Guide to Deconstructing a Visual

A picture may be worth a thousand words, but whose words are they?

Just as an author carefully selects words and phrases to express ideas, a photographer, advertising executive, or graphic designer composes a photograph, ad, or layout to convey a specific emotion or message. As a result, a visual is not simply a reflection of reality, but rather the expression of a point of view. The following guide will help you deconstruct any image.

1. **Content** can be symbolic and the following elements may affect how we interpret an image:
   - who or what is emphasized
   - facial expression
   - body language
   - the use of computer retouching
   - the action featured
   - objects
   - setting
   - colours

2. **Composition** refers to the arrangement of elements in the picture. Consider:
   - use of blank space
   - juxtaposition (putting seemingly unrelated items close together or side by side)
   - details in the foreground and background
   - what is excluded or cropped

3. **Camera distance and angle** may indicate a photographer’s attitude toward the subject. Consider:
   - high angles (looking down) suggesting vulnerability
   - low angles (looking up) suggesting power
   - close ups suggesting intimacy
   - long shots suggesting distance
   - eye-level shots suggesting equality

4. **Lighting** may contribute to mood and atmosphere. Consider:
   - brightness/darkness
   - top lighting
   - side lighting
   - bottom lighting
   - back lighting
   - artificial lighting
   - natural lighting
5. **Captions** influence how we interpret an image. Different captions on identical pictures will change the meaning entirely. Consider:

- word choice
- use of adjectives
- punctuation

If the visual you are deconstructing is an ad, you might use the following checklist to help you:

- What effect do the five elements listed above have on the meaning of the advertisement?
- Does the advertisement appeal to our needs or desires?
- If the ad appeals to a need, what kind of “need” is it?
- Does the ad play on the audience’s fears? How?
- What solution to the desire, need, or fear does the ad offer? Is the solution realistic?

Describe the target audience by age, gender, income level, and any other identifying features. In your opinion, would the ad have any appeal beyond the target audience?

Describe the actors/models and the scenario in which they appear. Consider each of the Elements of an emotional Appeal in Advertising on page 79 of the Student Text.

Are the beliefs of one particular group represented? Who is in a position of power and who is not?

Are any stereotypes used? Describe them.

What views of happiness and success are implied?

To follow upon your deconstruction, you may wish to offer an alternative advertisement to promote the product.