

## Personification in Multimodal Advertising Discourse: A Case Study of the "Share a Coke" Campaign

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**Abstract:** This study deals with the example of embodiment as a basis for understanding advertising discourse. It studies material developed for the "Share a Coke" campaign by Coca Cola. The basis of this campaign are personal names printed on Coca Cola bottles, which differ according to the language of the country in which the product is sold. Official campaign results show a high success rate and rise in Coca Cola sales during the implementation of the campaign. This study will try to show why this campaign was so successful and how the linguistic content within its multimodal structure prompted consumers to purchase the product. The relationship between advertising discourse and the consumer is studied through Embodied Mind Theory (Lakoff 1987, Varela et al. 1993, Lakoff and Johnson 1999, Gibbs 2005), and theories of multimodality in advertising discourse (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001, Koller 2009). The study explains how the discourse of these advertisements used personification to encourage product purchases. The hypothesis is that the personalized bottles, along with the specific linguistic content of the advertisements, act as extensions of the consumers' personalities, and that embodiment is the key to understanding the consumer's desire to purchase and consume the product. The study takes into consideration poster advertisements used in the Croatian and English-speaking markets. Similarities and differences in the realization of the discourse between these two markets could point to a relative universality of embodiment, and the applicability of the Embodied Mind Theory for the creation, development, and usage of multimodal discourse.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Embodiment, the idea that cognition is shaped by the body's experiences and sensory-motor interactions with the world, has become a significant concept in Cognitive Linguistics. This theory, particularly emphasized in the works of Lakoff (1987), Varela et al. (1993), and Lakoff and Johnson (1999), suggests that the human mind is grounded in physical experiences and perceptions, influencing not only language but also behavior. In the context of commercial discourse, embodiment often plays a crucial role in understanding how consumers interact with advertisements. The "Share a Coke" campaign by Coca-Cola, which started in Australia and later spread globally, provides an ideal case study for examining how embodied cognition influences consumer behavior and advertising success.<sup>1</sup>

The campaign's central concept involved replacing the Coca-Cola brand name on bottles with popular personal names, creating a sense of personalization. This personalized branding was tied to multimodal communication strategies, including the visual appeal of the product and its linguistic content. The campaign's success, measured by increased sales, prompts the question: why did this personalized approach resonate so deeply with consumers? This study aims to explore the relationship between embodiment, multimodality, and advertising discourse, focusing on how the "Share a Coke" campaign utilized these principles to create a bond between the product and its consumers.

### 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on Embodied Mind Theory and Multimodal Discourse Analysis to understand how the "Share a Coke" campaign successfully connects with consumers through embodied cognition and

<sup>1</sup> All information regarding the marketing campaign was taken from the official Coca Cola website. All slogans are trademarked by the Coca Cola company, and are only reproduced here for the purposes of our analysis. For more information on the campaign, see: <https://www.coca-cola.com/au/en/media-center/share-a-coke-how-the-groundbreaking-campaign-got-its-start-down-under>

multimodal communication. Both frameworks are crucial for analyzing how language, imagery, and bodily experiences shape consumer behavior, particularly in the realm of advertising.

### *Embodied Mind Theory*

The Embodied Mind Theory argues that human cognition is not solely a product of abstract mental processes but is deeply rooted in our physical bodies and sensory-motor experiences. This is exemplified in Lakoff's (1987: 267) claim that "our conceptual system is fundamentally shaped by the nature of our bodies", asserting that the mind cannot be understood apart from the body. In marketing and advertising, this framework suggests that products can be more than just objects; they can become extensions of the self, forming a connection to our sense of identity that transcends their practical use.

Johnson (1987: 29) elaborates on this by stating, "The body is the primary site of meaning-making". He emphasizes that our cognitive experiences are grounded in our bodily interactions with the world, which would suggest that advertisements that evoke embodied responses, such as the personalization in the "Share a Coke" campaign, resonate more deeply with consumers. This embodied connection is key to understanding how and why this specific campaign was successful: by placing a personal name on the bottle, Coca-Cola taps into the consumer's embodied sense of self and identity. So, in the context of this campaign, the names on the bottles represent more than just a marketing tool; they act as metaphors for the consumer's identity. As Lakoff and Johnson (1999: 146) argue, "metaphors are grounded in the body's interaction with the world", and the use of names on the bottles is a prime example of a metaphor that creates an embodied connection between the consumer and the product.

Further supporting this view, Forceville (2017: 159) examines how visual and multimodal metaphors in advertising create cultural connections through embodied experiences, noting that "visual metaphors often rely on shared bodily experiences to evoke emotional responses that are culturally resonant". This aligns with the "Share a Coke" campaign, where the embodied metaphor of seeing one's name on a product elicits a personal emotional response that enhances brand attachment.

### *Multimodal Discourse Analysis in Advertising*

Multimodal Discourse Analysis provides a framework for understanding how different semiotic modes—text, image, sound, and more—work together to construct meaning. In the "Share a Coke" campaign, the integration of personalized names (linguistic mode) with the visual appearance of the bottle (visual mode) forms a powerful multimodal message. As Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001: 12) explain, "meaning is always multimodal; it never resides in any one mode alone". This reflects how the linguistic and visual elements of the advertisements work in concert to shape the consumer's embodied perception of the product.

The campaign uses the visual mode to present an image of a personalized Coca-Cola bottle, which symbolizes an embodied connection to the consumer. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996: 2), "images are not merely representations of reality, but play a key role in constructing meaning". The act of placing a name on the bottle transforms the product into something more than just a drink; it becomes a personal, humanized object that connects with the consumer's identity.

Forceville and Urios-Aparisi (2009: 214) argue that multimodal metaphors in advertising engage the viewer's embodied cognition by combining images and language in ways that evoke bodily experiences, noting that "multimodal metaphors often create emotional and cognitive experiences that are grounded in bodily perception". This theory directly supports the effectiveness of the "Share a Coke" campaign: by presenting the product as an extension of the consumer's own identity through personalized names, the campaign engages the consumer's embodied cognition, making the product more desirable.

Sharifian (2011: 118) emphasizes the role of cultural conceptualizations in understanding how meaning is constructed through multimodal semiotics, asserting that "cultural conceptualizations are grounded in bodily experiences but also shaped by shared cultural practices". This highlights the importance of cultural context in advertising, as the "Share a Coke" campaign adapts its multimodal discourse to different linguistic and cultural settings, personalizing the product according to local tastes and names. The success of the campaign in different countries suggests that the embodied appeal of the product transcends cultural boundaries, though the specifics of the personalization (e.g., names) are shaped by local culture.

### *Personification and Embodiment in Advertising*

One key multimodal strategy employed by Coca-Cola in this campaign is **personification**, where the product is given human-like qualities to foster a deeper connection with consumers. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001: 131) argue that "personification involves the projection of human attributes onto inanimate objects, which helps to make those objects more relatable and meaningful". By assigning personal names to the bottles, Coca-Cola imbues the product with human-like characteristics, transforming it from a mere object into a personalized, emotionally resonant entity.

This technique aligns with the broader embodied metaphor at play in the campaign, the PEOPLE ARE CONTAINERS basic conceptual metaphor. As Lakoff (1987: 26) suggests, "we conceptualize ourselves as containers and assign different identities to ourselves based on the metaphors we use". By placing a name on the bottle, Coca-Cola taps into this metaphor, making the bottle a container of personal identity. The consumer no longer sees a generic product, but a personalized object that represents their own embodied self.

Forceville (2017: 162) expands on the role of visual and multimodal metaphors in advertising, stating that "the power of visual metaphors in advertising lies in their ability to elicit a bodily response, thereby creating a sense of intimacy and connection between the consumer and the product". This is evident in the "Share a Coke" campaign, where the personalization of the bottle creates a metaphorical bond between the consumer and the product. The embodied cognition evoked by seeing one's name on the bottle is an example of how advertising can humanize a product through multimodal elements.

### *Linking Embodiment and Multimodal Advertising*

By combining embodiment with multimodal discourse, the "Share a Coke" campaign uses both linguistic and visual elements to create a compelling, personalized experience for the consumer. The personalized names serve as metaphors for the consumer's identity, tapping into the embodied self-concept that Lakoff and Johnson (1999) describe as central to human cognition. As they note, "metaphors shape not only our understanding of the world, but also our desires and actions" (1999: 146). This embodied metaphor, where the product is personalized and thus becomes a reflection of the consumer's self, helps explain the campaign's effectiveness in driving consumer behavior.

Moreover, the integration of embodied metaphors with multimodal semiotic resources allows the campaign to engage the consumer on multiple cognitive levels. As Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001) assert, "multimodal resources function synergistically to convey meaning that resonates emotionally and cognitively with the audience" (p. 14). In the case of Coca-Cola, the combination of the personalized name (linguistic mode) and the product's visual identity (visual mode) creates a message that appeals to the consumer's embodied experience, fostering a sense of ownership and connection.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

The primary data for this study consists of two posters from the Croatian and English-speaking markets, selected for their diverse linguistic and cultural contexts. A multimodal discourse analysis will be conducted to examine how the linguistic elements (personalized names and campaign slogans) and visual components (bottle designs) work together to create an embodied connection with consumers. The study will compare the representation of embodiment in these two markets, exploring whether the campaign's success is driven by universal embodied principles or by culturally specific practices.

## 4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

### *Embodiment in the "Share a Coke" Campaign*

In this analysis, we looked at the "Share a Coke" campaign as it was marketed in English-speaking markets, and in the Croatian-speaking market. The campaign consisted of TV commercials, as well as posters. It should be noted that each TV commercial would end by showing an image that was also used as a poster in the campaign. For the purposes of this study, we have analyzed the main campaign poster as an example of the multimodal use of metaphor in advertising. Below we can see the main poster for the campaign:





Figure1. "Share a Coke" campaign in Australia



Figure2. "Share a Coke" campaign in Croatia

What can immediately be noticed is the multimodal representation. On the one hand, we can see the linguistic input which focuses on the personal names on the bottles, but also on the accompanying slogans provided by the company. The main slogan of the Coca Cola company – Open happiness – is followed by the main campaign slogan – Share a Coke. These are both trademarked slogans by the Coca Cola company.

Let us first focus on the English language example. It includes both slogans, but also a text that says "Get in touch with a good friend, an old friend, or maybe even a new friend". So, the intended meaning of the advertisement is that if you share a Coke, you can connect with friends. This connection is doubly asserted by the image presented on the poster: two bottles touching. These two bottles, held by two hands, are touching as if the people holding them were saying "cheers". The action of touching bottles, which is culturally associated with socializing, is further strengthened by the accompanying text that says "Get in touch with a good friend". Therefore, the getting in touch is multimodally stated in order to strengthen the message that Coca Cola brings people together. This message is further strengthened through the personal names printed on the bottles. So, in the case of this poster, "Kylie" and "Luke" can be understood to be good friends, old friends, or new friends, who have come together thanks to Coca

Cola. Therefore, this multimodality is based on several inputs, linguistic and visual, which all depend on the underlying metaphorical mechanisms used in their creation.

If we consider these mechanisms, we will realize that we are dealing specifically with conceptual metaphors based on embodiment and personification. The mechanism of personification is represented in the bottles themselves. Conceptual metaphors are represented in the linguistic input. Let us look at Figure 1 again, but this time with the main linguistic input:



We can see the primary messages circled red: open happiness, share a Coke, and get in touch. If we try to break this down, we will get the following:

Open happiness = opening a bottle of Coca Cola is opening a bottle of happiness. This entails that the bottle of Coca Cola is a container for the emotion of happiness.

Share a Coke = if the bottle of Coca Cola is a container for happiness, then sharing it means that we are sharing happiness.

Get in touch = the touching of bottles is equated to socializing

Now lets turn to personification. If we take into consideration the above explanation of the linguistic mode of the advertisement, and add the personal names onto the bottles, we will get the following explanation: if the bottle of Coca Cola is conceptualized as a container for happiness, and if my name on the bottle creates an extension of my identity to the bottle through personification, then I am also a container for happiness when I am drinking Coca Cola. Therefore, my name on the bottle is a signal for my happiness based on my embodied experience and personification. If we break down this conceptualization process schematically, we will get the following:

Bottle = container

Coca Cola (the drink) = happiness

Bottle of Coca Cola = container for happiness

My name on the bottle (personification) = the bottle is me

Therefore, if the bottle of Coca Cola is a container for happiness, then I am also a container for happiness when my name is printed on the bottle of Coca Cola. This conceptualization is primarily based on the basic conceptual metaphor PEOPLE ARE CONTAINERS (Lakoff 1987: 26).

The same conceptualization pattern presented through multimodality can be seen in the Croatian example:

Again, the linguistic input circled in red illustrates the container metaphor through two trademarked slogans, Open happiness (Cro. *otvori za radost*) and Share a Coke (Cro. *podijeli*). In the Croatian version, the Share a Coke slogan has been adapted for the Croatian market and a summer advertising campaign, and translates to "Share the summer with your crew". The message is the same, accompanied by the visual input of Coca Cola bottles carrying Croatian personal names, held by different people,

touching in the culturally established gesture of socializing (e.g. saying 'cheers'). The conceptualization based on metaphor and personification follows the same pattern as the English language example.

Therefore, the personalized bottles are a key example of embodiment in this advertising campaign. When consumers see their own name on a bottle, the product becomes more than just a beverage; it becomes an extension of themselves, a representation of their identity. This personalization activates embodied cognition, as consumers can "see" themselves as part of the experience, making the product more appealing.



### *Comparative Analysis: Croatian vs. English-speaking Markets*

The Croatian and English-language advertisements differ in how they use embodiment. While the personalized names have a universal appeal, the cultural context shapes the emotional response. For example, in Croatia, the emphasis may be more on collective identity – as illustrated by the use of the word 'ekipa' (Eng. crew) in the linguistic mode, while in English-speaking markets, individualism or more intimate friendships could be more prominent. These variations could provide insight into how embodiment operates differently in diverse cultural contexts, suggesting that while the underlying principle of embodiment remains constant, its realization may vary based on local values.

### *Personification in Advertising*

Personification is an essential component of this campaign. By giving the product a "personal identity," Coca-Cola makes the product seem alive, relatable, and human. This anthropomorphism encourages consumers to feel a personal connection, which increases the likelihood of purchase. Through this embodied connection, consumers are not just buying a drink; they are buying a piece of themselves.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the success of the "Share a Coke" campaign can be attributed to its highly effective use of embodiment and personification in advertising, which resonate deeply with consumers on both cognitive and emotional levels. The personalized bottles, each bearing an individual's name, function as more than just containers for a beverage; they act as extensions of the self. By incorporating the consumer's identity into the product itself, Coca-Cola successfully creates an embodied connection that goes beyond mere consumption. The experience of drinking from a bottle that bears one's name taps into the embodied cognition framework, wherein personal identity and physical experience are intertwined. This embodied connection, grounded in the consumer's sensory and emotional interaction with the product, strengthens the brand's appeal and fosters a sense of belonging, making the product feel personal and meaningful.



The study also highlights how the "Share a Coke" campaign utilizes metaphor to further enhance the embodied connection between consumer and product. The act of placing a name on the bottle can be understood as a metaphorical gesture that transforms the product from a generic item into something unique and deeply personal. Drawing on metaphor theory, particularly the work of Lakoff and Johnson (1999), the personalized bottle functions as a metaphor for the consumer's identity. It not only represents a product but becomes an embodiment of the consumer's self, making the advertisement more emotionally and cognitively compelling. This metaphor of "selfhood" embedded in the product taps into deep psychological and cultural associations, increasing the likelihood of purchase.

The comparative analysis of the Croatian and English-speaking markets further reveals the universal appeal of embodiment as a marketing strategy, demonstrating its power to create emotional resonance across cultures. However, subtle cultural differences in how names are perceived or the linguistic nuances involved in the campaign suggest that the application of embodiment and personification can vary according to local context. For example, the use of names in the Croatian market may carry different connotations or associations compared to English-speaking regions, such as varying levels of personal intimacy or societal norms around name usage. These differences underscore the importance of understanding cultural conceptualizations, as emphasized by Sharifian (2011), which influence the way embodiment is interpreted and experienced by different consumer groups.

Ultimately, this study underscores the critical role of embodied cognition in understanding consumer behavior, showing that the physical, emotional, and cognitive engagement with a product is a key driver of purchasing decisions. By tapping into the consumer's embodied experience, Coca-Cola's "Share a Coke" campaign transforms a simple product into a personal, meaningful experience. The campaign's success lies not only in its innovative use of personalization but also in its ability to create a metaphorical link between the consumer's identity and the product.

This insight has significant implications for future advertising strategies. Advertisers can leverage the concept of embodiment to create stronger emotional connections with consumers, particularly by focusing on personalization and identity. The metaphorical power of such personalized products, as well as their ability to evoke embodied experiences, can serve as a model for crafting ads that are not just persuasive but deeply meaningful. Understanding how consumers embody products and the metaphors that resonate with them can be a crucial factor in developing more effective, emotionally engaging advertising campaigns that transcend cultural and linguistic boundaries.

In conclusion, the integration of embodiment and metaphor in the "Share a Coke" campaign represents a powerful marketing strategy that taps into universal cognitive processes while simultaneously adapting to cultural contexts. It provides valuable insights into how advertising can be designed to foster deeper consumer connections, offering a model for future campaigns that aim to resonate with consumers on an embodied and metaphorical level.

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