Consumption experience on Tmall: a social semiotic multimodal analysis of interactive banner ads

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This article contributes to the methodology literature of experience design by analysing banner ads on Tmall with a synthesis of social semiotics, multimodal analysis, and interactivity which guides our analysis of consumer-oriented advertising in e-commerce. Departing from Tmall’s annual Double 11 Carnival, our analysis shows that the banner ads have been incorporated into a gamification design to encourage consumers to spend more and buy things they may not need even after the event has been completed. Our approach of analysing the ads on both the syntagmatic and paradigmatic dimensions is explicitly multimodal, taking the linguistic, visual and interactive resources (the tri-fold convergence) into consideration to study new phenomena in an e-selling environment. The approach of this study could be helpful to scholars and practitioners in the field of experience design, where multimodality and textual analysis of visual information is of great importance.

Keywords: Social semiotics, multimodal analysis, interactive banner ads, experience design, e-commerce

Introduction

In recent years, experience design has been advocated and practised in a variety of projects as it can bring significant human, social and economic benefits to nations and organisations worldwide. According to Cheung (2016), experience design is the process of enhancing users’ trust, satisfaction and recognition of a product, service or system by improving users’ perception of the innovativeness, aesthetics and relevance of the experience provided in the interaction between the users and the product, service or system’s design elements in a particular context. It takes the users’ cognitive and emotional needs as its starting point and focuses on developing products, services or systems that could enable an experience to address the needs. Experience design elements include information, navigation, engagement, entertainment, and personalisation (Cheung, 2016). This study focuses on the element of information in one of the most influential e-commerce platforms in China, namely Tmall owned by Alibaba. It investigates Tmall’s information design strategy with a primary focus on its banner ads for advertising and promoting consumption experience.

Advertising plays a crucial role in pervasive marketing for organisations and businesses to build brand image, engage with their targeted audience, and promote their goals and activities (Sifaki & Papadopoulou, 2015). For e-commerce, advertising is particularly aimed at turning attention into transactions. Of the various types of ads, banner ads are an important genre. They are placed at a prominent position on a website or mobile app to attract consumers’ attention during their visits, in accordance with web design and search engine optimisation practices. Unlike advertising through third-party intermediaries such as traditional mass media or
social media, banner ads on e-commerce websites function as a direct touchpoint to facilitate consumer navigation. They are an effective tool for targeting consumers to boost sales and spending. This is in line with the concept of "e-selling", which is different from e-commerce or e-retailing, in that it has a more nuanced focus. E-selling is a term intended to conceptualise human-computer dialogue “characterised by the digital spatio-temporal locus, the psychology of online persuasion, and complex perceptions of value” (Parvinen, Oinas-Kukkonen & Kaptein, 2015, p. 214). It is closely linked to concepts such as human interactivity, intentionality, persuasion, and value creation.

This article aims to contribute to the methodology literature of experience design by examining banner ads on Tmall with a social semiotic and multimodal analysis approach. We examine a selection of banner ads designed to attract consumers’ attention and develop user trust for “e-selling” a brand, product and/or service. We also look at gamification design and how it drives consumer experience in the annual Double 11 Carnival on the e-commerce platform. Gamification design has been experimented by retailers, a practice of creating a game around the shopping experience, for example, to collect coupons and stamps (see more in Frith, 2013).

Tmall, literally Sky Cat, is China’s largest third-party platform for brands and retailers. It was originally named Taobao Mall or Taobao Shangcheng (Alibaba, 2017a). It is a business-to-consumer (B2C) web domain launched in 2008, parallel to Alibaba’s consumer-to-consumer (C2C) platform Taobao. Tmall has achieved a 136% year-on-year increase in cross-border retail revenues and remains the number one e-commerce platform in terms of market share (Alibaba, 2017b). CIW (2018) reports that the listing of more than 16,400 international brands from 68 countries on Tmall has attracted more than 529 million mobile Monthly Active Users (MAUs). Tmall now occupies almost 60% of the Chinese B2C market sales in fashion and apparel and maintains steady growth in consumer electronics and fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG). A particularly significant figure is connected to the 11th of November (Shuang 11, or Double 11), known as Singles’ Day (Meng & Huang, 2017). The annual Double 11 Carnival is a spectacle celebrated by the platform, endorsed by the government, and participated by consumers. Every year Alibaba organises a grand live show and conducts a 24-hour countdown to see how much money it makes during the Carnival. In 2018 Tmall generated over USD 30.8 billion in just 24 hours (see Figure 1, Alizilia, 2018). Together with Alibaba’s offline infrastructure (Yintai Mall and unmanned supermarkets), cloud computing (Ali Cloud), payment gateway (Alipay), and logistics (Cainiao Yizhan Delivery), Tmall has made a huge global impact in e-commerce consumption with its well-rounded industry ecosystem.

![Figure 1: Live grand celebration of Double 11 Carnival. Source: Alizilia](image)

**Literature review**

Our research focuses on Tmall banner ads, which are multimodal. Such ads make and convey meanings through a combination of textual, audio-visual and interactive modalities (augmented reality, virtual reality, clicks and hyperlinks, thus hypertextuality), all in one entity. We first follow the work of social semiotics and multimodality. It holds that semiotic resources such as signs and codes are socially constructed (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006; O’Halloran et al., 2011). The experience design element of information, in this case, is signified by various signs and codes. These conventions in the form of language and visual images are not static. They are subject to change and transformation and should be interpreted in specific social and cultural contexts.
The underlining theoretical rationale is that meaning-making and discursive processes with the help of semiotic resources are shaped by the motivations and interests of the sign-maker (He, 2016). However, we know little about the discursive constructions that aim to persuade consumers and change their minds (Van Dijk, 1993). This is particularly the case for the process of discursive construction in post-reform China after 1978, where consumerism is on the rise yet seldom investigated with a perspective of multimodal analysis. In the case of Tmall, the motivation and interests of the sign-maker can be investigated through a social semiotic and multimodal analysis of banner ads. In addition, because these banner ads are situated within an e-commerce website, we also examine the hypertextuality and affordances as part of interactive modalities for facilitating the discursive process through digital and multimedia texts. Here, we focus on the two-dimensional aspects of banner ads as interactive signs and sites, a departure from traditional multimodal analysis. In banner ads, hypertextuality is achieved through the affordances of digital text (search, scan, click, and tap). This interactivity allows and enables consumers to travel between texts and pages through hyperlinks and interactive functions. Informed by Adami’s semiotic analysis of website interactivity, we aim to examine the interactivity in banner ads as both signs and sites (the two-fold nature in Adami’s term, 2014). We investigate affordances available to activate interactivity, in addition to the communication of meanings achieved through traditional textual forms such as still and dynamic images, graphics, and words. To achieve this, we adopt and extend Halliday’s (1978) three metafunctions (the ideational, interpersonal, and textual) to analyse both the (previously static) discursive process and the now interactive banner ads in e-commerce websites.

In advertising and marketing research, discourse analysis guided by metafunctions has been widely used to study information and persuasion conveyed via a diversified range of texts (Wagner, 2015). The first strand of work is centred on language and text. In recent years, a visual turn has occurred, as identified by several scholars in advertising (see a review in Holsanova, 2012). Following this turn, there has been a growing body of interdisciplinary literature that employs social semiotics and multimodal discourse analysis to analyse advertising and media formats (Thomas, 2014; Holsanova, 2012). These include food and product packages (Wagner, 2015), magazines (Lick, 2015; Chen & Machin, 2014), posters (Sifaki & Papadopoulou, 2015; White, 2010), picture books and animated movies (Unsworth, 2015), photography on social media (Zappavigna, 2016), automobile commercials (Chen, 2016), website and TV ads/reviews (He, 2016; Adami, 2014; Jessen & Graakjær, 2013), café design and architecture (Aiello & Dickinson, 2014), as well as political speech and presentation (Wong, 2016), to name just a few. Against this backdrop, we champion a tri-fold convergence of the multimodality of texts, visuals and affordances (interactivity) and use it as a framework to guide our analysis.

The social semiotic framework of interactive banner ads

The tri-fold nature of the text, visuals and interactivity of banner ads contributes to the meaning-making process in Tmall. This is in line with social semiotics which regards codes of language and communication are shaped by social and cultural processes. In this study, we are particularly interested in visual information, that is, how the producer, mediator/interpreter and audience/consumer are connected through banner ads. There are a few theoretical approaches to this, including the semiotic and cognitive approach – a seamless circle in line with experience design strategy and practice. The semiotic approach focuses on visual segmentation as a result of “intentional, socially typical choices that are made to achieve the optimally desired communicative effect on a hypothetical model reader/viewer”, whereas the cognitive approach treats the dynamic and engagement process between the audience and the visuals as a point of departure from a reception perspective (Boeris & Holsanova, 2012, p. 263). The distinction between the production and reception study shows that the semiotic approach focuses more on the factors that can shape perception and segmentation process as a shared knowledge, whereas the cognitive approach investigates the general and individual patterns that unfold in the actual reading of such constructed discourses. How consumers actually engage with various banner ads (subjectivity and agency) is out of the scope of our study. At the outset, the tri-fold approach we take in this study is semiotic in nature. In fact, such an approach is widely used in investigating the socially and culturally entangled semiotic system (see Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001). This strand of work focuses more on the construction and communication processes (and their effect) than on individual preferences. However, both approaches value the principles of perception structure and organisation of textual and visual resources, in a predicted and interpretative manner. Therefore, in analysing banner ads, our study will particularly look at the structure and organisation of the multimodal resources of interactive banner ads. In doing so, it allows us to investigate these resources from three levels, namely the macro (ideological), the meso (organisational), and the micro (semiotic) level of shared social and cultural contexts in China. This is
in line with Foucault’s theory that places interaction and communication under specific power-knowledge regimes (Pereira, 2015).

**Contextualise the three metafunctions with interactive affordances**

In this section, we look at existing literature about how multimodal discourse analysis is incorporated with such an approach to study both the textual and visual aspects of advertising and digital marketing. Multimodal analysis can be traced back to Halliday’s (1978, 1994) Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). It is used to study the “functional and situational organisation of language in the social context” (He, 2016, p. 171). As a “functionalist”, Halliday regards “language as a device designed for accomplishing communicative ends, and insofar as function the basis for his description of language” (Urban, 1981, p. 660). Halliday (1978) views linguistic signalling as an intersubjective phenomenon. He therefore contends that language study should begin with discourse analysis (linguistic signalling in action). As language users also encode individual and multiple layers of meaning within a given discourse, the distinct functional modes must be analysed. He suggests that the discourse is constructed by the intertwined meaning and function. He then develops three abstract metafunctions (the ideational, interpersonal, and textual), a framework that can be mapped onto a given discourse, textual, visual or both. First, the *ideational function* is to say something about the world, referring to particular “objects, people or even ideas” for a given socio-cultural group (Sifaki & Papadopoulou, 2015, p. 473). Second, the *interpersonal function* is to say something about the actors who participate in the communicative process. Finally, the *textual function* focuses on the text as a whole. Another important component of this framework is “contextualism”, that is, to view language use in relation to both linguistic and non-linguistic contexts (Urban, 1981).

Drawing on Halliday’s SFL, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) adapt the metafunctional theory to study multimodal information in the face of the visual turn (He, 2016, p. 171). They have developed a theoretical framework called Visual Grammar (VG), mirroring and naming Halliday’s three functions as representational, interactive, and compositional meanings. They suggest that visual information is a semiotic mode of its own kind. Therefore, the three metafunctions can also be applied in visual analysis. In doing so, VG provides new terms as “grammatical realizations of metafunctional meaning in visual social semiotics” (Boeriis & Holsanova, 2012, p. 265). This is particularly useful in our case of analysing interactive banner ads. Representational meanings follow the ideational function, unfolding “actions and events, processes of change, transitory spatial arrangements” (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 56). Interactive meanings are coordinated via a number of interpersonal systems: gaze, social distance, perspectival angle, and modality. Compositional meanings at the textual level are achieved by leveraging resources such as information value, framing, and salience. Lemke (2002) further develops three equivalent terms, presentational, orientational, and organizational, to analyse hypermodality, whereas Zammit (2007, as cited in Adami, 2014) follows the terms in VG, adding an additional logical function. Here, to study the interactivity together with the multimodal VG of e-commerce banner ads, we stick to the terms of Halliday refined by Adami to avoid the possible confusion of an “interactive” function with different connotations and theoretical underpinnings (see more in Adami, 2014). As shown in Table 1, we present the refined framework for the examination of interactive banner ads on Tmall to facilitate both analysis and evaluation and to avoid turning our study into a mere description of the banner ads.

**Table 1 Axis of metafunctions and the two dimensions of interactive sites/signs, adapted from Adami (2014, p. 142)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Ideational function</th>
<th>Interpersonal function</th>
<th>Textual function</th>
<th>Interactive value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Syntagmatic</td>
<td>What it is: form/meaning (representation of the world)</td>
<td>What it says about: authors and users</td>
<td>How/where in the page: salience; information structure</td>
<td>Aesthetics of interactivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(within the page)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paradigmatic</td>
<td>Which action; which effect; where</td>
<td>Directionality/power: who towards whom; authors/users/others</td>
<td>Before-After; Given-New</td>
<td>Functionalities of interactivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(optional realisation)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Table 1, we synthesise the framework adapted by Adami with SFL and VG to analyse the source text in two dimensions, namely, the syntagmatic dimension and paradigmatic dimension. The synthesis is useful for explaining the two dimensions (space and time) of interactive banner ads on top of SFL and VG: (1) the spatial
dimension of the ads, for example, where it sits on the page, and how a sign is made up of multimodal texts; (2) the intertextual dimension, which works as a gateway for realisation of potential meaning-making through specific functions such as clicking, hovering, searching, and sharing (Adami, 2014, p. 140). These two dimensions will guide our analysis given the two-fold nature of interactive banner ads as both signs (forms of meanings) and sites (for actions to produce certain effects).

Table 1 illustrates how the three metafunctions are mapped with the two dimensions (the totality of the sign and the site), creating an axis of meaning-creation. Syntagmatically, this contributes to the ideational function capable of presenting the world with various arrangements. Paradigmatically, it contributes to the effects endowed by the sites, activating potential meanings through various inflections and actions with these sites. In terms of the interpersonal function, syntagmatically, it communicates to the users with diversified expectations. Paradigmatically, it sets the directionality within a connection, a power-knowledge regime built between the authors and users (who acts upon whom). As for the textual function, syntagmatically, it concerns the structure of the information and its value created by the ideational and interpersonal function of the text as a whole. Paradigmatically, it relates to the time-space pair of interactive banner ads as both signs and sites, mapping the two dimensions in a before-after relationship within a certain change, that is, the text that is given as it is and the text it becomes if activated. These two dimensions (the syntagmatic and paradigmatic) mark two distinct yet relevant processes on a continuum: one is the arranging process of the texts, images, and affordances (for interactivity) of the banner ads (once activated); the other is the completed arrangement and layout, an equilibrium presented as the banner ads in a static state.

As we will demonstrate in our analysis section, the syntagmatic dimension (the ideational, interpersonal, and textual) guides our interpretation of interactive banner ads as signs in a relatively static way compared to “sites” to be activated. In turn, the paradigmatic dimension guides our analysis of the interactivity to be activated in a more dynamic manner. That is, the interactive affordances are designed to achieve interactivity with certain effects through consumers’ actions to make the meaning-making process complete.

Methodology

Following the theoretical framework developed above, we use a combination of the visual, textual and interactive analysis of the banner ads on Tmall as our primary methodology. We select banner ads from its 2018 Double 11 Carnival, as well as other banner ads as an extension of the carnival metaphor. Because we do not aim to conduct a reception study, nor validate the effects of designated design campaigns, the eye-tracking method (Boeriis & Holsanova, 2012) or retrospective interviews (Gidlof, Holmberg & Sandberg, 2012) are not used. The detailed working process of semiotic and multimodal analysis involves an “analytical zoom” in and out of the banners examined (Boeriis & Holsanova, 2012, p. 264). We then regard the zoom levels as a point of departure to closely investigate elements of the banner ads with the guidance of VG. These include images, texts, fonts, colours, and the banner as a whole. The relationships between the various elements will be explained in detail during analysis. We then put the banners in the wider social and cultural context with the message that it is designed to convey, zooming out from the separate and segmented clusters of elements to the comprehensive and interactive view of the banner ads as a whole again. As we merely aim to explore the production aspect of banner ads, these methods are deemed sufficient because they have proven to be fruitful in a number of social semiotic studies (Chik & Vásque, 2016; Grumbein & Goodman, 2015; Feng & Wignell, 2011; Tan, 2009).

Data analysis

As indicated in Table 1, the syntagmatic dimension utilises several modes of textual and visual semiotics to fulfil the ideational, interpersonal and textual functions, whereas the interactive value is achieved through the paradigmatic dimension with affordances of intertextuality and interactivity. These two dimensions will in turn be analysed in conjunction with multiple banner ads. At the outset, these two dimensions often work together in digital and multimedia environments. It is hard to separate them, even within one banner ad. Therefore, it makes sense to analyse these two dimensions together as a whole and as a complete process. However, to test our proposed framework, we have to separate and analyse them respectively at a later stage to achieve better clarity.
Figure 2: Banner ad on 2018 Double 11 Carnival’s landing page. Source: Alibaba

We first take a holistic view in analysing both dimensions with the banner ad in Figure 2. For the ideational function, this ad shows the Double 11 Carnival is on. It also provides a video depicting the myth of the traits of 12 constellations and the responses of consumers when they receive their parcels delivered from the Carnival. It is extremely simple in terms of design as the concept and navigation of Double 11 Carnival are well known in China. As stated, the celebration of carnival and gamification has extended to everyday consumption on Tmall as an organisational marketing strategy. We will look at two banner ads of the 2017 Double 11 Carnival (Figure 3) and then other banner ads in everyday scenarios (Figures 4-6).

Figure 3: Banner ads of 2017 Double 11 Carnival. Source: Alibaba

In Figure 3, the key message is that Tmall is a creator of comfortable life. The cat-shaped icon is marked with 11.11 as the nose and eyes of the Sky Cat icon. The cat stretches its two arms, embracing a banner with multiple “red envelopes” indicating good fortune, money, and coupons on offer during the Carnival. In 2017 Tmall used the gamification design of spreadable red envelopes worth RMB 250 million to stimulate sharing through digital word-of-mouth. According to Chen (2017), Tmall also ran a series of pre-carnival campaigns to
attract consumers’ attention and engagement (see Table 2). Such campaigns realise the important role played by gamification design in promoting Tmall’s annual Double 11 Carnival. Such design has been widely deployed into after-carnival operation which we termed as “extended carnival” in everyday online consumption in China.

Table 2 Tmall pre-carnival campaigns 2017. Source: Chen (2017)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Campaigns</th>
<th>Timeline</th>
<th>Events</th>
<th>Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Red envelopes torch relay</td>
<td>19.10-10.11</td>
<td>Ask friends to click and sign up through various social media to share the red envelopes</td>
<td>Red envelopes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepaid order</td>
<td>20.10-10.11</td>
<td>Prepayments, secure chosen goods, predelivery (with anticipated traffic jam based on past experience)</td>
<td>Prepayments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coupons and discounts</td>
<td>20.10-11.11</td>
<td>Store/brand-specific coupons and discounts</td>
<td>Discounts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huabei lucky draw</td>
<td>21.10-10.11</td>
<td>Deals of more than RMB 200 will gain a lucky draw of a free deal up to RMB 4999</td>
<td>Free lucky draw</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group red envelopes</td>
<td>25.10-11.11</td>
<td>Create social media groups, accumulate impact to get further discounts</td>
<td>Red envelopes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cat hide-and-seek</td>
<td>26.10-11.11</td>
<td>Red envelopes worth RMB 50 million will be distributed on Double 11, and Golden Cats will randomly appear in 50 categories, with the smallest red envelopes worth RMB 100 each</td>
<td>Red envelopes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The three banner ads in Figures 4-6 present the goods on sale with instructions and invitations. The text “shop now” together with product images achieves the overarching function of informing consumers that they are ads, selling FMCG (Figure 4), mooncakes (Figure 5), and tailor-made outfits (Figure 6). The “informing” process is the interpersonal function in action, realised by designers and consumers within a communication and meaning-making process. For the textual function, these ads are placed at the top of the page to increase salience. The three metafunctions are achieved through a combination of multimodalities, with texts, images, and icons. In addition, the intertextual dimension is achieved through interactive affordances such as scrolling gadgets and links (clickable text together with text boxes) for interactivity, providing a gateway and site for the realisation of potential meaning-making and actions. Putting together, these banner ads not only work as signs, but also sites, realising the two-fold nature discussed in the literature review. In the following two sections, we will zoom-in and analyse the syntagmatic and paradigmatic dimensions, respectively.

Figure 4: Banner ad promoting FMCG and snacks. Source: Alibaba
The syntagmatic dimension under the framework of VG

Colour. Colour is associated with effects and functions as a communicative carrier and vehicle. Van Leeuwen (2011) points to two important functions of colour: identity and textual meaning. For identity, colour can be associated with a certain brand or product that the banner is advertising. For textual meaning, it has an ability to convey structure of an ad (its coherence and overall “feeling”). In Figure 4, Fulinmen (福临门, literally, blessing comes to your doorway) is a rice brand in China. By using light green, Fulinmen tries to create a brand image associated with nature to signify that it is healthy, organic and environmentally friendly. The Chinese character 福 (fu, blessing) in gold is to express prosperity and glory. The brown Snickers chocolate and the yellow AXE cleanser essence made of lemon extract are in their “natural” colours to deceive and persuade consumers, that is, to make consumers believe that “what you see is what you get”. Tmall has various festival-related campaigns, such as Spring Festival, Mid-Autumn Festival, Mother’s Day, and Christmas, beyond its self-created Double 11 Carnival for Singles’ Day. Colours are tailored for different festivals to celebrate a certain festive mood. Despite red is deemed alarming and aggressive in certain cultures, it is widely used in China, particularly during Spring Festival and weddings. It is believed that red discourages bad luck and evil spirits, thus bringing blessings and happiness. Figure 5 uses pink, gold and red to create a festive mood for the Mid-Autumn Festival. In particular, red is used for the characters of 抢100元优惠券 (to snatch the RMB 100 coupons). It makes the “instruction” stand out from the already crowded space of an ad full of symbols and texts in large font. In comparison, the banner ad in Figure 6 uses black to represent premium products (the texts indicate premium and tailor-made female outfits) and therefore coupon and low-price strategies do not apply. Similarly, as presented in Figure 7 in the next sub-section, the banner ad advertising an automobile uses blue to signify trustworthiness.

Text. Text includes brand name (including the logo), basic information about a certain product, and most importantly, storytelling. Because text is one of the most conventional modes used in advertising and many
The analysis has demonstrated how multimodal analysis can be conducted across the various modes of Tmall banner ads including colour, texts, typography, and imagery. At the same time, the analysis has been conducted at different levels, zooming in and out to focus on specific elements and clusters following the ranking mechanism of the whole, group, unit, and component (Boeriis & Holsanova, 2012, p. 262-265).

The paradigmatic dimension on interactivity

The second part of the analysis is devoted to the investigation of interactivity and its associated interactive meanings in banner ads. Interactivity is defined as the affordance of a text with multimodality to be acted upon, realising the full capacity of hypertextuality, and thus meaning-making. As for banner ads, the meaning-making process is embedded in the affordance of interactivity to make the consumption experience easier and playful (gamification). A symbolic and discursive process as such is used to boost sales and also contributes to (not necessarily causes) the cultivation of a materialist and consumerist culture in contemporary China. Figures 7 and 8 show two Tmall banner ads, advertising automobile and Mother’s Day outfits respectively. We will use these two ads to analyse the interactivity value achieved through the framework we proposed as an extension of the Double 11 Carnival.
Ideational function. At the top of the screenshots, above the banner ads, there are three interactive sites/signs from left to right. Syntagmatically, the top left ad places a QR code and AR (augmented reality) scanner with two Chinese characters 扫码 (to scan code); paradigmatically, touching or tapping the scanner activates the QR code scanner to direct consumers to anything that can be scanned. Scanned items can be a
product image online, or a physical product with coded information on its packaging. In the middle of the top bar, a lens symbol is presented. It is often used to represent a “search” function. It also uses text to advertise hero goods placed in front of many goods lined up for consumption, just as supermarkets do in their physical stores. The search bar in Figure 7 displays “穿小白鞋 来一场和青春的约会” (wear the little white shoes on a date). The “little white shoes” are hero goods that went viral online and have gained popularity among Chinese youth. The text displayed on the search bar in Figure 8 promotes a newly released model from the Chinese smartphone manufacturer Huawei, model Honour5c, and announces its exclusive release on Tmall. Following this text, the symbol of the lens syntagmatically presents an additional camera symbol. Paradigmatically, this function (called “miaopai”) allows consumers to take a picture of any desirable good they see and search for. It can bring up search results with similar and even identical goods on Tmall. Alibaba has incorporated this function on various video platforms to form strategic partnerships (for the camera symbol and “search with picture” function, see Figure 9). Of course, the search area can be filled through conventional typing, which is a conventional interactive affordance. In Figure 9, a symbol of a text box on the top right corner is presented syntagmatically. Clicking or tapping it, paradigmatically, opens up a new page with the Tmall notification box, filled with various messages (currently four). The message box may include, retargeted promotions (based on consumers’ search history and previous purchasing behaviour), direct marketing messages pushed by official shops that consumers follow, social media chats with friends on Tmall, and notifications of delivery tracking status.

Figure 9: Built-in miaopai function located within the search bar of Tmall ads. Source: Alibaba

Within the banner ads, the ideational function is embodied in clickable/touchable links and icons, such as “去抢购 go” (to snap up and go), “火速下订 >>” (order now) with an arrows symbol, and “美妈新衣满减包邮 更有好礼相送” (new outfits for pretty moms, in addition to free delivery if a purchase exceeds a certain amount, and other nice gifts). Syntagmatically, these texts and symbols all send similar information to encourage spending as in the Double 11 Carnival. Paradigmatically, clicking or tapping on the ads, the “go” sign, or the arrows “>>” directs consumers to the relevant Tmall product page. In addition, below the banner ads there are ten rectangles with rounded corners. They present ten other services in the Alibaba ecosystem, including e-payment, fans’ party (social media function), free gift samples, as well as coupons and memberships, to name just a few.

Ideationally, the landing page of the Tmall app is dense with interactive signs and sites. Syntagmatically, it incorporates various formats such as dynamic elements (flash), symbols and icons, still images, and writing. Paradigmatically, it requires possible actions such as clicking, tapping, scanning, typing, and taking photos. These interactive actions have greater effects than mere reception of the text and enable access to new texts and sites. The interaction consumer has does not necessarily limit to banner ads themselves. These interactive affordances achieve hypertexuality by linking to and opening up new sites in a variety of ways, such as sliding for new images (dots placed at the bottom left of the banner ads), page changes, and pop-up windows.
**Interpersonal function.** The interpersonal function is orchestrated at an organisational (meso) level through technology-enabled affordances. These include search engine optimisation and algorithm-based re-targeted ads. However, due to limited space, our focus is on the front-end, including the graphic design and the intended affordances the interactive icons are embedded with. Syntagmatically, the icons and symbols on top of the banner ads signal to consumers that Tmall is all-purpose and ubiquitous: consumers can buy everything and socialise with friends on it. According to Adami (2014), such interactive functions are expected by consumers (perceived interactivity) and once provided, they create a complex dynamism to augment consumers’ experience. As a B2C e-commerce platform, Tmall uses other features such as colour palette and modular layout to differentiate itself from the C2C Taobao platform, which is seen as filled with counterfeits. Tmall aims to build a different brand image. By collaborating with well-known brands home and abroad, Tmall aims to emphasise professionalism and its official status. This carefully constructed identity can be seen from the multimodal resources it uses. The richness, coolness (enabled with up-to-date technology), and exclusiveness are constructed from both the syntagmatic and paradigmatic dimensions, converging on various non-interactive and interactive modalities. Banner ads are created to show consumers what products and services are on offer with an “official tone”, for example, through branded trademarks.

Paradigmatically, the interpersonal function can be achieved through a range of affordances and interactive functions to be activated. However, this interactivity is controlled and restrained to a certain degree. The modality configuration of the banner ads uses more images than text, exemplified by dynamic and still images, as well as icons. These images and icons are used to present both products and interactivity signifiers. Such configurations are intended to encourage consumer actions to achieve selective effects – not to allow consumers to create and manipulate ads or products (as they can to a certain degree on Taobao as shop owners) – but to provide mere access to further pages within Tmall, selling more products and services provided by certified brands (strategic partners). Even the social media function is limited to actions such as providing reviews, posting pictures after purchase, and befriending shop owners or other buyers within the Tmall platform. Therefore, the interactive affordances are enhanced, but only to a certain degree. There is a clear directionality (self-referencing) in the realisation of the interpersonal function, recursive within the larger Alibaba ecosystem. In addition, Tmall not only shapes its own professional, cool, official and exclusive image, but also projects a controlled “identity value” to consumers who visit the site, with a preference for visual modalities (signs and sites to be activated) over conventional texts (deemed non-interactive).

**Textual function.** Syntagmatically, the design and positioning of the interactive functions follow Tmall’s conventions, cultivating a habit and particular aesthetic experience for its consumers. Once consumers open the Tmall app, they will expect the same layout that they experience in a physical store process. In addition, the banner ads are also placed in a very salient position (at eye level) and at the top of the landing page. There is also a sliding function so that consumers can switch between the ads (the dots sign). Overall, the banner ads allow for a level of manipulation, enhancing their interactive aesthetics as a whole. Paradigmatically, the transformation process marked by the before-after (interaction by clicking or hovering over) relationship between the signs and sites is quite cohesive and limited in scope, because Tmall does not allow third-party expansion. Whether it involves scanning, searching or redirecting, the interactive affordances are restrained within Tmall and are connected with purchasing. In this sense, the experience provided by Tmall has little to do with sociality or life uplifting, it is all about purchasing under the disguise of gamification and carnival. For example, the coupons and red envelopes with deadlines (the icon of countdown) creates an interactive stimulus for consumers to click and pay, timely. Otherwise, consumers may lose such an opportunity to get a bargain.

**Conclusion**

Combining a detailed multimodal analysis and social semiotic study of the meanings of the banner ads (micro), the Tmall platform design (meso) and wider Chinese society (macro), we have demonstrated that banner ads of Tmall have been constructed as a commodity. Tmall also has commodified the interactive and social sphere through social media functions to share pictures and reviews on purchased products and services. In doing so, we have shown that experience driven by a communicative consumerism is underway in contemporary China. Through an analysis of both the non-interactive and interactive functions of Tmall banner ads, we present a picture of the development of such visual information as both signs and sites. Equipped with the two-dimensional framework, the textual and visual modalities (texts, colour, typography, and imagery) are analysed as the initial state, followed by the interactivity as “what happens” if they are activated – a before-after relationship within a “becoming” process.
Based on the analysis of Tmall banner ads on both the syntagmatic and paradigmatic dimensions, we find that the ads have been incorporated into a gamification design to encourage consumers to spend more and buy things they may not need, even after the Double 11 Carnival. The banner ads of the Carnival are largely the same as those for the everyday consumption on Tmall, however, with intensified modalities to encourage consumers to spend. These include, festive colours and gamification design (red envelope campaigns) and more importantly, an emphasis on “low cost” such as special discounts, coupons, and free delivery services. Combined with words such as “buy now” and “go”, terms such as 低价 (low price), 特价 (on sale), and 抢 (snap up), the intentionality of purchasing (panic and scare of losing a bargain) is intensified through such gamification design. The message of “there will be no chance to get the goods at such low price later (after the Carnival)” is expressed explicitly through the aforementioned terms and icons. The reason why we see the Carnival has been extended to non-carnival, everyday consumption is because coupons and red envelopes (hongbao) are becoming a norm for most Tmall shops. These banner ads and coupons with clickable and touchable links are directly linked to a user’s Tmall account, offering discounts, special deals, and “buy 1 get 1 free” services. In addition, if one’s purchase exceeds a certain amount of money, a free gift will be sent with the delivery or the shipping fee will be waived. These discourses and visual constructions (afforded by interactivity) are primarily monetary stimuli. Such stimuli work particularly well on Tmall because users are attracted by cheap, quick and convenient shopping and delivery services, again, on a daily basis. The Double 11 Carnival is an important case in focus, extending its reach even after the event has been completed. In sum, our approach is informed by existing studies but provides original insights in two ways. First, it departs from a social semiotic approach, combining both the textual and visual analysis and employing the VG framework at a more detailed level. Second, we have conducted much-needed testing of the tentative framework developed by Adami (2014, p. 150), a nuanced development focusing on the ‘meaning-potential of interactive sites/signs’. In conclusion, the multimodality and interactivity examined in this study support Cheung’s (2016) model in experience design. That is, experience design elements such as information, navigation, engagement, entertainment (in our case, gamification), and personalisation all work together to enhance users’ trust, satisfaction and recognition of Tmall as a service provider. Our approach is explicitly multimodal, taking the linguistic, visual and interactive resources (the tri-fold convergence) into consideration to study new phenomena in an e-selling environment, contributing further to research on multimodality, textual analysis, and experience design. Due to the limit of space, we only focus our discussion on one single most influential e-commerce platform, that is Tmall, in China. In future, comparative studies of different platforms may yield additional insights to the field of experience design for generalisation purposes.

References


