

# Ideologies in US Commercials: A Multimodal Analysis

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**Ideologies in US Commercials: A Multimodal Analysis**

Master's thesis

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Zagreb, 2020

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**Ideologije u reklamama u SAD-u: multimodalna analiza**

Diplomski rad

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Zagreb, 2020

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## 1. Introduction

The media have always been an indispensable part of our daily lives. Yet, today they play an ever-increasing role because we are flooded with information and messages transmitted through the news, social networks, TV shows, music, newspapers, magazines, advertising, political speeches, etc., which we often do not have time to fully process, i.e. consider critically. Since the media tend to be ideologically driven, there is a good chance that we will, without noticing, adopt certain ideas, values, or opinions implied through them. The media can make certain beliefs and views seem so normal and ubiquitous that we do not recognize them to be ideological or worth analyzing. Thus, they affect the way we perceive not only other people and their roles in the society but also our own role and identity. Therefore, media literacy is argued to be a key competence in modern society. This includes, in particular, the ability to critically analyze discourses, because those who are unable to “deconstruct” media content are in danger of becoming victims of media manipulation (Vučetić 2019: 5).

Research on ideology and discourse shows that ideologies work best when they are hidden under multiple linguistic layers of meaning. Hence, critical analysts have developed and described different linguistic tools for analysis of both linguistic and multimodal discourses, whose purpose is to reveal strategies used to implicitly promote ideological messages. This paper builds on this framework to attempt a multimodal analysis of US commercials. The commercials are analyzed qualitatively, with the aim of revealing their ideological meaning and the linguistic means through which it is realized.

After this brief introduction, in the second chapter, the reader will be provided with the theoretical framework necessary for the understanding of the key terms that the research revolves around, such as discourse, ideology, and multimodality, as well as of the relationship between these concepts. This chapter also introduces the tools for a multimodal analysis by presenting certain strategies used to convey ideological meaning, which should be looked for in a multimodal analysis. The third chapter is concerned with the research on US commercials. It includes a description of the aims, research questions and methodology, as well as the most important part of the paper, the multimodal analysis of selected examples, and, finally, a discussion of the results. In the last chapter, the main ideas and results of the paper are summarized and critically evaluated.

## 2. Theoretical framework

Since the study to be described in this paper deals with a multimodal analysis of discourse, in this chapter I am going to describe the major concepts and assumptions this kind of linguistic approach is based upon, by referring to a group of authors who have contributed to the fields of study called ‘Critical Discourse Analysis’ and ‘Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis’ and presenting their most important findings.

### 2.1. Discourse and ideology

The underlying assumption of the critical approach to discourse analysis is that discourse, which is defined as “language-in-action” (Blommaert 2005: 2) or “language use” (Verschueren 2012: 17), is social by its nature. Every time a linguistic or semiotic choice is made and used, it tells us something about the communicator and their interpretation or view of a certain experience, which might affect our own judgment of participants and events involved. Contrary to the structuralist view of language, critical analysts of discourse argue that the relationship between form and meaning is never arbitrary (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 8). Instead, all signs are considered to be motivated conjunctions of form and meaning, and the motivation for a particular choice of form needs to be related both to the sign maker and to the context in which the sign is produced (*ibid.*). In a discourse, the choice of form is not accidental but intentionally made by the sign maker, who considers all forms at his/her disposal and selects the most apt and plausible one to present the meaning s/he wants to communicate (*ibid.*). In this light, discourse is seen as “the main instrument for spreading complex patterns of meaning” (Verschueren 2012: 18), which makes it convenient for transmission of ideologies, which the sender does not want to communicate explicitly. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006: 15) suggest that discourse fulfills three major functions: an “ideational” function, a function of representing “the world around and inside us” and an “interpersonal” function. This means that utterances are never neutral but ideologically loaded, and as such, they not only reflect, but also construct, shape, and reshape social reality and perpetuate certain ideological patterns. Furthermore, this affects our image of the world, our identity, and the way we perceive social roles.

In the field of ‘Critical Discourse Analysis’ (CDA) it is argued that this quality of discourse makes it a convenient tool for the construction and maintenance of social status and power relations (Blommaert 2005; Kress & van Leeuwen 2006; Machin 2013; Machin & Mayr 2012; Starčević & Kapović & Sarić 2019; Verschueren 2012). The main objective of CDA is

the revelation of social relations of power, which are implicitly suggested by semiotic choices. This means that CDA looks for certain ideas and values, which are implied and communicated by the text without being overtly expressed. CDA typically deals with texts within the areas of political discourse, media, advertisement, ideology, racism, and institutional discourse (Blommaert 2005: 21) and analyzes elements which seem normal and neutral but, in fact, connote deeper meanings and serve strategic ideological purposes.

In this critical, social semiotic approach, ideology is defined in its broader sense, as being associated with “underlying patterns of meaning, frames of interpretation, world views, or forms of everyday thinking and explanation” (Verschueren 2012: 7). Aside from dealing with the grand political belief systems the term *ideology* is usually connected to, such as socialism, liberalism, nationalism, etc., CDA is also concerned with ways of thinking about “mundane and everyday processes” (ibid. 3) which appear natural and commonsensical and are therefore not recognized as ideologies (ibid. 11; Machin & Mayr 2012: 25). Since these ways of thinking are only implied by the text instead of being explicitly uttered, they become naturalized and legitimized up to the point where they are taken for granted and viewed as facts and common knowledge that needs no further explanation or justification (ibid.). The aim of a critical analysis is to ‘denaturalize’ the language and expose the hidden ideological meaning, by putting an emphasis on how a certain meaning is realized and what purpose it serves (Machin & Mayr 2012: 26). Blommaert (2005: 30) suggests three dimensions that must be included in every critical discourse analysis. According to him, the analysis must progress from “description”, to “interpretation”, to “explanation”. In the descriptive phase, the researcher looks into the linguistic features of the material and simply describes them as they are presented by the sign maker. These elements and their meanings are then interpreted, at which point the analysis progresses to the second phase. Blommaert points out that this phase includes a subjective understanding of particular elements, which is based on the researcher’s “cognitive, social, and ideological resources”. (ibid.) The researcher’s interpretation is necessarily marked by their own attitudes, which are usually connected with liberal views and left-wing political commitment (ibid. 6). Therefore, Blommaert stresses that the “interpretation” part is ideological in itself and if it were not followed by the phase of “explanation”, the analysis could not be seen as critical and scientific because it would just suggest the other ideological extreme as more accurate, without proper evidence. Thus, the third, explanatory phase is considered crucial for the analysis to be deemed ‘critical’. The



researcher here makes a connection to social theory and explains what social purpose particular linguistic choices and particular ways of meaning realization serve. (ibid. 30)

## 2.2. Multimodality

While discourse analysis traditionally focuses on the analysis of text, i.e. of the verbal parts of discourses, contemporary researchers point out to the multimodality of discourses and the need for a multimodal approach to critical analysis of discourse (Blommaert 2005; Kress & van Leeuwen 2006; Machin 2013; Machin & Mayr 2012; Verschueren 2012). These authors argue that discourse typically consists of other elements as well, such as images, pictures, materials, colors, logos, symbols, layouts, sounds, gestures, or facial expressions, and that these modes of representation should not be overlooked. In fact, they are considered equally important and just as meaningful as the text because when a semiotic choice is made, the sign maker chooses not only between verbal resources, such as lexis and grammar constituting his linguistic repertoire, but also between all other semiotic resources which are at his/her disposal at the moment of sign-making. S/he might decide that e.g. the visual mode is more suitable to transmit a particular message than the verbal mode. (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 7-8)

Machin (2013: 350) supports this argument by saying that “each of these different semiotic resources allows the sign maker to do different kinds of work in terms of the way that discourses are realised”. He points out that different semiotic modes involve different kinds of “epistemological commitment” (ibid.), which means that in a certain context, a particular representational mode allows the sign maker to omit some qualities of a concept while highlighting others (and vice versa). For example, if we were to provide a verbal representation of a *house* in the form of a definition, and a visual representation in the form of a drawing, these modes would involve different kinds of commitment. We could define a *house* as ‘a building for people to live in’ (taken from *Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries*) and we could draw e.g. a small, rectangular object with two windows, one door, a roof and a chimney. On this example we can see that the verbal representation informs us only about the function of the house, without specifying its visual qualities such as its size and shape, or how many windows or doors it has, if it has a chimney, etc. But there is nothing wrong about the definition – it is accurate and makes perfect sense. In the drawing, on the other hand, the sign maker must make certain decisions about the visual features of the building, whereas the function of the building is glossed over.

Implicit promotion of ideologies in discourse functions in the exact same fashion. Through the choice of a representational mode, the sign maker decides which qualities of an event or of a person represented in the discourse s/he wants to talk about and which s/he would rather not discuss. Thus, the representation remains accurate and appears commonsensical, when it is, in fact, ideological because the sign maker makes the decision to omit a certain idea in favor of emphasizing another. Therefore, a multimodal analysis considers not only the elements present in the discourse but also those that are absent. It considers all semiotic choices and looks into how each representational mode contributes to the foregrounding or backgrounding of certain ideas. (ibid. 351)

### 2.3. Multimodal strategies used to imply ideological meaning

Just like CDA, a multimodal analysis puts emphasis on the social motivation behind the semiotic choices and the exposure of hidden ideologies. In order to do that, researchers have developed a set of tools to analyze different modes of representation, i.e. to expose the manipulative strategies that can be found in a particular mode. The following is a brief overview of strategies that can be found in the textual and visual mode.

#### 2.3.1. Linguistic analysis

One way to analyze manipulative strategies is studying the discourse on the linguistic level. This concerns the analysis of different lexical and grammatical features of the text.

The analysis of lexis focuses on the choice of words and what meanings they connote, especially if certain words or kinds of words are used excessively, which Machin and Mayr refer to as “overlexicalization” (2012: 37). On the contrary, one might find that certain words which one would expect to appear in the discourse are suppressed in favor of concealing one idea and highlighting another. This process is called “deletion” (Machin 2013: 352; Starčević & Kapović & Sarić 2019: 73) because certain participants, settings and actions, i.e. certain aspects are strategically deleted from the representation of a social practice in favor of the naturalization of some other aspects (Machin 2013: 352). Another strategy which can be indicative of the intention to foreground and legitimize certain ideas is the use of rhetorical tropes, such as personification or metaphor (Machin & Mayr 2012: 163; Verschueren 2012: 29). Metaphors are especially interesting because they involve the use of concrete concepts which one can see, hear, feel, taste and smell to make abstract phenomena easier to understand and categorize (Forceville 2009: 20). Thus, the use of metaphors allows more

complex or abstract ideas to become simplified to the point at which they are perceived as commonsensical, resulting in the naturalization of these ideas (Machin & Mayr 2012: 164). Furthermore, the word choice might indicate some opposing concepts prompting the viewer to perceive one concept as having good qualities and the other as having bad qualities (ibid. 39). Other lexical choices include such word choices that contribute to the classification of participants, such as e.g. whether they are depicted as individuals or as a part of a collectivity (ibid. 80). Also, if the text uses quoting verbs, the choice of verbs might indicate how participants are evaluated in terms of both their character and the reliability of their words (ibid. 57).

As far as grammatical features are concerned, the mood in which the author addresses the reader (or viewer) might be of interest. For example, the imperative mood might be used to suggest authority and confidence of the author (Machin & Mayr 2012: 47). Other grammatical features worth analyzing include the use of active and passive verb forms, the transitivity of the verbs, and the process of nominalization (Machin & Mayr 2012; Verschueren 2012: 29). All these strategies are concerned with ‘who does what to whom’ and are used to either emphasize or hide the agency of particular participants.

Another process used as a linguistic manipulative strategy is that of “presupposition” (Machin & Mayr 2012: 153). This is a natural process performed by our subconscious, which makes us perceive the meaning of certain statements or concepts as obvious and unquestionable. For example, if a sentence starts with *The real problem is that...* this presupposes that there are other problems but this one is the one of the greatest importance and the only one that should be discussed. Sometimes the text might presuppose vague concepts such as *our way of life*, which can become so common in the media that they start to be perceived as self-evident. (ibid. 158)

Finally, it is important to consider the modality of the text, which can be accomplished through the use of modal verbs such as *might* or *should*. Machin and Mayr (2012: 192) point out that it can also be accomplished through so-called “hedging”, which stands for e.g. the use of modal adverbs such as *perhaps*, auxiliary verbs such as *seems to*, approximators such as *some*, phrases such as *Some people say*, etc. All these linguistic elements can be used as a strategy to show how committed the author of the text is to their words and how much responsibility they want to take.

### 2.3.2. Visual analysis

When analyzing visual semiotic choices, there are again various aspects to be considered. Just like in the analysis of text, one can look for connotative meanings of elements and consider what elements have been ‘deleted’ from the picture. Some other strategies which have been described in the context of linguistic analysis but can also be found in the visual mode include the use of metaphor, modality, and classification of participants. (Machin & Mayr 2012) Aside from that, one can analyze what kinds of ideas and values are communicated through objects and the way they are represented (ibid. 51), and how settings of the image contribute to the general context: e.g. the use of high-key lighting might suggest optimism whereas low-key lighting usually suggests pessimism (ibid. 52).

Furthermore, it is important to observe which elements are made to stand out and draw the viewer’s attention, i.e. which elements are “salient” (ibid. 54). Different ways to achieve “salience” include the use of potent cultural symbols (e.g. a smile), size and color of certain elements (e.g. rich or warm colors as opposed to colder and less saturated ones), tone (brightness), focus (exaggerating details), foregrounding (giving importance to an element), and overlapping (placing elements in front of others) (ibid. 54-55; Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 72).

Visual semiotic choices can also concern representations of participants. Apart from classifying them in terms of their character and identity, the image can also suggest the speaker’s attitude and the position of the viewer in relation to people inside the image. The attitude of the speaker is suggested through their gaze and poses. For example, if the speaker looks directly at the viewer, this means that the viewer is demanded some kind of reaction, and if they smile, the viewer is invited into a personal relationship (Machin & Mayr 2012: 71; Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 120). Likewise, poses they strike can tell us whether they feel e.g. confident, sensitive, or defeated (Machin & Mayr 2012: 74). Furthermore, the choice of shots (long, medium, or close) tells us about the degree of social intimacy between the viewer and the person in the image and helps emphasize specific features of the participant’s looks which connote deeper meanings (ibid. 97; Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 125). Lastly, the angle from which the viewer observes the participant suggests the relations of power between them. If the angle prompts the viewer to look down at the participant this suggests their vulnerability, whereas looking up to the participant suggests that the participant is either in power or that we should admire them and try to be like them (Machin & Mayr 2012: 100; Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 132).

All the above described tools for analyzing semiotic choices, both the linguistic and the visual, will be taken into consideration in the research described in the next chapter.

### 3. Research: A multimodal analysis of US commercials

The research described in this chapter deals with a qualitative, multimodal analysis of four American commercials, aired on TV or YouTube in the last three years. Assuming that every commercial is ideological in a more or less evident way, I will analyze which semiotic choices contribute to conveying an ideological message in a particular commercial and how this is done.

#### 3.1. Aims and research questions

The aim of the research is to illustrate the logic behind multimodal representations. The representations will be analyzed critically to reveal what kind of ideological or worldview implications get transmitted in American commercials, and through which multimodal strategies they are realized. Accordingly, the following research questions will be answered:

- 1) What ideologies do the commercials transmit?
- 2) How are these ideologies realized multimodally?

#### 3.2. Procedure

The data was collected via YouTube, by looking for commercials which seemed interesting for a multimodal analysis because of e.g. the use of metaphorical language, symbols, controversial visual representations, etc. In the selected commercials, different modes and how they are relevant for the transmission of certain ideologies will be observed separately, in the order which seems the most logical for a particular commercial. The visual representations will be presented in a form of chronologically sorted screenshots, the spoken text (and the written text that is difficult to read from the screenshots) will be transcribed, while other modes (e.g. sounds, music, gestures) will be described verbally. The analysis of the textual and visual modes will be based mostly on the work of Machin and Mayr (2012), but will also rely on a free interpretation based on common knowledge or the work of other authors, which will be cited in parentheses. After the analysis of separate modes, the relationship between them will be discussed, by looking into how they work together to convey the implicit or (in some cases) explicit message.

#### 3.3. Analysis

In this chapter, four commercials for different kinds of products will be analyzed and each of them will be assigned a title.

### 3.3.1. Fox News – “Democracy”

The first example is a commercial published this year by the popular American television network Fox. “Democracy” is a part of this pro-republican broadcaster’s marketing campaign for the 2020 presidential election.

The commercial shows separated shots of Fox News hosts, who, one at a time, talk about ‘their nation’. Each of them says only one sentence or one part of it, but they finish each other’s thoughts, resulting in a cohesive text. This is what they say:

We're a nation founded on principles, on freedom. With leaders who've changed the course of human civilization. When we take part in democracy, we control our destiny. We exercise our rights and hold our leaders accountable. And we always speak our mind. We may be separated by issues, but we're united by a common truth: America's ultimate power lies in her people.

Democracy 2020. It's in your hands.

What stands out already when first reading or listening to the text is an overlexicalization of the pronouns *we* and *our*. Even though it is not clear who exactly is implied by the use of *we*, it creates an impression that what the hosts say is what everybody thinks and agrees upon. Through the use of *we* and *our* the ideas of the text producers start to seem like the viewer's own ideas. This persuasive strategy is further assisted by claims such as *America's ultimate power lies in her people*, especially when this is previously declared to be *a common truth*, presupposing that everybody is aware of it. Also, the wording *ultimate power* presupposes that there are other things contributing to America's power, but people are the 'entity' that matters the most.

In the first two sentences *principles*, *freedom* and *leaders who've changed the course of human civilization* refer to the historical events that Americans are proud of, such as for example the abolition of slavery. American presidents are classified as *leaders* and their performance is described metaphorically as *changing the course of human civilization*, dramatically suggesting how important they are and that throughout the history they have 'guided' human civilization on its 'path' to prosperity. In the next few sentences, the words *democracy*, *rights* and *speak our mind* bring the viewer back to the notions of *principles* and *freedom*, again foregrounding national pride. Another element contributing to the sentimental feeling of the text is the fact that America is personified through the possessive pronoun *her*.

While it would be more neutral to refer to America as 'it', referring to the country as 'she' is emotionally marked. This prompts the viewer to think of America as the 'motherland', nurturing its nation just like a mother nurtures her children (although many ethnic minorities constituting 'the nation' probably do not perceive America as their motherland).

The text ends with the sentence *We may be separated by issues, but...* There are two linguistic phenomena suggesting that this sentence is ideologically loaded: the passive voice and the use of the modal verb *may*. The text does not say 'Some issues separate us...' or 'There are certain issues that separate us...' because this would give more importance to the external causer referred to by *issues*. The text does not even define what kind of issues are being discussed, if they are for example based on economy or ethnicity or both, because *issues* are not something that the text producers want the viewer to be concerned with and ask further questions about. What follows in the second clause of this sentence, starting with *but*, is the idea of the *common truth*, which is meant to take all the focus from the first clause, and the *issues* mentioned in it. Even though these two clauses are coordinated, it is the second clause that is given more importance. Furthermore, through the use of the modal verb *may* the text producers reduce their commitment to the idea that certain issues dividing people even exist in their country, which further supports their argument. What is important and conveniently highlighted in the text is that, in spite of the supposed issues, American people remain *united* and that the power is *in their hands*.

Finally, the metaphor *in your hands* prompts the viewer to imagine power not as an abstract concept but as something tactile and close to them. It implies that power is not dispersed over the fields of politics and economy and thereby inaccessible to ordinary people. In fact, it is so compact and concrete that it can be 'held' in the hands of these people. And not only can it be held in the *nation's* hands collectively, but it can also be in the hands of the viewer themselves as an individual, which is emphasized by the possessive pronoun *your*.



Figure 1 ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=587KxLrSwyY&ab\\_channel=FoxNews](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=587KxLrSwyY&ab_channel=FoxNews))



As Figure 1 shows, the visual representations in the commercial support the patriotic attitude. The first shot shows former American president Abraham Lincoln, setting the scene in the

Lincoln Memorial and setting the tone for the rest of the commercial. Solemn music and the angle of the shot suggest admiration of the man, his sculpture being positioned above the viewer, making the viewer 'look up to' him. He symbolizes the notion of 'freedom' that the text is based upon. Some other 'leaders' appear as well, in the form of projections on the wall: L. B. Johnson, J. F. Kennedy, F. D. Roosevelt and R. Reagan. Set in the porch of the Memorial, built from marble, granite blocks and limestone, with big walls, high ceiling and classical pillars, the scene implies persistence of tradition and American leaders being the 'pillars' of society (Machin 2013: 350). The monotonous, colorless porch is additionally muted, highlighting the representations of the presidents and making them stand out. But what is even more salient than the projections of the presidents are the clothes of the female hosts, who are dressed in rich white, red and blue colors – the colors of the American flag. The fact that it is the women who are chosen to wear such intense colors, and not the men, is also interesting in this context where traditional values are being brought to the fore because, from a conservative point of view, for men to wear a colorful or white suit would not be in line with their social role as decision-makers and authority figures.

The hosts are looking directly at the viewer, demanding a reaction from them and giving the impression that they are confident about what they are saying. At one point (the shot showing Reagan in the background), the host turns his palms to the viewer and makes a motion with his hands, suggesting honesty and truthfulness about his words (Gerber, 2020; Yadav, 2017).

The last shot shows the host saying, *America's ultimate power lies in her people*. At this point the angle changes from the level of the viewer to a level slightly beneath them. This prompts the viewer to 'look down on' the host, suggesting the authority and the power of the viewer, supporting the main idea of the commercial – the one of power being in the viewer's hands.

Yet, as appealing as it might sound, the idea of people possessing all the power is just a fiction. In a capitalist society like America, it can be argued that the power is in the hands of those who can afford it – of “the power elite” (Domhoff 2012). Politics and economy are deeply intertwined: the elite consists of the owners of “income-producing land and businesses” such as “the largest corporations, banks, investment firms, and agri-businesses”, who dominate the federal government through “lobbying, campaign finance, appointments to key government positions, and a policy-planning network made up of foundations, think tanks, and policy-discussion groups” (ibid.).

Still, the idea of a privileged group of people dominating the economy and the government goes against the founding principles of the country and people are manipulated into believing that power is “constitutionally lodged in all people” (ibid.) and that democratic values, such as the right to vote, and the existence of interest groups, such as organized labor, play an important part in, as the text of the commercial says, ‘controlling the nation’s destiny’.

The marketing goal of the commercial is to encourage people to watch the coverage of the presidential elections by Fox News, through the argument that the future of the country depends on them. However, after this multimodal analysis, it can be said that what is implied by the semiotic choices is an argument in favor of the Republican Party. The notions being strategically foregrounded in the commercial are those of shared history, sentiment, nationalism and the ideals of Western democracy, whereas current issues, which are the actual reason why there is an increasing interest in politics among Americans and why they would want to watch the coverage of the elections on TV, are glossed over.

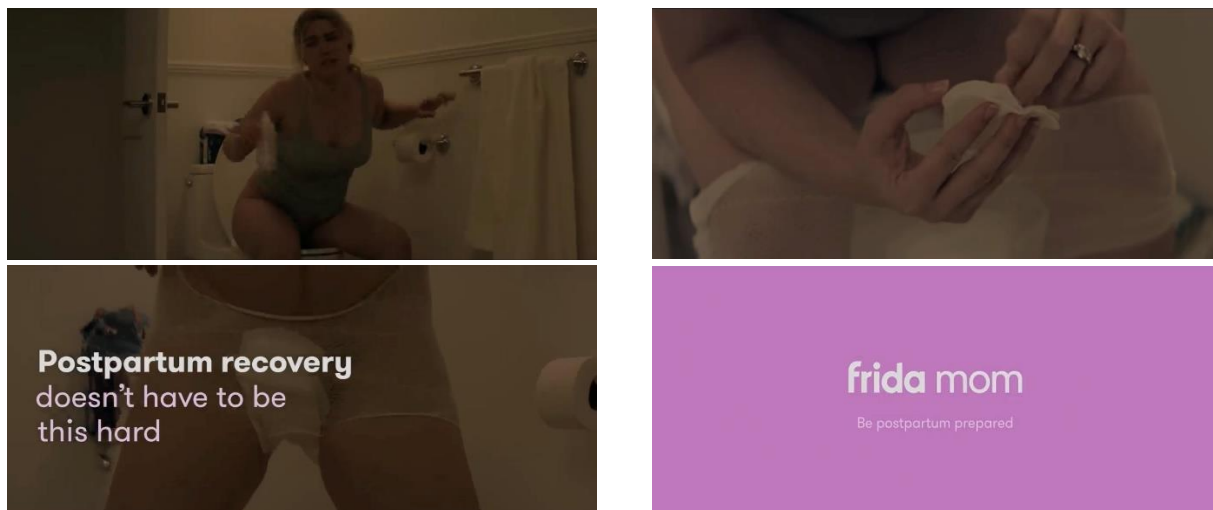
### 3.3.2. Frida Mom – banned postpartum commercial

The next example shows an ad by the postpartum hygiene products brand Frida Mom, which was banned from this year's Oscars and later published on YouTube. The brand's marketing strategy is about telling women that postpartum recovery is easier with Frida Mom because they offer all kinds of products that a mom needs after giving birth.

The commercial depicts a new mom waking up in the middle of the night, going to the bathroom and applying different kinds of hygiene products. There are no spoken words during the commercial, instead what can be heard is sad piano music, intertwined with the crying of the baby in the background and the mom's moans of pain. In this commercial, it is the visual semiotic choices that carry the most meaning potential, therefore the largest portion of the analysis is going to be dedicated to this mode.

Figure 2 ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3GePXGfRP04&ab\\_channel=FridaMom](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3GePXGfRP04&ab_channel=FridaMom))





As can be seen in Figure 2, throughout the commercial, the settings and the objects look very realistic and there is almost no censorship. The lighting is dark, making the scene appear pessimistic and scary. In the first two shots the viewer gets to see the whole room and the objects in it: the crib, the bed, and the nightstand illuminated by the lamp. In the first shot the light of the lamp puts the focus on the items standing on the nightstand. There are tissues, a breast milk pump, a glass bottle of milk, a plastic bottle of water, glasses, a cellphone on a charger and an alarm clock showing the time 2.57 a.m. The items are not just filling the space, nor do they have a symbolic meaning. Instead, they look like they have been used. It is also noticeable that, aside from the items necessary after having a baby, there are some basic, everyday items like the cellphone and the glasses. All these elements create a reality effect and make the scene appear believable and convincing.

The woman is looking off camera, so at this point, the viewer is not demanded any kind of reaction, they are just provided with the image as information which is up for their own consideration. There is an expression of pain on the woman's face as she struggles to get up from the bed and walk to the bathroom, holding her lower back with one hand. In the close shots that follow, the most salient elements are the woman's postpartum belly and the diaper that she is wearing. These kinds of shots create a very intimate relationship between the viewer and what is being represented. It becomes even more intimate when the woman starts peeling off the used pad with signs of blood on it – real red blood, not the blue or purple one the viewer is used to from conventional pads commercials. Even though this representation is actually a euphemism as well, because there should, in fact, be a lot more blood, this element is very salient and intimate, and certainly meant to evoke some kind of reaction in the viewer. After this, with the same painful expression, the woman applies different kinds of products to

her vagina, which suggests that her episiotomy cuts have still not healed and invites the viewer to feel compassion.

All the aspects described above concern the elements which are present in the commercial. Yet, what is of interest when looking for meaning potentials are the elements that are missing when one would expect them to be there. Looking at the shots from the beginning of the commercial, one can realize that the woman is in her bed all alone. From the first to the last shot, there is no man (or woman) in the picture. This is also suggested by the audio, since the baby's crying intensifies by the end of the commercial suggesting that there is nobody else who can comfort the baby while the mom is in the bathroom taking care of her own hygiene. There is a moment though, when the woman changes her pad, at which a big shiny ring on her finger becomes salient, suggesting that she is married. This element itself implies certain ideological viewpoints such as 'a woman has to be married before she has a baby' or 'a woman has to be married because she would not be capable of raising a baby alone'. But back to the missing elements, the fact that the woman is wearing a ring and there is no other sign of her partner might be a strategy used to show that the woman has no real support at this time and that she is left to cope with her problems all by herself. There is also no visual representation of the baby, it can only be heard making noise. So, it could be said that the baby is backgrounded in order for the mom and her body to be foregrounded.

Other elements one would expect to find in a commercial about a mom and her new-born child are elements of joy, tenderness, and love. One would expect to see a happy baby and a happy mom because this is a conventional way of representing 'the miracle of childbirth'. Instead, intending to portray the postpartum problems of a woman and a solution to the problem (which is to use Frida Mom products), the commercial shows a supposedly very realistic situation, which is actually also an extreme, while it may be argued that the 'truth' is, in fact, somewhere in between the conventional joyful representation and the unconventional pessimistic one.

In the last two shots, text appears on the screen, saying:

Postpartum recovery doesn't have to be this hard.

frida mom

Be postpartum prepared.

The text presupposes that most women are postpartum unprepared but with Frida Mom they will be prepared, and their recovery will not be this hard.

Even though the part *postpartum recovery doesn't have to be this hard* is meant to alleviate the fear created through the other modes, especially through the visual representations, the images inevitably stick in the viewer's mind. Therefore, it can be said that what is highlighted in the commercial are pain, blood, struggle and the feeling that women are not prepared for what awaits them, whereas all kinds of positive elements and feelings connected to childbirth are missing.

Yet, the fact that the commercial was rejected from airing during the Oscars has an even more manipulative effect than the commercial. The commercial is still pretty truthful and realistic because postpartum recovery really is a challenge for most women. The only problem is that too much emphasis is put on the negative elements in this process. But the official reason for the rejection of the commercial is it being 'too graphic'. The question is: why and for whom is it 'too' graphic, especially considering that there are still euphemisms, such as the case of blood on the pad? Whoever decided to reject the commercial thought that it would be better if the perfect image of everything related to childbirth was not spoiled. They decided that details about a woman's recovery are too shocking and unpleasant to watch – probably for the male audience, even though a lot of women consider such topics shameful, too, because they have been told for too long to hide all their vagina-related problems from the public sphere and not to complain about it. The commercial being banned means that female hygiene is still considered a taboo topic and this is a perfect example of how the advertising industry gets to control one's image of the world by deciding what should or should not be in the public eye.

### 3.3.3. Mazda – “Rules for the Road Ahead”

Like the first two examples, the following commercial by Mazda was also broadcast this year, but it is important to add that it was just around the time when the COVID-19 epidemic was starting to escalate and turning into the pandemic it is today. The commercial was inspired by the ongoing events and the sudden, strong feeling of uncertainty among people. Mazda recognized the consumers’ need for a sense of safety and used the situation to highlight an important quality of their cars – the one of being safe.

The commercial depicts a couple running from the rain and entering their Mazda car, where they immediately feel relief and security, and as they hit the road, the weather improves, and they contentedly continue their trip. This visual representation is accompanied by the text written over the screen and uttered by a female voice-over, which explicitly tells the viewer how they must behave in order to stay safe during the pandemic. It provides them with, as the title of the commercial on Mazda USA’s YouTube channel says, the ‘rules for the road ahead’. Even though Mazda could have illustrated the quality of safety without linking it to the pandemic, this way they sparked an emotional response in the viewer and let them know that Mazda cares about their safety not only on the literal road but also on the *road ahead*, which is a metaphorical expression for ‘our life in the next few months (or years)’.

This is what the text says:

In these times of uncertainty, here are a few guidelines. If a trip is necessary, to buy groceries, pick up a prescription, or tend to a loved one – make sure to keep your social distance. Be mindful of your environment, especially what you touch. And remember – wash your hands. Follow the rules and we’ll get through this together.

The text is simple, informative, and easy to understand. The female voice, accompanied by melancholic, piano music in the background, utters it in a soft and calm way, sounding almost like a psychologist, making the viewer feel understood and supported. The opening line uses the wording *in these times of uncertainty*, and even though it is not specified what kind of uncertainty the line refers to, the viewer immediately knows that the rest of the commercial is going to be about the pandemic and what this lexical choice implies. It implies uncertainty not only about one’s health, but also about one’s job and economic situation on both the personal and the global level; as well as the uncertainty about how long this situation will last. However, it is obvious that the intention of the text producers is not to put emphasis on these issues. If it were, the complement of *uncertainty* in this noun phrase would be verbalized, as

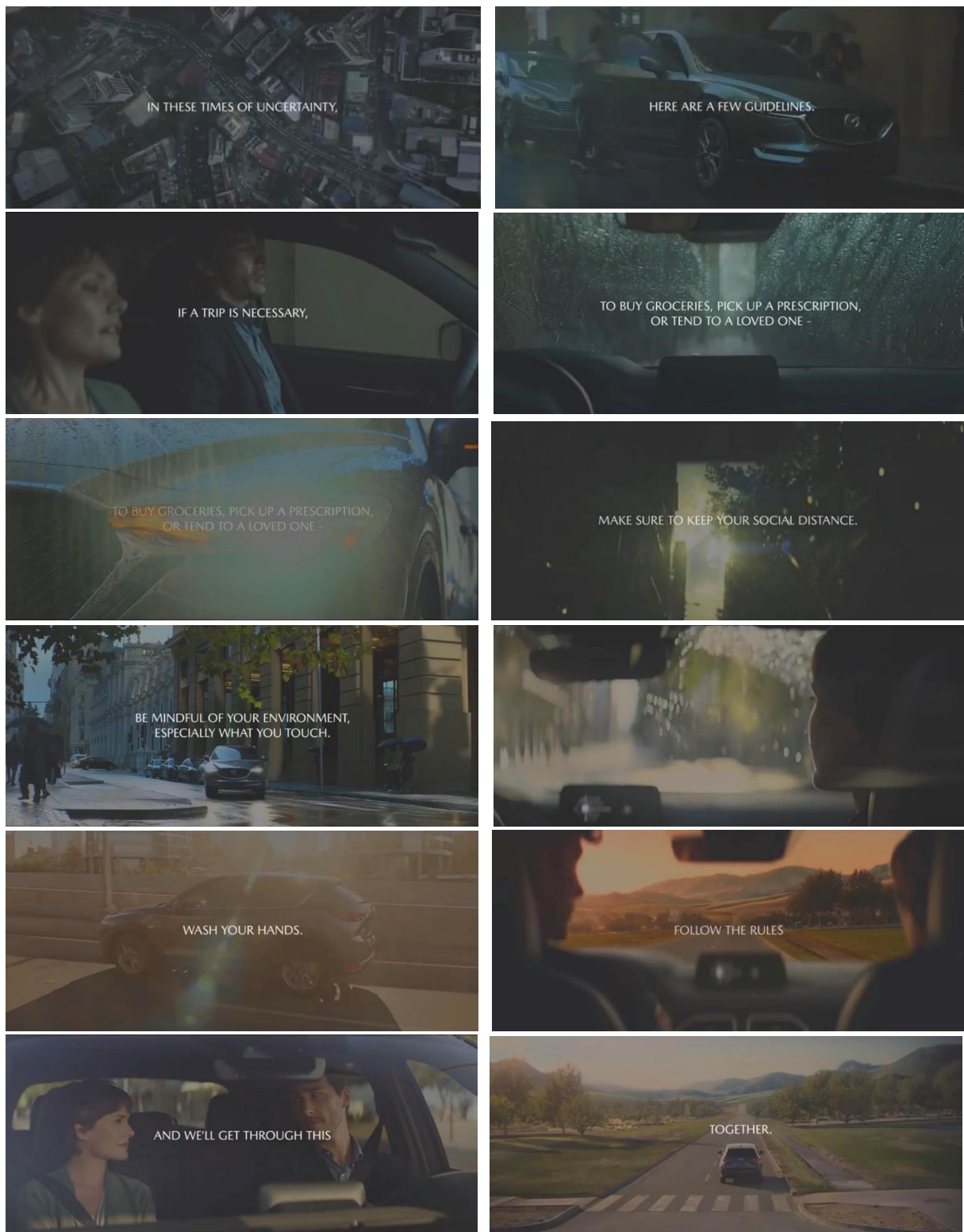


in e.g. ‘in these times when people are uncertain about their health and financial situation’. The nominalization of the verbalized phrase ‘are uncertain (about)’ into *uncertainty* is a strategy used to avoid further specification and to background issues which evoke pessimistic thoughts in people and potential questioning of their governments’ moves.

The text continues with *guidelines* on how to act in these times: people should keep their social distance, be mindful of what they touch and wash their hands. What stands out is an excessive use of the imperative mode, in the verbs *make*, *be*, *remember*, *wash*, and *follow*, through which the text producers position themselves as a voice of expertise and bring a sense of confidence and authority. Aside from the rules, the text implies that the only justified reasons for leaving home and going on a trip are buying groceries, picking up a prescription or tending to a loved one. Moreover, the text uses the term *social distance*, which has been coined by epidemiologists (and excessively used in the media) to refer to a physical distance of approximately one, two or three meters (the definition has varied depending on the medical research and the interests of particular economies in particular time periods). But the fact that the distance is referred to as ‘social’ rather than ‘physical’, implies that people should also socialize less and stay home as much as possible.

In the end, the text says, *Follow the rules and we’ll get through this together*, encouraging the viewer to stay safe and optimistic. By the use of *we* and *together*, the text suggests that the viewer is not alone, but this notion of togetherness also implies that everybody follows the rules, and as a part of a community which is ‘in this together’, the viewer should act accordingly. This way the commercial affects people’s views regarding the situation and the way they behave in their community. Ideological messages of this kind influence people in the way that they start to control each other, and in short time, nobody feels comfortable disregarding the rules and acting differently from the rest of their community. People stop thinking critically about the instructions they are told to follow because, regardless of their personal opinion, they are expected to act as responsible members of their community.

Figure 3 ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P49GN3qPT9c&ab\\_channel=MazdaUSA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P49GN3qPT9c&ab_channel=MazdaUSA))



The visual choices shown in Figure 3 support the argument that following the rules leads to a brighter future. The representations are based on the metaphor 'after the rain, comes the sun', in which the rain stands for the feeling of uncertainty and the sun stands for the feeling of safety. This metaphor is convenient because it can be linked both to the argument that Mazda

cars evoke a feeling of safety on the road and to the argument that abiding by the rules leads to a happy, secure life in the future, which is developed by the text. The lighting in the beginning is low and dark, suggesting a pessimistic mood, but after the car engine starts, along with the lines containing the rules, the sun starts to break through and the lighting becomes higher and brighter, suggesting optimism.

In the last three shots, the couple arrives at a crossroads, where there is a long, straight road ahead of them. As they pause at the stop sign and let another car pass through, the couple gives each other an uneasy smile, but the look on their faces suggests hope. The last scene shows them driving off into a beautiful, romantic landscape, in the far end of which there are hills and mountains, making it unclear where the long road ends – if it is before the mountains or on the other side of them. This suggests that nobody knows how long the social distancing will last. But the beautiful natural scenery the couple enters might also suggest that this 'road', i.e. this critical period does not have to be ugly and depressive, instead it should be used in the best way possible: people can still go into nature, hang out with their families or find some other preoccupation which will make them feel optimistic and hopeful.

In this commercial the modes work together to imply that the future is bright, provided that everybody acts responsibly, in accordance with the rules enumerated in the text. These implications are ideological for many reasons. Firstly, all conspiracy theories and hearsay aside, the corona virus is still very unexplored and there is not enough scientific research to confirm that these rules make sense and that they should be adopted without any doubts. An obvious example showing that the rules are not certain, is the variability in the definition of the term *social distance*, discussed above in the analysis. The governments change the rules depending on their interests, therefore their arguments for introducing a new rule or abandoning an old one often tend to be contradictory. Secondly, there is no chance for the near future to be bright. The effects of the 'rules', the lockdown, the border closures, and the reduced economic activity are enormous and can already be felt. Millions of people have lost their jobs already at the beginning of the pandemic. Economies and people around the world are faced with existential problems, which will linger long after the pandemic is over, not to mention the psychological effects of this 'new normal'. Yet, ideological messages of this kind have been taken for granted because they have been all over the media, manipulating people into being uncritical and obedient, as in the case of Mazda's commercial, which foregrounds the importance of rules, hope and optimism, while backgrounding pessimistic thoughts and the reasons for the common feeling of uncertainty.

### 3.3.4. 84 Lumber – “The Entire Journey“

The last example is a commercial published three years ago, by an American building materials supply company called 84 Lumber. The whole, online version, which will be analyzed, lasts more than five minutes, and had to be both shortened and censored when it initially aired on TV during Super Bowl.

The commercial depicts a Mexican woman and her daughter on their long and dangerous, illegal journey to America. Unlike the previous examples, in this commercial, the focus is on the ideological message itself. The whole point of the commercial is to draw the audience’s attention to the products provided by 84 Lumber by making a clear political statement – the one that Mexican immigrants should be welcome in America and given the opportunity to succeed. Therefore, the aim of the multimodal analysis in this case is not to reveal a hidden ideology, but to explore which semiotic choices contribute to the realization of the ideological message that wants to be overtly communicated. Since it is the visual representations that carry the most meaning potential in this example, the analysis will be based on the visual mode.

Figure 4 ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nPo2B-vjZ28&ab\\_channel=84Lumber](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nPo2B-vjZ28&ab_channel=84Lumber))





As shown in Figure 4, the commercial begins with the woman and the little girl waking up at dawn in their shabby room in Mexico, preparing to leave all their memories in it and start their journey. The scenes that follow, not all of which are contained in the screenshots, show how difficult, dangerous and exhausting their journey is and what natural obstacles they encounter (e.g. a rainstorm, going through a desert, crossing a river). These scenes constitute a big part of the commercial, emphasizing their bravery as well as their emotional and physical strength. Not only does this imply a feminist argument that women are just as capable as men and that they can fight for a better future all by themselves (which is additionally supported by the fact that the woman is obviously a single mother), but it also prompts the viewer to admire their strong will and dedication to their goal.

While the little girl has her breezy moments, the mother is very serious. The third screenshot in Figure 4 shows her in a close shot as she sits by the fire with her daughter. She is looking down, which suggests that she is worried. She is also looking off-frame, which is a strategy



used to invite the viewer to imagine what she is thinking, i.e. what she is worried about. Even though the woman is not looking directly at the viewer and thus inviting them into interaction, this moment prompts them to see the woman as a human being with her own fears, concerns, feelings, and reasons for doing this. This is important because the viewer perceives her as an individual and not as a part of a homogenized group of Mexican immigrants, who are 'all the same', which is the usual way immigrants are represented in the media when negative effects of mass immigration are discussed.

The stillness of this scene gets interrupted by another plot – construction workers arriving at a desert in their trucks and starting to build an undefined structure. From this point, the two plots alternate, and in one of the close shots, there is a worker who, judging by the color of his skin, seems to be a Latino himself. This indicates that immigrants can assimilate and become decent citizens and workers. The two plots culminate when they 'meet' at the same scene, i.e. when the woman and the little girl arrive at the construction site, which is actually already a finished structure (another indicator of how long their journey was). There is a terrified look on the woman's face as they encounter a big wall. What follows is a long shot of the wall, showing how wide it is – it cannot fit inside the frame and we do not know where it ends. The next shot shows the woman and the girl from their back as they stand in front of the wall. The angle is very significant in this shot because both the women and the viewer have to look up to the tall, grey wall. This implies the power of the structure which is about to ruin the dreams of thousands of immigrants hoping to enter the American territory and start a better life. The scene is an overt reference to 'the Trump wall', whose construction was first announced by Trump during his campaign in 2016. Then he formally directed the US government to attempt the wall construction in January 2017, which was just days before the commercial was published in February.

Helplessly standing in front of the wall, the little girl opens her backpack and pulls a creative version of the American flag out of it, which she made herself, from different materials that she found during the journey (the viewer only now realizes what she was creating). There is a sad, resigned look on her face as she holds the flag because she knows that, despite all the effort, their 'American dream' will not be fulfilled. This is a strong criticism against the Republicans and their hypocritical use of the term 'democracy'. The American flag in the girl's hands symbolizes the democratic ideals of freedom and equal opportunity for everyone, regardless of gender, race, or other social factors. Yet, this scene suggests that under Trump's government these ideals are just a myth.

Just as the woman breaks down crying, she sees a ray of sun breaking through the wall in the distance. Meanwhile, another construction worker is shown, driving away from the scene, taking one more look at the wall in his rearview mirror, smiling and, as it seems, being satisfied with how the work was done. The fact that the worker is white might indicate that not all white people are racist, because the next shot shows the reason for his satisfaction – there is a big door in the middle of the wall. The woman and her daughter slightly push the door and effortlessly enter their 'Promised Land'.

In the last scene the text written on the screen says, *The will to succeed is always welcome here*. The lexical choice in this sentence is interesting because the subject of the sentence, *the will to succeed*, is actually a personification of a quality which would be attributed to the subject if the sentence said, 'Immigrants with the will to succeed are always welcome here'. By making this lexical choice, the emphasis is put on the importance of hard work, which is required from the immigrants if they want to become American citizens. But since this sentence is preceded by the visual representations in favor of the immigrants, it also implies that, contrary to popular belief, many immigrants, in fact, *are* determined to work hard and become successful.

All visual and lexical choices in the commercial analyzed above prompt the viewer to feel compassion and understanding for the Mexican immigrants. They help develop a democratic argument, which supports immigration, by contributing to the fore- and backgrounding of certain elements. What is highlighted in the representation of the Mexican woman's identity is her strong will and determination. Also, she is represented as an individual, a single mother fighting for the better future of her daughter, and not just as 'one of them'. Her lack of education as well as the negative effects of the mass immigration are backgrounded. Furthermore, the commercial implies criticism against Trump and the Republicans by contrasting the notion of freedom and equality, contained in the representation of the American flag, with the notion of unequal opportunity, contained in the representation of the wall.

### 3.4. Discussion

Following the analysis, this section will provide a summary of the results and discuss them in relation to what has been said in the theoretical part. First, it will provide concise answers to the research questions, which concerned the kinds of ideological implications that get transmitted in the particular commercials and the way they are realized multimodally, through different semiotic choices.

In the first example, the discourse implies that ordinary people in the US are in control of all the power and the country's future, which is ideological due to the power relations and inequality which arise from the system of capitalism. The most significant verbal choices through which this ideological meaning is realized include the use of inclusive *we*, the use of the metaphor of power being in the viewer's hands, and emphasizing the ideals of Western democracy (principles, freedom, rights) while at the same time glossing over the issues the country is facing at the moment. Visual representations contribute to the glorification of the traditional American ideals promoted by the text, through the choice of general settings (solemn architecture, sculptures) and of salient elements such as the colors of the American flag on the participants' clothes, as well as through the non-verbal behavior of the participants.

The second example promotes a liberal, feminist view on the woman's postpartum body and recovery, implying that childbirth is followed by a painful, scary period which the woman is left to deal with on her own. This view is ideological because postpartum recovery also includes positive emotions and moments, which are in this case deleted. Here, the visual mode plays the central role in the meaning realization, along with the accompanying sounds. Semiotic choices contributing to the realization of this meaning include the use of the realistic (not symbolic) representations of objects, the use of low lighting, and salient elements such as the diaper, the blood, and the wedding ring.

The third example implies that keeping social distance and washing your hands guarantee the end of the pandemic and a bright future, which is ideological due to the lack of medical research to confirm the efficacy of these rules and due to the far-reaching consequences the pandemic has caused for the economy and mental health. In the realization of this ideological meaning, both the verbal and the visual semiotic choices play an important role. The most important choice in the verbal mode is the excessive use of imperatives, which gives the sense



of authority and confidence, whereas in the visual mode the metaphor ‘after the rain, comes the sun’ plays the crucial role.

The fourth example implies the argument that illegal immigrants deserve a chance in the US, which is ideological because such policy might lead to bad economic and cultural consequences. The meaning is realized mostly through visual semiotic choices, the most important of which are the use of shots and angles in the development of criticism against Trump and the classification of the Mexican woman as an individual and a single mother who the viewer is invited to feel compassion for.

All results support the findings of researchers dealing with the critical analysis of multimodal discourse, described within the theoretical framework. The results show the use of various manipulative strategies, such as connotation, overlexicalization, deletion, metaphor, personification, nominalization, presupposition, modality, classification of participants, salience (colors, foregrounding, brightness, symbols), manipulation through choices of shots and angles, and choices of settings such as lighting and location. Moreover, the results show that in the realization of ideological meaning, all representational modes are important and work together in the process of foregrounding and backgrounding of certain values and ideas.

#### 4. Conclusion

After dealing with the topic of multimodal critical discourse analysis both theoretically and practically, in this chapter the main ideas and results of the paper will be presented as well as critically reflected upon.

The paper builds on the assumption that mass media discourse, such as commercials, plays an important role in shaping the social reality and social relations of power. As a means of transmitting complex ideas, it is convenient for implying ideological meaning. The ideological meaning in this sense is related to its broader definition and includes everyday ways of thinking, which are made to seem commonsensical through the processes of naturalization and legitimation. This is done through different strategies which involve a careful choice of signs. When making the choice, the sign maker takes into consideration all representational modes because each mode carries different kind of responsibility in terms of being able to foreground or background certain qualities and ideas.

The paper first describes and then illustrates various strategies used in the linguistic and visual mode to convey ideological meaning. As shown in the analysis, some of these strategies include lexical and grammatical choices such as overlexicalization or the use of the imperative mood, visual choices such as the choice of settings, colors, shots, or angles, as well as the use of rhetorical tropes, modality and different ways of representing people. The strategies realized by different representational modes are combined to convey either a (right-wing or left-wing) political message, as in the case of commercials by *Fox News* and *84 Lumber*, or an ideological view of everyday experiences, as in the case of commercials by *Frida Mom* and *Mazda*.

Yet, the results of the study arise from what could be argued to be just one possible interpretation of meaning. The given interpretation is also ideologically marked because it reflects my own views and beliefs. Moreover, the examples analyzed in this study are very recent and, especially in the case of Mazda's commercial, there is a lack of objective evidence that would speak in favor of a certain viewpoint. Also, the results are restricted to only one culture, the culture of the US, especially in the case of commercials involving political messages (*Fox News*, *84 Lumber*). They cannot be applied universally, although the results related to commercials implying ways of thinking about everyday processes (*Frida Mom*, *Mazda*) might also be applied to other Western cultures such as European. Accordingly, further research on this topic could deal with a comparison of ideologies found in the US

commercials and ideologies conveyed by commercials in another Western culture, such as e.g. British. Furthermore, the analysis could focus on one specific kind of ideology, such as nationalism, racism, gender inequality, etc. and observe different commercials from the chosen perspective. Moreover, one could analyze other similar types of popular discourses, such as e.g. videos of famous YouTubers and Instagram influencers and the meaning potential of their non-verbal behavior and linguistic choices.

On a final note, it can be said that in spite of certain limitations, the paper fulfills its aim of exposing ideologies and how different semiotic choices contribute to the ways implicit ideological meaning is realized. It approaches commercials critically and has an educational quality because it prompts the reader to follow the example and try to be critical of discourses they deal with on a daily basis, in order to recognize hidden manipulative intentions.

## 5. Abstract

The paper deals with a critical, social semiotic approach to the analysis of discourse. It assumes the ability of discourse to serve ideological purposes by implying certain values and ideas and making them appear natural and commonsensical. Moreover, it argues that in a multimodal discourse all modes of representation play a role in the realization of ideological meaning because each semiotic choice might help foreground or background certain ideas. Building on this assumption, the paper analyzes four US commercials multimodally, with the aim of revealing hidden ideological meaning. In a qualitative analysis of commercials by *Fox News*, *Frida Mom*, *Mazda* and *84 Lumber*, various manipulative strategies are described and illustrated in an attempt to find what ideologies are implied in the commercials and how they are realized multimodally. Results show implications of different kinds of ideologies, including political messages and everyday ways of thinking. The representations contributing to the realization of ideological meaning are found in the combination of different modes (linguistic, visual, and sometimes audio) and include the strategies of connotation, overlexicalization, deletion, metaphor, personification, nominalization, presupposition, modality, classification of participants, salience (colors, foregrounding, brightness, symbols), manipulation through choices of shots and angles, and choices of settings such as lighting and location.

Keywords: multimodal critical discourse analysis, ideology, manipulation, naturalization, legitimation, commercials

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