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## Visual and Multimodal Metaphor in Advertising: Cultural Perspectives

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**Abstract.** It is often claimed that a picture tells us more than a thousand words, but studying pictorial metaphors reveals how much background knowledge is needed to understand and evaluate visuals. Commercial print advertising and billboards make for good case studies, because their goal is unambiguous: to sell consumer products and services. In this chapter some of the pitfalls in analysing visual and multimodal metaphors are discussed, Consideration of a number of examples suggests how metaphors involving visuals may misfire when they are interpreted by members from another culture than the one for which they were designed. In the conclusion some ideas are put forward to make these insights productive in educational contexts.

**Keywords:** visual/pictorial metaphor; multimodal metaphor; advertising; metaphor and culture; ideology.

### 1. Introduction

Thanks to the pioneering work of Andrew Ortony (1979) and Lakoff and Johnson (1980, 1999), the study of metaphor has over the past decades enjoyed an enormous boost in attention. Metaphor is nowadays understood as not simply a matter of linguistic creativity, a nice way to adorn poems and spice up speeches, but as one of the motors of human cognition. In Lakoff and Johnson's famous characterization, metaphor is "primarily a matter of thought and action and only derivatively a matter of language" (1980, p. 153).

If, indeed, we *think* metaphorically, this means that metaphors should appear not just in language but also in visuals, gestures, sounds, music, and in discourses that combine these modes. Over the past twenty years, non-verbal and multimodal manifestations have been studied in a wide variety of media and genres, such as print advertising (e.g., Forceville, 1994, 1996, 2000, 2007, 2013; Van Mulken et al., 2010), film (Whitlock, 1990, Carroll, 1996, Forceville, 1999, 2006a, 2016; Forceville and Jeulink, 2011; Forceville and Renckens, 2013; Koetsier and Forceville, 2014; Rewiś-Łętkowska, 2015; Coëgnarts, 2015, Coëgnarts and Kravanja, 2015; Fahlenbrach, 2016), cartoons (El Refaie, 2003, 2009; Schilperoord

and Maes, 2009; Teng, 2009; Bounegru and Forceville, 2011; Dominguez, 2015a, 2015b), and gestures (Müller, 2008; Cienki and Müller, 2008). It has also been demonstrated that three-dimensional objects, too, may cue metaphorical interpretations (Van Rompay, 2005; Cila, 2013). Such manifestations can be highly idiosyncratic and creative (Black, 1979), or deeply rooted in conceptual thinking (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, 1999). The latter line of research, generally known as “Conceptual Metaphor Theory” (CMT), has also been labelled the “embodied metaphor” view, since it has as a central tenet that abstract, complex target domains are systematically understood in terms of concrete, sensorily and bodily apperceived source domains. For instance, Zoltán Kövecses proposes that we understand the domain of EMOTIONS systematically in terms of PHYSICAL FORCES (e.g., Kövecses, 2008; see also Forceville, 2005). The fundamental “source-path-goal” schema (e.g., Lakoff, 1993; Johnson, 1993: chapter 7) gives rise to a whole range of metaphors that are formally rendered as PURPOSIVE ACTIVITY IS SELF-PROPELLED MOVEMENT TOWARD A DESTINATION, more popularly known as the JOURNEY metaphor. Examples are LIFE IS A JOURNEY, A RELATIONSHIP IS A JOURNEY and A CAREER IS A JOURNEY (e.g., Katz and Taylor, 2008; Ritchie, 2008; Kromhout and Forceville, 2013).

One of the vital questions to be asked when analyzing a metaphor is what knowledge and background assumptions must be recruited by its envisaged audience for this audience to be able to interpret the metaphor by and large in the manner its sender *intends* it to be interpreted. While many conceptual metaphors, due to their bodily basis, are presumably widely (possibly even universally) shared on planet earth, they also inevitably have dimensions that are culturally determined (e.g., Yu, 1998, 2009; Kövecses, 2005; Ibarretxe-Antuñano, 2013). This issue is no less pertinent to non-verbal and multimodal metaphors than to verbal ones.

In this paper I will discuss aspects of the cultural dimensions of creating and comprehending visual and multimodal metaphors, where visual metaphors are defined as metaphors in which both target and source are exclusively or predominantly rendered visually, and multimodal metaphors as metaphors in which target and source are exclusively or predominantly rendered in *different* modes – in the context of this chapter the visual and the written-verbal mode.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, I will focus on creative metaphors of the type discussed by Black (1979) rather than on structural metaphors of the type that is central to Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) work. In practice, this means that the underlying schema is CONCRETE A IS CONCRETE B (as opposed to Lakoff and Johnson’s ABSTRACT A IS CONCRETE B). There are some good reasons to focus on the genre of advertising. In the first

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<sup>1</sup> The question of what constitutes a mode is a much-debated and hitherto unresolved issue (Forceville 2010). I distinguish the following modes: written language, spoken language, visuals, music, non-verbal sound, gestures, olfaction, taste, and touch. In the context of this paper, only two modes matter: the written language and visual modes. For more discussion about modes, see Forceville (2006b).

place advertisers can use visuals to suggest claims that, when made in language, advertisers would either not get away with or that would sound trivial or ridiculous (Forceville, 2012), which makes them interesting material for study from an ideological point of view. In the second place, advertisers have to make sure they choose the right metaphors as advertising is expensive, and messing up metaphors can result in incomprehension or, possibly worse, erroneous interpretation. A third reason that makes analysing metaphors in the genre of commercial advertising attractive for scholarly reasons is that this genre has strong conventions that help the addressee interpret them. Most metaphors in commercial advertising have the advertised product/service, or an object metonymically associated with it, as the metaphor's target domain. This product is then coupled with something else. Interpreting the metaphor then boils down to finding positive qualities of the "something else," the source domain, that can be mapped onto the product (Forceville, 1996, p. 104). These genre conventions steer and constrain the interpretive process much more than visual/pictorial (the terms are used interchangeably) and multimodal metaphors in for instance feature films (Forceville, 2016).

The structure of this paper is as follows. In section 2 I will outline, on the basis of my earlier work, what the interpretation of a metaphor amounts to, and by extension what could go wrong in metaphor use. In section 3 a number of cases are discussed, leading to a few conclusions in section 4.

## **2. How to Interpret Something as a Creative Visual/Multimodal Metaphor?**

Lakoff and Johnson's well-known definition of metaphor as "understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (1980, p. 5) points towards the first criterion that needs to be fulfilled for something to be called a metaphor: two "things" are involved. Secondly, it is generally agreed upon in metaphor studies that the two "things" of a metaphor are not reversible. The structure of a metaphor is in principle TARGET IS SOURCE. *In a given context*, target and source cannot be reversed. Both "my butcher is a surgeon" and "my surgeon is a butcher" can be meaningful metaphors – but in completely different situations. In exceptional cases – always in the realm of art – it may be the case that some hybrid may give rise to construing both A-AS-B and B-AS-A, but in advertising this would only lead to confusion. (To be sure, there are highly meaningful visual hybrids in which no target and source can be distinguished – but these then simply are not metaphors.) So, after the two "things" have been identified, it needs to be assessed which of them is the target and which is the source. Whereas in verbal metaphors the interpreter is often helped by grammar, particularly when the metaphor is already presented in a convenient A-IS-B structure ("football is war," "Juliet is the

sun,” “Napoleon was a highway man”), in purely visual metaphors, the target-source distribution requires other cues for construal. The principle of relevance (Sperber and Wilson, 1995), here guided by the genre convention that commercial advertising always makes a positive claim about a product or service, is vital (see Forceville, 1996, 2014; and Forceville and Clark, 2014 for more discussion of relevance theory applied to visuals). The target domain thus usually constitutes the product itself (a car, a drink, a coffee machine) or it constitutes the brand. After all, most of the time it is not products or services in general about which a positive claim is made, but the products or services of a specific brand. Identifying the target of a metaphor in commercial advertising thus involves taking into account the type of product or service promoted as well as the brand name and/or brand logo of the advertiser. If no product or service is identified in the first place, the advertisement has either been very badly designed, or the viewer simply does not belong to the ad’s envisaged audience.

Let us assume that target identification is not a problem. The next step is to identify the source domain. If the source domain is rendered (or, in the case of the contextual metaphors/MP1 subtype – see Forceville, 1996, pp. 109-126 – suggested) visually, the audience must know what the source domain looks like; if it is rendered sonically, the audience must know what it sounds like. Such knowledge may be very broadly shared, namely when source domains pertain to certain natural phenomena (for instance the visual and sonic manifestation of rain and thunder, the looks and sounds of certain animals, the human body and the way it interacts with the world). But they may also be specific for a certain (sub)cultural community. The third stage of metaphor construal pertains to its interpretation. In the case of advertising, this means deciding which positive feature(s) or connotation(s) is/are to be mapped from source onto target (i.e., product) – unless of course the advertisement promotes a product by disparaging a competitor’s product, in which case the feature(s) to be mapped is/are negative.

In purely pictorial metaphors both target and source are exclusively or predominantly rendered visually – as holds for other monomodal metaphors. But while verbal discourse by definition can only sport monomodal metaphors, print and billboard advertising draws usually on the combination of visual and verbal modes, and thus can try to persuade its audience by presenting multimodal metaphors of the VISUAL A IS VERBAL B or VERBAL A IS VISUAL B variety.

### 3. Possible Misunderstandings in Visual/Multimodal Metaphor Interpretation

#### 3.1 The Source Domain is Not Identified/Recognized [Now: an orphan]

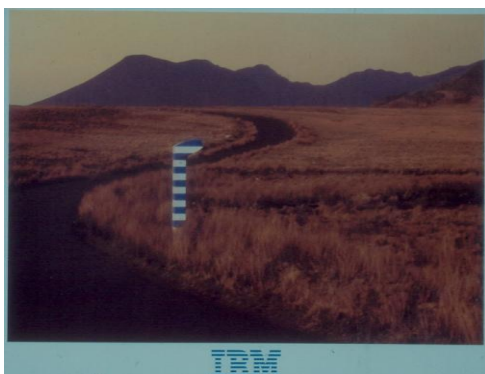


Figure 1.  
IBM billboard from the 1990s, The Netherlands.



Figure 2.  
AA telephone booths along Dutch highways, common in the 1990s.

Consider Figure 1, a billboard from a Dutch 1990s campaign for IBM (discussed in Forceville, 1996). We see a more or less vertical object with a protrusion at the top end, painted in stark blue-and-white stripes, standing next to what appears to be a deserted rural road. Thanks to the striking visual resemblance with the IBM logo we probably guess that we need to construe a metaphor with IBM as the target and this blue-and-white object as the source. But what is it? Well, it is an open-air telephone booth, at the time standardly occurring at regular intervals along Dutch motorways, via which a car-driver in trouble could contact the AA to ask for assistance (see Figure 2). Presumably the idea underlying the metaphor is that just as the AA provides help for unfortunate car drivers, so does IBM to those using its systems – wherever they may be located. But clearly such an interpretation is only open to those who recognize the source domain in the first place. To people from another culture this object may be as baffling as some of those in a Magritte painting. Actually, since such telephone booths have nowadays become much rarer, thanks to the widespread possession of mobile phones, I suspect that many younger Dutch people, too, will be puzzled by it.

Figure 3 offers another example (which I owe to Lisa El Refaie, University of Cardiff). The product advertised is obviously Wonderbra Bliss, as transpires from information given verbally, and we see the woman on the left wearing such a bra. We are moreover presented with the claim that it provides “undisputed shape & comfort.” Not every viewer, however, may recognize the rose-coloured objects on the right as *marshmallows*, and thus miss that the metaphor BLISS

WONDERBRA IS (LIKE) PAIR OF MARSHMALLOWS is to be construed. While the claims about the bra's good shape and pleasant comfort are communicated via the verbal track, the viewer who does not register that the source domain is "marshmallows," cannot infer that the shape and comfort are of the kind typical of this sweet – and thus cannot recruit yet other positive connotations associated with it. It is to be noticed, incidentally, that the girl also seems to be eating a marshmallow, which means that there is some sort of "realistic" motivation for the presence of the source domain in the picture – and perhaps also adds erotic overtones to the features that can be mapped from source to target.

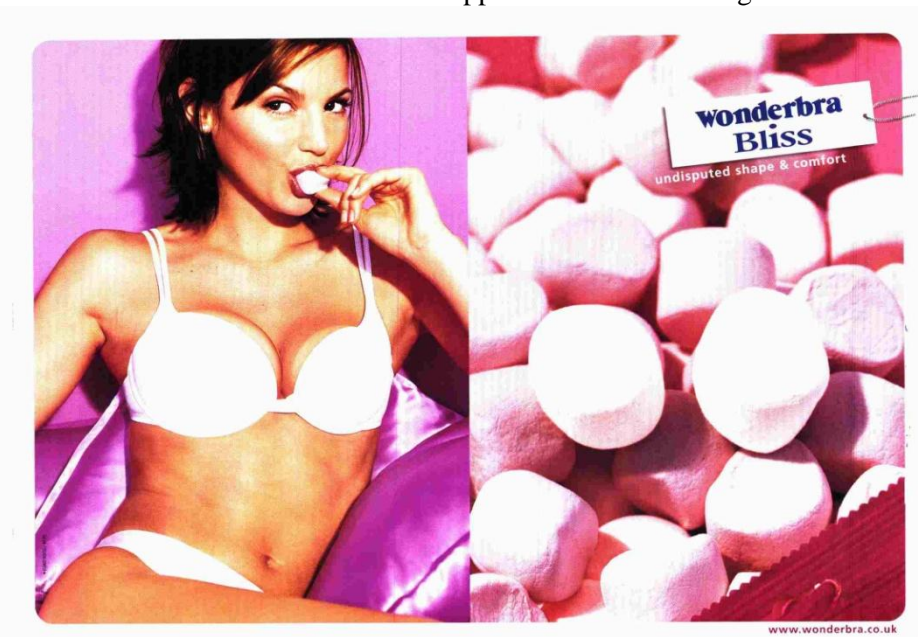


Figure 3.

Advertisement for Bliss Wonderbra, UK, date unknown.

Understanding what is going on in Figure 4 requires quite a bit of background knowledge. We first of all need to figure out what product is advertised here. The picture of the plastic flacon in the right hand bottom corner and the line "Advanced synthetic motor oil by Avia" make clear both the type of product advertised and the brand. But what has this oddly postured horse to do with motor oil? In order to make sense of the horse, viewers must be able to recruit from their knowledge of the world the information that the capacity of motors is measured in terms of "horse power." The following metonymic chain must thus be recognized: MOTOR OIL - [helps function] - MOTORS - [whose capacity is measured in horse powers, which is visually suggested by] - HORSE. But this horse

is depicted in an odd, unusual position, and it appears to look at and play with a ball of wool. Clearly, we are to understand the metaphor HORSE IS CAT. We are helped in the identification of the source domain by the line “makes your horses purr” – purring being a sound exclusively associated with cats, more specifically with *happy* cats. We further need to be aware that cats like playing with balls of wool being dangled above them. Now we are there: what is to be mapped from CAT to HORSE is something like “happily playing,” which, when applied to the motor, becomes something like “unproblematically running.”

While the envisaged audience probably has no problem going through these interpretative stages, it is important to realize that the central metaphor depends on specific connotations evoked by *Felis catus*, the house cat held primarily as a pet. People in cultures and subcultures where the first, or even only, connotation of CAT is “useful for catching mice,” “pest,” or “edibility” may be confused by the metaphor.



Figure 4.

Advertisement for Avia Turbo motor oil (Germany 2011), whose interpretation depends on the metaphor HORSE IS CAT. See <http://www.creativeadawards.com/makes-your-horses-purr/> (last accessed 22 April 2017) for other specimens in the same campaign (I owe this example, and part of the discussion, to Donny van Sas).



Figure 5 shows a trolley suitcase of the brand “Rimowa” situated on a white cube. The background shows what appear to be marble plates as well as stylishly designed windows. It is unclear whether this is an outdoor or an indoor scene. The viewer can simply take this information at face value. However, the envisaged audience of this advertisement in the magazine of an upmarket department store is meant to construe a metaphor. The cube is a *pedestal*, and thus “transforms” the trolley on top of it into a sculpture, that is, into a work of art. If construing a metaphor only because of the pedestal may seem far-fetched, it will not be so for the intended audience, because this audience will be able to recruit two other cues that facilitate this metaphorical reading. In the first place, many Dutch viewers will recognize the background as part of the ground floor of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, one of the best-known museums in The Netherlands (with Rembrandt’s “Nachtwacht”/”Night Watch” as its most famous painting). In the second place, this is an advertisement in a longer series, in the same issue of the *Bijenkorf* magazine, in which DESIGNER OBJECT IS ARTISTIC SCULPTURE is the recurring metaphor. Clearly, what is to be mapped from “sculpture” to “trolley” is the feature “being art” – which in turn may evoke other mappable features: aesthetic value, tastefulness, prestige, expensiveness ... Not everybody needs to map the same features – for advertisers the attractiveness of using visual/pictorial metaphors presumably resides in a degree of “customization” for individual viewers, who are after all aware that they are invited to map positive connotations from art onto Rimowa trolleys. One final dimension that deserves mention is that this ad appeared at the very moment when the Rijksmuseum was re-opening after a ten-year long, very expensive restoration that was fraught with problems and controversies. This is pertinent because during this re-opening period photographs of the museum were ubiquitous in newspapers and news programmes, which would enhance the recognisability of the ad’s background as not representing just any museum but specifically the Rijksmuseum. Moreover, the series of ads could be seen as constituting a form of free publicity for the Rijksmuseum that at *this* moment of its history, after having been closed to the public for an entire decade, was particularly welcome.

Non-recognition of the source domain (“sculpture”) results in a diminished interpretation of the advertisement. Non-recognition of the location as the *Rijksmuseum* (rather than just a generic museum), too, detracts from the potential richness of the metaphor. This example shows, again, that visual metaphors are aimed at specific communities of viewers, who in this case ideally are supposed to possess knowledge about art, manners of displaying sculptures, and the *Rijksmuseum*.



Figure 5.

One from a series of advertisements all cueing the DESIGN PRODUCT IS SCULPTURE metaphor in an issue of the upmarket *Bijenkorf* department store magazine, The Netherlands, April 2013.

### 3.2. The Source Domain Potentially Evokes Unwanted Emotions or Connotations

Mick and Politi (1989) discuss the advertisers' problem how to get across their intended meaning to the target audience in terms of the "hell of connotation." Translated to the issue at hand, the challenge is to ensure that audiences map the "right" (kind of) features and associations from source to target in their interpretation of the metaphor. Using metaphors always involves the risk that addressees consciously or subconsciously map features that the communicator does not want them to map. This could happen if the reputation of a source domain

should somehow have suffered a blow at some stage *after* the metaphor's launch, since then the target domain becomes in turn vulnerable to unwanted mappings. Imagine that it should suddenly be discovered (or even only rumoured) that Rembrandt's "Nachtwacht" is actually a fake. The wide media attention given to this sensational news might result in cynical comments that the trolley in Figure 5, too, probably is not a vintage design brand but a cheap forgery.

In a famous scene in *Shrek I* (2001), the eponymous hero tries to convey to his friend Donkey that ogres are complex creatures by comparing the species to onions. The feature Shrek wants Donkey to map from onions to ogres is "having layers," but his smart-ass companion exasperates Shrek by asking whether he wants to intimate that ogres stink, make you cry, or grow sprouts and turn brown in the sun. All these are salient features of "onions," which means that Donkey's interpretations are, as such, warranted by the metaphor. The following anecdote illustrates the same problem. The architect of the Erasmus bridge in Rotterdam, Ben van Berkel, proudly explained that it was designed to resemble a swan. Apparently an architect whose agency had also competed to be awarded the prestigious bridge project, venomously commented, "Oh, that is nice ... That means that Rotterdam's South Side looks straight into its ass!"

Now presumably both Donkey and the jealous architect deliberately "subverted" the metaphor, performing what Stuart Hall (1980) would call an "oppositional reading." It is more serious when people automatically or intuitively access unwanted features of the source for mapping onto the product domain. Let us consider three advertisements sporting visual metaphors that might misfire when interpreted by audiences with different (sub)cultural backgrounds.



Figure 6.  
The metaphor SHOE IS TIE, as discussed  
in Forceville (1996).



Figure 7.  
Hint at the metaphor BLACK HAIR IS  
NIQAB. Provenance and date unknown.

Maalej (2001) considered the French advertisement in Figure 6 (the texts translate as “watch my shoes!” and “shoes at their most beautiful”) from the perspective of a Tunisian-Arabic audience. In my own analysis, the feature mapped from TIE to SHOE (the advertised product) would be something like “proudly showing off one’s good taste,” or “demonstrating individuality in the choice of a non-functional piece of clothing.” But apart from the fact that “ties” are not a common piece of apparel in traditional Arab clothing, Maalej points out, most Arabs would be shocked at seeing a shoe so prominently situated on a man’s chest, since prominently flaunting one’s shoe in a person’s field of vision is considered highly impolite in Arab society. Conversely, the shampoo ad in Figure 7, clearly aimed at an Arab audience (“A tribute to Arabian beauty”), might be disconcerting to some Western viewers. Construing the metaphor as (BEAUTIFUL) BLACK HAIR IS A NIQAB, the hair being metonymically linked to the advertised product (a shampoo), their first association with the source domain might be “fundamentalism” or “intolerance,” or “repression of women.”

Figure 8, finally, shows an advertisement from a while ago for a Hewlett Packard PC. The body text emphasizes the product’s “security features that guard your vulnerable data.” Now while the opening words of the ad, “Protector. Defender. Sentinel.” are very general characterizations of the source domain in the metaphor, I would label the person depicted as performing this role specifically as a Japanese Samurai warrior. Clearly the features of “strength,” “capable of guarding,” “intimidating” ... are all suitable for mapping onto Hewlett Packard PCs. But what if an audience has somehow highly negative associations with the source domain? One could easily imagine that, given the strained Sino-Japanese history in WWII, particularly older Chinese viewers might instinctively feel revulsion at the sight of a Japanese warrior, and would not at all spontaneously map the features that Hewlett Packard undoubtedly had in mind.



Figure 8.

The metaphor HP PROTECTION SYSTEM IS JAPANESE SAMURAI WARRIOR.  
 Source: *PC Magazine*, July/August 1999, American edition (discussed in Forceville, 2000).

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

I have argued that an effective advertising metaphor requires that (1) the envisaged addressee recognizes the target domain (usually: the product and the brand to which this product belongs) as well as the source domain; and (2) activates one or more positive features from the source to be mapped onto the target. In print advertising and billboards the advertiser can use the visual and the written-language mode for both these tasks: identification of target and source and identification of appropriate mappable features, the latter including emotions, attitudes, and beliefs no less than more fact-oriented associations. The examples discussed in this chapter all cue (by depiction or by contextual suggestion) both target and source *visually*; the degree to which the verbal text plays a role in the two tasks mentioned varies per ad. To the extent that text proves crucial, the

metaphor verges toward the multimodal pole; to the extent that it proves dispensable, it verges toward the visual/pictorial pole.

Metaphors in advertising (and in many other genres as well) have strong evaluative and ethical dimensions, and therefore are an excellent instrument to discuss ideology. By the same token, they can be helpful in zooming in on insights and risks in intercultural/cross-cultural communication. We should never forget that relevance and meaning can never be measured objectively: relevance is always relevance to an individual (Sperber and Wilson, 1995, pp. 142-151).

Researching and discussing visual and multimodal metaphors in advertising lend themselves well, I propose, to stimulating critical reflection in inter/multi/cross-cultural communication pedagogy and will benefit from a hands-on component. Tasks could involve the following:

- Find a number of advertisements promoting a specific product category (e.g., cars, beers, perfumes) both from your own and from another culture which you know or suspect to sport a visual or multimodal metaphor. Analyse them, asking the questions (i) which are the two terms of the metaphor, and how do you know?; (ii) which is the target and which is the source, and how do you know?; (iii) which are the probably intended features that are to be mapped from source to target, and how do you know?
- Reconsider the metaphorical advertisements collected, and (mentally) eliminate first all text and then all visuals and then see how much of the metaphor is still comprehensible. How much of the identification of target and source depends on each of the two modalities? How much of the identification of pertinent mappable features depends on each of them? Discuss your findings with a student from another culture. Which similarities and differences across cultures do you find? How easy or difficult is to “subvert” the metaphor?
- Create an advertising metaphor promoting a product with which you personally have affinity, trying to restrict yourself as much as possible to the visual modality alone (for inspiration, see the work done by some of my students on <https://muldisc.wordpress.com/>). Try to think of a source domain that would appeal to members of your own (sub)culture; then try to think of a source domain that would appeal to a global audience. Now couple the product with a *different* source domain and consider what features of the product are emphasized using this new source domain. Show your results to fellow students and record their responses. Consider how by changing elements you could improve the cuing of the right connotations in the source domain of your metaphor.

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