

## Visual Binary Opposition: A Method to Clarify Meanings of Advertising Messages.

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### Abstract:

Visualizing messages in advertising plays a critical role in clarifying meanings to the target audience. "Binary Opposition" is a method that can clarify meanings according to its opposite meanings. Using this method can improve advertising messages. This statement will be examined through an analytical study and a survey that tends to explore how far this method works to clarify advertising meanings visually.

### Keywords:

*Visuals*  
*layer of meaning*  
*decoding opposites*  
*direct and indirect meaning*

Paper received 11<sup>th</sup> July 2016, Accepted 26<sup>th</sup> August 2016, Published 1<sup>st</sup> of October 2016

### Introduction:

Due to new editing programs and professional cameras used nowadays in changing and editing photos or images for advertising design, more complex visuals are being used in advertising design to influence the audience. This research tries to examine a methodology to clarify meanings of advertising messages by using the "Binary Opposition" method. Then the research will apply the method to a sample of target audience with different ages and genders to assess the clarity of the advertising message and goals.

This paper is an interdisciplinary and descriptive study that will try to apply the "Binary Opposition" method, which is originally used in linguistics. This research will suggest a framework based on "Binary Opposition" method that may help the designer in designing effective visuals that may help clarify the meaning to the audience. In addition, three selected ads will be analyzed visually according to the "Binary Opposition" method and tested through a survey of a sample of 312 people with different ages and genders.

Accordingly, this will help the research to achieve its aims and goals, which are to clarify meanings, messages, and values to the audience in a simple way. The research questions suggested by the paper are answered after describing and analyzing the selected ad samples according to the results of the research and the survey.

The contribution of this research paper is proving that "Binary Opposition" can play a vital and effective role in the communication process by relying on the use of opposites using visuals. So this paper recommends that academic and educational advertising schools use "Binary Opposition" as a new strategy that can help create untraditional opposition visuals in ads to clarify

meanings and messages to achieve the clients' goals. Finally, advertising agencies are advised to use "Binary Opposition" due to its clear impact on the audience, if employed properly.

The originality of this research mainly lies in the fact that this linguistic "Binary Opposition" method is used rarely in designing visuals in advertising. However, there is a study named "Advertisement/commercial as a text eliminating oppositions" by Bogumila Mika (2004) used "Binary Opposition" as a framework for advertising design. Mika did not provide any statistics and concluded twenty differences depending on his analytical study as for example dream and reality, desire and achievement, individual and a group.

### Binary Opposition

The "Binary Opposition" method has different definitions with same basic meaning. The researcher chooses the following definition as it simply shows the core meaning of the term as "the principle of contrast between two mutually exclusive terms: on/off, up/down, left/right etc" (Baldick 2008). "Binary Opposition" as a concept was found in Structuralism by Ferdinand de Saussure. He applied it in linguistics by understanding language, its values and meanings according to opposites words. Jacques Derrida is also well known in deconstructionism and used the "Binary Opposition" method too. This method is also applied in folklore, religion, and human behavior science fields. "Binary Opposition" seems similar to Semiotic method, maybe because they are both methods used in Structuralism and are both applied in linguistics as systems to understand meanings. However, there is a difference between the two methods in the way the audience receives the message. Semiotics depends

on studying signs and their meanings under the umbrella of a certain culture. The sign consists of mainly two parts: the signifier (the form which the sign takes) and the signified (the concept represented). So the receiver decodes the signs according to his thoughts and culture (Cantor 2016, p.215). But “Binary Opposition” has a wider range in understanding meanings. It is concerned with nature and existence thoughts that we all have as human beings, such as me and others, a human and a thing.

The core of this method is the way we understand words, so that each word gains its meaning according to its opposite word. For examples, existence/disappearance, good/evil, alive/dead, and so on. The most important discrimination between the opposite types is according to the following famous types:

- *“Oppositions (logical “contradictories”)*. Mutually exclusive terms (e.g. alive/dead, where “not alive” can only be “dead”);
- *Antonyms (logical “contraries”)*. Terms which are comparatively graded on the same implicit dimension (e.g. good/bad, where “not good” is not necessarily “bad” (Mika 2004, p.494)

Obviously the opposite word cannot be found unless we have the first word. Such as existence logically comes first then the opposite disappearance, also alive then the opposite dead.

In addition, “Binary Opposition” refers to many aspects of meanings that can be understood in terms of its opposite such as night and day (Danesi 2009, p.41). Although many systems of meanings are based on it, some critics found this concept as discrimination between gender, culture and even social classes.

It is easy for human beings to apply this method using a supported system of categorization. Based on Oguibenine’s assumption, the fact that knowledge could be turned into information is known as duality. In fact, “Binary Opposition” usually provides the simplest as well as most sophisticated definition of a given term. To give a full meaning to any discourse “A”, it is essential to suggest a reference discourse “B” to which “A” is compared. Discourse “A” could be defined by being not “B” or lacking some of “B’s” aspects. In this respect, linguistics suggest that items, which are set, in contrast are distinguished as marked vs. unmarked. (Oguibenine 1988, p.36)

## VISUALS

Visuals appear in advertising in different forms such as photos and illustrations. The uses of these visuals are to grab attention, stimulate curiosity and the most important part is to deliver meanings.

Each detail counts and helps to deliver the message. Colors, pictures, illustrations, and even the font style and size can all be used to deliver meanings. This combination works to achieve the client’s aims to market products, services, or ideas. Moreover, meanings always have values that relate to a specific audience. These values such as cultural values, human values, and loyalty values are considered the main aim in certain advertising messages. In addition, any advertising has its objectives to affect the audience such as, to make humans feel, connect, believe, think, see, or act. And matching messages to the advertising objectives has its objective too, such as to get attention, to create interest, to resonate, to create believability, and finally to be remembered (Grancea 2014, p.146).

Many philosophers who are concerned with visuals and meanings in advertising argue that visual design including all graphic elements can’t be separated from verbal messages. In addition, all visuals used in advertising have much significance. Generally the presence of both text and image does not simply represent the sum of both of them (text + image), but it represents a correlation between text and images (text ↔ image) that produce a new and additional meaning (Lick 2015, p.145). Designers are concerned with delivering messages in a right way, so they are responsible for coding messages using visuals in advertising. According to the level of education of the target audience, messages can be coded visually in a simple or more complicated way. So the selected audience can decode it in the right way to understand the intended meaning.

“Binary Opposition” is a method that can be used in coding advertising messages. It is based on using opposite visuals to clarify and deliver certain meanings. This method can express direct and indirect meanings in advertising. The direct meaning is easily detected by the eye when seeing opposite visuals used. But the indirect meaning is the way each member of the audience decodes this message, and we can name this as the deepest level of opposition. As a result, direct meanings in “Binary Opposition” is the first meaning that the audience decodes, and the indirect meaning represents the second meaning distinguished by the audience. That leads us to highlight the layer of meaning concept. It’s first used to describe human behavior to understand the meanings behind words. Well-known philosophers such as Birdwistell (1970), Mehrabian (1972), and Schefflen (1972) all tried to analyze, explain, and determine the meanings behind kinetics of body motion such as facial expressions, gaze, head

movements, and posture (Jenkins 2003, p.91). Their arguments opened the way for other researcher to apply this concept as a layer of meaning to understand the non-verbal behavior.

Another researcher, Katherine Frith (1998), stated and described three layers of meaning used in advertising. First, is the surface meaning which includes the recognition of all visuals used in the ad. Second, is the intended meaning. Here comes the message according to the value of the ad that the designer needs to transmit to the audience. Third, is the cultural meaning which depends on the cultural knowledge of the target audience to understand the meaning of the advertising message. Furthermore, there are many classifications for meanings, such as shown or hidden messages. This paper will deal with the layer of meaning in its simplest form, which is direct and indirect meanings, because it is more important for the designers in designing and coding advertising. While other classifications are related to research concerned with culture and the target audience.

The researcher can conclude from the above part a classification of elements that can help designers achieve the “Binary Opposition” method in designing visuals in advertising as follows:

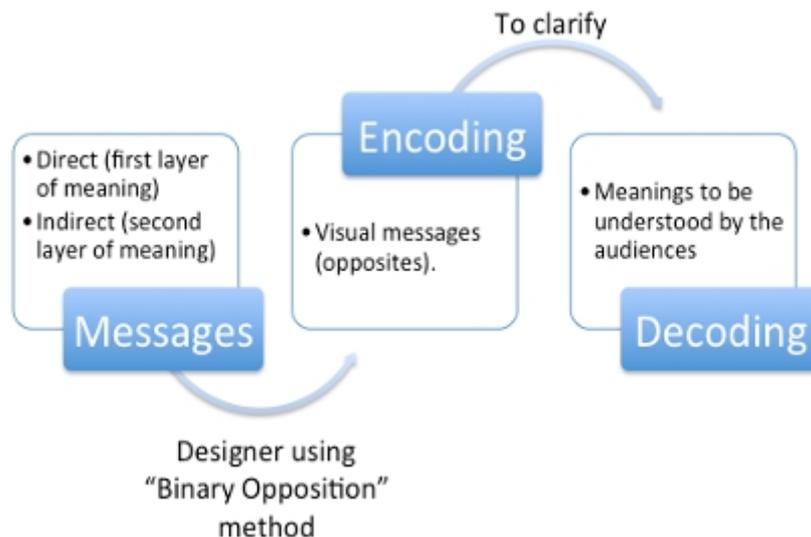


FIGURE 1 “Binary Opposition” Frame Work

### Analatical Study

The following part will focus on analyzing three ads that have been used in the mini questionnaire with the same arrangement. “Binary Opposition” and “layer of meaning” is the framework of analysis. This will help to highlight the value, layer of meaning, elements that help opposites performance, advertising message, and finally expected target audience in each ad. The importance of this part is the integration between the theories and designing visuals in ads.

- *Opposite Colors.* Using colors with contrast such as black and white that may give the meaning of good and evil as an example.
- *Opposite Pictures.* Such as a male and a female pictures, which can represent that this ad works for both genders as an example and also humans vs. things.
- *Opposite Cultural Values.* Such as conservative and liberal.

Accordingly, these opposites will clarify the direct and indirect meanings of the ad.

As a result to all of the above, the research can suggest a framework to apply “Binary Opposition” in designing advertise. The chart is a simple representation of the communication process applying “Binary Opposition” and the way we deliver messages. The chart includes three main processes; the first one is the messages including direct and indirect meanings, which the designer tries to express visually. The second one is the encoding process which includes visualizing messages using opposite visuals with respect to the “Binary Opposition” method. The third is the decoding process in which “Binary Opposition” method plays a vital role to clarify messages to audiences and help them understand the ad easily.

### A) Evian’s Mineral Water Advertisement

The advertisers wrote on “Evian” website that they “wants to represent their water as one that can keep adults young at heart”. They also wrote “popular styles and expenditure patterns among consumers become a principle force for social cohesion”. The following analytical points will be analyzed according to the company’s desires.

*The Main Value.* Purity.

*Layer of Meaning.* First layer of meaning is Evian’s mineral water makes you feel young

(message of the ad). Second layer of meaning is Evian's mineral water will complete your style – your healthy style-, (message according to the value of the ad).

*Elements That Help Opposite Performance.* Picture of a baby's body and another one for a youth's body. White color that represent infants, and the blue color of the jeans that represents youth.

*Advertising Message.* Live young.

*Expected Target Audience.* A young woman with a healthy lifestyle primarily targeted at young women.



**FIGURE 2 Evian's Mineral Water Advertisement**

**B) Transformer's Fitness Center Advertisement**

The advertisers wrote a slogan on "Transformers" website, that says, "go beyond your limit". They also used some terms such as motivation and high energy. In addition the colors of the site (orange and black) and the photos concerning perfect body shape all represent the two concepts of power and shaping. The following analytical points will be analyzed according to the company's desires.

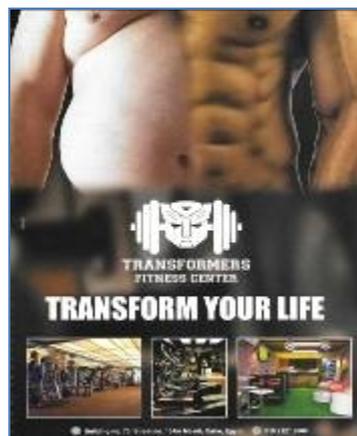
*The Main Value.* Health.

*Layer of Meaning.* First layer of meaning is Transformer's center will help you reshape your life (message of the ad). Second layer of meaning is Transformer's center will charge your power - reshape your body- (message according to the value of the ad).

*Elements that help opposite performance.* The shape of the slim body and the fat body. The difference of the body color. The black and white that represent the opposites of the concept of transform (after and before).

*Advertising Message.* Transform your life.

*Expected Target Audience.* The desired attractive body shape primarily target at men.



**FIGURE 3 Transformer's Gym Advertisement**

**C) Virgin's Mega Store Advertisement**

The advertisers of "Virgin" listed on their website all the valid products that they work in such as electronics, accessories, fashion, beauty, gaming, gifts, toys, books, and music etc. notice the variety of products. They also wrote all the numbers of branches in and out Egypt, which means that they can open other branches. Accordingly, the following analytical points will be analyzed according to the company's desires.

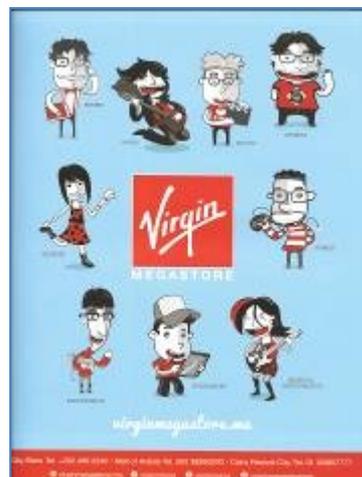
*The Main Value.* Varieties.

*Layer of Meaning.* First layer of meaning is Virgin's Megastore has a variety of products (message of the ad). Second, Virgin's Megastore will open new branch -varieties also in places- (message according to the value of the ad).

*Elements That Help Opposite Performance.* Boys and girls. The varieties of products such as technology, music, books, and another products.

*Advertising Message.* Virgin Megastore.

*Expected Target Audience.* The electronics and the style of the clothes are primarily targeted at youth.



**FIGURE 4 Virgin's Megastore Advertisement**

**Research Questions**

This study of using visual opposites in advertising aims to clarify messages in Egyptian

magazine ads, seeks to answer the following research questions:

- RQ1.** To which extent did “Binary Opposition” method clarify meanings in advertising depending on visuals only?
- RQ2.** Does the demographic (age and gender) of the audience affect the understanding of the meanings of the advertising message?
- RQ3.** Are there categories for applying “Binary Opposition” method in visual advertising design?

### Methodology

“Binary Opposition” is a method that works on opposite meanings through verbal words. The researcher found this method interesting and thought it could help the designer while designing visuals in advertising by putting opposite visuals in it. This study tries to examine this method as an effective one that can be applied in using opposite visuals while designing and coding messages in advertisements to clarify meanings visually to the audiences.

### Study Procedures

The researcher started to search for magazine ads that can represent “Binary Opposition” method depending on choosing opposite visuals by getting exposed to about 20 magazines which are popular in Egypt in the last two years, such as “Teen Staff”, “Elshabab”, “kol ElNas”, “Nos ElDonia”, and “Alam ElSayarat”. They are all Egyptian and Gulf magazines some of them are in English and the others are in Arabic language. Finally the researcher found three ads that contains opposite visuals and can represent “Binary Opposition” method. The data include two different English Egyptian magazines (Enigma magazine and Sports and Fitness magazine), and a well-known Arabic Gulf magazine (Zahrat el Khaleej). The three ads are in English language, and their target audiences are the youth.

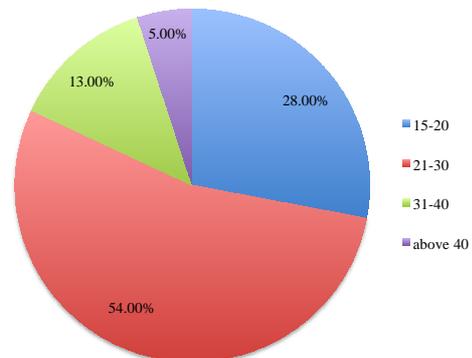
Complimenting to the above the researcher conducted a field study to survey to which extent did the Egyptian audiences understood the messages of the selected ads. A mini questionnaire was distributed on a nonprobability (available sample), with respect to the following conditions: highly educated, internet users, Egyptian youth (15- 40), that belong to difference age group and gender, and will be the basis for grouping. An electronic mini questionnaire was written in English and posted on “Facebook” social media channel, as it is a popular channel in Egypt, for 14 days in July 2016. The total number of responders was 312 and they were asked to evaluate three magazine ads. The three ads can be named as

follows; Evian’s advertisement will be (A), the Transformer’s advertisement will be (B), and finally Virgin’s advertisement will be (C). Their advertising messages were in the English language and they were removed from the three ads before putting them in the mini questionnaire. Also there were three different suggested answers arranged randomly under each ad. One of these answers represents the meaning of the message that had been removed from the ad, which acts as first layer of meaning. Another one was suggested according to the main value of the ad, which build on the message behind the corporate identity of the organization that viewed on the website, this will represented the second layer of meaning. And the third one was “other” to give the opportunity to any responder to suggest another layer of meaning that they might understand from the visuals of the ad. Then two final questions assess the demographics of the sample (age and gender).

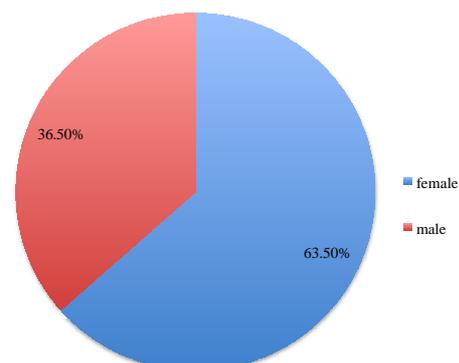
### Survey Results

The results of the mini questionnaire highlighted the following:

The responder’s ages were 54% from ages 21-30, 28% from ages 15-20, 13% from ages 31-40, and finally 5% aged above 40. According to these percentages the demographic sample of the survey would be the youth from 15 to 40 years old as they were the needed sample of users. The age above 40 was neglected from the study results, as it doesn’t represent the needed sample.



**FIGURE 5 Total Age Percentage**

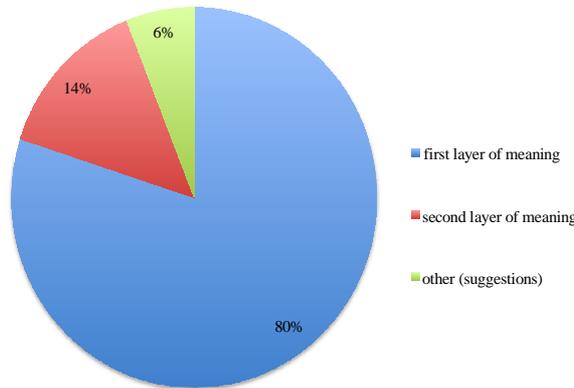


**FIGURE 6 Total Gender Percentage**

The females were more active in responding to the mini questionnaire than males. This was according to the percentage of female responders which was 63.5% and the percentage of male responders which was 36.5%

Each ad represented two layers of meaning and a third suggested answer. The responders answered as follow:

*Advertisement (A).* 80% of the responders

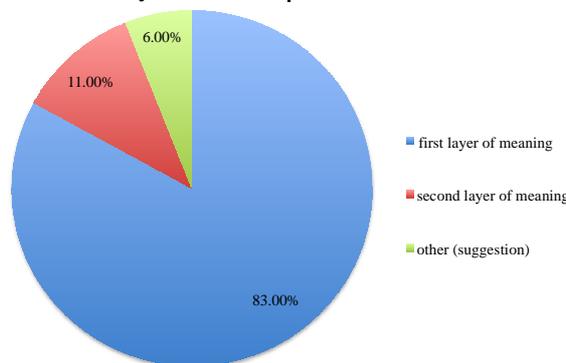


**FIGURE 7 Evian’s Advertisement Total Responses Percentage**

*Advertisement (B).* 83% of the responders choose the first layer of meaning, and 11% choose the second layer of meaning. This means that 94% can understand the intended meanings according to opposite visuals. While 6% only choose

choose the first layer of meaning, and 14% choose second layer of meaning. This means that 94% can understand the intended meanings according to opposite visuals. While 6% only were out of focus. Some of them couldn’t understand the meanings of the ad and the others related meanings to the relation between mothers and their baby.

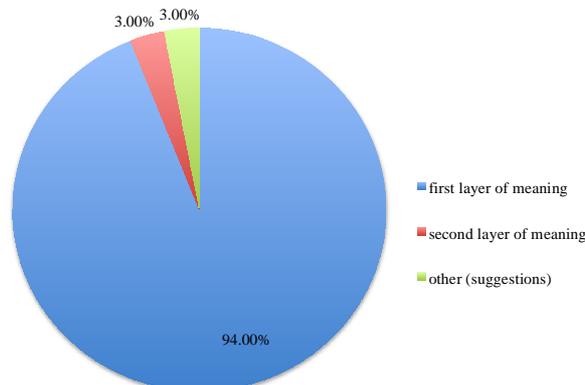
“other”, some of them chose both (first and second layer) while others related it to health and physical stuff and few were out of focus and related the meaning to certain diseases.



**FIGURE 8 Transformer’s Advertisement Total Responses Percentage**

*Advertisement (C).* 94% of the responders choose the first layer of meaning, and 3% choose the second layer of meaning. This means that 97% can understand the meanings according to

opposite visuals while 3% only were out of focus. Some of them can’t understand the meanings of the ad and the others relate the meaning to the enjoyment of life.



**FIGURE 9 Virgin’s Advertisement Total Responses Percentage**

RQ1 asked about the extent that “Binary Opposition” theory clarifies meanings in advertising depending on opposite visuals only. The researcher found according to the mini questionnaire results that using “Binary Opposition” in designing visuals in advertising is highly clarifies meanings for an average of 94% to 97% of the demographic.

RQ2 asked whether the demographic (age and gender) of the audience could affect the understanding of the meanings of the advertising

message. The researcher found the answer of this question to be no, according to the questionnaire results. According to the responders of the mini questionnaire, applying “Binary Opposition” in ads can clarify meanings visually to a wide range of ages and different genders. While the research excluded the demographic above 40 ages all the rest of the age groups came within a very close percentage in choosing the first and second layer of meaning.

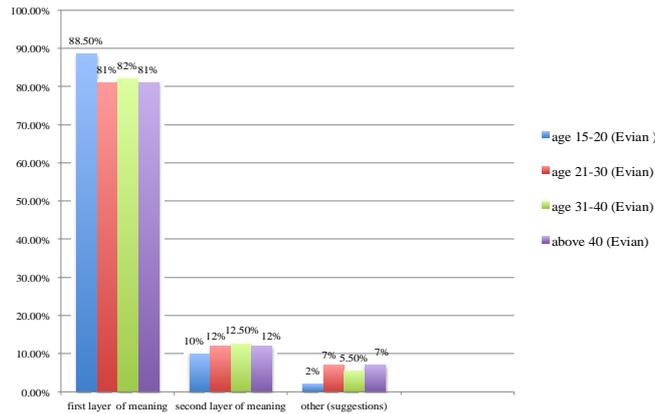


FIGURE 10 a Evian’s Advertisement Age Responses Percentages

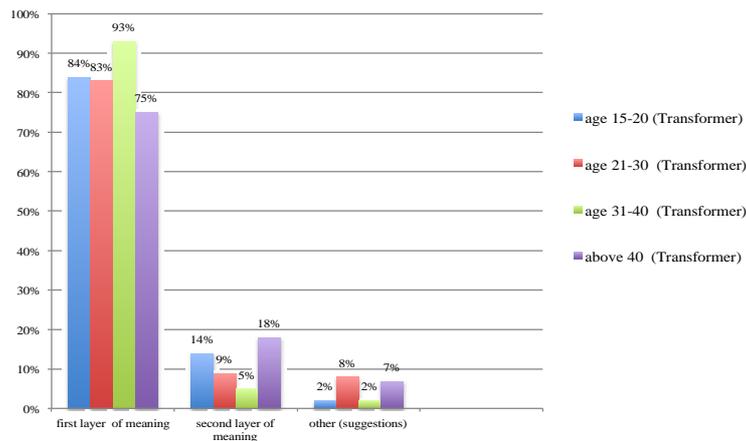


FIGURE 10 b Transformer’s Advertisement Age Responses Percentages

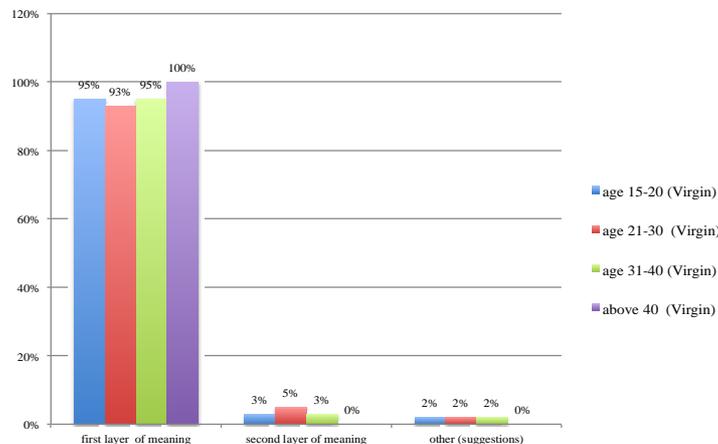
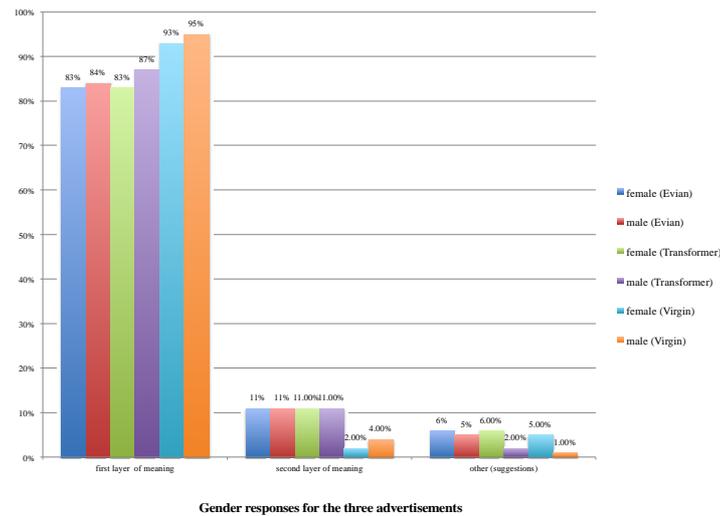


FIGURE 10 c Virgin’s Advertisement Age Responses Percentages

In addition, different genders came within a very close percentage in choosing first and second layer

of meaning.



**FIGURE 11 Percentage Of Gender Responders For The Tree Advertisement**

RQ3 asked about categorizing visuals using “Binary Opposition” theory in visual advertising design. The researcher could answer this with yes, because the questionnaire results vary according to the percentage of first layer of meaning. Advertisement (A) took 80%, advertisement (B) took 83%, and finally advertisement (C) took 94%.

Which leads us to conclude that using “Binary Opposition” in designing visuals in advertising can vary and range according to their level of difficulty. We can arrange them as follows:

- *Direct Binary Opposition.* That uses the opposites as it is with out any visual merging or editing example (C).
- *Semi Direct Binary Opposition.* That uses the opposites with obvious visual editing example (B).
- *Complex Binary Opposition.* That uses the opposites with a higher level of creativity in visual editing example (A).

**GENERAL DISCUSSION**

The goal of this research was to apply “Binary Opposition” in advertising design to clarify meanings based on visuals only. To achieve this aim, three important parts had to be done. First, was designing a framework for applying “Binary Opposition” in advertising design. Second, analysis of the three ads used in the mini questionnaire with respect to this method. Third was a mini electronic questionnaire as a good solution to reach Egyptian youth, specially Facebook users as it represents popular social media in Egypt. Accordingly, internet users were an important edge in choosing the sample of the study. In addition, higher educational level was another important edge for choosing the sample to be able to answer the mini questionnaire in

English language and the three advertisements were also chosen in English language. The sample then was a purposive – available one, which included different ages and genders. 312 responders answered the mini questioner and by analysis of the answers and the relation between them the study can conclude the following points, “Binary Opposition” can be applied in advertisements to achieve highly accurate understanding from the audience as the messages will be clear and focused, due to its ability to clarify meanings using opposite visuals. Using layer of meaning will confirm the value of the message that needed to be delivered to certain audiences. There are three levels of using “Binary Opposition” in designing visuals in ad; direct semi-direct, and complex. Choosing higher level in “Binary Opposition” will be necessary for selected audiences that can cope with higher levels of opposite visuals. The “Binary Opposition” framework will help the designer use this method correctly to achieve the highest level of understanding of advertising messages by the audience. Using the classification of elements can help designers apply the “Binary Opposition” method in designing visuals, achieving clear meanings in advertising to target audiences.

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