

The Visual and Cognitive Perception of Shocking Ambient Advertising and Its Impact on the Audience

Prof. Dr. Ateyat El-Gabry

Professor of Design, Department of Advertising, Faculty of Applied Arts, Helwan University,
ATEYAT_ALGABRY@a-arts.helwan.edu.eg

Prof. Dr. Rasha Mahmoud El-Sayed

Professor of Information Design and Guidance Systems, Department of Advertising, Faculty of Applied Arts, Helwan University, rasha_mahmoud@a-arts.helwan.edu.eg

Passant Moustafa

Helwan University, Faculty of Applied Art, Advertising Department, Giza, Egypt,
passant.ali596@gmail.com

Abstract:

In light of rapid changes in communication technologies and visual marketing methods, shock ambient advertising has emerged as one of the most prominent forms of modern advertising. It relies on surprise and intense emotional impact as tools to capture attention and provoke awareness. This type of advertising transcends traditional methods, targeting the audience indirectly but powerfully by relying on both visual and cognitive perception, which serves as a core axis in processing and interpreting media messages. Visual perception represents the first phase in receiving the advertisement, during which visual elements such as color, imagery, and typography are processed before they are analyzed cognitively to derive meaning and interpret symbolic or subliminal messages. As a result, the audience interacts not just with the surface appearance but through deep cognitive processes that affect behavior, psychology, and social attitudes. The strength and danger of shock advertising lie in its ability to cause a "cognitive disruption" in the viewer's mind, urging them to think critically or adopt a position toward the ad's message. This opens the door for deeper study of its effects from psychological and media perspectives, especially with the increasing use of shock elements in both awareness campaigns and commercial promotions. Accordingly, this research paper aims to analyze how shock ambient advertising engages both visual and cognitive perception and to explore its psychological and emotional impact on the audience. It also presents analytical examples showing how shock messages are crafted to achieve the intended effect

Research Problem: Despite the notable evolution in advertising techniques particularly the rise of shock ambient advertising that uses surprise to capture attention its impact on visual and cognitive perception remains an open question. There is a critical issue regarding how effective this advertising style is in embedding the message in the viewer's mind and influencing awareness and behavior, especially considering the diversity of psychological and cultural backgrounds and their varying responses to shocking stimuli.

Thus, the central research question becomes: "To what extent can shock ambient advertising influence the visual and cognitive perception of the audience, and how does this reflect on their psychological and behavioral response?"

Research Importance: The importance of this study lies in shedding light on a key factor in the success of shock ambient advertising the element of shock which has been heavily utilized in international campaigns but remains underrepresented in Egypt. The significance of the study can be summarized as follows: It contributes to the theoretical understanding of shock ambient advertising as an effective mass visual communication tool. It highlights the role of sensory and cognitive perception as essential pathways in audience responses to advertising messages. It helps guide attention to the importance of aligning visual messages with emotional content to ensure lasting and positive impact.

Research Objectives: To analyze the relationship between the audience's visual and cognitive perception and shock ambient advertising by understanding how viewers receive and mentally process shocking visual content. To examine the impact of shocking advertising messages on the audience's psychology in terms of emotional and cognitive reactions. To uncover key design mechanisms that influence both visual and cognitive perception in shock ambient ads.

Research Methodology: The study adopted the inductive method in collecting information for the theoretical part of the research, followed by the descriptive-analytical method in examining and analyzing

selected advertising models, and finally the applied method through conducting practical experiments to verify the validity of the research hypotheses.

Research Results: Visual and cognitive perception plays a central role in receiving and interpreting shock advertising, as it relies on the interaction of the senses with surprising stimuli, leading to varying mental and emotional responses among individuals. Ambient shock advertising depends on unconventional elements such as intense or provocative images and striking symbols, which stimulate the recipient's subconscious perception, making them more likely to store the message in long-term memory. Visual appeal is a key factor in the success of shock advertising, especially when supported by strong form and symbolic significance aligned with the recipient's experience and visual culture. Sensory memory—both visual and auditory—greatly contributes to embedding shocking advertising messages, as impactful images and sounds are retained longer than ordinary ones. The impact of shock advertising varies according to the psychological and cultural background of the recipient, such as mood, personal bias, and social values, meaning its effectiveness can differ from one audience to another. The study emphasizes the importance of integrating psychological knowledge with creative design in developing shock advertising, enhancing its ability to influence both the mind and emotions without offending the recipient's values or feelings. Subliminal messages are proven to be an effective tool in shock advertising, provided they are crafted with care and intelligence to ensure the intended effect on both the collective and individual subconscious.

Recommendations: Focus on studying the recipient's psychology before designing the advertisement to determine the most effective visual and cognitive methods for achieving the desired impact without causing aversion or unacceptable shock. Rely on carefully crafted subliminal messages that respect the audience's culture and address their subconscious in a balanced way, helping embed the message without violating psychological or moral boundaries. Enhance collaboration between designers and psychologists to better understand how audiences react to shocking stimuli and how to direct such stimuli to serve the advertising message. Use visual appeal creatively in shock-based design elements, maintaining a balance between attractiveness and content to ensure clarity of meaning and ease of perception. Consider individual and cultural differences in perceptual responses by testing multiple advertising models before launching a campaign widely. Develop strategies for evaluating the effectiveness of shock advertising through scientific tools such as memory response analysis, attention tracking, and emotional interaction assessment.

Paper History:

Paper received July 24, 2025, Accepted September 7, 2025, Published online November 1, 2025

Keywords:

Ambient Shocking Advertising, Shocking Advertising, Subliminal Message, Sensory Cognitive trauma

References:

- 1- Ghazi, F. R. 'Strategic study of shock advertising design', Master's thesis, Department of Advertising, Faculty of Applied Arts, Helwan University. (2014)
- 2- Ibrahim, S.M. Shock in Interactive Awareness Advertisements and Its Role in Influencing the Audience, Department of Advertising, Faculty of Applied Arts, Helwan University. (2023)
- 3- <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.3846/23450479.2014.997317>
- 4- Skorupa, P. (2014) 'Shocking contents in social and commercial advertising', Creativity Studies, 7(2), pp. 69–81. doi:10.3846/23450479.2014.997317.
- 5- Seo Design Chicago (2024) 'What is Shockvertising and Does It Work?', SEO Design Chicago, 11 December, [online]. Available at: <https://seodesignchicago.com/advertising-blog/what-is-shockvertising-and-does-it-work/>

CITATION Ateyat El-Gabry et al, (2025), The Visual and Cognitive Perception of Shocking Ambient Advertising and Its Impact on the Audience, International Design Journal, Vol. 15 No. 6, (November 2025) pp 475-484