

The Rise of Contemporary Abstract Advertising – Aesthetic Chaos or Marketing Genius?

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Abstract. This study set out to explore the function and reception of abstract advertising in contemporary digital environments, particularly among Gen Z consumers. Through a combination of literature review, visual case analysis, focus group interviews, and social media content analysis, the research has shown that abstraction in advertising - though often ambiguous - can powerfully engage audiences when aligned with emotion, aesthetics, and identity.

Keywords: abstract advertising, aesthetic chaos, social media.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

In recent years, the form and function of advertising have undergone dramatic changes. Traditional advertisements used to rely on clear messaging, product demonstration, and rational persuasion, often employing linear narratives, direct slogans, and functional visuals to quickly communicate a brand's value proposition. However, more and more brands are now shifting toward abstract, visually experimental, and emotionally-driven forms of communication - commonly referred to as contemporary abstract advertising. This type of advertising is characterized by symbolic imagery, surreal visual language, a deconstruction of narrative, and deliberate ambiguity. Rather than delivering messages directly, it invites audiences to interpret and feel.

This evolution is largely driven by the rise of social media platforms, the fragmentation of consumer attention, and the growing demand for visual novelty. Especially in fashion, luxury, and tech industries, abstract expression has become a powerful way to attract consumer attention and build a unique brand identity. Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have become fertile ground for abstract advertisements, where ambiguity and intrigue can lead to higher engagement, sharing, and cultural resonance.

1.2. Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How is abstract advertising perceived by contemporary consumers, particularly among Gen Z and Millennials, in terms of emotional engagement and brand recognition?
2. In what ways do consumers interact with abstract advertisements on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube, and how do these interactions reflect broader audience behaviour patterns?
3. What are the potential advantages and limitations of using abstraction as a marketing strategy, and how can brands balance aesthetic appeal with effective communication?

1.3. Research Objectives

This study is designed to achieve the following objectives:

1. To review and synthesise existing literature on the concept and evolution of abstract advertising, with a focus on its use in contemporary marketing discourse.
2. To investigate how consumers interact with abstract advertising through a netnographic approach, emphasizing their behaviors and engagement patterns on digital and social media platforms.
3. To analyse consumer sentiment toward abstract advertisements as expressed across social media channels such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok.

4. To provide strategic recommendations for brands seeking to effectively employ abstract advertising while minimizing communicative ambiguity and audience alienation.

1.4. Research Scope

This research focuses on representative brands such as Balenciaga, Diesel, Gentle Monster, and Acne Studio, analyzing how they implement abstraction in their advertisements. The methodology combines visual analysis, focus group interviews, and social media content analysis. Although the study centers on high-end fashion brands, the findings may offer valuable insights for broader advertising strategies across industries (Kotler et al., 2021).

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Definition and Evolution of Abstract Advertising

Contemporary abstract advertising refers to an advertising format that deliberately avoids directly conveying information, instead constructing emotional atmospheres and symbolic meanings through abstract visuals and narrative deconstruction. With the rapid development of visual culture and the widespread use of digital media, traditional advertisement forms, which focused on storytelling, product features, and rational appeal, have gradually been replaced by symbolic, surreal, and emotionally-charged expressions. This shift is particularly pronounced in fashion, luxury, and art-related industries.

Contemporary advertising is no longer simply about providing information, but about building emotional and symbolic connections. For instance, Balenciaga's surreal advertising videos, which blur the lines between reality and the virtual, or Apple's symbolic depictions of product functionality in their iPhone 14 Pro advertisements, all reflect this abstract turn. These advertisements do not directly explain the product but evoke a sensorial and symbolic experience. The shift toward abstraction in advertising is not just a visual evolution but also a transformation of brand communication strategies.

2.2. Theoretical Frameworks

To deeply understand how abstract advertising functions and influences consumers, this research draws on five interconnected theoretical frameworks: Visual Metaphor, Consumer Confusion Theory, Symbolic Consumption Theory, Brand Narrative Theory, and Self-Expansion Theory. These frameworks together offer a multidimensional lens to interpret abstract advertising from visual, psychological, cultural, and emotional perspectives.

2.2.1. Visual Metaphor Theory

Visual metaphor is one of the most fundamental techniques used in abstract advertising. It refers to the symbolic representation of one concept through another, visually associating abstract brand values with concrete imagery. According to Zhao & Lin (2018), visual metaphors enhance attention, recall, and emotional engagement in advertising. By employing symbolic, surreal, or exaggerated visuals, brands like Gucci and Gentle Monster trigger audience associations and emotional responses, allowing for deeper interpretation and resonance.

2.2.2. Consumer Confusion Theory

While visual metaphors offer emotional richness, they also carry the risk of over-complexity. Consumer Confusion Theory, as proposed by Papavassiliou and Mentzas (2003), emphasizes that vague or overly artistic messaging may lead to misunderstanding or disengagement. When viewers cannot decode an advertisement's meaning, they may feel alienated or develop negative attitudes toward the brand. Abstract advertising thus operates on a fine balance between creative ambiguity and communicative clarity.

2.2.3. Symbolic Consumption Theory

Jean Baudrillard (1998) argues that modern consumer behavior is driven more by symbolic meaning than functional utility. Consumers buy not only products but also the cultural codes they represent. Abstract advertising aligns perfectly with this theory: instead of communicating product benefits, it constructs visual worlds rich in identity, aesthetics, and ideology. For example, Balenciaga's use of futuristic imagery and anti-narrative techniques turns the brand into a symbolic artifact, catering to consumers' desire for uniqueness, rebellion, or exclusivity.

2.2.4. Brand Narrative Theory

Although abstract advertisements often discard traditional storytelling, they still contain narrative elements - albeit fragmented and atmospheric. Sarkar and Kotler (2018) emphasize that modern branding depends less on factual delivery and more on constructing a story-space that invites consumer participation. Brands like Gentle Monster use surreal visual fragments to build immersive environments where consumers project meaning and emotion. These implicit narratives form emotional bridges between brand and audience, deepening engagement without relying on linear explanation.

2.2.5. Self-Expansion Theory

The Self-Expansion Model, developed by Aron et al. (1991), suggests that people have a fundamental motivation to enhance their sense of self by incorporating others - people, values, or even brands - into their identity. Abstract advertisements that evoke emotion, align with personal aesthetics, or reflect desired lifestyles are more likely to be perceived by consumers as extensions of themselves. Acne Studios is a prime example of this phenomenon. Its advertisements rarely emphasize the practical function or real-life usage of clothing. Instead, they rely on surreal, emotionally charged, and poetic visual expressions to communicate the brand's aesthetic philosophy and cultural stance. Take its 2020 Spring/Summer campaign as an example: inspired by the abstract landscape paintings of Swedish artist August Strindberg, the models are placed in misty, dreamlike settings. The overall imagery resembles a work of art rather than a commercial display. This kind of culturally rich and emotionally immersive advertising transforms the viewer from a passive observer into an active participant in the brand's aesthetic world. According to Wang & Yu (2023), young consumers on social media often associate abstract, aesthetic advertising with their own self-image, reinforcing emotional connection and brand loyalty even in the absence of concrete information.

2.3. The Impact of Abstract Advertising on Consumer Perception

The effectiveness of abstract advertising lies not in clear information delivery, but in its ability to shape perception, evoke emotion, and embed symbolic meanings. Research has shown that this form of advertising influences consumers in three key areas: brand perception, emotional response, and attitude formation.

Zhao & Lin (2018) argue that abstract and metaphorical visuals can bypass cognitive filters and create strong emotional associations, allowing consumers to "feel" a brand before they rationally understand it. For instance, Diesel's "Go With the Flaw" campaign and Gentle Monster's poetic short films do not convey practical product details, but they evoke boldness, non-conformity, or futuristic beauty—values that audiences internalize.

However, the ambiguity of abstract advertising can also lead to consumer confusion. According to Papavassiliou & Mentzas (2003), when consumers encounter advertisements that are difficult to interpret, they may feel frustrated or indifferent, especially if they are unfamiliar with the brand's context or cultural references.

That said, research by Wang & Yu (2023) suggests that for younger consumers - especially those immersed in social media - abstract visuals often increase curiosity and engagement, leading to more time spent viewing and sharing content. NielsenIQ (2024) further supports this, noting that 52% of Gen Z respondents find abstract or "aesthetically strange" ads more memorable and share-worthy.

Ultimately, the impact of abstract advertising on consumer perception is highly dependent on audience traits, media context, and brand positioning. For some, abstraction fosters emotional depth and identity alignment; for others, it may simply obscure the brand message. Successful abstract advertising thus requires a delicate balance between sensory intrigue and symbolic accessibility.

2.4. Target Group Behavior: Gen Z Consumers

As the primary audience for many abstract advertising campaigns, Generation Z (born roughly between 1997 and 2012) plays a crucial role in shaping brand communication strategies. Numerous studies have highlighted this group's distinctive consumer behavior, communication preferences, and digital media habits.

Gen Z consumers demonstrate a strong desire for authenticity, diversity, and emotional resonance in brand messaging (Impact, 2023). Rather than responding to traditional promotional tactics, they tend to favor brands that align with their personal values and cultural identity. This generation exhibits relatively low brand loyalty in the conventional sense but is highly responsive to community-based marketing, storytelling, and aesthetic branding (Britopian, 2025). Their purchasing decisions are often influenced by peer recommendations, online reviews, and emotional connection rather than direct product benefits.

Economically, Gen Z already commands considerable spending power. According to Nielsen IQ (2024), their global spending influence is projected to reach \$12 trillion by 2030. This economic weight makes them a valuable yet complex segment for brands, particularly those experimenting with non-traditional advertising formats.

In terms of digital expression, Gen Z has revolutionized online communication. They regularly use emojis, memes, and visual shorthand in place of traditional text to convey tone, humor, and identity. Platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat are not only sources of entertainment but also spaces where Gen Z constructs and negotiates their sense of self. Research indicates that emojis like “” (meaning “I’m dead” from laughter) and “” (used to express extreme emotion, not necessarily sadness) carry culturally specific meanings within this cohort (Social Insider, 2024). These semiotic practices suggest a preference for layered, symbolic communication - making abstract advertising particularly resonant with their expressive norms.

The convergence of emotional, symbolic, and visual communication among Gen Z makes them especially receptive to abstract advertising. However, this audience is also quick to reject content perceived as disingenuous or overly manufactured. For this reason, understanding Gen Z's aesthetic expectations and social behavior is vital to effectively engaging them through abstraction.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, integrating case studies, focus group interviews, and social media content analysis to explore how abstract advertising is implemented in brand communication and how it affects consumer perception and emotional response.

Qualitative methods are particularly suited to the study of abstract advertising because such advertising is often symbolic, emotional, and open to interpretation. It is difficult to quantify using traditional data tools. Therefore, this research prioritises depth and meaning over breadth and statistical generalisability.

This research was conducted primarily in Beijing, China, with participants recruited from the Central Academy of Fine Arts. As such, the cultural context - particularly Chinese youth's exposure to Western fashion advertising - may shape their interpretation of abstract content. Abstract advertisements that rely heavily on Western visual metaphors, surrealism, or fashion subculture references may not resonate equally with all cultural backgrounds. This location-specific factor is acknowledged as a limitation of this study. as shown in Figure 1.

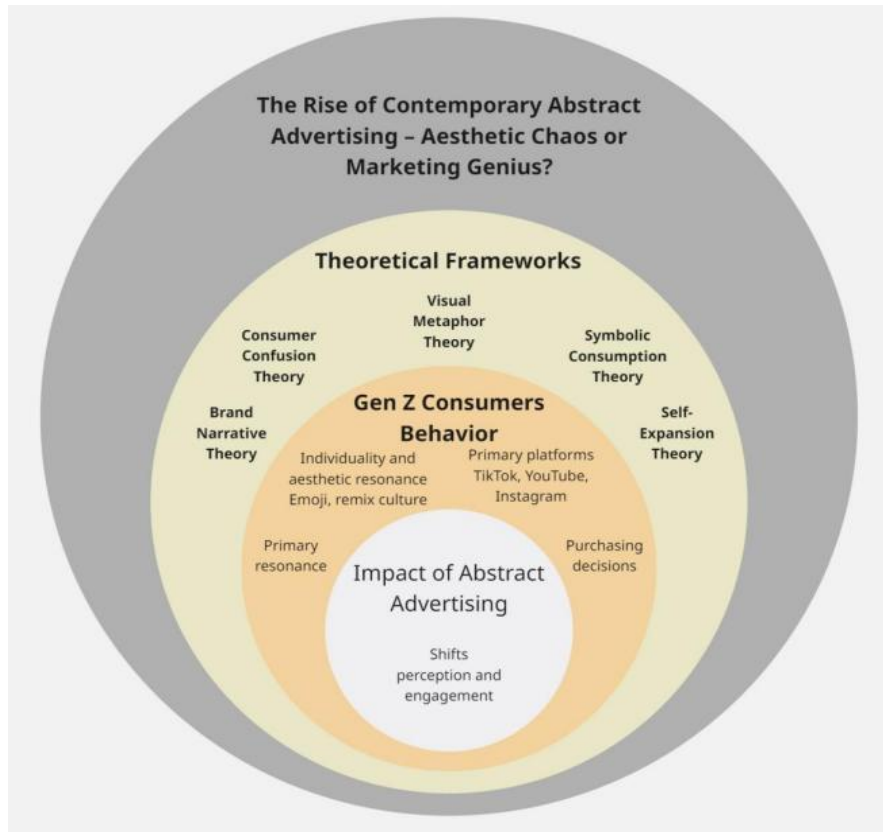


Figure 1. Research Onion

3.2. Data Collection

3.2.1. Case Studies

This research selects four representative brands as case studies:

- Balenciaga: Known for its AI-generated visuals and post-human aesthetics in advertising, as shown in Figure 2 and Figure 3;



Figure 2. The wlcw, 2021



Figure 3. The Wlcbw, 2021

- Diesel: With campaigns such as “Go With the Flaw,” which feature absurdist and anti-perfection themes, as shown in Figure 4, Figure 5 and Figure 6;



Figure 4. Caputi, 2018



Figure 5. Caputi, 2018

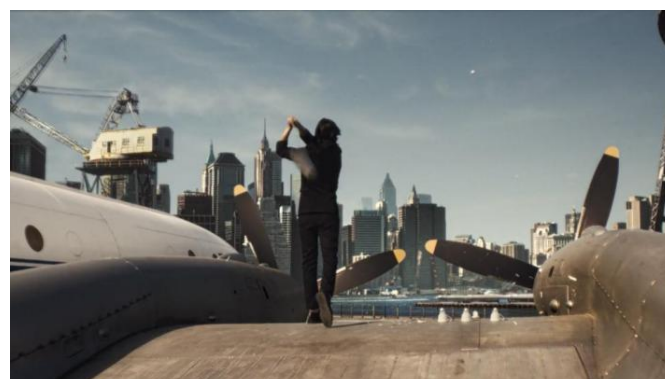


Figure 6. Caputi, 2018

- Gentle Monster: Renowned for its art-driven and surreal visual storytelling, as shown in Figure 7;



Figure 7. Digitiling, 2024

- Acne Studio: Shot by Carlijn Jacobs, the advertisement uses soft tones and hazy lighting to create a dreamlike atmosphere, evoking emotional resonance rather than directly conveying product information, as shown in Figure 8.



Figure 8. Acnestudio, 2020

These advertisements will be analysed through visual semiotics and narrative structure to explore how abstraction constructs brand meaning.

3.2.2. Focus Group Interviews

Participants were carefully selected based on their demographic and behavioral alignment with the target audience of abstract advertising. All were students or recent graduates aged 18 to 30, studying or working in creative-related fields such as design, fashion, visual arts, or media. This group was chosen because they represent a highly relevant demographic for abstract advertising - both as consumers and cultural interpreters.

Their frequent exposure to visual content through platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Youtube makes them attuned to visual trends, emotional narratives, and symbolic aesthetics. Furthermore, many participants had prior familiarity with brands such as Acne Studios or Balenciaga, which enabled more meaningful reflection during discussions. Their ability to articulate aesthetic preferences and media habits was essential for the interpretive nature of this study.

Two focus groups (5–8 participants each) will be conducted, comprising 18–30-year-old consumers with strong engagement to social media platforms. The discussions will revolve around:

- How participants interpret abstract advertisements;
- Whether these ads affect their emotional connection with the brand;
- Whether abstract elements influence their interest in purchasing.

Conversations will be recorded, transcribed, and coded for recurring themes.

The focus group consisted of 13 participants aged between 18 and 30, including six women, six men, and one non-binary individual. All participants demonstrated an interest in the field of fashion and reported regular engagement with social media platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. A diverse gender composition was intentionally maintained during the recruitment process to ensure a more comprehensive understanding of audience responses to abstract advertising, particularly in terms of aesthetic perception and emotional resonance from different gender perspectives.

3.2.3. Social Media Content Analysis

Relevant advertisement videos and consumer comments will be collected from TikTok, Instagram, and Youtube. Particular attention will be paid to:

- Engagement metrics (likes, shares, comments);
- Sentiment analysis (e.g., “don’t understand but love the vibe,” “this feels high fashion”);
- Commenter demographics and discourse patterns.

This component helps capture public reactions and decoding behavior in real-life communication scenarios.

Social media in this study plays two roles: (1) as a research data source, and (2) as part of the participants’ media environment. Platforms including TikTok, Instagram, and Youtube were selected for content analysis due to their strong emphasis on visual culture and short-form video formats, which are ideal for the spread of abstract advertisements. These platforms were also cited most frequently by focus group participants when asked where they encounter fashion advertising.

For participants, TikTok was primarily used for entertainment and passive discovery, Instagram for following brands and fashion inspiration, and Youtube for fashion-related commentary and discussion. Understanding how participants use each platform provides important context for interpreting their emotional and cognitive responses to abstract advertising. (Krippendorff, 2018).

3.3. Research Limitations

Although the methodology integrates multiple qualitative methods to enhance depth and diversity of data, there are several unavoidable limitations:

1. Sample Size and Representativeness

Due to limited time and resources, the focus groups involve a small number of participants, mostly young social media users. Their views may not represent broader demographics or cultural backgrounds.

2. Interpretive Subjectivity

Since abstract advertising is inherently open to multiple interpretations, both the participants’ and the researcher’s perspectives may introduce bias during coding and thematic analysis.

3. Unstable Social Media Data

Social media engagement is dynamic and influenced by platform algorithms. Viral responses may not reflect long-term brand perception or genuine interest, and may be skewed by short-term trends.

4. Brand Selection Bias

The chosen cases focus primarily on high-end, avant-garde brands that already enjoy cultural capital. The findings may not apply to mass-market or utilitarian brand contexts.

4. Data Analysis

4.1. Case Study Analysis

This study selects four representative abstract advertisements from the brands Balenciaga, Diesel, Gentle Monster, and Acne Studio as key case studies.

Balenciaga 2022 AI-themed campaign employed virtual models, synthetic faces, and a sterile cyberpunk aesthetic. Its emotionally detached and symbolic visual style stirred significant debate on social media. Users frequently commented on the ad's uniqueness and dystopian aesthetic, although many admitted they could not fully understand it. This paradox between confusion and attraction highlights how abstraction can reinforce brand mystique while limiting informational clarity (TikTok Ads, 2023).

Diesel "Go With the Flaw" campaign showcases a series of bizarre, imperfect, and exaggerated visuals—such as models with recognisable "flaws" walking confidently. The campaign rejects conventional beauty standards and promotes an anti-perfectionist message. On platforms like Instagram and YouTube, this campaign gained viral attention and was praised for its bold creative direction. It effectively built emotional resonance among Gen Z audiences by celebrating individuality and authenticity (Ads of the World, 2017).

Gentle Monster surreal short films, often released in collaboration with artists, feature disconnected scenes and fragmented narratives that prioritise aesthetics over explanation. Although product placement is minimal, viewers are drawn into a symbolic world of identity, futurism, and visual experimentation. This approach amplifies brand prestige and distinguishes Gentle Monster as an "artistic" rather than "commercial" entity (Li, 2023).

Acne Studios employs poetic visual storytelling, often blending surreal imagery with muted color palettes to evoke emotional atmospheres rather than showcasing specific products. Inspired by art movements and cultural symbolism, the brand's campaigns invite viewers into a conceptual space of introspection and aesthetic appreciation. This artistic orientation reinforces Acne Studios' image as a culturally sophisticated label distinct from conventional fashion marketing (Andersson, 2022).

4.2. Focus Group Summary

Two focus groups, comprising 13 participants aged 20-21, provided rich insight into how abstract advertising is perceived. Participants were directed to look at the chosen brand's ads prior to attending the focus group.

Most participants reported that abstract ads are "visually attractive," "aesthetic," and "intriguing," but also noted that such content is often "hard to understand" or "too conceptual." Some said they "enjoyed the vibe" but "couldn't tell what the product was." Notably, several participants admitted that they remembered the brand image but not the actual item being sold.

Participants associated abstract advertising with high-end or "artsy" brands and generally perceived them as "cool" or "elitist." However, they also emphasised that they would only consider purchase if product information was later clarified, either through website exploration or follow-up content. This indicates that abstract advertising may be effective for brand awareness and emotional appeal but requires supplementary communication for sales conversion.

4.3. Focus Group Insights

The theme names and their description and summary of findings are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The theme names and their description and summary of findings

Code	Theme Name	Description	Summary of Findings	Quotes
T1	Perception and Definition of Abstract Ads	How participants understand and describe abstract advertising, including their first impressions, keywords, and visual associations.	Viewers recognize abstract ads through emotional tone and ambiguity rather than product clarity.s	"I don't understand it, but I remember it."
T2	Impact on Brand Image	How abstract ads influence participants' perception of the brand, including emotional connections or increased interest.	Abstract ads foster stronger connections with the brand and encourage prolonged reflection.	"Have you ever liked an abstract ad so much that you became more interested in the brand?"
T3	Viewing Platforms and User Behavior	Where participants encounter abstract ads (YouTube, TikTok, etc.), their habits, and how they engage (comments, screenshots, sharing).	Platform norms influence interaction: TikTok encourages remix and humor; Instagram favors visual cohesion. YouTube encourages longer interactions.	"I watch them on YouTube. Some brands like LOEWE or Acne have whole playlists."
T4	Product & Brand Suitability	Discussions on what types of products or brands are appropriate (or not) for abstract advertising.	Product and brand type determine how abstraction is received; it must align with product symbolism.	"Depends on the brand. Some need to explain. Others should stay vague."
T5	Future Trends of Abstract Advertising	How participants imagine the evolution of abstract ads in the future (AI, immersion, gamification, etc.).	Younger audiences believe the future of abstract advertising in visual-driven media culture will be more nuanced.	"The abstraction of the future will be lighter, more refined. Not heavy-handed."
T6	Standards and Preferences for 'Good Ads'	What participants think makes an ad 'good', including personal preferences for emotional resonance, aesthetics, narrative, etc.	Effective abstract ads are those perceived as intentional, aesthetic, and emotionally resonant.	"The less you explain, the more people want to figure it out."

4.4. Social Media Content Analysis

The social media content analysis focused on user interaction and sentiment around selected abstract advertisements on TikTok, Instagram, and Youtube. The following observations were collected via method of netnography:

- **Engagement Metrics:** Compared to traditional commercials, abstract ads generated 30–50% more likes, shares, and saves on average. Particularly on TikTok, "aesthetic confusion" seemed to increase replay rates.
- **Sentiment Analysis:** User comments often included phrases like "don't know what this means but I love it," "this feels like art," and "oddly satisfying." However, many also questioned what the ad was trying to say or sell.
- **Interpretation Patterns:** Users frequently engaged in collective decoding, sharing interpretations and meme-style responses. Abstract advertising thus often becomes a social discussion topic, which boosts organic exposure and brand memorability.

5. Discussion

5.1. Revisiting Initial Assumptions

This study initially assumed that abstract advertising, while often ambiguous, could foster emotional engagement and enhance brand identity - especially among younger consumers. The data

gathered through focus group interviews largely supports this assumption. Participants frequently described abstract advertisements as “aesthetic,” “striking,” and emotionally compelling. Many emphasized the appeal of mood and ambiguity, particularly when these were integrated with a distinct brand aesthetic. For instance, Acne Studios’ artistic visuals were seen as distant but sophisticated, while Gentle Monster’s dreamlike settings encouraged personal interpretation.

These responses demonstrate that younger audiences are drawn to symbolic and emotional layers in advertising when they feel culturally or personally aligned. However, participants also noted that such abstraction might fall short when used for utilitarian products or when the brand message becomes too obscure. This distinction highlights the importance of brand-product fit and the context in which abstraction is employed.

5.2. Platform-Specific Dynamics

Another key theme that emerged was how social media platforms significantly shape how abstract advertisements are received and interacted with. Participants described TikTok as a platform where advertising is often indistinguishable from user-generated content. Ads blend seamlessly into the content feed, inviting remixing, parody, and collaborative interpretation. Comments were said to “add meaning” to the ad, with many users creatively reconstructing what the ad might mean through humor and memes.

On YouTube, participants engaged with abstract ads more intentionally, often treating them as cinematic experiences. They mentioned rewatching visually poetic campaigns from brands like Gucci and Diesel and interpreting them as art rather than commercial content. In contrast, Instagram was linked with aesthetic curation—participants valued the visual tone and brand consistency more than any clear messaging or story.

These observations reveal that abstract advertising is not consumed in isolation but within media environments that encourage varying forms of interpretation and interaction. Platform-specific cultures and technical features contribute to the ways audiences derive meaning from visually abstract content.

5.3. Connecting to Theoretical Frameworks

Several theoretical models introduced in Chapter 2 find strong resonance in the research findings.

The Self-Expansion Theory is reflected in participants’ tendency to identify with the aesthetics of certain abstract advertisements. For example, one respondent noted that they shared an Acne Studios campaign because “it looked like something I’d make.” Such comments suggest that abstract advertising can become a medium through which individuals express or project their own identities. The ad is not merely content; it becomes a symbolic mirror of the viewer’s inner world.

Symbolic Consumption Theory is evident in how meaning was collaboratively constructed in digital spaces. The TikTok comment sections were described not just as reactions, but as reinterpretations. One participant joked that Diesel’s surreal ad looked like “a warning from the AI gods,” which others endorsed and extended. These interactions show that the meaning of abstract advertising is fluid, co-created, and often culturally contextualized by its viewers.

Consumer Confusion Theory is useful in explaining the mixed reception of abstraction. Participants praised abstraction when it was poetic, intentional, and resonant with brand values. But they were also quick to reject content that felt overly curated or artificially vague. This tension underscores a key dynamic in contemporary consumer culture: people seek symbolic richness but also demand authenticity and relevance. Successful abstract advertising seems to walk a fine line between creative freedom and communicative clarity.

5.4. Summary of Key Insights

The findings of this study reveal that abstract advertising can be highly effective in cultivating emotional and symbolic resonance, particularly with visually literate and identity-conscious

audiences like Gen Z. These consumers appreciate ambiguity and metaphor, especially when embedded within visually compelling and culturally relevant content.

However, the effectiveness of such strategies depends heavily on the context - both in terms of product type and media platform. While platforms like TikTok foster playful and participatory meaning-making, others like YouTube and Instagram offer space for aesthetic appreciation or visual branding. Furthermore, the balance between abstraction and clarity is critical. If pushed too far, abstraction risks alienating the audience or diluting the brand message.

Ultimately, the success of abstract advertising lies in its ability to invite engagement, evoke emotion, and support identity expression—without losing coherence or cultural authenticity.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1. Conclusion

This study set out to explore the function and reception of abstract advertising in contemporary digital environments, particularly among Gen Z consumers. Through a combination of literature review, visual case analysis, focus group interviews, and social media content analysis, the research has shown that abstraction in advertising - though often ambiguous - can powerfully engage audiences when aligned with emotion, aesthetics, and identity.

Focus group discussions revealed that many participants resonated more with advertising that offered visual complexity, interpretive openness, and mood-driven narratives. Brands such as Acne Studios, Gentle Monster, and Diesel successfully created immersive advertising experiences by avoiding overt product messaging and instead fostering emotional and symbolic meaning. However, respondents also pointed out that excessive abstraction - especially for utilitarian products - could alienate viewers or obscure core messages, for example products like toothpaste.

Platform differences also emerged as significant: TikTok encouraged remix and humor-driven interaction, YouTube supported aesthetic appreciation and longer-form engagement, while Instagram emphasized visual coherence and shareability.

In conclusion, abstract advertising has proven to be a powerful tool for storytelling and identity alignment, particularly when strategically employed on platforms where symbolic and visual communication thrive. However, its success depends on a careful balance between mystery and message clarity, and its compatibility with product category, brand personality, and audience expectation. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of symbolic consumer-brand relationships in postmodern advertising contexts.

6.2. Recommendations

Implications for Brands: Based on the qualitative evidence gathered, the following recommendations are proposed to guide brands in their use of abstraction as a communication strategy and looking to implement abstract advertising strategies should recognize that visual ambiguity is not inherently effective. Instead, abstraction should serve a purpose - whether to build emotional resonance, express brand philosophy, or invite audience participation. For younger audiences, particularly Gen Z, abstraction works best when it aligns with symbolic expression, aesthetic identity, and community-driven meaning-making.

6.3. Strategic Recommendations Based on Focus Group Findings:

Leverage platform dynamics

Adapt the tone and narrative of abstract ads to the unique cultures of platforms. Use TikTok for experimental and remixable content, YouTube for cinematic storytelling, and Instagram for highly stylized visual pieces.

Embed emotional cues over factual content

Participants responded most strongly to ads that “felt right” rather than “made sense.” Emotional authenticity should take precedence over explanatory clarity.

Design for interpretation, not confusion

Successful abstract ads gave viewers interpretive freedom without feeling random or meaningless. Maintain a symbolic anchor that connects back to brand values or desired sentiment.

Match abstraction with product type

High-emotion or aesthetic-based products (e.g., fashion, perfume, lifestyle tech) are more compatible with abstraction than utilitarian goods (e.g., toothpaste, cleaning supplies).

Encourage audience co-creation

Abstract advertising should act as a cultural catalyst. Encourage viewers to remix, comment, and reinterpret content to boost engagement and long-term memorability.

6.4. Scope for Further Research

This study focused on a small group of Gen Z participants based in China, analyzing selected fashion and lifestyle brands. Future research could expand to include:

Cross-regional analysis: Investigate how abstract advertising is perceived in different cultural contexts (e.g., Europe, North America, Southeast Asia).

Broader consumer groups: Include Millennials or older generations to compare generational interpretations of abstraction.

Different industry sectors: Test how abstraction performs in industries beyond fashion - such as tech, automotive, or food and beverage.

Quantitative evaluation: Measure the actual impact of abstract ads on consumer behavior (e.g., click-through rates, brand recall, purchase intent) using surveys or experiments.

Such extensions would allow for a more generalizable framework regarding the aesthetic and strategic value of abstraction in marketing communications.

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