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# AMERICAN MOVIE POSTERS: A MULTIMODAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

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**SUMMARY OF DOCTORAL THESIS**

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Reviewer 3: ……

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**The thesis can be accessed at:**

- The National Library of Vietnam
- The Information and Library Center, Vietnam National University, Hanoi.

# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. Rationale for the study

Over the past three decades, multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) has evolved into a robust field of inquiry, generating a substantial body of research that has significantly influenced the study of media and communication. This thesis aligns with that trend while addressing a relatively underexplored multimodal advertising genre: movie posters. Although movie posters share similar promotional purposes with other advertising genres, they possess distinctive semiotic and communicative characteristics that worth further investigation. However, scholarly attention to movie posters remains limited, both internationally and within Vietnam. Therefore, this study investigates top-grossing American movie posters of three popular genres—horror, action, and romantic comedy—to provide insights into how visual images and language are successfully employed in these posters to promote the movies. The findings are expected to contribute to both academic understanding of multimodal promotional discourse and practical applications in media communication and poster design.

## 1.2. Research aim, objectives and questions

The overall aim of the study is to identify the common patterns of using visual images and language to achieve the promotional purposes or the semiotic strategies in the posters.

The overarching question that guides the study is:

**How do top-grossing American movie posters utilize verbal and visual resources to promote the movies?**

In this study, the posters are examined through three primary dimensions: (1) the macro-structure, (2) the meaning-making, and (3)

the interaction between verbal and visual components, which are equivalent to the following specific objectives:

i. To identify the generic macro-structure of movie posters, outlining the key components and analyzing their communicative purposes and realizations.

ii. To identify the selling points conveyed in the posters and investigate how they are presented through linguistic and visual components.

iii. To analyze the interaction between verbal and visual components and its contribution to the construction of the movie poster for promotional purposes.

This study aims to answer the following research questions (RQ):

RQ1**:** What are the components characterizing the generic structure of these movie posters and how do these components fulfill the promotional purposes?

RQ2: How are these components constructed through metafunctional meanings to foreground the selling points of the movies?

RQ3: How do these components interact to promote the movies?

**1.3. Scope of the study**

This study examines movie posters from a linguistic perspective, drawing specifically on Systemic functional linguistics (SFL) and social semiotics. With SFL, the analysis focuses on the "grammar" of the posters—that is, their arrangement, composition, and structural organization. Social semiotics is employed to identify the promotional strategies limited to the selection and interplay of visual and linguistic resources. In terms of semiosis, the study is limited to two modes—visual images and language—and the term intersemiosis is used to denote the interrelations between these modes. Finally, the dataset comprises top-grossing American movie posters that achieved high

box-office revenues across multiple countries; therefore, cultural, cross-cultural, and broader social dimensions fall outside the primary scope of this research.

### 1.4. Significance of the study

This study aims to contribute to the field of MDA both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, it proposes an adapted analytical model that integrates elements from Bateman's (2008) Genre and multimodality (GeM), Kress and van Leeuwen's (2021) Visual grammar (VG3), and Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) SFL. By applying this model to a large dataset, the study not only tests the applicability and effectiveness of each individual framework but also demonstrates the potential of combining them for a more holistic and nuanced analysis of multimodal artefacts. Practically, the research provides poster designers and film marketers with concrete insights into the effective deployment of multimodal resources. It also contributes to the enhancement of multimodal literacy among moviegoers by equipping them with analytical tools to 'read' the visual and linguistic elements of movie posters more critically and effectively. Furthermore, the study holds pedagogical value within media and communication studies, serving as a concrete illustration of how to analyze and evaluate a specific type of media product, while also informing educators and students about contemporary trends in movie poster design.

### 1.5. Structure of the thesis

This thesis is structured into seven chapters: Introduction, Literature review, Methodology, The macro-structure of the posters, The selling points highlighted in the posters, The interaction between verbal and visual components of the posters, and Conclusion.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter 2 provides a literature review on the field of MDA to set the theoretical foundation and choose the suitable models in an attempt to form an adapted framework for the present study. It also examines movie posters as a form of promotional discourse by presenting relevant theoretical concepts and reviewing previous studies to identify existing research gaps and possibilities to address them.

### 2.1. Multimodal discourse analysis: theoretical basis

MDA is an emerging paradigm in the academic world that "attends to the full repertoire of resources that people use to communicate and represent phenomena and experiences including speech, sound, gesture, gaze, body posture and movement, writing, image and so on" (Jewitt, 2014, p. 127). MDA has developed in three major approaches, including conversation analysis, SFL and social semiotics and some other additional approaches like multimodal metaphor, multimodal corpus analysis and multimodal reception. This study mainly adopts the social semiotic approach to identify the semiotic strategies to promote the movie while the primary theory underpinning the present study is SFL and multimodal corpus analysis provides valuable insights into how large collections of multimodal texts can be systematically examined using SFL and social semiotic approaches.

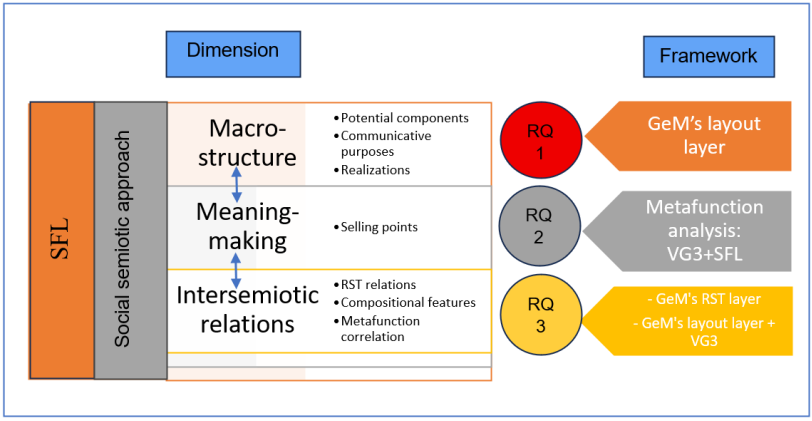
### 2.2. Towards a framework to analyze movie posters

This section critically reviews the theoretical frameworks relevant to the present study, outlining the rationale for their selection and the ways in which they are integrated to address the research objectives. While SFL, visualized as the Integrative multi-semiotic model (Lim, 2004), serves primarily as the theoretical foundation for integrating verbal and visual modes and for determining the dimensions of

analysis, the analytical framework adopted in this study is a synthesis of GeM, VG3, and SFL (Figure 2.3).

Figure 2.3

*The adapted framework in the present study*




First, GeM's layout layer is used to investigate the macro-structure with their components and their spatial, structural, and typographic properties. Second, to explore meaning-making, a metafunctional analysis is conducted with VG3 for visual images and SFL for linguistic components. Lastly, the interaction between the verbal and visual components are examined through three interrelated aspects: rhetorical structure, compositional features and correlation in metafunctional analysis between the two modes. Together, these three sub-dimensions provide a nuanced account of the intermodal interplay that contributes to the posters' overall communicative effect.

**2.3. Movie posters as promotional discourse**

As movie posters share promotional functions with advertisements, they can be regarded as a form of advertising and thus exhibit the characteristic features of this type of discourse. Accordingly, advertising-related concepts—such as selling points or

advertising structure—can be flexibly applied in the analysis of movie posters.

The review of previous studies on movie posters has indicated three major gaps that need to be met. First, these studies mainly served as exploratory research into the application of multimodality in analyzing movie posters with a relatively small number of samples. Second, with the popular employment of Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) Visual grammar, the analysis of linguistic elements are unsystematic and inadequate, which in turns leads to the lack of investigation of the relations between verbal and visual elements and the overall structure of movie posters. Finally, despite their important role in the posters' meaning-making, the issue of genre has not been put into consideration in previous studies. The review of previous studies on posters in general and advertisements has raised the possibility of filling in these research gaps.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines and expands on the methodology that guides the research, drawing on the discussion in the literature review. The study is largely qualitative with constructivism worldview, using MDA as the main research method. The chapter also details the methods and procedure of both collecting and analyzing data processes.

### 3.1. Data and data colletion

#### 3.1.1. Data description

The data included the official posters of 60 top-grossing American movies of 3 genres including romantic comedy, horror and action in the period between 2000 and 2022 (20 movies for each type). These American movies were released worldwide and received a great success in both domestic and international box office. The box office

revenue may indicate the success of the promotional campaign in general, and to a certain extent, the success of the posters as one of the promotional materials. Besides, the choice of one specific country (i.e. America) was to assure that the chosen posters share a great deal of similarities in terms of context, including target audience, purpose, nature of information. America was chosen due to the leading role of Hollywood in the world of cinema. The three genres of romantic comedy, horror and action were purposely chosen for their popularity and their least cross-over potential. Lastly, years of release from 2000 to 2022 was to avoid the influence of the development of technology on the design of the posters.

### 3.1.2. Data collection procedure

The procedure of data collection has two main stages. The first stage involved selecting the 20 top-grossing American movies in each of the three genres. The information of the movies was crosschecked in different websites and those with conflicting idea or combination of different genres were excluded from the dataset. After 60 movies were chosen, in the second stage, their official theatrical release posters were taken from the website en.wikipedia.org. The use of movie posters in this study does not constitute copyright infringement.

## 3.2. Data analysis

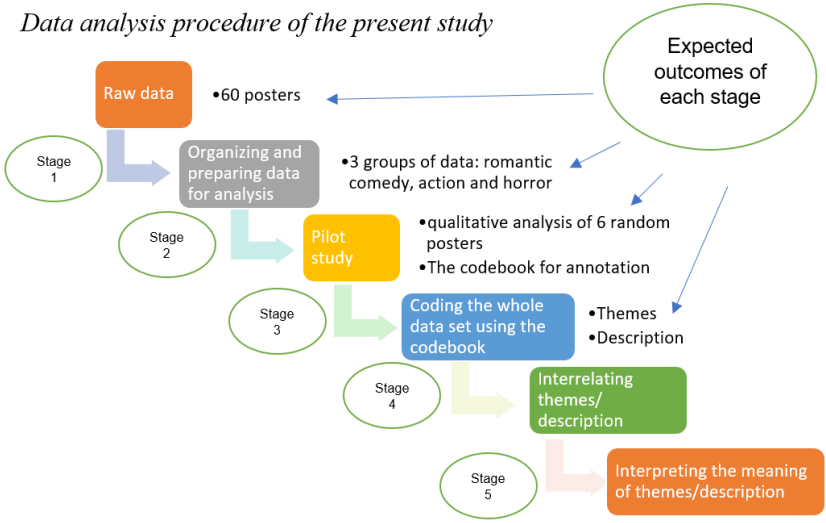
### 3.2.1. Data analysis procedure

The study followed the procedure of data analysis in qualitative research suggested in Creswell (2014) with five stages as illustrated in Figure 3.2. In stage 1, after the sample posters had been collected, they were categorized into three groups: romantic comedy, horror and action. From these, six posters (two from each genre) were randomly selected for a pilot study in stage 2 to develop a codebook for

annotation. This codebook was informed both by the adapted theoretical framework outlined in the literature review and by engagement with the real data for practical purposes. Following the pilot study, the refined codebook was applied to the entire dataset in stage 3 to identify recurring patterns. The purpose of this coding stage was to generate description and themes from analysis. Stage 4 provided the detailed discussion of these themes and examined the interconnection among them. Finally, the last stage made an interpretation in qualitative research of the findings or results with reference to the context and the literature.

Figure 3.2

*Data analysis procedure of the present study*

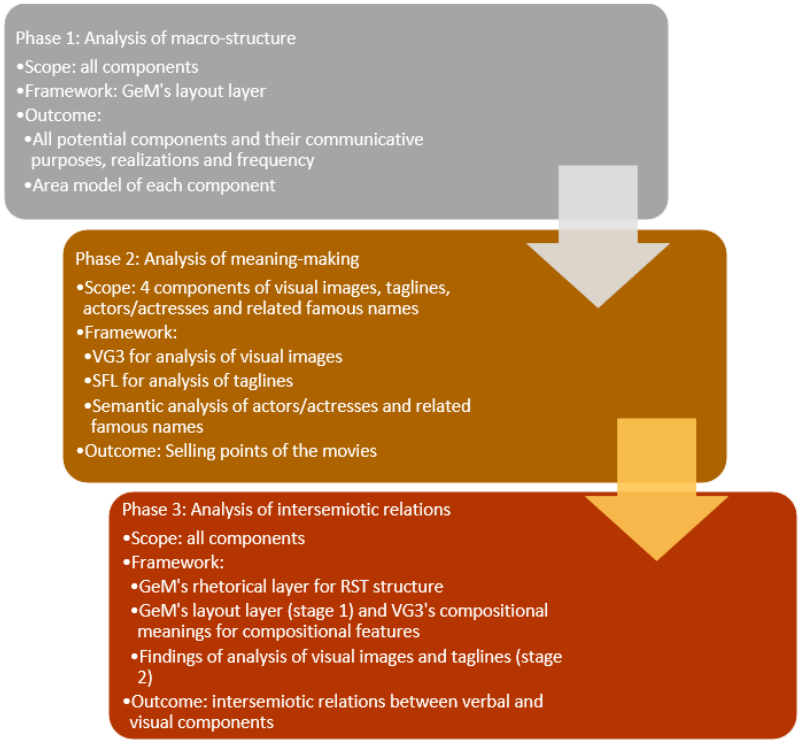



### 3.2.2. The analytical framework and the codebook

The application of the analytical framework unfolded across three distinct phases, each corresponding to one of the three analytical dimensions outlined in the research questions (Figure 3.3).

Figure 3.3

*The phase of analysis using the codebook*




The first phase aimed to analyze the generic structure of the posters by drawing on the layout layer of the GeM model. This phase involved examining all elements present on the posters to identify the key components, along with their communicative purposes, frequencies, and realizations. The second phase concentrated on four components with persuasive functions: visual images, taglines, actors/actresses, and related famous names. With regard to actors/actresses and related famous names, their meanings are largely explicit; therefore, semantic analysis was sufficient to identify the

selling points conveyed through these components. By contrast, metafunctional analysis was applied exclusively to visual images and taglines to provide an in-depth examination of the movie's promotional content. Specifically, VG3 was employed to interpret the visual images, while SFL was used to analyze the taglines. The final phase addressed the interaction among all poster components through three interrelated aspects. First, the rhetorical structure of the poster was constructed using the rhetorical layer of the GeM model. Second, the compositional features were examined by integrating the layout analysis from GeM with compositional meanings derived from VG3. Third, the study explored the correlation in metafunctional analysis between the two modes, thereby revealing how the two semiotic systems align or diverge in constructing meanings. A relevant codebook with predetermined codes was developed for each of these phases.

### 3.3. Validity and reliability

With qualitative research design, subjectivity is unavoidable as a discourse interpreter; however, several solutions were taken to minimize the subjectivity and increase the validity and reliability of the research.

Four main strategies were employed to ensure the validity of the study. First, triangulation was conducted by cross-checking the analytical results across different categories, on the premise that all segments ultimately belong to the same poster and should therefore exhibit internal consistency. Second, intertextuality was carried out by consulting related promotional materials—such as film synopses and trailers—which offered additional information for interpreting the posters. Third, the study employed rich and thick description to present the findings. Although the analysis followed the codebook with predetermined categories, the interpretation drew not only on technical

coding decisions but also on the important notes recorded throughout the analytical process. Finally, while direct consultation with Hollywood studios was not feasible, insights were supplemented through published articles and online guidelines on graphic design and, more specifically, movie poster design, thereby incorporating insider perspectives and deepening understanding of the field.

Qualitative reliability was increased by the clarification of analytical procedure and terms and intercoder agreement. Other researchers were trained with the codebook and randomly checked the analysis in some parts to review the project.

## CHAPTER 4: THE MACRO-STRUCTURE OF THE POSTERS

To address Research question 1, this chapter analyzes the generic structure of the posters with the examination of both verbal and visual components using Bateman's (2008) layout layer. The findings are presented in two parts. The first part indicates the similarities in their macro-structure to find the conventions in designing these posters while the second part identifies any possible differences among the poster structure of these three movie genres. The discussion reveals how these semiotic choices help to promote the movies and identifies the promotional strategies in constructing the macro-structure.

### 4.1. The generic structure of the posters

The macro analysis identified the generic structure of movie posters with eight potential components: title, visual image, billing block, access, release date, tagline, actors/actresses, and related famous names. Among these, the first three components—title, visual image, and billing block—are compulsory and consistently present across all posters. The next three—access, release date, and tagline—are conventional, while the final two—actors/actresses and related

famous names—are optional and appear in approximately half of the analyzed posters.

A closer examination of each component reveals their fixed set of communicative purposes, which collectively constitute six main promotional functions typical of movie posters: (1) Attracting attention, (2) Informing, (3) Persuading, (4) Branding, (5) Crediting, and (6) Instructing. The frequency and primary promotional functions of each component are summarized in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2

*The main promotional functions and frequency of each component*

| No | Component | Frequency | Main functions |
|---|---|---|---|
| **1** | Title | Obligatory | Informing, branding |
| **2** | Visual image | Obligatory | Attracting attention, informing, persuading |
| **3** | Billing block | Obligatory | Informing, crediting |
| **4** | Access | Conventional | Informing, instructing |
| **5** | Release date | Conventional | Informing, instructing |
| **6** | Tagline | Conventional | Informing, persuading |
| **7** | Actors/actresses | Optional | Informing, persuading, branding |
| **8** | Related famous names | Optional | Informing, persuading, branding |

As can be seen from Table 4.2, movie posters demonstrate some shared features with other advertising genres in fulfilling the promotional purposes. First, they perform the dual functions of informing and persuading, which align with other advertising genres. In addition, movie posters also conform to the traditional AIDA model of advertisements with the realization of all four phases of Attention, Interest, Desire, and Action. Second, these two primary functions are combined with other functions of branding, crediting or avoiding legal

conflict. This further illustrates the blending of multiple communicative purposes, a rising trend in non-traditional promotional discourse (Bhatia, 2005). More importantly, the presence of the informative function across all components reflects a common technique in movie poster design: implicit positive evaluation, whereby advertising appeal is achieved through the strategic highlighting of facts rather than through overtly evaluative or affective language. Finally, the primary persuasive force, the key function of a movie poster that influences viewers' decisions to watch the movie, is conveyed through four key components: actors/actresses, related famous names, visual images, and taglines.

Although movie posters share promotional purposes with other advertising genres, these purposes are realized through distinctive strategies, leading to the unique generic structure of movie posters. Most notably, movie posters rely more heavily on visual imagery, which assumes a dual role equivalent to both the Lead and Display functions outlined in Cheong's (2004) generic structure potential for advertisements. The visual image is not only designed to capture attention but also to visually represent the movie and its key selling points. Furthermore, the functions of the linguistic components in movie posters differ significantly from those in traditional advertisements. In Cheong's (2004) model, the Announcement encapsulates the core message of the ad. In contrast, movie posters lack a single verbal component that performs this central role. Instead, linguistic elements typically act as Enhancers, providing further information to support the key message.

The analysis also reveals that the promotional purposes of these components are fulfilled through both verbal and visual resources. Visual elements include images, logos and signs of rating block, while verbal elements are generally expressed through proper nouns,

phrases, and elliptical clauses. The analysis reveals three dominant strategies in designing linguistic components: (1) being economical, (2) following conventions and (3) using graded salience within individual components. The first strategy ensures brevity, with components often appearing in their most concise form. The second and third strategies serve to enhance clarity: by following familiar conventions and foregrounding the most critical information, these components allow for efficient and immediate comprehension of the poster's core message. Collectively, these strategies reflect a minimalist approach well-suited to the spatial and temporal constraints of movie posters. This approach also prioritizes visual impact while ensuring that verbal components remain clear, purposeful, and easily comprehensible.

**4.2. The differences in macro-structure of the three movie genres**

Although movie posters from the three genres share similar components, their frequency and realizations vary, particularly in the three elements of actors/actresses, taglines, and related famous names. Overall, while action movie posters heavily rely on visual images to express the message with limited use of linguistic items, posters of the other two genres still make use of language to clarify the major selling points of the movies. This different degrees of reliance on linguistic elements, in turn, shows different selling points of the three genres. While both romantic comedy and horror posters emphasize the storyline, the former makes use of star power to increase relatability and the latter deemphasize this to create the fear of the unknown and immerse audiences in an entirely new realm of horror and suspense. Meanwhile, all these factors are not highlighted in action movies, which focus on physical stunts and heroes. This linguistic brevity aligns with the straightforward nature of action movie plots, which generally require little additional explanation through text and shifts

the emphasis onto the visual image, allowing striking imagery to take center stage in capturing the audience's attention.

### 4.3. Chapter summary

This chapter outlines the generic structure of movie posters through a detailed analysis of both verbal and visual components. The findings indicate that although movie posters share typical promotional functions of advertising genres, they employ distinctive strategies to achieve these purposes. The analysis further revealed genre-specific semiotic strategies, particularly in the use of actors/actresses, taglines, and related famous names, highlighting differing emphases across the three movie genres.

## CHAPTER 5: THE SELLING POINTS HIGHLIGHTED IN THE POSTERS

As established in Chapter 4, the persuasive force of movie posters is concentrated in four key components: actors/actresses, related famous names, visual images, and taglines. Building on this insight, this chapter provides a detailed analysis of these components to investigate how they are strategically designed to communicate the movies' selling points – those distinctive features strategically emphasized to persuade potential viewers to watch the movies.

### 5.1. Credibility as key selling points highlighted in actors/actresses and related famous names

The inclusion of renowned actors/actresses and related famous names—such as directors, producers, or prior successful works—serves to establish the movie's credibility through star power. This strategy implicitly signals quality and prestige, thereby enhancing the movie's appeal. However, the deployment of these components differs notably across genres. In romantic comedy posters, they are

prominently featured to foster relatability and attract audiences through recognizable figures. The casting of well-known actors and actresses serves not only to evoke familiarity but also to generate anticipation around their on-screen chemistry, especially when big names are paired together for the first time. In contrast, horror posters tend to minimize the presence of well-known actors/actresses, instead emphasizing narrative or thematic elements to evoke suspense and fear. Overemphasis on celebrity could disrupt viewers' immersion in the unsettling world that horror movies aim to construct, potentially diminishing the intended emotional effect. Action posters, on the other hand, rely more heavily on visual imagery to convey dynamic content, often downplaying linguistic components. As a result, actors/actresses are often omitted, and other related famous names are typically conveyed visually through company logos or franchise symbols. Marvel posters are exceptions in action group, which use actors/actresses to prioritize their roles of iconic superheroes and thus establish credentials for the movie.

### 5.2. Content-related selling points in visual images and taglines

#### 5.2.1. Common strategies in the design of visual images and taglines

The latter two components – visual images and taglines – present selling points related to the movie content. The metafunctional analysis of these components reveals that three core aspects are consistently foregrounded: character depiction, world-building, and genre. Additionally, some posters highlight theme and CGI technology as supplementary selling points.

The findings also reveal several consistent strategies in how visual images and taglines are designed to present these aspects. First, as each

aspect is realized through a distinct set of semiotic resources, the design of these components adheres to recognizable visual and linguistic conventions and draws on the grammar of visual design to convey meaning. The second strategy is minimal revelation of movie content as posters typically allude to genre, key characters, and world-building, without disclosing substantial plot information. This strategy prioritizes intrigue over information, which aligns with psychological principles and marketing trends that emphasize emotional engagement and curiosity as more effective drivers of audience interest than mere plot disclosure. Finally, genre is consistently foregrounded through symbolic imagery, color schemes and evaluative language in taglines. As genre is a key classification tool for audiences, its explicit representation enables viewers to quickly determine whether a movie aligns with their viewing preferences.

### 5.2.2. Different semiotic strategies of the three genres

Each genre demonstrates distinct semiotic strategies shaped by its unique content and target audience, resulting in varying emphases in the promotional strategies used in movie posters.

In romantic comedies, the primary strategies include character chemistry, relatability, and narrative predictability. Character chemistry is conveyed by the posters' focus on a limited number of participants—typically the romantic leads—and their interactions. Relatability is achieved through the use of familiar character archetypes and their realistic, down-to-earth portrayals. Predictability, which is positively received in this genre, is reflected in the relatively high frequency of plot-revealing taglines.

Action movie posters emphasize intensity, heroism, and escapism. The posters highlight movement, urgency, and tension over the plot content through the depiction of ensemble casts in dynamic, high-

stakes scenes and minimal or absent taglines. Heroism is visually reinforced through hierarchical layout: heroes occupy central, elevated, and salient positions, while antagonists are marginalized or omitted entirely. Finally, escapism is often expressed through the construction of a supreme and far away world of powerful heroes and formidable villains, giving viewers an opportunity to leave behind ordinary life and enter a thrilling alternative universe where justice prevails and extraordinary feats are possible. This world-building is often supported by high-quality CGI effects, which function as an additional appeal, elevating the spectacle of the cinematic experience.

Horror movie posters primarily seek to evoke fear, which is carefully constructed through three strategies: provocation, viewer involvement, and heightened realism. Fear is provoked through symbolic imagery and mystery rather than explicit brutality. Moreover, the psychological effect of horror is intensified through viewer involvement – either directly confronting the evils or sharing the emotions with the victims – and heightened realism of the scene through both verbal description and high validity visual imagery.

### 5.3. Chapter summary

The examination of four components with persuasive functions – actors/actresses, related famous names, visual images and taglines – has indicated the common selling points highlighted in movie posters and pointed to the visual grammar in movie poster design. Despite the shared semiotic resources to attract and persuade audiences, the semiotic strategies used in different genres are tailored to align with genre-specific conventions, viewing expectations and emotional appeals. This observation supports the earlier finding that movie genres are consistently made explicit to viewers, thereby accounting for the differences in semiotic strategies across the three genres.

# CHAPTER 6: THE INTERACTION BETWEEN VERBAL AND VISUAL COMPONENTS OF THE POSTERS

This chapter discusses the interaction between verbal and visual components in the posters with the examination of three interrelated aspects: rhetorical structure, metafunctional correlations, and compositional features. Based on the insights gained from these three aspects, this section synthesizes the findings to provide a comprehensive conclusion on the nature of verbal–visual interaction in movie posters, thereby addressing Research question 3.

## 6.1. Relations between verbal and visual components

The findings indicate that movie posters represent a distinctive type of image-centric discourse, characterized by a unique way of combining verbal and visual components. This image-centricity is primarily realized through compositional features. Visual images occupy a dominant role due to their "perceptual dominance or salience"—they are typically the viewer's first point of entry into the poster's meaning—and their "semantic centrality", meaning they communicate the primary content-based appeals, which are central to the movie's promotional strategy (Stöckl et al., 2019, p. 7).

However, unlike other forms of image-centric discourse—where the popular intersemiotic relations are elaboration—movie posters frequently exhibit independent relations between verbal and visual components. The rhetorical analysis shows that, with the exception of some elaborative taglines, the majority of poster components are connected through joint relations. This indicates that visual and verbal elements function as rhetorically equal nuclei, each presenting different aspects of the movies. The metafunctional analysis further supports this equal relation, as minimal alignment is observed between the transitivity structures of the two modes, confirming their relative independence in meaning-making.

### 6.2. Intersemiotic relations and the creation of coherence and cohesion in movie posters

Given the independence and self-containment of the components, cohesion, or surface-level ties among components, is notably minimal in movie posters. Therefore, coherence—or the semantic unity of the text—is primarily achieved through functional integration. Rhetorical relations organize both visual and verbal components into a unified rhetorical structure that supports the overall communicative purpose of the poster. At the same time, transitivity roles among fragmented linguistic components help reconstruct elliptical or nominal structures into coherent clauses, thus supporting metafunctional cohesion within the verbal mode.

In the absence of strong cohesive ties, compositional features—particularly layout and salience—play a critical role in simulating surface-level connectedness. Layout positioning not only groups elements by proximity but also decides the importance of such elements. More important components (typically the Ideal) are positioned at the top, while less critical information (often the Real) is placed toward the bottom. This spatial arrangement corresponds to the Theme–Rheme structure in SFL, guiding the viewer's interpretation. Meanwhile, salience effectively signals relationships and constructs "a reading path" or the order of information in movie posters. In this way, visual prominence simulates a multimodal cohesive device, compensating for the limited use of explicit linguistic cohesion. Four primary strategies for generating salience can thus be understood as surface-level ties to create connectedness in the poster's multimodal composition.

### 6.3. Chapter summary

This chapter reveals a distinctive way of connecting verbal and visual components in movie posters, setting them apart from other

multimodal advertising genres or posters. This unique intersemiotic relationship accounts for the special ways in which movie posters achieve textual unity. Rather than relying primarily on surface cohesive ties, coherence in these posters emerges from functional and compositional features, offering a new perspective for examining the texture of multimodal discourse.

# CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

This chapter provides an overview of the study and summarises the key findings by answering the three stated research questions. It also discusses the implications, limitations, and makes some suggestions for future research.

## 7.1. Summary of the findings

This study has examined 60 top-grossing American movie posters of three genres – horror, action and romantic comedy – to identify the common patterns of using visual images and language to achieve the promotional purposes or the semiotic strategies in these posters. The analysis of the three analytical dimensions reveals that the posters consistently conform to genre-specific conventions while also adhering to cross-genre design patterns.

At a cross-genre level, posters display an eight-component structure that foregrounds their promotional function while distinguishing them from other advertising genres. Three key characteristics define their uniqueness: the prioritization of credibility through star power and imagery, the condensed and fragmented nature of linguistic components, and a strong reliance on visual images as both central attractions and primary conveyors of selling points. Notably, despite the diversity of visual imagery employed, consistent conventions can be observed in their semiotic strategies, particularly in the recurring use of distinct semiotic resources to highlight common

selling points, the minimal revelation of movie content, and the strong emphasis on signaling genre. The analysis further highlights the distinctive integration of modes: despite its image-centric nature, movie posters frequently exhibit independent verbal–visual relations with joint rhetorical connections and minimal alignment between transitivity structures, achieving textual unity through functional and compositional integration rather than cohesive ties.

At a genre-specific level, the study demonstrates that persuasive strategies vary systematically across horror, action, and romantic comedy posters, reflecting the conventions, emotional appeals, and audience expectations distinctive to each genre.

### 7.2. Discussion of the findings

The findings have addressed the three research gaps identified in the literature review. Drawing on a relatively large corpus of 60 samples and analyzing both verbal and visual components, this study is the first to reveal both cross-genre and genre-specific design patterns in American movie posters. These conventions point to the existence of a grammar of movie posters, offering a framework for both the design and interpretation of this multimodal discourse. Within this framework, designers can extend their creative choices while ensuring that posters remain both visually compelling and readily comprehensible to audiences. At the same time, the framework provides viewers with an effective tool for interpreting movie posters without being overwhelmed by their aesthetic appeal.

### 7.3. Implications for MDA and media and communication studies

This study makes both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it advances MDA by illustrating the applicability of an integrated framework for analyzing multimodal texts of large scale and complexity and providing new insights into the study of intersemiosis. Practically, it offers a systematic tool for designers to balance

creativity and convention, ensuring that their messages are engaging, accessible, and immediately comprehensible. These findings are beneficial to both the production and reception of movie posters. Understanding the conventions and semiotic strategies used in successful posters not only allows for the creation of more impactful and visually compelling promotional content but also contributes to the development of multimodal literacy among moviegoers by equipping them with analytical tools to interpret movie posters more critically and meaningfully.

### 7.4. Limitations of the study and suggestions for further research

This study has several limitations that suggest directions for future research. Using top-grossing movie posters constrains the dataset as box office success does not necessarily reflect poster effectiveness and often leads to the selection of ongoing series (e.g., the *Conjuring* or *Marvel* universes), which may reduce semiotic diversity and concentrate the findings around some dominant studio styles. Future work could incorporate audience evaluations, enlarge the corpus, or sample only one poster per series to improve representativeness. The focus on globally released, English-language posters also narrows cultural variation; therefore, cross-cultural comparisons or analyses of localized poster adaptations would help reveal how design choices vary across contexts.

The analysis is further limited by its manual and qualitative nature, which introduces subjectivity and restricts sample size. Greater reliability and scalability could be achieved through interactive computational tools for multimodal analysis (O'Halloran, 2011). Finally, the study pays limited attention to discourse production processes. Future research could address this gap by engaging marketing or design professionals through interviews or questionnaires.

## 7.5. Concluding remark

For decades, movie posters have served as powerful tools to attract the attention of moviegoers. With their visually striking and often aesthetically captivating designs, some posters have even transcended their promotional function to become collectible artworks for personal or decorative use. Yet, the question of what constitutes a successful movie poster has remained largely unexplored and elusive.

This study has addressed that question by examining the macro-structure, meaning-making, and intersemiotic relations among the various components of movie posters. The findings demonstrate that, despite their artistic appeal, movie posters are strategically crafted commercial products, designed to persuade and engage potential audiences. They consistently follow genre-specific conventions while also adhering to cross-genre design patterns, striking a deliberate balance between creativity and convention.

This balance ensures that the messages conveyed by movie posters are not only visually engaging but also clear and accessible. The identification of these recurring semiotic strategies helps to demystify the "secret" of successful movie posters and points to the existence of a grammar of movie posters, which provides a framework for both their creation and interpretation. Ultimately, this research benefits both the movie industry and media and communication studies by offering insights that can refine promotional techniques, while also empowering audiences to interact with visual media more critically and meaningfully.

## THESIS-RELATED PUBLICATIONS


Nguyen, T. T. L. (2023). Reading images - The grammar of visual design (third edition). *VNU Journal of Foreign Studies*, 39(4), 153-156. https://doi.org/10.63023/2525-2445/jfs.ulis.5061

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