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## RELEVANCE THEORY IN ENVIRONMENTAL MARKETING: A MULTIMODAL ANALYSIS OF ECO-ADVERTISING

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### Abstract

The 2021 Nestl  (NESCAU) advertisement “Safira”, created by Ogilvy Brazil, is a campaign that contrasts the 20-year journey of self-discovery of a transgender person with the permanent and destructive nature of a single plastic straw in a coral reef. This article presents the interpretative process of this eco-advertising commercial from the perspective of Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1995, 2015, 2025; Carston, 2002; Wilson and Sperber, 2012). This genre falls within a subset of “green advertising” in corporate communication, focusing on environmental sustainability to influence consumer perception. The data used in this study derive from descriptive and qualitative research. Our analysis has the following general objectives: (a) to examine whether Relevance Theory can effectively analyse the audiovisual genre; (b) to present an analysis using elements that support communication, such as sensory elements, which include visual (sight), auditory (hearing), tactile (touch), olfactory (smell), and gustatory (taste) modalities; contextual and spatial elements, encompassing time (chronemics), space and distance (proxemics), and silence as a meaningful communicative resource; and action and state elements, which involve higher-level interpretations such as attitudes or illocutionary acts, as well as emotional states that shape meaning and interpretation. Based on these objectives, the research addresses the following questions: (a) Can eco-advertising be effectively analysed through Relevance Theory? and (b) How can eco-advertisements be examined using an extension of the communicative elements presented in this study? In this study, we understand these elements as being used in communication, while multimodality is defined here as the strategic combination of these diverse resources to create a richer, more comprehensive, and more cohesive communicative experience. The results confirm that Relevance Theory is a robust framework for analysing the audiovisual genre. This theory provides tools to analyse both explicit content and implicit, weak, or non-propositional effects in visual and auditory messages. Action and emotional effects capture information about the attitudes and emotions of the speaker/writer in relation to the explanation they have communicated. We cannot claim to fully understand a speaker’s or writer’s message if we do not correctly understand the attitudes and emotions that he or she intends to convey. I claim, all communication is inherently multimodal.

**Keywords:** *eco-advertising, relevance theory, multimodality, audiovisual genre.*

### 1. Introduction

Although Wilson and Sperber originally proposed Relevance Theory as a cognitive framework capable of accounting for all forms of communication, their foundational work does not explicitly

address mass media, advertising, or visual communication. Nevertheless, scholars such as Coffey-Glover (2025), Desilla (2009; 2012; 2014), Forceville (1996; 2005; 2014; 2020), Manojlović (2025), Scott (2022), and Yus (2018), among others, have argued that, if Relevance Theory is to fulfil its promise as an inclusive theory of communication, it must be adapted and extended to account for different media, modes, and genres. This need arises from the fact that the original model largely overlooked the diversity of communicative forms beyond face-to-face verbal interaction.

In recent years, Relevance Theory has become one of the leading frameworks for analysing media discourse, where the communicator is often an institution rather than an individual interlocutor. Following Forceville (2020), I argue that a cognitive-pragmatic approach is essential for explaining multimodal textual genres, and that Relevance Theory currently offers the most comprehensive and theoretically coherent framework for this purpose. Its explanatory power lies in its ability to account not only for explicit meaning, but also for implicit, weak, and affective communicative effects that are central to media texts.

A concrete illustration of this approach can be found in an advertisement produced by Ogilvy Brazil, which employs a split-screen technique. On one side of the screen, the viewer follows the character Safira over a twenty-year period, while the other presents the gradual bleaching of coral reefs. The scientific explanation of coral colour loss functions as a well-established and empirically grounded account of a natural phenomenon. Through visual evidence alone, the advertisement enables viewers to grasp complex realities—such as climate change, environmental degradation, and ecological fragility—without reliance on verbal explanation. This reinforces the view that meaning can be efficiently communicated through the orchestration of visual and auditory resources, supporting our claim that all communication is potentially multimodal.

This article is organised as follows. Section 2 introduces the audiovisual genre of eco-advertising, to which the video “Teodoro, Safira” belongs. Section 3 presents the theoretical framework, focusing on (a) the central concepts of Relevance Theory and (b) the main communicative elements involved in multimodal analysis. Section 4 describes the corpus and methodology, followed by the presentation and discussion of the results in Section 5. Finally, Section 6 offers concluding remarks and directions for future research.

## **2. Eco-advertising: an audiovisual genre**

According to Black (2006, p. 37), “genre” is comparable to the concept of “schema”: it draws on our previous knowledge and experience and offers a framework for interpretation. Genre is a kind of pre-setting device, which predisposes the reader to approach a text in a particular way, it tells us whether what follows is likely to be a joke, business discussion, chat, novel or poem. And genres that exist in one culture at one time may not exist in another culture at another time – they are constantly changing. The expectations we bring to a text are strongly affected by the genre to which it belongs.

Genre also functions as a kind of intertextual device. Forceville (2020, p.121) calls it an “ever-present ‘interface’ between discourse and context.” With the advent of the Internet and mobile technology, new genres have emerged and materialized in the digital environment, bringing new forms of communication. It can be said that this process occurs based on social demands, since a genre emerges or disappears depending on socio-discursive conditions, as is the case of eco – advertising or green advertising. It constitutes a distinct, evolving textual genre within commercial communication, characterized by the integration of ecological themes into the persuasion strategies of advertising discourse.

The advertisement, created by Ogilvy Brazil for Nestlé’s NESCAU in February 2021, is titled “Teodoro, Safira” and acts as a powerful example of green advertising. It employs a split-screen technique to contrast the 20-year life journey of a transgender woman, Safira, with the enduring, 20-year lifespan of a single, indestructible plastic straw in the ocean. It falls under the “green advertising” subset of corporate communication, focusing on environmental sustainability to influence consumer

perceptions. This campaign is part of a broader trend where companies use sustainability to build a positive, eco-friendly brand image. We can see the advertisement's commercial narration in Table 1:

Table 1

The advertisement's narrative <sup>1</sup>			
<p><b>00:0 / 0:45</b></p> 	<p><b>0:06 / 0:45</b></p> 	<p><b>0:12 / 0:45</b></p> 	<p><b>0:18 / 0:45</b></p> 
<p>The video uses a split-screen effect with a light soundtrack, without any spoken or written words. On the left, a baby (Safira) sits in its highchair while on the right, a plastic straw floats in the ocean.</p> <p>The soundtrack intensifies from the moment the straw sinks into the coral reef and stays in motion unchanged. Meanwhile, a quick montage of photographs and videos (timelapse) begins to move quickly across the screen showing Safira growing up.</p>		<p>Starting at the 12<sup>th</sup> second, the advert takes an unexpected turn, revealing the message: <b>“20 years of Safira’s life.”</b> What follows are more clips capturing Safira’s teenage years.</p> <p>The text <b>“20 Years in the Life of a Plastic Straw”</b> appears on the left screen at the 18<sup>th</sup> second mark. Throughout the entire commercial, only the ocean background changes, while the straw stays in the same position, completely unchanged.</p>	
<p><b>0:21 / 0:45</b></p> 	<p><b>0:22 / 0:45</b></p> 	<p><b>0:33 / 0:45</b></p> 	<p><b>0:35 / 0:45</b></p> 
<p>Shortly after, in the series of photographs of Safira as an adult, it becomes clear that the protagonist of the video is a trans woman. The campaign showcased everything from the character’s style (changes in appearance, hair, etc.) to her involvement in sports like swimming and tennis.</p>		<p>At this point in the video, the split-screen technique comes to an end and Safira dives down and removes the straw and message appears <b>‘If the straw doesn’t change, we change the straw,’</b> plays across the screen.</p>	
<p><b>0:37 / 0:45</b></p> 	<p><b>0:38 / 0:45</b></p> 	<p><b>0:44 / 0:45</b></p> 	
<p>The NESCAU product is then briefly shown before its plastic straw is swapped out with a paper one. The following message then appears on screen, <b>‘NESCAU. Now with 100% paper straws. Let’s change the world one straw at a time.’</b></p>		<p>ad is part of Nescau's "Joga Junto" ("play together") movement, which encourages consumers to take part in environmental responsibility, and includes a partnership with the Tamar Project for sea turtle preservation in Brazil.</p>	

### 3. The theoretical framework

#### 3.1. Key concepts of Relevance Theory

Relevance Theory, proposed by Sperber and Wilson (1995; 2015; 2025), Carston (2002), Wilson and Sperber (2012), is a cognitive-inferential framework for communication based on how humans optimize processing effort to achieve maximum cognitive effects. It explains focuses on how the human mind processes information, and inferential meaning based on context and efficiency, which means the listener must guess/infer the writer/speaker's intention, rather than just decoding a coded message. For example, if I say, "It's cold in here," I am not just giving you the temperature. I am inferring that you should close the window.

Relevance Theory centers on two key principles: the cognitive principle of relevance (Human cognition is geared toward maximizing relevance, meaning individuals tend to process information that provides the greatest cognitive benefit for the least mental effort). What it means that we naturally pay attention to things that seem meaningful or useful and ignore things that are not. If you are walking down the street, you ignore 99% of what you see (trees, cars, people, etc) but notice a loud crash or a friend waving because those inputs have a high "cognitive effect" and the communicative principle of relevance (every act of communication (or overt intentional communication) carries a presumption of its own optimal relevance. It means that when someone talks to you, they are promising that the information is worth your time and effort to understand. You assume they are being as relevant as possible without wasting your energy.

According to Relevance Theory, "relevance" is a technical term and it is the balance between the benefits (positive "cognitive effects" – this is what you gain by hearing information) and the costs ("cognitive effort" – this is the mental energy, time, and attention needed to understand the message) of processing information. in conformity with the theory, the less effort required to achieve a cognitive effect, the greater the relevance. A simple example: Imagine you are at a train station and a stranger walk up to you and says, "The number 5 bus is blue." The effect will be very low (you don't care). The effort will be low too. The result is low relevance (it wasn't worth the mental effort to listen). But if a stranger says, "Your train is leaving from Platform 4, not 10," the effect will be high (you avoid missing the train) and the effort will be low (it was a quick sentence). The result will be high relevance (maximum benefit for minimum effort).

On the other hand, the communicative principle of relevance states that each ostensive stimulus carries the assumption of its own optimal relevance, i.e. that it is relevant enough to be worth the processing effort needed for its interpretation and that it is the most relevant stimulus according to writer/speaker's abilities and preferences (Carston, 2002, p.45). In other words, this principle suggests that when someone speaks (an ostensive stimulus), the listener/reader assumes the message is worth the mental effort to decode and is the clearest possible way the speaker/writer could have said it given their constraints. An example illustrating this: If you ask a stranger for the time and they say, "It's 2:30," you assume this is the most relevant answer. They could have said, "It is 30 minutes past 2:00" or "The time is currently fourteen-thirty," but those require more processing effort or provide unnecessary precision. You trust they gave you the most helpful answer they could (abilities) while being as brief as possible (preferences).

Communication is normally ostensive-inferential (Sperber & Wilson, 1995, p. 54). In Relevance Theory, ostension refers to the intentional, overt communication of information by attracting an addressee's attention to a particular stimulus. It is a form of "showing" rather than just signaling. In their 2025 paper, "Rethinking Ostensive Communication in an Evolutionary, Comparative, and Developmental Perspective", Sperber and Wilson distinguish between basic and mentalistic ostension based on the type of evidence provided to the audience. In basic ostension, a communicator provides direct evidence for the information they want to share. The goal is to make a fact in the environment highly salient, allowing the hearer to arrive at the information with minimal inference. For example, I want to tell my teacher that I have a sore throat. Instead of saying "I have a sore throat," I speak in a strained, hoarse voice. The voice is direct evidence of the fact.

In contrast, mentalistic communication the communicator provides evidence of their intention to communicate a specific piece of information. The focus is not just on the evidence itself, but on the fact that someone is deliberately trying to convey a message. For example: My mother points to an open window, looks at me, and shivers. She is not simply informing you that the window exists. She is using this ostensive act (pointing + shivering) to convey, “I would like you to close the window” message. I must mentalize my mother’s intent (desire for warmth). In both cases, the goal is to make the information manifest to the receiver, triggering a search for relevance. In Figure 1, we can see inferential paths to the communicated information. The black arrow illustrates inferential paths of basic ostension and gray arrows illustrate inferential paths of mentalistic ostension.

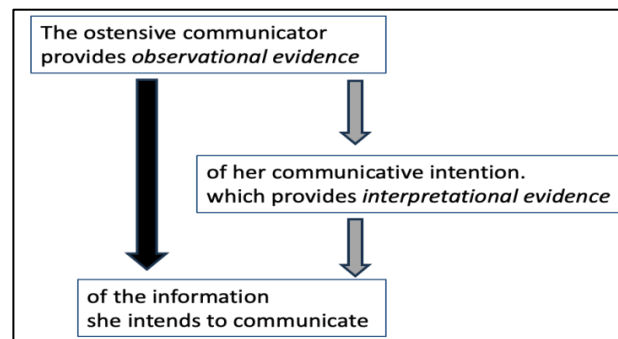


Figure 1. Basic ostension vs. Mentalistic ostension<sup>2</sup>

Scott-Phillips (2024) says that these developments consolidate the communicative principle of relevance as fundamental to understanding human interaction. Human ostensive behavior. Any behavior humans can perform can be performed in an “ostensive” way, that is, overtly attracting attention to the behavior and simultaneously providing evidence of meaning. However, as Sperber and Wilson (2025) note, human communication often involves a mixture of both basic and mentalistic ostension

Another important distinction is that between explicit and implicit layer of communication. In Relevance Theory, this distinction is fundamental to understanding how meaning is constructed. Explicature in Relevance Theory refers to the explicitly communicated content of an utterance, developed by enhancing its linguistically encoded logical form with context-driven inferences, such as disambiguation, reference resolution, and enrichment. It represents the writer/speaker’s intended proposition, bridging the gap between sentence meaning and what is said. In a carnival context, when a reveler wearing a king costume tells a friend, “It is too hot in here”, an explicit, relevancy-driven interpretation requires: (a) decoding- translating the linguistic sound/text, (b) disambiguation – understanding “here” refers to the crowded parade tent, not the city, (c) reference assignment – determining “It” refers to the heavy velvet costume they are wearing and (d) enrichment- recognizing “too hot” means “too hot for comfort/safety,” not just high temperature. This process transforms the literal utterance into the explicit proposition: “The velvet king costume I am wearing is making me uncomfortably warm inside this crowded tent”.

In Relevance Theory, explicatures are classified into lower-level and higher-level, with higher-level explicatures often incorporating illocutionary force. This distinction maps closely to the difference between locutionary acts (the literal propositional content) and illocutionary forces/acts (the intention, attitude, or speech act performed) in pragmatics. Lower level (propositional content): The literal meaning of the sentence – what is said, which can be true or false. Higher-level (attitude/act): How the speaker takes the proposition (believing, fearing, hoping) or what they are doing with it (ordering, promising, joking, warning). The “Cold Room” Scenario: (a) Lower-level: “It is cold in here.” (Statement about temperature) and (b) Higher-level: A request/command: “Close

the window” or “Turn up the heat”. When a piece of information is either actively represented in someone’s mind or can be easily activated, we say that it is “manifest” to them.

In Relevance Theory, implicatures are implicitly communicated meanings derived from utterances, classified as either implicated premises (these are contextual assumptions that the hearer must supply to understand the utterance, as they are not explicitly stated) or implicated conclusions (these are deductions reached by combining the explicitly stated information (explicature) with the implicated premises. Both types of implicature are generated through a process of inference intended by the speaker/writer to maximize relevance. Implicatures can vary in strength; a strong implicature is one that is essential to finding the utterance relevant, while weak ones are just one of many possible interpretations. Here are two examples of these concepts:

- (1) *A: “Do you want to go to the cinema?” B: “I have an exam tomorrow.”. Implicated premise: Studying for exams takes time/prevents going out. Implicated conclusion is: “No, I cannot go to the cinema.” This is an example of a strong implicature.*
- (2) *If someone says, “The coffee is a bit cold,” they might implicitly suggest: It’s not good or It’s not worth drinking or I want a new cup. These are weak implicatures because the speaker/writer leaves it open, which specific conclusion the hearer draws, if they grasp the general sentiment that the coffee is unsatisfactory.*

We cannot forget that Relevance Theory argues that context is not fixed before communication, but rather constructed during the comprehension process and background knowledge is not just important—it is essential to the interpretation of communication.

### **3.2. Broadened key elements used in communication to multimodal analysis**

Multimodality theorists assume that the process of meaning-making does not operate in isolation, but usually integrates several modes or modalities (e.g., language, gesture, image, layout, sounds, intonation, writing), but it is not a discipline or a theory; it is “a field of application” (Jewitt, 2009, p.2) which transcends and draws on different disciplines and theories. The recognition that all communication is multimodal has profound implications for applied linguistics, and questions long-standing assumptions about the nature of language, and how it should be learned, taught, researched, and theorized.

Braun (2016, p. 6) claims that Sperber and Wilson do not have much to say on multimodal discourse, but from their claim that visual images as “non-propositional objects” do not have explicatures (1995, p. 57) and given the importance of explicatures in RT, the theory might indeed appear less applicable to multimodal discourse. However, various suggestions have been made to adapt RT to the analysis of multimodal discourse, arguing that visual images may give rise to both explicatures and implicatures (Braun, 2016) Forceville, 2014; Yus, 2018).

Forceville (1996; 2005; 2009) proposed that Relevance Theory is not limited to accounting for verbal communication in context of face-to-face interaction but is applicable to the analysis of nonverbal and visual multimodal discourse. Later, Forceville and Clark (2014) in “Can pictures have explicatures?”, showed that pictograms, traffic signs, and corporate logos function as highly coded, conventionalized visual information that, due to their specialized, non-naturalistic nature operate closer to verbal language than to pictorial representation. Within the framework of Relevance Theory, these elements function directly as visual explicatures because they are not merely interpreted through inference but are “decoded” based on pre-established conventions and contexts. In the current context of Relevance Theory, they are a basic ostension, that is, they (pictograms, traffic signs, and corporate logos) have a direct communication, they act as “visual speech acts,” serving to warn, guide, or inform in a manner that bypasses the need for language processing.

Numerous scholars apply Relevance Theory to visual and multimodal communication: Coffey-Glover (2025), Desilla (2009; 2012; 2014), Forceville (1996; 2005; 2014; 2020), Manojlović (2025),

Scott (2022), and Yus (2018), among others. All this research suggests that the theory initially developed for verbal communication can be extended to other semiotic discourses or modes. Although there are now several approaches within the field of multimodality, the primary shared assumption behind all of them is that communication, whether mediated or face-to-face, is largely achieved through the simultaneous use of different modes (Djonov and Zhao, 2013, p.1).

Forceville (2020, p.66) argues the concept of multimodality has hitherto not yielded a generally accepted definition and the concept of mode, however, is not as straightforward as it may seem. But he commits himself provisionally to the following: (1) visual elements; (2) written language; (3) spoken language; (4) bodily behaviour (including gestures, posture, facial expressions, and manner of movement); (5) sound; (6) music; (7) smell; (8) taste; (9) touch. Forceville's rationale was to try to keep as close some correspondence as possible between sensory perception and mode, and to consider other meaning-generating mechanisms as simply not belonging to "modality". In this present study, I understand sensory channels and modes as elements used in communication, while multimodal approach helps reveal the mechanism of combining them. For me all communication is inherently multimodal.

In the present study, this list from Forceville's (2020) modes of communication is expanded to provide a clearer and more systematic account of communication. To facilitate understanding, the elements of communication are organized into three broad categories: sensory elements, which include visual (sight), auditory (hearing), tactile (touch), olfactory (smell), and gustatory (taste) modalities; contextual and spatial elements, encompassing time (chronemics), space and distance (proxemics), and silence as a meaningful communicative resource; and action and state elements, which involve higher-level interpretations such as attitudes or illocutionary acts, as well as emotional states that shape meaning and interpretation. See in Table 2.

Table 2

Elements used in communication<sup>3</sup>

<b>Sensory elements</b>		
<b>1- Visual</b> (Sight)	<b>Communication through visual cues</b>	- Facial expressions: Show emotions - Gestures: Support or replace speech - Text: Conveys written information
<b>2 -Auditory</b> (Hearing)	<b>Communication through sound</b>	- Spoken words: Used for verbal communication - Music: Expresses emotion and mood - Alarms: Serve as alert signals
<b>3 - Tactile</b> (Touch)	<b>Perception through physical contact</b>	- Indicate greeting or agreement [ "high fever"] - Hugs: Express comfort or affection - Braille: Enables reading through touch
<b>4 - Olfactory</b> (Smell)	<b>Perception through scent</b>	- Smoke: Signals danger - Perfume: Influences attraction - Food aroma: Triggers appetite or memories
<b>5 – Gustatory</b> (Taste)	<b>Perception through taste</b>	- Reflect cultural identity - Bitterness: Warns of potential toxins - Sweetness: Associated with pleasure
<b>Contextual &amp; spatial elements</b>		
<b>6 -Time</b> (Chronemics)	<b>Use of time in communication</b>	- Punctuality: Shows respect and reliability - Pauses: Add emphasis or reflection - Duration: Influences message interpretation

Continuation of Table 2

<b>7 - Proxemics</b> (Space & Distance)	<b>Use of physical space in communication</b>	- Personal space: Indicates comfort level - Proximity: Reflects intimacy or formality - Seating: Influences interaction and hierarchy
<b>8-Silence</b>	<b>Silence as a means of communication within human interaction.</b>	- Reflective pause: Indicates thoughtfulness - Silent treatment: Expresses emotional state - Respectful silence: Shows reverence or empathy
<b>Actions &amp; states elements</b>		
<b>9- Higher-Level Explicatures (Attitude/Act)</b>	<b>The intended action behind a spoken utterance</b> (e.g., promising, warning, or commanding), which relies on context rather than just literal meaning.	-Assert, question, exclaim, threaten, promise, apologize, command, warn, suggest, request, wager, object, christen, marry, bequeath etc. (force of an utterance is important)
<b>10 - Emotions Affective Communication</b>	<b>Recognizing emotions</b> These are conveyed through all the above elements and are central to making communication effective and memorable	-Anger, disgust, surprise, fear, sadness, and happiness (Paul Eckman (1992, p.169).

#### 4. Materials and methods

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative research design. According to Creswell (2007, p.38), qualitative research explores how individuals or groups make meaning of social or human problems. It uses emerging questions and procedures, with data collected in natural settings. Analysis is inductive, moving from specific data to broader themes, and the researcher interprets the data's meaning. Reports are flexible in structure. This approach values inductive inquiry, individual meaning, and the complexity of real-life situations.

The data analyzed consists of an audiovisual advertisement published on YouTube, namely the Nescau Safira 100% Paper Straw Campaign, which was uploaded on July 6, 2021, to the official Nestlé Advertising Brazil channel (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jEQsDKVD05M>). As an example of eco-advertising, the commercial integrates visual, verbal, and auditory modes to communicate its message, with the researcher actively interpreting the meanings produced through these multimodal resources.

The study is guided by two main *objectives*: (a) to analyze images from an audiovisual text using relevance theory, and (b) to propose an extension of communicative elements that supports the interpretation of audiovisual texts, particularly in environmental advertising.

Based on these objectives, the research addresses the following *questions*:

(a) Can eco-advertising be effectively analyzed through relevance theory?

(b) How can eco-advertisements be examined using an extension of communicative elements presented in this study?

More broadly, this research seeks to explain how multimodal analytical approaches are applied in eco-advertising and how they contribute to a deeper understanding of meaning construction in audiovisual environmental campaigns.

#### 5. Analysis

##### 5.1. Coral color contrast and human development

Images – such as the vibrant colors of healthy reefs vs. the white of bleached reefs - can be effectively analyzed using relevance theory. While originally developed for verbal communication, relevance theory is a cognitive pragmatic framework that applies to any “ostensive” stimulus (intentional communication) that seeks to maximize cognitive effects while minimizing processing effort. I argue that meaning is not a semiotic process, but crucially one relying on inference and the principles of

relevance (Wilson and Sperber, 2012). When viewing the “science of coral colors” through this lens, the following insights emerge.

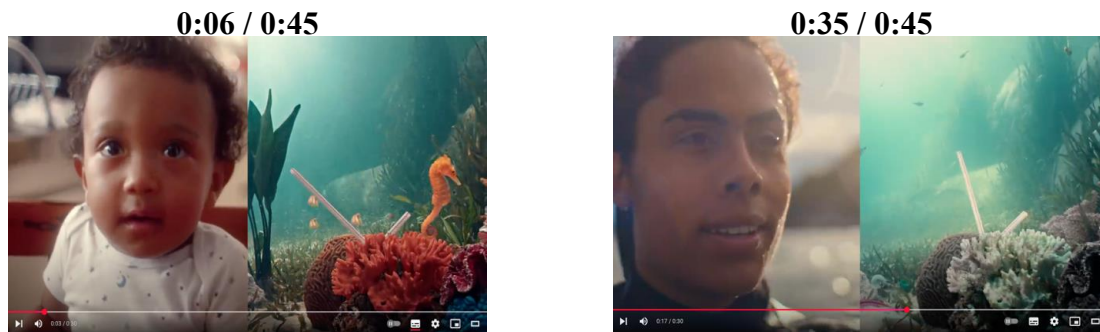


Figure 2. Coral color contrast and human development<sup>4</sup>

By connecting the visual evidence of color (or lack thereof) with knowledge of plastic’s harmful effects, the reader/hearer arrives at the understanding that plastic causes degradation, achieving the “maximum cognitive effect” of understanding the immediate, visual impact of plastic straw on the environment. The reader/hearer infers that the contrast is not random but intended to communicate a message with minimal processing effort. The reader/hearer relies on background knowledge about marine biology and ecology to interpret the visual stimuli by scientific knowledge: Healthy, living coral reefs are generally colorful due to symbiotic algae (zooxanthellae), while dead or bleached reefs appear white or grey. Instead of relying on a linguistic code (words), the image acts as an “ostensive stimulus.” The creator of the image intends to draw the reader/hearer’s attention to a particular situation (dead coral + plastic = ecological damage).

The reader/hearer, through cognitive, non-verbal inference (utilizing existing knowledge of coral biology), arrives at an explicature - an explicit, communicated proposition that “this plastic is causing this reef to die”. Because visual images are often ambiguous, the conclusion is “weak” because the image could imply different things to different readers/hearers – e.g., a call for immediate environmental action, a feeling of sadness, a belief that it is too late, or a focus on specific local plastic impacts etc. Rath Foley (2021, p. 31) says when adverts involve indirect language, they require the audience to construct self-generated inferences, and there are indeed cases where promoted attributes and/or benefits are communicated indirectly or weakly. This argument points to the fact that the audience do not only decode and infer implicatures, but explicatures as well.

While basic ostension merely draws attention to information, the scenario suggests a more complex, communicative intention (a mentalist approach) where the agent is trying to make a specific, complex, and intentional message manifest to the audience. The image is not just a natural sign (like a grey sky), but an intentional, communicative act designed to change the mental state of the reader/hearer regarding environmental damage.

From Relevance Theory perspective, the scene depicted in the image centers on a stark visual contrast between vibrant, healthy coral reefs and gray, bleached, lifeless reefs. This contrast is intensified by the visible presence of long-term plastic waste—specifically plastic straws—embedded within the damaged coral. The juxtaposition is not merely aesthetic; it foregrounds environmental degradation by opposing what coral ecosystems can look like in optimal conditions with what they become after prolonged exposure to human-made pollutants.

The image itself functions as the ostensive stimulus. Through its deliberate and high-contrast composition, it makes mutually manifest that the communicator intends to convey a meaningful message. By placing a colorful, living reef alongside a gray, dead one contaminated by plastic, the communicator signals intentionality: the image is not neutral or decorative but purposefully constructed to draw the viewer’s attention to a specific environmental issue, namely the destructive consequences of plastic pollution over time.

At the level of explicature, the viewer can derive a relatively explicit proposition from the image: a plastic straw remained in contact with a living coral for twenty years, after which the coral is now gray and dead. Although the image itself contains no verbal explanation, this cause-effect relationship is visually suggested strongly enough to be recoverable as an explicit interpretation once contextual assumptions are activated.

To arrive at this interpretation, the reader/viewer relies on several implicated premises drawn from background knowledge. These include the understanding that plastic waste such as straws does not biodegrade easily and poses long-term hazards to marine ecosystems, as well as the knowledge that coral bleaching and death signify severe ecological damage and biodiversity loss. These contextual assumptions allow the viewer to connect the visible plastic waste with the deterioration of the coral, filling in gaps not directly stated by the image.

Because the image contains no written or spoken text, the implicated conclusions remain relatively weak and open-ended. As a result, the cognitive effects may vary from one viewer to another. Some may interpret the image as an urgent call for environmental action, others may experience sadness or moral responsibility, while still others might infer a sense of hopelessness or focus on the localized impact of everyday plastic use. This multiplicity of possible interpretations reflects the inherently underdeterminate nature of visual communication without explicit verbal guidance.

The process also involves mentalistic ostension. The viewer is expected to recognize both the communicator's informative intention—to show the environmental damage caused by plastic—and the communicative intention—to make that damage matter emotionally or ethically. The success of the image depends on the viewer attributing these intentions to the communicator and accepting the stimulus as purposeful and meaningful rather than accidental.

Finally, the image operates under the assumption of optimal relevance. It demands a reasonable amount of cognitive effort from the viewer, but this effort is justified by the significant cognitive effects it produces, particularly the clear causal link between plastic pollution and ecological destruction. By relying on visual contrast rather than verbal explanation, the communicator arguably presents the most relevant stimulus available to convey the gravity of plastic pollution in a concise, impactful, and memorable way.

## 5.2. The image with the advertising slogan

In Relevance Theory, communication is a trade-off between cognitive effects and processing effort. Adding text shifts the image from a poetic, open-ended message to a more directed, strong communication. When you add a caption the cognitive landscape shift, with text, these are transformed into strong implicatures. The reader/hearer is pushed toward a single, unavoidable conclusion (e.g., “I must stop using plastic straws to save coral”). The “poetic effect” of the image is sacrificed for clarity and persuasion. The addition of text makes the ostensive stimulus more complex. The reader/hearer must now process both visual and linguistic data. However, the text acts as a pointer, drastically reducing the effort needed to identify the communicator's specific intention. The addition of text changes the communicative act from suggestive / evocative (weakly communicative) to persuasive / directive (strongly communicative). See the example in Figure 3.

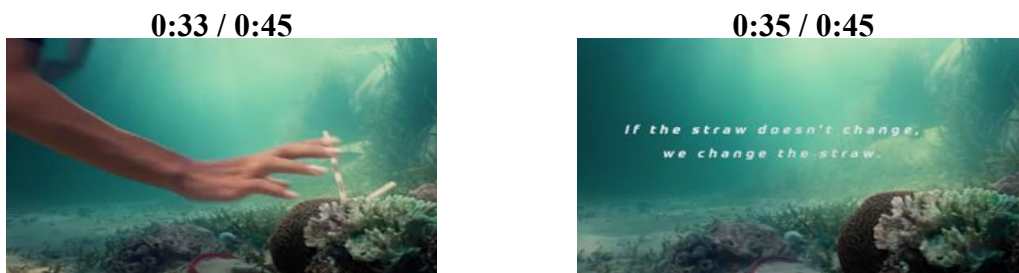


Figure 3. Image with the advertising slogan<sup>5</sup>

The final scene of the advertisement presents Safira, a trans man whose identity is culturally associated with transformation and change, removing a plastic straw that has been embedded in ocean corals for twenty years. This visual moment functions symbolically, linking personal transformation with environmental change. By foregrounding the long duration of the straw's presence in the coral, the scene emphasizes the persistence of plastic pollution and frames change as both urgent and overdue.

This moment is reinforced through the ostensive stimulus, which consists of the deliberately displayed "relic" straw accompanied by the caption "If the straw does not change, we change the straw." Together, the image and slogan operate as a highly intentional, attention-directing communicative act. The advertiser makes its intentions manifest by drawing the viewer's focus to an object that visually represents environmental stagnation while simultaneously proposing change. The pairing clearly signals the brand's goal of promoting paper straws and, more broadly, sustainability.

At the level of explicature, the audience can recover the explicit meaning: "If the twenty-year-old plastic straw does not change its material or presence, we change the straw for a new, sustainable version." Through free enrichment, viewers implicitly understand that "we" refers both to Nescau and to consumers aligned with the brand, and that "change" involves replacing single-use plastic with environmentally friendly alternatives. Contextually, "the straw" is interpreted not as Nescau's new packaging, but as traditional plastic straws associated with environmental harm.

To arrive at this interpretation, viewers rely on several implicated premises grounded in shared background knowledge. These include the assumptions that plastic straws are harmful to marine ecosystems, that plastic persists for decades without degrading, that coral damage represents serious ecological loss, and that responsible brands should take action to reduce environmental impact. Additionally, the twenty-year timespan embedded in the visual narrative supports the broader cultural assumption that meaningful change is difficult but necessary, especially in environmental contexts.

From these premises, viewers are likely to derive several implicated conclusions that produce strong cognitive effects. The advertisement suggests that Nescau's switch to paper straws is not a superficial packaging decision but part of a larger commitment to environmental responsibility. It also implies that choosing Nescau products contributes to preventing long-term ocean and coral damage in the coming decades. More broadly, the act of consuming the product is framed as a conscious, positive choice aligned with sustainability and transformation, echoing the persona embodied by Safira.

This interpretation is guided by mentalistic ostension, as the advertisement aims to reshape the viewer's mental state regarding everyday plastic consumption. By juxtaposing a powerful visual of long-lasting pollution with an empowering message of agency ("we change"), the ad alters the viewer's cognitive environment. It reframes the straw from a mundane, disposable object into a symbol of environmental harm, while simultaneously offering change—through consumer choice—as a viable solution.

Finally, the advertisement operates under the assumption of optimal relevance. It presumes that viewers will invest minimal processing effort to achieve substantial cognitive effects. The visual metaphor is intentionally simple and accessible: the old, harmful straw is framed as "bad," while the new, eco-friendly straw is framed as "good." The slogan provides a clear logical structure that connects responsibility, agency, and positive action, ensuring the message is easy to process, socially meaningful, and worth the audience's attention.

### **5.3. Elements used in communication: a multimodal analysis**

This commercial, created by Ogilvy Brazil, uses a divided-screen technique to contrast the 20-year lifecycles of a plastic straw and a person (Safira), highlighting environmental damage and the shift to paper straws. The commercial is not just a video; it is a complex, synchronized combination of modes (multimodal) that work together to create meaning. The advertisement functions as a multimodal

narrative, where visual, auditory, and kinetic modes are interdependent to drive the message of sustainability.

The advertisement relies heavily on visual structure to communicate its core message, particularly using a split-screen and time-lapse technique. On the left side of the frame, viewers see a linear and rapid montage of Safira growing up, visually representing human growth, development, and change over time. On the right side, the image contrasts this progression with the slow, almost static descent of a plastic straw in the ocean, symbolizing decay, stagnation, and persistence. This contrast is intensified by the changing colors of the coral reefs: vibrant, saturated colors indicate living reefs, while gray, muted tones signal dead or stressed corals damaged through prolonged contact with plastic. Together, these visual elements juxtapose the brevity and dynamism of human life with the longevity and destructiveness of plastic pollution.

The linguistic mode reinforces and anchors this visual narrative through the slogan, “If the straw doesn’t change, we change the straw,” accompanied by explanatory text about the transition to paper straws. The wording is simple yet directive, providing viewers with a clear interpretive key. While the visuals show the problem unfolding over decades, the language offers a concise solution, aligning the brand’s action with the broader theme of change. The repetition of the word “change” linguistically mirrors the visual motif of transformation seen in Safira’s life, creating cohesion across modes.

Auditory elements further support this multimodal interaction by shaping the emotional tone of the advertisement. Ambient ocean sounds establish a natural setting and evoke environmental vulnerability, while the darker musical soundtrack intensifies as Safira descends into the water. This auditory progression parallels the visual passage of time and heightens the emotional tension between the evolving human subject and the inert, destructive presence of the straw. Sound thus acts as an affective bridge, guiding the viewer’s emotional response to the visual and linguistic cues.

Time operates as a central organizing principle that binds these modes together. The 20-year parallel timeline emphasizes the contrast between environmental time and human time. While Safira’s growth unfolds quickly and visibly, the environmental damage caused by the straw accumulates slowly and silently. This temporal imbalance underscores the long-term consequences of seemingly trivial consumer choices and reinforces the urgency of intervention, even when harm is not immediately visible.

Spatial relationships, or proxemics, also play a crucial role in shaping interpretation. At the beginning of the ad, the straw exists at a distance from Safira, both physically and symbolically. By the final scene, the camera brings the audience into proximity with Safira as they hold the piece of trash in their hands. This reduction in distance collapses the gap between consumer, waste, and consequence, making environmental damage feel immediate, personal, and unavoidable.

At a higher pragmatic level, these modes together generate an illocutionary force that functions as a warning about environmental damage. Rather than explicitly instructing viewers, the ad lets the cumulative effect of visual contrast, temporal parallelism, and emotional cues signal the seriousness of the issue. The message warns that inaction leads to long-lasting harm, while change—though difficult—is necessary.

Emotionally, the narrative blends fear and sadness, with much of the affective weight carried by the contrast between human growth and material stagnation. Viewers are invited to mourn environmental loss while simultaneously recognizing the possibility of intervention. The inclusion of Safira, a transgender individual, adds a layer of inclusivity and reinforces the theme of transformation as both personal and collective. In this way, the advertisement appeals not only to environmental responsibility but also to social awareness, aligning ecological change with broader narratives of identity, growth, and dignity.

## 6. Conclusion

The Nescau advertisement demonstrates how Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory effectively accounts for the audiovisual advertising genre, particularly through its model of overt-inferential communication. The campaign combines visual and verbal stimuli to make the communicative intention—promoting sustainability—mutually manifest to viewers. By foregrounding a highly salient visual contrast, namely the degradation of colorful coral reefs after prolonged contact with a plastic straw and the subsequent shift to a paper alternative, the advertisement minimizes cognitive processing effort while maximizing cognitive effects. This multimodal presentation guides the audience toward positive contextual implications, encouraging consumers to associate the brand with environmental responsibility and positioning Nescau as a “greener” and socially conscious choice.

Extending Forceville's (2020) modes of communication is therefore essential. Research addressing multiple communicative resources has tended to overlook silence as a mode. Yet silence can function as a powerful meaning-making resource, mobilising cognitive and contextual inferences in ways comparable to verbal or visual modes. When treated as a communicative mode alongside speech and image, silence does not operate independently but in systematic interaction with other modes (Eisenmann & Meyer, 2018, p. 412). Communication should thus be understood as an interdependent system of modes, in which meaning emerges from their mutual influence rather than from any single modality in isolation. For instance, a stern facial expression (visual/gestural) may significantly alter the interpretation of a spoken utterance (auditory/linguistic), just as silence may intensify, contradict, or reframe both.

Equally important is the role of higher-level explanations, particularly illocutionary speech acts, in capturing information about the attitudes and emotional stances of the speaker or writer towards the message being communicated. These attitudinal and affective dimensions are not optional additions to meaning but central components of interpretation. We cannot claim to have fully understood a communicative act unless we correctly infer the attitudes and emotions that the speaker or writer intends to convey. In this respect, emotional and attitudinal effects play a crucial role in meaning construction, especially in multimodal texts such as audiovisual advertising. Taken together, these findings reinforce the view that communication is inherently multimodal and that meaning arises from the dynamic interaction of modes, including those—such as silence—that have traditionally remained under-theorised.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Adapted from *Nestlé advertising | Nescau Safira 100% paper straw campaign* [Video], by Nestlé, July 6, 2021, YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jEQsDKVD05M>). Copyright 2021 by Nestlé.

<sup>2</sup>Adapted from “Rethinking ostensive communication in an evolutionary, comparative, and developmental perspective” (p. 6), by D. Sperber and D. Wilson, 2025, *Psychological Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/rev0000565>. Copyright 2025 by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson.

<sup>3</sup>Data collected from survey conducted in May 2026. Own work.

<sup>4</sup>Adapted from *Nestlé advertising | Nescau Safira 100% paper straw campaign* [Video], by Nestlé, July 6, 2021, YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jEQsDKVD05M>). Copyright 2021 by Nestlé.

<sup>5</sup>Adapted from *Nestlé advertising | Nescau Safira 100% paper straw campaign* [Video], by Nestlé, July 6, 2021, YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jEQsDKVD05M>). Copyright 2021 by Nestlé.

## Declaration of competing interest

The author declares that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper. I declare that this manuscript is

original, has not been published before, and is not currently being considered for publication elsewhere, including in different languages.

### **Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the manuscript preparation process**

During the preparation of this work the author used Microsoft Copilot to improve grammar, spelling, clarity, and language translation. After using this service, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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## ТЕОРІЯ РЕЛЕВАНТНОСТІ В ЕКОЛОГІЧНОМУ МАРКЕТИНГУ: МУЛЬТИМОДАЛЬНИЙ АНАЛІЗ ЕКОРЕКЛАМИ

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### Анотація

Реклама «Safira» компанії Nestlé (NESCAU) 2021 року, створена Ogilvy Brazil, є кампанією, у якій двадцятирічний шлях самопізнання трансгендерної людини протиставляється незмінному та руйнівному характеру однієї пластикової соломинки в кораловому рифі. У цій статті представлено процес інтерпретації цього екорекламного ролика з позицій теорії релевантності (Sperber & Wilson, 1995, 2015, 2025; Carston, 2002; Wilson & Sperber, 2012). Цей жанр належить до підтипу «зеленої реклами» у корпоративній комунікації, зосередженого на екологічній сталості з метою впливу на сприйняття споживачів. Дані, використані в дослідженні, отримано в межах описового та якісного дослідження. Наш аналіз має такі загальні цілі: (а) дослідити, чи може теорія релевантності ефективно застосовуватися для аналізу аудіовізуального жанру; (б) представити аналіз із використанням елементів, що підтримують комунікацію, зокрема сенсорних елементів, які охоплюють візуальну (зір), аудіальну (слухову), тактильну (дотик), ольфакторну (нюхову) та смакову модальності; контекстуальних і просторових елементів, що включають час (хронеміку), простір і дистанцію (проксеміку), а також тишу як значущий комунікативний ресурс; і елементів дії та стану, які передбачають інтерпретації вищого рівня, такі як установки чи іллокутивні акти, а також емоційні стани, що формують значення та інтерпретацію. Відповідно до цих цілей дослідження вирішує такі

питання: (а) Чи можна ефективно аналізувати екорекламу за допомогою теорії релевантності? та (б) Як можна досліджувати екорекламу з використанням розширення комунікативних елементів, представлених у цьому дослідженні? У межах цього дослідження ми розуміємо ці елементи як такі, що використовуються в комунікації, тоді як мультимодальність визначається тут як стратегічне поєднання різноманітних ресурсів для створення багатшого, більш комплексного та більш цілісного комунікативного досвіду. Результати підтверджують, що теорія релевантності є надійною основою для аналізу аудіовізуального жанру. Ця теорія надає інструменти для аналізу як експліцитного змісту, так і імпліцитних, слабких або непропозиційних ефектів у візуальних та аудіальних повідомленнях. Дієві та емоційні ефекти фіксують інформацію про установки та емоції мовця/автора щодо пояснення, яке він або вона комунікує. Ми не можемо стверджувати, що повністю розуміємо повідомлення мовця чи автора, якщо неправильно інтерпретуємо установки та емоції, які він або вона прагне передати. Зроблено висновок, що будь-яка комунікація за своєю природою є мультимодальною.

**Ключові слова:** *екореклама; Теорія релевантності; мультимодальність; аудіовізуальний жанр.*

### **Декларація про конфлікт інтересів**

Автор заявляє про відсутність будь-яких відомих фінансових чи особистих взаємин, які могли б вплинути на результати дослідження, представленого в цій статті. Я заявляю, що цей рукопис є оригінальним, раніше не публікувався та наразі не перебуває на розгляді для публікації в іншому виданні, зокрема іншими мовами.

### **Декларація щодо використання генеративного ШІ та ШІ-асистованих технологій у процесі підготовки рукопису**

Під час підготовки цієї роботи автор використовував Microsoft Copilot для вдосконалення граматики, правопису, ясності викладу та перекладу тексту. Після використання цього сервісу автор переглянув і за потреби відредагував зміст та несе повну відповідальність за зміст публікації.

### **Подяка**

Висловлюю щирі вдячність професорові Charles Forceville за його неоціненне ознайомлення з Теорією Релевантності та за віддане академічне наставництво.