

Art Appropriation in Advertising: A Study on the Creative Concept

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Abstract

This study examines the growing phenomenon of fine art appropriation in contemporary advertising practices. Through a critical analysis of case studies and theoretical frameworks, the research investigates how commercial entities leverage established artworks to enhance brand communication strategies. The paper identifies three primary benefits of this practice: elevation of brand perception through cultural association, increased message memorability via visual recognition, and enhanced emotional engagement through artistic resonance. However, the analysis also reveals significant challenges, including intellectual property conflicts, cultural appropriation concerns, and potential degradation of artistic meaning. The findings suggest that successful implementation requires a nuanced balance between commercial objectives and respect for artistic integrity, proposing guidelines for ethical appropriation in marketing contexts.

Keyword: appropriation, contemporary advertising, visual recognition, Renaissance

Introduction

The intersection of art and commerce has become increasingly prominent in modern advertising strategies, with brand communicators frequently incorporating canonical artworks into marketing campaigns. This practice, known as art appropriation, represents a strategic synthesis of cultural capital and commercial messaging, offering advertiser's access to pre-established aesthetic value and emotional resonance. The current research explores this phenomenon through the lens of semiotic theory and intellectual property law, examining how corporate entities negotiate the complex terrain of artistic borrowing. Academic literature identifies several motivations for art appropriation in advertising contexts. First, recognized artworks provide immediate visual shorthand, reducing cognitive load for consumers while conveying sophisticated brand associations. Second, the emotional valence of appropriated art transfers to commercial messages through associative networks (Joy & Sherry, 2003). Third, artistic references enable brands to position themselves within cultural conversations, a strategy particularly valued by luxury marketers (Schroeder, 2005). However, this practice raises significant theoretical and practical concerns. From a legal perspective, copyright and moral rights issues frequently emerge, particularly when dealing with contemporary artists or institutional collections. Ethically, questions arise regarding the commodification of cultural artefacts and potential misrepresentation of artistic intent. Furthermore, the over-appropriation of certain iconic works may lead to semiotic saturation, diminishing both artistic and advertising effectiveness.

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining visual analysis of prominent advertising campaigns with legal case studies and consumer perception data. Through this multidimensional

framework, the research aims to develop best practice guidelines for art appropriation in advertising that respect artistic integrity while achieving commercial objectives. The investigation focuses particularly on three key areas: intellectual property considerations, cultural sensitivity, and maintenance of artistic meaning in commercial contexts.

Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa

Few images in human history carry the instant recognition and cultural weight of Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa. Painted in the early 16th century, this Renaissance masterpiece has evolved beyond the confines of art history to become a global icon—one that advertisers have eagerly co-opted to sell everything from luxury watches to fast food. Her enigmatic smile appears in more commercials to match the brand's theme, their taglines or their campaigns to build a relationship between the costumers and the product.

Knowone.de is an online dating service, to keep the eternal beauty from getting lonely, a German dating service has found her a partner. No one should be alone. The advertisers used mona Lisa painting to highlight their concept of everyone can get a companion and you will never be alone. The advertisers selected this particular painting as mona Lisa sits alone in the portrait and idea to give her a date. A truly witty advertisement doesn't just sell a product or service—it etches itself into your memory like a clever inside joke.

Pepsi's 1992 ad, featuring a digitally altered Mona Lisa holding a soda can, was a bold attempt to merge high art with pop culture, leveraging the painting's universal recognition to position Pepsi as rebellious and youthful. By superimposing a can of Pepsi into da Vinci's masterpiece while retaining her enigmatic smile, the ad created a jarring yet memorable juxtaposition—suggesting that even history's most revered art could be “refreshed” by modern consumerism.

The Encyclopaedia Britannica featured Mona Lisa painting in their advertising campaign for many reasons as it has an artistic history and a famous smile with a beautiful window view. Taking this as a point they recreated the whole studio where she sat to pose for the artist next to the window rising more interest and to match their tagline “More information than you know”. This phase suggests a potential source for additional details or knowledge beyond what is currently possessed.

Van Gogh's Self-Portrait

KelOptic came up with a clever way to show how good their glasses are - they used a famous Van Gogh painting. Everyone knows Van Gogh's self-portrait with its wild, swirly brushstrokes. The company put their special lenses in front of the painting in museums. When people looked through them, something amazing happened - the blurry, chaotic painting suddenly looked clear and normal. This simple idea worked perfectly. It made people think: "Maybe Van Gogh painted that way because he needed glasses!" While experts aren't sure if this was true, it didn't matter. The ad let people experience for themselves how much difference clear vision makes - even when looking at art we all think we know well. What made this campaign special was that it didn't just tell people "our glasses are good." It showed them, in a way they'd never forget. Visitors got to physically try the glasses and see the change happen before their eyes. It turned an ordinary ad into a fun, interactive experience that got people talking.

KelOptic proved you don't need flashy commercials to sell glasses. Sometimes the best way to show your product works is to let people discover it for themselves - especially when you can connect it to something

famous and meaningful that everyone cares about, like great art. That's why this campaign stood out and made such a lasting impression.

The Alliance Française (a group that promotes French culture) came up with a funny and smart way to connect old art with today's world. They took Van Gogh's famous 1889 self-portrait—the one with his serious face and swirling colors—and added just one modern thing: a smartphone in his hand, as if he's taking a selfie. This simple change does something amazing. It makes a painting from over 130 years ago feel fresh and relatable, especially for people who love social media. The joke is clear: if Van Gogh were alive now, he'd probably be posting selfies just like we do. But there's a deeper idea here too—it shows that the need to express ourselves and capture our image isn't new. Van Gogh painted dozens of self-portraits because he wanted to explore his identity, just like people today use selfies to do the same thing. Seeing a serious artist as a selfie-taker surprises people and makes them smile. The original painting isn't changed; the phone is just added in a way that fits naturally. It makes art feel alive instead of treating old paintings as untouchable museum pieces, it shows they can still speak to modern life. It's made for sharing, the image is perfect for social media, where people love clever mash ups of old and new. This idea proves you don't need big budgets or complicated technology to get people excited about culture. Sometimes, all it takes is one small, smart twist that helps us see history in a new way. By imagining Van Gogh with a phone, the Alliance Française reminds us that great art isn't stuck in the past, it's always evolving, just like we are.

Raja Ravi Varma's inspired an Iconic Indian Brand

Mysore Sandal Soap, made by the Government Soap Factory in Bangalore and launched in 1916, is more than just a bar of soap. It has come to represent Indian tradition, beauty, and pride. A big part of this identity comes from the influence of Raja Ravi Varma, the famous Indian painter known for his beautiful images of goddesses like Lakshmi and Saraswati.

From the 1920s to the 1950s, Mysore Sandal Soap's ads often showed elegant women wearing traditional silk sarees. These women were shown in calm, graceful poses, sometimes holding flowers, mirrors, or the soap itself. These images closely resembled Ravi Varma's paintings of goddesses—peaceful, divine, and beautiful. The backgrounds were simple but meaningful, helping the soap feel more special and sacred.

This wasn't a coincidence. The makers of Mysore Sandal Soap chose this style on purpose. By using artwork similar to Ravi Varma's, they gave the soap a sense of purity, richness, and Indian culture. Some early packages even showed women holding the soap like a precious gift—just like Lakshmi holds a lotus—symbolizing good fortune and respect.

This artistic style was part of a bigger plan. During the Swadeshi movement, when Indians were encouraged to buy local products instead of foreign ones, brands like Mysore Sandal Soap stood out. At a time when British soaps like Pears and Lux were popular, Mysore Sandal Soap offered something proudly Indian—beautiful, high-quality, and deeply connected to Indian values. This helped the brand earn trust and become a beloved part of many Indian homes.

Thanks to the timeless beauty of Raja Ravi Varma's art, Mysore Sandal Soap became more than just a soap. It became a symbol of Indian culture, tradition, and pride.







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