

Sven Giebel & Susan Hinterding

Advertising Impact Wins in the Emotional Realm: Pre-Figurative as an Analytical Approach in Action Research

1. Introduction – Advertising between emotion, atmosphere and changing forms of reception

Advertising used to be a special experience. Perhaps you remember the days when people looked forward to the commercials before the main film at the cinema. These commercials told complex stories in seconds, small dramatic miniatures that presented products and emotionally engaged the audience. These didn't just sell products but addressed everyday problems and offer solutions for our everyday dramas. Commercials addressed our experiences by creating atmospheric situations and tapping into deeper psychological tensions.

Advertising impact is more than just information processing, it is part of a psychological creative process. Advertising picks up on moods, tensions and everyday images that shape our experiences, embedded in cultural contexts, routines and personal life situations (Salber, 1971). This shaping process does not happen consciously or deliberately – it unfolds in our everyday experiences, in routines, stories, images and small moments that shape how we see the world (Salber, 1994).

An impressive example is the Coca-Cola commercial (Coca-Cola, 1991) with Matt LeBlanc from the early 1990s: A young man is waiting at a bus stop in the sweltering heat. Above him hangs an advertising sign with a Coca-Cola bottle. Suddenly, the bottle descends and becomes real, tangible. He opens it, drinks it – and the slogan appears: “You Can't Beat the Feeling”. In a few seconds, an image of summer, desire, surprise and refreshment emerges. An atmospheric mini narrative that succinctly shows what an ice-cold Coke promises: a moment of tingling vitality in situations that require tough endurance. The song from the commercial was heard on the radio all summer long, probably because it captured a certain attitude towards life.

Such artfully staged advertising films have become rarer today. There are several reasons for this: On the one hand, production conditions have changed. Advertising budgets are shrinking, timings are getting shorter, and generative artificial intelligence is now taking over many creative tasks (Rimscha et al., 2025). Today, commercials are no longer necessarily narrated by directors, but constructed by algorithms:

from the script to the selection of images to the voice of the narrator. Even radio advertising is increasingly being produced with AI voices (Schneider, 2024).

On the other hand, media formats and modes of reception have also changed: traditional advertising spaces such as TV commercials and cinema advertising are losing importance. Instead, advertising is embedded in social media, personalised by influencers or disguised as branded content (lifestyle instead of direct product advertising). Advertising is becoming more fleeting and closer to everyday life, but also more repetitive and interchangeable. The structured dramaturgy of traditional advertising formats is increasingly being replaced by non-linear forms such as situational snapshots, fragmented micro narratives and personalised product recommendations that algorithmically integrated into the digital media flow (Kreutzer & Klose, 2025).

A particularly striking example of this change is the TikTok platform, which has become an everyday media space for many young people, especially those from Generation Alpha. By 'Generation Alpha', we mean those born from 2010 onwards and whose births will continue until around 2024. They are the first generation to grow up completely in a digitally shaped world, embedded from the outset in an everyday life permeated by media and technology (Ziatdinov & Cilliers, 2022). A deep psychological-morphological cooperation study conducted by BSP Business & Law School and the market research institute inner-Sense involving 64 teenagers and young adults (Hinterding & Hanisch, in press) showed that TikTok is much more than just an entertainment medium. The platform functions as an emotional resonance chamber in which advertising, content and self-positioning are almost inextricably intertwined.

At the same time, advertising research is shifting traditional advertising tests often focus on visible reactions – eye tracking, click behaviour, recognition. What is measured is what can be counted. Eye tracking provides precise data on what content is seen, but it does not capture how this content is processed psychologically. Providers such as eye square are therefore increasingly combining eye tracking with implicit measurement methods and emotion analysis to gain a more complete picture of advertising impact (eye square GmbH, 2022).

Precisely because advertising today is more fleeting and contradictory, we need methods that capture how images and messages are reinterpreted, emotionally charged or atmospherically shifted in the experience – beyond what is superficially visible or rationally explainable (Salber, 1971; Zwingmann, 2021).

2. Tension, form, resolution: Advertising impact in the light of actual genesis

Effective advertising does not encounter a neutral consciousness but rather a tense, already agitated field of experience: the psyche. Three influential psychological

approaches address precisely this connection: Kurt Lewin's *field theory* (Lewin, 1943/1963; 1944/1966), Friedrich Sander's *Gestalt concept* (Gestaltkonzeption; Sander, 1927/1962), and Wilhelm Salber's *morphological psychology* (Morphologische Psychologie; Salber, 1965). They share the assumption that mental experience is not linear but must be understood as a dynamic process of tension, formation, and resolution. Within this framework, advertising impact is not an isolated event but part of an ongoing design process.

Field theory as a dynamic concept of space

Kurt Lewin's field theory describes experience as inextricably linked to the subjectively perceived environment. The so-called "psychological field" is characterised by tensions, needs, barriers and goals that not objectively predetermined but subjectively experienced and constantly reshaped (Lewin, 1940/1963; 1943/1963). In this field, mental movements unfold that advertising can pick up on and steer in a specific direction – not through stimuli or mere information, but through participation in these inner processes.

Lewin understands the tensions in this field not as mere stimuli, but as vectors of psychological movement that push for resolution and formation. Psychological movement is set in motion from an initial state of mental unrest (locomotion). Advertising is effective when it taps into the formative forces in the mental force field – when it does not merely address, but psychologically moves and directs development in a certain direction (Lewin, 1944/1963). Both the researchers involved as resonance media and the users under investigation are embedded in this force field of action research.

Pre-figurative form and psychological movement as psychological process

Friedrich Sander conceives mental events as a structured, dynamic whole unfolding as *actual genesis*, a process moving between pre-figurative form and final form (Sander, 1927/1962; 1940/1962). The pre-figurative form is a tension-filled, atmospheric unrest that keeps the mental process in motion. Experience oscillates between wholeness, an overwhelming chaotic whole, and particularity, a fragmented diversity. Object formation seeks to stabilise a coherent form within this field of tension (Salber, 1969).

Pre-figurative forms are embryonic drafts: expressive, heightened states of mental life marked by potential for form, progression toward essentialisation, and openness to incorporate other elements. The final form can even represent a lower level of organisation than the pre-figurative state (Sander, 1967, as cited in Salber, 1969, p. 126). For Sander, the pre-figurative form is not merely a starting point but the decisive locus from which developmental directions emerge. Psychological

advertising research examines this movement from pre-figuration toward specific developmental directions, ideally culminating in a final form.

Wilhelm Salber (1969) adopted and expanded this concept within morphological psychology. He highlights that formative movement may either achieve a viable final form or collapse into morpholysis, the inner decay of object formation. Movement then loses its formative power and dissolves into emptiness: “Morpholysis seeks to uncover the boundaries beyond which mental formation dissolves into dissonance, disintegration, and emptiness. The perception of these boundaries is accompanied by fear and anxiety” (Salber, 1969, p. 127).

Advertising as a process of cultivation in everyday life

In his essay ‘Sind Ganzheiten praktisch?’ (Are wholes practical?) (1959), Salber argues that psychological forms (Gestalten) are not stable, closed units, but can be understood as dynamic fields based on ambivalence, tension and contradiction. Instead of identifying isolated motifs, Salber advocates examining the psychological framework in which products and experiences are anchored. These constructs are often contradictory: products can symbolise security and threat, closeness and distance at the same time. Salber emphasises that advertising must not resolve these tensions, but rather shape them. The pre-figurative is a central category here: it describes the field of tension that has not yet been symbolically or linguistically formulated and is activated in the reception of a product or commercial: an open psychological terrain in which meanings are hinted at but not yet fixed.

For Salber, advertising is not just a means of promoting sales – nor is it merely manipulation. Wilhelm Salber describes advertising as a form of psychological cultivation: it intervenes in our experience in order to set something in motion and give it form – not through mere information, but through design. Advertising does not seek to convince, but to engage. It creates scenes, atmospheres and characters that trigger something, not logically, but emotionally.

Psychology helps to define advertising from more comprehensive processes and thus remain in touch with the increasingly diverse living and working conditions of the next decade. [...] Advertising appears as stimulation, flow, temptation – advertising becomes a point of reference, provokes opposition, is contested like an ideology; Life shapes or reshapes itself in analogies to advertising, and this gives way to new forms of learning, dissolution, acceptance and rejection – which can then once again be ‘clarifying’ advertising (Salber, 1971, p. 50).

This perspective deepens understanding of advertising’s impact: it’s the psychological response, not the external form. Advertising resonates with people when it taps

into emotional tensions already present in everyday life – a pre-figurative disposition, a wholeness experienced as a contradictory dynamic that drives the search for form. “Advertising and entertainment operate at the heart of these processes: they do not add something ‘extra,’ but rather pick up on the mixture, redistribute the weights, and offer solutions to this back-and-forth” (Salber, 1995, p. 50).

Consequences for advertising impact research

The combination of field theory and the pre-figurative concept make it possible to understand advertising impact not as a linear cause-and-effect model, but as a design process within psychodynamic fields. Advertising research inspired by depth psychology and morphology therefore focuses on the psychodynamic movement of experience and asks: What is developing psychologically? What atmospheric unrest is being addressed? What symbolic form does advertising offer as a response? And: Does advertising succeed in structuring the pre-figurative field in such a way that meaningful object formation can take place as a specific direction of development, or does the respective object formation develop into morpholysis? On the use of “pre-figurative developmental directions for the appropriate positioning of products in the emotional sphere” (Fitzek, 2008, p. 262), see also Salber (1959). The following example of a commercial by Deutsche Telekom, a major German telecommunications company (hereafter referred to as Telekom), illustrates a formative development process leading to morpholysis.

3. An Example: The Telekom commercial “Without Consent: A Message from Ella” (Deutsche Telekom AG, 2023) – morpholysis through a shift in responsibility

A particularly ambivalent example of advertising communication that picks up on pre-figurative tensions but fails to transform them into a viable psychological gestalt is the Deutsche Telekom commercial *Without Consent: A Message from Ella* (Deutsche Telekom AG, 2023). The much-discussed spot has also attracted considerable attention in advertising research.

In her unpublished bachelor’s thesis at the BSP Business & Law School, Janett Kodlin (2024) analyzed the commercial from a depth-psychological–morphological perspective and qualitatively examined its effect on young parents. The thesis, supervised by the authors of this article, draws on central concepts of morphological advertising impact research: product impact units (PWE), image impact units (BWE) and scissors analysis (Melchers et al., 1997). In morphological advertising psychology, PWE capture the ambivalent tensions arising in the use of a product, while BWE are the brand’s symbolic and atmospheric offers suggesting how these tensions may be approached and resolved.

Advertising becomes effective when PWE and BWE interlock to form a coherent psychological gestalt.

The advert begins with everyday family life: a little girl is shown bathing, playing and sleeping – filmed from her parents’ perspective. Over these images, a girl’s voice narrates in retrospect, explaining how these seemingly loving memories took on a life of their own online because her parents posted them without thinking. Only at the end does it become clear that the voice does not belong to a real child but was synthetically generated – an AI-generated commentary from the future. The staging escalates into an appeal: parents are confronted with the consequences of their digital openness – shame, loss of control and the feeling of being unable to escape. The sender is then revealed: Telekom warns of digital-visibility risks while simultaneously showcasing its own media competence (see Figure 1).

Kodlin applies the concept of the pre-figurative form – the preliminary image contours of psychological wholeness (see Chapter 4.3) – capturing the unease many Generation Z parents feel about their children’s digital visibility. She explicitly addresses parents who openly share pictures of their children and considers family influencers whose online presence shapes perceptions of parenthood. Although the commercial appeals to parents’ sense of responsibility, that very responsibility is displaced: rather than parents themselves being central to the debate, the commercial and its creators adopt the role of moral authority. Thus, the moral weight shifts outward – to medium, technology and company.



Fig. 1. Telekomspot Ella (Picture) - Official press photo “Ella” from Deutsche Telekom’s ShareWithCare campaign (Deutsche Telekom AG, 2023). © Deutsche Telekom. Used for scientific analysis under quotation right (§ 51 UrhG).

Kodlin's analysis makes it clear that the advert picks up on a real tension:

- on the one hand, there is the pride of parents in wanting to share their children's development with the world,
- on the other hand, there is the desire to protect their children from the misuse of these images.

In the commercial, Telekom presents itself as a moral authority promising protection while warning of digital risks. Yet this promise conflicts with the media design: the message uses the very digital means it criticises, such as artificial voices, algorithmically generated images and emotionally charged dramaturgy. Telekom thus appears in two roles – as a warning authority and a technological actor shaping the risks it portrays. This paradoxical dual role – between warning and participation – was perceived as contradictory and confusing. Rather than enabling emotional development, the staging disrupts identity formation: recipients feel guilt and powerlessness without relief or guidance. The tension remains unresolved, as the commercial offers no way Telekom addresses the paradox between education and entanglement.

Psychologically speaking, what Sander and Salber described as morpholysis emerges in the reception of the advertisement: the pre-figurative tension – the desire to proudly display one's child's development while simultaneously fearing digital loss of control – is not transformed into a viable gestalt. Instead of fostering inner development, emotional stagnation ensues. The commercial addresses the real dilemma faced by young parents but offers no practical, everyday solution. Telekom confronts viewers with guilt without offering relief or actionable options. The emotional overload creates moral urgency but no path for action, leaving viewers powerless. Telekom's role as the sender is perceived as deeply ambivalent: while it draws attention to digital risks, it simultaneously uses the very means of digitality – AI voice, data staging, affective dramaturgy – to convey its message. This creates a contradictory gestalt context (in the sense of Gestalt theory: a psychologically perceived whole): Telekom warns against something that it itself helps to create – and yet positions itself as a moral authority.

This constellation reveals a psychodynamic defence mechanism: the blame for the loss of digital control is externalised – i.e. unconsciously shifted away from parents and onto technology, media and platforms. However, Telekom does not offer a solution, but cleverly shifts the moral weight to the outside world. The recipients are left alone with their inner tension – between showing and protecting – without the commercial enabling them to transform this tension into a coherent inner attitude. Due to this specific development towards morpholysis, this commercial does not achieve a deep-rooted impact on the target groups it is addressing; rather, it activates a psychological defence mechanism.

- **Empirical application of Ad Pre-Figurative Test © 2025 | QUES | Berlin - depth psychological-morphological analysis of a Dr. Oetker short commercial with a focus on pre-figurative developmental direction**
 - **Introduction: Psychological effects of advertising under changed reception conditions**

Previous considerations have shown that advertising exerts a profound effect when it encounters pre-figurative tensions and transforms them into a coherent symbolic form. But how can this psychodynamic process be analysed in concrete terms, especially when classic dramaturgical advertising formats are replaced by extremely short commercials?

Sander and Salber had already shown that the pre-figurative process begins even with very brief exposures. The agency QUES, Marketing Research, uses this approach by demonstrating that even very short commercials, which are now commonplace, trigger fully valid development processes. In this respect, it can be concluded that five-second commercials trigger an effective pre-figurative process. With the help of detailed descriptions of experiences, interview processes and group discussions, this process can be extended and reconstructed. QUES has thus developed a new concept that combines depth psychology and morphological approaches with new reception habits: the *Ad Pre-Figurative Test* © 2025 | QUES | Berlin (Giebel & Hinterding, publication in preparation).

1. Analytical approach: Ad Pre-Figurative Test©

The Ad Pre-Figurative Test © 2025 | QUES | Berlin was developed as part of joint projects between Giebel (QUES) and Hinterding and is used in practice for the depth psychological evaluation of ultra-short commercials. Unlike classic analyses of complete advertising narratives, the method takes a pre-design approach. The focus is on the question of which psychological development directions a commercial evokes at the beginning and how these are structured. The approach can be summarised as follows: the shorter the narrative in the commercial, the essential it becomes to have a deep psychological understanding of the underlying holistic pre-figurative to analyse the effect of the specific development direction of the object formation in the commercial in a psychologically reliable manner. The advertising impact analysis process according to the Ad Pre-Figurative Test © | QUES | Berlin is divided into four steps (see Figure 2):

- **Step 1: Brainstorming pre-design image contours for the product category underlying the commercial (category insights)**
Exploration of central associations and tensions relating to the category (follows the PWE concept)

Ad Pre-Figurative Test © 2025 | QUES | Berlin - Process

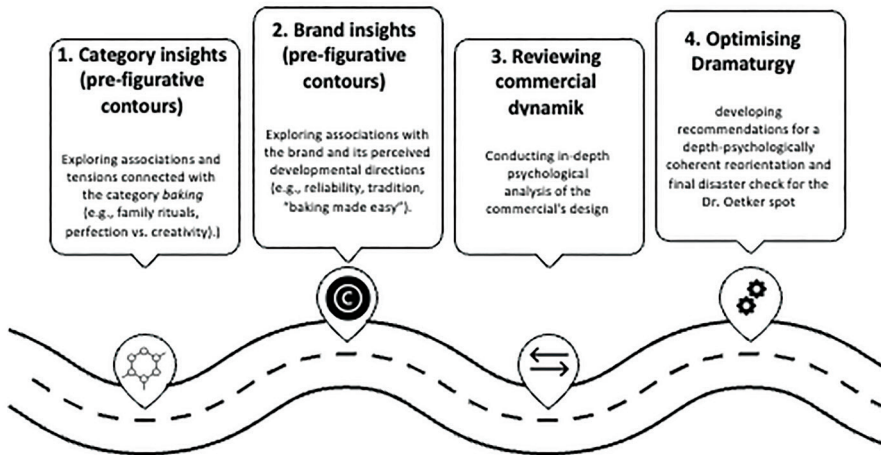


Fig. 2. AD Pre-Figurative Process - Steps of the Ad Pre-Figurative Test © 2025 | QUES | Berlin. Graphic created by the authors based on morphological advertising psychology.

- **Step 2: Brainstorming pre-designed image contours for the brand**
Exploration of key associations with the brand and its development directions (based on the BWE concept)
- **Step 3: Review of the specific development dynamics in the commercial**
In-depth psychological analysis of the dramaturgical concrete design of the preliminary image outlines
- **Step 4: Optimisation of the development dramaturgy**
Development of recommendations for a psychologically coherent reorientation and final disaster check

1. Empirical application of the Ad Pre-Figurative Test© for the spot Dr. Oetker 'Classic Muffins'

To illustrate the methodological approach, the following analysis focuses on the first second of the commercial as an example. In practical application of the Ad Pre-Figurative Test © 2025 | QUES | Berlin, however, the entire commercial is subjected to a detailed analysis. The qualitative study (N = 75) by Giebel and Hinterding (in preparation for publication) focuses on a five-second online commercial by Dr. Oetker ('Classic Muffins') that was launched in early 2025 to promote a muffin mix but is no longer available (as of June 2025). The commercial shows a woman baking muffins with a child in a bright, tidy kitchen. The child is allowed to help, there is laughter, stirring, and peeking into the oven. The mood is relaxed and positive. Baking appears to be child's play, is presented



Fig. 3. Dr. Oetker Spot: Collage of key scenes from the Dr. Oetker 'Classic Muffins' online commercial (Dr. Oetker, 2023). © Dr. Oetker. Screenshots by the authors. Used under German quotation right (§ 51 UrhG) for scientific analysis.

as a joyful ritual of family closeness and harmony – not as an overwhelming or stressful chore. Key scenes from the commercial are included in Figure 3 for illustration purposes.

According to the Ad Pre-Figurative Test © 2025 | QUES | Berlin concept, the depth psychological morphological analysis begins with an exploration of the psychological associations of the product category underlying the commercial (here: Category Insights Baking) and continues with an exploration of the psychological associations of the brand (here: Dr. Oetker). Figure 4 provides an overview of the specific procedure.

Step 1 – Brainstorming preliminary image outlines on the topic of baking

In order to understand how the short commercial psychologically addresses the topic of baking, the first step was to explore central images and associations related to baking. The depth psychological morphological analysis reveals six pre-designed and ambivalent development directions that organise and structure the experience of the baking process (see Fig. 5).

Sensual Creative Process of Making – baking as a sensually shaping act performed with one's own hands

In the experience of many people, baking is initially described as a sensory-creative process. Simple ingredients such as flour, eggs, milk and sugar are transformed into something whole through one's own actions. This activity is often

Ad Pre-Figurative Test © 2025 | QUES | Berlin - Process – Dr. Oetker

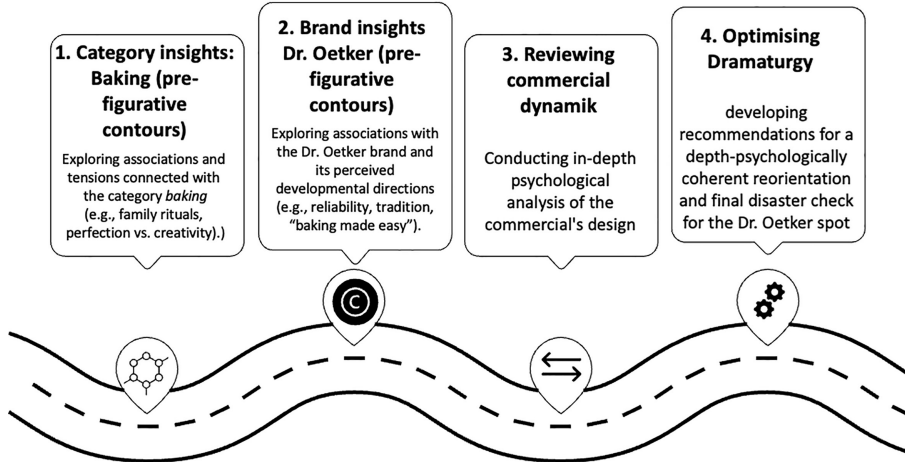


Fig. 4. Example Spot Oetker: Ad Pre-Figurative Test © 2025 | QUES | Berlin process steps, applied to the Dr. Oetker “Classic Muffins” commercial. Graphic created by the authors based on morphological advertising psychology.

Pre-figurative category insights contours of the baking process

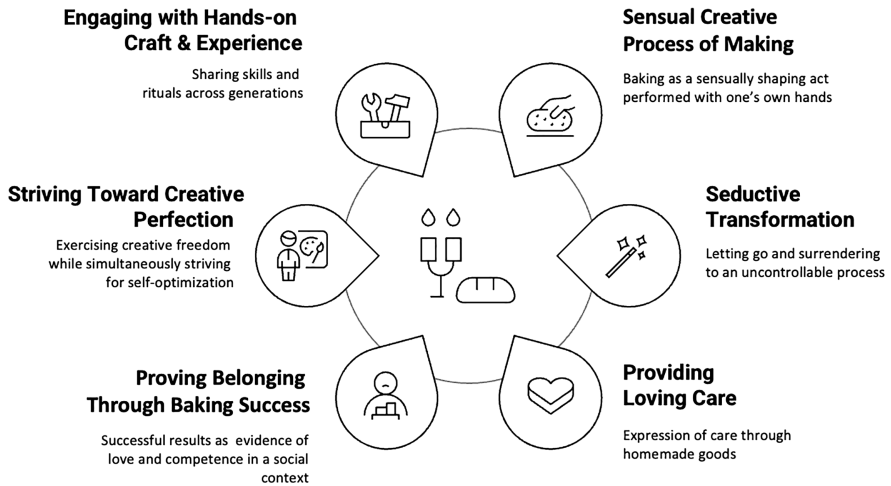


Fig. 5. Baking-Process: Developmental directions of the experience of the baking process. Graphic created by the authors. The creative process – baking as a sensory and creative activity using one's own hands.

experienced as a creative process of production – as a moment of completion that not only involves manual work, but also activates emotional meanings: memories of previous baking experiences, visions of baking with children in the future, or

the feeling of creating something just for oneself. The process thus combines both individual self-realisation and the social transmission of rituals. *“I enjoy making something just for myself[...]. As I think about the past, I wonder what it will be like when I’m standing in the kitchen with my child one day and we’re baking together” (experiential protocol, own data).* On the one hand, baking is linked to family tradition, but also to possible visions of the future. In this way, baking enables a sensual sense of completeness and, at the same time, the passing on of rituals.

Seductive transformation – letting go and surrendering to an uncontrollable process

The active production process is followed by a phase of letting go and surrendering: the dough rises, transforms, changes colour and consistency. An enticing aroma spreads through the room, creating a seductive anticipation of the cake, but also a sense of restlessness and even a certain pain at being unable to influence the process of becoming, the development process, which is constantly changing and reshaping itself. The process of making something whole has something healing about it, because even the (self-)conversations you have while baking is experienced as healing. *“Sometimes I dance around the kitchen in the smell of cake” (group discussion 1, own data).*

Providing Loving Care – expression of care through homemade goods

Baking is also experienced and described as *a loving gesture* towards oneself and/or others. Creating something with love while giving and receiving love through praise and gratitude. *“I love baking with my best friend. We could talk about everything under the sun and laugh a lot (experiential protocol, own data).” At the same time, the use of ready-made baking mixes is viewed ambivalently, as the “lightning-fast” ready-made mixes are associated with convenience but also with a lack of appreciation (taking less time). Homemade food becomes a yardstick for genuine care.*

Proving Belonging Through Baking Success – successful results as evidence of love and competence in a social context

Baking is also associated with social expectations. One’s own expectations as well as those of others. The result must be successful and look beautiful, especially when presented to others. *“If I bake a cake for someone’s birthday and it’s just eaten and no one celebrates it, then I’m disappointed” (group discussion 2, own data).* The balance between creative activity and social pressure is fragile. On the one hand, ready-made products minimise the risk of failure, but on the other hand, they are also interpreted as a betrayal of the desire for genuine attention. *“When I bake*

brownies or something with a mix and people tell me how good they taste, I always say, slightly embarrassed, 'Thanks, but I just used a mix.' It somehow devalues the end result. As if there was less love and less effort put into them" (experiential protocol, own data).

Striving Toward Creative Perfection – exercising creative freedom while simultaneously striving for self-optimization

Baking opens up space for individual expression and creative experimentation. The design possibilities are endless – they range from decorating and modifying secret recipes to inventing your own compositions. This creative diversity makes it possible to try new things, develop your skills and surpass yourself. At the same time, there is an underlying desire to continually improve your baking skills and achieve perfection. *"I decide to add chocolate sprinkles. I love the freedom to do what I feel like doing – not strictly following a recipe" (experiential protocol, own data).*

Engaging with Hands-on Craft & Experience – sharing skills and rituals across generations

Finally, a sixth development trend highlights the *need for basic (hand) tools* and experience in baking in order to achieve perfection and exercise creative freedom. Baking utensils often have nostalgic value as gifts or heirlooms from parents or grandparents. Just as recipes are passed on, methods, procedures, tools and techniques are also handed down from generation to generation. Childhood memories serve as a guide, and traditional customs are skilfully implemented with perseverance and patience, depending on individual talent. *"It took me a whole afternoon to make the three-tiered cake with homemade marzipan elephants on top, and I had to prove all my skills" (group discussion 1, own data).*

These six psychological developmental trends are pre-designed as soon as the whole concept of baking is invoked. The question remains as to which developmental trend the dramaturgy of the commercial picks up on and how it is developed.

Step 2 – Brainstorming pre-figurative image contours on the topic of 'brand'

In the second step, the pre-designed image contours of the Dr. Oetker brand were explored in order to reveal the pre-designed developmental directions of the brand experience. Here, too, it becomes apparent that the psychological experience of the brand is already shaped by different developmental directions that structure the field – even before the specific advertisement is received. The Dr. Oetker brand evokes six development directions that determine its impact in everyday life, either consciously or unconsciously (see Figure 6).

Pre-figurative Image Contours – Brand Dr. Oetker

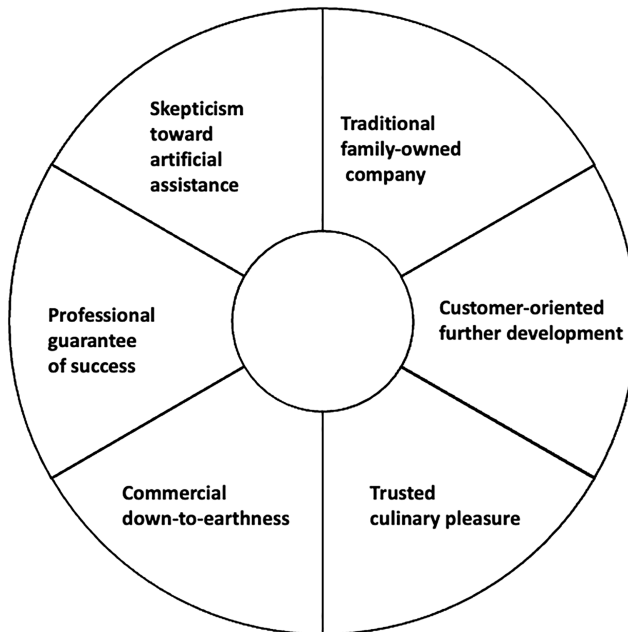


Fig. 6. Prefigurative Image Contours: Prefigurative image contours, illustrated with examples from the Dr. Oetker “Classic Muffins” commercial. Graphic created by the authors.

Traditional family business – rooted in a cross-generational baking culture

The *first development direction* shows Dr. Oetker as a *traditional family business* that stands for baking experience spanning generations. Traditional recipes and familiar rituals are passed down from grandparents to parents and children – the company lives this baking tradition as part of its identity.

This passing on is described as a cross-generational cycle, which is also symbolically reflected in the brand’s logo. However, there is also a risk that the brand will latch on too strongly or too weakly to these traditional values in its presentation and fail to think ahead. Consistency can create trust, but it also carries the risk of the brand becoming too stuck in the past. *“They’ve definitely been around for decades. I can still remember adverts from my childhood that were shown on TV. They’re a traditional company that has long been known for its good quality” (experiential protocol, own data).*

Customer-oriented development – between adapting to modern realities and potentially losing the brand essence

Dr. Oetker’s brand image is evolving, with changes geared to both new and existing customers. The brand answers the changing lives of modern working women with

easy-to-prepare, time-saving, convenient products. Its long success reflects consistent customer focus, yet there is a risk of losing its core values. “Dr. Oetker always moves with the times and its customers’ needs” (group discussions 2, own data).

Trusted culinary pleasure – discerning foodies: quality promise as an emotional anchor

Dr. Oetker stands for high quality standards – the products should taste good and turn out well. Especially in the world of ready-made baking products, the brand is a guarantee that the results will taste good despite the minimal effort required. This proven quality promise includes a guarantee that the products will turn out well. “*Dr. Oetker shows the end result directly on the packaging. So there are no surprises if you follow all the steps and instructions for preparation – the consumer is not disappointed in the end*” (experiential protocol, own data).

Commercial down-to-earthness – between everyday relevance and a lack of exclusivity

As the mass market leader, the Dr. Oetker brand dominates the baking market, followed only by discount brands in terms of consumer experience. The widespread presence and establishment of the Dr. Oetker brand in all supermarkets nationwide and internationally has been learned and recognised for generations. However, it is precisely this presence that causes the Dr. Oetker brand and its products to slip into something suitable for the masses, losing the glamour and love of homemade baking. “*You can’t offer your own family baking mixes*” (group discussion 1, own data).

Professional guarantee of success – the brand as insurance against failure

In this development of the Dr. Oetker brand image, the title “Dr.” acts as an anchor of trust: it suggests professional competence, tested quality, and perfect results. (Dr. Oetker is a long-established German baking brand whose name includes the academic title “Dr.”) In users’ experience, the “Dr.” stands for high quality, safety, and control, and serves as a psychological seal of approval that cushions any uncertainties when using ready-made products. “It makes up for laziness. It’s a bit like buying a quality sticker with the Dr. Oetker packet that you can stick on your baked goods. It’s a ready-made baking mix, but at least it’s from Dr. Oetker” (experiential protocol, own data). This broad perception of competence is gratefully accepted, as it confirms the baker’s skill and secures praise and admiration – even if only within narrow limits.

Skepticism toward artificial assistance – between convenience and unease

This development of the Dr. Oetker brand image highlights a growing unease with artificial support. This reveals the downside of perfect success, as ingredients

are perceived as artificial, which can trigger uncertainty and even fear. *“Ultimately, you don’t know what chemicals are in there or how much”* (group discussion 1, own data). And as bakers, people admit that they don’t make everything themselves after all. *“It’s like buying ready meals and saying you’ve cooked”* (group discussion 2, own data). However, if the preparation fails, it is easy to blame the baking mix. *“Once, a cake from Dr. Oetker didn’t work when I baked it, but there must have been something wrong with the packaging, because the instructions are foolproof”* (group discussion 1, own data). The pre-design development direction of the experience of ‘baking’ and the Dr. Oetker brand image form the psychological starting point, which is addressed and further developed by the concrete images in the commercial. In step 3, we analyse which of these development directions are activated in the commercial, how they are staged – and whether this results in a credible solution or a disappointment of emotional expectations.

Step 3: Staging in the commercial – activated pre-existing image contours and psychological dynamics

In a third step, the development process of the short commercial is explored based on the first image in order to examine the specific psychological development directions of the staging of baking and the Dr. Oetker brand, i.e. to examine the specific development direction of the pre-designed image contours.

The following psychological questions arise for the analysis:

- Which developmental directions are dramatized and staged in the commercial regarding baking?
- What promises and limitations are associated with this specific form of staging?
- What solutions does the brand offer for the psychological tensions inherent in the direction of development of the staging in the commercial?
- Based on the pre-designed image contours, is a concise final form achieved in the respective direction of development, or does a morpholysis emerge in terms of actual genetics as emotional dissolution, emptiness and disappointment?

The baking mix shown in the first scene of the commercial (child holding a ready-made muffin mix to his mother) immediately picks up on something prefabricated, not homemade, which is associated with practicality, time savings and a quick guarantee of success, but not with loving attention and genuine care. The flip side of the ideal image of baking is evoked and dramatized in the very first frame of the short commercial. *“It’s a strange gift. Instead of giving her mother ready-made muffins, she has to bake them herself. The father and daughter could have done that in advance. The idea that the mother has to take care of her ‘birthday cake’ all by herself makes me a little sad”* (experiential protocol, own data). This lack of

appreciation is reinforced by the child, who has to hand the woman (*“is that the mother?”* group discussion 2, own data) the packet of three birthday candles to remind her of (his) birthday. *“Did the woman/mother forget the child’s birthday?”* (group discussion 1, own data). The exploration raises more questions and reveals more neglectful qualities than the creative process of baking or the loving attention involved in baking can offer as psychological developments. The Dr. Oetker brand image also suffers immediate devaluation. *“You can’t offer your own family baking mixes. Or is that the nanny?”* (Group discussion 1). *“Because if I really want to show someone my love by baking, I don’t use baking mixes”* (group discussion 2). The short commercial shows the flip side of baking: it evokes a pre-existing situation of modern parents who want to create closeness in their hectic everyday lives – and are torn between genuine care and feigned family harmony. *“Not only does the question arise as to why women are always depicted in advertisements for baked goods, but also why the mood is bombastic the whole time. The mother and son can hardly contain their laughter, and I wonder whether the good mood isn’t included in the plastic bag of ready-made dough”* (experiential protocol, own data).

Even a psychological analysis of the very first image (first second) of both the specific developmental direction of the pre-figurative image contours of the category insight “baking” and the pre-figurative image contours of the Dr. Oetker brand image clearly shows how immediately the flip sides of wholes can be evoked.

Disaster check: The following pain points are activated throughout the entire commercial

- The opening scene shows too little love; instead, qualities such as lovelessness and neglect unfold.
- The entire staging of the baking process shows too little creative flair and care, for example in the way the individual ingredients are added, which is not reminiscent of a baking mix.
- The baking process in the oven, the cake rising, is staged too quickly, which again minimises the sense of care and once more allows qualities of haste and neglect to emerge.

Optimisation of the dramaturgy – recommendation for a psychologically appropriate advertising effect

Embed the creative production process, the process of creation and the scene of enjoyment

- i.e. the opening scene is particularly important so that the specific development of loving care and the creative process can begin
- Show the process of becoming instead of the scene in which the baking tray is held in the hand

- Then align and accentuate the caring and creative qualities as a direction of development towards a scene of enjoyment, which culminates in the final form of the baking mix at the end of the commercial.

These recommendations for optimisation are not just about making cosmetic changes to the ad; they go deeper, addressing the necessary creative shift towards a psychologically sound dramaturgy that activates emotional development rather than blocking it. At a time when AI-generated advertising material is becoming increasingly shorter, more condensed and more automated, the careful staging of opening scenes and transitions is becoming increasingly important. Only if these are dramaturgically coherent can advertising touch the soul – and not just be visible.

Based on the analysis of the pre-figurative wholes, it is recommended, for example, to start with image 2 (kitchen, mother and child baking together) of the commercial as the direction of development in the commercial to bring the ideal aspects of baking to life. In this way, the ideal side of baking as a creative process is brought to life with loving attention and a tempting transformation, which can be further enhanced by creative perfection (e.g. the child decorating the muffins themselves). And then, at the end of the (short) commercial, the Dr. Oetker baking mix package is shown as the final image, representing a psychological solution between successful care in the hustle and bustle of everyday life without sacrificing the ideal aspects of baking. Only by analysing the pre-figurative image contours of baking and the pre-figurative image contours of the Dr. Oetker brand image using the Ad Pre-Figurative Test © 2025 | QUES | Berlin is it possible to achieve a psychologically accurate assessment of a short commercial after just a few seconds

Conclusion: the shorter the narrative in the commercial (e.g. a five-second sequence), the higher the risk of psychological morpholysis if the psychological field of the advertising effect is not understood in advance.

The Ad Pre-Figurative Test © 2025 | QUES | Berlin can also be used as a disaster check tool, especially when creative processes are delegated to AI. The rapid implementation of creative processes by artificial intelligence requires professional psychological analysis to ensure a psychologically coherent dramaturgy that is truly effective.

1. Discussion: Advertising impact begins in the emotional field – not in the storyboard

The analysis of the Dr. Oetker commercial illustrates that advertising does not encounter a neutral audience, but rather a psychologically charged field – pre-figurative wholes in which atmospheres, tensions, memories and cultural patterns of

interpretation are interwoven. Advertising does not work through simple stimulus-response mechanisms, but by picking up on, shaping or even missing these inner fields of tension. Baking as a cultural activity activates specific psychological developments: creative design, loving care, but also pressure to perform, self-assurance and family rituals. In this context, the Dr. Oetker brand is not perceived as neutral, but as a psychologically coded entity that can trigger both security and alienation – depending on how it relates to the emotional significance of baking.

The study shows that even in the first few images of a commercial, it can be determined whether advertising will connect emotionally or trigger disappointment, emptiness or even irritation. In ultra-short commercials, the first image often determines whether psychodynamic processes unfold or are blocked. Pre-design analysis reveals where advertising connects, where it falls short, and how these processes can be influenced through design. It also shows where advertising aligns well with expectations and where it unintentionally evokes ambivalence that undermines trust in the product or brand.

In the age of AI-generated content, this approach is becoming increasingly urgent. AI can access data patterns, replicate prototypical narrative sequences and generate aesthetically appealing images. But it does not understand the psychological field it is addressing. Its spots are formally coherent, but often emotionally empty. A psychological analysis of the advertising impact must therefore not be evaluated retrospectively but must be considered at an early stage in the design process.

Advertising, whether it uses AI or not, therefore needs psychological expertise even more in the new forms of advertising and reception: not only for evaluation after the fact, but already in the design process. A new kind of deep psychological-morphological executive competence is needed in advertising design – one that thinks atmospherically, recognises tensions, develops forms tentatively and focuses not only on target groups but also on emotional states.

Advertising research based on pre-figurative wholes from QUES' Ad Pre-Figurative Test © 2025 | QUES | Berlin opens a precise, psychologically and morphologically sound set of tools that goes beyond traditional impact research. It makes advertising not only more effective, but also more responsible – because it approaches the emotional space of the recipient with formative prudence and creative intent. Only when advertising enters the psychological space with psychological care, reflection and depth can it not only sell, but also truly touch the soul. The test can be used in the early stages of concept development, such as when reviewing initial storyboards, selecting opening scenes or revising AI-generated content. In this way, psychological impact is not only measured retrospectively, but designed in advance. In this way, advertising design becomes a psychological activity in the best sense of the word: meaningful, differentiated and touching.

Acknowledgements

The reproduced advertising stills (Coca-Cola, Deutsche Telekom, Dr. Oetker) are used exclusively for non-commercial scientific analysis within this article. Their inclusion serves as quotation under §51 UrhG (German Copyright Act) for academic purposes. All copyrights remain with the respective rights holders.

Zusammenfassung

Werbung entfaltet sich heute weniger in geschlossenen Dramaturgien als in fragmentierten, algorithmisch erzeugten Medienflüssen. Dieser Beitrag versteht Werbewirkung als psychodynamischen Prozess von Spannung, Gegenstandsbildung und Auflösung, im Anschluss an die Feldtheorie Kurt Lewins, die Gestaltkonzeption Friedrich Sanders und die morphologische Psychologie Wilhelm Salbers. Wir zeigen, dass Werbung dann wirksam ist, wenn sie Vorgestalten aufnimmt und in tragfähige symbolische Gestalten überführt. Aufbauend darauf stellen wir den Ad Pre-Figurative Test © 2025 | QUES | Berlin vor, ein in der Praxis entwickeltes Verfahren zur Analyse ultrakurzer Werbespots. Anhand von Fallbeispielen (Coca-Cola, Deutsche Telekom, Dr. Oetker) wird deutlich, wie Werbung entweder kohärente Gestaltbildung ermöglicht oder in Morpholyse mündet, wenn Spannungen ungelöst bleiben. Gerade in KI-generierten Formaten zeigt sich, dass die Eingangsbilder entscheidend für die psychologische Wirkung sind. Die Vorgestaltanalyse bietet damit ein Instrument für die frühe Konzeptprüfung, um Werbung nicht nur informativ, sondern auch resonanzfähig und sinnstiftend zu gestalten.

Schlüsselwörter: Gestalttheorie, Morphologische Psychologie, Werbewirkung, KI-generierte Werbung, Ad Pre-Figurative Test © 2025 | QUES | Berlin

Summary

Advertising today unfolds less in closed dramaturgies than in fragmented, algorithmically generated media flows. This article conceptualizes advertising impact as a psychodynamic process of tension, object formation and resolution, drawing on Kurt Lewin's field theory, Friedrich Sander's Gestalt concept and Wilhelm Salber's morphological psychology. We show that advertising is effective when it addresses pre-figurative forms and transforms them into viable symbolic Gestalts. Building on this, we introduce the Ad Pre-Figurative Test © 2025 | QUES | Berlin, a method developed in practice for the analysis of ultra-short commercials. Case studies (Coca-Cola, Deutsche Telekom, Dr. Oetker) illustrate how advertising can either foster coherent object formation or result in morpholysis when tensions remain unresolved. Especially in AI-generated formats, the opening images prove decisive for psychological impact. Pre-figurative analysis thus provides an instrument for early concept testing, enabling advertising to be not only informative but also resonant and meaningful.

Keywords: Gestalt theory, Morphological psychology, Advertising impact, AI-generated advertising, Ad Pre-Figurative Test © 2025 | QUES | Berlin

Literature

- Coca-Cola (1991). *Coca-Cola commercial starring Matt LeBlanc* [Video]. Retrieved June 3, 2025, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bgqm0lz6xx8>
- Deutsche Telekom AG. (2023). *Ella* [Photograph]. © Deutsche Telekom. Retrieved September 21, 2025, from <https://www.telekom.com/de/konzern/details/share-with-care-1041638>
- Dr. Oetker. (n.d.). *Classic Muffins* [Online commercial; no longer publicly available]. Dr. Oetker GmbH.
- eye square GmbH. (2022). *Fast, bold, beautiful – Successful ads in social media* [White paper]. Retrieved June 3, 2025, from <https://www.eye-square.com/en/whitepaper-fast-bold-beautiful/>
- Fitzek, H. (2008). *Inhalt und Form von Ausdrucksbildungen als Zugangswege zur seelischen Wirklichkeit: Ein Vergleich von Inhaltsanalyse und Morphologie als Methodenkonzepte der qualitativen Sozialforschung*. Pabst Science Publishers.
- Giebel, S., & Hinterding, S. (in preparation). *Ad Pre-Design Test©: Tiefenpsychologische Analyse ultrakurzer Werbespots* [Unpublished manuscript].
- Hinterding, S., & Hanisch, N. (in press). Generation Alpha and the power of algorithms: When TikTok knows you better than you know yourself. In K. Bodrožić-Brnić, V. Schulte, & T. Thiessen (Eds.), *Responsible entrepreneurship – Competencies in the age of digital transformation*. Springer Nature.
- Kreutzer, R. T., & Klose, S. (2025). *Praxisorientiertes Online-Marketing: Konzepte – Instrumente – Checklisten* (5th ed.). Springer Gabler.
- Kodlin, J. (2024). *Qualitative Werbemittelanalyse der Telekom: Werbekampagne „Nachricht von Ella – Without Consent“ aus der Perspektive von Eltern der Generation Z* [Unpublished bachelor's thesis]. BSP Business & Law School.
- Lewin, K. (1963). Formalisierung und Fortschritt in der Psychologie. In *Feldtheorie in den Sozialwissenschaften* (pp. 47–73). Huber. (Original work published 1940)
- Lewin, K. (1963). Feldtheorie und Phasenraum. In *Feldtheorie in den Sozialwissenschaften* (pp. 86–101). Huber. (Original work published 1943)
- Lewin, K. (1963). Konstrukte in der Feldtheorie: Qualität und Quantität in der Psychologie. In *Feldtheorie in den Sozialwissenschaften* (pp. 74–85). Huber. (Original work published 1944)
- Melchers, C., Kretz, K., & Rudolf, E.-J. (1997). *Jenseits der Schere: Aktuelle Verfahren der Werbeforschung*. Deutscher Fachverlag.
- Rimscha, M. B., Ehrlich, G. L., & Siegert, G. (2025). *Medienökonomie – Eine Einführung mit Leitfragen*. Springer VS.
- Salber, W. (1959). Sind Ganzheiten praktisch? *Zeitschrift für experimentelle und angewandte Psychologie*, 6, 645–659.
- Salber, W. (1965). *Morphologie des seelischen Geschehens*. Henn.
- Salber, W. (1969). Drei Abhandlungen von Friedrich Sander aus dem Jahre 1967. *Archiv für die gesamte Psychologie*, 121, 123–130.
- Salber, W. (1971). Psychologie und Werbung. In *Der Beruf des Werbefachmanns in der veränderten Welt von morgen* (pp. 1–7). Reprint available at <https://zwischenstritte.de/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Psychologie-und-Werbung.pdf>
- Salber, W. (1994). *Medien-Wirkung*. [Lecture presented at the Cologne Academy for Market and Media Psychology, January 20, 1994; [Unpublished manuscript].
- Salber, W. (1995). *Wirkungsanalyse*. Bonn, Bouvier-Verlag.
- Sander, F. (1962). Experimentelle Ergebnisse der Gestaltpsychologie. In F. Sander & H. Volkelt (Eds.), *Ganzheitspsychologie* (pp. 73–112). Beck. (Original work published 1927)
- Sander, F. (1962). Gestaltwerdung und Gestaltzerfall. In F. Sander & H. Volkelt (Eds.), *Ganzheitspsychologie* (pp. 113–117). Beck. (Original work published 1940)
- Schneider, G. (2024). Wie Medien und Marken voice cloning für sich nutzen können. *HORIZONT*. Retrieved June 3, 2025, from <https://www.horizont.net/medien/nachrichten/ki-trend-wie-medien-und-marken-voice-cloning-fuer-sich-nutzen-koennen-219110>
- Ziatdinov, R., & Cilliers, J. (2022). Generation Alpha: Understanding the next cohort of university students. *European Journal of Contemporary Education*, 10(3), 783–789.
- Zwingmann, B. (2021, May 19). Einige Aspekte der morphologischen Medienpsychologie [Conference presentation]. *Zwischenstritte* lecture series, BSP Business & Law School.

Dr. Sven Giebel (1971): Research Associate at BSP Business & Law School. Depth-psychological researcher and consultant with over 30 years in market and media research. Founder of QUES, specializing in consumer culture, symbolic storytelling, and social transformation. He integrates academic teaching with applied professional practice with a focus on morphological psychology / qualitative methods in the fields of marketing and market and consumer psychology.

Korrespondenzadresse: BSP Business & Law School / Campus Hamburg, Am Kaiserkai 1, 20457 Hamburg

E-mail: sven.giebel@bsp-campus-hamburg.de

ORCID: 0009-0005-0503-2874

Prof. Dr. Susan Hinterding (1972): Professor of Business Psychology at BSP Business & Law School. She combines teaching, research and practice with a focus on morphological psychology, qualitative methods, and the analysis of consumer behavior, brands, and digital trends including AI and social media marketing.

E-mail: susan.hinterding@bsp-campus-hamburg.de

ORCID: 0009-0009-3101-1822