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Pictorial and multimodal metaphors of DISTRUST in subverted BP logos from Greenpeace's 'Behind the logo' competition[1]

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Trust is a valuable relational asset for companies. A high level of public trust can bring a number of benefits to business organizations, including increased customer satisfaction, higher investor confidence, and fewer regulatory restrictions (Barney and Hansen, 1994; García-Marzá, 2005; Ingenhoff and Sommer, 2010; Pirson and Malhotra, 2011). But trust is also a fragile commodity; it takes a long time to build, but just moments to destroy. Episodes of wrongdoing or negligence can generate distrust in a company. Recent history has provided a number of such examples – from Enron and WorldCom in the early 2000s to the more recent BP, FIFA and Volkswagen controversies.

What happens when trust is broken? How do we perceive and understand trust-breaking events? How do we communicate distrust? This paper is part of a larger project that investigates the cognitive underpinnings and discursive dynamics of TRUST and DISTRUST, which are still poorly understood (Fuoli and Paradis, 2014). It examines the pictorial and multimodal metaphors (Forceville 1996, 2002; Forceville and Urios-Aparisi, 2009) used by participants in the 'Behind the logo' rebranding competition launched online by Greenpeace in the aftermath of BP's Gulf of Mexico oil spill of 2010[2]. As part of the competition, participants were asked to re-design BP's sunflower logo to reflect what they thought are the 'real' values and principles guiding the company's behavior. The result is a collection of culture-jammed or 'subverted' logos (see e.g. Harold, 2007; Kukuk, 2014; Rumbo, 2002) that capture the widespread feelings of distrust and resentment towards BP after the spill and the controversies that arose from it.

The analysis aims to (i) identify and describe the pictorial and multimodal metaphors found in the subverted logos that relate to the concept of DISTRUST, and (ii) uncover regularities in how this construct is conceptualized and understood by the participants in the competition. The identification and analysis of the metaphors follows the criteria outlined by Forceville (1996, 2002). Preliminary results reveal consistent patterns in the way that DISTRUST in BP is conceptualized and expressed, and in how the company portrayed. Common pictorial metaphors found in the corpus include TRUST IS A FRAGILE OBJECT, BEING UNTRUSTWORTHY IS BEING DOUBLE-SIDED, BEING UNTRUSTWORTHY IS HIDING SOMETHING, and UNETHICAL IS DIRTY.

In addition to advancing our understanding of the cognitive and discursive dynamics of TRUST and DISTRUST, this paper adds to the literature on pictorial and multimodal metaphor by examining the phenomenon of subvertising, which, to date, has not been systematically investigated.

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[2] URL: http://www.greenpeace.org.uk/files/tarsands/logo-competition.html

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