

## THEORETICAL CONCEPTUALIZATION OF SEMIOTIC MESSAGES IN ADVERTISING

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – This article proposes to overview theoretical fundamentals of symbols, signs and, the use of the semiotics analysis method in advertising. An additional aim is to identify visually how these messages of signs and symbols affect consumer behaviour.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This study adopts a literature review and historical overview and an advertising review with visual examples as its research methodology.

**Finding** – Until recently, the semiotic method which is based on a knowledge of semiotics and the theory of advertising has been forgotten. It is hard to find new scientific articles and scientific discussions. Therefore, this theoretical overview is needed for the marketers and consumers in order to find out the semiotic method from the new perspective.

**Research limitations/implications** – Theoretical approach most recently requires empirical investigations in order to prove literature review and fulfil the gap in exposed printed adverts, which will come in the further studies.

**Practical implications** – The proposed conceptual framework provides marketing strategists with a template for a different approach to advertising contents' which success depends on semiotic method and codes revealed in printed advertisings. Gives two-way perspectives for advertising one as marketing tool and the other as communication processes perspective.

**Originality/Value** -- The novelty lies not in the acquainted use of semiotics in advertising but in the carefully orchestrated construction of gazes, angles, representations, narratives and interpretations characteristic of semiotic use in advertising in which has a tremendous influence to consumer buying behaviour.

**Keywords:** advertising, semiotics, symbols, signs, consumer behaviour.

**Research type:** general overview.

### Introduction

Advertising has become the 'art of the modern world' (Danesi, 2004, 273). In all kind of social media, printed or electronical, exists a complex network of written text supplemented non-linguistic images or elements, deliberate as comprehensible objects (mostly visual then verbal) (Kress and Leeuwen 2016). Advertising is the dominant force it suggests noticeable "answers" by giving ideas and goods, it pledge the hope of more wealth, better jobs, security against the risks of illnesses and aging, better health, personal reputation, erotic stimulus, admiration from others, better wellbeing, social improvement and satisfaction, better look, emotional confidence and many others. The success of the methods used to stimulate purchase remembrance is restricted only by the cleverness of the provider, several networks

of communications used to broadcast commodity identification, by specific authorised boundaries in situations where the advertising messages are provided, and by standards introduced by the industry of advertising. Moreover, by the using signs and symbols in order to separate independent opinion by consuming semiotics as the study of signs, which was tremendously dominant method in order to comprehend images, sound and words developed in XX century and continuously using in present time.

In that respect, the presentation of semiotics in human's daily life and the fact that human made signs were important for communication began quite early, researchers of semiotics agree that it is possible to recognize them quite early in the works of Aristotle and The Stoics, later by St. Augustine, who suggested that every sign in human life exists and implicit interpretative dimension that constrains its meaning, and it is consisted with hermeneutic tradition (the study of interpretation of ancient texts, mostly religious or mythical) and today its considered as a part of semiotics (how all kind of "something that stands for something else" referring to sign as signifier perceptible by senses and signified – as the idea, object, event to which sign refers.

### **Semiotics as a tool to advertising – theoretical revision**

The interest in the signs is not a new phenomenon, yet Aristotle, Hippocrates, Locke, and many others (the philosophers we have already mentioned) have contributed to semiotics. The epistemological meaning of the term "semiotics" derives from the Greek word "sema" (sign, mark). Defined as the science of sign doctrine, Locke (1696) was the first to use the Greek word 'semeiootikee' in the modern sense (Cassidy, 1982). Contemporary semiotics emerged thanks to two linguistic theorists, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and the American philosopher Charles Saunders Peirce (1839-1914). These two philosophers have inspired Charles Morris, Thomas Sebeok, Umberto Eco and also Roland Barthes, among many others. The Saussure sign consists of two components: a signifier or "audio image" and a signifier or "concept". The relationship between "signifier" and signified is self-serving. He used the term "semiology" to refer to the systematic study of signs and nowadays we use "semiotics" (Eco, 1976).

Semiotics is a sign science, as well as some form of scientific research exploring everything, we do by using the imaginary world around us. Semiotics or semiology is seen as a subject, movement, philosophy or science, often a meta-analytic tool used in philosophy, anthropology, sociology and linguistics (Cassidy, 1982), the study of signs in advertising as affecting purchasing habits is a relatively new perspective. Semiotics investigates every sign, icon, or symbol, from traffic lights to charts, graphics in a newspaper, advertising to icons on web pages (Danesi, 1994, Rossolatos, 2018).

In the field of marketing the first dissertation in regard to semiotics was by Holman's (1976) in his thesis named "Clothing as Communication: an empirical investigation". Where he had studied the role of purpose in marketplace undertakings such as branding, packing, advertising and trade is meaningful for market researchers and marketers (Mick 1986; Oswald & Mick, 2006). Therefore, marketing semiotics studies mostly are related to culture and consumer behaviour than goods and profit itself (Oswald, 2015). Unlike other predictable studies, semiotics gives special investigation that indicates not only for revealing the cultural characters of some products, but also helps to brands to create culture. Consequently, semiotics is used for a variety of marketing actions from brand strategy, planning to creative development (Berger, 2014)

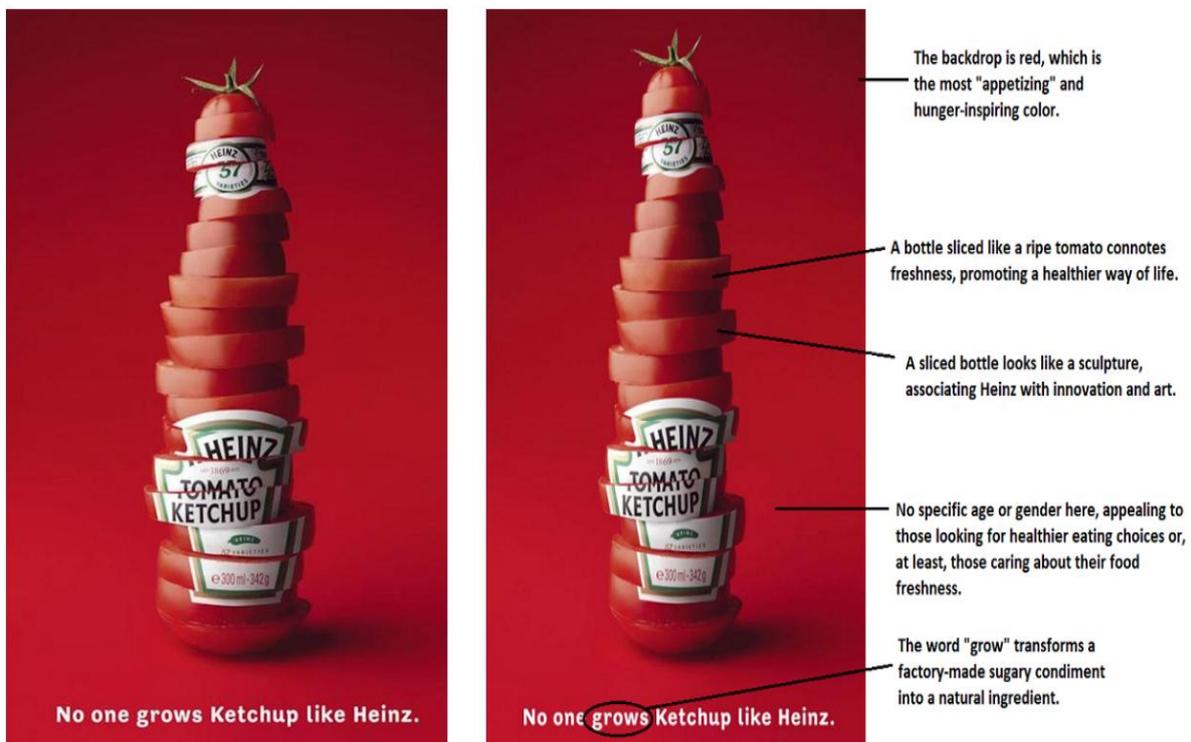
Therefore, Barthes (1977) intention was to demonstrate cultural meaning of advertising which is hidden in the production of signs as well as the use of imagistic tricks of advertising.

Here, Botterill arguments that by using connotations advertising, gives consumers what they try to be or to accomplish (Botterill et al., 2000, 72). One of the quite foundations is that consumers are not reading images if the verbal text that accompany them are not paying attention to the expressed text without reference to the associated image (Goddard, 2005, 13).

Semiotics could be used as a metalanguage to define human purpose since people use signs in order to communicate. Signs may have different meanings, differing from the culture it emerges for example – a gesture (Semetsky 2007, 180). The thumbs-up sign in most European and American cultures means refers to positive agreement. Although, the same sign in Islamic and Asian countries means rude and offensive gesture. As so in Australia, it could refer to positive agreement but if one moves it up and down it is considered a serious insult (Padmavat, 2013, 7).

In the age of the consumption, marketers prescribe and describe social culture in the way they communicate. The signs used in advertising communication have more than one meaning and the marketing message (implied marketing message) is the result of the “conversation” with the intended audience. The meaning ascribed to these signs is thus not fixed but negotiated between the brand owners and the intended target audience. The audience has to be actively involved to arrive at a plausible or implied marketing message.

Written advertisings are best illustrated via accompanying images (Goddard, 2005, 31) As the examples (Picture 1 demonstrated below, the semiotic analyse has been used in order to decode and understand the real message delivered to the consumer. Recent times, most of the famous brands likes to address intelligent messages as well with the help of semiotics and in these two examples it is also very obvious. In the message advertisers are using semiotics and socially acceptable and recognizable explanations and so they do that in very detailed manner.



**Picture 1. No one grows Ketchup like Heinz. Real advertising and semiotic analysis in the same Heinz advert**

The bottle of ketchup demonstrated as the icon of a sliced tomato is a signifier of health and freshness. The line in bottom of the advertising also signifies this “freshness” as implies the ketchup as being “grown”. The decision to colour background in a red intends to show that a Ketchup is a symbol itself. At least, the line, which states “no one grows Ketchup like Heinz” transmits the message and image of health and freshness that is implied.

Generally, symbolic dominance is based on the idea that objects acquire symbolic meaning from the social interaction that people have with other individuals and organizations in society (directly or not). They create social meanings through which actions defining society or culture are formed. Historically, social images were symbolic imaginary: ensembles of typical symbolic forms, socially diffused – rites, rituals, myths, religious systems and their images.

Meanwhile, in today's society and in the pulsating market, there are specific products encoded in symbolism, such as medals, diplomas, or engagement rings. They show a commitment to faith, achievement, or compromise in order to prove more pragmatic and interpreted patterns of consumer behaviour as symbolic consumption (Zang and Kim, 2013).

Theoretical analysis confirms that each model is based on certain spacing variables. Nevertheless, some assumptions are understood as specific forms of social direction and used as symbols. The most common misunderstanding with symbols is the ambiguity between appearance and content. The symbol represents the inner opposition, which is expressed. The main function of a symbol is to provide an opportunity to express itself. A symbol always seems to have an excess of meaning beyond what it directly reveals, besides the best involvement of a symbol can be determined in the consumer buying process and influencing their purchasing decisions (van Niekerk, 2018).

The modern consumer market has been evolved as a network of symbols and signs which is based on an interdisciplinary approach in order to create a brand image (brand, logos, icon) based on consumer perception. Marketers construct and deconstruct signs and symbols for the purpose to create a positive image and give a satisfaction by motivating to purchase. Signs and symbols can be treated as personal and interpersonal taxonomies. Advertising is given the space to manipulate consumers' perception and behaviour. Each advertisement is like a document that reflects culture and has a cultural shadow that users can use to represent themselves. These symbolic and iconic representations of communication are ritualized acts through the dimensions of cultural values. The semiotic brand exploration focuses on the ability of brands to communicate and to create the meaning. The brand enables the consumer not only to recognize certain products and services but also to distinguish them from others, as well as to associate them with cultural and emotional (connotative) meanings. Thus, brand awareness comes from symbolic consumption, which emphasizes the role of products and services by conveying the social and emotional benefits of consumption that can meet consumers' needs, such as love, satisfaction and self-image sometimes even spiritual needs in the product or advertising (Oswald, 2012).

When we think about advertising, we usually think of it as an invasion of urban spaces - posters, signboards, and visual associations that penetrate our personal spaces and lives. Most print advertisings have a strong tendency to fill their space as much as possible that could spread the commercial message as loudly as possible. Semiotics in marketing helps improve the communication potential of brand and thus reach more effectively by the widest possible audience, such as colour effects, logic play or even intelligent messages for an already confident audience who wants to recognize the message being sent to their consciousness.

Advertising strategists are not just ideologists, manipulators, but also the programmers. The main task of such programming is to plan the sequences of effects that advertising will have on the target audience. The main purpose of advertising is to make the users to mislead,

to surprise and to notice. As a tool, semiotics serves this purpose well, the advantage of the semiotic approach already discussed - hiding under the signs what is obvious, important, emphasized.

Recently, one of the most relevant kind of advertisings is socially responsible one, which is not intended to wake the consumer to consume, but otherwise, in this case, to be more sustainable, to belong to a new category of people depending on vegan, zero waste, natural, eco, green or local – they are inviting a costumer to become the saviour of the greener world. The most important things is to demonstrate your achievements to all the world via social media and try to influence others to follow this ways of life as much as possible.

The implications of reusing the meanings of signs in advertising through social networks are divided into several stages of presentation. In the first step, the meaning of the sign is presented as a whole that any user could understand. It can be called a “direct interpreter” (Picture 2).



**Picture 2. MacDonal’s advertising with the symbolic meaning of Wi-Fi made from French fries and Supermarket Coop promotes healthy eating with the symbol of lungs**

In the second stage, the sign has some effect on the translator. In addition, a person uses mental capacity and behavioural intentions based on the sign. In this case, the mental process of the user is called a dynamic interpreter. Based on the stages, consumers perceive and experience advertising. The final stage refers to how the sign portrays itself as relating to an object. In this way, by "unintentionally", joining mass culture, levelling with things, they become one of the meanings to our existence (Picture 3.)



**Picture 3. Fingerprints as symbolic meaning to touchscreens in MacDonald's restaurants and lungs made from sneakers by Nike**

This hegemonic action now, encoded through signs and symbols in advertising, we call it a form of discourse, in the sense that it has influenced not only the structure and lifestyle of the language, but also the exchange of the content of routine daily communication actions, influencers, who can exemplify what's right.

Perception comes even through some semantic slogans like *Pepsi*, which called to join a new generation – this term of communication understood only by those who were in that generation back then therefore now it is a meaningless phrase since no one would want to join the *Pepsi* generation if it there is no known "opinion-maker" (famous influencer) or unless it contains sugar- free, the packaging is non plastic or self-adhesive, and the company itself supports some kind of charity or NGO. Otherwise, no one would want to belong to a generation of such company today. So, new generation back then, it is an old generation with no meaning today.

Lotman's (2002) and later his idea was followed by marketing semiotician Rossolatos (2018), who state that human communication is regulated by cultural textuality, which makes it noticeable in dialogue by exchanging information between people, but it is influenced not only by time but also by signs and symbols of that time, despite how they are expressed – on a graffiti wall, in television commercial, or by social media provided celebrity influencer. This texture gives a sense of routine wholeness and unity between everyday communication and the importance of the personality (Rossolatos, 2018).

Semiotics have an impact on brands (and their improvement) and it has been made many novelties in recent years by using semiotic analysis in advertising. Brands benefit from semiotics in many ways: they make improvements that naturally suits to society, they reveal insights and ideas that do not certainly occur from traditional market research as for more, they help brands invent culture than purely respond to it. Semiotics is not necessary time consuming or costly. For instance, a few hours of semiotic reflection can inspire you and push

the boundaries of thinking, helping you to think laterally and strategically. Even in today's time-pressured society, taking just a little time out to think semiotically can help answer the one hard question your brand is facing and solve problems which may take huge amounts of time with traditional methods. Semiotic thinking really is the brand management tool of the future.

## Conclusions

Marketing and advertising are cultural products that are mostly indivisible from a consumer's point of view in a world filled with technology and other signs. Most use of the signs are often underestimated by the realm of marketing experts further is underestimating the meaning of signs in the process of purchasing and product development. Although the applicability of current quantitative studies of semiotics has been observed in the various literature (Kabuto, 2014; Mingers and Willcocks, 2014; Epure, Eisenstat & Dinu 2014, Pan et al., 2014; Lorusso, 2015, Hunter, 2016; He & Shao, 2018), one can come to the mistaken conclusion that the more sign types there are in an advertisement, the more effective it will be. Moreover, consumer's life expresses the search of meaning and to pursue an improvement in one values or self-grow as well as for the hope for better future. Thus, current modern advertising system fulfilled with signs has been commanding for the hegemonic luxurious culture. Advertising culture has intermediated in the macro society but has the power in micro habits of everyday life. Consequently, becomes obvious that after this COVID-19 times, we will have completely the new era of advertising. Presuming, future will bring new approaches to ecology, wasting behaviour, consumers attitudes by paying more attention to our human interactions, it will effect our purchasing habits as well our glance will focus to different signs and will react accordingly to certain symbols.

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