



THE SEMIOTICS IN ADVERTISING: DECODING THE IMAGES

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the use of semiotics in advertising and how it can be used to decode the images presented to consumers and also this article highlights the power of semiotics in advertising and its role in shaping consumer behavior.

Introduction

If at all we are to better comprehend the application of visual signals in the field of advertising, it is necessary first that we comprehend also the generation of symbolic meaning. Most of the symbolic meaning finds its source in semiotics. Semiotics refers to a hypothetical communication approach whose goal is to lay out extensively appropriate principles (Stone 2000). As such, semiotics may be seen as the art behind signs study.

In this respect, signs may assume the form of images, words, objects, or even sounds. Each medium for advertisements, be it a magazine, television, or radio often gets constrained by the variety of channels that may be utilized (Harvey, Michael & Malcolm 2001). For example, if we were to take language as an advertising medium, we find that at times, words may not succeed in symbolizing various experiences. By extension, such feelings as those of smell or touch may not be represented in any known form.

From the context of semiotics, a sign is taken to mean a symbolism of another thing. The signing process usually entails a sound, word, object, or image (the signifier) that stands for something else (the signified), that may be an idea, a concept, thought, emotion, or feeling that one may wish to communicate or associate (Ligerakis 2003). The association between on the one hand the signified and on the other hand, the signifier, often gets set up via a cueing process. Charles Price, a semiotics theorist, has grouped the signification types as indexical, iconic, as well as symbolic. Such a grouping becomes vital especially in a case whereby we may wish to further elaborate on the cueing concept, within the context of semiotics in advertising.

Emotive as the science behind semiotics analysis

For the reason that emotions may not be articulated via the use of rational terms only, semiotic analysis is usually applied to assist in the decoding of the words, images, comments, and words of consumers. The analysis of semiotics is alive to the realization that the entire

communication process of humans consists of text systems that are capable of being decoded, thereby acting as signifiers of other intended meanings (Ligerakis 2003). It then becomes possible to deduce these types of signifiers for purposes of capitulating a comprehension of exactly what it is that they represent from both an individual and cultural point of view).

This particular approach to the science behind semiotics analysis becomes precious, in as far as decoding of texts and images about say, the reaction of a consumer towards a certain ad, for instance, or even a novel concept. It may not be unusual to have consumers being asked to express their feelings regarding a specific package or advertisement by way of, for example, creating collages. These kinds of exercises enable the respondents to semiotic research on advertising to instinctively articulate their profound, individual feelings as regards the utilization of a given brand or product, within the context of a non-rational environment or process (Harvey & Malcolm 2001).

Most of the time, however, consumers tend to be extremely naïve as to why they usually respond in a certain way, or even the reason behind their choice of specific images to utilize in a collage. From a rational point of view, therefore, this kind of collage or text may prove quite intricate to interpret.

The use of semiotics in the advertising industry

The main objective of semiotics is to facilitate in decoding the principle symbols, ideas, and metaphors that could be 'at play' in as far as cultural texts are concerned (these may entail websites, ads, packaging, or editorial) concerning a given area or category of interest. In as far as semiotic analyses are concerned, the issues of signifiers (the symbol or object behind the conveyance of meaning) as well as the signified (these may include the themes or cultural domain that the signifiers seek to invoke) (Harvey, Michael & Malcolm 2001). For instance, we may want to ask ourselves the kind of cultural values and symbols that advertisements of such a product as rum may seek to communicate.

Another example could be the symbols and values that brand advertisements meant for the teenagers seek to signify. As can be seen, the goal of semiotics is to assist in the assessment of such cultural texts, with a view to such a vantage point as has hitherto not been achieved. This is regardless of the type of advertisement that one may seek to run, which could be the introduction of a novel product brand, a positioning of an existing brand of products, or even attempts at resonantly speaking with a particular group of an audience.

The application of semiotics in the advertising industry is vital if at all such an advertisement is to record success. Semiotics therefore contributes significantly in grasping the desired target market's attention. Such a target market could be teenagers, adults, men, or women. How certain text, images, color, as well as additional signs play a crucial role in as far a triumphant advertisement is concerned. It is also important to note that the application of semiotics in the advertisement shall also differ, based on the nature of the products that such an advertisement seeks to promote.

Nevertheless, the overall advertisement idea appears to remain unchanged, albeit with several exclusions, in a case whereby the products being advertised are similar (Stone 2000). For instance, a majority of the advertisements for automobiles emphasize no excitement or freedom feelings that come about following the driving of a given type of automobile. How such advertisements can accomplish this is via utilization of images that ensure that vehicles being advertised appear more versatile or rugged, in comparison with the other types of

vehicles. Taking yet another example, advertisements on alcoholic beverages gives an impression that by consuming these, one stands a chance of gaining popularity of, for example, a party scene, and that one is bound to experience added fun by consuming a given type of beer, rum, or vodka.

A variety of media supplies various structures that allows for a representation of experience. As such, particularly senses may control a certain communication medium, thereby resulting in a system of semiotic, as opposed to a communication means. The press often makes use of visual-based channels, in which the written language is usually augmented by graphic designs, photographs, and even printing (Harvey & Malcolm 2001). Conversely, the radio makes use of the oral channel, with an over-reliance on the spoken language, broadcasting as well as sound. Television, on its part, makes use of image, sound, and broadcasting. As such, every advertising media may be seen to be somehow unique from each other.

Indexical, symbolic, and iconic signs in advertising

About 'iconicity', the best example to take here would be photographic images that may symbolize a place, real object, or even an individual. These are usually the iconic signs that the advertising industry utilizes regularly. In this case, the signified-signifier connection is usually sourced from a likeness or resemblance to the iconic image (Stone 2000). An individual's portrait may be seen as an authentic iconic sign, seeing that the image is more of a resemblance of the person. As such, iconic images may be seen to be both representational and literal.

On the other hand, 'indexicality' is used about those signs that tend to go past a mere object or personal delineation, to illustrate extra meaning or information to the object or person that we may have just observed (Ligerakis 2003). For instance, information that may be meant to convey a vacation package in Rome, Italy, could be symbolized by the use of the Rome Coliseum picture, which happens to be a Rome landmark.

In addition, a picture that depicts a man clad in Nike wear may be seen as iconic in two ways. First, it is iconic from the perspective of the attire's manufacturer (Ligerakis 2003). Also, the movement of the character could be concurrently indexical, concerning the social status, frame of mind, and values of the character.

Symbols in advertising

In a situation whereby the signifier-signified connection does not depend on resemblance, but rather appears anchored on principles, such a sign is often referred to as a 'symbol'. For instance, the rose is usually seen as symbolizing love, yet it does not possess any intangible passion or love features. Rather, this is a result of a long-term cultural association of love and roses. Without a doubt, symbols are determined culturally and socially, while their meaning may get altered (Harvey & Malcolm 2000).

Across time, and even amongst the various cultural categories, visual advertising cues, at least from a symbolic level, goes beyond just a plain signification, as they bring out a multifaceted construction of meaning based on a network of connections that have been encountered in the past (Monty 2000). A good example here would be the ads for the Marlboro brand of cigarettes. Here, we can witness The Marlboro ad appearing to express the wide nature, streams in the mountain, as well as a cowboy filled with masculinity. As an audience, the ad appears to invite us to draw a relationship between these scenes and the brand being advertised; Marlboro.

These are conventional Wild West images that have been borrowed by the advertisers in the cigarette industry to act as a 'signifier for the signified': freedom, adventure, success, and masculinity. In this case, the cowboy comes out as the Marlboro symbol even though we may not be in a position to draw a logical association between, on the one hand, the brand of cigarettes and on the other hand, the cowboy. Most of the time, brand images symbolize products and for a majority of the ads, the indexical, iconic, and symbolic signs are seen to overlap frequently, with the result that they get presented at the same time (Harvey & Malcolm 2000). Eventually, we have no choice but to embrace the 'logic' via the system of symbols without pondering any questions.

Judith Williamson, in her book *Decoding advertising*, has noted that we often tend to associate a product in our minds with emotions and its image but all along, this associative process is usually an unconscious one (Williamson 1978). Signs to other systems of meaning for particular images, ideas, or emotions that are often associated with these, often get relocated to products, as opposed to the other way round. The ideas, thoughts, and emotions connected with factual and objective things are not a rarity for a majority of religious rituals, and also the various forms of arts. However, for the advertising industry specifically, its objective is to lure positive emotions and feelings by way of promising pleasures following purchase and the consequent consumption of a given product that is being advertised (Monty 2000). As such, ideals, images, and feelings get attached products through a cultural system sign transfer process onto those products that are being advertised. Consequently, the products along with the evoked ideology and feeling get etched into our minds. Even then, the linking process remains an unconscious one.

Advertising in the fashion industry: a semiotic assessment

Advertising in fashion comes across as an outstanding illustration of image vs. identity media for production. In this case, the product nature bears a direct association with its identity (these are the objects that often, we utilize for encasing our bodies, for purposes of a public display). In addition, fashion has been recognized as a cultural style of language (Stone 2000). From the context of 'high fashion advertising', there are image-identity advertisements and products that have positioned themselves at the pinnacle of the socio-economic continuum.

(These include Gucci, Dolce Gabanna, Prada, such media as Zoom, the runaway show, Allure, and Zoom). In this case, the objective of generating an eye-catching product of identity is often trailed using the talent or artist, as well as the influential positions of those who have money. These two elements get drawn from the international circle, for purposes of crafting imagery that is not just captivating, but emotive as well.

In general, advertising and the 'high fashion industry' depict an identity continuum, integrated with wide-ranging kinds of signifiers (these may include high status, young women, as well as high sexuality), and also via a continuous variation and repetition of the images that have been depicted by the intended themes (Stone 2000). Concerning advertising in the fashion industry, image is everything. Image depicts more than just pictures. Images may entail that which we are capable of learning via either the spoken or written words, words that are often seen to go along with the visuals.

The issue of polysemy is central to semiotics. This is a term that is used about the latent assortment of meaning which could be obtained from a certain text in question. Even then, we

must be seen to take into consideration any captions or text that may be surrounding a given image, and which attempts to supply an extra meaning for that particular image in question (Ligerakis 2003). In this case, captions play the role of condensing visual polysemy, as well as in augmenting that meaning which is favored. In this particular case, analysts of texts take the captions as being capable of supporting two roles. First, captions could facilitate the be seen the anchoring of meaning.

What this appears to portray therefore is that captions aids in the 'tying down' of meaning that could by now be too evident, and which has been availed via an image, thereby ensuring that other meanings are not seen to surface (Monty 2000). Secondly, captions could also be utilized in communicating a certain meaning, as well as in generating the same image but with a novel meaning, and which on its own, the image may not have been in a position to bring out.

Photography within the fashion industry (and especially the 'high fashion advertisement') facilitates a visual language definition of some of the strongest brands in the market (Wells 2000). With the right image of a given brand, there is a high likelihood that this could take the center stage, relative to the brand's logo, or even a copy that has meticulously and carefully been crafted, eventually possibly assuming the position of the actual brand.

Conclusion

Semiotics, from the perspective of the advertisement industry, refers to the study of the utilization of texts, symbols, and meanings, to communicate a given idea or notion. As such, semiotics could be regarded as symbolic. In advertising, there are two elements that come to play, as far as semiotics is concerned; the signifier (that is, that which is used to construe meaning, or symbolize something else) and the signified (that which has been symbolized by the signifier). Often, there exists a correlation between the signifier and the signified, and this is what facilitates drawing out meaning from a given text of an advertisement.

The main objective of semiotics is to facilitate in decoding the principle symbols, ideas, and metaphors that could be 'at play' in as far as cultural texts are concerned. The application of semiotics in the advertising industry is vital if at all such an advertisement is to record success. Semiotics, therefore, contributes significantly to grasping the desired target market's attention. In such high-end industries as the fashion sector, semiotics is well captured through photography, whereby the image and status of the celebrities that are used to advertise certain renowned products or brands, connect status, the social-economic dynamics, and the brands in question.

Semiotics analyses, therefore, enable us to decode the hidden images of certain texts and symbols that may be a characteristic of a given advertisement, so that we are now able to make a connection between the brand in question, and what that particular brand stands for.

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