

THE ADVERTISING MESSAGE: SEMIOTICS IN ACTION**Ludmila PRICEPA***Catedra Limbi Germanice*

Publicitatea, o formă care domină promovarea produselor și serviciilor din întreaga lume, se concentrează pe încercarea de a capta un public-țintă. Agenții de publicitate utilizează variate teme în reclamele lor pentru a comunica o idee ce prezintă interes pentru publicul-țintă. Mesajul dorit nu ar fi posibil de realizat în cazul în care companiile nu ar folosi semiotica în publicitate. Reclamele sunt pline de semne, simboluri, coduri și mesaje ascunse. Semiotica, știința semnelor, se concentrează pe imagini și decodează semnificația acestor imagini. Deoarece agenții de publicitate încearcă să creeze anunțuri care pot fi ușor reținute prin imagini și simboluri, semiotica este un factor-cheie în lumea promoțiilor. În ideea de a se apropia în mod eficient de publicul lor, companiile folosesc elementele semioticii în publicitate pentru a reprezenta mesaje ascunse și simboluri într-un mod creativ și interesant. Indiferent dacă publicitatea va fi sau nu utilizată pe larg în viitor, problemele de semiotică vor fi întotdeauna factorii-cheie pentru a ajuta agenții de publicitate să construiască idei inovatoare pentru reclame.

In today's society, the promotion of products and services is a crucial factor for the success of every company. The commercials and print advertisements help the business world with sales, sponsorship and company awareness. Without advertising, a company finds it difficult to get their name into the competitive market of sales. Although many people associate advertising with the idea of promoting only a product, many industries are joining the advertising phenomena. Since companies rely so heavily upon advertisements, the ads must include essential communication skills to reach a certain target audience. In order for companies effectively to connect with their audience, they use the ideas of semiotics in their advertisements to portray hidden messages and symbols in a creative and intriguing way.

To understand why advertising relies heavily upon semiotics, there must be an understanding of the history of semiotics, and what defines semiotics. Ferdinand de Saussure was the first to introduce the ideas of semiotics in "Course in General Linguistics". In his book, he included the two main components of semiotics: the signifier and the signified. Although Saussure founded the main idea of semiotics, philosophers believe that he only put it into other philosophers' heads. W. Keith Percival, Professor of Linguistics at the University of Kentucky, writes, "Saussure's idea of semiotics will need to be based on firmer and broader foundations" [8]. From the initial ideas of semiotics, Charles Saunders Peirce continued to study the theory. He added the idea of the icon, the index, and the symbol to the equation of the signifier and the signified. The movement of semiotics began to spread around the world with the introduction of Pierce's theories. Since semiotics has caught advertisers' attention, they use the components of the theory to produce effective ads. Semiotic criticism theory deals with the study of signs in terms of their connotative and denotative meaning. In order for a word and symbol to take form of an alternative meaning, there must be a sign. A sign is composed of the signified and the signifier. Berger believes that "a sign is a combination of a concept and a sound-image, a combination that cannot be separated" [3]. Berger explains that if the signifier or the signified is missing, a sign cannot be apparent. By definition, the signifier "refers to a meaningful form, while the signified designates the concept which that form evokes" [3].

Along with these ideas, there are three types of signs: icons, indexes, and symbols. An icon is "when there is a topological similarity between the signifier and its denotata" [4]. The icon resembles the actual meaning. An index is when "the signifier is contiguous with its signified, or is a sample of it" [4]. Lastly, a symbol is "a sign without either similarity or contiguity, but only with a conventional link between its signifier and its denotata" [4]. When dealing with symbols, multiple words may represent the same thing, people usually have to analyze the symbol in order to make an accurate meaning to their study of work.

Another popular issue of semiotic criticism theory is codes. Codes are groups of symbols that are associated with a meaning. Berger states, "these codes, or 'secret structures' in our minds, affect the way we interpret signs and symbols found in the media and the way we live" [3]. Berger explains that codes can define multiple cultures while the people in these cultures are not consciously aware of the impact codes have on their lives. All of the previously explained components of semiotics are what advertisers use in successful ads.

Although all advertising is important, the most common and widely seen advertisements are print ads. Magazines have now more than half of their pages dedicated to advertising. Agents know that consumers connect with print advertisements in a way that they cannot with any other type of promotion. With the usage of semiotics in print advertisements, ads not only portray a desired message to their audience, but they are also visually creative.

Consumers can connect with advertisements due to the usage of semiotics. When dealing with advertising, semiotics helps advertisers portray a desired meaning to their target audience. Advertisements use signs, symbols and indexes to make the ad creative and alluring for consumers. Even though most advertisements are abstract and the audience does not fully understand the desired message in accordance to the company, the symbols that advertisements use lure the audience anyways.

Advertisements use semiotics to disguise messages, yet also to captivate the audience to want to know more about the product. If a company has a good advertisement, even if the message is unclear, the audience will still want to learn more about the company because creative and symbolic ads intrigue them. Marshall Blonsky believes, “Advertisements, even print, and everything commoditized, will be produced to be splendidly seen, not read.” He explains that it does not matter what the advertisement is trying to sell, and the main focus is on the visual stimuli of the advertisement [4]. Advertisers use semiotics to form advertisements to be eye appealing and though provoking. Therefore, semiotics is important in advertisements because the signs and symbols help to captivate the audience and make the audience want to know more about the product the ad is trying to sell.

Since the 1960s, advertising has been one of the main areas of research in applied semiotics. The semiotics of advertising first developed as a critical instrument for the analysis of ideological meanings in advertising messages. It soon became an interdisciplinary forum at the crossroads of marketing, communication, and consumer research.

Foundations in semiotic advertising research were first laid by Roland Barthes in “Elements of Semiology” and “Rhetoric of the Image” [1, 2]. This semiological approach is characterized by the application of principles and methods of structuralist linguistics – with concepts such as system, structure, pertinence, distinctiveness, segmentation, and combination – to the visual, verbal, and symbolic messages in advertising [2]. Barthes's main tool of investigation was the semantic dichotomy of denotation versus connotation. Since denotation is the literal or core meaning of a sign and connotation refers to secondary meanings associated with it, the theory of connotation appeared to be a most appropriate tool for the discovery of “hidden” layers of meaning in the advertising message. For Barthes, an illustrated advertisement conveys a denotational meaning in the form of a noncoded iconic message. In particular, he sees the photographic image of the product as a denotational “message without a code.” At a second level of interpretation, we find connotational meanings in the form of a coded iconic or symbolic message based on our associated cultural knowledge. In advertising and in the mass media in general, the signifiers of connotative signs amalgamate into systems of connotations that form the rhetoric of advertising.

The semiotic theory of codes has been the basis of several studies of advertising. Since codes are the systems of knowledge underlying all cultural communication processes, the theory of codes has been considered as another key to deciphering the hidden messages of advertisements. Barthes first distinguished between an uncoded message, the photographic image of the “real” objects, and two coded messages: the verbal message, depending on the code of language, and the coded iconic or symbolic visual message [1].

Umberto Eco, in his “Struttura assente”, speaks of advertising codes with double registers, one verbal and one visual, and distinguishes five levels of visual codification:

1. the iconic level, similar to Barthes's uncoded iconic message;
2. the iconographic level, based on historical, cultural traditions and genre conventions;
3. the tropological level, with the visual equivalents of rhetorical figures;
4. the topic level, with the premises and topoi of argumentation; and
5. the enthymematic level, with the actual structure of the visual argumentation – that is, an incomplete syllogism that is implied by the juxtaposition of images [6].

Text-semiotic studies of advertising have been carried out in the tradition of structuralism, structural semantics, and semiolinguistics. An investigation of semantic deep structures that aims at the discovery of semantic universals in advertising is Varda Langholz-Leymore's “Hidden Myth” [7]. Her text-semiotic

approach follows Claude Lévi-Strauss's model of the structural analysis of myths and A.J. Greimas's structural semantics. According to this study, advertising is a mediator between the concrete (the product) and the abstract (the signs). The semantic characteristics of the advertisement appear as a binary structure in which an opposition between the positive properties of the advertised product and the negative properties of competing products are explicitly or implicitly contrasted. The two products and their positive/negative properties form a twofold sign of which the former are the signifiers and the latter are the signifieds. Within this twofold sign, an equivalence relation holds between the two opposed products and their two qualities. The analysis of these binary oppositions leads to the conclusion that advertising, just as myth, is concerned with finding answers to universal human problems such as those of life/death, happiness/misery, war/peace, and hate/love. These universal-themes are present with the same regularity in the deep structures of both advertising and myth, but because advertising works with simpler means, it appears as a degenerate form of myth.

Peirce's fundamental distinction between iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs has been applied fruitfully to the study of advertising. Pictorial representations of the product and its consumers, comparisons, metaphors, and other signs referring to their object by similarity belong to the domain of the icon in advertising. Symbols appear in the language, brand names, trademarks, and visual logos. In its most prototypical function, however, the advertiser's attempt to draw the consumer's attention toward the product implies an act of pointing, which as been seen as the sign type of an index.

Indexical semiosis also takes place in the subtler strategies of meaning attribution and image creation. These processes can be described as indexical-feature transfer. Instead of showing the positive features of the product iconically, which is often impossible, the product is represented in contiguity with valuable objects, film stars, or similar entities whose desirable attributes are well known. By means of this contiguity relation a semantic transfer occurs. The well-known features of the "valuable," "famous," or "desirable" object or personality become associated with the less well known commercial product. This feature transfer implies an indexical-sign relation: The features transferred to the product refer to it as an index. Most connotations with which products are associated in an advertising campaign are generated by this process of indexical semiosis.

An influential paradigm in the study of the pragmatic dimension of advertising has been Roman Jakobson's model of the six communicative functions. These functions can serve as the basis for a typology of advertising messages. In informative advertisements, the focus is on the referential function of the message. The expressive function predominates in messages representing an emotionally involved advertiser. Advertisements operating on the basis of the conative function focus on the potential consumer whom they want to persuade, advise, or invite to acts of consumption. When the phatic function predominates, the advertisement aims at creating or maintaining contact with the consumer. The metalinguistic function predominates in advertisements focusing on the name, sometimes the change of the name of a product. The poetic function focuses on the code that is used in a particularly creative way in communicating the message.

Despite the multiplicity of semiotic means and strategies, advertisements are messages with an invariant pragmatic and semantic core. No advertisement can be successful if it fails to convey the message of the product (referential core) and when it does not have some appeal to purchase it (conative core). These core messages belong to the consumer's general cognitive frame of the text genre. Even when the core messages of an advertisement are masked in the textual surface structure, the consumer will use his or her general text-pragmatic knowledge as a substitute.

Advertising is thus a text type that is interpreted by the consumer on two levels: the level of an overt or surface message and the level of a hidden message. The hidden message in this sense is not about any subliminal meaning (as described by some advertising psychologists) but about the economic realities of selling and buying. These realities are hidden only in the surface text; they are not unknown to the consumer. Reference to the economic interests of the advertiser is avoided in the surface message because it seems to be detrimental to the effects of persuasion. Therefore, a typical conflict exists between the contents of the surface and the hidden messages in advertising.

Now that there is a clear understanding of why semiotics is important in advertising, it is important to apply the ideas to real advertisements in circulation today.

Let's take for analysis the advertisement for the perfume called *Promesse* [9]. The advertisement, on first examination, is of a man and a woman who are sitting outside on a bench happily embracing each other on their wedding day. The woman is wearing a short white dress and the man is in a black tuxedo. The question

is what do two newlyweds have to do with women's perfume? Now the observer can semantically analyze the advertisement to show the true meaning.

The two people in the advertisement are a man and a woman dressed up. How can the audience know that the two have just married? One of the components discussed above is symbolism and code, both which apply to this advertisement. The woman is wearing white, which represents purity and virginity.

Women wear white on their wedding days to symbolize that they are pure and virginal and are promising themselves to the man they are to marry forever. The idea of wearing white on a women's wedding day is also a code. Not all cultures wear white on their wedding days, in the Asian culture, for example, it is custom for women to wear red on their wedding day. The woman in the ad is also holding a flower bouquet in her hands. During a wedding, it is tradition for the bride to carry a bouquet. With both of these symbols, the white dress and the flower bouquet, the audience can clearly understand that the two people in the advertisement have just married.

The words at the bottom of the advertisement read, “*Promesse, more than a fragrance, a promise...*” The word promise symbolizes that the two people in the advertisement have just promised and vowed to be faithful to each other forever, another symbol of marriage. The advertisement is trying to explain to their audience that the perfume is a pure (colour white) scent and that if a woman wears the perfume she will find a man to marry. Although the message may not be true, the advertisement through symbols and imagery shows that these two people are happy together because she wore *Promesse*.

The second advertisement strongly relies upon the use of photographic imagery. It features an advertisement for the fragrance 'Dune Pour Homme' [5]. The advertisement uses a variety of signifiers which publicise both the identity of the brand, and an image which is in line with the ideology of the text in which it appears, which, in this case, is the youthful, glamorous Sky magazine. The advert predominately features a male model in his early to mid twenties, and he is kneeling on a sand dune. Adjacent to him is an iconic image of the product itself, which is projected as being disproportionately large. Underneath this image of the product are the words: 'Essence of Freedom,' and together these separate components form an effective and unified message. On a simple level it is easy to deduce two obvious things. Firstly, that the subject, (the image of the man) provides a youthful element of glamour, which serves both the product and the text in which it is being advertised, and secondly, that the image of the sand dune is a physical reiteration of the product name. However, the more interesting semiotic elements of the advert exist within its notion of freedom, which is the advert's primary signified concept. The notion of freedom is 'primarily conveyed by the image of this lone man; who, in his lonesome location; seems extremely at ease, and unrestricted by normal life, thus providing a sense of liberation which is also conveyed by his loose, unorthodox, clothing. Furthermore the softly focused quality of the photography, and the advertisements colouring of gentle blues and pale browns are further signifiers which contribute to this dreamy, utopian image of liberation.

However, these images alone certainly do not convey this central signified concept, for this is only guaranteed by the inclusion of the advertisements of the statement: 'essence of freedom.' Thus, a strong relationship is allowed to be created between the 'signifiers,' (the photographic image of the protagonist and his physical environment) and the 'signified' which is the linguistically expressed 'essence of freedom.' Therefore, this stabilisation between the signifier and the signified allows for the creation of a plausible commodity code.' This code attributes basic meaning to the advert, whose conventional combination of iconic image and linguistic representation (of words and pictures) allows the recipient to receive a message, which is justified and reiterated by the relationships of resemblance at play.

As it has been seen from these two examples, the message that was designed for the audience to capture was due to the use of semantics in decoding what images and symbols mean in relation to the text of the advertisement.

Every object in an advertisement has a purpose and the audience has the capability to decode the symbols to try to uncover what the advertisement is really trying to say. Although many advertisements are corrupt by stereotypes and unethical ideas, when advertising and semiotics are put together, they work. When a person can look at an advertisement and effectively receive a message from that advertisement, semiotics has done its job.

Semiotics, the science of signs, focuses on images and decodes what the images mean. Since advertisers try to create catchy ads through images and symbols, semiotics is a key factor in the promotion world. In

order for companies effectively to connect with their audience, they use the ideas of semiotics in their advertisements to portray hidden messages and symbols in a creative and intriguing way. Whether or not print advertising will be popular in the future, no one knows, but the issues of semiotics will always be key factors in helping advertisers build new and innovative ideas for advertisements.

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