



BRANDING – THE SEMIOTICS WAY

Dr. Ajay Sahni

Department of Foreign Languages, Bharati Vidyapeeth Deemed University Institute of Management and Research, New Delhi

Abstract

This conceptual research paper is an attempt to highlight the importance of semiotics in branding strategies that a marketer can resort to, in creating a desired space in customers' mind space. In the present global economy, where customers are kings, and have awareness along with many choices that fulfill their needs, it is all the more important for brand managers to position and sometimes reposition their brands vis-à-vis their competitors', based on some aesthetic and symbolic tools that are culturally apt and accepted by the market. Moreover, customers are looking forward to imbibing image, personality and life style in whatever they indulge into, and brands are no exception. This qualitative research paper projects semiotics' brief history, contemporary issues, some notable cases studies where the brands have been able to command loyalty owing to the right mix of signs, colours, motifs, symbols that all constitute semiotics. This is an emerging area and has a lot of scope for investigations and detailed research thanks to its associations and connectivity with other disciplines, most notable being linguistics, psychology and semantics.

Key Words: *Semiotics, Branding, Strategies, Semantics, Symbols, Signs*

INTRODUCTION

Semiotics is the study of signs and symbols. Daily, one comes across many symbols like traffic signals, zebra crossings and star signs that project the intended meanings and interpretations. But it's not only the visual signs, semiotics also include sounds, body language, words and other epistemological combinations with varied typographic combinations. Colours also constitute an important element in semiotics. The term is derived from the Greek word *semiology* (from the Greek *semeion*, 'sign'). Semiology studies and investigates the signs and the meanings associated with them with reference to cultural interpretations that are accepted by human beings. Semiology is also connected with sociolinguistics, as it traces the connotations and denotations related to ethos. This research paper is an endeavour to highlight the aspects of semiotics and their relevance in branding. The research study is a conceptual research based upon secondary data. This propositional paper highlights the issues and perspectives connected with semiotics that are instrumental in positioning, repositioning and helping the brands in prevalent marketing challenges encountered by the organizations.

NEED AND IMPORTANCE OF STUDY

Although the usage of symbols in the brand names, logos, trademarks and copy writing is not new, but the emerging trend towards designing them to stand apart from competition thereby resulting in niche marketing, brand recall, cultural connotations and speedy brand association. As a result, semiotics is a very distinctive tool that the marketers are resorting to, that is helping them to pitch in their communications in the cluttered mind space of their customers. This qualitative research paper is an attempt to deliberate upon the history, origin and continuous journey of this science and art of symbols i.e. semiotics. It brings in its fold various terms, theories, concepts and multiple dimensions concerned with semiotics. This shall help the brand communicators and marketers in a proper and synchronized approach towards right mix of semiotics for execution of their desired advertising message and creating brand recall and brand equity thereby leading to brand loyalty.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

The emerging competition in the market in all the product categories, is creating challenging situations for the brand managers to think about strategies to occupy the mind space of target customers, that is already cluttered. Semiotics is a tool through which the brands can be positioned, repositioned and created owing to its symbolic and psychographic empathizing capacities.

Objective(s)

This investigation is being done with the objective(s) to:

1. To bring forth the importance of semiotics in branding strategy;
2. Cite notable examples of leaders in product line(s) who are resorting to semiotics in branding strategies.

Hypothesis

As a result of application of an effective semiotics', the brands can leverage the desired effect that brand managers envisage to endow vis-à-vis their target consumers' mid.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research study is conducted on the basis of secondary data. The study is conceptual and qualitative.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Historical brief: Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) is credited as the founder of Linguistics and now Semiotics (as referred in his Course titled: *part of social life*). Semiology is also connected with social psychology. This study of semiotics is concerned with symbols, their nature and laws that are associated with them. The laws which semiology will discover are the laws applicable in linguistics, and linguistics will thus be assigned to a clearly defined place in the field of human knowledge. (Saussure 1983, 15-16; Saussure 1974, 16).

Another notable field related to semiotics is Structuralism, which is also connected to Saussure's linguistic model. According to structuralists, there is an overall groupism and organization among various symbols and signs as they are parts of a system, and it highlights this very synchronization between them to communicate meaning(s). The best example of this phenomenon is Lévi-Strauss and myth, kinship rules and totemism. They engage in a search for 'deep structures' underlying the 'surface features' of phenomena. This is equivalent to the concept of "reading between the lines", i.e. going beyond the literal meanings of words, phrases and sentences. This system communicated the feel of what is intended to be said by the writer keeping the symbolic, and synonymy of the ethos that are expressed through depiction of signs and symbols.

OTHER NOTABLE CONTRIBUTORS TOWARDS THE FIELD OF SEMIOTICS

American philosopher, Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), Charles William Morris (1901-1979), who developed a *behaviourist* semiotics. Modern age semiotic theorists include Roland Barthes (1915-1980), Algirdas Greimas (1917-1992), Yuri Lotman (1922-1993), Christian Metz (1931-1993), Umberto Eco (b 1932) and Julia Kristeva (b 1941). *Contemporary semioticians* :These specialists investigate signs of semiotic 'sign systems' (such as a medium or genre) rather than studying them as an independent entity. According to them, study of making of meanings is important. Hence, they investigate the communication as well as creation and sustenance of reality. It is here that semiotics and semantics have a correlation with the meaning of signs. John Sturrock is credited to bring forth the difference between semiotics and semantics. He proved that semantics focuses on *what* words mean, semiotics is concerned with *how* signs mean (Sturrock 1986, 22). But semiotics is associated with semantics in some way or the other and study of both these disciplines aids the brand strategists in creating an innovative advertisement message.

(Barthes 1957) brought cultural studies within the periphery of Semiotics in 1960s after his work of essays got translated into English; "*Mythologies*". In the years 1970s and 1980s by many of his other writings, greatly increased scholarly awareness of this approach. In 1964, Barthes stressed that 'semiology is a system of signs, whatever their substance and limits; images, gestures, musical sounds, objects, and the complex associations of all of these. He further elaborated that these constitute in the formation of the content of ritual, convention or public entertainment. These constitute, if not *languages*, at least systems of signification' (Barthes 1967, 9). Although 'semiotics' is more likely to be used as an umbrella term to embrace the whole field (Nöth 1990, 14).

As it has already been discussed that Semiotics and Semantics complement each other, following are the other traditional branches of linguistics that have an important implication(s) towards semiotics that branding strategies incorporate in its fold to carve out the desired mind space in target market's mind. These three components are described hereunder, so that their implications could be understood from branding strategies' perspectives.

- (1) *Semantics*: it is the relationship of signs to what they represent;
- (2) *Syntactic* (or *syntax*): this is the connectivity or relationship; formal or structural between different signs i.e. it is concerned with the organization or different sign, patterns or designs used by brand managers in an advertisement;
- (3) *Pragmatics*: the relation of signs to interpreters. This means that each sign or a symbol is interpreted, and the study of these interpretations and connotations and the relation of signs to interpreters is the study that is termed as pragmatics, which is also very important, since cultural connotations and value systems are taken into consideration in this stage.
- (4) These three elements of semantics, syntax/syntactic and pragmatics had been contributed by (Morris 1938, 6-7).

The copy writer of an advertisement takes into consideration a textual analysis, where text is referred to as a communication or a message that sender intends to communicate to the target market i.e. customers. This message is prepared i.e. recorded

and structures in the form of writing, audio, video, depending upon the medium through which the message is intended to be communicated. This message has an independent entity, and has to stand on its own; whereby sender and receiver have no influence. It is rather a connect between these two entities. Hence a message has a personality of its own, and it is a conduit between sender and receiver i.e. advertiser and customer in the context of branding strategies through advertisements. This personality of the text is created by pictures, illustrations, signs, symbols, words, sounds, gestures, colours. All these attributes of text are constructed, planned and executed taking into consideration the conventions, norms, rules and procedure that are associated with a Genre and in a particular medium of communication. These all conventions call for an in-depth study of semiotics and linguistics.

Semiotics, how to go about it?: *Following are some key terminologies that need to be discussed to investigate semiotics and their implications in branding strategies*

Branding, brand, brand names: It is important to understand these terms for proper selection and application of semiotics in brand management i.e. brand semiotics.

Brand Name: – According to American Marketing Association, brand is : A name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers.

According to this definition, brand name, term, design, symbol etc. that is distinctive and is instrumental in differentiating a product, (termed in this context as a brand due to these terms itself) from its competitors'. This differentiation is also the positioning that helps marketers to occupy a particular space in the consumers' psyche. These elements viz. name, design, logo, trademarks, colour, typography are what is termed as semiotics. Since semiotics is the study of science and art of symbols, when related to brands, it is termed as brand semiotics.

Some of the most successful brands' semiotics is

- (a) *Coca Cola:* The typography/ lettering, the colour scheme i.e. White and Red are a perfect combination of colour, symbols, typography, size and design. These semiotics connect to consumers' mind set, and they are able to correlate with the value, attributes, and characteristics that the brand projects it as "a family drink". Similarly, the other brands of Coca Cola Inc.; *Limca, Thums Up, Maaza, and Sprite* are positioned for different market segments. Hence the symbolic connotation of *Thums Up* is different from its Umbrella Brand. *Thums Up* projects the adventurous and macho spirit of teenagers and youth. This is why the logo of *Thums Up* is designed with symbols of Thumb being up, which has the cultural connotation of Good Luck. This is how the cultural codes that are accepted in different cultures are also communicated by Semiotics, and brands are being designed taking these cultural aspects so that there is quick association in consumers' mind. The Logo of *Limca* has a combination of semiotics such as green colour, the typography and its colour, a lemon to communicate freshness, yellow colour that is also associated with freshness. Hence the cultural and symbolic meanings that are communicated by *Limca's* advertisements are *refreshness, thirst quenching and energy*, and this is reflected just by the brand semiotics. As a result, the space, time and energy spent in reading its advertisement and correlating with consumers' self-image and self-personality is also saved. The symbols are synonymous with the expected personality traits of target customers. Most importantly, these symbols are also accepted as codes of conduct and points of references, and stands for those values and ethos. In this case, lemon is symbolic with freshness, and tang, yellow and green are symbolic with freshness and coolness.
- (b) *Philip Kotler:* "a seller's promise to deliver a specific set of features, benefits and services consistent to the buyers..." (2001:188). As per above statement by Kotler, this commitment is fulfilled by the brand managers and advertisers through brand semiotics, as they are able to portray all these in the minds of their targeted market. This psychographic associations are very important, when buyers are more or less aware that each brand in the particular product category (soft drinks in this case) possess same features, attributes, fulfils the similar needs, then why should they purchase and consume a particular brand and not the other? It's here that brand semiotics come in and help consumer decide to go for a particular brand, because it fulfils some needs that are over and above the physical attributes. These are the psychographic, emotional attributes which are associated with consumer's right brain hemisphere.

Branding is all about what one does to the right brain hemisphere of the market. Brand semiotics help the advertisers to connect and appeal to these right brain attributes as a strong pull that results to factually and reasonably decision making process by them to purchase their preferred brand. The linguistic signs communicates on three levels: (a)

Linguistic record: This is adhered to by the brand strategists by the use of typography, signs, symbols, font size, colour combinations, designs and motifs. (b) Form of the linguistic sign: this projects the sense, meaning, position in the name, repetition, balance and symmetry, combination of letters, length of the name etc. (c) Meaning of the linguistic sign – the lexical formula, stylistic and semantic – values. The above divisions have been discovered by (Kall 2001:150)

(c) **Branding strategies:** Semiotics is applied in various forms in organization's branding strategies. If the features of a good brand name are analysed, following disciplines are identified that brand strategists incorporate: etymology • lexical statistics • lexicology • logic • neology • onomastics • phonetics • pragmatics • psycholinguistics • rhetoric • semantics • semiotics • sociolinguistics • word formation (Kall 2001:19). While each of these disciplines is an independent and specialized field in itself, but for this research study, semiotics is already being researched. In fact all these disciplines are interrelated and integrated. Especially when semiotics is applied in branding, etymology, syntax and sociolinguistics are already taken care of by the copy writer while creating an advertisement for print media. There is cohesion between the semiotics applied in Logo, Headline, Slogan, Body copy, and Typography that has an important role to play in bringing out this integration in various elements of semiotics. All the norms accepted by society and culture are respected by the visualiser for final advertisement, so that the well identified objectives are met by the brand strategist.

(d) **FEATURES OF A GOOD BRAND NAME**

Following are the distinctive features of a brand name. These features are also studied and semiotics developed and executed accordingly in the branding strategies by marketing communicators of any organizations.

1. Suggest the products benefits and qualities, e.g. DieHard, Sunkis and Craftsman;
2. Be easy to pronounce, recognize and remember, e.g. short names like Tide, Aim or Puffs;
3. Be distinctive, e.g. Kodak, Exxon and Oracle;
4. Be extendable, e.g. Amazon.com expanded from a bookseller into other categories;
5. Not carry poor meanings in other countries and languages, e.g. Nova means “doesn't go” in Spanish (based on Armstrong and Kotler 2003:290-291, Kotler 2001:192). Branding - successes and failures:
6. FIAT Panda (1980) – It was checked that the name was pronounced in a similar way in eight major languages of the world. (Metelski 1980).
7. Rolls Royce Silver Mist – the name means “silver animal dropping” in German and it did not sell well in Germany (Haig 2006:181).
8. Chevy Nova (i.e. Chevy cannot do it) not selling well in Latin America (Haig 2006:181).

(e) **Brand equity:** This is added value endowed on products and services. It may be reflected in the way consumers think, feel, and act with respect to the brand, as well as in the prices, market share, and profitability the brand commands for the firm. This value addition, something that can't be expressed by consumers in quantified form is what is added on by semiotics. Due to the association and connection that a brand develops between the product it represents and the target market vis-à-vis competition, high prices are also accepted, as the brands are able to make its consumers feel, remove the post purchase dissonance, resulting to garner of more market share and profits due to the brand loyalty that brands are able to derive. And, semiotics is very instrumental in playing the symphony of branding strategies.

Further, brand semiotics makes the marketers and organizations think from customers' perspectives. Hence it is empathic values that brand strategist incorporate in brand semiotics when they study likes, dislikes, preferences, tastes and styles of the customers, and apply the culturally accepted norms, and ethos that are synonymous with those value systems. This empathetic element in brand semiotics is a very important strategic tool applied by brand managers. The benefits accruing as a result of semiotics are noteworthy. These consist of positive perceptions about the product and the company, and also of product performance, loyalty and less probability of brand switching, and, effective marketing communication practices.

APPLICATION OF SEMIOTICS IN MEDIA FOR BRANDING

The print media uses a visual channel, written text, and pictures with the help of four colour printing reproduction. There are technologies of graphic designing as well. In case of audio media like radio, FM, the brand manager's spoken mode, sound recording and broad casting, whereas in television advertising strategies, there is a combination of sound and image recording, reproduction and broadcasting. Hence in audio and television media, the semiotics is more connected and there is a dialogue and direct connection with the target market. Especially in case of television, the brand strategists can directly devise semiotics to appeal to their target audience in the form of dialogue, and it is more interactive.

THE ADVENT OF SEMIOTICS FROM ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

'Semiosphere' is the term coined by Russian cultural semiotic, Yuri Lotman. This refers to the whole semiotic space of the thinking in 'ecological' terms about the interaction of different semiotic structures and languages. (Lotman 1990, 124-125). This theory and its application have helped the brand managers to coin the message strategies that are verified by a group of cultural, value systems and genre. It helps to transmit the message to readers' psychological perspectives both implicitly and explicitly.

OTHER PERSPECTIVES IN BRANDING

What is of prime importance in branding strategies is that structural semiotics is a study that is more focused to see the importance and significance of relation of elements to each other and analyze media texts as structured wholes and studies and examines latent, and connotative meanings and decipher the feeling patterns that are represented by signs and symbols in association with colours, words, design, design patterns and typography. It emphasize upon an integrated approach. Semiotics is rarely quantitative, and often involves a rejection of such approaches. A social semiotic Ian would also emphasize the importance of the significance which readers attach to the signs within a text according to the cultural connotations.

However there had been another school of thought that had integrated content and semiotic structural analysis. There is a need to integrate and structuralize some codes and theoretical structures, as there are many schools of thoughts regarding semiotics. An integrated study and investigation will do the needful to derive a common platform to which brand managers can refer to and researchers can contribute a lot in this aspect of semiotics.

CONCLUSIONS AND FINDINGS

Semiotics is a very wide and multi-disciplinary study that encompasses other studies including, culture, literature, art, colours, shapes, anthropology and the mass media, linguistics, psychology, sociolinguistics, sociology, anthropology, aesthetics, media theorists, psychoanalysis, education. The branding strategies can benefit from application of semiotics in a way that it leads to innovation, in design, packaging, marketing communications that are taken from the daily life, culturally apt situations which are accepted by the society. Hence semiotics is a preferred means to create brand loyalty leading to increased market share in the prevalent competitive and cost conscious market.

RECOMMENDATIONS, SUGGESTIONS, LIMITATIONS

Since this has been a conceptual study, it will be advisable to conduct a primary research and collect data through a well-structured open and closed ended questionnaire, so that important implications of semiotics are proved quantitatively as well. This research study has some limitations. It is conducted on the basis of secondary data. Plus, due to paucity of time and resources, data could not be collected. As a result the qualitative aspects of the topic could not be substantiated in a factual way. The discipline of semiotics is very wide and emerging in India, owing to its artistic and aesthetic value systems. Moreover due to awareness among the organizations and knowledge enhance of customers, semiotics is a field that hold tremendous potential for research studies with various inter disciplinary components connected with it.

REFERENCES

Websites

1. http://www.google.co.in/gws_rd consulted on 19/1/15 at 10:50 pm.
2. www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/symbol consulted on 19/9/15 at 10:54 pm.
3. dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/English/symbol consulted on 19/9/15 at 10:58pm.
4. www.collinsdictionary.com consulted on 19/9/15 at 11:00 pm.
5. <http://www.acrewebsite.org/search/view-conference-proceedings.aspx?Id> consulted on 19/9/15 at 11:02 pm.
6. [adage.com/article/adage-encyclopedia/cultural-symbols/98427/Sep 15, 2003](http://adage.com/article/adage-encyclopedia/cultural-symbols/98427/Sep%2015,%202003) consulted on 19/9/15 at 11:08 pm.
7. [twistedifter.com/2011/08/20_clever-logos-with-hidden-symbolism/Aug 29, 2011](http://twistedifter.com/2011/08/20_clever-logos-with-hidden-symbolism/Aug%2029,%202011) consulted on 19/9/15 at 11:11 pm.
8. www.freepatentsonline.com/article/Business-Perspectives/14412365.html consulted on 20/9/15 at 12:12am.
9. [www.google.co.in/search? Q=symbols + used + in + advertising +biw=1366&bih](http://www.google.co.in/search?Q=symbols+used+in+advertising+biw=1366&bih) consulted on 20/9/15 at 12:12 am
.Source: <http://visual-memory.co.uk/daniel/Documents/S4B/sem12.html> consulted on 28 Sep 2015 at 2:10am, Daniel Chandler.

Book(s) 1.Gupta C.B.,(1986), English, Scholar.