

## Marketing Semiotics - the Universal Language of E-Consumer

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### Abstract

*This researched aimed to study the perception related to shocking stimuli present in advertising. These visual elements raise the perception of images and brand semiotics perception is facilitated by shocking images and messages.*

*The results from the 3 stages of semi-structured interviews revealed that the semiotic elements identified in Nivea's and Caribu's Advertisements such as logos, colors, characters, symbols or language used played an important role because they accentuated perception by transforming an advertising into a shockvertising, creating a strong recall effect in the mind of the consumers.*

**Key words:** Marketing semiotics; shocking advertisement; Marketing stimuli.

**J.E.L. classification:** M30, R59, Z18

### 1. Introduction

Semiotics is a science claimed by many others, like: mathematics, computer science, aesthetics, psychology, psychoanalysis, sociology, rhetoric and also marketing (Aiello, 2019, p. 368). Although new as an object of study, semiotics has very ancient roots, dating back to ancient Greece, when there was a medical discipline called semiology, which consisted of studying and interpreting the signs or symptoms of various diseases (Stănculescu, 2004, p. 11). But the ancients considered not only medical symptoms as signs, but also language as a category of signs or symbols, which serve people to communicate with each other. Therefore, the concept of sign (from the Greek semeion - sign) is very old. He designates something that can be perceived and interpreted: colors, heat, shapes, sounds, etc., everything that can be perceived with the help of the senses. In modern times, semiotics (the American term) or semiology (the French term), although designating the same discipline, still have special connotations. Semiotics is considered a philosophy of languages and semiology (fr. Semiology) would refer to the study of particular languages, such as gestural image, theater, cinematography, etc.

In Marketing, we consider semiotics as an entire system of signs that express ideas, having three subordinate domains (Kroeber-Riel, 1995, p. 59): syntax (which deals with the formal characteristics and relationships of the signs themselves), semantics (which studies the content and meaning of signs), and pragmatics (which deals with the effects of signs on those who use them, transmitter and receiver). The sign is the fundamental unit of semiology (Fedorova, 2019, p. 199), it is a unit of meanings and semiologists believe that everything that has a meaning - an advertisement, a painting, a conversation, a poem - can be known by its signs and their action (Rose, 2001, p. 69).

Peirce (1990, p. 15) proposed a classification, depending on the type of relationship that exists between the signifier and the referent. From this perspective, there are three distinct categories of signs:

1. the icon corresponds to the class of signs whose signifier is in a relationship of analogy (resemblance) with the referent, the object it represents. The iconic signs (Chandler, 2007, p. 31) are not only visual (photography, figurative drawings, computer image that reproduces objects from

reality, etc.), but also auditory (noises, sounds from nature), olfactory (synthetic perfumes and smells that reproduce natural smells), tactile (imitation each skin reproduces the tactile sensations of genuine skin), gustatory (the synthetic taste of certain foods or beverages, which reproduces that of natural tastes).

2. the index or the index corresponds to the class of signs whose signifier maintains a relation of psychic contiguity with what they represent, the referent (contiguity - close neighborhood, without continuity). Signs of this kind are the pallor for fatigue, the smoke for the fire, the cloud for the rain, the footprints on the sand, the tracks of the tires of a car, etc.

3. the symbol corresponds to the class of signs whose signifier maintains a convention relationship with their referent. Through social and cultural conventions, certain meanings were assigned to certain signs, such as the flags of the countries, the black - color of mourning in Western cultures and white in some Oriental, the language of flowers, etc (Kauppinen-Räsänen, 2018, p. 101). Language is an arbitrary system of symbolic signs.

## **2. Semiotics and advertising**

Advertising images, which are a prototype of the media image, are in the category of those best suited to semiotic analysis (Faizan, 2019, p. 135), as has been the case since the 1960s, especially through the work of representatives of the French school of semiology.

The life of the modern human beings is daily assaulted by semiotics through advertising, from clothing labels we wear, to the nicely packed food, TV commercials, etc. We save this "sea of images" that we are surrounded subconsciously (Petre et al., 2005, p. 121).

Images are often used in advertising because they provide a significant example or illustration of the subject and they express the best a message. Images are used because they can evoke a multitude of emotions and reactions to the public. Also, they can express ideas very quickly, much faster if they were described by using a text. An image can be manipulated until its entire aspect is changed and due to the digital technology all of them are processed, intensified or improved in order to cause a high emotional impact to the public.

Advertisement causes different emotions from one campaign to another and the limit between awareness and often is very subtle. Controversies related to this type of campaigns questioned the impact through advertising because they can shock the public in a positive manner, to get them out of the passivity, where cruelty and offense begin.

Virvilaite (2013, p. 134) stated that the emotions caused by shocking advertising stimulate the consumer to choose or not to choose the advertised brand.

The power of shock is an image trait that forces the viewer to consciously notice it, because the multitude of visual images saturates the public and it has to be completely unusual in order to attract attention. The power of shock is one of the essential qualities of a good photo, but it also needs to have a high emotional impact and a proper content. The results show that distinctive stimuli have a positive effect on the degree to which attention is attracted and the ad is memorized (Tan et al., 2009, p. 368).

The aim of this research is to study the perception related to shock images present in advertising and how visual elements raise the perception of images. We also want to determine if brand semiotics perception is facilitated by shock images and messages. This is an exploratory qualitative research aiming to see the psychology behind the ads.

## **3. Research methodology**

Our approach started from a question: Is the perception of semiotic elements presented in print advertisements facilitated by shocking images and messages? Therefore, we wanted to analyze the perception of semiotic elements (such as logo, color, written message) from the advertisements which have a shocking message. This thesis aims to develop an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon of the perception of shocking advertisements. The objectives of our study are:

- O1 To identify the perception of the semiotic elements;
- O2 To identify the perceived message of the ads;
- O3 To identify the feelings created by the ads;

O4 To identify the recall effects of the visual elements from the ads;

In order to complete the prescribed research there are the 3 stages of the analysis and the method used is the exploratory qualitative research to see the psychology behind the ads.

#### 1. Choosing the advertisements and Content Analysis.

Two shocking advertisements were selected and fully analyzed. The criteria used to select the ads was based on the semiotic components such as logo, signs, language, figures, symbols, but also on how well known was the ad and its brand and how many consumers were exposed to the advertisement. The advertisements chosen were from known brands, but those ads were never seen by the subjects. The ads chosen were also each from a different product field: the first one is from personal care industry and the second one from the food industry. The content of the ads was fully analyzed from the semiotics point of view by researching the company and looking for the following components of the advertisement: logo, signs, language, figures, symbols, colors, font and characters.

#### 2. Interview- part 1

The second stage was an in-depth analysis by creating a semi-structured interview as a discussion on online platforms agreed by subjects (skype, zoom) to see how the advertisements were perceived. The semi-structured interview delved into the semiotic world by bringing out the perceived message of the ad, what emotions felt the subjects about the ad, what doesn't fit together, what thoughts the subjects took away from the ads, and how the advertisement affected their desire to buy from the advertised brand or the product advertised.

#### 3. Interview- part 2

The third stage was the second part of the semi-structured interview, also a discussion with the subject, one week later, to identify which was the recall effect of the semiotics including visual elements from the ads such as general visual items, colors, messages or other brand semiotics, but also to identify the order of perceiving this visual image and to see if the shock influences the perception.

In order to see how effective are the advertisements analyzed we measured the following facts: emotional response, purchase desire after viewing the ad, product recall, brand recall, visual elements recall, the most impactful ad.

Participants were approached individually via Skype or Zoom and they were invited to answer to 11 questions in the first part of the interview and 23 questions in the second part of the interview, one week later. The questions were in Romanian, their mother tongue language. All participants were asked to indicate their age, gender and occupation in both of the first and the second part of the interviews. On average, it took 15 minutes to answer the questions. In total, a number of 20 participants took part in the study, all of them being chocolate consumers, young people from the generation Z aged between 20 and 26 which are interested in buying a car in the close future and also consumers of the personal care industry products.

## 4. Findings

The first advertisement analyzed was one from Nivea, a brand owned by the German company Beiersdorf. By creating an advertisement where the main character is holding in his right hand his own previous head, before using the Nivea's products, they created an image which is shocking for anybody who sees the ad. Nowadays, people encourage natural beauty and Nivea tried to prove wrong by using this ad. Also, the written message of this ad is inappropriate, offensive and shocking, because Nivea deliver the message that if you are a black person and you don't keep your face clean-shaven and your hair with a crew-cut, you will look like a beast. The power of the shock message force the viewer to observe deeply an image and catch his attention. In order to attract the attention of he viewer, Nivea delivered a shocking message and image in order to raise the quality of the ad by adding two essential facts: touching content and controversy message.

Image no. 1 Semiotics within Nivea ad



Source: personal organization

The semiotics identified within this ads are:

- **Logo:** The Nivea's brand logo doesn't have any graphic elements in it, but only a rectangle with the brand's name written in capitals, the background is dark blue and the letters are white. This logo has a simple design which is easily recalled. The name of the brand is written with the Eagle Bold. This simple logo represents the professional manner of the brand, the comfort their products give to the consumers and gives you the idea that you can trust their brand.
- **Written message:** 'Made for men'; 'Re-civilize yourself'; 'Look like you give a damn'. The slogan 'Re-civilize yourself' is a semiotic element from this advertisement and it is the main sign from the ad because it is imposed over the image. This sentence describes that if you are a black person and you don't keep your face clean-shaven and your hair with a crew-cut these will make you look like a beast. The sentence 'Made for men' describes the target population for this product and the world men refers to these men from the ad. The tagline from this ad is 'Look like you give a damn' which is an aggressive way to encourage men to use this brand products in order to make them look nice.
- **Font:** Nivea's ad is based on the Eagle Bold font and the letters are written with uppercase and also are the slogan and the tagline, written in bold.
- **Colors:** The colors which appear in this advertisement are white and dark blue and shades of grey. The colors white and dark blue represent the colors of the sky and sea, but also help to keep brand's identity with a high recognition value. The color blue is associated with a trustful brand and white is associated with high quality products which protect the skin.
- **Language used:** The word 'damn' from the tagline of the advertisement is used to express the anger, the frustration.

The second advertisement was from Caribú Chocolate, a Peruvian chocolate brand that little is known about. The advertisement chosen from this brand has the following written message: "The Dark Side of Sweetness".

The advertisement is supposed to show the message that their Caribú line of bitter chocolate is a very dark chocolate, but to do that Caribú shows the girl in the advertisement performing a "dark" action of putting a baby chick through a meat grinder.

This advertisement could be offensive, shocking and aggressive to a few different groups of people. First, it is offensive and shocking for those who are concerned with animal rights as this advertisement clearly shows abuse to animals. Also, it could portray bad parenting in the sense that the young girl was not taught proper principles of treating animals.

Image no. 2 Semiotics within Caribu ad



Source: personal organization

The semiotics identified within this ads are:

- **Logo:** The logo is very hard to see because in the bottom right corner of the image and it's written with dark brown shades and small letters and only a persistent reader could see it and only if he searches very closely. Their logo reflect the essence of the brand: bitter chocolate.
- **Slogan:** 'The Dark Side of Sweetness' is the written message from this Caribu Bitter Advertisement and the idea of this message was to alert the consumer that this chocolate is so dark and it can make you do horrible things including killing an animal just for entertainment.
- **Characters:** In this image we can see two characters: the little girl and the baby chick. The little girl does a shocking action: she is grinding up the baby chick in a meat grinder. The little girl should represent the innocence of a child, but in this image she is doing a strange a horrible action which made the ad a shocking one.
- **Colors:** The background is made with dark shades which are reflecting evil and dangerous moods and the preponderant color used is dark green.
- **Language used:** We have only one written message in this ad: 'The Dark Side of Sweetness'. In this sentence, the language used can be interpreted from the speech figures point of view. The world dark is associated with sweet, and from lexical perspective they are antonyms.

The shocking advertising has the purpose to capture the eye of the viewers by violating some social norms or ideas in a deliberate manner in order to break through the noise of the advertising.

A shocking content is created by using semiotic elements which violate some norms and intend to transform the message of the ad in something that can offence or hurt someone in order to raise the engagement with the brand or to raise the commitment with the brand

The cruelty from the Caribu Ad shows to the public another perspective of reality which has to be proportional with the concern related to violence and by bringing the children in the forefront made the message more sensitive

In the Caribu advertisement, from the first glance you will see the shocking image: a girl performing a dark action- she is putting a baby chick through a meat grinder. This image is offensive, aggressive and shocking for many groups of people: for people concerned with animal rights, for young viewers, for people with little siblings, for parents, for grandparents or even for other groups of people.

This Caribu ad was transformed in a shockvertising because the consumers recall better and frequently the content and the brand which transmit fear or negative emotion instead of those ads which transmit only positive emotions.

The semiotic elements identified in those two advertisements were:

- **the written message** was perceived by 17 respondents in Nivea's ad, while none of the respondents noticed the written message from the bottom right corner in Caribu's ad
- **the slogan** was secondly noticed by the respondents for both ads: in Nivea's ad was perceived by 15 out of 20 people, while in Caribu's one was noticed by 14 out of 20 respondents
- **the logo** was the third element noticed in Nivea's ad, by 12/20 people, while in Caribu ad was notice only by 4/20 people, because you have to pay a lot of attention to see de small logo from the right bottom corner.
- **the colors** of the ads caught the attention of the respondents, 11/20 notice the colors in Nivea ad, while 10/20 noticed the colors in Caribu ad.
- **the characters** were noticed only by 7 people in Nivea ad, while in Caribu ad, the characters were notice from the first place by 18 out of 20 respondents.
- only in the Nivea ad was noticed the **language** used, by 5 out of 20 subjects.

The message perception of the two advertisements was mainly negative, as following:

- 18 out of 20 respondents said that they find the Nivea ad message an **aggressive** one, while the preponderant message for Caribu ad was **brutality**, 19 out of 20 perceived like this the message. The respondents considering the ad an aggressive one explained their answer saying that it is promoting an aggressive message because it instigates violence by showing a character holding a human head in his hand.
- the second message perceived by subjects for both Nivea and Caribu ad is the promoted **violence**, 16/20 subjects responded the same.
- the **racism** was perceived by 14/20 subjects in Nivea ad, because of the written message and message sent by the character. For Caribu 15/20 subjects perceived the message as an **aggressive** one
- on the fourth place 12/20 subjects considered the Nivea's message a **shocking** one, while Caribu message shocked 15 subjects.
- a **discriminatory** message was received by 8/20 subjects, and **repulsion** by one single person in Nivea Ad and by two in Caribu's case.

The feelings provoked by the ads were:

- for both ads, **shock** was the first feeling among the subjects, 17/20 respondents were shocked or **astonished** by the ads.
- for the Nivea advertisement, the second feeling among the subjects was **discomfort**, 10/20 subjects encountered this. In the Caribu ad, 11/20 were **disgusted** about the ad;
- for the Nivea ad, **confusion** was created for 9/20 subjects, while 10/20 subjects were **scared** about the Caribu ad;
- for both ad, 8 out of 20 subjects took **aggression** as a feeling;
- for the Nivea ad, **disdain** was the feeling of 6/20 subject and **ignorance** for 4/20 subjects
- the last feeling subjects encountered for Caribu ad was the antagonistic one, because they find the innocence of young age opposite with the aggression of putting a baby chick in a meat grinder.

One week later, the same respondents were kindly asked to rejoin for a short feedback interview, aiming to reveal the recalling effect of those two advertising stimuli exposure.

So, a week later, the most impactful advertisement considered by 14 out of 20 respondents was the Caribu chocolate advertisement, while Nivea for Men advertisement was considered impactful for only 6 out of 20 subjects.

Also, we aimed to identify the colors recalled by our subjects:

- the color blue was recalled by all 20 subjects for Nivea ad, because they linked the logo's color with the ad, while for Caribu ad the dark green shades were recalled by 17/20 subjects.

- the color white was recalled by 18/20 subjects for the Nivea ad, because they linked the products purity with the advertisement, while for the other ad, the color black was recalled by 14/20 subjects
- grey color is the third recalled color by 10/20 respondents for Nivea ad, while pink was linked with the little girl from the Caribu ad by 9/20;
- the last color recalled by 8/20 for Nivea ad is black, while 4/20 recalled the yellow color for the Caribu ad.

We aimed to identify the recall effects of the semiotic elements from the ads such as general visual stimuli:

- we can observe that 20 subjects recalled the **logo** from Nivea, after 1 week from the first interview, while 19/20 subjects recalled the **character** from the Caribu ad;
- the **slogan** from Nivea ad was recalled by 16/20 subjects, while the **brand** Caribu was recalled by 18/20 subjects;
- the third place stands for the **symbol** of the head carried by the main character was recalled by 15/20 respondents, while the **written message** was recalled by 14/20 subjects;
- the **colors** were recalled by subjects for both ads, 9/20 for Nivea and 6/20 for Caribu;
- the **clothing** was recalled by 7/20 subjects, they recalled that the character was wearing a casual outfit;
- the **font** was recalled by 5/20 respondents for Nivea ad and by 9/20 subjects for Caribu ad.

To sum up, 18 out of 20 subjects considered that the brand semiotics perception was facilitated by the shocking message from Nivea ad; while all subjects considered that the brand semiotics perception was facilitated by the shocking image from Caribu ad. All the subjects, for both advertisements, considered that a shocking image make the brand easily to be recalled.

The second part of the interview had the purpose to identify which was the recall effect of the visual elements from the ads such as general visual items, colors, messages or other brand semiotics, but also to identify the order of perceiving this visual images and to see if the shock influences the perception.

The results from the questions regarding the recall effects of subjects lead to a positive effect- because the advertisements had a shocking image or written message, subjects remembered almost all the visual and semiotics elements which they mentioned and noticed before, in the first stage of the interview, the same elements identified and analyzed in the first stage of research.

The subjects recalled the predominant colors from both advertisements, because they associated the colors which define the brand with advertisements or they associated colors with the colors which express the primary shades from the ad or shades related to the emotion felt when viewing the ads.

The subjects identified the advertisement from Caribu more impactful then the one from Nivea for Men because the Caribu ad created more harm on the emotional part.

The subjects considered that brand semiotics perception is facilitated by shock images or messages and they are strongly believing that a shocking image or message can make the brand easily to be recalled, because in a world full of advertising, differentiation is needed.

Limitations

- We could not measure if the recall effect was influenced by the notoriety of the brands;
- An experiment could be conducted in order to better highlight the cause/effect results;
- Equipment could influence the findings, because the order in which the semiotic elements would have been perceived better with an eye-tracking system.

## 5. Conclusions

Semiotics is considered a philosophy of languages, a general theory of signs and its elements refers to visual elements such as image, logo, symbols, characters, font, written message, slogan, etc. The image is the main tool through semiotics elements can be expressed, because semiotics has a core contribution when we are speaking about meanings.

Photos are used in advertising for a variety of reasons: they can provide an eloquent example or illustration of the subject in question or to express a message. Images are used because they can evoke a multitude of emotions and reactions in the ranks to the public, for example an image of an

athlete known in the immediate vicinity of a product may suggest that this celebrity supports and supports that product.

Images can express ideas very quickly, much faster than if they were described by a text and due to this fact, the images are a key element in advertising.

Images are a tool used in advertising to reach the attention of the consumer by using different ways of catching their attention: by intense physical impulses (color and size of the ad), by emotional impulses (reproductions of people's expressions) or by surprising impulses (images that go beyond and exceeding the waiting horizon of the subject by stimulating their mental activity). In advertising the most important thing is not only to arouse attention, but also to maintain it and images can have effects because of the surprising impulses which produce a sufficient activation in the mental activity of the subjects.

Using images is probably the most interesting part of design, because they have a profound impact on the end result. An image can be manipulated to completely change the appearance, to accentuate or diminish, isolate or complete certain properties to be used in design.

Image manipulation techniques can lead to results spectacular. Nowadays, with the vast digital technology, almost all images presented to the public are processed, intensified or improved in some way before to be printed or published. The success of such a work is measured by reaction emotional that is induce to the public.

This researched aimed to study the perception related to shocking images present in advertising and how visual elements raise the perception of images and if brand semiotics perception is facilitated by shock images and messages.

To sum up the results from the 3 stages of the research, the semiotics elements identified in Nivea's and Caribu's Advertisements such as logos, colors, characters, symbols, language used played an important role because they accentuated the properties of the advertisements by transforming them from advertising in shockvertising and created a strong recall effect in the mind of the consumers.

In the first stage were identified and analyzed the semiotics elements within the two advertisements, the same elements which were identified by the subjects in the second stage of the research which means the perception of this elements was increased because the subjects found the advertisements shocking and once the image or the written message was seen, the subjects searched in the image for the promoted brand, for the logo, for slogan or main characters. Their interest in finding who and what is behind the ad increased significantly.

The visual and semiotic elements were recalled easily by the subjects because the perception of this elements was facilitated by shock images and messages. This elements had a higher impact on the subjects because the emotional response appeared in the moment they first saw the ad.

The recall effect was tested after one week after the first contact with the ads and due to the fact that ads caused numerous illocutionary effects such as shock, the subjects stated that it is easier to remember visual elements, brands or products when an image creates a negative impact, because in a world where you see a lot of brands and products advertisements which you may confuse at one point, the differentiation is needed in order to get noticed or recalled.

An advertisement should have a dose of shock, even if it is in the image or in its written message, because this shock attracts the attention and forces the viewer to notice in a conscious way the ad. A proper content in conjunction with a high emotional impact message or image can have a positive effect on the degree to which attention is attracted and the brand and product advertised is perceived and memorized.

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