

# Brand Semiotics—A Strategic Marketing Tool for Psychographic Segmentation

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**Abstract**—Semiotic is the scientific study of production and usage of signs and symbols and their use or interpretation. There are basically two analytical elements related to this, the connotative relation and the denotative relation. The connotative relation is the relation between signs and their interpreting signs. Two other components come into picture in this content viz. the signifier and the signified. There are cultural implications related to this. While in India, while holding a thumb and forefinger together with other fingers above, denotes a sign of very good. Whereas, in France, the same symbol denotes zero. Similarly, in USA, silence is interpreted as disagreement to a business proposal, whereas in Japan, it denotes under consideration. This variation in interpretations represents a difference in semiotics which is influenced by cultural connotations.

The present day marketers are resorting to brand semiotics as a strategic initiative to build brand equity and make their presence felt in consumers' mind frame through psychographic segmentation. This is done by symbols, signs and various other cues that create a perceptual gateway in consumers' psyche that has a strong emotional connectivity. This is due to the premise that brands become symbolic of a product or service and are synonymous with a cultural aspect, a set norm, a pattern or a strong belief.

The semiotics can be traced back to the early history in western countries back to the era of Pluto (428-348 BC), Aristotle (384-322 BC). The marketers have also started to use semiotics in branding from the perspective of not only of what it is referred to as "signs" in daily life, but also of anything which stands for something else. Ferdinand de Saussure is considered as father of Semiotics.

**Keywords:** Brand, semiotics, connotation, perception

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This conceptual research paper, based upon secondary research throws light upon a brief history of the concept of semiotics, its various aspects related to branding of products by marketers in the prevalent global competitive environment, and how it can be used as a strategic tool to carve niche for the brand. This research papers is based on secondary data, and is aimed to highlight brand semiotics as an emerging area through which the marketing communications are devised through usage of symbols that have cultural connotations.

The word semiotics is derived from a Greek root, *seme*, as in *SEMIOTIKOS*, an interpreter of signs. Semiotics is the scientific study of production and usage of signs and symbols

and their use or interpretation. There are basically two analytical elements related to this, the connotative relation and the denotative relation. The connotative relation is the relation between signs and their interpreting signs. Two other components come into picture in this context viz. the signifier and the signified. There are cultural implications related to this. While in India, holding a thumb and forefinger together with other fingers above, denotes a sign of very good. Whereas in France, the same symbol denotes zero. Similarly, in USA, silence is interpreted as disagreement to a business proposal, whereas in Japan, it denotes "under consideration". This variation in interpretations represents a difference in semiotics which is influenced by cultural connotations.

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In the prevailing competitive environment, brands are trying to occupy their respective places in the consumers' mind. The marketers are fine-tuning their strategies to make their brands most fit from psychographic segmentation perspective(s). As a result, the target market is able to extract the desired association after possessing the brands, thereby helping the marketers to create the brand personality vis-à-vis self personality of their market. This also helps them to position and reposition their brands from their strategic implications and derive optimum brand equity and recall.

**Semiotics** is defined as the study of signs and symbols and their use or interpretation. From the perspective of brand semiotics, when two arches are depicted, it is synonymous with Mc Donald's, the typical sign of "right symbol" is NIKE, the symbol of "T" written in a specific lettering reminds the TATA group that is synonymous with trust, the symbol of LIC, there is no need to communicate through text; the philosophy that they mean. It is easily understood from the Indian cultural value systems. What does the colour schemes, the shape(s) used in the logo denote? They refer to the emotional connect with the consumers.

The basic premise through which brand semiotics is referred to by the organization is based upon following three levels

- i. Signs and representations through them;
- ii. Object(s) level(s);
- iii. Interpretation level(s)

At the level of sign/interpretation, it is called firstness, at the level of object; it is termed as secondness, while at interpretation(s) level(s), which is quite significant, it is referred as thirdness.

Similarly, the advertisement messages are conceived, devised and executed, as per the myths that are there in human mind which are basically inherited and exist since time immemorial, and they are prevalent naturally. They require detailed analysis, which semiotics can address to. Secondly, the symbols help the brand managers, creators and marketers to create the myth surrounding their brands in the minds of their consumers and position them appropriately in the brand cluttered market. Hence brand semiotics include words, (coded iconic message(s)), connotations ; ( non-coded message), and the resultant denotations, which are culturally accepted and are important from consumers perceptions. And, all these mushroom from linguistic message(s).

Hence, brand semiotics is the scientific study of production and usage of signs and symbols. Throughout the world, there are some culturally accepted norms, procedures and processes that have importance. Then, there is psychology in picture when semiotics is applied by marketers, as it is known that a brand is a system of sensory signs that propels consumers in a symbolic process which then leads to tangible value(s). Semiotics is the system that creates the tangibility right in consumers' psyche before, during and after the possession of a brand. Hence, it helps to convert the intangibilities to tangibility of a product, and then to brand, before and after the consumption stages. This further helps in retaining that space in consumers' mindset.

The encyclopedia of branding defines brands in marketing as: *The marketing practice of creating a name, symbol or design that identifies and differentiates a product from other products.* Hence, the semiotics are the instruments that connects the brand name to brand symbol or a design, and presently, the graphic designers are further associating the

geometrical patterns, colours, shapes in converting the feel of brands from mind to heart of the consumers. Moreover, with the advent of digital marketing, and informational technology, various special effects are being imbibed by advertisers while executing an advertising appeal on time media through special visual effects. This is why, when the generic *Colgate Toothpaste* advertisement shows tingling and freshness semiotic connotations, the target consumers easily connect to those bubbles with freshness, as it is symbolic. Similarly, the usage of Green colour, water, plants, trees, while showing an advertisement of soaps, is synonymous with freshness, and bathing denotes freshness and vice-versa. The colour is white denoting cleanliness, and so is the blue. Hence, the packaging "P" of detergent powders will have white and blue colours. All these bring forth the brand semiotics in foray to communicate and associate with the consumers. An effective **brand** strategy gives the marketers a major edge in increasingly competitive markets.

There is an old saying '*where there's smoke, there's fire.*' Similarly, facial micro expressions often manifest unseen emotions. Even the signs like *Thumbs up* connote best of luck, but in some other cultural context, it is not taken likewise. Similarly, the hand gesture of very nice relates to the zero in French language. Similarly, the alphabets of English language are also patterned according to symbols. Like "A" is in the shape of triangle, while the number 8 is a combination of two zeros, then the alphabet "2" is having the shape of a duck. All these letters are used by brand communication specialist in different cultural connotations. *Even words or letters, which are only sounds, carry meaning to communicate and persuade.* Here mention may be made of foreign language brand names, that are not pronounced correctly, as a result of which, the desired semiotic benefit is not achieved, since the consumer does not pronounce the word as it should be, due to lack of awareness. This was the reason that when *VOLKSWAGON* launched their cars in India, they launched a massive print media campaign through which the company educated the consumers about the exact pronunciation of brand *VOLKSWAGON*, through Devnagari, Telugu, Kannad, Tamil, English, and other East Indian vernacular languages, so that the right pronunciation phonology and sound patterns could be created while pronouncing the brand name. This would result in the desired neuron combinations in consumers' brain; to extract the perceived value segmentation and help them achieve psychographic profile(s). Like signs and symbols, brands are also imaginative signposts, signifying sign-object relations and connecting specific signs to definite objects. This definition is interpreted and inferred through cultural contexts.

As a brand is a system of sensory signs that incites consumers in a symbolic process, which then contributes to tangible value, semiotics is the keystone of brand building.

**History of semiotics:** The historical perspectives of semiotics can be traced from the time of Hippocrates to **Plato**.

However, there are two primary traditions in contemporary semiotics in 20<sup>th</sup> century system viz. Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and American Philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914). He conceived his triadic model of sign according to cognitive-philosophical method. He emphasized upon analyses of meaning interpretation. These are: (a) Sign: This is the form/shape that the sign/symbol takes, and it is denoted as sign vehicle, (b) Object: This is referent that is beyond the sign to which it refers, (c) Referent: This is the sense aspect of the symbol/sign. These same elements are resorted to, by brand managers while creating and consolidated brands. The modern semiotic analysis can be said to have begun with Swiss linguist **Ferdinand de Saussure** (1857-1913) who is considered as the father of semiotics. According to him, “semiotics is a two sided entry dyad, consisting of signifier and signified. The signifier was the material marker and signified was the mental concept the signifier enkindled. There are some agreed and accepted norms that governs and decides the conventional and orthodox relationship between signifier and signified, but, this exists within collectivity. In any language, how the feelings are expressed? It is through letters and alphabets, which form a word, then a word forms a sentence, and the sentence has punctuation marks in the form of a comma, full stop, colon, semi colon, question marks, and exclamation mark. So these are all accepted as systems and procedures by the society, that when there is a question mark, the tone is like a question, and when there is an exclamation mark, it symbolizes an order, a request, or an invitation. Similarly, a full stop denotes the completion of a sentence, a comma reflects that there is to be a pause, and various other punctuation marks and symbols represent some accepted rules and norms that are passed, they are imbibed within the “have to do” annals of all languages of Europe. This is nothing but semiotics in action.

So, when a marketer resorts to semiotics, the basic purpose is to lend tangibility to the benefits accruing after consumption of an advertised brand, and make consumers’ buying and consumption experience an enjoyable one and as a satisfied one, so that they become brand loyal, and there is creation of brand equity. Hence, language has letters, and symbols, and they are a socio-cultural phenomenon. These letters as symbols are assorted by brand specialists to communicate a feeling. Further noticeable contribution has been made by American pragmatist and polymath **Charles Sanders Peirce** (1839-1914). Further contribution was made throughout the 20th century by **Claude Levi-Strauss**, **Roland Barthes**, **Umberto Eco**, and several other distinguished semioticians. Unlike conventional research approaches, Peircean semiotic resources are emergent approaches that emphasize determining referents by interpretants to further develop brands as dynamic symbolic entities. “**iPod**” has been an inspiration for brand managers, that not only leveraged culture, but also repositioned the pop culture. Similarly, brand **Nintendo Wii** brought in the much required transition in video games product

category that had been synonymous with gaming culture of laziness into human value based interaction, cohesion and team activity.

**Other applications of semiotics** : Semiotics are very effective in branding, but these techniques are also useful and very effective in conceiving brand elements viz. packaging, promotion mix, logos, advertising etc.

**Why semiotics?** In the prevalent competitive and complex business environs, semiotics is a valuable tool to counter the marketing warfare to occupy the much solicited space in consumers’ minds.

## 2. SEMIOTICS IN THE CONTEXT OF BRAND BUILDING

A semiotic specialist is called semiotician. He has all the skills to extract the bits and pieces of signs and concepts and design them into meaningful patterns and designs that are synchronized according to the marketing mix and appeal to the corresponding consumers’ psychology on the basis of concentrated marketing efforts based upon psychographic segmentation. This leads to brand associations and brand personalities associated with self-image/concept and self personality. He can figure out the desired coherence in symbols and signs. He works on the premise that *people buy things not only for what things can do, but also for what they stand for*”. Simply put, semiology or semiotics plucks out the meanings that are mediating between products, services’ tangible and intangible benefits vis-à-vis brand meanings that flow between products and consumers’ motivation.

## 3. SOME STRIKING POINTS ABOUT SEMIOTICS IN BRANDING

Semiotics when applied in marketing, is instrumental in lending marketing research a distinctive edge, as a result of which marketers can position their brands based upon cultural contexts, design, that can include symbols, icons, archetypes, and things that have some historical significance..

## 4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This conceptual research paper based on secondary research was an attempt to understand the concept of semiotics in brand management. Due to paucity of time, and lack of resources and time, primary research could not be conducted. But, through this paper, an effort is made to understand the issues and aspects related to brand semiotics, its history, and related mechanisms that brand managers need to delve into. The concepts are also supported by citing examples of some famous brand names that have been positioned in the market through application of brand semiotics. Brand semiotics is an emerging area in the field of marketing, and marketing communications and there is a lot of scope in this field. It gives an opportunity to marketers to structure their advertising and brand communication messages that are implicit and

based on feelings. As a result of this, the consumers are able to relate to brands and associated value from heart and emotions, leading to effective brand equity development and brand loyalty. Brand semiotics calls for a perfectionist approach towards knowledge related to cultural, designing, color, symbols, patterns, synchronization of elements of symbols, colours, pictures, special effects, and communication related skills.

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