Semiotics in Advertising – The Anatomy of an Advert

Leanne Arnold
Illustrations

Fig. 1. Artist Unknown, September 2011, J'Adore 1, Christian Dior. Available at: http://www.advertolog.com/brands/dior/ (Accessed 13th January 2014 at 12:45) (Page 5)

Fig 2. Authors own image, December 2013. (Page 6)


Semiotics in advertising - The anatomy of an advert

In today’s world we see and process images everyday, we live in a world dominated by the media and one major way they communicate with us is through images. Many of these images are advertisements, ranging in purpose. Some trying to sell products, some are selling services, whilst others are trying to gain something from the viewer. The majority of adverts, whether that is a commercial advert trying to sell a brand and product, or a public service advert trying to emotionally coerce and gain financial support from the audience, will use semiotics in order to express their chosen message to a target audience.

Semiotics is the study of signs and symbols. According to semiotic pioneers, Saussure and Pearce, these signs are made up of two elements the signifier and the signified. The signifier is a literal thing that you can see, a person, an object or a colour. Whilst the signified is the meaning this item has, what it represents for us, and how we react to it. Anything can be a signifier and what these signify is wholly dependent on the viewer’s cultural influence and beliefs. As Hall says, ‘Signs are always produced and consumed in the context of a specific society’ (Hall, 2007, p7). This is clearly shown through the representations of the colour white. White in the UK signifies purity, and innocence, where as in China it signifies death. What is signified depends on your understanding of the language you use. Crow states, ‘All that is necessary for any language to exist is an agreement amongst a group of people that one thing will stand for another.’ (Crow, 2003, p22).

We consume and process semiotics everyday. We often don’t even register we are doing it. ‘Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognises before it can speak (Berger, 1972, p7). We live in an image-saturated world, specifically an advertisement saturated world, we are ingesting images constantly and we automatically decode the semiotic message and fall for the sell point. Advertisements rely on us being able to do this unconsciously and quickly, we often view an image for seconds and so the semiotics must be clear and effective. Images used in advertising are carefully constructed to
show elements and items, we will link to create a visual metaphor, to impose onto the desired purpose. ‘Adverts in particular are embedded with semiotic codes in order to coerce or persuade the viewer into thinking in a particular way.’ (Wells, 2009, p152)

The semiotics used in advertising can be used to create different feelings and connections in and with the viewer, in order to make the advert successful. This can be done in a number of ways, depending on the purpose of the advert. Advertisers link items in the image together to create a preconceived message, ‘We need to decide which social myths the ad draws on, and whether these myths are reinforced or challenged’ (Bignell, 2002, p32). The audience makes the connections between the signifiers and creates a visual metaphor automatically and subconsciously, due to their previous knowledge of the elements in the adverts and what they signify.

Adverts trying to sell a product can use semiotics and therefore visual metaphors to link the product to a certain lifestyle. To create an aspirational element to the product and make it more desirable. ‘… the meanings of ads are designed to move out from the page or screen on which they are carried, to shape and lend significance to our experience of reality’ (Bignell, 2002, p30) Advertisers use specific celebrities, or people with a certain appearance, so what they represent to us, healthy, rich, beautiful, athletic, expensive, elite, is automatically transferred onto the product they are advertising. They use semiotics, carefully picking settings, colours and props, to signify a certain emotion or life they want you to buy into.

Adverts for perfume do this particularly clearly. These adverts, like many others, are selling an aspirational lifestyle linked to their product. This lifestyle is linked directly to their demographic. They link the idea of feminine beauty to their product making it essential in the mind of the viewer, in order to embody it.

The adverts for the company Dior are an excellent example of the use of semiotics and visual metaphors being used to sell a wealthy lifestyle and feminine beauty.
Figure 1 is an advertisement for the company Dior; it is advertising their perfume *J'adore*. The model used in the advert is Charlize Theron, she is a well known contemporary actress with multiple movie credits and modeling contracts.

This advert has many denotations, a lady, a dress, a perfume bottle, text, a fancy room and the colour gold. The elements of this image combine to create a lavish and aspirational lifestyle. The most prominent element is the model, Charlize Theron. She is beautiful, woman want to be her, and men just want her. She is used to represent female beauty, as a whole, in the image. She isn’t the average looking women which I think helps to add a feeling of aspiration and an element of high class to the advert. Those feelings of aspiration and desire reflect off her on to the second most prominent element of the perfume bottle. Her body shape is accentuated, so it matches the shape of the product. The two are undeniably linked. ‘...the name of the perfume becomes a linguistic sign that seems to connote feminine beauty as well.’ (Bignell, 2002, p34). The dress the model is wearing is also used to reflect the design of the bottle, reinforcing the connection between the model.
and the bottle. The textured lines of the dress and the slight change in tone to the rest of the dress match perfectly to the design on the neck of the bottle, creating a visual link.

The model having direct eye contact connects with the viewer and makes the ad personal, it is talking right to you. The location the image is set in looks lavish and expensive. This reinforces the lifestyle the image is trying to sell. The advert is aimed at both men and women; we know this as they have used a model that is desirable to both. Men typically buy perfume for their partners, so the adverts must entice them too. They are more likely to buy a product of which they can recall the advert to. They want their significant other to look like Charlize Theron as much as the women do, if not more.

The colouring in the image is fairly monochrome, it is all gold. Therefore everything about this image screams expense. A gold dress which sparkles looks more expensive than a black dress, a gold house interior looks more expensive than a beige house interior and a gold perfume bottle looks like you have spent more money on it than a clear one, even the model has a gold tint to her skin. The colour gold reinforces the feeling of high class and expensive tastes, which was introduced through the contents of the image. We automatically link wealth and gold. Culturally when we think of gold we think rich. Gold itself, is a precious metal, it is also expensive. So a product draped in a gold covering, projects expense and a treasurable sentiment, which makes it more desirable.

The main signifier in the image is the model, Charlize Theron. She comes with preconceived perceptions, about her as a person, her lifestyle and her appearance. These perceptions are then automatically transferred onto the image and therefore the product, (fig 2.) creating a visual metaphor between the model and the product. The metaphor being created runs though all Dior adverts, past and present, across their whole range. They use a different signifier, depending on who embodies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signifier – linking notion – Signified</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Person – Abstract Concept – Object</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlize – Beauty and – Dior Perfume</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theron – Wealth</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 2. Authors own image, December 2013
the linking notion and would be able to communicate this to the current market. There is a constant use of metaphor through the Dior advert history, which creates the company’s visual aesthetic. They are a high end, classy, expensive and desirable company to buy from, as they always have a high class, expensive and desirable signifier selling their product. This can be supported clearly when we look at the newest Dior adverts (fig 3), they have moved on from Charlize Theron to Natalie Portman, who is the current representative for Dior. Natalie Portman is a more contemporary actress, in many films popular at the present time. This makes her a more recognisable signifier in the visual metaphor being created. The narrative themes and semiotic functions that run through the image are similar to that of figure 1. For example the use of colour to represent an ideal to the target audience. Pink is considered a very feminine colour and the model is attractive and petite. This presents an image of the epitome of femininity because everything has a pink hue to it and pink equals female. The pink tones to the image reflect the colour of the product, unquestionably linking the two. The outfit worn by the model also reflects the message of the advert. It is an overtly feminine dress, likened to one a fairly tale princess would wear; this reinforces the strong feminine theme to the

Fig 3. Artist Unknown, 2014, Miss Dior.
image. The ruffles of the dress, again link to the product, as they match the design on the bottle. The setting for the image emphasises these themes, as the pink colours and princess dress, lead the viewer to think of fairy tales. Then the staircase leads the mind to the story of Cinderella, a well-known fairy tale. Encapsulating the complete tone intended.

On the completely opposite end of the scale these visual metaphors can also work as a shock tactic to draw in and emotionally motivate an audience; this is seen regularly in adverts for charities. The semiotics used in these adverts are often subtle and the visual metaphors more complex. The purpose of these adverts is to raise awareness and gain financial donations, the advertisers need you to stop and look at the adverts, so the semiotics used can be more complex and require you to think about the message that is being portrayed. ‘The aim of ads is to engage us in their structure of meaning, to encourage us to participate in decoding their linguistic and visual signs and to enjoy this decoding activity’ (Bignell, 2002, p31) Semiotics can be used to suggest elements that they would not normally actually be able to show in an advert. Many more contemporary charity adverts use semiotics to their advantage, creating clever imagery, with a deep and powerful meaning. Often these adverts apply shock tactics to make the image more memorable. These shocking images don’t actually have to contain a ‘shocking’ element as it can be hinted at through semiotics, causing the viewer to create the shocking element, making it even more powerful.

The charity organisation WWF is very good at hiding powerful visual metaphors, in interesting and intelligent imagery. They create adverts with the purpose of gaining financial donations, as well as making people aware of causes important to them. The charity focuses around animal welfare and this makes the images particularly powerful, as people tend to have a soft spot for animals, and don’t want to see them harmed. They emotionally coerce the viewer into sympathising with their cause and therefore gaining donations from them.

This advert from the WWF (fig 4) is a great example of semiotics being used
to create narrative and emotion in an image without being instantly obvious. To fully understand this image we need to look at the signifiers and what they signify.

The image consists of an alleyway full of bins, rubbish, a polar bear and some text. The elements of this advert combine to create a bleak, but visually interesting image. Conjuring ideas of homelessness, poverty, dirt, endangerment and global warming.

Fig. 4 Artist Unknown, 2007, Polar Bear.

The message is clear, whilst not being thrown in your face. It is a clever advert that relies on the viewer to make the connections and understand the emotional aspect of the image. The polar bear is a homeless person. Being set in an alley, full of bins and rubbish with only a small blanket, the bear resembles a homeless person on the street. The advertisers rely on you being able to form this connection. We have all seen homeless people, be that in person or on TV, this image can be related to worldwide and doesn’t overly challenge the viewer to make this connection. The element that is challenging is the viewer making the connection between the polar bear and
homelessness. The text stating ‘you can help stop global warming’ adds more context to the image. Global warming is destroying the polar bears habitat and it is saying, if this continues the polar bears will too be homeless. The lack of colour creates a gritty, and uncomfortable look to the image, it is desolate and dreary, and not somewhere you would want to be. The use of some green, reflects the ‘nature’ aspect of the image, it also creates a link to the text, which includes the same colour. This highlights it and gives the ‘you can help’ message importance. The green makes the image more uncomfortable to view. The positioning of the polar bear is also important. It has one paw out, almost begging you to stop. This personalises the advert, and plays on your emotions. You pity the bear and want to help it. Charity adverts rely on the viewer’s emotional response to be effective so the camera angle being higher than the bear puts the view at an elevated level positioning the bear below us. This adds to the feeling of our power over the bear and its situation. This also makes the bear seem more desperate and again affects us emotionally. This advert works particularly well on the emotional coercion front, as every person viewing the advert is responsible for the situation being portrayed, this makes the advert very effective.

Having looked at two very different ways of how semiotics are used to create effective advertisements, it is clear to see they play on our cultural influences and emotions. The images, no matter what their purpose, are made up of carefully chosen elements. ‘The focus is upon clues which together constitute a text ready for reading and interpretation. (Wells, 2009, p31) These elements, the semiotic signifiers, are used to help us create a visual metaphor, in order to create an emotional response to the image. This response could be desire, in the case of adverts selling products, or guilt and responsibility in the case of charity adverts. Advertisers can construct images in order to make us feel a certain way towards an image; they essentially manipulate the viewer into connecting and engaging with the image and therefore its purpose.
Some companies, such as Dior, use the same semiotics, just changing the person in the advert to make it work in the current market, it is important that the viewer identifies with the model involved, so someone prominent in current media works well, as they are seen regularly and are seen as an influential and aspirational figure. Dior sticks to this formula of semiotics as they have found the right combination of signifiers in order for their advert to be effective and affluent. Companies such as WWF have to change their mixture of signifiers regularly in order to keep the emotional response from the viewer, as we can become desensitised to images we see regularly. They need the initial emotional response upon first seeing their message, for the advert to work effectively. Whichever ways the semiotics are being used, it is clear that they are essential for adverts to work. The visual metaphors they create draw the consumer in and create the appropriate reaction to the cause. An advert not utilising semiotics and one therefore not communicating a message to the viewer isn’t going to be successful. The success of an advert is reliant on the strength of the semiotics and visual metaphor, it has is created, and how well it translates to its target audience.

Semiotics is a massive umbrella covering a whole world of representation and meaning, it is an expansive subject and one I feel as an image-maker I should have some understanding of. Although I feel I am making head way, but I am not sure it will ever be possible to fully understand the enormity that is semiotics, it is a subject matter in itself. Everything is open to interpretation and those interpretations can change daily depending on your experiences and the constant change of our culture.
Bibliography

Books


Hall. S, (2007), This means this, This means that. Laurence King Publishing Ltd.


Websites


**Dissertation**


**Article**