

The Meaning Behind Marketing: Semiotic-Oriented Research in Marketing and Consumer Research

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The importance of meaning in marketing and consumer research has long been widely recognized, however the application of semiotics in marketing theory development and research is fairly recent. The merits of Ferdinand de Saussure's and Charles S. Peirce's conceptualizations of semiotics have been the major paradigms of marketing and consumer research to date. This essay traces the origins of semiotics and its applications to the field of marketing. Among its strengths, semiotics is well suited to uncover the phenomenon behind meaning and signification, and provides a structural framework for ascertaining the structure of meaning in consumer research. Future directions for semiotic-oriented research are also presented, as semiotics research has been limited in the domain of marketing and consumer research.

Consumer behavior research often focuses on the self-concept, as a set of perceptions where consumers symbolize to themselves who they are. The importance of signs and symbols in the domain of consumer research has been widely recognized since the conception of the consumer behavior discipline. Whereby research has been driven by the meanings and interpretations woven into consumer consumption and disposition of marketplace stimuli. By addressing the structure and process of signification, semiotics is well suited to explain how meaning comes about in marketing and consumer behavior. This does not undermine other approaches to conducting scholarly research in marketing and consumer behavior. This is simply the framework for this essay.

Semiotics takes on two forms: 1) a general semiotics that seeks to answer, "What is the nature of meaning?" and 2) a specific semiotics that asks, "How does our reality – words, myths, gestures, assets, and theories acquire meaning. With an intense focus on meaning, semioticians seek to investigate the systems of signs essential to verbal and non-verbal communication. Semiotics rejects the view that the study of meaning is beyond the purview of science.

Semiotics as a whole, along with its applications within marketing and consumer research has had two dominant paradigms (Mick et al. 2004). One is Saussure's, grounded in linguistics, but positioned by Saussure as elemental to

social psychology. The second is Peirce's, based strongly in philosophy and logic. The Saussurean epistemology has been mostly utilized in structural, and text-interpretive analyses of meaning; whereas, the Peircean view of semiotics has been utilized primarily in conceptual papers (Mick et al. 2004). Inasmuch, as it relates to the individualistic nature of consumer meaning, semiotics has been an invaluable tool in investigating the complex nature of meaning and consumption symbolism.

The scope of this essay will cover the development of semiotics by de Saussure and Pierce. The foundation of semiotics and its alternative orientations is beyond the scope of this essay. Mindfully, it is not the intent of this essay to represent a complete anthology of the field of semiotics, as some contributors will not be included in this paper. We will then briefly discuss the history of the development of a postmodernist, semiotically aware discourse in marketing and consumer research. We close by drawing conclusions about the progress, and the future of semiotic research in marketing and consumer behavior.

ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION OF SEMIOTICS

Semiotics is primarily a mode of analysis that seeks to understand how signs perform or convey meaning in context. The initial premise of semiotics was to uncover the rules that govern the conventions of signification (meaning A signifies B). The aim of semiotics is not to lay out the descriptive, historical, or prior conditions necessary or sufficient for the appearance of a phenomenon (Manning, 1987). Nor does it aim to describe individual actor's motives, morals, or attitude values except as they are symbolized through the system of signs. But semiotics is sought to understand the structure that undergirds both the production and interpretation of signs.

Aristotle, and other philosophers such as Locke, Leibniz, Poincaré, and Vico all discussed signs, symbols, and communication, however it was not until the turn of the 20th century that semiotics achieved its identity through the independently developed works of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914).

Ferdinand de Saussure

Saussure was one of the first scholars to rationalize language as a self-contained system whose interdependent parts acquired meaning through their individual functions, and relationship to the whole. By overthrowing the traditional view of linguistics, Saussure concluded that relationships and interactions among words superceded individual words when meaning is derived. This in fact, is Saussure's greatest contribution to the scientific study of signs: meaning is generated from the priorities human beings construct and perceive among signs in a system.

Saussure's broad conception of semiology as a science that studies the life of signs within society is inclusive of, and limited with respect to linguistics. He suggested that linguistics is only a part of the general science of semiology, and the laws discovered by semiology would be applicable to linguistics. He left the placement of semiotics up to the psychologist, who he recommended should study the social sign-mechanism in the individual.

Nature of the Linguistic Sign

Saussure defined language as the whole set of linguistic habits that allow an individual to understand and be understood without existing apart from society. He further proposed three general principles of signs 1) the structure of the sign; 2) the arbitrary nature of the sign; and 3) the linear nature of the signifier. The arbitrary nature of the sign is relative to the bond between the signifier and the signified. The two terms are not linked by any inner relationship. Whereas, the arbitrary nature of the signifier is unfolded in time, and therefore represents a linear span, and the span is measurable in a single dimension.

Saussure posited the linguistic unit as a double entity, one formed by the association of two terms. For example language includes the mental perception of the object, and the language that labels that object. Both terms are psychological, and are united in the brain by an associative bond (Saussure 1959). Therefore, the linguistic sign unifies a concept and a sound-image.¹ Where the sound-image is the impression it makes on our senses. The intimate unification of the two elements allow for each to recall the other. Thus, the combination of the concept, and the sound-image is the *sign*. To remove ambiguity, Saussure designated the *concept*, as the *signified*, and the *sound-image* as the *signifier*.¹

Charles S. Peirce

Peirce believed that all reasoning is an interpretation of signs of some sort, whereby the art of reasoning is the same

¹ The term sound-image may seem to be too restricted inasmuch as beside the representation of the sounds of a word there is also that of its articulation. The sound image is par excellence the natural representation of the word as a fact of potential language, outside any actual use of it in speaking (Saussure, 1959).

as marshalling signs (Peirce 1894). More importantly, he emphasized the relevance of the self in the generation of meaning from signs. According to Peirce, every thought, regardless of its object, is, a feeling that semiotically manifests the self: "When we think, then, we ourselves, as we are at that moment, appear as a sign" (Peirce 1868). With that, Peirce establishes his framework for the relationship between logic and semiotics.

Nature of the Logical Sign

Peirce defined a sign as anything, of whatsoever mode of being, which mediates between an object and an interpretant; since it is both determined by the object relatively to the interpretant, and determines the interpretant in reference to the object (Peirce 1907). In simpler terms, a sign is a thing that serves to convey knowledge of some other thing, which it stands to represent. This thing that it represents is called the object of the sign; the idea in the mind that the sign excites, which is a mental sign of the same object, is called the interpretant of the sign (Peirce 1895). Ultimately, the interpretant is transformed into a language or other symbolic code by which it is shared with and transmitted through the social environment (Mick 1986).

Triadic Nature of the Mind

Peirce proposed a triadic nature of the mind that included feeling, reacting, and thinking (Peirce 1894). Feeling is the state of mind in which something is present, without any reference or compulsion, and without reason. There is a primary interest in the object for itself. Reaction is the sense of acting and being acted upon, which is our sense of the reality of things. It doesn't rely upon any particular feeling, but upon the breaking of one feeling by another. A secondary interest in the object is based on its reactions with other things. Lastly, thinking is the awareness of learning where an individual goes through a process by which a phenomenon is governed by a rule, or has a general knowable way of behaving. Here, mediatory interest is generated as a result of the idea that the object conveys to the mind. It is at this stage that the object becomes a sign, or presentation.

Types of Signs

Peirce suggested three types of signs (Peirce 1895). First, there are likenesses, or *icons*. Their primary function is to convey ideas of the things they represent by imitating them. They communicate meaning by imitative sounds, gestures, and pictures. Likenesses are the only means by which qualities and actions of objects can be described; they have no dynamic connection with the object they represent, just that its qualities resemble those of that object. Secondly, indications, or *indices* show something about objects on account of their being physically

connected with them. No combination of words can ever convey the slightest information. The index is physically connected with its object, but the interpreting mind has nothing to do with connection, except remarking it after it has been established. Thirdly, there are symbols, or *signs* that have become associated with their meanings through usage (Peirce 1894). Symbols are applicable to whatever may be found to realize the idea connected with the word. However it does not, in itself, identify those things. The three sign typologies are not mutually exclusive, as a sign may function in all three categories.

SEMIOTICS WITHIN MARKETING AND CONSUMER RESEARCH

So how has semiotics evolved within the discipline of marketing and consumer research? The two prominent paradigms offered by Saussure and Peirce frame the foundation for identifying the origins of semiotics within these two fields. The discipline of semiotics can functionally fill the gap in knowledge attainment, where other research paradigms leave off. Next we examine the application and theory extension of semiotics to marketing and consumer research by illustrating the research that has been completed both in marketing and consumer research using the Saussurean and Peircean paradigms. This review is not meant to be holistic, but rather an examination of semiotics in the field of market and consumer behavior.

Product Design

The conceptualization and design of products is full of meaning and symbolism. Semiotics is applicable to a new product's various features and qualities during its development and prototyping, including the anticipation of meanings for targeted consumers. However the historical functionality of product design focuses more on performance and profitability. Semiotics has addressed product design issues such as: 1) developing languages and taxonomies that help to identify and differentiate the signs and meaning of design; and 2) explaining sign functions and consumer meaning processes.

Based on Peirce's paradigm, Kwama (1987, 1990) developed one of the more mature lexicons for visual sign in product design. He emphasized the iconic nature of product design; suggesting consumers assign significance to new products based on what the new design reminds them of. This is the very process of signification in which Saussure proposed.

Hoshino (1987) adopted Saussure's symbolic paradigm and branched meaning in product design based on its connotative and denotative structure. Hoshino, then further subdivided the connotative meanings into surface and deep meanings. This hierarchical analysis of design is however only one perspective, and further research has yet to

determine whether these differences influence consumer attitudes.

Vihma (1995) grounded in Peircean principles, examined the functions of signs and related meaning expressed in common product designs. Suggesting that iconic qualities can include color, materials, and analogies in product design; and symbolic qualities are those associated with branding efforts such as logos, taglines, and graphics. Vihma effectively showed the theoretical and normative approach to the process of semiosis in product design. But further research has not showed why and how semantic qualities in the Peircean paradigm dominate or diminish in various contexts.

Packaging

Semiotic-based research on packaging explores the multifaceted and complex nature of meaning. The two problems that semiotically-driven research addresses is: 1) how the network of commercial and consumer packaging goals interact to form meaning; and 2) mapping the sign structure of the packaging communications and content.

Klapsich (1995) addressed the semiotics of packaging by arguing that understanding meaning depends on appreciating different goals of signs. She proposed three functions of feminine products: utilitarian, anthropological, and marketing. Klapsich uses these functions to demonstrate in a diachronic analysis how feminine products have systematically changed or maintained certain meanings about women's bodies, taboos of menstruation, socio-cultural values, and the products themselves. The move from white or pale packaging suggests the move away from clinical and pharmaceutical codes. New signs and codes include brighter symbols and colors.

Rose (1995) adopted a Peircean framework that stresses how the consumer has a prior mindset that substantially influences experiences with the package. Noting, shampoo is not intended for human shoulders, and this fact makes the brand name (*Head and Shoulders*) inherently vague. Perhaps it may be a rhetorical pun, regarding the boasting phrase 'head and shoulders above the rest'. How only those familiar with the meanings of the phrase could appreciate the pun. Conclusively, products and their packages are a complex fusion of signs from culture and nature.

Promotion

Earlier advertising research utilized an engineering model of communication (Shannon and Weaver 1949). This model allowed researchers to conceive advertising as the direct transfer of brand information to consumers, who merely receive and react to the message in the presence of varying degrees of clutter. Advertising research based on semiotics originated in France, and is currently the oldest and largest category of semiotic consumer research (e.g. Barthes 1967; Durand 1970; Porcher 1976). In terms of

meaning, the significant challenges of inquiry that semiotic advertising research has addressed is: 1) theorizing the selection and organization of ad components as signs; 2) revealing the meanings of those choices and structurings; 3) conceptualizing the consumer's processing of ad signs in terms of meaning; and 4) understanding the philosophical, historical, and socio-cultural nature and effects of ad signs (Mick et al. 2004).

Symbolic signs and latent connotations in advertising emanating from cultural mythologies have been heavily researched (Chapman and Egger 1983; Domzal and Kernan 1993; and Porter 1992). For example, the American cowboy is full of mythical meanings of unlimited freedom, inner and outer strength, and a capacity to vanquish the wild. Analysis of cigarette ads by Chapman and Egger (1983), and by State (1991) has suggested that the portrayal of these products in the context of cowboy signs signify meaning about outcomes bestowed by these products.

Some analysts have sought to signify connotative ad meanings using Peirce's distinctions among indexical, iconic, and symbolic semantic relations with consumer's actualized meanings (McQuarrie and Mick 1999; Zakia 1986). Zakia focused on Schnapple liquor in which an attractive woman wearing a fashionable evening dress delicately holds a glass of liquor. Respondents were immediately shown the ad, and asked to immediately provide one word that expressed the overall meaning of the ad. He then grouped the responses according to four thematic categories, and applied Peirce's conceptual terms to the ad structure, indicating which signs functioned in which semantic fashion to potentiate the thematic meanings.

Pricing

There is a limited amount of research on pricing and semiotics. This could be the result of a lack of interest in pricing, or due to pricing's evident nature. In Mick's 1988 article, he pointed out that semiotic-oriented researchers were overlooking pricing. Possible orientations of pricing and semiotics have been proposed by Mick et al. (2004). Perhaps prices can be assessed across different categories, brands, and national settings in terms of their semantic qualities according to Peirce (for example, symbolizing status; indexing high quality). Overall, pricing remains one of the most scarcely researched areas, but one of the most important and salient areas of marketing meaning that has yet to receive much attention from a semiotic perspective.

Placement

Marketing researchers have typically investigated the locations where consumers interact and acquire products, while overlooking consumer behavior in these locations, or the nature and role of meaning specifically. Semiotic research on the meanings of place, space, merchandising, and money captured by Sherry (1998) with a perspective on

service atmospherics was among the first. The scope of acquisition sites examined by semiotic-oriented researchers is inclusive of shopping malls, hypermarkets, department and company stores, restaurants, and entertainment parks, and small boutiques and shops. Semiotic researchers have also focused on historical-geographical sites, museums, expositions and festival, and public landscapes. Semiotic retail research addresses 1) what are the dominant signs selected for acquisition sites and how they have been arranged; and 2) what influence do signs have on consumer meanings and behavior.

One manner in which consumers experience and draw meanings in these environments is through self-expression (Mick et al. 2004). Umiker-Sebeok (1992) studied 41 museum visitors and applied Peirce's stage of interpretants; along with his essay on semantic relations to construct a three-part model of museum consumption. The first stage is where visitors experience objects similar to those they've seen before (icon). The second stage is characterized by the newness of other exhibits (index). Thirdly, visitors translate each exhibit as a symbol according to habits and tendencies of the interpretation. Visitors 'act upon the museum', Umiker-Sebeok concludes, 'dynamically building meaningful "spaces" in which to move and maneuver to their own advantage'.

The over-coding of acquisition sites (Eco 1979) is another aspect of semiotic retail research. Malls are designed with a plethora of core and peripheral spaces. Some spaces are strictly retail-oriented, while others are more leisure-oriented. As a result, the mall becomes a place where different consumers with various socioeconomic and motivational backgrounds customize their mall experience (Shields 1994). They can either process mall signs and meanings by assessing other people's appearances or behavior. Or they may simply wander about the mall while focusing on the experience of signs and meaning at particular sites (Floch 1984).

Consumption

Marketing and consumer research has become more meaning-oriented, dealing with topics of experience, usage, and disposition. A full understanding of consumer meanings can be assisted by semiotics, which seeks to address: 1) how does meaning come about as consumers interact with products; and 2) what is the specific nature of these meanings. Consumer behavior research in America on consumption symbolism was cultivated from seminal articles such as Gardner and Levy's "The Product and the Brand" (1955), Levy's "Symbols for Sale" (1959) and Levitt's "The Morality (?) of Advertising" (1970). However it was Goffman (1959) and Hall and Trager (1953) who wrote on the self, and linguistics and culture, respectively, which began the movement of semiotics in consumer research.

Holman's (1976) research on symbolic consumption is an extensive exposition and application of semiotics

focusing on women's clothing. Her dissertation entitled, "*Communicational Properties of Women's Clothing: Isolation of Discriminable Clothing Ensembles and Identification of Attributions Made to One Person Wearing Each Ensemble*" investigated the syntactic and semantic level of consumer semiosis from pure, descriptive, and applied perspectives by examining women's clothing system as codes, and their ensembles as messages. By identifying the many messages within a context-specific clothing system, Holman assessed the socio-cultural rules that give meaning to clothing through signification.

Holbrook and Grayson (1986) fused insights signs and connotative meaning from Saussure, Barthes and Eco with Peirce's notion of abductive inferencing. They detailed how consumption signs are effective resources for artists and producers. Additionally, they suggested how consumers apply their knowledge of those signs to comprehend thematic meanings. This and other symbolic consumption work by Holbrook reveals how possessions and behaviors in entertainment, and other literary forms can make immediate many profound meanings about the human condition, especially surrounding materialism.

The application of semiotics to marketing and consumer behavior has been instrumental in understanding consumer's behaviors and intentions in the marketplace. From symbolic interactions to packaging has reshaped the nature of the consumption experience.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Meaning has been the focal point of a growing but still scattered assembly of marketing and consumer researchers. The goal of this essay was to trace the origin of semiotics as a discipline and suggest research based on semiotics to assess what it has provided for advancing knowledge within marketing and consumer behavior.

Semiotic research has historically flourished in countries and cultural regions where issues of style, form, fashion, and elegance have been historically central – most notably in France, Italy, Scandinavia, and Japan (Mick et al. 2004). Semiotic research on product design has resulted in the development of mature terms for conceptualizing the types and natures of sign that constitute a product and its interpreted meaning. Consumer influences of sign variations in product design have been theorized in terms of their aesthetic reactions at the product level.

Advertising research has highlighted surface-level information about brand features and benefits. Peirce's index-icon-symbol semiotics has proven valuable in assessing meanings below the surface. Other successful approaches are based on Saussure's traditional focus of meaning being derived from differences.

Research on places and spaces of acquisition have been a low priority in academic consumer research, with rare attention to issues of meaning until recent. Knowledge gaps are being addressed by semiotic retail research, with a focus on understanding the sign, nature of acquisition sites, the

meanings of those signs and consumer's actualized meanings and experiences. Peirce's semiotics has had limited influence on this research stream, whereas Saussure's structurally-oriented semiotics is more compatible with the importance of the physical structure in acquisition environments.

Next to advertising and consumption sites, the study of entertainment and leisure, and clothing are the next most prominent in semiotic marketing and consumer research. However, a drawback of this research is its close ties with linguistic and literary origins; it focuses on the potential meanings of consumers, and lacks direct consumer data to assess the attribution to sign structure of certain processing implication as well as meaning content.

LIMITATIONS

Due to length constraints, not all philosophers of semiotics were included in this essay including Jakobson, whose works were often the premise for advertising and branding semiotic research. Jakobson's (1960) six semiotic functions of communication has been widely applied to product design, logo, and advertising research. Further, in terms of semantics, we failed to present the works of several other approaches to understanding the how of meaning. The Greimassian paradigm (e.g. research on product design, ads, consumption sites, clothing); Durand (the catalog of varied rhetorical figures drawn from several sources). Those works have drawn variously from the likes of Peirce, Eco, and other contributors to the philosophy of the signification.

FURTHER DIRECTIONS

There remain knowledge gaps within marketing and consumer research beyond the functionality of meaning, and the implication of meaning for consumers. Historical meanings and interpretations may be another area of future research. In addition the self-oriented nature of consumption can stand to benefit from a semiotic paradigm.

Scholarly research on packaging, brand names, and logos has been fairly limited in marketing and consumer research. With the exception of those studies based on semiotics, few studies have focused on meaning. More research that deal with understanding the influence of marketing goals, and their meanings in packaging is needed. Additional research that will highlight public policy issues such as stereotyping, unclear language, and other subvert communication techniques will be insightful for semiotic promotion research.

Even though advertising research is the most mature of semiotic research in marketing, there are still areas of future growth. The lack of advertiser input, including how and why ads were constructed in certain ways to exhibit certain meanings. The assumption of an attentive and engaged consumer is misguided, as consumers do not always process advertisements with concentrated efforts.

Consumers routinely process only a fraction of the advertising they experience. It will be important to apply realistic assumptions in future research.

There is limited research on consumer's responses to the acquisition environment. There have been few attempts to measure consumer responses and to correlate them through quantitative analysis to a systematic coding of environmental signs. Lastly, there is a need for research on more objective assessment of consumer behavior; in particular, actual time spent window-shopping, foot traffic patterns, and consumption patterns at acquisition sites. This could easily be done in an online environment.

In terms of symbolic consumption, more research is needed for obtaining deeper meanings of literary, cinematic, and clothing consumption. Additional research is warranted on the intentions, truths deceptions and desires that influence the choice of media and clothes. Meaning there has been too much research on the social meaning of clothing, and not enough research of the private intentions and meaning of individual selection.

Consumer research has advanced beyond focusing on specific products, to augment knowledge about more universal domains, such as memory, identity, and gift giving. Overall increased research attention to other consumer research topics such as cognition, brand preferences and choices, goods versus services, and well as word-of-mouth behavior, would be a significant step toward the validation of the merits of semiotics for marketing and consumer research.

CONCLUSION

Semiotics addresses why meaning comes about in marketing and consumer behavior. Semiotics addresses this question in terms of a focus on structure and process in sign phenomena. As the founders of semiotics, Saussure and Peirce remain the framework for most semiotic and consumer research. Saussure had the first influences, and his paradigms were applied by French scholars and practitioners in the mid-1960s. By the later 20th century, Saussure's impact in this field had spread across Europe through Asia and across to North America.

Peirce's paradigm emerged in marketing and consumer research several years after Saussure's in the United States. It has since proliferated rapidly, including application across many of the same topics as Saussure. Nonetheless, semiotic-oriented research is likely to grow and become more global in the years ahead. According to Mick et al. (2004), the future of semiotics in marketing and consumer research will depend considerably on more efforts to corroborate, qualify and extend semiotic insights using a variety of analytical approaches.

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