

Creative Exploration: Semiotic Analysis of Popular Advertisements

Exploration Explainer Paragraph:

Given that the purpose of my final project is to highlight the powerful use of semiotics in advertising, I felt that it would be extremely beneficial to show and explain specific semiotic concepts utilized within popular advertising campaigns. In each advertisement example, I will highlight specific elements that correspond with specific definitions of semiotic concepts. I will provide a brief explanation from my perspective on how particular aspects of the advertisement align with these semiotic concepts. As an advertiser who's well-versed in semiotics, it's quite easy for me to identify and understand the specific semiotic elements that are used in these popular advertisements. By demonstrating how powerful the use of semiotics is in advertisements, I believe this exploration will perfectly illustrate the key points of my final project

Please Note:

On the page below, I have added a brief definition guide for each semiotic concept that I am using. This should make it easier for the reader to understand the terms I refer to and see how everything is interconnected.

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Semiotic Concept Definitions for Reference

KEY:

→ **YELLOW HIGHLIGHTED TEXT** = Conceptual Meaning of the semiotic concept

→ **BLUE HIGHLIGHTED TEXT** = Examples of Interrogating Ads with the semiotic concept

Auteur Theory: It is necessary to understand the style, motifs, and thematic preoccupations of creators. Does your favorite author, designer, composer, strategist, or artist have a distinctive style that typifies the works that he/she/they create? How does this sign, work, or text compare to the other signs, works, or texts from this creative person? Does this continue his/her/their familiar style? Or is it different?

Codes: Social structures that shape our behavior. What's the "game" in this sign? And what are the rules for that game?

Connotation: The historic, symbolic, and/or emotional meaning of a representation or image. Does it mean something else?

Denotation: The literal meaning of a representation. See the thing for what it is.

Icon: A sign that communicates resemblance. What iconic resemblance(s) is/are contained or communicated in that sign?

Images: Visual, aural, and mental representations. What images or "representations" are contained in that sign?

Interpellation: The process by which cultural representations coerce acceptance of ideologies: also "hailing" as if to say "... this film is about you" or "... this film is about them": finger-pointing. To whom is this sign really talking to?

Metaphor: Figures of speech and representations that communicate meaning by analogy. What is this “like”?

Metonymy: Figures of speech and representations that communicate meaning by substitute naming based on an aspect of the thing or person being referred to... Do I know this sign under a different name?

Reception Theory: A mass communication theory which asserts that audience response or acknowledgment can make a literary, media, or cultural text “concrete” or “bring it into reality.” He is a talented artist but it was the audiences’ embrace of his work that made it popular and made him an international star.

★ **Signifier + Signified + Overall Sign:** “... within a system of meaning, an overall sign may be separated into two components: the “*Signifier*” (the material vehicle of meaning) and the “*Signified*” (the meaning of that material vehicle). When you see a *sign*, what are the *signified* and *signifier* of that sign?

Symbol: A sign whose meaning has to be learned. What symbolic meaning(s) is/are contained or communicated in that sign?

Popular Ad Semiotic Analysis #1: Dove Real Beauty Sketches | You're More Beautiful Than You Think Campaign



Video Link to Advertisement: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=litXW91UauE>

Signifier: The women who were asked to describe their physical features to the sketch artist, and we're all giving inaccurate and self-deprecating depictions of themselves, which led the sketch artist to draw an unrecognizable person.

Signified: Not only Dove's brand essence but specifically the Dove "You're More Beautiful Than You Think" Campaign.

Symbol: When these women were asked to describe themselves you would hear them say things like, "I have a fat rounder face", or "I've been told by my mom all my life that I have a very long pronounced chin." However, when total strangers were asked to look at other women and describe to the sketch artist what they look like, they said very positive natural descriptions. Such as, "She had nice eyes. They lit up when she spoke and were very expressive." In these examples alone you can see the symbolic meaning behind this commercial is that we are so critical of ourselves and our appearances, that we often lose sight of what we REALLY look like in real life.

Denotation: The literal meaning of this commercial is to show women how they are more beautiful than they think. And they need to stop self-loathing their looks and beauty, from either-

things they may have been told while growing up or just their own inner battles within themselves.

Connotation: Underneath the literal meaning of this commercial, is the process in which Dove is pushing the idea of self-confidence, comfort in one's own skin, positivity in natural beauty, and becoming aware of how society has viewed female standards of beauty. Yes, the literal meaning of the Ad is to show that "you're more beautiful than you think", but you see the connotation when these women look at the images of themselves that were drawn from a stranger's perspective. You can see these women's faces lighting up when realizing how they are being so hard on themselves, and that they should start learning to be more confident in their own skin. This is something that this campaign doesn't specifically note, but is the underlying meaning that is implied.

Metaphor: A metaphor from this advertisement would be the metaphorical 'filter' that we put over our self-image. This 'filter' distorts the real version of our beauty, with insecurities, society's unrealistic beauty standards and expectations, and every bad thing that you may have been told about your appearance in your life. This metaphorical filter gets thicker and thicker with each negative feeling or thought we have about our own physical appearance. And as you can see in this commercial, each person who was describing themselves had this filter blocking them from seeing what everybody else sees.

Codes: The social structure regarding the unrealistic expectations of one's appearance is shown in this Advertisement. Our society shapes the behavior of this Ad through the unrealistic societal definition of what is 'beautiful' or 'desirable' when it comes to one's appearance. In today's world, we are subject to constantly comparing ourselves to others, especially through social media. These comparisons leave people with insecurities and self-destructive feelings toward their physical appearances.

Metonymy: You see metonymy a lot in this advertisement, specifically in the responses of those who were asked to describe a stranger. These people used certain phrases and words that attributed to beauty to describe a person, for instance, when somebody stated "her eyes are a beautiful blue, like an ocean". This statement shows that this person who was describing a stranger saw her for her beautiful features. When the same woman had to describe her own eyes, she stated that they were, "brown like almost the color of shit". These are two very different representations that describe one person's eye color. The contrast in these two-

representations can show how each individual can look at the same exact sign, and come up with two completely different descriptions of what it is. It really is in the eyes of the 'reader' (who in this case, is the stranger describing another person's beauty to the sketch artist) to interpret how they perceive and accept the sign that is in front of them.

Images: The images or representations that are contained in this advertisement, are the visual and mental representation of just how different our perception of our own beauty is from the perception of others. You see this in the advertisement where they compare the two different drawings made by the sketch artist. One of them was the actual realistic sketch that looks more like the person being described, while the other looks like somebody almost unrecognizable. Finding out that the stranger's version of the sketch turned out to be the more realistic one, proves how self-bias can change the very perception of a sign.

Auteur Theory: Dove has been known as the brand of positivity and self-empowerment since the early 2000s. This advertisement is nothing far from their normal content. A lot of Dove's advertisements, messaging, and very brand essence, are about bringing back the more realistic side of not only beauty, but life in general. And putting it in an advertisement so that people can start to not only accept, but interpellate. Dove has a variety of commercials such as, "Curly/Afro Natural Hair Journey", "Baby Dove Under Pressure Postpartum", and "Beauty On Your Own Terms #MyBeautyMySay". You can see from these commercial titles alone that these are representations of how Dove communicates its brand essence.

Reception Theory: The advertisement itself was a very out-of-the-box creative idea to convey the message of embracing your beauty. But the audiences' reaction to this advertisement made it even more powerful. The commercial now has over 12 million views and has been referenced/shared in multiple women's empowerment and body positivity campaigns for the past five years. This advertisement was able to successfully convey the message that they were trying to send not only to their customers but to people in general. Part of the reason why the audience embraces this commercial so much is because Dove didn't try to stray from the target concept at hand. You see in a lot of advertisements where companies try to convey a message such as this one, and in the end, relate it back to a product. This leads the audience to believe that the advertisement may not have been as sincere as it claimed to be. But with this-seven-minute-long Dove commercial, not once did they mention a body wash, product, or even a link to go onto their website. This advertisement was solely meant to be taken as an empowering message to all and to convey Dove's values, and purpose as a brand.

Popular Ad Semiotic Analysis #2: Escape The Loop: The International OCD Foundation



Video Link to Advertisement: <https://www.ogilvy.com/work/escape-loop>

Signifier: Spreading the awareness of early signs of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), and encouraging those who experience OCD behaviors to seek help in time.

Signified: The actors used in the GIF/constant loop commercials were expressing common OCD behaviors and signs, that our society mistakes for everyday normal things.

Metaphor: The very name of the campaign, "Escape The Loop," is a metaphor itself. It expresses how people overuse social media and technological entertainment services. Escape The Loop was made through GIFs in constant loops, showing repetitive actions that define OCD and show behaviors to look out for. While Escape The Loop can also mean escaping the constant use of social media and technologies in so much of our everyday lives. It also means escaping the loop of OCD, and knowing what signs/behaviors are actually OCD, and not just what TikTok and other social media platforms may have told you.

Denotation: The literal meaning behind this advertising campaign wants to show that OCD isn't a 'quirky personality trait' or an entertaining term used to describe orderly people. It's a serious-

mental illness. The purpose behind this campaign was to change the perception around the stereotyped term and to also help suffering youths break the vicious cycle of OCD, at an early age.

Connotation: The symbolic and emotional meaning of this campaign was to visibly show how OCD is a serious mental disorder. It causes people to suffer from intensely negative and intrusive thoughts, as well as repetitive actions. The denotation of this campaign was to correct the stereotyped term of OCD and show that it's a real mental illness. The connotation behind this campaign is showing those who may have signs of OCD or suffer from it, how it's not a very glorified experience like others are communicating through social media. Seeing people self-diagnosing on social media about having random anxiety or health disorders makes those who heavily use these platforms easily influenced, and gullible to serious misconceptions of real disorders, diseases, and health concerns. With TikTok and social media as a whole glorifying OCD, it leads people who show these signs of the disorder to feel that they just have a cool adjective to describe themselves. But, when these people have this incorrect information about a very real mental disorder, it defers them from seeking the help and treatment they need in a very time-sensitive situation.

Images: In this advertising campaign, they used a specific logo that shows an orange infinity sign with the words "Escape The Loop" inside it. This visual gives the audience another mental representation of this campaign's whole message, Escaping The Loop. The infinity sign used, is to serve as a representation of how those who suffer from OCD who are untreated, are going through this constant infinite loop of repeating actions, again and again, intrusive inner thoughts, repetitive checking, and so on.

Interpellation: This advertising campaign was made for those who may have signs or behaviors of OCD, to interpellate these commercials and take action. With each of these GIFs visually showing repetitive actions and behaviors that people with OCD commonly experience, it activates people who have the disorder's mirror neurons. Seeing these repetitive actions in front of them, makes them lean more into it because they recognize the sign that is being performed. And can easily align themselves with it, as they have performed the same actions almost their whole lives. That's why at the beginning of each GIF, they have the actor portraying the basic behaviors of OCD, then shortly after, explaining through text on the screen how this behavior is a common trait of OCD. They then provide a call to action link for you to see further if you may-

have the disorder, and how to go about it. Since I am a person who has been diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder, I can confidently say that I interpellated this whole advertising campaign. Also, I felt a deeper emotional connection to it, because I knew that they were talking to me. This can explain why I chose this campaign for my semiotic analysis because this campaign spoke to me and aligned with who I am.

Codes: The social structures that shape our behavior, concerning this advertising campaign, are those we see through social media. Since the 2020 pandemic, many youths and young professionals relied on TikTok or Instagram as their main source of entertainment, news, and education. We're going through a time where people are self-diagnosing themselves from one TikTok video made by a young adult who has no professional or educational experience in the fields that they are talking about. This leads many to be easily convinced into something that has no fact-checking or real professional insight. This all explains how OCD, now more than ever, is a term that is commonly used but not commonly understood. Thanks to our social structures through social media, we often associate OCD as an adjective or just a 'quirky' person who happens to like things clean or organized.

Icon: In this advertising campaign, the International OCD Foundation and Ogilvy Denmark purposely used GIFs and the website GIPHY, as their primary means of communication. They did this because their target market uses GIFs, social media, and short repetitive loops, as a way of communicating and entertaining. With the target market being very familiar with GIFs and these social means of communication, they can now be nudged into recognizing early signs of OCD, helping them Escape The Loop, one GIF at a time.

Symbol: All the looped GIFs in this advertising campaign showed the most common early-stage OCD/compulsive behaviors. However, they also let every loop carry a hidden message. For example, at the beginning of each GIF, you see a person perform an action, either opening a door multiple times, turning on the stove multiple times, or picking at their nails. When first looking at these GIFs, one may find it hard to understand the meaning behind them. But shortly after each character performs these repetitive actions, it's met with large bold/highlighted text that explains how the actions performed in each of those GIFs is a common trait of OCD. For instance, one of the advertisements visually showed how a common trait of OCD is repetitive and intrusive inner thoughts, another showed how a common trait of OCD is repetitive checking. When first looking at these GIFs it may seem confusing, but after you learn the meaning behind-

them and see the call to action message with the International OCD Foundations website link and resources, one can now understand what the meaning of these advertisements is.