

The Structural Semiotics Paradigm for Marketing Research: Theory, Methodology, and Case Analysis

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2015 (Semiotica 205[1/4])

Abstract

Brands are semiotic systems that create value in the marketplace by differentiating competitors in a category, forming emotional connections with consumers, and aligning the company's symbolic equities with contemporary cultural trends. The author aims to expand the current state of semiotics for marketing beyond advertising research to the whole gamut of media and consumer touchpoints in contemporary marketing, from strategic communication to retail design and consumer behavior. The importance of this paper is not limited to marketing, but raises important issues about connections heretofore ignored between semiotics, business, and the production of value in the marketplace.

Key Words: semiotics, marketing, brands, advertising, retail design, consumer research, culture, codes, strategy, signs, meaning, value, consumer response.

Paper

Brands are sign systems that transcend the functional value of goods and add emotional or esthetic value to the “use value” of products. Brands constitute an intangible asset on the annual report of the firm and have considerable impact on the valuation of companies on the financial market (see Aaker 1991, 1996; Keller 1993). They create value by differentiating the products of one company from another on the basis of the meanings consumers associate with the brand name, the logo, and other proprietary symbols.

1. Brands as sign systems

In the following paper, I apply structural semiotic theories and principles to brand equity research and management. Though the review of semiotics presented here may seem rudimentary for some readers, the aim of this paper is to introduce marketers to semiotics-based research, and to introduce semioticians to semiotics-based brand equity management.

1.1. Semiotics and brand value

The extent to which consumers recall, internalize, and relate to the brand's symbolic system has more than academic interest; it has direct, financial impact on the firm's performance, even its stock value. For instance, the Interbrand Group (2011) valued the Coca-Cola brand at over \$70 billion, basing their valuation on symbolic factors such as consumers' perception of brand quality, its competitive difference, the range and depth of associations consumers make with the

brand, and consumers' loyalty to the brand over time. For this reason, it would not be an exaggeration to claim that managing brand equity consists principally of managing brand meanings or marketing semiotics (Pinson 1998). As symbolic systems, brands are constructed along the lines of discursive structures such as narrative. This paper illustrates the theoretical and managerial implications of structural semiotics for brand equity.

The business press provides ample evidence of companies who have declined or failed because management lost track of their brand heritage or changes in consumer culture. Take the case of Kodak, a company with universal brand recognition that nearly collapsed because it failed to adjust the brand culture to emerging trends in imaging technologies and culture. Compaq went out of business because it lacked a coherent brand identity and cultural positioning in the emerging PC market. In a happier case, McDonald's made a comeback in 2003 from a financial crisis in the late 1990's, in part by realigning its message and management strategy with changes in global consumer culture.

1.2. Semiotics and brand management

The semiotic methodologies outlined here have the potential to guide management through all stages of the planning process, from consumer research to the brand positioning and creative execution stages. Semiotics can be used to provide clarity and cultural context to a range of marketing activities, including the design and implementation of qualitative research, the competitive analysis of a category, brand positioning, market segmentation, advertising strategy, and the design of logos, packaging, and retail space. Semiotics-based research can be used spearhead innovation, steer brands through technological and cultural change, differentiate brands in the competitive environment, and mitigate the natural depletion of brand meaning over time.

Whereas in Europe, semiotics is standard practice in brand management and consumer research, in North America, semiotics research is typically commissioned at the end of the planning process to develop creative communication strategy. In this paper I claim that semiotics should form the foundation of brand equity management, because brands are semiotic assets that contribute to profitability by distinguishing brands from simple commodities, differentiating them from competitors, and engaging consumers in the brand world. I propose moving semiotics-based research up front in the planning process to develop, clarify, or extend the brand strategy.

2. The Interpretive tradition in marketing research

The notion that goods have symbolic value for consumers has foundations in the interpretive tradition in cultural anthropology, consumer behavior and marketing. Sidney Levy (1959), Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood (2002 [1979]) and Russel Belk (1987, 1988) are among the

leaders of this tradition. Levy (1959) identified the implications of semiotics for brand value in his seminal article in the *Harvard Business Review*, “Signs for Sale,” and paved the way for the current, meaning-based approach to brand equity management. The very idea that brands have semiotic value for consumers is based in the idea of symbolic consumption (Douglas and Isherwood 2002 [1979]), whereby consumers endow goods with meanings, from status symbols to prized possessions. Consumers transfer personal aspirations and needs to goods and brands in order to enhance or “extend” their identities, mark their membership in social groups, or communicate status (Belk 1987, 1988).

The interpretive consumer research tradition in marketing can be classified in two major areas, advertising research and symbolic consumption. It includes a range of perspectives and methodologies, from the social sciences to critical literary theory. The summary below presents highlights of this very rich literature.

2.1. *Advertising research*

Advertising was naturally the focus of the early research on meaning in marketing because advertisements are formal texts, like novels or films. Marshall McLuhan (1951) and Vance Packard (1984 [1956]) were responsible for drawing parallels between the persuasive use of word and image in advertisements and consumers’ choice of brands. Ogilvy (1979) gives an account of the early days of advertising, where brand meanings originated around the conference table and were then thrust upon consumers by means of persuasive advertising claims. The early literature thus focuses more on the art of persuasion than on researching and satisfying consumer needs and wants. As a consequence, the early research on advertising emphasizes the effects of persuasion in advertising on consumer behavior, brand meanings, and the culture at large. Since the 1980’s, under pressure from an increasingly crowded marketplace, advertising has changed focus from persuading consumers to accept a ready-made value proposition to basing that proposition upon consumer needs and wants. This consumer-centered approach increased the need for depth research with consumers.

The advertising research literature falls roughly into five major categories: critical literary theory, rhetoric, reader response theory, content analysis and semiotics. For more a more detailed discussion of advertising research approaches, please see Oswald (2012).

Advertising research may be the natural application of semiotics to marketing since advertising is the medium for transferring the brand identity to goods and engage consumers in the brands’ symbolic world. For example, consumers associate Nike with excellence and achievement because of the consistent association of the brand logo in advertisements with elite athletes and courageous amateurs. They associate BMW with technological excellence in the tagline, “a Driving Machine,” and edgy, bold drivers, such as Clive Owens’ characters in the BMW short

films series created in the 1990s. McCracken (1986) emphasizes the role of advertising in transferring culturally determined meanings to brands, which tailors the brand message to the culture of consumers.

Semiotics-based advertising research experienced a brief heyday beginning in the late 1980s with the first International Conference on Marketing and Semiotics (Umiker-Sebeok 1987).

For example, Mick (1986, 1988) outlines the history of semiotics and its implications for consumer research. Holbrook and Hirschman (1993) apply concepts drawn from linguistics, cultural anthropology and literary studies, such as myth, archetype, and genre, to analysis of consumer symbolism represented in cultural texts such as films and television shows.

Williamson (1994 [1984]) uses structural semiotics to explain meaning production in advertising, discussing how meanings are transferred from advertising signs to products, how these meanings evolve over time, and how they ultimately serve to distinguish brands on the marketplace.

Goldman and Papson (1996) draw upon post-modernist theories of spectator engagement and deconstruction to analyze the evolving forms advertising takes as marketers respond to the competitive environment.

Barthes (1973 [1964]: 11) calls semiotics a “translinguistic” activity because it accounts for the codes structuring culture and social life in the same manner that codes structure language.

Semiotics may be best described as a social science discipline, as it takes into account the codes that structure the phenomenal world into semantic categories, such as gender and power, and implicate consumers and their brands in cultural discourses and social structures, such as patriarchy, for example (Levi-Strauss (1967 [1958]), Geertz (1973), and Eco (1976). As Eco explains (1979: 76), “the sign is a unit of culture”. The semiotic analysis of advertising transcends formalism, rhetoric, and content analysis because it anchors the form of meaning production in the broader cultural system. Semiotics is also interdisciplinary, as it bridges a range of research areas such as culture studies, consumer research, and communication science.

For example, in a cross-cultural analysis of Japanese packaging that mixes English and Japanese words on the label, Sherry and Camargo (1987) illustrate how brand communication can reflect and even foster cultural change. Sherry (1998) extends this approach to the analysis of the retail space, or Servicescape, of Niketown. He coins the term Servicescape to describe the dialectical relationship between retail design semiotics and consumers’ retail experiences. Kozinets et al (2004) extend this approach in the examination of the interplay between retail design and consumer agency – the choices they make in co-creating the retail experience. Heilbrun (1997, 2006) accounts for the implication of the logo’s iconic symbolism in the brand world, and its ability to engage consumers in the brand discourse. Noth (1997) edited a collection of essays applying semiotics to a range of media channels, from advertising to postage stamps.

In recent years, there has been renewed interest in the diachronic or historical dimension of structural semiotics to account for the ways social change is reflected in the mass media. In a recent paper, Xin and Belk (2008) draw upon Barthes' (1972) semiotic analysis of myth to account for the ideological tensions between communism and consumerism in advertising in the People's Republic of China. In another paper, Humphries (2010) performs a structural analysis of dozens of newspaper articles to highlight the ways symbolic structures in the mass media on the long-range evolution of consumer values as they relate to gambling.

This much said, the current literature on semiotics and advertising research falls short of applying semiotics to the actual business of marketing, including brand positioning, creative strategy, and consumer segmentation.

2.2. Symbolic consumption

The potential importance of semiotics for marketing is not limited to advertising research, since the realm of meaning transcends formal texts per se and extends to the very structure of the phenomenal world, including the lived environments, social rituals, and ideological tensions structuring daily life.

Semiotics also enables the researcher to investigate how cultural codes structuring culture and social organization influence the ways humans respond to messages in their environments. Take the traffic sign system. Rather than simply describe the shape and symbolism of the stop sign, i.e. a red octagonal sign, inscribed with the white letters S T O P, the semiotician examines the stop sign as one element of a broader system of the *Rules of the Road*, and takes into account the implication of these rules or codes and driver behaviors in a given setting.

The range of research applications for semiotics is illustrated by the early research on topics ranging from cultural branding (Holt 2004) to consumer rituals (Arnold and Fischer 1994; Arnold and Wallendorf 1994), product design, and shopping behavior (Belk 1987; Sherry 1987; 1990; Hoshino 1987; Kehret-Ward 1987).

Semiotics-based research is grounded in the fundamental principle that goods have symbolic value for consumers, whether or not they are branded consumer goods (Douglas and Isherwood 2002 [1979]). At the risk of misrepresenting the depth and breadth of consumer research devoted to symbolic consumption, I will summarize some key papers that address the ways consumers transfer personal meanings and emotions to their possessions.

Belk (1988) introduces the idea that consumers use goods symbolically to form or "extend" their personal and social identities, and lose a sense of self when goods are stolen or lost. In line with this research, Belk et al (1989) investigate the sacred status of certain kinds of possessions for consumers based on the personal meanings and experiences they associate with objects such as

collectibles. Thompson (1997) proposes a hermeneutic construct for analyzing consumer data in terms of the narrative structure that holds goods, consumer meanings, and memory in a self-perpetuating system.

A comprehensive review of the literature on semiotics and marketing by Mick et al (2004) reveals a glaring lack of research on the strategic implications of symbolic consumption for brand equity management. The current research focuses instead on the implications of symbolic consumption scenarios for the social sciences and philosophy.

3. Meaning-based theories of brand equity

Just as the semiotics research literature focus on meaning production without addressing its implications for brand strategy, the brand management literature acknowledges the importance of meanings for brand value, but does not typically account for the mechanics of meaning production itself. This paper bridges the gap between advertising research and brand management by linking semiotic theory to the “strategies beneath the signs” (Floch 2001 [1990]) in marketing semiotics.

3.1. The consumer-centric tradition in marketing

In their influential book, *Positioning, the Battle for Your Mind*, Ries and Trout (2000 [1981]) announced a shift in the orientation of brand research from the conference table to the consumer, claiming that the battle for a share of market is in fact a battle for a share of consumers’ minds. This trend in marketing led to a rich stream of research that investigates correlations between brand value and the meanings consumers associate with brand symbolism, including logos, packaging, and advertising. Authors such as Park et al (1986), Aaker and Keller (1990), Aaker (1991, 1996, 1997), Keller (1993), Kapferer (1994), and Fournier (1998) provide both theories and empirical evidence for the value of meaning-based marketing research and strategy for growing strong brands.

3.2. Brand equity management

David Aaker (1991, 1996) developed a brand equity “system” that ties consumer-based brand meanings to brand equity. He identifies five elements of a brand’s value, including consumers’ awareness of the brand name, consumer perceptions of the brand’s quality, consumers’ emotional, lifestyle, and cultural associations with the logo and other brand symbols, and their loyalty to the brand. He makes direct links between these intangibles and the brand’s value for the firm and investors. He explains that consumers’ personal associations with brands encourage repeat purchases and long-term loyalty, saving the firm the costs associated with marketing and

advertising. Strong brands also claim more influence with retailers, claiming more shelf space and influence at the point of purchase.

Keller (1993) extends Aaker's model, articulating in more detail the form and intensity of associations consumers make with brands based on personal, lifestyle, and cultural experiences and the role of marketing communication in creating these associations. Keller also develops a research tool for measuring the contribution of these associations to brand equity.

Jennifer Aaker (1997) takes a closer look at the brand identity concept, focusing on the notion of the brand's personality, the associations consumers make between their brands and five human personality traits, including sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. She emphasizes the role of advertising to construct these associations and develops an instrument for measuring the scope and depth of brand personality. Her research into the symbolic meaning of brands for consumers derives to some extent from McCracken's (1986) account of advertising as a mechanism for transferring meanings from culture to goods and brands. Fournier (1998) extends the brand personality concept into the notion of consumer-brand relationships. She finds that consumers engage in multiple types of relationships with brands in their personal "brand portfolios," ranging from practical to intimate.

As illustrated by these examples, the brand equity literature abounds with discussions of the symbolic function of brands, but unlike the advertising research literature, does not account for the actual mechanics of meaning production as it relates to the strategic marketing function.

3.3. Semiotics and brand strategy

A few writers, notably Jean-Marie Floch (2000 [1990]), Beasley and Danesi (2002) and Schmitt and colleagues (Schmitt et al 1994; Pan and Schmitt, 1996; Schmitt and Zhang 1998) have explored the implications of linguistics and semiotics for brand strategy. Floch (2001 [1990]), applies Greimas' notion of the semiotic square to strategic brand research, and covers a range of planning activities, from recruiting and interviewing consumers, and interpreting data to developing brand positioning and designing logos and public spaces. By mapping the semiotic dimensions of a product category on a double axis grid, Floch identifies strategic solutions to the apparent ambiguities and tensions structuring a product category, such as male/female. The semiotic square clarifies the broad oppositional relationships that structure the strategic dimensions of a competitive set, including contradiction, complementarity, and contrast.

Floch's book is unique inasmuch as he demonstrates, with actual case studies, how semiotic theory can be directly applied to brand equity management. It could be argued that Floch relies too narrowly on Greimas' (1984) "semiotic square" in his analysis, rather than drawing upon the rich repertoire of visual, verbal, and spatial codes available to the semiotician. Furthermore, the

semiotic square may clarify the underlying conceptual relationships within a data set, but does not account for the influence of cultural codes such as gender or power in the construction of market-based meanings.

Beasley and Danesi (2002) apply structural semiotics to advertising, but rather than using semiotics-based research to interpret themes in advertisements, they examine advertising as a form of social discourse structured by codes. They then demonstrate how semiotic theories can be used strategically in marketing communication, from logos to advertising to create a distinct, recognizable brand identity.

Schmitt and colleagues (Schmitt et al 1994; Pan and Schmitt, 1996; Schmitt and Zhang 1998) have applied linguistic theory to the cross-cultural brand management literature, presenting evidence that brand choice and consumers' perceptions of foreign brands are rooted not only in cultural differences between East and West, but that those cultural differences can be traced to the distinct linguistic structures of the languages spoken in each market.

4. Applications of semiotics to market research

The research approach presented in this paper is based upon many years of theoretical inquiry on semiotics and the application of semiotics to business cases. Marketing semiotics research not only interprets the meaning of marketing texts, from advertising to consumer behavior, but also takes into account cultural codes that structure meaning in a product category or consumer segment. This approach draws upon the intersections between marketing, structural semiotics and the social sciences. It is based on the assumption that brands grow in value to the extent that they resonate with the structure of myths, archetypes, and rhetorical operations at work in the cultural environment.

4.1. Terminology

The term “semiotics” derives from the Greek word, *sēmeion* or “sign,” originally a medical term for “symptom.” “Semiotics” can be used in both a general way to define the discipline of semiotic study, or in an applied way to describe the sign system structuring meaning in a given communication context, as in a brand’s semiotics. The brand’s semiotic system embeds proprietary symbolism such as logos or icons in the culture of a specific segment and/or product category, for instance.

The term “semiology” has been used interchangeably in the literature with the term “semiotics” to refer to the science of signs. The term “semiology” is used here in the very narrow sense of an epistemology or worldview organized by the theory of signs. The semiological perspective

transcends the metaphysical orientation of phenomenology and interprets the world of phenomena in terms of cultural codes that structure phenomena into signs and meanings.

Another term used in semiotics research is the term, “semiosis,” which names in a broad sense the dialectic of meaning production that includes the consumer’s or speaker’s own manipulation or performance of semiotic codes in any communication event.

4.2. Saussure and Structuralism

The semiotics research approach advanced here is grounded in structural linguistics, a discipline founded by the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure in the nineteenth century (1983 [1913]). Saussure revolutionized the study of language by isolating the formal codes of the language system, “*la langue*,” that are responsible for meaning production in language use, “*la parole*.” These codes define the timeless structural system of language—its synchronic dimension—that transcends evolutionary change, its diachronic dimension.

Structural semiotics borrows concepts from structural linguistics to analyze the structure of meaning in non-linguistic systems, from poetics to the traffic code. For example, the formal characteristics of language resemble the rules of chess, the monetary system, or the rules of etiquette. These code systems dictate the conventions for play, value creation, and social behavior, and have the potential to generate an infinite number of games, transactions, and social interactions bound by formal conventions. In the last century, writers such as Jakobson (1990 [1956]), Sebeok (1966), Benveniste (1971), Barthes (1972 [1957], 1973 [1964]), Lévi-Strauss (1967 [1958]), Metz (1991[1971], 1981 [1977]), Greimas (1984), Eco (1979), and Danesi (1999, 2007), have extended structural semiotics to a wide range of meaning systems.

4.2.1. *A Dialectical interpretation of meaning production.* The distinctiveness of the European tradition in semiotics stems from the dialectical nature of structural semiotics and the key role of binary analysis in the production and interpretation of meaning. Unlike his counterpart in the United States, C. S. Peirce (1955 [1884]), whom I discuss later on, Saussure emphasized the dialectical nature of the sign as the normative association of a material *signifier*, such as the sounds in a word, with a *signified* or concept, as exemplified in Figure 1.

Figure 1 [here](#). The Dual Structure of Signs.

4.2.2. *Meaning and (brand) difference.* The proponents of structural semiotics interpret the world of meaning as a system of tensions and relationships, as in the dialectical relation of signifier and signified in the sign, the dialectic of meaning and reference in discourse, the articulation of discourse into the semiotic and semantic levels of analysis, and the binary organization of sign systems in paradigms.

The paradigmatic structure of meaning advanced by the structuralists has particular resonance for brand equity research because it accounts for contrasts, distinctions, and differences within a sign system, the very kinds of relationships that characterize brand performance in the competitive arena, structure market segmentation, and define cross-cultural consumer behavior. Furthermore, structural semiotics ties the structure of meaning to the structure of culture by emphasizing the role of codes and conventions in meaning production. This approach embeds brand meaning in the cultural context of the marketplace, and provides means of analysing brands in terms of their relationship to consumers in different markets.

Structural semiotics differs from structural linguistics on the issue of the “arbitrariness” of the relationship between sounds and concepts in the linguistic sign (i.e. /k/a/r/ - “car”). However, cultural codes and social norms dictate the use of certain symbols or rituals in social settings, not individual choice. Cultural codes regulate meaning production in an infinite number of sign systems, from traffic signs to visual perspective and narrative discourse. It is the role of shared conventions and codes that anchors meaning in the cultural world and aligns semiotics research squarely within the social science disciplines of sociology, psychology, and anthropology.

4.2.3. *Code and performance.* Critics of structural semiotics warn that the linguistic sign forms a limited model for semiosis in non-linguistic sign systems because it cannot account for the influence of consumer behavior and perception on brand meaning. For example, Grayson and Shulman (2000) emphasize the plurality of potential meanings consumers associate with brands, meanings that are not the result of codes but of consumers’ individual experiences, memories, and cultural prejudices. This critique could apply to all forms of discourse, not just marketing. Its validity is based on the privileging of the individual, idiosyncratic dimension of meaning production over its social function.

However, meaning production is, by nature, a social and cultural phenomenon that relies to a great extent on shared perceptions and interpretations of meaning by groups of people, not individuals. Structural semiotics accounts for this social dimension of meaning in the theory of shared codes. Without the common ground guaranteed by the code, social life would become a kind of Tower of Babel, a cacaphony of individual voices. Furthermore, without a commonly shared identity or brand code, brands would not enjoy the profitability due to broad recognition in the marketplace. Saussure anticipated this kind of critique when he proposed two dimensions of sign systems – the codified – “*la langue*”, and the performative – “*la parole*.” The structural dimension includes the universal codes structuring meaning over time and across social groups. The performative dimension includes the deployment of these codes by individuals in everyday use. In extrapolating the linguistic notions of *langue* and *parole* to non-linguistic systems, I shall employ the terms “code” and “performance”.

- *The Code.* The regulating function of linguistic codes such as grammar and syntax may be more obvious than the codes structuring culture and social life, because they have been formalized in textbooks and language pedagogy. Though cultural codes are more transparent and informal, they have nonetheless a pervasive influence on consumer perceptions and behaviors. Since humans are essentially social animals, the originality in the behavior of any one individual is limited. Our statements, perceptions, and even behaviors are, to a great extent, structured in advance by the cultural systems that we inhabit. Lacan (1981 [1956]) puts it this way: when we “speak,” we are in fact “spoken” by the codes structuring meaning in the culture we inhabit.
- *Performance.* Individuality nonetheless comes into play in the way consumers manipulate codes in everyday communication and behavior. The dialectical tensions between the code and performance - *langue* and *parole* - enables humans to create an endless number of individual statements or performances while working within the bounds of shared codes. Consumers may personalize a consumption ritual to suit their schedules, tailor a brand to their personal style or modify a tradition in line with their ethnicity. For example, when Greek immigrants serve turkey moussaka in place of the traditional roast turkey at Thanksgiving, they are bending the cultural code, i.e. Thanksgiving > turkey, according to their own ethnic traditions. The code/performance dynamic enables immigrants to thus participate in the mainstream while retaining something of their ethnic identity. These kinds of consumer behaviors are testimony to the on-going dialectical play between code and performance in consumer behavior.

4.2.4. *Meaning and reference.* Saussure articulated distinctions between signs and any specific referent in “reality.” He emphasized that the relation of a sign to its meaning is “arbitrary” – it is determined by social convention rather than some intrinsic motivation. The theory of codes anchors semiotics in the study of culture and dispels notions such as the universal or “natural” meaning of things. For example, the association of the sounds for /car/ and the concept “car” is not intrinsic to the object itself (the car), but is entirely dictated by semantic codes in the English language. This insight prompted Eco (1979: 61) to claim that “the codes, inasmuch as they are accepted by a society, set up a ‘cultural’ world which is neither actual nor possible in the ontological sense. Its existence is linked to a cultural order, which is the way in which a society thinks [and] speaks ”

With the theory of codes, Saussure made a dramatic break with the traditional philological approach to linguistics that prevailed in the 19th century. Philologists took the structures of meaning for granted as a kind of “natural” legacy, and focused on the evolution of sounds and meanings over time. Saussure, by comparison, identified the synchronic structures of language

that link sounds to meanings and meanings to discourse, structures that transcend any given utterance and ensure the perpetuation of the language system through history or diachrony.

The philosophical implications of structural semiotics make clear that language and other forms of representation are forms of social and cultural production, regulated by codes and norms, not simply mirrors for a transcendent “reality.” In this sense Saussure posed a challenge to the positivist tradition that held that Nature transcends its inscription in signs.

4.3. Peirce and Pragmatism

The semiotics-based marketing scholarship in North America (Mick and Buhl 1992; Grayson and Shulman 2000) mainly draws upon the pragmatics of Charles Sanders Peirce, reflecting something of the empirical orientation of North American research. Peirce was a contemporary of Saussure’s living in the United States. Peirce’s brief but seminal treatise on “logic as semiotic” formed part of a longer philosophical work on Pragmatism. By contrast with Saussure, who was a linguist, Charles Sanders Peirce (1888 [1955]) was an American philosopher. This distinction determines the ultimate scope and purpose of their works. While Saussure laid the foundation for a “science of signs” based on linguistic codes, Peirce delineated the formal dimensions of sign types, i.e. icons, indexes, and symbols, in order to draw parallels between thought and meaning production.

A key distinction between Saussure and Peirce concerns the structure of the sign. Peirce proposes a triadic, rather than binary, model of signification, including 1. the sign itself or *representamen*, 2. the semantic framework or *interpretant* that delimits the precise interpretation of the sign, and 3. the reference of the sign or its *object*. For example, the McDonald’s logo would be the *representamen*, the material sign. The *object* would be the company to which the logo refers – a concept rather than the material aspects of the company. The *interpretant* consists of the context in which the logo is perceived, a kind of lens through which consumers “read” the world. Researchers can identify the *interpretant* by probing consumers about their personal experiences with a brand or category.

Without referencing Peirce directly, Mick and Buhl (1992) illustrate how Peirce’s semiotic could be applied to consumer research. In a study that examines the influence of consumer life projects on their perception of advertising, the authors examine the ways consumers read the world of goods through the filter of unconscious structures stored in memory. This finding is not unlike Peirce’s claim that meaning is a function of both the concrete representation or sign, the context to which the sign refers, and the unconscious structures - schemata or interpretants – in the consumers’ minds.

Next, in contrast to Peirce, Saussure was not a philosopher, but his emphasis on the binary structures of sign systems is rooted in dialectics and metaphysics. As opposed to empiricist

approaches, the metaphysical approach to phenomena is theoretical, rather than tangible, as exemplified Descartes' statement, "I think, therefore I am." Peirce's approach, by contrast, is pragmatic inasmuch as it relies on evidence gleaned from direct observation. Rather than focus on an ideal sign structure from which all other sign types can be inferred, Peirce lists a taxonomy of sign types, based upon the kinds of relationships they entertain with their objects. The iconic sign would be based on the similarity between the representamen and its object, the indexical sign on the continuity between the representamen and its object, and the symbolic sign on the conventional relationship between the two. For example, the cross represents Christianity by virtue of long-standing tradition, though it may have originally been motivated by an indexical relationship to the Crucifixion.

Peirce, like Saussure, contested the idea that Nature transcends representation. He made an important contribution to the philosophy of language with the idea that a unit of meaning can become in turn a sign for another meaning, and so on ad infinitum. In other words, "reality" as we know it is a function of meaning production and perception. Eco (1979) extends this concept to account for the endlessly creative and dynamic structure of semiosis, or meaning production, through time and space.

The present emphasis on Peirce's semiotic in the marketing literature reflects the Anglo-Saxon orientation of marketing theory in North America. However, structural semiotics has many advantages over Peirce's theory for marketing research. First, structural semiotics accounts for the implication of signs in culture by insisting that cultural codes are entirely responsible for the structure and movement of meaning production (Levi-Strauss 1967 [1958], Eco 1979). Next, the dialectical structure of structural semiotics provides means of shedding light on the competitive contrasts and cultural tensions that structure brand meaning. And third, structuralism's focus on discursive operations, by contrast with Peirce's triad of sign types, is flexible enough to account for the movement of meaning production across a wide variety of media.

4.3.1. *An empirical approach.* First, the pragmatic orientation of Peirce's model favors an empirical approach to the study of meaning production. As a result, in studies that apply Peirce to advertising research (Mick and Buhl 1992; Grayson and Shulman 2000) rely on empirical observations to infer parallels between advertising content and consumer response, such as the way consumers read authenticity in heritage sites. However, these studies were not any more successful in accounting for the phenomenology of perception than the proponents of reader-response literary theory (Scott 1994a; Hirschman et al 1998).

By contrast with Peirce, the dialectical orientation of structuralism enabled Benveniste (1971 [1966]) to theorize a phenomenological relationship between the mind of the subject of discourse (speaker, consumer), and specific codes structuring identity and identification *in* and *with* representations. Benveniste cites the dialectical implication of *I* and *you* as traces of this

phenomenology in verbal communication, while Metz (1981 [1977]) and Oswald (1986, 1989, 2010, 2012) extend this dialectic to the phenomenology of vision linking camera eye to spectator “I” in visual representation.

4.3.2. *Signs vs. semiosis*. Second, by relying on a classification of sign types, Peirce suggests that only certain forms of signs are ruled by convention or codes, namely “symbols.” Peirce claims that some kinds of signs, such as indexes, are motivated by a kind of natural, universal logic, such as cause and effect or mimesis, rather than convention. By contrast, Saussure builds the foundation for a theory of semiosis or meaning production that transcends any particular sign form. Saussure also underscores the role of convention in the structure of meaning for all kinds of signs, at various levels of analysis.

4.3.3. *The cultural condition of meaning*. Third, Peirce’s semiotic isolates sign theory from the broader cultural paradigms that structure culture into binary oppositions. By contrast, in Saussure, the science of signs is always and already a social science, “a part of social psychology.” The dialectical structure of the Saussurian sign (signifier/signified) forms a model for the semiotic analysis of non-verbal sign systems. The binary analysis provides means of identifying the cultural codes that structure the inchoate blur of phenomena into cultural categories and paradigms, the basis of what we know as “reality.” Semioticians, anthropologists, and social scientists have applied the structural model to a broad range of phenomena in order to lay bare the underlying paradigmatic systems constructing myth (Barthes 1972/1957), kinship ties (Levi-Strauss 1967/1958), and ideology (Bourdieu 1984/1979).

Though a lengthy debate on the relative merits of Saussure and Peirce is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that contemporary semiotic theory and practice do not rigidly conform to one tradition or another. Semioticians such as Jakobson, Eco, and Benveniste draw upon the traditions of both Peirce and Saussure to advance the science of signs. For a detailed comparison of these two traditions, please see Mick and Oswald (2007).

5. Applications and case analysis

The structural approach to meaning in the marketplace has important implications for strategic brand management because it provides means of articulating the noise and clutter in the marketplace into competitive positions. It also accounts for relationships between the brand world and the broad cultural paradigms structuring a consumer segment or product category.

As stated earlier, a brand consists of a system of signs and symbols that contributes tangible value to a product offering (see Oswald 2012). Brands have the potential to contribute to the value proposition by growing awareness, positive associations, and long-term customer loyalty, and contributes to trademark ownership and operational advantages such as channel and media

clout (see Aaker 1991 and 1996). The brand, symbolized in the logo, advertising, and design of packaging and retailing, engages the consumer in an imaginary/symbolic relationship that fulfills unmet emotional needs for intangibles ranging from status to romance.

Furthermore, brand semiotics is not limited to advertising, but also influences perception of all the elements of the marketing mix, including product, price, promotion, and product placement. Though price may seem to communicate very little beyond dollars and cents, the pricing strategy influences the brand meaning, from the perception of quality to the goodwill of the retailer or manufacturer. Thus brand semiotics forms a cornerstone of brand equity and must be managed as rigorously as any other feature of the marketing mix in order to grow brand value.

5.1. The marketing semiotics research process

The marketing semiotics research process involves collecting and decoding data from three sources, including cultural texts, consumer insights, and brand communication. Data is then classified into groups ordered into a hierarchy of larger to smaller units of meaning, including:

- the broad *cultural codes* associated with the product category, such as relationship,
- the *emotional territories* consumers associate with these categories as reflected in their lifestyles and values, i.e. some consumers make commitments, some don't, and
- the *brand heritage and identity*, as reflected in the logo, historical advertising, and other proprietary brand communication.

5.1.1. Cultural research

To identify the broad cultural categories structuring meaning in a category or consumer subculture, the researcher begins with a broad set of cultural texts before interviewing consumers. These include current fashions and trends, popular media, advertisements, and prominent cultural icons and thought leaders as they relate to the product category or consumer segment. For example, to target a soft drink brand to teens, researchers begin by collecting data from media sources teens consume, from magazines to music and social networking sites. They may find, for example, that social commitment is a dominant cultural code in the teen market.

5.1.2. Consumer research

Next, researchers conduct primary research with teens to identify the various ways teens interpret “relationship,” based on factors such as personality or lifestyle. These variations constitute the “emotional territories” structuring meaning within a cultural category, and form the basis for segmenting consumers by attitudes, beliefs, personality, or lifestyle. For example, teens may be more or less committed to social causes. They also may be committed to social causes but express this commitment differently. Extroverted teens may express social commitment by being activists and organizers; introverted teens may participate in more symbolic ways, such as

wearing group symbols or making financial contributions. In other words, the cultural category “+/- social commitment” may be refined by another category, such as introversion/extroversion.

When mapped on a strategic grid, these emotional territories form the variables for consumer segmentation (Figure 2). For example, consumers can be segmented in to four broad types, including 1) HSC- I. High Social Commitment/Introversion, 2) HSC-2. High Social Commitment/Extroversion, 3) LSC-1. Low Social Commitment/Introversion, and 4) LSC-2. Low Social Commitment/Extroversion.

Figure 2 about here. A Binary Competitive Analysis - Soft Drinks

5.1.3. The brand audit

These kinds of emotional territories also construct filters through which teens interpret brand communication. In the third phase of the semiotic study, researchers ask consumers to relate their values and beliefs to the brand and competitors, usually by means of associations they make with brand logos and advertisements. Analysis may indicate that socially-committed, introverts prefer a soft drink brand associated with tradition and maturity; that socially-committed extroverts prefer a soft drink brand associated with trendiness and youth; lower committed introverts prefer a niche brand associated with individual uniqueness; while lower committed extroverts prefer a niche brand associated with rebelliousness.

The semiotician then projects these consumer types over the identities consumers associate with popular brands. In a very general way, Coke is mature and traditional, Pepsi is young and trendy, Dr. Pepper is unique and individualistic, and Mountain Dew is rebellious.

These factors have important implications for market segmentation, brand strategy and advertising. The marketing semiotics research process aligns brand positioning and creative strategy to the culture, lifestyles, and emotional territories consumers associate with a product category.

5.2. The levels of analysis

Semiotics research thus applies not only to advertising, but to the study of cultural texts and primary research with consumers. At the analysis phase, semiotics takes into account the multiple levels on which meaning is produced, taking into account the material, structural, conventional, contextual, and performative levels of analysis. The logo for the McDonald's brand serves as illustration. Though logos are micro-sign systems, they represent the brand identity, the corporate mission, and the target culture. They can be analyzed in terms of all five dimensions, including:

- *Material*. The McDonald's logo is a visual icon that can be reproduced in many media.

- *Structural*. The logo always includes the same pattern of elements, including the golden arches, red background, brand name superimposed on the arches in white, squared font. The arches located to the left of the square so the logo moves off to the right, suggesting movement.
- *Conventional or Codified*. The logo is a universal symbol for McDonald's, in the same way that the cross symbolizes Christianity. Anywhere in the world, and in many languages, the golden arches, the color scheme, and the brand name consistently signify the company and brand offerings for the McDonald's company.
- *Contextual*. The time and place in which the logo is situated contributes to the subjective connotations of this sign system. For example, while some consumers in the U.S. market may associate McDonald's with cheap, unhealthy fast food, in many markets in the world, such as China, McDonald's represents a special treat. The contextual environment may also embed brand communication in cultural archetypes and myth, creating either positive or negative associations derived from local interpretations of the message.
- *Performative*. Marketing sign systems engage consumer/spectators in a communication event by means of codes inscribing subject positions for I and you in representation. This dimension is crucial for building brand relationship and for calling the consumer to action, i.e. making a brand choice.

Since all of these dimensions work together in the brand system, to overlook any one of them in the planning and advertising process could muddle and even harm consumer perceptions of the brand. For example, in the current global economy, marketers must consistently calibrate brand meanings to the cultural context of local markets to remain relevant.

Though the example used here focuses on the brand logo, this same multi-level approach applies to all kinds of data, including cultural texts and consumer research. For example, an ethnographic interview of consumers at home, work, or play is a multi-dimensional text that involves many levels of analysis, including verbal, visual, and ritualistic dimensions of consumer behavior.

6. Case examples

Below are summarized case studies for the McDonald's and Compaq brands where semiotics contributed to the strategic planning process. For the sake of brevity, cases were chosen that did not involve extensive primary research with consumers. However, primary research is necessary for most studies because it both supports findings from the secondary research and accounts for the effects of social context and regional differences on brand perceptions, product rituals, and advertising semiotics.

The McDonald's case illustrates how a company revived a brand by responding to cultural change. McDonald's repositioned their brand in 2003 to reflect emergent codes in the cultural environment related to gender and ethnicity. The Compaq case illustrates how a diachronic analysis of competitive brand communication in the personal computer category revealed way in advance of Compaq's demise that the brand had lost direction.

6.1. A Cultural repositioning at McDonald's.

Marketers have more or less control over the material, structural and conventional elements of brand communication, but risk miscommunication and ambivalence at the levels of the contextual and performative elements. A case in point is the representation of women in an annual report for the McDonald's corporation dating back to 1996. By decoding gender archetypes in the ads, the semiotic analysis reveals an unfortunate feminine stereotype that suggests management lost touch with its target market, potentially tarnishing the brand.

By way of introducing the reader to the semiotics-based analysis, I first present an elementary semiotic analysis of a cultural archetype associated with gender.

6.1.1. Targeting Martians at NASA

In 1970, NASA attached a sign or plaque to the side of the Pioneer 10 satellite with the express purpose, according to NASA scientists, of communicating universal meanings about mankind to the potential interlocutors from outer space. (Figure 3.) A semiotic analysis of the image reveals something of the ethnocentrism of this effort.

Figure 3 [about here](#). Nasa Plaque

First of all, the very placement of this image on the satellite betrays the ethnocentrism of that prevailed in the 1970's when Pioneer 10 was launched, because it presumes that creatures from another planet would recognize and read the codes structuring visual representation in this image. When the West was at the heights of its influence, North American white culture formed a lens through which marketers represented the world.

Furthermore, even if Martians could "read" the codes of Western culture, they would receive a narrow interpretation of what it means to be human on the planet earth. The cultural codes structuring relations between power and gender alone betray a cultural stereotype shaped by the dominance of a white male ideology in the West at the end of the millennium.

A rough binary analysis of the organization of the figures in the frame, the direction of their looks, and the details of their presentation, leads to paradigmatic oppositions linking the male to power, speech, action, and self-control, and linking the female to passivity, silence, inaction and lack of control. The male stands upright and strong in the foreground, feet planted squarely on the ground, looking out with authority towards the spectator and communicating with his right hand. The female slouches in the background, looking to him (is “spoken” through him?), relaxed, hands at her sides. The binary analysis is summarized in the following grid (Table 1).

Male	Female
Foreground	Background
Upright	Slouching
Strong	Weak
Looking	Looked at
Active	Passive

Table 1. A Binary Analysis of Gender Archetypes

6.1.2. Implications for Brand Equity

A similar disposition of men and women in advertisements for the McDonald’s brand betrays an out-dated gender ideology at McDonald’s at a time when the brand itself was declining on the global stage. A cursory look at the annual report for McDonald’s in 1996 shows men in dominant positions in visual space, by contrast with women who are positioned lower than men, marginalized, or left out of the picture altogether. For example, in the following ad, the two men engage in a power play – shaking hands, addressing each other with speech and looks, standing strongly and securely in the foreground of the image. The woman sits silently in the background, at a level below the men, eyes looking up to them as if to silence her own voice by listening to the men. (Figure 4.)

Figure 4 about here. The Shrinking Female (Target). McDonald’s 1996 Annual Report.

If this unbalanced representation of male and female characters were limited to a single ad, it would not be remarkable. However, *all of the ads* in the 1996 annual report repeat this pattern, either eliminating women altogether or placing them in marginal positions or turned away from the camera. Furthermore, the representation of women in the 1996 annual report would have no more than academic interest were it not for the fact that women with children formed McDonald’s primary target at the time.

The marginalization of women in the 1996 annual report signals, rather, that management had lost sight of their customer base and lost touch with the dramatic social and cultural changes that challenged gender stereotypes in the second half of the twentieth century. Indeed, during an economic slump in the 1990's McDonald's sacrificed their long-term brand strategy in favor of discounting tactics aimed at short-term sales growth, a path that traditionally leads to a decline in brand value. For example, Blackett et al (2003) find that a long-range brand strategy succeeds in a recession where short-term discounting fails.

The following grid maps the strategic implications of the gender binaries structuring the McDonald's 1990's positioning and compares it to the repositioning of the brand in 2003. The intersecting axes defined by the oppositions male/female and power/no power are based upon the paradigmatic opposition of male and female figures in advertising. As discussed later on, McDonald's revised their positioning in 2003, as designated by the lower right quadrant, inhabited by the "empowered female consumer" (Figure 5).

Figure 5 about here. The Binary Structure of Cultural Brand Strategy

The double axes form four quadrants that frame distinct discourses about gender and power in the social world referenced in the ads. The upper left quadrant is formed by the intersection of the terms male/power, and includes cultural attributes such as being in the foreground of the image, being prominent, having the power to look back and to speak. By contrast, the lower right quadrant is formed by the intersection of female/no power, and includes cultural attributes such as being in the background, being obscured, being passive, being looked at rather than looking, and silence. This kind of paradigm represents the traditional assignment of gender roles in the West. The lower left quadrant represents a cultural attributes associated with an empowered feminine archetype.

6.1.3. Cultural branding

As stated at the beginning of this paper, managing brand semiotics is fundamental to managing brand equity. Furthermore, as Oswald (2012) illustrates with many similar cases, there is an obvious correlation between the cultural positioning of a brand and its financial well-being. Since cultural branding influences the ways consumer perceive brands and companies, an outdated or irrelevant cultural positioning reflects management's indifference and even the perception of quality. Furthermore this cultural positioning affects a broad range of management decisions, related not only advertising, but also to new product development, retail design, and even pricing strategy. The sum total of these decisions creates dissatisfied, disconnected consumers.

6.1.4. McDonald's cultural repositioning

Though the analysis of a small set of advertising images may not provide exhaustive evidence of the company's financial strategy or the success of the brand at any point in time, it nonetheless provides evidence of the effects of cultural change on the brand's integrity and relevance for consumers. This analysis illustrates in very simple terms how the formal structure of an image, such as the organization of bodies and looks in an advertisements, and the repetition of this structure in a corpus of images, forms a cultural subtext – in this case the association of men with power and women with “no power.”

Successful brands calibrate the strategic positioning and advertising with the evolution of contemporary culture. For example, McDonald's corrected their cultural strategy when they repositioned the brand in 2003, along the lines of the new, multicultural world order. As evidenced in advertising for the “I'm Lovin' It” campaign, the new strategy modified the strict binaries structuring gender and power in the West. The campaign features ethnic consumers and empowered women looking out at the spectator on the covers of the annual report, in advertising, and in restaurant signage.

On the double axis grid (Figure 5), the revised brand image is positioned in the lower left quadrant, representing a cultural space mid-way between the powerful male and the passive female. It is the space of the empowered female consumer.

6.2. Compaq Personal Computers

Advertisers as well as scholars often focus on the appeal of the latest advertising campaign rather than evaluating the campaign's consistency with the brand positioning and its relationship to category trends. Semiotics research implicates each *micro* unit of brand communication, such as the single advertisement, in the broader, *macro* system of meanings associated with the brand heritage, the product category and the cultural environment. The following case study demonstrates that a diachronic analysis of historical and competitive advertising for the brand is crucial for monitoring the brand's consistency and distinctiveness with reference to these contexts. The case examines how inconsistencies in the positioning and cultural identity of Compaq over a seven year period set the stage for the company's demise and takeover in 2003.

6.2.1. The growing personal computer market

Apple and IBM defined the strategic parameters of the growing personal computer category in the 1980s and '90s in terms of a broad cultural paradigm relating Man to Machine. Apple appealed to the insecurities of the amateur computer user and adopted an intimate, consumer friendly identity. IBM, on the other hand, targeted business users who identified with the more professional and aloof identity of Big Blue. These contrasts are reflected in the brand names

themselves. International Business Machines is straightforward; it references the product and emphasizes technology. The IBM logo is an acronym rather than an image. On the other hand, the Apple name is poetic; it emphasizes creativity over technology. The logo promises access to knowledge, like Eve's forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden.

These brand distinctions extend beyond logo design to the color scheme, camera point of view, characters, and visual style of advertising over the life of the brands. IBM's straightforward prose style, distant camera angles, and cool, low key color palette, reinforces the brand's associations with conformity, logic over emotion, a distant, professional relationship to consumers, and a scientific approach to personal computing. By contrast, the close camera angles, subjective camera point of view, and wide ranging color scheme reinforces Apple's personal, accessible relationship to consumers, its association with innovation and creativity, and a lifestyle, rather than technological approach to personal computing.

To stand out in the PC market in the 1990s, a brand such as Compaq had to identify a clear and distinct positioning within the Man/Machine paradigm. However, as a diachronic analysis of advertising for Compaq, Apple, and IBM over a seven year period from 1990-1997 revealed, Compaq management failed to identify a clear path for the brand. Instead, they alternated from one year to the next between the two dominant positionings.

These shifts in the Compaq positioning are clear and sharp. When the brand was launched in the 1980s, it was positioned as a less-expensive IBM-compatible product. This positioning is reflected in advertising from the early 1990s which emphasized advanced technology targeted to business professionals. Their tagline emphasized technology rather than lifestyle: "Compaq does it better." However, in the same time frame, Compaq advertising in the U.K. took the opposite tack, targeting the home computer user with humor. In a television campaign, John Cleese, of *Monty Python* fame, represents a blundering first-time user who confuses the colloquial and technological meanings of computer "chips" and "buses." In another year, after the launch of the Presario home computer, Compaq began targeting students and families, using emotional appeals about the ways computers "enrich our lives" reminiscent of Apple. One year Compaq is warm and intimate; the next it is cool and professional.

These positioning shifts are even more dramatic in North American advertising over the 7-year period from 1988-1995. A campaign from 1995 mirrored IBM with the cool, unapproachable image of a gray computer against a white background. By contrast, in 1997 the positioning resembles Apple, as reflected in a colorful campaign comparing the computer to a work of art by Leonardo DaVinci. Though most of these ads were appealing as individual texts, when examined in relation to the historical advertising for the category, they revealed to what extent the Compaq brand was floundering like a ship without a rudder through the 1990s.

No wonder that by the end of the 1990s, Compaq resorted to discounting tactics to retain market share and became identified with low price, similar to Dell. Unfortunately, Dell already owned that space on the competitive map, so Compaq gradually, inevitably declined. By the end of the millennium, Compaq had lost its competitive edge and was forced to compete on price. Hewlett Packard took over the company in 2003.

6.2.3. A new market space for Compaq

A semiotics-based strategy would have steered Compaq to a more distinct brand identity and consumer target by deconstructing the Man/Machine binary altogether. By plotting the category dimensions on a semiotic square, the following analysis finds a unique positioning for Compaq that may have led to more positive business outcomes.

6.2.4. The Semiotic Square

The binary analysis of the codes structuring meaning in a category represents but the first stage in a strategic semiotics process. To identify creative ways for brands to move within these binary structures, the semiotician submits the cultural binaries to analysis on a semiotic square, which deconstructs the dominant binaries of contrast to subtler binaries structuring complementarity and implication.

Greimas developed the Semiotic Square account for nuance and ambiguity, the slips and slides of meaning that fall within the two poles of a paradigm and structure the complexity of cultural systems. The Semiotic Square is a powerful strategic tool, because it superimposes the cultural dimensions onto the strategic dimensions of a category, deconstructs these dimensions, and presents in graphic detail new fields of meaning, new market spaces, and new opportunities for positioning brands and distinguishing them from competitors.

The analysis proceeds as follows. The researcher plots the cultural data on a double binary grid (Figure 6). The dialectical opposition of “Man” and “Machine” frames the dominant paradigm for the personal computer category in the early 1990s, as represented by the solid arrows joining the contrasting terms of [S1] Man versus S2 Machine and [-S1] Not-Man versus [-S2] Not-Machine on the inner square. We deconstructed the dominant binary by applying the operations of negation and implication, creating secondary binaries.

Figure 6 [about here](#). A New Market Space for Compaq

By means of negation, we traced connections between contradictory terms on the grid, such as [S1 Man > -S1 Not-Man], and [S2 Machine > -S2 Not-Machine]. By the operation of implication, we traced relations of complementarity between positive and negative states of the original binary, such as [S1 Man > -S2 Not-Machine] and [S2 Machine > -S1 Not-Man]. The Semiotic Square illustrates the logical complexity of any paradigmatic system by deconstructing

the metaphysical realm of universals, Man versus Machine, into the pragmatic realm of relative concepts, neither Man nor Machine. In other words we exposed an underlying synergy between two poles of a dialectical structure.

As noted before, the Man/Machine binary is implicated in a series of paradigmatic associations, such as brand intimacy and consumers' technical expertise. For this reason, we superimposed a second binary system Emotional/Logical, over the first binary, and deconstructed it by means of the same process of negation and implication.

We then traced relationships between these two binary systems, tracing intersections between the two by means of negation and implication. The [-S Not-Man > -S2 Not-Machine] / [-Ss1 Not-Emotion > -Ss2 No-Logic] forms a new cultural space at the bottom of the Semiotic Square that deconstructs the metaphysical contrast formed by the two PC giants in the 1990s, IBM and Apple, and forms a new cultural space defined by everyday consumers who need help with technology. The findings from the semiotic analysis suggest a new market space as well, characterized by unmet consumer needs for a Windows-based operating system that is also easy to use.

In the course of an actual business case, management would have developed a positioning for Compaq based upon the semiotic analysis of advertising. They would then follow up with qualitative research in order to fill in details about the lifestyles and values of the potential target, i.e. newcomers to the PC market who need a brand that is neither emotional and poetic nor logical and serious, a brand that speaks to them in plain language and provides excellent technical support. An analogy with cars may be useful. Neither a Cadillac nor a Mustang, the Compaq brand could resemble the Chevy, a strong, all-American brand for the everyday consumer.

7. Conclusion

The semiotics research paradigm has broad and deep implications for brand equity management, consumer research, and advertising. I have discussed only a few examples in this essay, but hopefully I have provided the basis for future research in theoretical and applied semiotics as it relates to a range of topics on meaning in the marketplace, including visual semiotics, marketing design, innovation, and consumer culture.

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Figures And Tables

Figure 1. The Dual Structure of Signs.

Figure 2. A Binary Competitive Analysis - Soft Drinks

Figure 3. Nasa Plaque

Figure 4. The Shrinking Female (Target): Mc Donalds 1966 Annual Report

Figure 5. The Binary Structure of Cultural Brand Strategy

Figure 6. A New Market Space for Compaq

Table 1. A Binary Analysis of Gender Archetypes

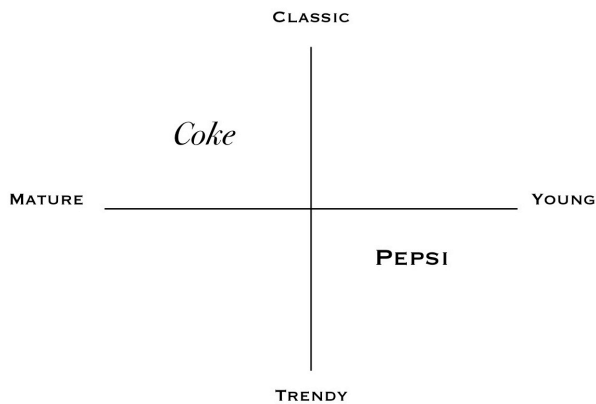


FIGURE 1. A BINARY COMPETITIVE ANALYSIS - SOFT DRINKS

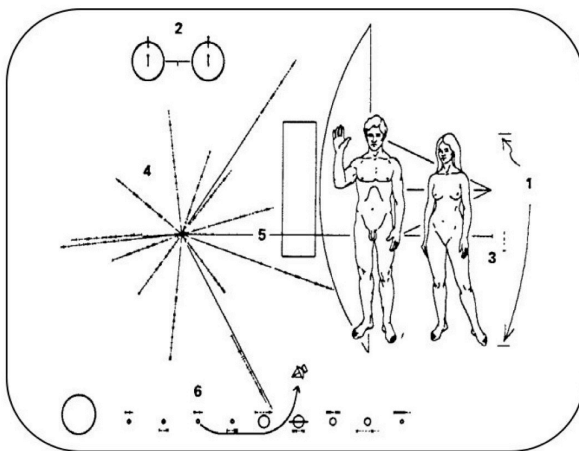


Figure 3. The Plaque on Pioneer 10

The Dual Structure of Signs

$$\frac{\text{Signified (concept)}}{\text{Signifier}} = \frac{\text{Image of a car}}{/\text{car}/}$$

Figure 2. The Dual Structure of Signs



Figure 4. The Shrinking Female (Target).
McDonald's 1996 Annual Report.

