

Guest Editorial Preface

Special Issue on the Semiotics of Print Advertising and Branding

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The semiotics of print advertising and branding has, indeed, become widespread. The growing number of journal articles, monographs, anthologies, conference papers, and so on strongly shows how print advertising and branding have become major targets within applied semiotics (cf. Nöth 1995; Mick et. al. 2004).

Roland Barthes' (1915–1980) famous article “Rhétorique de l’image” (1964), of course, became the starting point for numerous analyses and theoretical developments concerning print advertisements using concepts such as denotation, connotation, message, code, and metaphor/metonymy (cf. Sonesson 1989).

Since the pioneering work of Barthes, semioticians, marketing scholars, consumer researchers, and others (e.g., experimental psychologists) have set out to show the usefulness of semiotics in studying not only print advertising but also the meaning, signification, and communication of products, designs, logos, packaging, and consumer identities, etc.

And since Barthes, a plurality of semiotic notions, concepts, and methods stemming from different schools and theories have found their way into the study of print advertising and branding.

Let us just mention, in passing, the influence of Greimas (generative trajectory, the semiotic square) on, e.g., Floch (1990), and Rossolatos (2014); the influence of Levi-Strauss (myth) on, e.g., Williamson (1978) and Dyer (1988); and, finally, the influence of Peirce (the triadic sign and the icon, index, and symbol) on, e.g., Magarinos de Morentin (1984), Mick (1986), McQuarrie and Mick (1996), Nöth (2011), and de Lencastre and Corte-Real (2013). Furthermore, scholars such as Danesi (2006, 2007) see a combination of theoretical discourses (e.g., structuralist and Peircean) as the platform from where print advertising and branding can be analyzed.

Print advertising and branding are, perhaps, more than ever, culturally significant in rhetorically influencing the identities of the consumers and making them navigate meaningfully in the marketplaces.

The semiotics of print advertising and branding still is, and most likely always will be, a rather heterogenous field. However, there seems to be no end in sight concerning the relevance of semiotics when it comes to analyzing, e.g., the signification, communication, and different effects of print advertising and branding as also witnessed by a steadily growing interest into semiotics from practitioners trying to make their marketing efforts as effective as possible.

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In the first article “Emoji in Advertising,” Marcel Danesi undertakes to study emoji in print advertising from a two-fold perspective: He describes emoji in print advertising as constituting a pictographic writing system with a code, stylized iconic signs, and different utterance functions with respect to usage – in particular what Jakobson called the “Phatic function.” Furthermore, Danesi asks the

fundamental question: “Is the use of emoji in print advertising truly effective psychologically?” To answer the question tentatively, Danesi presents the results of his empirical study involving 100 undergraduate students from University of Toronto as informants. The idea of study was to measure the so-called connotation index of print ads with and without emojis, suggesting that ads with more connotations will, more likely, show to be more effective.

In the second article “The Image in Print Advertising – and Comments to Val Larsen’s Research Program” by Bent Sørensen and Torkild Thellefsen, the authors re-visit, with Val Larsen (2008), the use of Peircean icons and symbols in print advertising and thereby, they find (some) formal conditions concerning its images. Even though the authors are indeed inspired by Val Larsen’s research program, they also are rather critical of it. Hence, the authors set out to demonstrate how Val Larsen overlooks crucial parts of the semiotic potential of the icon and the symbol within print advertising. Furthermore, Val Larsen needs, the authors argue, the Peircean index within his research program. At the end of the article, and inspired by Val Larsen, the authors put forth nine Peircean points they find relevant for a research program concerning the image within print advertising. Here, ontological and methodological deductions are made from Peircean ideas and principles.

The third article “The Face is (Not) Like a Mirror: The Advertising Rhetoric of the Catoptric Metaphor from the Art of Physiognomy to the Science of Facial Expression,” by Devon Schiller, presents the catoptric metaphor – the face is like a mirror – as an epistemological trope within advertising designs of “face studies.” Schiller shows how the catoptric metaphor is not a fixedly stable (semantic) type within scientific communication and its print advertising – e.g., frontispieces, newspaper cartoons, and periodical spreads – calls for the attention of the knowledge consumers. Furthermore, the article argues for how the catoptric metaphor – the face is like a mirror – itself leads to novel concepts and methods in the very studies about the face itself.

Finally, the fourth article “Ego meets *Alter* on the marketplace: New directions in the cultural semiotics of brand communication” by Goran Sonesson is an examination of marketing as a message concerning inter-cultural communication. Sonesson focuses on this kind of message from the perspective of cultural semiotics as well as rhetoric. He analyzes the marketing situation concerning how global companies use national identities in order to sell their products and services on local markets. Furthermore, Sonesson gives concrete examples of this inter-cultural transfer of values – e.g., when European values are transferred to a Swedish product, Absolute Vodka, and Swedish values are transferred to products from IKEA which are, most often, not coming out of factories in Sweden.

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