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Emily B. Rhoades

Tracy Irani

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## "The Stuff You Need Out Here": A Semiotic Case Study Analysis of an Agricultural Company's Advertisements

### Abstract

In today's mediated society, people are continually searching to describe relationships among themselves, the items they encounter in their physical environment, and the cultural and historical contexts in which they reside. By placing meaning-laden visuals in a medium as popular as magazines with rural audiences, advertisers are sending messages as to what rural life is. The 2004-2005 advertising campaign of the Tractor Supply Company utilized photographs of rural life to sell viewers "The stuff you need out here." This advertising campaign, which relied heavily on a humorous appeal to play into stereotypical images of rural life, was seen in a variety of magazines that reach rural audiences. Using semiology as the framework of how images construct meanings, this case study sheds light on the various messages behind these advertisements and how they convey the cultures of rural life to farm and non-farm audiences. It is apparent that these advertisements have a tendency to play into the dominant ideology of what farming and farmers look like. Through simplistic images playing into known stereotypes such as male domination, rural work ethic, and freedom, the dominant ideal is enforced through the selling of these products. By utilizing American ideals and colors, the advertisements played into the American ideal of patriotism.

# “The Stuff You Need Out Here”: A Semiotic Case Study Analysis of an Agricultural Company’s Advertisements

Emily B. Rhoades and Tracy Irani

## Abstract

*In today’s mediated society, people are continually searching to describe relationships among themselves, the items they encounter in their physical environment, and the cultural and historical contexts in which they reside. By placing meaning-laden visuals in a medium as popular as magazines with rural audiences, advertisers are sending messages as to what rural life is. The 2004–2005 advertising campaign of the Tractor Supply Company utilized photographs of rural life to sell viewers “The stuff you need out here.” This advertising campaign, which relied heavily on a humorous appeal to play into stereotypical images of rural life, was seen in a variety of magazines that reach rural audiences. Using semiology as the framework of how images construct meanings, this case study sheds light on the various messages behind these advertisements and how they convey the cultures of rural life to farm and non-farm audiences. It is apparent that these advertisements have a tendency to play into the dominant ideology of what farming and farmers look like. Through simplistic images playing into known stereotypes such as male domination, rural work ethic, and freedom, the dominant ideal is enforced through the selling of these products. By utilizing American ideals and colors, the advertisements played into the American ideal of patriotism.*

## Introduction

“We can only understand what advertisements mean by finding out how they mean” (Williamson, 1978, p. 17). In today’s mediated society, people are continually searching to describe relationships among themselves, the items they encounter in their physical environment, and the cultural and historical contexts in which they reside. Advertising texts and visuals are cultural and social expressions that allow us to shed light on these relationships (Page, 2004). These images can be seen as “systematic masses of complex intricate soci-cultural relations that have been ordered in very specific ways to produce a variety of meanings” (Fuery, Fuery & Wagner, 2003, p. 87).

By placing these meaning-laden visuals in a medium as popular as magazines with rural audiences (Maddox, 2001), advertisers are sending messages as to what rural life may be. While the advertiser may or may not intentionally set out to portray these meanings in their images, they still can have an effect on the individuals viewing them (Bandura, 1986).

The 2004–2005 advertising campaign of the Tractor Supply Company utilized photographs of rural life to sell viewers “The stuff you need out here.” This dynamic advertising campaign, which relied heavily on a humorous appeal to play into stereotypical images of rural life, was seen in a variety of magazines and on television channels that reach rural and urban audiences. To uncover the advertising’s messages, this study will examine several of the print advertisements of the 2004–2005 Tractor Supply Company “The stuff you need out here” campaign. Through a semiotic lens, this paper attempts to shed light on the various messages behind these advertisements. Semiotics is a philosophical framework that seeks to discover how images construct messages through the study of

signs and codes (Rose, 2001).

Background into the company behind this advertising campaign will be provided to give a basis for these images. A review of advertising as a visual communication will follow, along with a brief overview of the methodology employed to evaluate the images and their meanings. An analysis of three images included in the 2004 campaign will be presented preceding an explanation of the implications for future analysis.

## **Literature Review**

### **Tractor Supply Company**

Tractor Supply Company (TSC), the largest retail farm and ranch store chain in the United States, was founded in 1938 as a mail-order catalog business offering tractor parts to family farmers. Located mostly in states east of the Rocky Mountains, the company claims to focus on “supplying lifestyle and maintenance needs of recreational farmers and ranchers, and others who enjoy the rural lifestyle” (Tractor Supply Company, 2005). In 2004, the company was named to Fortune Magazine’s list of 100 fastest-growing companies. TSC, now headquartered in Brentwood, Tenn., reported revenues exceeding \$1.7 billion in 2004, making it a leading retailer in its market. The corporate business mission of TSC is “to work hard, have fun, and make money by providing legendary service and great products at everyday low prices” (TSC, 2005). The highly visible efforts to communicate this mission are seen in the advertising campaign being studied.

### **Portraits of Rural Life**

Farming and rural life in the United States have continually been portrayed throughout the 20th century as being subjected to a “domestic ideology” where men are farmers and women play a supporting role (Walter & Wilson, 1996). Media oriented toward rural audiences continue to project images of rural domestic life and gender roles that feed into these stereotypes (Walter & Wilson, 1996). Rural areas are typically composed of lower-income families with lower educational levels than those found in urban areas (Strover, 2001). While research has looked at how women have been portrayed in agricultural media (Walter & Wilson, 1996), only a few studies have analyzed how media portray farm life (Kellogg Foundation, 2002; Walter, 1995).

Agricultural businesses continue to see magazines and other trade publications as an important tool for reaching producers with their advertising messages (Boone, Meisenbach, & Tucker, 2000). Agribusiness advertising is a major source of revenue for most rural publications and broadcast stations. Advertisers are given many opportunities to display images of cultural life in these publications. By portraying images of rural life in these publications, advertisers confirm the relationships sought after by viewers between themselves, the product, and their physical environment.

A study by the Center for Media and Public Affairs and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation looked at perceptions of rural America based on media coverage (Kellogg Foundation, 2002). While this content analysis of major print and television outlets mostly covered issues, the researchers looked at the common frames linked to rural and farm life. They classified their findings under three distinct frames: linking “rural” with agriculture and farmstead lifestyles; portrayals of people in rural areas as being impoverished, being “rednecks,” or having backward lifestyles; and rural areas as a retreat from urban life that are “pastoral,” “peaceful,” and “quaint” (Kellogg Foundation, 2002). Research looking at rural publications has included analysis of the media’s image of the farmer. Walter (1995) analyzed articles that featured successful farmers in agricultural magazines to determine if they are encouraging a model of what “success” in farming is. The researcher noted that all portrayals

showed farming as a business rather than as a lifestyle. Farmers were also shown in larger than average operations. The author argued that while the magazines may not have intentionally showed these images for these reasons, they still may have an effect on viewers (Walter, 1995).

A nationwide study of consumers was done by the American Farm Bureau in 1998 to see how the buying public views farmers. While this study did not aim to define the dominant ideology of agriculturalists and rural citizens, it did shed light on it. The report was developed out of a concern that farmers were being portrayed in advertisements as lacking in modern context (American Farm Bureau, 1998). Results of the American Farm Bureau study found that consumers perceived farmers in a very positive light, saying that farmers contribute greatly to society. Consumers reported describing farmers as "hard working," "honest," and having "good family values" (American Farm Bureau, 1998). Researchers concluded that while the results were a step into the right direction to defeating stereotypes of farmers in the media, there is still a long way to go.

While this portrayal of agriculturalists is common in most media (American Farm Bureau, 1998), very little research has been done to describe consumer perceptions, as well as media portrayals, of agriculturalists. In 1991, Mary Anne Higgins made a plea in the *Journal of Applied Communication Research* for more research looking at the communication gap between farmers and non-farmers, citing the fact that non-farmers hold farmers in high esteem, while holding an idealistic, romanticized view of farming.

### **Advertising as a Visual**

Advertising, at its core, is a communication method that is mass mediated to a specific audience with the goal to persuade someone about a product, service, idea or way of life (O'Guinn, Allen, & Semenik, 2003). Advertisements have been described as one of the most powerful tools that can influence and reflect a culture (Gorman, 2004, p1).

Advertisements work to make a connection and transpose meanings between an object and an image (Williamson, 1978). Messaris (1994) discussed this association of juxtaposition in the visual organization of advertising images. The notion is that these images will transfer their meanings to one another just through association in the advertisement. Williamson (1978) noted that an advertisement's primary function may be to sell the product, but advertisements also create a structure in which they are selling us ourselves. By relating a way of life through juxtaposition, advertisements sell viewers a lifestyle that they would like to have. Advertisements, according to Williamson (1978), have an independent reality that allows them to link to our lives and the lives we hope to live. TSC clearly understands this notion. The vice president of advertising and marketing was quoted in a 2004 issue of *AgriMarketing* stating the company is striving to make its customers have an emotional connection to TSC (AgriMarketing, 2004) through its advertising campaign.

Several studies have looked at specific cultures and their representations in advertisements. Merskin (2001) analyzed the stereotypes that have been created and perpetuated by advertisers in relation to Native Americans. Through a semiological analysis of several American advertising brands, the researcher found that these brands (consisting of companies like Crazy Horse Malt Liquor and Sue Bee Honey) reinforce an ideology that has caused consumers to be blind to forms of racism against this culture group. Merskin (2001) concluded that stereotypical images of ethnic groups are not only trends of the past, but remain typical of advertising and product branding today.

Some cultural groups have worked to define the ideologies being portrayed in advertising about them. Firth (2003) described the regulation of cultural content in advertising in Southeastern Asian countries. By analyzing advertising in Singapore, Malaysia, and Vietnam, the researcher was able to

describe the distinctive methods of shielding local cultures through regulation of what international and national advertisers could depict in their advertisements.

These studies shed light on how other cultural groups are battling the stereotypes placed upon them through advertising images. Williamson (1978) argued that advertisements allow viewers to create meaning out of what they are seeing. As these stereotypes continue to be portrayed, will viewers reinforce these meanings in their own minds?

### **Purpose**

Based on the preceding literature review, this study aims to explore the advertising messages presented in the 2004-2005 Tractor Supply Company “The stuff you need out here” campaign. By shedding light on the various messages behind these advertisements, agricultural communicators can better understand portrayals of rural life. The research questions guiding this analysis were as follows:

RQ1: How is agriculture and rural life portrayed in these advertisements?

RQ2: Do the images support or defy the stereotypes surrounding agriculture?

RQ3: How does the Tractor Supply Company portray its company in this campaign?

### **Theoretical Framework**

To explore these connections, advertisements will be analyzed through the theoretical framework of semiology. Semiotics is a philosophical approach that seeks to confront the question of how images construct messages (Rose, 2001). The study of semiotics originated in the literary and linguistics realms of study, and has been developed further by the works of Pierce, Levi Strauss, and Saussure. Semiotics is the study of signs and codes that are used in producing, conveying, and interpreting messages (Rose, 2001).

Saussure developed a systematic understanding of how linguistics works through the use of the sign (Moriarty, 2005). A sign is the basic unit consisting of the signified — a concept or an object, and the signifier — the sound or image attached to the signified. Researchers assert that the relation between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary and can mean different things to different people (Rose, 2001). For example a dog, the sign, can signify different things to different individuals. For some it means a companion, while others may see it as a guardian or threat.

Individuals who belong to a culture are said to interpret the world in similar ways with similar ideals that are set by rules and norms of the culture (Kates & Shaw-Garlock, 1999). Over time, these codes, constructed by legitimate social power relations, form what is known as ideology. Ideology is defined as those representations that work with the interests of the ruling class in mind (Rose, 2001). Codes are sets of conventionalized methods of making meaning that are particular to certain cultural groups. These codes allow a semiologist to come in contact with the wider ideologies at work (Rose, 2001). Advertisements are created with images loaded with ideological assumptions that reach audiences with a preconceived message (Merskin, 2001).

Ronald Barthes took semiotics further to describe how researchers must move beyond the common and obvious meanings of signs to see the hidden meanings in complex messages (Barthes, 2002a). Barthes’ theory describes a bi-level reading of messages that must take place. The initial level, denotation, is a starting point in which one reads the direct, specific meaning of the sign. This is followed by the connotation, second level, in which the meaning that is evoked by the object is read. Barthes describes connotation as something that reflects the cultural meanings, mythologies, and ideologies. For example, an image of a tropical island would have a basic denotative reading of a tropical island, and a possible connotative reading of a vacation or relaxation and slow living. These

meanings can reach mythological status as the text and the ideology work together to give a deeper meaning. Barthes describes myth as a second-order meaning of the signifier and signified that brings about more cultural meanings (Barthes, 2002b).

Williamson (1978) stated that through semiotic theory, advertising associates specific feelings with objects. Many products start with no basic meaning to a viewer. However, after they are placed in a specific situation, they are given value through the process of signs. As viewers of an image, audiences are the host to the meaning. They must insert themselves into the advertisements and find signs within it. By seeing images that naturally would not be connected placed in the same visual, viewers associate those meanings together.

This paper analyzes three advertisements that are dominated by visuals of rural life. The analysis recognizes the dominant visuals, their function as signs, and the denotative and connotative messages they convey, as well as the overall ideologies.

## Methods

Semiology, as a method, offers many analytical tools for researchers to use to dissect an image and describe its meaning in relation to the world around it (Rose, 2001). This study will focus on the idea of the sign and how it makes meanings in the advertisements. Semiology studies tend to concentrate on the image itself in terms of composition and social modality. This study uses these methods to develop a case study of three advertisements used in the TSC campaign.

Bloom (2004) described the "The stuff you need out here" campaign as engaging and effective. The campaign developed by Carmichael Lynch (Bloom, 2004) reflects the organizational mission of the Tractor Supply Company. TSC's vice president of advertising and marketing described the campaign as "we present a situation along with our unique products and we solve the problem" (AgriMarketing, 2004). While several television commercials, as well as print advertisements, were included in the campaign presented by TSC in 2004, three specific print advertisements were selected for this study. These three images were selected because beyond being interesting, creative, and offering a unique rural perspective, they were run in several agricultural-focused publications. While a total of 12 different print advertisements were found by the researcher in various magazines, the selected three were published the most out of all of the ads.

The magazines in which the ads were taken include America's Horse and Western Horseman. The researcher also chose these advertisements since they were in publications the researcher could identify with as part of the target audience. Western Horseman described its readership as being educated individuals who live in rural areas and are involved in the western and equestrian lifestyle (Western Horseman, n.d.). The researcher fits into these categories. By being familiar with the genre, the researcher can understand the intertextuality of the images—their relationships with other text and images (McKeown, 2005). However, these were not the only publications in which these advertisements were published; they were published in a variety of magazines reaching rural audiences and small farms, like Hobby Farmer. TSC is attempting to reach audiences who members are part-time farmers, own horses, or are returning to small towns across America (AgriMarketing, 2004). While 10% of TSC's customers are full-time farmers, 15% are part-time farmers, and 30% own horses.

Moriarty and Sayre (2005) noted that the single "expert-reading" approach was the traditional method used in semiotic analysis. This is the method that was utilized in this study, as well. One researcher analyzed these images individually without taking into consideration the text surrounding them on the page. Once the images were located and selected, the researcher utilized the steps out-

lined by Rose (2001, p. 91) to identify and explore the connections between signs. While many paths can be chosen for semiotic analysis, this method is supported in the literature (Rose, 2001). First, the images were dissected to identify the individual signs relevant to the analysis. Next, these signs were explored in terms of what they signify by themselves. Third, they were analyzed in relation to other signs and text within the advertisement. The advertisement images were next examined to determine the denotative and connotative readings of the identified signs. Lastly, the ads were analyzed as a whole to describe the ideology that was being utilized to reach the viewer. When analyzing signs, as was done in this study, there is an understanding that they are polysemic in their nature, as they are open to different interpretations depending on the individual and the culture (McKeown, 2005). Signs were identified based on the research presented in the literature review. Through the analysis steps, thorough field notes were kept and the researcher continually referred back to the literature when looking for meanings. After the analysis was completed, an impartial researcher looked at the field notes and offered further analysis with the findings.

### **Analysis**

Each advertisement in the campaign is designed with an identical look that quickly connects the reader to the company. While text is not initially seen as the most important part of the advertisement, upon closer inspection it was designed on the advertisement to appear three-dimensional, and in turn very important. All ads are laid out in a horizontal plane, with the viewer at eye-level with the subjects in the advertisements.

Each advertisement was placed toward the middle of the publication as a half-page advertisement on the bottom of the page. When the ads were run, there were typically three ads run in a row on three consecutive pages; however, no two ads could be seen at the same time.

Each of the images utilizes a photographic technique that makes it appear as if it was a snapshot of someone's day in rural America. The layout of the image appears to be an individual's personal photograph based on the format and size of the image. Photographs are successful as advertising visuals because they are thought of as picturing reality instead of a premeditated message (Gorman, 2004). By portraying this "ruralness," the advertisers are reaching farmers and non-farmers alike. Farmers are able to place themselves easily into the advertisement, as it is a picture of their daily life, while non-farmers who romanticize farming (Higgins, 1991) are able to place themselves into this lifestyle they see as relaxing and serene.

The text is then "posted" with what appears to be duct tape onto the image so it stands out and draws attention. The duct-taped note plays into the imagery of hard-working (Strover, 2001) rural America. Duct-tape, as a product, prides itself on being rugged, industrial strength, and for those working on demanding applications (3M, 2005). By positioning a product that is seen this way by the public, the advertisers are juxtaposing these qualities onto the TSC product. These stand-out images are also shown in a sepia tone, indicating they are old. By tying into this tone, the advertisement is connoting a historical way of doing business and a company that is based on traditional values.

These posted messages appear to be cut out of another magazine or a newspaper that someone put onto the image as a humorous side note. One would consider these to be humorous as the object they are selling in this pop-out advertisement is usually in contrast or a solution to what is happening in the image itself. Williamson (1978) described how advertisers rely on these visual puns to draw viewers into the advertisement and involve them in the image.

Considering the very mixed audience of the magazines in which these ads were published, it is interesting that the dominant person in all three advertisements is a male figure. Only one advertise-



ment contains a woman, who is very passive, and in the background. She is sitting between several men in the advertisement, and while they are all very open in their sitting by being sprawled out on the chairs, she is closed with her arms and legs crossed. As Gorman (2004) described, this is seen as being powerless or subordinate as she has lowered herself and made herself smaller, in comparison to the men around her. These ads play into the dominant ideology of the white, male farmer in rural America (Walter & Wilson, 1996).

Many semiotic studies of advertising images have pointed out the use of sexual symbols in order to place a "male gaze" into the advertisement (Messaris, 1994). While these ads do not use blatant sexuality to sell their images, they portray a male gaze in which they confirm the males' comfortability with his sexuality and his active role in life. This is achieved by the viewer seeing all of the men in the advertisements doing something or seeing them in a position where they have just completed a task.

The images utilized in the TSC advertisement campaign show a product in order to juxtapose viewers into a lifestyle of agriculture and stereotypical rural lifestyle. These ads serve as an answer to viewers' problems.

### **The Manure Fork**

This first advertisement (Figure 1) appears near the beginning of the February 2005 issue of *America's Horse*. Its bright colors and three-dimensional appeal, with the taped advertisement popping out of the photo, draw the viewer's eye straight to the advertisement. Upon first inspection, the viewer sees an older, white-collar, politician speaking at a lectern. He is stationed in a farmyard in front of a classic red barn, signifying the ideal farm setting. This plays to the viewer's romanticized picture of rural life that has been shaped through media, such as movies and television programs.



*Figure 1. Tractor Supply Advertisement for a Manure Fork*

Four people are placed in mismatched chairs off to his left side. By using chairs that do not match it appears as if this image is real and was not posed. These people came here on their own, bringing their own chairs. The four onlookers are an eclectic group who, by their posture, appear to have been listening to the politician speak for a while. The three males are dressed in stereotypical farmer clothing: bib overalls, jeans, baseball caps, and flannel shirt. Another person appears to be on the right side of the speaker; however, you can see only his arm and leg. He appears to be dressed nicely like the politician, in contrast with the farming audience.

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The setting for the image is something that most minds conjure when thinking of farming life: the red barn, green grass, clear skies, wood fence, and crops in the background. The green grass and blue skies in the advertisement connote freedom and purity by showing the beauty of nature. The barn, fence, and crops continue to play on the image of rural America, bringing the idea of simplicity, hard work, and trustworthiness to the viewer's mind. These connotations are then transferred to the

advertisement, showing the company as holding these qualities. By arranging this political speech in this setting, the advertisement is playing into the stereotypical farm scene putting viewers in an idyllic setting they would like to find themselves. Viewers are not supposed to wonder how there is a lectern with a microphone stuck in the middle of this scene and why they are not indoors.

The audience of onlookers plays into the common ideal of what a farmer might appear like, as well. The four people to the right of the speaker include an elderly farmer, a woman, a man in a flannel shirt, and a man who appears to be drinking something. The elderly farmer plays into the ideal of the rural person. He wears coveralls, a farm hat, and work boots. He is also the only one in the advertisement looking at the politician. This could symbolize his age and wisdom, and that he is the only one actively engaged with the politician. The other two male farmers do not appear to be paying attention to the speaker. Both men are relaxed and show no interest in the events going on in the scene. One of them is looking off toward the viewer and the other is taking a drink of what appears to be coffee. The coffee again helps to convey to the reader that this is a realistic scene that the advertiser did not pose.

The four people who are sitting alongside the politician are all smug in their expressions. The elderly man appears as if he is just about to respond to the politician, showing that he is paying close attention. However, the other three are either looking off into space or have their eyes closed, connoting that they are not concerned with what the politician is saying and are wanting to be somewhere else.

The politician is shown gripping the lectern and wearing a white, collared shirt with his sleeves folded. He is looking out at what that viewers assume is the audience with a concentrated look. This image connotes a hard-working man who is willing to roll up his sleeves to do the work. This meaning is transferred into the product being sold, showing that it is hardworking and ready to get the job done. The image is also shot to where the viewer appears to be below him. The angle of the shot connotes that he is in a position of power.

The only woman in the advertisement plays the role of the typical farm wife. While she is seated before the two younger men, she is obviously the most passive person in the advertisement. She is sitting closed with her legs and arms crossed, while the men in the advertisement are open in their sitting style. As mentioned earlier, this connotes her lack of power and submission to the men (Gorman, 2004) who by spreading out are seen as showing their power and comfort with the situation. Walter and Wilson (1996) discussed how women in rural media are portrayed as farm support as opposed to farm managers. They are seen as the spouses and siblings, and the woman in this advertisement plays into that stereotype because one can obviously notice a ring on her hand. This ring indicates that she may be there as a listener or as a support to her farming husband.

The elderly gentleman is one of two people in the advertisement holding a small American flag. His flag is held predominantly showing off his patriotism. The younger man in flannel is also holding a flag, but his is pointed out of the image and he appears not to be paying attention to the politician. This difference in how the flags are held plays into the difference in the way the men are paying attention, as well. The signs connote that the older farmer is more concerned with what the politician is saying and could be more patriotic, and that the younger farmer seems to be less concerned with these things. By the younger farmer turning his gaze away from the politician, he can be seen as withdrawing from the situation and the communication with the political figure (Goffman, 1979).

The image of the flags being held connotes a patriotic image when thinking of this company. Tractor Supply is aligning itself as the all-American company by using such images. The dominant

ors in the advertisement are dull, the red, white, and blue colors in the image stand out and continue to add to the connotation of patriotism (Kellogg Foundation, 2002).

The sign on the front of the lectern plays into this ideal as well. By showing the patriotic swag, as well as the traditional political sign, the patriotic meaning is continually transferred to the product and the company. The political feel in the advertisement also connotes that this company is concerned for the future of agriculture.

Another connotation can be read into the sign of the text presented in the advertisement. The torn, paper that is duct-taped to the advertisement contains the logo, the slogan of the campaign, and a brief description of what is carried in the store. The satire of the advertisement comes into play with the image of the object they are selling and the title, "6-tine manure fork." While this image is denoting a political speech and farm life by the association of the product for sale, it is connoting a message that what the politician is saying is "manure" and to solve your problem of boredom and get rid of this filth in your life, you need the product. This advertisement could be playing on a mythical level by providing signs that support the idea that politicians are full of manure.

### **The Deluxe Shade**

The next advertisement (Figure 2) from the campaign to be analyzed appears near the middle of the March 2005 issue of *Western Horseman*. The advertisement is placed as a dominant image on the lower half of the page, in contrast with a continuing article featured at the top of the page featuring a black-and-white image. Its bright colors and three-dimensional appeal draws the viewer's eye directly to the advertisement over the article.

In this advertisement, the viewer again sees the apparently cut-out advertisement that has been placed on the image with duct

tape. The duct tape again connotes the strength of the company and the product being presented. The image in this advertisement is very simple compared to the previous advertisement. An older gentleman, presumably a farmer because he is standing in a field with what is considered a "farmer's tan," is featured in the foreground of the image facing the viewer at eye-level.

Behind him is a typical rural scene of rolling fields, trees, and a dirt road. The background of the image connotes the freedom and openness of the scene. This naturalistic scene shows the viewer a simple life that allows one to feel the serenity of the image (Kellogg Foundation, 2002). By transferring this idea onto the product, the viewers feel that by buying the item, they will experience the same freedom to explore nature and live a simple life. The farmer in the advertisement is shirtless and wearing blue jeans. By using an older gentleman, the advertisement symbolizes his age and wisdom. He demonstrates the classical "farmer's tan" with a burnt face, neck, and arms, and a pale chest and shoulders. This plays into the idea that farmers are typically out in the field for many hours and will have burn lines around their shirt. This does contrast with his age and wisdom, showing he had a lapse in judgment by allowing himself to get burnt. By looking straight at the viewer, he appears to be saying, "I am you and if you do not want to be in the same pain I am, you should buy this product."



*Figure 2. Tractor Supply Advertisement for a Tractor Shading Canopy*

The “farmer’s tan” also connotes the ideological notion of farmers being hard-working people who participate in manual labor. By showing this through the image, the advertisement is transferring this ideal into the company, showing that TSC is also a hard-working business that is willing to do manual labor to get the job done right.

It is interesting to note that out of the three ads, this is the only advertisement in which the image appears to have been created electronically. The man in the image looks as if he was digitally placed into this scene of a bright green field and bright blue sky in order to accentuate his redness. The strong background connotes the idea that this is a naturalistic setting and could be seen anywhere in America. This red-and-white person continues to play into the patriotic theme seen in the previous advertisement, by placing him against a bright blue sky, again connoting that TSC is an American company. Research has shown that non-farmers trust farmers and romanticize their profession (Higgins, 1991; American Farm Bureau, 1998). By showing stereotypical farming scenes and tying it into the ideal of Americana, TSC is positioning itself as a hard-working, trustworthy, American company that the viewer should want to visit.

The pop-out advertisement duct-taped to the image is exactly like the previous advertisement, but the product advertised this time is a deluxe shade for the riding lawnmower. The answer to his pain and his “farmer’s tan” is this product sold by TSC. The man in the image is also not physically fit, indicating undesirability by today’s society. Through juxtaposition, the viewer feels that by buying this shade you will not look like the individual in this advertisement.

### **The Deluxe Insulated Coverall**

The final advertisement being analyzed (Figure 3) is similar to the tractor shade advertisement. This advertisement was two pages behind the previous advertisement in the March 2005 issue of *Western Horseman* magazine. Just like the previous two images, this advertisement was dominantly placed at the bottom of the page underneath a story featuring a black-and-white image. This advertisement was also placed near the middle of the magazine, but due to its contrast to the text above it, it was able to stand out to a viewer flipping through the publication.

This advertisement depicts a larger, middle-aged man sitting in a lawn chair in the snow. He is wearing a head band, hat, shorts, and pool shoes. The man is sitting in a lawn chair, which symbolizes the spur of the moment reality of the image. It is obvious that it is snowing around him, and you can see a hot tub sitting in a barn in the background, indicating he possibly could have just gotten out of it. His shorts appear to be made for swimming and are obviously wet.

There is a sense of innocence about the man, as he is holding a cup and smiling at it as if he was trying to capture the snowflakes that are falling around him. Goffman (1979) described how advertisers will present men in ludicrous or childlike poses to make them appear unreal, and in turn preserve the image of strong, smart men. This connotes that while this man appears to be childlike, he is still on the job, and as the mission of TSC states: “work hard, have fun, and make money...” The man



Figure 3. Tractor Supply Advertisement for Insulated Coveralls

in the advertisement is smiling, showing that he is having a good time, and by putting yourself in his place, you could, too. The advertisement seems to say, by buying the product advertised or shopping at TSC, you can still be successful and have fun, while maintaining your manly image.

The man is obviously cold, indicated by the pale color of his skin and the few red marks on his bare stomach that could be from frost bite. Farmers and people living rural areas are usually seen as less-educated populations in America (Strover, 2001). This advertisement plays into that ideal by showing a man on a cold day sitting outside half-dressed and wet who is simplistically amused by the snow. By sitting in the snow with so little clothing, this advertisement is also connoting the freedom that was seen in the other two advertisements. While this advertisement does not show the green rolling hills as the other two advertisements, the white purity of the snow and the random falling flakes connote a simplistic lifestyle and a sense of freedom.

Interestingly, this advertisement plays into the idea that TSC is an American company just as the previous two advertisements have. The lawn chair he is sitting on is red, white, and blue; his clothing is all blue and white, while he is holding a red cup. These colors, while subtle, continue to place this company as an American organization that is founded on rural, hard-working traditions. By buying their product the consumer is also buying into this farming lifestyle, which by this advertisement shows, is not all work.

As in the previous ads, TSC tries to tell the viewer that by buying the product on the pop-out advertisement you can combat this stereotype and solve your problem. The product being offered by the duct-taped note is TSC's deluxe insulated coverall. By calling this a deluxe product, TCS continues to play on the idea that this is a product that is strong and reliable in any situation you find yourself facing.

The duct tape used in this advertisement is different from that used in the other three advertisements. It is shown as being more wrinkled than that of the other two. This helps to connote the ideal of hard working. While in the other two advertisements, they show how the product is hard working, in this image they are showing a fun scene. This wrinkled tape appears to be struggling to keep the advertisement posted and in turn is working hard for the advertisement. This meaning is again transferred into the product.

## Conclusions

Due to the importance of visual images in today's mediated society, it is essential to take inventory of what these images are portraying and saying about rural culture and ideologies. Semiological analysis offers a unique opportunity for researchers to analyze such images and determine the messages that they portray.

Based on this analysis, it is apparent that these advertisements shown in rural magazines have a tendency to also play into the dominant ideology of what rural life looks like. Through simplistic images playing into known stereotypes, the dominant ideal is enforced through the selling of these products. By utilizing American ideals and colors (Kellogg Foundation, 2002), the advertisements played into an American need to be patriotic. The romanticized ideal of farmers living a serene lifestyle (Higgins, 1991; Kellogg Foundation, 2002) in picture perfect settings is continuously portrayed in the ads analyzed. For the most part, the farmers are seen to be middle-aged, hard-working men (Kellogg Foundation, 2002; American Farm Bureau, 1998). These ads also play into the ideal of the subordinate farm wife who is there to support her husband.

Many classical advertising techniques are utilized to draw in viewers and allow them to put themselves into the images and make specific meanings out of those images (Williamson, 1978).

While these techniques have allowed the advertiser to juxtaposition the qualities of hard working Americans and rural life onto their products, they have also played into the myth of farming life. The images portrayed through these images continue to emphasize the same stereotypes previous researchers have warned about (Walter & Wilson, 1996).

Further analysis of other advertisements used in the “the stuff you need out here” campaign or a more comprehensive analysis of all advertisements in the campaign, as well as triangulation with audiences could shed more light on the contexts and messages being presented. By analyzing the television spots as well as the print advertisements, one could gain a broader picture of what this campaign is saying about rural life. Since signs and signifiers are polysemic, or able to have multiple meanings, in their nature and are open to different interpretations depending on the individual and the culture (McKeown, 2005), it is important to note that these findings are the readings of one individual in the target audience of TSC. Thus, other researchers should look at these images and consider other denotations of the images.

It is imperative as communicators that we continue to study how rural cultures are portrayed in the media. It is apparent through this analysis that negative stereotypes about farmers are still being presented. There is hope in that many positive ideals are also being presented. As future studies explore these ideologies, it is important to realize how information presented by these cultural groups is read by non-farming audiences. Farmers are seen as stewards of the land, and must be trusted when presenting information to publics. Researchers must continue to track these stereotypes if communicators want to be able to effectively portray farming in the media.

### About the Authors

Assistant professor and ACE member Emily Rhoades teaches agricultural communication at The Ohio State University. ACE member Tracy Irani, associate professor, teaches in the University of Florida’s Department of Agricultural Education and Communication. This article is based on a paper presented at the 2005 Southern Association of Agricultural Scientists Conference.

### Keywords

Rural Images, Advertising, Semiology, Qualitative Case Study, Tractor Supply Company

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