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Danai Tsotra

University of Missouri - St. Louis

Marius Janson

University of Missouri - St. Louis

Dubravka Cecez-Kecmanovic

University of New South Wales

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Marketing on the Internet: A Semiotic Analysis

Danai Tsotra

University of Missouri – St. Louis
St. Louis Missouri USA
tsotra@umsl.edu

Marius Janson

University of Missouri – St. Louis
St. Louis Missouri USA
janson@umsl.edu

Dubravka Cecez-Kecmanovic

University of New South Wales
Sydney Australia
dubravka@unsw.edu.au

ABSTRACT

This study demonstrates how semiotics, which constitutes the “linguistic turn” in human sciences, is a powerful tool for revealing concealed meanings in Internet marketing. Semiotics deals with symbols in the form of text and pictures, and also with their underlying meaning. Hence, since Internet marketing makes extensive use of symbols in order to affect product awareness and cultural meaning, semiotics is a very effective and efficient tool for interpreting online marketing. This paper analyzes two examples of Internet marketing and explains how potential consumers with different cultural backgrounds perceive the advertised product.

Keywords

Internet marketing, online marketing, semiotics, critical theory, cultural differences, de Saussure

INTRODUCTION

Internet marketing is different from online advertising, mainly due to the fact that the Internet is more than just a simple advertising medium or a communication channel (Goodwin, 1999). Internet marketing campaigns not only create product awareness, but also reflect a generation of advertising with benefits such as self-selectiveness, interactivity, full integration of various media and marketing capabilities targeted towards specific individuals, countries or cultures (Wehling, 1996).

The fact that Internet marketing can be targeted to specific cultural groups is significant because different groups may react differently to the presence of the same stimulus. Furthermore, manifestations of culture, such as values, heroes, rituals and symbols, offer insight in the way Internet marketers can organize effective Internet advertising campaigns. In such cases, effectiveness is enhanced by making these campaigns congruent with consumers’ culture and ensuring that appropriate symbols are used (Luna, Peracchio and de Juan, 2002). Symbols are a broad category of objects that are meaningful and unique to a particular group of people or culture (Luna et al., 2002). Especially in cases of different cultures, different symbols can activate different schemas, depending on the linguistic and cultural background of the group.

Consumers’ cultural background comes into play during the design of Internet advertising strategies because it allows for adaptation to local cultures. Website designers can create both a standardized and a culture-specific set of materials, which in turn “enable localization of marketing communication”. By including culture as an important design factor, “cultural congruity” becomes essential for effective Internet websites. Thus, the inclusion of verbal and nonverbal content that is congruent with the culture allows for site structures that conform with and support existing cultural concepts (Luna et al., 2002).

Often, concepts and attitudes about specific items are “culture specific.” Even though their meaning might be readily available, the Internet marketer does not know the range of its possible truths until he/she adds the extra dimension of cultural background. In addition, as suggested by the semiotic analysis of a given piece of communication, a range of possible consumer take-outs is useful because it helps one recognize messages that he/she may inadvertently be communicating, in addition to the message he/she wants to be present (Lawes, 2002).

Semiotics, which constitutes the “linguistic turn” in human sciences, is a particularly powerful tool for uncovering concealed meanings of Internet marketing, due to the fact that online marketing involves symbols, such as written words and pictures. In addition, semiotics examines how people form perceptions that are products of the surrounding culture in which respondents live and participate. Culture, as far as semiotics is concerned, is the way people communicate, both consciously and unconsciously, through cultural aspects, such as visual images and language. Understanding the implicit meaning of such elements, allows Internet marketers to make “informed decisions” and communicate more efficiently with potential consumers (Lawes, 2002).

This article analyzes the figurative and cultural elements of two distinct Internet advertisements. This is accomplished by examining elements of background, color, and form so as to obtain understanding and creation of reality in spatially restricted settings, such as the computer screen. We demonstrate that semiotics can be effectively applied to both traditional and Internet marketing and can benefit designers who want to create aesthetically pleasing and effective advertising promotions.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: Section 2 discusses semiotics as a research methodology. Section 3 describes two Internet advertisements. Section 4 analyzes these two advertisements from a semiotic perspective. Section 5 discusses findings and philosophical implications. Section 6 is the paper’s conclusion.

RESEARCH METHOD

This section first introduces semiotics and several related concepts such as bricolage and bricoleur. Next, it presents the model used in our analysis.

Semiotics

Umberto Eco (1976) stated that “semiotics concerns everything that can be perceived as a sign.” Signs constitute printed and spoken words, images, sounds, gestures, and objects. Individuals interpret signs as “signifying something.”

According to Peirce (1894), “nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign”. This interpretation process occurs by relating a sign to familiar systems of conventions and, hence, the sign becomes part of an organized collective of interactions and cannot exist outside such a collective. Signs function as a code between individuals and they trigger or “unlock” previous experiences (Cobley and Jansz, 2000). In short, a human being functions as a “homo significans,” that is to say, as a meaning-maker who uses signs to receive, understand, and convey information.

Interpretation and understanding of signs involves physical elements of objective existence (e.g., American stop sign), which lead to some type of common understanding (i.e. stop the vehicle). This type of common understanding is usually derived from socially accepted norms and rules. Hence, the hexagonal American stop sign creates a system of connotations that individuals have learned to perceive as part of everyday reality and social norms (Figure 1).



Figure 1. The American Stop Sign

By reading the above paragraphs, it seems evident that semiotics has certain similarities with hermeneutics, since both aim at meaning creation. However, by reflecting on the definitions of these two methods, it follows that, although similar in their purpose, semiotics and hermeneutics differ in important ways. Ricoeur (1981), for example, stated that “hermeneutics is the theory of the operations of understanding in their relation to the interpretation of texts.” Moreover, as N oth (1990) pointed out, hermeneutics, by being one of the earliest methods of text interpretation, is a precursor of the present day semiotic theory. Semiotic theory studies sign systems of any kind, including written texts, logos, films, or forms of behavior (Floch, 2001). Consequently, as Internet marketing makes use of text and graphics, we decided that semiotic theory was the proper method for our analysis. In relation to online environments, the way consumers perceive online elements is an issue not thoroughly examined in the Information Systems literature and to which semiotic analysis can clearly contribute.

In summary, semiotics, by studying signs, deals with the construction and maintenance of reality so as to avoid reverting to a set of mere physical artifacts - solely described in terms of rules, forms, shapes, sounds and colors. Furthermore, semiotics enables the altering of everyday reality by adding subjective understanding and a possibility to make subjective what would otherwise seem universal (if the individual's experience and his/her unique way of thinking were absent.)

A Model of Semiotics

De Saussure (1965) proposed a semiotic model in the form of a dyad, comprised of a signifier and a signified. The signifier may consist of actual objects such as background or lines, whereas the signified is the concept in someone's mind. The distinction between the signifier and the signified can also be expressed in terms of form and content (Chandler, 2002).

A particular signifier/signified combination does not exist in isolation but needs to be combined with other signs in order to enable a definitive understanding of what is the signifier and what is the signified. In summary, de Saussure (1965) proposed a "structural" semiotic model. A stop sign exemplifies these ideas - the sign includes a hexagon, white letters, and red background as signifiers, whereas the driver obtains the signified in the form of the obligation to stop the vehicle.

A concept that applies to semiotics was introduced by Levi-Strauss (1983) under the name of "bricolage." "Bricolage" represents the process of creation by using materials that are not necessarily best-adapted to the task in hand. Instead, "bricolage" constitutes an eclectic dialogue among available materials, thus suggesting adaptive courses of action, whereby the "bricoleur" (the initiator of the "bricolage") might even modify his/her initial aim. With respect to semiotics, bricolage is the process of interpreting symbols and signs using available cultural aspects. If the required aspects are not available, people adjust or modify existing ones (Floch, 2001).

In order to construct new arrangements, the "bricoleur" works with signs, by adopting existing signifieds as signifiers and by choosing from limited possibilities. A "bricoleur", in other words, is someone who "tinkers," by actually using tools not for their designed purpose but only as seems fit. Furthermore, the "bricoleur" always includes parts of his/her self when facing the choice of what material to call up for modification, reinterpretation and adjustment to his/her way of thinking. In the context of interpretation, semantic nihilism cannot exist if the bricoleur/interpreter properly adopts and accepts the role of creating new, individually-understood and individually-initiated meanings of one or more signs.

A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF TWO INTERNET ADVERTISEMENTS

The analysis focuses on two mobile phone advertisements by Nokia of Finland (<http://www.nokia.fi/>) and by Ericsson of Sweden (<http://www.ericsson.com/se/>) (Figure 2). The specific advertisements were found in the companies' websites and are a convenient sample, chosen due to the fact that both companies are global telecommunications companies, among the biggest in the world, with contrasting messages towards the consumers (as the analysis will show). In addition, one of the authors spent a considerable amount of time in Finland and was struck by the different messages associated with these two advertisements. It should also be mentioned that these ads are also used by the companies in the physical world as well, a fact that proves that both, Nokia and Ericsson, do not separate their online from their more classic advertisements.

These two Internet advertising instances are analyzed using semiotic principles. Acting as "bricoleurs," we analyze the external characteristics and forms of these two advertisements, with the aim of constructing meaning. The point of interest is how the components of the two advertisements stand for something else, along with the social norms and group experience that they represent. After a general description of the two advertisements, we then focus on specific elements such as background, color and form.



Figure 2. The Nokia advertisement (on the left side) and the Ericsson advertisement (on the right side)

The Nokia advertisement features the following parts: 1) the actual physical object (i.e. Nokia phone), 2) an image comprising two hands extending towards each other, and 3) the brand name that appears twice. A schematic of the Nokia advertisement is shown in Figure 3. As Floch (2001) noted, traces of concrete reality refer directly to normal, everyday life, as it is experienced without any effect of advertisement. Because the phone is depicted against a completely white background the advertisement fails to produce an effect of “concrete” reality.

The Ericsson advertisement features the following primary parts: 1) the actual physical object (i.e. Ericsson phone), 2) an image on the phone’s screen stating “welcome home 12-June 19:03,” and 3) the name “Ericsson” on the phone’s screen (Figure 4). Moreover, the advertisement features secondary parts that affect “concrete” reality such as a wooden table with a cutting board, tomatoes, bread, a metal object, and a yellow object in the right hand lower corner that looks like a bottle of oil. These items constitute concrete reality because they all are everyday, easily recognizable and identifiable objects and can be understood properly even outside the advertisement context. Thus, for example, the tomatoes are perceived as tomatoes regardless of whether they appear in Ericsson advertisement or not.

An in-depth semiotic study should focus on the advertisements’ images and background. The Nokia advertisement forwards the phone’s image in favor of its background. A close reading of the two hands is suggestive of the hand of a parent reaching out to his or her child. In short, these elements draw attention to Nokia’s stated mission, which is “connecting people” and presumably families (Figures 2 and 3).

The Ericsson advertisement shows the time as three minutes after seven in the evening, the date as June 12, and further states “welcome home.” The time and the statement “welcome home” suggest the end of the work day when family members return home for dinner. Moreover, by stating “June 12,” the advertisement draws attention to summer and justifies the presence of the two seemingly fresh tomatoes (Figures 2 and 4).

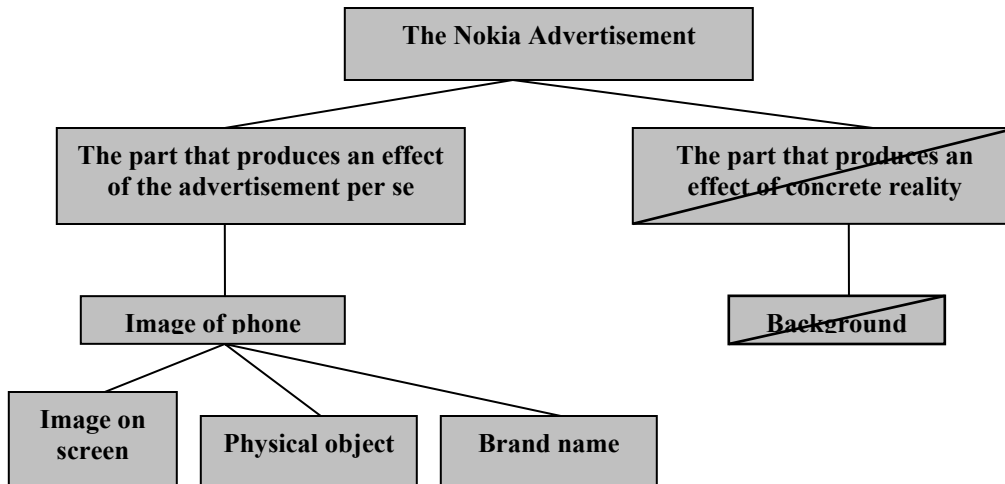


Figure 3. The Nokia Advertisement

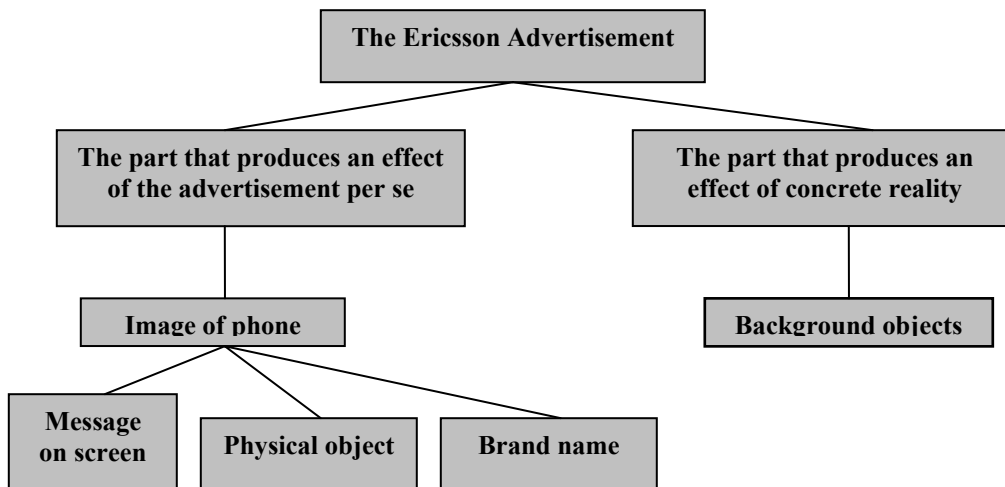


Figure 4. The Ericsson Advertisement

As far as the existence of background is concerned, on the one hand, the Nokia advertisement lacks precise background, yet we may consider the color white to function as background. One of the characteristics of white is that it is not always perceived as a color, thus it helps other chromatic elements of the advertisement be more prominent to the eye. On the other hand, the Ericsson advertisement has a set of background objects. These elements suggest preparation of a vigorous meal, containing healthy ingredients.

The two advertisements also differ with respect to the use of color. On the one hand, in the Nokia advertisement, the cold blue color is prominent against white. The outstretched hands appear to belong to individuals of a white race. Overall, the use of a white background and a cold color seem to create a cold, even austere atmosphere. The Ericsson advertisement, on the other hand, features mostly yellow and red colors. Red attracts attention and, along with yellow, they are both warm colors. Furthermore, the dark-colored phone appears prominent because it is portrayed against warm colors and also because it is mirrored on the silver metal object. Overall, the Ericsson advertisement casts a warm atmosphere.

The two advertisements also feature different geometrical forms (Figure 5). The Nokia advertisement has a circular form focusing on the way the two hands extend towards each other. The Ericsson advertisement features a triangular form, the

basis of which is the phone with the top of the triangle formed by the tomatoes. Finally, while in the Ericsson advertisement there is mirroring of the phone on the metal object, in the Nokia advertisement mirroring is achieved by the two hands that mirror each other as they extend.

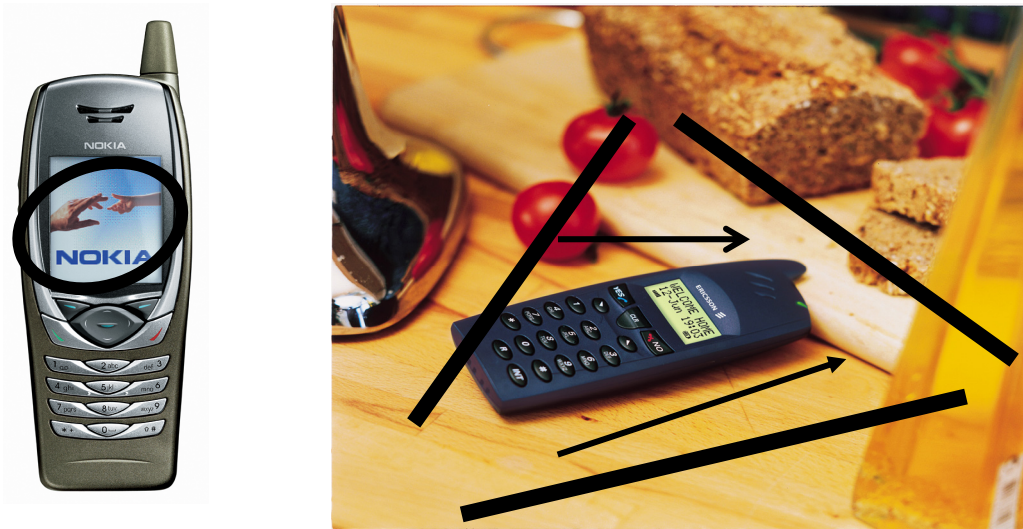


Figure 5. The circular form of the Nokia advertisement contrasted against the triangular form of the Ericsson advertisement

On Semiotics

The semiotic study presented above uses objects, colors and shapes as elements of advertisement design. However, a thorough semiotic analysis should delve beneath the aforementioned items and attempt to analyze context and, if possible, draw comparisons.

The two hands in the Nokia advertisement recall the famous and religious painting the “Creation of Adam” by Michelangelo Buonarroti. The painting, which is on the Sistine Chapel ceiling of the Vatican, depicts God’s life-giving act. Thus, the Nokia advertisement brings to mind God and Heaven, the miracle of creation, and the genius of Michelangelo (Figure 6). The advertisement’s colors play a special role. First, the blue and white colors remind one of heaven and sky and, by extension, they bring to mind a Superior Entity, thus referring back to Michelangelo’s painting. Alternatively, white is also the color of the snow and draws attention to the Finnish landscape that is covered by snow during most part of the year.

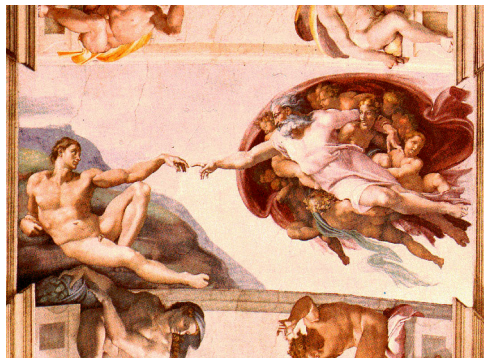


Figure 6. “The creation of Adam” by Michelangelo (1508-1512)

On visiting Finland and especially Northern Finland and Lapland in winter time, one is struck by the extreme beauty of the sky which, like a gigantic dome, hovers over vast fields and lakes covered with snow. However, despite the beauty, one also recognizes within oneself a strong feeling of forlornness and danger. Getting lost in this environment (i.e., for example during

a cross country ski trip) likely means death. As a visitor, one either hears or reads tales of people who, while skiing alone, were met with an accident and were saved because their mobile phone allowed calling for help.¹ Within this context, the Nokia advertisement acquires additional meaning since the two outstretched hands now suggest being given a new lease on life. Pushing the image to its logical end, it seems that owning a Nokia phone may imply having a permanent stake in life.

The various elements of the Ericsson advertisement suggest the end of the work day when people return to a relaxing family environment at home. The colors and the date suggest warm summer days and simple pleasures such as a fresh, home-cooked meal and a healthy lifestyle. The advertisement portrays a slice of everyday life and resembles a still life of which the Ericsson phone is a natural part.

The foregoing discussion is summarized by a comparison of the two advertisements using elements of de Saussure's semiotic model (Table 1). Furthermore, the two advertisements represent different visual categories that enhance the effects mentioned above (Table 2). Finally, the two advertisements represent different levels of reality construction as evidenced by figurative, thematic and abstract levels (Table 3).

		Signifiers Nokia	Signifieds Nokia
Nokia	Screen elements	Image of extending hands	Family Connectedness
		Nokia	Emphasis on the brand name
	Background	White color	Sky Snow
	Color	Cold color	Winter
	Form	Circular form	Connectedness Completeness Bringing people together
	Mirroring	Extended hands	Connecting people
Ericsson		Signifiers Ericsson	Signifieds Ericsson
	Screen elements	19:03	End of work day Time to prepare dinner
		13-June	Middle of summer Warm weather
		"Welcome home"	End of work day Coming back home
	Background	Various everyday objects	Healthy diet About to eat a meal
	Color	Warm colors	Summer
		Black phone	Emphasis on the phone
	Form	Triangular from	Emphasis on the phone
		Arrow	Emphasis on the phone
	Mirroring	Silver object	Emphasis on the phone

Table 1. A semiotic analysis of the Nokia and Ericsson Advertisements

¹ One of the authors is a frequent visitor to Finland and spent a seven month period in Oulu, Finland in 2000.

		Nokia	Ericsson
Visual categories	Form/mirroring	Circle	Triangle / arrow
	Colors	Cold	Warm
	Visible message	Image	Letters
Semiotic categories		Higher level Family Mankind Ability to connect	Human level Healthy, natural lifestyle Bright, enjoying life

Table 2. Visual and semiotic categories of the Nokia and Ericsson Advertisements

	Nokia	Ericsson
Figurative level	Ability to connect	Simple natural lifestyle
Thematic level	Genius	Feeling of home
Abstract level	Creation/miracle	Belongingness

Table 3. Construction of reality in the Nokia and Ericsson Advertisements

However, we can also take our analysis yet one step further by contrasting the two advertisements using a semiotic square (Figure 7). Nokia’s and Ericsson’s advertisements are depicted on the left and right side, respectively. Nokia’s phone advertisement symbolizes a sky and Not Earth relationship whereas Ericsson’s phone advertisement symbolizes an earth and Not Sky relationship.

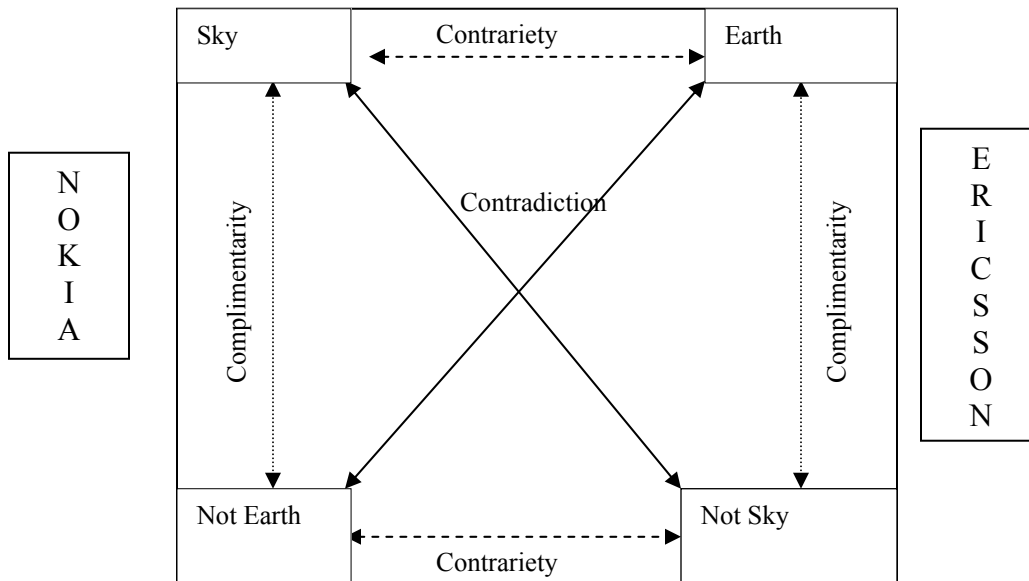


Figure 7. A semiotic square: Nokia versus Ericsson

Furthermore, Nokia’s phone symbolizes Michelangelo’s genius and the extraordinary (Figure 8). It suggests, in a subtle manner, that anyone acquiring a Nokia phone is associated with genius and simultaneously is placed in an extraordinary category. Ericsson’s phone, on the other hand, symbolizes everyday life and normality. It suggests, in a subtle manner, that anyone acquiring an Ericsson phone is performing a sensible act considered normal under the circumstances. The Finnish advertisement projects the phone into a mythical category whereas the Swedish advertisement classifies the phone as an everyday and mundane appliance.

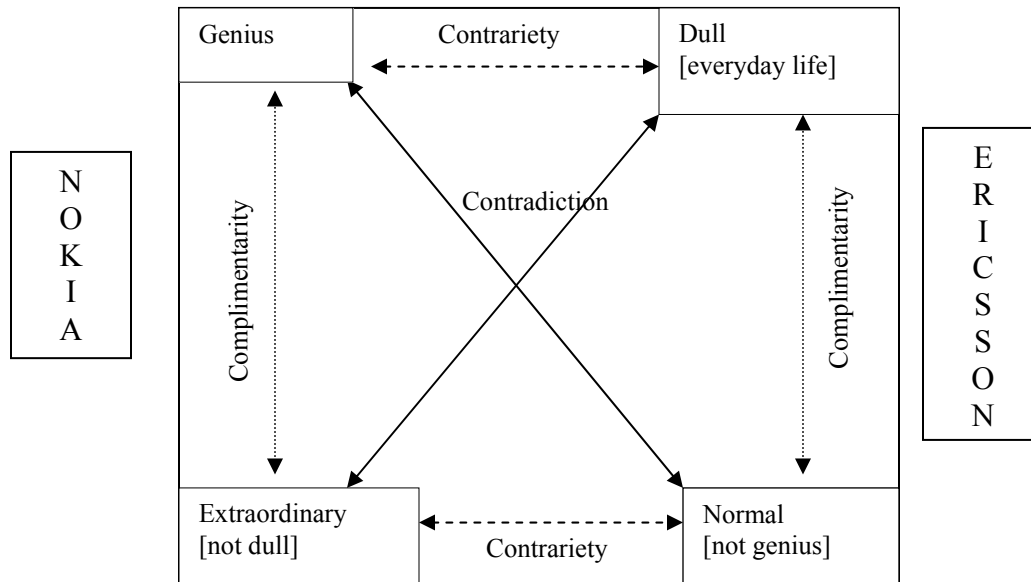


Figure 8. A semiotic square: Nokia versus Ericsson

A semiotic analysis also enables the use of culture in order to disconnect and reconnect spaces. The Ericsson advertisement, for example, seems closer to the Mediterranean climate, bright sunshine and colors, a natural life style with healthy food (tomatoes, oil, and home-made bread) and simple pleasures, where family and home are important aspects. Generally speaking, this advertisement seems to reflect the recent tendency in the Swedish culture to return to a healthier/natural lifestyle and way of living (as stated in a Swedish tourist website <http://www.sverigeturism.se>)

Furthermore, the Ericsson advertisement also reflects the company’s ideology in terms of the ability to use the phone while doing other things and enjoying “colorful, easy-to-use” services:

“Doing the laundry...playing with the kids...sitting in traffic, knowing where you are in faraway towns in the busiest of streets...enjoying mysteries, love stories, soaps and playing games, solving puzzles, glimpsing life-changing news, organizing a life lived seamlessly on the move...every moment of every day ... around the world, around the clock.” (<http://www.ericsson.com>)

The Nokia advertisement suggests that communication is a sacred activity of connecting in a mythical and non earth like environment. Hence it is no surprise that Nokia’s stated mission is expressed in the slogan “Connecting People.”

Nokia’s advertisement also echoes Finland’s survival as a nation. ²As noted by Lyytinen and Goodman (1999):

“The prominent features of the Finnish military organization were organic forms, improvisation, individual reliability and responsibility, and fast reaction.”

According to these authors, Finnish social values are dominated by the values expressed in the above quote. Indeed, Nokia has a flat hierarchical organization that enables quick action and where workers can improvise (Lyytinen and Goodman, 1999). It is evident that the Nokia advertisement reflects aspects of Finland’s cultural history as well as national pride.

As a general conclusion, it is interesting to notice that both countries are geographically close (only separated by the Gulf of Bothnia), with similar climates, and with similar positions to the rest of Europe, and yet their cultures and marketing strategies for the same products are entirely different.

² Finland was a Swedish colony for several hundred years until the nineteenth century after which it became part of Czarist Russia. After being granted independence in 1917, Finland was attacked by the Soviet Union in what still today is known as the 1939 “Winter War.” The Finns fought valiantly and almost succeeded in defeating the Soviet army.

On Semiotics and Philosophy

Semiotics promotes understanding reality as a system of signs by which humans actively create meaning in accordance with codes of which they are normally unaware. These codes are present because individuals live in the society, both as creators and as users of the codes.

We considered Internet marketing in terms of semiotic activities that function by creating meaning. Even though Internet advertisement designers and webpage creators do not have the caliber of Michelangelo, they face similar dilemmas: Should the message be metaphor-based in a way that consumers/viewers will be able to grasp directly or should one create new ways of interpreting messages at an unconscious level? In short, how and to what extent are website designers able to control meaning creation, given a vaguely subjective resemblance between the sign and the perception related to it?

Internet marketing designers as well as viewers of Internet marketing practices seem to act as “bricoleurs.” First, the Internet marketing designer uses existing semiotic codes in unusual ways so as to create new meanings. Second, the viewer uses existing semiotic codes in innovative ways to interpret the Internet marketing website. It goes without saying that the website designer wants the viewer to interpret his/her message in the manner intended.

In light of Internet marketing operations and actions, it can be argued that “a good tool makes users direct their attention towards the object of the work while the tool itself disappears” (Bodker, 1987). Put differently, the tool is handled by unconscious operations, while the work object is manipulated by conscious actions. In the case of Internet marketing, the browser is the tool. Once the user manages to detach himself/herself from this fact, what remains is the individual’s unconscious and instinctive reaction to signs. This statement does not diminish the importance of social codes. However, we suggest that social learning can be conscious, only to become an unconscious source of knowledge and direction later on.

The semiotic analysis presented above leads to concerns that are better addressed by critical theory. If one defines a good tool as one that is used subconsciously, the question that arises is whether Internet advertisements empower, emancipate, or subjugate viewers. As explained above, the Nokia website advertisement reaches the observer at a deep level along several dimensions – spiritual, metaphysical, mythological, cultural, and nationalistic in nature. Perhaps it would be correct to state that owning a Nokia phone empowers individuals, however, the manner of advertising the Nokia phone subjugates viewers. Website advertisements can present the signified in a distorted manner and, hence, users are well advised to be suspicious and critical, and to direct their attention towards the meaning producing mechanism. In short, users who have a rudimentary knowledge of semiotics are in a more advantageous position to avoid being manipulated than those individuals who are ignorant of semiotic mechanisms.

CONCLUSION

One of the advantages of Internet marketing is its ability to target promotion and marketing to audiences in new and innovative ways. A thorough semiotic analysis of the elements and signs of a website advertisement shows that individuals belonging to different cultural groups create meaning in different ways. Our semiotic study demonstrates that alternative visual categories are relevant to different groups. Because semiotic categories affect perception even when perceived unconsciously, the use of appropriate semiotic elements is essential to effective Internet advertisements.

Furthermore, we should mention some limitations of the present research. We attempted to provide an introduction to semiotics as a research method in the IS area, and we used two online advertisements to exemplify the applicability of semiotics. We were not interested in the overall marketing strategy of the company. In addition, we did not discuss the possible effect of other onscreen elements that appear simultaneously with the advertisement (i.e. what percentage of the whole screen is covered by the advertisement, existence or not of text/buttons).

Finally, semiotics can help Internet marketers develop appropriate communication strategies and design communication channels with a certain degree of cultural sensitivity. Overall, techniques such as semiotics influence and can improve the impact and effectiveness of currently used promotional strategies.

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