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# **Semiotics and Sport Communication Research: Theoretical and Methodological Consideration**

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## **Introduction**

Today, sport operates as cultural text which symbolically represents a diverse range of social and political values. Given this symbolic nature of sport, the language of sport also constitutes an important element of the communication system (Beard, 1998; Segrave, 2000). Reflecting this, a number of scholars have critically examined ideological meanings disseminated through mediated sport such as sport broadcasting and advertising associated with sport (Butterworth, 2014; Gee, 2009; Grano, 2009; Jackson, 2013; Milford, 2012; Wenner, 2013). While this paper does not deny the importance of the critical examination of mediated sporting text, it points out that most interpretative sport communication research tends to focus primarily on social and political contexts, wherein sport media text is produced and consumed, as a way to reveal its underlying ideological assumption (McDonald & Birrell, 1999; Wenner, 2015). This indicates that comparatively less attention thus far has been paid to a communication mechanism of sporting text itself. It is true that the meaning of a particular text cannot be completely isolated from the contextual factors. Yet, this paper argues that the meaning making process of sporting signs is equally an important aspect of sport communication studies. In this respect, this article aims to raise a point that an academic discussion on interpreting methods for media sport text needs to be further advanced. Particularly, this paper contends that semiotics, which considers both the meaning making process of signs and the socio-cultural context wherein the linguistic signs are used (Bignell,

2002; Copley, 2001; Gottdiener, 1985), deserves more academic attention in the field of sport and communication research.

Semiotics is a science of signs and their meanings (Chandler, 2007). Fundamentally, it concerns how people communicate and make sense each other using verbal and non-verbal signs (Copley, 1996). Given that symbolic value of sporting signs and the frequent use of the language of sport in political and promotional discourse (Billings, Butterworth, & Turman, 2012; Butterworth, 2012; Jackson, 2015; Lee J. W., 2015), the use of semiotics in sport communication research appears to be fairly justifiable. More specifically, it offers what I suggest an anatomy of a sign system in a specific communication setting. In analysing a sport related advertisement, for example, it dissects various sporting and non-sporting signs employed in a commercial campaign and then examines meaning of each sign unit separately (Gripsrud, 2006). After this, it investigates the way in which each meaningful sign is associated with other signs in ads so as to discover the patterned sign system (Fiske, 2011). It is through these systemically combined multiple sign units that the intended meaning of sport, or that of other statement underpinned by sporting signs, can be grasped. At the same time, it is also through this patterned sign structure that continuously engenders ideological connotations (Stokes, 2003). A semiotic analysis challenges such ideological meanings and offers, where possible, an alternative way of reading mediated sporting text.

Broadly, there exist two different but closely connected theories of semiotics: structuralism and post-structuralism. Structuralism looks at the structured process through which a specific sign is invested with a particular meaning (Smith, 1998). This approach also examines the way in which a number of different signs are organised and associated in order to construct more meaningful sign units (Oswald, 2012; Saussure, 1983). Furthermore, structuralism notes that a fixed sign system reflects dominant power relations which eventually determine the meaning of cultural signs including sport (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993).

On the contrary, the post-structuralist approach challenges the existence of the structured system of organising signs. Pointing out the necessity of destabilising a patterned sign system, it takes institutional and individual contexts more seriously when attempting to decipher a situated meaning of the sign more accurately (Belsey, 2002). Similar to structuralism, post-structuralism also accepts the view that a specific deployment of signs underpins the dominant political and social order. Yet, this approach further stresses that the relation between language and power is neither fixed nor unchallengeable (Eagleton, 1996). Thus, it attempts to demystify the established power relations embedded in a sign system and eventually to destabilise such a linguistic structure permanently (Norris, 2002).

In spite of analytical and theoretical values of semiotics, there exists comparatively little academic literature in the field of sport communication that discusses semiotics in detail. For example, the inaugural issue of the journal *Communication and Sport*, which is the collection of essays looking at major research trends in the field, does not include an article on semiotics. The *Routledge handbook of sport communication* edited by Pedersen (2013) does contain a chapter on semiotics in sport broadcasting (Bonnet & Lochard, 2013). Nevertheless, this work insufficiently deals with the fundamental theories and concepts in semiotics. Such omission of an article discussing this approach from the key academic texts on sport communication is somewhat odd because semiotics accounts for one of the major theoretical paradigms of communication studies in general (Cobley, 1996; Mattelart & Mattelart, 1998)

In this respect, this paper aims to provide an overview of semiotics and its use in sport communication research. In doing so, it is hoped that this article facilitates theoretical and methodological conversation between semiotics and other communication research approaches, notably cultural studies and critical rhetoric. While this article mainly addresses the value and usefulness of semiotics in sport communication studies, it should be noted that

this theoretical position is by no means superior or necessarily more effective than other conceptual frameworks within the academic discipline. In fact, one of the key theoretical roots of cultural studies can be found in structuralist and post-structuralist semiotics (Barker, 2008; McDonald & Birrell, 1999), and more systematic media text analysis can be done when Fairclough's version of critical discourse (2001) is used in conjunction with some elements of semiotics (Lee J. W., 2015). Moreover, semiotics and rhetoric share some analytical common ground because the both, to some extent, pay attention to the way in which the media project a certain worldview as natural and more privileged (Barthes, 1993; Ott & Mack, 2010). However, while critical rhetoric mainly focuses on the media practice of deploying specific terminologies so as to construct and disseminate messages that underpin the dominant ideology (McKerrow, 1989), semiotics, in addition to this critical reading of text, also looks at the process through which each sign, both verbal and non-verbal, is invested with a meaning according to a specific cultural code so that people within a same cultural zone can participate in meaningful communicative action (Cobley, 2001). In that sense, it can be argued that semiotics involves a more detailed analysis of a sign and its communicative function (Gottdiener, 1985). None the less, at least in sport communication studies, critical rhetoric appears to be more widely used in interpreting contested symbols and languages associated with sport especially in North American academia (Butterworth, 2008; Grano, 2009; Milford, 2012). Therefore, as an alternative or supplementary method, this paper will review the nature of semiotics with the aims of facilitating conversation between semiotics and other textual approaches.

Bearing this in mind, the next section discusses a theoretical orientation of semiotics. Here, it mainly addresses theoretical development from structuralism to post-structuralism with specific reference to Saussure, Barthes, and Derrida. It should be noted that, out of a number of different traditions within semiotic scholarship, it is these three theorists who were

primarily concerned with a signifier and signified relation. In fact, both Barthes and Derrida developed their ideas based on the criticism of Saussure's notion of arbitrary sign relation and his emphasis upon the referent that a sign indicates (Barthes, 1993; Derrida, 1978). In that sense, a conceptual link between the three semioticians is clearly identifiable (Belsey, 2002; Powell, 1997). Then, it explains key analytical foci of semiotic research in connection with three conceptual pairs, namely denotation and connotation, metaphor and metonym, and syntagmatic and paradigmatic sign relations. Here, a conversation between semiotics and other theoretical approaches will also be presented. The following part presents a case study of analysing advertising associated with sport to showcase the application of semiotics to sport communication research. Finally, this paper finishes with a critical evaluation of semiotics.

## **Theoretical orientations**

### **Structuralism**

The theoretical foundation for semiotics can be found in structuralist linguistics and post-structuralist critique of it. Let me explain linguistic structuralism first. The conventional linguistics regards language as a neutral medium that merely reflects the nature of things. Hence, the focal points for this academic discipline lie in the development of the language system and the evolution of usage and meaning of words (Smith, 1998). The social nature of language itself, especially the language's influence on meaning making, is seldom questioned (Campbell, 2013). The structuralist linguistics contests this traditional approach. Instead, it perceives language as a social institution which is comprised of a structured sign system that regulates the way in which a sign produces meaning (Mattelart & Mattelart, 1998). The implication of having a structured sign system is that any individual sign units become meaningful only in relation to other signs within the system (Hawkes, 2003; Saussure, 1983).

This suggests that a sign does not simply mirror the characteristics of the referent. Rather, its meaning is relational in terms of how the meaning of each sign is differentiated from that of other signs (Saussure, 1983). Any language is therefore the meaning system of differences. Regarding this, structuralism proposes a complete systematic investigation into the relation between signs with the aim of discovering the linguistic structure that governs the language system at any given time in the history (Hawkes, 2003).

In order to theoretically analyse linguistic structure, Saussure (1983) abstractly divides a sign into two parts: a signifier and a signified. The former indicates a physical substance of sign such as sounds, words, and images, and the latter refers to the mental concept that is expressed through these material substances (Saussure, 1983). This conceptual division is important because it indicates that there is no natural link between a signifier and a signified but the relations between them are arbitrary (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993; Saussure, 1983). This means that a sign become operational in the linguistic system when a sign value is articulated with empty symbols. Importantly, the articulation is essentially the process of social fixing of meaning (Coward & Ellis, 1977). For instance, the term fitness does not essentially reflect a particular emotional and physical status of individuals. Objectively, this is a mere combination of seven letters (f-t-t-n-e-s-s, a signifier) from the English alphabet whose meaning is arbitrarily associated with the state of being healthy (a signified).

It is an arbitrary convention that establishes the relation between a signifier and a signified. However, when signs are organised to build a linguistic system, a specific arrangement of meaning structure that governs the relation between signs largely reflects social and moral values of the society in question (Coward & Ellis, 1977; Levi-Strauss, 1978). In a linguistic system, signs can be divided into a number of different categories including synonym, antonym, and equivalence, and such categorisation of signs are often made in accordance with the moral codes of the wider cultural system (Chandler, 2007). In addition,

this grouping of signs helps clarify the definition of signs in use. Thus, structuralism highlights that the meaning of a sign is defined not by the inherent value of the sign but by its reference to other signs. In this respect, Jakobson (1971) claims that sign units are built into the structure of binary oppositions. The pairing is a type of pecking order that categorises things according to its relative social values (Smith, 1998). The pairs such as good and evil, civilised and barbarous, and live and dead all suggest a cultural preference of one term over the other. Hence, cultural codes and convention play a crucial role in establishing the arbitrary relation between a signifier and a signified (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993). Language is by no means a value-free communication tool after all.

The language of sport also contains a number of oppositional binaries that reflect the value system in society. Some selected examples include professional and amateur, a team and an individual, a winner and a loser, male and female (for events and athletes), traditional sport and alternative sport, thin and fat, and fair play and foul play. These pairs are invested with meaning that engenders cultural preference or stereotypes, and the use of these terminologies influences the way in which a sporting person, practice, and performance are understood and represented in a particular cultural zone (Beard, 1998). The deployment of this type of sporting language appears to reaffirm the established social norms and to facilitate the clarification of other rhetorical logics in non-sporting settings (Segrave, 2000). This indicates that sport accounts for a significant component of communication system today (Miller, 2014).

It should be noted that cultural codes that structure the meaning system convey ideological assumptions. As Althusser (1971) claims, culture is the political sphere through which the dominant mode of a political and economic system and underlying power relations are continually reproduced in order to sustain the established social order. As Althusser's contemporary and cultural critique, Barthes (1993) advances linguistic structuralism further



to this political domain and his version of semiotics attempts to discover linguistic rules that invest signs with ideological undertones. Based on his analysis of French cultural texts, including the case of professional wrestling that will be discussed later, Barthes (1967; 1977; 1993) argues that these texts work as implicit signifiers for the notions which naturalise the specific historical development that gives rise to the current social relations including a capitalist (consumerist) economic system, a patriarchal gender order, and a particular characteristic of national identity. This means a compounded meaning system is in operation: a plane of a literal explicit signifier and that of a hidden implicit signifier. In order to underscore the ideological function of an implicit signifier, Barthes (1993) uses the term meta-language which refers to the semiotic chains that connect the two planes of a linguistic system, namely the plane of literal meaning and that of unspoken underlying assumption.

#### Post-structuralist critique

While structuralism stresses an arbitrary but stabilised signifier and signified relation, proponents of post-structuralism note that there is no such thing as a fixed meaning system (Belsey, 2002; Norris, 2002). They also argue that the existence of a priori concept that a language tries to express does not exist (Eagleton, 1996; Sarup, 1993). From the perspective of structuralism, any signifier is empty until it is associated with a particular signified. This means that this position presumes the existence of a reality pending to be articulated with a signifier so that it can be uttered and communicated as a form of a sign. In so doing, structuralism epistemologically values a signified more than a signifier as the former is a reality existing outside of human cognition and the latter is simply a tool for mediating this reality. Post-structuralism challenges this perception, noting that the nature and quality of a signified are, in fact, largely determined by a signifier. According to post-structuralism, an authentic definition of a sign does not exist at all but the meanings of signs are all constructed

through an orchestration and manipulation of signifiers. Hence, in post-structuralist analysis of text, the emphasis is given to the nature of signifier over that of signified.

In this connection, Derrida's (1976) notion of *différance* is particularly relevant here. This French word implies both a difference and a deferral. Similar to structuralist's thinking, this term indicates that the meaning of a sign does not lie in a sign itself, but its meaning is chiefly defined by how it is differentiated from that of other signs. Yet, Derrida also notes that there exists no established meaning structure which determines the definition of signs. Instead, meaning is flexible and the interpretation of signs can be, or should be, deferred until the context of a specific communicative action is fully understood. In other words, the meaning of a sign is practically undecidable without consideration of the entire context in which a specific sign is deployed. Put simply, the nature of a sign can be characterised as undefinable polysemy. One of the key implications of *différance* is that in a communication setting, neither a writer nor a speaker governs the process of signification. In terms of literature and films, for instance, authors and directors build a specific order of meanings in their work. Yet, their intended meanings are not always fixed and received as they planned by audiences. Instead, consumers of those products equally play an active role in producing a new meaning of novels and movies depending on their social and individual contexts wherein these cultural products are consumed (Hawkes, 2003; Sarup, 1993). Some readers are no longer simply receivers of a text, but in fact producers of the meaning of the text, and in this sense the relation between the author and the reader is destabilised (Belsey, 2002). Here, the theoretical legacy of post-structuralist semiotics in cultural studies is clearly visible. Especially, it appears that the influence of Derrida's notion of *différance* on Hall's (1980) encoding and decoding model is undeniable.

Deconstruction is another term that is of particular significance in post-structuralism (Norris, 2002; Sarup, 1993). Derrida also recognises the existence of hierarchal binary

oppositions in language. Yet, unlike structuralist thinkers such as Levi-Strauss and Jakobson, he does not simply accept this linguistic mechanism but actively questions the operation of such a system. This hierarchically ordered binary categorisation is, in fact, a linguistic reification of dominant ideology, and against this situation the process of deconstruction aims to dismantle this communicative practice completely and eventually to neutralise social values underpinned by such oppositions (Eagleton, 1996; Norris, 2002). As noted before, in binary oppositions, a meaning of a certain term is privileged over the other depending on the cultural code within which the communication system operates. The process of deconstruction involves identifying the ideological practice of deploying a subjective position in communication which renders the structure of binary oppositions, and social values underpinned by it, seemingly objective and naturalised. By revealing the relative nature of linguistic structure that facilitates the process of meaning making, it emphasises that there is no such thing as an objective description but every linguistic expression is subjective, inherently contaminated by an element of prejudice and bias.

In this respect, Barthes's later work also displays a post-structuralist critique of a text. In his book *the pleasure of text*, Barthes (1976) identifies two different types of reading a text: pleasurable reading and blissful reading. The pleasure refers to a "readerly" text which implies that a reader accepts his or her subject position as a reader and interprets the text as the author intended. The bliss means a "writerly" text which indicates that a reader challenges the conventional reader and author relation, and in so doing, a reader also actively engages in the meaning making process. As no text is value-free, the blissful reading also involves debunking a mythology, or dismantling the naturalisation of existing social and political relations, embedded in the text. Furthermore, this type of reading stimulates readers to reverse their subjective position, enabling them to address the text as they wish, including creating a new meaning of the text. In that sense, reading is as creative as writing. As such, a

theoretical connection between Derrida's deconstruction and Barthes' blissful reading can be clearly identifiable here.

Sporting texts such as media coverage, films, and advertising contain a diverse range of sign relations that are exploited to represent a particular way of doing and seeing sport as natural (Beard, 1998). Such media representation of sport also helps inject docile subjectivity, which conforms to discourses of the established sexual, racial, and national identities, into individuals (McDonald & Birrell, 1999; Wenner, 2013; 2015). A semiotic analysis involves an anatomy of signs used in different communication settings. Adopting a structuralist approach, it initially pays attention to the signifier and signified relation of each sign with reference to the system of the binary oppositions. Given that the binary oppositions entail an ideological preference for a particular sign over the other, political mechanism underlying the deployment of a sign can be identified at this level of interpretation. Then, it moves on to analysing a patterned relation between signs in the text such as how particular sporting images are associated with other verbal signs. In this way, a certain way of seeing and doing sports can be discerned. Once the structured pattern of sign relations is identified, it revisits the signifier and signified relation with reference to Derrida's notion of *différance*, aiming at demystifying a fixed meaning system that naturalises a specific version of sporting activities. Through this, the analysis attempts to destabilise the meaning of sport represented by the media and offers an alternative way of seeing and reading sport. As such, semiotics offers a valuable theoretical framework for identifying the process of signification within sport communication system and for interpreting the meaning of signs associated with sport. Also, it helps deconstruct sporting sign's ideological supposition.

### **Analytical foci**

Semiotics is “a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life” (Saussure, 1983, p. 15). It should be noted that semiotics is not a single theory and there exist a number of distinctive types of a semiotic analysis within the framework of structuralism and post-structuralism (Chandler, 2007; Copley, 2001). These include Hodge and Kress’s social semiotics (1988), Lacan’s psychoanalytical approach (1977), and Kristeva’s (post)-structuralist identity politics (1975), to name but a few. Due to the limited space, however, it is practically not possible to discuss an every variant of semiotics in this short article. Instead, this paper mainly concerns the semiotic approaches of Barthes and Derrida because the theoretical link between the two is more clearly identifiable in terms of a critical reconceptualization of Saussure’s signifier and signed relation (Powell, 1997). In critical reading of text, these two semioticians also question the position of subjectivity as explained in the previous section. In conducting a semiotic analysis within this tradition, three major conceptual pairs of semiotics can be particularly relevant. These include the notion of denotation and connotation, metaphoric and metonymic signs, and syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations.

### Denotation and Connotation

Firstly, the notion of denotation and connotation concerns explicit and implicit meanings of a sign. Put simply, denotation means a descriptive meaning of a sign whereas connotation refers to a sign’s allusive dimension. The relation between denotation and connotation is closely related to the Barthes (1993)’ concept of meta-language mentioned earlier which explains the process of signification that literal meaning of a sign becomes an implicit or connotative signifier for the concept in another communicative plane (Copley, Introduction, 1996). Crucially, it is this connotative sign that naturalises specific social and historical development that underpins the established power structure (Belsey, 2002; Fiske,

2011). In this respect, the role of semiotician is to elicit the element of history and culture embedded in texts and thereby to identify the practice of reproducing the dominant ideology and its diffusion (Barthes, 1993).

In his influential books, *Mythologies*, Barthes (1993) himself presents sport as an example of an ideological cultural text and it is worth providing a brief summary of his work. According to Barthes (1993), professional wrestling is more than sport. It is a spectacle of abundance and exaggeration in terms of the use of excessive floodlight and displaying muscular masculinity on the ring. Professional wrestling denotes a spectacle and drama which exhibit a staged feud between heroes and villains and the subsequent resolution of such a conflict. Yet, at the same time, this sporting spectacle connotes a broader social meaning: justice has always been served. In professional wrestling a heroic figure always wins the ultimate match after a period of vendetta against a villain character. It is an ideological narrative because, as Barthes (1993) claims, French society lacks social justice and it is not uncommon to see the practice of injustice and discrimination within the specific context of the colonial domination. Hence, connotatively, professional wrestling simply displays a false image of society as if the notions of fairness and equality were a common aspect of the world. Therefore, professional wrestling is a modern myth.

One of the most distinctive contributions that Barthes made to semiotics is that he perceives every material object and product such as a fashion item and an automobile as a sign which has both denotative and connotative dimensions within a specific cultural code. (Barthes, 1993; Gottdiener, 1985). Additionally, this gives rise to social and visual semiotics that look at the meanings that specific gestures and images signify (Hodge & Kress, 1988; Kress & Leeuwen, 2006). This communicative aspect of material and cultural objects also indicates a diverse range of sporting activities and equipment operates as a sign which often engender ideological connotations. Using semiotics, the media representation of sport can

also be dissected so that each constitutive part of media text such as commentaries, videos, and background music is examined first separately. Then, semiotic investigation looks as the way in which these elements are combined in order to create a particular discourse on sport. In so doing, a meticulous analysis of meaning system at work in the practice of sport communication can be conducted.

It should be noted, however, that semiotics is, by no means, the only approach to interpreting a connotative meaning of sporting text. Cultural studies and rhetoric also aim to reveal media text's underlying ideology. Yet, cultural studies approach to mediated sport tends to focus on how the media portrayals of sport, with the notions of representation and articulation (Hall, 1997), contribute to reproduction and reinforcement of a hegemonic form of national, racial, gender, and class identities (Brookes, 2002). This means that a more subtle investigation into linguistic features in the media text is missing from cultural studies. Rhetoric does engage in a certain level of linguistic analysis, but it mainly concerns how sporting symbols and the language of sport are exploited in order to make more persuasive, if not manipulative, political speeches and doctrines (Butterworth, 2008). Here, again, the process of signification, which is a more fundamental mechanism of the ascription of meaning to a sign or a symbol, is not fully investigated. In that sense, while the demystification of power structure is one of the common goals for the three different approaches, it is semiotics, in my view, that offers the most sophisticated method for reading sport amongst them.

### Metaphor and metonym

Secondly, metaphor and metonym refer to the association of words by their similarity and contiguity (Jakobson, 1960). Metaphor works as a signifier for other signs by means of presenting shared characteristics (Oswald, 2012). It helps understand one type of

thing or experience in terms of another expression (Chandler, 2007). In metaphor, a sign does not directly indicate the referent but the sign only implies it by hinting some similarities between the sign and the allusive referent. English language is consisted of a number of sporting metaphors such as a “level playing field”, and “it’s not cricket”. When these phrases are used in a non-sporting setting, they signify the importance of the sporting values of fair play in a daily business. While identifying and analysing metaphors in literary and cultural texts are one of the major focal points of semiotics in general, it is the rhetorical tradition that has made a valuable contribution to sport and communication studies in this respect. Especially, rhetorical scholars stress that the use of sporting metaphors in social and political discourses often have ideological implications (Butterworth, 2012; Jansen & Don, 1994; Segrave, 2000). Hence, the deployment of sporting metaphors in non-sporting communication settings is by no means value neutral but highly hegemonic in many occasions. Regarding this, Segrave (2000) argues that revealing which agenda is continuously reoccurred and reproduced for whose interest accounts for one of the major tasks for sport communication scholars. At this point, semiotics and rhetoric are not mutually exclusive but the methods can complement each other so that the signification process of metaphoric signs can be investigated more accurately.

Metonym, by contrast, signifies other signs by highlighting a particular characteristic of a thing or experience (Fiske, 2011). It evokes the whole by pointing out a certain connection. In most cases, a metonymic sign is consisted of only a particular component of the referent but not the entire object it signifies. For example, based on researcher’s observation, during the period surrounding the London Olympic Games in 2012, the terms such as “London” and “2012” were frequently appeared in the media and corporations’ promotional campaigns. The name of the city and the number 2012 do not directly indicate the entire sporting competition but semantically they have some connections with the event.



Hence, these are metonymic signs for the Olympic Games and various organisations, especially non-Olympic sponsors, utilised these metonym in order to invoke their implicit association with the Summer Olympics. However, it should be noted that because metonym employs only partial elements of the referent, it can mislead the audiences by exaggerating a partial component as a comprehensive view (Brummett, 2015). Again, with regard to London 2012 examples, some of the catch phrases in the media during the Games include “we all make the Games” and “we are London”. In this case, the use of personal pronoun “we” can be a metonym for either Londoners or British citizens. Yet, given that not all British people wholeheartedly supported the Olympics nor benefitted from the event (Horne & Whannel, 2012), the meaning constructed through such phrases which implies that every British citizen or every resident in London was in favour of hosting the sporting event does not mirror a more objective and realistic public opinion.

#### Paradigmatic and syntagmatic sign relations

Thirdly, the paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations refer to the selection and arrangement of signs in order to construct a more meaningful combination of signs (Jakobson, 1971; Oswald, 2012). Paradigm indicates a cohort of replaceable linguistic signs which have similar characteristics but signify different meaning. Here, signs can be categorised into a different type of associated sets according both to their grammatical functions such as nouns and adjectives and to their nominal divisions such as a group of fruits (i.e. apple, banana, and strawberry) and a group of sport (i.e. football, golf, and parkour). In constructing a discourse, the choice of a particular signifier, including visual and verbal symbols, from a set of associated signs shapes preferred meaning of the text (Chandler, 2007). By contrast, syntagmatic relations concern a permissible way to arrange multiple signs. A grammatical structure of language exemplifies this. Cultural convention also influences syntagmatic

relations of signs because it is these cultural codes that determine the appropriate use of language and that direct the way in which a specific utterance is imparted and eventually interpreted. More importantly, syntagmatic structure of signs helps identify the way in which a narrative of texts unfolds. For instance, literature and films can be divided into different genres such as comic, tragic, romantic, or horror, and each genre tends to share a similar narrative structure (Eagleton, 1996). This implies that there exists a structured mode of speech or storytelling in the realm of literary and cinematic culture, and that this narrative category works as a syntagmatic structure of these cultural products (Bignell, 2002; Mulvey, 1975).

Barthes (1967) likens these sign relations to a garment system. From hats to shoes, there are a number of paradigmatic categories of different clothes and there also exists a syntagmatic convention on how the clothes should be worn. With regard to film making, syntagmatic relation provides a structural framework for storylines and paradigmatic relation is functional to embellish the overall undertone of the film. Sport films, for example, often represent the human experience and life stories in relation to the practice of sport, such as hard training, facing challenges, and competitions and rewards as a vehicle for transmitting certain social norms and values (Waldburger, 2010). Regarding this, syntagmatic relation means a specific arrangement of the events in the films. Paradigmatic relation refers to a choice of sporting activities, a choice of characters, and a choice of an actor and an actress. With these semiotic concepts, generic narrative structure and shared socio-cultural meanings of sport genre films can be identified. A similar narrative structure can also be found in non-fictional media coverages. Hill and Kennedy (2009) note that the British media portrayals of Kelly Holmes tend to build media stories with reference to how a child from a poor working class and ethnic minority family becomes a national heroine. Such a narrative of sporting heroes is not uncommon in the contemporary media sport, and by examining these linguistic

structures, semiotics helps to uncover cultural codes and convention embedded in the media text in question.

### **Case Study**

So far, I have discussed a theoretical framework for semiotics and its major analytical foci. This section offers a semiotic interpretation of advertisements associated with sports in order to provide an exemplary case study to show how semiotics can be used for sport communication research. Cultural significance of advertising associated with sport has been widely acknowledged and a number of researchers have analysed sport related advertising with the aim of discovering underlying ideologies (Armstrong, 1996; Gee, 2009; Jackson, 2013; Jackson, Andrews, & Scherer, 2005; Lee J. W., 2015). More specifically, critical reading of sport related ads largely involves the investigation into the way in which hegemonic gender and racial identities are represented. As a planned communication, advertising contains a diverse range of signs which reinforce and naturalise a dominant social order (Leiss, Stephen, Jhally, & Botterill, 2005). Such a characteristic is indicative of the fact that semiotic potentially offer a useful tool for critically analysing advertising. In fact, in communication studies in general, a number of researchers attempt to decipher the meaning of particular objects in commercials (Fiske, 2011; Goldman & Papson, 1996; Williamson, 1978). Yet, it seems that a relatively fewer number of sport communication researchers have adopted semiotics as their conceptual framework. Therefore, analysing sport themed advertising provides useful case study that shows how semiotic can apply to sport communication research and subsequently displays the value of semiotics in this emerging academic subfield.

With this in mind, this article discusses the Procter & Gamble's (P&G) commercial campaigns associated with the 2012 London Olympic Games. The P&G has joined the

Olympic Partner's programme since 2010, and during the London Olympics the company exploited images of Olympic medallists in their marketing campaign (Bean, 2012; The IOC, 2014). Amongst the company's Olympic marketing communications, this case study examines two cycling themed advertisements published in eight nationwide British newspapers including the *Times*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Guardian*, the *Independent*, the *Sun*, the *Mail*, the *Daily Express* and the *Daily Mirror*. Both advertisements appeared on the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> of August 2012 when the two British cyclists, Chris Hoy and Victoria Pendleton, won the Olympic golds. As these two adverts contain photographic representations of the two British Olympic cycling champions respectively, this case study offers a useful example of semiotic analysis for revealing a specific gender ideology embedded in the commercial discourses.

It is interesting to note that the two advertisements shares a similar syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations. In terms of syntagm, they both contain four major elements 1) an image of an athlete in the middle, 2) a claimed athlete's statement, 3) the name of the product and its image, 4) texts describing the nature of the product. It can be argued that these are structural codes of this advertising campaign. While further research needs to be done, it seems that this advertising displays a generic syntagmatic pattern of celebrity endorsed commercial messages (Oswald, 2012). With regard to the paradigmatic choice, it shows A) a photograph of either Chris Hoy or Victoria Pendleton, B) a statement presumably made by one of the two athletes, C) an image of either razor or beauty products, and D) different claimed benefit of using the product. It appears that these paradigmatic signs are selected intentionally in order to construct preferred meaning of these commercial discourses which incline to reinforce the hegemonic gender order.

When examining signs used in this work more closely, the case of the razor advert shows an image of Chris Hoy riding a race bicycle in the Velodrome, wearing a bicycle suit.

He is also wearing a helmet equipped with a pair of bike specific goggles. A logo of a sport brand attached to his sporting suit is also visible. Here, the items and the clothes Chris Hoy is wearing and the place where he is performing all work as signifiers for an identity of an elite cyclist. By contrast, the beauty product advertisement depicts Victoria Pendleton riding a non-sport bicycle, donning a black short revealing her thigh and a sleeveless blouse decorated with golden flakes. Her cleavage is also visible. She is wearing a golden bracelet and a small but visible earring. The image also highlights her long and slightly curly hair. It is obvious that all these signifiers indicate a sexually attractive woman leisurely riding a bicycle.

It should be noted that the both cyclists are the Olympic champions. They all won the Olympic golds at the London 2012. Nevertheless, the advertisement for the male product emphasises Chris Hoy's sporting identity whereas the beauty product's advert underscores Victoria Pendleton's femininity. In the case of the latter, a bicycle is only featured as one of marginalised items. Such sexualised representation of the two Olympians implies that a sporting activity which requires strength and endurance is an exclusively male domain. Even if a woman achieves an equally notable sporting success as her male counterpart, what highlighted through this advertising is Victoria Pendleton's highly glamorised appearance. Hence, while these visual signs denote an elite male cyclist and a sexualised woman riding a bike, the connotative message is that high performance sport is mainly an activity for men and that a sporting woman should look sexually attractive for a male gaze regardless of her athletic talent and achievement. This connotation is a clear reinforcement of a male centred sporting culture based on the gender hierarchy underpinned by hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005).

The images of the two athletes and other visual signs associated with them exemplify binary oppositions at work. As noted earlier, every sign does not contain any essential and inherent meaning but the definition of a sign can only be constructed by making

reference to other signs within the communication system (Chandler, 2007). The principle binary structure in this advertising campaign is the difference between male and female, and the contrasts between the two are further clarified through the use of a number of binary sporting symbols which include Chris Hoy and Victoria Pendleton, a racing cycle and a leisure bicycle, and a cycle suit and a sleeveless blouse. These signs clearly indicate heterosexual relations, and paired sporting symbols are deployed to reinforce such a hegemonic gender order. In spite of the fact that the both individuals are elite athletes, the visual signs used in the ads appear to privilege male's performance and to downplay female's involvement in sport regardless of their achievements. This suggests a gendered structure of the sporting signs in this communication system and relative socio-cultural values of the oppositional sporting signs.

In relation to text messages, one ad is printed with a claimed Chris Hoy's statement "*Many roads lead to the medals, but all begin with a great start* (emphasis added)." In addition, it is also written as part of the commercial message that "Nothing beat a *great start* (emphasis added)" next to the logo and image of the safety razor. Here, interesting metaphor and metonym are at work. In Hoy's statement, "Many roads" can mean bicycle tracks, and "the medals" indicate a sporting success. Also, "great start" implies the importance of agility in a sporting performance. Yet, this same sentence may metaphorically refer to the idea that there are a number of different ways to be successful in life but the start-up is the most significant part. The meaning becomes more manifest when looking at the associated commercial message, "nothing beat a great start". Here, the term "great start" operates both as metaphor and metonym. Metaphorically, this term has the same meaning as the previous one: the importance of an effective start-up. Yet, metonymically, it means a shave because this is one of the first things that most men do in the morning. Hence, it ultimately means that

having a good shave is the most important element of a daily ritual which may lead to a successful life which is, following Barthes, a myth.

Interesting metaphors can also be found in Victoria Pendleton's case. This advert is printed with a presumed Ms Pendleton's comment: "Hours and Hours Training and I'm Staying *Ahead of Frizz* (emphasis added)". Associated commercial discourse includes "Smooth and Sleek Collection" which is printed next to the small images of the beauty products. It is important to note that there is an element of wordplay and of double meaning in the expression "ahead of frizz". The term frizz works as an interesting metaphor and metonym. Metaphorically, the term frizz implies a curled object which, in this context, indicates Victoria Pendleton's curled hair style. When this term is used as part of "ahead of ...", this simply means that she is in a superior position in taking care of her appearance. However, when this term is used in sporting context, the interpretation of text can be deferred, and due to the metonymic connection, it may also mean "ahead of curve" as the term "curled" contains an element of a curved object. Hence, Victoria Pendleton is represented in this ad as a beautiful and successful athlete. Thus, overall undertone of this text suggests that she trains hard so that she can maintain her sporting excellence. Yet, given that a literal meaning of the term frizz refers to curled hair, that this text is part of advertising for beauty products including shampoo, and that this advert vividly displays the female athlete's curled hair, this text also means that while she is a hardworking elite athlete, Victoria Pendleton still keeps the conventional femininity. The associated text, "Smooth and Sleek Collection" is also indicative of this type of reading. This is an ideological practice of the disposition of a gender role, and the implication is that while she is an energetic cyclist, she does not challenge the established gender order by performing conventionally acceptable femininity (Krane, 2001; Liston, 2006).

In the semiotic analysis of the P&G's Olympic communication campaign, this research reveals two major ideological connotations: gender identity and gender stereotyping. While both Chris Hoy and Victoria Pendleton are excellent sporting persons, this commercial campaign tends to naturalise athletic male and sexualised female identities. In addition, it also reinforces the gender stereotype based on the patriarchal system by highlighting an ambition to be a successful individual as a typical male characteristic and by emphasising a desire to be a sexually attractive woman as a natural female quality. It should be noted that while the two commercial media texts contain a number of signifiers that indicate the relation between a particular sporting activities and a specific gender identities, these are by no means fixed. Moreover, adopting Derrida's notion of *différance*, these are all contesting signifiers which attempt to characterise the personality and identity of the two athletes. This means that these texts say, in fact, very little about authentic characteristics of the two athletes, the term authentic can be questionable within the tradition of post-structuralism though.

In a more radical way, every sign utilised in these texts are all artificial signs: the two visual signs that illustrate the two athletes are not Victoria Pendelton nor Chris Hoy but the printed images of them. In this connection, any norms and values can be added to the signs used in these advertising texts because they are all artificial symbols after all. In this respect, it can be argued that the meanings ascribed to the signs of the two athletes which naturalise a specific gender role in sport are only a temporary association. According to post-structuralist semiotics, there exists no essential characteristic that determines a particular gender role and sexuality that each individual needs to embrace (Butler, 1990; Kristeva, 1975). Thus, the combination of signs in this sport communication setting, and the subsequent signification processes, do not give rise to fixed meaning in terms of sport and gender identity. Rather, these are all floating signifiers pending the articulation with other signifiers so that they become more meaningful but not definite signs. Therefore, these texts



must be a subject to deconstruction: revealing ideological gender order embedded in the texts and neutralising sport and gender relations without a gender bias. Barthes's notion of blissful reading potentially enables readers of these media texts to problematize this type of meaning construction. In addition, by critically re-reading them, sensible readers may be able to offer a "writerly text" which demystifying a dominant ideology underpinned by the ads.

In fact, such a disposition of gender roles through a sporting practice, and media sport in particular, has been an enduring problem since the early stage of critical reading of sport (Eagleman, 2015; King, 2007; Krane, 2001; Lee J. , 1992; Theberge, 1989; Wenner, 2013). This implies that the gender trouble in sport will not disappear easily and it may require "long revolution" to improve the situation as Raymond Williams (1965) puts. In relation to a semiotic analysis of media text, the dissemination of deconstructed materials as a popular form of cultural text may not easy, and perhaps this type of an academic essay can be considered as one of such attempts. Yet, without a persistent disclosure of the dominant ideology embedded in the contemporary communication system, it is difficult to expect that the society will change. In this respect, by reading sports semiotically, especially with reference to the notions of deconstruction and the blissful reading, one can make a useful contribution to this ongoing cultural struggle.

## **Conclusion**

Semiotics potentially provides an effective tool for critical reading of sport media text. Yet, comparatively little academic literature on sport communication expounds theoretical and methodological values of semiotics at length. Given that semiotics is not a single theoretical perspective but is rather seen as an independent academic discipline (Cobley, Introduction, 1996; Oswald, 2012), it is impossible to include every aspect of semiotics in this short article. Instead, this paper offers a brief but succinct discussion on the

semiotics' major theoretical roots and the selection of key concepts particularly relevant to critical reading of a sporting text broadly from Saussure's structuralism, through Barthes' (post) structuralism, to Derrida's post-structuralism. With the exemplary case study provided, this article also explains how the semiotic framework can be used for analysing sport media text.

It seems that both structuralist and post structuralist semiotics are underutilised in the field of sport communication studies. This is probably because of the presence of cultural studies and rhetorical approaches that apparently dominates the paradigm of critical sport communication research. While I certainly see the merit of these dominant frameworks, however, I also argue that semiotics can also make a useful contribution to the field of sport and communication studies. Essentially, semiotics is a linguistically-oriented method which is mainly concerned with communication via verbal and non-verbal signs. Hence, the ultimate focal point of semiotic research lies in a sign itself and the process through which an empty signifier is invested with a meaning (Gottdiener, 1985). Most meaningful communicative actions in sport from a simple technical instruction to more complicated sport related advertising are consisted of multiple signs. At the first level of semiotic analysis looks at each sign separately with reference to a signifier and signified relation and the binary oppositions (Gripsrud, 2006). Then, it examines how each sign is connected to other signs in order to create a more meaningful combination of signs. Here, syntagmatic and paradigmatic relation offers a useful conceptual guideline (Fiske, 2011). Once the process of signification established, an ideological undertone of signs can be revealed with the notions of a denotation and a connotation (Stokes, 2003). The ideas of a metaphor and a metonym are also useful in grasping the semantic connection between signifiers (Gripsrud, 2006). Having mentioned the elements of semiotic analysis, I argue that semiotics offers comparatively a

more intricate research tool for examining the language and symbols of sport than the two more popular traditions.

It should be borne in mind that while cultural studies and rhetoric largely concern power relations and hegemonic identities embedded in the sport media text with reference to Althusserian and Gramscian theories (Billings & Hundley, 2010; McDonald & Birrell, 1999), this level of analysis accounts for only one component of semiotic investigation. Additionally, having linguistic (post) structuralism as a fundamental theoretical framework, semiotics can be associated with other socio-cultural theories flexibly (Hawkes, 2003). The fact that the legacy of semiotics can be found in the tradition of rhetoric and cultural studies (Barker, 2008; Ott & Mack, 2010) is indicative of the theoretical flexibility of semiotics in terms of socio-cultural and political analysis. Again, the principal goal of the semiotic enquiry is to understand the logic of the signification that enables individuals within a particular cultural zone to communicate with each other. Sport is one of communication devices that engender a number of meanings, and sport itself works as a communication system which involves various communicative actions (Wagner & Storm, 2013). By focusing on the process of signification and its ideological implications, semiotics can help identify the meaning and the nature of various communicative dimensions of the contemporary sport.

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