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Abstract

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Keywords

Structuralism, Connectionism, Rhetorical Semiotics, Brand Equity, Brand Associations

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This paper furnishes a structuralist rhetorical semiotic conceptual framework for brand equity planning. The main source of brand equity that is employed for exemplification purposes is the advertising filmic text. The conceptual framework assumes as its general blueprint Greimas's generativist model of the trajectory of signification. Structuralist operations and operations of rhetorical transformation are posited as the basis for the generation of superior brand associations. The conceptual model put forward challenges the Greimasian assumption that a depth semantic structure is reducible to a binarist rationale, while adopting a connectionist approach in the form of associative networks. At the same time, the proposed framework deviates from the application of conceptual graphs in textual semiotics, while portraying in the form of associative networks how the three strata of a brand's trajectory of signification interact with view to generating brand associations. Keywords: Structuralism, Connectionism, Rhetorical Semiotics, Brand Equity, Brand Associations

Introduction

Semiotic research is an integral perspective of the wider discipline of interpretive market research. Proliferating perspectives on branding lay claim to the polyvocal nature of branding research (De Chernatony, 2009). Branding related semiotic perspectives have been propounded by various scholars (Floch, 2000, 2001; Semprini, 1992). However, no concise brand equity related models have been put forward. This paper presents a semiotic conceptual framework for brand equity planning, by drawing on structuralist rhetorical semiotics.

Mick (1997) made some vehement, yet insightful remarks about the application of semiotics in consumer research. In summary, he contended that there is a troubling tendency on the part of consumer researchers to use terms such as semiotics or semiology in a flippant manner, without a reasonable discussion of which particular semiotic tradition or concepts the research is drawing on, while urging researchers to strive for greater rigor in applying semiotics. All too often semiotic concepts and analytic approaches are not adequately clarified before their implementation.

By taking on board these words of caution, I embarked on developing a structuralist rhetorical semiotic model of brand equity with view to furnishing an applicable planning platform for managing sources of brand equity, with an emphasis on the ad filmic text. The contribution of this conceptual framework to the extant literature on consumer-based brand equity consists in furnishing a novel and focused outlook on how brand equity may be managed from an encoding point of view, with regard to ad films as key sources for the formation of brand equity. According to Keller, brand knowledge perspectives draw largely on cognitive psychology. "Important perspectives on branding and brand knowledge obviously can be, and have been gained from other disciplinary viewpoints, for example, anthropological or ethnographic approaches. Part of the challenge in developing mental maps for consumers that accurately reflect their brand knowledge is how best to incorporate multiple theoretical or methodological paradigms" (Keller, 2003, p. 600; also see Heding et

al., 2009, p. 111). The propounded approach in this paper responds to Keller's plea, while addressing a significant opportunity gap in the extant literature by recourse to the discipline of structuralist rhetorical semiotics.

My exposition of the conceptual framework begins with rooting rigorously in structuralist semiotic terms the brand trajectory of signification, as brand planning blueprint. Then, I proceed with an analysis of structuralist operations that are mandatory for effecting brand signification across the generative trajectory. Structuralist operations are enriched with operations of rhetorical transformation, which are responsible for reducing the complexity of figurative discourse to a brand's depth meaning as semic nucleus. The exposition of the framework continues with an illustration of how the transition may be effected from the binarist rationale that underpinned the structuralist approach to depth grammar, which is still common currency among researchers, to a connectionist rationale. I conclude with the benefits for applied brand equity research that stem from the conceptual framework of the brand generative trajectory of signification and the connectionist rationale propounded for making sense of how morphologically distinct elements of the three strata of the trajectory interact in terms of managing brand equity in the light of the ad filmic text as its key source.

The brand trajectory of signification as blueprint for brand equity planning

In structuralist semiotic terms, a brand's semantic kernel as core brand identity or a brand's DNA consists in a semic micro-universe. The key brand image attributes or semes that make up its semantic edifice constitute nuclear semes, which, while enriched with contextual semes or classemes in discrete communicative contexts, make up sememes as manifestations of a brand's core and peripheral semantic territory. Nuclear semes constitute the minimal units of signification of a brand langue or its core image attributes. What was originally conceived by Greimas (1966) in *Structural Semantics* as a semic micro-universe and particularly as a semic category, was redefined by Rastier (1987) as semic molecules, which combine at least two semes. The semic micro-universe makes up a brand's logically organized depth grammar, which becomes manifested through the elements and the particular syntax of two additional strata in the generative trajectory of signification [*parcours génératif* [1]], viz. semio-narrative and discursive structures (Greimas & Courtés, 1979).

A brand's textual coherence is maintained synchronically and diachronically through the isotopic recurrence of invariant elements of both expression and content planes, while the differential value of a brand's idiolectal, intra-textual, isotopically recurrent elements is gauged by comparison to sociolectal product/service category invariants that constitute key image drivers for a given category.

Semio-narrative structures contain the depth meaning of discursive structures and furnish the form of their organization. From a structuralist semiotic perspective, a surface discursive structure is customarily translated in semio-narrative terms through segmentation into narrative programs [NPs]. In terms of brand structure, semio-narrative structures are, or at least, should be embedded in a brand specific canonical narrative schema, which constitutes what was termed above as brand master narrative. A brand master narrative includes a brand's key positioning statement that features its nuclear semic brand image structure (Rossolatos 2012b).

Discursive structures are situated at a more superficial level in the generative trajectory and allow for the manifestation at the discursive level of semio-narrative structures in the face of an enunciative predicament (Greimas & Courtés, 1979). Discursive structures

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[1] Let it be noted that Rastier (1989) redefined the three levels of the trajectory in the context of his model of interpretive semantics into micro, meso and macrosemantic levels (see Rastier, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c).

correspond to the manifest texts of a brand master narrative, such as advertising (TV, print, radio, outdoor, ambient), but also experiential events (road-shows, in-store sampling / competitions), sponsorship and any form of brand communications, The model of the brand generative trajectory of signification (Rossolatos, 2012b) is portrayed as follows, by interpolating the discrete brand semiotic strata on Greimas's *parcours génératif*:

Brand Generative trajectory			
	Syntactic composition		Semantic composition
Brand semic molecules Brand master narrative	Depth level	Fundamental syntax	Fundamental semantic structure
	Surface level	Surface semio narrative syntax	Narrative semantic structure
Ad filmic text	Discursive syntax		Discursive semantic structure (themes, figures)
Generative trajectory			
	Syntactic composition		Semantic composition
Semio Narrative structures	Depth level	Fundamental syntax	Fundamental semantic structure
	Surface level	Surface narrative syntax	Narrative semantic structure
Discursive structures	Discursive syntax		Discursive semantic structure (themes, figures)

Figure 1. A brand's generative trajectory of signification.

The above model represents a top-line view of how a brand's various semiotic strata of signification hold together. In order to effect a transition from a brand componential approach to a semiotic outlook on brand equity, considerable conceptual groundwork must be covered in order to root rigorously a conceptual framework of brand equity in a semiotic

discipline, while taking into account how this heavily researched topic has been tackled in the marketing literature. This groundwork involves engagement in an inter-disciplinary dialogue regarding the notion of "meaning" and "value," as will be displayed in the ensuing sections.

Customer-based brand equity in focus

According to Aaker (1991) brand equity is the set of brand assets and liabilities associated with a brand that either add or subtract from its value. Keller (1998), who inaugurated the customer-based brand equity perspective, defined brand equity as the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of a brand. "Customer-based brand equity occurs when the consumer has a high level of awareness and familiarity with the brand and holds some strong, favorable and unique brand associations in memory" (p. 50). "Brand equity is a function of the level or depth and breadth of brand awareness and the strength, favorability and uniqueness of brand associations" (Keller, 1998, p. 87).

Brand associations lie at the heart of the customer-based (or, rather, consumer-based, in order to avoid connotations with B2B marketing) brand equity perspective. The epistemological underpinnings of various approaches to brand associations and the variable methods that have been employed by consumer researchers in the exploration of brand associations will be outlined in due course. Prior to proceeding with the analysis of brand associations it is advisable to dwell further on the notion of brand equity, from a semiotic point of view (also see Rossolatos, 2012a).

Blackston (1995) placed considerable emphasis on the definitional components of meaning and value, as indispensable for understanding and managing brand equity. Insofar as brand equity concerns, first and foremost, the generation of superior value and given that value is interwoven with meaning, the mode of this intricate relationship should be further qualified. This intuitively appealing idea formulated by Blackston, from a consumer research point of view, constitutes a fundamental premise of structuralist semiotics.

The structuralist semiotic view of the interrelationship between meaning and value

Greimas distinguished clearly between two major types of value, viz. value as act of semiotic exchange and value as axiological framework in both *Du Sens II* (1983) and *Sémiotique des Passions* (1991). "Value is employed in semiotics in two different ways, viz. value as an underpinning of a project in the course of one's life [my note: that is as axiology] and value in the structuralist sense, as formulated by Saussure[2] [as linguistic value]" (Greimas & Fontanille, 1991, p. 47). The axiological[3] and linguistic definitions of value are complementary and non-contradictory (Greimas, 1987; see also Rossolatos, 2012e).

I shall briefly describe Greimas's different approaches to value, prior to illustrating how value is shaped textually, as well as the implications for a semiotic approach to brand equity.

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[2] See Rossolatos, 2012f.

[3] The concept of value from an axiological point of view was further elaborated by Greimas and Courtés (1979), as well as by Greimas and Fontanille (1991). Within the wider axiological framework postulated by Greimas, thymic analysis aims to furnish a more detailed outlook of the various psychic workings involved. Thus, "the main elements involved in thymic analysis are: (1) the evaluating subject, (2) the object being evaluated, (3) the thymic value attributed to the object (euphoria, dysphoria, etc.), (4) the intensity of the value (low, medium, high, etc.), (5) the time of the evaluation, and (6) the transformations that may affect thymic elements" (Hebert, 2012b, p. 106).

A key premise that undergirds Greimas's approach to value is that it becomes valorized through figurative discourse (such as advertising texts). "The figurative form of the object guarantees its reality and at this level value becomes identified with the desired object" (Greimas, 1987, pp. 85-86).

Values as actantial objects, that is objects of desire, are embedded in objects in a virtual state. In this sense, any brand *qua* object of value may become figuratively invested in all sorts of manners. Greimas's recurrent standpoint that structures are responsible for the organization of the imaginary, achieves its full expressive potential in this approach to value. Additionally, this is one of the crucial points where the import of semiotics in planning and accounting for the figurative rendition and maintenance of brand equity is deemed to be indispensable, as by virtue of a set of semiotic constraints in the form of a brand's idiolectal and a category's sociolectal[4] degree zero[5], the potentially infinite expressive possibilities awaiting to be realized in brand discourse may be reduced to a set of salient alternatives.

In a quite self-explanatory manner, Greimas (1987) stresses that there is no ex nihilo creation of values. Values are always already embedded in cultural axiological frameworks. Axiological frameworks also allow for deriving pairs of contrariety and contradiction that are responsible for organizing both elementary structures of signification, in terms of semiotic squares (see Rossolatos, 2012c), as well as surface structure grids (Greimas 1989) and oppositional pairs of visual elements, especially in the context of visual figurative discourse, as amply shown by Floch (2000). Axiology is not just 'out-there', awaiting to be discovered, but actively co-created through brand discourses.

In this sense, I propose the following sharper distinction between invented brand values, that is values instituted in brand discourses (at least during their emergence as undercoded acts of semiotic inventio, in Eco's [1976] terms), and appropriated brand values, which reflect the appropriation on behalf of brands of existing values embedded in social structures (e.g., Overby et al., 2005) and the particular target group(s) to which a brand's communication is addressed.

The ability of an object *qua* brand to assume linguistic value (in structuralist terms) depends on the distance of the figurative discourse (Greimas 1976) with which a brand's semic structure is exchanged or the particular exchange between signifier and signified (in Saussure's terms), both from a local and an absolute degree zero point of view. "There is always a distance between the cluster of semes that metalinguistically organizes the representation of an object and the final lexeme" (Greimas, 1987, p. 86). The qualification of this distance that determines the ability of figurative discourse (as advertising text) to be exchanged for a brand (as object of desire), hence for a brand to assume linguistic value, is a significant facet in the determination of brand equity from a semiotic point of view. The qualification of this distance in the light of a highly figurative discourse (such as the advertising text), implies putting in focus structuralist operations that are responsible for maintaining brand identity as textual coherence, while enriching them with operations of rhetorical transformation.

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[4] Each brand possesses an inventory of lexemes, figures and modes of relatedness, which constitute its idiolect, while the common elements among brands constitute a category's sociolect. Rastier (1987) contends that the idiolect is a system of norms proper to a sender, while the norms of an idiolect may transgress those of genre.

[5] Groupe μ (1970, 1992) distinguishes between absolute and relative degrees zero, in an attempt to pinpoint whether semantic deviations through rhetorical operations of transformation take place in the context of a global structure (such as a grammatical system or a dominant cultural code of visual representations) or a local structure (such as a poet's or a brand's idiolect).

The role of structuralist operations in the brand generative trajectory

The proposed semiotic approach lays emphasis on the encoding process, whereby a brand's semic structure is carved in a master brand narrative and multifarious surface discourse brand communications (as advertising texts). Elsewhere (Rossolatos, 2012a, 2012b), I argued as to how the process of structuration and the involved structuralist operations of reduction, redundancy, recurrence, homology, isotopy, are responsible for maintaining textual brand coherence and communicative consistency among variable advertising executions, by virtue of which brand equity is built and may be effectively managed through time. In this section, and for the sake of expository clarity of the propounded conceptual framework, I am focusing on the operation of isotopy, which is of paramount importance for maintaining brand identity through difference.

In Greimas's terms, the main task of isotopy consists in discerning correspondences among the various strata of the generative trajectory. In terms of correspondences between the figurative and the thematic or the discursive and the narrative levels, various combinations are possible, such as between two or more figurative elements and a single narrative element or between different complexes of figurative elements and different themes within the same text. Isotopies furnish a reading grid that allows for a homogeneous reading of a text (Greimas & Courtés, 1979).

Discursive isotopies are complemented by actorial isotopies (Greimas, 1976), in which case a surface discourse actorial figure is sustained throughout the deployment of a manifest narrative by anaphorical or deictic pronouns (in the case of verbal discourse) or by iconically isotopic signs, in the case of visual discourse or by an interplay between verbal/visual expressive units, in the case of a polysemiotic/multimodal sign system, such as the ad film. Greimas further complements the roster of isotopies with thematic and figurative, in line with the discursive aspects of the generative trajectory (see Figure 1).[6]

At the heart of the concept of isotopy lies the notion of recurrence, which may concern either the plane of expression or content or both. Eco (1976) expanded the notion in order to encompass even purely stylistic isotopies[7].

Groupe μ adopted the Greimasian structuralist operation of isotopy as global discursive norm (1970, p. 35) and as a principle regulating the normal usage of language (1970, p. 121), while positing that the generation of isotopies presupposes the initial creation of allotopies by reference to a general degree zero (e.g., grammatical rules for verbal figures or genre rules for iconic figures). They further qualified the concept (1992) by allusion to cultural isotopies, in cases where the homogeneity of the expressive units making up a visual message may be discerned only by recourse to an embedded cultural practice.

In the context of the ad filmic text as source of brand equity, an isotopically recurrent theme, following Metz (1971), is conceived as the depth structure of a film. Furthermore, a pluri-isotopy[8] may occur as two or more recurrent themes on an intra-filmic level. "The revelation of a theme's recurrence is equivalent to the constitution of a generic isotopy" (Rastier, 1989, p. 56).

On a surface discursive level, recurrent nuclear semes are evinced differentially as contextually enriched sememes, either through visual anchors or through filmic sequences. By the same token, recurrent image attributes are contextually evinced either through the

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[6] Also see Hebert, 2012b for further details about thematic-figurative-axiological analysis and Greimas's writings on aspectual grammar.

[7] According to Eco (1976) isotopies do not occur simply at the thematic level or, in our instance, at the level of a semic nuclear structure, but also at the level of surface discourse elements, which he calls stylistic isotopies. This term has also been used by Rastier (1972), who expanded the concept to encompass paratopies (2001).

[8] Rastier (1989) redefined the term as poly-isotopy, while retaining the same operative meaning.

discourse of an actor or through a filmic sequence or by featuring a product-shot in various narrative programs. The maintenance of brand coherence as recurrent nuclear brand image attributes is effected by rendering redundant contextual (i.e., classematic) elements that are not pertinent in terms of the brand's canonical narrative schema. This process represents the way whereby a brand's semantic micro-universe and positioning is maintained diachronically throughout variable ad executions.

By virtue of brand image attributes' ability to be fleshed out in different ad filmic texts against a master brand narrative, they constitute what Guiroud and Panier (1979) call discursive configurations. The inventory of possible discursive configurations amounts to a brand's discursive dictionary or idiolectal dictionary, as Klinkenberg (1990) put it. Thus, a brand's dictionary includes not only its core image attributes, but also contextually enriching elements. Contextual brand elements attain to enrich a brand's narrative structure, but, only to the extent that they do not compromise the integrity of either uniformly recurring surface discourse elements or the underlying semic nucleus of a brand. In order to determine stylistic isotopies, as complementary to thematic isotopies, and account for their formation in surface figurative discourse, we must complement structuralist operations with operations of rhetorical transformation.

Operations of rhetorical transformation as links between figurative discourse and a brand's semic nucleus

Operations of transformation introduce dynamism in a structure, by producing, annihilating or transforming objects (Hebert, 2012b). A brand, as object of desire, is transformed textually by generating linguistic value as acts of exchange between a brand's semic nucleus and expressive units embedded in polysemiotic sign systems, such as a brand's ad films. In this section, the operations of rhetorical transformation that are responsible for figurativizing a brand's semic nucleus are laid out.

Greimas and Courtes (1979) recognized that rhetorical figures are not just surface structure stylistic elements, but responsible for streamlining signification among the strata of the generative trajectory. Variable tropical relations lead to a profound textual isotopy (Greimas, 1976)

Taxonomies of rhetorical figures and typologies of rhetorical operations have been yielded by various scholars in the semiotics and consumer research discipline, such as Groupe μ (1970), Durand (1970, 1987), Groupe μ (1992), Mick and McQuarrie (1996), McQuarrie and Philips (2004), and Huhmann (2008).

Rhetorical semiotics, and particularly the treatises put forward by Groupe μ (1970, 1992), is capable of bridging the conceptual gap regarding the semantic distance between figurative discourse and semic nucleus, and by implication how brand equity as linguistic value may be managed. In essence, managing brand equity is indistinguishable from managing the semantic transformations that takes place between advertising stimuli and brand associations, with the aid of semiotics and rhetoric.

The scope of this analysis is polysemiotic or multimodal, encompassing textual formations that comprise verbal and visual elements of an expression plane. In order to render the operationalization of rhetorical transformations as concrete as possible, we must synthesize (to the extent that it is methodologically permissible) the different types of operations that were furnished by Groupe μ in the two rhetorical treatises. In the *Traité du Signe Visuel* (1992, p. 274) Groupe μ included the verbal modality under the fourfold categorization of operations, which will be presented below, but did not pursue an in-depth analysis of the application of the new typology to verbal figures, as conducted in the first rhetorical treatise. Essentially, the difference between the two taxonomies of operations lies

in the absence of permutation in the second treatise. However, given that the field of application of the operations features metaboles in the first treatise, which are absent from the second treatise, operations may be fully leveraged if viewed in conjunction with the metabolic types (which was pursued in Durand's [1970, 1987] application of rhetorical operations to print ads; see Rossolatos, 2012d). This synthetic approach is complicated by two factors, first, the incidence of combined verbo-visual figures in the case of the filmic text, which is our applied analytical field and second, by the fact that the main field of application of the second treatise was static, rather than moving images.

Operations of rhetorical transformation, in crude terms, consist of operations that alter the semantic content of words or phrases, as regards the verbal modality. In both rhetorical treatises (Durand, 1970, 1992) the fundamental premise that underpins the transformational rationale rests with the subsistence of invariant expressive and/or logico-semantic elements throughout modifications.

More precisely, Groupe µ (1970) distinguishes between two types of operations of rhetorical transformation, substantial and relational. Substantial operations alter the substance of the semantic units on which they operate, by adding, deleting or substituting (that is adding and deleting at the same time) expressive elements. Relational operations modify the relative position of semantic units. They are simpler than substantial operations as they only involve changes in the ordering of words or phrases and they are effected by permutation. In addition to the delineation of the two overarching classes of rhetorical transformation and their constituent operations, that is adjunction (which was rendered in the *Traité*, 1992 as conjunction), suppression (which was rendered in the *Traité*, 1992 as disjunction), suppression/adjunction (or substitution) and permutation, Groupe µ classified rhetorical figures into four types of metaboles, viz. metaplasms, metataxes, metasememes and metalogisms.

Metaplasms are figures that act on phonemic or graphemic aspects of words. Indicative examples of metaplasms by rhetorical operation are paronomasia and alliteration (adjunction), apocope and aphaeresis (suppression), calembour and neologism (substitution) and palindrome, anagrammatism (permutation).

Metataxes are figures that act on phonemic or graphemic aspects at the level of the sentence (even though boundaries between between metetaxes and metaplasms are not clear cut; Groupe µ, 1970, p. 54). Indicative examples of metataxes are polysyndeton, parenthesis (adjunction), ellipsis, asyndeton (suppression), chiasmus, anacolouthon (substitution), tmesis, hyperbaton (permutation).

Metasememes are figures that replace one sememe for another, thus resulting in replacements of semes (or elementary units of signification; Groupe µ, 1970, p. 101, in line with Greimas's [1966] definition). They affect primarily the plane of content or the signified. Changes of form incur changes of meaning, while figures are produced by the manipulation of the arrangement of semes (Groupe µ, 1970). Examples of metasememes are syncecdoche, antonomasia (adjunction), metonymy, metaphor in absentia (substitution), while there is no known figure at the level of permutation.

Metalogisms are figures of thought that modify the logical value of sentences. Examples of metalogisms are repetition, pleonasm (adjunction), litotes (suppression), allegory, parable (substitution) and logical inversion (permutation).

The four operations of rhetorical transformation regarding the verbal modality were interpretively enriched and rendered in the *Traité du Signe Visuel* (Groupe µ, 1992) as in absentia conjoint (IAC), in praesentia conjoint (IPC), in praesentia disjoint (IPD) and in absentia disjoint (IAD). In praesentia denotes the co-presence of two types in a visual sign, whereas in absentia the fact that none of these types operates autonomously in the sign's meaning. Thus, for iconic signs (plastic and icono-plastic ones aside), (IAC) denotes that two

expressive units are completely substitutable at the same place of the message [enoncé] (as in the case of the Haddock painting), (IPC) that two co-present expressive units are partially substitutable (as in the case of the cat-shaped kettle), (IPD) that two entities occupy different positions, without substitution (for example Magritte's painting *Les promenades d' Euclide* - see Sonesson, 1996), (IAD) that only one expressive unit is manifested, while the other is external to the message, For the sake of reducing complexity in the context of this expository account, I am retaining the key terms applicable to the three operations that are common between verbal and visual semiotic systems, viz. adjunction, suppression and substitution, as well as permutation, which is applicable both to verbal elements, but also, in the context of the ad filmic text, to visual sequences, such as flash-backs, montage effects, but also techniques, such as jump-cuts, which do effect a reordering of the expected sequence of an event or a state-of-affairs by manipulating rhetorically the text.

Zero degree as point of reference for gauging operations of rhetorical transformation

In order to discern whether and to what extent an operation of rhetorical transformation is operative in a text, according to Groupe μ (1970), we must posit a zero degree of signification, by reference to which a deviation or distance [écart] may be gauged. In *Rhétorique Générale* two types of degree zero were propounded, absolute and local. Absolute degree zero is defined as univocal semantic ground or as a convention that binds sender and receiver in a manner that is not dependent on certain literary genres or individual authors' style and advertising genres/styles, in our case. An example of absolute degree zero is standard grammar and rules of syntax. On the contrary, local degree zero constitutes a text-specific point of reference or genre-specific or dependent on an individual author's stylistic convention. An extreme example of textual signification by recourse to local rules imposed by a local degree zero of signification is surrealist literature/painting and avant-garde films. The concept of degree zero is a regulative hypothesis and not a strict set of rules (see Rossolatos 2013b for further elaboration). In the course of both treatises, various examples are provided that are indicative of how rhetorical deviations as distances from degrees zero may be determined (see, for example, 1970, p. 96 on the different ways whereby deviations are generated between metataxes and metasememes), but the process is highly adhocratic and hardly systematizable in an encyclopedic sense. Insofar as figurative language infuses the element of surprise into texts, operations of rhetorical transformation and the figures that partake of each operation essentially constrain the interpretive possibilities that result from expressive irregularities.

In the second treatise (1992) Groupe μ contended that the general degree zero is furnished by the prior knowledge of a code. The determination of level of codedness in terms of a sign's distance from a degree zero of signification is crucial as it constitutes a ground rule for the entire theory of visual rhetoric. The level of codedness of a visual sign also attains to address the sign as sign functive or correlation between planes of content and expression, in Eco's (1976) terms, rather than resting at the level of expression. This point of departure also constitutes the crux of Groupe μ's hybrid rhetorical semiotic approach, viz. the employment of the semiotic conception of the code as the fundamental rubric under which the classification of rhetorical operations may be effected.[9]

Groupe μ posits at the center of its theory of visual rhetoric the need for addressing both expression and content planes, while accounting for how coherence emerges in a visual

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[9] The same point of departure was assumed by Eco, who posited a theory of the Code as the necessary condition upon which a theory of the production of signs may be predicated (Eco, 1976).

text. The local degree zero is the element pertaining to such a territory of a message [énoncé], by virtue of a structure that is particular to that énoncé.

For Groupe µ (1992), the defining characteristics of strongly coded signs consist in clearly segmenting the planes of expression and content, in a strongly stable relation between the units of each plane and in the ability to describe sign systems outside of the énoncé, with the aid of a vocabulary and a syntax. In short, the relationship between the elements of the plane of expression and the elements of the plane of content in the incidence of a strongly coded sign is clear, stable and independent of the contextual contours of an énoncé.

On the contrary, the key features that make up a weakly coded sign include the fluid formalization of the relationship between the two planes, the establishment of a link between them through a ratio difficilis (in Eco's [1976] terms) and the fact that no content may be furnished to the receiver of a visual message by a lexicon that preexists the énoncé. The differences between weakly and strongly coded signs are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1.
Differences between weakly and strongly coded signs (Groupe µ, 1992, p. 260)

Type of semiotic	I. Segmentation of units	II. Relationship between expression and content
Strongly coded	Clear	Stable
Weakly coded	Unclear	Unstable

Four types of relationship between expression and content ensue from the above classification:

(a) Strongly formalised expression + strongly formalised content = stable link
(b) Strictly formalised expression + weakly formalised content = unstable link
(c) Weakly formalised expression + strongly formalised content = unstable link
(d) Weakly formalised expression + weakly formalised content = unstable link

Thus, two classes of semiotics are distinguished based on the level of codedness, (a) overcoded semiotics, where the segmentation of the planes of expression and content is clear and the boundaries of units are stable and easily identifiable. (b) undercoded[10] semiotics, which are characterized by fluid and unstable boundaries between the planes of content and expression.

The semic and expressive (lexical or otherwise) inventory of a brand is by definition a weakly coded sign system, insofar as it is constantly enriched by new expressive elements throughout variable ad films. This is why brands are semi-symbolic, rather than symbolic (Mick & Oswald, 2006) semiotic systems, as recognized by Floch (2000), which implies that the projected correlations between elements of the two planes is always in a state of flux. In order to render the projected brand associations through surface discursive manifestations, such as ad films, as links between brand semic molecules and expressive elements, ad texts must be encoded with an associative rationale in mind, that brings together the morphologically distinct elements (e.g., semes on a depth structural level, actants on a semio-narrative level, lexemes/videmes on a surface discursive level) of each stratum of a brand's generative trajectory into a coherent relational structural system.

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[10] Groupe µ actually does not employ Eco's term "undercodedness," but "weak codedness" [sémiotiques faiblement codées], which is a rephrasing of the term initially coined by Eco (1976).

Insofar as ad stimuli are responsible for furnishing brand meaning and by implication long-lasting brand-related associations, an account of how ad stimuli are transformed into associations at the very initial encoding stage of ad stimuli is called for. The establishment of such a web of associations creates what Kapferer (2008) calls a brand contract between brand and consumers, echoing Greimas's contractual relationship that binds senders and receivers in an enunciative predicament.

This web of associations must be foreseen and planned from the very first phase of encoding a brand with values, as a reflection of its benefits stemming from attributes with a long-term orientation, coupled with specific guidelines and a rationale for carving these values in concrete advertising stimuli. "It is important to incorporate from the start the higher levels of meaning that are intended to attach to the brand in the longer term" (Kapferer, 2008, p. 56).

This need for planning for relationships between sources of brand equity and superior brand equity *qua* linguistic value (Rossolatos, 2012a,e) calls for a reorientation from the binarist rationale that underpinned the original Greimasian conception of depth grammar towards a connectionist rationale, as will be shown in the ensuing sections. At the same time, having established that rhetorical figures and operations of rhetorical transformation are essentially responsible for translating semes into surface discursive elements, the potential for isotopically recognizing in manifest discourse ad filmic texts in a relational brand structure presupposes that ad filmic texts as sources of brand equity are encoded in such a form as to allow for the recognizability of invariant brand elements.

Based on the above, the conceptual framework that is put forward in this paper is intended as a rhetorical semiotic brand equity planning platform. In the meantime, let us dwell briefly on how brand associations have been conceptualized and researched from within the consumer research discipline.

Brief overview of marketing related research into associative networks

Brand associations and their qualifying dimensions constitute the outcome of successfully inscribing in consumers' perception and memory attributes and benefit-related elements in the form of ad textual stimuli. Brand associations contain the meaning of the brand (Keller, 1998). Brand associations are the heart and soul of the brand (Aaker, 1996). Aaker's and Keller's research and discussion of brand associations are rooted in the cognitive psychology theory of associative networks. Associative networks have been referred to as the human associative memory (HAM) model, the Hebbian model, the Bayesian model, the spreading activation model, and the connectionist model (Till et al., 2011). The majority of stimuli stored in memory are non-verbal, rather than verbal (Coulter & Zaltman, 1994, 2001; Zaltman & Zaltman, 2008).

Advertising, as a pervasive mode of semiosis (Mick, Burroughs, Hetzel, & Brannen, 2004) constitutes an indirect source of brand associations (Krishnan 1996), as against a direct source (e.g., product usage) and can influence brand equity by impacting on consumer's brand-related memory structure (Edell & Moore, 1993). Associations are receivers' memories and fantasies evoked by advertising stimuli (Praxmarer & Gierl, 2009).

Associative networks constitute a standard mapping technique for portraying relationships among brand image attributes and consumer groups, but also all sorts of relationships in a brand knowledge structure. The central role of brand associations in the creation and maintenance of brand equity is widely accepted (Till et al., 2011). Brand associations are the myriad nodes that are linked to the brand in memory (Silverman et al., 1999). Memory models that have been propounded from various psychological perspectives vary considerably as regards their fundamental assumptions (Krishnan, 1996), yet they

converge on viewing memory as a network of connections among concepts. Lawson (2002) contends that networks are better suited than hierarchies in accounting for how associations are activated in memory, as they are not constrained, thus reflecting the structure of haphazard experience.

Associative networks consist of nodes and links. The greater the number of links that emanate from a node, the greater the centrality of the node in consumers' memory. Each node in a network acts in turn as a source node for another node, thus making up a "chain of thoughts" or an "association chain" (Teichert & Schontag, 2010).

Associations are retrieved from memory through the process of spreading activation. Once each node passes an activation threshold, it leads to the activation of linked nodes. However, it should be borne in mind that, as Teichert and Schontag (2010) contend, associative networks are merely simplified representations of knowledge stored in the consumers' minds and cannot be assumed to depict actual neural connections. Associative networks are always already simulated abstractions of actual memory processes and the myriads of stimuli that are processed in brain neurons in a parallel processing mode (Morgan, 1997). They constitute a useful heuristic for iterative brand equity planning and ongoing management and not an epistemological panacea.

Keller categorized brand associations into three classes, viz. attributes, benefits and attitudes. Attributes are distinguished in two categories, product and non-product related, denoting respectively the ingredients necessary for performing the product or service function and the aspects that relate to their purchase and consumption. Benefits are distinguished into three categories, functional, symbolic and experiential.

Supphellen (1999) developed a set of practical guidelines for in depth elicitation of brand associations in an attempt to overcome the limits of direct questions, which are associated with problems of access, verbalisation and censoring. She employed focus-groups, moodboards and object-projective techniques (OPT), while probing for secondary associations in terms of situations with which brands are related.

Henderson et al. (2002) employed network theory in their exploration of associative networks, by connecting cognitive theories of associative structures with literature on structural networks. They used a combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques, such as repertory grids and network analysis.

Janiszewski and Osselaer (2000) coined a connectionist model, consistent with the epistemological assumptions of multi-attribute utility models, for predicting brand associations as salient cues (i.e., brand names, brand features).

Low and Lamb (2000) conducted three studies that aimed to validate Keller's and Aaker's multi-dimensional constructs, by drawing on HAM and network theories. Their study consisted in testing a protocol for developing product category specific measures of brand image, investigating the dimensionality of the emergent brand associations construct and exploring whether the degree of dimensionality of brand associations varied depending on a brand's familiarity.

Coulter and Zaltman (1994) put forward the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET), which consists in a set of qualitative methods for eliciting metaphorically brand related consumer associations and quantitative methods for transforming insights into actionable input for marketing mix decisions and segmentation strategies. Repertory grids (also see Walker et al., 1987; Henderson et al., 2002), laddering, content analysis and visual dictionaries are integral components of ZMET, as are visual (photographs) and other sensory images that consumers provide. The elicited brand associations are aggregated into consensus maps, which represent brand image facets. Consensus maps portray diagrammatically the linkages among elicited constructs. The linkages, which are drawn by consumers, constitute consumers' own representations of their brand knowledge structures, which, in ZMET

language, are equivalent to causal models. Further research into advertising-related brand related associations with the employment of ZMET was conducted by Coulter and Zaltman (2001), which resulted in five conceptual metaphors about advertising's role as brand information gathering vehicle, viz. hostess, teacher, counselor, enabler, and magician. ZMET-inspired research into (service) brand associations was also conducted by O'Cass and Debra (2002), who employed a two-stage exploratory/confirmatory research, featuring phenomenological interviews with view to gauging how consumers defined brand image dimensions. Furthermore, qualitative free association, storytelling and collage techniques were used by Koll et al. (2010), while assessing their differential value in the creation of brand knowledge structures and the elicitation of both verbal and visual brand-related associations.

Roedder-John et al. (2006) propounded a brand-concept mapping approach for managing brand associations with managerial orientation that did not require knowledge of advanced statistical analysis, as a simpler alternative to Zaltman's (1997) ZMET technique, and a more representative portrayal of interconnections among brand associations than multi-dimensional scaling (MDS; see Bigno et al., 2002 for a combined application of MDS and cluster analysis in mapping brand associations). They accounted for overall brand associative strength by combining individual with consensus maps, based on frequency tables and aggregate scores by following a 5-step procedure, which involved selecting brand associations, selecting first-order brand associations, selecting core brand association links and non-core brand association links and finally selecting the number of connecting lines among links in brand association maps. They presented their brand concept mapping method as an iterative process with long-term orientation for evaluating brand-related perceptions in the light of the implementation of brand communications programs and competitive activities.

Further to the above exposition of indicative approaches to exploring and mapping brand associations in the consumer research literature, let us turn to an examination of how a brand's trajectory of signification and a brand equity planning platform that is fabricated on this generativist blueprint may be rendered in connectionist terms.

Semiotic deviations from the binarist perspective to the organization of a semantic universe

Depth structures in Greimas's original conception of the generative trajectory of signification are structured in the logical form of the semiotic square (Greimas, 1970, Greimas & Courtes, 1979). The semiotic square organizes a semic micro-universe in relationships of contradiction, contrariety and implication (see Rossolatos, 2012c). Semiotic squares in brand planning are still propounded by consumer researchers (Oswald, 2012).

Rastier, who co-created the semiotic square with Greimas, became highly critical of the binarist approach to signification in general and particularly of the square's ability to function as depth grammar in the generative trajectory (see Rastier, 1989, p. 65). He pursued a connectionist semantic approach to textual signification, while drawing on Sowa's (1993) existential graphs (Rastier, 1987, 1994), which were incorporated into his system of differential semantics.

Four systemic components undergird textuality according to Rastier (1987; also see Rastier, 1989, 2005c), viz. the thematic, the dialectic, the dialogic and the tactical. The thematic component "accounts for invested contents and their paradigmatic structures" (1987, p. 54). The dialectic component "accounts for the succession of intervals in textual time, such as states-of-being and processes" (1987, p. 66). The dialogic component is concerned with modalities, such as "ontic, alethic, epistemic, deontic, evaluative" (1987, p. 82). Finally, the

tactical component accounts for "the linear disposition of semantic units. The tactical component concerns both planes of content and expression, either jointly or in a standalone fashion" (1987, p. 95).

Rastier's graphs connect aspects of the different systemic components. For example, the thematic graphs constitute a preamble to the dialectic level. Their nodes represent actants and processes, while their links casual relations that are articulated among them. Nodes are represented in rectangular shapes and links in circular ones, in line with Sowa's graphs. "In a conceptual graph, the boxes are called concepts, and the circles are called conceptual relations" (Sowa et al., 1993, p. 15). "The elements that make up this structure are the nodes (the terms), the links (the relations) and the direction of the links. A node is generally labelled with one or more semes and a link is labelled with a semantic case" (Hebert 2012a). The cases used in the semantic graphs are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2.
Types of cases in Rastier's semantic graphs (Hebert, 2012b, p. 145)

	CASE	DEFINITION	POSSIBLE NAME FOR TEACHING PURPOSES
(ACC)	accusative	the patient of an action; the entity affected by the action	PATient
(ASS)	assumptive	point of view	PERspective
(ATT)	attributive	property, characteristic	CHARacteristic
(BEN)	benefactive	the entity for whose benefit the action is performed	BENeficiary
(CLAS)	classive	an element of a class	CLASsitive
(COMP)	comparative	elements joined by a metaphorical comparison	COMParison
(DAT)	dative	receiver, entity that receives a transmission	RECeiver
(ERG)	ergative	the agent of a process or an action	AGEnt
(FIN)	final	goal (result or effect sought)	GOAL
(INST)	instrumental	means used	MEAns
(LOC S)	spatial locative	position in the space represented (LOC S)	SPAce
(LOC T)	temporal locative	position in the time represented (LOC T)	TIME
(MAL)	malefactive	the entity to whose disadvantage the action is performed	MALeficiary
(PART)	partitive	part of a whole	PARTitive
(RES)	resultative	result, effect, consequence	EFFect (or CAUse)

The following example portrays a simple relationship between two semic molecules[11] (A and B), joined by a locative verb (Rastier, 1989):
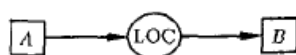
LOC : locatif.
A = /saillant/, /fragile/, /attirant/, /vivant/, /coloré/.
B = /creux/, /puissant/, /repoussant/, /mortel/, /sombre/.

Brand equity planning with structuralst semiotics: Projecting brand associations with the aid of structuralist operations and operations of rhetorical transformations

A key difference between the mode of connectivity between links and nodes in differential semantics and the mode adopted in the brand trajectory of signification, as put forward in this paper, is that whereas differential semantics draws on primitives, such as the ergative and the attributive cases in order to mark the way whereby links are attached to nodes, I emphasize rhetorical operations of transformation and figures. This change in focus

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[11] According to Rastier (2005c, n.p.) "a semic molecule may be variably defined based on the frame of reference, i.e., dialectical, dialogic, thematic, tactical."

allows for operationalizing what was put forward in a schematic fashion by Greimas (1976) as the metaphorical mode of connectivity (among other tropes and schemes) among morphologically distinct elements from the three strata of the brand generative trajectory.

Furthermore, in addition to the portrayal of semantic relationships put forward in differential semantics, where semes are included in squares and modes of connectivity in links, in the context of the brand trajectory of signification manifest discourse elements of ad films (individual iconic signs, shots, sequences, verbo-visual interactions) are portrayed as triangles. Moreover, the connectionist graphic portrayal of the brand trajectory of signification emphasizes multiple links among semes and surface discursive elements, as well as links among triangles, thus providing a snapshot of both thematic and stylistic/figurative isotopies. A schematic portrayal of the connectionist conceptual framework of the brand generative trajectory of signification is provided in Figure 2:
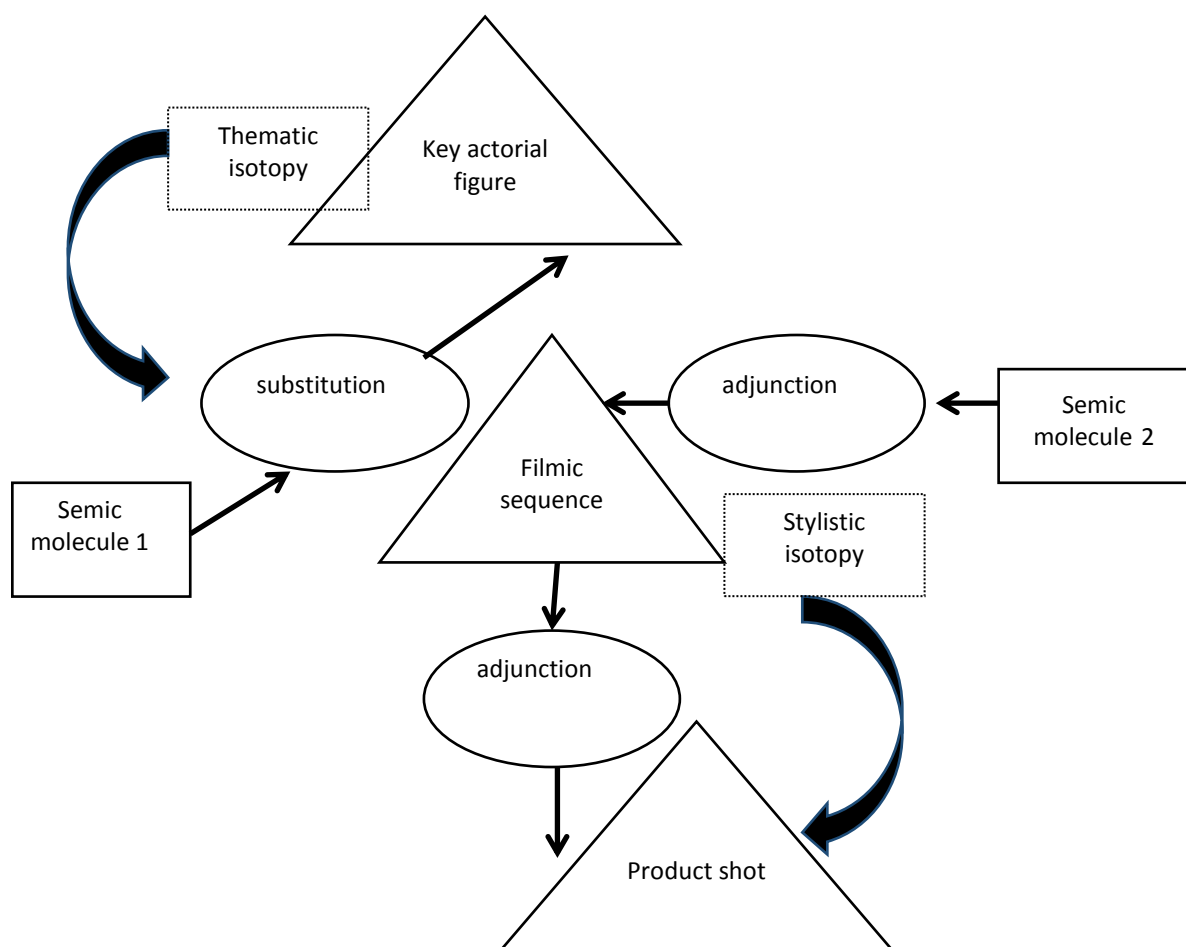

Figure 2. A connectionist conceptual model of the generative trajectory of signification

There are two key dimensions that must be addressed in order to establish a product category's sociolectal degree zero and a brand's idiolectal degree zero (see Table 3).

Certainly within the limited scope of this preliminary presentation, which aimed to tackle significant facets of the conceptual groundwork that must be covered in order to effect a transition from the binarist rationale that underpinned the generative trajectory of signification to a connectionist rationale, while retaining its merits for the practical purposes of brand equity planning, there is not sufficient space either for expanding to the complexities involved in the full-fledged conceptual model, nor to the methodological implications of its

application (cf. Rossolatos, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c). However, it is hoped that it does afford to clearly demarcate the research field of semiotics of brand equity.

Table 3.
Levels of analysis of the brand trajectory of signification

		Synchronic	Diachronic
		Film	Film
Synchronic	Brand	Intra-film/Intra-brand	Inter-film/Intra-brand
Diachronic	Brand	Inter-film/Intra-brand	Inter-film/Inter-brand

Conclusion: The value of semiotics in brand equity research

The intention of this paper was to present the key principles of a conceptual framework for a rhetorical semiotic model of brand equity planning, by drawing on structuralist operations and operations of rhetorical transformation. The connectionist advances in consumer research attain to bring up to date Greimas's generativist model, which was adapted in the context of the brand trajectory of signification, and complement the semantic graphs propounded by the perspective of differential semantics. By positing an integrated approach to the generation of thematic and stylistic isotopies through the graphic portrayal of associative networks, the dynamic interaction among the strata of the trajectory is highlighted and its operationalization as iterative brand equity planning platform for essentially undercoded sign-systems, such as brands, is enabled. The conceptual aspects of the semiotic framework of brand equity planning that were tackled in this paper pave the way for further research and call for an active inter-disciplinary dialogue between semiotics and consumer research.

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