

ORIGINAL

Advertising semiotics and its impact on consumer emotions

Semiótica publicitaria y su impacto en las emociones del consumidor

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ABSTRACT

This opinion article exposes the impact of advertising as a crucial economic function for society, as it allows companies to publicize their products or services by showing their characteristics and benefits. However, the objective of this document is to analyze advertising and the impact it has on customer perception, taking advantage of campaigns with innovative visual elements that allow focusing the attention of the target audience. Where semiotics, for its part, also plays a very important role in the process. Semiotics is a discipline that studies signs and the way they are interpreted. The concepts of the theorists Saussure and Peirce are exposed, where their models allow to explain the relationship between the sign, meaning and interpretant. Initially Saussure proposed the binary model of sign, which is composed of the signifier and meaning. On the other hand, Peirce, in turn, contributed new concepts and a more social approach with his theory of the triad. Both approaches are essential for understanding how visual, auditory and textual signs are used. Finally, we analyze how advertising semiotics allows brands to establish an emotional connection with consumers, encouraging purchases through the use of color and music.

Keywords: Advertising; Semiotics; Sign; Consumer; Emotions; Public.

RESUMEN

En este artículo de revisión se expone el impacto de la publicidad, como una función económica crucial para la sociedad, ya que les permite a las empresas dar a conocer sus productos o servicios mostrando sus características y beneficios. Sin embargo, el objetivo de este documento es analizar la publicidad y el impacto que esta tiene en la percepción del cliente, aprovechando campañas con elementos visuales innovadores que permitan centrar la atención del público objetivo. En donde la semiótica, por su parte, también juega un papel muy importante en el proceso. La semiótica es una disciplina que estudia los signos y la forma en que se interpretan. Se exponen los conceptos de los teóricos Saussure y Peirce, donde sus modelos permiten explicar la relación entre el signo, significado e interpretante. Inicialmente, Saussure propuso el modelo binario de signo, que lo compone el significante y significado. Por otro lado, Peirce, a su vez, aportó nuevos conceptos y un enfoque más social con su teoría de la tríada. Ambos enfoques son imprescindibles para la comprensión de cómo se emplean los signos visuales, auditivos y textuales. Finalmente, se analiza como la semiótica publicitaria permite a las marcas establecer una conexión emocional con los consumidores, incentivando la compra con el uso del color y música.

Palabras clave: Publicidad; Semiótica; Signo; Consumidor; Emociones; Público.

INTRODUCTION

Advertising is a very important element in the economy of companies today, as it helps promote and encourage sales of goods and publicizes the characteristics, benefits, and advantages that consumers will obtain when purchasing their products and services. Thus, advertising attracts the attention of new or potential customers and works to build loyalty among current customers.

Advertising not only provides information about products, but one of its main objectives is to influence the emotions and behavior of customers and/or consumers through innovative and creative campaigns that focus on capturing the attention of the target audience to connect with them and focus on achieving the desired result. To do this, we must use semiotics, the science that studies the signs of communication, how models work, and how customers receive them.

Various authors have approached this field of knowledge from different perspectives, but in this case, we will discuss two of the most influential theorists, Ferdinand Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce. Each of them had unique perspectives on signs and how they communicate, thus making an important contribution to this field by providing key concepts that have become part of this science.^(1,2,3)

Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist and philosopher, is the father of modern semiology. In his work *Course in General Linguistics*, he argues that semiotics, or semiology, is a science that studies the life of signs within social life.⁽³⁾

To learn more about his theory, we must discuss an important concept. This linguistic sign is a representation with relevant and inseparable parts, such as the signifier, which consists of the letters and sounds of a word, and the meaning, which refers to the mental idea or conception we have of the form. Furthermore, he proposes that language is more than a means of communication; it has a complex system and established structures, and it is impossible to separate words or phrases from their meaning. On the contrary, we must define how they relate to each other. Example of the theory proposed by Saussure:⁽³⁾

The word “tree” is a sign that has its meaning (the mental idea) and the signifier (the letters). This means that the relationship between them is arbitrary (there is no connection between the sign and its meaning); there is no connection between the words “T-R-E-E” and their sign. This is thanks to the agreement of a community that speaks the same language.

Charles Sanders Peirce, an American thinker, decided to expand the theory of signs and take them beyond language in his work *The Meaning of Signs*. Pierce’s semiotics has a philosophical and logical perspective on reality. He also argues that signs must necessarily exist in order to know a thought; thus, “we cannot think without using signs.”^(1,2)

Peirce presents the theory of the triad of signs, which is illustrated in figure 2, emphasizing terms such as the representamen or signifier (the symbol, name, i.e., the sound of words, a drawing, an image, the physical or concrete aspect), at one extreme, the object or meaning (the notion, the idea, the conceptual part of the sign; it is the concept of representation) and finally the referent or interpretant (it is part of the nature to which the sign refers or the mental image generated by the human being).^(1,2)



Figure 1. Pierce’s triad theory
Note: taken from Graph by *El Pensador*.

Continuing with the tree example, according to Peirce’s theory (figure 1), the sign or signifier (sound of the words) is the word TREE, which represents the object or meaning (the idea) to which the sign or signifier (the word) refers. To complete the triad, the interpretant or referent (mental process) varies since all human beings interpret the sign differently.⁽⁴⁾

In addition, he classified signs into three categories, which are described below:

- a) Icon
- b) Index
- c) Symbol

a) *Icon*: The author explains that:

“An icon is a representamen whose representative quality is a primacy of it as first. That is, a quality that the icon possesses in itself makes it suitable to be a representamen. Thus, anything is suitable to be a substitute for something else to which it is similar.”

Considering this, we can infer that icons are signs that are equal to the object, the graphic element.

b) *Index*: Secondly, we have the index, for which Peirce states:

“An index is a sign that refers to the object it denotes by being affected by that object.”

Peirce says indices are directly related, as they have a cause-and-effect relationship with meaning. They are graphic elements considered universal, such as traffic signs, meaning they universally communicate something.^(1,2)

c) *Symbol*: Finally, the definition related to this item is:

“A symbol is a sign that refers to the object it denotes by a law, usually an association of general ideas that operate in such a way that they cause the symbol to be interpreted as referring to that object.”

Symbols are signs that relate to and express the object (meaning) through social agreements, such as the words of a language.

After analyzing the meaning of semiotics, we move on to another key concept in advertising: advertising semiotics. This concept involves analyzing the signs used in campaigns and how they are interpreted by the end consumer.

Advertising semiotics has become a fundamental tool for creating emotional connections with consumers; according to this theory, sensations, actions, and emotions are directly related to emotional responses to brand, product, or service advertising. This suggests that the signs used in advertising campaigns should induce purchasing actions based on emotions. Elements with which potential consumers identify or that generate feelings, such as nostalgia, can be used. Additionally, graphic and visual resources such as colors can be used; for example, red creates energy and positive emotions, while blue and green are associated with calm and tranquility. The aim is to convey a brand image to the target audience and capture their attention with what the color conveys.

Another essential element is the use of music in advertising, as stated:

“Musical compositions can influence certain emotional states in people, causing the listener to bring back memories that can instill joy or sadness, induce states of relaxation, awaken spirituality, and other feelings previously experienced.”

Considering what Mosquera-Cabrera⁽⁵⁾ says, it is clear that the decision to include musical pieces in an advertising campaign is fundamental. Certain melodies can make consumers remember significant moments, allowing them to establish a more intimate and personal connection with the brand. Whether the music evokes joy or nostalgia, this resource helps create a stronger emotional bond between the consumer and the brand, essential for fostering customer loyalty and retention. In this way, advertising semiotics, combined with carefully selected visual and auditory resources, becomes a powerful tool for influencing consumer purchasing decisions and strengthening long-term relationships with brands.

We can infer that advertising semiotics is key to understanding, promoting, and harnessing the power of signs and symbols in the communication of a product or service. It offers a unique perspective on the visual and textual elements of advertising materials, with the aim of influencing the emotions of the audience, captivating them, and ultimately influencing the consumer's purchasing decision.

Below, we can analyze an example of how advertising uses elements that have semiotics: an advertisement for the Coca-Cola brand (figure 2), in which, to promote its product, a thirst-quenching soft drink, it uses images of happy and friendly people to get consumers to associate drinking Coca-Cola not only with quenching their thirst but also with a feeling of happiness when quenching their thirst, added to sharing with other people, which can be associated with the friendship reflected by the characters in the photograph. In this way, the consumer can interpret that the product fulfills the function of quenching thirst, and the semiotic elements presented in the image are associated with the fact that the product can be consumed in environments where it can be shared with other people, such as family members, colleagues, and friends. In other words, its consumption can generate companionship, joy, and other emotions generated by purchasing this product when consumed in different settings or environments.



Figure 2. Coca-Cola advertisement (2016)

Note: taken from Photograph by Coca-Cola showing happiness.

On the other hand, advertising semiotics can also have adverse effects if not used correctly. For example, the Burger King billboard promotes a new sandwich, featuring a woman's face with her mouth open in front of the sandwich, and is positioned horizontally (figure 3). In this advertisement, Burger King promoted its new product and decided that a suggestive image that could be interpreted as sexual was the best way to sell it. The poster made a not-so-subtle pun with the word "blow": "It'll blow your mind away," which means "it will blow your mind," but "blow" is also used to refer to fellatio. The image left no room for other interpretations. The rest of the advertisement was not far behind: "Fill your desire with something long, juicy, and grilled with BK's new super seven-inch."⁽⁶⁾ In this advertisement, Burger King used elements that have a sexual connotation that could affect or offend a more conservative audience and generate a negative association or image of a group of people who do not perceive this type of advertising in the best light, as it does not have the expected impact on them, giving the advertisement a different meaning and generating the opposite result to that expected for some potential consumers. In addition, an additional connotation can be interpreted as if the image were intended to simulate shooting the woman, which could be disturbing and add a further negative dimension to the interpretation of the advertisement.



Figure 3. Burger King advertisement (2014)

Note: taken from Burger King flyer promoting its new sandwich.

After analyzing some examples of the uses of advertising semiotics, it is possible to affirm that advertising has a profound and significant impact on consumers' emotions. According to the study by Zequeira-Rodríguez,⁽⁷⁾ we can conclude that advertising cannot only evoke positive emotions such as happiness, empathy, and well-being but that these emotions can strengthen relationships between consumers and the brand by provoking positive feelings, thus making potential customers more attracted to the product or service offered. This will generate greater trust in the target audience, as users perceive that the brand can meet their needs and expectations. It also projects the image that they offer a quality product or service so that they can then focus on achieving satisfaction with their requirements to increase sales, user loyalty, and brand recall.

Conversely, advertising can also generate negative emotions such as anger, anxiety, or discontent, which can negatively affect purchase intent and overall brand perception. In this sense, the negative emotions generated by an advertising campaign can decrease the likelihood that consumers will be inclined to purchase the products or services it offers.

This is why it is essential to plan campaigns well, based on knowledge of customers, target audiences, and/or consumers, and identify their needs and expectations. This allows for designing and creating advertising products that captivate through semiotics to mobilize emotions and fulfill the objective, thereby positively capturing customers' attention and achieving the desired goal, which translates into closing the sale.

DISCUSSION

After analyzing the different concepts and examples throughout the article, we can conclude that semiotics has become a fundamental element in advertising, as it allows us to infer consumers' emotions, perceptions, and purchasing choices, whether positive or negative. Furthermore, advertising promotes a product or service, seeking to create emotional connections through different campaigns using visual and auditory elements that

encourage purchase. Saussure and Peirce present semiotic models to understand how consumers see these signs and how brands can better structure their campaigns.^(1,2)

Saussure's theory, which divides the physical aspect of a sign into a mental aspect, is essential for understanding how visual and auditory elements can be used to convey clear messages in an advertising proposal. On the other hand, Peirce's triad introduces a dynamic interaction between the consumer and the advertising campaign by including signs, emphasizing the cultural context, past experiences, and emotions influencing different interpretations observed, focusing on the need to plan careful and eye-catching advertising strategies for their audience, correctly using colors, images, symbols, and music to generate emotions of happiness, nostalgia, or well-being and thus increase consumer loyalty to the brand.^(1,2)

Likewise, good use of colors can convey joy, fun, calm, and enthusiasm, so consumers will describe the brand in accordance with what was projected in the campaign and how they received it.

On the other hand, music can trigger emotions that reinforce connections with the product, so a detailed and correct analysis of what you want to convey must be carried out.

Based on the above, advertising can make people interested in the brand and, after consuming the product or service, comfortable and confident.

As we have seen, the poor use of semiotic characters in advertising can also have adverse effects, such as anger or dissatisfaction, which could damage the brand image and result in a lack of interest on the part of the customer or consumer dissatisfaction with the product.

Advertisers need to understand the importance of semiotics in influencing consumer attitudes and behaviors, as the message, meaning, and emotions conveyed are fundamental factors in an effective advertising campaign. This is because advertising provides information and can create emotional experiences that can shape consumer behavior and purchasing decisions. Therefore, the correct use of semiotics can offer a significant competitive advantage when developing powerful advertising pieces that meet marketing objectives, bringing benefits for brand positioning and avoiding any adverse effects.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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