

Abstract

This research investigates consumer interpretations of one print advertisement with a dual semiotic approach. The research design features 20 in-depth interviews with participants from ten different cultures, where participants were asked to tell the story that the ad depicts. This investigative process generated consumer narratives that were analyzed with a dual semiotic approach comprising an application of both Peirce's Semiotic Triangle (cf. Grayson and Shulman 2000) as well as Greimas's (1983) Actantial model. The findings demonstrate that across a diversity of cultures consumers interpret this print ad either with or without recognition of a key expressive element (object) in the ad. Interpreting the ad in recognition of the intended object of the ad renders a story that screams a concealed meaning - as intended by the creative designers; interpreting the ad without recognition of the intended object renders a somewhat confusing story. The dual analytic approach reports similar findings from both semiotic viewpoints, thus enhancing the credibility of the output. The findings of this research therefore include advertisement design implications for practitioners.

Keywords: narrative analysis, semiotics, Peirce, Greimas, advertising.

0. Introduction

How consumers understand and interpret advertising is a complex phenomenon (Bulmer and Buchanan-Oliver 2006a; Scott and Vargas 2007; Koslow and Costley 2010). The complexity of this phenomenon is compounded by the national cultural lens through which consumers view the world (Taylor 2005; Bulmer and Buchanan-Oliver 2006b). This research investigates who sees what, with one print advertisement as the point of reference. Narratives were generated and analyzed with a dual semiotic approach by drawing on in-depth interviews from a diverse group of consumer participants in terms of ethnic background. More specifically, the dual semiotic analysis involves the application of Peirce's Semiotic Triangle (cf. Grayson and Shulman, 2000), as well as Greimas's (1983) Actantial model. The application of these two analytical frames shows a variation in who sees what in this print ad, where interpretations hinge on the recognition of a key expressive element in the ad, or not. The key element that is recognized by some consumers is two bare feet protruding from below a curtain line. Recognition of this key element yields an interpretation of the ad as intended by the creative designers. However, interpreting the ad irrespective of this key element yields a different, somewhat confusing story. Therefore, the findings of this research include print advertisement design implications for practitioners.

This paper begins with an overview of the relevant marketing semiotic literature as the science of meaning. Then, the dual semiotic analytical approach is explained, while research findings are reported with view to lending support to the semiotic frameworks. Tables 1 and 2 present a summary of the findings which are subsequently discussed in terms of their contribution to both theory and practice. Theoretically, this work shows how an advertising message can be analyzed with semiotics to

uncover connotations and nuances based on consumer narratives about marketing communications, and more specifically about one print ad. The identification of similar variable interpretations by drawing on the selected semiotic perspectives enhances the credibility of the findings. More practically, therefore, it is demonstrated that semiotics is a useful business analytical tool.

1. The role of semiotics in communications research

The English language is inherently ambiguous (de Mooij 2011), and consequently communication can be difficult (Hornikx, van Meurs, and de Boer 2010), demanding (Majaro 2013), and even strategically treacherous (Czinkota and Ronkainen 2003, 2012; Mueller 2011). The plethora of communication theories (Ballantyne, Frow, Varey, and Payne 2011; Schmid and Kotulla 2011) is indicative of the embedded complexity of communication. In seeking to understand the complex phenomenon of communication, semiotics as the science of meaning offers a means to investigate consumer interpretive perspectives on communications such as advertising. As Oswald (2012) explains, semiotics is about the analysis of verbal, visual, and spatial sign systems and is most appropriate in the study of advertising and ad meaning. More specifically, Oswald (2012, p. 1) premises her book on the notion that “consumers shop for meanings, not stuff.” Similarly, the seminal work of Sydney Levy (1959) *“Symbols for sale”* suggests that a considerable portion of consumer choices are made against the background of symbolic meaning, rather than rational criteria, and this suggestion is reinforced in a more recent publication by Bastos and Levy (2012).

Marketing and advertising are meaningful discourses that reflect and shape cultural values, stereotypes, and norms. However, the use of stereotypical imagery in advertising is a long standing societal concern (Wiles, Wiles and Tjerlund 1995). As Wiles et al. (1995) and de Mooij (2010) discuss, this concern lies with sexist and racist stereotyping, such as the portrayal of men and especially women in inaccurate, outdated, and demeaning roles. The problem with this portrayal is that such images are used as a method of establishing a shared experience of identification with the consumer. The use of stereotypical images is especially problematic in the global marketplace, where kaleidoscopic contexts further complicate media communications (Borgerson and Schroeder 2002) and intended meaning. According to Borgerson and Schroeder (2002), marketing communication depends largely on visual representations to produce meaning. However, the counter debate to stereotypical portrayals in advertising is that communication media are simply a mirror of the existing values and traits of a culture (Plakoyiannaki and Zoto 2009). In this way, advertising is a form of cultural expression; a mirror of social conditions. From this perspective, advertising is a source of information about values, beliefs, and lifestyle activities of a culture.

Problematic to both sides of this debate is that visual representations create meaning within the circuit of culture that often extends beyond what may be intended by photographers, art directors,

advertising agencies, and firms doing the advertising (Borgerson and Schroeder 2002). Current research in promotion and advertising still draws largely on behavioral psychological frameworks. Contrastingly, interpretivist approaches such as semiotics are becoming increasingly accepted. Semiotic research considers key elements such as language, signs, and symbols that may not necessarily hold universal meaning. Therefore, meaning in international advertising and branding strategy is highly relevant and central to the question addressed in this research, namely “*Who sees what?*”. As Oswald (2012) contends, interpretation beyond an individual consumer and their private world of meaning is a venture into the ambiguity of social communication and the world of brands, branding, and advertising. Even non-linguistic sign systems are interpreted at some level and this realm of connotations and nuances of consumer narratives derive from marketing communications, brand advertising, and culture.

Semiotic analysis begins with the identification of the signs, symbols, and codes that are embedded in a text, whether that text is verbal or nonverbal, visual, symbolic, or experiential. Another important part of semiotic analysis involves looking at contrasts and implied contradictions. Visual elements of advertisements, such as pictures or symbols that are an important component of many advertisements imply a meaning, but what meaning? As per a groundwork Barthesian tenet, semiotics applied in the study of advertising reveals implicit and connotative as well as explicit and denotative concepts that are produced through the selection and combination of signs (Zhou and Belk 2008).

2. Applying the dual semiotic framework to consumer narratives

The work of Charles Sanders Peirce (Mick 1986; Grayson and Shulman 2000) is fundamental to semiotic thinking. Peirce presents a relational theory of meaning between three elements as shown in Figure 1. These three elements are the object, the sign, and the interpretant, where the interpretant is not equivalent either to interpreter or to interpretation, but rather to the interpreter’s interpretation of the sign (Mick 1986). Known as the Semiotic Triangle (Figure 1), the three interrelationships between the three elements are symbolic, iconic, and indexical. A symbolic interrelationship involves the symbolic sign relating to the object in a conventional manner (Mick 1986; Grayson and Shulman 2000). Many organizations employ this symbolic interrelationship as a branding strategy when a symbol or sign is devised to represent a particular object such as a product, brand, and/or organization in a meaningful way. The Apple brand, for example, uses a simple white apple silhouette with a clean bite missing to symbolize more than just a highly technical computing device, but simplistic design, as well as original thinking. The iconic interrelationship involves the iconic sign relating to the object as an imitation or resemblance (Mick 1986; Grayson and Martinec 2004), such as counterfeit copies of a designer brand.

The indexical interrelationship involves the indexical sign relating to the object with a factual or historical connection (Grayson and Shulman 2000), such as heirlooms or irreplaceable possessions, such as jewelry from a great grandmother.

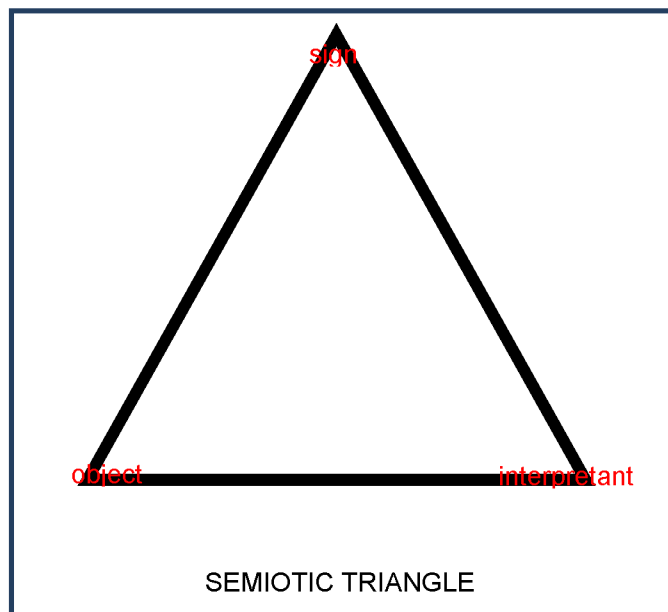


Figure 1. Peirce's semiotic triangle (adapted from Mick 1986).

Other semiotic applications in advertising include Zhao and Belk's (2008) study of ideological tensions between communism and consumerism in Chinese advertising and Humphrey's (2010) semiotic analysis of newspaper articles related to gambling. Exploring the rise of consumerism in China during the shift from communism, Zhao and Belk (2008) use semiotics to show the symbolic role of advertising in reframing the transitional politics of the day. Similarly, Humphreys (2010) analyzes semiotic structure in her investigation of shifts in public discourse that legitimize consumption practices. In both Zhao and Belk's (2008) and Humphreys' (2010) applications of semiotics, the investigation is a sense making inquiry.

In asking the question "*who sees what?*" in the context of a print advertisement, this work is based on the premise that narratives are a sense making tool for consumers. This premise is evident in other works such as Levy (1959), and Shankar, Elliott, and Goulding (2001) as well as Schembri, Merrilees, and Kristiansen (2010) and Stern, Thompson, and Arnould (1998). As Levy (1959) discusses, contemporary consumer culture structures the myths and meanings that consumers attach to goods and rituals. More to the point, Shankar et al. (2001) discuss how narratives are considered a fundamental way for consumers in structuring and making sense of their lives. Narrative analysis is shown by Schembri et al. (2010) to be a useful tool in the study of how consumers use brands to construct the self. Through interacting within and interpreting the social world, consumer experiences are considered to be a basic way whereby we structure and make sense of our lives (Stern et al. 1998).

The narratives, or stories, that consumers provide offer valuable insight relevant to marketing strategy and tactics (Thompson 1997). Storytelling has a long tradition in consumer culture, as

demonstrated by the many and varied folklore tales that abound in historical archives. In contemporary society, consumers use brands as props or anthropomorphic actors in the stories they tell (Woodside, Sood, and Miller 2008). Stories and narratives convey meaning of a personalized experience and the personal nature of stories and narratives reflects the essential power of storytelling.

Narrating is telling a story in the form of a linked set of events, happenings, and situations that affect human beings. In telling stories, consumers create a sense-making situation where the chronological order of happenings is respected and the narrative conveys experience through reconstituting that experience (Squire 2008). More specifically, narrative meaning is created by establishing that the story is part of a larger whole. Narratives also display the significance that events have within a certain context (Denning 2001). Consumers are the storytellers narrating their life experience to others in a meaningful way and marketers are beginning to recognize narration as a powerful brand strategy.

As with any good story, there is a beginning, middle, and end. Skillful storytellers also seek to establish a setting, specific characters, and a sequence of episodes that are more or less interrelated. In seeking to analyze such narratives, A.J. Greimas developed a tool that can be applied to any real or thematized action. This analytical tool put forward by Greimas (1983) is known as Actantial model, where an action is broken down into six identifiable roles called actants: subject and object, helper and opponent, sender and receiver (see Figure 2). Assigning each action to one of the actantial roles enables narrative analysis relative to the plot, complemented by the modalities of wanting to, being capable of, and knowing how to. These modalities are referred to here as axes of desire, power, and knowledge, respectively. Hence, the Greimasian Actantial model is adapted to our analysis of consumer narratives as composed of six actants across three axes:

- ❖ **The axis of desire:** includes a subject and an object where the subject is what is directed toward an object. For example, the narrative of a fire-fighter saving people in a burning house depicts the fire-fighter as the subject, the people being saved as the object, and the life-saving effort as the axis of desire.
- ❖ **The axis of power:** comprises the helper and the opponent. Continuing with the fire-fighter narrative, the helpers for the subject are the resources that are available to the fire-fighter for extinguishing the fire and saving people: water, ladder, other fire-fighters etc. The opponents are the elements of fire, wind, and location, for example, that effectively prevent the fire-fighter from accomplishing the life-saving mission.
- ❖ **The axis of knowledge:** includes the sender and the receiver. The sender is the element requesting the action from the subject and the receiver is the element for which the quest is being undertaken. Continuing with the fire-fighter narrative, the sender is the fire station and the receivers are the people being saved, along with their neighborhood and surrounding community.

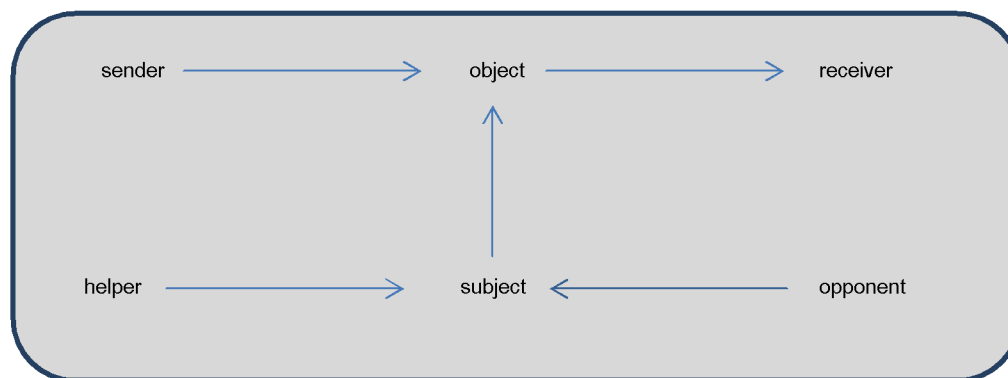


Figure 2. Greimas's Actantial approach to narrative analysis (Greimas 1983, Greimas 1986).

3. Investigating who sees what

The participants in our study consist of 8 females and 12 males, aged 25-35 years, from 10 different nationalities: Chinese, Croatian, Egyptian, French, Italian, Malian, Polish, Portuguese, Spanish, and Moroccan. The research was conducted in Paris, France. In line with the premise of this study that narratives are a sense-making tool for consumers and that consumer storytelling is a powerful branding strategy (Denning 2006; Fog, Budtz, and Yakaboylu 2010), the participants' interpretations of a print advertisement for Nutribalance (Figure 3) constitute our primary data.

Nutribalance is a dog food brand and the ad central to this investigation is part of a print advertising campaign created by the Chilean ad agency ProlamY&R. According to Macleod (2009), ProlamY&R is promoting Nutribalance pet food with a print campaign that is sensitizing pet-owners about the connection between bad food and bad dogs. While the Nutribalance campaign comprised several print ads, the focus of this research is the ad titled "Pilot", where the dog betrays the woman who does not feed him well by revealing the hidden feet of her lover. The ad is designed to show consumers what happens when dogs are not fed well and therefore the message is about feeding dogs good food and specifically Nutribalance dog food. In seeking to document consumer interpretations of this Nutribalance dog food ad, participants were shown the advertisement (Figure 3) for 30 seconds and then asked to tell the story depicted in the ad. This auto-driving image elicitation technique, as per Heisley and Levy (1991), gives research participants the opportunity to describe what they see from their perspective. To further enable the 20 participants to articulate the story depicted in the ad, participants' interviews were deliberately unstructured, while featuring only short and minimal probing questions. The purpose of this storytelling interviewing style is to identify symbolic markers in an ad in an inductive manner (Gummesson 2005). In this way, the narratives that were generated from this interviewing process reflect an accurate and authentic interpretation of the ad from the participants' perspective.



Figure 3. Nutribalance “Bad Food Bad Dog” advertisement created by Polam Y&R.

4. Findings

This research sought to identify and analyze consumer interpretations of a Nutribalance print advertisement based on a pool of diverse consumer participants (in terms of gender, age and ethnic background). The reported findings demonstrate that the various interpretations of this print advertisement may or may not be in line with the intended marketing message. More specifically, the dual semiotic analysis shows that some participants recognize the key expressive element in the ad of two bare feet protruding from below a curtain line and some do not. This expressive element is key to the intended story that screams a concealed meaning. Effectively, variable interpretations are reported, where the same outcome is demonstrated with a dual semiotic analysis.

In applying Peirce's Semiotic Triangle, the findings are organized in terms of what the participants have assumed as the semiotic elements: interpretant, sign, and object. Table 1 summarizes these findings. In applying Greimas's Actantial model to the analysis of the participants' narratives, the findings are organized in terms of what participants have assumed as actants. Table 2 summarizes these findings. The findings from each of the two analytical approaches concur in that the 20 narratives fall neatly into two distinct interpretations. As per Tables 1 and 2, the findings are reported as two different interpretations, where participants either recognized the bare feet protruding from behind the curtain as exposed by the dog, or not.

From the application of Peirce's Semiotic Triangle, the consumer narrative that recognizes the bare feet as the key expressive element, or object, of the advertisement (Table 1, Interpretation #1) was in line with the creative strategy that was intended by the ad designers, as reported by Macleod

(2009). In recognizing the bare feet as indicative of infidelity and a covert affair, the narrative also interprets the betrayed pilot as the interpretant along with the sign of the ashamed woman who is hiding her face with her hands. According to this interpretation, the symbolic interrelationship is about the woman being ashamed of her infidelity. The iconic interrelationship in this narrative is the woman's shamefulness in the face of the exposed bare feet of the hidden lover. The story here, therefore, is a story of the pilot who is often absent and his loyal dog revealing the woman's infidelity and her hidden lover's bare feet. The indexical interrelationship then is about the shamed woman having been unfaithful. In this narrative, the bare feet as the object and the shamed woman as the sign, indicate a hidden lover and a covert affair as confirmed by the woman's body language.

In the second interpretation (Interpretation #2, Table 1) the participants did not recognize the bare feet as part of the story. Assuming the interpretant as the pilot arriving or leaving, this narrative posits the uncontrollable dog as the object and the emotionally needy woman as the sign. From this interpretation, the symbolic interrelationship is about the pilot either just arriving or near leaving and the needy woman showing her desperation in her body language, as does the dog with bad behavior. The iconic interrelationship here is about the pilot either arriving or leaving, and as a result the woman's becoming needy and the dog's becoming uncontrollable. Indexically, the woman has not handled the dog well when the pilot master is away. Consequently, the behavior of the dog is uncontrollable and the woman responds to this situation with desperation.

Table 1. Application of Peirce's Semiotic Triangle.

Elements	Interrelationships			Participant narrative	
	Symbolic	Iconical	Indexical		
Interpretant = betrayed pilot Sign = ashamed woman Object = bare feet exposed by the dog indicating infidelity and a covert affair	Symbolically, the woman is ashamed of her infidelity. The woman has been unfaithful and the dog's behavior exposes the hidden lover's bare feet.	Iconically, the woman is ashamed of the evident covert lover. The pilot has arrived home unexpectedly and the dog is loyal to his master so reveals the hidden lover's bare feet.	Indexically, the shamed woman is shown to have been unfaithful. The dog exposes the hidden lover's bare feet indicating infidelity and a covert affair.	Interpretation 1: The dog displays his loyalty to the master who feeds him well but the dog also shows revenge to the woman who does not feed him well when the master is away.	<u>Participants:</u> Chinese, Portuguese, Croatian, Polish, Malian, Egyptian, Italian
Interpretant = pilot is arriving	Symbolically, the woman is needy	Iconically, the emotional	Indexically, the	Interpretation 2: The dog shows	<u>Participants:</u> Moroccan,

Elements	Interrelationships			Participant narrative	
	Symbolic	Iconical	Indexical		
or leaving Sign = forlorn, emotionally needy woman Object = uncontrollable dog	and the dog is uncontrollable. The pilot is either on the way in or out and the woman is feeling desperate and needy, while the dog is behaving badly.	woman's behavior reflects the uncontrollable dog's behavior. The pilot is either just arriving or near leaving and so the woman is in despair and the dog becomes uncontrollable.	emotionally needy woman has historically not handled the dog well. The dog may not be controlled by the woman and this is a recurring and unresolved problem.	bad behavior because the woman cannot manage the dog and his pilot master is always leaving or arriving.	Chinese, French, Egyptian, Portuguese, Spanish

In applying Greimas's Actantial model to the narratives provided by the 20 participants, as summarized in Table 2, two interpretations are again reported. These interpretations also differ in terms of whether the bare feet are recognized or not. The application of Peirce's Semiotic Triangle concurs in this way with the application of Greimas's Actantial model to narrative analysis.

As presented in Table 2, Interpretation #1 places the dog as the subject and the hidden lover as the object. The axis of desire tells the story of the dog desiring to reveal the hidden lover; the axis of power revolves around the dog who reveals the truth; and the axis of knowledge where the dog knows the truth and the lover chooses to hide. Considering the helper and opponent actants, along the axis of desire the dog helps his master by revealing the truth while the woman hides her face in shame and in opposition to the truth; the axis of power is about the woman holding the power because she chooses a lover and she feeds the dog when the pilot is absent; the axis of knowledge sees the dog knowing the woman is unfaithful and so chooses to oppose the woman's actions. In terms of sender and receiver actants, along the axis of desire, the dog sends a message to his master that the woman is unfaithful; on the axis of power the dog appears to be powerful by revealing the hidden lover; on the axis of knowledge the dog appears to be all-knowing, while choosing to reveal the covert affair.

Table 2. Application of Greimas's (1983) Actantial model.

Actants Axes	Subject - Object	Helper - Opponent	Sender - Receiver	Participants	
Axis of Desire	The dog as the subject desires to reveal the hidden lover as the object	The dog is helping his master by revealing the truth while the woman is hiding her face in opposition	The dog is sending a message to his master that the woman is being unfaithful	Chinese Portuguese Croatian Polish	Interpretation #1
Axis of Power	The dog is holding the power by revealing the truth of the hidden lover	The power of the situation is held by the woman because she chooses a lover and feeds the dog when the pilot is absent	The dog holds the position of power and seeks to reinstate his master's power by revealing the hidden lover	Malian Egyptian Italian	
Axis of Knowledge	The dog knows the truth and the lover chooses to hide	The dog knows the woman is unfaithful and chooses to oppose her	The dog knows all and seeks to inform his master of covert actions by his wife in his absence that his master is not knowledgeable of		
Axis of Desire	The pilot as the subject desires the woman as the object	The pilot desires to help the woman with the dog's uncontrollable and opposing behavior	The dog desires good food rather than bad and sends this message both to the officer and the woman with bad behavior	Moroccan Chinese French Egyptian Portuguese	Interpretation #2
Axis of Power	The pilot is denied intimate relations by the woman who holds the power in this situation	The woman is powerless to control the dog	The dog captures the attention of both the officer and the woman with bad behavior	Spanish	
Axis of Knowledge	The pilot and the woman	The pilot knows how to manage the dog but	The dog knows he wants good not bad		

Actants Axes	Subject - Object	Helper - Opponent	Sender - Receiver	Participants	
	have a difficult relationship as reflected in the dog's bad behavior	is often absent and the woman does not possess the requisite knowledge	food and seeks to send this message to both the pilot and the woman		

In contrast to Interpretation #1, Interpretation #2 does not recognize the hidden lover's bare feet as pertinent to the story and therefore the narrative does not comprise this actant. Instead, Interpretation #2 assumes the pilot as the subject and the woman as the object, where the pilot desires the woman on the axis of desire but is denied intimate relations on the axis of power and the dog's bad behavior reflects the difficulty of the man-woman relationship on the axis of knowledge. In terms of helper and opponent actants, on the axis of desire the pilot desires to help the woman with the dog's uncontrollable behavior, but on the axis of power the woman is powerless to do so, while on the axis of knowledge, even though the pilot knows how to control the dog, given that he is often away, the woman is charged with this responsibility, but does not possess the requisite knowledge. Considering the sender and receiver actants, on the axis of desire, the dog desires good food rather than bad and sends this message to both the pilot and the woman with bad behavior. On the axis of power, the dog captures the attention of both the pilot and the woman with bad behavior. On the axis of knowledge, the dog wants good, not bad food and sends this message to both the pilot and the woman with bad behavior.

The findings reported here and summarized in Table 1 and Table 2 involved an application of Peirce's Semiotic Triangle and Greimas's Actantial model. Each of these interpretive routes identified similar outcomes. The application of Peirce's Semiotic Triangle and Greimas's Actantial model show that a key element in interpreting this advertisement is the bare feet that signify a hidden lover and a covert affair. The one interpretation recognizes this key narrative element, whereas the other does not. In effect, the findings have implications for both theory and practice, however prior to addressing implications the following discussion relates the literature to the findings.

5. Discussion

The findings of this dual semiotic analysis of a print advertisement for Nutribalance dog food show that the ad is interpreted in variable ways. More specifically, in applying both Peirce's Semiotic Triangle (cf. Grayson & Shulman, 2000), as well as Greimas's (1983) Actantial model, various interpretations of this print advertisement are reported. The application of Peirce's Semiotic Triangle shows that variable interpretations involve different assumptions regarding the elements of the Semiotic Triangle, where the

assumed object or assumed central component directs the narrative. As Rossolatos (2012) explains, from a semiotic perspective, elements in brand imagery are significant in their relatedness to the brand's combinatory logic. Consequently the semiotic interrelationships differ according to what element of the story is assumed as the central object directing the narrative. In Interpretation #1, when the bare feet of the hidden lover are recognized as the key element of the story, the story is about the dog displaying loyalty to the master who feeds him well and revenge to the woman who does not feed the dog well when the master is away. In contrast to Interpretation #1, Interpretation #2 does not recognize the bare feet and hence the consumer narrative misses the point of choosing Nutribalance dog food. Similarly, in terms of Greimas's (1983) Actantial model, variable interpretations also involve assumptions regarding the actantial roles and the axes of desire, power, and knowledge, while, again, the assumed object directs the narrative.

As shown by the dual semiotic analysis in this study, one way of interpreting this advertisement recognizes the hidden lover's bare feet as a key element of the narrative. In this interpretation, the dog demonstrates loyalty to his master by revealing the truth that the woman is hiding a lover. However, an alternative interpretation is a story where there is no recognition of the bare feet, a hidden lover and a secret affair. Accordingly, the story becomes one of the pilot's arriving or leaving, while the woman becomes emotionally needy and the dog is behaving badly, with little relation to Nutribalance. The intended meaning of the print ad is therefore missed in this interpretation. This (mis)interpretation confirms the suggested problematic of media communications in the global marketplace given cultural complexities (Borgerson and Schroeder 2002). With visual representation understood to produce meaning, the meaning produced in the interpretation that does not recognize the bare feet as representative of a hidden lover and secret affair is an interpretation that fails to reinforce the intended advertisement message.

By looking at this print ad in terms of an integrated plan, this ad has been part of a successful campaign (AdLiving 2012). Beyond the traditional notion of advertising as stimulus and response, the dual semiotic analysis employed in this work has identified that imagery does not necessarily hold universal meaning. By venturing into the ambiguities embedded in social communication inasmuch as in advertising, this work reports on the semiotic structure of a print ad to uncover connotations and nuances of consumer narratives derived from interpretations of one print ad. However, as an interpretivist study, this work is neither exploratory nor confirmatory. The value of this research lies in the depth of insight on consumer interpretations of that one print ad (Figure 3) and the findings are particular to that context.

6. Managerial implications

When an advertisement is designed, there is an intended narrative as is the case with the print advertisement used in this research. The ad of interest in this study was designed by the Prolam Y&R ad agency to demonstrate the negative consequences of feeding your dog bad food. The ad is a promotion for Nutribalance dog food as a solution to the problem of a badly behaving dog. According

to DrPrem.com a simple image that screams out a concealed meaning is what keeps consumers spellbound and DrPrem rates the Nutribalance ad used as the point of reference in this research as No.2 in a list of Top Ten print ads (DrPrem.com 2013). DrPrem.com describes the ad as the situation of someone trying to hide something and your pet exposes you, which is the message as intended by Prolam Y&R. However, a key element of that story is the bare feet protruding from below the curtain line. If this key visual element is missed, the consequent interpretation is a story without any concealed meaning and therefore no consumer holding power. The findings reported here show that only some recognize the key visual element, while others are missing that key element and interpret a story of something other than intended. As shown in this research, the findings report that the story as intended by the ad designers is only one way of interpreting this ad and primary to this interpretation is recognition of the lover's bare feet as the object directing the narrative. Consumers who accurately associate the symbolism of an ad effectively buy into the ad's message (Stern 1988).

Beyond the standard industry comprehension that semiotic analysis is a useful tool for effective visual design, the research design employed here demonstrates the usefulness of a dual analytical approach. In using just one or the other framework, accurate findings may be produced. However, by using a combination of two different semiotic frameworks the credibility of the findings is enhanced. Our findings suggest that this ad, given that it is part of a global campaign, is only partially effective and can be improved by ensuring that the key element of the bare feet is more clearly portrayed and more easily recognized. Without that key element being recognized and interpreted, the message is off track, as is the media spending.

7. Limitations and areas for future research

The dual semiotic interpretive approach pursued in this paper has demonstrated concurrently that some consumers interpret this advertisement as intended by Nutribalance and Prolam Y&R, while others do not. With interviews from 20 participants from different nationalities, this diverse selection enabled a variation to be identified in what and how the participants interpreted the advertisement used here as the point of reference. Some participants understood the message as intended to be interpreted through the key element of the hidden lover's bare feet protruding from behind the curtain, but other participants did not see this element as part of the story. The analysis of the stories that were elicited from participants was subjected to a dual semiotic analysis that drew on the variable interpretations of this print advertisement, where each of the two semiotic frameworks identified similar findings. Further research could therefore apply this dual semiotic design to an advertisement prior to release. As highlighted in the managerial implications of this work, each of the two semiotic frameworks applied in this study have provided accurate findings. Hence, employing a dual semiotic analysis adds credibility to the reported findings.

8. Conclusion

This research investigated consumer narratives against the background of one print advertisement with a dual semiotic analysis. With this one ad as point of reference, 20 participants from ten different national cultures were interviewed with a view to generating narratives for the purpose of semiotic analysis. The analysis featured two semiotic interpretive frameworks: Peirce's Semiotic Triangle and Greimas's Actantial model. This dual semiotic analysis identified variable interpretations with similar findings for each of the two semiotic frameworks in that some participants recognized a key element in the ad and therefore understood the intended meaning, whereas other participants did not recognize a key element in the ad and therefore (mis)interpreted the story. The benefits of adopting a dual semiotic approach in the generation of variable interpretations consist in enhancing the credibility of the research output, while producing more nuanced interpretations. Moreover, semiotics was found to be a most useful business tool for optimizing the design of global advertising at a planning stage.

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