

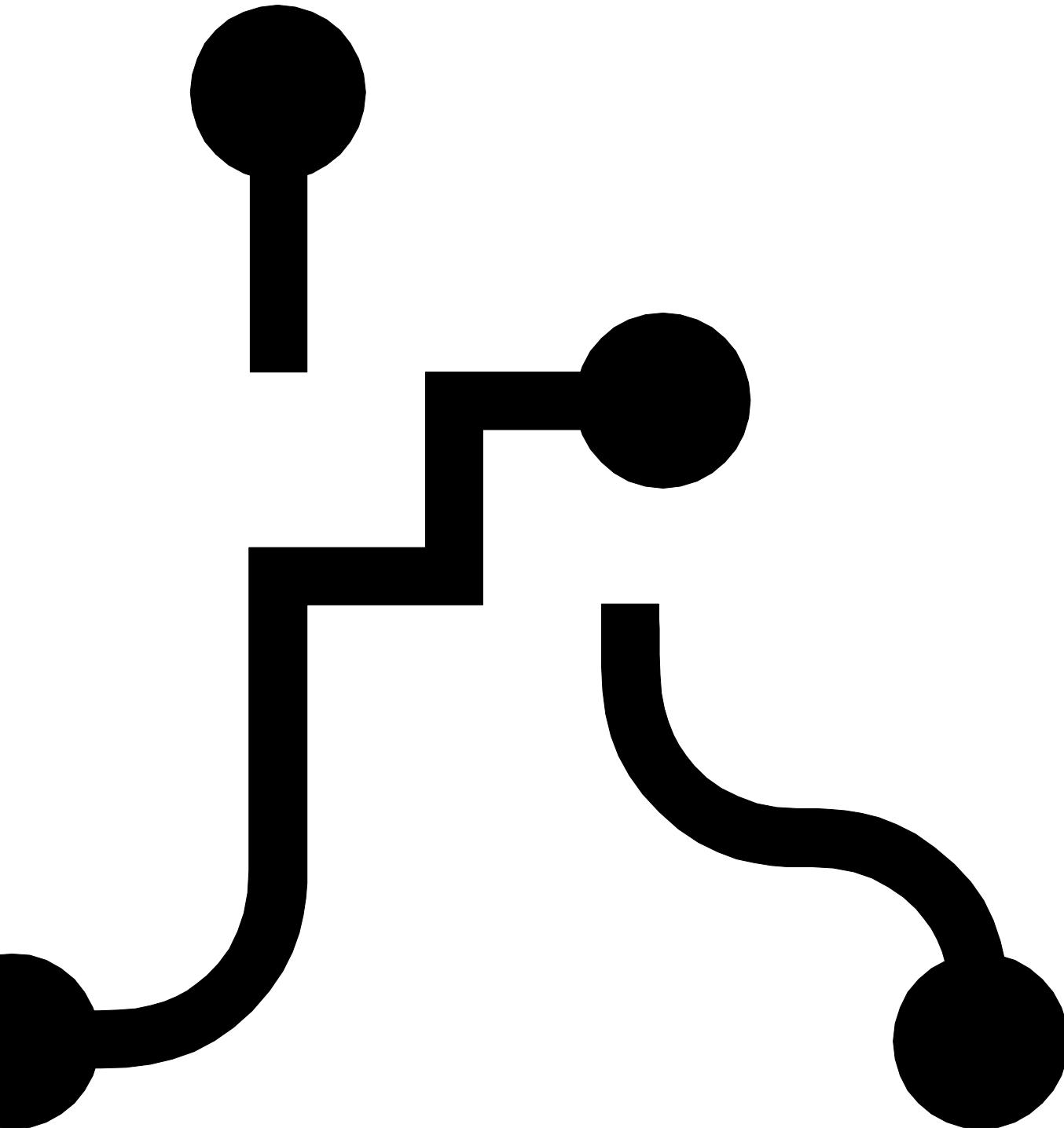
**International
Journal of
Marketing
Semiotics**

2015

Vol. 3

ISSN: 2195-2280

www.ijmarketingsemiotics.com



Editorial

The past year has been quite semiotically intensive, as I have been almost fully immersed in the editing of the Handbook of Brand Semiotics (forthcoming in 2015 from Kassel University Press). The editing of the Handbook turned out to be a particularly edifying experience, both in terms of engaging dialogically and at great length on various topics that are currently on top of the semiotic research agenda with the colleagues who generously offered to participate in this project, as well as in terms of obtaining a clear picture as to why (academic) brand semiotic research (if not, more broadly speaking, marketing semiotic) has not been advancing at a comparable rate to advances in the distinctive schools of thinking in the wider semiotic discipline and to the proliferating perspectives from the humanities and the social sciences that have been making inroads in consumer cultural research.

Notwithstanding that you may read a fuller (yet, still introductory) account of the latter problematic in the introductory chapter from the Handbook of Brand Semiotics that is hosted in this Volume of IJMS, there is merit in going through some of the key points that are discussed therein.

The first issue identified in an attempt to scrutinize the reasons behind brand semiotics' relatively stagnant status over the past years concerns the dominant perceptions among marketing researchers as to what is semiotics and how it has been and may be used in marketing research. These perceptions have been consolidated on the grounds of a couple of standard reference papers (which I shall not mention in this instance) which, somehow, have attained to become catapulted to 'gatekeepers'. The issue is that semiotics in these papers has been treated as a uniform paradigm with very basic concepts that stem from at most two dominant schools of thinking (structuralist and Peircean). Subsequently, the perceptual barriers that have been established around semiotics have forced it to a constant recycling/regurgitation of basic concepts in empirical research. This has been compounded by marketing journals editors' reluctance to publish new thinking in the involved stream, especially when such thinking, and quite oxymoronically so, references semiotic sources with much greater accuracy than is the case with the second-hand importation of semiotic concepts to consumer research by a select few authors (whose works have almost monopolized the marketing semiotic landscape).

The truth is, as most semioticians would readily acknowledge, that semiotics is far from a uniform discipline, while its conceptual panoply is as rich as the majority of established disciplines. Hence, the relative under-representation of semiotics in (academic) branding research is not attributable to a stagnant theoretical landscape, but to the reluctance on behalf of an academic community to re-cognize evident advances.

The second issue concerns the frequent employment of the generic descriptor marketing semiotics. Its use is justifiable as an umbrella title for a journal, such as the one you are currently reading, but not for a research paper that should be positioned more succinctly in specific streams. Marketing has evolved into a highly fragmented and specialized discipline, inasmuch as semiotics, and hence, the term marketing semiotics is a catch-all phrase that is as vague and vacuous as any generic descriptor. At this stage we should be talking about specific branding, consumer research and other marketing related areas and how distinctive semiotically informed perspectives may contribute in advancing the marketing discipline, inasmuch as about new areas that currently constitute the mainstay of other disciplines.

The third issue and quite compelling challenge rests with the fact that 'marketing semiotics' is by definition an inter-disciplinary research field. This presupposes that interested scholars are or are willing to become versed in the relevant literature from specific streams in both semiotic and marketing disciplines. Unfortunately, cross-fertilizations between the two disciplines are not automatically realizable, as significant epistemological and ontological discrepancies are bound to emerge that require elucidation prior to proceeding to an empirical research stage. This consideration often poses additional constraints to the publication potential of semiotically oriented research, as the extra work that is required in terms of conceptual elaboration may result in manuscripts that are well in excess of an acceptable length. However, this is hardly the main source of potential frustration. The main reason and most validly so for disgruntlement lies with the fast-foodization of consumer research and the repeatedly noted tendency to allocate in published research disproportionately larger space to the empirical, rather than the conceptual part. This is further compounded by the fact that marketing journals are largely aversive to purely conceptual papers, which merely propagates cyclically the reasons why seriously informed by semiotic perspectives semiotic research is not easy to publish in mainstream marketing journals. Thankfully the above are not an issue with the International Journal of Marketing Semiotics which has

been and continues to be particularly receptive to inter-disciplinary perspectives, both as regards empirical, as well as purely conceptual research.

Pursuant to these preliminary considerations which are further elaborated in the Introduction to the forthcoming Handbook of Brand Semiotics, Volume III of the International Journal of Marketing Semiotics, although slimmer than the previous two volumes, mainly due to lagged submissions that resulted in 'excess stock' for Vol.IV, at the expense of this Volume, hosts two research papers that converge, utterly coincidentally, on semiotically inflected Critical (Discourse) Analysis. Although their core lies with a critical analytical approach, the adopted conceptual platforms are quite divergent and very interestingly so, as the hosted papers have been informed and enriched by as varied perspectives as critical rhetoric, Lacanian psychoanalysis, sociosemiotics, multimodality and Bakhtin's notion of chronotope.

The first paper, by Kevin Marinelli, is situated in the broader stream of cause-related marketing which it seeks to extend through a branch eloquently tagged as 'civic branding'. By examining two cause-related marketing campaigns of Starbucks within a critical-semiotic framework, it is argued that traditional theories of argumentation and ethical consumption fail to illuminate the burgeoning sophistication of ethical branding. Civic branding attempts to untie the problematic "cash nexus" of ethical consumption and interpellate branded citizens rather than ethical consumers. It displaces the ethical commodity with a sense of direct civic engagement, while also exploiting logics of Desire by perpetually enticing individuals back to the well of civic brand identification.

The second paper, by Per Ledin and David Machin, actually constitutes the continuation of their Chapter that is featured in the Handbook of Brand Semiotics. Their paper (in the same vein as the respective Chapter, but with a different focus as regards semiotic resources and modes) adopts a CDA perspective in tackling Orebro university's (Sweden) rebranding that was introduced in 2011 and continues until today. By extending CDA to MCDA, that is multimodal discourse analysis, they set out to examine the multimodal representation of space in key rebranding documents and how this representation coheres ideologically with the wider marketing objectives behind the rebranding initiative. Ultimately, the adopted MCDA perspective presents a unique take on how a university as brand is shaped in terms of goals, and how such objectives are reflected in internal branding documents that may be aligned with actual perceptions and practices within the represented organization.

George Rossolatos

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