Visual Semiotics and Interpretation in the Moroccan Television Advertisements: 
The Case of ‘Garlic Cube Knor’ and ‘Prince Biscuit’

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Abstract:
For many of today’s cultural critics and semioticians, questions about visual semiotics and interpretation of TV images are of central concern. It focuses on the ways visual images communicate messages and also on the system that dominates their code and usage. Admittedly, television advertising is a communication field whereby images are “perfect” representation of life. This paper examines the construction of meaning of visual messages in television advertising from a semiotic analysis perspective. More precisely, patterns of meaning construction are analysed and interpreted. For this purpose, I have investigated two specific advertisements The ‘Garlic Cube Knor’ and the ‘Prince Biscuit’ commercials which ran in Moroccan 2M channel. Obviously, traditional criticism mostly questions the aesthetic aspects of object or the text according to their face values. However, semiotics largely makes inquiries into the manner of which the meaning is created rather than simply investigating what it is. The results yielded both iconic message elements and symbolic or indexical ones. However, symbolism seems to be more effective and prevalent than iconic meaning.

Key words:
Visual semiotics, meaning construction, symbolic meaning, iconic meaning.

Résumé :
Pour beaucoup de critiques et de sémioticiens culturels d’aujourd’hui, des questions sur la sémiotique et l’interprétation des images de télévision visuelle sont au centre des préoccupations. Il se concentre sur les façons d’images visuelles communiquent des messages ainsi que sur le système qui domine leur code et l’utilisation. Certes, la publicité télévisée est un champ de communication dans lequel les images sont considérées comme étant une parfaite représentation de la vie. Cet article examine la construction du sens des messages visuels dans la publicité télévisée à partir d’une perspective d’analyse sémiotique. Plus précisément, les modèles de construction signifie seront analysées et interprétées. A cet effet, je l’ai étudié deux annonces spécifiques « L’ail de Cube Knor » et le produit du ‘Prince Biscuit’ qui couraient dans le canal marocaine 2M. De toute évidence, la critique traditionnelle interroge essentiellement les aspects esthétiques de l’objet ou le texte en fonction de leurs valeurs faciales. Cependant, la sémiotique fait largement enquêtes sur la manière dont le sens est créé plutôt que de simplement enquête sur ce qu’il est. Les résultats ont donné les deux éléments de messages emblématiques et symboliques ou indiciels. Cependant, le symbolisme semble être plus efficace et plus répandue que signification emblématique.

Mots clés:
Sémiotique visuelle, la construction de sens, une signification symbolique, la signification emblématique.
Introduction

Human beings have always craved to understand and interpret the world in which they live. They want to get to know, and read, the nature, the universe, human beings and their culture. That is why they need to think about and analyze their meanings. Undoubtedly, the meaning doesn’t necessarily come out visibly. Rather, it often exists latently and most often waits to be disclosed, analyzed and read. Significant images are an important part of television advertising. According to Barthes (1964), “in advertising the signification of the image is undoubtedly intentional; the signifieds of the advertising message are formed a priori by certain attributes of the product these signifieds have to transmit as clearly as possible. If the image contains signs, we can be sure that in advertising these signs are full, formed with a view to the optimum reading: the advertising image is frank, or at least emphatic.” (Barthes, 1999: 33). The paper aims to use visual semiotics to unravel the deeper level of meaning in some selected television advertisements, notably in 2M Moroccan channel. In this brief analysis, after an introduction of advertising and semiotics, the meaning construction process and its interpretation will be examined and clarified.

Advertising and Semiotics

The purpose of this paper is to consider the use of semiotics in the field of television advertising. Specifically, I will attempt to pin down the pertinence of the theory of semiotics to the practical world of television advertising. It suffices then to reiterate that most scholars agree that semiotics is the study of signs and sign systems of all kinds. It involves the production of signs, communication through signs; the systematic structuring of signs into codes, the social function of signs, and the meaning of signs (Chandler, 1995). Accordingly, advertising is a sign process which has developed from the semiosis of marketing. Experts have used semiotic interpretations to the rich cultural meanings of products and consumer behaviors. Within this frame, television advertising, as visual texts, is a crucial area of analysis for semioticians and for scholars working on visually intensive forms because images are such central part of mass communication sign system. From a semiotic perspective, Zakia and Nadin (1987) state that “Advertising is the modern substitute for myth and ritual and, directly or indirectly, it uses semiotics (the science of signs) to invest products with meaning for a culture whose dominant focus is consumption” (p. 6). To put this quite another way, semiotics, the authors add,

is the “useful tool for discovering the sophistication and richness of ads. By deconstructing an advertisement, we learn how it is constructed and discover its underlying message. And by discovering its message, we also discover the way in which words and pictures work together to reinforce the message, how the alphapictorial (words and pictures) components utilize gesture, art, myth, and symbol to give emotional impact” (ibid.).

As an analytical approach, semiotics offers a fixed perspective for examining the content of an ad. It stresses the idea that images are set of signs that are correlated together, in some way, by the viewer. It considers a variety of texts, using Eco’s term, to investigate such areas as movies, advertisements, fashion as well as visuals (Moriatry, 1995a). Today, the field of marketing, in general, and advertising in particular, uses signs to represent products and services directed to an audience in order to inform or persuade, to prompt purchases of goods and services, and to socialize consumers into a culture of consumption.

There are many basic concepts of visual semiotics that are deemed worthy of consideration in the field of television advertising. Semiotics is simply defined as the science of signs (Eco, 1976; Chandler; 1995; etc.). Having a literary and linguistic basis, the study of semiotics has been expanding in a number of directions since the early work of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and Charles Sanders Pierce (1839-1914). Saussure (1916) divides a sign into two components: the signifier (the sound, image, or word) and the signified (the concept the signifier represents, or the meaning). As Chandler (1995) points out, the question of meaning arises from the fact that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary and conventional (p. 22). Put differently, signs can mean anything we agree they mean, and they can mean different things to different people. Given the alphapictorial nature of commercials, it might be usual that the complex sign system of advertisements is likely to produce a variety of meanings. Pierce , on the other hand, classified the patterns of meanings in signs as iconic, symbolic and indexical (cited in Chandler, 1995). An iconic sign is a form whereby the signifier is perceived as resembling or imitating the signified. For example, a portrait is iconic, in that the signifier represents the appearance of the signified. Fiske and Hartley (1978) indicate that “The primacy of the iconic sign on television can tempt us to ignore the arbitrary nature of the medium’s signification” (pp. 39-40). Indeed, the selectivity and use of television as a medium influences the purpose of the message. Implicit in this is the meaning of Marshal
Mcluhan’s aphorism ‘the medium is the message’ (Cited in Chandler, 1995, p. 12). An indexical sign is a form in which the signifier is not arbitrary but is directly related, in some way, to the signified. The link might be observed or inferred. For instance, the tire tracks are indexes of a car. A symbolic sign is a mode in which the signifier doesn’t resemble the signified but which is essentially arbitrary or merely conventional. Words are illustrative of arbitrary symbolic signs. (ibid. p. 35). Advertising, as visual communication, uses all these three types of signs. As I have said, by virtue of the principally iconographic nature of TV ads, it is particularly loaded with complex visual signification.

What is important is that most signs, Fiske and Hartley (1978) point out, operate on all these three elements: the iconic, the symbolic, and the indexical. Hence, understanding types of signs helps us explain how they convey meaning. This may suggest that visual semiotic analysis of advertisements will address a hierarchy of meaning as well as components of meanings. As Eco (1990) explains “what is commonly called a message is in fact a text whose content is multileveled discourse” (p. 24).

So, the first level of understanding is to take signs as a ‘self-contained construct’, which means that meaning is enclosed within the sign itself. According to Barthes (1977), this is called a first order of signification. The second order of signification is when the “motivated meaning meets a whole range of cultural meanings that derives not from the sign itself, but from the way society uses and values both the signifier and the signified” (Fiske and Hartley, 1978, p. 41). Barthes posits that signs, in the second order of signification, are functioning separately both as “myth-makers’ and also as ‘connotative agents’. Fiske and Hartley see myth as validating from two directions: first, from the specificity and iconic accuracy of the first order sign, and second, from the extent to which the second order sign meets our cultural needs (ibid., p. 42).

The relationship between the sign and the communicated meaning is indicated by the denotation and the connotation. Denotation operates at the first level of signification; while connotation and myth work at the level of the second order of signification. To be more precise, denotation describes the commonsense meaning of the sign, usually understood as proper or literal meaning. Connotation is the meaning derived by an individual receiver and also the suggestive sense of an expression that extends the literal meaning. Myth is the cultural meaning that a particular society uses and values. It is the “story by which a culture explains or understands some aspects of reality or nature” (Fiske, p. 88). For Barthes, it is “a culture’s way of thinking about something, a way of conceptualizing or understanding it” (ibid.). One of its major aspects is that it is not static. It is continuously changing and updating and television plays an important role in this process.

Television commercials, the visible artefacts of advertising in their familiar fifteen second versions, use various techniques, visual and audio, to connote meaning. Camera angle, shots, lighting, background, frequency of cutting are just few examples representing what Berger (1982) called the grammar of television. In general, Fiske (1990) sums up the denotation/connotation dichotomy in relation to television by saying that

> Denotation is the mechanical reproduction on film of the object at which the camera is pointed. Connotation is the human part of the process: it is the selection of what to include in the frame, of focus, aperture, camera angle, quality of film, and so on. Denotation is what is photographed; connotation is how it is photographed (p. 86).

While Barthes focuses on how signs are connected to the culture that uses them; still we need to ask the question of how signs convey meaning in TV and the way they relate to each other. It is believed that the meaning of an ad is not something there, statically inside, waiting to be revealed by correct interpretation. Rather, it depends exclusively on how it operates.

Metaphor and metonymy are two related words responsible for how meaning is produced and interpreted. According to Fiske and Hartley (1978), “a metaphor is a word (signifier) which is applied to an object or action (signified) to which it is not literally or conventionally applicable. [...] A metonym is the application of a mere attributes of an object to the whole object” (p.47). Metaphor, the authors maintain, incorporates what is referred to as ‘transposition’ or ‘displacement’ from the signified to signifier (ibid.). In this regard, “television advertisers are particularly adept at exploiting both metaphoric and metonymic modes in order to cram as much meaning as possible into a thirty seconds slot” (ibid.)

In the realm of television, the use of analogical thinking is called visual metaphor which is not asserted but constructed. In this respect, visual metaphors in television advertising make use of tangible materials from real life to represent abstract concepts such as freedom, power, and ideology. Hence, a shot of an ad, for example, representing a woman is a constructed metaphor of a real woman.

The last level of signification is referred to as what Barthes labelled ‘mythology’ or ‘ideology’. In this level, signs mean what they do via a particular conformity with members of the culture. Signs are located in an area Fiske called intersubjectivity.
The myths which operate in the latter area are invisible but organized. Hence, the third level of signification reflects the dominant ideology by which a culture or a society organizes and interprets the reality it has to deal with.

**A Semiotic Analysis of 2M Commercials**

There is no doubt to say that advertising is inexorably being examined and analyzed as a result of its regular speculation of hidden meanings and underlying messages. Given the fact that product meaning is important, semiotics provides us with the interpretative framework to analyze the ad. The following is an illustration of how we can read and interpret an ad text, especially those that are aired on the TV screen.

**Reading Ad for Meaning: The Case of ‘Garlic cube Knor’**

In order to show how semiotics can be used to analyze TV advertisement and how ads convey meaning, I have opted for what, at first glance, appears to be a simple and unsophisticated ad. The ad is ‘Douima d-Knor’ (Garlic cube) aired on 2M Moroccan TV channel. From a semiotic perspective, there are a number of elements that could be deconstructed. However, the reading will look only at elements which seem to be the richest in symbolism, metaphor, and connotation. Television as a medium has a specific impact on meaning production and reception. Given the fact that it is as an important medium for social myth and mythology, television helps understand the significant nature of various signs in a specific cultural space. Commercial visuals, for example, have the characteristics to be presented in motion picture, reinforcing the culture of the country. Televisual signs work in tandem so as to create the intended complex meaning of the advertisers. Reading ads for meaning is carried out at two main levels: denotative and connotative. In the TV ad of ‘Douima d-knor’ (cf. appendix 1), the denotative meaning is self-contained in the syntagms or shots of the whole ad text. In this sense, each shot is taken as a signifier and has an idiosyncratic meaning as signified, that the iconic representation of the woman denotes a real woman, garlic cube denotes a real food product, and kitchen denotes a real cooking place. We move to a second level of signification, the connotative function, when we try to match the meaning of how Moroccans perceive such images and what interpretations they assign to them. The portrayal of man and woman in this TV ad (shot 14, 15) is an example of a stereotypical image of how a typical Moroccan man and woman should be conceived of. Generally, the commercial is a sequence of more than sixteen shots presenting a food product called ‘Douima D-knor’ in a very refined setting, a modern kitchen. The TV ad targets women viewer and associates the purchase of the product with success, happiness, and love. Trying to create suspense, the ad started with an image of ‘question mark’ accompanied by catchy music so as to draw the attention of the viewer. We understand that question mark as an indexical cue of questioning and inquiry. This image goes in parallel with the female voiceover saying an enigma: ‘Very small, delicious, and it is not a cube of tastiness. Guess what?’ (Trans. mine). This linguistic codification is directive, informational, and speculative. It serves as a means to delimit the reader’s making sense of the ad. The next long shot represents a typical modern woman. Feminists have pointed out that ads addressed to women define them in terms of commodity. Such a food product (Garlic cube) is advertised not as a commodity; but for what it can do for her relationship with her husband and family. In terms of appearance and character, she is a beautiful, attractive, young, chic, slim, and cute woman in appearance. Therefore, the iconic nature of the sign and the denotative meaning are clear. However, the connotative and mythic meanings need more inspection. The iconic image of the woman signifies the stereotypical image of the modern Moroccan woman. The visual code represents gender in which the female takes on the active role. So, one would say that woman is in complete control of the situation.

In addition, one would also notice the color codes emerging. The prevalent color is green and has connotations in Moroccan culture such as vivacity, life and vitality which are all linked with the success associated with the product. At times, when we start looking at the color connotations, a syntagmatic pattern springs out. The woman clothes are in complete symbiotic relation with everything in the kitchen. Equally important, the colors of legumes are all found in her multicolored dress. Then, the camera moves in to a close-up shot of the woman’s face making a nonverbal cue (finger sign) that can be interpreted as signifying or standing for the product. At the same time, the voiceover uttered the sentence /qtidhakda/ (having this volume).

Hence, we may deduce that the zooming of the camera connotes a specific focus or foreshadowing of the product to come. This visual codification through the camera focus can be seen as directing the meaning-creation process. The nonverbal sign stands for the ‘garlic cube of knor’. This is made quite evident in the next close-up shot when the woman is shown to hold a bundle of garlic between her fingers. What is intriguing about shot 3, 4, and 5 (see appendix 1) is that the viewer is invited to make the connection between the product and the aperture of the woman’s eye which connote the idea of focus and concentration that are required from the viewer. Similarly, Shots 6, 7, 8, and 9 are sequences of TV syntagms denoting simple legumes namely, parsley, lemon, onion and carrots; but at another level of signification they act as indexical cues of...
the Moroccan dish or ‘tagine’. In shot 11, the constraint in terms of meaning is provided by another close-up shot of the garlic cube laid at the centre of the woman’s palm. In attempting to interpret this visual image, the meaning generated by this shot is that of tastiness, deliciousness, and good quality of the dish. It also implies that without the garlic cube, these qualities cannot be assured. Besides, garlic is highly valued in Moroccan culture because it has the paramount significance of relief, relaxation, and therapy. Another significant component of the garlic cube product (shot 13, 14, and 15) is that it generates meaning of love, happiness, security, and satisfaction. Evidently, the iconic representation of the man and woman denotes a mere relationship of husband and wife. Yet, the connotation goes further than that. The use of the personalized format is well exploited by the iconographic power of the image. Shot 14 illustrates the association between the success of product, the happiness of the couple, and the comment of the verbal cue: ‘A bit of love, a bit of competence, and the garlic cube of Knor, and all to Knor’. The aforementioned values generated by the ad are clearly manifested in shot 15 where the husband is kissing his wife as result of his delight and satisfaction with her appetizing dish. This is, in fact, something new in our TV advertisement because if it were only in a few years ago, TV producers would have censored such a shot in TV films and the like. As the Moroccan proverb says ‘the nearest way to the man’s heart is his stomach’.

Semiotically speaking, the kiss stands for love, comprehension, and contentment. This is of course due to the purchase of ‘douima d knor’. The last shot is a visual image of Knor’s logo positioned at the centre of the TV screen. The logo of the garlic cube has gained a new meaning. It stands for not only what it denotes as a sign of the firm’s product; but it connotes love, success, and delight.

**Discerning Product Meaning: the Case of ‘Prince Biscuit’**

Given the fact that TV adverts are coded messages having surface meaning and latent meaning, reading an ad semiotically is to interpret its signs in the context of their structure. Therefore, I will present a brief account of the story of the ad to be examined then I will narrow the analysis in terms of how meaning is being generated and discerned. In an 8 second story, Prince biscuit ad tells a mythic narrative from which various meanings and interpretations are possible. The story begins with a picture of a man driving a car full of animated toys. Then, a little girl appears in a close-up shot crying because she is afraid of a monster. The next scene shows the girl fleeing in a rush manner. A gigantic dragon is behind her trying to swallow her savagely. Luckily, a saver appears suddenly from above and throws a bit of ‘Prince Biscuit’ to the girl’s friend so as to gain strength and energy to beat the monster and save the girl. Having eaten the Biscuit, the idea springs to the boy’s mind that his girlfriend is being afraid of hosepipe (in the form of a beast), and we can see him standing confidently against the watery powerful and treacherous beast. In a few seconds, he managed to bravely turn off the tap and the hosepipe faintly fades away and falls down to the grass. Because of wheat and calcium, the voiceover explains, the benefit of ‘Prince Biscuit’ accompanied by another close-up shot of children in a state of delight and rhapsody. The last close-up shot focused on the pack of the product with the male voiceover commenting on the positive attributes of the product.

After carefully and significantly presenting the content of ‘Prince ad’, I begin assigning several possible meanings such as adventure, strength, power, intelligence, and satisfaction (the list could be long); but these four meanings are adequate for illustration. The first meaning generated by the ‘Prince ad’ (see appendix 2) is adventure. Indeed, the term refers to an unusual or exiting experience. As such, we read this meaning from the very first images showing close-up shots of visual signs such as a car, a driver, animated toys, a girl running, and a monster. Semiotically speaking, these elements signify the beginning of children’s adventure. The accompanying linguistic message has a function vis-à-vis the iconic message, a function that Barthes calls ‘anchorage’, which means the determination of the selection of the intended message. The male voiceover says ‘live adventure and challenge is with tasting Prince with excellent chocolate’. All along the other shots, we understand that children are the target audience. Therefore, the advertiser tries to present the ad in a mythic way. The ad is an example of advertisements that use a mythic story to reinforce the idea of adventure. The iconic representation of the watery dragon may be interpreted as a way of directing the minds of children towards this exploratory fantasy. The ‘Prince’ TV ad is dominated by images that captivate viewers especially children, prompt their fantasies and aspirations, and serve to strengthen the implications that often make up the text’s message. The second meaning produced by this image (shot 2) is linked to strength and power. It should be pointed out that strength and power are also illustrated in verbal communication of the voiceover (‘Energy will become your power with Prince’). Borrowing visual tactics to convey this message, the iconic image of the ‘Saver’ (shots 5, 6, and 7) and his throwing of the Prince cake stand for an act of bravery aiming at gaining power and strength. Thirdly, a close look at the close-up shots 10, 11, 12 demonstrates that the paralanguage connives with language to induce inferences from the audience, especially children. In this regard, energy will become your power but with Prince is transcribed to action. We see the iconic picture of a child using his intelligence to remove the scary situation of the girl by turning off the tap. Eating Prince in this context signifies becoming intelligent and brainy. The last meaning that can be inferred from the Prince ad is satisfaction and contentment. A symbolic picture of
shots 15 and 16 signifies that children have gained a sense of self-gratification. The smile of the child in the close-up shot 16 in an index of happiness and satiation as a result of eating Prince. It should be clarified, in this case, that this commercial visual triggers a multiple possibilities for meaning. Yet, it attempts to manipulate the consumer reasoning toward the one inference preferred by the marketing authors. Prince as a signifier may have meanings such as adventure, energy, power, intelligence, and satisfaction as signified. Accordingly, I would say that using visual and verbal signs, producers of advertising exploit the abduction process to direct the meaning of the consumers. The case of ‘Prince’ ad is truly demonstrated. Here, the challenge in abductive reasoning is for the message recipient to ensure that every relevant alternative receives consideration as a propositional meaning (Chandler, 1995). As Barthes (1984) puts it “...all images are polysemous ... [which] poses a question of meaning” (Barthes, 1984b, pp. 38-39). These propositions must be evaluated before the meaning. As it is shown, the process of abduction may use personal and social perceptions inculcated through culturally based images, symbols, and meanings.

Conclusion

This study has confirmed that a semiotic analysis of visual television advertising can be definite to identify patterns of meaning construction. Overall, iconicity, symbolism or indexical elements are signs or elements with symbolic meanings that can generate host of implications by virtue of the awareness to the ambiguity. It has also been shown that interpretation of the TV ads provides recognition which is part and parcel of the of visual communication. Thus far, individuals do not come prepared with ready-made meanings. Rather, interpretation of a visual images can be initiated by our knowledge and experience. The interpretation of visual information, such as the semiotic methodology to meaning interpretation, is highly subjective and projective. Because of the similarity aspect for icon interpretation and the experience aspect for index interpretation, the formal exercise can be required less than for language. Hence, we may deduce that with visuals people are much more on their own, both in learning and in interpreting. This is why visual learning in our modern society is correspondingly as thought-provoking an achievement as verbal learning.

References


Appendix 2

Shot 1

Shot 2

Shot 3

Shot 4

Shot 5

Shot 6

Shot 7

Shot 8