

A CONCEPTUALIZATION OF MARKETING THROUGH THE PERSPECTIVE OF SEMIOTICS

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ABSTRACT

Marketing, the act of promoting products or services to consumers, has been an essential constituent of business since times immemorial. One of its principal (and more subtle) functions is to generate meaning and disseminate it to customers. The current article analyses the field of marketing through the lens of semiotics. Semiotics is the study of signs and symbols, and affords a better understanding of the process of meaning generation and dissemination during marketing, which usually happens through signs and symbols. We look at the key elements of marketing and semiotics, key concepts involved and the role of semiotics in the various domains of marketing such as advertising and branding.

Keywords: Marketing.

INTRODUCTION

Marketing, the act of promoting products or services to consumers, has been an essential constituent of business since times immemorial. One of its principal (and more subtle) functions is to generate meaning and disseminate it to customers. However, the dissemination of meaning in commercial domains can be a complicated, enigmatic affair. Marketing may involve myriad domains such as public relations, sales promotion, product distribution, pricing, and customer service, and it may take place at any stage of production, including before, during, or after manufacturing. At any of these stages, the transfer of meaning remains a primary purpose of marketing. Marketing may occur at the individual level (consumer), organizational level (corporation), or societal level (government). Marketing concepts such as positioning, branding etc. relate to semiotics directly or indirectly. The positioning of a product is how it is positioned relative to its competitors. In terms of marketing, positioning refers to the way a company presents their products to consumers. A company's positioning strategy determines what they want to achieve and how they plan to do it. Branding is the name given to a company's identity. It is the image that represents the company and its products. Brands are often represented by logos, slogans, colours, fonts, and packaging. Marketers have more or less control over the material, structural and conventional elements of brand communication, but risk miscommunication and ambivalence at the levels of the contextual and performative elements (Oswald, 2007). Marketing mix is the combination of elements that make up a brand's marketing strategy. These elements include advertising, promotion, pricing, distribution channels, and place. Market segmentation is the process of dividing a market into groups based on similarities between them. Market segmentation helps companies understand who their customers are and what makes them different from each other. Signs and symbols, which are basic constructs in semiotics, play a significant role in the segmentation process. Advertising is any communication that uses paid messages to attract attention to a particular product or service. It is a type of communication that uses mass media (print, radio, television, etc.) to promote

products or services. Advertising is often used to generate brand awareness, increase sales, or both. In addition to traditional forms of advertising, online marketing includes email marketing, search engine optimization, social media marketing, and display advertising. Advertising can take many forms, including television commercials, billboards, radio advertisements, print ads, and online ads. Promotion is the act of getting word out about a product or service. Promotions can be done through traditional methods like TV, radio, newspapers, magazines, and social media, or newer methods like internet search engines, YouTube videos, and Facebook.

Research Gap

The need to explore a certain domain arises because of evident lacunae in the previously established body of research associated with it. In our case, we were looking at two varied disciplines of study, both of which are immensely important in their own right and at their own respective places. Marketing is arguably the most crucial domain in business, given that it drives profits and is the proverbial last mile in the commercial value chain. As such, it has been a well-researched domain with numerous aspects covered in its humongous umbrella. Semiotics, on the other hand, has been a rigorous literary discipline allied with linguistics, albeit with an increasingly widening horizon. Starting from a largely theoretical approach, it has been constantly developing interrelationships with more practical disciplines such as communication, marketing and advertising, architecture, politics, media and music, and even biological and cognitive sciences. Its role in marketing has been studied to some extent. However, given the significance of meaning generation and meaning transfer in marketing and especially its subdomains such as advertising and branding, a stronger conceptual underpinning needs to be created for assisting marketing enthusiasts with understanding cultural signs and symbols through semiotic analysis. The current conceptual study is an endeavour in that direction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The intersection of marketing and semiotics is a rapidly growing discipline with a recent yet resourceful scholarly history. The inception of semiotic interventions in marketing can be observed from a seminal article by Levi (1959) who suggested that products are ‘symbols for sale’. Levy (1959) wrote: “As behaviour in the market place is increasingly elaborated, it also becomes increasingly symbolic. This idea needs some examination, because it means that sellers of goods are engaged, whether wilfully or not, in selling symbols, as well as practical merchandise. It means that marketing managers must attend to more than the relatively superficial facts with which they usually concern themselves when they do not think of their goods as having symbolic significance” What he meant was that products are purchased and consumed for their symbolic and pragmatic value. Roland Barthes’s seminal work *The Fashion System* (1967) in which he reveals that fashion language draws a veil around the fashion object which is none other than the veil of images, of meaning or of reasons; eventually it becomes a reason to resort to semiotics to unveil and clarify the signifying structures behind the representation, consumption and circulation of meaning. Eco (1976) proffers a radiant possibility for the possible utilization of semiotics in varied contexts when he asserts that “a general semiotic theory will be considered powerful according to its capacity for offering an appropriate formal definition for every sort of sign-function, whether it has already been described and coded or not. So the typology of modes of sign-production aims at proposing categories able to describe even those as yet uncoded sign-functions conventionally posited in the very moment in which they appear for the first time.” *Marketing and Semiotics* (1987) is an edited book by Jean Umikar and T.A. Sebeok in

which various scholars have contributed their scholarly papers on the subjects like semiotic marketing and product conceptualisation, semiotic approach to design process, study of signs in consumer behaviour etc. It is a guide book drawing on rich conceptual and methodological tools of various schools of semiotics. Floch and Pinson (2001) contend that “in studying semiotics, marketers can better understand consumer behaviour and how to be effective in their marketing communications”. Serban (2014) delineates the route that marketing traversed from its inception to the creation of definitive concepts of consumer behaviour research and the underlying implication and application of the semiotic paradigm for constructing and comprehending meaning in the marketplace.

Elements of Semiotics

Semiotics is a discipline that provides a structure for exploring, analysing and comprehending the sign functions within a particular context. The theoretical groundwork known as semiotics serves as the foundation for this work. According to Halliday in Webster (2003), the study of language as an object helps us better grasp meaning and systems of meaning with various modalities of realisation. The study of semiotics is a study on sign. Eco (1976) defines sign as “which may be interpreted to stand for (or substitute for) something”. As a result, he challenges the notion that the meaning of signals or signs is defined by the objects (i.e. things or events) to which they refer in his theory of semiotics. He contends that the existence of actual items to which signals or signs may correspond is not a necessary condition for their signification and clarifies that the meaning of signals or signs is not necessarily defined by whether they refer to actual objects. (Eco, 1976)

Signs, the primary entity studied in semiotics, can take many different forms, including words, images, sounds, smells, sensations and from a written word to a picture to a spoken phrase. Signs have their own rules of interpretation, and these rules determine what they mean. In semiotics, signs are analysed according to three categories: signifiers, signifieds and context. Signifiers are the things that make up the message. They are the physical objects that carry the message. Examples of signifiers include words, pictures, numbers, and sounds. Signifieds are the meanings that the signifier carries. They are the ideas or concepts that the signifier represents. Context refers to everything outside the signifier and signified. It includes the environment, culture, and history surrounding the signifier and signified. One can ponder what indicators are utilised in the field of marketing today to symbolise which goods or services, who they are intended for, and why. Semiotics offers a rationale for asking such questions and creating a system of suitable indicators.

One of the most prominent semiotic scholars whose work is often used as a lens for understanding and analysing various marketing phenomena is Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913). Saussurean analysis focuses on how signs relate to each other and how they function in communication. The sign is the whole that results from the association of the signifier with the signified. (Saussure 1916). Both the signifier (the "sound pattern") and the signified (the concept), in Saussure's view, are wholly "psychological." Instead of substance, both are immaterial forms. Language is based on signs rather than objects. He argued that language was based on the relationship between signs, not their physical representation. Saussure believed the only difference between spoken and written language was the use of different signs. The structure of linguistic signs in the language system, which enables them to function as human beings and communicate with one another, is one example of how Saussure's theory of signs emphasises internal structure devoted to cognitive thought process or activity of human minds in structuring the physical (material) or intangible (abstract) signs of their environments or surroundings. Because we use language to give meaning to both things that exist in the world of reality and things that do not, Saussure's theory is regarded as

the proponent of the idea that "language does not reflect reality but rather constructs it" (Chandler, 2002, p. 28).

Charles Sanders Peirce is well-known for being a forerunner of the pragmatic school of thought. In his *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* (1931), he proffered a three-dimensional definition of a sign. Sign to him is something which stands to something in some respect or something that relates to something else for someone in some respect or capacity. Peircean sign model has three components. In this triadic model of the sign, there is representamen, the form which sign takes (sign vehicle), an Interpretant: focuses on the sense made of the sign, and an Object: something beyond the sign to which it signals (a referent). To qualify as a sign, all three elements are essential. Sign, in this way, becomes a unity of what is represented, how it is represented and how it is interpreted. Peirce referred to the interaction between the representamen, the object and the interpretant as 'semiosis'.

According to Saussure, who studied behaviour, a sign is the product of human imagination or mental activity that is conveyed through linguistic codes and is comprehended by those involved in the communication process. In opposition to Saussure's views Peirce studied logic and, as a philosopher who favoured logical thinking, he wanted to understand how people thought, specifically how they use their common sense or rationality, (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1993). Peirce claimed that individuals thought through signals, which allow them to interact with one another and provide meaning to everything around them. According to Peirce's fundamental tenet everything can be a sign as long as it can symbolise something in accordance with the individual's interpretation and idea. Succinctly, the distinction between Peirce and Saussure's orientations lies on the aspect of reality as well as the discipline of epistemology. Saussure believed that reality is connected to our physical bodies or human minds, whereas Peirce believed that reality exists outside of human internal structure and is unrelated to humans.

Marketing and Semiotics

Marketing is all about creating meaningful connections between people and products. In one of the earliest instances of juxtaposing marketing and symbols together. Semiotics is the study of signs and symbols, which is why it is important in marketing for understanding the meaning that products have. Semiotics is concerned with the signs and meanings that are attached to linguistic and non-linguistic things and events. As such it plays an increasingly important role within marketing as marketing is seen in terms of exchange relationships that entail psychological and social, as well as physical and financial meanings (Floch and Pinson, 2001). Serban (2014) describes the way that marketing traveled from the first schools of thought to the consumer behavior research and the implication of semiotic paradigm on meaning in the marketplace. Mick et al (2004) conducted an elaborate review of the various directions in which marketing semiotics researches had been undertaken. There are three main aspects of meaning that are relevant to marketing: literal meaning, implied meaning, and symbolic meaning. Literal meaning refers to the actual words that are used in a text or advertisement. This is how much attention people pay to the text itself and how much they understand it from its content alone. Implied meanings arise from what's left unsaid, or from what's been left out of the text. Symbolic meanings relate to the way in which a sign or symbol can be interpreted by viewers or readers. This may involve associating a particular sign with a certain emotion or idea, for example. Understanding these different meanings is essential when it comes to effective marketing because it allows marketers to target their messages specifically towards consumers. They can also use this knowledge to create engaging and persuasive advertisements that will compel people to take action (by buying a product, signing up for a newsletter, etc.). Scholarly work on packaging, brand names, and

logos has been relatively limited in marketing and consumer research, with very few on meaning except for studies based on semiotics. (Mick et al, 2004).

Advertising and Semiotics

Advertising is one of the salient domains of applied semiotic research. Advertising has always been an important part of the global economy. It's been responsible for changing the way we think about products, and it's helped create some of the most popular brands in the world. But what is semiotics, and why is it so important in advertising? It uses symbolism to get its message across. By understanding the language of advertising, we can better understand how it's designed and interpreted, and eventually learn how to improve our own marketing efforts. Barthes (1990) signifies the utility of multiple layers of symbols used in marketing and advertising as primarily an economic one. He propounds: "Why does Fashion utter clothing so abundantly? Why does it interpose, between the object and its user, such a luxury of words (not to mention images), such a network of meaning? The reason is, of course, an economic one. Calculating, industrial society is obliged to form consumers who don't calculate; if clothing's producers and consumers had the same consciousness, clothing would be bought (and produced) only at the very slow rate of its dilapidation; Fashion, like all fashions, depends on a disparity of two consciousnesses, each foreign to the other. In order to blunt the buyer's calculating consciousness, a veil must be drawn around the object – a veil of images, of reasons, of meanings, a mediate substance of an aperitive order must be elaborated; in short, a simulacrum of the real object must be created, substituting for the slow time of wear a sovereign time free to destroy itself by an act of annual potlatch." Of course, semiotics plays an important role in advertising, as it helps to create effective messages that can be understood by consumers. Within the discourse analysis, semiotics identifies how signs are used to represent something. In the discourse of advertising, it can be a wish, a need, a desire or a worry to be solved. (Džanić and Tuzli, 2013) One of the benefits of using semiotics in advertising is that it can help to create a more engaging experience for customers. For example, ads that use colours or images that are associated with feelings (like happiness or excitement) will tend to be more effective than those that don't. Semiotics also allows for ads to be visually striking and memorable, which can help them to stand out from the competition. Overall, semiotics is an essential tool for advertisers who want to develop successful campaigns that will appeal to consumers worldwide. Branding

Branding is the act of associating a product or service with a particular image, name, symbol, or idea. A brand is a promise of quality, reliability, and trustworthiness. According to the American Marketing Association, "A brand is a name, term, sign, symbol, or design which is intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors". Brands are often associated with companies, products, services, people, organizations, events, ideas, emotions, and values. Schaefer and Botte (2010) use semantic differential and functional MRI to investigate brands as cultural symbols. Brands have become increasingly important in our lives, and are powerful tools for communication. They help us identify who we are and what we stand for. Brands are semiotic systems that create value in the marketplace by differentiating competitors in a category, forming emotional connections with consumers, and aligning the company's symbolic equities with contemporary cultural trends. (Oswald, 2015). Budtz et al (2010) discuss the idea of branding through storytelling. Brands help us communicate our message to others. Brands give us a sense of identity and belonging. They allow us to express ourselves and connect with others. Brands help us make decisions about what we want to purchase and consume. Brands help us find information about products and services. Brands help us determine whether we should trust someone or not. Brands help us decide if we

should vote for a candidate or not. Brands help define our culture and society. McCracken (1986) projected a model that postulated the transfer of meaning from culture and society to product brands through the medium of advertisements, and then to the consumers when they possess and consume those products. Conejo and Wooliscroft (2014) redefine brands as complex multidimensional constructs with varying degrees of meaning, independence, co-creation and scope. They postulate that brands are semiotic marketing systems that generate value for direct and indirect participants, society, and the broader environment, through the exchange of co-created meaning.

CONCLUSION

Semiotics is a field of study that deals with the study of signs and meaning. It has been used in business for a long time, and there are many reasons why it is an important tool. With all the talk of 'the semantic web' and 'digital marketing', it's no wonder that semiotics is starting to play an increasingly important role in business. Semiotics is the study of signs and symbols, and it's used to understand how people communicate. It can help businesses understand their customers, understand how their products are being perceived, and even understand their own brand identity. In short, semiotics can help businesses get a deeper understanding of what's going on inside and outside of their businesses

From understanding product labels to decoding body language, semiotics provides a valuable perspective that can help us understand the world around us. Semiotics is important in marketing because it helps us to understand how people process and interpret information. This is essential in developing effective marketing campaigns that target specific consumer groups. By understanding how consumers process and interpret information, we can create messages that are more likely to be effective. In addition, semiotics can help us to better understand consumer behaviour and trends. This knowledge can help us to design effective product packaging, for example, or tailor marketing messages to specific demographics. Overall, semiotics is an essential tool in the marketing arsenal that can help us to create more effective campaigns and products.

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