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Understanding the Interplay of Signifiers and the Signified(s): A Semiotic Analysis of Anti-Obesity Ad Images

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Abstract

According to WHO's fact sheet, worldwide obesity has more than doubled since 1980 and it is also researched that overweight and obesity kills more people than underweight. The data and facts related to obesity are alarming worldwide and efforts towards generating awareness about the ill effects of obesity are on the rise. The anti-obesity posters, advertisements, images, etc., are loaded with visual cues (such as signs, images, colours and so on) to captivate viewer's thoughts and communicate the message in the most appealing manner. It is interesting to observe what they contain and how effectively they suggest the pernicious consequences of obesity on adults and children. The paper analyses these visual cues and examines them for their impact on the psyche of the viewer. The methodology of this research is semiotic analysis, which has provided the tools here for analyzing selected images available online, containing anti-obesity text messages with conspicuous illustrations.

Keywords: Semiotic Analysis, Linguistics, Sign, Signifier, Signified, Anti-Obesity Advertisements.

Introduction

Semiotic Analysis or Semiology is the study of sign and sign process. The term, 'semiotic' is derived from the Greek word 'Semeion', which means sign or a mask. Sign can be defined as any object or word which suggests or represents a meaning. It is closely related to the field of linguistics which specifically studies the structures and meanings in a text. Semiotics can also be studied under the heads of Semantic Analysis (study of meaning) and Syntactic Analysis (study of structures). The semiotic analysis yields are based on the proportion of visual and verbal content in the images. The

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conclusions drawn from the analysis reveal the effect of different signs on the viewer i.e., how the visual and verbal aspects of images interact to induce a range of emotions, such as, fear, awe, anxiety, and humour. Semiotic analysis can also help one understand how messages can be communicated in the most impactful manner through an intelligent combination of text and images.

The world around us is full of symbols and we assign meaning to each of these to communicate. Semiotics believes that meanings do not lie in the pictures, rather we derive our own meanings out of them. Hence, there is a likelihood of one sign emanating multiple meanings every time it is viewed, observed, or studied by the same person or different persons at different points of time. The meaning which a sign entails often corresponds to the circumstances, cultural bias, individual perceptions, mental state of an individual, and a host of such other factors. Hence, it is a very complex study, and observations or results obtained might appear to be highly individualistic and cannot be generalized.

Conceptual Background: The Meaning and Scope of Semiotic Analysis

The well-known Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Sassure (1857-1913) in his work, *The Course in General Linguistics* (1967) described semiotics as a science and explained how signs function in society, specially the use of language. According to him, a sign is a composite of two elements, first, its physical form in which we see it and second, the concept or idea which that physical form is supposed to designate. The former, he called a 'signifier' and the latter was termed as a 'Signified'. Signifiers may have different signified. Hence, it becomes crucial to distinguish between a signified, i.e., the phenomenon which a sign represents and the actual physical object or referent that forms the sign. Semioticians explore the meaning in signs and understand the layers of meanings in manifestations. Charles Sanders Pierce is known as the founder of American Semiotics. His perspective about semiotics is philosophical and psychological.

We are surrounded by symbols and we build meanings from representations through them. Semioticians believe that we bring meanings to the picture, and picture itself does not convey anything objectively. Visual interpretation is rooted in the perception through cognition and language. Social, cultural, and personal frames often influence meaning. Sonia Maasik and Jack Solomon, in their essay, *The Semiotic Method* state, "Signs, in short, often conceal some interest or other, whether political, or commercial, or whatever. And the proliferation of signs and images in an era of electronic technology has simply made it more important that we learn to decode the interests behind them" (Maasik). Semiotic Analysis helps us understand the complexity of visual communication, while processing visual information and producing meanings from images. The various images we observe and the meaning we derive depends upon how and when we try to analyze to uncover the social and cultural realities. His focus was on the perception of the people about the phenomenal world and how they communicate it through visual and verbal modes of communication. Pierce (1934)

proposed three models of semiotic analysis. He referred to them as Representament, Object, and Interpretant. Representament is name given to the object, object is the thing or the physical form which sign represents, and Interpretant is the meaning understood or interpreted from the sign. Pierce talked about three different types of signs: icons, symbols, and index. Umberto Eco (1986) also focuses upon the communication done by the representation of one idea and emotions through words, images, colours used in drawing a picture of something we can sense or imagine. Roland Barthes (1964) uses denotations and connotations to indicate the primary and secondary meaning of sign respectively. Study of semiotics is a relatively recent phenomenon. It has helped to increase the awareness about signs, their representation, and a host of possibilities in which the signs are interpreted.

Area of Study: The Case of Anti-Obesity Ad Images Available Online

In recent years, obesity has become a significant health problem in affluent population. The World Health Organization identifies obesity as one of the top ten global health problems. Obesity can be defined as the imbalance between energy intake and output. This is chiefly the outcome of overeating and sedentary lifestyle. To bring seriousness about obesity problems in children specially, a host of advertisements, posters and images are available online, in print media, and broadcast through televisions.

In this paper, Semiotic Analysis is the methodology adopted for analyzing the select anti-obesity ad images available online. The discussion on the images chosen, aims at understanding the impact their contents can have on the viewer's mind. This largely depends upon the ways in which images address and manifest the signified concept. The analysis will explain the visual cues and how successful they are in stimulating their viewer's thought process and appeal to them leaving an impression.

Images Set - 1: Georgia's anti-obesity ads



Image 1



Image 2



Image 3

These images include pictures of young children who are visibly overweight. Each image has some text messages. These black and white images flash a WARNING in red. Using the red colour is significant. Red is conventionally associated with warning, danger, etc. It has the lowest frequency that makes things appear nearer than they are, thus ensuring maximum visibility. The text under the warning is in bold letters intended to catch attention instantly. However, before these verbal messages are read, attention is caught by the expressions on children's face. The profound sadness in their eyes, firmly shut lips, and body language of hands folded across chest/droopy shoulders/ hands in pockets, convey a sense of exasperation and the words below them aptly support the visuals in conveying the message intended. It is significant to note that the texts and the pictures complement each other. In absence of either of them, these signs would lose their impact on the viewer's psyche. The idea behind projecting the images in black and white enhances the gloom inherent in the message. The pictures sans words below them, could have invited altogether different interpretations, such as, anger and depression in children. The idea of highlighting the ill effects of obesity would not strike primarily in viewer's mind. It is important to reflect upon the text accompanying the pictures as well.

IT'S HARD TO BE A LITTLE GIRL IF YOU'RE NOT.
MY FAT MAY BE FUNNY TO YOU BUT IT'S KILLING ME.
BIG BONES DIDN'T MAKE ME THIS WAY. BIG MEALS DID.

In the first sentence, the dependent clause (If you're not) succeeds the main clause without a comma. This implies that the sentence must be read in one breath and registered as imperative. Placing a comma before the dependent clause would make the sentence appear incomplete, as the reader would expect a subject complement following the verb. The ellipsis of 'little girl', a negative marker, 'not' and the final full stop lends the utterance a sense of firmness and holds forth the anguishing irony of not appearing as a cute/ pretty/ beautiful little girl despite being one, is the essence of the statement. In the second sentences, two coordinated independent clauses joined with 'but', have the same purpose of being read at one breath. The pronoun, 'you' points at the viewer and addresses the embarrassment that 'fat' children face. The independent clause, 'It's killing me', forcefully holds forth the health hazard obesity is. The third message takes in two different clauses. The intent behind writing two sentences could be to draw

attention towards people not being able to discriminate between the causes behind having a large stature. They assume largeness might be due to bone structure. Hence, the pause between the two clauses is essential for the grasp of real cause of the child's larger body. The repeated adjective, 'big' is adding to the viewer's mental imaging of size of food portions which leads to such unproportionate built.

The warning in the pictures is 'Stop childhood obesity.' But, significantly it does not appear immediately after its loud heading, WARNING. The insertion of a poignant message intermediately after the heading signifies that just an imperative would neither draw attention nor leave an impression on reader's mind for a longer duration, as the time and thought given to it would be minimal. Although the core of the entire advertisement is this imperative sentence but it relies heavily for its significance on the visual cues amidst which it appears. Secondly, there is a high probability of it being read at the end, once every other detail has been pondered over. Thus, it is understood that the pictures and thought provoking quotes are ample to convey the desired meaning because they retain the viewer's attention for the maximum period. The picture leaves the imprint on the brain and since the quotes stimulate thoughts, they are grasped well too. Visibly, in the third image, the statement is left out for the same reason.

Images Set-2



Image 4 Image 5 Image 6

The second set consists of colourful images. The images draw attention for being the intelligently modified versions of popular advertisements of junk food brands. Their appeal lies chiefly in them being intelligently designed, meaningful, and having a tinge of humour as opposed to the gloominess of the previous set of images. The former set of images from anti-obesity campaign ensued a lot of repercussion for their depressing portrayal of obesity issues. "The ads won praise for their attention-grabbing tactics. But they also have outraged parents, activists and academics who feel the result is more stigma for an already beleaguered group of children" (Freeman).

These bloated images of iconic characters from brand advertisement posters rouse curiosity of them being represented in a new form. The most important aspect of an advertisement is that it draws immediate attention, which these ads surely intend to do. Since, they are familiar images, their meaningful modifications become appealing.

It would be interesting to understand the modifications each image has undergone. Haribo is a popular German brand of gummy candies. It uses the slogan: "Kids and grown-ups love it so – the happy world of Haribo." The revised slogan for the anti-obesity reads: THE UNHAPPY WORLD OF HARIBO. A simple modification of adding the prefix 'un' to the adjective happy appears easy superficially, but becomes significant in its implications. It indicates how the consumption of this popular confectionary has been making children fat and eventually 'unhappy'.

A rather amusing modified slogan is that of Pringles chips brand. The original slogan, ONCE YOU POP YOU CAN'T STOP!, is changed into BETTER STOP. OR YOU'RE GONNA POP… The apparently catchy original slogan of one sentence splits into two in its altered version. The idea behind the split is to allow the viewer's mind to pause to register the strong imperative and its reason which follows. Rhyming structures are proven to be easy to remember, hence, the modified slogan retains the rhyme of the original version. Both have the similar intent, i.e. to be picked up easily, but have radically different message to convey. Placing full stop between two sentences is a way of highlighting the exhortation, 'Stop'. The sentence that follows starts with a conjunction 'or' and ends in ellipsis as compared to the exclamation in the original ad sentence. The ellipsis might imply that popping Pringles will have many more adverse effects other than being popped after becoming severely bloated.

In the third advertisement of Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC), the slogan 'Finger Licking Good' has been rendered as, 'Little Freakin' Good'. The bloated cheeks of Colonel Sanders (KFC founder) accompanying the slogan, implies a fast food which is annoyingly or contemptuously good.

Significantly, the images have not undergone major modifications or radical changes. The idea behind this is to draw attention and convey the message. The verbal aspect of the images has the same acoustic effect and intends to retain the appeal of the original versions. If the structures of slogans are changed, there is a plausibility of the new slogans being forgotten or ignored against the familiar background. The core message is presented inside a colourful bubble. The colour of the bubble is in contrast with the background colour for prominence.

Images Set-3



Image 7



Image 8

These two images are examples of no text message in an ad image, versus excess of text in one. The image without any text message could draw multiple interpretations (if the context is unknown):

A. People are fond of burger and soda.
B. People like to travel with them, or
C. Burger and soda are the best company when in good mood.

The fact that the person depicted is obese goes unnoticed unless much thought is given to it. The expression on his face also does not help much in deciphering his condition. Since the picture shows that the person is holding hands of both the food items, it gives the impression that person willingly takes them along. If observed in isolation, the picture nowhere conveys obesity as a menace. In the second image, the verbal aspect occupies a lot of space. The picture of yo-yo doesn't contribute anyway to the idea of eating disorder. Too much of text generally fails to retain attention for a longer duration. The common saying that picture speaks a thousand words holds true in this context too. The main idea about discouraging yo-yo dieting is clear through the letters in bold and red, at the centre of the image and the illustration with the image of a yo-yo is uncalled for. The attention span of viewers generally is very less. Thus, it becomes vital to convey information in less words, place, and in a manner, that could hold attention. The three sentences that are suggesting doing away with yo-yo dieting may not hold the reader's attention till the whole text is read, also, it is likely that viewer skips reading the text after knowing that it would be some elaboration of the text in bold. Rob Weatherhead in his article, "Say it quick, say it well – the attention span of a modern internet consumer", analyses the phenomenon of attention span in the era of technology. He says, "The current generation of internet consumers lives in a world of 'instant gratification and quick fixes' which leads to a 'loss of patience and a lack of deep thinking'" (Weatherhead).

Images Set-4

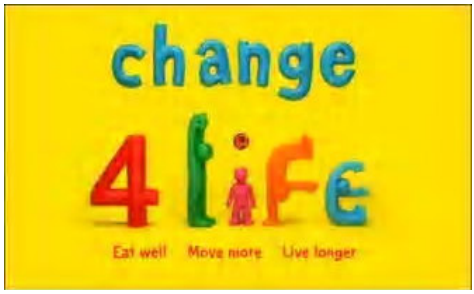


Image 9



Image 10

These images put forth the idea of healthy living in a positive way and do not project any sign of the gloomy aspect of obesity, as noticeable in previous ads. The first image encourages to change the lifestyle mainly through movements, as suggested in the exercising figures creatively drawn to take the shape of letters L, I, F, and E. The different colors used for the message are the chief cause of them catching attention.

The image uses all the primary colours, i.e., red, blue, and green against a yellow background for prominence. The creative rendering of letters as exercising figures aids in the viewer's understanding of making exercise an essential part of life or movement is life. Compared to a plain text saying, 'Change for Life', the creativity in it helps one grasp the message in a better way.

The second image uses the popular symbol of fast food brand, Mc Donald's. This symbol is one of the most recognized symbols worldwide. Mc Donald's has become synonymous with junk food and often finds place in the campaigns against obesity. The symbol is modified as a banana peel and supports the message, 'Eat Healthier'. Using the comparative adjective, 'healthier', instead of 'healthy' signifies that the ad doesn't want to pronounce Mc Donald's food as 'unhealthy'. It just suggests making better choices in eatables.

Observing such images and trying to understand the significance of signs chosen for an advertisement can help in designing impactful ads in future. It is interesting to observe which ad appeals best to the viewer's psyche and in what ways.

Conclusions

In any advertisement, all signs, whether they are icons or symbols, are indexes. Before understanding the significance of a sign used, it must be identified in a material world. Choice of the signifier is the first thing that attracts viewers emotionally to a product or space. It evokes feelings and provides meaning to the signified. All these have an incredible ability to influence viewer's reactions, provided they appeal in a right way.

The ultimate objective of these anti-obesity ads is to gain attention, evoke interest, and to leave an imprint on the spectator's mind. From the semiotic analysis of these images, following conclusions can be drawn:

1. Although verbal messages are important, visuals dominate the ads. The verbal aspect explains and often enhances the visual attributes in the ads.
2. The effect or appeal of these ads is either self-focused (such as disappointment with one's own self or who-cares attitude) or others-focused (such as attract or appease).
3. There is no fixed pattern for the depiction of the message. The similar looking images included here, are the part of the same campaign, hence, they follow a similar framework. The means used to communicate are appeal to cognition, emotion, or volition. Humour, fear, anxiety are the tools of the creator with which a specific reaction can be generated.
4. The ads which include modified versions of popular junk food brand symbols and slogans are essentially to attract attention to the ad and then convey the effects of overconsumption of junk food.
5. The viewer's reactions may vary from a graceful acceptance and transition to an aggressive resistance, resulting in delay or denial. These reactions depend upon the meanings which viewers assign to the signs.

Advertising fascinates viewers. Semiotic analysis of these ads gives an insight into the various interpretations a sign can generate. It needs thinking and putting meaning into this thinking from multiple dimensions. It also helps us discover the intricacies and nuances involved in the overall design. The viewer's background, mood, necessities etc., contribute significantly to the way (s)he interprets signs and symbols. It is an interesting area because it provides a broad spectrum of possible meanings. There is no uniform or universally recognized pattern. It all depends on how we organize the signs and assign meaning to them by bringing alive the diversities and attributes of human nature.

Note

- The word 'Warning' in Images 1, 2 and 3 is red in colour.

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