Semiotic Usages In Advertisements To Create Meaning

One of the branches of semiotics in this modern world is “consumer or marketing semiotics” as referred to the usages of semiotics in the marketing and consumers field (Noth 1990). As suggested by Mick (1986: 196-213) the fields of semiotics and advertising within the marketing umbrella seem to be interconnected. He stated that semiotics can explore and suggest ways in which consumers can achieve added insights in the efforts to comprehend symbolism in the marketplace.

The science of semiotics and its usages was explored and researched first by Swiss Linguist Ferdinand De Saussure. His linguistic paradigm which has been based on social psychology and has led to a concentration on first, is the role of the communication structure, meaning and its nature; second, is the role of symbolism and its origins and third, is the cultural relativity of communication and meaning (Ranjan 2010: 6-11). Along with Saussure, Charles Sanders Peirce who is also considered to be the co-founder of the semiotics study, defined semiotics as the doctrine of signs stand for something else and is understood or has some other meaning for somebody. A sign is applied as a substitution for another thing to transmit a concept about it (Peirce 1958). When applying semiotics into advertisements, Sherry (1985) pointed out that its usages is a way to present and apprehend the events which happened and are happening in the world. Advertisements in general are constructed by symbols, icons, colors, images and texts. By combining these elements, consumers find its meaning through what is delivered. According to Morris (1946), three categories of an image are divided: syntax, semantics and pragmatics. In order, syntax is the relation between signs, the esthetical level (form), which is placed in the advertisement in hierarchy so that consumers or viewers can understand which signs are more or less important than others. When signs are assured in viewers’ mind, semantics as the referential level (content) comes as referred things and the connection between different signs, it is usually known as wordings and its hidden meaning. Hence, it is called the content of an image. After form and content are recognized, pragmatics as the communicative level (interpretation) comes to place as a viewer’s cognitive process is considering the various aspects. In social-caused advertisements, the role of semiotics is to create positive experiences and feeling associated the advertised matters, which might engage receiver’s response. For instance, most of anti-smoking advertisements are visualized with damaged lungs and rotten teeth. The images of the damaged lungs and rotten teeth alone themselves hardly make any substantial influence on viewers, however it does strike them when associating with the causing reason. The reason which has been proven and presented by many death cases that smoking kill hundreds of people than accidents do. Thus, Scott (1994: 252-73) pointed out that in order to impact consumers, images should communicate claims, evaluations and even express offers.

As defined and stated by many researchers how semiotics is used in advertising, it is essential to understand the different types of meaning that semiotics illustrate visually in advertisements:

Cueing

“A cue is a signal of something or a reminder of something” (Chandler 2007). As a reminder of something, the concept of cueing is quite important to visual communication because the it

brings to mind something from past knowledge or experience that can help to create a framework of meaning which might be used to interpret the sign. Chandler pointed out that during the association with the advertisement, two thoughts are normally presented in people's mind, first is the appearance of a product or service itself and second is the delivered message. If consumers think about the message together with its visual cues and recall the product and vice versa, which means that this advertisement has successfully registered in their mind. Therefore, the success of an advertisement relies on the performance of the cueing process. In other words, cueing drives the process of association of various meanings in advertisements. Thus, visual cueing has immensely important role in decoding of the messages in advertisements.

Symbolic Meaning

To understand how visual sign constructs its meaning in the advertisement, it is paramount to realize how the meaning of symbol is produced. As explained above the theory by Saussure, "the sign process involves a signifier – as it could be words, sounds, or objects that represents a signified - which is the idea, concept or thought that people want to communicate (Saussure 1983). For instance, a drawing of a tree and the letter T R E E (the signifiers) can both be said to represent or signify the type of plant growing from the ground with brown wood, several pointed branches with green leaves and sometimes with blossoming fruits (the signified) which can be seen growing along the road. This example of TREE illustrated that both the drawing and the signified are the products of visual imagery. According to Bignell (2002), a symbol is something that represents something else by convention or by association. For example, red color is a symbol and associated with danger while green color is associated with safety or eco-friendly. Human being has been taking these symbols with fixated meaning from society and agree upon the meaning of these symbols – as in the color example, by convention.

Thus, the signal or a cue stimulated the production of meaning in a person's mind. This process appears to be particularly imperative in understanding symbolic meaning in advertisements' messages since it elicits a formation of meaning based on earlier encountered associations.

Metaphoric Meaning

The process of symbolization is broad. Nevertheless, a more complex type of symbolic communication is derived from metaphoric meaning. What is a metaphor? A metaphor is an imaginative way of explaining or describing things by referring to something else that has the equal qualities that the describers want to express. Kaplan (1943: 230-47) stated that "a metaphor is a combination of two ideas presented in relationship to one another such that one idea is used to organize or conceptualize the other". Metaphors is useful for expanding the conventional way of seeing things and by that, producing a variety of individual meaning. However, a metaphorical expression in some way is considered as a category mistake since it confuses and challenges the viewers to make sense of things that does not quite fit.

The metaphoric analysis is important in advertising because it is the most convenient form for transferring abstract qualities such as value and durability to products or services. However, considering the confusion and complication of metaphorical meaning has represented, advertisers should be much careful when ones want to use this type because it might easily get

misunderstood by some viewers.

Meta-Codes

The concept of meta-codes in semiotics theory is similar to the concept of genre. The set of code is an agreed upon set of rules that guide the meaning making (Berger 2010). It is quite essential in understanding how people decode and interpret the message of an advertisement. Berger also explained, “people carry codes around in their heads, highly complex patterns of associations that enable them to interpret symbolic and metaphoric communication correctly”. Hence, audience usually have expectations about the advertisement’s meaning based on their knowledge with the form of advertising and their understanding related to that specific product or service.

Denotation and Connotation

These two terms Denotation and Connotation in semiotics theory are quite common and they are explaining the connection between the signifier and its signified. Denotation is described as a factual or definitional meaning of a sign while connotation is referred to personal experience or associations like emotional perspectives of the sign. As Wilden (1987) said, “Denotation is considered as a digital code whereas connotation is regarded as an analogue code”. Simply, denotative is the most conventional significant level in society whose meaning is socially agreed and accepted. Denotative has other referred terminologies, such as ideational meaning, the meaning of conceptual or referential meaning. Meanwhile, connotative is the type that opens the possibility of broad interpretation. Connotative meaning could be subjective due to its relation with personal experience which react and give meaning for emotive connotations (e.g. scary, smooth, calm, polite, etc.). The aim of connotation is to dismantle hidden meanings. Hence, since connotation are more related to personal and socio-cultural aspects, people find it much easier and more open to interpretation than in denotations.

Anchorage

Unlike the other types of meaning, anchorage illustrates a straightforward meaning of advertisements. Usually, it is what the advertisement is about, what the caption means, especially when there is no product appearance. Visual elements sometimes have anchor meaning, particularly if those elements dominate the whole picture or advertisements in some way. For instance, to maximize the product quality, advertisers use “soft and gentle” for a brand of baby soap with some feather icons to anchor the soft and gentle meaning.