

Introduction to Market Research Semiotics

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- Background
- Theory & Mechanics of Semiotics
- Metasemiotics & Intertextuality
- Packaging Semiotics: Red Bull & Pimpjuice
- Questions (& Answers)

- **Forefathers:**
 - Ferdinand de Saussure, (1857 - 1913): Linguistics
 - Charles S. Peirce (1839 - 1914): philosophy and logic
- **Academic Roots:** linguistics and literature
 - then photography & film studies
 - then cultural studies and media studies (advertising)
- **Giants in the Field:**
 - Roland Barthes (*Mythologies*)
 - Umberto Eco (*Travels in Hyperreality, The Name of the Rose*)
 - John Fiske (*Television Cultures*)

- Semiotics holds that all languages (spoken, visual, musical) are composed of signs
- Any sign has two basic parts: Signifier & Signified
- **Signifier**
 - what something *is*, or denotative ('dog')
- **Signified**
 - what something *means*, or connotative
 - what does the image of a dog mean or connote to us?
 - loyalty
 - devotion
 - unconditional love
 - masculinity (all dogs are masculine in the same way that all cats are feminine)

- we start learning this in kindergarten and then spend the rest of our lives building up denotation-connotation relationship in our brains
- this relationship is mediated through culture
- our culture dictates these meanings, which do not necessarily translate across cultures (although globalization aids this process)
 - Western culture vs. Eastern culture
 - English Canada vs. French Canada
- culture gives texts further connotations:
 - dogs = loyalty & masculinity in part due to *Lassie*, *Tintin*, *Red Badge of Courage*, *Old Yeller*, *Littlest Hobo*, *Mad Max/Road Warrior*, etc.:
- advertising is part of a cultural, connotative loop
- as marketers, we play a role in how connotative values evolve over the years

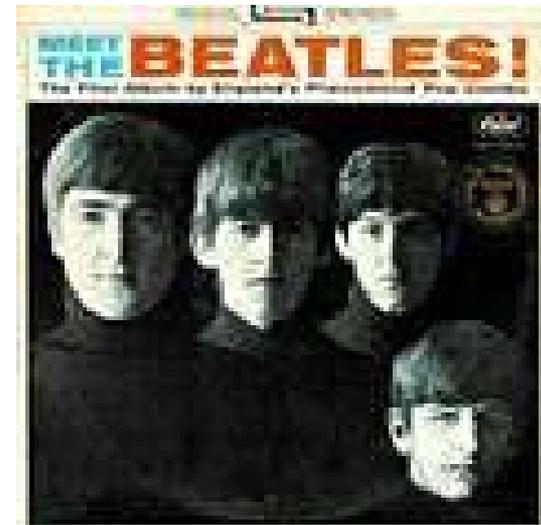
- Semiotics sees all communication as **text** or **narrative**
- **Text** = word, novel, film, commercial, song, outfit, party environment
- **Text** = anything that can be read, or decoded
- Text = 'narrative'
- because signs/texts all tell a story
- we employ these narratives to communicate information about ourselves (true or not)
- tastes in clothing, jewellery, music, film, décor, cars, etc.

- Semiotics is the art of **thinking profoundly** about **banal things**
- Establish **relationship between signifieds and signifiers** by asking following questions:
 - Who or what created the text?
 - What does it mean?
 - Where did it come from?
 - What does it look like or resemble or imitate or suggest?
 - How does it deliver its message?
 - What medium was employed?
 - In what context does it occur?
 - How many different interpretations are possible? Positive and negative?

- Theory that all texts are constructed of parts of other texts
- “only three original stories in the whole world”
- Two kinds of intertextuality:
- **Horizontal**
 - references to the same text within a text
 - Smithers points out that Marge painted a portrait of Mr. Burns in a previous episode of *The Simpsons*
- and **Vertical**
 - references to other texts within a text
 - 95% of *The Simpsons* humour

Simpsons Intertextuality

- Hundreds of intertextual references per episode
- ‘Homer’s Barbershop Quartet’ episode is play on The Beatles
 - Pete Best (Chief Wiggam)
 - Beatlemania in Springfield
 - group dissolves when Barney is seduced by “abstract Japanese performance artist”
- Humour of show is largely dependent on recognition of references



- Lava lamp, chair = 1960s 'swinger' sexuality and libido, now faded and dated
- Troy McClure: the fading Hollywood star (Hollywood sexual politics)
- name evokes dramatic names from old Hollywood star system (Troy = Troy Donahue, McClure = hooked by lure)
- ("You may remember me from such films as . . ." is horizontal faux-vertical intertextuality)
- *Planet of the Apes* films and television series
- Broadway musicals, and Broadway musical choreography
- Times Square as center of live theatre/musicals world,
- Defunct Fox Studio is only run-down theatre: self-depreciation of Fox Studios
- *Stop The World I Want To Get Off* (stage play and movie)
- Stylized music of Andrew Lloyd Weber
- Ape Nurse = soft-core porn characters, such as in films of Russ Meyer (*Faster, Pussycat! Kill, Kill!*), still popular in current music videos & skateboard culture (Blink 182 videos, *American Pie* movies)
- "Dr. Zaius" song melody is from "Rock Me Amadeus" by 1980s band Falco, complete with strange, out-of-place piano solo
- Homer loves "legitimate thee-a-ter" (illegitimate theatre = strip clubs & lap dances, etc.)
- 80s dance phenomenon 'break-dancing' (*Electric Boogaloo!*)
- John Travolta's disco pose from *Saturday Night Fever*
- head-banger head-thrash (Metallica, etc.)
- References to *The Full Monty*, *Rocky*, i.e. notion that Broadway musicals made from movies tend to sanitize and trivialize any of the film's initial social criticism and dramatic impact
- squeak of Statue of Liberty reference to basement-quality regional community theatre performances
- The can-can (French music-hall dance, turn-of-the-century Parisian culture)
- Fireworks = 4th July, Celebration (which is utterly inappropriate for shocking horror of the moment)
- "I love you, Dr. Zaius!" reference to Heston's reputation as gay icon thanks to Tony Curtis in *Ben Hur*
- White towel = Elvis comeback tour (triumphant return . . ."it's good to be back!")



- Umberto Eco: intertextuality in film, TV, movies, ads are ***consciously constructed*** to be semiotically decoded
- one of the examples that Eco cites is the difference between
 - *Casablanca*
 - and
 - *Jurassic Park*

- *Casablanca*:
 - modern, semiotic text
 - very rich, opening 2 minutes requires full semester to decode
 - but Curtiz did not consciously design it to be decoded
 - no conscious, deliberate, overt intertextual references
- *Jurassic Park*:
 - postmodern, metasemiotic text
 - Spielberg consciously designed the film to be decoded
 - deliberate, overt reference to *King Kong* via the park gates
 - Goldblum's character articulates this reference in the script

- in *King Kong*, the gates are a **semiotic** text
 - (they can be analyzed for what they communicate about the film to the audience)
- in *Jurassic Park*, the gates are now a **metasemiotic** text
 - (they can be analyzed for what they communicate to the audience,
 - **and** *King Kong* can also be analyzed for what **it** communicates about *Jurassic Park* to the audience)

Energy Drink Exercise

Red Bull – Pimp Juice

- What are the narratives communicated to the consumer by these packagings?
- To whom are these packages designed to appeal?
 - gender? lifestyle? socio-economics?
- What specific elements can we identify as the source of this communication?
- What are the potential problem areas or liabilities in each packaging?

Example: Red Bull energy drink packaging



- in Western culture, bulls connote
 - strength, power
 - *brute* strength, specifically
 - virility
 - masculinity
 - endurance, determination
 - anger, temper, rage, short fuse
 - dishonest, not straight-forward or straight-up, prevarication (especially when combined with “shit”)
 - not so bright, perhaps



- in Western culture, the colour red connotes
 - passion
 - excitement
 - intensity
 - love, but also hatred and anger
- together, a “red bull” suggests
 - angry, excited bull
 - active, kinetic, violent bull
 - aggression, conflict, a bull covered in blood
 - a bull who sees red, or who is blind to everything but the battle



- these are perfect connotations for an energy drink
- the brand name suggests that the target skews male
- the aggressive, antagonistic, competitive connotation of the brand name also suggests young males who might be
 - physically active
 - engaged in virility competitions, i.e.
 - competing for women at nightclubs and bars
 - who can stay up the latest
 - dance the longest
 - get into the most trouble, etc.



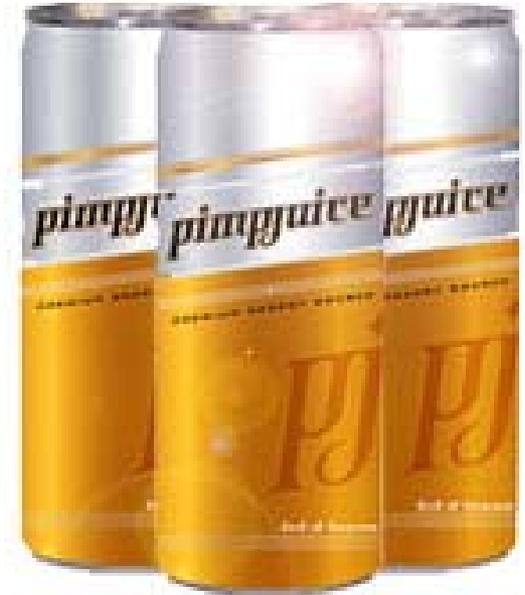
- the logo itself shows two bulls engaged in head to-head combat, which supports the aggressive competitive personality of the brand
- the logo actually shows animal behaviour more commonly associated with rams, deer, elk, etc., when they are competing for female partners (ref. Discovery Channel, etc.)
- this animal posturing further supports the male sexual competitiveness of the brand personality
- this is mitigated by the simple, almost cartoonish design of the bulls, which gives this competitiveness and aggression a more mainstream, socially-acceptable tone
- it also makes the brand socially acceptable for sexually-aggressive young women



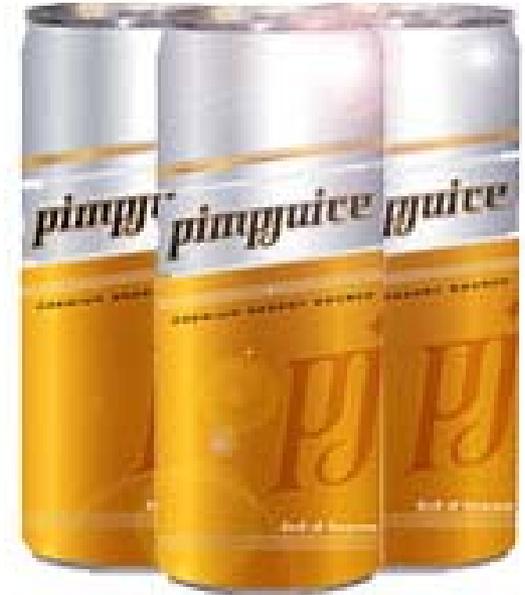
- the packaging design of the product is also a semiotic element worth considering
- the size and shape of the can is standard in the category of energy drinks
- the smaller size (250 mL) connotes potency and strength (good things coming in small packages), as it suggests that the product does not need volume to be effective
- this is essentially a pharmaceutical or recreational drug positioning
- the can packaging also carries connotative resemblances to gun cartridges (long metal cylinder or “full metal jacket”)
- it is no accident that small amounts of very potent liquids used in competitive, active social environments are called “shots”



- pimp juice: “the #1 hip hop energy drink” (endorsed by hip hop superstar Nelly)
- pimp juice works on two primary connotative platforms
 - luxury, high quality, conspicuous consumption, brand as aspirational label (enables you to ‘pimp’ your juice in the same way you can ‘pimp’ your car)
 - sexual innuendo and reference
 - if you’re a pimp, you drink this juice
 - literally, the ‘juice’ of a pimp



- the pimpjuice brand is **metasemiotic** in construction and decoding
- the term 'pimp' here is an intertextual reference
- this brand name and packaging requires an understanding of what the reference to 'pimp' means in hip hop culture in order to communicate the correct information to the correct target market
- without the semiotic skeleton key of intertextuality, this marketing approach would make no sense



Thank You

Questions

&

Answers

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