



# Semiotic Analysis: A Prelude to Understanding the Advertising Phenomenon

El análisis semiótico: antesala para comprender el fenómeno publicitario

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## Abstract

The advertising phenomenon present almost everywhere has a series of characteristics and qualities that grants it with an omnipresent dimension that seems to have no limits. There is, in fact, a considerable number of studies and research that reveal a form of commercial supremacy closely tied to the phenomenon, prevailing over any other condition or aspect.

In order to understand its nature and implications, the document herein refers to studies by authors who have analyzed the structure of the sign and the meaning of things over time, two fundamental aspects in understanding the contemporary role of the advertising phenomenon in individuals and their daily consumer behavior.

An analysis of the current state of affairs offers perspectives that examine its abstract nature, making it possible to infer its future developments and their implications for individuals and the territories we inhabit.

**Keywords:** Semiotics, sign, advertising phenomenon

## Resumen

El fenómeno publicitario presente en prácticamente cualquier lugar posee una serie de características y cualidades que le otorgan una dimensión omnipresente que no parece tener límite. De hecho, existe una cantidad importante de estudios e investigaciones que ponen en evidencia una especie de supremacía comercial estrechamente vinculada con el fenómeno sobre cualquier otra condición o aspecto.

Para intentar comprender su naturaleza e implicaciones, el presente documento recurre a estudios elaborados por autores que a lo largo del tiempo han analizado la estructura del signo y la significación de las cosas, dos aspectos fundamentales para dimensionar el actuar contemporáneo del fenómeno publicitario en los individuos y en las acciones de consumo que éstos realizan de manera cotidiana.

La revisión del estado de las cosas posibilita el acceso a posturas que analizan su condición abstracta, permitiendo inferir la realidad futura del fenómeno y las implicaciones que ello tendrá en los individuos y en los territorios que habitamos.

**Palabras clave:** Semiótica, signo, fenómeno publicitario

## ◆ Introduction

The concept of semiotics has an historical connotation that goes back to the beginnings of humanity and the processes through which humans performed different actions, enabling the significance of objects, experiences, ideas, or artefacts that existed in some form within the context they inhabited.

The semiotic approach hereby presented seeks to explore the theoretical concepts and debates that drive the understanding of the contemporary advertising phenomenon and its expansion in contemporary life, allowing us to unveil the nature of this phenomenon in the lives of individuals from a philosophical perspective. To achieve this, the perspectives of relevant contemporary authors are reviewed, especially Mauricio Beuchot (2004), whose work offers a timeline that helps to understand semiotics and, by extension, the interrelationship of theoretical constructs that allow a better understanding of the impact the advertising phenomenon has on the way individuals are, feel, and think, even disrupting aspects of tradition, history or culture.

## ◆ Historical background of the semiotic approach

"Semiotics, also known as 'semiology', is the science that studies the sign in general; all signs that form languages or systems" (Beuchot, 2004. p. 7<sup>1</sup>). In this regard, Ferdinand de Saussure defined the study of semiology as "the science that studies the life of signs within social life" (Giraud, 1975, p. 7) and Charles S. Peirce as "a general theory of signs called semiotics" (Giraud, 1972, p. 8). In the first case, Saussure emphasize the social aspect of the sign, seeing it as a system through which ideas are expressed, meaning that, even without a general theory, its relevance and significance are acknowledged. In the second case, Peirce highlights the logical function of the sign, which allows having an approach to the study of signs since the mid-20th century (Beuchot, 2004).

Concerning texts that describe the historical development of semiotics, the theories put forth by Mauricio Beuchot (2004) allow us to take a simple, but efficient historical journey of the different ways whereby the semiotic analysis has been approached.

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<sup>1</sup> T. note: The cited pages refer to the Spanish version of the book and may be different in the original language.

To begin with, "The study of semiotics can be traced back to the Stoics" (Beuchot, 2004, p. 14), whose approach is primarily on the linguistic sign, although the evidence of semiotics theory can already be observed. According to this author, and referring to the Stoics, a general theory of the sign is conceptualized, where the linguistic sign is just a part of it, and where the user of the sign is positioned first in the process of signification alongside with three elements: "the sign or signifier (*to semainon* or *to semeion*), the meaning or sense (*to semaineinomenon* or *to lekton*) and the denotation, reference or physical object (*to tynjanon* or *to pragma*)" (Beuchot, 2004, p. 16).

"Thus, the sign and the object are physical things; however, the *lekton* is neither a physical object nor a conceptual object. It is, therefore, an abstract object, with its own subsistence" (Beuchot, 2004, p. 17). According to the author, the Stoics take from Plato the ideal or abstract entity and the existence of a physical object that the sign designates from Aristotle. In this context, it is worth mentioning that for some authors, there is a difference in the way the Stoics used the words *semainon* and *semeion* to define the vehicle of the sign. That is, the first is identified as "sign" and the second as "signal", with the latter having two meanings: commemorative and indicative.

This statement highlights the Stoic position, which it is said that signs have to be materials, excluding those that could be situated in the context of the mental. His position significantly contributes to semiotic studies by defining not only the sign but also sense and a denotation or reference that are clearly understood nowadays and provide the basis for the comprehension of contemporary views, especially those related to the urban structure that supports the advertising phenomenon.

Roger Bacon (1978), in his treatise *De signis*, states "The sign is in the predicament of relation and it is essentially stated in relation to that for which it signifies, because it brings it into action when the sign itself is in action, and potentializes it when the sign itself is in potential" (Beuchot, 2004, p. 23). Therefore, when something is a sign and has no one to signify, it is a sign in potential, and it only becomes a sign in action when it signifies to someone. It is important to note here that the sign is assumed as a relational entity. "It seems that he understands this relation by considering the interpreter as the main correlate of the sign and not the meaning; the relation with the latter is accidental or secondary" (Beuchot, 2004, p. 23).

Roger Bacon defines a sign as "that which, presented to the senses or the intellect, designates something to the intellect itself" (Beuchot, 2004, p. 25). The division proposed by this author for the sign corresponds to those that are natural or those created by the soul, for those that obtain meaning through their essence. The artificial signs are given in relation to the intention of the soul. Likewise, he proposes three subdivisions of the sign:

The first occurs when something is inferred in a probable or necessary manner, representing either the present, past or future. The second occurs when something is not inferred but is instead determined by the conformity of one thing to another in its parts or properties. The third class is the natural sign, which is the least fitting and occurs in the effect in relation to its cause. (Beuchot, 2004, p. 24)

For artificial signs, the author proposes two alternatives:

In the first, it refers to meaning through deliberation and the purpose of the will, as established by the intellect. In the second, it occurs without the deliberation of reason or the choice of the will, but rather suddenly, as a result of the deprivation of sensible time and certain natural instinct and impulses from nature and virtue, acting naturally. (Beuchot, 2004, p. 25)

Juan Duns Escoto (1266) reflects on the sign and states:

To signify means to represent something to the intellect; consequently, what is signified is conceived by the intellect. But everything that is conceived by the intellect is conceived with a distinct and determinate notion, since understanding is a certain act, and thus, what is understood is distinguished from other things. Then, everything that is signified is signified under a different and determined reason. (Beuchot, 2004, p. 27)

Guillermo of Ockham (1285), viewed as one of the most speculative minds of the Middle Ages, discusses the sign in *Summa Logicae* as follows:

In one way, [sign] refers to anything that, when apprehended, leads to the knowledge of something else, even if it does not lead the mind to the first knowledge—as shown elsewhere—but to current [knowledge] from the habitual [knowledge] of it. And so, the word naturally signifies, just as any effect signifies its cause; just as the circle signifies wine in the tavern. But, in this case, I am not referring to the sign in such a general way. Sign is understood in a different way as something that leads to knowledge of something and is naturally capable to be inferred by it or to be added to such [signs] in propositions, like taking the word "sign", the word (vox) of nothing is a natural sign (Beuchot, 2004, p. 29)

Saint Thomas Aquinas did not write a general treatise on the sign, however, his work reveals various elements that define a particular view of it. Thomas Aquinas presents the following specific reflection on the subject:

Understanding the vicarious nature of the sign and its function of referring to something else, meaning that through the sign, anyone could access knowledge of another thing. The sign functions

as a type of vehicle through which one gains specific knowledge of something different. This concept consists of three elements for defining the sign; the sign, the meaning and the intelligible capacity to perceive it. (Beuchot, 2004, pp. 35-36)

This conceptualization is based on a foundation that could be interpreted as the structure for establishing a connection between the sign and its aforementioned elements, similar to an image or mental abstraction of what is perceived, a capacity given to the formal sign, while the instrumental sign will have a casual connection as it is natural, and for those belonging to the conventional sign, their foundation will concern the agreement between humans.

Therefore, the essence of the sign is the relation with another thing; it is not only directly related to humans, but also indirectly and immediately leads them to the meaning. "It relates to human beings and their cognitive faculties, but also with the represented object. Because the sign represents, makes another thing presente, and refers to it" (Beuchot, 2004, p. 37).

Although in medieval philosophy it was believed that everything in the universe was a sign, thinkers like Thomas Aquinas questioned "whether all things could truly be considered signs, given that objects or things required a state of institution or imposition" (Beuchot, 2004, p. 38) whether by nature, humans or God in order to be considered as signs."

According to Thomas Aquinas, a sign becomes perceptible through an intelligible process that defines it as a formal sign, meaning the formality is established when it presents itself as a sign and it is given a meaning (the meaning is simultaneous with that of the sign). The material or sensible sign is instrumental, meaning it requires prior knowledge to infer its meaning. (Beuchot, 2004, p. 39)

In the case of the intelligible sign, Thomas Aquinas refers to "concepts as signs" (Beuchot, 2004, p. 40). From Aristotle, he receives the theory that external signs primarily represent the affections of the soul, including concepts, and only through them, the things. From St. Augustine, he adopts the concept of *verbum* or mental sign. The external sign immediately represents the concept and then the object or, if required, it tries to definitively represent the object, but achieves this through the concept, since it directly means the concept and indirectly the object, even though the object is the main meaning according to the intention. Beuchot (2004, p. 40) states: "When it refers to the object, the concept is a mental, intelligible sign, while the external sign is corporeal and sensible."

In terms of the sensible, material or instrumental sign, Thomas Aquinas considers that the knowledge of the sign as an object is evident and necessary, and is later recognized as a sign, thus indicating its meaning.

With regard to natural and conventional signs, the imposition of the natural condition is emphasized. They are considered signs because they represent the effects of a cause, while arbitrary or conventional signs detach from this natural aspect and are connected to human action or convention.

When referring to the verb or concept as a sign, we draw a clear connection between Thomas Aquinas' view and that of Aristotle, since, as with the latter, the first contact with things occurs through knowledge and subsequently through language. The first representation of perceived things occurs through thought, which represent things as they are, while language represents things as they are known.

"Ramon Llull (Palma de Mallorca, 1232) whose fundamental work focused on developing a combinatorial logic to prove everything that one wished to be prove" (Beuchot, 2004, p. 61), established that this logic was based on the ideal of knowing all things by combining their main elements and it was also intended to be applied not only to philosophy but also to political and religious projects. He found and justified all knowledge from a few essential notions and principles; with this he will obtain the contents of all sciences by using combinations of the symbols that would represent them.

He opposes the "nominalist conventionalism of the majority and adopts a Platonic type of surrealism" (Beuchot, 2004, p. 65), where the primary terms are "natural (innate) signs by all humans" (Beuchot, 2004, p. 65). And rather than innatism, it is illuminationism. Through illumination, "God makes causes humans to deeply understand the meaning of words and communicate them fully to others, based on that universal language rooted in the mind" (Beuchot, 2004, p. 65).

In this sense, words refer to divine thought rather than representing human thoughts as such. Divine ideas serve as the basis through which semantic interpretations are made for practically anything existing in the universe as understood in that period and circumstance. "These words and primitive notions are acquired through analysis (ascent) and arranged through synthesis (descent), complicating them into multiple combinations that enrich them. Definitions are found by analysis, reducing the term to a primitive notion of the art" (Beuchot, 2004, p. 66).

By reducing the problems to the principles of art, their definitions are contracted and specified to the object in question through combinations that will inevitably give the solution. The definitions are combined with each other through composition and conversion. "Such combinations result in propositions, and as they are combinations of two or more primitives (and their definitions), Llull calls these 'conditions', meaning basic propositions. Therefore, there are primitive terms that are reached through analysis, with their respective definitions, to which the terms of any problem should be reduced; these primitive terms form a *universal language*" (Beuchot, 2004, p. 67).

For Llull, the *ars magna* serves both to read and interpret texts, seeking different meanings through combinatorial considerations; as well as an expositional method, helping him to combine tales, fables and parables that express what he wants to communicate. (Beuchot, 2004, p. 71)

### ◆ **The semiotics of Locke, Leibniz, Pierce and Morris**

Beuchot's work (2004) discusses the decline in the semiotic studies in modern philosophy and establishes a certain connection with the criteria of modernity that prevailed at the time. However, there were great thinkers whose ideas continue to be a reference in the semiotic studies. Locke, who gave the name of semiotics to this discipline, Leibniz, who contributed significantly to this field, as well as Pierce and Morris are all mentioned (Beuchot, 2004).

To John Locke (1632-1704), the father of English empiricism, who had a strong nominalist influence in conceptualism, universals are concepts of the mind that lack any basis in reality, being only cognitive constructs created by the human understanding. For this author, the study of ideas and words is essential to for thinking, meaning they are signs and, thus, essential for thought. (Beuchot, 2004, p. 128)

"This author proposes the idea of the sign in general, which includes linguistic signs, which are the most appropriate for communicating ideas" (Beuchot, 2004, p. 131). According to Beuchot (2004), the cited author's perspective seems to suggest the necessity of establishing a general approach to the discipline for further development.

In contrast, for Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716), the relation between the sign and the idea was more important, meaning he acknowledged Locke's contributions, but critiqued his empiricism and introduced a logical perspective in his own theories, reflecting his personal preferences. Leibniz emphasized the existence of innate ideas as, linking them to rationalist thought.

To Leibniz " a sign is what we feel now and also judge to be linked to something through previous, personal or external experience" (Beuchot, 2004, p. 133).

According to this definition, the primary function of any sign is to evoke its meaning in the mind of the interpreter. Even within this fundamental function, it is possible to distinguish several special functions, based on the differences between types of interpreters, things signified, vehicles of sign and the temporal aspects involved. (Beuchot, 2004, p. 133)

The division of signs that the author proposed highlights an informative function and a mnemonic function, from which signs and also notes specifically arise (Beuchot, 2004). The argument is that humans do not necessarily understand everything, therefore, "signs do not always make us know, but they make us remember or keep in mind things that they refer to" (Beuchot, 2004, p. 134).

On the other hand, Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), the founder of pragmatism, gave a different and significant meaning to the current study of semiotics through action and habit. His main activity was to "clarify the object of semiotics" (Beuchot, 2004, p. 135) and its different components.

At this stage, the study of semiotics is viewed as a general study that includes all types of existing signs, meaning that it includes the categories that other authors differentiate from each other.

To define the sign, it refers to its three ontological categories: *firstness*, which represents what is immediately present to consciousness, with no reference yet to its existence; it is only represented as a quality. Existence emerges in *secondness*, which is the character of resistance or imposition that something exerts on consciousness, marking the relation between something first and something second, between an object and a subject. Next comes *thirdness*, which is a *triadic* relation between three elements and has the character of law, legality, of something that usually happens, and can be established as a law of nature or logic. Indeed the main example is that of the sign and signification. (Beuchot, 2004, p. 136)

Pierce divides the sign in *qualisign*, which is a quality that functions as a sign; *sinsign*, a substance that functions as a sign, and *legisign*, which is a law that functions as a sign (Beuchot, 2004, p. 138), which together offers a structure that describe the particularities of its elements and allows the understanding of signification.

Moreover, he divides the sign into an index, which is an immediate, almost natural sign that represent in a natural way. The icon, which is an intermediate sign that is partly natural and partly artificial, imposed by humans but based on reality and containing some resemblance or analogy to it. The symbol is completely arbitrary, meaning it is conventional. (Beuchot, 2004, p. 131)

Concerning the icon, the author proposes three types: image, diagram and metaphor. The image is a copy, thought it is never identical to the real. The diagram has an analogy with the object but in a more flexible way. The metaphor also retains an analogy with the object, but in a less explicit and direct form (Beuchot, 2004).

The author position concludes with a third classification of the sign:



*rheme* or term, *dicisign* or statement, and *argument*, emphasizing the division of the argument into inductive, deductive and abductive. The latter, abduction, corresponds to the hypothesis method (Beuchot, 2004).

On his behalf, Charles Morris (1901-1979), from the perspectives of psychology and philosophy, incorporated Pierce's perspective to develop a functionalist approach on semiotic studies (Beuchot, 2004).

According to Morris, semiotics is a process of semiosis that involves two aspects: the first is considered as pure due to its theoretical nature, while the second is considered applied, since it refers to a specific instance of meaning (Beuchot, 2004). "Pure semiotics is thus the elucidation of the sign process or phenomenon, that is, semiosis. This happens when a sign vehicle is given a sign vehicle, a meaning and users of that sign" (Beuchot, 2004, p. 141).

"For Morris, syntax is the study of the relation between signs and meanings. Semantics studies the relation between signs with meanings, while pragmatics studies the relation between signs and their users" (Beuchot, 2004, p. 141). As a whole, Morris' theoretical proposal certainly builds upon many of Pierce's elements but provides a unique touch to semiotics by analyzing the various applications of semiotic principles in diverse fields of expression.

### ◆ The structuralist line

Several authors contributed significantly to the structuralist perspective in semiotic studies during the 1960s (Beuchot, 2004). Among these authors, Saussure, Barthes, Eco and Derrida are mentioned as some of the most relevant, yet the crucial contributions of others, such as Jakobson, Tynianov, Propp, and Hjelmslev, should also be acknowledged.

On one hand, Saussure is recognized as one of the founding fathers of semiotics in its form as semiology (Beuchot, 2004), thought rooted in the field of social psychology. "For him, the signifier is the acoustic image of the given word, and the meaning is the concept or mental image of the object" (Beuchot, 2004, p. 159).

The author gives linguistic aspects a determining role to the linguistic aspect in the process of semiology, in a way that 'the signifier and the signified are related in an arbitrary manner in the linguistic sign' (Beuchot, 2004, p. 159).

The value of signs is different from signification, but it is just as important, if not more so, since it results from the relations established among the elements within the system, including their oppositions and associations, which constitute their articulations. (Beuchot, 2004, p. 159)

Roland Barthes (1915-1980), on the other hand, developed structuralist semiology and systematized it (Beuchot, 2004, p. 161). He also refined Saussure's idea by establishing a semiology as the study of signs in general, meaning beyond linguistics (Beuchot, 2004). He even identified it as a "deconstruction of linguistics" (Beuchot, 2004, p. 163). His study primarily focused on meaning and how we make this process intelligible.

Regarding semiology, he stated:

This work captures the impurity of language, the remnant of linguistics, the immediate corruption of the message: nothing less than desires, fears, grimaces, intimidations, advances, tenderness, protests, excuses, aggressions, the melodies that that form active language. (Beuchot, 2004, p. 164)

The particularity of this author is that he gives language a role as a subset of all signs, as these can range from sounds to images, covering a range of categories that, unlike other authors, were not as important when it came to signification.

The sign exerts signification through the signifier and the signified. But in semiology, the connection between the signifier and the signified is not always arbitrary or unmotivated; it can be motivated, meaning it is analogical or within the same system, the can be arbitrary or motivated signs. (Beuchot, 2004, p. 165)

Barthes proposes applying his concepts and oppositions to other objects, especially those in the fashion domain, since for him there exists a system of distinctions and conventions that give these objects a meaning value. The author identifies a grammar or syntax and a semantics in the ways people dress, where various systems also participate in the meaning of fashion-related objects. Thus, he declares that:

Fashion and literature carry meaning strongly, subtly, with all the complexity of an extreme art, but, so to speak, they mean 'nothing'; their existence lies in the signification, not in what is signified. (Beuchot, 2004, p. 167)

On the other hand, a key author linked to the works of Peirce and Saussure, Umberto Eco, proposes a logic of culture and the relation with the act of lying in his work related to semiotics. In his contributions, he conducts an analysis of signification and communication, where "a source is used by the transmitter who uses a code to send the signal as a message and is its recipient; additionally, the signal is exposed to noise or communicative distortion" (Beuchot, 2004, p. 171).

In addition, he discusses codes and highlights previous works in which connotation and denotation, sense and reference are indicated. He also points out the element of intentionality in semiotics as a factor of signification, and

the interpretant in the unlimited semiosis of things. Later, he discusses the production of signs, focusing on enunciation and reference, the problem of signs, predictability and defined descriptions (Beuchot, 2004).

Later, Eco questions "Pierce's position on the index, icon and symbol elements, since indices and icons require the presence of the referent to be discriminated, and in this theory of codes, the author excluded reference and extension" (Beuchot, 2004, p. 172). His position on iconicity suggests the removal of these elements, and even requests a new typology of signs based on modes of production rather than modes of signification (Beuchot, 2004); a situation that, over time, has become a lost cause for other important authors.

Eco ends by discussing codes as something natural and cultural (Beuchot, 2004) and concludes that:

Even when the metaphor of the code has merely been a metaphor, it has always been linked to a unifying obsessions: the dialectic between a law and creativity, or, according to Apollinaire, the constant battle between Order and Adventure. (Beuchot, 2004, p. 174)

For his part, Jacques Derrida (1930) through his critical reflections on the sign, distinguishes between phenomenology and structuralism (Beuchot, 2004). His criticism in the first case consists in the privileged position of the voice over writing in Western culture. Presence, understood as illusion is a fundamental part of his critique of how things are understood.

With regard to structuralism, the author highlights "the science of writing as the difference to preserve a logic of identity" (Beuchot, 2004, p. 176) and comments the following about writing and difference:

They teach that there is no sign nor signifier, what we discover is that there is no sign but trace, something that is never fully there. The trace is less than a sign, it is the ongoing deferral of meaning, of representation, because there will never be full presence. (Beuchot, 2004, p. 176)

The author comes to the conclusion that: "All language is metaphorical; but we lack a metaphor that explains the functioning of metaphoricality" (Beuchot, 2004, p. 177). For Derrida, the critique of meaning focuses on the deferred and postpones nature of meaning, so there is only an approximation to the fact, where only a vestige, a trace remains (Beuchot, 2004).

### The process of signification

The signification we assign to all the elements or aspects that shape the context in which we operate precisely follows that degree of convention

through which we assign significance to all perceived objects. Those that are not perceived simply lack meaning. Not because they inherently lack meaning, but because, from a particular perspective, and considering the individual's characteristics, culture and circumstances, they remain unnoticed.

Signification is implicitly the act or effect of signifying, that is, assigning meaning or value to something. Therefore, signification implies a consequence; it is an action involving a referent, a representation and an interpreter. "Semiology is also considered in signification, understood as a formalist method of analysis, since it links the expression of meaning or content within analysis to the elements of formal composition." (Trifonas, 2001, p. 10). One could say that it is an interaction between a subject, an object, and the elements of a given context. Semiotics, then, is understood as a discipline that studies the process by which something is used as a representation of something else.

"Signification involves an interpretation of a representation, which should not be understood merely as a graphic depiction, but as any model or system of signs that mediates the object of knowledge" (Caivano, 2016, p. 114). Therefore, representation can take different forms, depending on various aspects and circumstances of the social convention of those who perceive a sign. The study of signs within social life and structures is the foundation of semiology; its main objects of study are especially the sign, the code and the structures that support this process.

In it, the process of semiosis is identified as an action, an influence, as understood by Pierce, in the activity of clarifying and initiating what is called semiotics, that is, the doctrine of the essential nature and fundamental varieties of any possible class of semiosis. (Eco, 2005, p. 32)

Signification is a concept that involves individual interpretation, where the context in which the citizen is involved affects their own definition, their own reality. Conventional decoding, then, takes on a form or meaning depending on aspects closer to the individual, their culture, their particular conditions, and the way they interact with their surroundings and the elements present in it.

Ultimately, however, the process of interpretation or the creation of meaning relies on the reader. "Ideology, like culture and subjectivity, is malleable. Hence, its dimensions change with experience" (Trifonas, 2004, p. 44).

Ideology is seen as a structural aspect of culture in individuals, regulating not only the means and models of textualization but also the distribution, consumption and legitimacy of meanings within social contexts. (Trifonas, 2004, p. 45)

"To signify and to communicate are social functions." (Eco, 2005, p. 54); therefore, they are closely linked to the cultural aspect, which influences the formation of individuals and, especially, in their corresponding interpretations of what they see, perceive and interpret in a world filled with countless elements that can be considered as signs or symbols.

Signification requires a referent that is not at the core of every act of signification; it remains uncertain and arbitrary. This action involves the presence of certain codes that must be decoded by a receiver for their corresponding interpretation and respective reaction. Based on the above, a sign is "an object, phenomenon or material action that, by nature or convention, represents or substitutes another" (Real Academia Española, 2025, n. p.). A sign is defined as "anything that, based on a previously accepted convention, can be understood as representing something else that stands in place of something else" (Eco, 2005, p. 34), highlighting the notion of agreement between two individuals or entities concerning a particular subject.

According to Peter Pericles Trifonas (2004), in the book *Barthes and the Empire of Signs*, "a sign cannot have a motivational, contiguous, analogical, or relational link with what it represents." A sign is always arbitrary, otherwise, it would represent itself, which, in turn, determines whether the sign is what Pierce called an "icon", an "index", or a "symbol" (Trifonas, 2004, p. 55).

### ◆ The iconic sign

The theoretical stance of the "Treatise on the Visual Sign", which serves as the conceptual basis for the semiotic development of this project, is presented by Groupe  $\mu$  (1993). It offers a modeling of the iconic sign and its relation with the corresponding object.

The referent is considered as the manifestation of a type, which simultaneously acts as a stabilized mental representation and is compared with the product of perception or the signifier encountered in the cognitive process. Through this process, perception generates a mental image that, via a process of transformation, will assume an iconic form, allowing the recognition and association of that image with a type or mental representation, establishing a triadic relation between the iconic signifier, the referent, and the type (Groupe  $\mu$ , 1993).

The theoretical proposal presented by Groupe  $\mu$  (1993) defines the iconic sign through the relation between three elements: "signifier, type and referent. Compared to previous approaches, this model offers a greater potential for addressing previously raised issues in the semiotic process" (Groupe  $\mu$ , 1993, p. 121).

This group defines the referent as an object, but understood not as an unorganized sum of stimuli, but as a member of a class, which is validated by the type (Groupe  $\mu$ , 1993).

It is important to note that, in the case of the description of the type, authors clarify that these characteristics are conceptual and, therefore, may even refer to physical aspects of the referent. That is to say, "the features that can be pointed out or described to refer to the product may adopt a range of terms" (Groupe  $\mu$ , 1993, p. 121).

Regarding this, the authors conclude that:

The emission of iconic signs can be defined as the production, within the visual channel, of simulations of the referent, through transformations applied in such a way that the result aligns with the model proposed by the type corresponding to the referent. On the other hand, the reception of iconic signs identifies a visual stimulus as coming from the corresponding referent through suitable transformations. (Groupe  $\mu$ , 1993, p. 126)

Thus, summarizing what this group of authors has described, "the iconic sign possesses certain characteristics of the referent, but, correspondingly, it also has certain characteristics that do not come from the model, but from the image producer. This difference gives it a principle of differentiation" (Groupe  $\mu$ , 1993, p. 118).

### ◆ The plastic sign

From a theoretical perspective, the plastic sign possesses specific characteristics that differentiate it from the iconic sign. Although these differences may appear highly specific and sometimes difficult to isolate, they are essential for the study and analysis of the signification process.

The semiotic value of the plastic sign establishes that there are objects in the universe that generate stimuli, some of which can be considered signs when they are no longer seen as autonomous objects and are instead recognized for their function of referring to something they are not. A plastic sign contains or provides space for a physical description that enables a detailed analysis of its shape, color, texture, and their overall composition.

The theoretical perspective assigns greater importance precisely to the relationship between these three elements, as it describes a semiotic process that requires a series of oppositions that establish them, such that without opposition, the plastic sign would not exist.

In the review of the state of the art, the concept from Groupe  $\mu$  (1993, p. 177) is adopted as its own, attributing to it "the notion of trace."

The shapes, colors, or textures can, in fact, be seen as the outcome of an assumed specific psychic or physical disposition. The product thus becomes a frozen sign of that disposition. Plastic meanings would then be a system of psychological contents inferred by the

receiver, which do not necessarily correspond to scientific psychology. (Grupo  $\mu$ , 1993, p. 177)

### ◆ The advertising sign

"Advertising is a form of argumentative text in which the sender presents a series of proofs or arguments that guide the receiver's interpretation toward a specific conclusion" (Guerrero, 2007, p. 485). In this process, words, images, physical or virtual objects, as well as their respective values of meaning and interpretation, are commonly used elements in advertising practices, which take place in nearly any location, space, or virtual environment.

Advertising plays a crucial role in information and communication processes, especially in the context of production capacity development, where manufacturing products is easier than selling them. This fact explains the phenomenon of competition among companies and the rise of advertising messages as we know them today. (Guerrero, 2007, p. 485)

Guerrero (2007) defines the advertising sign in relation to contemporary commercial reality, going beyond the material by stating "advertising no longer describes objects; instead to distinguish them, it endows them with a strong representative or symbolic charge, meaning that this argumentative process is already a semiotic activity" (Guerrero, 2007, p. 486). Through the establishment of an operational framework, he identifies "three key phases of advertising communication: information, emotions, and behaviours; fundamental aspects that collectively serve persuasion as their ultimate goal" (Guerrero, 2007, p. 485).

In this regard, Figure 1 shows the advertisement from Volkswagen's "Think Small" campaign (1959), which illustrates the symbolic meaning of the visual elements that compose it. These elements can be identified with a form of visual rhetoric that can be understood as an intentional interpretation of the advertisement through an argument based on the *syntax of automotive visual discourse*. This discourse reveals an intention to disrupt the effects on the receiver in order to generate the necessary conditions that promote a particular consumer behaviour. This highlights the relevance of the advertisement in the time it was published, as its components and channels of information reflect a specific time and space that would hardly work in a contemporary consumer market.

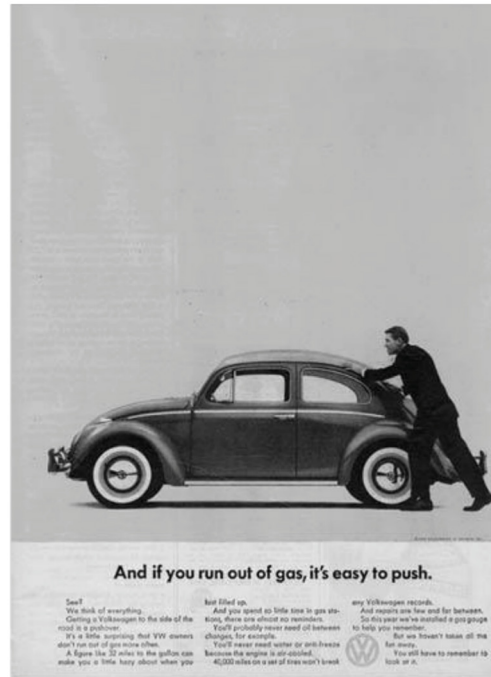


Figure 1. Advertisement image from Volkswagen's "Think Small" campaign. Source: Advertising Documentation Center, 2024.

In contrast to the advertising elements of the previous advertisement, Figure 2 shows an image from an official digital platform of the Kia company, promoting an automotive product for the Mexican market in 2024. The differences between the two advertising elements demonstrate a clear control by the sender over the behavioral characteristics of the target audience, their information channels, and the interaction required to create emotional responses based on the value proposition expressed through attributes. which is essential for the user or final customer's decision-making process. This situation highlights an evolutionary process of the advertising phenomenon towards scenarios of interaction and real-time experiences.



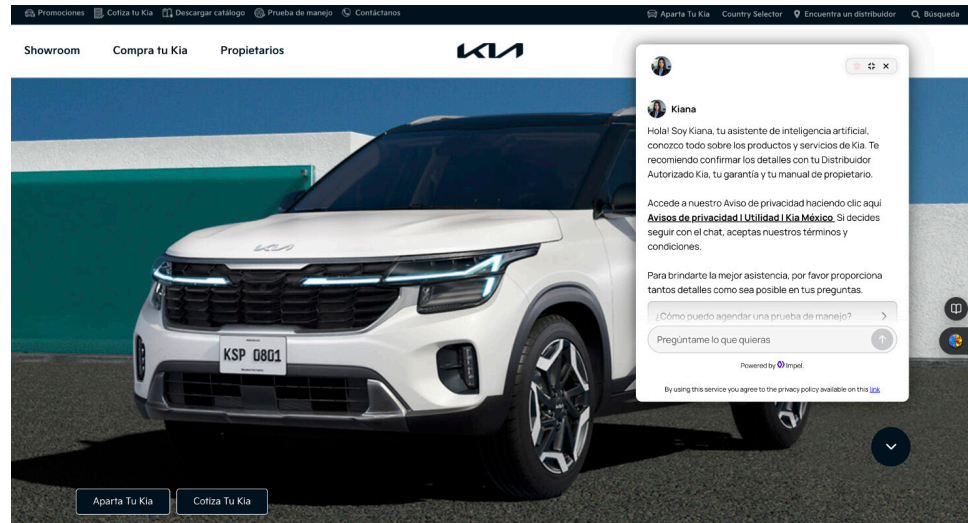


Figure 2. Advertising element from Kia's digital campaign.  
 Source: Kia Automotive, 2024.

The epistemological study of advertising as a communication system has, up to now, presented conflicting perspectives. Many of the authors in the field of advertising argue that it does not have the necessary attributes to be considered a fundamental element of a communication system due to its technical implications and interpretations related to fields such as marketing. However, there seems to be a general acknowledgment of the level of influence advertising has on the masses and, consequently, on their culture.

In this regard, advertising and therefore the advertising sign is recognized for its precise and objective nature due to the time and space limitations it faces when deployed as an information and persuasion tool.

This precision stems in part from the constant dynamism of the modern world, where relevance becomes increasingly short-lived due to the incorporation of new technologies in advertising and the constant emergence of new products and services.

A comparative analysis of the advertising image used by Coca-Cola in the 1960s and in 2024 (see Figure 3) makes it easy to identify the precise and objective nature of this phenomenon. The symbolic elements used in advertising reflect the cultural context and consumer behavior of each era. Both images have similarities, such as the value of saving for the user or final customer. However, the way in which brand value is communicated and conveyed clearly highlights the level of specialization that advertising production has today.

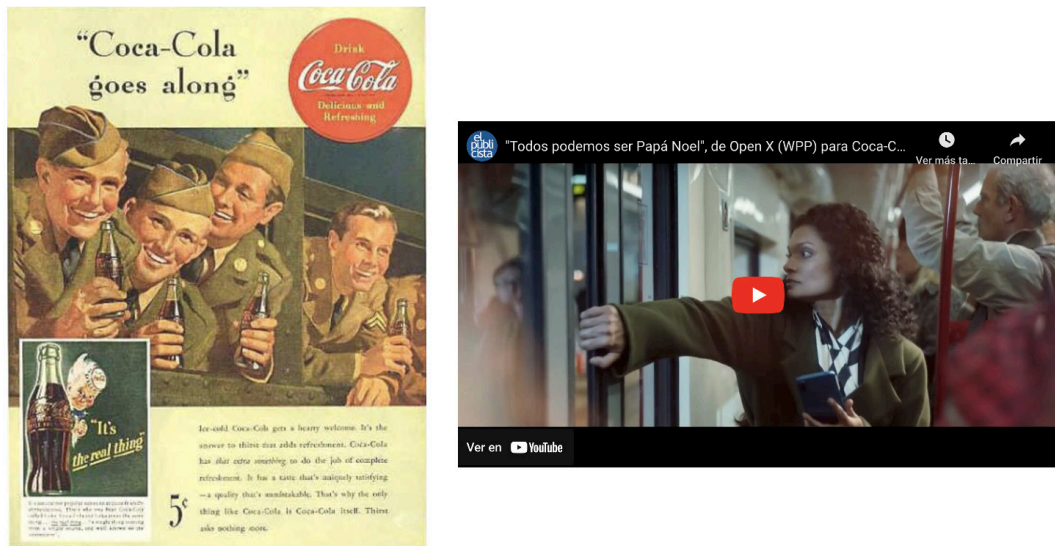


Figure 3. Visual comparison of two Coca-Cola advertising campaigns. Source: YouTube Advertising website, 2025, and El Publicista, 2025.

Advertising is an integral part of mass culture. Its content incorporates elements that merge with individual culture through messages, texts, and images designed to persuade and influence behavior. The values, beliefs, behaviors, tastes, and desires of individuals play a fundamental role for advertising strategies, as these descriptive and intrinsic data that determine the strategic component from which advertising proposals emerge.

In relation to the above, Noguero and Garrido (2023), in their book *¿Hacia dónde va la publicidad? Lecciones del pasado para discernir el futuro*, explain:

Over the past few decades, there has been a significant shift in corporate advertising strategies, moving largely from traditional media to non-conventional media (De Aguilera y Torres-Romay, 2007). This transformation has been driven by increasing use of the Internet and social media, the fragmentation of audiences, and companies' growing need to reach specific segments more effectively. (p. 105)

**◆ To conclude** We might place the connection between the advertising phenomenon and its contexts above apparent reality. Its role as a persuasive tool disrupts behavioral models in both physical and virtual spaces. This influence extends into cultural aspects, as it relies on language and symbolic value

to influence the perception of worth that people assign to everything around them.

Fundamentally, the phenomenon aims to shape how people act, feel, and think.

Understanding the advertising phenomenon from a semiotic perspective provides the necessary tools and knowledge to anticipate its positive and negative impacts within the context we inhabit and in which we develop as a society to see and understand what happens around us.

Following this reasoning, advertising is distilled into clear, visually engaging informational packages designed to attract consumer attention in an environment saturated with competition, where 84% of brand communication and information go unnoticed (Forbes, 2024). This poses a challenge for commercial organizations, which must stand out from the rest to gain a greater share of today's consumer markets while also contributing to the disproportionate growth of advertising strategies.

Advertising, viewed as a visual phenomenon, appears to constitute a form of culture that legitimizes the ongoing homogenization not only of brands and products but also of geographic spaces. Part of the argument supporting this claim refers to the commercial complexes in major cities across Mexico and other countries, where business models and practices from trend-setting societies on a global scale, which replicate formulas or practices emerging from them. This approach is assumed to serve as a roadmap with significant economic implications.

The advertising phenomenon entails an underlying process of meaning-making that is interpreted and generates a response shaped by the recipient's values and behaviors. A relevant aspect of this idea is that, given the advancement of technology and the way advertising manifests today, feedback is now completed through tools that did not exist before. These tools allow for a more intense and immediate response from individuals living in environments that appear increasingly receptive to consumer trends.

The unique trait of being everywhere at once makes the advertising phenomenon an omnipresent force that imposes itself and transcends virtually any setting or circumstance. This situation, which could well be the subject of critical debate regarding its nature, also allows us to recognize two aspects of our reality. The first is that advertising has developed forms and capacities for generation and impact that extend beyond human limitations. The second is that our physical reality can hardly be conceived without the presence of this phenomenon. With this in mind, and focusing on the urban dimension where this reality is most evident, Baladrón Pazos (2007) states that:

Due to its structure, the city becomes an advertising theater, a parade of commercial messages and brands, a continuous flow of persuasion serving the interests of the new economy and the most influential social sectors. As a symbol of modernity, the city is overtaken by advertising. (Baladrón Pazos, 2007, p. 80).

According to the author, modernity encourages and shapes a wide range of individual and collective consumer behaviours that infiltrate daily life. Baladrón Pazos (2007) states:

The city, as a powerful and fascinating stage for consumption, takes on a dynamic, colorful, and pleasurable image, in which the urban bourgeoisie seeks to express its attained prestige. (González Martín, 1996, p. 80)

This brings us to a final reflection:

The omnipresence of the advertising phenomenon appears to have no boundaries. If they do exist, they will likely be altered and serve as a foundation for achieving and fulfilling commercial objectives, regardless of the urban setting that contains them.

Understanding the nature of the phenomenon not only involves comprehending its signifying structure or identifying the implications it has had throughout its existence, but also requires reflecting on the impact it represents in social, environmental, and technological terms. ●

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