

Title: Question 1: “The good of a book lies in its being read. A book is made up of signs that speak of other signs, which in turn speak of things. Without an eye to read them, a book contains signs that produces no concept; therefore, it is dumb.” Umberto Eco quoted in The Book of Informatics Hobbs et al (2011) Using this quotation, critically discuss it in relation to the contemporary media and debate whether you think we, as a society are being taught to not read the signs of modern life

Student Number: 1900934

BA Course Title: Graphic Design

Word Count: 2,521 words

Lecturer’s Name: Timi O’Neill

In this essay, I will assess the quote above stated by philosopher Umberto Eco about whether we are ignoring the signs around us and how the way our modern society has developed looking into semiotics by learning through periods of time. I will start by looking into one of the earliest methods used by Egyptians of communicating before comparing to how we interact now. I will also integrate what different symbols represent in various countries, research into more modern ways of connecting using emojis and find more information about my own practice (studying graphic design) and how that effects marketing, advertising, and the media across the world. These signs are everywhere we look including the roads we travel on to the advertisements we walk past and by the end of the essay, I hope to correspond with my own conclusion, whether I agree or disagree with Eco’s quote regarding society today.



Figure 1: Photograph of Egyptian Hieroglyphics

To start, I am researching thousands of years ago to the Egyptian period. After discovering people have voices in their heads and can think of new and innovative ways to create ideas, the Egyptians needed to find a method to tell everyone what they are thinking about. To analyse how one thought from one person through pictures they draw, can be visualised and how a general understanding of the meaning behind each symbol or shape creates a formula to be easily translated to another person. Multiple formulas can also correlate another meaning e.g., assigning two formulas together can completely change the meaning behind what each formula singularly could signify. In a recent BBC documentary called *The Secret History of Writing – From Pictures to Words*, they show one of the first discoveries of communication was from the tomb that buried Egypt's first pharaoh Teti and Egyptologist Yasmin El Shazly stated that "the fact that his name is still there made him in a sense immortal" and that 'ancient Egyptians realised that, they realised that the written word had so much power and that by writing your name you became immortally immortalised'. This quote can also suggest that even though these markings were written years before discovery and after Teti's death, the words of a ruler are still among us. We would not have been able to adapt and communicate the way we do now if those etched hieroglyphics never existed.

To extend the theory of semiotics further, I will study some of the few 'founders' who invented thesis to help understand the meaning behind signs. Ferdinand de Saussure was one of the first philosophers to explore this by creating the concept of the signifier and the signified. An object we can use to explain this theory is an apple. The signifier would be the word used to name the object so in this case it would be the name 'apple' however the signified would be a word or image that an apple would be used to represent something else either brought up by history or contemporary media e.g., schools, education the doctors, as the saying goes an apple a day, keeps the doctor away. To broaden Saussure's ideology more was another philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce. Peirce had the idea of investigating deeper into fitting these objects into three different categories: an icon, an index, and a symbol. If we use the example of an apple once more, the icon would be of a simple drawing to signify an apple being a round shape with a little leaf on top, index will create a link whether it is the smell, texture, taste, sound with the chosen object e.g., the crunchy sound that erupts as bit into the apple and the sweet taste the crunchy sound that erupts as bit into the apple. The symbol of an apple would be a picture that shows some relation to the object, this could be like the icon but have a more focused purpose e.g., it could be incorporated into a logo design for a healthy/dieting programme or a green grocers/supermarket (to locate the fruit section).



Figure 2: An icon showing images of water and wind – referring to the Chinese ancient art of Feng-Shui

Here, we recognise the various connotations from around the world, where many symbols can be interpreted into different meanings behind a picture. From singular elements such as shapes and colours to the actual image itself, many countries develop multiple connections through ancient cultures and the objects that surrounds us to create a purpose. In one of the most populated countries, China, one ancient method called the Feng-shui is applied from upbringing to give various definitions of symbols. Authors of the article *Managing Corporate and Brand Identities in the Asia-Pacific Region* Schmitt and Pan described 'Feng-shui, which is widely applied in Chinese culture but also in Japan and Vietnam, means "wind and water" and refers to the ancient art of geomancy—a calculated assessment of the most favorable conditions for any venture.' It is also commonly applied throughout the country and some beliefs upon Feng-shui can become supernatural, some signs bringing luck and happy spirits and others evil. One example of this is the idea of having a lucky number to

bring prosperity and harmony. Feng-shui sees the number 8 favoured as it may result in a business to achieving great success.

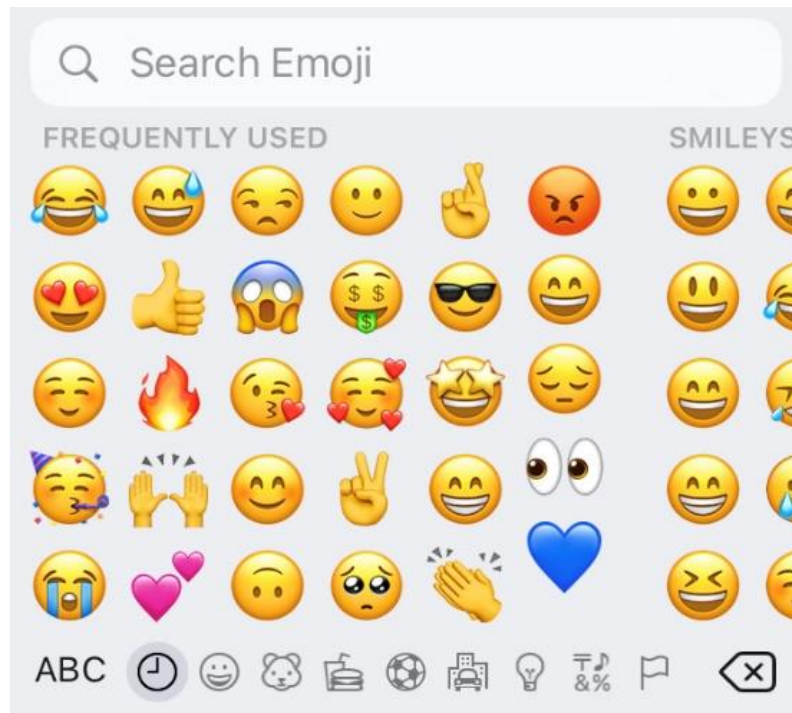


Figure 3: Own screenshot of my most frequently used emoji on my iPhone

The image above shows a screenshot I collected from my mobile device which shows that I am an avid user of including these little faces called emojis into my daily messages. The emoji was created in Japan and translates to 'picture character'. It is further development from emoticons, which are quite similar and simpler however had little variation in each icon which led to audiences being confused and questioned the differences between each of the small faces. Petra Kralj Novak et al. stated in the 2015 article *Sentiment of Emojis* that 'An additional structuring of the emojis can be derived from correlations between their sentiment' and 'Not only the position of an emoji, but certainly its textual context is also important in determining the role of the emoji as an amplifier and modifier of the meaning.' The extreme facial reaction on the emojis is to help distinguish the differences between each emotion. It represents an emotion, determine an atmosphere/mood, express ideas, thoughts, opinions, started with simple face expressions, over time it can represent objects, types of transport, weather, colours, sent through text messages and social media every day, appears normally at the end of a message almost to summarise the purpose/message the respondent is trying to get across. In the semiotics theory from Charles Sanders Pierce, emojis would fit into the category of an icon, as they are small images to represent an

expression and with more ways of simplifying objects to transform into emojis, it would not be surprising if in the future we almost turn back in time to when the Egyptians only used hieroglyphics to communicate with each other that maybe one day we would only be using these little icons to interact with one another.



Figure 4: Own screenshot of my iPhone's home page including social media application (from left to right) Pinterest, Messenger, WhatsApp, Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram

Since the ancient periods, we have built a more advanced and contemporary place to live. Our modern society sees signs and symbols everywhere from huge billboards in the city centre to small pop adverts on social media. Design is all around us and I see that bigger as a student studying graphic design even more. Figure 4 is of a screenshot I took of the home page screen of my iPhone. As most teenagers and young people today, I have a lot of social media platforms downloaded as it is a quicker and more efficient way of keeping touch with family, friends of course the media. The logo of the different brands is shown as they are to identify a business or company in its simplest form. As you can see the imagery used for some of the companies are self-explanatory for example the logo of Instagram shows an image of a camera as the app's purpose is for people to upload pictures online to share with others. Another example is the WhatsApp logo which contains a telephone inside a speech bubble, again showing the users what you can do on the application which is to call or text another person.

Rachel Lawes wrote in the article *Big semiotics: Beyond signs and symbols*, that a way to describe these signs and symbols are called semiotics. And are an 'activity of connecting signs to meanings.' Our world is changing slowly however it should not keep no one distracted from achieving their goals and sticking to their core values, not only to other people but to themselves. Some of my own core values include being respectful, empathetic and to continue exploring my passion and creativity in art and design and if I did not have any values, what would be the point of being a human being? As a student studying at university, communicating the correct message across our audiences are highly important. Many intentions are to produce something that is communicated well and is universal. With the ever-advancing growth of science and technology, ideas need to be more and more innovative and smarter. The growth of economy is increasing with more people becoming rich due to the expansion of job opportunities and people are living healthier and therefore living to the age of 80+.



Figure 5: Own screenshot of laptop home screen showing the recycling bin icon

Before testing a product, application, website etc. a designer would do some consumer research into how to make their product more appealing to their target audience. Market research is conducted and shown to members of the public for them to form their opinion on whether something works or does not, this would lead to either a financially successful product or a concept to go back to the drawing board with. It can be just as easy to confuse members of the public too especially if they do not use technology as often. You would not want to make the design of an icon too complicated or far from its actual meaning that it

would be difficult to support the real reasoning behind the image. It would lose all interaction with its audience and as a result, become useless in its function. In the article *Big semiotics: Beyond signs and symbols*, the author Rachel Lawes states that 'It loses the characteristics that made it penetrating and valuable in the first place.'

An example of this is the work of interface designers who use simple symbols and icons to represent an object e.g., a rubbish bin is used to delete items from your computer as day to day, you would normally use a bin to throw away your rubbish etc. Something that would make clear sense to use to a wide range of audiences. To illustrate a rubbish bin in its simplest form for example would be to draw a vertical rectangle with a little lid on top to represent the object we use almost daily or to use a recycling symbol, one to show how you can use something again and again. Personally, I believe the figure I have included above of a recycling bin from my laptop home screen is a good example. Even without the writing of recycling bin underneath (which in some cases could make some audiences understand the significance of the application), I would still recognise what this would do. If I were to drag a piece of work across it and let go of my mouse, it would drop into the bin and disappear showing that the item had been deleted off the system. However, to get an icon to be recognised of its purpose around the world can prove to be a big challenge. It may be quite difficult to generalise a certain image to represent an object but through history and the modern period of society as we have all grown up in various eras and have experienced different ways of growing up, been influenced by our parents who raised us and the media that shows the latest of news at our fingertips etc. With that knowledge, it has helped us to try and decipher a universal way for most people to understand the significance of a sign/symbol.



Figure 6: Own photograph of a construction sign taken in a cemetery

The image above is of a construction sign I noticed along my one of my daily walks across a cemetery. This small sign reminded me that. This would be an example of an index sign as it is letting the audience know that there is construction/demolition in their path and from this the audience would think of another way to get to their destination. It is a simple yet effective way of not only being simple enough to recognise but showing how a sign's purpose or meaning is very important to in this case avoid the intrusion/danger of walking straight onto a place of construction which may result in a dangerous incident.

We are people with various opinions, who have had different experiences/memories. We are all going to visualise an object differently whether from different beliefs, experiences/memories, or emotion. It is what makes us unique as human beings however it may not help us to understand the true meaning of a certain object. Barnham quotes from the article *Qualitative semiotics: Can we research consumer meaning-making?* that 'we see things not as they actually are in physical reality—but rather we see them *as concepts*;' Some people may look at something and respond by making a personal connection to it, an

example of this could be a person looking at a swinging object which perhaps could remind them of their youth and when they used to recreate that action on a swing set in their local park therefore reminding them of a memory they once had and maybe had forgotten. This creates a personal connection between the person and the object. Others may look at the object and think of it as a literal concept. Most likely designers and artists would look at an object and their response would be to become influenced or inspired by that object or to think about what this could mean to them in the future.

To summarise from the findings investigated in this essay, I support the quote written by Umberto Eco. Without the knowledge of knowing how to read, it would prove very difficult to understand what you would see in front of you as nothing more than strange symbols marked on paper. Signs are everywhere we look and have been proven to help identify many things around us showing only a simple picture. Throughout this essay, I have verified the importance of a signs purpose and believe to prove why they were a part of integral conversation in the past and are essential to help guide us through our lives.

Bibliography

2020. *The Secret History Of Writing - From Pictures To Words (Documentary)*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hbmyXjqXIEY&t=37s>> [Accessed 9 December 2020].

Barnham, C. (2019). Qualitative semiotics: Can we research consumer meaning-making? *International Journal of Market Research*, 61(5), 478–491.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1470785319851317>

Kralj Novak, Petra et al., 2015. Sentiment of Emojis. *PloS one*, 10(12), p.e0144296.

Lawes, R., 2019. Big semiotics: Beyond signs and symbols. *International journal of market research*, 61(3), pp.252–265.

Schmitt, Bernd H., 1994. Managing Corporate and Brand Identities in the Asia-Pacific Region. *California Management Review*, 36(4), pp.32–49.

Figures

Figure 1

names, I., 2020. *Learn Introductory Egyptian: Recognize Pharaohs' Names And Much More On Memrise*. [online] Memrise. Available at: <<https://app.memrise.com/course/232864/introductory-egyptian-recognize-pharaohs-names/>> [Accessed 9 December 2020].

Figure 2

Astrohub. 2020. *5 Misconceptions In Feng Shui Clarified*. [online] Available at: <<http://astrohub.com/resources/five-misconceptions-in-feng-shui-clarified/>> [Accessed 10 December 2020].