Semiotics

deconstruction

TBWA Paris, 2007

A deconstruction of an advertising message

This advertisement design wholly relies on visual information to communicate core messages for the Absolut Vodka brand. This helps it transcend language and cultural boundaries.

It is promoting an alcoholic drink and is aimed at a very specific target audience with some very clear objectives. Who do you think the audience is?

It intends to communicate market domination, by suggesting that without question it is the ‘absolut’ best.

Useful key semiotic terms

• Sign	The sum of the signifier plus signified
• Signifier	The physical thing. (Works with signified to combine into a sign)
• Signified	The meaning that is intended from a sign
• Iconic sign	Looks like what it represents (falling rocks)
• Indexical sign	Where there is a relationship between the signifier and signified (smoke and fire)
• Polysemic	A sign that has more than one meaning
• Arbitrary or symbolic sign	A sign where the meaning of it is culturally acquired
• Anchorage	The combination of elements within a sign that fit together and fix the meaning (i.e. word and image)

Useful key semiotic terms

• Denotation	The literal meaning of a sign or code
• Connotation	The symbolic/abstract meaning or intention created by a sign
• Code	A system used to create meaning
• Decoding	When audiences interpret a text
• Encoding	The intended meaning in a text
• Myth	The way in which certain signs contribute to ideologies in our society
• Paradigm	A distinct set of theories, models or class of objects or concepts (exemplar) like in this case, the ‘ideal man’

THE PERFECTMAN
THE ABSOLUT VODKA
IMPORTED
IN AN ABSOLUT WORLD

Deconstruction

Let us endeavor to decode some of the elements that have created this advertisement

Very little written information is provided in this advert. Most of the information presented is visual. This aids communication, especially through language barriers. The text is encoded and weighted with semiotic meaning.

Anchorage text is used to establish and fix meaning. The headline is a representation of a culturally shared idea. ‘Absolut’ replaces the word ‘perfect’, therefore fixing the meaning for the audience. The product is now aligned with perfection. The spelling in the headline matches the brand name on the bottle. This emphasizes that the product is Russian, providing authenticity and pre-eminence for this vodka brand. It also, once again, re-establishes the brand name with perfection.

The only other appearance of anchorage text is on the box from which the elements have been removed. Alongside is a symbol. The symbol is a culturally learned signifier that represents male. It is a pictogram and also the symbol for Mars, the Roman God of War. Therefore the symbol denotes male but the connotations are power, strength and conflict.

The box itself is symbolic of an object that can be selected, purchased and delivered remotely. It removes dialogue and suggests relationships/partners can be manufactured and obtained as part of a consumer choice. It objectifies the ‘man’ into a commodity.

The representation of the male figure itself denotes ideals of masculine perfection whereas the bespectacled appearance is a signifier that has connotations of intelligence. The facial expression is also happy which denotes male compliance in this paradigm, i.e. that a perfect man can be purchased and built. Also note the packaging foam which has connotations of protection suggesting the contents are valuable.

Red roses are polysemic, being an icon for flowers, but also a signifier of romance. This further promotes the paradigm of the ‘perfect man’. In doing so, in this case, it perpetuates the myth of an idealized, homogenized and traditional heterosexual relationship.

The ‘ripped’ six pack torso signifies vitality, fertility, strength, health and sexual dominance. This social coding perpetuates the myth of the ‘perfect’ man in this advertisement.

The body parts also look simple to fit together suggesting the ease that one can find the ‘perfect man’ in the ‘Absolut’ world. The fixing parts also signify childhood toys like dolls and play figures. This also has a discriminatory and disparaging connotation, and it is implied that anyone can do this, hence the symbolic representation that has connotations of childhood toys.

The tattoos or ‘sleeve’ is a sign of interest and participation in contemporary cultural traditions and social behavior. It is a code that adds to the myth of the perfect man as well as displaying a level of (non) gender conformity.

The male figure is perceived as culturally relevant, and conforms widely to his cultural ‘tribe’, which it suggests is a desirable attribute for the male figure, and also for heterosexual females such as the one presented in the image.

The guitar denotes musicality. In turn it connotes skill, talent and dexterity. Playing a musical instrument also takes time and effort to learn, so this has connotations of commitment and perseverance. These attributes align with the myth of the ‘perfect man’.

The choice of instrument adds credibility to these conservative qualities as this fits closely with the ‘rock and roll’ myth, which balances the previous attributes with an element of risk, fun-loving, passion and openness.

In contradiction of many of the previous signs we have analysed, the arbitrary smart, black, polished, formal shoes firmly re-establish traditional professional/managerial stature that aligns with the paradigm of career success. This is part of a code to denote conventional and traditional professionalism and conformity in the business world. This indicator of success also aligns with the myth of the ‘perfect man’.

As a binary contrast the advertisement uses the female model to signify a gender aligned, traditional representation of idealised female beauty.

The polysemic red cheeks suggest the character is flustered by the model-building operation but may also denote heightened stimuli similar to sexual arousal.

The red discarded stilettoes are an indexical sign of abandon albeit they are carefully positioned so this may be an affectual or intentional symbol. In a similar way to the male characters black polished formal shoes the red stilettoes are an arbitrary or symbolic sign of gender and sexuality.

The instructions are also anchorage text in that they help to fix meaning even though they are illegible. They function as an iconic sign of knowledge, know-how and procedure. The female characters' reliance shows obedience, trust and convention. This supports the myth of the subservient female who has less of a tendancy for independent thinking and a willingness to follow set rules, structures and constructs.

A pile of books/papers are denoted on the storage unit and the connotation of this is intelligence and knowledge. The creators of the advertisement wish to ensure their paradigm is one that follows contemporary attitudes and the audience decodes their symbolic value as being aligned with intellect. There is an intention to dispel the myth that beauty and brains are at odds. In this depiction they are not.

The framed photographs are icon signs in that they physically resemble what they signify. Carefully selected, collected and presented imagery are polysemic and can function to signify many things such as sentimentality, memory and an appreciation of artistic endeavor. This semiotic reading depends on the actual visual content.

The contemporary furnishings stylistically fit with the subtle colour-coded accents of the female characters' clothing. It signifies order as well as sophistication which in turn is used to signify the traits of the female character.

The modernist style and quality of furniture suggests financial stability, taste and also affirms her role as a homemaker.

The iconic red colour throughout suggests vitality, passion and sexuality and also an element of danger albeit this seems pre-empted and intentional.

The physical context for this scene is the final code that supports the myth that has been created. From the view through the shrouded window it is apparent that we are in a contemporary city apartment. When decoded it suggests a conventional young, single female professional who is financially secure living an inner-city lifestyle. Likely to be surrounded by like-minded individuals, it reinforces the paradigm set up by all the other signs. Every element has been encoded to provide relevance to the target audience who may consciously or unconsciously decode the advertisement.

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The next stage to writing a draft

Once you have deconstructed the semiotic messaging the next stage is to write a précis and support your observations with references from academic texts, peer reviewed journals/articles, books and credible websites.

Here is what you need to do for this part of your submission:

- Introduce your chosen piece – creator, publisher, date, purpose.
- Choose 3 semiotic devices and discuss how they apply to your image.
- How has your view of your chosen image changed?

Include images, captions and a map. 500 words in total. (+/-10%)

Activity – Semiotic Analysis

Take a look at the following image(s) and attempt to deconstruct the design elements using some of the techniques you have learnt.

We will then discuss your thoughts and ideas.

STAY EXTRAORDINARY
Diet Coke
Entertain in style with
TAYLOR SWIFT
Enter and you could win a $2,500 gift card and cool Diet Coke and Taylor Swift prizes to throw your own extraordinary party.

HOPE

UNITED COLORS
OF BENETTON.

Well done!

- Once you get a grasp of deconstructing imagery, your next challenge is communicating your ideas in an academic piece of writing.
- The best way to do this is through practice. Most things that are difficult to begin are often the most rewarding (honest!).
- Next week is an instructional session and your opportunity to share any images you have chosen or planning you have done so far. Please send your chosen image to me before the next session if you want it discussed.
- We will look at the guidelines for your written submission. Next week we will also look at the Harvard referencing system.

Any questions?