

**„ALEXANDRU IOAN CUZA” UNIVERSITY OF IAȘI
FACULTY OF PHILOSOPHY AND SOCIAL-POLITICAL
SCIENCES**

RESUMÉ OF THE PHD THESIS

**THE SYMBOLIC LANGUAGE OF A
BRAND: SEMIOTIC MODELING**

**Scientific coordinator,
Prof. univ. dr. Traian D. Stănciulescu**

**PhD Candidate,
Oana Culache**

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RESEARCH CONTEXT

The proposed work investigates the relationship between brand communication and symbolic language, manifested by the attempt to discuss, from a semiotic point of view, the way a brand becomes a complex of meanings, as an autonomous symbolic language. Considering that the current semiotic problematization originated in the contemporary communication (Codoban 2001 17) by conjunction of key concepts such as: language, communication, symbolically, on the one hand, semiotic organon, on the other hand, the current research is subordinated to the philosophic field.

The approach followed in the present study aimed at a complex cumulative meaning, more or less voluntary and conscious, which is transmitted by a brand through language used at both verbal and nonverbal level (visual, gustatory-olfactory tactile, auditory), meanings that may influence the development of the brand and how it is positioned in the minds of the target audience. By using a specific set of codes and meanings, the brand itself becomes a symbolic language with an undeniable value in a given socio-cultural perimeter.

Given the importance of meanings created in the memory and a brand positioning, considering the semiotic perspective in building a brand becomes a necessary fact. Despite numerous disciplines which aim to communicate the axis consumer - brand, brand owners and experts in communication, branding, advertising and marketing practitioners have a predominantly intuitive and superficial approach when launching marketing messages. However, this context causes a number of complications arising from heterogeneous lexical field created around a brand. Our interest to investigate such a matter is justified by the belief that the problem of building a brand can find its way to improvement by addressing the methodology involving semiotic analysis of language use.

Background research has been defined by two main circumstances: on the one hand, the theoretical background and research, on the other hand, brand communication practice in a highly competitive market. Theoretical context was the constant interest shown by semioticians towards research conducted to develop and clarify the possibility of applying semiotic methodology in areas such as marketing, branding, advertising, web design. In practice, despite the efforts of theoretical semiotics, late work it is still a commonly used methodological resource. While this may be particularly useful in communication, branding, competitive research, consumer research, professionals are not familiar with and semiotic analysis prefer to use established methods to create an identity marks and generate a connection with the target audience. The implications of these so popular decisions are defined by similar styles of communication through brands "fabricated" a pattern and a variety of divergent messages in terms of connoted meanings.

Compared to the situation identified, our study focused on the relationship between semiotics and brand communication being carried out in a scientific

context defined by the need to exceed the field of semiotics, thus confirming its important role in creating significant brands. However, in terms of managerial implications, we found the need for more complex and integrative approach, allowing to identify how best to communicate the significance for building a coherent, unitary and distinctive brand, by using a particular symbolic language.

RESEARCH PROBLEMS, AIM AND OBJETIVES OF RESEARCH

The proposition of a model to build a brand is an important step in the research, given the failure of the subject in the literature, especially the lack of a semiotic model itself that takes into account the full complexity of brand communication.

The realization of building a brand meant crossing an interdisciplinary scientific approach and using concepts from many fields: semiotics, communication theory, branding and engineering - for a better understanding of how semiotics can be used strategically to create a significant brand. In the context of the interdisciplinary approach, the dominant work was represented by the philosophical semiotics, whereas research has consistently pursued a thorough understanding of how the brand can communicate and the way the parameters of the communication situation, particularly the codes, can help create a significant brand. Thus, the question of how research aimed codes can be used in brand communication so that to ensure consistency, unity and distinctness brand.

According to the research problem, the aim of the thesis was to investigate how the symbolic language can be used in a strategic manner to create a coherent, unitary and distinctive brand. To achieve this goal, we considered necessary to develop a model which contains constitutive parameters of the brand communication situation, together with their related functions.

The multiplicity of communication patterns from literature generated numerous methodological difficulties that we have sought to overcome in our study, by adopting a complex model integrator, where I adapted brand communication to match the research purpose and objectives derived from it:

- O1: to define the universe of methodological and object-language research;
- O2: to identify and analyze parameters - semiotics of brand communication;
- O3: to outline a semiotic perspective, by advocating for treating brand as a construct based on symbolic language, by taking experience to a specific situation (case study);
- O4: to develop a model of creation for a brand through the strategic use of symbolic language.

By achieving these research objectives, we felt that we could fulfill the purpose of our study, namely to investigate how the symbolic language can be used in a strategic manner to create a coherent, unitary and distinctive brand.

THESIS STRUCTURE

The thesis has been organized as follows: the introduction includes a presentation in the form of a situational analysis - we argued the choice of the research topic, defined the problem of study, the research objectives and exploratory approach implications. Next, we described the context of research, highlighting the importance of semiotics applied in related areas of brand communication and proceeded to clearly define the concepts used in the thesis.

Part one of the thesis, entitled *Semiotic universe of the brand: theoretical and methodological aspects* comprises two chapters. In Chapter 1, we established the universe of discourse - the theory of the study, dealing in conceptual and methodological terms, the semiotic dimension of the brand. In its content, we conducted a critical review of the literature in the field of semiotics, by presenting the fundamental theories and semiotic studies semiotics applied in branding and marketing. With the establishment of the semiotic discourse, we presented the critical definitions and established brand theoretical approach aspects in terms of object-language thesis.

More specifically, the chapter approached: (1) a description of semiotic theory and its object by highlighting the relationship sign-semiosis-semiotics, (2) semiotic theories and applications reflected in branding and marketing, (3) the definition of the concept of brand: both the literature and the semiotic perspective, (4) the semiotic status of the brand on the consumer market.

In Chapter 2, we discussed the status of semiotics' methodology and usefulness in the context of a field based on communicative acts. In this chapter, we set out the methodology used for the construction of the research. In this regard, we nominated kinds of analyzes used to carry out case studies in the last part of the thesis.

In Part II, entitled *The brand - a complex situation of communication*, we presented the multiplicity of elements which compose the communication process determining a brand. Chapter 3 presents an illustrative graphical analysis of the semiotic situation of brand communication. The analysis involved identifying each structural parameter of brand communication, by reference to the standard components of the graphical model: emitter, transmitter, referential, message, context, code, channel, noise, receiver, recipient, finalities and observer. Based on the adaptive model, we performed a functional analysis of the semiotic graph, in order to determine the relationships between the parameters. Defining the parameters and functions was a prerequisite for a deeper understanding of the communication situations.

Following the analysis we had previously run, in Chapter 4 we treated the brand as a constitutive parameter of the semiotic graph, a key element in building a brand identity. In this chapter, we defined the concept of language and we later explained the concept of *brand language*.

In Part III, which we entitled *Semio-pragmatic approaches to brands*, we treated semiotic brand as a compound based on previous theoretical and methodological approaches. Chapter 5 presents a case study conducted on a product brand. The brand which was the subject of the case study is the most powerful Romanian brand, a traditional brand that sells one of the archetypal natural elements: water, namely natural mineral water. Throughout the study, we deployed the established research methodology by applying the triadic analysis: syntactic, semantic and pragmatic, in order to decompose the brand into meaningful units of communication.

In Chapter 6 we proposed, according to the analytical approaches conducted in the thesis, a model for brand creation via the strategic use of symbolic language - in order to create a coherent, unitary and distinctive brand. The proposed model is a developed form of the brand language parameter included in the semiotic graph. Considering the uniform treatment of the two models, one can deduce an optimized model to build a brand.

In the final considerations, we addressed in detail the main ideas of the research. These dealt with the importance of semiotics in brand development as a set of symbolic language. The thesis concludes with some open considerations on theoretical and managerial implications of the study and discussion on possible limits and complementary research directions of this work.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The exploratory approach was based on the premise that semiotics can be used as a method of analysis and modeling that would determine how symbolic language can work as a basis for creating a brand. In semiotic terms, we studied the symbolic power of a brand, understood not as a possibility by the symbol signifying that mark, but through the symbolic sign, deeply significant.

In Chapter 1 of the thesis, we introduced the theory of semiotics and the semiosis - sign relationship, in order to achieve a transition from the semiotic theory. Presentation of the brand as the object-language was performed from an interdisciplinary perspective, by transferring the operational definitions of branding to the semiotic area.

The second part of the thesis focused on the brand communication situation by proposing a situational analysis conducted at the structural and functional level under the optimized semiotic model we identified. Based on this analysis, semiotics offered us the possibility of developing an authentic perspective on a parameter called the language of brand communication, which we defined on our own terms.

In the third part of the research, we applied the semiotic methodology to achieve a case study through triadic analysis represented by the analysis of the elements of meaning and language in brand communication. Chapter 6 consisted in

setting up a model for creating a consistent, homogenous model through the strategic use of symbolic language. This model deepens the brand language parameter that must be interpreted in the context of the whole brand communication, according to the semiotic graph we designed in Chapter 3.

The work involves a variety of methodological aspects of research, the semiotic metalanguage manifesting itself both as an explanatory resource and as a method using the following semiotic analyses presented by Stănciulescu (2004): (1) structural analysis and functional analysis, (2) syntactic, semantic and pragmatic analysis, and (3) situational analysis of communication.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The increasing competition among brands reveals the importance of proper understanding of the way brands should be built in order to be coherent, unitary and distinctive. Although specialists in branding and marketing are engaged in a continuous exploration of viable methods for growth and market balance, efforts made so far through in semiotic resume to several theoretical initiatives. There is a lack of a clear perspective on how semiotics can generate a strategic advantage in creating brands.

Consequently, the aim of this thesis was to investigate how the symbolic language can be used in a strategic manner to create a coherent, unitary and distinctive brand. This research is an initiative of modeling semiotic process of creating a brand through: (1) addressing the situation of brand communication as a graph semiotic, (2) semiotic analysis for an in-depth understanding of meanings within communication brand. The exploratory approach determined a semiotic model that summarizes how the symbolic language can be used in a strategic manner to create a brand. This model is subordinated to the brand communication situation and it should be treated as such.

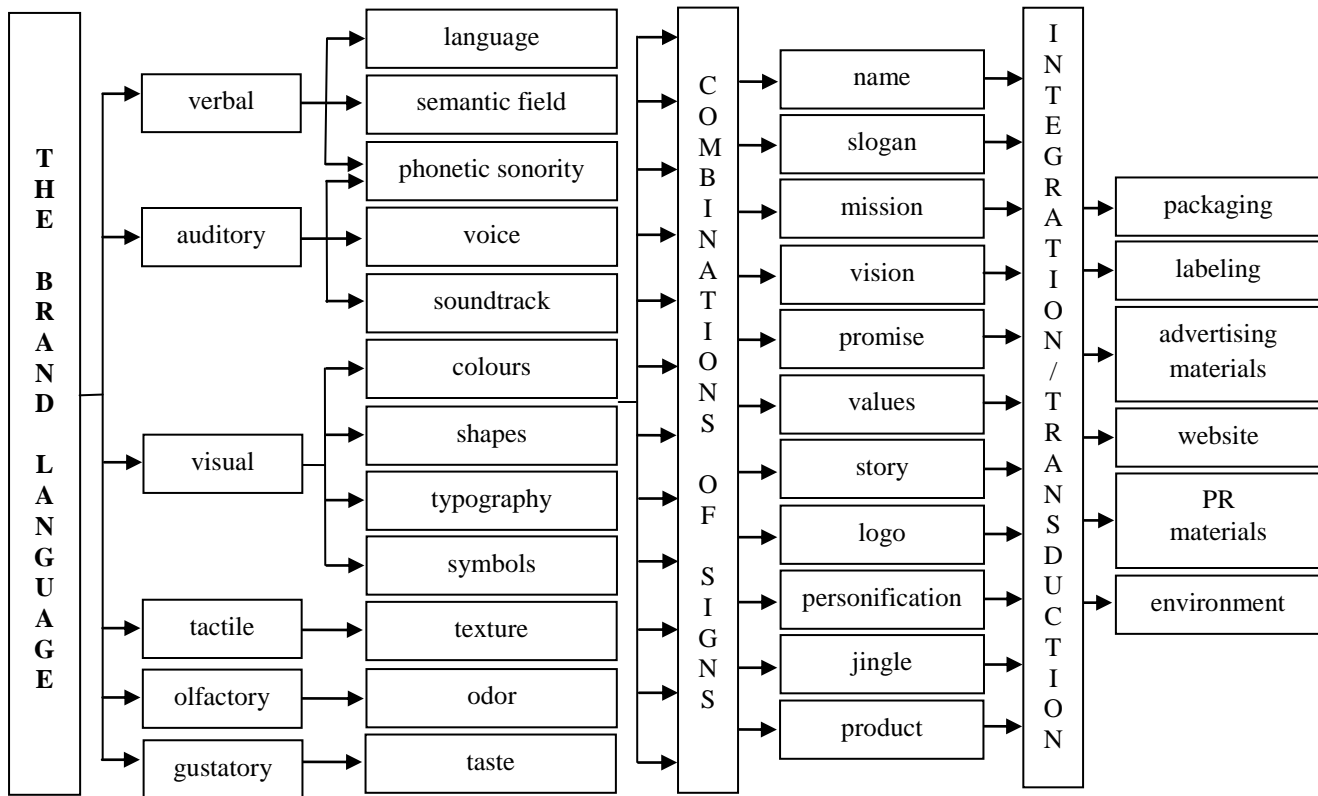


Figure no. 1 – Modeling strategic construction of a brand via symbolic language

Modeling was performed using specialized terms of the language-object and the structure was defined depending on the particularities of a brand as multisensory artifact. The model was constructed by dividing the creation of the brand into four major steps: 1) selecting sensory-perceptual levels (2) defining the symbolic dimension of verbal and nonverbal language, (3) combining signs and creating brand identity, respectively (4) managing intersemiotic translation and integration of meanings.

These four main phases involve handling and operating symbolic language elements in order to create a brand via the communication act. The proposed model is theoretically derived from the contents of an exploratory approach within a case study and is in close connection with the analyzes carried out previously. The manner of selection of the language, the identification of the brand language and the way brand identity elements combine engender comprehensive messages expressed via packaging, labeling, advertising, websites, public relations materials and environment.

The use of symbolic language determines coherent, unitary and distinctive brands. This manner of establishing a hierarchy of steps ensures subordination between the sensory elements of the same mechanism, namely coordination mechanisms between elements belonging to different sensory modes.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The results of the research show the importance of its theoretical and practical implications, as we shall expose and argue.

First, our research is interdisciplinary, contributing to increased interweaving of two distinct areas of research: semiotics (as part of philosophy), as a method, respectively branding, whose main concept - brand - is the language-object of the study. This paper presents a contribution towards the development of the state of the art regarding the relationship between semiotic concepts and the process of brand creation.

Second, in this paper, we integrated an expanded theoretical research, by providing a review of the main contributions in the literature corresponding to semiotics, from fundamental studies of semiotic theory to the most recent interrogations in applied semiotics. This contribution is complemented by our attempt to define the concept of brand and the brand creation process from a semiotic perspective, by proposing a definition of the brand in semiotic terms.

Third, although connections between semiotics and brand have been studied over the last 30 years, there is still an insufficient knowledge and understanding of the way various semiotic constructs can support the process of brand creation. The topic we approached within this thesis and its completion with a model represent one of the few Romanian contributions in the field of brand semiotics. Despite the increasing global interest and the numerous interdisciplinary

perspectives on this subject, in Romania, brand semiotics is poorly treated as a research topic, amid a small number of specialists in the field of semiotics. In this context, we aimed to answer the following research question: how can codes be used in brand communication so as to ensure coherence, unity and distinctness? That prompted our research to the perspective of symbolic brand language.

Fourth, the paper's complexity lies in the dichotomous nature of semiotics as methodology, which requires a dual approach - the semiotic-philosophical and the linguistic branch, which is complemented by research in communication theory. The concept of brand is also a difficult element to express in all its complexity, given the perpetual disagreement among experts about the proper definition of the term, and the many taxonomies and parts that describe it.

Fifth, the originality of our approach is driven by the research design, including the creation and use of two semiotic models. The first model deploys graphical methods to illustrate the semiotic situation of brand communication. This model identifies the constituent parameters, describing their functionality and relations established between elements. The second model, which is also the purpose of this work, was created for the brand language parameter detailing the nominee in the graph illustrating the situation semiotic brand communication. The model explains the steps for creating a brand through symbolic language within the communication process.

Our contribution includes the strategic advantage created by the initiative of combining two research approaches: an integrated one (the situation of brand communication) and a specific one, derived from the first model (model to create a brand through the strategic use of symbolic language). Therefore, the research is enhanced by the semiotic graph that provides an overview of the communicative process in its entirety. In this way, we avoided a superficial and unrepresentative approach of the parameters that would have jeopardized the relevance of the study we undertook. Complementary, the decision to go into details with an extract from the main model, in a new illustrative model, enables us to explain the interdependence established between the process of creating a brand and the brand language.

Sixth, the research contributes to the improvement of the level of knowledge regarding this interdisciplinary subject by clarifying semiotic implications of language use in branding. The main models in the literature which discuss brand creation have a rather abbreviated approach to the brand creation process, identifying the components of a brand identity without analyzing their previous stages of development. The models have been focused so far on illustrating the relationship of determination between brand identity and the soon-to-be brand, aiming namely to launch a series of recommendations on creating brand identity, but without articulating the relationship between brand identity and language and without discussing the strategic role of language in the process of brand creation.

In addition, developing a semiotic model that would define the relationship system and the main steps in the process of brand creation, could represent an important theoretical and practical contribution. In theory, this may support the efforts to understand the way the co-participation of those two areas - namely semiotics and branding - would create socio-cultural artifacts. The model proposes brand language as a central concept in the process of brand creation, by offering new opportunities to explore the perspective.

On a practical level, the model could serve as a reference for brand managers, by guiding their efforts to build a coherent, unitary and distinctive brand. Thus, practitioners in branding and marketing should be concerned with building solid brand meanings created through symbolic language.

Seventh, our study extensively discusses a topic only tangentially mentioned in the literature (Kapferer, 2012), without being defined, explained and illustrated: the concept of brand language. In our research, we defined this concept, we integrated it into the semiotic graph, exposing the brand communication situation and we identified the determining relationships between this concept and other constitutive parameters of the situational analysis. Finally, the concept of brand language was discussed in terms of its symbolic dimension which lies in the types of language that encompasses them, languages defined by strong connotative accents which ensure a brand's semiotic strength.