



## **Semiotic Advertising by International Firms: A Comparative Study of Premium Smart Phone Brands in China, South Korea and USA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper presents a theoretical discussion regarding how semiotic advertising is adopted by international firms. The semiotic advertising concept as explained in this study is defined as an advertising approach or method based on the use of signs and symbols for the purpose of communicating with a target audience. The signs and symbols act as indirect communicators of messages that firms try to convey to consumers. Since this method of advertising is focused and based on the use of different symbolic features or signs, it was found to be beneficial for cross-cultural advertising by international firms. Therefore, this study evaluated the use of semiotic advertising by two (2) premium smartphone brands in three countries, i.e. South Korea, USA and China.

Analysis of different advertisements adopted by these firms in the three countries revealed that there were two underlying factors regarding the use of semiotic advertising. The first factor was definitely the cultural factor, where it was found that Apple's hidden messages in the advertisements were highly aligned to each country's cultural aspects and other factors. The other factor established by Samsung was the use of signs to create a special perception about the brand, thus, leading to the development of better relations between the brand and the customer. The findings showed that the use of semiotic advertising by international premium smartphone brands was definitely different across countries.

**Keywords:** semiotic advertising, international firms, smartphone brands, cross-cultural marketing

### **1. BACKGROUND OF STUDY**

The emergence and growth of multinational firms on a global scale has led to a significant increase in the importance of advertising around the world. Advertising is used for informing as well as convincing people to buy products and services sold by the advertiser. However, it is argued that since 21<sup>st</sup> century consumers are regularly made to look at a plethora of advertisements, the advertisements lose their value (Johnson, 2013). Advertisers in the modern world have been found to prefer visual methods of advertising and communication. One of the key components of visual advertising is the inclusion of components that resonate with personal experiences, culture etc. of the customers so that they are more attracted to the brand and products offered (Mohanty and Ratneshwar, 2015). Such a method or form of advertisement or marketing is commonly referred to as semiotic advertising, in which the message that the advertiser wants to communicate is communicated with hidden meanings in the advertisements. There are some criticisms regarding the use of the semiotic advertising method and approach, such as the method being highly imperialistic in nature and often considered as abstract in nature (Solik, 2014). However, it has become one of the most commonly adopted modes or methods of advertising. One of the key advantages of the advertising method, as identified by Freire (2014) and Oswald and Oswald (2015), is that it helps to break down an entire message into several smaller and important parts. This allows customers and interpreters to evaluate and understand the meaning of different signs and symbols as well as the relationship between them. In addition, it was stated that since the advertising method helps in integrating cultural as well as related symbols and meanings into advertisements, it is much more relatable for the



consumers (Oswald and Oswald, 2015). Moreover, adopting semiotics helps in ensuring that communication, packaging and product design are all rooted and related to people's live experiences, leading to better outcomes.

The advertising method is presumed to make advertising simpler and more effective for international companies because it can be altered to make it more relatable to customers in different countries (Anand, 2014). However, there is an intense debate surrounding marketing strategies adopted by international firms. While some experts suggest the use of standardised methods of advertising so that the same brand message is conveyed, some have argued otherwise. According to discussions by some experts (Minowa and Belk (2017), international firms need to focus on semiotic advertising so that their advertisements, marketing and communication strategies can establish intercultural communication. The study further investigated how premium smartphone brands make use of semiotic advertising in different countries. Since the US, South Korea and China exhibit different cultures and beliefs, further discussions presented a critical analysis of how international premium smart phone brands adopt semiotic advertising in these countries.

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Semiotic Advertising**

Semiotics, in the simplest of words, can be explained as a concept that focuses on the use of symbols and signs for the purpose of conveying different ideas (Danesi, 2017). It is also referred to in the contemporary world as a science that involves the use and application of different signs related to people and society. Semiotic advertising refers to an advertising method or practice that promotes the use of symbolic meanings for communication (Callier, 2014). Since the main role of advertisers is to adopt verbal as well as non-verbal techniques used in advertising to persuade buyers, semiotics is useful for creating these advertisements according to the needs and requirements of the target market group (Callier, 2014). It is stated that the core of marketing lies not in the communicator or the message being communicated, but rather in the relationship that is formed between the customer, advertiser and advertisements; hence, since the use of different signs and semiotics in advertisements help in ensuring that customers can relate to these signs, it forms stronger relationships between buyers and advertisers (Freire, 2014). An interesting perspective often associated with semiotic advertising is that the method allows transformation of advertisements from a person's perception into experiences of reality and hence, the advertisements tend to draw upon different hidden meanings of the social world to promote a given product or service (Kim, 2015). There are numerous discussions surrounding the application of semiotic advertising, especially in the area of cross-cultural marketing because the use of signs and symbols, as defined in semiotic advertising, helps in relating the advertisements with different buyer cultures. Thus, semiotic advertising is definitely an integral part of cross-cultural marketing. Further discussions had evaluated and discussed the use of semiotic advertising in a cross-cultural context.

### **Semiotic Advertising in a Cultural Context**

It is often argued that since culture and cultural communications taking place in the world do shape and influence the buyer's consumer behaviour, semiotics is becoming a defining aspect of marketing and advertising practices (Amatulli et al 2016). There is also a special term used to define and explain signs related to different cultures, which is known as cultural semiotics. Cultural semiotics refers to the study of incorporating different signs and symbols that are usually associated with a specific culture. Therefore, since discussions concerning cultural semiotics define the way different signs are used and interpreted in different cultures, it could be adopted and incorporated in the marketing and advertising process to ensure advertisements are interpreted appropriately by target customers (Radford, 2010). Therefore, semiotic advertising could be extremely beneficial in a cross-cultural context because it helps to ensure suitable signs and symbols are included and can assist in communicating the brand and advertiser's key products as well as messages to people from different cultural backgrounds. However, the same signs and symbols are often interpreted in different ways in different cultures and it is important for companies to ensure that the signs and symbols it uses is not interpreted negatively by its target audience (Patel and Bhutiani, 2017). There were several questions raised regarding the benefits of semiotics and its effectiveness for cross-cultural marketing or communications, but Evans (2016) explained that the use of different signs and symbols associated with the overall culture of people usually creates an emotional connection between buyers and firms, which affects their purchase behaviour. It can be deduced that semiotic advertising is definitely beneficial and advantageous in facilitating cross-cultural

communication and advertising and has a positive impact on the firm's performance. This study analysed how premium smartphone brands used semiotic advertising across three countries. Further discussions identified and explored some of the key components used for analysing semiotic advertising.

### **Components of Semiotic Advertising Analysis**

There are several different models and theoretical frameworks that have been developed in order to carry out a comprehensive semiotic analysis of advertisements. Semiotic analysis was developed over time and is beneficial for assessing and evaluating the use of signs as well as the communication processes adopted in advertising (Sifaki and Papadopoulou, 2015). Three most important things that are usually considered in a study of signs and semiotic behaviour of advertisements are the signs, the object the sign refers to as well as the users and consumers of those signs (Sifaki and Papadopoulou, 2015). These findings suggest that it is not only the sign that needs to be analysed, but also how the sign is perceived and interpreted by users, in order to understand the use of semiotic advertising in an effective and convenient manner. The study of signs includes the study of verbal and non-verbal signs, in which verbal signs include the messages that are verbally written or conveyed in advertisements, while non-verbal signs refer to images that present non-verbal behaviour and characteristics of the advertisement. There are two levels where the semiotic analysis needs to be carried out, i.e. the denotation and the connotation levels (Michelson and Alvarez Valencia, 2016). The first level, i.e. the denotation level, requires the study of the literal significance or meaning of a particular advertisement or sign, while the second level or the connotation level, requires the study of hidden meanings of signs and symbols that are more closely associated with the culture of a target group of consumers (Michelson and Alvarez Valencia, 2016). The researchers were required to carry out a comprehensive analysis and study of the way signs are related to the target audience. Analysts and researchers were required to make sure that they look at the advertisement from the customer's perspective, especially a customer from a particular culture who is looking at the advertisement and analysing it before making a purchase decision.

### **Summary of the Literature**

The literature review on the subject established that semiotic advertising is an effective and helpful method as well as a mode of advertising for modern, multinational firms because it makes use of different signs and symbols that allow companies to effectively advertise in a cross-cultural environment. Since the study aimed to evaluate semiotic advertising adopted by international smartphone brands in three different countries, the components mentioned above were used to analyse advertisements by selected firms.

### **III. METHODOLOGY**

This study was based on the qualitative research method, which required the researcher to gather and make use of theoretical information and data that needs to be critically analysed and evaluated by the researcher to accomplish the aims and objectives of the research. While the quantitative method of study is often considered more reliable because the statistical analysis offers highly reliable results, the qualitative method is considered to be more effective because it provides a more detailed and in-depth study of the subject (Smith, 2015). The researcher had adopted a qualitative research method in the form of a semiotic analysis. Semiotic analysis refers to a strategy where researchers try to identify and seek meanings from different forms of signs that exist, which can include words, pictures and objects (Berger, 2015). The researcher tried to evaluate the signs as thoroughly as possible in order to determine the hidden meanings in them. It is usually argued that signs are mostly related to other signs or meanings and it is important for researchers to consider and include all signs and meanings while carrying out semiotic analysis (Berger, 2015). Hence, the present study was based on a semiotic analysis of advertisements by two (2) international premium smartphone brands in three countries. The researcher had chosen advertisements from two biggest international smartphone brands, namely Apple and Samsung, from each country and then analysed it to identify the signs used as well as the rationale in using those signs. Selection of the advertisements was done randomly from some of the successful advertisements by both companies in these respective countries. The researcher had used the components identified in the literature review, including denotation and connotation-based analysis of signs and tried to relate these components with cultural factors existent in these nations for a wider analysis. The findings of the study and its analysis are elaborated below.

#### IV. FINDINGS

##### Apple

Apple is one of the largest premium smartphone companies in the world and its products are widely consumed and appreciated in countries across the world. Selective advertisements by Apple in three countries, namely China, South Korea and the US, were further compared to evaluate the semiotics involved in them.

##### China

Figure 1: Apple's Advertisement in China



This screenshot is part of an advertisement of the *Old Record* commercial by Apple in China that was released in 2015 and shows a young girl letting her grandmother listen to an old song on an Apple product. The advertisement presents the sign of a family relationship. From a denotation perspective and an analysis of the advertisement, it reflects the use of an Apple product for listening to music and creating memories. However, the connotation analysis of the advertisement reflects the contributions of Apple in forming and strengthening family relationships. The sign refers to the fact that the brand is beneficial in strengthening family ties. As explained by Wenzhong and Grove (2010), China's culture exhibits a collectivist behaviour where people are close to each other and pay special attention towards personal relationships. Hence, it could be deduced that Apple's advertisement in China was consistent with the cultural behaviour and beliefs of Chinese consumers, thus,

suggesting the use of pictorial semiotics for advertising purposes.

##### South Korea

Figure 2: Apple's Advertisement in South Korea

Figure 2 is a screenshot of an advertisement released by Apple for its iPhone 7. The advertisement was introduced and publicised by Apple to promote its newly added feature of iMessage stickers. The picture is a still from a video advertisement that featured the use of different stickers in different ways with a lot of pop-culture references that includes references to modern shows like *Family Guy* and *South Park*. The tagline used in the advertisement was "*Say it with stickers*". The denotation meaning in the advertisement clearly promotes and demonstrates the different ways in which stickers offered by iPhone's latest updated iOS could be used.



However, the advertisement was representative and used due to the existence of pop-culture in the country. South Korea is widely known for its pop-culture and the advertisement was intended to connect with customers who appreciate this culture (Jin and Yoon, 2016). Hence, the semiotic use of advertisements seems to be based on the cultural preferences of consumers in the country, which leads to the development of better relationships with buyers.

USA



**Figure 3: Apple's Advertisement in USA**

Similar to targeting customers preferring pop-culture in South Korea, Apple's advertisement in the USA, as shown above, also targets customers who prefer pop culture icons. Americans are found to be closely associated with pop culture and pop culture icons, such as Audrey Hepburn for a long time. iPhone advertisements in the US, as shown above, present two meanings to the concept, whereby the direct meaning reflects sales of the phone in two colours, whereas the connotation meaning appeals to the consumer's pop-culture in the country. These findings confirm that Apple, the premium smartphone brand, does alter its advertisements based on the consumer's culture.

### **Samsung**

Samsung is the biggest competitor to Apple in the premium smartphone manufacturing industry and it is also expanding its sales and growth across countries all over the world. Some of the most widely sold premium smartphones by Samsung include its Note and Galaxy S series. The advertisements by Samsung in the three countries along with the analysis are presented below.

### **China**

**Figure 4: Samsung's Advertisement in China**

Figure 4 presents the screenshot from an advertisement adopted by Samsung for its premium smartphone, Galaxy Note 5, intended for Chinese market. The advertisement's tagline is "Get More Done Faster". The direct meaning of the advertisement refers to the smart features of the phone that helps to carry out activities much faster and in a much more effective way. However, at the same time, it caters and appeals to young consumers and their preferences for new and faster technologies. Since China is considered the hub of inventions, people prefer new and faster phones and technologies and that is what is being promoted by the advertisement (Di Giovanni et al., 2014). Therefore, the use of verbal signs presents a key aspect of semiotic advertising by the brand. South Korea





**Figure 5: Samsung's Advertisement in South Korea**

The screenshot above is from an advertisement for Samsung Galaxy Note in South Korea. While the advertisement does not have any verbal signs, it presents an image based on a pictorial sign. The denotation analysis of the advertisement suggests and reflects unique capabilities of the phone, but at the same time, the analysis reflects a more personalised meaning given to the phone. Samsung establishes the customer's emotional relationship with the brand because of the close association that relates to their emotional side. Hence, the use of semiotic advertising helps Samsung to develop emotional relations with its customers in the country.

USA



**Figure 6: Samsung's Advertisement in USA**

Samsung's advertisement in Times Square in New York, is shown in Figure 6. It was a common advertisement used by Samsung for its phones across the world. The tagline used by the company, *unbox your Phone*, literally means to open and unbox the phone, but the hidden message in the tagline is for consumers to think beyond the literal meaning and features of a phone, which points towards innovative features added and introduced by the phone. However, there is no cultural connection with the semiotics used by the brand in its advertisement with respect to the US. The semiotic analysis of advertisements, as presented above, was further compared and analysed to discuss and provide answers to the research topics presented above.

## V. ANALYSIS

The meaning of semiotic analysis presented by Solik (2014) and Freire (2014) confirms that the advertising or marketing method refers to the adoption of images and different indirect signs and symbols that help to establish a close relationship with a target group of customers. The use of signs and symbols, as shown in the advertisements by Apple and Samsung, were both

verbal and non-verbal, hence, suggesting the application and effectiveness of a semiotic form of advertising. Use of semiotic advertising has been found to be extremely beneficial and advantageous for cross-cultural marketing by international firms. Radford (2010) and Evans (2016) explained that international firms need to cater to the needs of consumers from different countries who exhibit different cultures and it is important for them to ensure that they adopt suitable advertising and marketing strategies that help to enhance their sales and growth in nations worldwide. Oswald and Oswald (2015) also explained that since the same signs and symbols could be interpreted differently in different countries, advertisers need to ensure that they make informed decisions regarding their strategies. Hence, semiotic advertising allows firms to incorporate suitable signs and symbols in their advertisements while keeping the basic tagline and advertisement the same in order to achieve a higher-level of effectiveness. The examples presented above regarding the advertisements by Apple and Samsung in three different countries (China, USA and South Korea) confirm that international smartphone brands do make use of semiotic advertising by manipulating advertisements to suit the cultural preferences of consumers. While China exhibits a culture of collectivism focusing on family and friends as well as higher technological development, South Korea and USA exhibit a pop-culture and therefore, the differences in semiotics and signs used by Apple in its advertisements can be related to these cultural differences. Samsung on the other hand, does not use much semiotic differences based on culture, but rather the association of its customers with the brand. Samsung's advertisement in China indicates the need for higher technologies, whereas in South Korea and USA, it was more related to the development of a specific brand image. Hence, it can be confirmed that the use of semiotics exists in premium international smartphone brands, but semiotics is not always related to culture, instead it is related to the relationship that the brand wants to establish with its customers.

## VI. CONCLUSION

It can be summarised and concluded based on the analysis presented above that semiotic advertising is indeed used by international premium smartphone brands when advertising and marketing their products across different countries. The study aimed to compare how semiotic advertising was used in South Korea, China and the USA by premium smartphone brands and examples of advertisements by firms in these countries were taken and analysed. The findings of the analysis indicated that these brands did incorporate and utilise different signs and semiotics for the purpose of international advertising. The use of signs and semiotics was largely found to be associated with consumers' cultural characteristics in a country where they were used. In addition, they were also found to be related to the need of establishing a strong relationship between the firm and the consumers.

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