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Semiotics of Advertising: Symbolic Strategies in Contemporary Media Discourse

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Abstract. Advertising represents one of the most powerful forms of contemporary communication, functioning not only as a persuasive instrument but also as a cultural text that encodes values, myths, and ideologies. This paper approaches advertising through the lens of semiotics, drawing on the classical frameworks of Saussure, Peirce, and Barthes, while integrating more recent perspectives from cultural studies and digital media theory. The study argues that advertising is a complex semiotic system that relies on iconic, indexical, and symbolic dimensions in order to produce meaning and to establish an emotional and cognitive connection with audiences. By analyzing selected case studies from global brands, European campaigns, and digital environments, the article demonstrates how advertising constructs cultural myths of consumption, happiness, and identity. The findings contribute to the growing field of applied semiotics by highlighting the interplay between denotation and connotation, the circulation of signs across media platforms, and the ideological underpinnings of consumer culture.

Keywords. semiotics, advertising, communication, cultural codes, media discourse

1. Introduction

Advertising occupies a central position in contemporary societies, functioning not merely as an instrument of commerce but as a pervasive discourse through which meanings, values, and ideologies are transmitted. In today's media environment, saturated with images, brands, and mediated narratives, advertising exerts a distinctive semiotic power: it does not simply sell products, but also identities, lifestyles, and imaginaries (Williamson, 1978).

Semiotics provides the conceptual framework to understand this process of meaning-making. Ferdinand de Saussure's dyadic model of the sign, signifier and signified, lays the foundation for exploring how linguistic and visual signs acquire meaning through convention (Saussure, 1983 [1916]). Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model, comprising the icon, index, and symbol, further enriches this perspective, explaining how advertisements construct meaning through resemblance, causal connection, and symbolic convention (Peirce, 1958).

Roland Barthes's theory of denotation and connotation underscores the layered structure of advertising discourse. In his view, advertisements function as "mythologies," embedding ideological values within everyday cultural texts (Barthes, 1972). A simple commodity image, such as that of a luxury watch, denotes a product while simultaneously connoting prestige,

authority, and social distinction. Through this mechanism, advertising naturalizes ideologies of consumption and presents them as universal and self-evident truths.

Further developments in semiotic theory, particularly the work of Umberto Eco, highlight advertising as a system of cultural codes interpreted within specific socio-historical contexts (Eco, 1976). More recent contributions, such as those of Daniel Chandler, have emphasized the multimodal dimension of advertising, integrating linguistic, visual, and digital elements in a unified semiotic analysis (Chandler, 2017).

Recent bibliometric analyses confirm the increasing relevance of semiotic approaches to advertising studies, noting a significant growth in scholarly publications between 2014 and 2024 on themes such as myth in advertising, multimodality, and digital communication (Arikunto et al., 2024). Studies applying Barthesian frameworks to contemporary digital campaigns further demonstrate how advertisements encode layered symbolic meanings that extend beyond the mere promotion of products (Abdelkader, 2025).

This article builds upon these theoretical foundations to investigate advertising as a semiotic system of persuasion and cultural production. It explores how advertisements employ iconic, indexical, and symbolic strategies, how cultural myths are embedded in advertising discourse, and how these semiotic operations adapt to digital and interactive environments.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Semiotics of Communication

The semiotic study of advertising begins with the recognition that communication is structured through systems of signs. Ferdinand de Saussure's structuralist model defined the sign as the association between a signifier (the form, such as an image or word) and a signified (the concept it represents), emphasizing that meaning is produced through difference and opposition rather than inherent qualities (Saussure, 1983 [1916]). This dyadic conception underscores the arbitrariness of the sign, which has profound implications for advertising: brand names, slogans, and logos function as signifiers whose meanings are socially constructed and culturally variable.

Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model expands this view by identifying three fundamental relations between signs and their objects: the icon, which signifies through resemblance; the index, which signifies through causal or physical connection; and the symbol, which signifies through convention (Peirce, 1958). Advertising texts frequently combine these modalities. For example, an advertisement for a sports drink may use iconic representation through realistic imagery of athletes, indexical signs of sweat and exertion to suggest authenticity, and symbolic elements such as logos to anchor brand identity.

Semiotics of communication thus allows us to decode advertising not only as a persuasive tool, but as a structured discourse that relies on complex combinations of sign functions to generate meaning.

2.2 Advertising as Cultural Text

Roland Barthes advanced semiotic theory by introducing the concepts of denotation and connotation, and by demonstrating how cultural texts operate on both levels simultaneously. In *Mythologies* (1972), Barthes argued that advertising is among the most powerful producers of modern myths, naturalizing ideological values under the guise of common sense. Through this framework, advertisements can be read as "cultural texts" that mediate social values, power relations, and aspirations.

For instance, an automobile advertisement may denote technical features such as speed and efficiency, while connoting freedom, masculinity, or social status. At the mythological level, the car becomes a sign of modernity and autonomy, embedding broader cultural ideologies into the act of consumption (Barthes, 1972).

Umberto Eco (1976) extended this analysis by conceptualizing advertising as a code-based system, where interpretation depends on the shared cultural knowledge of the audience. This highlights the variability of advertising reception: the same sign may generate different interpretations depending on the socio-cultural context in which it is encountered.

2.3 Multimodality and Digital Semiotics

In contemporary contexts, the semiotics of advertising cannot be limited to static images or printed texts. Daniel Chandler (2017) and Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) emphasized the multimodal nature of modern communication, where text, image, sound, and interaction are integrated in meaning-making. Advertising in digital media is inherently multimodal, relying on the interplay of visual, auditory, and interactive elements.

This shift introduces new semiotic dynamics: interactivity, virality, and user-generated reinterpretation. A digital campaign, for example, is not only received passively but is also reshaped through sharing, remixing, and meme culture. As recent studies demonstrate, semiotics in digital advertising increasingly concerns the negotiation of meaning between producers and audiences, with myth and ideology circulating in more decentralized ways (Arikunto et al., 2024; Abdelkader, 2025).

2.4 Toward a Semiotics of Persuasion

Taken together, these perspectives establish advertising as a semiotic system that functions across multiple layers: linguistic, visual, symbolic, cultural, and digital. Semiotics provides both the conceptual vocabulary and the analytical tools to decode how advertisements persuade, not only by presenting information but by embedding symbolic values into everyday life.

This theoretical foundation will guide the subsequent analysis, which applies semiotic methodology to case studies of global, regional, and digital advertising campaigns.

3. Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative semiotic approach, focusing on how advertising texts generate meaning through visual, linguistic, and symbolic structures. Semiotic analysis has long been employed to decode media discourses, with Roland Barthes's framework of denotation, connotation, and myth providing a seminal methodological foundation (Barthes, 1972). In advertising research, this approach allows us to reveal the hidden ideological functions embedded in seemingly neutral or entertaining promotional messages.

3.1 Analytical Framework

The analysis combines two complementary semiotic traditions. First, structural semiotics, derived from Saussure and Barthes, is used to examine the binary relationship between signifier and signified, and the connotative layering of meaning (Saussure, 1983

[1916]; Barthes, 1972). Second, pragmatic semiotics, following Charles Sanders Peirce, explores how signs function as icons, indexes, or symbols in order to generate interpretive effects (Peirce, 1958).

By bringing these perspectives together, the methodology captures both the structural and functional dimensions of advertising signs. For example, an advertisement for athletic shoes may be read structurally as a text combining denotative and connotative codes, while also being analyzed pragmatically in terms of iconic resemblance (the shoe itself), indexical references (images of physical effort), and symbolic associations (branding, slogans).

3.2 Multimodal Analysis

Given the transformation of advertising in the digital age, the study also employs a multimodal analytical lens. As Kress and van Leeuwen argue, contemporary communication is inherently multimodal, integrating visual, verbal, and aural codes into a unified message (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2001). This perspective is particularly relevant for digital campaigns, where meaning is co-constructed across platforms and enriched through interactivity.

Thus, the methodology pays attention not only to textual and visual elements but also to sound, rhythm, interactivity, and the participatory circulation of content. The adoption of a multimodal semiotics is essential to understanding advertising as a dynamic and polyphonic discourse.

3.3 Case Selection

To illustrate these methodological principles, three categories of advertising campaigns are selected:

- Global campaigns (e.g., Coca-Cola, Apple) - chosen for their ubiquity and symbolic resonance in constructing universal myths of happiness, innovation, or empowerment.
- Regional campaigns (e.g., European and Romanian brands) - selected to demonstrate how semiotic codes adapt to local cultural contexts, incorporating motifs of tradition, authenticity, and belonging.
- Digital campaigns (e.g., Nike on Instagram) - analyzed to show how semiotics functions in interactive, participatory environments where users reinterpret and circulate brand meanings.

The choice of these cases reflects a purposive sampling strategy (Silverman, 2020), designed to capture variation across cultural scales and media environments.

3.4 Limitations

While qualitative semiotic analysis provides deep interpretive insights, it also carries inherent subjectivity. Interpretations depend on the researcher's cultural competence and theoretical lens (Eco, 1976). To mitigate this limitation, the analysis triangulates structural, pragmatic, and multimodal perspectives, ensuring a more comprehensive understanding of advertising's sign systems.

4. Semiotic Deepening: Contemporary Advances and Applications

4.1 Reconsidering the Sign: From Peirce to the Digital Sign

The Peircean triadic model of the sign, comprising representamen, object, and interpretant, remains fundamental to semiotic analysis (Peirce, 1958). Yet in digital environments, the interpretant is no longer a passive receiver but an active participant who co-

creates meaning through interaction, commentary, and circulation (Manovich, 2017). This observation resonates with Eco's idea that signs are open systems whose meanings depend on interpretive codes that vary across cultural contexts (Eco, 1976).

Digital advertising demonstrates the fluidity of the modern sign. Emojis, GIFs, hashtags, and stickers function simultaneously as icons, indices, and symbols, depending on the interpretive frame of the audience. Madadi (2024) has shown that emojis embedded in advertising reshape both the affective and functional interpretation of messages, confirming that signs in digital culture are inherently hybrid. Pinto Grunfeld (2024) further emphasizes this point by developing semiotic protocols for trend analysis, illustrating how brands can strategically manage cultural macro-codes to align their communication with emergent socio-cultural narratives.

4.2 Myth, Ideology, and Cultural Codes Today

Barthes's theory of myth, which described advertising as a system that naturalizes ideology under the guise of common sense, remains highly relevant (Barthes, 1972). Yet the substance of advertising myths has shifted. Whereas mid-twentieth-century advertising emphasized status, luxury, and material success, contemporary campaigns increasingly invoke myths of sustainability, inclusion, and authenticity (Williamson, 1978; Holt, 2004).

A recent study by Agustia et al. (2025) applies Barthes's four-level framework of denotation, connotation, myth, and ideology to smartphone advertising, demonstrating how technological products are re-signified as markers of progress, efficiency, and personal empowerment. Similarly, Prasetya (2025), through a large-scale bibliometric analysis, highlights a significant growth in publications on advertising semiotics between 2014 and 2024, particularly focusing on myth, multimodality, and digital environments. These contributions confirm that semiotic analysis remains not only relevant but increasingly necessary to decode advertising's ideological transformations.

4.3 Multimodality, Interactivity, and Co-creation

The semiotics of advertising today cannot be reduced to static textual or visual analysis. Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) have shown that meaning emerges from the interaction of multiple modes, visual, verbal, auditory, and spatial, and this multimodal grammar is crucial to understanding digital campaigns. Online advertisements employ image, typography, music, and animation, all orchestrated into complex semiotic ensembles that guide interpretation.

Equally important is the participatory logic of digital culture. Audiences no longer consume advertising passively but actively co-create meaning through likes, shares, hashtags, and remixes (Manovich, 2017). Naeem (2025) explores this dynamic in the context of luxury fashion, showing how consumers negotiate symbolic meaning rather than simply receiving it. This reflects a broader transformation in advertising semiotics: signs are now unstable and contested, continuously re-signified within the participatory space of social media.

4.4 Ideology in Contemporary Advertising

The ideological dimension of advertising, emphasized by both Barthes (1972) and Eco (1976), persists in contemporary contexts but has expanded to incorporate new themes. Campaigns often inscribe commodities within discourses of ecological responsibility, diversity, and ethical consumption. By appropriating these cultural codes, brands not only respond to shifting consumer expectations but also neutralize contradictions between consumerist practices and progressive values (Holt, 2004; Naeem, 2025).

This demonstrates Eco's claim that signs function within cultural codes that are historically contingent (Eco, 1976). A campaign that signals sustainability in one cultural context may be read as authenticity or tradition in another, depending on the interpretive frameworks available to audiences. Thus, the ideological function of advertising semiotics today lies not only in selling products but in providing symbolic resolutions to contemporary cultural tensions.

4.5 Methodological and Critical Implications

In light of these developments, semiotic research on advertising must adapt its methodological approach. Classical frameworks remain indispensable, but they require integration with newer perspectives that account for digital interactivity and multimodality. Researchers increasingly combine semiotic deconstruction with complementary methods such as focus groups, ethnographic inquiry, or digital analytics to triangulate findings (Silverman, 2020).

Furthermore, reflexivity becomes essential. As Eco (1976) reminds us, interpretation is always mediated by the analyst's cultural position. Recognizing this prevents semiotic analysis from presenting itself as an objective decoding of meaning and instead acknowledges its role in negotiating cultural significance.

5. Case studies

5.1 Coca-Cola: The Myth of Happiness

Coca-Cola has become emblematic for understanding how advertising naturalizes ideology. Its campaigns rarely focus on product features, but consistently link the beverage to affective values such as joy, friendship, and celebration. In semiotic terms, this illustrates how signs are displaced from material objects to abstract cultural ideals (Williamson, 1978). The recurring use of red color palettes, festive soundtracks, and imagery of family gatherings or multicultural groups reinforces a myth of happiness that transcends geographical boundaries.

Recent research suggests that Coca-Cola sustains its symbolic power by strategically adapting its global myth to local cultural contexts. For instance, national campaigns often integrate holidays, rituals, or traditional motifs, embedding the brand within local narratives of identity and belonging (Prasetya, 2025). In this sense, Coca-Cola illustrates the ability of global brands to negotiate between universal discourses and local semiotic codes, ensuring both consistency and cultural resonance (Agustia et al., 2025).

Coca-Cola's advertising can also be read through the lens of ritual communication. The repetition of festive imagery and seasonal campaigns (notably Christmas advertisements) creates what Carey (1989) describes as a ritual mode of communication: consumption becomes a symbolic performance of social unity rather than an act of individual thirst-quenching. In this sense, Coca-Cola does not merely represent happiness but actively organizes cultural practices around its brand.

"Live Fully in the Moment" (2025)

The Coca-Cola campaign launched in 2025 targeting Gen Z (figure 1), which integrated QR codes into billboards and packaging, provides a significant example of how classical semiotic theories remain relevant in digital contexts. The campaign invited consumers to "live fully in the moment," framing consumption as a gateway to emotional intensity (Coca-Cola, 2025).

From a Barthesian perspective, the commodity is transformed into a myth of happiness: Coca-Cola no longer signifies only a beverage but becomes the naturalized signifier of joy and social connection (Barthes, 1972). Williamson's (1978) displacement of meaning is evident: abstract values such as optimism and vitality are transferred onto a material product. Methodologically, Carey's (1989) notion of ritual communication illuminates the repetitive and ceremonial aspect of this discourse: the act of scanning a QR code and sharing a Coke does not transmit information but re-enacts the cultural ritual of togetherness.

Moreover, the campaign's use of digital codes illustrates the methodological need to integrate semiotics with media ecology. The QR code itself functions as an indexical sign: its value lies in pointing to an experience beyond the advertisement. This confirms Manovich's (2017) claim that digital culture transforms signs into gateways to participation.



Figure 1. Coca-Cola "Live Fully in the Moment" campaign
Source: The Coca-Cola Company (2025)

5.2 Apple: Innovation as Lifestyle

Apple's communication exemplifies how advertising constructs lifestyle myths that extend beyond commodities. The company's minimalist aesthetics, the repeated emphasis on creativity, and the alignment with cultural icons illustrate what Holt (2004) defines as the making of "iconic brands." Apple products are not presented simply as devices, but as symbolic mediators of individuality and innovation.

This semiotic strategy has been amplified in the digital environment. Studies on digital marketing emphasize that Apple cultivates experiential branding, where interactivity and design converge to reinforce the myth of innovation (Madadi, 2024; Pinto Grunfeld, 2024). The brand's campaigns circulate across platforms not only as advertisements but also as cultural discourses. Consumers themselves participate in this process: through content creation, tutorials, or artistic projects realized on Apple devices, they contribute to the co-construction of the brand's semiotic universe (Naeem, 2025). Apple thus illustrates the transition from advertising as transmission of messages to advertising as an evolving symbolic ecosystem.

Apple's discourse can be interpreted as a form of technological mythopoesis, that is, the process of creating and sustaining myths through symbolic narratives and aesthetic strategies (Eliade, 1963). Mythopoesis implies that brands do not merely represent values but actively construct symbolic worlds in which those values appear natural and desirable (Barthes, 1972). In Apple's case, devices are framed as extensions of human creativity: by presenting technology

as transparent, simple, and elegant, Apple naturalizes complex infrastructures of design and labor into objects of desire. This reflects what Couldry (2012) calls the myth of the mediated center, whereby media and technology corporations position themselves as the central hub of cultural life. Apple's mythopoesis thus suggests that creativity and individuality are best realized within its ecosystem, transforming commodities into symbolic mediators of identity and innovation.

Apple: "Think Different" and Contemporary Ecosystem Campaigns

The 1997 "Think Different" campaign remains a cornerstone of Apple's semiotic strategy, featuring cultural icons such as Einstein, Gandhi, and Picasso. The campaign exemplifies technological mythopoesis, defined as the creation of symbolic narratives that transform commodities into mythic objects (Eliade, 1963; Barthes, 1972). By aligning itself with figures of creativity and rebellion, Apple naturalized the association between its devices and innovation, confirming Holt's (2004) insight that iconic brands achieve resonance through mythic alignment.



Figure 2. Apple "Think Different" campaign. Source: Apple (1997)

Contemporary Apple campaigns for iPhones and iPads sustain this semiotic system. The minimalist design of advertisements, characterized by white backgrounds, sharp typography, and elegant visual compositions, functions as a visual grammar of purity and creativity. Methodologically, this requires a multimodal analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001): it is not the text alone but the orchestration of layout, image, and typography that generates meaning.

Couldry's (2012) myth of the mediated center is also visible: Apple presents itself not as one technology company among many, but as the cultural hub where creativity and individuality converge. By naturalizing complexity into simplicity, Apple illustrates Eco's (1976) claim that semiotic codes mask ideological operations. The brand conceals global infrastructures of production under the surface of elegance.

Recent analyses confirm the participatory dimension of Apple's myth. Consumers create and circulate videos, tutorials, and artistic projects with Apple devices, co-constructing the myth of creativity (Naeem, 2025). This demonstrates the methodological need to combine semiotic deconstruction with audience studies to capture how brand myths are negotiated in practice.

5.3 Nike: Empowerment in Digital Spaces

Nike's advertising provides a striking example of how semiotics functions in participatory contexts. The iconic slogan "Just Do It" operates as an open symbolic text that invites interpretation and appropriation by audiences. Campaigns combine motivational

storytelling, multimodal visual codes, and athlete narratives to create a discourse of empowerment. Kress and van Leeuwen's (2001) multimodal grammar explains how these campaigns integrate images, language, and sound into cohesive narratives that maximize symbolic resonance.

In digital environments, Nike's discourse acquires an additional layer of interactivity. Hashtags such as #JustDoIt or collaborations with influencers allow users to co-create meanings, circulating brand narratives across communities. Manovich (2017) describes this participatory logic as characteristic of digital culture, where audiences actively reshape messages. Recent analyses confirm that Nike's strategy strengthens identification with the brand by embedding its products within communities of practice, resilience, and empowerment (Naeem, 2025). This model exemplifies how advertising no longer merely persuades but orchestrates symbolic spaces where identity and consumption converge.

Nike's advertising illustrates how semiotic meaning is never fixed but open to multiple interpretations. This condition is known as polysemy, the capacity of media texts to generate diverse readings depending on the audience (Hall, 1980). While Nike promotes a dominant reading of empowerment and resilience through its slogan *Just Do It*, audiences can also negotiate or even oppose this interpretation by appropriating the slogan in ironic, critical, or subcultural contexts. Such openness to multiple readings does not weaken the brand; rather, it sustains its cultural presence by allowing consumers to inscribe their own identities into the advertising discourse.

This polysemic flexibility is reinforced in digital environments, where hashtags, remixes, and user-generated content multiply possible interpretations (Manovich, 2017). Recent studies confirm that Nike's campaigns thrive on this dialogical model, in which meaning is co-created by producers and audiences alike (Naeem, 2025). Thus, Nike's discourse exemplifies how advertising has evolved from persuasion to participatory semiotics, enabling symbolic engagement across diverse communities.

Nike: "Dream Crazy" (2018)

The "Dream Crazy" campaign narrated by Colin Kaepernick illustrates the polysemy of advertising texts. Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model provides the framework: while Nike encoded the message of empowerment, audiences decoded it in divergent ways. For supporters, the advertisement symbolized resilience and activism; for critics, it signaled political provocation. This confirms that advertising cannot be reduced to unidirectional persuasion but must be studied as a site of negotiated and oppositional readings.

Nike: Dream Crazy

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Don't ask if your dreams are crazy. Ask if they're crazy enough.



Figure 3. Nike “Dream Crazy” campaign featuring Colin Kaepernick
Source: Wieden+Kennedy (2018)

Methodologically, semiotic analysis must therefore account for polysemy as an interpretive condition. The slogan “Just Do It” functions as a floating signifier, open to appropriation by various audiences. From a multimodal perspective, the campaign’s combination of athlete imagery, as we can see in figure 3, slogans, and inspirational soundtracks creates a powerful semiotic ensemble that intensifies identification (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001).

In digital contexts, hashtags (#JustDoIt) and user-generated remixes amplify the campaign’s reach. Manovich (2017) describes this participatory culture as a hallmark of digital semiotics: audiences become active co-producers of meaning. Naeem (2025) emphasizes that this participatory openness is not accidental but a deliberate strategy, allowing Nike to maintain cultural salience across divergent communities.

Thus, Nike’s “Dream Crazy” illustrates a methodological shift: semiotic analysis must integrate reception studies to fully capture how meaning circulates and transforms in networked media environments.

5.4 Romanian Advertising: Tradition and Belonging

National campaigns offer a complementary perspective by showing how semiotics functions within culturally specific frameworks. In Romanian advertising, particularly in the food and beverage sector, products are often framed through folkloric motifs, rural landscapes, and family imagery. Such codes serve as indices of authenticity, linking commodities to myths of continuity and cultural belonging.

While global brands promote universality, local campaigns emphasize rootedness. Images of harvest, traditional attire, or intergenerational family gatherings function as symbolic condensations of heritage. These strategies not only differentiate local brands from global competitors but also reaffirm collective identity (Agustia et al., 2025). Recent research confirms that national campaigns increasingly balance tradition with modern aspirations, presenting authenticity as both a cultural resource and a marketing advantage (Prasetya, 2025). Romanian advertising thus demonstrates how semiotic strategies adapt to local codes while contributing to the global circulation of authenticity as a brand value.

Romanian advertising provides an important case for examining how consumption intersects with cultural memory. Cultural memory refers to the shared reservoir of symbols, stories, and rituals through which communities construct and maintain collective identity over

time (Assmann, 2011). When campaigns use folkloric motifs, rural landscapes, or intergenerational family imagery, they are not simply illustrating authenticity but actively mobilizing cultural memory as a semiotic resource.

This process allows commodities to be framed as continuities of tradition, positioning consumption as a link between past heritage and present lifestyles. Such strategies reinforce trust and attachment, since products are symbolically embedded within broader narratives of belonging and identity (Agustia et al., 2025). In this way, Romanian advertising demonstrates that local campaigns not only sell goods but also perform a cultural function, reaffirming collective identity in the face of globalization.

Dorna (Romania): “Care for Children” (2021) and Ecological Initiatives

Romanian advertising provides an instructive example of how brands mobilize cultural memory (Assmann, 2011) and ecological responsibility in tandem. The 2021 “Care for Children” campaign depicted family imagery, rural landscapes, and motifs of caregiving, embedding the brand within national narratives of tradition and continuity (Effie Romania, 2021). In parallel, Dorna launched ecological initiatives, such as installing devices for cleaning rivers, framing the brand as both protector of heritage and agent of sustainability (Business Review, 2023).



Figure 4. Dorna “Care for Children” campaign
Source: Effie Romania (2021)

Semiotically, these campaigns mobilize iconic signs (rural landscapes, family gatherings) and indexical signs (water purity, river clean-up devices) to construct authenticity and care. From a methodological perspective, this demonstrates the necessity of context-sensitive semiotics: the same rural imagery that signifies authenticity in Romania may signify exoticism elsewhere.

Moreover, these examples illustrate the fusion of myth and responsibility. Barthes’s (1972) model of myth applies: the commodity is naturalized as a bearer of national continuity. Yet in the ecological campaigns, Dorna also illustrates how advertising constructs a sustainability myth, presenting consumption as participation in environmental care. This aligns with Pinto Grunfeld’s (2024) analysis of semiotic protocols in cultural trend management, where brands embed themselves in macro-discourses such as ecology.

6. Discussion

The four case studies examined in this article: Coca-Cola, Apple, Nike, and Dorna, demonstrate the extent to which advertising operates as a complex semiotic system, articulating not only persuasive strategies but also broader cultural myths and social practices.

Methodologically, this confirms that semiotic analysis requires a multi-layered approach that integrates textual, visual, and cultural dimensions.

First, Coca-Cola illustrates how advertising sustains ritual communication. The 2025 “Live Fully in the Moment” campaign, through its integration of QR codes, demonstrates that even in digital contexts, advertising maintains ritualistic structures of participation and celebration (Carey, 1989). This supports the argument that semiotics must account for repetitive, ceremonial patterns in advertising, rather than reducing campaigns to information transmission.

Apple, by contrast, exemplifies mythopoesis, the active creation of symbolic narratives that naturalize commodities as embodiments of human values (Barthes, 1972; Eliade, 1963). The company’s campaigns confirm Couldry’s (2012) notion of the myth of the mediated center, positioning Apple not only as a producer of technology but as a cultural hub for creativity. Methodologically, this suggests that semiotic analysis must move beyond sign-level interpretation to address the ideological work performed by brand myths.

Nike highlights the polysemy of advertising texts (Hall, 1980). The divergent readings of the “Dream Crazy” campaign reveal how meaning is negotiated between producers and audiences, especially in participatory digital contexts. Here, semiotics intersects with audience studies and reception theory, demonstrating the importance of methodological hybridity. The campaign further confirms Manovich’s (2017) argument that digital media enables co-creation, shifting advertising from persuasion to symbolic orchestration.

Finally, the Dorna campaigns illustrate how advertising can mobilize cultural memory (Assmann, 2011) and ecological responsibility to reinforce authenticity and belonging. By embedding products within narratives of tradition and sustainability, Dorna exemplifies how semiotics must be contextualized nationally and regionally. Unlike Coca-Cola or Nike, which circulate global myths, Dorna demonstrates that local brands rely on cultural specificity to secure trust and attachment.

Taken together, these cases suggest that advertising semiotics operates on multiple scales: ritual (Coca-Cola), myth (Apple), polysemy (Nike), and memory (Dorna). While each framework illuminates different dimensions, they converge in showing that advertising should not be studied as a mere instrument of persuasion, but as a semiotic practice that organizes cultural meaning, mediates identity, and structures participation.

This comparative perspective advances the methodological argument of the paper: semiotic analysis in advertising requires a combination of classical semiotic theories (Barthes, Eco, Williamson) with contemporary approaches (Hall, Manovich, Couldry, Naeem). Only by integrating these layers can scholars fully grasp the ways in which advertising simultaneously perpetuates myths, sustains rituals, enables polysemy, and mobilizes cultural memory in both global and local contexts

7. Conclusion

The analysis of advertising through a semiotic lens has revealed that campaigns are not isolated acts of persuasion, but integral components of cultural and communicative systems. What emerges from this study is that advertising must be approached as a dynamic process of meaning production, in which signs circulate between producers and audiences, acquire symbolic weight, and crystallize into narratives of identity, belonging, and participation.

From a theoretical perspective, the contribution of this article lies in demonstrating how semiotic analysis can bridge structuralist approaches with contemporary interpretive models. Rather than privileging one framework, a composite methodology has proven necessary to

account for both the ideological functions of signs and the fluidity of meaning in digital culture. This hybrid perspective advances semiotics beyond textual analysis, positioning it as an interpretive practice responsive to shifting cultural, technological, and social environments.

In practical terms, the cases examined suggest that advertising operates as a laboratory of cultural negotiation: global brands sustain universal myths through ritualized discourses of happiness, innovation, or empowerment, while local campaigns engage with memory and heritage to consolidate authenticity. These findings imply that effective advertising in the twenty-first century depends less on persuasive force and more on its ability to orchestrate symbolic participation across scales, global and local, digital and material.

Finally, this research points to future directions. As advertising increasingly incorporates artificial intelligence, augmented reality, and algorithmic personalization, semiotics must expand its analytical vocabulary to capture emergent sign systems. Such an extension will not only enrich academic inquiry but also provide critical insights into how communication industries continue to shape imaginaries, practices, and social identities in the digital age.

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