

MCTP Exam – Q1 – Semiotics

Semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign (Chandler – Eco, 1976, 7). How meanings become associated with a sign and thus, a sign's representation in reality are elements fundamentally rooted in the study of semiotics. The founding fathers of semiotic theory were the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857 - 1913) and the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839 – 1914). Both of these men suggested their own unique models regarding what formulates a sign. Their theories have become the dominant concepts behind modern semiotics.

Saussure proposed a dyadic model of a sign. He defined a sign to be consisted of two features: a '*signifier*' and a '*signified*.' 'The signifier is the form that the sign takes and the signified is the concept to which it refers' (Chandler – PDF). In contrasting opinion, Peirce offered a triadic structure for his model. According to his theory, a sign consisted of three features: the '*representamen*,' an '*interpretant*' and an '*object*.' The representamen is the form which the sign takes, similar to Saussure's '*signifier*'. The interpretant is the '*sense*' made of the sign, similar to Saussure's '*signified*'. Finally, the object is to which the sign refers. Comparatively, Peirce grants this latter element higher status in his model, whereas Saussure does not include it directly in his.

The importance of semiotic study to marketing is paramount. Advertisements increasingly enclose the general public in a world that requires interpretation and understanding. Entities and locations take on social, psychological and cultural symbolic meanings (Williamson (1978;2002)). Researching and practising semiotics in a relevant and appropriate manner is crucial to successful ad campaigns. The predominant tradition I will be employing throughout this analysis will be Peirce's semiotic theory. In my opinion, the triadic nature of Peirce's model promotes a more comprehensive and well-rounded outlook of a sign.

Whiskas is a brand of cat food owned by the American group Mars Incorporated. They have been selling pet food since 1958 (Whiskas.co.uk). Since the numerous years they have been operating, Whiskas have employed various different marketing approaches. Their sole focus initially was that Whiskas cat food had superior taste compared with the other cat foods available. Their strapline for some years was, '8 out of 10 owners said their cat prefers Whiskas.' This was a seemingly appropriate strategy until it became apparent consumers had growing concerns regarding cat health and nutrition. In the mid-90s, Whiskas switched their solitary approach of excellent taste and incorporated great nourishment into their strategy as well. However, by the turn of the century the cat food market had become increasingly competitive. With Iams and Nestle Purina both hosting nutrition-focused pet foods, Whiskas found themselves in a limbo-like predicament.

By attempting to stand for both taste and nutrition the effect was they stood for nothing. Resulting from this, Whiskas reassessed their position and decided to revert back to their

original focus of supreme taste. Utilising the services of the Waltham Centre of Pet Nutrition, a leading authority within the field of pet nutrition and care, Whiskas were able to gain a significant wealth of understanding into cats, their behaviours and ultimately, what food they like to eat. Using this knowledge, Whiskas, in collaboration with ad agency AMV BBDO, created a new campaign entitled 'Big Cat Little Cat.' The promotion aims to show how big cats and little cats share the same natural instincts (**The Drum**). The poster featured in this question belongs to the same campaign. The image is part of a series of posters that have been digitally manipulated by retoucher Tony Swinney of Mustard Post Production Ltd. The emphasis towards superior flavour is a clear driving force with regard to the design and invention of the artwork. How Whiskas are continuing their tradition of promoting tasty cat food will now be analysed.

On first glance at the poster, it is clear to see it is a digitally edited image. Although, the use of digitally manipulated images is a controversial topic in advertising, particularly considering women's cosmetics and lifestyle products (**Business Insider**), the application here produces a humorous effect. The image of a small animal chasing after a much bigger animal instantly conveys a comical and somewhat slapstick feel to the viewer of the poster.

Now, I am going to analyse the various elements that make up the artwork, of which include: the cat, gazelle, background, logo and strapline. First, there is the cat. The cat appears to look cute and tame (representamen). What brought me to this thought are the collar and bell (object) around the cat's neck. The inclusion of a collar and bell leaves me believing this cat is undoubtedly a domestic cat (interpretant). Choosing this type of cat helps Whiskas engage with their target audience: women 25 to 54, with a loving "parent-teen" relationship with their cat. Resulting from this relationship is the notion cat owners feel they know what's best for their pet. As long as their pet enjoys the food they eat, they will keep buying that same cat food.

Next, the cat's running position is not a typical and natural coordination for a domestic cat (representamen). The position of the cat's arms and legs (object) almost overlap one another in the air. This running stance is synonymous with 'big' cats, i.e. tigers and cheetahs, particularly when they are hunting their prey. Their considerable size means they are a long way away from the ground and so when they stride their arms and legs are positioned very high, relative to the ground, and they both overlap. However, in contrast, a domestic cat is very close to the ground and so when they stride their arms and legs do not leave the ground nearly as high as a big cats' do. For this reason, I believe the cats running position has been exaggerated in order to resemble that of a big cat hunting it's prey (interpretant).

Additionally, the cat in the poster appears to have stripes and spots (object). These are also synonymous with large predatory cats (representamen). Big cats, such as leopards and tigers possess stripes and spots on their fur to aid them with staying concealed in bushes and other plant-life, in order for them to track and capture their prey. Including stripes and spots on the domestic cat further solidifies my theory that the cat is not simply racing the other animal but is in fact hunting it, like a predatory animal (interpretant).