CHAPTER - 2

LITERATURE REVIEW
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(Literature Review of related research was done on Proquest, Open access journals, books, newspapers and magazines and online search engines for the proposed research topic)

The importance of understanding the nature and role of meaning in market place activities such as product design, branding, advertising and retailing is indisputable among marketing strategists and researchers. Consumer culture is, in a sense, the product of the consumer’s relationship to messages of all kinds, from advertising and the organization space to the cultural cues internalized through group participation and ethnic identification.

One of the richest and oldest paradigms for understanding meaning is, “Semiotics.” The term originates from ancient Greece in relation to the study of signs. Peirce (1955, p 98) used the term “Semiotics” to describe the relation between signs and thought or logic.

Roland and Barthes introduced semiotics to the marketing discipline almost 50 years ago (Barthes [1964] 1967). Visual messages operate along the lines of associations by similarity and contiguity. The ability to create and read associations by similarity and contiguity enables marketers to communicate brand messages via photography. The signs of the brands exist ubiquitously in our modern societies and are potentially able to be processed by whoever contacts with them.

Chandler (2007), states that human beings interpret things as signs mostly in an unconscious way. We consider being acceptable to conclude that the processing of the semiotic signs of the brands can be framed just like any other cognitive process and, in that sense, we infer that consumers use the signs most of the time unknowingly.

Zaltman (2003) states about this that, “The term cognitive unconscious, sometimes called the unconscious mind, refers to the mental processes operating outside consumers’ awareness.” The processing of the signs creates meanings that, in this perspective, we can
consider to lie most of the times in an unaware state, in the minds of the consumers. What consumers already know shapes the way they gather more information (Zaltman, 2003).

David Aaker (1991, 1996) in his research on brand equity states that brand equity refers to the customer response to a brand name. Jennifer Aaker (1997) further probed on the brand personality aspect and researched on the symbolic dimensions of the brand. The research carried out by McCraken (1988) elaborates on the meaning transfer from culture to products and this research supplements the research carried out by Jennifer Aaker. It is of prime importance for big brands to manage the consumer and brand relationship and needs to be scrutinized often to check the uniqueness and resonance of the communications used with the existing/potential target.

McCraken, 1986 has suggested the theory of transfer of cultural meaning from one location to another. He states that the meaning a consumer may associate with a product or brand in one region may not be the same in another region hence the transfer of meaning.

Semiotics is the study of sign phenomena. Specialized research into natural human language– the semiotic phenomenon par excellence–constitutes linguistics; within linguistics, semantics is concerned with the conveyance of meaning by the grammatical and lexical devices of a language. Semiotics makes use of the principles of structural linguistics to analyze verbal, visual and spatial sign systems. This field of marketing semiotics is an important aspect of the strategic brand management process and could be applied to refocus, extend and reposition a brand. It could also add value to the existing form of communication to expand the target market segment.

Semiotics can also provide information which will enable the marketers to align their messages with the consumer requirement and make the product more appealing by using the right media channels.

Brands are like a bundle of signs that need to manage and polished every now and then to suit the dynamic market needs hence marketing semiotics forms an important part in brand building activities like advertising. Marketing semiotics can help track changes in the changing codes of the society and help create clear and relevant messages for the audience.
Sidney Levy (1959) published some path breaking research called, “symbols for sale”, which highlighted the importance of the language of symbols. She has mentioned that symbols could become a part of an individual’s identity. She also says that products have the capacity to turn consumer’s thoughts and feelings towards symbolic implications. Messages and symbols need to be wisely selected while advertising as they may be interpreted contrarily to what they actually mean. Most goods say something about the social world of the people who consume them. Shopping at certain places could also indicate a certain class or social stature of a segment of consumers. End of season sales would be looked down upon and considered inferior by a certain class of people whereas for another class it may mean value for money. Symbolic appropriateness is what the research also describes in terms of symbolical age of a brand and also the gender preference for a brand. In this way, the effects of the signs that consumers gather in their minds, the meanings that consciously or unconsciously they already have stored in their memory will potentially influence the way they process new signs. The meanings of the brands are used by consumers to make their choices and this can happen in an unconscious way, like explained by Zaltman (2003, 55): “The areas of the human brain that involve choice are activated well before we become consciously aware that we’ve made a choice. That is, decisions ‘happen’ before they are seemingly ‘made’.” Our actions as consumers may seem to derive from conscious decisions when most of the times we have actually made them much earlier.

Consumers consume brands not only when they acquire them and use their products and services, but also when they encounter and assimilate their semiotic signs. We consider that a part of the brand is being consumed in every situation in which a potential meaning about a brand is assimilated into the perceptual spaces. Consumers are permanently and often unconsciously constructing their thoughts about brands and every decision regarding them are based on these meanings Peirce (in Beebe, 2004: 626) has defined semiotics as “a domain of investigation that explores the nature and function of signs as well as the systems and processes underlying signification, expression, representation, and communication”. Thus, semiotics seems to be the most adequate option in order to study the consumption, with a focus on the meanings that consumers
ascribe to products and brands. The modern semiotics is founded on the work of the linguist Saussure and of the philosopher Peirce (Mick, 1986). Peirce established the relation with a referent in the real world and called this semiotic element as object. The process of representation of the reality can be envisaged through the relation between the semiotic signs, the object that they represent and the interpretant, that basically is the meaning that the sign creates about the reality of the object. Beebe (2004) states that early in his semiotics, Peirce spoke of this as a triple connection of sign, thing signified and cognition produced in the mind.

Peirce (in Beebe, 2004, 628) considers that “the entire universe is perfused with signs, if it is not composed exclusively of signs”. For Ramello and Silva (2006, 943) “In simplified terms, we can say that a sign is nothing more than a kind of label – technically it is termed a ‘semiotic device’ – which conveys a meaning that denotes some particular object. Human interactions are permeated with such labels that are necessary tools for communication and collective human activities.” So, signs exist all around us and through them we can construct our relation with the world (Johansen and Larsen, 2002). Stephen Brown, Darach Turley (1997), state in their book "Consumer Research: Postcards from the Edge" that the mid 80’s marked a sudden spike in the publications relating to marketing and semiotics (Mick 1986, 1988; Umiker-Sebeok 1987a; Vihma 1990). Cultural conventions govern the organization of marketing signs whose comprehension and identification are crucial in understanding the concept of semiosis.

Psychoanalytic Semioticians like Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva have tried to equate semiotics and psycho analytics. Scientists primarily are inclined towards locating deeper meanings towards certain phenomenon inspite of less relevance while on the contrary a lot of studies also state that surface meanings of phenomenon can be more influential determinants in everyday communication.

Bertrand 1988 has carried out an intensive semiotic research involving qualitative and subjective text analysis thus relating marketing and consumer behavior to semiotics. The gap in this research is that it does not involve actual data from the consumers for the purpose of justifying the conclusions from the subjective text analysis hence there is a gap of authenticity of relevance (cf. Mick 1994; Schroder 1998). The review by Conley,
James G; Berry, J Duncan; DeWitt, Laura; Dziersk, Mark, “Inventing Brands: Opportunities at the nexus of semiotics and Intellectual property” in Spring 2008 states that the definition of a brand has evolved encompassing the signifier, a related performance and a vast collection of meanings. These meanings are associated with the brand in the consumer’s mind space and link the meaning with the outcome/ performance of a brand before, after or during a purchase. Semiotics, can thus assist in developing cues to befit the brand strategies, to register the brand effectively in the consumer minds thus building brand equity

Marshall, D. (2005), states that the context of interpretation is guided by the nature of the sign vehicle (marketing texts, images, television, websites, etc) these not only carry signs and images but also set context, value and direction of the interpretation process. It is the primary images that define the product, promised experiences and expectations which are achieved by the socially and culturally embedded semiotic messages or the symbolic values. (Mintz and Du Bois,2002). The signs and images can be broken into two elements, the narrative and the Conceptual (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996, p.56). Narrative structures always have a vector (a gaze or line of communication that directs the reader to the message being presented in the text). However, conceptual representations are not reliant on vectors in the transmission of meaning. Vectors are formed as lines of vision across the pictures thus leading to the connections between the vector and the message. A vector thus provides a link or means of realization between the consumer and the advertisement in which the interpretation is achieved.

The research carried out by Hélène de Burgh-Woodman; Brace-Govan, Jan (2008) integrates the Roland Barthes theory into qualitative research design in marketing and opens avenues for interpretative analysis in marketing as an interpretive tool. Research has been conducted in the structural devices of language like (Rhetoric, tropes, word frequency schemes and their links to persuasion in advertising. The same can be said about the reflexive effects of the Brand name (Bargh, 2002) and the phonetic effects of Brand name on the consumers (Meyers-Levy, 1989; Yorkston and Menon, 2004). Roland Barthes’ work on language has two implications:
1. Understanding that language can have more than one meaning and that meaning is inscribed by the subcultural consumer. Marketers can study the meanings of such words in depth before integrating them. Tailoring language to suit the audience can improve the accuracy of their message in advertising and communication with the consumer.

2. Selecting the appropriate language for the consumer will increase the degree of success of communication. For marketers who market products to a specific consumer audience an ability to communicate in their same language will gain authenticity in advertising. (Beverland and Ewing, 2005) and maintain a competitive advantage over the companies that are unable to connect with the audience as effectively. The assumed relationship between language and meaning, animated by the use of symbol, reasoning, metaphor and syllogism is clearly problematical and ultimately abandoned by Barthes. He states that the empty spaces of signs are filled with the impressions, suppositions and predilections of the reader.

Barthes (1977a, p.148) has proposed that a text is made up of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into the mutual relations of dialogue, parody and contestation but there is one place where multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader. The reader being the space on which all the quotations that make up writing are inscribed without any of them being lost. A text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. Barthes’s theory of text and its clear meaning with language and the variable meanings that can be apprehended from the symbol, enables researchers to critically evaluate the impact of marketing text, the manifold series of receptions that such texts might initiate among consumers and the texture of consumer readership. Interviewing the word or the text as written symbol, embedded in the discourse, we can investigate the impact of brand names, their accompanying language and the role the consumer has to play in interpreting that discourse within the context of their own community.

Hélène de Burgh-Woodman; Brace-Govan, Jan (2008) suggests that the reception of the marketer’s/advertisers’ message can be varied and unpredictable. Potentially the risk of a message being interpreted in an unfavorable light may be reduced by a more in-depth approach to language thus enabling the marketers to maximize the impact of their presence in the subcultural community.
Tavory, Iddo; Swidler, Ann, (2009) uses semiotic not as a synonym for “meaning but to convey the following important ideas:

1. Particular terms, symbols and objects have meaning only with reference to a wider code of relationally-defined possibilities (Saussure [1916] 1986) (Eg: What one wears conveys meanings along the formal/informal dimension)

2. The term “Semiotics,” conveys the idea that a shared social code constitutes the array of likely meanings of words and actions (Sewell 1999) independent of what an individual may actually signify for example, an individual wearing ragged jeans at a wedding may connote condemn of the proceedings, no matter a person’s intentions (Caplow 1984)

3. A semiotic space suggests that the meanings can shift in the semiotic space so the meaning of an object can change registers and locations even within a particular interaction (Sewell 1992, 1996)

4. The image of meanings as enacted within the multidimensional semiotic space allows for discontinuities-discordant semiotic framings that create conflicting motives, identities and experiences. These discontinuities also allow individuals to use openings between one register of significance and another to quite suddenly shift the meanings of an interaction.

The paper by Lawes, Rachel (2002) studies the outside in approach of semiotics, studying human communications and consumer culture. Semiotics is cutout for analyzing marketing communications and is uniquely equipped to investigate what is going on for consumers in a cultural context. Semiotics keeps one updated on the current communication codes used within the sector and target market.

The author believes that semiotic study will begin by finding out how things got into the person’s head first. In semiotics culture is more about studying the ways that people communicate with each other, consciously and unconsciously through things such as language, visual image and music which are very critical to market research. As semiotics is tailor made for understanding the packaging, advertising and all kinds of
market literature including the 3D spaces such as retail environments it has wide applications.

Rachel Lawes, 2002 also states that signs are flexible and sometimes elusive for example, gold is not a reliable sign of luxury that it once was and is gradually lapsing. In the market of biscuits, gold communicates luxury in quite a down-market manner since mass market luxury products use a very bright shiny gold on their packaging and the biscuits are either covered in a very thick jam within or with chocolate outside. Now the theme here is excess and abundance-bright shiny gold is just one element of that and if observed well there would be contrasting thing of understatement and restraint. Really up market biscuits are most likely to be only half dipped in chocolate and packaged using unexpected materials such as corrugated boxes and subdued natural colors. These themes have to do with social classes, and increasing interest in organic products and modern ideas. Hence, ongoing semiotic research is required because signs change over time, and it is good to know what the language of a particular category or a sector is. This will help avoid lapsed or outdated signs in the communications and make good use of the most emergent ones. Signs change their meaning depending on what other signs you place them with. When signs are mixed and matched in the communications they lead to specific meanings and hence it is good to know as much as possible about the meanings they signify so as to make informed decisions. By studying marketing semiotics, communications agencies can help maintain conventionally accepted meanings of a sign and prevent it from getting obsolete or even push it in another direction to mean something new.

Castell, Sarah (2004) in article in the Financial Times, London stated that semiotics can be a really effective approach, which opens doors for new ways of thinking towards a brand challenge or marketing issue.

Semiotics could provide a lot of creative solutions to a client’s problems. The author states that a semiotic approach could help a multi-national corporation facing a corporate image crisis to break unprofitable codes which hamper the effective management of its reputation. Semiotics could help create messages which drive behavioral change for
public sector organizations, charities and NGOs. However, she mentions a drawback that clients in such domains of business and public life often focus on quantitative data rather than qualitative understanding. This prevents genuine strategic partnership with thoughtful research agencies.

Leech, Charles (2001) feels many marketers find the results of semiotics insightful, and there is an increased demand for semiotic analysis in research projects on new packaging, brand names and logos, evaluation of advertising creative and a lot of other similar projects. Semiotic theory is based on the notion that all forms of human communication can be read as a text (or narrative), and broken down into at least two important levels of communication: signifiers, or denotative communication (what something actually is), and signified, or connotative communication (what something actually means). The author states that a Semiotician is able to identify specific elements of a media communication and what they connote, making the subsequent manipulation of particular connotations much easier. The semiotic process begins with a breakdown of the image, icon, word, logo, packaging, graphics, music or object into its smallest component parts, which can include fonts, colors, words and the choice of media (photographs vs. drawings). These components are then assessed for connotative meaning and associations. What do they resemble, and what images, emotions, attitudes and pop culture references do they evoke? What are their historical and emotional etymologies? Lewis Moberly (2004) in his research uses Visual Intelligence (R), to uncover fundamental truths about category and brand codes which can form the basis of a number of decisions in this regard.