

SEMIOTICS

USING SIGNS FOR INSIGHT
CULTURAL INTELLIGENCE @ IPSOS



EXPLAINING THE WORLD THROUGH SIGNS AND STORIES

Semiotics looks at the things culture makes – products, communications, brands – and analyses them to understand their underlying meaning. Semiotics can explain opinions and behaviours that consumers struggle to articulate, and provides us with fundamental cultural insights that can be used to inform creative and brand development.

DEMYSTIFYING SEMIOTICS

Semiotics is about meaning: the analysis and interpretation of 'signs' in culture. Signs are everywhere – they are shortcuts and guides to how to think about virtually everything, from fatherhood to natural foods to cleanliness. Decoding signs in culture helps illuminate the meaning and relevance of brand categories across global markets.

Semiotic cues can be important for understanding why a product looks premium, budget, or niche, by dissection of visuals and language in a way that we don't consciously process. Using the right codes helps build stronger brands, designs, communications and product innovations, and means understanding where your brand lies against competitors and within the larger cultural landscape.



DISCOURSE ANALYSIS:

BOTH VISUAL AND LINGUISTIC

“Discourses” are at the heart of all social and brand communications. A discourse is that conceptual site where words and images, gestures and objects all become ‘signs’ or ‘codes’ that are packed with rich conceptual meaning. Consumers interpret these meanings on a subconscious level. It is where your claims and propositions, visuals, packs and communications hook into all the deep cultural knowledge at the foundation of your consumers’ thought processes.

Discourses are the big conversations happening politically and socially, swirling around the world of consumer goods. On the surface, they consist of visual (logos; photos) and linguistic (key words) elements that are part of larger social and behavioural trends. Dig a bit deeper, and these discourses connect to the deeper myths, legends, archetypes, rituals, gestures and sounds that are specific to particular markets.

These stories can be represented in the consumers’ minds in different ways. Their sausages, which had imagery of happy pigs rolling around on a farm, and their vegetables, appearing to be handpicked from the fields, created visual signals that showed the food is local and farm fresh. In doing this, Tesco realised that consumers have two sets of eyes - one for a low price, and the other for ‘provenance’, which has made this Value Range incredibly valuable to their range.

Just like a puzzle, brand and product narratives build into larger cultural discourses that you must tap into in order to stay relevant – which is all about connecting with your audience. This is key in a world where we use fewer and fewer words and more images to express deeper complexity of our life.



MAPPING CULTURAL CHANGE

Culture is always shifting in small and but significant ways. Consumers are immersed in the latest products and services that sometimes change at a rapid pace. Mapping cultural change allows us to see how expectations are shifting by identifying which products, services and behaviours are setting the trend. Analysis of these products and brands offer the biggest clue to becoming part of, or even leading, a movement.

Semioticians have a specific method for mapping culture based on Raymond Williams' framework for cultural change. Using a longitudinal analysis of culture, we collect, analyse and map cultural data, identifying what is dominant (ongoing and culturally relevant for consumers) or emergent (on the peripheries of culture and maybe destined to become relevant). By classifying brand, product and conceptual stimulus in this way, we can help your brand attain cultural relevance or help steer it into the future.

CULTURAL TENSIONS

Identifying the most pertinent cultural tensions for a brand or product helps inform how brands should act and which discourses consumers are struggling with the most. Semiotics can help us identify where the most fruitful tensions lie by looking at the points of divergence from the mainstream - where tensions lie, we see new behaviours and attitudes emerging.

EXAMPLE: THE WEDDING INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX

As weddings become an increasingly big business, the pressure to get married and feel like a princess intensifies, yet rates of divorce remain high (42%, 2015 for England/Wales).

Herein lies a fundamental tension: Despite a high likelihood of marriage ending in separation, cultural (including commercial) forces are idealising and championing marriage so as to not only encourage more marriages but also to encourage more spending on a fairy-tale wedding day. As part of this phenomenon, we see evidence of both mainstream acceptance of the fairy-tale marriage and rejection of the trend, via co-habitation. Brands working in this or related fields could leverage this tension by understanding how different demographic cohorts relate to these trends - where marriage as a mechanism of social order continues to be unravelled by the wave of women's equality and entrance to the workplace over previous decades.

Stories are the vehicle through which we pass on culture to those around us, but we rarely see the tensions that lie in those stories. By mapping cultural change, we can help brands as well as governments navigate tensions in ways that help steer their narrative towards clear and powerful cultural relevance.

WHEN TO USE IT

Semiotics and discourse analysis can be used to find white space, for brand development/stretch/positioning, audience knowledge, territory development, stimulus development and all communications and concept development.

Ipsos has both in-house semioticians and content curators as well as a global network of cultural analysts to meet all of your business challenges.

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