

# **Advances in Brand Semiotics & Discourse Analysis**

Edited by  
**George Rossolatos**

**Series in Communication**



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# Introduction

George Rossolatos

*International Journal of Marketing Semiotics & Discourse Studies*

This volume seeks to contribute to the ongoing theoretical discussions and empirical studies in branding related research, by highlighting how distinctive semiotic and discourse analytic perspectives may accentuate our understanding of established and emergent branding streams.

Although, arguably, the main disciplinary territory wherein branding research emerged and has been thriving ever since is marketing, brands, by dint of their conspicuousness, global cultural value (Torelli & Cheng 2011), and paramount importance as intangible assets, have been scrutinized from within multiple disciplines, with semiotics and discourse analysis ranking prominently among them. This volume does not approach brands as entities cloaked with a suspicious veil that is undergirded by a phantasmatic zero-degree of signification resting with oversimplified and unduly commodified 'functional attributes' (e.g. Lischinsky 2018), and concomitantly with attempts at subsuming their culturally salient and resonant signifying ramifications under untenable concepts such as commodity fetishism. The chapters that make up its fabric explore constructive pathways that are geared towards demonstrating what specific discourse analytic and semiotic perspectives, tools, and methods can do *for* brands, rather than against them.

While paying heed to the inherent multidisciplinary of branding research, yet with an intent at justifying the pertinence of semiotics and discourse analysis for marketing research as flagship discipline, the chapters making up this volume engage in a fruitful dialogue with narrowly focused branding research streams, most eminently with regard to brand image and brand equity, cultural branding, food and country-of-origin branding, place and destination branding, digital and social media branding, political branding, brand storytelling. In continuation of the *Handbook of Brand Semiotics* (Rossolatos 2015) which was positively endorsed by fellow semioticians, but also in anticipation of regular advances that will be published on the occasion of the stepping-stone at hand, we endorse a pan-branding approach, namely that everything and everyone may be branded, from sand (aka Kotler) to Adam Sandler (in his capacity as celebrity) and beyond.

As regards the dual orientation of this volume, it merits noticing that although semiotic and discourse analytic perspectives, in their own respect, have been propounded and consolidated within distinctive disciplinary silos, their interdependency and similarities may hardly be overstressed. For example, for Greimasian structuralist semiotics, (surface) discourse has been a key facet of the seminal trajectory of meaning (Greimas 1987). Fontanille (2006) revamped structuralist semiotics as semiotic discourse analysis which was labeled as a synthetic approach, in recognition of the later expansion of Greimasian structuralism into a social scientific terrain (Greimas 1990), but also of post-Greimasian advances. Hjelmslevian structuralism has exerted a massive conceptual influence on both Greimasian structuralism and social semiotics, Hjelmslev's (1969,1975) glossematics has been instrumental to the development of Halliday's SFL (Bache 2010), while Hallidayan SFL and social semiotics have been of paramount influence on Fairclough's CDA perspective (Ledin & Machin 2018). On a similar note, Peircean semiotics is an integral aspect of Wodak and Reisigl's HDA perspective (Reisigl 2018). The evolution of discourse analysis, according to van Dijk (1985), on the one hand, passed through semiotics in the 1960s as a text-centered discipline and began to take shape in the first half of the 1970s with the advent of initially scattered fields, such as speech act theory, stylistics (as renovated rhetoric) and conversation analysis, among others. The permeating thread among the formative stages of these emergent fields of research was discourse in use or what was described by Greimas in his conceptualization of the trajectory of meaning as surface discourse (i.e. prior to reducing it to semionarrative structures; see Rossolatos 2014; Badir 2018). The aforementioned interdisciplinary interdependencies have been reflected in research that has been hosted over the past 10 years in the *International Journal of Marketing Semiotics & Discourse Studies*. In any case, "disciplinarity can be seen as one of the ways in which academic life is controlled and policed, though it may also be an (always ambiguous) defense against external pressures of a kind that ought to be resisted" (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie 2004, p. 23).

Finally, in contrast to positivistic research that draws on consciously elicited associations, but also to experimental psychological research that views situated language use as an epiphenomenon of latent psychological processes, semiotic and DA analyses are principally preoccupied with interpreting how latent and unconscious meanings emerge in situated language use. By adopting a largely linguistic constructivist epistemological posture, both disciplines are more inclined to recognize the ontogenetic power of language, rather than viewing it as an effect of latent cognitive processes (quite the contrary). Although some strands in both semiotics and DA do combine cognitivism with more textually oriented readings, such as cognitive semiotics

and van Dijk's sociocognitive DA approach, both DA and semiotics remain textually oriented approaches at heart.

The above, nevertheless, does not imply that in their largest part, semiotic and discourse analytic perspectives do not possess their distinctive competencies. A preliminary systematic literature review of the ways whereby DA perspectives have been applied in marketing research (Rossolatos 2023), though, does point to significant avenues for furthering such inroads. In greater detail, and without any intention of casting stones, but in all earnest hope for enhancing the robustness of interdisciplinary cross-fertilizations, quite often the following have been observed while adapting DA perspectives into marketing research.

First, adaptation to branding streams is pretty scarce, with the bulk of studies focusing on consumer research (without implying that branding is independent of consumer research). Second, the import of conceptual models is occasionally performed on a top-line and schematic level, in oblivion to the plethora of nuanced subordinate concepts and principles. Third, a lagging effect is observed with regard to advances in specific semiotic and discourse analytic streams, most eminently evinced as an almost dogmatic fixation on otherwise antiquated concepts such as the semiotic square, as well as in the troubling routine of providing catch-all literature reviews that approach semiotics as a 'paradigm', while canvassing a broad spectrum of fundamental tenets from dominant schools such as Peircean and structuralist semiotics. The outcome of this fixation is that, on the one hand, salient and more contemporary perspectives in semiotics, such as social semiotics, but also various strands of cultural semiotics, recede to the outskirts of an interdisciplinary mosaic, while, on the other hand, that a significant portion of the detailed application of semiotic and DA concepts in the same streams, but outside of the marketing discipline, pass under the radar. In a nutshell, the preoccupation with referencing a select few interdisciplinary intermediaries, and their largely watered-down adaptation of the conceptual complexity of both DA and semiotic perspectives, has resulted in not keeping pace with the advances in the source disciplines, thus rendering the importance of the produced research marginal outside of its disciplinary silos. We are concerned, here, with the usual phenomenon of advances in different speeds. Therefore, there is a marked need for stepping outside of one's disciplinary comfort zone, to speed up the process whereby concepts and methods from the source intellectual domain are adequately reflected in the target domain. This is further complicated by the fact that both DA and semiotic perspectives are in themselves interdisciplinary at heart. As shown repeatedly by van Dijk, DA has incorporated a versatile roster of linguistic and other perspectives across the humanities and the social

sciences, some of which were noted earlier. Likewise, what became recognized as 'structuralist semiotics', constitutes a *mélange* of a plethora of perspectives spanning linguistics, literary studies, anthropology, and psychoanalysis (Rossolatos 2014a). Fourth, an occasionally intuitive employment of DA as conceptual background is noted, in the absence of further qualification in concrete perspectival terms. For example, studies that may have used the term 'discourse' in the abstract and/or in the keywords, in fact, employ it in a more intuitive, and mainly qualitatively oriented interpretive/analytical manner, such as inductive, thematic analysis, or even grounded theory. This is also evinced as a discrepancy between the extent and depth whereby specific DA streams have been advancing (for example, media discourse analysis or MDA or computer-mediated discourse analysis or CMDA, or psychoanalytic discourse analysis—see Rossolatos 2018) and their application within marketing research. Fifth, the occasionally identified discourse strategies need to be defined in context, as their use may be identical in nominal terms, albeit differing in their manifestation, especially when seeking to demonstrate how their use covaries with the employment of distinctive lexical and grammatical resources. This will also allow for comparative studies that adopt or revise previously coined discourse strategies, thus contributing to the formation of a research wall. Finally, despite the fact that the application of CAQDAS (or QDAS) is almost a mainstay in DA studies (Djonov & van Leeuwen 2018), in interpretivist and mixed methods (Bazeley 2018) marketing research, it has been applied on an embryonic level, with the exception of studies which have not been published in the mainstream marketing literature (e.g. Rossolatos 2014b, 2018). In this respect, there is a marked need for moving from traditional interpretive analysis that is laden with selectivity bias, especially as regards the use of verbatims as exemplars, to a more systematic approach with the use of CAQDAS.

It is precisely such inroads that the present team of semioticians and discourse analysts, most of whom have been wearing both disciplinary hats on different occasions, intends to open up for the scholarly community of potentially interested interdisciplinary researchers.

In light of the above precursory remarks about the mission and the objectives of this volume, here below follows an overview of the hosted chapters. Bateman's opening chapter *Methodological challenges in the empirical application of semiotically informed multimodality theory to branding research*, by assuming as its point of departure the experiential turn in branding theory and practice, offers a detailed argumentation as to the need for adopting multimodality as an integral conceptual armory and methodological framework for brands that wish to furnish seamless and rich experiences to their consumer franchise as part of their core promise and DNA. In this context, multimodality is clearly distinguished from multisensoriality, while its relative merits are

highlighted through a critical engagement with the latter. On a broad scale, meaning does not work on or emerge from the senses in an unadulterated fashion, as the material that impinges on the senses is always already embedded in a semiotic web of meaning. As Bateman contends, it is rarely the senses themselves that are responsible for the production of meaning, but rather the particular semiotic *uses* made of sensory possibilities, while sensory distinctions do not provide sufficient information for characterizing semiotic modes because semiotic modes commonly cross-cut sensory distinctions.

The discussion essentially harks back to the fundamental requirement for attending to both how a brand structure is projected, as well as how it is perceived by its intended target audiences, with the crucial difference that here we are not concerned with perceptually decoding brand meaning, but how the latter emerges within immersively lived experiences. Attending in a piecemeal fashion to perception, as the associationist perspective, for example, would be inclined to achieve in the face of a brand name that shelters a plethora of brand-identity elements, simply leaves a huge managerial gap with regard to the actual sources whereby specific image associations, equity, and value emerge. In the case of brands as experiences, and not simply experiential branding (as an offshoot of event marketing), a multimodal framework attains a systematic approach to how consumers become immersively conditioned by constellations of modes in intermodal interaction. This approach, of tremendous implications for the design of brand experiences, on the one hand, accomplishes significant strides compared to what might come across as dry, formalistic descriptions in a structuralist vein. On the other hand, it also raises fundamental questions as regards the potency of conscious elicitation methods in encapsulating intermodal interactions, as against interpretive, ethnographic, and auto-ethnographic work. Moreover, it raises questions as to the meaning and import of materiality in a multimodal framework, and whether the former may be reduced to the latter, as traditional social semiotic theory suggests. Bateman effectively tackles such often aporetic questions, by offering a framework for parsing materiality as the substratum of identifiable modes.

In Chapter 2, Bianchi and Ragonese undertake a sweeping conceptual excursus into structuralist and post-structuralist semiotic theory and narratology, while discussing how new forms of narrativity and textuality may account for digital brand storytelling. In this context, they challenge traditional distinctions between enunciator and enunciatee, as well as the fixed boundaries of texts, while accommodating digital brand storytelling under Eco's notion of 'possible worlds', and substituting the role of the 'reader' with that of an 'active user' and 'producer' as co-creator of endlessly deploying brand meaning. In these terms, the brand identity-driven demand for

semantic coherence and syntactical cohesion succumbs to the self-referential circle of mobile semantics whose metanarrative dimension posits the narrative as its own topic.

In continuation of the inquiry into the multivocal landscape of the 'new narrative turn' where narratives are increasingly approached as being constructive of meaning and culture (Epp 2011), in their chapter on *Narrativity approaches to branding* Ruiz Collantes and Oliva take a long detour into the semiotic and narratological underpinnings of brand storytelling approaches. The authors argue for the importance of addressing the original concepts and theories that are often obliterated in interdisciplinary adaptations. By comparing and contrasting how narrative approaches have made inroads into branding research with the original theories and conceptual frameworks from which they stem, they identify areas for improvement in the existing brand storytelling theory, while putting popular adaptations in perspective. The chapter is divided into five sections: the first one addresses models that are common currency in contemporary storytelling applications to brands. The second section focuses on explaining why and how narratology is an integral aspect of structuralist semiotics, although often obliterated both in marketing semiotic approaches, as well as in brand storytelling ones. The third section scrutinizes the fine-grained details of anthropological and psychoanalytical perspectives that have informed archetypal models and approaches to branding. The fourth section engages genealogically with the anthropological and cognitive psychological theories that have informed consumers' narratives with regard to brands' consumptive facets. The final section engages in a critical comparison between the various approaches that are laid out throughout this chapter, with an emphasis on the relative merits of narratively informed semiotic research.

The ensuing three chapters focus on new media and how brand meaning shapes up in the context of brand communities, a topic that is on top of the branding research agenda in Web 2.0. Chapter 4 has an applied orientation, offering step-by-step guidance on how to apply CAQDAS or QDAS micro-analytics to social media brand communities' (SMBCs) verbal and multimodal data. In addressing the 'hows' of consumer engagement against the background of the core capabilities and functionalities of major QDAS programs such as Atlas.ti, NVivo, and MAXQDA, Friese distills her extensive experience as an academic researcher, but also as a practitioner of QDAS, with working experience in the companies that produce and market these software programs. The chapter has been composed in issue/solution mode, aiming at supporting researchers who seek to implement discourse analytic methodological approaches. The exposition focuses on sentiment and content analysis, exploring linguistic categories, the representation of attitude

and knowledge status, searching for contextualizing cues, the types of interaction that take place, and the roles and relationships that are expressed.

Despite the initial proclamations in the marketing literature about the consumer brand engagement (CBE) opportunities that lie ahead for brands in the face of the co-creative potential of Web 2.0, recently the bleak picture of SMBCs has been repeatedly canvassed by drawing on concepts such as negative brand engagement and co-destruction. Similar constraints in the broader democratizing potential of the medium have also been voiced from a CDA point of view (see Bouvier & Machin 2018). While arguing that effective dimensionalization and focalization as regards specific thematic threads and engagement levels are essential for understanding and managing the negative aspects of brand engagement in SMBCs, in chapter 5, Rossolatos puts forward the Depth of Brand Engagement Funnel (DOBEF). By shifting focus in identifying CBE levels in SMBCs from attitudinal/behavioral antecedents/outcomes towards the content of interaction, a nuanced perspective is offered as regards the depth of interaction, while addressing posted comments not only in terms of valencing, but even more importantly of valorization. A computer-mediated discourse analytic (CMDA) approach is adopted, by employing a mixed methods research design, along with a netnographic approach as regards data collection, while data analysis/synthesis proceeds with the aid of the CAQDAS software atlas.ti.

The micro-analytic DA endeavors that were deployed in the previous chapters are succeeded in Chapter 6 by a big data CDA approach that sheds light to how Brexit was branded by UK's Conservative and Labour political parties, in largely divergent ways that align with each party's political vision and fundamental principles. By drawing on the capabilities of the Multimodal Analysis Platform (MAP), a cloud-based platform for searching, storing, and analyzing online media texts, Zappettini, Serafis, O'Halloran and Jin unearth the major discursive strategies and their realization paths whereby the parties appropriated Brexit to meet underlying political agendas. The exemplary analysis that is offered in this chapter is also corroborative of what has been termed by Thurlow as the pseudo-sociality of the institutional use of social media (see Tannen & Trester 2013), by effectively translating tacit into explicit knowledge (Krafft, Sajtos & Haenlein 2020).

The last two chapters of this volume are situated in an interdisciplinary terrain between cultural studies and branding while being concerned with cultural heritage branding, allegedly one of the most promising branding streams, inasmuch as a research stronghold across disciplines.

In chapter 7, Mangiapane and Puca recruit a bewildering array of structuralist and cultural semiotic concepts and case studies for demonstrating how the image of food and places can and has been mutually enhanced in brand

strategies. By adopting a dynamic processual outlook to place branding as an essential complement to brand identity approaches, this relationship is explored in multiple instances and instantiations, beginning with the semiotic transcription of how 'geographical indications' (GIs) have been employed as branding devices in the cases of the 'Balsamic Vinegar of Modena' and the 'Traditional Balsamic Vinegar from Modena'. The following case focuses on Noma restaurants and their contribution to the consolidation of representations about the so-called 'New Nordic Cuisine'. Then, the authors offer a semiotic account of how the visual brand identity of Michel Bras restaurants is permeated by an identity that is edified on the ingredients favored in Bras' recipes. Finally, with reference to the Sicilian Caponata, it is shown how food brands' narrative structure contributes to a *synthetic* recipe where ingredient branding is overdetermined by the recipe's communitarian consumption mode. These are all remarkable examples of how cultural heritage crystallizes as a complex process of heritagization (Ascione 2018) and a series of practices that are heavily influenced by regional cultural politics, regardless of whether this localization concerns a city (Lucarelli & Berg 2011) or an entire nation (Hao et al. 2021). From a discourse analytic point of view, taste naturalization strategies presuppose the effacement of nominalization and the invention of a body politic based on food as ordinary metaphor.

While continuing within a cultural heritage territory, the volume concludes by shifting from theorizing the intertwined semiotic web between food and place branding to empirically researching how meaning shapes up for the heritage site of Santralistanbul. In this chapter, Doğan accounts for the museumification of Santralistanbul by adopting a conceptual framework informed by social semiotics of multimodal spatial texts, in combination with a visual auto-ethnographic methodological approach. In this respect, Santralistanbul is viewed as a mnemotope whose exhibits do not carry simply representational qualities, but once assembled and reconfigured through their experiencing, they are invested with organizational meanings that are further accentuated on an affective level via visitors' bodily engagement. Doğan's multilayered reading strategy, thus, affords to demonstrate the contribution of a nuanced stream of social semiotics to branding theory and research, while opening new avenues to our understanding of how museums may be branded, and how brands become museumified.

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