

Identification and Realization of Advertisement: A Semiotic Trajectory

Chunjuan Wang*

Saengchan Hemchua**

Abstract

Technology makes the forms of advertising more diversified; media makes the promotion of advertising more accessible, and the recognition of advertising is increasingly blurred due to the reasons of technology and media. Scholars have been exploring the definition of advertising. Scholars have studied, developed and continuously improved the definition of advertisement from the perspectives of communication, source and effect of advertisement. Various focuses lead to the different interpretations and identifications of advertisements. This paper interprets advertisements from a semiotic perspective to gain the nature of advertisements as a dialogue chain from communication initiators to consumers.

Keywords: advertisement, semiotics, pan-advertisement, dialogue

* Management, School of Management, Shinawatra University

** Advisor

Introduction

The history of how to identify and define advertising is an evolutionary story. Each definition of “advertising” is considered in combination with the development of technology and media, but because of this, each definition is no longer complete and rigorous due to the changes of technology and media.

For example, was peddling in ancient times an advertisement? Some scholars pointed out that “the initial hawking along the street could not be regarded as formal advertising due to the small audience.” However, it should not be ignored that in ancient times, there was neither advanced technology nor media to reach the public. Then, is it true that advertising is all about profit? Nonprofit advertisements will soon put in mind to question and refute.

What could be regarded as an advertisement, or how can an advertisement be identified? If the cry of a hawker counts as advertising, does a friend’s recommendation count? Does a piece of news count? The question is becoming increasingly difficult to give a definite answer with the dramatically developing technology because in the digital era, dealers and customers can interact instantly not only on information exchange platforms but also through the diversity of communication media; meanwhile, a large number of new advertising forms appear.

In a survey about the recognition of whether the line “*Hongqi car is a special car for Beijing Winter Olympics*” is a piece of news or advertisement, half of the respondents choose to totally agree that this is an advertisement, and another 37.93 choose to take it as an advertisement more than a piece of news. However, in fact this line appeared as a piece of news on the website.

This more specific preference leads to the topic of this paper. How to identify and interpret advertisements arose from interest, discussion and puzzle among the ordinary, academic and professional. This is not only a question that ordinary people would often feel confused about in their daily life but also a definition that should be clarified academically.

The forms and acceptance, identification and recognition, definition and realization of advertising have changed dramatically, with media, technology, consumers and the market as a whole moving forward. Marketers, advertisers and consumers are adapting to these changes today. All this poses a challenge to the redefinition of advertising. Miklosik (2012) defined advertising as a form of communication whose author or sponsor sends a message to a recipient (consumer) with the explicit intention to sell a product (or idea) to the customers. Advertising and semiotics have a natural association for communication.

Research objectives

This paper interprets advertisements from a semiotic perspective to gain the nature of advertisements as a dialogue chain from communication initiators to consumers. It discusses the recognition and realization of advertisements from a semiotic perspective.

Literature Review

Advertising, a genre informing the general public of a certain thing is derived from news. Time witnessed the changing and developing of definition of “advertisement”. According to the American Marketing Association (AMA, 1960), “advertising is any paid form of non-personal presentation and promotion of ideas, goods and services by an identified sponsor”.

Since AMA (1960), the classic definition of advertising has always focused on the sources, payment, mass media, non-interpersonal communication, persuasion and action influence, serving ideas, products and services. Wells (1992) defined advertising as “paid non personal communication from an identified sponsor using mass media to persuade or influence an audience”.

Richards and Curran (2002) used the Delphi method with a diverse group of experts in advertising to derive a commonly shared understanding of what advertising is. Their definition is that “advertising is a paid, mediated form of communication from an identifiable source, designed to persuade the receiver to take some action, now or in

the future”.

Thorson and Rodgers (2012) cited a chart aggregated by Jooghwa Lee and Chang Dae Ham, in which they provided a summary of 20 textbook definitions of advertising (including AMA definition) and showed that advertising messages are commonly defined as paid communication from an identified sponsor using mass media to persuade an audience. Thorson and Rodgers mention that

“With notable exceptions, these elements bear similarities to the definition provided by Richards and Curran (2002) who undertook the Delphi Method with a group of advertising experts, to arrive at essential elements of advertising that constitute a definition.

In 2014-2015, professors Gayle Kerr and Jef Richards conducted a Delphi Study on the Definition of Advertising with 18 academics and industry experts from around the world. Ultimately, the study proposes a new definition of advertising, which reads as follows: Advertising is a paid, mediated form of communication from an identifiable source designed to persuade the receiver to take some action, now or in the future.

Dahlen and Rosengren (2016) define advertising as “brand-initiated communication intent on impacting people.” They conclude:

Answering recent calls for a new definition of advertising, we identify three dynamics—(new) media and formats, (new) “consumer” behaviors, and extended effects of advertising—that drive the evolution of advertising. Based on these, and a survey of advertising academics and professionals, we formulate an updated working definition of advertising as “brand-initiated communication intent on impacting people.” We also test and validate this definition and the three dynamics in a content analysis of recently published advertising research (2010 to 2015). In doing so, we hope to contribute to a more diverse and contemporary development of advertising research. The definition of advertising from the narrow sense and broad sense, but obviously broad also need to be expanded. (Micael Dahlen and Sara Rosengren, 2016)

In addition to the definitions from the textbooks, Gu Mingying (etl. 2018) reviews the advertising study in the journal of the Advertising Association of America from 2016-2017. See Table 1.

Table 1 Definitions of advertisements compiled by Gu (2018) (translated by the author of this paper)

Reference	Source	Message	Channel	Effect	Mediated or not	Objects
Dahlen and Rosengren (2016)	Brand initiated	communication		Impacting people		
Martin Esiend (2016)	Brand related	communication		Positive response to a brand		
Russell N. Laczniak (2016)	Brand initiated	communication	Value touchpoints	Influence an audience		
Rust Roland (2016)	Brand or consumer		Interactive two-way communication	Individual consumer feedback	Word of mouth	Corporation
Stewart (2016)	Brand		Owned media strengthen	Persuade and generate financial benefits	Oral communication enhancement	Organization products and services
Gita Johar (2016)		communication		Persuade an audience		Products, services or brands

Table 1 Definitions of advertisements compiled by Gu (2018) (translated by the author of this paper) (cont.)

Reference	Source	Message	Channel	Effect	Mediated or not	Objects
JisuHuh (2017)	Identifiable source	paid	Mediated/mediation	Controlled persuasion	Non-personal communication	Organization or individuals
Chen and Pan (2016)	Organizational source	Identified communicative content	Communication	interaction emotional-behavioral changes	Cognitive-	Organization or life manager
Malthouse and Li (2017)	Brand initiated and consumer led	communication	Digitization touchpoints	Behavior, dialogue, environment and experience	Paid and unpaid	

In Gu's (2018) summary, he (2018) remarks that table as follows:

Most advertising experts recognize that the definition of advertising based on the communication structure of mass media information distribution has reached its peak in the past and should be closer to the broader needs of brand marketing communication. Traditional advertising appears and embodies its responsibilities in the form of media-oriented agency in the supply chain, and the brand pays mainly on the basis of media purchase costs and creative production costs. Now, media buying has changed dramatically in the Internet age. The future of advertising is developing toward a new goal, where brands participate in the media life of users and the communication

and creation of consumer communities. Building activities. Payment is only one of the ways of media procurement. It can also sponsor producers or implant content. The intention is to create scene-oriented experience and consumers' will and change from direct persuasion and information transmission of goods and products representing civilization to interactive dancing with consumers and activity support. Interpersonal communication, user autonomy and two-way action (multidirectional interaction) are actively occupying media volume.

It can be seen from this table that most experts still hold a conservative attitude toward the source of advertisements, believing that the source and brand have a direct correlation or could be identified and confirmed. This conservative attitude ignores the traditional advertising model that individuals can also be the source of advertisements. Chen (2016) mentioned in his research that message is communicative content, thus pointing to the channel of communication and interaction. However, only Jisu Huh mentioned that message is paid, which shows that other experts' definition of advertisement has begun to abandon the concept that advertisement should be paid in the traditional definition of advertisement. For advertising channels, experts have realized the interactive two-way nature of channels and the role of "we media". The effects of advertising are intentional impact, positive response, (controlled) persuasion and cognitive, emotional and behavioral change.

The growth of social media has dramatically changed the way to pay. Social media is different from traditional media in that its influence comes not only from the media itself but also from users. Social platforms pay to attract influential users to attract customers. As a result, not only do these users not have to pay to advertise on social media, but they may also be paid by the platform.

The above definition of advertising emphasizes a certain characteristic. To give a more compatible and comprehensive definition of advertising, as Micael Dahlen and Sara Rosengren (2016) mentioned, "the definition of advertising from the narrow sense and broad sense, but obviously broad also need to be expanded."

The development of new media and new technology has caused a fundamental impact on the creation subject, text form and operation mode of advertising, and advertising is no longer advertising (Rao, 2020).

Duan (2020) explains that “with the development of big data and new media, the forms of contemporary advertising have undergone profound changes, showing a trend of flexibility and diversification”. Some scholars call this kind of new advertising the “pan-advertising”. Pan advertising appears to be the diversification of forms, but it is actually the evolution of advertising genres. Liu (2017) holds a different attitude toward “pan-advertising”. He believes that the so-called “pan-advertising” means that the extension of the definition of advertising is infinitely enlarged so that many areas that do not belong to advertising are defined as advertising.

The forms of advertising began to flourish, such as micro movies, MTV, or even a piece of news; it is a never-ending list. In fact, advertising was originally transformed from news, which was once called commercial news. The norms of form and the diversity of media led to the emergence of the term pan-advertising. It is a fact that the term “pan-advertising” seems to hold every aspect of advertisement, to accumulate the genres of all types, to consider the various possibility to generate an advertisement, but the pan method does not deliver a clear definition or approach the nature of advertisement. Advertisement, as a subject employing signs to do things, naturally goes to the definition from the semiotics perspective. A semiotic study of contemporary advertisement reveals that, in the context of the emergence of new media, the phenomenon of Pan-advertising is the most significant trend of development.

A Semiotic Recognition of Advertisement

Gita (2016) proposed a new concept called “advertising conversations” while researching the future of advertising trends. He pointed out that today’s advertising has undergone fundamental changes. Before, some people defined advertising as a paid non-interpersonal communication method; that is, a certain sponsor uses mass media to persuade and influence a specific audience. However, much so-called advertising is no longer clear whether it is paid, non-personal, with a certain advertiser, or in mass media.

The advertising conversation coincides with Peirce's dialogue of signs, which informs both semioticians and experts to share the same understanding of the dialogue characteristic of signs, which is the fundamental component of advertisement.

Throughout his career, Peirce proposed numerous definitions of signs. The most common definition is "A sign, or representamen, is something that stands for something in some respect or capacity" (CP 2.228). In addition, he offers the following dialogical definitions in a letter addressed to Christine Ladd-Franklin:

A sign is an object made by a party we will call the utterer, and determined by his idea, which is the sense or depth of the sign, in order to create in the mind of the interpreter an interpretant idea of the same object. (MS L 237: 1)

and

[...] all deliberative mediation, or thinking, takes the form of a dialogue. The person divides himself into two parties which endeavor to persuade each other. From this and sundry other strong reasons, it appears that all cognitive thought is of the nature of a sign or communication from an uttering mind to an interpreting mind. (MS 498)

Apart from process factors such as sponsors and payment, the essence of advertising is a dialogue between manufacturers and dealers, between dealers and consumers, and between individual consumers themselves. These three conversations form a chain of conversations, and this chain could be simplified from dealer to consumer. Illustrated as follows:

Manufacturers/Dealers → Customers → Self

This chain of dialogue can be simplified as a dialogue between the manufacturer and the consumer, which begins in the form of advertising, with the purpose of attracting the attention, acceptance and purchase of its consumers. When many manufacturers and consumers cannot talk directly, they also need to join dealers as participants and assume the middle link of their dialogue chain.

Consumers today are quite different from a few years ago. Before the new media, consumers are passive receivers in communication, and they seldom have the chance to reveal their attitudes and comments. Now, they are more active in gaining access to information and controlling the communication between the dialogue parties.

A Semiotic Definition of Advertisement

Semiotics was originally developed as a way to study advertising. The semiotics of advertising has its roots in the work of Roland Barthes, who published his seminal article *‘Rhétorique de l’image’* [Rhetoric of the Image] in 1964, an analysis of an advertisement for Panzani noodles. One of the main branches of semiotics in the present world is “consumer or marketing semiotics.” The usages of semiotics as a whole in the marketing and consumer field (Noth, 1997) have had two main dominant paradigms. Dharmakeerthi and Ranjan (2010) hold a similar opinion:

Marketing, Advertising and communication are the inseparable, three major concepts in the distinctive market – consumer behavioral world. Specially, advertisements mainly bring the language, photo graphics, colors, and other symbols for its own usage to make consciousness on the production and its grandeur on the customers and outside. In the present world advertising is a large-scale business and is a part of the national economy in many countries.

Advertisements construct, form and manipulate the perception and the behavior of its consumers and the outside. All the symbols are paying an immeasurable service of presenting and apprehending the culture and the world. Theoretical back ground clearly immerge the interdisciplinary doctrine with vast range of topics to make consciousness on the academics and public on this purpose.

Thus, it is possible to define advertising in a broader or more inclusive way from the characteristics of signs and the study of meaning. This is mainly because advertising, as mass communication, naturally falls into the subject of semiosis.

Peirce put semiotics on the basis of phenomenology, and his triadic semiotics emphasize how people create meaningful signs in cognitions and communication. Sebeok (1994) provides his understanding of signs:

Signs allow each species to (1) signal its existence, (2) communicate messages within the species, and (3) model incoming information from the external world. Semiotics is the science that studies these functions.

Advertising is a genre employing signs to construct meaning to communicate. To date, a few semioticians define advertising as an announcement, a process or a text. For example, according to Danesi (1995), advertising is “any type of or form of public announcement intended to promote the sale of specific commodities or services”. Zhao (2012) interprets advertising from a semiotic perspective: “Advertising, as an activity to transmit information, is actually a process in which advertisers transmit meaning with the help of certain perceptible material forms (signs).” Rao (2012) defined an advertisement based on text from the perspective of advertising semiotics: “As long as the text meets the following three conditions, it is an advertisement: first, it must contain information of goods or services; second, commodity or service information appears in the form of endpoints; the third is that text is transmitted through non-interpersonal channels.”

These semiotic definitions note that advertising is presented in the form of text to communicate. As a method to communicate, the completion or realization of advertising requires the presence of both sender and receiver of information. The sender of the message, who has encoded the signs, sends the message, intentionally or unintentionally, through some medium. The recipient of the information then responds with passive or implicit conversational feedback, including changing beliefs and taking action to buy goods or services.

When defining “advertisement”, many scholars no longer attach importance to or emphasize the role of media, believing that media is various and self-evident. However, it is the diversity, change and development of media that make the definition of advertisement constantly change. Advertising, from the original street hawking, from

the call issued by individuals to today's individual voice in the media, is both similar and different. The similarity lies in that it is the individual call for public attention, and the difference is that the audience and the number of people are vastly different. With the booming of media, advertising communication develops in spirals, which consequently promotes the way advertising is transmitted and is changing people's perception of advertising.

The development of media has roughly gone through three phases, namely, physical media, digital media and the coming algorithmic media. As shown below:

Table 2 First phase: Physical media

Media for Ad	Description
Cries, signs of shop smell etc.	Advertisements attract customers nearby by what they hear, see or smell etc.
TV, newspaper, radio	Advertisement presented in these channels to promote local, nationwide or even worldwide business

Table 3 Second phase: Digital media

Media for Ad	Description
E-commerce	Advertisements on e-commerce websites and Apps to promote online shopping of products and services Stimulate buying behavior directly when online shopping
Search engine	Advertisements in a searched website or by a search result Accurately target audiences who are interested in related products and services
Social media	Marketing by pushing advertorials, pictures and other promotional materials Establish/Cultivate brand image and display products and services in various forms
Video streaming	Advertisements at the beginning, in the middle or at the end of a video stream Easy to capture the attention of audiences and lead to significance feedback

Table 3 Second phase: Digital media

Media for Ad	Description
Online car media	PGC and UGC or web source ads Enhance brand awareness, manage customer relationships and enhance customer loyalty
Portals and News Aggregation Platforms	Ads placed on portal site subscriptions, or displayed as PGC Related advertising can attract the attention of the audience

The third phase of media is algorithmic media, which is essentially the deep integration of various digital media. Yu Guoming mentioned in a lecture that

“the form of media has developed from physical to virtual characteristic (from physical media, relational media to algorithm media), In the future, algorithmic media will become the basic and ubiquitous media.

According to Yu, the evolutionary and logical regression of communication goes under this direction: it first starts from subject (man) to object (external media) and then from object (external media) to subject (man). Under the new civilizational form of metauniverse, digital man is a kind of media form.

It is a regression of human as media. McLuhan (1994) observes that “the personal and social consequences of any medium– that is, of any extension of ourselves– result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology”. However, it should be noted that it is not a simple return; it is an upward development with the technology that provides the possibility that man will become the subject again.

Signs are used to construct, identify and interpret advertisements, and it should be kept in mind that advertising itself is the aggregation of signs. Then, it is clear what a semiotic definition of advertising would involve. Advertising initiator construes signs, or codes into tangible text, transmits to the targeted positional audience via some media,

which the latter consolidate this information to make a decision to take action, to buy right away, soon later or not.

Conclusion

Scholars have been perfecting and refining the definition of advertising from various perspectives, such as the changes of consumption patterns, the accelerating technology and media, and the way to communicate. The digitalization of consumer life and the continuous development of big data analysis make consumers integrate into every link of advertising production, and the precision, visualization and real-time advertising effect make advertising develop rapidly. Technology and consumer role change are also driving the rapid development of advertising.

The essence of advertising conforms to the conversational nature of signs. It is a dialogue chain composed of at least two or more dialogues, which is accomplished through physical or virtual media in the process of information transmission. The term advertising derives from the Medieval Latin verb *advertere* “to ‘direct one’s attention to’ a product or service by means of some public announcement (oral or written). (Danesi, 2015). Right now, the ever developing technology and media seem to bring “advertising” to its original significance. Technology makes individuals, in particular, gain more chances and channels to spread their persuasive information to attract potential customers. This is very different from the ancient street peddling in terms of scope of influence. It is technology that facilitates the spread of advertising. With the support of technology, new advertising formats, trends and characteristics will be in change. Therefore, the definition of advertising is necessarily always in dynamic adjustment, but the dialogical nature of advertising, is at the heart of its stability.

Semiotics studies sign systems and their organization and concerns how meaning is produced. It is a practical approach to the study of advertising. Images, words, colors and other signs are of the overall of recognition, realization and success of advertisement.

Notes:

1. PGC and UGC

PGC (Professional Generated Content) is an Internet term used to describe Professional Generated Content. UGC (User Generated Content) refers to user-generated Content, which is rising along with the concept of Web 2.0 with the main feature of advocating personalization. Some early video websites adopted the user-generated content (UGC) mode. UGC has the advantage that users can upload content freely and enrich the content of the website, but the disadvantage lies in the uneven quality of the content. At present, most professional video websites adopt the PGC mode, with more professional classification and more guaranteed content quality. At present, e-commerce media, especially high-end media, also adopt the PGC mode, whose content setting and product editing are very professional, which cannot be achieved by the UGC mode.

2. The Delphi Method

The Delphi method is a collaborative process for formulating predictions about a variety of future trends. It typically seeks to bring expert opinions together to create a consensus of where a technology or movement might lead. This forecasting method often employs a questionnaire, which helps group members read each other's answers and formulate predictions. In most instances, those polled maintain anonymity throughout the process, in an effort to reduce the amount of influence the group has on each answer. (Darlene Goodman Last Modified Date: January 27, 2022)

Reference

- Danesi, M. (1995). *Interpreting advertisements: A Semiotic Guide*. Ottawa: LEGAS Press.
- Danesi, M. (2015). *Advertising Discourse*. The International Encyclopedia of Language and Social Interaction, First Edition. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Dharmakeerthi, G. D. & Ranjan, S. (2010). Science of semiotic usage in advertisements and consumer' s perception. *Journal of American Science*, 6(2).
- Johar, G. V. (2016). Mistaken Inferences from Advertising Conversations: A Modest Research Agenda. *Journal of Advertising*, 45:3, 318-325
- Liu, L. (2017). Study on the Problem of “Pan Advertising” in Advertising Research. *Advertising Observatory (The theory of version)*, 14-21
- Solík, M. (2014). Semiotic Approach to Analysis of Advertising. *European Journal of Science and Theology*, 207-217.
- Dahlen, M. & Rosengren, S. (2016). If Advertising Won't Die, What Will It Be? Toward a Working Definition of Advertising. *Journal of Advertising*, 45:3, 334-345
- Noth, W. (1997). *Handbook of Semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana, University Press. (Ed.). *Semiotics of the Media: State of the Art, Projects, and Perspectives*, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Peirce, C. S. (1931). *Collected papers of Charles sanders Peirce*. Columbia: Harvard University. Press. Peirce. C.S. n.d. Unpublished Manuscripts (MS). Peirce Edition Project. Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis.
- Rao, G.X. (2012). *Defining advertising from Textual Form: a Semiotic view of Advertising*. Gansu Social Sciences. 149-153.
- Rao, G.X. (2019). A Study on the Semiotic Mechanism of Pan-Advertization. *Journal of Sichuan University (Philosophy and Social Science Edition)*. 126-133.
- Richards, J. I. & Curran, C. M. (2002). “Oracles on ‘Advertising’: Searching for a Definition,” *Journal of Advertising*. 31 (2), 63–77.
- Sebeok, T. A. (1994). *An Introduction to Semiotics*. University of Toronto Press.
- Zhao, Y. (2012). Semiotic Angle of advertising interpretation. *News Dissemination*. 22+24.
- Wells, W. & Burnett, J. (1998). *Advertising: principles and practice*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
-