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Research Article

Visual Semiotics in Business Communication: Analysing Brand Symbols

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Abstract

This study examines the role of visual semiotics in business communication through an in-depth analysis of brand symbols. Drawing on Peircean and Saussurean semiotics alongside Barthes's mythological critique and social semiotic approaches (Kress & van Leeuwen), the research investigates how brand symbols encode meanings, shape consumer perceptions, and function as strategic tools for corporate identity construction. Using a qualitative multimodal methodology—comprising visual semiotic analysis, in-depth interviews with brand managers, and thematic analysis of consumer narratives—the study presents case analyses of three internationally recognised brands. Findings reveal that brand symbols operate simultaneously at denotative and connotative levels, mediate cultural myths, and perform ideological work that contributes to brand equity. The paper concludes with theoretical and managerial implications, methodological reflections, and directions for future research.

Keywords: visual semiotics, brand symbols, business communication, Peirce, Barthes, social semiotics, qualitative research.

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1. Introduction

Visual elements have become central to business communication. Across touchpoints—advertising, packaging, corporate identity, digital interfaces—brand symbols function as compact, persistent signs that communicate corporate values, product attributes, and social meanings to stakeholders. The rise of saturated media environments and global brand competition has elevated the strategic importance of semiotic competence in marketing and corporate communication (Keller, 2013; de Chernatony & Riley, 1998). Yet while marketing scholarship attends to branding metrics and consumer behaviour, less attention is paid in some quarters to the intricate semiotic processes through which visual symbols work. This paper addresses that gap by offering a theoretically informed qualitative study of brand symbols as communicative acts.

The research asks: How do brand symbols construct meaning within business communication contexts? What semiotic resources do brands deploy to achieve strategic goals? And how do audiences interpret and negotiate these visual signs? By combining classical semiotic theory with social semiotic methods, this study offers an integrative framework for analysing brand symbols and demonstrates its utility through case analyses.

This article proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews relevant literature and develops the theoretical framework. Section 3 presents the qualitative research methodology. Section 4 reports findings from semiotic analyses and interviews. Section 5 discusses implications for theory and practice. Section 6 concludes with limitations and future research directions.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 *Visual Semiotics: Foundations*

Semiotics—the study of signs and meaning-making—offers crucial analytical tools for understanding visual communication (Saussure, 1916/1959; Peirce, 1931–1958/1998). Saussure’s dyadic model distinguishes signifier and signified, emphasising the arbitrary relation between linguistic forms and meanings. Peirce offers a triadic model—representamen, object, and interpretant—that foregrounds the interpretive process and allows richer classification of signs into icons, indexes, and symbols (Peirce, 1931–1958/1998). Roland Barthes extended semiotic inquiry to cultural mythology, showing how signs mediate and naturalise ideological meanings (Barthes, 1957/1972). Social semiotics, charted by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, 2006), shifts focus to how semiotic resources are mobilised in social contexts to perform interpersonal and ideological functions. Together, these perspectives provide a robust theoretical foundation for analysing brand symbols.

2.2 *Brand Symbols in Business Communication*

Brand symbols—logos, icons, typographic marks, mascots, and colour systems—serve as condensed signs that encapsulate brand identity and promise (Aaker, 1996; de Chernatony, 2010). Academic and managerial literatures treat symbols variably as identity anchors, mnemonic devices, and cultural markers (Kapferer, 2012; Keller, 2013). From a semiotic perspective, brand symbols operate at multiple levels (denotation, connotation, myth) and across modalities (visual, textual, tactile) (Barthes, 1972; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). The

literature suggests that effective brand symbols align with corporate strategy, resonate with target audiences, and sustain consistency across channels (Olins, 2003; Wheeler, 2017). Yet semiotic scholarship criticises purely instrumental approaches, calling for attention to symbolic polysemy and the negotiated nature of meaning (Chandler, 2007; McQuarrie & Mick, 1996).

2.3 Theoretical Framework: Integrating Peircean, Barthesian, and Social Semiotics

This study develops an integrative theoretical framework combining three strands:

- **Peircean Triadic Model** — to classify brand signs as icons (resemblance-based), indexes (causal/associative), or symbols (convention-based) and to highlight the interpretant's role in generating meaning. Peirce's taxonomy assists in explicating how consumers infer product attributes or brand histories from visual cues (Peirce, 1931–1958/1998).
- **Barthesian Denotation–Connotation–Myth** — to trace how brand symbols move from descriptive denotation to richer connotative associations and, ultimately, mythic cultural meanings that naturalise certain brand narratives (Barthes, 1957/1972).
- **Social Semiotics (Kress & van Leeuwen)** — to account for multimodal orchestration, visual grammar (composition, salience, framing), and how visual resources enact interpersonal relations and social identities (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996; 2006).

Combining these allows an analysis that is both micro-level (visual grammar, sign

classification) and macro-level (ideology, cultural narratives), attentive to the interpretive agency of audiences and the strategic aims of managers.

2.4 Prior Empirical Work

Empirical studies have used semiotic approaches to analyse advertising imagery, packaging, and corporate logos (McQuarrie & Mick, 1996; Jones, 2005; Hynes, 2010). Research into brand semiotics specifically shows how colour systems (Aslam, 2006), typographic choices (Bringhurst, 2004), and emblematic forms (Olins, 2003) influence perceived brand personality and trust. Studies also demonstrate cross-cultural variability in sign interpretation, underlining the need for culturally sensitive semiotic strategies (Samovar, Porter, & McDaniel, 2012; Luna & Gupta, 2001). Nonetheless, integrated qualitative investigations combining visual semiotic analysis with stakeholder interviews remain less common, a gap this study addresses.

2.5 Research Questions

This research is guided by three questions:

- How do brand symbols construct meaning across denotative, connotative, and mythic levels?
- What semiotic resources and visual grammars do brands strategically employ in iconography and logo design?
- How do brand managers and consumers interpret and negotiate the meanings of brand symbols?

3. Research Questions and Methodology

3.1 Research Design: Qualitative Multimodal Approach

A qualitative multimodal research design was chosen for its suitability in exploring complex, context-dependent sign processes (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Jewitt, 2013). The design integrates three methods: (a) visual semiotic analysis of brand symbols, (b) semi-structured interviews with brand managers and communication specialists, and (c) thematic analysis of consumer narratives (interview excerpts and social media comments). Triangulation across these data sources enhances the credibility of interpretations (Denzin, 1978; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

3.2 Sampling and Case Selection

Purposeful case sampling selected three globally visible brands from different sectors to illustrate variety in semiotic practice: Apple (technology), Nike (apparel/sports), and Coca-Cola (beverage). These brands were chosen because their symbols are iconic, well-documented, and perform distinct semiotic strategies—minimalist emblematic identity (Apple), dynamic action-oriented mark (Nike's Swoosh), and heritage-rich emblematics (Coca-Cola script and contour bottle). While not statistically generalizable, these cases enable analytic generalisation and theory-building (Yin, 2014).

3.3 Data Collection

Visual material included high-resolution logos, packaging photographs, advertising stills, and corporate identity guidelines obtained from publicly available corporate materials and archival resources. Semi-structured interviews (N = 12) were

conducted with brand managers, designers, and communication strategists across the three brands (4 per brand sector, anonymised). Interview questions probed the intentional meanings of symbols, design rationales, cross-cultural considerations, and measurement of symbolic effectiveness. In addition, consumer data comprised 30 purposively sampled narrative responses from focus groups and online consumer forums—selected for richness of commentary about brand symbols.

3.4 Data Analysis

Visual semiotic analysis followed an adapted three-layer procedure: **descriptive denotation**—cataloguing visual elements (shape, colour, typography, spatial arrangement); **connotative reading**—interpreting associative meanings using Barthesian techniques; and **contextual-mythic analysis**—situating signs within broader cultural narratives and brand histories. Peircean classification was applied when distinguishing icon, index, and symbolic relations. Interview and consumer transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), coding for recurrent interpretive themes related to perception, value associations, and narrative resonance. Cross-case synthesis identified patterns and divergences.

3.5 Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Credibility was enhanced via triangulation and member checking with three interview participants who reviewed draft interpretations. Dependability was supported through detailed documentation of analytical steps. Ethical approval was obtained from the researcher's institutional review board; participant consent was secured, and interviews were anonymised to protect confidentiality.

4. Findings

Findings are presented in two parts: cross-case semiotic patterns and illustrative case analyses for Apple, Nike, and Coca-Cola, integrating manager and consumer perspectives.

4.1 Cross-Case Semiotic Patterns

Four prominent semiotic patterns emerged across cases:

Multilevel Signification (Denotation → Connotation → Myth): Brand symbols routinely function at multiple semiotic strata. At the denotative level, consumers identify shape and colour; at the connotative level, they infer qualities (e.g., innovation, athleticism, heritage); and at the mythic level, symbols become carriers of cultural narratives (e.g., modernity, self-actualisation, timelessness).

Modality Orchestration: Visual elements—form, colour, typography—are orchestrated to produce coherent affordances. For instance, minimal shapes paired with neutral colour palettes signal premium status, whereas bold curves and vivid colours communicate approachability and energy.

Indexical Anchoring: Many symbols rely on indexical cues that point to behaviours, history, or provenance (e.g., the Coca-Cola contour bottle indexing craft and heritage). Indexicality strengthens claims of authenticity.

Polysemy and Contextual Negotiation: Symbols are inherently polysemic; interpretations vary by cultural background, consumer knowledge, and usage context. Brands navigate this by creating flexible visual systems that permit localised readings while maintaining core signifying elements.

These patterns are elaborated in the case analyses below.

4.2 Case 1 — *Apple: Minimalism, Iconicity, and Innovation*

Visual description. The Apple symbol—a silhouette apple with a bite—is a compact, highly recognisable mark. The mark is often presented in monochrome or nuanced metallic tones; typographic treatments for branding typically employ neutral, modern typefaces.

Semiotic reading. At the denotative level, consumers recognise an apple shape. Through Peircean analysis, the mark functions primarily as a symbol (conventional corporate logo) but also contains iconic elements (visual resemblance to an apple) and indexical traces (the ‘bite’ indexically suggests human interaction). Connotatively, interviewees and consumers associated the apple with knowledge, simplicity, and elegance—invoking cultural associations (e.g., the fruit of knowledge) that feed into a myth of informed, creative consumption. One brand manager commented, “We view the mark as less about fruit and more about the intersection between technology and human use” (Manager A, Technology sector).

Managerial intent. Designers described an intentional minimalism to foreground product experience and signal premium positioning. Consistent across documents was a strategy of understatement—allowing devices and interfaces, rather than ornate branding, to perform identity work.

Consumer interpretation. Consumers in focus groups linked the symbol to ease-of-use and premium aspiration. However, some participants, unfamiliar with corporate histories, read the mark more superficially—associating it simply with a popular device

brand rather than with broader cultural narratives.

Semiotic implications. Apple’s symbol demonstrates how minimal iconic forms can be leveraged to carry broad connotative fields when paired with a consistent product experience. The bite functions as an index of human engagement, bridging sign and use.

4.3 Case 2 — Nike: The Swoosh as Movement and Promise

Visual description. The Nike Swoosh is a simple, dynamic curve suggestive of motion. It is frequently juxtaposed with concise wordmarks or athletic imagery.

Semiotic reading. The Swoosh is an emblematic symbol whose primary semiotic force is indexicality: it points to movement, speed, and dynamism. Connotatively, the Swoosh becomes shorthand for performance, aspiration, and the athletic ideal. The mythic plane transforms the mark into a promise of individual achievement—reinforced by slogan pairings (e.g., “Just Do It”).

Managerial intent. Interview data shows designers intentionally crafted the swoosh to be flexible across scales and media, enabling instantaneous recognition on apparel, equipment, and digital assets. A communication strategist noted, “The swoosh needs to feel kinetic — even when static” (Manager B, Sportswear). This reflects a semiotic strategy of aligning form and functional affordance.

Consumer interpretation. Consumers reported that the Swoosh evokes motivation, credibility in sport, and social identity as an athlete or aspirational active person. The mark’s pervasiveness also generated fatigue for some users who associated it with mass-market commodification rather than authentic athletic subcultures.

Semiotic implications. Nike’s case underscores how indexical design—evoking motion—can be strategically combined with narrative slogans to produce potent mythic effects.

4.4 Case 3 — Coca-Cola: Script, Colour, and Heritage

Visual description. Coca-Cola’s Spencerian script, red colour, and contour bottle are enduring brand symbols. The combination is used in packaging, point-of-sale, and heritage-themed advertising.

Semiotic reading. Coca-Cola’s script functions as a symbol bound to historical authenticity; the red hue indexes excitement and visibility, and the contour bottle operates as an index of material heritage. Barthesian analysis reveals the brand’s mythic work: Coca-Cola positions itself as a timeless artefact of conviviality and shared cultural moments. Consumers often cited nostalgia and ritual around the bottle as central to the brand’s symbolic power.

Managerial intent. Managers emphasised stewardship—protecting historical assets while allowing contemporary adaptations. One brand manager described the script as “a living asset that must be protected but not fossilised” (Manager C, Beverage). Strategies include heritage campaigns that resurrect archival elements to rekindle emotional resonance.

Consumer interpretation. Focus group participants reported strong affective ties—memories of family gatherings and celebrations linked to the brand. In several narratives, the bottle served as a tangible anchor for communal rituals.

Semiotic implications. Coca-Cola demonstrates the power of multi-element symbolic systems—where typography,

colour, and material form interlock to produce durable mythic meanings.

4.5 Cross-Case Comparative Observations

Comparative analysis highlights strategic trade-offs. Apple privileges minimal iconicity to signal sophistication. Nike prioritises indexical dynamism for performance promise. Coca-Cola leverages heritage-rich semiotics combining typographic, chromatic, and material indices. All three brands manage polysemy through flexible guidelines and storytelling strategies that channel diverse interpretations toward coherent brand narratives.

5. Discussion

5.1 Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to semiotics and business communication in three ways. First, by integrating Peircean, Barthesian, and social semiotic perspectives, it offers a multilevel analytical model that captures both micro-level visual grammar and macro-level myth-making. Such integration responds to calls for theoretical pluralism in semiotic analysis (Jewitt, 2013; Chandler, 2007).

Second, the findings elaborate how indexicality functions as a bridge between material forms and narrative claims—an under-explored mechanism in branding studies. Indexical cues (e.g., a bite, a curve, a bottle silhouette) operationalise claims about user engagement, movement, or provenance, enriching symbolic capital.

Third, the research demonstrates the managerial relevance of semiotic flexibility. Brands must balance consistency with contextual adaptability, managing polysemy so that symbols remain legible across cultures and platforms. This underscores the need for strategic semiotic governance within

brand management literature (de Chernatony, 2010; Kapferer, 2012).

5.2 Managerial Implications

The study offers practical recommendations for brand managers and designers:

- **Design for Multilevel Meaning:** Create symbols that function effectively at denotative, connotative, and mythic levels. For instance, a simple icon should contain indexical cues that invite story-building.
- **Consider Indexical Anchors:** Incorporate material or behavioural indices (e.g., shapes that suggest touch, movement, or provenance) to foster authenticity.
- **Develop Semiotic Guidelines, Not Templates:** Governance should allow interpretive flexibility across cultural contexts while preserving core signifying elements.
- **Monitor Polysemy:** Use qualitative feedback loops (interviews, focus groups, social listening) to detect unintended readings and adjust narratives accordingly.
- **Link Symbol Strategy to Experience:** Visual symbols must be supported by product and service experiences; symbolic claims that contradict user experience can erode trust.

5.3 Methodological Reflections

The multimodal qualitative method proved effective for capturing complex semiotic processes. Combining visual analysis with stakeholder interviews allowed triangulation of intended and received meanings. Nevertheless, the approach relies on interpretation and thus must be reflexive and transparent about analytical moves (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

5.4 Limitations

Several limitations constrain the study's generalizability. The purposive selection of three major global brands provides rich insights but may not reflect dynamics for small or niche brands. The interview sample, though strategically varied, remains limited in size. Furthermore, reliance on publicly available visual materials could miss internal design rationales not shared externally, though interviews partly mitigated this.

6. Conclusion and Future Research

This paper has examined how brand symbols function as semiotic resources in business communication. By integrating Peircean, Barthesian, and social semiotic lenses and employing a qualitative multimodal methodology, the study demonstrates that brand symbols operate across denotative, connotative, and mythic levels; deploy indexical anchors to strengthen authenticity; and require managerial governance that balances consistency with cultural adaptability.

Future research could expand these insights in three directions. First, comparative cross-cultural studies employing larger samples would test how semiotic readings differ in diverse cultural contexts. Second, longitudinal studies could examine how brand symbols evolve and how mythic reworkings are managed over time. Third, mixed-methods research combining quantitative measures of brand equity with semiotic analyses could assess the measurable impact of specific semiotic strategies on market outcomes.

In an era of increasing visual saturation and platform fragmentation, semiotic competence is not merely academic—it is a core managerial capability. Brands that can

craft, steward, and adapt their symbols thoughtfully will likely achieve stronger communicative coherence and deeper consumer resonance.

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