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## COMMENTARY

# SEMIOTICS, ADVERTISING AND MARKETING

**Richard D. Zakia**

**Mihai Nadin**

*In the summer of 1986 the first International Conference on Marketing and Semiotics was held at Northwestern University. It was sponsored jointly by J. L. Kellogg Graduate School of Management at Northwestern and the Research Center for Language and Semiotic Studies at Indiana University.*

*The three-day conference underscored the fact that although the vocabulary for the two disciplines might be different, there was much commonality between Semiotics and Marketing.*

### **Semiotics**

Semiotics is a discipline that provides a structure for studying and analyzing how signs function within a particular environment. A sign can be thought of as anything that conveys meaning. Thus words, pictures, music, smell, taste, sound, pain, sculpture, architecture, film, video, dance, mime, gesture, and so on are signs once they are interpreted as such.<sup>10</sup> They can function alone or in concert. Semiotics is not a new discipline; it can be traced back to ancient

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**Richard D. Zakia** is professor of photography and Chairman of the Fine Art Photography Department and Graduate Program at the Rochester Institute of Technology. Dr. Zakia has a B.S. in Photographic Sciences from RIT and an Ed.D. from the University of Rochester. He has authored and co-authored several books on photography and perception and is completing a book with Dr. Nadin entitled *Visual Education*.

**Mihai Nadin** is Eminent Scholar: Professor of Art and Design Technology at Ohio State University. Dr. Nadin holds an M.S. in Electronics and Computer Science, an M.A. in Philosophy (both with honors), and a Ph.D. in Aesthetics, all from the University of Bucharest. The University of Munich (West Germany) awarded him a prestigious post-doctoral degree based on a dissertation in semiotics, aesthetics, and communication. Prior to his appointment at OSU, he was a Professor at the Rhode Island School of Design and founder and Director of the Institute for Visual Communication and Semiotics. Dr. Nadin also held the William A. Kern Institute Professor in Communications Chair at the Rochester Institute of Technology and an adjunct professorship at the Center for Research in Semiotics at Brown University. He is widely published and has lectured before many university and professional audiences in the United States and Europe on communication, semiotics, technology, and artificial intelligence.

Greek writers, especially Aristotle and later St. Augustine, who distinguished between signs and the things signs represent. Today in the field of marketing one could ask what signs are used to represent which product or service, to which audience they are directed, and with what purpose in mind. Semiotics provides a logic for seeking answers to such questions and for designing a system of appropriate signs.

As the means people use to communicate diversity, the need for a better understanding of how signs are used by humans becomes critical. Advertising is a sign process which develops from the semiosis of marketing.

For a long time, knowing about language meant knowing about communication. Linguists provided us with everything we needed in order to use language to its maximum potential. Once the visual component became important, however, once we learned how to use word and image to enhance our messages, once movement, texture, smell, sounds, and so on became part of our repertory, the need for a generalized science to teach us *what* to use, and *when* and *how*, became urgent. Semiotics is this science. Its object is to understand all the different sign systems people use, advertising being a prime example. It deals with the conditions under which different signs can be interpreted according to a preestablished intention, or with the circumstances under which people assign meanings to signs different from those intended. The main concepts semiotics uses to fulfill this function are *sign*, *sign process*, *meaning*, *context*, and *code*.

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If advertisement is the "Town Crier" for marketing, it follows that good marketing should always be established on a sound semiotic basis. Marketing is relevant to advertisement not merely through the way a certain product is presented, but rather through the manner in which the general marketing concept is embodied in various signs through which producers communicate with users. There are some instances when the town crier should be loud, others when the town crier should use a combination of expressive means, and others when silence—a very

controlled silence—can make a well-defined marketing strategy reach its goal. Semiotic awareness allows marketing professionals and advertisers to discover what is required for each circumstance.

## Advertising

Advertising is the most sophisticated "Town Crier" man has yet devised. It shouts its message from magazines, newspapers, billboards, radio, and television. It shouts wherever people congregate. Its market is no longer local or national but worldwide. It also speaks in many tongues. The purpose of advertising is to inform and to persuade, to prompt purchases of goods and services, to socialize consumers into a culture of consumption. Advertising is the modern substitute for myth and ritual and, directly or indirectly, it uses semiotics (the science of signs) to invest products with meaning for a culture whose dominant focus is consumption.<sup>8</sup> In addition to promoting products, advertising serves as an important and interesting historical document, as Marshall McLuhan noted some years back when he made this prophetic statement in his book *Understanding Media*:

*The historians and archaeologists will one day discover that the ads of our times are the richest and most faithful daily reflections that any society ever made of its entire range of activities.*<sup>3</sup>

## Applied Semiotics

Semiotics is a useful tool for discovering the sophistication and richness of ads. By deconstructing an advertisement, we learn how it was constructed and discover its underlying message. And by discovering its message, we also discover the way in which words and pictures work together to reinforce the message, how the alphapictorial (word and picture) components utilize gesture, art, myth, and symbol to give emotional impact.<sup>9</sup>

To show how semiotics can be used to analyze an advertisement and how it might be used to educate (educate through advertisement) the general public to the subtlety and strength of advertisements, we have chosen what, at first glance, appears to be a simple and unsophisticated ad. The ad is for *Fidji* perfume and has appeared in women's fashion magazines for several years (Plate 1). Some general observations can be made.

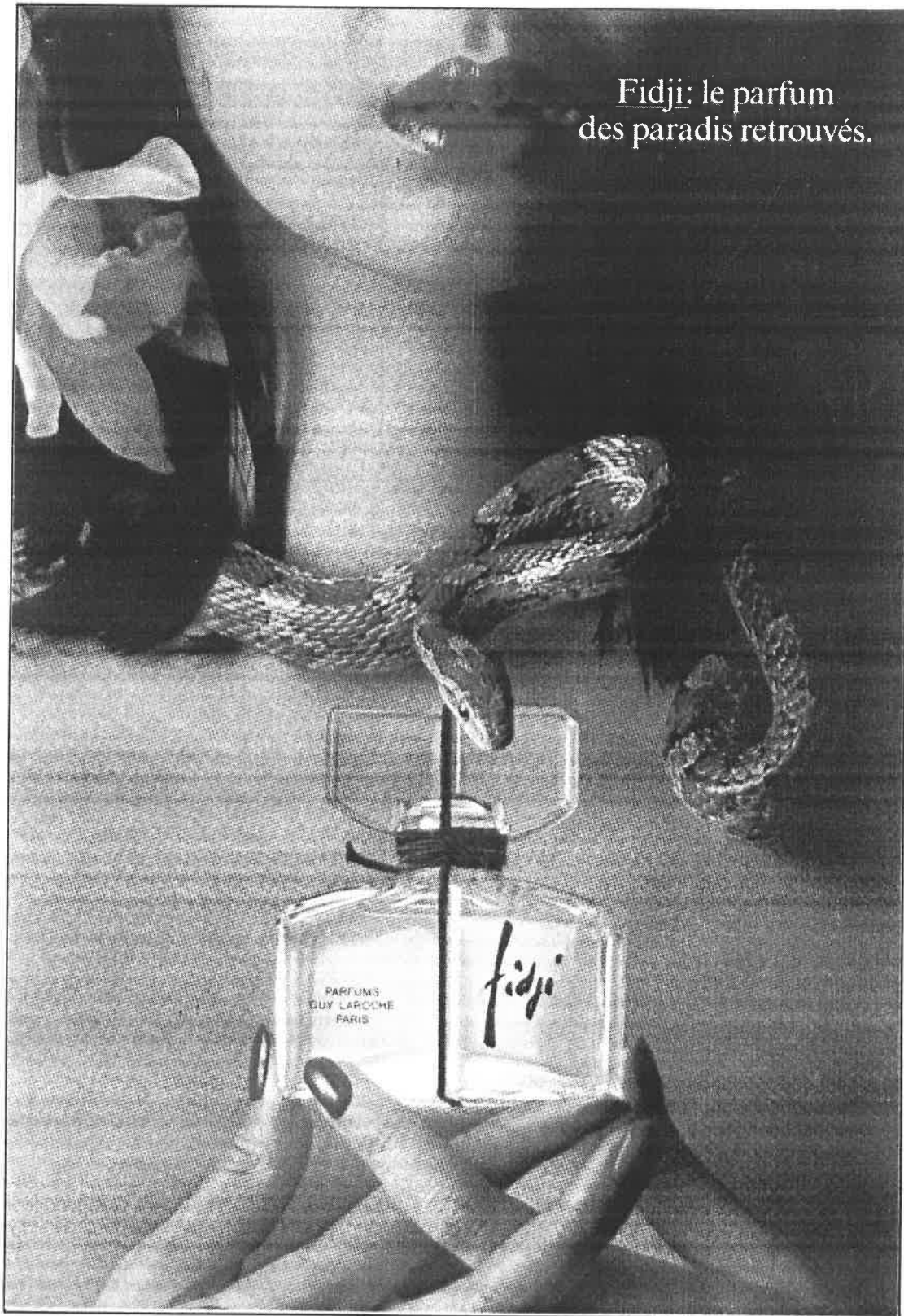


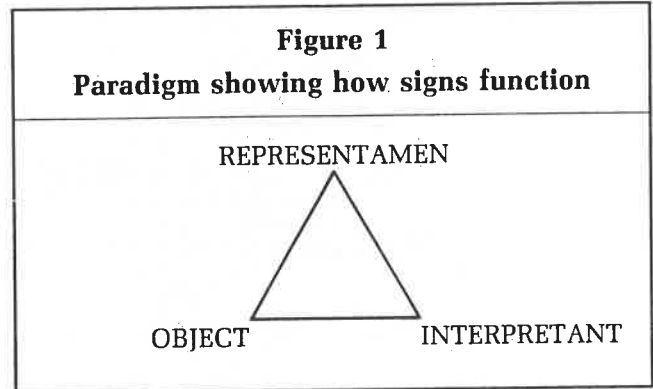
Plate 1. Fidji advertisement (colors in the original ad are amber, yellow, and red).

1. Only part of the model's face is shown. Because of this omission of the upper half, the viewer can do an *insertion* — complete the face in his or her image — and participate in the fantasy.
2. The model is face-to-face with the viewer, but there is no eye contact — or is there?
3. Color is symbolic — ambers and yellows are considered warm, tropical, sensuous colors.
4. Note the unique way in which the model holds the elevated bottle of perfume and the finger-weave she uses to support the bottle.
5. The presence of the snake (serpent is a more romantic term) is obvious. Not obvious are the other things we can attribute to this symbol of the Garden of Eden. They will be revealed later.
6. Note the yellow flower in the upper left corner of the ad. One would have to look far and wide to find such an exotic flower. Could it be out of the Garden of Eden?
7. What might be hidden in the dark abyss to the right of the model's face — if anything? We will never know.

## Ads as Mediators

Semiotics has been defined variously as the “knowledge science of signs;”<sup>7</sup> the “general theory of representation;”<sup>4</sup> the “theory and practice of mediation;”<sup>6</sup> and a “general theory of signs in all their forms and manifestations among man and animals, normal and pathological, linguistic or non-linguistic, social or individual.”<sup>2</sup> Since we are concerned here with advertisement, we ask, “How does an ad mediate between the consumer and the product, Fidji perfume?” A paradigm showing how signs function is helpful as a visual reference (Figure 1). At the left leg of the triangle is the *Object* to be represented (Fidji perfume). At the apex is the *Representamen* (advertisement), and on the right the *Interpretant* (consumer). The function of the ad is to mediate between the product to be sold (Fidji perfume) and the consumer. This approach allows us to evaluate three distinct relationships that constitute the *sign*: Object/Representamen (How well does the ad represent the product?); Representamen/Interpretant (How well does the ad communicate?);

and Interpretant/Object (Was the communication significant? i.e., did the product sell?). Here we concern ourselves with only one component of the sign-representation, the first of the three mentioned above.



## Semiotic Analysis

We will analyze the Fidji ad to discover how the advertising talent which designed the ad represented Fidji perfume. To do this, we will use another paradigm — an *Interpretant Matrix*<sup>6</sup> (Figure 2). The alphapictorial components of the Fidji ad will be identified in terms of three characteristics: *iconic*, *indexic*, and *symbolic*. These three terms can be distinguished by using a car as an example. *Iconic* refers to likeness (a car looks like a car); *indexic* refers to imprints left by the car (tire tracks); and *symbolic* is the abstract convention used to represent the car (the logo).

## Advertising is the modern substitute for myth and ritual.

The three identifiers — iconic, indexic, and symbolic — are placed in the vertical column of the interpretant matrix. In the horizontal rows are the descriptors that probe the intended meaning (or what we think is the intended meaning) of the various elements that make up the ad.

After carefully and critically studying the Fidji ad, we begin to assign several possible meanings such as *exotic*, *sensual*, *sophisticated*, *androgynous*. (The list could continue, but these four meanings are adequate for illustration.) We now search the ad and isolate the alphapictorial elements that we feel support the meanings we have assigned. In a way, we are testing our hypothesis that the ad is exotic, sensual, sophisticated, and androgynous.

**Exotic Fidji**

*Exotic* refers to something strikingly or excitingly different, something foreign. How is the exotic shown in the Fidji ad? We identify as *iconic* a rather unfamiliar, perhaps foreign, flower to the left of the woman's face. We notice the *indexic* quality of the word 'Paris,' which refers

Table 1 <i>Exotic</i>	
Iconic	Foreign flower
Indexic	Paris, France Suggested fragrance (snake smells it)
Symbolic	Text in French (Fidji: le parfum des paradis retrouves) Native woman Serpent (Garden of Eden) "Phallic" neck and flower

to a familiar yet foreign country and the fantasies it evokes. The fragrance of Fidji is also *indexic* and can be inferred by the head of the snake that appears to be attracted by the smell. As for the *symbolic* aspect, the text in the upper right is in French; the model's color and face (partial view) suggest she is Fidjian; and the snake (serpent), of course, relates to the Garden of Eden. We also note the strange flower to the left. These observations can now be abbreviated and put into the matrix.

**Sensual Fidji**

Next we search out the alphapictorial com-

ponents that suggest the ad (perfume) is *sensual*. *Iconically*, there are the partially opened and inviting lips, the long flowing neck line, and the long, loose hair. *Indexically*, a long feminine finger points to Fidji. *Symbolically*, there are the unusual interlacing or interlocking of the fingers, which is obviously staged, the warm red, amber, and yellow of the ad, and, of course,

Table 2 <i>Sensual</i>	
Iconic	Partially opened lips Long flowing neck line Long loose hair
Indexic	Feminine finger pointing
Symbolic	Interlocking fingers Warm red, amber, yellow colors Curving, coiled serpent

the curving and coiled serpent. Again, we put these into our matrix.

The interlocking fingers are similar to those in the famous classical painting *Primavera* (Allegory of Spring) completed in 1478 by Sandro Botticelli. The original of this popular painting which is almost the size of a billboard, is in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. To its left are the Three Graces in lacy transparent gowns positioned in a rhythmic stance with arms upraised and fingers intertwined. The meaning of this finger gesture is elusive and has been the subject of much study and speculation. The original

Figure 2 An interpretant matrix				
Object of Advertisement	Meaning <sub>1</sub>	Meaning <sub>2</sub>	Meaning <sub>3</sub>	Meaning <sub>4</sub>
Iconic				
Indexic				
Symbolic				

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painting of *Primavera* and its countless reproductions have been seen worldwide by millions of people over the years. The use of art in advertising, directly or indirectly, completely or partially, greatly enhances the stature of any advertisement and, by association, the product advertised. John Berger has written:

Any work of art "quoted" by publicity serves two purposes. Art is a sign of affluence; it belongs to the good life; it is part of the furnishings which the world gives to the rich and the beautiful.<sup>1</sup>

### Sophisticated Fidji

The third meaning assigned to the Fidji ad is *sophistication*. *Iconically*, the model's face is elevated and we feel that she may be looking down at us as she holds a rather fancy bottle which is laced and sealed to protect its contents. *Indexically*, there are the Paris address on the bottle and the French spelling of the distant Fiji Island. The placement of the ad in magazines

Table 3	
<i>Sophisticated</i>	
Iconic	Elevated face Fancy bottle laced and sealed
Indexic	Paris address Fidji (The Fiji Islands) Placement of ad in <i>Vogue</i>
Symbolic	Rich warm colors in the ad Serpent as danger and risk (take a chance) Finger language

such as *Vogue* is also an important factor. *Symbolically*, the golden glow of the bottle and the overall warm colors in the ad suggest richness and warmth. The serpent appears poised as a pet or as a signal for danger and risk. And, of course, we have the rather sophisticated, staged finger language which broadcasts the promise of Fidji.

We now test the hypothesis that the ad has both female and male pictorial components that suggest it is *androgynous*. *Iconically*, the model's smooth face, extended neck, and slender fingers are very feminine. The flat chest and rather broad shoulders that extend beyond the ad are

very masculine. *Indexically*, the ad is seen as a unity even though it is split down the middle — the left side with very light colors while the right side is dark and heavy. *Symbolically*, the yellow flower in the upper left has both male and female attributes. And the interwoven fingers which form an altar on which the perfume rests suggest both male and female genitalia.

Table 4	
<i>Androgynous</i>	
Iconic	Female: face, neck, fingers Male: flat chest, broad shoulders
Indexic	Ad is half light colored (female) and half dark (male)
Symbolic	Yellow flower and fingers: male/female forms

(To test further the hypothesis that the ad is androgynous, we informally had a number of people smell the fragrance of Fidji and tell us if it has a feminine or masculine fragrance. Most pondered the question after testing the fragrance and then, a bit puzzled, said it was somewhere in between.)

Through the use of a logical, analytical paradigm such as the interpretant matrix, we now have supporting alphapictorial evidence of how the ad was constructed to represent the Fidji perfume as exotic, sensual, sophisticated, and androgynous. By deconstructing this ad, we have "constructed" its meaning, the meaning to be communicated to the interpreters (the audience). We are but two interpreters, and what we have presented is what we perceive to be the message of the Fidji ad.

### Managerial Implications

Management is exercised today through various forms of communication which convey goals, methods for achieving these goals, and the global strategy pursued. Managers must translate management requirements into the language of those who will implement them. Natural language, while still the dominant communication means, can be supplemented by visual representations (diagrams, charts, pictures) and by all kinds of explanatory methods (videotapes, interactive



graphics, slides, demonstrations). Aware of it or not, managers use semiotics in the process of defining their goals, of conveying them, and of evaluating the success of the strategy used. An important component of management is the need to project a homogenous image in which product, service, advertisement, and public relations are approached not independently but in their interrelation. Especially when we deal with conglomerates, the problem of maintaining a homogenous identity requires the participation of professionals who can advise on particular methods management can use to ensure uniformity, appropriateness of methods, and consistency in representing the company.

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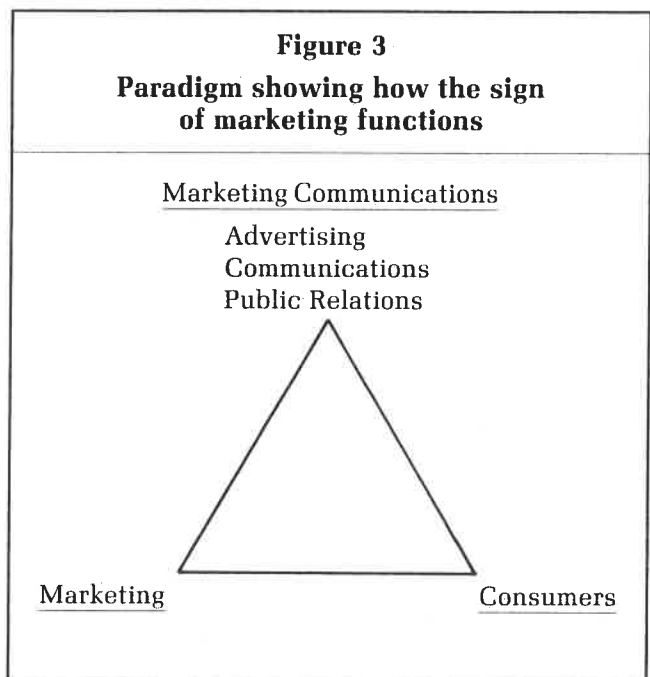
**The function of the ad is to mediate between the product to be sold and the consumer.**

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The need to deal with complexity in a very competitive marketplace is reflected in the need to devise a corporate language accepted by managers and implemented in their activity. Several major companies in the United States and abroad have recognized their need for a long-term semiotic strategy. Consequently, they have gone beyond the "logo and stationery" approach, usually satisfied by a design studio, and have adapted what can be called a corporate language especially devised for their particular needs. This language includes graphics, problem-solving strategies, corporate communication, public relations and management style, which all together comprise a semiotic strategy. The main managerial implications of such a decision

are reflected in the need to make it a component of the entire management activity.

The relationship between marketing management, communications, and the consumer population is illustrated in Figure 3. It shows the unity between marketing (part of the global corporate activity as defined by management and implemented by marketing professionals) and the representation of marketing goals in advertising, corporate communication, and public relations. The sign of marketing is constituted at a higher level than the signs used in advertising. The sign of marketing can help in defining short- and long-term marketing strategy.



## END NOTES

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