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**A SEMIOTIC RESEARCH UPON THE MARKETING  
COMMUNICATION OF GLOBAL FASHION RETAIL BRANDS**

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A Semiotic Research Upon The Marketing Communication of Global Fashion Retail Brands

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Göstergebilimsel Bir Araştırma

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## ABSTRACT

Brands constantly use signification and meaning creation systems to create strong and permanent identities in the minds of their consumers. Semiotics, the study of signs, is a resourceful approach to understand and deconstruct these sign systems. The signs and semiotic approach brands use, however, might be controversial from time to time. Inspired by the sample controversial advertising campaigns, this study aims to research on the culturally structured sign systems of global fashion retail brands and their advertisement images. Roland Barthes and John Berger's methodologies and Saussure's structural approach will be used to find out whether or not certain signs of advertisement images or strategies might be derogative and what makes it derogative for some cultures around the world. Today, Semiotics is not restricted only to visual signs or narrative content analysis. Anything that can be interpreted as a sign opens a research window for Semiotics to be actively adopted. Since marketing is a practice that always tries to establish a permanent existence in the minds of consumers and probable customers, marketers also use signification systems consistently. In this study, using Barthes' and Berger's methodologies in addition to Saussure's structural approach to semiotics, it has been seen that some advertising campaigns or certain images can be perceived as derogative on a cultural level.

**Keywords:** Semiotics, Marketing Research, Structural Semiotics, Sign, Brand Marketing, Advertisement

## ÖZET

Markalar, müşterilerinin zihinlerinde güçlü ve kalıcı marka kimlikleri yaratmak için her zaman işaret sistemlerinden yararlanırlar. Gösterge bilimi olarak tanımlanan Semiyotik, bu işaret sistemlerinin anlaşılmasında ve çözümlenmesinde kullanılır. Ancak, markaların kullandığı işaretler ve semiyotik yaklaşım, zaman zaman tartışmaya açık bir konu haline gelebiliyor. Bu çalışma, dünya üzerindeki global moda perakendesi markalarının örnek vakalarından esinlenerek, reklam görsellerinde kullanılan işaret sistemlerini araştırmaktadır. Roland Barthes ve John Berger'in metodolojileri ile Saussure'in yapısalcı yaklaşımı kullanılarak, reklam görselleri veya pazarlama stratejilerinde yer alan bazı işaretlerin dünya üzerindeki toplumlar ve kültürler için problemler ve hatta aşağılayıcı olup olmadığı ile bu duruma sebep olan öğeler araştırılacaktır. Semiyotik, sadece görsel işaretler veya içerik analizi ile kısıtlı bir alan değildir. İşaret olarak yorumlanabilen her şey semiyotiktin aktif olarak kullanılması için bir araştırma olanağı sağlar. Pazarlama, tüketicilerin ve olası kullanıcıların zihninde devamlı bir yer edinmeye dayalı bir pratik olduğu için, pazarlamacılar da işaret sistemlerini sürekli olarak kullanırlar. Bu çalışmada Barthes ve Berger'in metodolojileri ile Saussure'in yapısalcı yaklaşımı kullanılarak, bazı reklam kampanyaları veya imajlarının kültürel düzeyde aşağılayıcı göstergeler içerdiğinin algılanabileceği görüldü.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Semiyotik, Pazarlama Araştırması, Yapısalcı Semiyotik, İşaret, Marka Pazarlama, Reklam

## INTRODUCTION

How meaning and reality are constructed is a challenging question. The answers to this question are countless and seem to be hanging in the air at the same time. Even though you have conclusion about the above questions, one's mind never stops asking another question about reality and meaning once it is interested in it. For example, is reality shaping the language or vice versa? What if language is shaping the reality instead? No matter what answers you have to these questions, you may not be able to refute the other side of the story at the end of the long discussions. How reality is constructed is closely linked to how meaning is constructed since one's reality is formed via ascribing meanings to concepts in his/her mind. When one looks at how meaning is constructed, he/she will instantly recognize that communication is at the center of the abovementioned discussion since we create our meaning based on our relationships and communication system with the outside world.

Communication is defined as *“the activity or process of expressing ideas and feelings or of giving people information”* in the Oxford Learner's Dictionary (2018). No matter communication happens between people or masses, it always has its own way of working and its own rules. These rules, eventually, lead to meaning creation between people, thus enabling a collective concept of reality. How this communication system works and what elements it has are the concern of linguistics and its subbranches. Linguistics is the scientific study of languages (Oxford Learner's Dictionary, 2018). How a knowledge system is structured, how it is acquired, how it is used in the production & understanding of the messages and how it changes over the course of the time is the core study questions of linguistics.

Apart from happening between groups of people, communication also takes place between brands and their target audiences. All the activities brands carry out to give messages to their audiences is simply called marketing communication. In detail, marketing communication is described as all the messages and media a brand create to communicate with the targeted market, including digital and offline advertising, social media marketing, public relations and etc. In the light of the linguistics and



its subbranches, one can analyze these communication systems thoroughly. Semiotics, accepted as a subbranch of linguistics, provide various analysis methodologies developed since the early 1950s.

During a semiotic analysis, cultural codes and items can be analyzed as well since it is becoming easier to get trapped in an international faux pas while designing a brand marketing strategy. In the first section of the thesis, social media marketing communication will be presented from the point of brand marketing communication. In the second section, semiotics and its elements will be discussed. In the third section, the research will be conducted, and sample marketing materials of global fashion retail brands will be analyzed in the light of semiotics research approach.

**CHAPTER 1**  
**BRAND MARKETING COMMUNICATION**  
**and**  
**SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING**

Communication is key to the relationship that brands build with their audience. As commercial production & service design is getting much easier and competition is getting even challenging day by day, brands are using every source of communication method to reach their target audience faster and become the number one choice among others. When traditional ways of communication are getting a bit obsolete and not creating any difference to shine as a brand, a new perspective on media usage seems inevitable from every perspective (Scott, 2007).

Brand marketing are the activities of promoting and creating publicity about a brand's service or products in a way to make differences from other brands. This difference is generally created by bringing brands' stronger aspects compared to competitors. As can be understood from the above definition, brand marketing is actually the activity of presenting differences, strength and also novelty as well. These aspects eventually are expected to create priorities in the process of selection by consumers. In other words, brand marketing activities ensures to be positioned as a priority choice of destination by target audience.

There are lots of definitions and theoretical ways as to what social media is. In sum, the uniting aspects of all perspectives are that social media is the type of technologies creating suitable technological environment for users to maintain existing relationships, create new friendships or commitments, to create and share self-generated content, and to some extent, make their own social networks observable to others (Ellison and Boyd 2013; Heinonen 2011; Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy and Silvestre 2011; Romero, Galuba, Asur and Huberman 2011; Qualman 2012).

The emergence of the social media technologies and its applications for every device is often called Web 2.0, that refers to the presence of a class of web-based

applications offering all users the opportunity to write and contribute through posting content, and could be accessed through multiple devices (Beer and Burrows, 2007a). The opportunity to create user-generated content can be seen as the main rising aspect of social media since creating their own content with their own way of conveying is key cause of choice for most social media users.

### **1.1 The Usage of Social Media in Brand Marketing Communication**

The paradigms of brand marketing have kept shifting ever since the 4P's of marketing has been conceptualized by Jerome McCarthy in 1960. The 4P's of the marketing theory assumes that a thorough marketing strategy should incorporate the elements of price, product, placement (of the product) and promotion (how the product is promoted (McCarthy, 1960). When we look at brand marketing from this point of view, it can be seen that the theory has shortcomings in today's ever-changing world. The consumer is now looking for contribution, creation, entertainment and a difference in his/her lifestyle provided by any product or service right now, which eventually leads to a shift in the marketing strategies of brands. This shift is moving to online marketing more and more everyday as it is easier to customize, target and contribute to consumer's life via online marketing (Hazar, 2011).

Consumers crave for novelty in the new media era. A new content, a new perspective or a new way of doing anything seems to be drawing attention in today's new media age. Online marketing, also called online advertising, often provides new opportunities for online media users to receive daily information or create their own content regularly. Unlike traditional media channels, such as printed media, television or OOH (out of home) advertising, online media channels are often presenting a novelty even users cannot come up with most of the time. The most commonly online media channels can be summarized as search engines, display banners, e-mail marketing, native advertising, video ads and lastly social media marketing.

When it comes to social media, the term appears to be coined in the early 1990s explaining the new emerging web-based communication tools that maintains online interaction (Bercovici, 2010). It is intriguing how social media keeps growing more and more and evolving even after there remains to place to grow is offering that social media gives its users to share a sense of belongingness, meet around commonalities and inevitably bonding of some sort due to its diverse nature (Bratucu et al, 2014). To understand even deeper, we can elaborate on social media's features under five main topics (Mayfield, 2008).

The first one is participation. The line between the follower and followed has been diminished since social media is a platform that encourages everyone to contribute and give feedback. Openness is the second feature. Social media is differentiated by its encouragement of participation and free expression as mentioned above. All kinds of voting, evaluating, sharing, criticizing activity is supported. When there are barriers to reach or release content, users tend to look for alternative platforms. Mutual Speech is another element, referring to a two-way communication and interaction. Traditional media was more about publishing and social media is more about sharing. Community stands for social media allows for communities to form and grow quickly with efficient communication. People are usually united around a shared interest. Lastly, connection, refers to social media sites are usually connected to each other, web pages, sources and people via links.

What makes social media attractive for the brands is the question for many social media and online marketing providers. This curiosity creates a lot of new emerging ways of measuring what attracts and engages social media users and what does not at the same time. According to the report prepared by one of the world's biggest e-mail marketing platform, Emarsys, social media statistics shows that there are 3.2 billion active social media users around the world in 2019 (Emarsys, 2019). It can be said that it would be an irreplaceable loss if a brand would be missing the opportunity to target the potential audience among 3.2 billion people who are apparently in the need for new content.

In terms of communication media channels brands use, it can be practically seen that different social media channels are preferred as an easy and quick way to interact with the target audience no matter what types of services or products are presented to the end user (Neti, 2011). The next section of this study is aiming to give a summary about the most commonly used social media channels throughout the world.

## **1.2. Social Media Channels**

Social media is web-based technology used by people who can personalize the content on their own ways. Social media is both used by businesses for commercial purposes and at the same time by people to receive information, get entertained and share moments of their life. How effective social media channels are demonstrated in the global reports prepared by around the world.

According to the Global Digital Report (2019), holistic social media statistics of 2019 are as follows:

- Total number of people using internet in 2019 is 4.388 billion.
- Total number of people who use any social media platforms in 2019 is 3.484 billion.
- Total number of mobile phone owners in 2019 is 5.112 billion.

To go a lit bit further in social media and understand the insights more clearly the most commonly used social media technologies will be covered in the following section. The channels that will be covered are as follows: Instagram, Facebook, Youtube, Twitter, Pinterest, and locally known platforms.

### **1.2.1. Instagram**

Instagram is among the most used social media channels around the world. According to the report prepared by Hootsuite (2019), Instagram has almost one billion monthly active users and five hundred million of them use the channel every day. Founded in 2010, Instagram is among the most used social media channel in

the world right now. The differentiating feature of the platform is it emphasizes visually. Shared contents are imagery focused and generally the most high-quality imageries are receiving more attention in comparison.

The platform also keeps adding new features in order to increase user engagement and not lose popularity. For example, users are able to upload momentary contents called as story since 2017. Later as a new feature, the stories can be pinned to the user's own page called as profile. Liking comments below one's content or phone calls, new photography filters and other new features are being created constantly. It seems that the platform is giving priority to user activeness and popularity in order to gain even more users and user activity over the course of time. Moreover, the platform keeps increasing the advertising types day by day.

Brands produce and share contents in Instagram as individuals do on their business profiles. Other than organic post shares, social media marketing strategies also include Instagram sponsored contents, in other words, Instagram advertisements. Advertisements help brands increase their engagements and reach a bigger audience, along with sales and follower increases.

**Figure 1.1:** Massimo Dutti's Sample Instagram Content

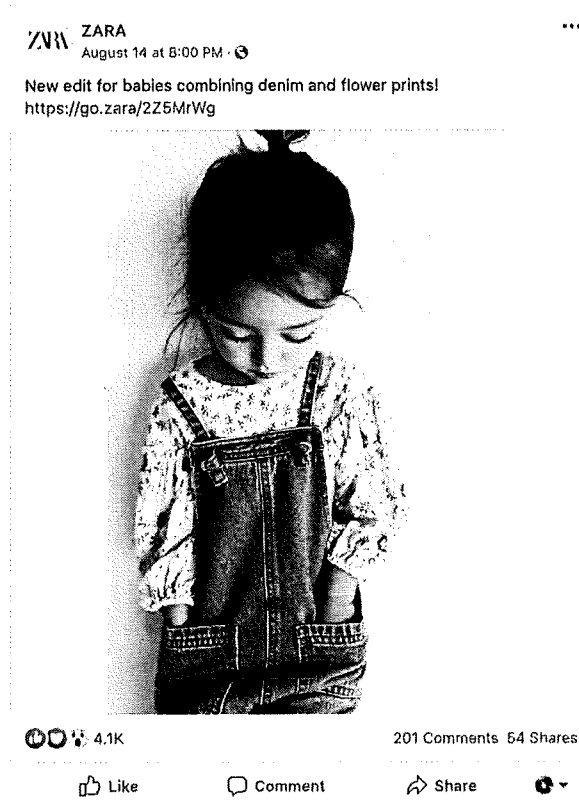


Source: Massimo Dutti (2019). Massimo Dutti's Sample Instagram Content. Retrieved: June 2019. <https://www.instagram.com/p/B15XRxNAh0I/>

### 1.2.2. Facebook

Founded in 2004, Facebook has been one of the first most trendy social media channel among users until Instagram has taken over (Global Digital Report, 2019). It still is the leading platform in terms of active monthly users (eMarketer, 2019). The reasoning behind the usage of Facebook is similar to Instagram since it is also imagery and video focused. The main features are that users can add friends or follow anyone and follow brands' pages by first liking them, thus increasing their own social network.

**Figure 1.2:** Zara's Sample Facebook Content



Source: Zara (2019). Zara's Sample Facebook Content. Retrieved: August 2019  
[https://www.facebook.com/pg/Zara/posts/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pg/Zara/posts/?ref=page_internal)

Facebook have been trying to compete with Instagram since the statistics show Instagram is going trendy faster than any other social media platforms (We are Social, 2019). It adds similar features as Instagram is offering to the users in an

attempt not to lose users' engagement and online activity ratio. Other than user features, Instagram is also offering business profiles like Facebook, enabling brands to present their website, create an online store and also give different types of advertisements.

### **1.2.3 Other Social Media Channels**

YouTube is a video content-based platform where users are able to watch, share, comment on videos as well as uploading their own videos. According to eMarketer's global report *Video Ads in Social Media 2019*, video content creators will not be leaving Youtube in the near future even though there are other alluring platforms. Brands are also using Youtube to create engagements of video contents, sharing their video contents or giving video advertisements to the related videos that target audience is probably watching.

Other than video and imagery-based platforms there are more text-based platforms such as blogs and microblog websites used as social media channels. Among them, Twitter can be counted as the leading micro-blog platform. Users are able to share posts including up to 280 characters along with horizontal imagery and videos up to 45 seconds. Brands are able to create their business profiles and create contents for their followers like in any other social media channels.

Another widely used social media channels are Pinterest. Pinterest is actually the fourth most popular social media platform (eMarketer, 2018). It provides you a board that you can see your saved contents, called pins. The platform is mainly used as a visual search engine for inspirational ideas by the users. Additionally, recent statistics show 90% of weekly Pinterest users are searching in Pinterest to decide for shopping (Pinterest, 2018).

Apart from globally known and used platforms, there are also locally famous social media channels in some countries. VKontakte used in Russia and Youku used in China can be given as examples.



## **CHAPTER 2**

### **SEMIOTICS**

Considering that marketing is an immense form of communication between masses and brands, as an everyday practice; it makes use of verbal, visual, auidial and even cognitive signs on a great extent. This usage, therefore, enables us to create and build a semiotic point of view while we are approaching to analyze and break down the communication process of brand marketing activities managed all over the world. In broader sense, semiotics exceeds the literary or narrative analysis of meaning production in the sense that it seeks, finds and discovers the details of codes structuring the way we produce meanings and eventually our reality in the worlds of brands. Semiotics can be used to understand and build strategies for fields like brand management, brand positioning, offline and online marketing and consumer behavior (Oswald, 2012).

Semiotics is a field of study, with its own theoretical standpoints and methodological approaches. It studies the signs and how signs work. When we say the word sign, the term might be misleading, though. A sign in terms of semiotics has more than one description, one of the simplest of which is that a sign is anything that stands for something else (Eco, 1976). Accordingly, semiotics is the science that analyses sign systems like languages, codes, etc. (Özgür, 2005). In this study, we will be explaining semiotics in detail in this section together with its historical background, its pioneers and elements.

Semiotics is an accepted social-science discipline that falls underneath linguistics. One must first understand the concept of linguistics to comprehend the importance of semiotics completely. In his *Course in General Linguistics*, Saussure (1983) describes linguistics as a science that deals with all manifestations of human speech and all other forms of expressions as well. According to Saussure (1983), the scope of linguistics is to describe and trace the history of all observable languages, to determine the forces that are permanently and universally at work in all languages, to deduce the general laws to which all specific historical phenomena can be

reduced (Saussure, 1983). In this sense, Semiotics is the subbranch of Linguistics that deals with the laws of meaning creation.

Semiotics or semiology is the study of signs, symbols, and signification; it is the research of how we confer meanings (Oswald, 2012). As the prominent Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1983) states that imagining a science studying the signs and their roles in social life is possible. Saussure (1983) continues to coining a term for the particular field as semiology, coming from the Greek *semēion*, *sign* (Saussure, 1983). He also states that the study of signs is a part of social psychology (Saussure, 1983).

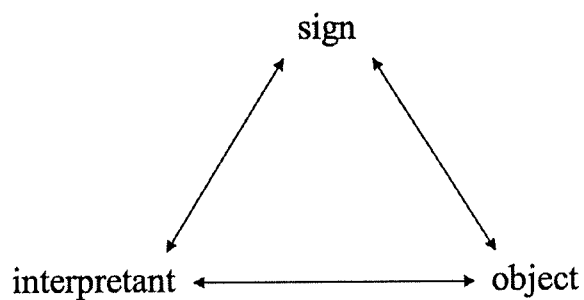
Semiotics, as we know it today, is not restricted in interpreting simple visual signs or interpreting the syntax in simple sentences of any language; it also extends the laws of structural linguistics to the analysis of verbal, visual, and spatial sign systems (Oswald, 2012). To illustrate, any mediums such as gestures, images, songs, videos, a theatre play, traffic signs, a sculpture etc. are considered as signs in terms of semiotics.

The roots of semiotics can be traced back to the pre-Socratic era. Hippocrates discussed that bodily manifested symptoms (signs) are actually a medium of physical and mental states (Danesi, 2013). Greek doctor Galenos, used the term *semeiosis* for diagnosing diseases. The famous British philosopher John Locke (1841) also used the term *semeiotic* to describe his indication analysis teaching. Plato, Aristotle, Vico, Poinot, and Leibniz all were interested in signs, symbols and communication. However, no one had thoroughly seen it as a separate field to conceptualize the creation and communication process of sign systems we use every day.

Semiotics gained its first academic appearance mainly by the works of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1976) and the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1988). Saussure (1976) and Peirce (1988) were the first semioticians who created a model of the sign. Some of the other contributors can be counted as the Danish Linguist Louis Hjelmslev (1961), who is thought to be following the tradition of Saussure (1976). Hjelmslev (1961) also has a great

influence on Algirdas Greimas (1983) and Roland Barthes' structuralist approaches (1957). Peirce's (1931) semiotic tradition has been represented by Charles William Morris (1938), Ivor A. Richards (1932), Charles K. Ogden (1930) and Thomas Sebeok (1960).

**Figure 2.1:** Peirce's Model of the Sign



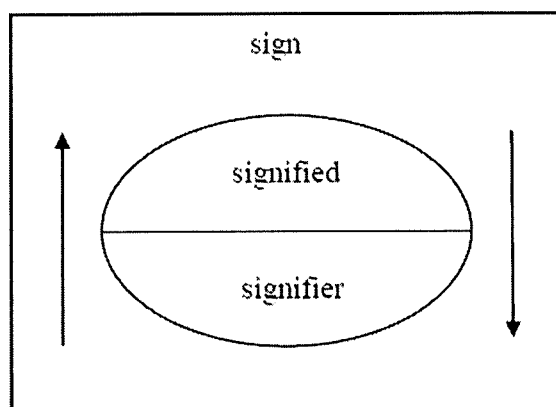
Source: Peirce, Charles Sanders ([1955] 1988). "Logic as Semiotic," in Justus Buchler (ed.), *The Philosophical Writings of Charles Sanders Peirce*. New York: Dover Press, p.111

Peirce's tradition and structuralist approach have been pieced together by the Russian linguist Roman Jakobson (1960) and also the leading French philosopher and semiotician Umberto Eco (1976). Jakobson had a great influence on Claude Lévi- Strauss (1972) and the psychoanalytical theorist Jacques Lacan (1977). In the late 1960s, poststructuralism approach in the linguistics has started to gain importance. The pioneers of the poststructuralism are Roland Barthes (1982) and Jacques Lacan (1977), literary philosopher Derrida (1974), the philosopher and social theorist Michel Foucault (1974) and the literary theorist Julia Kristeva (1980).

Peircean semiotic tradition was neglecting the codes as an integral part of the meaning creation process. As a result, Peircean tradition was not contributing to the dialectic relationship of meaning in cultural discourses as well. However, Saussurean semiotic tradition is proved to be more influential than that of Peircean over the course of time. The reason is that Saussure (1974) saw semiotics as a part of social psychology. His approach to structural linguistics in terms of the inseparable connections between signifier and the signified paved the way for the

future of the modern Semiotics as we know it today. In an attempt to bring a structuralist analysis approach to the marketing communication of global fashion retail brands, this study will adopt Barthes' (1976) approach as a methodological road map.

**Figure 2.2:** Saussure's Model of the Sign



Source: Saussure, Ferdinand de ([1916] 1983). *Course in General Linguistics* (trans. Roy Harris), The Philosophical Library Inc., London, p.56.

## **2.1. The Elements of Semiotics**

Semiotics has had its own terminology and jargon developed by its theoreticians over the course of time. In his book *Elements of Semiology*, Roland Barthes states that the terminology he is offering is aiming to enable an initial order to be introduced into the heterogeneous mass of significant facts, which he thinks a priori to be sufficiently general to start semiological research on its way (Barthes, 2000). Barthes (2000) grouped his elements in four categories as language and speech, signified and signifier, syntagm and system, denotation and connotation. This study aims to give a general concept of these elements and what constitutes them at the same time.

### **2.1.1 Language and Speech**

What is language and speech in their simplest definition? What are the connection and differences between them? These concepts and the relation between them constituted a great importance Saussure's (1974) work. Attempting to answer these

questions, Saussure (1974) also revolutionized the way we look at the terms. He describes language as a social institution and a system of values at the same time (Saussure, 1983). The importance of this perspective to the semiotics lies in his description of what made language at a functional level. Saussure claims language is made of a certain number of elements, each one of which is at the same time the equivalent of a given quantity of things and a term of a larger function (Saussure, 1983). These elements would have been later called signs by him.

As it comes to speech, it is essentially an individual act of selection and actualization; it is made in the first place of the combination (Saussure, 1983). Barthes claims that there could not be possibly a linguistics of speech, since any speech, as soon as it is grasped as a process of communication, is already part of the language (Barthes 2000). Moreover, speech is offered as a combining element which, in result, is caused by the recurrence of identical signs at work. The importance of relationship between language and speech also lies in the dialectical existence of the two elements.

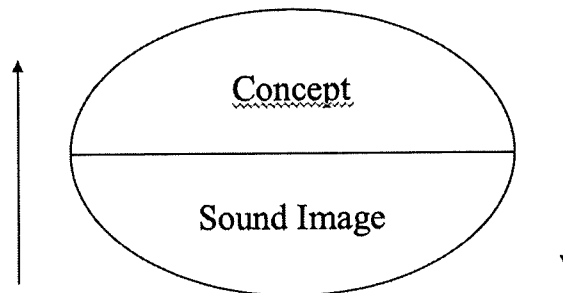
### **2.1.2. The Concept of Sign**

The word sign is now used more in daily life to speak about, draw attention and prove the existence of daily activities as well. Yücel (2006) has explained this practice neatly, saying that a sign is presenting and providing us with the idea of existence of an object or a phenomenon. This usage has led to the commonness of the word in daily life, as well. Simply put, a sign is the starting point of meaning creation. There has been countless other definitions and descriptions of the concept of sign in linguistics and also in other professions at the same time. One of the pioneers of modern Semiotics, Charles Sanders Peirce has defined the notion of sign saying that a sign is what identifies and what makes an object distinctive (Peirce, 1931). The broadest definition has been made by Umberto Eco (1976) who says a sign is anything that can count for something else.

Ferdinand de Saussure's book *The Courses in General Linguistics* has brought a revolutionary perspective to the concept of sign in 1966. Saussure (1983) brings a different point of view to the sign, offering a two-sided psychological entity of a

linguistic sign. According to him, the linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name but a concept and a sound-image as represented below (1966):

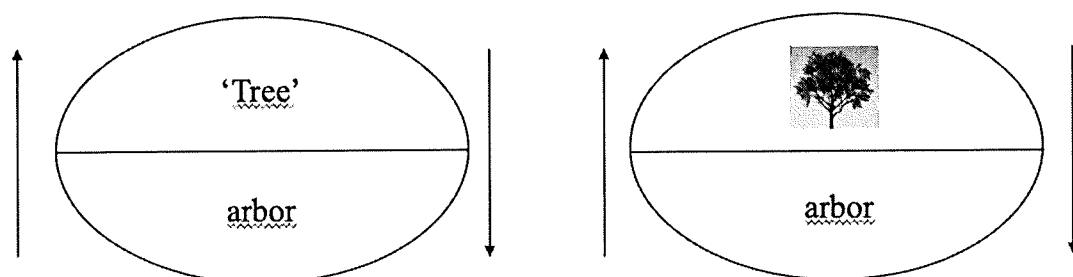
**Figure 2.3:** Saussure's Representation of Linguistic Sign Concept



Source: Saussure, Ferdinand de ([1916] 1983). *Course in General Linguistics* (trans. Roy Harris), The Philosophical Library Inc., London, p.56.

After explaining what a concept represents eventually, Saussure (1983) then suggests retaining the word sign to designate the whole and to replace concept and sound image respectively by signified and signifier as represented below. Given this representation, the linguistic sign has acquired its two features that had been at work since the beginning of the time.

**Figure 2.4:** Saussure's Representation of Elements of Sign Concept



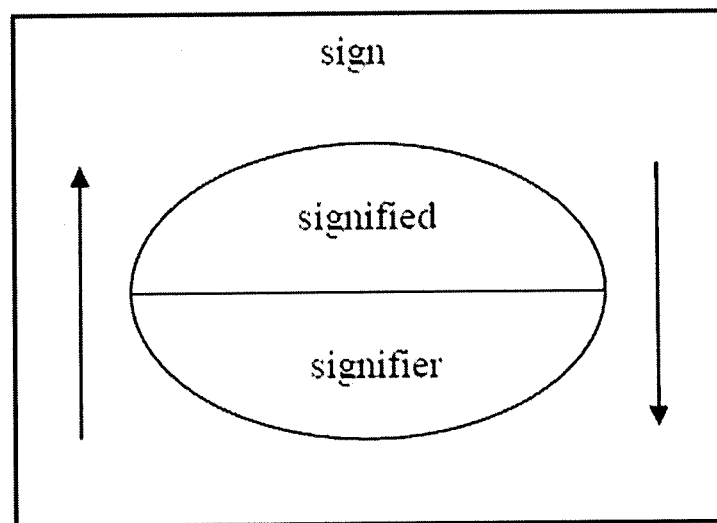
Source: Saussure, Ferdinand de ([1916] 1983). *Course in General Linguistics* (trans. Roy Harris), The Philosophical Library Inc., London, p.56.

### 2.1.3. Signified and Signifier

What is natural to mankind is not oral speech but the faculty of constructing a language, i.e. a system of distinct signs corresponding to distinct ideas (Saussure, 1983). What Saussure (1983) means is that our communication language is not necessarily comprised of only oral words, but it actually consists signs that are accepted as the real actors of the language. In order to understand what a sign really means and how to interpret the signs at work in any field, one must comprehend how the signifier and the signified works at the heart of any communication system.

As stated earlier, signified and signifier is the two inseparable elements of the notion of the sign in terms of linguistics literature. In Saussurean terminology, concept and sound image shown in the Figure 2.5 has been gathered together in the name of sign as a whole and concept has been renamed as signified, while sound image has been renamed as signifier.

**Figure 2.5:** Saussure's Model of the Sign



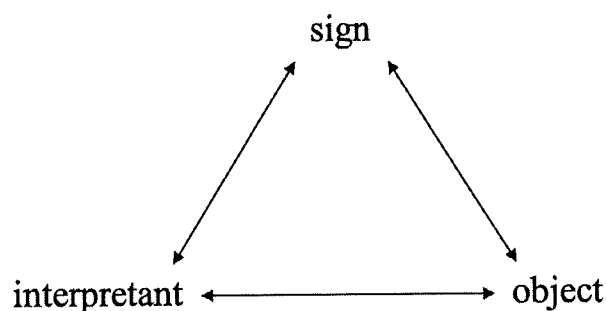
Source: Saussure, Ferdinand de ([1916] 1983). *Course in General Linguistics* (trans. Roy Harris), The Philosophical Library Inc., London, p.56

Simply put, the signified is the mental representation an evoked feeling of a thing (i.e., the idea of a tree). The signifier, which stands right at the other side of the

meaning creation, is the physical existence of the smallest unit of communication, which is a word. Eventually, the sign is the object that pieces the signifier and the signified together into a meaningful unit.

It goes without saying that there are also other claims and concepts put together by the other leading semioticians over the course of the time. Louis Hjelmslev (1961) coined the terms expression and content in replacement of the signifier and signified respectively (Hjelmslev, 1961). Moreover, Charles Sanders (1931) Peirce claims we think only in signs and has put a third element to the picture of sign, being interpret as shown below.

**Figure 2.6:** Peirce's Model of the Sign



Source: Peirce, Charles Sanders ([1955] 1988). "Logic as Semiotic," in Justus Buchler (ed.), *The Philosophical Writings of Charles Sanders Peirce*. New York: Dover Press, p.111

Saussure and Peirce were not the only semioticians who conceptualized a model of the sign based on signifier and signified in the search of bringing a methodological point of view to the field. The Danish linguist Louis Hjelmslev (1961) suggested a similar connection between form and content as in signifier and signified. He claimed that there can be no content without an expression, or expressionless content; neither can there be an expression without a content, or content-less expression (Hjelmslev, 1961).

According to Hjelmslev (1961), the signifier is recognized as the form of a sign and while the signified is recognized as the content of a sign. While Saussure (1974) underlined and emphasized that language is a form, not a substance, what Hjelmslev



summarized in the below figure enables the text analyses based on different dimensions and understand the signification levels.

**Figure 2.7:** Hjelmslev's Model of Substance and Form

	Content (Sedimentation)	Expression (Folding)
Form	Chosen in order (Layers)	Organization (Connections)
Substance	Chosen	Compounds (Structures)

Hjelmslev, Louis (1961). *Prolegomena to a theory of Language* (trans. Francis J. Whitfield). Madison:University of Wisconsin Press, p.187.

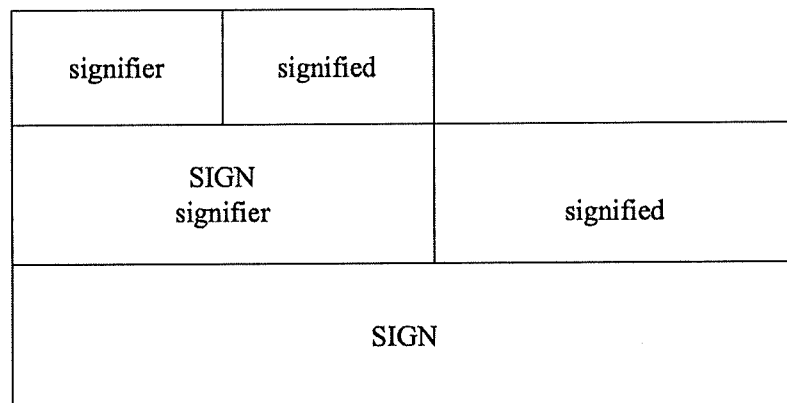
#### **2.1.4 Denotation and Connotation**

Any communication units, even basic entities', might have other associations than that of literal meaning. These associations are called the figurative meaning of a concept. Literal, definitional meaning of a concept is called denotation, while figurative meanings are generally called connotations. More specifically, denotation and connotation are term describing the relationship between the signifier and its signified, and an analytic distinction is made between two types of signifieds (Chandler, 2002).

In terms of semiotics, denotation and connotation works at the level of the signified as they are related to the representation level of a concept. As Fiske (1982) explains it denotation is what is photographed, connotation is how it is photographed. The art historian Erwin Panofsky (1970) brings a cultural perspective, stating that the denotation of a representational visual image is what all viewers from any culture and at any time would recognize the image as depicting.

Saussure (1976) was more focused on the denotation process of a sign, neglecting the connotation process as he was more interested in creating a model of the sign. Barthes (1976) and Hjelmslev (1961) attempted to conceptualize the concept of connotation after Saussure (1974). Barthes (1957) was inspired from Hjelmslev (1961) about focusing on different orders of signification. The first order of signification is denotation's signification, which is created using signifier and signified since its signifier and attaches to it an additional signified as exemplified in the below figure (Chandler, 2002).

**Figure 2.8:** Orders of Signification



Source: Chandler, Daniel (2002) *Semiotics: The Basics*, Routledge, London, p149.

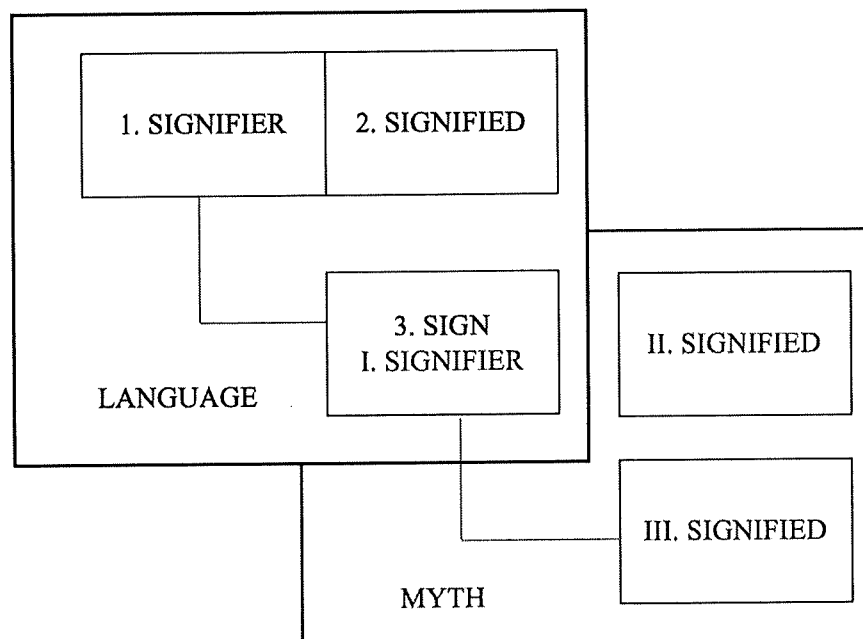
### 2.1.5. Myth

One tends to think about classical fables, fairy tales and stories when it comes to the word myth. Common daily usage of the word myth makes us think that the reference of the word is mostly unreal and imaginative. However, in semiotics, myth refers to a phenomenal, explaining the meaning of our experiences on cultural level. Myth is an integral part of this study as well, since we will analyze the brand marketing activities in terms of cultural level at the same time.

To go a bit further in the element of myth in culture and to illustrate, an image or word can stand for mother, connotating the concept of sacred motherhood that also shows the representation of motherhood and its meaning in society. This example

is a simple illustration of Barthes' (1979) understanding of myths working in a group of people or a society. Barthes (1979) saw the myths of culture as ideal narratives in terms of cultural studies.

**Figure 2.9:** Barthes' Representation of Myth and Language



Source: Sebeok, T.A. (2011) *Mythes Today*, Barthes *Myth and Language*, Retrieved: January 10, 2012 from <https://www.mat.ucsb.edu/~g.legrady/academic/courses/01sp200a/students/enricaLovaglio/pandora/MithToday.html>

In Semiotic terms, Barthes (1979) sees myths as a system of signification at a higher level. According to Saussure (1976) signs can include other signs while creating a more complex structure. Broadly, a whole image or a text can be a sign, comprised of different signs. Why myth is important to communication and advertisement lies in the relationship between advertisement and culture. Whenever advertisements and other marketing communication materials makes use of cultural values, they will also be automatically using myths in semiotics terms.

The link between advertisement and myth has been put forward by Barthes (1976) and Levi-Strauss (1961). They both conceptualize and claim that myths naturalize

what is cultural at the center. Advertising, also, eliminates the concepts created by the binary oppositions, which are used for interpreting the meanings out of advertisements.

## **2.2. Structural Semiotics**

Coming from a linguist background, Saussure (1983), the Swiss linguist who developed a structural theory of signs at the end of the nineteenth century, was interested in structuralist linguistics for a considerable amount of time. The Swiss linguist differs from his early linguist counterparts in the sense that he was searching for an understanding of the conditions for existence of any language rather than a historical and diachronic approach which looks at the changes that take place over time in specific languages (Cobley and Jansz, 2003). Saussure (1983) was the first person to talk about the terminology and difference of diachronic and synchronic linguistics in his book, *Course in General Linguistics*. Saussure (1983) names his approach as Synchronic Linguistics and he describes its aim as forming the essentials of idiosynchronic system, that is the elements of language-state. (Saussure, 1983).

The significance of Saussure (1983) in the studies of semiotics comes from his structuralist approach to the meaning which incorporating culture as an integral part, emphasizing that culture provides the basis of communication with the help of signs which are creating a language that can be analyzed by interpreting the roles and system of codes (Ogilvie and Mizerski, 2011). What makes culture inevitable for semiotics is the emphasis of the context that any means of communication is built and created on. An analysis without cultural point of view would only be a content analysis that lacks of the structures and codes of culture in the end. As Umberto Eco (1976) simply states, culture is a reference point, a means by which one comes to believe in the reality of the expression (Eco, 1976).

The modern-day semiotics has been considered to be conceptualized by Peirce (1988) and Saussure (1983) for the first time. Peirce (1988) names the field as

semiotics and Saussure (1983) gives the name of semiology. However, Saussure (1983) is more influential today, since he approached the semiotics from a social psychology standpoint rather than a grammatic or historical standpoint.

Saussure (1983) indicates that people do not maintain communication via signs separated from one another, but we communicate through signs that forms relationships with each other to shape meaning, thus creating bigger forms of signs (Saussure, 1983). This leads us to the notion of how these organized sign masses communicate with each other and convey their messages, constructing the reality. Reality is socially constructed, as are the signs that convey, indicate, or represent it (Manning and Cullum-Swan, 1994). But, how reality can be socially constructed is the question that occupies one's mind for a very long time and it is not easy to answer without basing the argument on different standpoints.

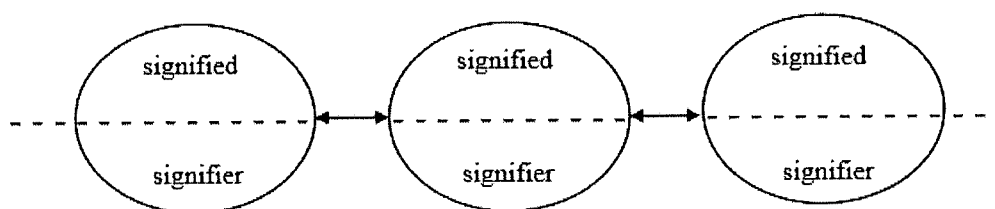
The way how our values and eventually realities are constructed by society was illuminated by Saussure (1983) through a structural approach to linguistics. Thinking we create our meanings via interpretation of signs, we then relate these signs to what we have familiar in our minds, which making us conform to the conventions already exist in the minds of other people as well as in ours. Saussure ([1916] 1998) offered a model that consisted of two parts. As a starting point, he coined the terms signifier (*signifiant*) and signified (*signifié*).

Saussure (1983) expressed the distinction of the above terms saying that a sign, in linguistic terms, is a mental concept [signified] and an audial pattern [signifier]. The latter, a sound pattern is not a factual sound, but the psychological projection of the sound (Saussure, 1983). Expressing the terms Saussure coined, it can be further looked into how signs work according to Saussure (1983). What makes Saussure's approach valuable to the study of semiotics comes from the central idea of relational system he offered in terms of signs.

In this study, Saussure's approach will be used as a way of looking at advertisement campaigns and images of global fashion brands. The most remarkable part of Saussure's theories is coming not only from his model of the sign but also from the relational system he offered between signs. What Saussure (1983) suggests for the

value of a sign is based on its relations with other signs within the system it operates as can be seen in the below figure. The relational signs will lead the way to interpret and analyze the advertising and branding strategy, thus creating a roadmap for advertising analysis. However, it should be noted and emphasized that the associations between signifier and signified is arbitrary, enabling no meaning creation as an output between each other. The relations between different signs are totally independent from the arbitrary association of the signifier and signified.

**Figure 2.10.** The Relations Between Signs



Source: Saussure, Ferdinand de ([1916] 1983). *Course in General Linguistics* (trans. Roy Harris), The Philosophical Library Inc., London, p.56

The meaning creation process from the point of relational conception was differential for Saussure (Chandler, 2002). He was especially interested in the differences between the signs. This viewpoint also brings a broad possibility of usage area for semiotics to be applied in marketing and advertising management as well as product positioning since a product or service gains its meaning also through the differentiation of signs rather than the similarities.

Structuralist theory, offered by Saussure, mainly suggests that signs gain their meaning related to each other. Sturrock (1979) simply expresses the notion as languages cannot be shaped by single term, otherwise, it would be impossible to differentiate objects and facts from one another (Sturrock, 1979).

The differential conception between the signs can be looked into through binary analyses, which was a considerable part of the European semiotics literature. The

distinctive feature of European school of semiotics comes from the dialectical nature of structural semiotics and the key role of binary analysis in the production and interpretation of meaning. The dialectical foundations of structural semiotics have particular and urgent implications for marketing semiotics, because they account for the ways codes articulate the world of noise and chaos into systems of relationships characterized by distinction and difference. For instance, the binary distinctions between brands form the basis of positioning strategy, persuasion, and consumer choice in the marketplace.

Apart from looking into language and its sign systems from a radically different point of view, Saussure (1983) is also the father of Structural Linguistics along with Levi-Strauss. In her book *Marketing Semiotics*, Laura Oswald (2012) clearly explains how Saussure's structural semiotics help us understand the way brands create meaning, saying that structural semiotics is basing the meaning creation process on the relations of signs which are incorporating small units into larger units related to each other which are shaping the meaning creation process (Oswald, 2012).

What makes Saussure (1983) different from the former linguists in terms of semiotic tradition is that he emphasized that language was comprised of signs and the codes that structure signs in its related discourse. A code, in semiotics terms, is any behavior pattern adopted by a cultural group. Saussure (1983) states that social codes play role in the meaning creation process of a particular culture, thus maintaining that meaning is constructed culturally, but not naturally contrary to common belief.

Saussure (1983) was not alone in his social meaning construction point of view. As the famous cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1980) states, there is no intelligible discourse without the operation of a code (Hall, 1980). Accordingly, the codes actually can be viewed as an integral part of the societies that create them as a way of untold and unwritten systems of daily life, and the culture itself. The life of a culture or a group of people operates around the codes they actually build themselves at the very beginning. These codes, eventually, help any group of people

create and sustain and interpret meanings in any environment. It should be noted that a code can be unique to a society as it can be the prevailing code in other cultures at the same time.

When it comes to the study of signs, the abovementioned particular approaches to codes and signs eliminated the stable meaning of a sign in a given discourse, which, in return, challenges the way how we interpret signs and create meanings from a cultural point of view. The structuralist Roman Jakobson (1971) was also one of the structuralists, underlining that the analysis of texts is based on codes and conventions (Jakobson, 1971).

The leading Italian writer, philosopher and semiotician Umberto Eco (1979) was a strong believer in using semiotics for marketing purposes, thus stating that semiotics is a great potential field and interpretation methodology for consumer research from the point of culture (Eco, 1979). He claimed that accepted codes in a society create a cultural reference and a world, which does not exist in brick and mortar but actually exist in the way how a specific culture lives and communicates (Eco, 1979). This also verifies how Saussure (1983) thinks about the way social codes work in the process of meaning creation, claiming that meaning is a cultural formation.

To go a bit further in the field of culture, we also have to look into the binary analysis tradition that is an integral part of the structural semiotics theory. Binary analysis suggests that people view the concepts in two opposing poles such as young and old or classic and modern. Binary analysis can be also applied to the world of modern brands while interpreting the signs they use in marketing activities. Some consumers, for example, might see Coca Cola trendy, and the rest of them might consider Pepsi to be classic. This gives marketers the opportunity to position their brands in a scheme of binary relationships in their related product groups among the competitors.

Oswald takes it a step further, explaining that binary analysis is a helpful source of understanding how myths and archetypes are shaping meaning creation in a group of people, thus structuring the value systems and social norms of a culture (Oswald,



2012). Within the light of Oswald's opinion, one can say that binary analysis can also be adopted in interpreting the cultural codes of a given content from a semiotic point of view in order to make a thorough analysis. Various semiotics research methodologies developed in the field of semiotics which will be mentioned in the third part of the study are using binary analysis methodology as well.

### **CHAPTER 3**

#### **APPLIED SEMIOTICS RESEARCH**

As far as marketing is concerned, communication activities and advertisement copies are one of the top channels that can be analyzed in terms of semiotics. McCracken (1986) neatly explains that since marketing is used to transfer meanings to the consumers advertising materials are a source for semiotics research. The significance of semiotics comes from the notion that it is not only a content analysis methodology for linguists and culture theorists. But, it is an approach everyone can use and practice on a daily basis who are operating business or studying in the fields of communication and media studies. Even though research methodologies in semiotics are still limited and there is no established scientific research scope, researchers have some different ways of looking at the sign systems of today's world.

One can recognize that most of the semioticians were mainly focused on theoretical foundations of semiotics. Researches and content analyses in Semiotic traditions are qualitative, based on content analysis. There have been only a few attempts to form an established quantitative research approach and scope in the field of semiotics. Saussure's work can be considered to be the foundation of structuralist approaches used while analyzing written contents and social practices at the same time. He also inspired Hjelmslev and Greimas in their attempts to create a framework of semiotic researches. In order to give a general idea of the analysis

and research literature of semiotics, Roland Barthes', Algirdas Julien Greimas's and John Berger's approaches will be investigated.

Along with Saussure, Barthes was one of the great contributors to the field of structural semiotics. The French lecturer, critic and semiotician Roland Barthes wrote his famous essays *Mythologies* in 1957. The essays were about the social life of French society, demonstrating a view of the French culture back then. What Barthes did was to read social life and look beyond the surface appearance of the object or practice to decode its real significance as the bearer of particular meanings. One of his essays in the book, for example, was about wrestling and what it meant to the society as a cultural sign (Bignell, 1997).

According to Barthes, even the toys the French kids were playing with was a system of signs that can be interpreted in the end. Barthes states that any kinds of sign are used not only to denote something but also to bring together the connotations to create a specific message and this phenomenon is called myth (Barthes, 1957). The way he looked at the everyday life through the eye of the signs and myths was a significant starting point for semiotics to be used for the purpose of interpreting and going beyond the surface of everyday phenomena. The way he looked at the codes and myths of the French culture in any given context has paved the way for a detailed semiotic analysis of texts, advertisements and literary texts.

Different semiotic methodologies have been developed inspired by Barthes, as well. Some of them can be counted as the British professor Michael S. Ball's work *Analyzing Visual Data* (1992) and the communication and culture professor Robert M. Seiler's article, *Semiotic Analysis Guide*.

As stated earlier, Michael S. Ball is another researcher like Berger, developing a semiotic analysis method based on Barthes. Ball claims that any element of the content has a symbolic meaning. In his work, Michael S. Ball is the supporter of the idea that "*a sign is always thing + significance*" (Tekvar, 2006), stating while signifier is actually an object or image and signified is what that object means or attributes.

As for Seiler, he presents the detailed steps of a semiotic analysis to be followed. In his *Semiotic Analysis Guide*, he summarizes these steps as follows:

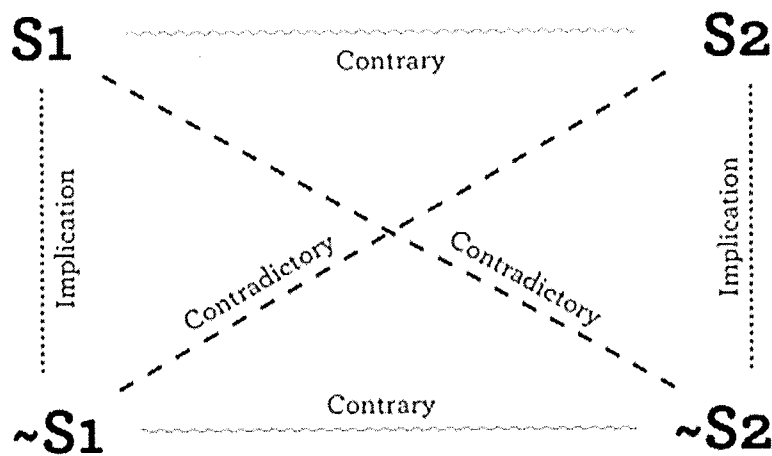
1. Present your readers a small review of the message: small portrayal of the advertisement will enable the reader to visualize the message.
2. Identify the signifier and signified: What are the important signifiers and what do they mean? What is the sign system that gives significance to the text? What are the ideological and sociological problems?
3. Identify the current paradigmatic relations: what are the central contraries in the text? Which matched contraries fit in different category? Do these contraries have any psychological and social values?
4. Identify the syntagmatic relations in the text: What are the expressions or messages that you could identify? Answer these questions while regarding the following:
  - a) Linguistic messages: this message is made of all words, denotation and connotations.
  - b) Coded iconographic (absolute) messages: this message is made of denotation in photograph.
  - c) Coded iconographic (symbolic) messages: this message is made of connotations that are created in arrangement of photographed elements.
5. Finally, identify the basic principles that are mentioned in the message or text. Do not forget that the purpose of this analysis is to determine the rhetoric or the grammar, which combines these factors (Atabek and Atabek, 2007).

In addition to abovementioned semiotic analysis methodologies, Algirdas Julien Greimas' Semiotic Square is a quantitative methodology in semiotics literature that has been offered in 1983. Greimas(1983) is a French linguist and semiotician who offers a graphic representation of the underlying structure of a semiotic system. He uses this representation in order to bring together the contrary and contradictory

terms. Jean-Marie Floch (2001), also applied and built on Greimas' concept of semiotic square for strategic brand researches. In his book, *Semiotics, Marketing and Communication*, Jean-Mari Floch (2001) recruited and interviewed consumers, and at the end interpreted the research data for the purposes of brand positioning developments as well as logo designs and public space decorations.

By demonstrating the semiotic parts of a consumer product category or a service on a double axis grid, Jean-Mari Floch (2001) shows us the way how strategic dimensions can be applied using semiotics. The apparent problematic areas and issues that structure the concept of a product category. That being said, the semiotic square is a good representation of the oppositional relations structuring the dimensions of a competitive product set or service offerings, including contradictions, complementarities, and contrasts. These contrasts can be exemplified as: female/male, extrovert/introvert, trendy/classic, etc. The square designed by Greimas(1983) can be seen as follows:

**Figure 3.1:** Greimas' Semiotic Square



Source: Greimas, Algirdas J. (1983) *Structural Semiotics: An attempt at a method*, translated by Danielle McDowell, Ronald Schleifer, and Alan Velie (Lincoln, NA: University of Nebraska Press), p.89.

### **3.1 Method and Model**

Saussure's structural semiotics methodology together with his sign model will be used as a basis of this research study. Saussure (1983) claims that signs do not stand alone while creating meaning and actually shape the meaning creation process altogether. Accordingly, this study will research how the signs relate to each other in the process of meaning creation. In addition, Saussure's model of the sign (the overall concept and distinction between signifier and signified) will also be used throughout the research (Saussure 1983).

Additionally, Barthes' (1976) semiotic content analysis approach will be used as a framework of the study. To begin with, Barthes states that any kinds of sign are used not only to denote something but also to bring together the connotations to create a specific message and this phenomenon is called myth (Barthes, 1976). According to him, myth aspect can be adopted while interpreting advertisement messages (Barthes, 1976). As myth aspect is focusing on the cultural surface of the meaning, it will be used in this study as well.

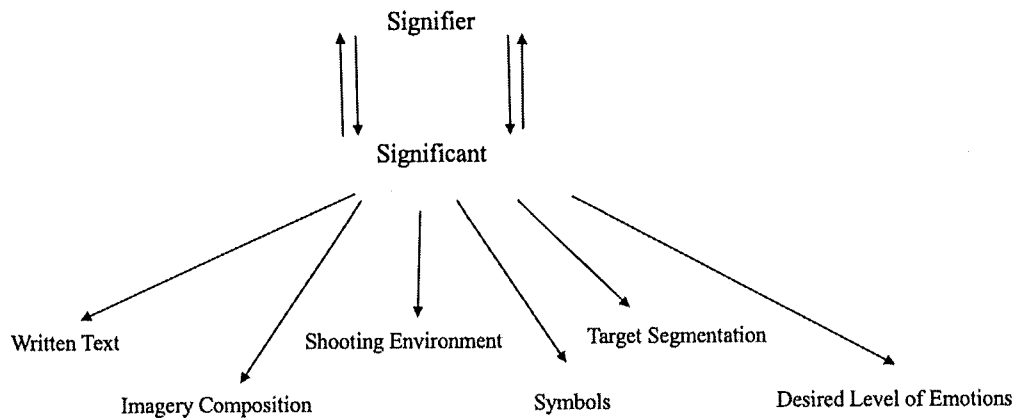
In addition to Barthes (1976) and Saussure (1983), The British essayist and cultural thinker John Berger focused on advertisement analysis in his influential book *Ways of Seeing* (2009). Berger's steps and questions of interpretation levels will be used in this study as follows:

1. What is the general attitude of the advertisement? What kind of an environment is created? How is it done?
2. How is the design of the advertisement? What are the basic resultants and factors?
3. What is the relation between visual factors and written material and what does it tell?
4. What is the layout of the advertisement on paper? Is the white too big or is the advertisement full of graphics and written items?
5. What kind of signs and symbols are there? What is the role of various sign and symbols in the advertisement?

6. If the extras (man, woman, boy, animal) are present in the advertisement, how are they? What can be said about factors like their facial expressions, poses, hairstyles, age, sex, hair color, things they do, their relations with others?
7. How is the background in the advertisement? What does it tell? Where is the montage in the advertisement and what is the effect of the background?
8. What kind of a Montage is there in advertisement and what kind of an impact does it make?
9. What kind of themes is there in the advertisement? What is the topic of the advertisement?
10. What kind of language is used in the advertisement? Does the language initially give information or does it make an emotional reaction? Or does it contain both? What kinds of techniques are there in the text? Is it humoristic, are there repetitions in the narration, are there comparisons, covert sexuality?
11. Which font is used and what kind of impact did it make?
12. What is the advertised object? What is its place in American culture and society?
13. What are the aesthetical factors? If the advertisement consists of photography, what kind of shooting is there? What are the effects of master, middle shot or close-up? How is the lighting, color choice, shooting angle?
14. What are the direct social, political, economic or cultural attitudes in the advertisement? It can be a jeans advertisement, but indirectly it might have implications such as sexuality, coldness, stereotype idea, and conflict of generations, conservatism, loneliness, and choiceness (Berger, 2009).

As a combined way of interpreting the advertisements, signifiers, significant and written texts will be decomposed in the analysis section of this research. Analyses will be attained interpreting and combining the below elements:

**Figure 3.2:** Semiotic Analysis Method of Case Study Advertisements



Within the light of abovementioned combined semiotics approaches as a marketing research tool, the purpose of this study is to prove or refute the below hypotheses:

H1: A social media advertising campaign can be perceived as violating the cultural codes from a semiotic point of view.

H2: The advertised item of a social media advertising campaign can cause cultural code violations from a semiotic point of view.

H3: The targeted product segmentation of a social media advertising campaign can cause cultural code violations from a semiotic point of view.

H4: The imagery composition of a social media advertising campaign can cause cultural code violations from a semiotic point of view.

H5: The choice of advertising mannequin of a social media advertising campaign can cause cultural code violations from a semiotic point of view.

The analysis part will be focusing on the below elements as written texts, imagery composition, shooting environment, symbols, target segmentation and desired level of emotions in the advertisements. Analyses will be done around this framework, using Berger's above questions. And Barthes' analysis of denotation & connotation distinction is going to be used as well.

Firstly, Saussure's valuable structural approach will pave the way for understanding what elements and signs can be culturally derogative in certain modern marketing campaigns in this study. Inspired by Saussure's approach, semiotics analysis will be applied to the decomposition of marketing images on certain marketing campaign cases in order to understand the signification system they use and what these systems account for. During the research it will be investigated why some campaigns arise social crisis in certain communities and cultural groups while others succeed hypothetically and in practice as well.

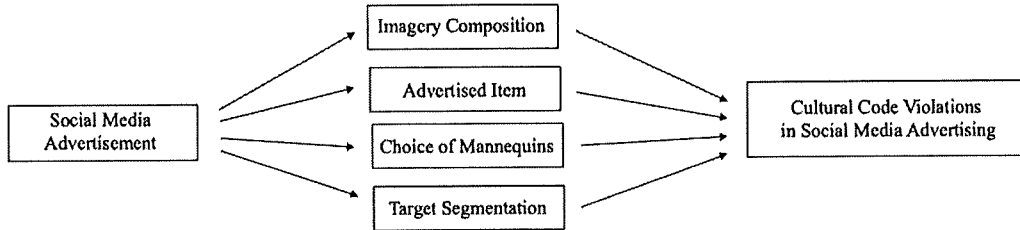
The research of this study is based on the abovementioned methodologies, Saussure's model of the sign and Berger's semiotic analysis approach.

The data of this study will be analyzed and interpreted using structural semiotics approach based on Barthes' and Berger' approaches, enabling us to observe and analyze the process of what creates and contributes to the brand conception for the culturally different individuals on certain marketing campaigns from a marketing semiotics point of view. Four sample advertisements will be analyzed to see the effect of signs in marketing campaigns that can be researched with Saussure's structural semiotics theory along with Roland Barthes's approach and Berger's analysis methodology in order to understand if an advertisement image/campaign can be culturally derogative from a semiotic point of view.

Based on the abovementioned approaches and analyses questions, the selected social media campaigns will be first decomposed into signifiers and significant. Signifiers and significant are shaping the signification system of selected social media advertisements and they will be analyzed in terms of what they mean to the various cultural group. Written text will be decomposed in terms of connotations as well. The relationship between the signifiers/significant and the conveyed message of the advertisement will be decomposed in the last section, which is called analysis.



**Figure 3.3: Research Model of the Study**



This study is searching the relationship between social media advertising elements and cultural code violations. These elements as represented in the above research model are imagery composition, advertised item, choice of advertising mannequins and targeted product segmentation. Throughout the semiotic research, it will be analyzed if social media advertisements can be perceived as culturally derogative from a semiotic point of view and if imagery composition, advertised item, choice of advertising mannequins and targeted product segmentation is related to cultural code violations in social media advertising or not.

### **3.2 Data Set**

Global fashion retail brands are constantly releasing new collections and new campaigns. However, newspapers seem to be writing about fashion marketing and public relations crisis all the time as well. Some brands are learning from their mistakes about these crises but some of them may be intentionally creating a strategy around public opinion. Nothing really can be said to refute the other side of the discussion. On the other hand, a pattern or a common dynamic can still be searched.

The data set of this study has been selected among the campaigns of the global fashion retail brands. The reason behind this selection can be based on the huge amounts of public feedbacks to the selected campaigns, which belong H&M, Chanel and Reformation. The public feedbacks and controversies will be covered in the analysis section of the cases.

Some of these abovementioned brands received so many negative feedbacks about their advertisement campaigns, which are the selected data set of this study, they had to issue apology notes, cancel their campaigns and even cancel their product offer in some countries of the world. However, the cancellations of the advertisements and products only happened in certain markets but not at the rest of the world. The questions why this is happening and if or not there is a pattern in many example advertisement campaigns are the main questions triggering the selection of this data set. In seek of a pattern that causes the same problematic cases and public controversies in certain cultures, this study will be analyzing advertisement campaigns of H&M, Chanel and Reformation in the next section.

### **3.3. Semiotic Analysis**

#### **3.3.1. Campaign 1: H&M Loves Music**

H&M is a multi-national fast-fashion retail brand founded in 1947 in Sweden. The brand has almost 4.000 stores worldwide, selling clothes and accessories for all age groups as well as household goods. Despite being one of the most profitable fast-fashion brand around the world, the corporation is often having tough times with their marketing strategy. Below are two examples of the controversial social media marketing campaigns of H&M which will be analyzed from a semiotic point of view in this study.

**Figure 3.4:** H&M Advertisement for a Headband Accessory



Source: H&M (2013). H&M Advertisement for a Headband Accessory. Retrieved: June 2019. <https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/h-m-pulls-hipster-headaddresses-after-complaints-of-cultural-insensitivity-1.1403955>

Brand Name: H&M

Type of Advertisement: Social Media Image

Signifiers: Visual Text: A shiny make-up and elaborate jewellery choice with a female model. The model is looking far away, holding her hair with her hand on the left side of the imagery.

Significants: entertainment, expectancy, excitement, preparation, dynamism, reachability, accessibility

Written Text: The price of the headdress is written and emphasized on the outdoor image: Headband: £ 7.99

Analysis: Looking at the overall appearance of the H&M advertisement, shiny and glossy look of the image is dominant. The female model seems to be prepared to going to a hit festival, with a so-called “trendy” look of the recent years of the fashion world. Given her glossy face and energy, she seems to be expecting to have fun a lot in the event she plans to go. Shiny colors in the overall look of the advertisement refers to entertainment and energy. The woman in the advertisement seems also fun and outgoing. The advertised product conveys the message that the product will stand for a nice festival/event accessory to complete a festival outfit that will eventually a woman the look she opts for a festival.

The target audiences in this advertisement are fun and dynamic modern women, who are interested in music & partying and would wear special accessories for festivals at reasonable prices.

The written test showcases the price of the headdress, emphasizing that a headdress shown in the ad is 7.99 Pound. Brands use reachable prices in their marketing materials to look like reasonable compared to other competitors in the market. The written text also in this advertisement makes the advertised product look like cheap and reasonable for the target audience. The cultural controversy seems to be starting at this point according to the public opinion, leading to the removal of the product from the stores.

The social media followers of the brand sent countless messages to the brand. The opponents of the advertisement were claiming that it was causing a cultural dilemma since the headdresses are used as a sign of respect and honor, respect and leadership in the native American Culture. Shortly, the brand had pulled the product, stating that “They never wanted to offend anybody or come off as insensitive.”

### 3.3.2. Campaign 2: H&M Kids Collection

**Figure 3.5:** H&M Monkey Sweatshirt Social Media Image



Source: H&M (2018). H&M Monkey Sweatshirt Social Media Image. Retrieved: January 2019. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2018/01/19/hm-faced-backlash-over-its-monkey-sweatshirt-ad-it-isnt-the-companys-only-controversy/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.827fc2a0c4aa](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2018/01/19/hm-faced-backlash-over-its-monkey-sweatshirt-ad-it-isnt-the-companys-only-controversy/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.827fc2a0c4aa)

Brand Name: H&M

Type of Advertisement: Social Media Post Image

Signifiers: Visual Text: Afro-American advertising model wearing a printed, green sweatshirt. Clean, white background. A casual, informal pose of the mannequin.

Written Text: The only written text in the social media image is the print of the sweatshirt, saying "Coolest Monkey In The Jungle".

Significants: playfulness, informality, entertainment, trendiness, naturality.

Analysis: The social media post image has a clean and natural look with no slogans or fancy art design. The sweatshirt is from the brand's kids collection. The background color is white and pure, signifying cleanness and naturality. The kid

model is putting his hands on his pockets casually, implying that he is comfortable and confident with what he is wearing. The only written text in the image is the print of the sweatshirt, stating “the coolest monkey in the jungle”. The target audience of the social media post is children and their parents who would like to buy a sweatshirt with a trendy classic and casual look and a fun print on it.

When the social media users have seen an Afro-American mannequin is used in the advertisement, it has been considered to be culturally problematic and even racist on its own. After the social media reactions, the brand had to apologize and cancel their product offer completely, after issuing an apology note on the social media.

### **3.3.3. Campaign 3: Reformation**

Reformation is an American fast-fashion retailer brand founded in 2009. The brand has started with an emphasis on vintage styles and retro garments. Later in 2012, they have relaunched as an eco-friendly brand and has getting bigger in terms of revenue ever since. The brand has launched a collection “Get Your Shit Together” which has received widespread social media reaction. Below is the two examples of the related collection.

**Figure 3.6:** Social Media Image of Reformation



Source: Reformation (2016). Social Media Image of Reformation. Retrieved: May 2019.  
<https://news.yahoo.com/racist-fashion-brand-reformation-posted-003000894.html>

**Figure 3.7: Social Media Image of Reformation**



Source: Reformation (2016). Social Media Image of Reformation. Retrieved: May 2019  
<https://news.yahoo.com/racist-fashion-brand-reformation-posted-003000894.html>

Brand Name: Reformation

Type of Advertisement: Social Media Campaign

Signifiers: A tall, white, beautiful and well-dressed female model who is positioned side by side with middle-aged Afro-American or Asian origin people walking in the street. The Afro-American and Asian origin mannequins seem poorly dressed, possibly coming from low socio-economic classes.

Significants: trendiness, high-fashion, motivation, expectancy, strength, admiration, envying, superiority, inferiority, beauty, youth, elderliness

Analysis: In the social media advertisement of brands Get Your Shit Together collection, Reformation is using a well-dressed, dynamic, beautiful woman to create attraction and attention for their new collection. According to the composition of the advertisements, we see a group of people, seemed to be completing the general message of the imagery, which is superiority of the Reformation-wearing model. The way how the secondary model is looking at the Reformation wearing model conveys the message that they feel inferior while looking down on the first

positioned model. As seen in the below collection promotion image, American fast fashion brand Reformation has used extra mannequins standing together with the main mannequin of the social media advertisement. Along with the well-dressed, beautiful and socially accepted women, stands either an Afro-American or an Asian mannequin. The poses and the costumes of the extra mannequins are implying an inferiority against Reformation-wearing model. Combined with the collection name, 'Get Your Shit Together', the social media advertising campaign is creating signs of classism and public controversy at the end.

### 3.3.4 Campaign 4: Chanel

Chanel, one of the most famous fashion houses in the world, was founded in 1910 in France. The brand has started as a little fashion house and evolved into a luxury fashion brand desired by most women in the world. Chanel has released a boomerang in 2017, collaborating with a celebrity. The social media campaign has created public discussions and social media reactions as seen below:

Figure 3.8: Jeffree Star promoting Chanel boomerang



Source: Jeffree Star (2017). Jeffree Star promoting Chanel boomerang. Retrieved: May 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2017/may/16/channels-2000-boomerang-criticised-for-humiliating-indigenous-australian-culture>



Brand Name: Chanel

Type of Advertisement: Social Media Image

Signifiers: A cropped image of a semi-celebrity person holding a branded boomerang on a green grass background.

Written Text: The caption of the Instagram Image that goes: “Having so much fun with my new #Chanel boomerang.”

Significants: pleasure, playfulness, entertainment, high-fashion, attractiveness, trendiness.

Analysis: In the image of the Instagram post, followers see a tattooed hand holding a branded boomerang. The hand belongs to a famous make-up youtuber, Jeffree Star. He is well-known with his fancy and expensive taste in fashion and his flamboyant style in his choice of accessories, clothes and make-up at the same time. Therefore, the social media collaboration with Jeffree Star is signifying a high-fashion product offer as a starter. Looking at the general glossy, shiny look of the boomerang, it can be said that it signifies an attractive, trendy product. The logo of Chanel is printed on the boomerang.

The caption, the written text in the Instagram post, says “having so much fun with my new #Chanel boomerang”. The caption signifies that the product is used to play with and have fun by the owner. The public controversy seems to be starting at this point. Even though we do not see in the post how much the Chanel boomerang costs, the positioning of the brand signifies a high-fashion brand identity and high pricing. This, in return, causes the public controversies about the boomerang, which apparently has cultural heritage connotations for Indigenous Australians.

### **3.4 Findings and Discussion**

This study aimed to research on the marketing communication of global fashion retail brands from a semiotic point of view. Saussure’s structural semiotics

methodology and Berger's semiotic approach were both used in the process of advertising and marketing material analysis.

We prize things not only by their monetary value, nor even their perceived excellence of design, but also by what they 'mean' to us – the experience they provide (Guedes and Buest, 2018). Now that the prices, marketing strategies and eventually the added value of the product is problematic on cultural levels, we can claim to consider analyzing the sample cases of H&M, Reformation and Chanel as a possible violation of cultural signs in marketing communication, which leads us to the discussion of marketing semiotics.

In the first case study by H&M, the Swedish retail brand presented a headdress designed for the brand's music festival collection, named as 'H&M Loves Music'. The product was being sold in Canada and in United States of America, as well. Even though the accessory and the outdoor advertisements seem unproblematic in other markets, the Canadians were reacting against the product offer because of the fact that the headdresses are reminding of honor, respect and leadership for the aboriginal cultures. The headdress may seem like a fun, trendy piece of accessory to be worn at a fun event, but it has other connotations for some specific cultures. The headdress was being identified as a festival item that a consumer will wear and dance to music by the retail brand. After getting the negative reactions from the Canadians, H&M pulled the product offer from the Canadian market to showcase their respect.

The brand apparently created a controversy and stated in their apology note they did not intend to offend anyone; however, they did so. How did that happen? Why were the native Americans offended? The answers to these questions may be found in Barthes's mythos aspect of the signs. Basically, the headdress is attributing to the myth of respect and leadership in native American culture. Also, pricing a material (whether it is priced reasonably or overpriced) that has mythos attributions in a cultural value system also can be claimed to be causing a public controversy in the Swedish retail brand's advertisement. The general signification system (entertainment, excitement, a commercial demand creation etc.) used in the

advertising also makes it seem like contradicting the cultural values of the native American. In conclusion, the cultural code system of the native Americans is claimed to be violated in this particular outdoor advertisement which have also been used in other channels of the marketing communication of the brand.

When it comes to the second case study by H&M, the problem and controversy begin with relating the print of the sweatshirt with the race of the advertising model. The advertising model, an Afro-American kid, used to be associated with being “ape-like” in terms of the appearance among white people in the past. Even if it is not the case in the modern world right now, the choice of the advertising model seems to be signifying a case of racism according to some people. In the light of semiotics, it can be claimed that the advertising mannequin seems to be causing a cultural contradiction in brand’s social media marketing material. It can also be seen how meaning creation is processed with signs acquiring their meaning related to each other. That is to say, if an Afro-American model were used in another context or a white model were wearing the above printed sweatshirt, they would not create a cultural insensitivity standing on their own. It can be claimed that the problem is coming from the relationship of the signs between each other. Even though the signifier, the written text on the product, is not meant to be signifying a stereotype in the minds of a white person, it actually stands for a stereotypical and derogatory word for the Afro-American culture. This shows the cultural codes changing from culture to culture with its own unique operating system and calls for customized marketing communication strategies in the very beginning of a brand strategy.

In the third case study by Reformation, the way how the Reformation-wearing model and the other extra mannequins positioned in the imageries in the collection named “Get Your Shit Together” have been altogether considered to be signifying an insulting message and communication to the subcultures of America. The conveyed message has been claimed to be the superiority of the white people if they wear Reformation products over the other people coming from different ethnic backgrounds. As a result, the social media posts of the brand have received

widespread negative reaction from the social media users. In the abovementioned advertisement cases, it can be claimed that imagery composition is creating an insulting message to the Afro-American and Asian origin people thus creating cultural code violations at the end.

When it comes to the last case study, it has been detected that many newspapers in 2017 from all over the world seemed to be talking about Chanel's product offer in its website, a boomerang priced exactly 1.930 \$. In order to promote the boomerang, the French luxury fashion brand preferred to collaborate with Jeffree Star, the worldly famous make-up artist and youtuber. After he posted Instagram stories and tweeted that "he was having so much fun with his Chanel boomerang", the tweets and stories received widespread interaction from social media users, which criticized the French luxury fashion brand for the idea and concept of commercializing a boomerang as a 'luxury' entertainment item. The product has been also claimed to be a weapon of survival in the Native Australian culture according to the social media comments. *The Guardian* writes that the criticisms have converged on the idea that boomerangs are the cultural heritage of Australian indigenous culture and that Chanel is appropriating the cultural object with an almost absurd high pricing strategy, considering Chanel's boomerang costs nearly 10% of the average income of Indigenous Australians.

Chanel was creating a signification system for the product that actually demonstrates boomerangs as a high-fashion playing toy. However, according to the social media comments the post received, Indigenous Australians use boomerangs as a survival weapon. All of the advertising choices Chanel makes relate to each other and structure the way consumers see the product offer and marketing strategy as problematic. Considering the price range, the promotion strategy and the target audience, it can be claimed that Chanel was attempting to create a new entertainment product violating the cultural value system and myths of a boomerang for the culture of Indigenous Australians. The way the brand uses a famous semi-celebrity digital influencer via social media collaboration, the concept and experience reflected by the social media images are a clear sign of usage of cultural

heritage element in a way that apparently seems derogative to the indigenous Australians. The advertised item seems to be creating a cultural code violation in Chanel's case.

In all of the above sample advertisement campaigns, we have seen a basically common problematic area; social media advertisements can be perceived as culturally derogative. The reason lies under the elements of the advertisements, which are targeted product segmentation, advertised item, imagery composition and choice of advertised mannequins. These elements are related to cultural code violations in social media advertisements. If these elements are neglected, cultural code violations in social media advertisements are highly possible.

As Saussure (1983) states people create communication via related signs which are organized to signify a system altogether instead of independent units of language. When brands neglect the idea of these organized signs in their strategies, public controversies seem to be emerging as researched in this study. Advertising and marketing are based on selling people experience and happiness through a certain product or a service by adding value to people's lives. When the added value is controversial on cultural level because of the codes it is structured over the course of history and embedded in the norms of the society, any marketing an advertising campaign may also create a much more different conversion than it originally targets and may create cultural code violations as seen in the above examples.

### **3.5. Limitations**

Although semiotics has begun to attract attention in the late 1960s with the English translations of Saussure's texts, there is still not very different established research scopes for Semiotics for the time being. All of the approaches used today are attempting to create a scientific scope for Semiotics to be used as a research tool not only in marketing but also in other fields as well. This limitation makes semiotics seem more like a superficial field of study rather than an organized way of looking at communication and language.

The limitation of this study is that it is incorporating only content and context evaluation based on methodologies of inspired by Saussure and Berger. All of the sample cases in this study can also be thoroughly examined to see the violations and also correct executions of the cultural signs as a marketing communication medium by actively interviewing individuals from all over the world with different cultural and ethnic backgrounds in addition to scanning the social media feedbacks & comments and the articles of newspapers about the product offers as is the case in this study. Especially, Greimas' Semiotic Square can be used while carrying out the interviews in preparation of creating a survey question set.

## CONCLUSION

As stated earlier, the signs acquire their meaning in accordance with each other according to structural semiotics. That being said, the purpose of this study was to research on culturally controversial advertisement campaigns from the point of Structural Semiotics. Selected sample cases of this study have shown that the signs operating together in the images and in the written texts signify a certain way of looking at the way how people think and associate to certain values and myths. This, in return, can be claimed to be causing the advertisements seem like culturally derogatory even though it might not be the initial target of the brands' strategy.

This study has researched five social media advertisement imagery belonging to global fashion retail brands. In the light of the semiotic analyses of sample cases, it can be seen that advertised item, choice of advertising mannequin, targeted product segmentation and imagery composition can cause violations of cultural value systems no matter the advertisement aims to do so or not. As a result of this research and the sample case studies, it has been seen that social media advertisements can be perceived as culturally derogative.

How the abovementioned cultural violations and intercultural communication can be avoided requires an intercultural point of view. In seek of an intercultural marketing communication analysis, researchers use the six dimensions of the famous sociologist Geert Hofstede (1994) since it is commonly known that every culture creates its own advertising communication based on cultural signs. The use of sign systems, therefore, are greatly important in order for brands while adopting a global advertising strategy. In today's world, postmodern values are generally adopted (Riou, 1999). Those postmodern values can be counted as globalism, pluralism, entertainment, multiculturalism, anti-hierarchy and, etc. Even though global brands are using global marketing strategies most of the time, it should not be forgotten that "all types of sales actions are inherently local" (Russell and Lane, 1992). As the Turkish semiotic researcher and professor Gül Rengin Küçükerođan says, it can be thought that the brands who reflect these values on their marketing

strategies will carry out successful and effective advertising communications (Küçükerdoğan, 2005).



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