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# A Semiotic Analysis of Selected Signboard Advertisements within Maiduguri

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**Abstract:** *This study presents a semiotic analysis of selected billboard/signboard advertisements using Ferdinand de Saussure's Dyadic Theory. The study focuses on politics, banks and poultry feed advertisements. Twelve (12) selected billboards/signboards within Maiduguri are obtained as data using sophisticated camera. The data is presented and analysed as follows: Snapped images of the billboards and signboards are presented as data and numbered for easy referencing. Semiotic signs are identified from the images. The signs are analysed using Saussure's Theory. The study reveals that the political, bank and poultry feed advertisers uses different signs to attract customers. The political advertisers use images of roads, schools and flyover constructed by the governor and IDPs fed together the vehicles bought to show the governor's achievements to persuade the people the state to vote for them for a second tenure. The banks and feed advertisers uses different signs to also attract passers-by, as first bank uses elephant to show they are big, Union bank uses a horse to show they are strong, while feed sellers use the paintings of a hen, eggs, chicks and bags of their feeds to attract customers to buy the real ones. This study therefore concludes that the signs on the boards make it easy for potential customers or passers-by to know the message the sign boards are trying to pass by providing clue to him/her on what they want to advertise.*

**Key words:** *semiotics, advertisements, billboard, signboard*

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## INTRODUCTION

This research attempts a semiotic analysis of selected billboard advertisement using Ferdinand de Saussure's Dyadic Theory. Semiotics is simply the study of signs, with sign as anything that creates meaning; it can be words, images, paintings, sounds, objects e.t.c.

Billboard or signboards are used to send so many messages in the forms of signs. Advertisers often use the billboard/signboards as sign in sharing messages to their customers in order to advertise their products. However, it is often difficult to understand the message they are trying to send. This, therefore, has prompted the researcher to carry out a semiotic analysis of the selected billboard advertisements.

The study focuses on twelve (12) billboards/signboards advertisements which comprises political, banks and feed advertisements. The study will also be limited to Saussure's Signifier and Signified.

The study is important because it gives a technical explanation on how signs can be figured out on advertisements placed on billboards. It is also important for researchers that will want to carry out a study on advertisements

Ferdinand de Saussure's Dyadic Theory is adopted for this study. It is a theory for semiotic analysis where a sign consists of Signifier and Signified. The Signifier" is the physical form of a sign, such as word, sound or image while the "Signified" is the concept the signifier refers to. For example, imagine a streetlight turning red, which makes many cars to stop. The red light of the traffic light is the "Signifier"- physical form of the sign; the act of stopping the car is the "Signified"- what the signifier refers to. Saussure's "Signifier" and "Signified" are further explained with an example below:

A teacher gives his students a test and announces that any student who is through with his test should raise his/her hand. One of the students raises his hand a few minutes later. This shows that the sign is understood. The message in the teacher's announcement shows that the students should submit their paper after raising their hand. The teacher's announcement is Saussure's "Signifier".

The response of the student by raising his/her hand is Saussure's "Signified". If the teacher decides to collect or reject the paper, this is the "object" of the sign.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This section consists of a review of some literature on the concept of semiotics and studies on advertisements.

### **The Concept of Semiotics**

The term "semiotics" comes from a Greek word *semeion* - meaning "a sign". It has been described as a term that explains what laws govern a sign and what constitutes it (Danesi, 2004). Semiotics is also described by Chandler (2007) as a study of the role of signs as part of social life which take the form of words, images, sounds, gestures, objects and more, while Sobur (2009) explains it as a science that explores signs. Sobur further considers semiotics as a method of analysing signs. On his part, Eco (1986) defines semiotics as everything that can be taken as a sign. To Eco, anything can be a sign as long as someone interprets it as something - referring to or standing for something other than itself. This means every existing thing in our life is like a sign. From the various definitions of semiotics given, one can generally define it as a study of signs.

Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) state that there is a mutual relationship between semiotics and language because a semiotic system operates in the same context of situation as language. Thus, it can be said that they complement each other. For example, "gesture" is a semiotic system that relates to language. The mutual relationship between the gestures and Language show makes language a semiotic system.

### **Studies on Advertisements**

A number of studies have been carried out on movies using different semiotic approaches (Saussure's, Barthes' and Peirce's, among others). For example, Ariyadi (2014), who carries out a study on meaning in advertisement of Axe perfume from a

Semiotics perspective. The study is aimed at identifying and analysing denotation and connotation of the new Axe perfume on television. Barthe's Theory of Denotation and Connotation is used as a theoretical framework in the study. The study uses the Descriptive qualitative method for the analysis. His data are moving pictures in the advertisement which is obtained from the internet. The result shows that the denotation of the advert is that producers influence the consumers by offering them reward if they use the Axe perfume while connotatively a reward is offered to the buyers which show that the perfume is effective. It is concluded that all the scenes have denotative and connotative meaning.

Another study relevant to this study in terms of semiotics is that of Nazar (2014). The study examines advertisement of beauty cream and their impact on university students from a semiotic perspective. Saussure's theory is adopted as a theoretical framework. Like the present study, the study focuses on Saussure's Signifier and Signified. Linguistic and Semiotics methods are used to analyse the data. His data is obtained from youtube. Nine (9) beauty creams are analysed. It is found that there is extensive use of adjectives in the advertisements to describe the beauty of the products. The findings also show that age and gender has a significant impact on the advertisement on Indian television advertisement while ethnic group or language group does not.

Similar to this study on semiotics is the work of Gupta and Sharma (2015) who conducts a study on the impact of Indian television advertisement on consumers. They analyse meaning, symbols and messages in the advertisement. Their data was obtained through online survey. Their findings indicate that it is difficult for advertisers to attract customers through their adverts because of different cultures.

Another study on Advertiseent is Fathiyah (2018), who carries out an analysis of Axe Monday perfume advertisement. The source of data of the study is video advertisement of axe Monday. The data for analysis include text images and sounds. Like the present study, Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of Signifier and Signified is used as a theoretical framework. Descriptive qualitative method is used to describe science in marketing advertisement of axe Monday perfume. The findings reveal that twenty (20) signs of axe Monday perfume were found. Monday in the advertisement is used to refer to many things including Monday (of working).

Furthermore, Alok, Amita and Rachana (2017) is a study on semiotics that examines gender role as stereotype in magazine advertisement. Twelve (12) advertisements are analysed from Feminina cosmopolitan 2016. Descriptive qualitative method is used in the analysis. Goffman's theory is used as a theoretical framework for the study. The findings reveal that feminine and masculine are used as sexual objects in magazines.

In another study, Lestara (2016) is also a study on semiotics. It is aimed at analysing KFC Advertisement Posters using Peirce's Semiotic Theory. The theory specifically analyses the advert using Peirce's Representamen, Object and Interpretant. Peirce's types of sign: icon index and symbol are used to categorise and explain the meaning of the advert. The internet is used to download the advertisement Posters. The analytical method

used in analysing the Data is Descriptive Qualitative method. Questionnaire is shared among KFC consumers to obtain their opinion on the posters. It is found that the Semiosis Process of Representamen, Object and Interpretant are all seen in the Advertisement. The findings also show that the meaning of the three types of signs depends on the background, knowledge and experience of the consumer.

Lastly, Adham (2012) presents an analysis of iconic representation of women in advertisement media of the Middle East. The study specifically examines how messages on representation of women in the Middle East are being conveyed to the audience using semiotic resources. The study adopts Kress and Leeuwen's Semiotic Theory for the analysis. Halliday's Functional Linguistic theory is also incorporated for the analysis.

The findings of the study show that different messages are realised from the advertisements as conveyed to its viewers. It is concluded that the underlying message is that the Middle East advertisement media has another agenda.

In conclusion, all the studies reviewed are on advertisements like the present study. However, they adopt different semiotic approaches.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

Twelve images of billboard/signboard advertisements are analysed and discussed using Saussure's theory. The advertisements are adverts on politics, banks and food stock within Maiduguri. The images of the billboard/signboard advertisements are also numbered for easy referencing. The data analysis and discussion are carried out together.

### **Billboard Advertisements on Politics**

Below is an analysis on billboard advert. relating to politics. Adverts 1-3 below are presented and analysed simultaneously.

#### **Advert One**

This advert shows an image of the governor of Borno State, Prof. Babagana Umara Zulum and his deputy providing for the needy especially the internally displaced persons (IDPs).



#### **Advert Two**

Advert two shows an image of the governor of Borno State, Prof. Babagana Umara Zulum with the vehicles he bought and the roads and flyover he constructed.



### Advert Three

This advert shows an image of the governor of Borno State, Prof. Babagana Umara Zulum with some the schools built during his first tenure.



Adverts 1-3 above are obviously billboard advertisements on politics within Maiduguri showing images of the governor of Borno State, Prof. Babagana Umara Zulum and his achievements during his first four years as governor. These achievements include providing for the IDPs in advert one, buying vehicles, constructions of roads and flyovers in advert two and building of schools in advert three. The images of the roads, schools, flyover constructed by the governor and IDPs fed together the vehicles bought is the signifier because they take the form of the sign. All these refer to the governor's achievements which is the signified. Four plus four (4+4) are also seen in all the adverts. The first four (4) here is a signifier which means the governor's first four years in office (signified). Plus (+) is another signifier meaning the governor wants something in addition (signified). The

second four (4) signifies that the governor wants another four years because of the achievements shown on three billboards.

### **Signboard Advertisements on Commercial Banks**

Below is an analysis on signboard advert. on commercial banks in Maiduguri. The adverts are presented and analysed below.

#### **Advert Four**

Advert four below shows Sterling bank sign board standing outside the bank.



The signboard here has an orange and white colour as its official colour. Number one is also seen on the sign board. The orange, white colour and the number one are the signifiers because they take the form of the sign. Sterling bank in which the sign represent is the signified.

#### **Advert Five**

Advert five shows Union bank sign board just outside the bank.



The signboard has a white and blue colour as its official colour. A horse is also seen on the sign board. The blue, white colour and the horse are the signifiers because they take the form of the sign. Union bank in which the sign represent is the signified.

### **Advert Six**

This advert shows United Bank for Africa (UBA) sign board in front of the bank.



The signboard has a white and red colour as its official colour. A logo is seen beside the name of the bank. The red, white colour and the logo are the signifiers because they take the form of the sign. United Bank for Africa in which the sign represent is the signified.

### **Advert Seven**

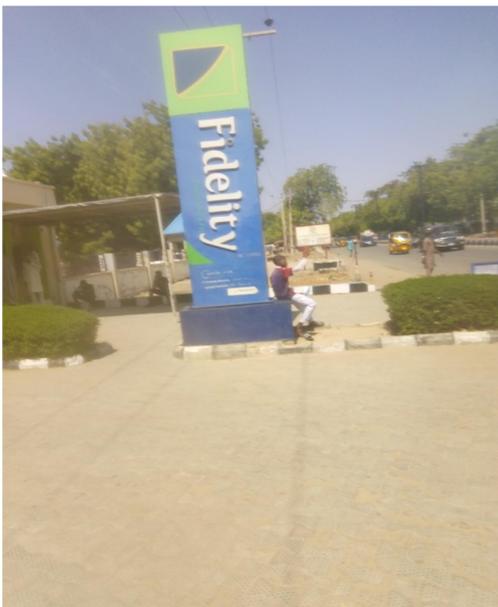
Advert seven below shows First bank sign board standing outside the bank.



The signboard here has a white and blue colour as its official colour. A sketch of an elephant is one is seen beside the name of the bank. The blue, white colour and the elephant are the signifiers because they take the form of the sign. First bank in which the sign represent is the signified.

### **Advert Eight**

This advert shows Fidelity Bank sign board in front of the bank.



The signboard has a green and blue colour as its official colour. A logo is seen above the name of the bank. The green, blue colour and the logo are the signifiers because they take the form of the sign. Fidelity Bank in which the sign represent is the signified.

### **Signboard Advertisements on Poultry Feeds**

Below is an analysis on signboard advert. on poultry feeds in Maiduguri. The adverts are presented and analysed below.

#### **Advert Nine**

This is a signboard of chicken and its feed



The signboard shows the painting of a hen, eggs, chicks and bags of their feeds. These are all signifiers because they are the form of what the seller intends to sell. The concept that real hen, eggs, chicks and feeds are what the seller is advertising for people to buy is the signified.

#### **Advert Ten**

This is a sign board of chicken feed seller



The sign board shows the painting of bags of chicken feeds and two chickens. The bag and chicken are the signifiers because they are the form of what the seller wants to sell. Chicken feeds are what the seller is advertising (Signified) because the two chickens are just to show that the feeds in the bags are for chickens.

#### **Advert Eleven**

This is a sign board of chicken feed distributor



The sign board shows the painting of bags of chicken and fish feeds. On both ends are fish and chickens. The bags, fish and chicken are the signifiers because they are the form of what the seller wants to sell. The chicken and fish feeds are what the seller is advertising (Signified) because the fish and chickens are just to show that the feeds in the bags are for both.

#### **Advert Twelve**

This is another sign board of chicken feed seller



The sign board also shows the painting of bags of chicken feeds and two chickens. The bag and chicken are the signifiers because they are the form of what the seller wants to sell. Chicken feeds are what the seller is advertising (Signified) because the two chickens are just to show that the feeds in the bags are for chickens.

## **DISCUSSION**

From the analysis, the sign boards are clearly trying to pass different messages to customers of such products using different signs. First, political adverts one, two and three show images of roads, schools and fly over constructed by the governor and feeding of IDPs together the vehicles bought which refer to the governor's achievements. Four plus four (4+4) seen on all the adverts means the governor after completing his first four years wants another four years because of his major achievements shown on three billboards.

Second, adverts four, five, six, seven and eight are all bank adverts trying to attract customers. Advert four uses the colours orange and white and the number one to represent the bank Sterling bank. The number one on the advert is to show that they are the best. Advert five uses blue and white with a horse to represent Union bank. The horse is to show that they are strong and reliable. UBA in advert six uses red colour and a logo to represent the bank. First bank in advert seven uses the colours blue, white and an elephant to represent the bank. The elephant signifies they are big. Fidelity bank in advert eight uses green and blue colours with a logo to represent it.

Finally, advert nine, ten, eleven and twelve are adverts of poultry feeds, chicken and fish. In advert nine, the paintings of a hen, eggs, chicks and bags of their feeds are used to attract customers to buy the real ones. In advert ten, the painting of bags of chicken feeds and two chickens are used to also attract customers to buy the real items. Advert eleven shows the painting of bags of chicken and fish feeds to also attract customers to buy the real products. Advert twelve is the painting of bags of chicken feeds and two chickens meant to persuade people to buy what they sell.

## **CONCLUSION**

At the end of this study, it is obvious that sign boards are very important means of passing message to possible customers. The political advertisers use images of roads, schools and fly over constructed by the governor and feeding of IDPs together the vehicles bought to show the governor's achievements to persuade the people the state to vote for them for a second tenure. The banks and feed advertisers uses different signs like first bank using elephant to show they are big, Union bank using a horse to show they are strong, while feed sellers use the paintings of a hen, eggs, chicks and bags of their feeds to attract customers to buy the real ones. They try to make it easy for customers and passers-by to know the message the sign boards are trying to pass by providing clue to him/her on what they want to advertise. Saussure's theory therefore makes it easy for the targeted customers or passers-by to find out the message of those sign boards using the Signifier and Signified. \

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