



สมาคมวิจัยการตลาด  
แห่งประเทศไทย  
Thailand Marketing  
Research Society



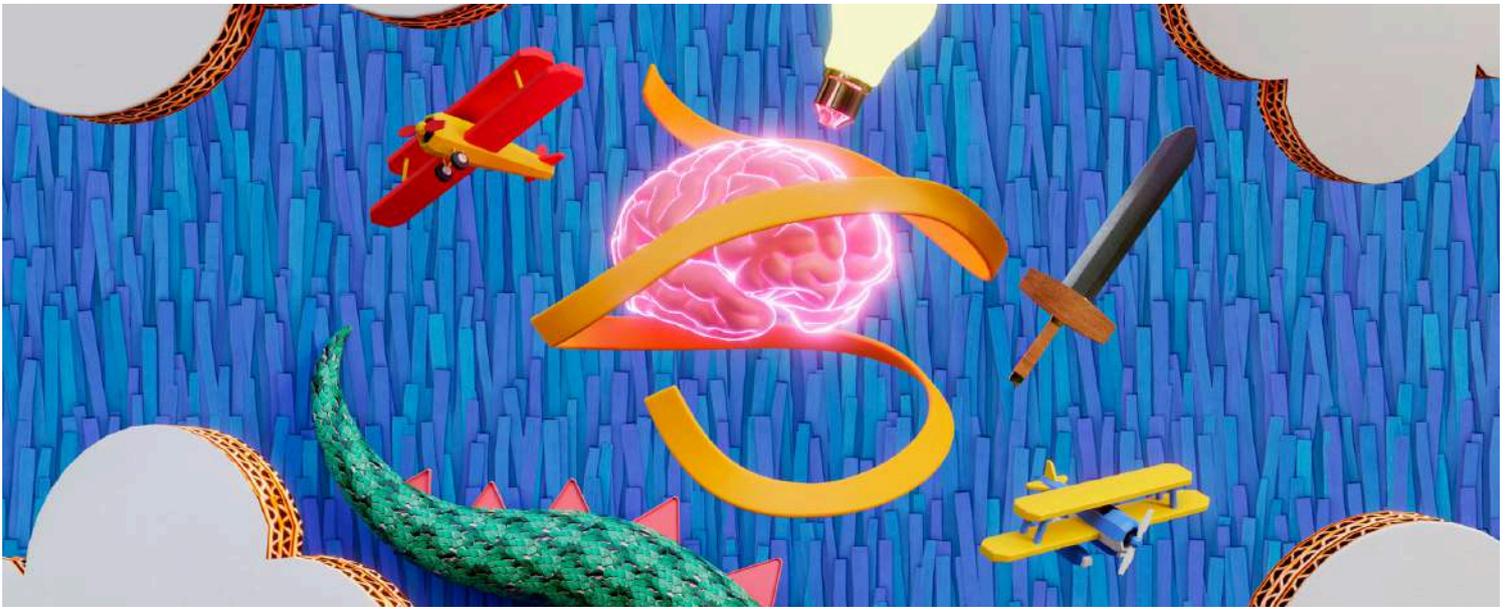
TMRS  
INSIGHTS Flash  
June Issue

# SEMIOTICS SEMIOTICS SEMIOTICS

**Five principles for  
using semiotics in research**

Dr. Neil Gains  
BEHAVIOURAL SCIENTIST  
CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGIST





I recently had the pleasure of joining TMRs's qualitative training day in Bangkok with the mission to encourage the use of semiotics in market research. I talked through several studies I have been involved in over the years, framed by five principles or rules of semiotics. Although the principles are based on semiotic theory, this article focus on the practical applications for market researchers.

## WHAT IS SEMIOTICS?

Before I go through the principles, it is worth sharing a definition of semiotics from **Using Semiotics in Marketing** by Rachel Lawes: *"[Semiotics is] a research method which is often defined as the study of signs and symbols. It investigates culture by examining the ways that humans communicate with each other, creating shared meanings and versions of reality. Commercial semiotics is especially interested in the shared meanings which are created between brands and consumers."*

Although semiotics has a wide range of research applications, it is most frequently used to determine the symbolism and meaning of visual and verbal codes that are used in product categories. It can be used as a stand-alone tool although it is most powerful when combined with other research to understand the implicit and explicit drivers of behaviour.



**SEMIOTICS REVEALS HOW BRANDS AND PEOPLE CONNECT.**

## DECODING MEANING THROUGH SIGNS AND SYMBOLS



# PRINCIPLE #1 EVERY SIGN IS A CODED SYMBOL WITH MEANING

Signs convey meaning in different ways.

- **Iconic signs** look like the thing they symbolize (think of a picture of a cat).
- **Symbolic signs** are arbitrary indicators of meaning such as the English word 'cat' which has no relationship to what it symbolizes. Equally, the Thai script '猫' is a visual symbol of a cat although when you pronounce the word it also sounds like a cat.
- This is a third type of sign, called **indexical**, which 'points' to a meaning without conveying the whole thing-in-itself. A paw print on wet ground or the English sound 'miaow' also index for a cat.



CAT

猫



'miaow'



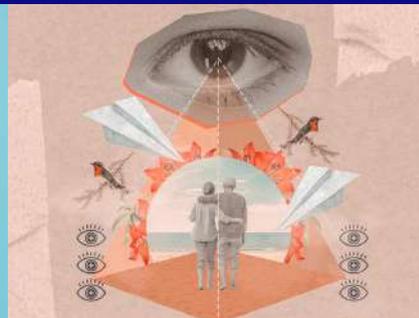
Brands typically use a mix of different kinds of sign. Dettol is a good example of this mix:

- The brand name is an arbitrary symbol (a symbolic sign).
- The brand logo is iconic—it visually resembles the idea of cleanliness and protection.
- The sword in the logo acts as an index, pointing to the brand's promise to "kill 99.99% of germs."
- The smell of the product and the white cloud that forms when mixed with water are also indices, as they are directly linked to the product's presence and action.

## EVERY SIGN TELLS A STORY

- whether it looks like, sounds like, or simply points to what it means.

Brands like Dettol blend symbols, icons, and indices to create powerful, layered messages.



# PRINCIPLE #2 MEANING CHANGES WITH CONTEXT

The word 'CAT' has a completely different meaning in the context of industrial equipment. Likewise, a red dot  can mean



- A clown's nose in a circus
- A third eye in Indian tradition
- A traffic signal for "stop"
- The Japanese flag when on a white background



## THE CULTURAL MEANINGS OF CONFIDENCE IN FEMALE BEAUTY ACROSS ASIA

In work **TapestryWorks** conducted on female beauty across several countries, we found many common meanings of beauty conveyed by language. However, while '**confidence**' is commonly used to describe the goals of beauty, it has very different meanings and contexts across cultures.



### JAPAN

In Japan, confidence comes from **purity**



### SOUTH KOREA

In South Korea, from **competitiveness**



### INDONESIA

In Indonesia, from **acceptance**



# PRINCIPLE #3 MEANING HAS STRUCTURE

Although I mentioned that some symbols are arbitrary, especially in language, meaning itself is generally structured in systems of associations.

## THE SHIFTING MEANINGS OF HYGIENE: CULTURAL INSIGHTS FROM SOUTHEAST ASIA DURING COVID-19

For example, in a study **TapestryWorks** conducted during the Covid lockdown we found that **'hygiene'** had many meanings across different categories including antiseptic products, feminine hygiene, hand sanitizers, oral hygiene and detergents.

The work was conducted in **Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam** as well as **Thailand**.

We found that hygiene can mean

- Cleanliness
- Comfort
- Power
- Protection
- Science
- Harmony
- Purity
- Medicine



## MORE SURPRISINGLY

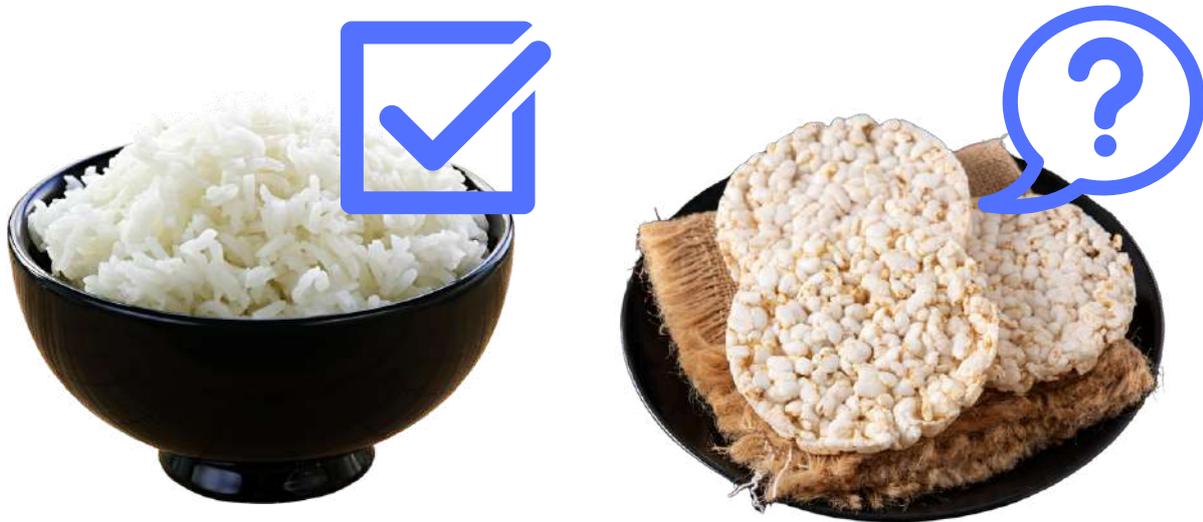
Hygiene can also mean **warfare** (think of a brand like Attack) and proximity (closeness). It was obvious that these meanings were shifting in their relative importance during the Covid-19 pandemic, with healthcare becoming a primary concern for many more brands.

# PRINCIPLE #4 CULTURE IS DYNAMIC

Meanings change over time as was evident with the analysis of 'hygiene' discussed above. Analysis of trends in meaning is a very common application of semiotics in market research, helping clients to understand

- **Dominant** meanings (current cultural trends)
- **Emergent** meanings (potential future directions)

## HOW EVOLVING CULTURAL MEANINGS SHAPE CONSUMER RESPONSE: LESSONS FROM RICE



Around 10 years ago I worked with an agency in China to help a client understand the meaning of rice in local culture (and why their multiple product launches of rice-based snacks had been unsuccessful).

Our work looked at the **history of the meaning of rice as well as the meanings that Chinese people associated with rice products.**

We found that rice had different meanings to snack products, although some emerging trends might be able to help the client bridge the gap between rice as food and rice as snack.



# PRINCIPLE #5 MEANING IS ABOUT WHAT THINGS ARE NOT AS WELL AS WHAT THEY ARE

One of the problems with the rice snacks discussed above was that they were not rice in the minds of consumers. Although Asian cultures are more tolerant of opposing ideas than Western cultures, there can still be cognitive dissonance between binary oppositions as exemplified and exploited in advertising for **Omo's "dirt is good" campaign**.



## LOCAL VALUES IN BEAUTY BRANDING: THE ABSENCE OF SCIENCE IN ASIAN BRAND NARRATIVES

In **TapestryWorks'** research on female beauty, we conducted detailed analysis of **brand communications** from local brands **across Asian markets**.

### Key findings:

- Most local brands avoided referencing the 'science of beauty'.
- In contrast, international brands often emphasized scientific aspects.
- Some Asian brands referenced nature, while others did not.
- Few local brands connected beauty with science.

This pattern reflects **local cultural values and priorities** in beauty perception.

## THE POWER OF SEMIOTICS



These five principles are a good guide for market researchers to start using semiotics as part of their research toolkit. Semiotics can be used by itself to identify important insights into brands and categories. However, it offers the greatest value when combined with insights from primary research to combine understanding of how culture and markets shape our view of the world with understanding of how our values and beliefs drive our behaviour.