



**THE EFFECTIVENESS OF SIGN-BASED COMMUNICATION IN THE  
ADVERTISING/MARKETING OF NIGERIAN PRODUCTS: A USER STUDY**

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**Abstract:** - Communication based on the use of conventional signs is grounded on the faulty assumption that receivers theoretically have capacity to decode the signs being used. Meanwhile, it is not uncommon to find receivers (especially among the laymen) not being initiated into recognizing and decoding these signs. Signs (especially symbolic and indexical in type) have high degree of slipperiness and/or arbitrariness. This obviously creates semantic noise and likely renders communication relatively ineffective. Based on a user study aimed at eliciting consumers' understanding and capacity to decode selected signs – which are recurrently used in the composition of marketing and advertising messages appearing on the packages of consumer products – this paper shows some limitations (the reduced intelligibility) of sign-based communication. It argues in favour of inter-semiotic translation or the use of anchorages, as strategies aimed at effective communication in advertising and marketing campaign.

**Keywords:** Signs, Semiotics, Effective Communication, Anchorage, Nigerian Product.

**1. Introduction**

The use of signs pervades almost all sectors of human activity. Two of such sectors where this use of signs is very much visible include the transport sector (with the frequent use of road signs and code to facilitate road traffic) and the marketing of consumer products (with signs often featuring on packages of such

products, to guide or instruct potential consumers on how to use the products). The International Commission of Illumination (CIE) defines a sign as a device which provides a visual message by virtue of its situation, shape, colour or pattern and sometimes by the use of symbolic images or alphanumeric characters, which is used to transfer information (CIE 1988: 3). In the same light, Adedamola (2013:62) defines signs and symbols as valuable tools for communication when he concedes that: "The terms signs and symbols refer to an observable substance, the mental image of which is associated in our minds with that of another image or concept. It is a form that is

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Received on: October 2014

Accepted after revision: March 2015

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marked by an intention to communicate”. However, in semiotic, signs are conceived to have a variety of forms. They can appear as words, gestures, photographs clothing or architectural features, among others. They have a physical form (signifier) and the concept (mental representation) they stand for (signified). O’Sullivan et al (1985: 214) note that all signs have three essential characteristics: (i) they must have a physical form, (ii) they must each refer to something other than themselves and (iii) they must be used and recognized by people as signs. The second characteristic mentioned above emphasises the distinction between the physical form of the sign and the concept it stands for, by introducing the term of “referent”. The referent, according to Brandston and Stafford (2006:13), is “what both signifier and signified refer to” which inevitably will differ from the single, rough and ready concept anyone conjures up when seeing or hearing the word (the sign).

The third characteristic on the other hand brings to the fore the necessity for users of existing signs to be initiated into recognizing and decoding them. This is why Wales (2001: 420) succinctly posits that “signs have no significance [...] unless users recognize them as signs”. This indicates that the meaning of signs, as well as the codes governing their use, have to be learned properly by the members of the community in which they are used.

The use of conventional and non-conventional signs for communicational purposes is grounded on the assumption that receivers have learned such signs and can thus decode them. Meanwhile, it is not uncommon, especially among the laymen, to find receivers not having adequate understanding of the signs and not being capable of decoding/translating them. Such people may view communication through the use of signs as a kind of technical or scientific language. In his study titled *signs and symbols as a communication strategy: A Semiotic study of highway codes in Nigeria*, Adedamola (2013:62) somehow corroborates this view. He notes that most road users in major Nigerian towns “pay little attention to road signs and consider them as mere road

adornment”. Another bitter reality is that some, nay most of them, are not so familiar with these signs. This paper seeks to show the limit of the use of signs and symbols as communication strategy in the domain of marketing. It seeks principally to elicit difficulties encountered by users to decode signs (visual signs) especially symbolic and indexical signs often featuring in advertising/marketing messages placed on packages of consumer products.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

This paper is grounded on two theories namely (i) Stuart Hill’s encoding-decoding theory and (ii) the aberrant decoding theory. The encoding-decoding theory emphasizes the stages of transformation through which any media message passes from its origins (the source) to its reception and interpretation (decoder). It was originally formulated in relation to television. However, it can aptly be applied to any mass medium, (Dominick 2011:34; Bradston and Stafford 2006; Watson 2003; McQuail and Windahl, 1993:145; O’Sullivan *et al* 1996:23). The encoding-decoding theory is centered on two principal assumptions:

- a) A communicator always chooses to encode a message for ideological purposes and manipulates language and media for those end (media messages are given a preferred reading or what is now called ‘spin’)
- b) The receivers are not obliged to accept or decode messages as sent but can/and do resist ideological influence by applying variant or oppositional readings according to their own experience and outlook.

The encoding-decoding theory stipulates that media messages are “encoded” according to established content genre (for instance pop music, news, advertising, soap opera and the like) with a face-value meaning and inbuilt guidelines for interpretation by audience (Dominick 2011; Bradston and Stafford 2006). These messages are read by audiences depending on individual idea, experience and conception of “meaning structure”. The encoding-decoding theory therefore recognizes the polysemic nature of media text, the existence of interpretative communities and the

primacy of the receiver in determining meaning. A very peculiar aspect of the theory is that meaning, as encoded in the media message does not necessarily or often correspond with meaning as decoded by audience.

The aberrant decoding theory, on the other hand, casts doubt upon the role of intentionality and upon the idea that meaning is contained in the message. The theory is used to describe a process whereby the encoding and decoding of a same message are done according to concurrent codes that is, a situation in which a message encoded according to a certain code is decoded by means of another. In such a case - just like in the encoding-decoding theory - the intended meaning will theoretically defer from the received meaning. O'Sullivan et al (1996:1) argue that aberrant decoding is an inevitable phenomenon in a context of multiplicity of cultures and subcultures. They opine that: "the variety of cultures and subcultures that receive a typical mass mediated message means that it must inevitably be subject to a variety of aberrant decodings if it is to make sense to the variety of cultures receiving it."

### 3. Literature Review

#### 3.1. Semiotic and Communication

Semiotics otherwise called semiology or style-content (Watson 2003: 39) can be defined as the scientific study of signs and sign systems; or the social production of meaning by sign systems. Semioticians identify verbal language as just one of the multiple systems of meanings. They argue that gesture, clothing, architecture, colours and the like constitute other systems of meaning worthy to be studied, the same as verbal language. As an approach to the study of meaning production (and a general theory of sign), semiotics has been applied not only to linguistic, but equally to graphic, visual, cinematic, cultural and culinary systems.

Semiotics uses the term "sign" to make reference to the ways that meanings are socially produced. Quoting De Saussure, Watson (2003: 39) further explains the link between the term "sign" and the phenomenon of the social production of meaning.

De Saussure spoke of language as a 'profusion of signs'. This was not just a

picturesque way of describing things. It proposed that we see the whole of communication and behaviour as assemblies of signs, governed by codes, or sets of rules, which by careful observation and analysis furnish clues to the decipherment of meaning. The relationship of signs, the interaction between them is called by De Saussure, *valeur*, was the determinant of meaning.

This clearly indicates the existence of a link between semiotics and communication. In fact, a perspective drawn from communication studies, views communication as a manifestation of a semiotic system. Semiotics is, in this wise, conceived as constituting a descriptive tool in communication study (Soukup 2012: 223). Communication is facilitated and rendered effective by the use of signs when these signs are used according to codes (guidelines, rules). The codes may be arbitrary, fixed or flexible. Transmission is meaningless in case of "violation" of these codes. Watson (2003:41) observes that a sign is always considered a member of a set of contrasting signs which function within a specific cultural context. He argues that "we may feel inclined to mix, for example letters, numbers and musical notes in random order. The signs are all genuine but in combination; they are meaningless (unless, of course, they are assembled according to a secret code)".

Semiotics has explored visual and verbal representations of information and has come up with three principal types of signs namely iconic, indexical and symbolic signs. To this three, a fourth category is often added, namely arbitrary signs. The iconic sign (for instance photographs or map) resembles that which it describes. There is a physical similarity between an iconic sign and the thing it stands for. A good drawing or picture of a cat, for instance, is very much physically similar to most people's sight of the animal (the cat). An indexical sign acts as a kind of evidence of something; that is, it, works by association with something connected to it for example sweat is an index for effort, smoke is an index for fire, crown an index for kingship and the like. Symbolic signs

on the other hand are visual signs (typically arbitrary) which are linked to referents. Watson (2003:41) counts letters of the alphabet among examples of this category of signs. He Concedes that “the symbol [symbolic sign] may have no resemblance to what it purports to signify. The letters of the alphabet are symbols. Their meaningfulness as signs exists through common consent and their use is governed by code such as grammatical rules”. Other example of symbolic signs may include flags (symbolizing a country) or the cross (symbolizing Christianity) and the half moon (symbolizing Islamism).

The value of signs can change over time. This indicates the arbitrariness existing in the relationship between the signifier and the signified. Most changes in values have often been from symbolic (less familiar nature or highly arbitrary) to indexical. Branston and Stafford (2006:21) make allusion to this trend when they note that:

Thirty years ago, the road sign used to warn drivers to take care near a school was the image of the ‘torch of learning’: it was meant to stand as symbol of the place where that learning happened. But this conventional symbolic meaning became unfamiliar, and the sign was changed to the ‘two children crossing’ sign, to a more iconic sign.

This may suggest that, because they are more arbitrary, symbolic signs are generally more difficult to decode than iconic and indexical visual signs. Brandston and Stafford’s (2006:24) note may equally mean that signification of sign is never secured or fixed and that there is possibility that they be struggles over how a sign be ‘officially’ read. Brandston and Stafford further give examples to illustrate this trend when they note that “the traffic sign for “caution, older people crossing the road” signified by stooped stereotypical figures of ‘old’ has been objected to (a ‘struggle over the sign’ began) by some groups of older people”.

### **3.2. (In)effective Communication**

There are broadly two approaches to defining communication: the mechanic (multi-stage)

approach and the structuralist approach. The first views communication as a multi-stage process by which a sender sends a message to a receiver upon whom it has effect. In this wise, communication is the exchange of information between the sender and the receiver. Soukoup (2012:220) gives a detailed description and assessment of this model when he concedes that:

This kind of traditional communication study, diagrams the communication process as a linear process involving a sender (or source), a message, a receiver (or target), a channel (or medium), a context and various sources of noise [...] The model, despite its mechanic presumptions, has found application in roughly identifying stages of communication. This model possesses a certain power since it diagrams various general aspects of communication in situation ranging from face-to-face interaction through written texts to electronic transmission.

The second (structuralist) approach to defining communication focuses on relationship between constituent elements that condition production of meaning. It is centred on the ways in which meaning is produced from the interaction between vital elements (the elements necessary for effective communication to exist). O’Sullivan et al (1985:42) classify these vital elements into three main groups including:

- (i) The text, its signs and codes
- (ii) The people who ‘read’ the text, the cultural and social experience that has formed both them and the signs/codes they use and
- (iii) The awareness of an ‘external reality’ to which both the text and the people Refer. (By ‘external reality’, they meant that to which a text refers that is other than itself)

In general, effective communication demands the careful encoding of the message according to receivers’ level of understanding and ability to decode it. This will entail not just the appropriate use by the encoder of the code governing the use of these signs but also a flexible adaptation of message to the level of understanding of the target audience (receivers and potential decoders). Liadi and Omobowale

(2011:474) somehow corroborate this view when they contend that “true communication through the use of certain language(s) [and signs] within a social circle requires mutual intelligibility of meaning for appropriate understanding; to avoid the problems of (mis)interpretations”. It is clear that if signs are unfamiliar to potential decoders, there might be misunderstandings or total absence of understanding of the intended message. This can only render the communication process ineffective. The slipperiness and/or unintelligibility of signs used in communicating a message can be equated to semantic noise which irrefutably is a threat to effective communication. Dominick (2011:6-7) explains that “semantic noise occurs when different people have different meaning for different words or phrases, or when the arrangement of words confuses the meaning [...] as noise increases, message fidelity (how closely the message that is sent resembles the message that is received) goes down”. It is therefore abundantly clear that the use of signs – which to receivers are intelligible or unfamiliar – can only amount to noise, which interferes with the delivery of the message, thus causing ineffective communication.

**4. Materials and method**

This study is based on a survey aimed at eliciting respondents’ understanding or capacity to decode selected signs used in the marketing/advertising of variety of products. The study considered signs featuring on packages of some consumer products marketed in Nigeria as a whole and Calabar in particular. Particularly six signs were considered for the study: 3 iconic and 3 symbolic signs. A detail presentation of the signs is offered in table 1 below.

The study considered 400 respondents randomly sampled: 160 from the technical sector (in fields/professions such as electric engineering, electronics, mechanics among others), 120 students principally from the Arts and 120 semi-literates. In administering the structured questionnaires containing mainly 6 items that focused on the respondents’ understanding of Iconic and symbolic signs, the sampling targeted the criteria of having respondents from diverse professions: from the technical sector, academic sector among others. The respondents’ understandings and capacity to decode signs were inferred from their responses; that is, their ability to decode signs featuring in the questionnaire. Their responses were compiled, computed and presented in percentages.

**Table 1: Signs considered for the study**

	1. Dispose properly		2. Flammable Material
	3. can/should not be ironed		4. Keep Dry
			5. Recyclable
			6. Breakable Material

**5. Results and Discussion**

The study came up with some major findings presented in tables 2, 3 and 4 below. Results indicate that, in general, the signs were mostly unintelligible to the respondents. The overall proportion of signs correctly read is 30.91%. The results of the study equally indicate that iconic signs are more intelligible than the other types of signs. They were easily read by the interviewees considered in the study. As

indicated in Table 2 below, most of the signs respondents showed familiarity with, included sign 1 (79%) and sign 2 (66.5) which are of the iconic category. The respondents on the other hand found serious difficulties in reading symbolic signs. The proportions of the sample which could read this category of signs ranged between 5.5 % to 9.5%.

Table 2: Signs Identified Versus Signs not Identified

Signs	Could Indentify		Could not Identify		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
<b>Sign 1</b>	316	79	84	21	400	100
<b>Sign 2</b>	266	66.5	134	33.5	400	100
<b>Sign 3</b>	66	16.5	334	83.5	400	100
<b>Sign 4</b>	34	8.5	366	91.5	400	100
<b>Sign 5</b>	22	5.5	378	94.5	400	100
<b>Sign 6</b>	38	9.5	362	90.5	400	100
<b>Total</b>	742	30.91	1658	69.09	<b>2400</b>	100

The study also shows that the signs were more readable to technicians than they were to the other folks composing the sample. Statistics show that of all the folks/groups considered for the study, they (technicians) have

the greatest percentages of understanding, followed by students. The semi literate always come last, showing no understanding of particular signs notably signs 3, 4 and 5 which happen to mostly be symbolic in nature.

Table 3: Understanding of the signs according to groups

Interviewees	Technicians		Students		Semi-Literate		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
<b>Sign 1</b>	148	46.83	90	28.48	78	24.69	316	100
<b>Sign 2</b>	122	45.86	84	31.57	60	22.57	266	100
<b>Sign 3</b>	54	81.81	12	18.19	00	00	66	100
<b>Sign 4</b>	22	64.70	12	35.3	00	00	34	100
<b>Sign 5</b>	16	72.72	06	27.28	00	00	22	100
<b>Sign 6</b>	18	47.36	14	36.84	06	15.8	38	100
<b>Total</b>	380	51.21	218	29.38	144	19.41	742	100

Results indicate that the respondents were able to identify the signs mostly by conjuring or instinctively. 76.02% of the signs correctly decoded by the respondents were identified instinctively, or by guessing. Meanwhile 21.29% of these signs were identified through informal education, that is,

respondents' personal experience. The results suggest that respondents acquired knowledge on the signs identified less by learning in formal education situations. Identification of signs facilitated by knowledge acquired in schools had an insignificant (the least) percentage: 2.69%.

**Table 4:** Ways of learning and identifying the signs

Method of Learning the signs	Formal Education		Informal Education		Conjuring/Instinct		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
<b>Sign 1</b>	00	00	28	8.86	288	91.14	316	100
<b>Sign 2</b>	14	5.26	58	21.80	194	72.94	266	100
<b>Sign 3</b>	00	00	14	21.21	52	78.79	66	100
<b>Sign 4</b>	06	17.64	18	52.94	10	29.42	34	100
<b>Sign 5</b>	00	00	14	63.63	08	36.37	22	100
<b>Sign 6</b>	00	00	26	68.42	12	31.58	38	100
<b>Total</b>	20	2.69	158	21.29	564	76.02	742	100

Only sign 2 and 4 have been learned by some of the respondents through formal education. This indicates that formal education seems to be less active in teaching the population how to read conventional signs. Most people, as a result, are compelled to guess what a sign could mean. The overall observation that we may make at this juncture is that communication through the use of sign seems less effective because of the receivers' incapacity to adequately read the signs employed.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to demonstrate that communication based on the use of signs is founded on the faulty assumption that the receivers have the ability to read conventional signs. Meanwhile, it is often common to find large section of the targeted receivers not possessing adequate skills to read these signs. As has been demonstrated in this study, using signs to communicate may prove ineffective because of this inability of the receivers to decode the signs. It is therefore recommendable that, for effective communication, anchorages be added to most of these signs, especially those of the symbolic categories. These anchorages have potentials of guiding targeted readers in a better way, in the decoding of the signs. It is equally recommendable that school curriculums at early levels of formal education (primary and secondary schools) give ample and sufficient attention to the teaching of conventional signs. This will enable Nigerians to easily acquire skill in the reading of this signs.

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