

# Semiotic Storytelling in Advertising: An Analysis of Four Indomie Noodles Advertisements

Adeniji, Julianah Bolade

Department of Art, Design and Printing Technology, The Polytechnic, Ibadan, Nigeria

Olalere, Samuel Aderemi

Department of Art, Design and Printing Technology, The Polytechnic, Ibadan, Nigeria

## Abstract

Advertising is around us. We are surrounded daily by adverts, which aim at changing a consumer's behaviour. These adverts are embedded with several meanings. This article will discuss semiotics and the types of sign images used in advertising, which are icons, indexical and symbolic. Furthermore, semiotics in advertising is discussed. This article aims to explain how advertising semiotics uses societal ideology and creates meaning behind images. Consequently, four indomie noodles adverts are decoded to illustrate the application of semiotics in advertising.

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## 1. Introduction

*"...semiotics provides the theoretical tools for the analysis of signs and communication process in advertising...semiotics expands the analytic horizon from the verbal message in the narrower sense to the multiplicity of codes used in persuasive communication". (Nöth 1990)*

In a market economy, one of the roles of advertising is to inform and convince consumers of the superior quality of products and services sold. To achieve these goals, advertisers and advertising agencies use a variety of socio-cultural value systems (Alozie 2002).

Semiotics is the study and communication of signs and symbols. It is based on the idea that a sign is merely a representation symbol to be interpreted by the recipient and that this interpretation depends on the reality of the experience of the recipient. Advertising is all around us, and consequently, these adverts are embedded with so many messages that the advertisers want to communicate to its target audience. Indomie instant noodles as a brand have several campaign series which are quite impressive.

Molnar (2011), note that semiotics are visual cues or signs which are combined into patterns that transmit messages to the viewer. Similarly, images tell stories using semiotics, which can be seen as a sort of visual grammar.

In this article, four Indomie Noodles advertisements created by Noah's Ark Creative in 2018 were analysed. The author discussed signs, what they signify and their relationships. Meanings were identified in the advertisements by analyzing their iconic, symbolic and index signs as well as the Paradigmatic relationships and Syntagmatic related signs.

## 2. Semiotics

Noble and Bestley (2005), opine that semiotics is the study of signs and symbols, especially the relationship between written or spoken signs and their referents in the physical world or the world of ideas.

Messages are made of signs and conveyed through sign systems called codes. A sign is anything that can be replaced by something else – i.e. a sign stands for an object or concept. The "stands for" process is the point where meaning is created both through encoding and decoding. Visual communication has various types of codes that help determine the message and semiotics is particularly useful in analysing visual communication. Advertisers make use of signs in advertising their products. These signs are those found within the culture of their target audience. In all advertisements analysed in this study, various signs and codes which could enable the advertiser to transmit its message easily are portrayed.

Dediyanto (2004) notes that we most commonly consider signs to be advertising related — as some kinds of displays, perhaps with words and pictures, announcing where businesses are located and the nature of businesses. In the creation of advertising signs, all kinds of media are used: carved wood, neon and other lighting, moulded

plastic, paint, and other materials form words and images. In the windows of supermarkets, we see advertising signs announcing "specials." We see signs on restaurants, on shops— wherever there is some commercial activity. The nature of such signs— their designs and the materials from which they are made — generally indicates whether the establishments they appear on are upscale or down-market. Many corporations use symbols and icons as a means of establishing some "corporate identity" because a symbol or icon can be easily remembered. Designing the symbols and icons of a company— through the use of colour and shape, and often the appearance of specific words or numbers — helps people to understand what the company is like. In its simplest definition, semiotics is the 'study of signs'.

Two key figures in the early development of semiotics Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) gave the subject its name. Underwood (2003) emphasises the usefulness of semiotics by stating that semiotics is the theoretical tools in advertising for analysing signs and communication processes. `

According to Chandler (1994), signs take the form of words, pictures, sounds, acts or objects, but such things have no intrinsic meaning and only become signs if we invest them with meaning. "Unless it is interpreted as a sign, nothing is a sign" (Reschke 2005). Anything can be a sign as long as someone interprets something as meaning— referring to something other than themselves or standing for something else. We explain things as signs by relating them to familiar conventions systems, mostly unconsciously. At the heart of semiotics, concerns are this meaningful use of signs. The models of linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce are the two dominant models of what constitutes a sign. De Saussure defined a sign as a composed dyadic model; A 'signifier' – the form which the sign takes, e.g. the clever use of indomie to make up the horn of a ram in figure 1.

- The 'signified' – the concept it represents, e.g. signifying the type of animal common during the Sallah celebration.



Figure 1: Ram (Noah's Ark Creative 2018)

De Saussure offered a two-part model of the sign as shown diagrammatically in figure 2A and 2B. (Underwood 2003).

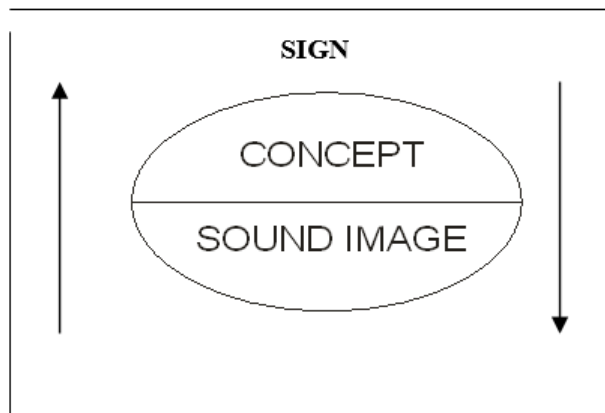


Figure 2A: Saussure's graphical representation of the sign as being made up of a sound image and a concept. (Underwood 2003).

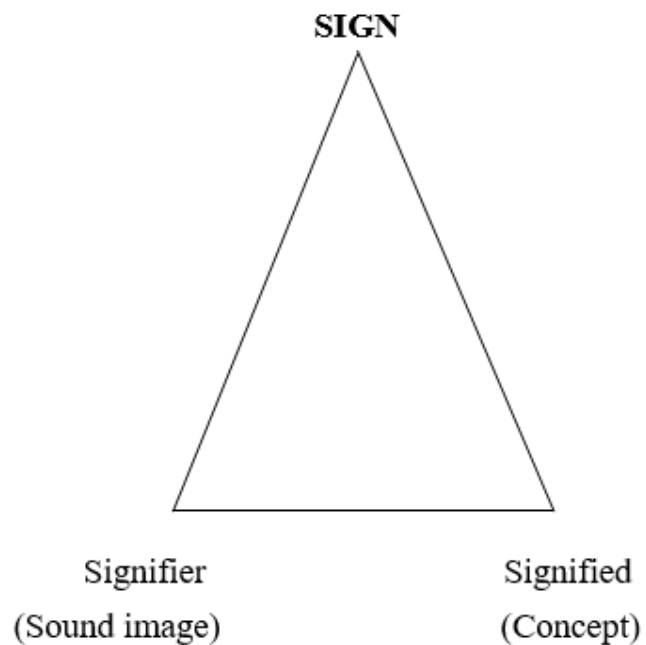


Figure 2B: Saussure's preferred terminology for the sign. (Underwood 2003).

Saussure referred to the concept as the signified and the sound image as the signifier. This idea shown in figure 2b attempts to show how the signifier and the signified coalesce into what we call a sign. The sign is the entire resulting from the signifier's association with the signified. The relationship between the signifier and the meaning is called 'signification,' which is represented by the arrows in the Saussurean diagram. A sign must have both a signifier and a signified. Thus the signifier is the term for the sign itself (the image), and the signified refers to the mental concept.



or symbols. A sign can be understood better as meaning or a symbol that means something else. In some cases, the sign may be an exact representation of the meaning of the thing, while it may be a symbol associated with it in other cases.

According to Dezeeuw (2017), the use of visuals to tell a story is not a new concept. There are many ways to depict a mood or communicate to a particular message in an advertisement. When images are used instead of only text, more value is created by connecting to a target audience. Likewise, meanings are generated semiotically either inherently or learned through our surroundings. Semiotics can be used in branding and advertising to tell a story or communicate a message. Semiotics is described as iconic, symbolic and indexical (see figure 5).

Equally, Molnar (2011) opines that semiotics are visual cues or signs which are combined into patterns that transmit messages to the viewer. Similarly, images tell stories using semiotics, which can be seen as a sort of visual grammar. To translate these images, audiences draw from cultural or personal experience, giving almost everyone who sees them a unique meaning.

Semiotic storytelling is also how semiotics meaning is created, either inherently or learned through your environment. In branding and advertising, you can use the concept of semiotics to tell a story or represent directly what you are trying to communicate with. Dezeeuw (ibid.).

There has been extensive research into the need for stories (Jensen 1999; Jensen 2002; Wartenson 2009) as well as their advantages in advertising; Alwit 2002 Fog, Budtz & Yakaboğlu 2003). Through the use of visual analysis methods, such as semiotics, visual elements used in advertising can be studied. It can, therefore, be stated that semiotics studies the effect a picture's construction and modality has on the viewer.

When analysing printed advertisements, there are a few prevailing questions that the visual analysis method of semiotics can help to answer, such as what can we read from the advertisements? Secondly, what messages do we come across?

Semiotics concept is divided into three categories: iconic, symbolic and indexical (see Figure 5). Some may be more impactful, depending on how they are used, while others may be more straightforward. Advertisements convey three messages, a denoted pictorial message, a connoted pictorial message, and a linguistic message, according to Barthes (1964). What the picture depicts is the denotation of a picture; i.e., the first degree to which we recognise an image above random lines, shapes and colours.



Figure 5: Classification of Semiotics (Molnar 2011)

### 1. Iconic

Lanir (2012) believes that the representamen, as an icon, resembles its meaningful object by possessing some of its qualities. Therefore, it is not necessarily necessary to learn the relationship between what the sign stands for – its referent and the meaning behind it, the interpretant. Iconic images represent their meaning in a literal visual way. For example, a typical example of icons is signs that are seen when walking at the airport. For information that needs to be read quickly at a glance, this type of visual representation is used. The information must be understood more immediately to a larger range of audiences that come from a variety of backgrounds and experiences.

Another example is the restroom icons shown in figure 6



Figure 6: Restroom Icons ([www.vectorstock.com](http://www.vectorstock.com))

Other forms of iconic images are seen on websites and iPhone app devices. Furthermore, the Nike Swoosh and Apple logo in figures 7 and 8 respectively are examples of the application of iconic images in logo design and branding.



Figure 7: Apple logo (<https://www.fineprintart.com>)



Figure 8: Nike Swoosh logo ([www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com))

Other examples of memorable icons in advertising are the Quaker Oats man dating back to 1877 and Bibendum, commonly referred to as the Michelin man. Accordingly, Miller (2016) note that for an iconic logo to be effective, it must be simple.

## 2. Symbolic

This means something that stands for something else. It is a mode in which the signifier does not resemble the signified but which is purely conventional – so that the relationship must be learnt. In other words, for this sign,

there is no resemblance or connection between it and the object. A symbol's connection with its object is a matter of convention, rule or agreement between the users.



Figure 9: The road sign with the car (Chandler 2004).

The road sign with the car in figure 9 has symbolic elements. White background with a red circle around it indicates it. These mean ' something is forbidden ' simply because we agreed that they mean that (Brown 2005). For example, the ram's horn created with two strands of indomie noodles in figure 10 below is a symbol of the animal common during the Sallah celebration. While this advertisement is primarily symbolic, it also has an iconic element by using indomie photography.

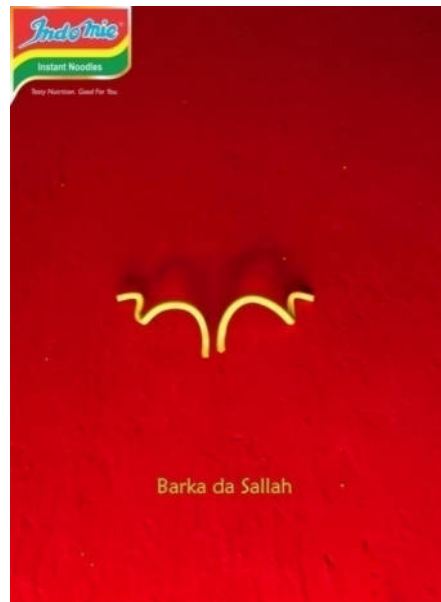


Figure 10: Ram ([www.adsoftheworld.com](http://www.adsoftheworld.com)).

A symbolic visual is the use of images that is more abstract. Using symbols can more easily portray a feeling than iconic pieces. Usually, symbols are created by cultural reference, so these images are usually restricted to the culture they were created in. Dezeeuw (ibid).

### 3. Indexical

This sign is directly connected in some way to its object. It is a sign whose signifier we have learnt to associate with a particular signified. For example, we may see smoke as an index of fire or a sneeze signifies cold. Other examples include thunder, footprints (see figure 11), phone ringing, among others.



Figure 11: In this example of an index, the signifier (footprint as shown above) is directly connected to the signified (feet). (Chandler 1994)

It can be as vague as you want it to be when you use this visual (indexical) in advertising. Usually, the more vaguely the image becomes, the more the audience can connect and apply your visuals and the underlying message to their lives and experiences, the more meaningful it is to them. An index sign is an indication that connects meanings.

There are many different ways of using each of the three semiotic categories in advertising, each with its storytelling purpose as well as connecting to audiences at different levels. From the more straightforward and clean use of photography to the vague and thought-provoking use of images (and usually minimal text), all of these categories are used separately, as well as in collaboration, to make something interesting and should be considered when thinking about the message you are trying to communicate. The key takeaway is to consider the value of your audience and how these values can be translated into a relevant visual. It is a great starting point to understand how these categories can be used to communicate with different audiences.

### **2.2 Syntagms and Paradigms — Telling a Story with Signs**

A single sign can communicate meaning on its own, according to Bradley (2016). When considering the relationship between multiple signs, signs can communicate more and more effectively. Syntagms and Paradigms are the two types of relationship that a sign might have. Syntagmatic relationships lead to the idea of story, myth and narrative. Usually, a narrative is defined as a sequence of events that are causally related.

The design is supposed to tell a story, share a story, or the like. One way is through a sequence of signs to do that; a sequence of visual elements. When viewed about another, signs communicate more. The hierarchy you create in visual design by using different elements, their attributes, and different design principles creates a sequential relationship in the order in which a viewer moves through the hierarchy. Simultaneously, you select which elements, attributes, and principles to use from a paradigm that provides different ways to attract attention.

### **3. Applying Semiotics theory to the Indomie Noodles Print Advertisements.**

#### **Indomie Noodles Profile**

De United Foods Industries Limited, Noodle Division, began operating at Ota, Ogun State in 1996, being the first instant noodle manufacturing plant in Nigeria and then the largest in Africa.

DUFIL PRIMA FOODS PLC was established as a private limited liability company in Choba, Port Harcourt, Rivers State in 2001. The company was converted to Public Limited Company after a restructuring exercise was completed and became the group holding company in 2008.

The facility's existence stems from the growing demand for the product from regional and national consumers. The goal is to provide consumers with fresh and quality products.

#### **Brands**

Indomie Instant Noodles, Power Oil, Minimie Chinchin, Pure, Power Pasta, Minimie Instant Noodles, Minimie Pasta.

#### **Indomie Instant Noodles brands are:**

Indomitable Chicken, Onion Chicken, Standard pack Chicken, Indomie Oriental Fried Noodles flavour, Indomie Chicken Pepper Soup Flavor, Super pack Chicken, Super pack Onion Chicken, Hungryman Size Chicken,



Hungryman Size Onion Chicken, Bellefull, Onion Bellefull, Relish Seafood Delight (<http://dufil.com/brands/>)



Figure 12: Pepper Dem Yoruba Demons (Noah's Ark Creative 2018)

Pepper Dem Gang is a popular slang amongst Nigerians. A popular singer Olamide used it in his song. Noah's Ark Creative used this slang in the creative advertisement of indomie noodles.

An icon is the direct depiction of the event. In this instance, the images of the pepper and indomie noodles. The index is what is represented by this image. The use of pepper created like men wearing the Yoruba agbada style and cap is indicative of Yoruba attire. The symbol is culturally learned before it can be understood. To those who knows and feels the hotness of pepper, this advertisement can communicate well. The paradigmatic relationship is evident in this image. It is clear from the advertisement that the men appear to be a group of successful and wealthy individuals. The language used in the advertisement is suggestive when connected with the image. "For those who love pepper" suggests that this particular brand of indomie noodles will be appreciated by a group of consumers that loves to eat a lot of pepper. It might also be stated that Indomie is a successful brand loved by all.

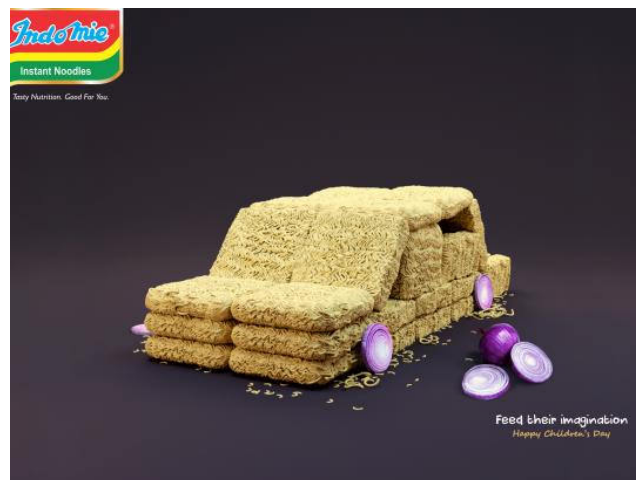


Figure 13: Feed their imagination (Noah's Ark Creative 2018)

Pretend play, sometimes referred to as symbolic play, imaginative play, dramatic play or good old make-belief, also introduces the concept that one thing can "be" another — a huge leap in the understanding of your child. Play is fun, of course, but courage and curiosity are also taught to them. ([www.whattoexpect.com](http://www.whattoexpect.com))

The image of the indomie noodles built in the form of a car and also, the onions used as a wheel stands for icons in the advert.

The indomie noodles in the shape of a car are suggestive of a broken down vehicle.

This advert indicates that children can grow to be successful if guided in the right path. Allowing children to be who they are will help them achieve a lot and be better leaders of tomorrow.

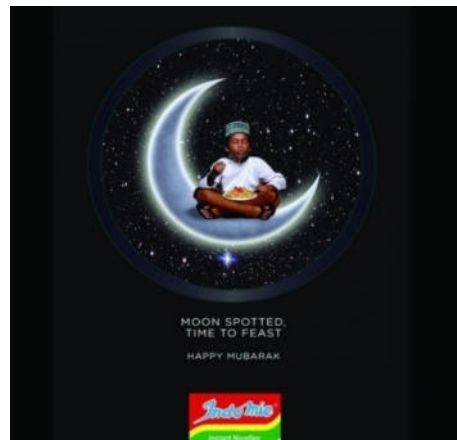


Figure 14: Moon Spotted (Noah's Ark Creative 2018)

The moon indicates the start and end of the Muslim's fast all over the world. The icon is the moon, the boy enjoying a plate of delicious indomie and the indomie logo. Indomie is a quick meal to break the fast. With indomie, it is time to celebrate. Also, the joyous moment is welcome with the brand.

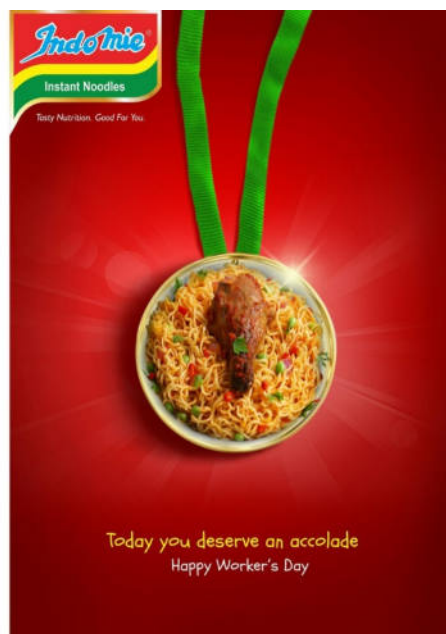


Figure 15: Happy Worker's Day (Noah's Ark Creative 2018)

Icon

A plate of cooked garnished indomie and chicken

Index

The use of the plate and green ribbon represents a medal.

## Symbol

To those who understand the essence of hard work, this advert will communicate well. The culture of doing legitimate work common with many Nigerians and often applauded. This advert indicates that Indomie supports and encourages hard work. This is supported by the text in the advert; ‘‘Today you deserve an accolade. Happy Worker’s Day’’.

## 4. Conclusion

In analysing advertising semiotically, cultural norms and values associated with a particular society or group of individuals are revealed. It is done within their sign system (depending on language, historical context, and culture) for people to decode signs. Social advertisers rely on these signs to quickly and effectively communicate a point to consumers. The four advertisements analysed shows the values portrayed behind the text and imagery. The values that were identified are the love for children, religion, a reward for hard work and conclusively the reward for excellence. The conclusion that can be drawn from the analysis is that using signs in advertisements help communicate better with the target audience, thus making the brand a popular one.

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