

The Semiotics of Anti-Consumption

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Abstract: *The paper examines the ways in which symbols are transmitted in order to convey a desired meaning and looks at consumer insights in connection with anti-consumption discourses. It considers anti-consumption and consumer resistance as the meaning and experience of the consumer towards current aggressive consumerism and explains “a resistance that is both a consumer activity and an attitude” (Cherrier, 2009). We employ Saussure dyadic’s model (Noth, 1995) to identify and explain the signifier and the signified. Using Peirce’s semiotic triangle (Peirce, 1931) we have incorporated in our analysis the sense, sign vehicle and referent of words in an attempt to identify the meaning of anti-consumption discourses. We have explored how semiotics was used in different anti-consumption messages, in an attempt to link the semiotics of two major anti-consumption discourse themes revealed by the work of Cherrier, 2008. The selected texts were organized as collages (appendix 1-7) that bring to light the most powerful signs along with their meaning. Anti-consumption attitudes result from a process of self-inquiry triggered by the failure to feel authentic through one’s consumption activities. People who are voluntarily reducing their consumption may be motivated by the underlying social-psychological stress related to living in a consumerist society (Zavestoski, 2002). The analysis was conducted on a limited number of texts, from different cultures, and for generalisation a wider range of anti-consumption discourses should be considered. This Paper’s originality consist of introducing semiotics theories and methodologies in order to identify the key elements of anti-consumption texts and also, to establish the possibility of measuring the impact of anti-consumption discourses on consumers and their social behavioural changes. By exploring anti-brand discourses, the paper brings a new perspective on people’s interpretation of brand and brand “addiction”.*

Keywords: *semiotic, anti-consumption, symbol, signs, brand, affluenza,*

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The modern study of semiotics is built on the theories of a number of linguists and philosophers who became fascinated by the way humans make meaning of the world around them through the creation of signs, and how these signs interact with one another to form languages and cultural practices (Saussure, F., Morris C.W, Barthes R., Umberto Eco, Lotman Y, Metz, Kristeva, J., Lacan J., Jakobson). Wherever it has been applied, semiotics has raised controversy (Douglas, 1982). It is clearly understood that semiotics is a vast field and that no one can claim it to be comprehensive. There are also divergent schools of semiotics, the most known theoretical currents being: Saussurean and Post-Saussurean semiotics and Peircian semiotics (Chandler, 2007). In fact, semiotics is a method of analysing texts, which are seen as communication instruments. American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce and later Charles W. Morris developed behaviourist semiotics, which are really interesting for consumer behaviour researchers. Defining semiotics has always been a real challenge and arriving to a consensus is not yet possible. The shortest definitions state that semiotics is the study of signs, but it can be seen as a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life (Chandler, 2002). Semiotics is part of social psychology and investigates the nature of signs and the laws that govern them. Communication between humans is basically reliant on language and language is composed from a series of signs that in a certain order can transmit a message with a specific meaning. Any academic discipline, including marketing, when looking at its own communications, finds that a semiotic analysis can be useful and that it can open new depths of awareness and raises a lot of questions (Aaker, 1991, Pelsmacker et al. 2005, Noel, 2009). Marketing communication, just like any other communication, relies on messages to influence consumers and to convince them the purchase products. In fact, when we discuss texts, the text concept refers to a message which has been recorded using a certain technique and it can be considered as independent of its sender or receiver. Going deeper than this, we can say that a text is a collage of signs (words, sounds, images etc) constructed considering the social conventions associated with a genre (Chandler, 2007). The communication process is about creating something, and as with any other creation, it can be quite an unpredictable process that has a sociological or psychological impact, and especially a visual impact on its receivers - the visual impact is widely recognised as being the most powerful one (Nöth, 1995). We are living in an age of the visible, therefore to a great extent the other senses are subordinate to vision for the tasks of reading, interpreting, and understanding the world. The most common usage of semiotics is to conduct textual analysis, but apart from semiotics one can choose other approaches such as discourse analysis, content analysis, which is well- established in the tradition of social science research (Chandler, 2005). Content analysis mainly involves the use of a quantitative

approach; semiotics analyses media texts as a structured whole and seeks to reveal the latent, connotative meanings. Semiotics is rarely quantitative and the relevance of its findings can be the subject of controversies. Nevertheless benefits come from the fact that semiotics emphasizes the importance of the receivers attached to the signs within a text (Chandler, 2007). Semiotics studies try to identify, to separate and to analyze the rules governing the discourse, mainly by stressing the role of semiotic context in shaping the meaning. No delimitation line has been drawn and some researchers combine textual analysis with content analysis (Leiss et al 1990, McQuarrie & Mick 1992). David Chandler (1995) advises anyone attempting semiotic analysis to state clearly at the beginning which definitions will be applied and of course what particular semiotician's approach will be adopted: Saussure or Peirce. Saussure refers to language as the most important of all systems of signs (Saussure 1983) and Harris Marvin (1988) stated that human languages are unique among communication systems due to their semantic universality. Peirce (1931) defined a sign as anything which is determined by something else, called its Object, and so determines an effect upon a person, an effect I call its interpretant, so that the later is thereby determined by the former. The Shannon & Weaver (1949) linear model of communication certifies the fact that semantic problems should be seriously considered in the process of designing an efficient message. Among its strengths, is the fact that semiotics positions meaning at the centre of consumer behaviour and it may bring a precision to the study of communication not otherwise possible with other disciplines.

The modern world is dominated by meanings, people as consumers are following certain patterns in their behaviour based on how they interpret symbols and signs according their cultural and social background. These signs and symbols are today playing an important role, especially in the marketing communication process. Marketers are using signs and symbols to construct positive image of brands to increase satisfaction and to sustain the purchase production. Advertisements are using language, photos, colours and other symbols to influence people's lives, and somehow consumers were "infected" with a new virus called affluenza (Hamilton&Denniss, 2005). We are living in a world dominated by material possessions; the social position is dependent on what kind of products are used, brands are more important than the real utility of the products, and psychological distress appears when one does not get a desired brand.

Predictably, a "resistance against a culture of consumption" (Penaloza & Price, 2003) starts to grow and anti-consumption discourses become more frequent. But an anti-consumption attitude is not easy to adopt and refusing to purchase certain items can often be emotionally and financially costly (Cherrier and Murray, 2007). Consumption provides comfort, ensures that physical needs are satisfied, and builds self-esteem and its communication to others (Ewens, 1988). Still, a key question arises: why do some people resist the dominant culture that sustains consumerism? Are we talking about resistance as a reaction to domination? Where there is a power there is a resistance (Foucault, 1988) and the concept "*dependre de soi-meme*" (i.e. depending on one's self) reflects a powerful orientation towards the self. Having these interesting and challenging starting points, our study is trying to reflect the key semiotics of a set of well-known anti-consumption discourses by Oliver James (psychologist), Clive Hamilton and Richard Denniss, Naomi Klein (journalist), anti-consumerism web activists.

2. SEMIOTICS OF ANTICONSUMPTION - analysis

We consider a brief introduction of concepts and theoretical approaches useful in order to give consistency and to build the foundation for our analysis. The importance of signs and symbols has been already recognized, but only a small number of consumer researchers world-wide have conducted research programs based on semiotics- none in Romania, as far as we are aware of. Most anti-consumption studies are located in Australia, but recently scholars from all over the world started thinking that a new form of social change has emerged and that the need to study and to predict its future impacts are more than desirable. The current textual analysis reveals that the anti-consumption discourses are oriented mainly towards describing the resistance to consumer culture and two major themes: **living in an uncontrollable world** which emphasizes the current ecological issues and social inequalities and **emotional solitude** which is related to consumption addiction and anonymity (Cherrier, 2008). Each of these two themes draws on *two cultural* aspects: *exploitative consumption*, meaning the exploitation of natural resources that generates inevitable social inequalities and *positional consumption* which refers to consuming as social integration. This approach gives us the opportunity to explore, this time from semiotics' perspective, the current anti-consumption discourses. We intend to identify which signs, symbols and meanings are more powerful in influencing audiences and converting them to consumer resistance. We as humans are driven by the desire to construct, to discover the meaning of all sorts of signs. Peirce (1931) stated that "*we think only in signs*" and this statement can be interpreted that we are exposed daily to a lot of different signs taking the form of words, images, sounds, odours, acts, objects with no intrinsic meaning, which become real signs only if we invest them with meaning. We intend to draw the marketers' attention on the fact that it is not enough to invent new ways to stimulate consumption and to sustain purchase, but that it is time to reflect on anti-consumption discourses and to evaluate the extent of their impact. Our opinion is that brand avoidance can be a reality that affects business profits and shrinks the market share of one particular brand. Current economic crises and the significant consequences on consumers' incomes can be seen as a permissive environment for anti-consumption discourses. The idea of analysing the semiotics of anti-consumption comes from our efforts to find relevant literature on the subject, that can clarify how consumer resistance /brand avoidance (Lee, Motion&Conroy, 2008) is

generated, how the consumers are interpreting all sorts of signs and how relevant is the meaning of signs in their decisions to voluntarily reduce their consumption (Alexander, 2011). For this purpose we have studied different anti-consumption discourses in order to identify meaningful signs, and also the major themes that emerge from these discourses to see if there is a link between the meaning of signs and the discourse's power of persuasion. We make reference in our analysis to Saussure's work (Saussure, 1983) that offers a two-part model of the sign: a "**signifier**" = the form which the sign takes and the "**signified**" = the concept it represents. The sign in his view is the result of the association between the signifier and the signified, named "signification". Also, we have taken in discussion the Peirce model (Nörth, 1990) which is a triadic model formed by: "representamen" - the form which the sign takes, "interpretant" - the sense made of the sign, "object" = to which the sign refers. Although, it is useful to bear in mind that Peirce himself stated that "*the meaning of a representation can be nothing but a representation*". The semiotic triangle sense-sign vehicle-referent (Chandler 2005, Nörth, 1990) offers the possibility to relate the **sense** made of a sign, the **sign vehicle** consist in its concrete form and the **referent**-that the sign stands for. Peirce's model allocates a place for an objective reality which Saussure's model did not directly feature. (Chandler, 2005). The most known themes in anti-consumption discourses are: (Cherrier, 2008)

- a) *Living in an uncontrollable world*- concept of global risk society; environmental risk are shown in the sense that they concern everyone, they are global, local and personal; global consumerism creates social inequalities (Kaynak & Eksi, 2011), destroys cultures and gradually reduces all value to those of a global hamburger/Coca Cola society
- b) *Emotional solitude*: the development of consumer culture comes at the expense of meaningful lives, it is blamed for the culture of obsessive consumption and behaviours that are related to feelings of emotional solitude.

Starting from these themes, and having as a background the Peirce and Saussure's models, we have explored what signs are most often used in the anti-consumption messages, for each of the above themes and how these signs construct different identities among consumers/anti-consumers.


3. SIGNS AND MEANINGS RETRIEVED FROM POPULAR ANTI-CONSUMPTIONS DISCOURSES


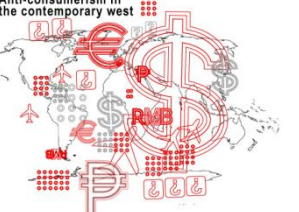


In our analysis we have used text selections from James Oliver's *Affluenza*, Hamilton & Deniss's *Affluenza – When too much is never enough*, Naomi Klein's *No logo* and some other short texts. Also, we turned our attention to icons as much as symbols and indexes, and we have selected a limited number of pictures promoting the idea of consumers' resistance. We have organized our work starting from the relevant signs/symbols/indexes of the two above mentioned major themes which we have identified in the selected texts. The information was organized in a tabular form able to sustain comparisons and we have drawn our findings from it. Table no.1 presents a synthesis of the semiotics related to the first theme of anti-consumption "*Living in an uncontrollable world*". The second theme "*Emotional solitude*" was identified in the selected texts, the most powerful signs were presented as word clouds, based on their positioning in the texts and the context in which they have used.

Theme 1. Living in an uncontrollable world

Table 1 Semiotics of anti-consumption's theme – “Living in an uncontrollable world”

(see: *Human Development Report 1998 Overview*; <http://www.sustainableenterprises.com/Planet/anticonsumer.htm>; <http://www.enough.org.uk/>;

Theme	Saussure's approach		Peirce's triangle model		
	Signifier	Signified	Sense	Sign vehicle	Referent
Case 1 Anti-consumption discourses – Human Development Overview					
Consumption generates...	<i>Environmental degradation</i>	<i>Be careful, it is not just for you, the environment should be available for the next generation</i>	Deprivation	Joining powerful words	Environmental features are irreversibly affected
	<i>Poverty</i>	<i>A undesirable social status must be avoided</i>	Lack of goods, means of living	Word that everyone understands	A social consequence of consumption growth
	<i>Inequality</i>	<i>Uncomfortable, barriers occur between individuals</i>	Social disparity/ injustice	Opposite to equal	Social situation between a group of people
	<i>Undermines resources</i>	<i>Destroying action with a sudden dramatic effect</i>	Injuring Destroying Causing a collapse	Word with multiple senses	A subversive action with dramatic consequences
Case 2 Common people are embracing anti-consumption theory					
Stop consuming so much “Turn from thing-oriented society to people-oriented society” <i>Martin Luther King</i>	<i>Stop Diminish</i>	<i>Cease from doing something</i> Very clear meaning	To put an end to.. To reduce	Stop sign (red traffic light), clearly understood by any humans	Forbidden action with strong/unpleasant consequences
Case 2 Common people are embracing anti-consumption theory					
Material possessions cannot bring happiness	<i>Possessions</i>	Material goods that people own	ownership	a social norm of ownership	What we have is not supposed to be shared with others
	<i>happiness</i>	Joy, pleasure	contentment	Showing certain facial features, smiling	A state of mind
Goals: - save the planet - increase the happiness - preserve planet's cultural tradition	<i>goal</i>	Result Achievement Aim	A desirable end	Word indicates where the efforts are directed	Something to be achieved, the purpose of our efforts
Hyper-consumption	<i>Hyper</i>	Hyper-active	Over, too much	Hyper-preposition that illustrates an e.g. over reaction	Far too much than one needs, a waste of goods/money
Case 3 Never enough anti-consumerism campaign					
Visual element (Black & white logo)	Dark silhouette of plant's smokestacks causing pollution	Too much pollution caused by uncontrolled consumption	Dark side of consumption	Black industrial buildings, black smoke	Pollution is associated with dark smoke
Case 4 Visuals of anti-consumption					
Exhibit A 	Image of anonymous person- a black & white drawing of a male bust	Depersonalised and selling human being (everything is for sale don't accept it)	People are not objects for sale	A dark anonymous image/ Drawing of a male figure with a label on the forehead	Not everything is for sale. Don't accept to be seen as merchandise

<p>Exhibit B</p> 	<p>Mother & child photo - breastfeeding</p>	<p>Even from the early stages of life we are already labelled and addicted to brands.</p>	<p>Take care of what we as mothers are “feeding” our children</p>	<p>A powerful image, mother and child; the child is already “infected” and “addicted”</p>	<p>Be careful of what you are passing to your child as life-style, your children educate correctly to avoid the “infection”</p>
<p>Exhibit C</p> <p>Anti-consumerism in the contemporary west</p> 	<p>World map covered with signs</p>	<p>Currencies symbols are covering and suffocating the planet, a lot of inquiries (question marks) needed to be solved</p>	<p>World is money dominated, and a lot a problems need a solution</p>	<p>Symbol of USA dollars, EU Euros, Chinese currency and question marks, red dots and a world map as background</p>	<p>Today’s world keeps moving around just because of money, where are the human beings and their aspirations? Change it!</p>
<p>Exhibit D</p> 	<p>A to do list with one priority, marked in red</p>	<p>A set of ordinary human actions, independent from the purchasing process are listed and just one specific, prioritised task (marked in red – stopping colour)</p>	<p>The list tells us what to do and what to avoid (buy nothing) – red colour of the word signifies the interdiction</p>	<p>The list of constructive actions (cook, draw, build no matter what) independent from spending money and at the end, in red and visible, what not to do</p>	<p>Everything constructive and positive is allowed, no matter what, anything is better than buying stuff that we do not need</p>
<p>Exhibit E</p> 	<p>An infant photo, already labelled by McDonald’s</p>	<p>Small children/infants are already McDonald’s addicted – please see the danger</p>	<p>From an early age we are exposed to future addictions (e.g. unhealthy food)</p>	<p>A cute little child has a branded bib and a French frizzes’ painted hat</p>	<p>Be aware, be responsible don’t turn your infant into a junk food addicted adult</p>

Theme 2. Emotional solitude

For this theme a set of cases constructed as a collage of texts was chosen from the following books: Oliver James - *The Affluenza – How to be successful and stay sane*, Vermillion, London, 2007, Clive Hamilton and Richard Deniss- *Affluenza: When too much is never enough*, Allen & Unwin, Australia, 2005 and Naomi Klein- *No logo*, Flamingo 2000, UK. The selected texts are presented in the Appendix no.5-7 and the semiotic analysis was conducted in order to identify the powerful signs (words) seen as symbols of anti-consumption discourses focused on “emotional impact”.

Oliver James - *The Affluenza – How to be successful and stay sane*, Vermillion, London, 2007 was selected to explore the theme of **emotional solitude** and the semiotics attached to it. The word “affluenza” was used by James, as he himself recognised, to capture people’s attention and also to define what Tim Kasser called “materialism” (book -*A High Price of Materialism*). Oliver James argues that the spread of the US model of capitalism is responsible for the epidemic of emotional distress that has swept across the developed world, and is threatening to engulf the new China and Russia, among others. The picture is scary and the perspective of getting an “illness” is not a pleasant one, humans are by their very nature protective of their “health” and an “infection” cannot be seen as a non risky situation, so they need to take action and to protect themselves. A diagnosis must be performed and the author does it from the first pages. At the beginning of the book, he sets out a test, a series of questions, to help determine if you have the virus.

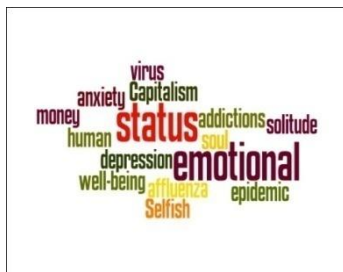


Figure 1 Word cloud for emotional status and signs meanings



Figure 2 Word cloud for Vaccination –cure of Affluenza' virus

Figure 1 should be seen as the Authors' representation of the selected texts from Oliver James - *The Affluenza – How to be successful and stay sane*, Vermillion, London, 2007 reproduced in the Appendix 5. One can see that some powerful signs emerge: emotional status as central turning point and also the proximity of factors affecting the emotional status, such as : depression, affluenza, addictions. Also, solitude is the consequence of addictions and at the same time affluenza can be seen as an epidemic affecting the emotional status of people. Our opinion is the analysis using word clouds is really challenging and the colours bring an extra strength by highlighting the key words. We share the same opinion with James: affluenza is a virus of capitalism which is generating an epidemic, and as any other illness caused by a virus a vaccine must be discovered. Just like other viruses are defeated, vaccination here is the best solution. Can we be vaccinated against “affluenza”? The authors' answer is YES and he provides us the vaccine in the form of a set of rules of conduct. James proposes a vaccine that consists in a behavioural change driven by a series of rules of conduct. We have selected the words composing the rules and a word cloud map results as a one can see in Figure 2. Vaccination, the essence of the rules, is the only word marked in yellow, and is easy to relate to the red word-affluenza, vaccination should “educate volition”, and of course we have a choice against affluenza: moderate consumption, and keeping children vivacious. In this case, to be involved means taking into consideration certain rules of conduct, and these meanings resulting from the cloud map are not easy to reach. To better illustrate affluenza as a generator of emotional solitude we have to study the content of other discourses from different writers – Clive Hamilton and Richard Denniss from the Australia Institute. Actually the Australia Institute have launched a public and web spread Well Being Manifesto (a quite challenging text from the point of view of semiotics <http://www.wellbeingmanifesto.net/>). The authors pose a simple question: If the economy has been doing so well why are we not becoming happier? , and the book, as a whole, is about the sicknesses of affluence. Also the authors explain how materialism and money hunger have changed Australian culture and shaped its politics. Another collage of sentences was selected from *No logo*, Naomi Klein's book. It contains a brief description of consumer culture- and presents the teenagers blaming it for making them feel different and lonely at school, causing arguments with their parents (that led to long-lasting emotional distance) and for turning them into addictive persons. Brand constructs identities and self concepts. Using brands people are searching a new identity, maybe an ideal of self, as it was been told in ads that are covering the reality around them. Finally, we have chosen icons to illustrate the second theme of discourses and as one can see in Figure 6, we work to be able to buy and we consume to die. The power of verbs (work, buy, consume, die) is stressed by using a transformation of a much known brand logos. The result has a significant impact for every one of us. The essence of life is reduced to the brand icons transformed to draw attention on the consequences.



Figure 5 The book cover of Naomi Klein' No logo



Figure 6 – A collage of brand transformed in an anti-consumption message(Source: internet free Google pictures)

4. FINDINGS

A wide range of marketing activities are built on communication, which basically means to send a “powerful” message to consumers in order to influence their behaviour, their purchase decisions and finally to create some well-defined consumer patterns (Pelsmacker et al. 2009). The first reference and use of semiotics in consumer behaviour literature appeared in Holbrook's (1978) article. Semiotics studies are important not only in analysing consumption advertisements but equally in analysing anti-consumption as a social movement that has grown in recent years. (Cherrier, 2008, Cherrier&Murray, 2007, Lee, Motion&Conroy 2008) Each set of anti-consumption discourses can be placed in one of the two major themes: *Living in an uncontrollable world* and *emotional solitude*.(Cherrier, 2008) Analysing a collage of selected texts from different discourses, it was obvious that there are some similarities: the semiotics are formed from powerful words, with a well known common meaning: portraying the effects of consumerism on environment, a set of common goals appears in all the selected texts, material possession can generate solitude and unhappiness. The visuals have a stronger impact just because icons are easy to understand, and appear more often in our everyday's life and so on. Anti-consumption attitudes result from

a process of self-inquiry triggered by the failure to feel authentic through one's consumption activities. People who are voluntarily reducing their consumption may be motivated by the underlying social-psychological stress related to living in a consumerist society (Zavestoski, 2002). By exploring anti-brand discourses, this paper brings a whole new perspective on people's interpretation of brand and brand "addiction". The findings give us confidence that semiotics should indeed be considered in consumer behavior research to a greater extent, and Romanian marketing researchers should think more about taking an interdisciplinary approach in their efforts to understand and to predict their consumers' decisions.

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