

# Contemporary advertising and Peircean semiotics: A methodological proposal

## *Publicidade contemporânea e semiótica peirceana: Uma proposta metodológica*

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to show that Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics can contribute to a broader and less superficial understanding of the currently produced advertising, deeming it a language modality that uninterruptedly permeates life and the world. We understand that Peirce's theoretical-methodological legacy grows nowadays to reflect and analyze the transformations that advertising communication undergoes in contemporary times both in its expressive plan and in its deeper logics. For this, we propose an advertising semiotics analysis methodology that goes beyond scrutinizing constituent elements of a specific piece, incorporating the ever-expanding referentiality of advertising and its ever-surprising power to generate meanings.

**Keywords:** advertising; semiotics; Peirce; semiotic analysis; advertising language.

### RESUMO

Este artigo pretende apresentar a contribuição da semiótica de Charles Sanders Peirce para um entendimento mais amplo e menos superficial da publicidade atual, compreendendo-a como uma modalidade de linguagem que permeia ininterruptamente a vida e o mundo. Entendemos que o legado teórico-metodológico de Peirce cresce em relevância para refletir as transformações por que passa a comunicação publicitária na contemporaneidade, tanto no seu plano expressivo, quanto nas suas lógicas mais profundas. Para isso, propomos uma metodologia de análise semiótica publicitária que vai além de esmiuçar elementos constituintes de uma peça específica, incorporando a referencialidade cada vez mais expandida da publicidade e sua surpreendente potência de geração de significados.

**Palavras-chave:** Publicidade; semiótica; Peirce; análise semiótica; linguagem publicitária.

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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.11606/issn.1982-8160.v18i1p145-170>

V.18 - Nº 1 jan./abr. 2024 São Paulo - Brasil POMPEU | SATO p. 145-170

MATRIZES

145



# A

## Contemporary advertising and Peircean semiotics: A methodological proposal

**N**O CLASSIC AUTHOR of semiotics developed his intellectual work to analyze advertisement. Charles Sanders Peirce, at least as far as we know, didn't even privilege or foresee in his extensive production the "application" of semiotics to this or that specific everyday material. In addition, therein lies his great value as the author not just of a theory — even less of a method, as is sometimes believed — but also of a philosophical architecture of such complexity and scope that it is possible to draw from it the basic theoretical concepts and methodological procedures necessary to achieve a privileged view of advertising. Not just of advertising, of course, but also of it. The fact that Peirce's semiotics were not developed based on any specific material — text or image, for example — but based on a broader conception of phenomena is what makes it possible for us to draw on it today.

By pursuing in his life's work the understanding of the processes through which human thought evolves, he achieved a profound generality that does not come up against the limitations of obsolescence — as happens with the works of some other authors, which age and lose much of their validity when they no longer find a way to get closer to contemporary reality. By conceiving a notion of sign associated with thought itself, Peirce offers his readers and all of us the theoretical precepts and methodological intricacies to understand the advertising phenomenon in its magnitude, its elusive aspect, and its growing complexity today. Although there is no evidence of any text by Peirce that demonstrates in what specific way his intellectual production could contribute to the understanding of one or another advertisement — not least because in his lifetime, from 1839 to 1914, advertising itself was still in its infancy — his theoretical-methodological legacy grows in relevance as advertising communication becomes more imprecise and omnipresent in contemporary times.

This is what this text is about, the main objective of which is to present how Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics can contribute to a broader and less superficial understanding of advertising produced today, based on the proposal of a contribution from his method, which can be applied to advertising communication. It deals with this already traditional approach between theories of language and advertising communication, defending a perspective that allows not only detailed scrutiny of the constituent elements of a given advertising message but, seeing advertising as being of a sign nature, also considers its ever-expanding referentiality and reveals its ever-surprising potential to generate meaning.

In a context in which advertising, as a language, is now present in practically all communication occasions — no longer only in well-defined formats, always with clear intentions or solely with a brand or company as the

signatory — the urgency for a method that can handle all this is undeniable. It can be useful in a pedagogical context, in educating new advertisers and consumers; and in a marketing context, in improving advertising management and creation processes.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to contribute to a broader and deeper understanding of advertising communication through the possibilities of analysis offered by Peircean Semiotics. To this end, we recognize that today, when we talk about advertising, we are no longer just talking about advertisements or related specific material, but about a mode of language that permeates life and the world uninterruptedly, which expresses a predominant worldview — that of consumption and capitalism — and which, under these conditions, participates directly in the development of imaginations, the establishment of patterns of behavior, the construction of values and, ultimately, the very cultural constitution of a given era or society.

To study this object, it is necessary to try to take another step in an extensive collective journey that still has much to be built. One cannot follow Peirce's thinking, especially when considering his production focused on the very paths and designs of research and science, without understanding that any academic contribution, no matter how small or innovative, is inevitably one of the infinite strands that make up a larger agreement, the production of knowledge (Santaella, 2001 and 2004c). In this sense, what is presented in this paper is both an outgrowth of previous research and a modest contribution to the thinking of so many other researchers who have dedicated themselves to the challenge and exercise of semiotic analysis of advertising communication.

In any case, what is presented below is a kind of result, that is dynamic and partial because it is known that it is doomed never to be finished or complete, due to the pure semiotic conviction that thought and language never stop growing, causing advertising itself to be in constant growth as well. It is, therefore, the product of this investigative journey that has always taken place between advancing in the search for a contribution to Brazilian advertising communication and crossing the bridge that brings together — rather than separating, as some would have it — academic thought and marketing practice in advertising. Faced with advertising expressions that are so diverse, so little like the standards that were established in decades of the last century, there was a need to look deeper into the conjunction between the theory and method provided by Peircean semiotics and current advertising production. On the one hand, the processes of consolidation and qualification of advertising research are relatively recent, particularly in terms of valuing the methodical dimension of the research produced (Trindade, 2018; Covaleski et al., 2017;



## Contemporary advertising and Peircean semiotics: A methodological proposal

Lopes, 2005); On the other hand, the growing development of the theoretical-methodological apparatus for understanding the process of signification in advertising, which has been taking place since the 1960s to the present day, also seems to need new developments when these methods are applied to what can be called advertising today.

Hence, the urgency of (re)delving into the concepts of Charles Sanders Peirce's speculative grammar, to (re)find a better match between the extreme complexity of his precepts and the equally complex advertising produced today. It's important to stress: that it's not a question of searching through the materials analyzed for the elements and procedures that make up a suitable analysis protocol for contemporary advertising — which would inevitably lead us to a limited set of possibilities, doomed to a brief exhaustion; it's a question of understanding and reaffirming, through this growing diversity of expressive possibilities that characterizes the advertising of our time, the importance of developing general methods, based less on form and manifestation, and more on generalities and fundamentals.

### **SEMIOTICS AND ADVERTISING: EPISTEMOLOGICAL ISSUES**

Roland Barthes is often credited with being the first theorist to propose a methodologically consistent analysis of advertising. The publication of his now classic "Rhetoric of the Image" (1990) in the legendary Communications magazine in 1964 marked the beginning of a tradition that has reached the present day, almost always using methods derived from theories of language to reveal the meanings of advertising pieces. In his text, Barthes presents points that are still relevant today when it comes to understanding how the signs that comprise advertising language are engendered: the relation between text and image, the search for meanings, the importance of photography, etc.

In the wake of Barthes came authors such as Jacques Durand and George Péninou, who, around the same time, also published their contributions to the development of a methodology for analyzing advertising in the magazine. While Durand, in "Rhetorical Figures in the Advertisements" (1974), dedicates himself to identifying and categorizing "figures" in print advertising, proposing an extensive list of them; Péninou, in his "Physics and Metaphysics of the advertising image" (1974), seems to want to penetrate the processes of the signification of the advertising image, also identifying the different codes that structure it.

Structure is even a providential term since we are dealing here with a type of analysis that arose within what is known as structuralism. Paying tribute to Saussurian principles, structuralism represents a kind of extension

of Saussure's typical linguistic thinking to other fields of knowledge, such as anthropology and history, with the ambitious aim of understanding all languages (Mattelart & Mattelart, 1999, p. 86; Nöth, 1996, p. 111). This is why the first theoretical-methodological efforts to understand what is now known as advertising language came from this structuralism impetus. What we notice, however, is that the search to identify the rigid structures of analysis in the body of the object being analyzed often takes up an excessively large amount of space, sometimes to the detriment of the analysis itself. In other words: the investigative gaze that seeks to find categories of analysis in the linguistic concreteness of what is often being analyzed ends up being more concerned with this search than with actually understanding the processes of generating meaning. As a result, its applicability is reduced, as the objects of language — and advertising is one of them — grow, transform, become more dynamic, and acquire new aspects. In this way, structures of analysis derived from the sign composition of a certain type of object, in this specific case, print ads, don't always apply to the generality of a certain type of language, in this general case, advertising.

In opposition to this type of thinking, Umberto Eco published his now classic *The Absent Structure* (1976), the title of which leaves no doubt: it is about the search for an analytical gaze that escapes the conceptual trap of analytical structures.

The problem is not to go into the merits of isolated research, but to take the — misleading — assumption of an *already given* structure as the ultimate and constant foundation of cultural and natural phenomena to its extreme philosophical consequences; and to show that this ontological *primum* implies, as we have said, the destruction of the very notion of structure, which resolves itself into an ontology of Absence, of Emptiness, of that lack of being that would constitute each of our acts. (Eco, 1976, p. XIX, emphasis added)

Symptomatically, it is in this book that his text “Some Verifications: The Advertising Message” is found, in which he seeks to advance — including citing Barthes — in the methodological possibilities of analyzing advertising. Although what has remained most famous in the mentioned work are the categorizations linked to the text-image relation and above all to the five levels of the advertising message, what is intended to be highlighted here from Eco's text are two other aspects.

Firstly, the direct link between advertising and consumption, which the author establishes extremely clearly, albeit succinctly: “The ideology evoked



## Contemporary advertising and Peircean semiotics: A methodological proposal

by any communication is the ideology of consumption” (1976, p. 183). But also the fact that the author uses concepts from Peircean semiotics to analyze advertising. Without intending to find obligatory or analogous parameters or methodological categories for the analysis of advertising in Peirce’s classifications of the sign, Eco makes an immense contribution in this sense, since he demonstrates that there is a conceptual foundation and methodological guidelines in North American semiotic theory that are undeniably profitable in understanding the production of meaning — and therefore how advertising works. The depth of the reflections that the author presents in his text based on the analysis of advertising pieces ends up serving as a guide for those who, today, want to understand a communication modality whose formal and phenomenological complexity is only increasing.

If an advertisement involves a great deal of logical articulation and yet is understood at a single glance, this means that the arguments and premises it communicates were already codified in this way and in the same form that they took there, so much so that they could be understood through a simple claim. (Eco, 1976, p. 182).

Even though he sometimes returns to the main names of structuralism, Eco opens up space for an analysis of advertising that, using — with some liberty that characterizes him — the principles of Charles Peirce’s semiotics, makes a commitment not to the analysis itself, but to the depth of what is discovered, to the complexity of what is revealed, to the attempt to understand the symbolic tangle that is advertising communication and its challenging process of generating meanings. In doing so, Eco extends the bridge so that the analysis of advertising can reach the so-called interpretive paradigm, which is aligned with the methodological proposals presented in this text, of clear and declared Peircean inspiration.

It is important to stress that, in addition to Eco and the other authors mentioned, several other researchers have contributed to this use of semiotics in analyzing advertising and understanding it as a language (Floch, 1993; Volli, 2003; Semprini, 2010, for example). However, it is this principle identified in Umberto Eco’s text that we use here, reiterating the importance of Peirce’s theory and method of semiotics in understanding advertising in the contemporary scenario.

Peircean semiotics or logic is, above all, a sign theory of knowledge. Peircean epistemology (a name, by the way, that he hated) postulates that knowledge

can only take place through the mediation of signs, for the simple fact that all thought only takes place in signs. Furthermore, his semiotics is a critical logic of types of reasoning and a theory of the scientific method (Santaella, 2001, p. 116, emphasis added).

Analyzing advertising using Peirce's semiotics (1995, 1999), therefore, does not have to be limited to simply dividing advertising pieces and ads into three categories — icon, index, and symbol — as is sometimes done. It is a matter of taking a specific and very well-defined perspective, one that understands advertising communication in its sign nature, thus analyzing it and escaping the limitations of format or means, for example. This does not mean ignoring the particularities and concreteness of the material being analyzed. On the contrary, it means dealing with these aspects in their sign condition. It's not looking at advertising as a framed material surface, like a canvas or a frame on which texts, images, and sounds rest, but rather trying to see it from the inside, in its sign composition, in its nature as a language, in its deepest mediating function — therefore, as a producer of meanings.

It should be noted that, with greater or lesser proximity to semiotic theory in their methodical issues, several researchers in what can now be called the scientific field of advertising have been addressing the problems of interpreting advertising in this context of expansion and complexity (Machado et al., 2020; Atem et al., 2014; Covaleski, 2010; Casaqui, 2011; Perez, 2016; Pompeu, 2018; Dias de Castro, 2012, among many others). Each with their theoretical basis, taking investigative paths as diverse as their purposes, all of them, to some extent, face this challenge that we also face here — that of recognizing in contemporary advertising an additional challenging component, linked to its processes of signification.

This is more or less what Santaella and Nöth also deal with in their book *Estratégias semióticas da publicidade* [Semiotic Strategies in Advertising] (2011), a work that here represents an important moment in a more recent academic movement, based on the efforts of several authors in this articulation between Peirce's semiotics and contemporary advertising communication (Perez, 2004 and 2007; Chiachiri, 2011; Ciaco, 2013; Pompeu, 2018, among others). However, those who assume that in this work, the authors are going to explain the method of analyzing advertising that can be built from Peirce's philosophical architecture and speculative grammar are mistaken. This type of content is much more present, for example, in the book *Semiótica Aplicada* [Applied Semiotics] (Santaella, 2004b). But it is in the combined reading of these two works — and several others, by the author and other authors





## Contemporary advertising and Peircean semiotics: A methodological proposal

already mentioned — that we will find the necessary support for an analysis of advertising that takes into account its complexity, especially when we consider the current context of countless new media-communication possibilities. Yes, because many of the methods developed in recent decades for analyzing advertising fail in the face of the transformations its object of investigation is undergoing. In other words: many of the analysis techniques developed in other times were based on a more fixed conception of advertising, centered, for example, on media and formats. This means that they cannot always be applied to contemporary advertising phenomena.

It is not that the advertising of decades ago was simple or lacked complexity in the way it was presented. On the contrary: it was precisely this complexity already latent in the ads of the 1960s and 1970s that led Eco, for example, to delve deeper into the issue. What this means is that, unlike what was done in the past, especially in linguistic studies, which was to find categories of analysis based on the advertising itself, we should look for a general categorization, a general method. It doesn't make sense to think of a method that is fully capable of analyzing a print ad, a poster, and a billboard, but which is completely inadequate for a film, a banner, a promotional meme, an envelopment, etc. In other words: as long as advertising analysis methods are created simply from existing advertising pieces, we may always be vulnerable in scientific terms when new communication possibilities arise. For this reason, the development and maturing of the scientific field of advertising and the growing complexity of the contemporary, advertising industry — without forgetting the technological, economic, and sociocultural context itself — require an adequate methodological apparatus.

It is in the face of advertising that is dematerializing itself to remain sign-based, that is detaching itself from the media in order to continue meditating, that doesn't obey formats to continue fitting in that we must look for methods to deal with this complexity. Semiotics seems to us to be the best option for this.

Yes, because the perspective that semiotics provides frees us from the conceptual framework based on formats or media as supports:

Despite the multiplicity of media and semiotic strategies, advertisements remain a textual genre with a somewhat invariant semantic and pragmatic core. From a pragmatic perspective, every advertising process involves a semiotic act of message exchange. Semantically, every advertising message contains a proposition, the argument of which identifies the product and the predicate of which attributes a positive quality to the product (Santaella & Nöth, 2011, p. 78).



Specifically about advertising analysis procedures and methods, this view of advertising as a “process” with a “semantic and pragmatic core” favors the search for a general analysis protocol, capable of enabling a deep and complex understanding of advertising in its most varied forms, in its most unexpected possibilities. In other words: one thing is linked to the other — a broader conception of advertising and a more general analysis methodology. In this sense, the theoretical-methodological framework of semiotics serves both purposes.

Peirce’s speculative grammar works with abstract concepts capable of determining the general conditions that make certain processes, when they exhibit behaviors that fall within these conditions, be considered signs. It is therefore a general science of signs. Its concepts are general, but they must contain, at the abstract level, the elements that allow us to describe, analyze, and evaluate any existing processes of verbal, non-verbal, and natural signs. (Santaella, 2004b, p. 4)

Clotilde Perez, in her *Signos da marca* [Signs of the brand] (2004), makes a great contribution to bringing the precepts and concepts of semiotics closer to the themes and elements of the advertising market. By establishing the first parallel in this book — later developed in a text included in *O livro da marca* [The Brand Book] (2007) — between Charles Peirce’s classifications of the sign and the instances of a brand, the author paves the way for finding the parameters for a profitable analysis of advertising in the same theoretical framework. “Brand semiosis is reinforced by advertising. The brand is created and expanded through advertising. One of the functions of advertising is to make brands replicate themselves in minds, conquering a specific and distinctive place” (Perez, 2007, p. 149).

Perez thus provides academic legitimacy for the same type of reasoning to be applied specifically to advertising communication. This is also what can be found in detail in Santaella’s work, *Applied Semiotics* (2004a), in which the author demonstrates theoretically, methodologically, and with examples, how semiotics can be effective in analyzing product packaging, static ads, and advertising films.

An advertisement for the repositioning of a product on the market is a sign of the product, which becomes the object of this sign, i.e. the advertisement. It is not just the product itself that is the object of the sign, but the repositioned product, as the ad presents it. The impact or otherwise that the advertisement arouses in its audience is the interpretant of the advertisement. (Santaella, 2004a, p. 9)



## Contemporary advertising and Peircean semiotics: A methodological proposal

We are not trying to reduce the contribution of the work — on the contrary, we are starting from it, recognizing and highlighting its importance — when looking for a protocol for analyzing advertising that takes into account its infinite expressive possibilities in the contemporary world. It is true that the paths defined by Perez (2004) and Santaella (2004a) already seek to achieve the generality typical of Peirce's thought and scientific production, and what is presented below may simply be a new framework based on what has already been constructed.

In any case, we believe that the contribution proposed here is important, not only in consolidating and integrating this knowledge but also in bringing us closer and more explicitly into contact with the new advertising that is being produced, free in form and detached from the means of communication.

### **THE METHOD AND THE SEARCH FOR GENERALITY**

Our starting point, of course, is Peirce's basic definition of the sign, the one that establishes its triadic nature — sign, object, and interpretant — based on the phenomenological categories — firstness, secondness, and thirdness.

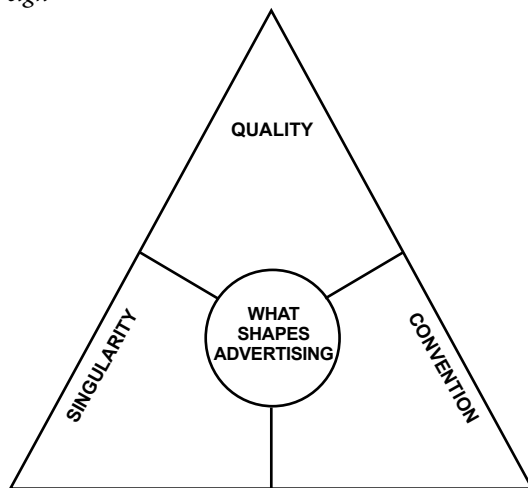
In the position of sign, of what is first in the process, we have everything that gives form to advertising, everything that, precisely as a sign, presents itself to the public's perception. This includes signs of the most diverse kinds, always depending on the expressive nature of the advertising. Colors, images, texts, music, sounds, objects, materials, and everything that makes up the advertising message — or the advertising action, if you want to be even broader — are included in this dimension of analysis.

To take into account the diversity of possibilities that have been included in the increasingly elastic definition of advertising, it is important to consider two important aspects of the sign: its ground and its relation with the object — which leads to two other categorizations of the sign proposed by Peirce. It is not easy to understand what is meant by sign's ground, since this concept already presupposes a very abstract view of the message in its sign condition, before the inevitable process it triggers in the mind of the interpreter. However, if we consider the ground of the sign to be that which allows it to act as such, the issue may become a little clearer. To explain: if the sign is, according to Peirce's semiotics, something that stands in the place of something else (to be interpreted by someone), the ground of the sign will be its defining element that allows precisely this "standing in place", which makes its relation with the object possible.

From there, we arrive at the qualisign, whose ground is a quality; the sinsign, whose ground is a singularity, an existent; and the legisign, whose ground is a convention (Figure 1). It is important to understand that, at this point, we are talking about the sign itself, without yet considering its actual relation with the object. Although what defines its ground is precisely what allows it to relate to the object as the initial process of generating meaning, the definition of its ground still only concerns its constitution as a sign. Qualisigns are signs that can refer to an object because they share a quality, or a characteristic with it: color, shape, volume, texture, etc. Signs that can fulfill their relation with the object through a unique existential mark are defined as sinsigns: traces, marks, tracks, etc. The category of legisigns includes those that could be linked to the object by an aspect of convention: letters, words, stamps, etc.

Attempting to exemplify this type of categorization is always a little sparse, precarious, and insufficient. This is because it is a categorization created from an abstraction, from a specific way of understanding signs, based on generality, and therefore without the possibility of effective enumeration on a concrete level. In other words: the search for the categorization of signs based on their grounds is essential — but it will take place effectively based on each sign, each message, and each language. For each of these possibilities, new types of signs will “emerge”. The important thing is not to lose sight of this first stage of seeking, within the sign dimension, triadic scrutiny based on its ground.

Figure 1  
*The ground of the sign*

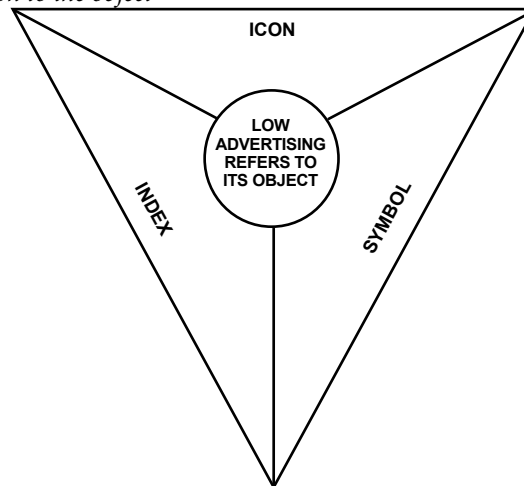


This is an extremely important categorization in the face of advertising that transmutes itself infinitely in its forms of expression in the media space, as it offers us a more detailed and attentive look at the constituent elements of the message. By scouring advertising, in any of its possibilities, identifying the quali, sin, and legisigns that make it up on its surface, we gradually see and discover the intricate network that gives it existence.

Still, in the first dimension of the sign, it is now important to look at its relation with the object. It should be noted that while in the previous stage, we were talking about a first categorization based on abstraction; this view is now balanced with another, concrete and objective look at the reality in which the sign occurs. We are talking about the famous classification of the sign proposed by Peirce based on its relation with its object: icon, index, and symbol (Figure 2). There is no need to dwell on the definition of each of these terms, as it is a recurring theme in various works in the field of semiotics — both theoretical and applied. The icon is defined by its relation with the object based on effective similarity, by sharing characteristics. If the sign refers to the object because it “resembles” it, we are talking about its iconic dimension. The index, on the other hand, is the sign that is linked to the object by a factual cause-and-effect relation. If the sign is the effect caused by the object, we have an index in front of us. Moreover, the symbol is the sign that refers to the object by force of law. If the sign refers to its object because it has been arbitrarily defined as such, that sign is considered a symbol.

Figure 2

*The sign in relation to the object*



At this point, it is essential to understand the differences and approximations that exist between the first trichotomy — qualisign, sinsign, and legisign — and the second trichotomy — icon, index, and symbol. Because it is not difficult to assume that qualisigns are necessarily icons or, worse, that they are the same thing, for example. They are not. What allows a sign to function as such (its ground) concerns its nature as a potential sign, and what links the sign to the object concerns its effective action as a sign in this first stage of the semiotic process. In other words: it is possible to have signs of a qualitative nature (qualisigns) but which are linked to the object by a cause-and-effect relation (index) or by arbitrariness (symbol). Just as it is possible to identify signs that are constituted as such by an aspect of law (legisigns) but which refer to their objects by a qualitative (icon) or singular (index) aspect. The red of a bruise and the representative red of an ideology are examples of the first case. Onomatopoeia and derived words are examples of the second. Again, it's not the case of trying to find examples: that would be as exhausting as it would be frustrating, as limiting as it would be impossible. The important thing is to make it clear that these two trichotomies of the sign work in a complementary way to scrutinize a message — in this case, an advertising message.

Moving on to the dimension of the object, that is, the second in the sign process of advertising, there are the referents of advertising, that is, what it refers to, directly or indirectly. We are talking here about products and services, what is for sale; but also about some other equally important aspects (Figure 3).

At some point in the past, it may have made sense to look at the referentiality of advertising only in terms of its marketing character, when the mediation process was still reasonably controllable and predictable and when advertisements offering products and services with a more identifiable outline predominated. Today, when products and services are no longer necessarily the protagonists — the referents — of advertising, when the media process can take place without limits or predictability, and when values and ideas start to appear more clearly in advertising discourse, it is essential to find in the theoretical-methodological framework of semiotics the means to consider all of this in the analysis process. Moreover, it seems to us that all of this lies precisely in this second dimension, that of the object.

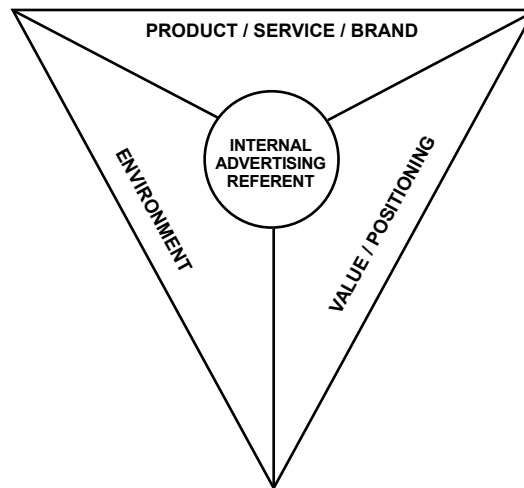
Yes, it's true that, ultimately, the vast majority of advertising pieces and actions are aimed at getting the public to buy a product or service. Even when it comes to institutional campaigns, engagement actions, or anything that may not at first appear to have the purpose of making sales, what is

# A

## Contemporary advertising and Peircean semiotics: A methodological proposal

known is that, due to its marketing essence, advertising seeks, in a closer or more distant end, profit, which is achieved through the existence of sales (Piratiniga, 1994; Arruda, 2015; Pompeu, 2018). Therefore, the first aspect to consider when analyzing the object of advertising is the product, service, or brand you want to sell — this is what advertising refers to at first, sometimes with almost didactic clarity, and in other situations in a more veiled way. If we take the Peircean concept of the immediate object — that contained in the sign itself — this is exactly where we will locate this first aspect of the object dimension in the analysis of advertising: what is “inside” the piece or advertising action, but which appears as its referent. The bottle of soft drink, the credit card being accepted, the reputable company, all this functions as an immediate object, it is contained in the advertisement itself. Moreover, make no mistake: even if it doesn’t seem to appear, this object is there — and it doesn’t depend on the interpreter consciously recognizing it for this to happen.

Figure 3  
*The immediate object*



In a position analogous to what Peirce defined as a dynamic object — one that, by touching and surpassing the perception of the interpreter becomes individually dynamic — we have the very idea of the dynamization of what is offered. In other words, we are dealing with the context that is presented in advertising, both in terms of the situations in which the actions take place and the scenarios and environments in which the products appear, which

is more evident in the case of advertisements that are presented in a more unidirectional communication logic; and in terms of the very moment of the mediating phenomenon of advertising, which is more evident when we think of the dialogical aspect that involves contemporary advertising or actions that directly involve the public.

Advertising inevitably gives rise to a context. No product, service, brand, or invitation to dialog or participatory action takes place without the projection or prediction of a context. In addition, as we know, context plays an important role in the production of meaning, in the semiotic process. That is why it's so important to delve deeper into this second dimension of object analysis (Figure 4). Indeed, both the internal and external contexts of advertising have always existed. If we take the example of an older or more traditional advertisement, perhaps a magazine ad, we'll see that in its internal dimension it already had a certain context, it already portrayed a certain occasion, it already involved what was being advertised in some kind of environment. But that same ad also had an external context, in this case, the actual situation in which it would be seen by the public — the comfort of their home, the waiting room of a doctor's office in pre-cell phone times. The thing is, at a time when advertising's media opportunities were infinitely more restricted than they are today — or so it was believed — this external contextual dimension left to the most basic media planning, from a professional point of view, or was embedded in the message itself, from the point of view of the theoretical analysis of advertising.

Today, with the pulverization and dematerialization of the media, in other words, with advertising being seen by the public in the most diverse situations, often comprising their most effective participation, in dialogue or action, it is essential to think about this external contextual dimension — because it is this that will give insight, in the procedure of semiotic analysis, into the effects of the mediating character of advertising in its process of generating meanings. In other words: any analysis of advertising that doesn't consider the occasion or context of its effective sign action will be incomplete.

Not least because, as we know, we are increasingly talking about advertising that is splintered in its media forms of reaching the public, but which is also pulverized in its content. Therefore, if we've been talking about convergence for some time now, it's because we no longer think of narratives that are isolated in media or complementary linearly. The pulverization of media is directly accompanied by the atomization of messages, which is yet another reason to consider when conducting a semiotic analysis, the external





## Contemporary advertising and Peircean semiotics: A methodological proposal

context of its sign functioning, which includes, for example, integration, convergence, and transit between the media that may act together to the same message.

Nevertheless, if advertising as a semiotic message first refers to something that, in the end, we want to sell (product, service, or brand); then it gives rise to a context of consumption and mediation (internal and external); it also refers to an idea. We have spent many years reserving the third sphere of the interpretant for the analysis of ideas, values, and meanings — we'll get to that later — as if we didn't realize that there is a dimension, still within the sphere of the object, that includes these ideas and meanings. It is one thing to think about the effects that a particular ad provokes or intends to provoke in the public. It is another thing to realize that the advertising sign itself refers to some abstract or conceptual component — such as the ideas.

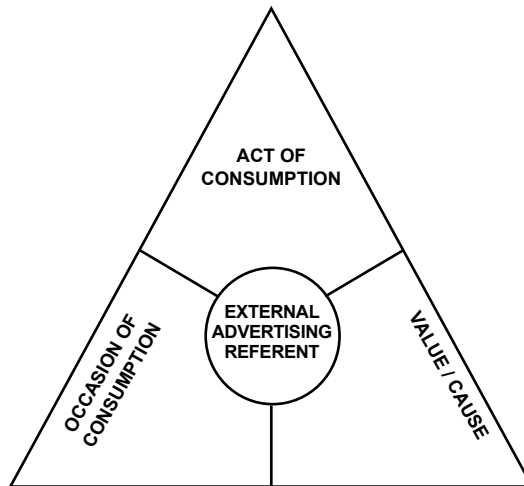
Yes, the ideology promoted by advertising in general indeed is that of capitalism — several authors have already discussed this. However, within this general capitalist framework, various other ideas are promoted by advertising as a signed message, even before its effects on the public mind are considered. Today there is a lot of talk, especially in the corporate environments of companies and agencies, about the lifestyles that brands promote. Moreover, what can these lifestyles be if not ideas manifested in aesthetics and behavior? Healthiness, lightness, family unity, patriotic spirit — how many are not and cannot be the meanings (ideas, values) to which advertising messages refer? The very positioning of a brand or product is, in essence, an abstraction, an idea. So, at a time when products and services are giving way in advertising to precisely these lifestyles, these values and, why not say it, these causes, not contemplating this third dimension of the object in semiotic analysis would be to leave out — or move to an imprecise point in the process — something that is increasingly present in contemporary advertising discourse.

The fact is that, like everything else in Peircean semiotics, these three dimensions of the object are intertwined and encapsulated. The idea that an ad can be of this, that, or the other type, advertising a product, favoring an occasion, or highlighting a value, makes no sense. There may be a predominance, but what is more correct is to imagine that every piece and advertising action will contain these three dimensions — and that good semiotic analysis needs to take them into account in all their complexity.

It is important to realize how indispensable this more detailed look at the sphere of the object is in the analysis of contemporary advertising. For it is precisely from this sphere, that is, from what the advertising signs refer to, that the most complex and challenging elements of contemporary advertising will

be encompassed in the analysis: the presence — or, in this case, the absence — of the product, the involvement of the consumer in the media process — in interaction or experience — and the growing abstraction of brand discourses, which are increasingly centered on values, lifestyles, causes and purposes.

Figure 4  
*The dynamic object*



Only finally should we reach the third part of the analysis, the sphere of the interpretant, that is, the effects that the sign potentially produces in the mind of the audience. We already know Peirce's distinction between the immediate interpretant — that which is internal to the sign itself — the dynamic interpretant — that which is realized by the public — and the final interpretant — that limit of thought to which every sign tends, without ever fully reaching it. The divisions of the dynamic interpretant into emotional, energetic, and logical are also known, giving an account here of the different types of effects that a given sign can have on the interpreter.

But it must be made clear that, although the abstraction is of the third order of interpretants, the ideas to which the sign refers, which are therefore to some extent in the sign itself, truly reside in the culture, to which the sign will refer in the sphere of the object, to generate an effect — potential or actual — with the public. The effect is abstract, but it is not to be confused, although it does combine with them, with the meanings to which the sign refers. In other words: the values, for example, to which the signs refer, in their relation with the object, will generate effects in the interpreter — effects that can be of an emotional, energetic, or logical nature,



## Contemporary advertising and Peircean semiotics: A methodological proposal

in other words, that can sensitize, make people act or produce an understanding (Figure 5).

In this sense, a thorough understanding of the semiotic process is also fundamental to understanding the process of generating meaning in advertising. Because its success, whatever it may be, depends on this process. The effect you want to generate with the public is contained in the sign and starts from the sign, passes through the instance of the object, in which it materializes, is contextualized and given meaning, to finally reach a mind that can be affected by it. In addition, it is in the construction of these signs, which refer to a half-true reality (so that it can be recognized), half-constructed (so that it can be desired), that advertising participates in the process of making meanings more dynamic. This is where the interpretant is revealed as the third dimension of a complex process, in which advertising is or is not effective, not because the promoted meanings are in it — they are in the process, in the whole, in semiosis, from the sign to the interpretant — but because there is the chance of sensitization, mobilization and, finally, signification. Whether we simply want someone to like or sympathize with “our” brand, whether we just want people to click and buy, whether we want people to associate the company with other values, whether we want the public to take a new stance on reality, all of this is in the interpretant. However, the meanings involved in this process are, need to be, and can only be in the sign, in its complex referentiality, so that it can achieve the potential to become a dynamic interpretant.

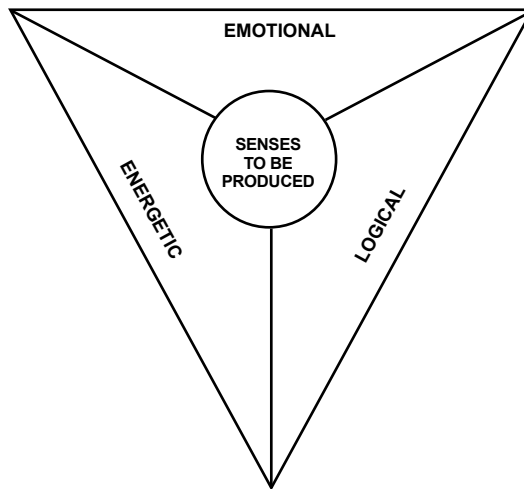
Of course, we can say, in the context of analysis, that the effects potentially generated by a particular piece or advertising action are emotional and can be defined as affectivity, or of an energetic nature and can be defined as protection, or even of a logical nature and defined as responsibility. However, it is essential to be clear that this simplification hides the true dynamics of the production of meaning, which, it should be said again, begins with the sign, passes through the object, and finally reaches the interpretant.

This creature [the effect of the sign on the mind] is generated by the sign, and so it is, not because the sign constitutes an omnipotent entity, but because it carries the power to receive the determination of the object. It is simply because the sign represents the object that it can generate an interpretant, so that the object also determines this interpretant, through the mediation of the sign. (Santaella, 2004b, p. 64)

In advertising, specifically, we can deal with the three types of dynamic interpretants in two ways. We can first think of emotional, energetic, or logical “type” interpretants, with, for example, affection being the first type, protection being the second type and responsibility being the third, as seen above.

Figure 5

*The nature of interpretants*



From this point of view, they would be interpretants that could be differentiated from each other by converting themselves into other signs. Moreover, it wouldn't matter if they only generated a shudder in the consumer, a decision to buy, or a revision of their values. This is the predominant approach when we think of the semiotic analyses that are already being carried out — both in the academic sphere and in the market context.

Nevertheless, there is another possibility, which is to look at these same three types of dynamic interpretants from the point of view of the effects they have on the interpreter. Santaella and Nöth propose three basic types of effects that advertising can provoke in the public: suggestion, seduction, and persuasion, which, according to the authors, “find their adjusted correspondence in the three phenomenological categories developed by C. S. Peirce” (2011, p. 85). Trying to adjust the general effects that advertising can provoke in the public to the three types of dynamic interpretants developed by Peirce, we arrive at another triadic classification: sensitization, mobilization, and understanding (Figure 6). Especially when it comes to promoting causes, transmitting values, and building positions — but also when it comes to the prosaic intention of selling — this classification

# A

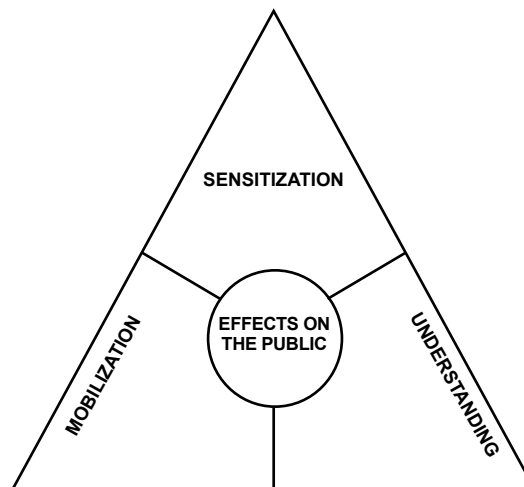
## Contemporary advertising and Peircean semiotics: A methodological proposal

is interesting because it not only sheds light on important aspects of the advertising sign under analysis but also allows us to consider its concrete effects on the public.

Sensitization is the first possible effect of a given advertisement. It boils down — without being easy or simple — to provoking a feeling, an emotion, it has to do with feeling. In marketing terms, it corresponds to the first stages of the infamous marketing “funnels”, those linked to attention and knowledge (as a synonym for knowing that something exists, not understanding it). If sensitization refers to an advertising sign that intends to make you buy a product or subscribe to a service, it is only the first stage. If we are talking about an ad that seeks to arouse a certain emotion in the public, such as those for the end of the year, it is in this type of interpretant that success lies.

Mobilization, the second possible effect of an advertisement on the public, involves acting, and it involves doing. We may be talking here specifically about buying, but let’s not forget that, among the objectives of advertising, other possibilities also involve action, such as clicking, liking, following, visiting a store, trying a product, etc. It has to do with the intermediate levels of the aforementioned funnels: intention, and purchase. Activation campaigns — not by chance — find their ultimate goal here.

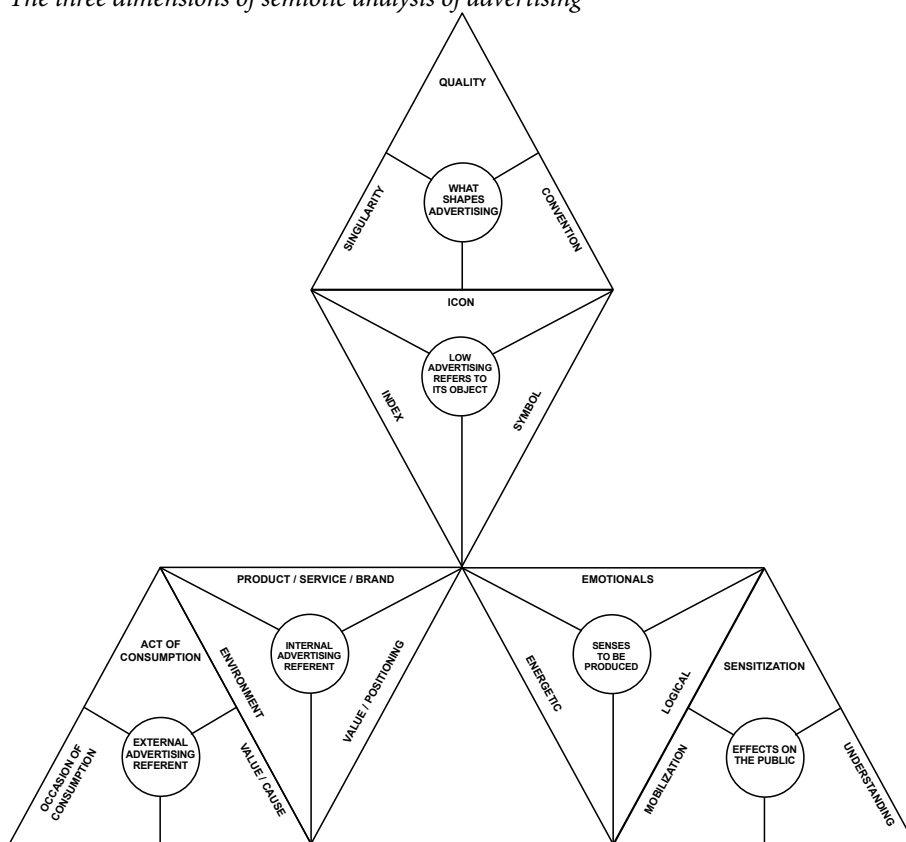
Figure 6  
*The second trichotomy of interpretants*



Understanding, the third dimension of this classification, consists of the effect of the advertising sign on the interpreter, which concerns the

comprehension of an idea, a change in conception, the adoption of a new perspective on reality or a certain subject. It has to do with thinking. The more abstract “purposes” that brands have been trying to build as a point of affinity with their audiences are usually values that, transmitted via advertising, will only be able to achieve their purpose if this advertising can provoke understanding in people. The change in habit, represented in these funnels by the last levels — loyalty to and defense of the brand — is one of the effects of the sign when the interpretant it provokes reaches this third stage.

Figure 7  
*The three dimensions of semiotic analysis of advertising*<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup>The graphic composition of figure 7 — an integration of the parts already presented in the previous pictures — simply seeks to synthesize the content presented in texts in a more visual language. At no point does it attempt to represent any kind of procedural schema or map — other than a mental map for understanding how advertising works in terms of its sign processes.

**BETWEEN AUSPICIOUS GENERALITY AND EXCESSIVE ABSTRACTION**

It is very important to make it clear, if it is not already clear, that what has been presented at this point in the study is not intended to define a schematic, mechanistic procedure based on the constituent elements of the



## Contemporary advertising and Peircean semiotics: A methodological proposal

expressive manifestations of contemporary advertising. Our intention has always been to achieve, precisely through the abstraction that characterizes Peirce's semiotics, the general, abstract, conceptual analytical procedures that can favor a more profitable analysis of the elusive and diverse advertising that is produced today. Moreover, even, who knows the propaganda that will be produced in the future. That is why we don't have — or at least we try not to have — pre-defined aspects of analysis, something like pre-established lists of what should be observed by the scholar or analyst. Lists such as these can produce analyses that are as limited as they are rigid, often missing out on the intellectual greatness that can reside in the sign processes engendered by advertising. What we have tried to do is clarify the mental pathway provided by semiotics that best enables us to understand how advertising works, in all its complexity and contemporary richness.

However, you can't seek intellectual generality in your understanding without running the risk of distancing yourself too much from the practical reality in which communication phenomena take place. This, then, is one of the weaknesses of our methodological proposal. By not offering the reader in a more explicit or didactic way an analysis protocol based on the elements that concretely constitute the advertising language of a certain era (photography, typography, title, signature, etc.), it risks losing its practical profitability in everyday applications, whether in the classroom or within advertising agencies. By always trying to demonstrate how semiotic thinking can provide us with the necessary light to reveal a kind of advertising logic, residing within the language of advertising itself, without limiting us to a particular type or format of ad (we're not even talking about ads here), we risk losing a certain aspect of practicality in its application. This is because each analysis would be unique and new, depending on a complex process of adapting semiotic principles to its sign specificities. Nevertheless, at the same time, each one would be a reiteration and strengthening of the method itself, in its quest for generality.

This balance, between more abstract generality and more concrete applicability, is also what was sought throughout this text. If, in some passages, the flirtation with materiality is clear — there are even more direct indications of what should or should not be considered at each stage of the analysis — the intention was never to turn semiotics into a mere tool. If, in other passages, the pursuit of generality ends up generating an excessive distance from the advertising material that concretely populates our daily lives, this needs to be understood from the point of view of one of the ambitions of this text, which



has always been to propose a method that deals with the analysis of advertising as language, not just as a concrete manifestation.

So, to overcome the limitations of the modestly proposed method — and a method that recognizes itself to be free of limitations has yet to be created — we recommend simultaneously comparing it with other reference works in the methodical approach of semiotics to advertising (many of which have already been cited here) and deepening the understanding of semiotic theory itself. Rather than a set of rulers, squares, and compasses that could be used to measure and square any ad, the method presented here is intended to work more like a map, a dynamic, abstract, and conceptual map that allows us to traverse the sign intricacies that make up the language of advertising with some certainty and reasonableness.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

As much as Peirce's semiotics inspire us to seek generality in a movement that is admittedly utopian, it is clear that we cannot ignore the various transformations that advertising communication is undergoing in contemporary times. From the most obvious — such as the growth of online over offline in terms of how it takes place or the prevalence of audiovisual language over other languages — to the most challenging — its entwinement with the so-called big techs (large global companies that have been popularizing the logic of artificial intelligence, big data, algorithms, etc.), its ideological and political character — there are clear signs that advertising is changing profoundly in the current context. In addition, this can happen both on an expressive level and in its deeper logic.

In this sense, the method proposed in this text should remain profitable (within its limitations) as long as advertising remains sign-based. Without wishing to state that this is a definitive or self-sufficient method, what is meant is that, as long as advertising communication can be understood in its communication, sign, and mediating nature, we will find some contribution in the work of Charles Peirce. As long as advertising, to fulfill its effects assumes a sign materiality of language — however syncretic or hybrid it may be — what this text proposes, it is believed, tends to be of some use in the search for its understanding.

It could be that, shortly, perhaps even in this kind of future that is already present, and we don't know it, advertising will transfigure itself and, from being a message, it will simply become numbers, calculations, formulas, and mathematical computer functions. It's hard to imagine what this kind of



## Contemporary advertising and Peircean semiotics: A methodological proposal

advertising would be like, from machine to machine, without at some point having to be seen in the form of a communication sign. At this point, semiotics will be there, ready to enlighten us on the question of its expressiveness. However, it will also be there to point out the loopholes through which we can penetrate its algorithmic mechanisms.

Fidelity to the so-called interpretive paradigm forces us to understand that, in the face of complex phenomena, the theoretical bases and methodological arrangements must be strengthened under the same sign of complexity. If we take science to mean, following Peirce, “that which is carried out by living researchers, science as the result of the concrete search of a real group of living people, thus characterizing itself as something in permanent metabolism and growth” (Santaella, 2001, p. 103) — and if we also consider that “there is no longer the interpretative *method* in research; in any discipline, we need to multiply methodologies. “ (Canevacci, 2013, p. 172, emphasis added) — it is important to make it clear that the method presented here is also designed to be integrated with other disciplines and other analysis procedures. Whatever perspective is taken to understand this phenomenon that is increasingly ubiquitous in our daily lives — and more and more intertwined with political, social, cultural, economic, and technological issues — which is advertising, it will be necessary to understand its language, which is also growing in complexity. This is where the semiotic method will come in handy. ■

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Article received on march 23, 2023 and approved on june 23, 2023