

## PREMISES AND POTENTIAL FOR THE APPLICATION OF SEMIOTICS IN MARKETING RESEARCH

Magdalena Sobocińska

Wrocław University of Economics

**Abstract.** Potential uses of semiotics in market research should be examined in the context of the multi-paradigmatic nature of marketing and the continuous development of qualitative research methods. The essence of semiotic approach is expressed in its focus on the contextual dimension of consumption. Semiotic studies represent a departure from the analytical examination of declarations, placing more emphasis on identification of behavioural changes and emerging trends in consumer attitudes. The semiotic approach places great significance on the analysis of cultural messages, also those propagated through mass media. Semiotic studies may be employed in brand management for portfolio-building, cultural branding and in the design of brand positioning strategies. It is also an effective instrument for the formulation of marketing messages and collation of cultural insights. To reduce the uncertainty of interpretation, results of semiotic analyses should be triangulated against those obtained using standard qualitative and quantitative methods.

**Key words:** marketing, culture, semiotics, semiotic square, binary opposition pairs, cinema market

### INTRODUCTION

Modern trends in market research development seem to follow a multi-directional and multi-paradigmatic approach, as attested by the emergence of new concepts of marketing and the pursuit of research instruments and methods to expand the knowledge base available to the various decision-making bodies. The purpose of this paper is to present premises for and potential benefits offered by the adoption of a semiotic approach to market research. Conclusions were drawn from literature studies, and presented in the context

---

Corresponding author: Magdalena Sobocińska, Wrocław University of Economics, Institute of Marketing, Department of Marketing Studies, Komandorska 118/120, 53-345 Wrocław, Poland, e-mail: [magdalena.sobocinska@ue.wroc.pl](mailto:magdalena.sobocinska@ue.wroc.pl)

© Copyright by Warsaw University of Life Sciences Press, Warsaw 2016

of the main assumptions of semiotics and the potential areas of application. The discussion on the utility of semiotic analyses was exemplified using case studies of local cinema market, to demonstrate methods for inducing change in the popular categorisation of cinemas. The examples suggest that, by breaking the binary oppositions and by concerted marketing effort, it is possible to create a new model (or formula) of a movie theatre.

### **THE METHOD: THE ESSENCE OF SEMIOTICS AND PREMISES FOR ITS USE IN MARKETING**

The essence of the semiotic approach is expressed in its focus on the contextual dimension of consumption. Semiotic analyses, belonging in the category of qualitative market research, are involved with identification of meanings attached to certain notions, with study of forms of product categorisation, or the examination of culturally-determined consumer attitudes and behaviours [Mazurek-Łopacińska and Sobocińska 2014, Mazurek-Łopacińska 2015]. Semiotic analyses place strong emphasis on the study of cultural messages, also those used in mass media (movies, TV productions, popular literature, the press, advertising). Semiotic studies represent a departure from the analytical examination of declarations collected from respondents, placing more emphasis on the study of cultural elements that influence consumer behaviour. It must be noted that semiotic analyses offer potential for the examination of adjustment between values projected by the brand and the current cultural patterns. Analyses of products as signs or symbols involve the study of their denotative meanings, in relation to functional needs and customer expectations, and their connotative meaning, related to the set of properties or features that define the buyer rather than the product itself [Nöth et al. 2001].

The use of semiotics in market research should be examined in the context of the multi-paradigmatic nature of marketing and the resulting development of methods based on paradigms alternative to the present positivist-functional-systemic paradigm, particularly the symbolic-interpretive approach. The latter is characterised by departure from the cause-effect model of neo-positivism, and by the adopted assumption (in accordance with the social constructivism theory) that human beings perceive reality through their culture and experiences. The symbolic-interpretive paradigm places key significance upon rooting the analytical research in practical observation of real-life scenarios and on the cognitive role of language in the formulation of social reality [Sułkowski 2012].

The cultural impact on consumers and their behaviour may be analysed from the viewpoint of:

- forming consumer identity through marketing activities of companies – sources of symbolic capital for the consumer;
- organisation of autonomous consumer groups, to improve the realisation of shared objectives related to consumption;

- consumer relations with various social or institutional structures;
- consumer attitudes and ideologies related to the established social norms and standards [Arnould and Thompson 2005].

Proper recognition of the symbolic roles attributed to products and brands is of paramount importance, since various consumer segments and individuals attribute different meanings to those roles. It may be useful to observe that the formulation of symbolic meanings attributed by consumers to brands and products is a process affected not only by the marketing activities, but also by peer influence, opinion exchange, and by the adopted set of values associated with customers' cultural or subcultural identification [Ahuvia et al. 2006].

The increased interest in culture as a determinant in management processes, modern development of symbolic consumption, heterogenization of lifestyles forcing brands to build their image on more than a single myth – all these can be viewed as premises for the use of semiotic approach in marketing. In addition, the semiotic approach is a good example of a modern qualitative research instrument offering results independent of respondent declarations. At the same time, it must be noted that the use of semiotics in marketing is a response to an ongoing pursuit for more effective forms of market influence.

Application of semiotic analyses in the design of marketing messages and collation of cultural insights may attest to the high potential of this approach. Semiotic analyses are also an effective instrument for the formulation of brand positioning strategies and product portfolios, identification of approaches to brand narration, and cultural branding (Fig. 1).

With regard to cultural branding based on the semiotic approach, it may be useful to emphasise the role of proper identification of identity conflicts which can be targeted and solved by suitably designed cultural myths. Furthermore, it is important to establish methods of building credibility of the brand as the vehicle for the propagation of the myth. Realisation of these postulates improves the chance of success in generating a unique communication code around the brand [Holt 2004].

The use of semiotic approach in marketing requires departure from the narrow perspective of branding based on perceptions and emotions. The brand should be perceived in terms of a cultural icon, a specific emanation of consumer's identity [Pogorzelski 2015].

At the same time, it must be noted that the complexity of modern decision-making processes forces market researchers to go beyond the framework of classical research based on isolated semiotic concepts. Research work in semiotic approach should involve triangulation of semiotic findings with those obtained using classical methods of qualitative and quantitative research.

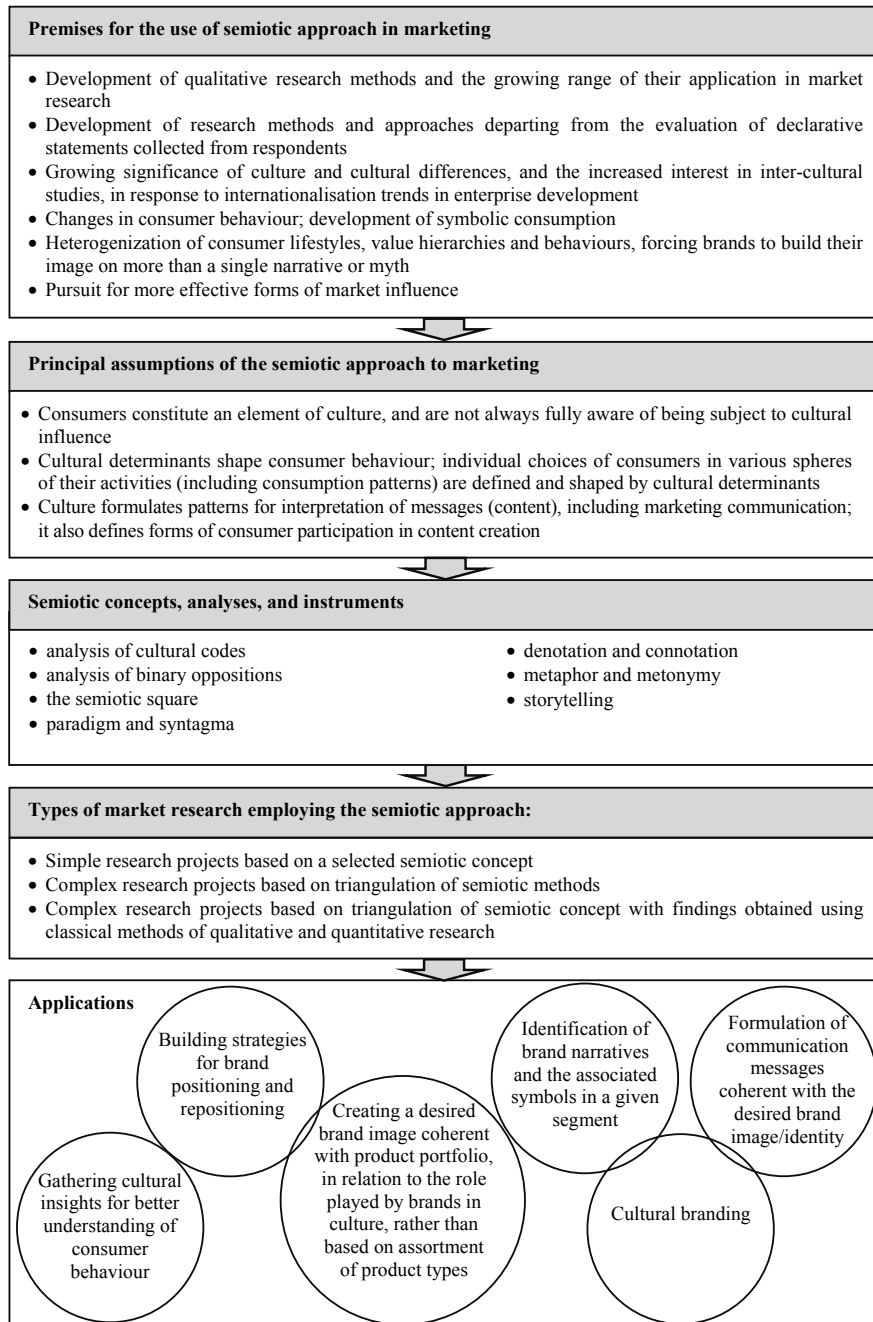


Fig. 1. Premises and main assumptions for the use of semiotic approach in marketing

Source: Own research.

## FORMS AND MAIN ASSUPTIONS OF SEMIOTIC ANALYSES

The concept of “sign” lies at the core of all semiotic analyses employed in market research. Professional literature presents two dominant models of the sign concept: de Saussure’s and Peirce’s. The former represents a dyadic approach. De Saussure’s model postulates the following constituents of a sign [Chandler 2011]:

- the signifier – referencing forms adopted by the sign;
- the signified, i.e. a notion, concept or value represented by the signifier.

De Saussure’s concept is relational in its assumption that signs as such are devoid of inherent meaning, and that their meaning is generated in relation to other signs. Peirce’s model, on the other hand, identifies three fundamental elements of a sign [Chandler 2011]:

- representamen (sign-vehicle), describing the form adopted by the sign;
- interpretant, representing the meaning carried by the sign;
- object – referring to the object signified by the sign and external to the sign itself.

Comparing the two models, it can be seen that there is a rough correspondence between the concept pairs: “representamen” with “signifier”, and “interpretant” with “the signified”. However, unlike the signified, the interpretant is also a sign by and of itself, although expressed solely in the mind of the interpreter.

It may be useful to note here the difference between the classic and the social approach to semiotics. In classical semiotics, meanings are derived from texts, and the task of the researcher is to identify and decode them based on references to the coding system. Social semiotics, on the other hand, is based on the assumption that meanings are formulated in the course of social communication [Kaczmarek 2014].

Semiotic analyses of visual and textual sources offer potential for identification of meanings attached to the notion or concept under study. Table 1 presents basic types and instruments of semiotic analysis, with examples of application in market research.

From the viewpoint of their utility and potential for market studies, one of the most promising approaches is the analysis of cultural codes: residual, dominant, and emergent. By drawing the trend trajectory, researchers can not only gain insight into past and present behaviour of consumers, but also forecast the emerging trends and future behaviours.

Another widely used method is the semiotic square – a graphical representation of correlations between distinguishing traits of a semiotic category under study. This instrument is an elaboration of the binary opposition analysis. The semiotic square, as a construct, is an elaboration of the assumptions of the structural linguistics, and involves mapping of the correlations based on validation of positive and negative assertions [Floch 2001a]. The semiotic square can be used for the identification of marketing categories, to help organise the structure of notions and to uncover categories which have not yet been targeted.

Table 1. Basic types and instruments of semiotic analysis and their potential applications in market research

Type of semiotic analysis	Authors	Main assumptions and premises	Applications in market research
Analysis of cultural codes: residual, dominant and emergent	R. Williams, M. Alexander, M. Evans, M. Harvey, M. Anderson	culture of a given period may be described through internal correlations between residual values (originating in the past, but still cultivated in culture), dominant values, and emergent values (signalling new meanings and practices of an emerging cultural change)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• building code maps to be used in brand management and marketing communication processes;</li> <li>• setting directions of product and brand development;</li> <li>• identification and interpretation of meaning structures used by consumers;</li> <li>• identification of communication codes employed by market competitors</li> </ul>
Analysis of binary oppositions	R. Jacobson, V. Valentine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• cognition and attribution of meanings or senses to various categories can also be derived from definition of the opposite (what the object is vs. is not);</li> <li>• binary opposition pairs are frequent in cultural and subcultural context, and play a significant role in social processes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• identification of binary oppositions and correlations between the notions under study and the understanding of their origin offers insight into the way consumers think and the way they organise the world they live in;</li> <li>• knowledge gained from semiotic analyses can be used in brand management to help identify barriers to development and formulate directions of changes in market communication and brand positioning</li> </ul>
The semiotic square	A. Greimas, J.M. Floch	an elaboration of the binary opposition analysis, extending the number of correlations between the notions under study beyond the narrow scope of binary pairing	

Source: Own research based on Polak and Żurawicka [2015].

## THE FINDINGS: THE USE OF SEMIOTIC ANALYSES IN THE STUDY OF CHANGES IN MARKET CATEGORISATION OF CINEMAS

To illustrate the utility of semiotic analyses in market research, let us analyse changes in popular categorisation of cinemas, as evident in the formation of new segmentation models in this particular market. For many years, the typical segmentation of cinema market was based on a binary opposition of multiplex cinemas vs arthouse cinemas. The discerning feature of multiplex cinemas is their focus on global (mostly American) and popular productions, presented in large, multi-cinema centres. The context of reception for these films is set in a mercantile environment, to accompany other shopping and entertainment activities, with moving pictures perceived as a source of pleasure and relaxation.

Arthouse cinemas, on the other hand, operate in a sort of opposition to the multiplex centres, both in physical market space, and in the minds of consumers. This model of cinema is characterised by its focus on art cinema and ambitious projects for discerning viewers, often of local or European origin. Arthouse cinemas are cosy and low-key, providing intimacy away from the crowds. They also put strong emphasis on educating their viewers, with introductory presentations and guest panels, to enhance the perception of cinema as an art with unique history and achievements. This image is reinforced by the setting and the décor, as well as the use of suitable forms of market communication, with strong associations to history. In addition, arthouse cinemas build their organisational culture around material artefacts: posters, artistic photos, stills of famous movie scenes, etc. (Table 2).

Table 2. Binary opposition pairs defining the perception of two basic types of cinemas

Multiplex	Arthouse cinema
egalitarian productions, easy reception	ambitious productions for elite audiences
mostly American production	European and local productions
blockbusters	arthouse movies and artistic cinema
movie as a market product	cinema as an art
large facilities	small viewing rooms
multi-stage complexes	mostly one-stage
noisy	low-key and sheltered
modern	retro
unified design	variety in design
hedonism	intellectual reflexion
entertainment	education

Source: Own research.

By pursuing this approach and elaborating it in the form of a semiotic square of the cinema market, we can identify some other types (models) of cinema operation on the market. For our purpose, the correlations between multiplex and arthouse cinemas are still defined in terms of opposing categories, while small cinemas offering commercial production and large cinemas with ambitious productions can be defined by negation (Fig. 2).

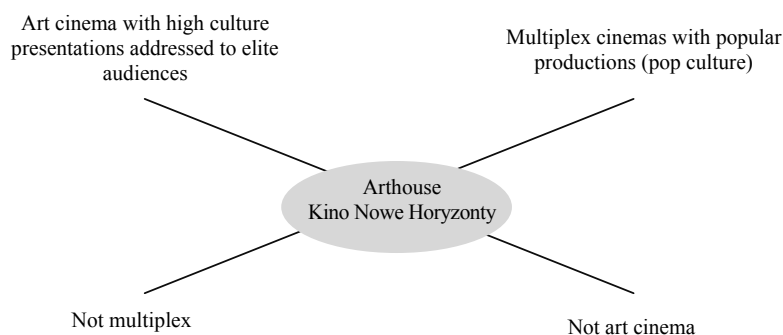


Fig. 2. The semiotic square, as used in the categorisation of cinema types

Source: Own research.

By using the semiotic square, we can identify a space for a new model of cinema operation, integrating features of both multiplex and arthouse models. Kino Nowe Horyzonty is a good example of a practical use of this space, based on transformation of a multiplex into an arthouse complex. The innovation of this approach lies in the potential to present ambitious repertoire in a large facility with nine projection rooms. The cinema offer is built on arthouse and middle-of-the-road movies, with great emphasis on education programs, movie festivals, reviews, guest presentations and other cultural events, not necessarily limited to cinema art. This identity is communicated through modern arrangement and design, contrasting both with the multiplex and the arthouse standards.

This example seems to confirm the notion that, by breaking the narrow space of binary opposition and reaching for suitable forms of communication, it is possible to fashion a completely new and attractive model of cinema house, integrating best features of the types already present and active on the market.

## CONCLUSIONS

The use of semiotics in market studies offers a range of benefits, such as [Floch 2006b]:

- better insight into sets of meanings related to the instrumental and operating spheres of marketing, and better organisation of those meanings, with proper identification of hierarchies and logical orders represented in those notions;
- improved effectiveness of marketing through the use of forms and message elements well-adjusted to the task of communicating brand identity;
- better projection of brand and product image on the market.

Semiotic analyses may involve both deconstruction of codes already used by the competitors, and the construction of original content designed to communicate specific values associated with the brand.

There are many premises for the use of semiotic approach in market research. Rapid development of qualitative methods and the growing significance of culture as a determinant of management processes and consumer behaviour patterns seem to confirm the validity of the semiotic approach. The semiotic approach offers good potential for solving decision-making problems in marketing areas, but it should be approached with competence, to avoid the risk of textual over-interpretation. For this reason, it is advisable that the findings of semiotic analyses be triangulated against those obtained by other means.

## REFERENCES

- Ahuvia, A., Carroll, B., Yang, Y. (2006). Consumer Culture Theory and Lifestyle Segmentation. *Innovation Marketing*, 2, 4, 33–43.



- Arnould, E.J., Thompson, C.J. (2005). Consumer Culture Theory (CCT): Twenty Years of Research. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31, 4, 868–882.
- Chandler, D. (2011). Wprowadzenie do semiotyki [Introduction to Semiotics]. Oficyna Wydawnicza Volumen Warszawa, 29–46, 46–54.
- Floch, J.M. (2001a). Rola semiotyki strukturalnej w projektowaniu hipermarketu [The role of structural semiotics in hypermarket design]. [In:] M. Lambkin, G. Foxall, F. van Raaij, B. Heilbrunn (Eds), *Zachowanie konsumenta. Koncepcje i badania europejskie [European Perspectives on Consumer Behaviour]*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa, 282–283.
- Floch, J.M. (2001b). Semiotics, marketing and communication. Beneath the signs, the strategies. Palgrave, New York, 6–12.
- Holt, D. (2004). *How Brands Become Icons: The Principles of Cultural Branding*. Harvard Business School Publishing, Boston, 13–38.
- Kaczmarek, J. (2014). Zobaczyć społeczeństwo. Film i wideo w badaniach socjologicznych [Picture the society. Film and video in social studies]. Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu, Poznań, 177–178.
- Mazurek-Łopacińska, K. (2015). Rola kodów kulturowych i zachowań konsumentów w kreowaniu innowacji [Cultural codes and consumer behaviours: their role in creating innovation]. [In:] *Marketing i Rynek*, 2, 26–36.
- Mazurek-Łopacińska, K., Sobocińska, M. (2014). Badania kodów kulturowych w tworzeniu marketingowych modeli biznesu [Cultural code analysis in the design of marketing models for business applications]. *Prace Naukowe Uniwersytetu Ekonomicznego we Wrocławiu, Badania marketingowe – nowe podejścia oraz metody na współczesnym rynku*, 336, 11–21.
- Nöth, W., Heilbrunn, B., Floch, J.M. (2001). Semiotyka konsumpcji [Semiotics of consumption]. [In:] M. Lambkin, G. Foxall, F. van Raaij, B. Heilbrunn (Eds), *Zachowanie konsumenta. Koncepcje i badania europejskie [European Perspectives on Consumer Behaviour]*. Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa, 418–419.
- Pogorzelski, J. (2015). Marka na cztery sposoby. Branding percepcyjny, emocjonalny, społeczny i kulturowy [The Four Ways of a Brand. Perceptive, emotional, social and cultural branding]. Wolters Kluwer, Warszawa, 16–17, 181–230.
- Polak, K., Żurawicka, M. (2015). Badania semiotyczne i ich praktyczne wykorzystanie [Semiotic analyses and their uses]. [In:] A. Dąbrowska, A. Wódkowski (Eds), *Badania marketingowe. Praktyka nauce – Nauka praktyce [Market research, the science and the practice]*. Instytut Badań Rynku, Konsumpcji i Koniunktury, Warszawa, 110–120.
- Sułkowski, Ł. (2012). Epistemologia i metodologia zarządzania [Epistemology and methodology of management]. PWE, Warszawa, 112–122, 181–187.

## PRZESŁANKI I MOŻLIWOŚCI ZASTOSOWANIA SEMIOTYKI W MARKETINGU

**Streszczenie.** Na zastosowania semiotyki w marketingu należy patrzeć przez pryzmat jego wieloparadygmatyczności i rozwoju badań jakościowych. Istota semiotyki polega na tym, że badany jest kontekst, w którym odbywa się konsumpcja. W badaniach semiotycznych odchodzi się od deklaracji respondentów i rozpoznaje się kierunki zmian zachowań nabywców oraz kształtujące się nowe postawy konsumentów. Szczególną rolę w badaniach semiotycznych pełnią teksty kultury, w tym także kultury masowej. Badania semiotyczne znajdują zastosowania w procesach kształtowania portfolio marek, w budowie strategii

pozycjonowania marek, w „branding” kulturowym oraz w tworzeniu przekazów marketingowych, a także służą pozyskiwaniu „insight” kulturowych. W celu zmniejszenia niepewności interpretacyjnej istnieje potrzeba stosowania triangulacji analiz semiotycznych z klasycznymi badaniami jakościowymi i ilościowymi.

**Słowa kluczowe:** marketing, kultura, semiotyka, kwadrat semiotyczny, pary opozycji binarnych, rynek kin

Accepted for print: 11.02.2016

For citation: Sobocińska M. (2016). Premises and potential for the application of semiotics in marketing research. *Acta Sci. Pol., Oeconomia*, 15 (1), 123–132.