

Decoding chocolate: a semiotic analysis of advertising posters, 1871–1900.

Authors: Xavier Jou-Badal, ESCI Universitat Pompeu Fabra, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6476-3371> ; Lara Martín-Vicario, Universitat Internacional de Catalunya, <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8056-4962>.

Introduction

From the tantalizing allure of cinematic chocolate factories to the indulgent visuals of advertising campaigns, chocolate has long captivated the collective imagination. Its rich imagery has been a cornerstone of promotional materials—printed advertisements, posters, collectible cards, and television commercials—transforming chocolate from merely a confectionery product into a symbol of desire, comfort, or luxury. By the late nineteenth century, this potent symbolism was skilfully employed by chocolate manufacturers, whose advertising posters transcended their commercial purpose to become cultural artifacts. These visual representations not only marketed products but also communicated societal values and aspirations, embedding brands within the cultural fabric of their time.

To explore these deeper layers of meaning, semiotics provides a framework for understanding the intersection of culture, language, and society. Umberto Eco (1979) describes semiotics as the study concerned with anything that can function as a sign, while Chandler (2007) refers to it as the study of signs and their use or interpretation, facilitating the interpretation of symbolic meanings conveyed through images, words, and cultural artifacts. Lipartito (1995) called on business historians to "leave the comforts of functionalism behind and light out for the unknown territory of semiotics". He later reinforced this argument by emphasising that organisational structures possess moral, emotional, and ideological dimensions (Lipartito, 2016). Semiotics thus becomes a tool to decode these advertising narratives, enabling historians to understand the broader societal impact of business practices and the role of advertisers in shaping collective memory (Decker et al., 2021).

Since the mid-nineteenth century, advertising has been a critical tool for entrepreneurs in the consumer goods sector, gaining increasing importance as industries expanded and consumer markets flourished (Church, 1999, 2000). This period also marked the rapid growth of the chocolate industry (Clarence-Smith, 2000), giving rise to

prominent brands across Europe. This article examines the advertising strategies of these successful chocolatiers, focusing on the use of posters as their medium for communicating brand identity to their products, improving the good display at the point of sale and advertise the enhance brand awareness against other chocolatiers (Fitzgerald, 1995, p. 98).

This case study centres on posters by Barcelona-based Chocolates Amatller, featuring an advertising artwork from 1900 authored by Czech artist Alphonse Mucha, whose art-nouveau illustrations were becoming renowned along Europe consumer goods products (Reade, 1964). This analysis is complemented with Madrid's chocolatier Matías López, who pioneered the first advertising poster in Spain in 1871 (Ruiz-Melendreras, 1985), created by caricaturist Ortego y Vereda featuring *Los Gordos y Los Flacos* (The Fat and the Thin), four satirical characters showing the nutritional benefits of his product. The study extends its scope to include international perspectives, analysing the French chocolatier Menier—known at the time as the Chocolate Cathedral of Europe, with a poster designed by artist Firmin Bouisset in 1893, who used his own child as a model (Drouard, 2016). The comparative analysis concludes with the British context through an examination of Rowntree's c.1900 poster that employs humour and domestic gender dynamics as part of its advertising appeal (Robertson, 2004).

The methodology analysis of semiotics will be guided by the methodology of visual imagery developed by Barthes (1967), Eco (1968, 1989, 1992), Rose (2001), which emphasizes the intrinsic relationship between vision, visuality, and the construction of meaning. According to Rose, images establish connections between seeing and knowing, linking the act of viewing to the process of understanding (Rose, 2001, p. 7). Central to this framework is the distinction between vision—what the human eye is physiologically capable of perceiving—and visuality, which encompasses what people are culturally allowed, able, or made to see (Rose, 2001, p. 6). Visuality operates within specific cultural and social contexts, shaping how advertisements are interpreted and understood by their audiences. This distinction proves relevant for analysing chocolate advertising, where visual elements were carefully designed to evoke emotional responses, reinforce societal values, and shape consumer perceptions. By decoding the symbolic messages conveyed through these posters, the study seeks to uncover how chocolate advertising served as a platform for articulating societal aspirations and fostering emotional connections. Ultimately, the analysis positions these brands as active participants in shaping consumer culture, reflecting and influencing broader social norms and ideals.

By integrating semiotics into the historiography of marketing and business history, this article offers insights into the transformative power of marketing, branding and advertising. It emphasizes the importance of viewing advertising not just as a commercial activity but as a cultural and social phenomenon, where businesses actively engage in shaping the narratives that define consumer culture. This interdisciplinary approach highlights how advertising, as a medium of cultural storytelling, extends beyond its immediate economic objectives to influence collective memory and societal norms.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that the advertising practices at the turn of the century were not merely about selling chocolate. They were about crafting identities, shaping aspirations, and embedding brands within the cultural consciousness of their time. By examining the visual imagery of chocolatiers through the lens of semiotics, the article contributes to a deeper understanding of the interplay between business practices, cultural storytelling, and consumer culture.

Literature Review

Business historians have increasingly acknowledged branding as a fundamental element in how firms create competitive advantage over time. Wilkins (1992) highlighted trademarks as the “intangible assets” that enhanced efficiency and scale in modern firms. This was further developed in the edited volume by Jones & Morgan (1994), which presented a series of case studies in the food and drink industries showing how brand development added value by fostering consumer loyalty and product differentiation. Subsequent contributions by da Silva Lopes & Casson (2007) emphasised the entrepreneurial agency behind the creation and consolidation of global brands. This growing interest has also been reflected in special issues of journals in the field, such as *Enterprise & Society* (2014), co-edited by da Silva Lopes & Duguid, and two themed issues of *Business History* (2019, 2020), co-edited by Castro & Sáiz, which explored the historical development of branding, trademarks, and national identity from a comparative perspective.

This historiographical foundation has created space for complementary perspectives, such as the study of content marketing, to analyse how the narrative strategies have shaped the symbolic construction of brand meaning. Using quantitative content analysis of textual advertising, Scott and Newton (2012) show that British building societies in the interwar period emphasised themes such as security, institutional credibility, and attractive interest rates, while largely avoiding appeals to personal thrift.

Similarly, Keneley (2015) traces how Australian mutual insurers evolved from Victorian-era messages centred on moral duty and financial responsibility to more personalised, emotionally targeted appeals directed at farmers, professionals, and women, who began to be explicitly addressed as consumers. The archival analysis of British railway advertising committee minutes reveals how coordinated efforts among competitors contributed to shaping the figure of the “average individual” as a standardised customer profile for nationwide promotional strategies (Shin, 2014). Moreover, the construction of nationally branded products has also been examined in the context of New Zealand’s butter and lamb advertising to Britain, where Producer Boards employed familiar brand names to reinforce cultural proximity and convey imperial familiarity (Barnes & Higgins, 2020).

In addition to studies focusing on textual content alone, several contributions have explored how brand identity was constructed through the combination of text and visual imagery, revealing how symbolic elements in advertising reinforced the shaping of consumer perceptions and were influenced by broader cultural meanings. For instance, Barnes and Newton (2019) show how the National Provincial Bank of England strategically employed architectural symbolism—using classical façades and regional sculptures—to project trust, respectability, and national reach, positioning itself as both culturally authoritative and locally rooted. Similarly, in the context of interwar Britain, gas industry marketing campaigns integrated visual imagery and printed media to promote domestic appliances, notably targeting housewives through lifestyle-oriented narratives centred on design, modernity, and public service (Heller, Kohli & Kondo, 2024). Turning to food branding, Pirani (2024) explores how Mulino Bianco used nostalgic advertising to construct an imagined tradition of the “Italian breakfast”, turning biscuits into mnemonic commodities by blending rustic visual iconography with emotionally charged messages embedded in collective memory.

Semiotic analysis, as applied in the present study, has also been explicitly used in prior historical business research. Wrigley’s chewing gum advertising in North America constructed layered meanings through health-related language and the recurring Spearman character, blending medical discourse with playful imagery to reframe the product as both curative and pleasurable (Robinson, 2004). Similarly, Hisano & Chapman (2023) demonstrate how symbolic associations embedded in cookbooks, food journalism, and advertising helped reframe U.S. table wine as natural and domestic, aligning it with middle-class culinary and cultural values.

Though, as Lipartito (1995, 2006) noted that business historians have often favoured narrative approaches over systematic symbolic analysis, many of the studies reviewed here do engage—at least in part—with the semiotic dimensions of branding and consumer meaning-making. Building on these contributions, the present study adopts an explicitly structured semiotic methodology to analyse how historical chocolate advertising combined text and image to construct brand identity, articulate consumer ideals, and embed products within broader cultural imaginaries.

Methods

This study examines historical advertisements from leading Spanish chocolate brands at the turn of the twentieth century: Chocolates Amatller and Matías López. To provide a more comprehensive view of the Spanish chocolate sector's landscape, the analysis extends to two international brands: Menier from Brand and Rowntree from Britain. Employing a semiotic approach to the four posters, the study aims to reveal how these visuals shaped the iconic representation of chocolate's historical and cultural significance.

The choice of elements depicted in advertisements is not accidental; instead, advertisers deliberately select from a palette of visual elements that are already encoded and interpretable by consumers, aiming to evoke specific consumer responses (Phillips & McQuarrie, 2004). As socially constructed artifacts, images are rooted in a shared cultural context between consumers and advertisers (Williams et al., 2007). This shared context suggests that advertisements may provide audiences—and academics—with updated discursive representations of the elements they portray (Williams et al., 2007). Furthermore, the effectiveness of an advertisement will rely on the audience ability to decode it as the advertisers intended (Rose, 2001).

For this study, a semiotic approach is adopted, as it provides tools how the study of meaning is adopted. Images, in this case advertising posters, possess an internal structure with a hierarchy of elements. Semiotic analysis provides a comprehensive set of tools to decrypt signs and codes within an advertisement's elements and to examine how these function within a broader system of meaning (Freire, 2014; Rose, 2001, p. 69). Many advertisements follow a structured narrative framework, incorporating elements such as settings and episodes. These narratives often present a problem, arouse emotional responses, and guide audiences toward specific goals and resolutions (Mick et al., 2004). By applying the use of semiotics, this analysis aims to reveal the structures and social discourses that advertisements often conceal (García-López & Cabezuelo-Lorenzo, 2016)

and how consumers interpret advertisements and construct symbolic relationships through their interpretive processes (Treddiser, 2010, p. 472). As Umberto Eco (1968) observes, a text serves as a battlefield where the author's text (advertiser) coding strategies and intentions clash with the reader's (consumers) decoding strategies and interpretations.

A semiotic approach is often seen as the most used methodology in case studies because, as opposed to other visual analysis approaches—such as content analysis, which focuses on representativeness of the sample—semiotics traditionally focuses on how conceptually interesting the sample is (Rose, 2001). That is the reason this study is articulated in the form of a case study since it complements semiotic analysis by enabling an in-depth examination of specific phenomena. Case studies provide rich, empirical descriptions and leverage diverse data sources (Eisenhardt, 1989; Dyer & Wilkins, 1991; Baxter & Jack, 2008). By using a case study framework, this research not only allows for detailed exploration of the intricacies and complexities of each company and advertisements (Miskell, 2018) but also supports the construction and validation of theoretical frameworks related to advertising and consumer interpretation (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 1994).

Semiotic analysis, as a methodological approach, has not been implemented uniformly across all scientific contributions (García-López & Cabezuelo-Lorenzo, 2016). For the purpose of this work, the approach draws from Eco's works (1985, 1986, 1998) and Barthes' seminal text *Rhétorique de l'image* (1964), alongside updates from contemporary scholars (García-López & Cabezuelo-Lorenzo, 2016; Rose, 2001). Rather than being straightforward reflections of reality, advertisements serve as social constructs that circulate across various platforms and levels, ultimately encapsulating advertisers' perceptions of their target consumers (Schwarzkopf, 2011). The analysis follows Rose's (2001) three-phase framework, which examines denotation (literal meaning), connotation (associative meaning), and broader systems of signification (cultural and ideological contexts).

For methodological purposes, an analytic grid is developed (see Table 1). While the primary concepts are drawn from the works of Eco (1968, 1989) and Barthes (1964), updates and clarifications provided by García-López and Cabezuelo (2016) and Rose (2001) have also been incorporated. Additionally, although not reflected in Table 1, Joly's fundamental work, *Introduction à l'analyse de l'image* (2009), has been considered to enhance the analysis of images and their connotations. Each level of the grid facilitates

the exploration of progressively deeper layers of meaning, ranging from basic recognition at the iconic level to complex cultural and interpretative meanings at the enthymemic level.

Table 1: Semiotic analysis grid. Source: Own elaboration from Barthes (1967), Eco (1968, 1989), García-López & Cabezuelo-Lorenzo (2016) and Rose (2001).

Register Type	Level	Description	Representative authors
Visual: characteristics that can be seen (e.g., shapes, colours, etc.)	Iconic level	Basic visual representation of an object or a scene. It is the direct resemblance or likeness of what is depicted, such as recognizing an image as a tree because it visually resembles one.	Eco (1968, 1989)
	Iconographic level	Connotative expressions by each icon. The cultural or symbolic meaning associated with the image based on a shared historical (conventional) or cultural (e.g., advertisement, marketing) knowledge.	García-López & Cabezuelo-Lorenzo (2016)
	Tropological	Visual equivalent to verbal tropes, how the visual elements convey abstract concepts, metaphors, or allegorical meanings. E.g., hyperbole, metonym, synecdoche, etc.	
	Enthymemic level	The interactive level where the viewer actively fills in implied or unstated meanings. It involves interpreting the "gaps" in the image's communication, often relying on shared knowledge or assumptions. E.g., an image of a young woman holding a baby will activate the convention that a) that woman is a mother; b) mothers love their children.	
Verbal: Text alongside images (e.g., captions, slogans, etc.).	Anchorage	Fixes or limits the meaning of an image, diminishing ambiguity.	Barthes (1967); Rose (2001)
	Relay-function	Complements the image to create a richer and more complex meaning than either could convey alone.	

Posters as Modern Visual Advertising

The illustrated commercial poster emerged in the mid-nineteenth century at the convergence of technological innovation, regulatory change, and evolving visual culture. In its early forms, the poster resembled typographic broadsides or newspaper advertisements with text-heavy, monochrome notices intended to inform rather than to seduce (Barjau, 2020).

The critical technological breakthrough underpinning this transformation was chromolithography, enabling the mass printing of large-format, full-colour images. In France, this innovation was significantly bolstered by the 1881 Law on the Freedom of the Press, which granted freedom of operation to printing businesses and liberalised regulations for *affichage* (billposting), removing the requirement to seek prior police approval (Iskin, 2014).

Nowhere was this transformation more vivid than in Paris, where the illustrated poster came to define the visual culture of the *fin-de-siècle*. The figure most closely associated with this shift was Jules Chéret, dubbed *le roi de l'affiche*, who produced over a thousand designs between the 1860s and 1890s (Blum, 1953). Chéret introduced stylised female figures, expressive typography, and vibrant colour into posters that promoted everything from cabarets to perfumes and aperitifs. As Chéret articulated, a poster had to “arrest the attention and appeal to the imagination of the average passer-by as he glances at the advertisement from the street pavement, or from the top of an omnibus” (The New Review, 1894, p. 50). By the 1890s, illustrated posters had become a pervasive part of Parisian streets, leading contemporary critics to describe the city as a “museum of images, an exhibition in the open air where the thinking masses, enamoured with art, could satisfy some of their aspirations” (Les Affiches Illustrées, 1896, p. 2).

In Britain, the poster's reception was more cautious, shaped by cultural anxieties regarding advertising's perceived vulgarity and its potential effects on public morality. An article in The Magazine of Art (1881) lamented the unsightly state of hoardings, urging artists to produce posters capable of replacing these “ugly, even 'evil' advertisements” to educate the working classes and improve the nation's cultural standards (p. 299). By the late 1890s, this reformist discourse gained institutional support with the launch of The Poster magazine (1898), legitimising poster art within British artistic circles through its coverage of exhibitions, artist profiles, and essays on poster collecting as a refined cultural practice (Hewitt, 2002).

British poster aesthetics developed along more restrained visual lines. Artists such as the Beggarstaff Brothers favoured bold silhouettes, flat colour planes, and minimal text—deliberately avoiding the decorative excesses of French Art Nouveau (Hewitt, 2002). Contemporary critics and designers viewed this visual strategy as better aligned with local preferences for designs that were effective, visually balanced, and easy to read (Rogers, 1914).

As for Spain, the roots of poster advertising can be traced to Madrid, where editor and printer Benito Hortelano used oversized allegorical prints to promote his books, placing dozens of them throughout the city as early as the 1850s (Ruiz-Melendreras, 1985). His promotional advertisements anticipated the formal recognition of the term “*cartel*” by the Royal Spanish Academy’s dictionary (1869), which defined it as “a printed or handwritten paper affixed in a public place to make something known.”

Beyond these experiments, the first widely acknowledged instance of large-scale commercial poster is attributed to the chocolate manufacturer Matías López (Santos-Torroella, 1947). His campaign, combining humour with effective product messaging, set a precedent for mass-circulated brand promotion and is considered the foundational example in the history of Spanish visual advertising.

Yet it was in Barcelona where the poster matured into a vehicle of commercial and artistic innovation. The city’s industrial expansion, robust export economy, and receptivity to European artistic movements made it a natural centre for graphic experimentation. Chromolithographic printing firms such as Seix & Barral and Rieusset, enabled manufacturers to exploit the persuasive potential of full-colour posters, not just to inform but to enchant and differentiate their brands (Barjau, 2020). Beginning in the 1890s, food and beverage companies such as Anís del Mono, Codorníu, and later Chocolates Amatller actively sponsored poster competitions to launch new products (Salom, 1979). These contests served a dual purpose: they allowed companies to crowdsource graphic innovation from talented artists (Ruiz-Melendreras, 1985), and elevated advertising into a space of public spectacle and aesthetic legitimacy (Sánchez Guzmán, 2004).

Far from mere visual decorations, commercial posters also offered a launchpad for established and emerging artists. The commissioning campaigns attracted prominent local talent such as Casas, Rusiñol, and De Riquer, alongside other Spanish artists from like Penagos and Ribas, and internationally recognised figures including Mucha, Hohenstein, and Hassall (Salom, 1979). The resulting designs contributed to a

recognisable visual language grounded in Art Nouveau's stylistic principles, or in the Catalan context, Modernisme—characterised by symbolic femininity, elegant linework, and ornamental harmony. Thus, in Barcelona, illustrated posters initially served commercial advertising purposes but soon came to epitomise modern urban life itself. Their aesthetic influenced the city's broader visual culture, shaping family residences, churches, and even hospitals. What began as an adaptation of the French graphic models, the poster's development evolved into a distinctly local synthesis of industrial ambition, artistic innovation, and consumer modernity.

The chocolatiers behind the posters

Matías López

Matías López, a self-made entrepreneur from rural Galicia, founded one of Spain's first industrial chocolate firms after relocating to Madrid and completing a nine-year apprenticeship in a colonial goods shop. Inspired by a visit to Paris, where he studied contemporary production techniques, López returned to Spain and introduced mechanisation into his workshop, installing a 15-horsepower steam engine by 1861 (López, 1875). To accommodate later phases of growth, López relocated production outside the city in 1874, converting a former sugar mill into a modern 6,500-square-metre facility. The site was equipped with French machinery and included housing, a school, and a church for workers and their families (Revista de Banca y Ferrocarriles, 1900). By 1907, a state labour inspection recorded a workforce of 130—98 men and 32 women (Jou-Badal, 2024b).

López was a pioneer of advertising in Spain, embracing mass media strategies from the 1860s onwards. His firm placed over 17,000 advertisements in newspapers during the second half of the nineteenth century (Jou-Badal, 2024a). This sustained print campaign was soon complemented by the illustrated posters of *Los Gordos y los Flacos* (1874), which became one of the most recognisable visual icons of Spanish commercial culture. In addition to his business ventures, López authored two public manifestos calling for the reduction of import tariffs on cocoa to democratise chocolate consumption (López, 1875). Appointed a lifelong senator by King Alfonso XIII, he also led Spain's delegation to the 1889 Paris World Expo. After his death in 1891, the company passed first to his wife and later to his sons-in-law. Despite initial efforts to sustain its momentum, the firm gradually declined, and the factory ultimately closed in 1964.

Chocolates Amatller

This Barcelona dynasty of chocolatiers traces its origins to the late eighteenth century, when Gabriel Amatller, originally from a rural peasant family, joined the city's chocolate grinders' guild. Initially benefiting from the protective structure that limited competition, the business expanded under the second generation, combining artisanal chocolate production with trade in colonial commodities such as cocoa, coffee, and tea. After 1874, under the leadership of Antoni Amatller (third generation), the company transitioned to industrial-scale manufacturing, incorporating French machinery and steam power (Nadal & Tafunell, 1992), and employing 81 workers by the turn of the century—well above the average for Catalan food manufacturers at the time (Jou-Badal, 2024b).

Amatller's marketing evolved progressively. While its presence in national newspapers remained modest, the firm pursued differentiation through visual branding. It was among the first to produce chromolithographic trading cards, initially outsourced from Italy and France but later manufactured in-house. These images, crafted to elicit the thrill of collecting, reached an annual production peak of over two million by 1899 (Jou-Badal, 2024a). Following the success of the centenary poster by Alphonse Mucha, the firm intensified its engagement with posters. In 1911, Teresa Amatller (fourth generation) organised a national competition to design a new visual identity for Chocolates Luna. From 596 submissions, the winning design by Rafael de Penagos portrayed a Black servant presenting chocolate, blending motifs of luxury and exoticism (La Actualidad, 20 June 1914).

Despite its commercial successes, the firm faced significant challenges due to political instability in the 1930s and the collectivisation of workers during the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939). The company remained under family ownership until 1960, after which it was acquired by Simón Coll, who maintains the brand today as a gourmet brand.

Chocolats Menier

Founded in 1821 by Jean Menier, a trained chemist from a family of food merchants, the company originated as a pharmaceutical venture in Paris's Marais district, where chocolate was initially used to mask the taste of bitter medicines (Clarence-Smith, 2000). Chocolate remained a secondary product until Menier recognised its market potential, prompting early innovations in manufacturing and branding. In the late 1840s, the company had pioneered the distinctive cylindrical chocolate bar wrapped in "canary yellow" paper. Soon, the packaging also began to feature the founder's signature and

medals awarded to the firm, establishing a visual identity tied to reliability, and prestige (Clarence-Smith, 2000; Drouard, 2013).

Industrial expansion followed rapidly, with the establishment of a London factory in 1863 and the construction of a model factory-town in Noisiel in 1874. This paternalist experiment offered workers affordable housing (rent capped at three days' wages), gardens, and lifetime occupancy for retirees (Harwich, 1992). By 1889, the company employed over 1,500 workers (Drouard, 2013).

Following the death of Émile Menier in 1881, leadership of the company passed to his sons, Émile-Justin and Gaston, overseeing its most dynamic period in branding practices. At the 1889 Paris World Fair, the company built a replica of the Arc de Triomphe using 250,000 chocolate bars—the output of a single day—while the 1900 Fair featured a life-size ship illustrating the firm's history (Drouard, 2013). Visual branding reached iconic status with Firmin Bouisset's 1893 poster, though this was only one among a broader repertoire of representations. Other campaigns, such as the image of a smiling Senegalese *tirailleur* used to promote Banania (a cocoa and banana-based drink), reflected the racialised stereotypes in the advertising of colonial commodities (Harwich, 1992)

After the passing

of Émile-Justin during the First World War, the company declined under the weak leadership of his brother Gaston, who failed to maintain effective management. The brand faded in the decades that followed, eventually being sold to Rowntree in 1971.

Rowntree

Founded in York in 1862, Rowntree emerged as part of Britain's Quaker chocolate triumvirate, alongside Cadbury and Fry (Clarence-Smith, 2000). It began as a modest trading business with just a dozen employees, guided by values of ethical labour and social responsibility. Rapid growth in the late nineteenth century led to multiple factory relocations, with the workforce expanding to over 1,600 by 1899 (Fitzgerald, 1995).

Although Rowntree ventured into visual advertising relatively early, commissioning the renowned Beggarstaff Brothers in 1896 to create a poster promoting Elect cocoa, the firm remained hesitant in systematically adopting marketing strategies compared to its competitors. Joseph Rowntree viewed advertising sceptically, dismissing branding expenditures as a "speculative quantity" and insisting that success was built on product quality rather than publicity (Fitzgerald, 1989, p. 48). Reflecting this stance, the company favoured a push-oriented strategy, utilising coupon schemes, sampling, and

stocking discounts to drive sales rather than relying on national advertising campaigns to create consumer demand.

Product development also remained largely uncoordinated, struggling to keep pace with shifting consumer preferences, such as milk chocolate and branded confectionery (Fitzgerald, 1989). Rowntree's strategic transformation began in the 1930s, when new leadership established a formal marketing department and embraced systematic consumer research in collaboration with J. Walter Thompson (Fitzgerald, 1995). This shift facilitated the launch of several successful branded products, including Black Magic (1933), Aero and KitKat (1935), and Smarties (1938).

Rowntree remained family-controlled through most of the twentieth century and pursued careful international expansion, especially in North America during the interwar years. The company's independent legacy concluded in 1988 when Nestlé acquired it, continuing to produce Rowntree's iconic brands.

Semiotic analysis

Starting from the premise that posters do not necessarily tell us what society was, but rather how advertisers perceived their target audiences, this section analyses the visual strategies used by two Spanish chocolate brands, one French, and one British. Another crucial aspect to consider is that advertising does not merely present the material product—it reflects the “sought-after benefit” consumers associate with it (Campbell, 2014).

Matías López – Los Gordos y los Flacos (The Fat and the Thin), 1870

Figure 1: Posters of Matías López, 1874 (1a) and 1880s (1b)



First version (1a)



Second version (1b)

The advertising poster was originally printed on translucent sheets and displayed on tram windows and grocery shop doors (Ruiz-Melendreras, 1985). Authored by caricaturist and illustrator Francisco Ortego y Vereda, he was known for his satirical work in publications such as *El Cascabel* and *Gil Blas*, as well as for visually chronicling the everyday life of Madrid. Ortego reportedly received a fee of 8 pesetas for the commission, and the campaign was an immediate success (Santos-Torroella, 1947).

However, the poster also attracted public criticism for its crude visual rhetoric and stark bodily contrast. In response, the company released a second version in the 1880s, reworking the composition into a more balanced triptych format (Ruiz-Melendreras, 1985). Unlike the original, this version was unsigned, raising questions about whether Ortego approved of the reinterpretation or distanced himself from the direction the campaign had taken.

At the iconic level, both Figure 1a and Figure 1b present a static arrangement of figures in frontal view, without background scenery. In Figure 1a, the composition displays two couples, each consisting of a man and a woman. The couples are separated by an ornamental vertical filigree at the centre of the image. Both pairs wear identical clothing typical of the Spanish urban middle class of the 1870s: modest suits for the men, high-necked dresses for the women. However, their facial expressions and postures differ: the couple on the left appears physically emaciated, with hunched shoulders and drawn faces, while the couple on the right appears fuller-bodied, upright, and alert.

In Figure 1b, the composition expands into three sequential panels. What's new is the third couple on the right, who diverge from the established visual logic. While not corpulent like the central pair, they are presented with more elaborate, aristocratic attire—the man wears a top hat and the woman holds a fan—and adopt a more theatrical pose, distinct from the reserved posture of the others. Though the overall layout retains a horizontal symmetry, the progression of gestures and expressions introduces intentional asymmetry. The third couple's flamboyant styling and confident stance visually disrupt the pattern of bodily transformation, hinting at a shift from literal nourishment to ironic social commentary. As in the earlier version, there is no narrative action, but the figures are arranged as static tableaux, inviting interpretive sequencing based on contrast and escalation. Notably, neither poster includes any depiction of chocolate or its packaging; the product is entirely absent from the visual field.

At the iconographic level, Figure 1a and Figure 1b rely on culturally legible codes that would have been immediately recognisable to contemporary viewers. These comparative formats were widespread in illustrated periodicals and posters, particularly those related to hygiene, nutrition, and public education, and would have required no textual explanation to be understood.

The fuller bodies in Figure 1a would have carried a positive connotation. At a time when undernourishment was widespread among the working and lower-middle classes, visible corpulence signified health, energy, and access to food. Viewers would have read this transformation as a shift from deficiency to wellbeing, reinforcing the idea that chocolate could serve as a functional food rather than an indulgence. In Figure 1b, the third couple's appearance introduces a more socially charged image. Their exaggerated presentation references familiar tropes from bourgeois parody, drawing on the visual language of satirical magazines, costumbrista illustration, and popular theatre. While still operating within recognisable cultural registers, the image begins to destabilise the positive connotation of fatness established earlier. Rather than signalling nourishment, this final couple may suggest vanity, excess, or ridicule. In this sense, the image may reflect a subtle shift in cultural attitudes, where body size begins to appear not only as a marker of health but also as a potential object of comic exaggeration or mild social critique.

At the tropological level, the posters convey their message through rhetorical exaggeration. The most prominent device in Figure 1a is hyperbole: the transformation from extreme thinness to visible corpulence is not a medically realistic depiction, but a visual amplification designed to dramatize the product's effect. Closely related is the use of juxtaposition, where the side-by-side placement of contrasting figures creates meaning through difference (Phillips and McQuarrie, 2005). Rather than showing the act of consumption or the product itself, the poster conveys its claim through the visual contrast alone. This is a form of metonymy: the effect (a healthy, fuller body) stands in for the cause (the consumption of chocolate), bypassing the need to represent the product directly. Figure 1b extends these tropes but complicates them through the addition of a third visual unit, introducing a tone of irony. Their appearance exaggerates not the body, but the performance of social identity.

At the enthymemic level, both Figure 1a and Figure 1b rely on the viewer to complete the message through inference and cultural assumption. The original poster invites a simple conclusion: if you consume Matías López chocolate, you too will be

transformed from weak to strong. The product itself is not shown, but its effects are made visible, encouraging the viewer to mentally supply the missing premise: chocolate restores health. In the revised edition, the inference becomes more ambiguous. While the first two couples maintain the same visual logic, the third introduces uncertainty: is this a further improvement, a parody, or a warning about excess? The viewer is left to interpret whether the transformation has reached its peak or tipped into absurdity. The final panel resists a singular conclusion, prompting reflection on consumption, aspiration, and visual exaggeration.

Shifting to the analysis beyond the visuals, it is the study of text into the artwork. For anchoring, Figure 1a captions “Antes de tomar el chocolate de López” (Before having the chocolate of López) and “Después de tomar el chocolate de López” (After...) provide a clear verbal framework for the visual comparison, guiding the viewer toward a causal reading: chocolate intake results in physical improvement. The product is not depicted, but the text serves as a verbal proxy, completing the persuasive message. In Figure 1b, the third panel introduces a new caption: “Los que tomaron dos” (Those who had two). This phrase functions as anchorage, clearly naming the cause of the third couple’s exaggerated appearance. However, the tone of the phrase—light, ironic, and unexpected—shifts the viewer’s engagement. It activates a relay effect, not because the words themselves are ambiguous, but because they prompt a more open reading of the scene’s intent: is this playful exaggeration, social satire, or parody of aspiration?

Chocolates Amatller- Centenary Poster by Alphonse Mucha, 1900

Figure 2: Poster Chocolates Amatller, 1900



The second poster analysed is the work of Alphonse Mucha, the celebrated Czech artist whose Art Nouveau aesthetic had become internationally recognisable by 1900. Mucha rose to fame in Paris after designing a poster for the actress Sarah Bernhardt's play *Gismonda* (1895), launching a long collaboration that helped define her public image and Mucha's distinctive visual style—marked by graceful female figures, floral ornamentation, and symbolic intimacy (Reade, 1963). Alongside his theatrical work, Mucha already had produced advertising for a chocolate brand, with the artwork for *Compagnie Française des Chocolats et des Thés*, bringing artistic prestige to commercial brands. By commissioning Mucha for its centenary poster, the Amatller dynasty aligned itself with this transnational visual culture while reinforcing its own role as patrons of the arts, already demonstrated by the architectural remodelling of their emblematic family residence Casa Amatller in Barcelona.

The poster depicts a seated woman occupying the central axis of the composition. She wears a flowing, stylised gown, delicately patterned at the neckline and sleeves, and holds an open book. Her head is framed by a circular floral motif resembling a halo, visually isolating and elevating her figure. Her hair is adorned with botanical ornaments that echo the poster's vegetal background, filled with vines, blossoms, and decorative curves typical of Art Nouveau (Reade, 1963).

The woman looks directly at the viewer, and her hands are poised as if about to turn the page. Unlike Matías Lopez's posters, the product appears in the composition with a chocolate tin container prominently positioned in the foreground. The entire composition is rendered in a warm, luminous palette dominated by shades of ochre, gold, and orange. These colours, combined with the symmetrical framing and stylised curves, contribute to an overall impression of softness, elegance, and visual harmony.

At the iconographic level, the image draws upon widely recognisable visual codes of bourgeois refinement, feminine idealisation, and aesthetic modernity. The central female figure is not portrayed as a specific individual but as an allegorical type: ethereal, composed, and intellectually engaged. Her elegant yet modest dress, floral adornments, and book embody a cultivated domestic femininity, aligning with the expectations of upper-middle-class taste. The presence of the halo-like floral disc behind her head invokes secular sanctity: she is both icon and consumer, symbol and subject.

The act of reading, combined with the inward gesture of page-turning, introduces a private moment. This invites the viewer to engage with the figure's gaze but also implies a quiet intellectualism and historical consciousness. The packaging placed at her feet and

the brand name above serve to subtly ground the image in commerce, without compromising its artistic dignity.

The poster's meaning is constructed through a series of rhetorical and symbolic devices that move beyond direct representation. The central figure represents a clear visual allegory: drawing directly from Mucha's repertoire of idealised female types, often described as modern-day nymphs or muses—figures that bridge the mythological and the decorative. Her stylised elegance and ethereal calm does not project an actual consumer, but a symbolic embodiment of the cultural values Amatller wished to project.

The figure also operates as a synecdoche: she stands in for both the refined consumer and the brand itself, signalling that Amatller chocolate belongs within a world of elevated aesthetic and moral sensibilities. Unlike the bodily hyperbole seen in the Matías López posters, this image avoids physical exaggeration or nutritional promise. It does not depict consumption; it depicts aspiration. The viewer is interpellated not by taste or transformation, but by visual harmony, symbolic intimacy, and bourgeois fantasy.

This poster's persuasive power rests not on explicit claims, but on cultural inferences the viewer is invited to make. Its meaning is constructed through an unstated syllogism: those who appreciate beauty, refinement, and heritage will also choose Amatller. The viewer is meant to complete the logic themselves: If I value these things, then this chocolate is for me. This rhetorical approach reflects a shift in advertising logic: from selling effect to selling identity. The poster does not answer a need—it proposes a lifestyle. By quietly integrating the product into a world of visual harmony, symbolic richness, and genteel femininity, it constructs a brand ethos that the viewer completes through cultural recognition.

Anchorage is primarily provided by the brand name at the top of the image. This verbal element situates the otherwise symbolic composition within a specific commercial identity, while also associating the brand with Barcelona's rising international profile following the 1888 Universal Exposition. Additional textual cues, such as the date 1900, discreetly placed on the product tin, and references to Cafés y Tes, reinforce the poster's commemorative and product-oriented context.

At the same time, the poster activates a relay function through its compositional details—most notably, the book held by the woman, which bears the upside-down title *Centenario de la Casa*. This inversion subtly disrupts the viewing experience and invites interpretive engagement. Rather than offering direct explanation, the text contributes to the scene's overall atmosphere of intimacy and introspection. The woman appears caught

in a private, unposed moment—absorbed in thought, rather than staged as a subject of persuasion. The visual logic transforms the poster into a scene of contemplation rather than persuasion, appealing through atmosphere rather than instruction.

Chocolat Menier – Poster by Firmin Bouisset (1893)

Figure 3: Poster by Chocolat Menier, 1893



The third poster under analysis belongs to the French company Chocolat Menier and was designed by illustrator Firmin Bouisset. It is one of a set of three closely related posters that the artist created for the brand between 1892 and 1893. Two of them depict a young girl writing the company's name on a blank wall, while a third version shows the same child facing the viewer as she traces the advertisement on a grocery shop window (Drouard, 2018). Reportedly modelled on Bouisset's eldest daughter Yvonne, the character embodied innocent mischief and emotional warmth. The 1893 version became the most iconic, introducing a figure who would become central to the brand's advertising for decades, though her appearance was periodically updated to reflect changing visual styles.

The scene depicts a young girl standing with her back to the viewer, centrally positioned against a flat, yellow background. She wears a blue dress with a white apron tied at the waist, and her brown hair is styled in loose braids. In her right hand, she holds a chocolate bar, which she uses to write the words "Chocolat Menier" on a grey wall. In her left hand, she carries a second bar of chocolate, identifiable by its distinctive packaging though the branding is less prominently displayed. At her feet, in the lower left corner, sits a wicker basket filled with boxes of Menier chocolate. Leaning against the wall beside it is a small red umbrella. A strip of green grass runs along the bottom edge of the image, suggesting an outdoor setting. There are no additional figures or scenery in

the background, which keeps the viewer's focus entirely on the girl and her action. The composition is simple and balanced, with strong vertical and horizontal lines.

The poster draws on culturally familiar codes of childhood innocence and playful transgression. The choice of a young girl—rather than a boy—reinforces associations with sweetness, obedience, and domestic tenderness, aligning the product with maternal values and family care. Her spontaneous act of writing on the wall suggests light mischief, a socially permissible form of disobedience, but in a way that is socially acceptable and even charming.

The image also plays with notions of emotional agency: the chocolate bar becomes not just a treat but a tool of personal expression. The girl's act of inscribing the brand name with chocolate transforms the product into a symbol of affection, familiarity, and recognition. Visually, the canary-yellow wall serves a dual function: as a neutral background that highlights the central figure, and as a reference to Menier's distinctive packaging, long associated with the brand since the 1840s (Clarence-Smith, 2000).

The scene conveys its message primarily through metonymy, as the girl's act of writing the brand name in chocolate symbolises emotional attachment. The product becomes more than a treat—it is an expression of joy, affection, and familiarity. A second rhetorical device is light transgression: writing on a wall, though socially improper, is reframed as harmless mischief. This charming disobedience suggests that the chocolate is so irresistible it inspires spontaneous, rule-breaking delight. There is also a touch of irony, as the child bends the rules not to rebel, but to promote a product she adores. In doing so, the image blurs the line between consumption and communication, turning pleasure into playful complicity.

At the enthymemic level, the poster invites the viewer to construct the story through inference. The scattered clues—the basket of goods, the umbrella, the outdoor setting—suggest that the girl was running errands when she gave in to an irresistible impulse. This implicit logic frames Chocolat Menier as a product embedded in ordinary routines—safe, familiar, and emotionally accessible. It is not disruptive or luxurious, but something close to home, trusted by families and beloved by children.

Anchorage in the poster is provided by the repeated presence of the brand name. It appears in three locations: spelled out on the wall by the girl's hand, faintly suggested on the chocolate bar she holds, and on the branded boxes in the basket. This visual repetition simplifies brand recognition and reinforces memorability. Rather than separating image and text, the poster integrates the brand name directly into the action

when the act of writing becomes the advertisement. This gesture ties the brand to early memory and literacy, linking chocolate part of childhood learning

Finally, the poster activates a relay function through its visual storytelling. With no slogan or explanatory caption, meaning emerges from the girl's gesture and context. Importantly, this strategy made the poster highly adaptable across markets. The emotional cues of innocence, spontaneity, and trust required no cultural translation. Even the textual element, *Chocolat Menier*, remained legible abroad: the brand name itself functioned as both message and medium. This allowed the poster to circulate widely during the company's international expansion, delivering a consistent emotional appeal without altering its language or form.

Rowntree – High Class Cocoa (c.1900)

Figure 4: Poster by Rowntree, 1900



The fourth example offers a glimpse into the moment when women began to emerge as a defined target audience for chocolate, anticipating a broader shift in gendered marketing that would become central in the decades that followed (Robertson, 2009). In the case of Rowntree, this poster reflects a transitional phase in corporate promotional strategy, as advertising began to favour storytelling and emotional appeal over purely functional product claims (French, 2017). It stands as an early instance of direct marketing aimed at mothers, a practice that Rowntree would develop more systematically after the 1930s through the launch of new products such as Black Magic and Dairy Box (Fitzgerald, 1995).

The composition features four animated figures captured in a moment of playful chaos. At the centre stands a maid in traditional uniform, balancing a tray of Rowntree's chocolate boxes, her posture slightly tilted as she navigates the commotion around her. Two upper-class children, identified by their refined attire, including a sailor suit, ribboned dress, and polished shoes, surround her in a lively struggle. The boy raises a toy sword while tugging at the maid's cap, and the girl simultaneously pulls on her ribbons, creating a sense of imbalance and domestic disorder. A small dog, leaping excitedly toward the maid's apron, reinforces the sense of dynamic, uncontrolled movement within a refined household setting.

The poster constructs an idealised Edwardian domestic scene, rich with familiar cultural codes and class-based visual markers. The maid's white cap and apron signal her subordinate role within the household hierarchy, while the children's refined attire projects bourgeois respectability, imperial discipline, and feminine innocence. These cues position the setting within a well-ordered upper-middle-class interior, where servants, children, and pets coexist under the signs of comfort and refinement. Yet here, the domestic order is playfully disrupted: the children tug at the maid's uniform, the dog leaps excitedly, and the tray of chocolates sways in the midst of this commotion. This visual disorder is not threatening but charming, reinforcing a vision of the home in which misbehaviour remains safely contained. The children's actions frame the chocolate as a highly desirable object, humorous in its disruption rather than a cause for alarm.

At the tropological level, the poster stages a playful disruption of social order in which the subordinate figure—the maid—is besieged by the unruly impulses of privileged children. This symbolic reversal of hierarchy hints at anxieties surrounding control, discipline, and generational authority within the bourgeois household. While the setting remains one of elegance and affluence, the comic tone masks deeper concerns about who holds power in the domestic sphere. The scene thus encodes a moral fable about restraint, ownership, and desire, all wrapped in the guise of upper-class domestic play.

This subtle narrative tension prompts the viewer to ask: for whom is the chocolate really intended? While the children reach for it, the tray remains untouched and the caption "Mother's Cocoa in danger" suggests that the product belongs to the maternal figure, whose centrality to the household is gently undermined through the scene's light-hearted struggle. The chocolate thus becomes both the object of desire and a symbolic marker of adult domestic authority, momentarily at risk.

Text plays a central role in guiding the viewer's interpretation of the scene. At the top, the banner "Rowntree's High Class Chocolates and Cocoa" functions as a declarative branding statement, situating the product within a world of refinement, status, and quality. The explicit use of the phrase "High Class" elevates the chocolate's social positioning and sets the tone for the domestic environment depicted below. At the bottom of the image, the caption "Mother's Cocoa in danger" provides anchorage, guiding the viewer to interpret the children's playful assault not as ordinary mischief but as a humorous disruption of maternal entitlement, with the word danger subtly dramatizing the scene and introducing a note of narrative tension within an otherwise light-hearted domestic setting.

This dual use of text is characteristic of British poster design during the period, which typically favoured narrative clarity, social messaging, and structured composition over the visual exuberance of French styles (Hewitt, 2002). Rather than relying on symbolic allegory or decorative flourishes, the Rowntree poster communicates through direct verbal framing and domestic storytelling, encouraging a middle-class viewer to recognise the scene's humour, social setting, and aspirational tone.

Beyond anchoring meaning, the caption also introduces a subtle relay function. While anchorage steers the viewer toward a specific reading of the children's mischief, relay opens interpretive space by hinting at a broader narrative beyond the frame. The phrase "Mother's Cocoa in danger" conjures an off-stage maternal presence whose authority is momentarily threatened, prompting the viewer to imagine what comes next: Will the mother intervene, reclaim her cocoa, or laugh off the disorder? This textual prompt invites viewers into a shared cultural script of family life, constructing meaning in dialogue with the image. In this way, relay acts as a narrative mechanism that co-produces the poster's message and emotional appeal.

Preliminary conclusions

Poster	Visual Style	Central Figure(s)	Emotional appeal	Social Target	Semiotic Function	Further poster examples
Matías López (1874, 1880s)	caricature satire	couples (before/after/twice)	body exaggeration, aspiration	mass market middle class	hyperbole, anchorage, visual symmetry	Fry's, 1902 Fry's 1904
Chocolates Amatller (1900)	Art Nouveau	woman with book and halo	beauty elegance	urban elite bourgeois	allegory, relay-function, aesthetics	Klaus, 1905 Ideal, 1897 Rowntree, 1900
Menier (1893)	clean narrative realism	young girl writing on wall	family, mischief	middle-class families children	innocence, repetition, trust, icon creation	Cadbury, 1886 Nesté, c.1900
Rowntree (c.1900)	illustrated realism	maid, children, dog, tray	Comic disruption, class-coded	upper class families	irony, dramatization, aspirational	Huntley Palmer's, c.1900

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