Using Semiotic Analysis to Determine Effectiveness of Internet Marketing

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Abstract

A well-designed Web site is essential for effective communication with potential customers and contributes to successful eCommerce. However, communication can be difficult when a Web site has broad cultural range. Because Internet marketing makes extensive use of text and visual images to affect product awareness and cultural relevance, we used semiotic analysis to reveal underlying meanings in elements of two online advertisements. This paper reports the results of our semiotic analysis of the Internet marketing efforts of two mobile phone companies and explains how potential consumers from six cultures (China, Taiwan, Sweden, Finland, India, and the US) interpreted the advertisements and attributed various characteristics to the products.

Introduction

Internet marketing is more than online advertising, because the Internet is more than a simple advertising medium or a communication channel (Goodwin, 1999). Internet marketing campaigns not only create product awareness, they often are part of the process of making an Internet purchase (Goodwin, 1999). Thus, Internet marketing reflects the next generation of advertising with benefits such as self-selectiveness, interactivity, full integration and unique one-to-one marketing capabilities (Wehling, 1996).

The fact that Internet marketing can be targeted to specific cultural groups is significant because different cultural groups react differently to the same stimulus (Janson & Tsotra, 2004). Furthermore, manifestations of culture, such as values, heroes, rituals and symbols offer insight in the way Internet marketers can organize effective Internet advertising campaigns by making these congruent with consumers' culture and ensuring that appropriate symbols are used (Luna et al., 2002). Symbols are a broad category of objects that are meaningful and unique to a particular group of people or culture (Luna et al., 2002). Especially in cases of different cultures, different symbols can activate different schemas, depending on linguistic backgrounds and cultures.

Consumers' cultural background comes into play during the design of Internet advertising strategies because this allows adapting to local cultures. Website designers can create both a standardized and a culture-specific set of materials that in turn "enables localization of marketing communication" (Luna et al., 2002). These authors also suggest that "cultural congruity" is essential for effective Internet websites. Thus, the inclusion of verbal and nonverbal content that is congruent with the culture allows for site structures that conform with and support existing cultural concepts.

Theoretical Framework

This section describes the theory of semiotics and provides a model of the theory. The theory is then applied to two Internet advertisements, one for a Nokia mobile phone and one for an Ericcson mobile phone.

Semiotic Theory

Umberto Eco (1978) stated that "semiotics concerns everything that can be perceived as a sign." Signs constitute printed and spoken words, images, sounds, gestures, and objects. Individuals interpret signs as "signifying something."

According to Peirce (1894), "nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign" by being related to familiar systems of conventions. Hence, a sign is part of an organized collective of interactions and cannot exist outside such a collective. Signs function as a code between individuals and they trigger or "unlock" previous experiences (Cobley, and Jansz, 2000). In short, a human being functions as a meaning-maker who uses signs to receive, understand, and convey information.

Interpretation and understanding of signs involves physical elements of objective existence (e.g., the American stop sign) which leads to common understanding (i.e., stop the car) that is derived from socially accepted norms and rules. Hence, the hexagonal American stop sign creates a system of connotations that individuals have learned to perceive as part of everyday reality and social norms. It is important to mention that what is perceived by the senses (i.e., hexagon and the color red) and the mental concept (i.e., stop the car) constitutes an arbitrary bond.

Semiotic theory not only studies sign systems consisting of text, but sign systems of any kind. Because Internet marketing includes text and graphics we decided that semiotic theory was a proper method for our analysis. Semiotics is a particularly powerful tool for uncovering concealed meanings underlying Internet marketing because it concerns symbols such as written words and pictures. Semiotics examines how people form perceptions that are products of the surrounding culture in which respondents live and participate. Culture, as far as semiotics is concerned, is the way people communicate, both consciously and unconsciously, through cultural aspects such as visual images and language. Knowing the meaning of such elements allows Internet marketers to make "informed decisions" about how to communicate with potential consumers about a specific product (Lawes, 2002).

Often attitudes about specific items are "culture specific." Even though their meaning might be readily available, the Internet marketer often does not know the range of its possible truths until he/she studies the range of cultural context in which it exists. However, semiotic analysis of a given piece of communication can suggest a range of possible consumer take-outs, which is useful because it helps one recognize messages that one may inadvertently be communicating in addition to the message one wants to be there (Lawes, 2002).

In summary, semiotics, by studying signs, deals with the construction and maintenance of reality so as to avoid reverting to a set of mere physical artifacts - completely described in terms of rules, forms, shapes, sounds and colors. Furthermore, semiotics makes possible altering everyday reality by adding subjective understanding and a possibility to make subjective what would otherwise seem universal if the individual's experience and his or her unique way of thinking were absent.

A Model of Semiotics

De Saussure (1965) proposed a semiotic model in the form of a dyad comprising a signifier and a signified. The *signifier* may consist of actual objects such as background or lines, whereas the *signified* is a concept in someone's mind. The distinction between signifier and signified can also be expressed in terms of form and content.

A particular signified/signifier combination does not exist in isolation but needs to be combined with other signs so as to make possible a definitive understanding of what is the signified and what is the signifier. In our earlier example of the American stop sign, *signifiers* are the hexagon shape, white letters, and red background. The driver obtains the *signified* in the form of the mental concept of stopping the car.

Semiotic Analysis of Two Internet Advertisements

Our semiotic analysis focuses on two mobile phone advertisements by Nokia of Finland (http://www.nokia.fi/) and by Ericsson of Sweden (http://www.ericsson.com/se/) (Figure 1). We analyzed the two advertisements' external characteristics and forms with the aim of constructing meaning. The point of interest is how the components of the two advertisements stand for something else, along with the social norms and group experience they represent. After a general description of the two advertisements, we then focus on specific elements such as background, color and form.

The Nokia advertisement features the following parts: 1) an actual physical object (i.e., Nokia phone), 2) an image comprising two hands extending towards each other, and 3) a brand name that appears twice (Figure 1). As Floch (2000) noted, traces of concrete reality refer directly to normal, everyday life, as it is experienced without any effect of advertisement. Because the phone is depicted against a completely white background, the advertisement fails to produce an effect of "concrete" reality.
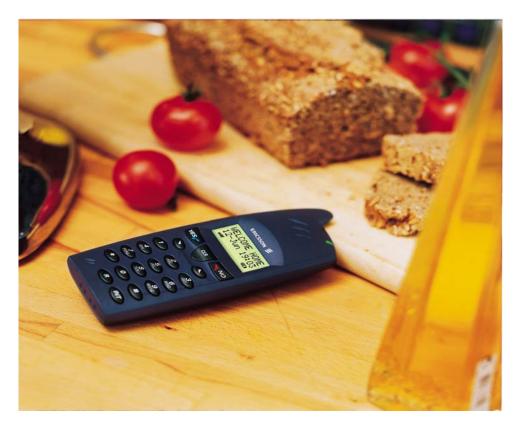
Figure 1: The Nokia Advertisement (left) and the Ericsson Advertisement (right)

The Ericsson advertisement features the following primary parts: 1) an actual physical object (i.e., Ericsson phone), 2) an image on the phone's screen stating "welcome home 12-June 19:03," and the name "Ericsson" on the phone's screen. Moreover, the advertisement features secondary parts that affect "concrete" reality such as the wooden table with cutting board, tomatoes, bread, metal object, and a yellow object in the right hand lower corner that looks like a bottle with oil. These items constitute concrete reality because they are all everyday, easily recognizable and identifiable objects and can be understood properly even outside the advertisement context. Thus, for example, the tomatoes are perceived as tomatoes regardless of whether they appear in Ericsson's advertisement or not.

An in-depth semiotic study should focus on the advertisements' images and background. The Nokia advertisement forwards the phone's image in favor of its background. A close reading of the two hands is suggestive of the hand of an adult/parent reaching out to a child. In short, the elements just discussed draw attention to Nokia's stated mission, that is "connecting people" and presumably families (Figures 2 and 4).
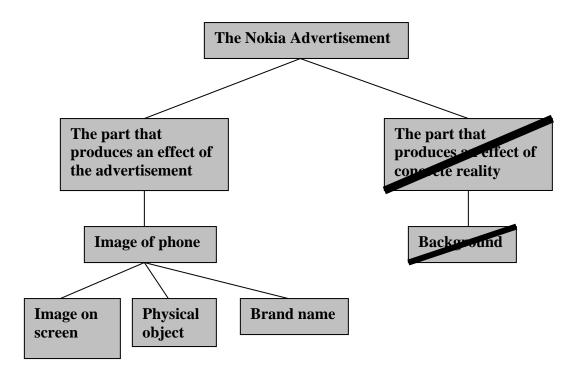
Figure 2: The Nokia Advertisement's Imagery

The Ericsson advertisement shows the time as three minutes after seven in the evening, the date as June 12, and further states "welcome home." The time and the statement "welcome home" suggest the end of the work day when family members return home for dinner. Moreover, by stating "June 12" the advertisement draws attention to summer and justifies the presence of the two seemingly fresh tomatoes (Figure 3).

The Nokia advertisement seems to lack a background; however, we may consider the color white to function as background. One of the characteristics of white is that it is not really a color and thus it helps other chromatic elements of the advertisement to be more prominent to the eye. The Ericsson advertisement has a background comprising tomatoes, bread, slices of bread, a wooden surface a cutting surface, and a metal object. These elements suggest preparation of a vigorous meal because it contains healthy components (Figure 1).

The two advertisements also differ with respect to the use of color. On the one hand, in the Nokia advertisement the cold blue color is prominent against white. The outstretched hands appear to belong to individuals of a white Northern race. Overall, the Nokia advertisement casts a cold and austere atmosphere.

The Ericsson ad, on the other hand, features mostly yellow and red colors. Red attracts attention and, along with yellow, they are warm colors. The Ericsson phone is black and, hence, the focus of the advertisement. The hard to identify metal object mirrors the black phone and thus enhances its image. Overall, the Ericsson advertisement casts a warm and family oriented atmosphere.
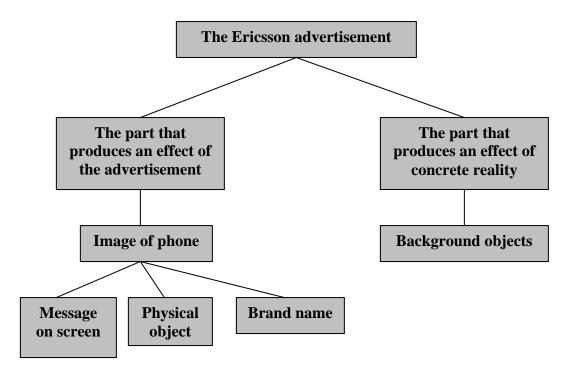
Figure 3: The Ericsson Advertisement's Imagery

Paying closer attention to the Nokia ad, it is interesting to notice that the image resembles a religious, famous picture by Michelangelo, the "Creation of Adam" (1508-1512), a symbolic depiction of the life-giving act found in the Sistine Chapel ceiling in Vatican, Italy. As a result of this connotation, the ad brings in mind the miracle of creation, the genius of Michelangelo, God and Heaven (Figure 4). These concepts are also emphasized by the colors of the ad. Blue and white remind one of heaven and sky and, by projection, they bring in mind a Superior Entity (one more connection with Michelangelo's painting). In addition, white can also be the color of the snow – Finland is covered by snow during most of the year.

In the Ericsson ad, the various elements bring in mind the end of work, when someone returns home in a relaxing environment to enjoy feelings of belongingness and a welcoming atmosphere. The colors and the date remind one of warm, summer weather and a natural lifestyle that contains simple pleasures such as a fresh, home-cooked meal and a healthy lifestyle. The ad portraits a slice of everyday life and resembles a still life.
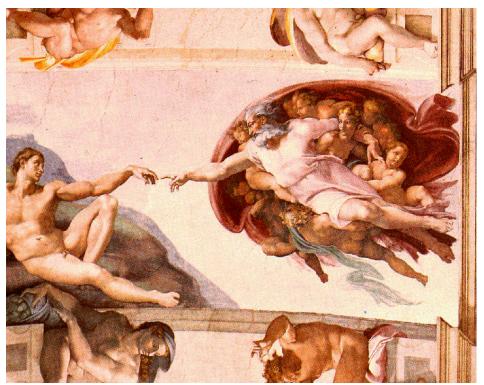
Figure 4: "The creation of Adam" by Michelangelo (1508-1512).

Using de Saussure's (1965) semiotic model to analyze the two ads, Janson and Tsotra (2004) developed the following table. (Table 1).

Table 1: A Semiotic Analysis of the Two Ads

		Signifiers Nokia	**Signifieds Nokia**
Nokia	**Screen elements**	Image of extending hands	family connectedness
		Nokia	emphasis on the brand name
	Background	White color	Sky, snow
	Colors	White Light blue Silver	Winter, cold Clean, heaven Sleek, modern
	Mirroring	Extended hands	connectedness
Ericsson		**Signifiers Ericsson**	**Signifieds Ericsson**
	Screen elements	19:03	end of work day time to prepare dinner

		13-June	middle of summer warm weather
		"Welcome home"	end of work day coming back home
	Background	Various everyday objects	healthy diet about to eat a meal
	Colors	Red, yellow	Summer, warmth
		Black phone	emphasis on the phone
	Mirroring	Silver object	emphasis on the phone

The two ads, using different visual categories, depict different semiotic categories. The Nokia ad depicts a higher level, while the Ericsson ad depicts the human level. The visual categories that enhance these effects are presented in the following table (Table 2).

Table 2: Visual and Semiotic Categories of the Two Ads

		Nokia	**Ericsson**
Visual categories	**Colors**	Cold	Warm
	Visible message	Image	Letters
Semiotic categories		Higher level Family Mankind Ability to connect	Human level Healthy, natural lifestyle Warmth, enjoyment

Janson and Tsotra (2004) presented the above ideas in semiotic squares (Figures 5 and 6). In the following figures, Nokia is depicted on the left side and Ericsson on the right. In other words, Nokia symbolizes a non-Earth situation and the sky, while Ericsson stands for Earth and a non-sky situation (Figure 5). Nokia also symbolizes genius (Michelangelo) and not everyday life, while Ericsson represents everyday life and not genius (Figure 6).
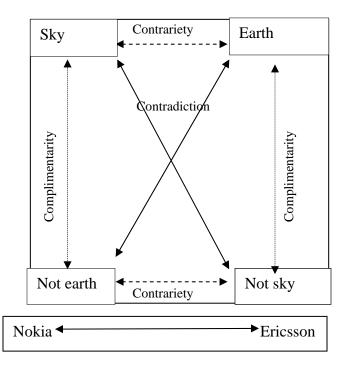
Figure 5: A semiotic square. Nokia is depicted on the left side and Ericsson is depicted on the right side. Nokia symbolizes a non-Earth situation and the sky, while Ericsson stands for Earth and a non-sky situation.
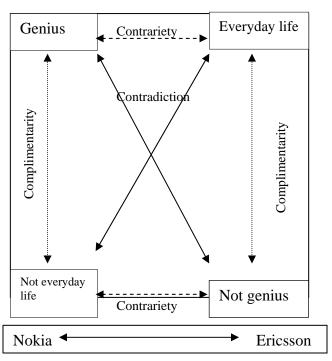
Figure 6: A semiotic square. Nokia is depicted on the left side and Ericsson is depicted on the right side. Nokia symbolizes genius (Michelangelo) and not everyday life, while Ericsson represents everyday life and not genius.

Cultural assumptions also seem to play a different role in the two ads. Generally speaking, in semiotic analyses, culture can be used to disconnect and reconnect spaces. For example, the Ericsson ad seems closer to the Mediterranean climate, bright sunshine and colors, a natural life style with healthy food (tomatoes, oil, home-made bread) and simple pleasures, where family and home are important. Generally speaking, this ad seems to reflect the recent tendency in the Swedish culture to return to a healthier/natural lifestyle and way of living and eating (according to information found on the official Swedish tourist site http://www.sverigeturism.se)

The Ericsson ad also reflects the company's ideology in terms of ability to use the phone while doing other things and enjoy "colorful, easy-to-use" services.

"Watching cartoons, doing the laundry, taking photos, playing with the kids, …sitting in traffic, …chatting in the gym, ….enjoying mysteries, love stories, soaps and playing games, solving puzzles, glimpsing life-changing news, organizing a life lived seamlessly on the move, checking shares, opening an account, walking in warm rain, just wondering aloud…Every moment of every day millions of consumers are accessing fast, colorful, easy-to-use mobile Internet services like the ones above … around the world, around the clock." (http://www.ericsson.com/network_operators/mobilesystems/buildarticle.asp?ArticleId=31425BCE-5282-11D6-99C3-0030474E2F8A)

The Nokia ad, on the other hand, can be interpreted in terms of genius (Michelangelo), connection and communication in a non-Earth environment. The idea of connection is also the company's ideology according to information in the Nokia website, where the slogan that appears everywhere is "Connecting People." In addition, the feeling of connectedness that a mobile phone promotes can be especially useful in a country where sometimes victims from ski accidents depend on their cell phones to call for help. The existence of the snow throughout most of the year promotes a connection with the sky and a higher level of existence, rather than earth bound.

Finally, in a country like Finland, connection with other people can be important since:

- winters last more than six months and the snow prevents easy transportation
- the sunshine can last only one hour per day during the winter, a fact that causes high levels of depression among Finnish people
- distances between places and cities are long and people can feel lonely

As a general conclusion, it is interesting to notice that both countries are geographically next to each other and have the same climate, yet marketing strategies for similar products are completely different.

Research Questions

Semiotics provides a theoretical framework for analyzing the appeals and strategies used in two Internet advertisements for mobile phones. While interesting in itself, the theoretical framework also serves a heuristic function. We wondered whether intended viewers of the advertisements would interpret the signs and symbols in the same way that semiotics suggests. Further, we wondered to what extent viewers' culture influenced the way that viewers interpreted the meanings of the signs and symbols used in the Internet advertisements.

Therefore, this study sought answers to the following Research Questions:

RQ1: What meanings do viewers ascribe to the contextual elements of Internet advertisements?

RQ2: To what extent does semiotic analysis coincide with intended viewers' interpretations of signifiers used in Internet advertisements?

RQ3: How does the culture of intended viewers influence their interpretations of signifiers used in Internet advertisements?

Method

A Nokia mobile phone advertisement and an Ericsson mobile phone advertisement that were published on the companies' Web sites were shown to interviewees from six cultures. Respondents were asked to interpret the advertisements' external characteristics and forms, including the text, images, colors, and objects. Respondents were also asked which ad they preferred and why. Results were compared for each cultural group and for each advertisement. Our interview protocol appears as Appendix 1 and Appendix 2.

Sample

Fifteen graduate business students from two major universities, one in the Midwestern US and one in the Southwestern US, volunteered to participate in this study. The researchers conducted semi-structured, private interviews with each of the participants, using the same interview protocol. Interviews also were conducted in Europe and the U.S. with 17 respondents who are native of five countries -- Finland, Sweden, Taiwan, India, and China. The total number of respondents representing six cultures was 32. Our sample is considered a convenience sample, one not selected scientifically or even randomly, to represent a population.

Results

Analysis of the elements and signs of the online advertisements shows that individuals belonging to different cultural groups create meaning in starkly different ways. The following sections describe reactions to each ad.

Nokia Advertisement

The Chinese, Indian, U.S., and Taiwanese respondents' first impression of this ad was positive. They all agreed it was "clear," "neat," "clean," "simple," and "businesslike." While the U.S. respondents thought the phone looked "heavy" and "standard," the Chinese felt it looked "high tech." The Swedish respondents reacted to the simplicity of the ad negatively, considering it "boring" and old fashioned.

The predominant blue and white colors, recognized by the Finnish respondents as their country's flag's colors, provoked a positive impression. Further, the Finns found the colors "reliable," "natural," "trustworthy," and "comfortable." By contrast, the Chinese and Taiwanese respondents said that white is a funereal color for them, creating a negative impression. The Swedes recognized that blue and white are "Finnish colors" and rejected them as "boring" and "cold." The respondent from India thought the colors warm and summery. The U.S. respondents were inconsistent about whether the blue and white colors were warm or cold, summery or wintery. Interestingly, several Americans connected the blue and white colors to "unlimited freedom" and "innovation," which no informants from other cultures mentioned.

The outreached hands on the phone screen had universal appeal, reminding all the respondents of parents and children, connecting, and helping. The Chinese went further, saying the ad is "based on humanity and love." However, the Chinese and Taiwanese were unfamiliar with the Michelangelo painting and did not perceive any spiritual or godlike imagery in the Nokia ad. While the Finns acknowledged the God imagery, they disregarded it and focused primarily on a "safety" factor, explaining that while outdoors driving or cross country skiing in winter, Finns count on their cell phones to summon help. The Swedes and Americans also recognized a resemblance between the outreached hands and the Michelangelo painting, but the Swedes were particularly unimpressed. The U.S. respondents liked the allusion to a deity and parental help. Going further, they interpreted the Michelangelo reference as "a high attention to detail" that makes the phone look like it's "empowering you with information and knowledge."

Ericsson Advertisement

Across all cultures in our study, the first impression of this ad was one of brightness, warmth, summer, and "everyday life." But these reactions were not always positive. The Finnish respondents did not like the Ericsson ad, calling it "silly," "messy," "crowded," "strange," and "complicated." They denied a connection between the food imagery and a cell phone, criticizing it as "quite Swedish." The Chinese and Taiwanese also did not see a correlation between the food items and the phone. They recognized that the ad gave an impression that the phone is part of home life, but did not like that connection, saying that the phone belonged on an "office table," not a kitchen table. The Americans also found the ad disagreeable, "small town," and "bland."

The predominant yellow and red colors of the Ericsson ad universally were interpreted as "warm" and "homey" colors, which the Indian respondent especially liked. But the Chinese did not like the colors of the ad because they are "just so personal," preferring more "serious" colors for a product that they consider appropriate for business only. The Chinese also reacted negatively to the "welcome home" message on the phone's screen, saying that Chinese never say "Welcome home [among family]. They only say this word when a guest comes or when you go to the hotel; then we say Welcome….Welcome to Beijing."

The U.S. respondents agreed with the Swedes that the mixture of images was "normal" and "homelike," even developing dramatic scenarios that could explain why the phone was sitting on a kitchen table among food items at dinnertime.

Consumer Preferences

Not surprisingly, our Finnish interviewees preferred the Nokia ad, while the Swedish preferred the Ericsson. Most cited loyalty to their culture and familiarity with the product as their primary reasons.

More interesting were the preferences of respondents from the four other cultures. Across the board, they preferred the Nokia ad. The Chinese said they like the Nokia ad because it is clear, simple, timeless, and focused. In China, Nokia phones have a reputation for quality. Our Asian respondents considered the phone to be "serious" and good for business, but not for personal use or for fun. The Americans concurred that they could "relate to" the Nokia because it was more for business, "efficient," "cool looking" and "technologically advanced."

The U.S. respondents agreed with the Chinese in considering the Ericsson phone to be more "suited to home life…you know, for the kids or for the wife." One U.S. respondent predicted that his mother would like it.

Discussion

Tables 3 and 4 show summary analyses of our interviews with individuals from Finland, Sweden, the United States, and China. In effect, the tables corroborate the predictions of semiotic theory concerning the signs and symbols used in the two Internet advertisements.

Nokia's advertisement with the characteristics *Color, Hands, Phone, Michelangelo Painting,* and *Culture* were meaningful to all interviewees regardless of country of origin (Table 3). Even though interviewees assigned a different meaning to the colors in the ad, they all felt an affinity to the colors used. Furthermore, the meanings reflected by the two hands in the Nokia ad have meanings that appear independent of the interviewees' country of origin. Next, the Finnish, Swedish, and Americans' interpretations of Michelangelo's painting were very rich, with Nokia's phone taking on mythical characteristics. Our Chinese interviewees were unfamiliar with Michelangelo, but they still connected the painting with new life. In conclusion, our analysis shows that Nokia's ad has global appeal.

Ericsson's advertisement elicited widely disparate responses from our interviewees with respect to C*olor, Phone, Text, Imagery*, and *Culture* categories (Table 4). The typical reaction to the phone itself was that it is Swedish, ordinary, and inexpensive. Moreover, our Chinese interviewees concluded that the phone does not belong in a kitchen environment. The meanings of the text "Welcome Home" ranged from 'it is a nice message' through 'I don't know what Ericsson is telling me' to 'In China we only say 'welcome home to hotel guests.' The ad's imagery gives rise to meanings that show a common focus on everyday life and a cozy familiarity, but the reaction to those meanings varied from positive to negative among the interviewees. The disparate cultural meanings and their emotional reactions suggest that the Ericsson ad is not well-suited for global presentation.

Comparisons of the respondents' reactions to our two Internet advertisements confirm the fundamental precept of semiotic theory, that culture plays a key role in assigning meaning to symbolic elements. Their universal appeals as well as ties to certain cultural values will determine the effectiveness of symbols used in online advertising. Our respondents overwhelmingly preferred the Nokia ad to the Ericsson ad, providing evidence that its elements are broadly appealing.

Table 3 – Summary of Reactions to Nokia Phone Advertisement

Characteristic	Finland	Sweden	United States	Chinese
Color	*White is snow, blue sky, lakes *White/blue are colors of Finnish flag, Finland *Blue refers to summer, white to winter *White & blue refers to nature	*I don't like color – cold *Connection between land & sky *I think it is comfortable	*Warm *Summer *Attractive & capable *Makes the phone heavenly *Freedom & innovation	*Boring- need red or yellow *Blue gives cozy feeling
Hands	*Helping each other, trust *Contact relatives, friends *Keep in touch	*Suggest connection *Reaching out to someone *Small v. large hand = child helping an elderly person.	*It is a fatherly figure, a deity *Larger hand is Nokia reaching out to the customer	*Parents/Children *Help & cooperation
Phone	*Nokia is a quality phone	*I see not only the phone but also the Nokia symbol that stands for connecting people	*It looks like the phone I have *Sleek, stylish	*Nokia enjoys a good reputation *Nokia is a business phone
Michelangelo Painting	*Phone takes on mythical proportions *Suggest genius of Finland designers. *Finns are familiar with picture	*If you don't have the phone you are not really alive *The hand could help some poor man on earth *It's like connecting to God *I don't see any connection	*It can give you life *God imparts knowledge to Adam, Nokia empowers you by information and knowledge	*New life *Connection with world *Chinese do not know the picture.
Culture	*Phone reflects Finns' pride in their technology *Phone reflects Finns' pride in their industrial design *Phone reflects Finns' love for nature	*The helping hands are global *The picture is global but I don't know about the hand's color in Africa	*I don't know of a culture where one would not know the painting – so it [ad] is global *Finnish & Swedish culture is high tech.	*Europeans like simplicity *Europeans are more abstract [than Chinese] *White implies death

Table 4: Summary of Reactions to Ericsson Phone Advertisement

Characteristic	Finland	Sweden	United States	China
Color	*Warm colors	*Dark blue – I like it	*Very warm *Summer *Very light	*Makes you feel bright
Phone	*Screen is pretty small *It is a Swedish phone *I don't like it	*Looks like an old model	*Phone is not a luxury item *Ordinary *Not a phone for business	*Modern [appliance] does not belong in a kitchen *Inexpensive
Text	*I don't know what Ericsson is telling me.	*Someone was on a journey & came back *Nice message for my girlfriend	*Maybe wife welcoming husband home	*'Welcome Home' gives warm feeling *Chinese say welcome only to hotel guests
Imagery	*Text suggests everyday life *Phone is as essential as bread *Why is phone in a still life?	*Someone left in a hurry and forgot phone *[Phone] suggests in peace with nature & environment	*Basic level of human familiarity *Phone is as basic as food *Everything has a shiny warm glow *Laid back setting	*I see food but I don't know what it is *Sense of daily life *Not a business [phone]
Culture	*Need to change background for Asian market.	*Swedes don't like technology and [the ad] places technology in a natural environment	*Don't think Chinese eat bread *It is old world style	*Yellow & red are pleasing to Chinese *Chinese don't feel a connection with the food

Conclusions

One of the advantages of Internet marketing is its ability to target promotion and marketing to audiences in new and innovative ways. A thorough semiotic analysis of the elements and signs of two Web site advertisements shows that individuals belonging to different cultural groups create meaning in starkly different ways. Our semiotic study demonstrates that alternative visual categories are relevant to different groups. Because semiotic categories affect perception even when perceived unconsciously, the use of appropriate semiotic elements is essential to effective Internet advertisements.

Miia Koski, a Finn who worked in Nokia's marketing department, explained the company's advertising strategy as a balance of global and local appeals:

Koski: They want to keep their brand consistent so you have always certain elements … because [if] people … see [them] so many times, then they are remembered. Of course you sort of have to customize your advertisement….[But] this can lead people to think, 'Okay this is targeted to certain people and I'm not part of that group.' When making global [ads] you should even be much more cleaner [*sic*] in these ads. There are so little [*sic*] elements which you can accent.

Janson: Does Nokia do that where they aim at local cultures too?

Koski: They aim more to global. But of course, they make savings with that. But you have to find a balance because if it is too global then it doesn't reach anyone. ….And then if you localize more it is very – you have to work hard. You have to update those….There are more possibilities to make mistakes.

The results discussed above warrant further validation. Our study has several obvious limitations. First, the number of respondents was just 32. Some of the six cultures were represented by only one respondent, while others were represented by 15 respondents. Another limitation is that only two Internet advertisements were studied. Both represented a single industry. A third limitation is that we used a convenience sample, making no attempt to scientifically select the interviewees.

Nevertheless, results of our study imply that semiotics can improve the impact of promotional techniques by:

- Helping Internet marketers design product ads appropriate to specific markets

- Helping develop communication strategies that are culturally, socially, nationally, and historically sensitive

- Helping develop online ads with worldwide reach that should appeal to the product but also to the experience associated with the product

Finally, semiotic analysis provides a methodological tool that helps consumers critically analyze Internet advertisements and, hence, escape being unduly influenced by them.

Acknowledgment

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Appendix 1 – Interview Protocol for Ericsson Advertisement

1.	When you first see the Ericsson ad, what comes to mind; what are your impressions?

2.	What are your thoughts when you look at the Ericsson phone screen?

3.	The screen has the words "19:03," "13-June," and "Welcome Home." What meanings do these words have for you?

4.	The Ericsson phone is part of what artists call a "still-life." It contains bread, a bottle of oil, bread slices, tomatoes, and some shiny object that reflects the phone. How do all these items relate to the Ericsson phone?

5.	When you look at the ad what does it suggest about what people should think about the Ericsson phone in relation to the other objects? Is it something special or is it ordinary?

6.	When you look at the ad does it give you a warm or a cold feeling or impression? Does the ad remind you of summer or winter? Can you explain?

7.	Can you say something about the Ericsson ad and its relationship to Sweden, the company's home country, or Swedish culture, its nature, its climate, its history, or its technology?

8.	Do you think the Ericsson ad is effective? For example, would a person be more likely to buy an Ericsson phone after he sees the ad than before he sees the ad?

9.	What are your thoughts about the effectiveness of the Ericsson ad in the international market? Thus, for example, would Asian people react in the same way to the Ericsson ad as Swedish or European or American people would?

10.	To what extent does this ad reflect your culture?

Appendix 2 – Interview Protocol for Nokia Advertisement

1.   When you first see the Nokia ad, what comes to mind; what are your impressions?

2.   What are your thoughts when you see the two outstretched hands? What meaning do the outstretched hands have for you?

3.   Do the outstretched hands remind you of some great artwork? *(Show Michelangelo mural)* If so, how does that relate to the Nokia phone?

4.   Does that impact or change your thoughts about or impressions of the Nokia ad?

5.   Can you say something about the Nokia ad and its relationship to Finland, the company's home country, or Finnish culture, its nature, its climate, its history, or its technology?

6.   When you look at the entire ad – the Nokia phone against its white background - what is your overall impression? Would the ad give you a warm or a cold feeling or impression? Does the ad remind you of summer or winter? Can you explain?

7.   Do you think the Nokia ad is effective? For example, would a person be more likely to a buy Nokia phone after he sees the ad than before he sees the ad?

8.   What are your thoughts about the effectiveness of the Nokia ad in the international market? Thus, for example, would Asian people react in the same way to the Nokia ad as Finnish or European or American people would?

9.   Which ad reflects your culture better – the Nokia ad or the Ericsson ad?

10.   If you saw the Nokia and Ericsson ads which phone would you most likely buy? Why do you think so?