



# Rethinking semiotics in qualitative research

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## Overview

**The purpose of this article is to encourage greater use of commercial semiotics in Australia.**

I believe that semiotics can play a more important role in qualitative research in the 21st century if we rethink some core assumptions, both about qualitative research and about semiotics.

Semiotics can be integrated within qualitative research if we adopt some of the concepts of social semiotics.

In my view, commercial researchers have defined semiotics too narrowly - as a desk-based 'study of culture', rather than as a communication theory which provides a practical analytical toolkit for researchers. As well, semiotics has mostly been used to study consumer brands, rather than the full range of topics covered by qualitative research.

To make progress, we need to reconsider some of the basic tenets of commercial semiotics, especially the lack of direct contact with consumers. The focus on desk-based analysis has proved both the strength and the limitation of commercial semiotics. Semiotics needs to become integrated within qualitative research if it is to help clients gain the insights they are looking for.

One way forward is to think about semiotics as a communications theory, not just a theory about culture. The second is to use some concepts from a branch of semiotics called 'social semiotics.'

But why should we bother? Let's start off by looking at semiotics' role in research.

# What is semiotics research?

**Semiotic research sets out to understand the social and cultural influences on behaviour.**

Semiotic theory gives researchers tools for thinking about communication and culture; concepts we can use as “*crowbars*” (to use Daniel Chandler’s term) to prise culture apart (Chandler, 2003).

It does this in two ways:

- By taking an outside-in perspective, very different from conventional qualitative research’s ‘inside out’ approach.
- By recognising that we live in a world of signs.

I explain these in more detail later. First, why do researchers need this outside-in signs-based approach?

## Why do researchers need an outside-in approach?

The main reason for an outside-in approach is that researchers, marketers and social policy makers are becoming more and more interested in the social influences on behaviour. We want to know why people behave as they do.

### We can’t always ask people ‘why?’

Historically, the ‘why’ question was answered by psychology in terms of individual motivation and attitude. However, there is considerable evidence from social cognition research that individuals are often unaware of the reasons for their own behaviour – see Bell and Burdon (2007) for a review.

Quantitative research is showing early signs of a move away from the conventional model which asks ‘will you buy’ questions of individual respondents. Instead, some are now looking at ‘the wisdom of crowds’ to predict purchase behaviour.

Meanwhile, qualitative market research remains grounded in individual psychology. Qual research began when researchers started to apply techniques common in psychological therapy - extended free-form interviewing and group discussions - to marketing problems. Psychological concepts such as beliefs, motivations and attitudes are still the main currency for almost all contemporary qualitative research. It would be hard to imagine a qualitative project which did not use these terms.

Yes, at the beginning of this decade there are more types of qualitative research than there ever were before – ethnography, creative groups, sensory qualitative are all maturing sub disciplines within qualitative research – but little has happened to rock the foundations of the ‘focus group’ with its premise that the right way to predict future behaviour is to ask individuals about their current attitudes and behaviour.

To understand how semiotics’ outside-in approach can benefit qualitative research, we need to take a brief journey into the world of semiotic theory.

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# A brief journey into semiotic theory

## Three semiotic traditions

There are three traditions in semiotic theory:

- The semiotics of the UK
- European semiotics, and
- American semiotics.

**UK semiotics** has been heavily influenced by UK theorists of culture, such as Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall and by structural linguists and anthropologists. The structuralist idea is that cultures have a 'deep structure' which is hidden from view, but which can be revealed through formal, structural analysis of oppositions. The vast majority of commercial semiotic research conducted in the UK follows this model, with commercial semiotic projects typically conducted as desk research by trained semioticians.



Advocates of this view argue that people within a culture cannot see how their culture is affecting them, and so cannot see it change. Therefore, the argument goes: we cannot use the people of the culture to tell us how that culture works, so interviewing them would be of no use. UK researchers have an impressive armoury of successful case studies to illustrate their point.

**European semiotics**, while highly varied, does share some of this structuralist approach. However, many of the leading original thinkers in European semiotics were linguistics, interested in human communication rather than culture, and so expect to talk to and listen to people as part of their work.

When linguists interview people, they do not interview them about their language – linguists already possess the analytical tools to do that. What linguists do is interview people to hear how they use language.

Key figures in applied European semiotics Jean-Marie Floch and Roland Barthes both extended structuralist ideas to include assessing how real people use signs and symbols.

The founding father of **American semiotics** was philosopher CS Pierce. Pierce was not a structuralist. Two of Pierce's ideas which have resonated through contemporary academic semiotics have enormous potential for commercial researchers:

- The best way to understand meaning is not through oppositions – as the structuralist believe – but by analysing how meaning-making occurs in practice.
- That any kind of communication needs an 'interpretant', some one who interprets the experience. In contrast, no 'interpretant' is built into the structuralist model.



The French / European and American traditions use – but do not rely on – desk-based analysis; they both overtly take the view that meaning is personal, that different people can vary in how they interpret something.

## An Australian perspective: social semiotics

In Australia, particularly through the work of Theo van Leeuwen, social semioticians have explored how people *use* signs - called 'resources' in social semiotics. Social semiotics focuses on what people do with the signs that they experience - how people understand what they experience. The words 'do with' in the last sentence are crucial to this point of view.



*“Traditional semiotics likes to assume that the relevant meanings are frozen and fixed in the text itself, to be extracted and decoded by the analyst by reference to a coding system that is impersonal and neutral, and universal for all users of the code. Social semiotics cannot assume that texts produce exactly the same meanings and effects that their authors hope for. It is precisely the struggles and their uncertain outcomes that must be studied at the level of social action, and their effects in the production of meaning.”* (Hodge and Kress quoted by Wendy Leeds Hurwitz, 1995).

Social semiotics:

- Focuses on different kinds ('modes') for meaning-making, such as visual imagery, verbal and written texts, gesture and music, either alone or in combination.
- Utilises some structuralist ideas and terms, but does not aim to describe how a culture works in the abstract.

Bearing in mind, then, that there are various traditions in semiotics with a varying commitment to structuralism, how can semiotics help commercial researchers?

## How does semiotics help us understand culture and communication?

**Semiotics helps us understand culture and communication in two ways:**

1. **How consumer culture influences consumer behaviour.** Whichever view you take of semiotics, its outside-in approach reveals how consumer behaviour is influenced by consumer culture.

As Rachel Lawes says, semiotics is about revealing how people's ideas "*get there in the first place*" (Lawes, 2002). Therefore, semiotics concerns itself with the things which can potentially influence us: packs, products, brands, media and the stories of our culture. Some people call this the 'semiosphere'.

2. **With analytical precision.** Semiotics provides researchers with analytical tools to take culture and communication apart so we can understand how they work. The three key analytical concepts are:
  - Signs
  - Codes
  - The commutation test

## Semiotics is about signs

Semiotics says that people “*live in a world of signs*”. Signs are in our minds. They are part of our everyday experience. Anyone looking at a static visual image, reading a written text, going on a journey, walking around a supermarket, or going to the theatre – anything – is interacting with the signs around them and making sense of that experience.

### The five ‘must know’ things about signs

Signs are to semiotics as attitudes and drives are to psychology, so it is important to be clear about what we mean by a ‘sign’.

1. A sign is anything which can be used to mean – it is a resource which has been “*drawn into the domain of social communication ...*”. (Van Leeuwen, 2005)
2. Some signs denote, that is they signify their meaning directly; some connote, which means to signify indirectly or by imagery or association. Some do both.
3. Some signs are discrete entities – like a chair – or they can be continuous like the amount of white space in a picture, or how close two people are in an image.
4. Signs don’t work by themselves. They work by combining with other signs.
5. When we make a choice to use one sign, we are choosing not to use another. **The commutation test** is based on this insight. An analyst can identify a sign by removing it or changing it and exploring how the overall meaning changes – if at all.

Although semiotics is about ‘outside in’ in the sense that it is concerned with the signs ‘out there’ in our everyday world, semioticians also have to think about how people actually make sense of all those signs.

## How do we make sense of signs?

Codes and conventions help us make sense of signs.

*We “have no way of understanding anything except through signs and the codes into which they are organised”* (Daniel Chandler, 2003)

If we live in a world of signs, how do we put them together, to make sense of them – why doesn’t it all just feel like a jumbled mess of words and symbols?

The two things we need to know about how signs work together are:

1. **Meaning making can occur through established codes.** In some instances, we draw upon established codes to make sense of the signs. Traffic light systems are the analogy usually used to explain this; we know what the red light means because we know the traffic light code. Knowledge of such codes is shared by members of the culture, but individuals can choose to accept, negotiate or oppose codes.
2. **When there is no established code** or the code is only partly formed, convention comes into play. Individuals create meaning from the available resources by responding to patterns or structures with which they are

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familiar. Common patterns that humans seem wired to respond to in a conventional way are:

- **Stories.** People often make sense of things by turning them into a story – seeing the collection of signs as a story. The stories in our culture share some common and predictable patterns so they can act as psychological scripts or schema.

*‘We do not merely add up the independent implications of each piece of evidence to arrive at a verdict. Rather, we arrive at a verdict by constructing a story’.* (Kunda, 1999)

- **Credibility / authenticity judgements.** Does it seem fake or not quite credible? A big part of how we make sense of our experiences is what social semioticians call ‘modality’. Does it seem true? Does this represent the world as we know it?
- **Self-image.** People respond to communication according to their self-image – asking does it fit with my self-image or my group image?

Saying that codes and conventions help us make sense of signs, leads to the next obvious question: how do we make sense of codes, and where do they come from?

## Where do codes come from?

Codes are the place where psychology meets culture. There is considerable evidence from psychology that people think in terms of cognitive scripts, schemas and stories. Codes are the shared cultural framework within which the signs that we perceive make sense.

What we mean by ‘culture’ is the complex mesh of codes and cultural conventions, which make up social fabric of ideas which we all share (Leeds Hurwitz, 1995).

The outside-in perspective that semiotics uses is therefore all about understanding culture, how we adopt shared ideas, and how those shared ideas transform over time. If culture is the key driver of semiotics’ outside-in approach, we need to be much clearer in our minds about what we actually mean by culture.

# What is culture?

We can understand more about what culture is, if we break it down into its key components. Key components of culture are:

- **Culture is shared.** The behaviour, attitude or value or categorisation expressed by individual must be shared with most others in the social group for it to be considered an aspect of culture.
- **Culture divides nature into meaningful parts.** Our language system divides our world into parts or categories which seem normal to members of that culture. These distinctions form our perception of reality.
- **Cultural rituals** transmit the culture's core values. In consumer terms "*ritual is used to transfer meaning from goods to individuals.*" (McCracken, 1990)
- **Culture is both material and subjective.**
  - People who study material culture study the everyday material objects used in the culture - the products and media used. In commercial research, this means studying how people use consumer goods as carriers of meaning – to create or reinforce their self-identity or the group identity. (McCracken, 1990)
  - People who study subjective culture study people's shared ideas, values and assumptions. In this context, the word 'culture' refers to the "*way of life or outlook adopted by a community or social class*" (Alasuuarti, 1993).

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## Can you interview people about culture?

Some researchers have expressed the view that people cannot explain their own culture because they are in it, too close to see it with any perspective. Semioticians hold either a weak or a strong version of this view:

- The strong view states that consultation with people in a culture is never worthwhile.
- The weak view – which I hold – is that people can inform researchers about some aspects of their culture and not others. Grant McCracken says that cultural is composed of "*categories*" such as "*the categories of person, activity, space or time and , 'principles'*" which are "*the ideas or values according to which these and other cultural phenomenon are organised, evaluated and construed.*" According to McCracken, consumers can inform us reliably about cultural categories, but not about the principles.

In conclusion, research respondents can play a role in research about consumer culture, but they cannot be expected to tell us all of it. We have to do some analysis of our own.

# Can semiotics fit within qualitative research?

## A little bit of history...

Commercial semiotics emerged as a way for commercial researchers to understand consumer culture (Keegan, 2009). Some researchers adopted a 'guru' methodology and ignored research altogether. Others, particularly in the UK, always saw semiotics as research, but adopted the stance that interviews with consumers were not the appropriate methodology for semiotics. Indeed any semiotician who adopts the structuralist approach to semiotics will struggle to integrate their work with psychology-based qualitative approach, because the two approaches are essentially incompatible.

In Europe, projects which actually combine semiotics and qualitative research are more common. The French semiotician Jean-Marie Floch successfully combined semiotic analysis with qualitative research in several studies.

## What about now?

Although most commercial researchers know the word 'semiotics', semiotics itself never became a mainstream research technique in the UK or Australia. In Sheila Keegan's words, semiotics is "*peripheral*" in qualitative research – an interesting topic at conferences and training sessions, but not a mainstream technique. Virginia Valentine's 2007 paper was on this same topic (Valentine, 2007). Within the local Australian market very few client briefs mention semiotics, especially outside the major international FMCG brands. Only a few research agencies actively promote semiotics now.

Why did semiotics become a peripheral qualitative technique – and what can be done about that?

There are four probable causes of semiotics' niche positioning in commercial research:

- 1 The anti-interview stance adopted by most semiotician researchers.
- 2 The FMCG / brand image focus of much of the most recent work.
- 3 The notoriously difficult semiotics terminology.
- 4 A refusal by researchers to believe that psychology does not have all the answers.

## The anti-interview stance

Semiotic research as it practised in the UK, and to a large extent in Australia, is a desk-based technique. Many of the key figures in semiotics have very publicly stated that there should be no consumer consultation as part of the semiotic analysis process.

The origins of this stance come from the largely structuralist approach to semiotics adopted by the UK researchers.

The two problems with this anti-interview stance are:

1. **Interviewing is what researchers do.** Sheila Keegan argues that semiotics became peripheral because qualitative researchers enjoy interacting with people – interviewing is what qualitative researchers do. Semiotics does not traditionally allow the researcher to interview anyone, except an expert, so therefore researchers choose to use semiotics less often than they use interview-based qualitative.
2. **Clients want to participate in the qualitative process.** In my view, there is a second reason - which is that this semiotic approach is at odds with the way clients buy research. Experienced clients know that they can learn almost as much from participating in the qualitative research experience as they can from the researcher proclaiming her findings from the PowerPoint pulpit at the end of the project.

Clients also make full use of the observation facilities offered to them by qualitative researchers as a quality control measure. Clients who buy research are buying evidence.

One of the least-lauded achievements of qualitative research over the years has been the development of a qualitative process that, at its best, involves impartial co-creation – where clients watch groups, reconsider their brief as their understanding grows, and are able to ‘sell’ the findings internally because they understand them. This has been part of a move from researchers as data-providers to researchers as strategic consultants. Except in rare cases, (Harvey and Evans, 2001) semiotics does not offer clients that same participatory experience.

Semiotic research has become the province of the guru; the ‘trained semiotician’ who analyses the materials of popular culture, and then reports the results of that analysis to the client, as a fait accompli.

Consequently, many clients are sceptical of semiotics. They understand and accept research findings when they experience them and can judge them on the evidence. The ‘semiotics by guru’ version doesn’t (easily) give clients this experience.

## The FMCG / brand image focus of much of the most recent work

Much of the pioneering semiotic work in the UK was on FMCG brands. The websites of most of the key figures in the industry cite brand-related case studies to explain the technique.

Some of the main semiotic methods which developed over the last 10 years have suited the FMCG market. For example, FMCG brands have accessible packaging, TV and print ads, and websites.

This is less useful for services, and even less useful for business-to-business markets where the ‘meaning’ that the customer finds in their experience cannot be found in readily-accessible historical records such as packs.

It is possible to translate the techniques to services and business to business if the researchers focus changes from visual materials. However, the methods are still immature. Therefore, one of the reasons why semiotics is a peripheral technique is that semiotics has not yet truly broken away from its FMCG heritage.

## The notoriously difficult semiotics terminology

Some of the academic writing on semiotics has also been very abstruse.

The difficult language should alert us to the idea that semiotics involves a different way of thinking about the world.

## Belief that psychology has all the answers

The psychological approach to research dominates the market and social research culture. Much of the consumer behaviour taught to marketing students is also primarily psychology-based.

There is ample evidence that people's behaviour is socially and culturally determined, and that semiotics offers the conceptual tools to give analytical precision to research into the cultural influences on behaviour. Semiotics terminology equips us with the conceptual tools that we need to construct and deconstruct culture. If we think only in psychological terms, we cannot see how culture works.

To accept semiotics, researchers trained in psychology have to be very clear in their own minds about the limits of psychological research and to accept that learning semiotic language is about learning to think about culture.

In conclusion, semiotics has successfully emerged as a stand-alone research technique to give insight into the cultural influences on human behaviour, and to provide a more sophisticated analysis of marketing communication than is possible from the traditional psychology-based qualitative research.

However, semiotics has had a niche positioning in the industry, both because it failed to provide qualitative researchers with the traditional qualitative experience and because clients did not share this experience – and the sense of validation that observation allows them. Researchers trained in psychology have also been reluctant to accept that semiotics offers better tools for prising cultural constructs apart than the familiar psychological concepts of 'belief' and 'attitude'.

Sadly, the effect of this niche positioning has been to exclude the cultural context from most mainstream qualitative projects. Interview-based qualitative research remains focused on individual psychology. This is a shame, particularly now, as the old model of 'individual' buying products and using services no longer describes consumer buying behaviour. Researchers need cultural insights, so we need to work on our techniques to give us the information we need.

But how should we do this? What is the best approach to understanding consumer culture?

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# How to conduct semiotics within qualitative research

In my view, the best approach is one which comes directly from semiotic theory, even though that means putting aside some differences between the theories. It has these features:

- **Semiotics to develop hypotheses.** Use desk-based analysis to develop hypotheses to test in qualitative research.
- **A qualitative interview to understand culture** on the model of the linguistic interview. That is, the interview is not about culture, signs or codes; the interview exposes culture, signs and codes, by revealing cultural categories actually used – and considered normative – by research participants.

The semiotic researcher is not interested in attitudes, beliefs and values per se. What is interesting to semiotics researchers is how these attitudes, beliefs etc cluster together into a particular cultural category, and how that cultural category fits into the culture in general.

For example, in a recent study of a snack food, one of the earliest distinctions to emerge naturally in almost all conversations on the topic was the difference between children's flavours and adult flavours – where teenagers were firmly included with 'children'. This seemed a perfectly natural and very important point to respondents, yet it is not as normal as they made it sound. After all, we tend not to think of adult versus children's / teens' flavours in other things we eat, such as yoghurt or fast food, where teen food is usually the same as adult food, except perhaps for the quantity....

- **Combines linguistic and narrative analysis**, by identifying:
  - **The language people use:** People frequently use language in particular rhetorical ways when they want to make it clear that certain distinctions and categories are preferred over others. Examples of these devices include stereotyping, nominalisation, referring to extremes, and referring to authoritative sources.
  - **The stories that people tell:** look for the differences and similarities in the type of stories that people tell. Again, it's not the actual stories which of interest, but what the pattern of story-telling teaches you about the values of this particular culture or subculture.

On this basis, semiotic research should include techniques to identify:

1. Signs and the way in which different signs work
2. Codes and the way in which different codes work
3. The conventions which shape interpretation of signs, and the way in which different conventions affect interpretation
4. Understand the rituals which convey cultural meaning and how they are changing – the things that people 'do', especially those which have particular social significance, like weddings or Friday afternoon office drinks....

The best approach is one which comes directly from semiotic theory.

# Conclusion

Individuals buy and consume for reasons beyond individual psychology; social interaction and cultural assumptions influence consumer behaviour in ways which individuals do not necessarily see.

Qualitative researchers need to abandon the assumption that individuals act entirely on their own volition, and recognise that we are all social creatures who belong to multiple tribes and communities.

Semiotics seems to offer researchers a significant methodology - and the conceptual 'crowbars' - for understanding exactly these kinds of influences.

Commercial desk-based semiotics has already brought us a long way in our understanding of cultural codes and cultural change. However, current structuralist approaches to commercial semiotics are difficult to combine with qualitative research.

Social semiotics is a form of semiotics which is more easily integrated into commercial qualitative research.

Qualitative interviews are a normal vehicle for discovering how culture shapes our thinking, and how people communicate. These qualitative interviews are used to identify cultural distinctions and categories – and these distinctions and categories in turn reveal what the culture is really like.

Qualitative interviews which are about psychological processes will not help us understand culture.

To summarise, semiotics is a qualitative research technique which complements mainstream methods which have psychological processes and concepts as their basis. Structuralist semiotics made the headway, so that semiotic concepts and terms are part of the lingua franca of most contemporary qualitative researchers. However, semiotics needs to expand its role in research. It can do this by borrowing social semiotic concepts and recognising that consumers can play a role side-by-side with researchers in the analysis of culture.

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Susan Bell is a highly experienced qualitative market and social researcher who aims to understand the psychological, social and cultural influences on behaviour. She specialises in communication research.

Susan's semiotic projects are practical, insightful, thoroughly grounded in theory yet easy to understand. She sometimes uses semiotics as a 'behind-the-scenes' analysis tool in mainstream qualitative projects, sometimes conducts semiotic analyses of packaging or promotional material, or conducts stand-alone semiotic projects. She has an Honours degree in English and Linguistics, a graduate diploma in psychology, a diploma in Marketing and qualified practising market researcher accreditation.

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