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I have discovered the most exciting, the most arduous literary form of all, the most difficult to master, the most pregnant in curious possibilities. I mean the advertisement. It is far easier to write ten passably effective Sonnets, good enough to take in the not too inquiring critic, than one effective advertisement that will take in a few thousand of the uncritical buying public.

Aldous Huxley (1894–1963)

The messages of advertisers are everywhere. They are on billboards, on the radio, on television, on buses and subways, in magazines and newspapers, on posters, on clothes, shoes, hats, pens – and the list could go on and on. To say that advertising has become a ubiquitous form of textuality in today’s ‘global culture’ is an understatement – it is estimated that the average American is exposed to over 3000 advertisements a day and watches three years’ worth of television commercials over the course of a lifetime (Kilbourne 1999). Using both verbal and non-verbal techniques to make its messages as persuasive as possible, advertising has become an integral category of modern-day signifying orders designed to influence attitudes and lifestyle behaviours by covertly suggesting how we can best satisfy our innermost urges and aspirations through consumption. As the American author E.B. White (1899–1985) aptly observed in 1936, in a New Yorker article (11 July):

Advertisers are the interpreters of our dreams – Joseph interpreting for Pharaoh. Like the movies, they infect the routine futility of our days with purposeful adventure. Their weapons are our weaknesses: fear, ambition, illness, pride, selfishness, desire, ignorance. And these weapons must be kept as bright as a sword.

Given its obvious importance to understanding modern signifying orders, it is little wonder that advertising has become a target of great interest to semioticians. The two questions that media semiotics attempts to answer in this domain are: (1) How does advertising textuality encode meanings? (2) How do advertisers create signification systems that are perceived by hordes
of people as so meaningful? Those will be the questions that will guide the discussion in this chapter.

**What is advertising?**

After the publication of Vance Packard’s 1957 work on the psychosocial effects of advertising, *The Hidden Persuaders*, an outpouring of studies in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s started examining the impact of advertising on individuals and on society at large. The implicit question that most of the studies entertained, without answering it in any definitive fashion, was whether advertising had become an ideological force moulding cultural mores and individual behaviours, or whether it constituted no more than a ‘mirror’ of deeper cultural tendencies within urbanized contemporary societies. Without going into the debate here, suffice it to say that there is one thing with which virtually everyone agrees – advertising has become one of the most recognizable and appealing forms of mass communications to which virtually everyone in society is exposed. The images and messages that advertisers promulgate on a daily basis delineate the contemporary social landscape. In themselves, they are not disruptive of the value systems of the cultural mainstream. Rather, they are effective because they reflect ‘shifts’ already present in popular culture.

Moreover, advertising is no longer just the servant of commercial interests. It has become a common strategy adopted by anyone in society who wants to persuade people to do something: e.g. to endorse a political candidate, to support a cause, and so on and so forth. Business firms, political parties and candidates, social organizations, special-interest groups, and governments alike advertise routinely in various media to create favourable ‘images’ of themselves in the minds of people. Since the 1960s advertising campaigns have also been mounted and directed toward issues of social concern (cancer, AIDS, human rights, poverty, etc.).

The term ‘advertising’ derives from the medieval Latin verb *advertere* ‘to direct one’s attention to’. It designates any type or form of public announcement or representation intended to promote the sale of specific commodities or services. Advertising is to be distinguished from other kinds of representations and activities aimed at swaying and influencing opinions, attitudes, and behaviours such as propaganda, publicity, and public relations. In the twentieth century, advertising evolved into a form of persuasive social discourse intended primarily to influence how we perceive the buying and consumption of goods. Advertising discourse ranges from simple notices in the classified sections of newspapers and magazines to sophisticated magazine lifestyle ads and television and Internet commercials. Advertising has,
therefore, become a kind of privileged discourse that has replaced, by and
large, more traditional forms of discourse – sermons, political oratory,
proverbs, wise sayings, etc. – which in previous centuries had rhetorical force
and moral authority. But advertising exalts and inculcates Epicurean, not
moralistic, values. It envisions human beings as ‘recurrent units’ that can be
classified into ‘taste groups’, ‘lifestyle groups’, or ‘market segments’, which
can be managed and manipulated according to the laws of statistics. As the
psychoanalyst Carl Jung (1957: 19–20) warned several decades ago, we live
indeed in an age that views a human being dangerously as a cog in an
assemblage, rather than as ‘something unique and singular which in the last
analysis can neither be known nor compared with anything else’.

Advertising falls into two main categories: (1) consumer advertising, which
is directed towards the promotion of some product, and (2) trade advertising,
in which a sales pitch is made to dealers and professionals through
appropriate trade publications and media. The focus of this chapter is on the
former, which can be defined more specifically as a form of discourse designed
to promote the sale of marketable goods and services.

Consumer advertising, incidentally, gave birth to the first agency for
recording and analysing data on advertising effectiveness in 1914 with the
establishment of the Audit Bureau of Circulations in the United States, an
independent organization founded and supported by newspaper and
magazine publishers wishing to obtain circulation statistics and to standardize
the ways of presenting them. Then, in 1936 the Advertising Research
Foundation was established to conduct research on, and to develop,
advertising techniques with the capacity to enhance the authenticity,
reliability, efficiency, and usefulness of all advertising and marketing research.
Today, the increasing sophistication with statistical information-gathering
techniques makes it possible for advertisers to target audiences on the basis of
where people live, what income they make, what educational background they
have, etc. in order to determine their susceptibility to, or inclination towards,
certain products.

Advertising is thus closely linked to marketing science. Advertisers and
marketing agencies conduct extensive and expensive surveys to determine the
potential acceptance of products or services before they are advertised at costs
that may add up to millions of dollars. If the survey convinces the
manufacturer that one of the versions exhibited will attract enough
purchasers, a research crew then pre-tests various sales appeals by showing
provisional advertisements to consumers and asking them to indicate their
preference. After the one or two best-liked advertisements are identified, the
advertiser produces a limited quantity of the new product and introduces it in
a test market. On the basis of this market test the advertiser/manufacturer can
make a decision as to whether a national campaign should be launched.
By spreading advertising messages constantly through numerous and varied media—newspapers, television, direct mail, radio, magazines, business publications, calendars, Internet sites, etc.—the aim of campaigns is to saturate the signifying order with advertising messages. This creates the illusion that there is a correlation between the products advertised and social processes and trends. As Barthes often claimed in his writings, for this reason advertising is identifiable as the root cause of neomania. Through adaptive change, advertisers are constantly trying to ensure that any shifts in social or entertainment trends (fashion, music, values, popularity of media personalities, etc.) are reflected in their advertising texts as well. Indeed, the contemporary mediated world is distinguished above all else by a dynamic interplay between advertising, pop culture trends, and general social tendencies, whereby one influences the other through a constant synergy.

A brief history

The first advertising texts of human civilization were the many outdoor signs displayed above the shop doors of ancient cities of the Middle East. As early as 3000 BC, the Babylonians used such signs to advertise the stores themselves. The ancient Greeks and Romans also hung signs outside their shops. Since few people could read, the merchants of the era used recognizable visual symbols carved in stone, clay, or wood for their signs. Throughout history, poster and picture ads in marketplaces and temples have, in fact, constituted popular media for disseminating information and for promoting the barter and sale of goods and services.

The use of shop signs and posters continued uninterrupted right into medieval times. With the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century, fliers and posters could be printed quickly and cheaply, and posted in public places or inserted in books, pamphlets, newspapers, etc. The printing press also spawned a new form of advertising, known as the handbill. This had an advantage over a poster or sign because it could be reproduced and distributed to many people living near and far apart.

The growing use and influence of advertising in the nineteenth century led to the establishment of the first advertising agency by Philadelphia entrepreneur Volney B. Palmer in 1842. By 1849, Palmer had offices in New York, Boston, and Baltimore in addition to his Philadelphia office. In 1865, George P. Rowell began contracting with local newspapers as a go-between with clients. Ten years later, in 1875, N.W. Ayer and Son, another Philadelphia advertising agency, became a rival of Rowell and Palmer. In time, the firm hired writers and artists to create print ads and carried out complete advertising campaigns for clients. It thus became the first ad agency in the modern sense of the word. By 1900, most agencies in the United States were
writing ads for clients, and were starting to assume responsibility for complete advertising campaigns. By the 1920s, such agencies had themselves become large business enterprises, constantly developing new techniques and methods that would be capable of influencing the so-called 'typical consumer'. It was at that point in time that advertising came to be perceived primarily as an instrument of persuasion by corporate executives. Business and psychology had joined forces by the first decades of the twentieth century, broadening the attempts of their predecessors to build a textual bridge between the product and the consumer's consciousness.

In the 1920s, the increased use of electricity led to the possibility of further entrenching advertising into the social landscape through the use of new electronic media. Electricity made possible the illuminated outdoor poster; and photo-engraving and other printing inventions helped both the editorial and advertising departments of magazines create truly effective illustrative material that could be incorporated into ad texts. The advent of radio, also in the 1920s, led to the invention and widespread use of a new form of advertising, known as the commercial — a mini-narrative or musical jingle revolving around a product or service and its uses (chapter 4). The commercial became immediately a highly persuasive form of advertising, since it could reach masses of potential customers, print literate or not, instantaneously. The commercial became even more influential as a vehicle for disseminating advertising messages throughout society with the advent of television in the early 1950s. TV commercials of the day became instantly familiar creating a perception of the product as being inextricably intertwined with the style and content of the commercials created to promote it. Recently, the Internet has come forward to complement and supplement both the print and commercial (radio and TV) forms of advertising. However, advertising textuality has not changed drastically from the way it was fashioned by the traditional media. As in TV commercials, Internet advertisers use graphics, audio, and various visual techniques to enhance the effectiveness of their messages.

The 'language' of advertising has become the language of virtually everyone — even of those who are critical of it. As Twitchell (2000: 1) aptly puts it, 'language about products and services has pretty much replaced language about all other subjects'. We assimilate and react to advertising texts unwittingly and, in ways that parallel how individuals and groups have responded in the past to religious texts, we utilize such texts unconsciously as templates for planning, interpreting, and structuring social actions and behaviours. Advertising has become one of the most ubiquitous, all-encompassing forms of social discourse ever devised by humans. As McLuhan (1964) quipped, the medium in this case has indeed become the message. There are now even websites, such as AdCritic.com, that feature ads for their
own sake, so that audiences can view them for their aesthetic qualities alone.

**Spreading the message**

The two main techniques used by advertisers to embed advertising into the social mindset are called *positioning* and 'image-creation'. *Positioning* is the placing or targeting of a product for the right people. For example, ads for Budweiser beer are normally positioned for a male audience, whereas ads for Chanel perfume are positioned, by and large, for a female audience. The advertising of the Mercedes Benz automobile is aimed at socially upscale car buyers; the advertising of Dodge vans is aimed, instead, at middle-class suburban dwellers. Creating an image for a product involves fashioning a 'personality' for it with which a particular type of consumer can identify. The product's name, packaging, logo, price, and overall presentation create a recognizable character for it that is meant to appeal to specific consumer types. Take beer as an example. What kinds of people drink Budweiser? And what kinds drink Heineken instead? Answers to these questions would typically include remarks about the educational level, class, social attitudes, etc. of the consumer. The one who drinks Budweiser is perceived by people as vastly different from the one who drinks Heineken. The former is imagined to be a down-to-earth (male) character who simply wants to 'hang out with the guys'; the latter a smooth sophisticated type (male or female) who appreciates the 'finer things' of life. This personification of the product is reinforced further by the fact that Budweiser commercials are positioned next to sports events on television, whereas Heineken ads are found next to current affairs programmes, and certain types of sitcoms. The idea behind creating an *image* for the product is, clearly, to speak directly to particular *types* of individuals, not to everyone, so that these individuals can see their own personalities represented in the lifestyle images created by advertisements for certain products.

Brand image is further entrenched by the technique of mythologization. This is the strategy of imbuing brand names, logos, product design, ads, and commercials intentionally with some mythic meaning. For instance, the quest for beauty, the conquest of death, among other mythic themes, are constantly being woven into the specific images that advertisers create for certain products. In the case of beauty products, this strategy often can be literally seen in the people who appear in ads and commercials. These are, typically, attractive people, with an 'unreal', almost deified, quality about the way they look.

Another way in which advertisers entrench product mythology is through logo design. Take, as an example, the McDonald’s golden arches logo. Most people today go to fast-food restaurants to be with family or with friends, so
as to get a meal quickly and because the atmosphere is congenial. Most people would also admit that the food at a McDonald's restaurant is affordable and that the service is fast and polite. Indeed, many today probably feel quite 'at home' at a McDonald's restaurant. This is, in fact, the semiotic key to unlocking the meaning that the McDonald's logo is designed to create. The arches reverberate with mythic symbolism, beckoning good people to march through them triumphantly into a paradise of order, cleanliness, friendliness, hospitality, hard work, self-discipline, and family values. In a sense, McDonald's is comparable to an organized religion. From the menu to the uniforms, McDonald's exacts and imposes standardization, in the same way that the world's organized religions impose standardized interpretations of their sacred texts and uniformity in the appearance and behaviour of their clergy. The message created unconsciously by the golden arches logo is therefore that, like paradise, McDonald's is a place that will 'do it all for you', as one of the company's past slogans so aptly phrases it.

Advertisers create brand names, logos, package designs, bottle shapes, print ads, and commercials that, below their surface appearance, tap into unconscious desires, urges, and mythic motifs. Ads and commercials now offer the same kinds of promise and hope to which religions and social philosophies once held exclusive rights – security against the hazards of old age, better positions in life, popularity and personal prestige, social advancement, better health, happiness, etc. In a phrase, the modern advertiser stresses not the product, but the benefits that may be expected to ensue from its purchase. The advertiser is, clearly, quite adept at setting foot into the same subconscious regions of psychic experience that were once explored only by philosophers, artists, and religious thinkers.

Creating a signification system

To create a personality for a product, advertisers construct a signification system for it. This is achieved, first and foremost, by giving it a brand name and, whenever possible, creating a visual symbol for it known as a logo. By assigning it a name, the product, like a person, can be recognized in terms of its name. No wonder, then, that trademarks – which is the legal term for brand names – are so fiercely protected by corporations and manufacturers. So important is the brand name as an identifier of the product that, on several occasions, it has become the general term to refer to the product type. Examples include aspirin, cellophane, and escalator.

Brand names

As was discussed in chapter 2, the name Acura was designed to be imitative of
the phonology of both Japanese and Italian words. By metaphorical extension, it is designed to evoke, arguably, the perceived qualities of both the Japanese and Italian cultures. In effect, the name on its own generates a signification system for the product. Here are other examples of how some brand names are constructed to generate specific kinds of metaphorical connotation systems:

- Names referring to the actual manufacturer evoke connotations of 'tradition', 'reliability', 'artistry', 'sophistication', etc.: e.g. Armani, Benetton, Folger's, etc.
- Names referring to a fictitious personality elicit specific kinds of images: e.g. Wendy's evokes the image a 'friendly young girl', Mr Clean of a 'strong toiler', etc.
- Names referring to some aspect of Nature bestow upon the product the qualities associated with Nature such as 'water', 'health', 'cleanliness', etc.: e.g. Tide, Surf, Cascade, Agua Velva, Mountain Dew, etc.
- Names constructed as hyperboles emphasize product 'superiority', 'excellence', etc.: e.g. MaxiLight, SuperFresh, UltraLite, etc.
- Names constructed as combinations of words elicit composite meanings: e.g. Fruitopia ('fruit + Utopia'), Yogourt ('yogurt + gourmet'), etc.
- Some names are designed simply to tell what the product can do: e.g. Easy Off, Lestoil, One Wipe, Quick Flow, Easy Wipe, etc.
- Some names are designed to show what can be accomplished with the product: e.g. Close-Up Toothpaste, No Sweat Deodorant, etc.

To be effective, however, brand-naming must keep in step with the times. In early 2000, car makers, for instance, started looking at newer naming trends that appeal to a generation of Internet users who have become accustomed to a different style of communication. Cadillac, for instance, announced a new model with the monogram name GTS in 2001. Names using just letters and numbers have, in fact, become widespread. Acura itself has transformed its line of models with names such as: TL, RL, MDX, RSX. Such names are consistent with 'Internet discourse', which can be called simply 'Internetese', a type of highly telegraphic form of communication that is centred on monogrammatic and alpha-numeric signifiers. Hyundai's XG300 model, for instance, sounds perfect for the times. On the other side of the naming equation, such abbreviations are hard to remember, especially for older customers who have not yet tapped into Internetese.

Brand names, clearly, do much more than just identify a product. As the above examples show, they are constructed to create connotative signification systems for the product. At a practical informational level, naming a product has, of course, a denotative function; i.e. it allows consumers to identify what
product they desire to purchase (or not). But at a connotative level, the product’s name generates images that go well beyond this simple identifier function. Consider Armani shoes as a specific case-in-point. Denotatively, the name allows us to identify the shoes, should we desire to buy them rather than, say, Russell & Bromley shoes. However, this is not all it does. The use of the manufacturer’s name, rather than some invented name or expression, assigns an aura of craftsmanship and superior quality to the product. The shoes are thus perceived to be the ‘work’ of an artist (the manufacturer). They constitute, in effect, a ‘work of shoe art’, so to speak, not just an assembly-line product for everyone to wear.

Clearly, in the fashion industry, designer names such as Gucci, Armani, and Calvin Klein evoke images of objets d’art, rather than images of mere clothes, shoes, or jewellery; so too do names such as Ferrari, Lamborghini, and Maserati in the domain of automobiles. The manufacturer’s name, in such cases, extends the denotative meaning of the product considerably. This extensional process is known, of course, as connotation. The signification system created to ensconce product image into the social mindset is a de facto connotative one. When people buy an Armani or a Gucci product, for instance, they feel that they are buying a work of art to be displayed on the body; when they buy Poison, by Christian Dior, they sense that they are buying a dangerous, but alluring, love potion; when they buy Moondrops, Natural Wonder, Rainflower, Sunsilk, or Skin Dew cosmetics they feel that they are acquiring some of Nature’s beauty resources; and when they buy Eterna 27, Clinique, Endocil, or Equalia beauty products they sense that they are getting products imbued with scientific validity. ‘No-name’ products do not engender such systems of connotations.

Incidentally, branding was, originally, the searing of flesh with a hot iron to produce a scar or mark with an easily recognizable pattern for identification or other purposes. Livestock were branded by the Egyptians as early as 2000 BC. In the late medieval period, trades people and guild members posted characteristic marks outside their shops, leading to the notion of trademark. Medieval swords and ancient Chinese pottery, for instance, were also marked with identifiable symbols so buyers could trace their origin and determine their quality. Among the best-known trademarks surviving from early modern times are the striped pole of the barbershop and the three-ball sign of the pawnbroker shop.

Names were first used towards the end of the nineteenth century when many American firms began to market packaged goods under such names. Previously, everyday household products were sold in neighbourhood stores from large bulk containers. Around 1880, soap manufacturers started naming their products so that they could be identified – e.g. Ivory, Pears’, Sapolio, Colgate, etc. The first modern-day brand names were thus invented. As
Naomi Klein (2000: 6) aptly observes, branding became the general practice among manufacturers of products because the market was starting to be flooded by uniform mass-produced and, thus, indistinguishable products: ‘Competitive branding became a necessity of the machine age’. By the early 1950s, it became obvious that branding was not just a simple strategy for product differentiation, but the very semiotic fuel that propelled corporate identity and product recognizability. Even the advent of no-name products, designed to cut down the cost of buying them to the consumer, has had little effect on the signifying power that branding has on the consciousness of people. Names such as Nike, Apple, Body Shop, Calvin Klein, Levi’s, etc. have become signs recognized by virtually anyone living in a modern consumerist society. As Klein (2000: 16) goes on to remark, for such firms the brand name constitutes ‘the very fabric of their companies’.

Iconic brand names are particularly effective, because they are memorable. A name such as Ritz Crackers, for example, assigns a sonority to the product that is simulative of sounds that crackers make as they are being eaten. Another example is the name Drakkar noir, chosen by Guy Laroche for one of its cologne products. The dark bottle conveys an imagery of ‘fear’, the ‘forbidden’, and the ‘unknown’. Forbidden things take place under the cloak of the night; hence the name noir (French for ‘black’). The sepulchral name of the cologne is clearly iconic with the bottle’s design at a connotative level, reinforcing the idea that something desirous in the ‘dark’ will happen by splashing on the cologne. The guttural sound of ‘Drakkar’ is also suggestive of Dracula, the deadly vampire who mesmerized his sexual prey with a mere glance.

**Logos**

Logos (an abbreviation of logogriphs) are the pictorial counterparts of brand names. They are designed to generate the same kinds of connotative signification systems for a product through the visual modality.

Consider the apple logo adopted by the Apple Computer Company. It is, clearly, an iconic sign suffused with latent religious connotations suggesting, above all else, the story of Adam and Eve in the Western Bible, which revolves around the eating of an apple that was supposed to contain forbidden knowledge. In actual fact, the Hebrew account of the Genesis story tells of a ‘forbidden’ fruit, not specifically of an apple. The representation of this fruit as an apple came about in medieval depictions of the Eden scene, when painters became interested in the Genesis story artistically. Now, the Biblical symbolism of the apple as ‘forbidden knowledge’ continues to resonate in our culture, since at least medieval times; and that is the reason why the Apple computer company has not only named itself ‘Apple’, but has also chosen the
icon of this fruit as its logo, symbolizing the fact that it, too, provides access to ‘forbidden’ knowledge to those who buy and use its products. Incidentally, the logo shows an apple that has had a bite taken from it, thus reinforcing the link between the company icon and the Genesis story by associating the use of Apple computers and products with Eve, the mother of humanity.

Logos can sometimes harbour more than one signification system. Consider the Playboy logo of a bunny wearing a bow tie. Its ambiguous design opens up at least two ‘connotative chains’ of meaning:

1  rabbit = ‘female’ = ‘highly fertile’ = ‘sexually active’ = ‘promiscuous’ = etc.
2  bow tie = ‘elegance’ = ‘night club scene’ = ‘finesse’ = etc.

The appeal and staying power of this logo is due, arguably, to its inbuilt ambiguity. As we shall see below, ambiguity is a fundamental characteristic of advertising textuality. It is the reason, in fact, why advertising is so ‘semiotically powerful’.

Logos are now displayed on products for all to see. Until the 1970s, logos on clothes, for instance, were concealed discretely inside a collar or on a pocket. But since then, they can be seen conspicuously. Ralph Lauren’s polo horseman and Lacoste’s alligator, to mention but two, are now shown prominently on clothing items, evoking images of heraldry and, thus, nobility. They constitute symbols of ‘cool’ (Klein 2000: 69) that legions of people are seemingly eager to put on view in order to convey an aura of high class ‘blue-blooded’ fashionableness.

Advertising textuality

The signification systems that are built into brand names and logos are transferred creatively to ad texts. ‘Advertising textuality’ can be defined simply as the construction of advertisements and commercials on the basis of the specific signification systems built intentionally into products. Among the many textual strategies used to bring out such systems, the following five are the most common:

- the use of jingles which typically bring out some aspect of the product in a memorable way;
- the use of certain music genres to emphasize lifestyle: e.g. the use of jazz or classical music to convey a sense of superiority and high-class aspirations;
- the creation of fictitious characters so as to assign a visual portraiture to the product: e.g. Speedy, Ronald McDonald, Tony the Tiger, Mr Clean, etc.;
• using famous personages – actors, sports figures, etc. – to endorse the product;
• creating ads and commercials to represent the product’s signification system in some specific way (e.g. through some visual depiction, through some narrative, etc.).

As an example of the last strategy, a popular television commercial for Miller beer that was shown during Sunday afternoon football games on American television in the early 1990s can be recalled here. The action of the commercial can be broken down into a sequence of actions as follows:

• As the commercial began, we saw a young handsome man who was seated at a bar counter in a crowded, smoke-filled room, with a beer glass nearby.
• He was surrounded by a group of male companions chatting and confabulating in ways young men are purported to do in such situations.
• At the other end of the bar, a matched group of males had congregated around another young handsome ‘leader of the pack’.
• Suddenly, an attractive female entered the scene. Instantaneously, the ‘leaders’ of both male cliques made their way towards her.
• To block the second leader from getting to her, the first male clique cut off his path to the female in a strategic manner, leaving the first leader to ‘get his prize’.
• The whole ‘action’ was described by the voice of a football announcer in a ‘play-by-play’ fashion.
• The commercial ended with the phrase ‘Love is a game’ appearing on the screen.

Given that the commercial was shown – i.e. positioned – during football game telecasts, and given that the actions took place in the context of a football game, a straightforward interpretation can easily be formulated. In a phrase, the action of the two cliques simulated an action play between two football teams. ‘Winning’ the game in this case is ‘getting to’ the female first. In order to accomplish this, the first male leader, or ‘quarterback’, needed the support of his ‘team’ to be successful in carrying out the crucial play, which of course he was able to do. By successfully blocking the path of the other team’s quarterback, the first team won the ‘game’. As a reward, the heroic quarterback ‘scored’ sexually, as the expression goes.

This interpretation was reinforced by the play-by-play description of an announcer whose voice simulated that of a television football announcer, as well as by the concluding metaphorical statement that appeared on the screen: ‘Love is a game’. In sum, the commercial constituted a specific representation of the beer’s signification system:
beer = ‘male bonding’, ‘interest in sports’, ‘interest in females’, etc.

This system was easily recognizable in the commercial’s narrative. The signification systems of many ads, however, are not so easily detected. Take, as a case-in-point, a truly ingenious ad for Versus cologne by Versace, which was found in lifestyle magazines in the mid-1990s. The actual surface text showed four rugged handsome young men who presumably wore Versus to smell as good as they looked. At this denotative level, the ad seemed to be merely saying: ‘To look as cool as these men, all you have to do is splash on Versus’. But the subtext told another story, since it was imbued with many subtle innuendoes and allusions that transformed it into a highly suggestive ad.

To start off, let us consider the ad’s most conspicuous iconic cues in terms of its layout:

- The name of the cologne starts with the letter ‘V’.
- The bottle displayed a V-shaped intaglio in its shape.
- The men in the ad wore a shirt or jacket whose open collar made a V-shape outline.
- The men were dressed in black.
- Two of the men wore leather items.
- The bottle was centred at the bottom.
- A V-shape cut across the page.

The perfusion of Vs strengthens the syntagmatic association between the cologne’s name, Versus, and its manufacturer, Versace. But Versus is also a word that connotes ‘opposition’ and ‘violation’, and the V-shape can also be interpreted as a symbol that connotes ‘indentation’, ‘cleft’, or ‘fissure’. This chain of connotations is reinforced by the fact that the word ‘Versus’ crossed the entire ad, as if it were a line of separation between the men in the ad and the viewers of the ad.

The ad was clearly aimed at young affluent males who could afford to buy an expensive bottle of cologne. The men are, presumably, prototypes of what young urban professional males aspire to look like during leisure hours – hours devoted to mate selection and sexual fulfilment generally. During the day, the men probably wear business suits; during recreational hours they wear ‘V-neck’ apparel and dash on Versus. So, one possible interpretation of the ad’s subtext is that Versus can be used by men propitiously for their ‘sex-seeking’ leisure activities. It is cologne designed to help them cross over, symbolically, from the work world to the leisure world – worlds that are in constant opposition. Reasoning mythically, the former world can be compared to the realm of Apollo – the god of male beauty, the fine arts, and order – and the latter to the realm of Dionysus – the male god of wine, the
irrational, and the orgiastic. One interpretation of the Versus subtext, therefore, is the following one:

Versus = 'the olfactory means by which a modern-day Apollo can cross over into the erotically enticing Dionysian realm'.

Several other features of the ad strengthen this interpretation:

- The V-shape of the men's collars and of the bottle design pointed downwards, i.e. down to the Dionysian underworld of carnality and sexual pleasure.
- The dark tones of the clothing and the bottle, which reinforce this indexical signified, suggested that something dark and dangerous, but nevertheless desirous, was about to happen.
- The word 'Versus' crossed the entire ad, seemingly inviting the male viewer to 'cross over' into the dark underworld of sex where he could satisfy his 'carnal nature'.
- There is no 'spark' in the men's eyes, which is suggestive of the fact that the underworld casts dark shadows which cover the eyes, the mirrors of the soul, because in the underworld, there is no soul, just carnality and ravenous cupidity.
- One of the men in the ad wore a leather hat and another a leather motorcycle jacket, both of which are synesthetically suggestive of sadomasochistic eroticism.
- The shape of the bottle, of the letter 'V' itself, and of the neckline configurations, are suggestive of female sexuality.

Such an interpretation is, of course, consistent with a signification system that is based on heterosexuality. The power of the ad, however, lies in its ability to summon up another signification system. One can ask, in fact, whether the object of the men's desire is not the 'opposite' of female sexuality, as the name Versus suggests at another subtextual level. In other words, does the cologne allow the men to descend even further into deeply-hidden homosexual desires? The good looks of the men, with their darkened eyes looking directly into the camera, muscular bodies and sensuously-protruding lips, leather apparel, together with the absence of women in the ad are features that are strongly suggestive of this other subtext.

Whether or not the two interpretations put forward here are 'correct', the point is that both are seemingly possible. The way the ad is laid out and designed creates an entangled web of ambiguous sexual connotations. Barthes (1977) referred to the ambiguity of such ads as *anchorage*, defining it as the ability of certain ads to evoke various equally probable subtexts, each of which is 'anchored' in a specific signification system.
Clearly, the design of the bottle with a V intaglio is a crucial part of the signification system(s) created for the above product. As Hine (1995) has amply shown, such things as bottles are, in effect, to be viewed as art objects. This is the reason why some products have been represented as true art objects by exponents of the pop art movement. Andy Warhol, for instance, made silk-screen prints of commonplace objects, people, events, etc., such as soup cans and photographs of celebrities. His painting of a Campbell’s soup can (1964) made it obvious how intrinsic product imagery had become in communal consciousness.

**Connotative chaining**

The suggestive power of the Versus ad lies primarily in its inbuilt ambiguity, i.e. in its ability to generate various kinds of subtexts. The more subtexts, or connotative chains, that are built into the ad, the more likely will be its appeal. Such chains are created by the utilization of techniques such as the following ones used in the Versus ad:

1. **similarity** (a V-shape and a cleft);
2. **difference** (the same V-shape and its opposite meaning);
3. **contiguity** (the location of the V-shape below the men in the ad);
4. **intensity** (using dark colours in the ad);
5. **association** (V-shapes are associated with various signifieds, including ‘clefts’, ‘fissures’, and ‘crossings’).

From a psychological standpoint, the human mind seems predisposed to link meanings together in such ways. And advertisers obviously know this. As Goldman and Papson (1996: 24) aptly put it, advertising is, in effect, an activity ‘in which the raw material worked into commodities is meaning’.

There are various types of connotative chains that characterize subtexts. A common type is forged from narrative sources. As such, it constitutes a chain of meanings linked together by themes, plot-lines, characters, and settings suggested from the implicit storylines built into the surface presentations. The surface text of the Versus ad unfolds, in fact, as a storyline about male camaraderie and the lifestyle associated with being an upwardly mobile male in today’s society; but one possible subtext is, as we saw, a mythic narrative text.

Another type of subtext is the one based on metaphor. Consider, as a case-in-point, a magazine ad for the perfume Volupté, a perfume designed to appeal to women in their 20s and 30s. The ad was found in lifestyle magazines of the mid-1990s. The perfume’s name means ‘voluptuousness’ in French. The bottle was placed in the centre of the text. It had a dark, round cap. The
phrase ‘Trust your senses’ was placed just below it, implying, at a denotative level, that the buyer would be able to smell the high quality of the perfume. However, the shape of the perfume bottle evoked a connotative subtext. The bottle cap was highly suggestive of an aroused nipple – a sign of successful sexual foreplay. In tandem with this image, the phrase ‘Trust your senses’ can now be interpreted as being suggestive of sexual ‘sensing’, since a breast involves most of the senses in foreplay – sight, smell, taste, and touch. The background scene in the ad reinforced this interpretation, since it showed a secluded, dark place where the bottle (= female breast?) could be looked at voyeuristically through the beam of light that fell upon it.

The signification systems built into the Versus and Volupte ads were relatively ‘silent’ ones, in the sense that the only meaningful words in them were the brand names themselves and, in the case of the Volupte ad, a metaphorical statement. But language is, more often than not, an important contributor to establishing the connotative structure of the product’s signification system.

Many brand names, for instance, are metaphors. The perfume named Poison, for example, has an immediate impact because of the metaphorical association between danger (poison) and attraction. In addition to metaphor, there are a host of verbal techniques that advertisers use effectively in generating connotative chains and product textuality generally. Some of these are as follows (Dyer 1982: 151–82):

- **Jingles and slogans.** These have the effect of reinforcing the recognizability of a brand name: *Plop, plop, fizz, fizz, oh what a relief it is!*  
- **Use of the imperative form.** This creates the effect of advice coming from an unseen authoritative source: *Pump some iron, Trust your senses*, etc.
- **Formulas.** These create the effect of making meaningless statements sound truthful: *Triumph has a bra for the way you are; A Volkswagen is a Volkswagen*; etc.
- **Alliteration.** This increases the likelihood that a brand name will be remembered: *The Superfree sensation* (alliteration of s); *Guinness is good for you* (alliteration of g); etc.
- **Absence of language.** Some ads strategically avoid the use of any language whatsoever suggesting, by implication, that the product speaks for itself. As Dyer (1982: 170) puts it, the absence of language in certain ad texts ‘has the effect of making us think that meaningful reality lies directly behind the signs once we have succeeded in deciphering them’.
- **Intentional omission.** This technique is based on the fact that secrets grab our attention: *Don’t tell your friends about ...; Do you know what she’s wearing?*; etc.
- **Parallelism.** This is the repetition of linguistic patterns (sentences,
phrases, etc.) which impart a poetic quality to the text: *It's longer/It's slimmer/It's surprisingly mild* (advertisement for *More* cigarettes).

In television and radio commercials the tone of voice, the sentence structure, and the use of various verbal ploys (jingles, slogans, etc.) are used as well to deliver product signification systems. The tone of voice can be seductive, friendly, cheery, insistent, foreboding, etc. as required by the signification system in question. The sentence structure of ads and commercials is usually informal and colloquial, unless the ad is about some 'high-class' product (e.g. a BMW automobile, a Parker pen, etc.), in which case it is normally more elegant and refined. Advertising also borrows discourse styles to suit its purposes: a commercial can take the form of an interview; a testimonial on the part of a celebrity; an official format (*Name*: Mary; *Age*: 15; *Problem*: acne); and so on.

**The use of multiple media**

The repetition of advertising messages in different media of the same system is a primary strategy used to strengthen product recognizability. Print ads reach people through newspapers, magazines, direct mail, and outdoor signs. Newspapers, on average, devote almost half of their space to advertising. These offer advertisers several advantages over other media. Most adults read a daily newspaper; and many specifically check the ads for information about products, services, or special sales. Newspaper advertising can also quickly incorporate a sudden demand for certain merchandise. Magazines, on the other hand, are usually read in a leisurely manner and may be kept for weeks or months before being discarded. They also offer better printing and colour reproduction. Direct mail advertising includes the use of leaflets, brochures, catalogues, and other printed advertisements that are delivered by a postal service. Outdoor signs are used because people pass by the signs repeatedly. In addition, large, colourful signs attract attention.

Print media now use computer and telecommunications technologies to create, produce, and print different versions of the same ad text. Called 'selective binding', this enables advertisers to stylize versions of their texts for selected groups of readers.

As we saw in chapter 4, radio advertising has the advantage that people can listen to programmes while doing other things, such as driving a car or working at home. Another advantage is that radio audiences, in general, are more highly selectable by the type of programming than are, say, television audiences. For example, stations that feature country music attract different kinds of listeners than do those that play rock. By selecting the station, advertisers can reach the people most likely to buy their products.
Television is probably the most effective contemporary medium for delivering product imagery. Advertisers can explain and demonstrate their products to viewers who are watching a specific genre of TV programme. Network television reaches a vast, nationwide audience at a very low cost per viewer. The majority of TV commercials consist of short spot announcements, most of which last 30 seconds to a minute. The commercials are usually run in groups of three to six.

Lastly, the Internet has made it possible for advertisers to reach vast audiences all over the world inexpensively. The Internet has, moreover, the advantage that it is simultaneously an impulse, a directional, and an interactive medium. The first refers to the fact that it induces large numbers of browsers to respond to commercial messages on a whim. The second refers to the fact that consumers can decide to buy a particular product at a company's website. And the third refers to the fact that the product makers and consumers can interact. The website for Hallmark cards exemplifies this. A 'reminder service' is available whereby customers are asked for prominent names and birthdays and are later contacted through e-mail when it is time to send that person a greeting card.

**Ad campaigns**

Advertising textuality is also built into ad campaigns. An ad campaign can be defined as the systematic creation of a series of slightly different ads and commercials based on the same theme, characters, jingles, etc. An ad campaign is comparable to the theme and variations form of music – where there is one theme with many variations.

Here are just a handful of examples of famous ad campaigns through the years:

- In 1892, the Coca-Cola logo appeared across the country, painted as a mural on walls, displayed on posters and soda fountains where the drink was served, imprinted on widely marketed, common household items (calendars, drinking glasses, etc.).
- In 1904, the Campbell's Soup company began its highly successful advertising campaign featuring the rosy-cheeked Campbell Kids and the slogan 'M'm! M'm! Good!' The campaign is still ongoing as I write.
- In 1970, McDonald's launched its highly successful 'You deserve a break today' advertising campaign.
- In 1985, Nike signed basketball player Michael Jordan as a spokesman, marking the beginning of a dramatic growth for the company. Nike marketed the Air Jordan line of basketball shoes and clothes with a series of striking advertising creations (ads and commercials). Those creations,
along with the company’s ‘Just Do It’ campaign featuring football and baseball star Bo Jackson and motion-picture director Spike Lee, boosted Nike’s profits considerably. In 1997, Nike entered a new period of high-profile product image when company spokesman Tiger Woods became the first African American to win the Professional Golf Association’s Masters golfing tournament.

- In the early 1990s Joe Camel ads became highly successful in promoting an image of smoking as something ‘refined’. In 1991, the American Medical Association criticized RJR Nabisco for using a cartoon character named Joe Camel in its Camel advertising campaign, claiming that the campaign was targeted at children. In 1992, the US Surgeon General asked the company to withdraw its ad and this request was followed by more government appeals in 1993 and 1994. The company responded to public concerns by promoting a campaign that encouraged store merchants and customers to obey the law prohibiting the sale of tobacco products to minors. In 1997, under increasing criticism, the company ended its Joe Camel ad campaign.

- The growth of the Gateway 2000 computer company in the 1990s was helped, in large part, by an unusual advertising campaign featuring employees standing in cow pastures. The company also shipped its computers in boxes splattered with black spots like those of Holstein cows, reflecting its Midwestern roots.

One of the primary functions of campaigns is to guarantee that the product’s image keeps in step with the changing times. Thus, for example, the Budweiser commercials and ads of the 1980s and early 1990s emphasized rural, country-and-western ruggedness, and sexuality seen from a male viewpoint. The actors in the commercials were types who embodied a rural country-style ruggedness, à la Marlboro man. In the early 2000s, the same Company changed its imagery with its ‘Whassup!’ series of commercials, which showed young urban males who loved sport and who expressed their form of ‘buddyism’ humorously with the expression ‘Whassup?’ So widespread and appealing was the ‘Whassup?’ campaign that its ‘verbal style’ became a part of pop culture. Its signature catch phrase was joked about on talk shows, parodied on websites, mimicked in other media, and used by people commonly in their daily conversations. The makers of Budweiser had clearly coopted the essence of the language, styles, and attitudes of 20- and 30-year-old males in their clever ad campaign.

Cooption

Indeed, the most effective strategy of advertising is not only to keep up with the times but also to coopt them, so to speak. In the 1960s, for example, the
image created by the media of self-proclaimed ‘rebels’ and ‘revolutionaries’, referred to generally as ‘hippies’, who genuinely thought they were posing a radical challenge to the ideological values and lifestyle mores of the mainstream consumerist culture, ended up becoming the incognizant trend-setters of the very culture they deplored, providing it with features of lifestyle and discourse that advertisers have, since the 1960s, been able to adapt and recycle into society at large. Counterculture clothing fashion was thus quickly converted into mainstream fashion, counterculture music style into mainstream music style, counterculture symbolism and talk into society-wide symbolism and discourse – hence the crystallization of a social mindset whereby every individual, of every political and ideological persuasion, could feel that he or she was a symbolic participant in the ‘youth revolution’.

The use of the ‘hippie image’ in ads and commercials of the era occurred at a point in time when a dynamic advertising community decided it was in its best interest not to fight the images of youth insurgency, but rather to embrace them outright. One highly effective early strategy of this ‘if-you-can’t-beat-them-join-them’ approach was the development of an advertising style that mocked consumerism and advertising itself! The strategy worked beyond expectations. Being young and rebellious came to mean having a ‘cool look’; being anti-establishment and subversive came to mean wearing ‘hip clothes’. The corporate leaders had cleverly ‘joined the revolution’, so to speak, by deploying the slogans and media images of youthful rebellion to market their goods and services. ‘New’ and ‘different’ became the two key words of the new advertising and marketing lexicon, coaxing people into buying goods, not because they necessarily needed them, but simply because they were new, cool, hip. The underlying system of signification of this ingenious marketing strategy allowed consumers to believe that what they bought transformed them into ersatz revolutionaries without having to pay the social price of true non-conformity and dissent.

Campaigns, such as the ‘Pepsi Generation’ and the Coke universal brotherhood ones, directly incorporated the images, rhetoric, and symbolism of the hippie counterculture, thus creating the illusion that the goals of the hippies and of the soft drink manufacturers were one and the same. Rebellion through purchasing became the subliminal thread woven into the pop culture mindset that the marketing strategists were starting to manipulate and control effectively. The ‘Dodge Rebellion’ and ‘Oldsmobile Youngmobile’ campaigns followed the soft drink ones, etching into the nomenclature of products themselves the powerful connotations of hippie rebellion and defiance. Even a sewing company, alas, came forward to urge people on to join its own type of surrogate revolution, hence its slogan ‘You don’t let the establishment make your world; don’t let it make your clothes’. In effect, by claiming to ‘join the revolution’, advertising created the real revolution. This is why, since the
late 1960s, the worlds of advertising, marketing, and entertainment have become totally intertwined with youth lifestyle movements, both responding and contributing to the rapid fluctuations in social trends and values that such movements entail.

Today, the advertising industry has appropriated ‘cool images’ completely. Sociologically, the end result has been a further obliteration of the crucial emotional difference that traditional cultures have maintained between the social categories of ‘young’ and ‘old’. This is why nowadays the rhetoric of youth is quickly transformed by advertising textuality into the rhetoric of all; why the fashion trends of the young are recycled and marketed shortly after their invention as the fashion styles of all; and why the fluctuating aesthetics of the youth culture are quickly incorporated into the aesthetics of society at large. Cultural cool has, in effect, become the social norm.

**Other strategies**

Ad campaigns are not only designed to coopt trends and turn them to advantage for the product, they are often intended to create a ‘history’ for a product, thus linking it to a sense of cultural continuity and communal tradition. This is done, in part, by simply getting the product ‘out there’, so to speak, into social consciousness. The Coke campaigns, for example, have always been designed to appeal to everyone. This is why nearly everyone alive today will recognize Coke and have some understanding of its signification systems. This works especially well for products and services that appeal to everyone — automobiles, cosmetics, insurance, food, beverages, pain tablets, etc. It cannot be used for ‘controversial’ products, such as cigarettes and alcohol, and for things that do not have a broad appeal (e.g. certain music styles, certain types of books, etc.).

But perhaps the most effective strategy for getting the product into the social mindset is to create, simply, appealing ads for it, as the ‘Whassup?’ campaign demonstrated. These catch the attention of everyone through the aesthetic channel and, thus, quickly become integrated into communal consciousness. In a fascinating book, titled *Twenty Ads that Shook the World* (2000), James Twitchell identifies 20 ads and ad campaigns that have, in fact, become part of this consciousness, simply because they were designed cleverly and had mass appeal. As Twitchell (2000: 8) puts it, ‘They got into our bloodstream.’ Among the ads are De Beers’ ‘A Diamond Is Forever’ campaign (1948), Hathaway’s ‘Hathaway Man’ campaign (1951), Miss Clairol’s ‘Does She, or Doesn’t She?’ campaign (1955), Marlboro cigarette’s ‘Marlboro Man’ campaign (1950s), Volkswagen’s ‘Think Small’ campaign (1962), Coca Cola’s ‘Things Go Better with Coke’ campaign (1964), Revlon’s ‘Charlie’ campaign (1970s–1980s), Absolut Vodka’s ‘Larceny’ campaign (1980s), and Nike’s ‘Air Jordan’ campaign (1990s).
The power of the ad to affect people as if it were a ‘work of art’ became obvious with Apple Computer’s brilliant ‘1984’ commercial, which was shown on 22 January 1984, during the third quarter of Super Bowl XVIII on American television. Obviously evocative of George Orwell’s 1984, and directed by Ridley Scott, whose 1982 movie Blade Runner was discussed in chapter 5, the commercial won countless advertising awards and was characterized by advertising moguls as ‘the commercial that outplayed the game’. Orwellian and other ‘1984-ish’ themes have found their way into a host of commercial campaigns, including one by Zenith in early 2000, which showed automatonic, depersonalized human robots walking all in tandem, without eyes, and a little girl who, with bright eyes, sees a new Zenith television set sitting on a column in the midst of this arid, spiritless, totalitarian world. The apparition and her childlike discovery of it instantly humanize the mindless throng, as people’s eyes emerge as if by metamorphosis from a cocoon. The social connotations that this ad evoked are self-evident.

Other strategies that now constitute an advertising meta-code for embedding product textuality into social consciousness are as follows:

- the something-for-nothing lure (‘Buy one and get a second one free!’, ‘Send for free sample!’, ‘Trial offer at half price!’, ‘No money down!’ etc.);
- the use of humour to generate a feeling of pleasantness towards a product;
- endorsement by celebrities to make a product appear reliable;
- inducing parents to believe that giving their children certain products will secure them a better life and future;
- appealing to children to ‘ask mummy or daddy’ to buy certain products, thus increasing the likelihood that parents will ‘give in’ to their children’s requests;
- using ‘scare copy’ techniques designed to promote such goods and services as insurance, fire alarms, cosmetics, and vitamin capsules by evoking the fear of poverty, sickness, loss of social standing, and/or impending disaster;
- creating brand names, logos, packaging designs, magazine ads and radio and television commercials that are highly suggestive of erotic, sensual, mythic, and other kinds of psychologically powerful themes.

These techniques have become so common that they are no longer recognized consciously as stratagems. Advertising has become the fuel for an entertainment-driven society that seeks artifice as part of its routine of escapism from the deeper philosophical questions that would otherwise beset it.

Interestingly, in 2001 BMW hired several famous directors to make short ‘digital films’ featuring its cars. The movies were, in effect, extended
commercials and were viewable only on the Web, but were promoted through TV spots. Each film was about six minutes long; each featured a prominent actor; and each portrayed BMWs used in a reckless, adventure-oriented fashion.

Advertising is powerful because it offers recognizable ‘objects’ and ‘solutions’ providing the hope of more money and better jobs, security against the hazards of old age and illness, popularity and personal prestige, praise from others, more comfort, increased enjoyment or pleasure, social advancement, improved appearance, better health, erotic stimulation, popularity, emotional security, and so on. The effectiveness of the techniques used to engender such meanings is limited only by the ingenuity of the advertiser, by the limits of the various channels of communication used to disseminate the product’s textuality, by certain legal restrictions in place where the advertising messages are delivered, and by standards self-imposed by the advertising industry.

It is no exaggeration to say that the history of modern pop culture is intrinsically interwoven with the history of advertising. In looking back over the last century, it is obvious that the messages of advertisers, their styles of presentation, and the ways in which they have used language have become the very fabric of modern modes of representation and communication. As McLuhan (1964: 24) aptly put it, advertising has become the ‘art’ of the modern world.