

BRAND MEANING AND ITS SOCIAL CATEGORIES: A SEMIOTIC APPROACH FOR FUTURE MARKETING

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to decode brand meanings from the logos of two multinational companies and to encode their social categories. The companies chosen for this study are in the technology field. To analyze this issue, a qualitative-descriptive method was used to define the message contained in the logo and express the logo's social categories in a cultural context. A semiotic approach was used to analyze the specified company's logo; results showed that the logo's meaning was conveyed through four dominant colors representing Innovation, Dominance, Variation, and Sophistication. These findings suggest that the companies attempted to achieve higher social categories, implying that they aim to have exclusive control of their products. In conclusion, companies can use its social category to create a new concept for another logo as part of a potential marketing strategy. Later, these findings can be used to create a future marketing strategy.

Keywords: Brand meaning; social categories; semiotic approach; future marketing

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INTRODUCTION

Meaning in a logo of a brand can be presented through visuals, verbiage, and the color(s) of the

logo itself. Therefore, logo as the representation of a brand implies specific meanings or values. It is clear that the design/color of a logo indicates inner value from the brand maker to the

customers. Color psychology is a scientific discipline that studies the various emotional states, behaviors, and moods in humans (Hunjet, & Vuk, 2017). Color has a direct impact on our subconscious, attracting or repelling us with its hidden meaning as a valuable tool and serving as an essential component of marketing communication. As a result, the implied meaning contained in the brand can be used to identify/classify customers into specific categories, which is known as the customer brandscape architecture approach (Thompson, & Zeynep, 2004). Furthermore, the implied meaning can be approached using semiotic principles (Saussure, 1981 and Barthes, 1968), which state that when language signs and their connotative meanings share certain messages with language users, it creates specific customer clustering. As a result, it can be stated that semiotics also exists in the marketing world to assist brands in reaching their customers through brand meaning.

Most discussions about semiotics and marketing nowadays center on the mechanics of meaning production in advertisements and cultural contexts (Oswald, & Laura, 2012). This means that signs are important in identifying customers' social categories because the cultural context itself may reveal their background; this is known as brand value (Marta, et al., 2012). The signs presented in the logos of multinational companies are decoded in this study to discover brand meaning, which can lead to the revelation/encoding of the customer's social categories, the brandscape (Thompson, & Zeynep, 2004), as the impacts of the logo presentation. Following the identification of the brand's meaning and social categories, a model of future marketing based on semiotic approach (Barthes, 1968) can be implemented.

Lawes (2020) has provided a good example of how semiotics is implemented in a brand; Apple has made it straightforward and literal in delivering its brand meaning through its logo. The picture of the bitten apple correlates with the word "bite" which actually represents "bytes" to include its brand as a technology company. However, the connotative meaning concerning "bite" has led societies to relate the logo with the story of Adam and Eve or with the story of Isaac Newton discovering the theory of gravitation after seeing an apple fall from a tree.

As a result, the purpose of this study is to discover how meanings are derived from the logos of two multinational corporations, as well as how their signs are constructed so that they can eventually suggest specific impacts to customers. As a result, a descriptive analytic method has been used to discover the problem, resulting in connotative meanings and cultural contexts that enrich the customers' social categories. A motivated relationship exists between the signifier and the signified in this study. That is, the concept raised by the connotative meaning is intended to represent individual/community thoughts. As a result, these findings are expected to aid in the interpretation of every recognized sign, making the meaning-making process in the brand easier.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A brand can be a name, term, design, symbol, or any other form that can be used to identify and differentiate a product, including both goods and services (Kusumah, et al., 2020). In addition, (Rossolatos, 2015) mentioned that a brand is a mark, a sign that generates pragmatic effects on subjects and objects by producing various possible meanings; it identifies, transforms, and gives them values. He also added that a wide range of social phenomena are rooted in brands as signs. As a result, it is critical to manage a brand in such a way that it covers the majority, if not all, customers, so that the brand can last longer with its own notable uniqueness. This means that every brand has its own meaning, which is known as Brand Value (Marta et al., 2012). (Polyanska & Malynka, 2014) argued that brand management is a complex knowledge structure since it covers knowledge accumulation and distribution in marketing and associated activities. Thus, it can be indicated that brand meaning also covers the complexity of brand management process.

This concept then leads to the creation of Behavioral Loyalty from the customers (Borirakcharoenkit et al., 2022) so that the meaning encoded from the brand (logo) represents its social categories at the same time. David Allen Aaker (Kusumah et al., 2020) recognized the combination between brand and its contained meaning as Brand Management, saying that brand is not merely a symbol but also implies its benefit through brand attributes.

One of the brand attributes that can be used to

discover brand meaning is through the colors used by the brand. Color plays an important role in shaping customer perception toward the brands and the products affiliated with it. Color psychology (Hunjet & Vuk, 2017) is a scientific discipline that studies the various emotional states, behavior, and moods in humans. As a valuable tool and an essential component of marketing communication, color has a direct impact on our subconscious, attracting or repelling us with its hidden meanings. As a result, it is critical to select the appropriate color(s) to achieve effective communication with the consumer.

Choosing the right color can lead to products standing out from the crowd. Using the logo's hidden meaning, the company can then map the customer, which in turn can reveal their social categories through the approach of customer brand scape architecture (Thompson & Zeynep, 2004). Since color, as one element constructing the logo that can create a certain impact to the customer, has a hidden meaning, then it is important to decode the message, one of which is through the approach of semiotics. Nowadays, most discussion on semiotics and marketing focus on the mechanics of meaning production in advertisement and cultural context (Oswald, & Laura, 2012). This means that signs play a significant role in identifying a customers' social category since the cultural context itself may reveal their background as well; this is known as the brand value (Marta, et al., 2012).

Astuti (2018) argued that customers nowadays have the preference to choose a product based on their connotative meaning, that is the message implied in the products' visual message. When language signs and their connotative meanings share certain messages with language users (Saussure, 1981), it creates particular customer clustering/categorization. Sokal defined categorization (Pierik, 2004) as the arrangement of objects into groups or sets based on their inferred or observable relationship. It is reasonable to believe that categorizing aids brands in matching their specified connotative meanings with their relevant potential customers. In simple terms, social categories are a collection of information about customers' behavior and their surroundings that identify/affect their respective preferences about a specific brand.

In this study, the signs presented in the logos of the multinational companies are to be decoded to discover the brand meaning, which in turn can lead to the revelation/encoding of the social categories of the customer - the brandscape (Thompson & Zeynep, 2004) - as the impacts of the logo presentation. Later, once the brand meaning and its social categories have been identified, the model of future marketing based on a semiotic approach (Barthes, 1968) can be set out.

(Pinson, 1998) argued that semiotic approaches have been successfully implemented in other elements of the marketing mix, such as branding, logo, packaging, products, promotional objects, etc. Marketing involves symbols such as written words and pictures. Semiotics, which constitutes the "linguistic turn" in human sciences, is a particularly powerful tool for uncovering hidden meanings (Tsotra et. al, 2004). Lawes (Tsotra et. al, 2004) added that semiotics investigates how people form perceptions that are products of the culture in which respondents live and participate. According to semiotics, culture is the way people communicate, both consciously and unconsciously, through cultural aspects such as visual images and language. Understanding the implicit meaning of such elements enables brand/company to make "informed decisions" and communicate with potential customers more effectively. (Rook, 1989) noted that because logos, as works of art, contain signs that affect an audience, semiotic concepts and methods can be applied to consumer esthetics.

Semiotics believes that signs as a system convey an idea or message (Saussure, 1981). In other words, within the scope of semiotics, color as part of a sign system carries meaning within the context of humans and their world (Barthes, 1967). A sign in linguistics is a combination of a *signifier* (language form) and a *signified* (meaning) and their relationship to the outside world (Hoed, 2014). A myth, which is referred to as a new form of message to convey meaning, or within the scope of branding can be said as the value with which the customer is accustomed, is formed when language signs and their connotative meanings share certain messages with language users or the customers (Barthes, 1967). In summary, the use of connotations in a text, color in this term, particularly those in the

logos, can create specific meanings about the brand identity/meaning (Barthes, 1972).

It is worth noting (Lawes, 2020) statement that sometimes marketers use semiotic thinking without realizing it. This implies that semiotics is involved in many marketing activities, including **content marketing and influencer marketing to customers**. (Lawes, 2020) also stated that when marketers identify elements in a brand that are important to a specific group of customers—that is, to specific subcultures—and latch on to them, making them the fundamental precepts of their marketing strategy, they start to engage with semiotics. In general, culture could be the operator of semiotic transformations, and therefore generates semiotic interpretations (Hudders et al., 2013).

In other words, conveying culturally specific and meaningful values to the target customers make businesses more rewarding. Semiotics investigates how the meaning of elements in a brand becomes relevant to specific consumer groups. (Lawes, 2020) simply concluded that semiotics sees markers as more than just a useful sign to send messages, but rather as a connection between the markers and a larger set of values prioritized by brand to customers. As a result, representing a brand is intricately linked to a specific value or event that surrounds us. For customers, brand functions more as a psychological and social self-existence that marks its exclusive values.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative method (Flick, 2018), meaning that the data was qualified in terms of its specific rapport to the topic and the applicable theories. The analytic-descriptive method was used to combine and describe data facts to further the studies (Ratna, 2013). The data was analyzed by describing each sign in terms of Barthes' connotative system; signs in the primary system denote literal meaning, while signs in the secondary system denote the decoded meaning (Barthes, 1968). As a result, the interaction of the connotative meaning signifies the brand meaning and its social categories. Any finding from this signification process can be used to encode customer brandscape, which is important in mapping future marketing strategy

using empathy creation in Design Thinking (Gasparini, 2015).

The two multinational companies specified in this study are Microsoft and Google. Both are technology companies that are quite popular and are used by many people around the globe.

Microsoft specializes in the development of software for a variety of digital devices. In addition, Google is primarily concerned with Internet search, advertising technology, and cloud computing. Its primary product is a multilingual search engine that provides quick access to relevant information. Therefore, their logos and branding can be indicated to have represented most customers. In addition to that, the brand meaning, and its social categories are believed to be inherent in the logos, which carries consumer's culture/behavioral loyalty or at least is indicated to cover the culture. The two logos were derived from *pixabay.com*, a popular site providing official logos of brands. The site was accessed on April 14, 2022, at 10.30.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Results

Although Microsoft and Google have many logos, only two were taken since both logos are the latest logos taken from *www.pixabay.com*. Referring to *www.usbrandcolors.com*, although both logos have a similar color pallet, they actually have different gradation according to their code, as illustrated in Table 1. All information presented in Table 1 concerning the differences of the color pallet has been confirmed by Visual Brand Guideline to comply with the original company logos.

Table 1 also obviously illustrates that both logos have a similar color pallet, with red, green, blue, and yellow as the dominant colors. The only difference lies in Microsoft logo number 1, in which the writing of "Microsoft" has a grey color. Looking carefully at the logo, Microsoft actually attempts to provide us with one large square divided/constructed by four small squares. As illustrated, the combination of the four squares constructing one big square gives the impression of a "window-like shape", which represents its most popular products.

Table 1: Logos of Microsoft and Google Companies and Their Color Code

Logo	Color	Code			
		Hex	RGB	CMYK	Pantone
	Orange Red	#F25022	2428034	073870	PMS172C
	Green	#7FBA00	1271860	5401000	PMS376C
	Blue	#00A4EF	0164 239	0821100	PMS2191C
	Yellow	#FFB900	2551850	0221002	PMS 7549C
	Gray	#737373	115115115	30201958	PMS424C
	Blue	#4285F4	66133244	885000	PMS660C
	Red	#DB4437	2196855	0788512	PMS7619C
	Yellow	#F4B400	2441800	020900	PMS123C
	Green	#0F9D58	1515788	8206711	PMS7724C

Source: pixabay.com and usbrandcolors.com confirmed by Visual Brand Guidelines

Additionally, each square represents its respective products;

- a. Orange stands for Office Suite representing the life in businesses that could also mean busy life,
- b. Green stands for Xbox, Microsoft gaming platform, which could also be interpreted as fun,
- c. Blue stands for Windows operating; which can be interpreted as a color that may give calmness in the user's daily activity,
- d. Yellow stands for Microsoft Search Engine, Bing, which signifies optimism and creativity.

On the other hand, Google's logo color is arranged in a so-called tetradic color palette, and it gives the logo design an optimistic and vigorous feel. It is one of the factors that has contributed to Google's extraordinary success. Aside from being eye-catching, bright colors cater to global cultural diversity and have a sort of unifying power.


Discussion

As suggested by the results, the main colors implemented in both Microsoft and Google are (orange) red, green, yellow, and blue which actually serves as the basic colors commonly known within the community. Each color represents its own meaning since the logo attempts to reach any social category in the

community. The meaning of the logo was conveyed through four dominant colors that represent innovation, dominance, variation, and sophistication. These findings indicate that this company attempted to reach out to higher social classes, which could imply that only those in this category will be able to use their products. Based on these findings, one can conclude that the logo's brand meaning is closely related to the value represented in the logo, which then creates the company's social category.

Table 2 depicts the meaning of the Microsoft logo. On the first level, the logo is understood as a square structure with specific colors and writing that construct it, which then becomes the denotative meaning and is labeled as SIGN-1. In the second level, the denotative meaning becomes the new Signifier, resulting in the concepts of **universality** and **unified**. The use of both words in the brand logo implies that the brandscape (Thompson, & Zeynep, 2004) of the brand's customers is expected to reach a much broader range of users. Despite the fact that users are assumed to be from sophisticated social categories of society, the brand meaning persists in reaching out to less sophisticated users in order to be able to use the products.


Table 2: Barthes's Semiotic Analysis on Microsoft Logo

2	E	R	C	Connotative Meaning
	SIGN-1		SIGN-1 is constructed by three universal basic colors; red, yellow, blue, where the combination of these colors can also create another basic color, green. On the other hand, grey is a natural color and is often used by many people.	Using these color pallets is intended to reach as many people since the color is easily recognizable. The four dominant colors in the logo represent innovation, dominance, variation, and sophistication.
I	ERC (Signifier)	Denotative meaning (Signified)		
		One big square has four squares with four different colors constructing it (red, green, yellow, blue). Beside the square is a writing with grey color = SIGN-1		

The use of color palettes is intended to reach as many people as possible because the colors are easily recognizable. Furthermore, the four dominant colors in the logo represent innovation, dominance, variation, and sophistication, according to the connotative meaning. As a result of the discussion, it appears that the desired meaning of the brand is

represented by a tangible element, namely the color combination implying technological **sophistication** (Barthes, 1968). This combination is meaningful in specifying the product category, which then leads to the market segment, that the users of this brand's products are from a higher social class, referred to as the social category.

Table 3: Barthes's Semiotic Analysis on Google Logo 2

	E	R	C	Connotative Meaning
	SIGN-1		SIGN-1 is constructed by three universal basic colors; red, yellow, blue, where the combination of these colors can also create another basic color, green. Simply saying, the concept results in varied combinations of the basic color.	The use of these color pallets is intended to reach as many people as possible because the colors are easily recognizable. The logo's four dominant colors stand for innovation, dominance, variation, and sophistication.
I	ERC Signifier	Denotative meaning Signified		
		Big Capital G letter is colored with red, yellow, green, and blue. It stands for the writing Google, in which each color in the Capital G is distributed to G=blue, o=red, o= yellow, g= blue, l= green, and e= red. = SIGN-1		

The meaning of the Google logo is depicted in Table 3. The logo is understood on the first level with the big Capital G letter that is colored with red, yellow, green, and blue. It is an abbreviation for Google, in which each color in the Capital G is distributed as G=blue, o=red, o=yellow, g=blue, l=green, and e=red, and is labeled as SIGN-1. The

denotative meaning becomes the new signifier in the second level, resulting in the concepts' **varied combination of the basic color**. The concept's use in the brand logo implies that the brandscape of the brand's customers is expected to reach a diverse range of users (Thompson, & Zeynep, 2004). Despite the fact that users are assumed to

be sophisticated social groups, the brand meaning persists in reaching out more varied customers to be able to use the products.

Because the colors are easily recognizable, the use of color palettes is intended to reach as many different users as possible. Furthermore, according to the connotative meaning, the four dominant colors in the logo represent innovation, dominance, variation, and sophistication. As a result of the discussion, it appears that the brand's desired meaning is represented by a tangible element, namely the color combination implying technological **sophistication** (Barthes, 1968). This combination is significant in specifying the product category, which then leads to the market segment, that the users of this brand's products are from a higher social class, but from a wider range of social classes.

By examining how Google and Microsoft establish their brand meaning, it is fairly obvious that both use the concept of [SIGHT] as their core value (Larson, 1984). Apart from their colors, the word "google" represents Google, and the image of four squares combined into one large square represents "a window," which then represents Microsoft. Both Google and Microsoft, through their association with "window," always refer to the eyes; implicitly, a point of view. As a result, Google represents a point of view through which we can see "things" (knowledge/information) more clearly. Microsoft (Windows) represents a point of view, in which we can see "things" (information/knowledge) based on our preferences through any part of the square-divided window. Furthermore, "window" can refer to a condition in which, when it is opened, it allows for fresher "air" (information/knowledge) to be exhaled.

Model for Future Marketing

Based on this discovery, it is suggested that the concepts of **universality** and **sophistication** (Gasparini, 2015) be implemented in order to increase customer engagement through a brand logo. In addition, the concept of **variety** should also be implemented in order to cope with more customer cluster/social categories.

It is somehow not easy to implement a specific strategy to achieve more customer engagement through brand meaning in the logo. However, applying the concepts (universality, variety, and

sophistication) presented within this discussion may help a company achieve more attention from its customers since they are the very common values shared by most people.

Based on a semiotic approach on two logos of multinational companies, in order to achieve more customer's social categories, the following steps can be used to structure your future marketing strategy:

- 1.Brands should first consider human values. The brand should be able to create a sense that makes customers feel acceptable, which can be accomplished by emphasizing **universality** and **variety**. This value provides customers with a positive meaning through the brand because customers do not feel aggressed by brand marketing. It naturally allows the brand to gain more exposure through its own values. The concepts and approaches of Design Thinking or User Experience can be used to set up the specified values. The brand should also consider how its function meets the needs of the customers, rather than focusing on the brand itself.
- 2.As technology advances, it is critical to incorporate the concept of **sophistication** within your brand marketing. Your strategy is suggested to be able to work seamlessly with these two multinational companies so that it can expand your social networks and increase customer engagement, which can lead to the creation of more social categories. Also, it is important to assure that the specified strategy is applicable in any platform.
- 3.As previously stated, a brand is a representation of the company's vision, mission, and values. **These values** must meet the logic, feelings, and spirit of the customer so that the brand's values can further create customer passion, establishing brand loyalty and trust. The brand can then be sustainable and stand out among other brands. The brand shall voluntarily exist in the culture of the customers.

Using one of the four color palettes in Google or Microsoft can also be an additional option to get your brand be more knowledgeable.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

A logo does not only represent a company's image to the public but also carries meaning/message/values to the customers within their social categories. The main differences of the brand meanings in Microsoft and Google lie in the social category concept, namely **variety** and **universality**. As technology companies, they both share the same concept of **sophistication** through their logos. The concepts contained in the logo can be used as a basic reference to create certain strategy for your brand. It can be inferred that the message contained in the logo carries not only the identity of the brand but also the ideology and the reach of the company. At the same time, it identifies the brand's or company's target market or customers.

To extend the concept model of future marketing, technology can be used to create an application that can structure detail and orderly information about customers' values/passion for specific products. This can accelerate the creation of not only the visual logo for brand marketing but also the slogan for the marketing strategy. The application can also be linked with SEO to ensure that the expected results are very satisfying. An application can go by a name of, for example, *NeuroApp Marketing*.

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