Book review

Creating Value: The Theory and Practice of Marketing Semiotics Research
Edited by Laura R. Oswald
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This book is grounded on two evidences:

(1) in line with cultural studies in marketing (McCracken 1986; Peñaloza *et al.*, 2011), markets are not only economic systems for exchange optimization but also places for meaning production and circulation; and

(2) in line with Oswald's (2012) book, financial efforts oriented to enrich a brand's semantics are to be seen as investments.

Value creation for brands, however, is partially the result of brand managers' self-determination (i.e. the expression of their free will), partially bounded by existing semiotic codes (e.g. cultural codes permeating a given industry or popular culture; Arsel and Bean, 2013; Holt, 2002). As such, marketing semiotics is at the same time a powerful device to improve a brand's financial performance and a means to properly contextualize this brand within its extended cultural milieu (e.g. local/global market cultures and consumer behaviors, market trends and taste regimes).

On the one hand, Oswald provides clear arguments and methods to appraise marketing semiotics' rigor in line with post-structural ontology (Derrida, 1967). On the other hand, she advocates the ambiguous and changing nature of meanings, which inevitably makes good semiotics a problematic practice. Maintaining this ambivalence makes justice to (marketing) semiotics, which is not trivialized for the sake of recipe-looking mangers or lazy scholars.

Creating Value: The Theory and Practice of Marketing Semiotics Research comprises six chapters, each of them including a theoretical introduction followed by one or more business cases, either selected from global brands (e.g. Coke and Ford Escape) or protected under fictional names. Chapter 1 presents semiotic foundations and terminology; Chapter 2 contextualizes the semiotic method to a discursive analysis of advertising; Chapter 3 develops an interpretive frame of brands as metaphors; Chapter 4 unveils the semiotics of physical and virtual servicescapes; Chapter 5 locates brands in

the midst of our cultural world; and Chapter 6 provides methodological tips for semiotic ethnography in commercial settings.

As Oswald writes, with the exception of Chapter 1, chapters' order is interchangeable. In consideration of the book's diverse audience and aims, logical routes to connect chapters together may vary. For instance, managerial readers are more likely to "cherry-pick" on the basis of their professional roles (e.g. advertising managers might prefer Chapters 2, 3 and 5; brand managers might prefer Chapters 5, 3 and 4; and market researchers may prefer Chapters 6 and 5). Academic readers will differ according to the research versus teaching aims they pursue when approaching the book. As researchers, they are also likely to select chapters according to their personal agenda. As lecturers, they can instead adopt the whole book as an excellent complement to "Brand Management" or "Marketing Management" courses.

The following review implies a lecturer's point of view, which in fact allows navigating book contents fully and intriguingly. Assuming a "Brand Management" course perspective, we start from Chapter 1 and then move along Chapters 5, 6, 3, 2 and 4. The first three chapters illustrate the theoretical and methodological foundations of a brand's semiotic strategy. Chapter 1 discusses what marketing semiotics is and how it sharpens managerial decisions and practice. Oswald sketches semiotics' history by contrasting two theoretical frameworks: "Code Theory" (Saussure, 1916) and "Discourse Theory" (Benveniste, 1967), which represent, respectively, structural versus post-structural semiotics. Although structural semiotics presents brands as sign systems structured by codes whose meanings can and should be relatively stable in space (syntagmatic axe) and time (synchronic axe), post-structural semiotics warns about the modifiability of brand meanings in space and time, as "subjects to the effects of history, ideology, and consumer agency" (p. 19). The interplay between structure and anti-structure echoes today's marketing research as located at the crossroad of structural forces (institutionalism, macro-marketing, etc.) and personal or collective agency (identity projects, identity politics, etc.). Cultural branding (Chapter 5) well reflects this tension. Brand meanings leverage upon, and are bounded by, existing meanings detectable at multiple levels: trends in popular culture, value conversations in a given industry/product category, competing brands' value propositions and consumer meanings embedded in their narratives, rituals and self-generated advertising (p. 115). Yet, authoritative brands are capable of acting on such existing meanings and of dialectically transforming them, to thus become part of a market's cultural structure. As Oswald underlines, to make cultural branding effective, semiotics should be involved since the very inception of a brand's strategy, that is, from the early market research stage meant to generate brand insights (Chapter 6). Among the many research methods that semiotics can fertilize, market ethnography is particularly responsive. Relying upon Herzfeld's (1983) definition, semiotic ethnography presents some peculiarities: theory and practice occur at any research stage, from research design to data analysis; focus is maintained on sign systems at play in the observed context; and ambiguity of interpretations is recurrent. Brands competing on a global scale and/or targeting consumers differing for ethnicity, gender or nationality can largely benefit from this method. First, for each ethnic/gender/national culture, semiotic ethnography helps identify what concepts are more/less important. Second, it unpacks how consumers shift codes from one context to another, and which problems of cultural translation they might encounter. Finally, it permits to observe how inter-subjective dynamics affect

consumers' meaning construction and presentation. This information provides blueprints for contextualized brand discourses, sensitive brand communication and symbolic benefits that a brand should potentially express for each of its customers.

The other three chapters elucidate the implementation of a brand's semiotic strategy, in particular through communication (Chapters 3 and 2) and retail management (Chapter 4). As per communication, Oswald presents brand metaphors as the cornerstone to access a symbolic economy. Elaborating from Zaltman (1996), she notes that verbal metaphors, more than visual ones, transcend the "stubborn materiality of the image" and help develop rich brand hypertexts (p. 65). Intriguingly, she observes that use of metaphors is meant to support not only immediate persuasion (as per "Trope Theory") but also brand polyvalent meanings that allow for longer-lasting (persuasive) effects. The reader is eventually warned about the risks of extrapolating metaphors from brand heritage and ongoing cultural discourses. Among the alternative forms of communication, advertising (Chapter 2) is still crucial in brand value creation. Differently from alternative theoretical approaches to advertising (e.g. "Intertextuality", "Reader-response Theory" and "Phenomenology"), a strategic semiotic advertising approach implies:

- a diachronic articulation of a brand's advertisements over time;
- the collective appraisal of advertisements, which exceeds individual idiosyncratic interpretations; and
- the incorporation of the advertising text within its competitive, industrial and cultural setting.

As per retail management (Chapter 4), the semiotics of space enriches established servicescape literature (Sherry, 1998). For physical spaces, Oswald provides a four-staged, structured strategy to design a servicescape by mobilizing:

(1) material space (e.g. architectonics, decoration, furnishing and traffic flows);
(2) cultural conventions (i.e. norms about alternative cultural structures of space);
(3) contextual dimensions (i.e. spatial trends and changes that constantly transform existing space cultural conventions); and
(4) performance (i.e. management and consumer actions occurring in a given space).

For virtual spaces, she spots their key difference consisting in consumers' possibility of inhabiting multiple spaces per time (Foucault's idea of "heterotopia", 1984). Kozinets and Arnould (2017) similarly warn about the need for more sensitive theory and methods to approach what they call the "consumer cyborgs", people enjoying unprecedented digital ubiquity.

Creating Value talks to a large public of academicians and practitioners and satisfies a variety of needs: anecdotal semiotic evidence, practical marketing guidance and sound and cutting-edge theory. By situating cultural studies within a semiotic frame, the book valuably contributes to both fields. It also documents the porosity between marketing and social life: marketing semiotics research is not only a means to create value for a brand but also, and above all, a means to properly make sense of the world we inhabit.

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