

The Photoset as a Qualitative Research Tool Designed from a Semiotic Perspective

Dora Ivonne Alvarez Tamayo

Abstract—Considering the need to integrate resources and techniques to access the mind of consumers to communicate brand positioning in a coherent and integrated way, the research team that I lead to work on branding for a college graphic design program for a private university in Puebla, has developed an exploratory study for which it has been designed a set of qualitative instruments from a semiotic perspective. The instrument presented in this document is called “photoset”. It is a projective technique association consisting of selecting a set of images that are brought into contact with the user to perform interpretations, from which the researcher takes notes and draws conclusions from contextual, metaphoric, metonymies and associated elements. In this case, the photoset was designed to understand the symbolic values associated with the graphic design as a profession. The results obtained using the photoset allows to analyze the configuration of the semantic field of a segment, in this case applicants to an undergraduate academic program, to design persuasive communication strategies. The instrument designed and the analysis was performed based on the semiosis model by Morris (1994) and supported by Eco’s theory of codes: syntactic, semantic and pragmatic s-codes.

Index Terms—Mind of consumers, photoset, projective technique, qualitative research, semiotics.

I. INTRODUCTION

University is a training institution for professional life; it currently faces a changing world thanks to the evolution of the media; so it has found new ways and new challenges for the organization of work and the performance of professional life. It is in this scenario where communications should be based on a tuned integrated marketing strategy that allows speaking in one voice.

Plurality is one of the main features at university. The university represents so many things to so many different people [1].

Considering this characteristic, this research focuses in the searching of methods to understand a consumer’s point of view.

The university is like a basket: there are different fruits suitable for every consumer’s taste, but overall the basket makes desirable.

The case that the research team is working on belongs to a graphic design undergraduate program in a private sector university that requires attention to its positioning in consumer’s minds.

Brand power is reflected in terms of capital value, which lies in the positive differential effect on customer response.

This represents various competitive advantages for the organization in its environment, as well as serving as the foundation for building solid customer relationships.

The trademark sign as an expression conveys the relationship with a significant content, which, by being present in every contact, assuming a persuasive character, not dependent of its syntactic structure, but rather on the semiotic value generated around it, and which persuades a costumer to a position, whether in favor or against, the entity which it represents (redaction). Brand associated meanings will be considered by the user accordingly.

The research problem is divided into three main aspects:

- 1) Communication: the institutional strategies that lead towards institutional reputation are executed in a general way; it means that there are not strategies designed to a particular program. The particular programs don’t have a controlled positioning process.
- 2) Method: the strategist needs to include resources and techniques that allow him/her to access to the consumers’ minds (stakeholders) in order to ensure the effectiveness of the message.
- 3) Case: low enrollment in the graphic design program, it was observed as a symptom of a positioning problem.

This document focuses on the second aspect, the method. The goal is to generate a diagnostic assessment instrument based on marketing semiotics, so that its application allows understanding the audience’s semantic field; in this case the research team works with a sample of 78 undergraduate applicants to a graphic design program divided in 3 focus groups. The purpose was to apply a methodological model in a private university in Puebla in order to communicate its brand attributes and contribute towards the reputation of the institution.

This study presents the most remarkable results of a semiotic analysis using the photoset to get meanings in order to know the operant code regarding the concept of graphic design.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

There are four areas of knowledge supporting this research:

A. Integrated Graphic Communication System

It refers to a strategic program model, product of a joint planning process and visual messages that are issued through the organization’s communication subsystems. The message’s integrity guarantees a branding, positioning in the audience’s minds. Shultz, Tannenbaum and Lauterborn [2] define this system as a management process to control all organization’s messages to the customer is exposed. The

Manuscript received July 9, 2015; revised September 30, 2015.

Dora Ivonne Alvarez Tamayo is with the Universidad Popular Autónoma Del Estado De Puebla (UPAEP), Puebla, Mexico (e-mail: doraivonne.alvarez@upaep.mx).

system goal is to change the consumer behavior, persuading him/her to buy and maintaining their loyalty.

B. Positioning and Reputation

In an environment governed by symbolic values of organizations, products, people and images, Ries and Trout [3] introduced the concept “positioning” which refers to the optimal location where a company wants to place their products in the consumer's mind. On the other hand, reputation along with human resources is the most valuable organization's resource. The users recognize brand value and use this information to make decisions and act upon them; therefore it should be protected and developed through a strategic plan [4].

C. Marketing Semiotics

It is defined by Floch [5] as a “vocation intended to address the conceptual and methodological tools useful to better understand market behavior in order to make a difference; an advantage over the competition”. Marketing semiotics will be used to design the intervention strategies in graphic design, particularly, to produce integrated graphic communication systems. Marketing and semiotics have points of arrangement to perform studies about the user. This is the main issue that serves as the basis of the research instrument design.

D. Projective Techniques

According to Zaltman [6], there is information within of target's behavior that is incapable of expressing through direct questioning instruments. However, accessing the consumer's mind is a necessary condition to develop successful strategies. The projective techniques could allow the access in analogical thinking of the subject, in order to penetrate the causes of the audience's symbolic configuration. Lindstrom [7] explains that when trying to find out why consumers were attracted to a particular brand, he realized that the answer was somewhere in the brain; the more companies know about our needs and our subconscious desires, more meaningful and useful products can offer ourselves as consumers.

III. METHODOLOGY: THE PHOTOSET AS A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH TOOL

There is a natural link between marketing and semiotics: consumer knowledge (interpreter), naturally social human beings who interact with the environment, who communicate, interpret, infer, decide and consume. Marketing Semiotics, making use of theories, principles and techniques which allow the understanding of processes of meaning, contextualized in the field of marketing goods and services in order to obtain information on consumer behavior in relation to the influence factors that determine their purchase decisions through the analysis of its symbolic and belief system. In this research, semiotics has been taken as the main focus by marketing since the development of diagnostic, market research and evaluation tools.

According to Eco [8], “the whole of culture should be studied as a communicative phenomenon” and “all aspects of culture can be studied as the contents of a semiotic activity”. Positioning is a cultural phenomenon that could be analyzed

through semiotic eyes. Therefore, the instruments were designed to get qualitative data about the meaning of graphic design in the consumer's mind; one of those instruments is the photoset. A photoset is an association projective technique consisting of selecting a set of images shown for users who interpret each image; the researcher take notes and draws conclusions. The photoset allows identifying the symbolic values associated with the graphic design profession.

The photoset offers a closer perspective about the reality of things through analogical thinking. The images appeal to different verbal language skills in which tropes can be apparent.

Considering Eco's perspective [9] “s-codes are systems or structures that can also subsist independently of any sort of significant or communicative purpose”. However, the s-codes (syntactics, semantics and pragmatics) are made up of sets of structured elements governed by combinational rules that can generate finite and infinite strings of meaning. The research instrument was produced considering the hypothesis: if the strategist knows the code structure around a concept – in this case graphic design- he/she could define an integrated graphic communication program highly effective in order to encourage brand positioning.

The photoset application includes the following stages:

- 1) Defining the research objective what do we want to know?
- 2) Clarifying and narrowing the topic.
- 3) Establishing categories that function as variables that correspond to each construct of our interest.
- 4) Designing or selecting the images that will be classified by category. To build the photoset it would be better design your own images, but it is possible to use an image bank and buy the images that respond to the needs of the instrument.
- 5) Testing the images through a pilot trial.
- 6) 6. Selecting the final images.
- 7) Design motor questions.
- 8) Submitting images randomly.
- 9) Asking consumers to write the first thing that comes to their minds when images are shown.
- 10) Submitting images in a focus group for discussion.
- 11) Codification of the responses.
- 12) Finding patterns and ruptures.
- 13) Analyzing messages.
- 14) Summarizing results.

IV. APPLICATION TO THE CASE

The photoset was part of a research with other instruments that aim to recognize the consumers' codes around the concept of graphic design. The sample was integrated with high school students from Puebla and surrounding regions, medium / medium-high (C, C+). The kind of sample was no probabilistic by convenience. There were 3 groups of applicants. Each group consisted of 26 high school students. The research team presented 10 to 20 images of a previously designed photoset. First, the applicants wrote about their image associations, and then their interpretations were discussed in a focus group. The application's length was 20-30 minutes and the materials needed were video camera,

pieces of paper, pencils, and of course the photostat.

A. Designing the Photostat

To define the images that the photostat includes, the research team worked on the basis of Eco's theory of codes [10], considering:

If the internal articulation of the signs provided by the code is examined, it is possible to analyze them in this way: i) a continuum of physical possibilities that is used as the unformed material from which the engineer obtains discrete elements to be used as expressive devices; ii) token expressive devices such as A, B, C, D plus their combinations (AB, BC, CD, AD) which represent elements selected from the original material; iii) a system of empty positions, a structure, by virtue of which the token expressive devices assume a positional and oppositional nature...vii) a continuum of physical possibilities, psychic events, behaviors and thoughts to which the system has given an order, selecting a structured set of recognizable semantic units.

The photostat was arranged considering that each image could be an expression that evokes different contents structured in a system of positions and oppositions into the limits of a context given by the researcher. The intention was to get a map of the signification system by means of the analysis of the responses given by the consumers.

From 188 images that were used in a pilot test only 30 were selected to be in the final photostat. The images were classified in 8 categories that reflected actions, associated areas, lifestyles, expectations, professional projection and meanings (see Fig. 1).

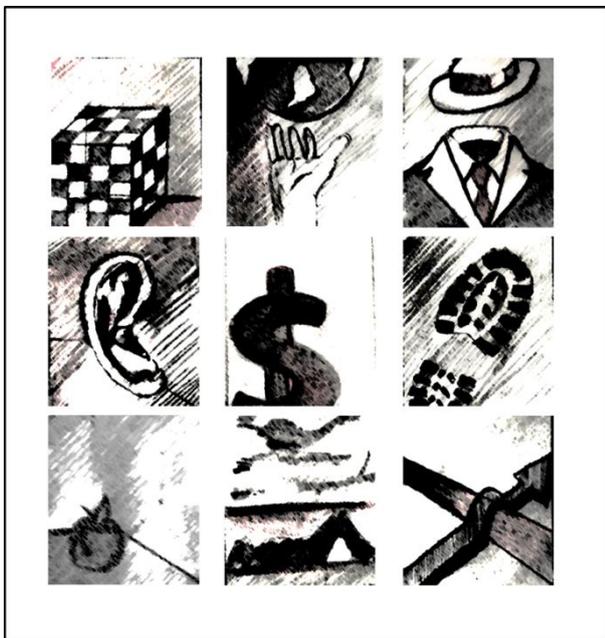


Fig. 1. Example of sketches that compose the photostat.

After that, some of "motor questions" had been designed for the instrument, for example:

What do you see in this picture?

What do you think about graphic design when you see this picture?

What does the image say about graphic design?

What is the relationship between the image and graphic

design?

Give an example that connects this image with graphic design

The analysis was performed based on semiosis levels model by Morris [11] and supported by Eco's theory of codes [12].

B. Findings and Discussion

The results were analyzed image-by-image looking for rhetorical figures- metonymic, metaphorical and synecdochic thought.

The photostat technique was applied to 3 groups of consumers to compare the results between them and to identify patterns and ruptures image by image.

Then it was possible to find connections between categories and finding subcategories.

The analysis criteria were: syntactic features, semantic connections, pragmatic transfers, motor question/answers, metaphors, synecdoches, and metonymies. There is an example of the kind of analysis made image by image (see Table I).

TABLE I: EXAMPLE OF AN ANALYTIC TABLE TO ANALYSIS IMAGE BY IMAGE. IMAGE 1 GROUP 01

Criterion	Findings
Syntactic features	Focus on prototypical forms of expression, colors and images
Semantic connections	Successful, executive, greatness and power, formal, reliability, photography, business
Pragmatic transfers	I can be whoever I want, In ca influence the world, the world is in our hands, we accomplished what we set out, the designer can serve the world through their art
What's on your mind when you see this picture	Mankind has developed good design around the world, doing well there are no limits, perseverance, good job, wide view
Metaphor	Power, man embraces the world, man is the villain of the film, the entrepreneurs are part of the world, the world is in my hands.
Synecdoche	Advertising is part of the company The entrepreneur is part of the world The world is in his/her hands
Metonymy	Cause and effect, the man dominates and has control of the world, the world will recognize my good design, I can manipulate the world through design

This is an example of the similarities found related with each image, between the three focus groups (see Table II).

Umberto Eco's theory of codes was chosen as a semiotic base for the data analysis, because one of this author's features is the development of a proposal, which summarizes the approaches of both the structuralist and pragmatist models by establishing linkages useful in explaining cultural units as categories.

TABLE II: EXAMPLE OF AN ANALYTIC TABLE TO ANALYSIS IMAGE BY IMAGE. IMAGE 1 GROUP 01



Image 2 – comparative between groups 01, 02 and 03: similarities

With the design may have the world at your fingertips, offering ownership and control, also the design is everywhere and is an universal language

Particularly in the case of applicants, the denotations and connotations helped identify existing information as a basis for entering new data (see Table III).

TABLE III: COMPONENTIAL ANALYSIS OF CANDIDATE SEMANTIC ASSOCIATIONS

Expression	Denotations (prototypes)	Connotations
/design/	Drawing, creativity, art	art, advertising, color, ideas
/graphic design/	Creativity, images, expressions, drawings, logotypes	Ideas, style, art, sketches, feelings, posters, web, messages, persuade, colors major, figures, magazines, advertising, ads, models, Coca-Cola, tools, designs
Associated images	Drawings, brands, posters	Advertising, art, drawing, sell, image, imagination, culture, animation, painting, ads, fonts
Associated words	Creativity	To create logotypes, to generate image proposals, to solve problems, to transmit visual proposals, to innovate, to generate ideas. Information, architecture, marketing, everything you see
Work of the graphic designers	To transmit information	It is interesting, using the computer, it is fun, it changes the perceptions of people, awesome, I can help people
Areas that relate graphic design	Art, advertising	Design office, design department of an enterprise, web, printing, publishing house
Reasons why you are interested in graphic design	I like drawing, I'm interested in innovation	
Working range of choice	Magazine, animation	

Those results were obtained with data from a field study applied to applicants interested in a graphic design undergraduate program from 2011 to 2013.

Several strengths perceived by the students, worthy of promotion as sales arguments, were identified in the instrument applied to them, which referred to the same analytical model used for the perceptual study.

The research team produced semantic maps to locate the connections between categories; an example is presented (Fig. 2):

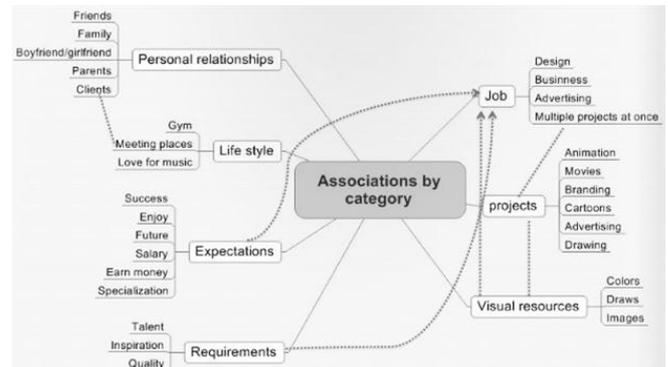


Fig. 2. Example of maps to locate connections between categories related with graphic design concept.

In relation to the photoset shown, the applicants realize that a graphic designer is a free person, able to work in a relaxed, innovative and creative, environment. The applicants believe that abstraction is helpful to generate ideas.

The environment is an essential part of the designer's work. Students expect to work in suitable spaces.

The students consider professional image is vital in order to enter to the business world.

V. CONCLUSION

The researchers have to openly declare the topics to apply the photoset. This information works as a framework or reference to limit the reader's semantic field.

Each picture or frame is a fragment of the whole; the reader will seek textual image coherence in relation to a subject.

During the sessions the research team realized that images mobilize the rational and emotional aspects at the same time (the gesture transformation when the applicant tries to express his/her point of view).

The richness of each image was not only its power of making the reality visible but exposes the meaning. The image is an expression that works as a vehicle that provides meaning. The content was filtered through the categories that organize the consumer's belief system.

The photoset analysis results serve as inputs to develop a set of communication strategies to articulate the messages that are expressed from the academic graphic design program to produce a consistent perception in their audiences.

Projective technique's application requires the inclusion of different disciplines to design the research instruments and interpret the results. Graphic designers, marketing specialists, psychologists, communication specialists, and discourse analysts supported this project.

Using the photoset technique, the researcher obtains information that other instruments cannot offer. That is why is recommended to combine the photoset technique with other instruments (qualitative or quantitative) to strengthen analysis results.

A semiotic approach is useful to design research tools and

to analyze qualitative data because semiotics has a place in all human activity areas; it allows building interdisciplinary relationships aimed at understanding different cultural phenomena.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Special thanks to the Academy of Graphic and Digital Design UPAEP for offer facilities for developing the methodology and all the members for always being willing to discuss the issue and provide an expert point of view.

REFERENCES

- [1] O. González. (January, 1992). El concepto de universidad. ANUIES [Online]. Available: <http://publicaciones.anui.es/revista/102/2/1/es/el-concepto-de-universidad>.
- [2] D. Shultz, S. Tannenbaum, and R. Lauterborn, *Comunicaciones de Marketing Integradas, Cómo Lograr una Ventaja Competitiva*, Argentina: Granica, 2007, ch. 1, p. 22.
- [3] A., Ries and J. Trout, *Posicionamiento: la batalla por su mente*, México: McGraw Hill, 2002, ch. 1, pp. 5.
- [4] J. Meyer. (2009). Comunicación estratégica: Nuevos horizontes de estudio. 1st ed México: Fundación Buendía – UPAEP. [Online]. ch. 5. pp. 112-136. Available: <http://www.razonypalabra.org.mx/Comunicacion%20estrategica.pdf>.
- [5] J. M. Floch, *Semiótica, Marketing y Comunicación*, Bajo los signos, las estrategias, Barcelona: Paidós comunicación, 1993, ch. 1, p. 14.

- [6] G. Zaltman, *Cómo piensan los Consumidores. Lo que Nuestros Clientes no Pueden Decirnos y Nuestros Competidores no Saben*, 1st ed, Barcelona: Empresa Creativa, 2004, ch. 1, p. 42.
- [7] M. Lindstrom, *Compradición*, 1st ed, México: Editorial Norma, 2009, introduction, p. 5.
- [8] U. Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, 1st ed, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979, p. 22.
- [9] U. Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, 1st ed, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979, ch. 1, p. 38.
- [10] U. Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, 1st ed, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979, ch. 2, pp. 50-51.
- [11] Ch. Morris, *Fundamento de la teoría de los signos*, Barcelona: Paidós Comunicación, 1994, pp. 1-128.
- [12] U. Eco, *Tratado de Semiótica General*, México: Ediciones De Bolsillo, 2005, ch. 2, pp. 48-139.



Dora Ivonne Alvarez Tamayo was born in Mexico City on February 1, 1976. She is a graphic designer and university professor since 1999, combining professional experience with academic practice. She is teaching courses on semiotics, hermeneutics, design workshops and research for designers. She has a PhD degree in management and marketing (UPAEP), a master degree in design processes (UPAEP), specialty in developing thinking skills (UMAD), and a specialization in semiotics (SES-BUAP). She served as Coordinator of the Academic Degree Program in Graphic Design at UPAEP (2008-2010). Dr. Alvarez is a member of the Semiotic Society of America.