Consumer research
Postcards from the edge

Edited by Stephen Brown and Darach Turley

London and New York
Contents

List of figures vii
List of tables viii
List of contributors ix
Pre-text: cometh the hour, cometh the manuscript xv

1 Travelling in trope: postcards from the edge of consumer research
   Stephen Brown and Darach Turley 1

2 Been there, done that, bought the souvenirs: of journeys and boundary crossing
   Russell W. Belk 22

3 Walking on the edge: a stereographic photo essay on the verge of consumer research
   Morris B. Holbrook 46

4 Shoppers on the verge of a nervous breakdown: chronicle, composition and confabulation in consumer research
   Stephen Brown and Rhona Reid 79

5 Exploring the différence: a postmodern approach to paradigmatic pluralism in consumer research
   Craig J. Thompson, Eric J. Arnould and Barbara B. Stern 150

6 Post-structuralism and the dialectics of advertising: discourse, ideology, resistance
   Richard Elliott and Mark Ritson 190

7 Beyond the semiotic strait-jacket: everyday experiences of advertising involvement
   Stephanie O’Donohoe and Caroline Tynan 220

8 Semiotics in marketing and consumer research: balderdash, verity, pleas
   David Glen Mick 249
Semiotics in marketing and consumer research
Balderdash, verity, pleas

David Glen Mick

INTRODUCTION

Semiotics is one of those distinctly arcane words that academics and consultants enjoy uttering. So effortlessly it conjures up a virtual terre haute of philosophical insights about human nature and society. Say it slowly and it spins off the tongue, glazes the eyes, and expands the mind. To where, one is often unsure.

My courtship with semiotics started in the early 1980s as I sought to explore her implications for marketing and consumer behaviour. At different times she has been profound, vacuous, intoxicating, solemn, demanding, common-sensical and baffling. As this chapter indicates, our love-hate affair lives on.

Since the mid-1980s, conference activities and publications on semiotics and marketing have swelled worldwide (e.g. Aoki 1988; Grandi 1994; Holbrook and Hirschman 1993; International Journal of Research in Marketing 1988, vol. 4, nos. 3 and 4; Larsen et al. 1991; Mick 1986, 1988; Umiker-Sebeok 1987a; Vihma 1990). Concomitantly, several fictions about semiotics have spread throughout the marketing field, some of which, mea culpa, I may be partially responsible for. For instance, consider the following terms, and ask yourself: which among them do you think semiotics should be equated with or, at least, strongly associated with?

- semiology
- structuralism
- post-structuralism
- semantics
- symbolism
- subconscious meaning(s)
- analytic (Freudian) psychology
- postmodernism
- post-postivism
- theory
- science
method
qualitative-interpretive analysis

Balderdash! As I outline in this chapter, there is convincing evidence that semiotics should not be interchanged with or strongly associated with any of these terms or concepts.

Since this chapter is not a tutorial, for conciseness I assume that the reader has already been exposed to the basics of semiotics (if not, see Deely 1990; Fiske 1982; Innis 1985; Mick 1986; Sebeok 1976, 1994). Also, during the ensuing discussion of misconceptions about semiotics, I have avoided referencing specific authors in marketing and consumer research because doing so would serve no effect but petty embarrassment (of myself included!). Nonetheless, in addressing the issues in general terms, my hope is to encourage marketing and consumer researchers toward a more refined and more accurate use of semiotics. I conclude this chapter with commentary on my beliefs about the core verity of semiotics and some simple pleas to those who may implement semiotics in future research.

FOUNDATIONALS

Etymologically, the term ‘semiotics’ originates from the Greek words for sign and signal. Although a number of philosophers during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance remarked on semiotics to varying degrees (e.g. St Augustine, Poinset, Vico, Locke), it is principally associated with scholarly developments at the turn of the twentieth century by two independent scholars. The prominent Swiss linguist F. de Saussure (1916) referred to it as semiologie (spelled in English as semiology), while the American philosopher C.S. Peirce (1935–66) tended to refer to it as semiotic (without the ‘s’ on the end). Other competing but less commonly used terms have included semasiology, sematology and sensifies. How it has come today to be called semiotics by most leading authorities worldwide, but still resists by others, is a fascinating topic unto itself, but outside the purview of this chapter (see Deely 1990; Noth 1990).

Multiple definitions of semiotics exist (Pec 1981). For consistency, I shall use the term semiotics broadly, to refer to any study of communication that uses the concept of the sign as its fundamental unit (see also Eco 1976; Sebeok 1976). Saussure, who was solely interested in language, maintained a bilateral model of the sign, consisting of the signifier (a spoken word) and the signified (the concept or thought which the spoken word refers to). A sign, according to Peirce’s more comprehensive perspective, is anything that can stand for something else to an animate being (i.e. an interpreter) in some context. Since everything is capable of standing for something else, everything is capable of being a sign. Examples of signs in the consumer world are everywhere a person wishes to look, listen, smell, feel or taste: brand names and logos; lyrics, melodies and tempos in music; deodorants and perfumes; wool sweaters and silk pillows; pizza and whisky; and so on, ad infinitum. What do these signs stand for? Meanings of all kinds, some of which are widely shared, while others are more specific to given subcultures, households or individuals. For instance, the Marlboro cowboy partly stands for American culture, independence and self-reliance, but may also stand for rebellion, chauvinism, fatalism, ill-health or the genocide of Native American Indians, depending on the communication context and the particular interpreter. The communication of meaning(s) through signs is often referred to as semiosis. It is fruitfully understood, as implicated in the example of the Marlboro man, according to Peirce’s (1935–66) model of semiosis which involves three indissoluble components: a sign, its object and its interpretant.

Pinpointing the introduction of semiotics to marketing and consumer research is difficult, occurring at least by the early 1970s in Europe and shortly afterwards in North America and Asia (see discussions by Mick 1986, 1988; Pinson 1988, 1993; Umiker-Sebeok 1987b). As suggested earlier, the application of semiotics in marketing and consumer research has since burgeoned across the world. Unfortunately, the wide-ranging and rapid growth of applications has also led to a number of continuing misconceptions about semiotics that threaten to turn this emerging spire of insights into another tower of Babel.

A LITANY OF BALDERDASH

The first, and perhaps most pernicious, balderdash is that semiotics is a consolidated field of ideas about signs and semiosis. In truth, one must be very cautious in using the term semiotics, as if to suggest that it is unified. Casual use of the term leads to the implication that most semioticians agree about such things as the nature of signs, their numbers and varieties, their operations, and so on. In fact, there is considerable divergence even about essential issues, including the definition of semiotic concepts such as sign, symbol and code. While these disagreements make semiotics appear chaotic, the situation is only exacerbated by the one-term-fits-all mentality when the word semiotics is used without qualification or further specification. (For those readers already feeling dubious about semiotics and for whom this first balderdash deserves ample snickering, you might wish to check your self-righteousness at the door before entering the central domains of marketing, psychology and anthropology, for example, where widely accepted definitions of foundational concepts are similarly elusive.)

In semiotics there exist several traditions, most of which trace their lineage either to Saussure (semiology) or Peirce (semiotic). Not only are these two forefathers and their philosophies vastly different, their property are quite varied as well (e.g. Barthes, Eco, Jakobson, Morris, Sebeok). In
addition, it is quite misleading to assume that the Saussurean and Peircean distinction maps onto the Atlantic divide between North America and Europe. In fact, renowned American scholars have drawn heavily from Saussure (e.g. Jonathan Culler), while eminent European scholars have done the same with respect to Peirce (e.g. Umberto Eco).

Another common balderdash is that semiotics is equivalent to structuralism. Slightly less onerous is the belief that semiotics is mostly concerned with structural issues. It is certainly true that the organisation of marketing signs (e.g. words and pictures in an advertisement) is pre-governed by cultural conventions (rules) whose identification and elaboration are crucial to understanding semiosis. But semiotics is not strictly focused on structural issues in communication (see e.g. Sebeok's 1984 fiery emphasis of this same point). Indeed, semiotics is more expansive than structuralism (Deely 1990). For example, semiotics also addresses the different processes (e.g. induction, deduction, abduction) and reactions (e.g. types of interpreters) that consumers evoke when confronting marketing signs. If semiotics is not structuralism in disguise, then perhaps semiotics is similar to post-structuralism. This too, however, is a slippery connection. In the first place, many of the major post-structuralists such as Derrida and Foucault still concentrate so intensely on structural issues that one observer has referred to them as superstructuralists (Harland 1987). On the other hand, some post-structuralists deny any affinity or interest in semiotics. Hence, while structural relationships among signs in a given system, or within a given message, are tantamount to communication and meaning, structural issues are only one aspect of semiotics per se.

Another balderdash is that semiotics is synonymous with semantics. In fact, semantics is usually characterised as the study of the relation between signs and their objects. Since semiotics also considers the relations of signs to other signs (syntactics or structural issues) and the relations of signs to their interpreters (pragmatics), it is wrongly delimiting to associate semiotics narrowly with semantics.

A related balderdash is another gross simplification that semiotics is chiefly concerned with symbolism or symbolic meaning. In fact, symbolism is only one of many possible sign–object relations within the study of semantics. Saussure, the linguist, emphasised that the relationship between words and their referents is arbitrary. For instance, the word ‘dog’, which English speakers use to refer to a four-legged carnivorous animal that is commonly kept as a pet or hunting aide, could just as well be replaced by the word ‘zog’ to refer to the same category of animate beings. This characteristic of arbitrariness is thought-provoking, particularly when one begins observing all the other things that serve as signifiers that have strictly arbitrary relationships with their signifieds. In fact, the meaning of nearly every socio-cultural artefact or event (material or otherwise) seems to be constructed from mere human agreement, including marketing and consumer phenomena such as jewellery, clothing, television programmes, books, beer, cigars, computers, discs and football. Since the early 1970s there have been numerous efforts to analyse the complex, subtle, and arbitrary meanings of marketing stimuli and consumption. These studies represent some of the most fertile and provocative insights produced from a semiotic perspective. One of the earliest and most widely known analysts in this genre of semiotic research is, of course, Roland Barthes. Dozens of others have followed closely in his footsteps.

Unfortunately, the rise and predominance of symbolism analysis under the rubric of semiotics has led many writers to use the terms interchangeably. This is doubly bothersome since, in addition, the word symbol is arguably the most abused semiotic term, having been subjected to ‘unjustifiably excessive generalization and overly broad application’ (Sebeok 1994: 34). Eco’s (1986) historical and philosophical examination of the symbol concept underscores Sebeok’s indictment. But as Peirce and other semioticians have argued, the relationship between sign and object (i.e. semantics) can take many forms. Only one of these is characterised in terms of arbitrariness, that being the relationship which should be properly called symbolic. In fact, Peirce maintained that there were sixty-six different types of sign–object relations and many of these apply to non-linguistic signs. Two of the other most commonly acknowledged sign–object relations are iconic (based on similarity or likeness) and indexical (based on causality or other existential connection). Thus, even though symbolism is a crucial and inescapable aspect of semiosis in marketing and consumer behaviour, it is inauspicious and misleading that 1/66 of sign–object relations has come to be equated by some researchers with the whole of the semiotic field.

Yet another occasional balderdash is that semiotics is chiefly concerned with hidden or subconscious meanings. This belief implies that semiotics and analytic (Freudian) psychology are similar or equivalent. In twentieth-century semiotics there certainly have been some significant psychoanalytic semioticians, chief among them being Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva. However, meanings as communicated by signs exist at multiple levels. While many researchers exhibit an inherent bias toward looking for ‘deeper’, less obvious meanings in every phenomenon, ‘surface’ meanings can be (and often are) more influential and determinative in everyday communicative acts. A realistic and comprehensive view of semiotics acknowledges multiple levels of meaning.

A recent and growing balderdash maintains that semiotics is elemental to postmodernity. Brown (1995) has done an admirable job in previously unveiling this misconception, though not necessarily for the same reasons I would. Among other things, postmodernity is associated with the idea that meanings are diffuse, indeterminate and provisional in the interpretation of virtually anything. If one primarily associates semiotics with semiology or structuralism (as Brown tends to do), then one is drawn to
the conclusion that semiotics is not postmodern because semiology and structuralism have together fostered the view that meaning is imminent in, and determined by, fixed codes that predicate the selection of signs and their combination in a given message. However, the Peircean approach to semiotics admits the possibility of an infinite regress of interpretations of signs, an idea that is actually substantial to postmodernism. As Partmentier (1994) writes,

Peirce offers the possibility that meaning is more than an operation of mental decoding, since semiosis is an open-ended process in which each moment of interpretation alters the field for subsequent interpretations. In contrast, Saussure’s theory focuses on the preestablished, fixed code shared equally by ideal speaker and ideal hearer.

(partmentier 1994: xiii)

Nonetheless, semiotics is not necessarily postmodern because it is just as readily applicable to messages in which meanings are not blatantly underdetermined or wildly multifarious. For example, consider simple marketing slogans such as ‘Come shop at Wagner’s Supermarket’ or ‘Introducing the New Manna Portable Computer’ to which semiotics could be applied to analyse the process and content of their meanings (see also Johansen’s (1993: ch. 8) thorough semiotic analysis of the traffic light system). There is nothing inherent to semiotics that prevents it from addressing the four Ps of postmodernism (Brown 1995), namely paradox, profusion, plurivariance and polysemy. Equally, however, there is nothing incorrect about semiotics addressing simplicity, scarcity, monovalence and singularity in marketplace meanings. As such, semiotics is not necessarily postmodern.

Akin to the previous balderdash is the claim or implication that semiotics is conterminous with post-positivism. Generally speaking, post-positivists maintain that multiple realities exist which are social constructed; the goal of research is understanding; and the knowledge gained from research is time-bound and context-dependent. Alternatively, positivistic researchers tend to believe that reality is singular, objective and tangible; the goal of research is explanation; and the knowledge gained is time-free and context-independent. In terms of epistemological foundations, it actually appears that many semioticians are situated between the positivist and post-positivist poles (see Figure 8.1).

Positivist view: individual → reality = realism

Semiotic view: individual ↔ signs ↔ reality = representationalism

Post-positivist view: individual → sense data = phenomenalism

Figure 8.1 Three epistemologies

contact with reality. This hard-core realist position is, of course, thoroughly rejected by most semioticians (e.g. Deely 1990; Sebeok 1994). Instead, they adhere to idealism to varying degrees (Savan 1983). Radical idealism assumes that people have contact only with sense data, behind which no independent reality exists. Sometimes this epistemological stance is called phenomenalism. The moderate form of semiotic idealism maintains that our most immediate contact is with sense data (signs) that are interdependent with a definitive reality, though the linkages between signs and reality are poorly understood. This latter type of idealism is sometimes known as representationalism and it closely approximates the epistemological position of many leading semioticians. Perhaps most noteworthy, Peirce was a representationalist in so far as he believed in the existence of an ultimate independent reality, but he also believed that human perception was of signs only and that human beings use signs to construct their views of what that reality may be. Consequently, he concluded that ‘the word or sign which humans use are the humans themselves’ (Peirce 1868). As such, the semiotic-representationalist position actually accepts the realist supposition about a singular, objective reality, but it also emphasises that knowing reality is complicated by, perhaps prevented by, an inevitable reliance on sign perceptions, interpretations, and use.

Another repeated balderdash is that semiotics is a theory. The word theory, like semiotics itself, supplies an appearance of intellectualism wherever it turns up. When applied to a set of ideas, the word theory also suggests rigour, sophistication, generality and timelessness. But problems quickly begin when the user of the T-word does not define it. Not surprisingly (given the arbitrary nature of words), theory has been defined in many different ways. It is not uncommon, however, to find many philosophers of science characterising theory as Rudner (1966) does:

A theory is a systematically related set of statements, including some lawlike generalizations, that is empirically testable. The purpose of theory is to increase scientific understanding through a systemized structure capable of both explaining and predicting phenomena.

(rudner 1966: 10)

Thus, explanation and prediction are often considered crucial to establishing a theory and empirically supporting it. Hempel (1965) suggests that the core of explanation is providing answers to ‘why’ questions. Answers to ‘why’ questions, according to many philosophers of science, should facilitate the ability to expect certain outcomes surrounding a given phenomenon, in view of specific antecedent conditions. In so far as expectation is similar to prediction, then explanation and prediction are highly related terms in the eyes of many philosophers of science.

If one accepts the preceding characterisations of theory, explanation and prediction, then it seems clear that semiotics is not a theory, despite Morris’s (1938) and Eco’s (1976) distinguished books with their arresting
titles. For example, Eco (1976: 3) begins by asserting that 'a general semiotic theory [should be] able to explain every case of sign-function in terms of underlying systems of elements mutually correlated by one or more codes.' Note that Eco uses the notion of explanation in his definition of semiotics, though it is not clear that he equates explanation with prediction. Two pages later, however, Eco (1976: 5) asserts that 'A general semiotic theory will be considered powerful according to its capacity for offering an appropriate definition for every sort of sign function.' By using the notion of definition to further clarify what he means by theory, Eco seems to be adopting a view of theory in which explanation does not mean prediction, since defining something says nothing about its predictive association with something else. In fact, nowhere in Eco's work is there the unmistakable aim to use semiotic concepts and related premises to predict aspects of communication (e.g. comprehension, attitudes, specific meaning content). Overall, Morris's and Eco's works are definitional or descriptive of semiosis, and not at all explanatory in a predictive sense. According to many philosophers of science, definitions and descriptions alone are not sufficient to establish a theory. These comments should not be taken as criticism of Morris's or Eco's research, as their reputations for advancing semiotics are well earned and rightly guaranteed for scholastic history. However, semiotics has not achieved the status of theory as the word theory is often used in scientific or philosophical circles. Whether semiotics will one day be the kind of theory many philosophers of science have in mind remains to be seen. And let me be clear, I am not necessarily advocating that semiotics should strive to become a theory which is evaluated in terms of its predictive strength. I am simply saying that if one believes that explanation-as-prediction is essential to what constitutes a theory, then it is balderdash to call semiotics a theory.

Hence, marketing and consumer researchers who have tended to write the word theory in the neighbourhood of the word semiotics (e.g. 'semiotic theory') are creating false impressions. Searching such writings for the semblance of predictions about marketing or consumer behaviour that have followed solely from semiotics is generally fruitless. It is possible, nevertheless, to combine semiotics with theories and insights from the social sciences to derive predictions (for one of my attempts, see Mick 1991; Mick and DeMoss 1992). But combining semiotics with social science theories and findings is one thing, claiming or implying that semiotics itself is a theory is the B-word.

Another potential balderdash is that semiotics is a science, as in calling it 'the science of signs'. If the word science is used to mean 'the study of', then it is appropriate and correct to call semiotics a science. However, according to Buzzez (1963: 37), the word science is often used to indicate that a particular discipline has matured to the point where it is:

- a systematised corpus of knowledge
- organised according to central theories and principles
- typically characterised in quantitative terms
- able to make predictions and, under some circumstances, control future events.

Semiotics meets some of these criteria, but certainly not all. Some semioticians would say that these are criteria that semiotics should be neither concerned about nor aspiring to. Leaving that debate aside, there are some convincing indications that semiotics is not currently a science.

Yet another potential balderdash is the belief or implication that semiotics is a method. In the context of consumer research, the word method conjures up data collection techniques such as interviews, participant observations, surveys, simulations and experiments. Obviously, semiotics is not a method in the same sense as these techniques. Nonetheless, if one thinks of semiotics as a refined approach to understanding or interpreting the meaning(s) of some idea or phenomenon, then it might be properly said that semiotics includes special tools, techniques, or methods. For example, one of the most distinguished tools for analysing meaning is Greimas's Semiotic Square (see e.g. Flocch 1988; Mick 1991; Verba and Camden 1987). It could also be said that Peirce's sixty-six distinctions among sign-object relations form a taxonomic technique for understanding meaning (semantics particularly). Nevertheless, marketing and consumer researchers must be cautious in writing phrases such as 'semiotic method' without specifying what is entailed by the combination of those words. In fact, there is no singular 'semiotic method' and, thereby, it is confusing to call semiotics a method.

Related to this latter balderdash is another that equates semiotics with qualitative data and interpretive analyses, juxtapositioned to quantitative data and statistical analyses. Here again, there is nothing inherent to Peirce, Saussure, Eco, Sebeok or most other major semioticians that necessitates qualitative-interpretive approaches to understanding semiosis. Granted, many applications of semiotics in marketing and consumer research have been based on qualitative data and interpretive analyses (see e.g. Bertrand 1988; Hirschman 1988; Holbrook and Grayson 1986; Mick and Buhl 1992). But there is nothing to prevent the use of qualitative-statistical analyses in semiotic research (see e.g. Kaiser et al. 1987) or the combination of qualitative and quantitative data in a semiotically-oriented project (see e.g. McQuarrie and Mick 1992). Not only is semiotics not a method generally, but also it is not implemented strictly through qualitative-interpretive approaches.

A MODICUM OF VERITY

With all this balderdash bantered about, what then is semiotics? Semiotics is a multi-traditioned, transdisciplinary doctrine. The notion that semiotics is a doctrine has been suggested by (Sebeok 1976) and supported by
parallel assertions that semiotics is a point of view (Deely 1990) or framework (Deely et al. 1986). As a doctrine, semiotics incorporates a wide set of concepts, principles and tools for explicating communication and meaning.

First and foremost, semioticians believe in the primacy of signs and sign systems. Equally critical is their unwavering focus on the nature and variety of signs, sign systems, sign uses, sign interpretations and sign effects. Semioticians continue to ply their doctrine across numerous disciplines, from phytosemiotics, zoosemiotics and medical semiotics, to the semiotics of law and of marketing. Within and across the applications of semiotics in these disciplines, there exists a range of ontological, epistemological, theoretical and methodological positions.

The semiotic doctrine is not one that is fathomed quickly or characterised concisely. It is, therefore, not surprising that semiotics is often described or criticised in terms of spurious equivalences, associations or caricatures. A serious negative outcome is that those who read such claims and who know little about semiotics go on to adopt a narrow and fallacious understanding. Consumer researchers who have definitive interests in communication and meaning must recognise that the level of semiotic-oriented insights they produce is directly proportional to the dedication they give to learning about the fuller history and range of semiotic ideas and applications. Perhaps no one in recent years has done more to assist in this task than Winfried Nöth (1990) in his impressive Handbook of Semiotics.

PLEAS: LET US BE EXPLICIT, RIGOROUS, AUTHENTIC AND INCREMENTAL

Beyond the balderdash and verity of semiotics, I wish to offer some heartfelt pleas for future semiotic research in marketing and consumer behaviour. First, as intimated in the opening paragraphs, there is a troubling tendency on the part of marketing and consumer researchers to use terms such as semiotics or semiology in a flippant manner. Apparently many researchers believe that any time the topic of communication or meaning is being discussed, it is perfectly appropriate to drop in the word semiotics or semiology. Unfortunately, all too often these words are raised in marketing and consumer research without a reasonable discussion of which particular semiotic tradition or concepts the research is drawing on, and even sometimes without any accompanying references to major semioticians. In fact, there are published articles in marketing and consumer research in which the title or opening section includes the term semiotic or semiology, and the articles then proceed with no further visible connection to the doctrine. This would be the equivalent of writing an article on ‘The Behaviourism of Consumer Behaviour’ and never citing Skinner or Watson and never using any key behaviourism concepts (e.g. stimulus, response, conditioning or reinforcement). Unless consumer researchers are prepared to be more explicit in their use of semiotic principles and concepts – not just invoking the word for its mesmerising effect – then there is little hope that semiotics will achieve the value and respect it has earned in other disciplines and which it deserves in marketing and consumer behaviour.

Second, it is equally important that researchers strive for greater rigour in applying semiotics. All too often semiotic concepts and analytic approaches are not adequately clarified before their implementation. As a result, the value of using semiotics is ambiguous. Since many semiotic terms and tools have been characterised in different ways, it is incumbent upon researchers to apply them in a lucid and precise manner. Further rigour is achieved through stronger efforts to show that semiotic concepts and approaches are applicable across multiple persons, stimuli and/or conditions. That is, semiotic-related insights are strengthened to the extent that understanding of communication and meaning is facilitated across several exemplars within the focus of a given study (products, brands, ads, consumption events, etc.). In short, semiotic research is more rigorous when researchers attend intensely to both the internal and the external validity of their applications and contributions.

Third, much semiotic research has involved qualitative data and subjective text analysis. Certainly, there has been some strong semiotic research of this variety that relates to marketing and consumer behaviour, advertising particularly (see e.g. Bertrand 1988). However, most of this work does not involve actual data from consumers for the purposes of verifying, enhancing or modifying the conclusions reached through subjective text analyses. As a result, there is a gap of authenticity or relevance to pure text analysis findings (cf. Mick 1994; Schroder 1991). It would be quite valuable for marketing and consumer researchers who have interests in semiotics to make stronger efforts to combine their qualitative data and text analysis with managerial or consumer responses (e.g. through thought listings, verbal protocols, interviews, surveys or experiments). Currently, few semiotic projects have adopted this tactic (see e.g. McQuarrie and Mick 1992; Mick and Politi 1989).

A fourth plea is for semiotic consumer researchers to demonstrate more convincingly that the application of semiotics in their work has led to truly incremental insights. By incremental I do not mean small. By incremental I mean an unmistakable knowledge advance, something that adds to and/or changes prior beliefs about the focus in the given study (e.g. theory, methodology, substantive domain). In general, semiotic researchers across many disciplines have been too complacent about this issue. Reaching the end of their articles the reader is often hard pressed to know exactly what new knowledge has been learned through the exercise of semiotics’ esoteric terminology or techniques. The knowledge base that marketing and consumer researchers must extend is most definitively established by
CONCLUSION

Semiotics is one of the richest sources of principles, concepts and tools for studying communication and meaning. It is unfortunate and ironic that the discipline which focuses on communication and meaning has been mired in miscomprehension and misrepresentation. My hope is that this chapter has made a small step toward rectifying these problems in marketing and consumer research.

REFERENCES


9 Consumer rules

Gordon R. Foxall

PROEM

Dozens of consumer behaviour textbooks – every one bearing the stunningly original title, Consumer Behaviour (though not always correctly spelt) – scarcely mention consumers’ behaviour at all. This is not, perhaps, because their authors think consumers’ behaviour irrelevant. It is simply that the prevailing paradigm for consumer research emphasises the alleged pre-behavioural determinants of choice – the procedures theoretically implicated in human information processing which culminate in brand beliefs, brand attitudes and brand purchase intentions – almost to the exclusion of the observable activities of those who purchase and use, give and receive, accumulate and dispose of social and economic products and services.

Some redress of this proclivity is apparent in the work of interpretive consumer researchers who have taken the bold step of going out to see what consumers do (e.g. Belk 1991). But too little of this has trickled down as yet to textbook writers. As one myself, I have to say mea culpa to this, even though people will think I’ve got religion.

But far be it for me to suggest that the cloning of these texts has become such an artform that they have barely changed since the mid-1960s. A penchant of comparatively recent origin which now impinges on the writing of consumer behaviour texts is the inclusion of a short section on classical and instrumental conditioning as these might apply to consumer choice in the grocery store. Sadly, the practice has been to blend these uncritically into cognitive consumer research, as though the ontological and epistemological gulf that separate them did not exist. We await a textbook of consumer psychology which informs students (as well as many practising consumer researchers) of these matters. Judging by the impact of the research programme dedicated for some sixteen years to the Behavioural Perspective Model, we apparently await an author capable of elucidating the implications of a radical behaviourist interpretation of consumer choice. Hey ho.