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**Branding commodity, tourist & cultural products: some thoughts on  
applying semiotic analysis for the marketing strategy in each product  
category**

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**Abstract**

This paper proposes the adoption of semiotic analysis to the branding process in an attempt to understand the function of the specific sign system and successfully manage its designing and evaluation processes, from audience research to audience targeting. Specific case studies of commodity, tourist and cultural product branding will be presented, in an attempt to underline, in a parallel goal, the differences and similarities of the symbolic process involved in the three areas: commodities, tourism and culture.

**EL Classifications:** M, Z

**Key words:** branding, commodity products, cultural products, tourist products, semiotics

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## **1 Introduction**

“Brands are carriers of meanings (Holt, 2004), making extensive use of symbols” (Papadaki, 2019). Brand meaning is a result of collective interpretations of these symbols by multiple stakeholders (Hatch & Rubin, 2005). “Brands are social, as they represent ideas that people have in common...while being personally relevant” (Bernstein, 2011, p. 194). Big western brands, like Nike or Coca-cola) “serve as meta-symbols of global culture” (Miller, 1998), highly associated with such desired situations as a happy family dinner or a good athletic performance respectively. In the same way, sociality, culture, tourist destinations can be branded, by creating associations and facilitating aspirational, symbolic consumption. Globally recognized landmarks like the Eiffel Tower or the Louvre are included, as Barthes states, in “the international language of travel”, while specific cultural resources or organizations are marked with specific codes, inspired by localities, history or recognized difference and

tradition and are proposed as having global symbolic value. A cultural or tourist brand can therefore be bonded to specific geographic spaces, but at the same time position itself as globally recognized. Global marketing strategies can create international value for the national by stressing its nationality. Of course, it is widely accepted that consumers add symbolic meaning to branded products, as they welcome them in their individual, social and cultural experiences. For cultural and tourist products, that are experience oriented, but at a certain extent to commodities, as well, consumers seem to function as *prosumers*, being at the same time producers and consumers of the symbolic associations embracing the products. If we accept that brands can be seen as sign systems, that some successfully branded products (be it commodity, cultural or tourist related) can be recognized as signifiers of certain priorities, processes and identities (Manning, 2010), then conducting semiotic research and analysis during evaluating, or even designing brands can be extremely useful.

Semiotics is a science that studies signs. Semiotic logos, packaging and advertising have been widely analyzed in recent semiotic research, but there are only a few attempts to examine, understand or apply semiotic principles during the actual planning, designing or promoting brands. However, brands can create many connotations and are, actually, responsible for the creation of product discourse and rituals (Oswald, 2015, p. 38), so the use of semiosis during brand building could inspire both creative and effective brand communication.

## **2 Literature review**

### **2.1 Brand building**

Building a brand requires many creative procedures, including creating a logo and a slogan, sketching a specific product image through advertising and other marketing techniques and eventually create a recognizable identity that could inspire consumer loyalty. There is a large number of bibliographic endeavors that connect these marketing procedures to semiotics. Starting from the first Marketing and Semiotics Symposium in 1989 in Copenhagen (Ekeanyanwu & Okorie, 2013) and coming to the recent articles on the role of semiotics as a brand management tool (Oswald, 2015), all studies come to stress the importance of the maintenance of a dynamic, but coherent brand identity, including a strong brand domain, a brand heritage, brand asset, brand value, brand personality and brand reflection (Belch & Belch, 2003). This consistent brand identity is structured around specific, social, but wide-spread and easily readable codes, suitable and recognizable to the target-audience that the brand relates to.

In the realm of tourism, the aim is to build a strong and unique destination brand, in order to attract potential visitors. It is a similar practice to that of the commodity brand building, as here, too, logos, slogans, images, advertisements are created, that constitute signs aiming at brand awareness and positive influencing. Destinations are promoted in a similar way to products and services as Destination Marketing Organizations try to “make people aware of the location and then link desirable associations to create a favourable image to entice visits and businesses” (Baker & Cameron, 2008, p. 86). Each destination should be promoted as differentiated from all others, able to create memorable experiences and generally attract tourist gazes (Urry, 1990).

Cultural products and services are also promoted through the same kind of procedures. Cultural organizations are included in contemporary cultural industries and arts marketing is believed to be a very useful tool for promoting their activities and communicating with their audiences. They have adopted many of the principles and practices of commodity brand building, adjusting them in the special characteristics of cultural products and services, so that their brand communication is more visitor-oriented than product-oriented.

Although many cultural organizations’ artistic directors were skeptical and pessimistic regarding the appearance of the word marketing near the words arts or culture, it became clear that in a highly competitive market, such as the cultural market, even the most well-known cultural good could remain hidden, if it does not become the object of a promotional communication strategy. The audience, however, is not treated as consumers, but as co-producers, taking part in an energetic meaning creation process.

## **2.2 Codes & signs**

There are certain assumptions/presuppositions that are believed to be common to a certain human community. The people of the specific community are able to decode signs related to these assumptions/presuppositions in common interpretive patterns. There are, therefore, national socio-cultural codes, wider spatial codes, such as European or of a certain continent, or narrower codes such as the ones used between people forming a small community on the basis of similar interests. Certain youth cultures, like, for instance, rock culture, have created such coding. The members of such communities communicate with each other through both verbal and non-verbal signs, such as certain vocabulary, clothing, colors, haircuts and even iconic signs or certain instruments and objects, like the electric guitar, the lightning bolt (firstly strictly connected to the Australian rock band AC/DC) or the

tongue and lips design, looking like Mick Jagger's mouth and used as the Rolling Stones Band symbol. Other such groups could be the buyers of specific type of products (e.g. a specific car brand lovers), a specific group of travelers (united through common visits, e.g. tourists that visit Greece every summer, or common interests, e.g. cultural tourists), or people that visit specific or a specific cultural organization (e.g. opera audience or the MET audience). There are, therefore, certain assumptions/presuppositions/beliefs that can be taken for granted for a particular targeted audience and certain coding that can be used to influence this audience, according to Perelman (1977, in Rossolatos, 2013). Western values, for instance, may not apply or even be understood in the eastern world, while, in certain instances, an advertiser might choose to localize such global values as family or health, in order to attract a wider audience.

The meaning of every sign is enriched and embedded with cultural definitions and is interpreted and accepted or rejected by the receiver of the message, according to his/her personal experiences, knowledge, habitus (Bourdieu, 1984), social stance and overall background. The hidden meanings, in contradiction to evident meanings of a message, need a grasp understanding of communication processes in order to be recognized, let alone perceived. Semiotics can guide the reader towards understanding of the complicated meanings of an advertising message, a well-designed logo or a clever slogan. All forms of brand communication (such as advertising, packaging and brand logo) are subject to semiotic analysis (Oswald, 2007) and deconstruction to specific readable codes and signs.

The challenge for contemporary brand managers, however, is to be able to apply semiotics to the initial design and overall choices at every step of brand building. In this sense, the application of semiotics in brand building and management, apart from brand marketing, may be "manipulated in such a way that the receiver immediately recognizes a product or brand and receives a specific meaning and, thus, a message" (Ekeanyanwu & Okorie, 2013). The task is, of course, difficult and time-consuming: one needs to find the common cultural assumptions, associations, symbols -namely codes- that a certain community uses, in order to shape a well-received and instantly perceived message that fits in the set sociocultural boundaries and has no implications that rejects or are in opposition to them. Certain "interpretive communities" (Fish, 1980) share common beliefs and shape common codes, which are then mediated, distributed and in many cases reshaped through various media (TV, the Internet, social media), reaching wider communities and establishing certain sign-readings, ideologies and Barthesian myths, meaning specific metaphorical meanings. It is

these signs that are widely used in advertising and create associative bonds between specific products and states of mind, habits or situations. It is this procedure that creates differentiated identities between commodities, tourist destinations, cultural services and consumer, tourists, visitors themselves, through estimations stemming from their consumption choices.

## **2.3 Semiotics**

In order to understand the role of semiotics in brand management, it is first necessary to come to terms with the various schools of thought and the historic development of the semiotic science.

The American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce Saussure is considered to be the father of semiotics, as he studied language as a system of signs. The dyadic character of a sign and its connection between signifier and signified is a fundamental concept in semiotic analysis. The second most influential semiotician is Charles Sanders Peirce, who also studied the connection between meaning and significant, but he added a third element of analysis, namely the interpretant, making the connection schema triadic and underlying the importance of interpretation, perception, co-creation of meaning on the part of the receiver.

The first semiotician that studied advertisements was Ronald Barthes in 1964. He found two main types of signs in advertisements: verbal and iconic signs, which he categorized as codified and non-codified. Following his semiotics of images, where he saw a denoted and a connoted meaning, he argued that each advertisement carries three messages: a linguistic one, offered through the text, a literal one, formed through the denotation and a symbolic one, stemming from the connotation (Rossolatos 2013). Connotation, therefore, is formed beyond the literal meaning and is more subjective, as it includes feelings, memories and emotions, as well as sociocultural assumptions and personal experience of the message receiver. The notion of anchorage stresses for Barthes the ability to control or guide apprehension through the text.

As mentioned in Zantides & Kourdis (2013, p. 30) "Groupe μ elaborated on Barthes' classification, categorizing iconic signs into *iconic visual signs* (Barthes' non-codified iconic signs) and *plastic visual signs* (Barthes's codified iconic signs) such as colour, form and texture".

Following Rossolatos (2013), Greimas sketched the area of structuralist semiotics, which inspired many marketing theorists, among which Floch, who proposed some semiotic principles that could be applied in marketing. Such principles include the description of conditions that affect the production and perception of meaning, the role of signs both in the production and understanding of messages, etc. He considered semiotics as a helpful tool to find different postures in a complementary way and different postures in a contradictory way (Floch 1993, p. 30), which is actually the origin of Greimas' semiotic square. Floch's semiotic model was widely applied in branding and influenced other authors, like Samprini, but was also criticized as not taking into account the context of the messages produced and therefore not understanding the evolutionary, dynamic, rather than static character of brands (Sanz-Marcos, 2018). Semprini, on the other hand, sees brands as active meaning-generators. His "semiotic mapping of consumer values" sees brand identity as formed through continuous interactions "among three sub-systems that we call encyclopedia of production (sub-system A), environment (sub-system B), and encyclopedia of reception (sub-system C)" (Semprini, 1992, p. 40, in Rossolatos 2012), drawing the "entropy of the brand" (ibid, p.37, in Rossolatos 2012).

According to the Prague School of Semiotics, every creator takes into account specific norms, in order to produce an artefact. During the audience's perception (or "concretization", to use the term proposed by the Prague School of Semiotics), the receivers of the artefact's message also use specific norms to decode and perceive it. These norms should be identical, or at least close, to the ones used by the creator, in order for the message to be perceived. In many cases, however, that is not the case and therefore the meaning perceived by the receiver of the message might differ from the meaning that the sender wished to form. Following Sonesson (2013) semiotics could connect the dots between the rhetoric of the sender (the norms used to make a statement) and the hermeneutics of the receiver (the perception of a message formulated by someone else). During concretization (or inner interpretation), semiotics could provide some ideas on choosing the means, the codes, that could help obtain understanding between the sender and the receiver of a message. "At the center of semiotics is the question *how*: in what way is meaning produced, conveyed, and collected" (Sonesson, 2013, p. 14).

Following the Tartu School of Semiotics, both the initiator and the receiver of communication messages create and circulate codes. According to this School, communication can be sender-oriented or receiver-oriented. Advertising, for instance, can be seen as a sender-

oriented communication act, while a music performance requires the receiver's participation.

From Floch's "entropy of the brand" to Danesi's "workings of the unconscious" (Danesi, 2006 p. 74), a brand is conceived in specific contexts, through socio-culturally accepted codes.

## **2.4 Semiotics in brand management**

There are many codes used in brand management. If we think of logos or advertising, we can easily understand that there are many elements that transfer meaning to potential gazers. The use of color, the position of the object on the picture, the appearance of humans, facial expressions, typography-both size and position-graphics and many other. Many marketing scientists were influenced by certain semioticians and proposed interesting applications of semiotics in marketing strategies. Valentine (2001) worked on Jakobson's metaphor and metonymy, while Alexander (1996) followed Levi-Strauss and tried to unveil mythic<sup>1</sup> signs.

Much research has been conducted on the semiotic analysis of advertising messages, seen as semiotic systems designed from the product company and addressed to potential consumers, consisting of verbal, visual and/or audiovisual signs, depending on the media through which they are distributed. The semiotics of tourism have also produced a small number of research papers, that used semiotic analysis to examine mainly tourist brochures (Uzzell, 1984; Dann, 1993, 1996) and other promotional material. Cultural organizations' messages, sent through posters, banners, brochures and most recently social media have also inspired some research, but it is only at an embryotic stage. "Brand image and symbolic consumption research, on the other hand, study the communicative functions of commodities as messages" (Nöth, 1988, p. 173).

### **2.4.1 Semiotics of Commodities**

According to Nöth (1988, p. 173) commodities "are prototypically perceived within three semiotic frames as utilitarian, commercial and socio-cultural signs". These frames have been studied in marketing science in relevance to advertising, brand image and symbolic consumption. Commodities, therefore, are seen either as signified objects (the objects to which advertisements point) or signs, signifying certain attributes of a brand or certain characteristics of the person(s) consuming it. Following Saussure, the commodity as object stands as the signifier of specific values (e.g. economic, social, technical etc.), while the

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<sup>1</sup> Embedded with rich metaphorical meaning



values the commodity implies are seen as the signified of the object.

Commodities carry, therefore, a lot of connotations, which have been decoded (Nöth, 1988) as myths (Barthes, 1964) or ideologies (Williamson, 1978). Apart from the commodities' use value, during *semantization* the products acquire secondary meanings, associated with cultural values, lifestyles and specific social attitudes. For Moles (1972, in Nöth, 1988) the denotative meaning of a commodity lies on its function, while the connotative meaning is associated with the object's economic or socio-cultural value. Other scientists like Lefebvre (1966, in Nöth, 1988) and Rossi-Landi (1975) accept commodities' use-value and underline that connotation comes from the potential satisfaction that the consumer might derive from it (Nöth, 1988) or its exchange-value. Baudrillard comes one step further, arguing that commodities become signs during their consumption, in their relation to other object-signs, in their difference from other commodities (Baudrillard, 1968, p. 277). According to Nöth (1988), people perceive commodity-signs through different virtual frames, such as utilitarian, commercial, socio-cultural and psychological frames. Commodities are therefore quasi-signs, in the sense that they could be seen as signs only when the circumstances are ideal for them to appear as such. The meanings that may be connected to the commodities can also differ: the co-production of meaning coming from an advertising message between the producer and the receiver of the specific message, the consumption habits of the consumers and their knowledge about the different commodities that are available may influence such meaning creation.

#### **2.4.2 Semiotics of tourism**

Tourists are interested in all things foreign, unfamiliar, different from their everyday surroundings and usual practices, the "Other". They are interested in everything as a sign, "an instance of typical cultural practice" (Culler, 1990). They have been characterized as an "army of semioticians", "the agents of semiotics" (Culler, 1990), due to their need to decode places, destinations, cities and cultures. They travel the world seeking for the "authentic", but are satisfied with its replicas, reproductions and miniature souvenirs, what MacCannell calls markers. Similar to Benjamin's "original of a reproduction" and bearing in mind that the tourist most likely comes to terms with the reproduction before he/she meets the authentic, it seems that "the proliferation of markers or reproductions confers an authenticity upon what may at first seem egregiously inauthentic" (Culler, 1990). Markers create signs and signs create more markers (e.g. tourist photography). Semiosis is deeply rooted in tourism and the mediation of symbolic markers through mass media, school books and more recently

social media has created a rather rich “language of travel” syntax. The Acropolis signifies Athens and the Eiffel Tower signifies Paris. Despite their locality, these signs have been included in a systemized, international touristic code.

The promotional material used for touristic marketing include many print, mass and new media and extends from postcards and brochures to television shows and social media posts. Online content, however, is the most dynamic and constantly enriched by photographic representations and/or comments by users, both tourists and potential tourists. It is more of a tourist-users construction, rather than the destination’s marketing choices that appear online. Research shows that due to these practices, tourist imagery has been enriched to include “selfies” and more street-related experiences. (Hunter, 2016). Sometimes, and surely during the covid-19 pandemic, where traveling was prohibited for a long period of time worldwide, representations of destinations virtually replaced the destination itself (Hunter, 2016) and the tourists took part in virtual tours of favourite places in all parts of the world. Similar to Baudrillard’s simulacrum (Baudrillard, 2006, in Hunter, 2016), these virtual tours have actually no referent, as the real place would in many cases never be visited by the tourist in any other way than virtually.

The research that has been presented so far examines “the structure of the tourism experience as communicated by the language of tourism marketing” (Echtner, 1999, p. 53). Of course, there are certain features of tourism that can justify the characterization of tourism as an industry: tourism services such as hotel, tour operators, travel agents, transportation networks, travel souvenirs, tourist attractions, restaurants and “staged” sight-seeing activities, to name only a few examples. The goal of the tourist industry is to sell commodities (commodified destinations and their supportive products) to potential visitors (customers). In order to do so, it creates synergies to other cultural and creative industries, such as film, museums, cultural organizations, computer games etc.

#### **2.4.3 Semiotics of cultural communication**

The unique characteristics of the cultural services, being immaterial, equalizing production with consumption -as, for instance, during a music concert-, being heterogeneous and non-storable (Bateson & Hoffman, 1999) require special treatment as far as marketing practices are concerned. The authors’ servuction model stresses the importance of the role of the audience, as it sees the service production as a result of the interaction with the audience. Newcomb’s ABX model strongly supports Bateson & Hoffman’s argument, by showcasing the

dynamic relationship between the audience and a performance, as the audience is treated here as a co-producer of the experience.

In previous studies we have tried to analyze cultural organizations' messages with the help of semiotics (Papadaki, 2019). It seems that this communication is more abstract and needs knowledge of the codes used to be fully apprehended. As polysemantic messages, artworks and cultural goods carry many different codes: historical, social, aesthetic, semantic.

#### **2.4.4 Semiotics of symbolic consumption**

Symbolic consumption refers to the signifying process taking part due to the actual selection and consumption of specific products, services, destinations. Commodity, cultural and destination choice and consumption may signify status, entering into a specific economic/social/cultural group of people or "interpretive community", eventually characterizing the user-consumer-audience-tourist. This group of people might be small (the pupils of a private school), bigger (e.g. all rock fans or a specific nation), or vast (all teenagers worldwide). According to Nöth (1988), sociological signs are usually cars, food or fashion products. Regarding cultural products and services, status is underlined through entering to specific big cultural brand names, like the Louvre or the Acropolis Museum, the MET Opera or the Royal Opera House. For tourists, photographs from exotic places or in front of landmarks of big capitals (once in frames in one's living room, nowadays uploaded in one's social media account) could serve the goal. Circulated or re-invented through the mass and new media, Barthes' "international language of travel" plays a crucial role in the signifying process taking place through Urry's (1990) "tourist gaze". This realization guides us to mythical signs, which are imprinted with ideological burden.

Agreeing with Nöth (1988), there are certain products that can be seen as utilitarian and other products that can be seen as mainly socio-cultural signs. We see commodities as having both utilitarian and socio-cultural signification, while cultural and tourist products and services are mainly seen as socio-cultural signs.

### **3 Sample and Methodology**

In order to test the above-mentioned theories and hypotheses, the author will examine the communication practices of three types of produced content: commodities, tourist destinations and cultural goods/services. To be more specific, the paper will study with the help of semiotic tools the branding procedures of Apple company, Greece as a destination

brand and National Opera of Greece, a cultural organization that stages opera and ballet performances. This specific sample was chosen using as a main criterion the fact that all three of these producers are big brand names in their area of expertise.

Two important stages of brand building procedures were chosen for the author to focus on: logos and advertisements. As the main goal of this research endeavor is to show the use of semiotics in the branding process, the main methodological tool that will be used for the analysis of the communication messages chosen is semiotic analysis with the help of the Saussurian dyadic model and the Barthesian extension of it.

## **4 Discussion & Results**

### **4.1 Logos**

In brand discourse logos are extremely important icons that embrace the logic of the products/services and the philosophy of the company/destination/cultural organization they are designed to represent. They are “the most established commercial practice when it comes to the promotion of companies’ or institutions’ brand names” (Kourdis, 2019). The same applies to tourist destinations and cultural products and services, we might add. As polysemiotic signs, logos stand for the brand (be it commodity, cultural or tourist), connote and represent it.

Advertisements is the second, but perhaps more powerful message producers offer to their potential consumers. As already mentioned, it has been the area most widely examined with semiotic tools, and has produced interesting discussions and research outcomes.

Other messages sent to consumers include packaging and media discourse. Contemporary brand communication is widely circulated both through the mass media (through TV ads and shows) and through social media accounts, either formal, created by the companies/ local authorities/ cultural organizations themselves or informal, created by users.

Each brand iconicity can therefore be examined in a semiotic frame. Logos, packaging and advertising carry images of the brands to various surroundings: on bus stops, on advertising boards around the streets, on our TV screens, into our houses. The big brand names seem characteristic of the phenomenon as a whole (Manning, 2010). According to Oswald (2007), brand communication is designed following a combination of signifying elements, such as material, structural, conventional, contextual and performative dimensions.

In order to understand these semiotic frames, let us examine the logos of three well-known brands, in the three areas of study: namely a commodity, a tourist destination and a cultural

organization. All three can be seen as having both a utilitarian and a socio-cultural possibility of signification. All three designers have tried to relate the product/service the brand offers to a specific social or cultural group, but they have also attributed aesthetic elements to make the icon visually interesting.



Image 1: the logo of Apple company



Image 2: the logo of Greece as a tourist destination



Image 3: the logo of the National Opera of Greece

The logo of Apple Company is one of the most recognizable images worldwide, by all ages and all professions: it is an image of an apple with a bite taken out of it. In this case the apple is the signifier, while the signified will arouse out of the associations that the gazers create while looking at the specific logo and might vary from notions such as simplicity, health (as apples are good for people's health), nature (as apples are natural products) or other social or cultural codes. The bite might point to mythical and religious associations, signifying new ideas or knowledge, but at the same time something too beautiful, but forbidden, as in the Garden of Eden. Or it might just signify use, something that is used every day and remains beautiful and valuable, even if hardly used and imperfect.

The official logo of Greece is a light blue box with the word GREECE written in white capital letters right in the middle, using a classic font. Underneath and at the right there is a phrase also in white capital letters, with the same font, stating ALL TIME CLASSIC. In this case, the signifier is the combination of the colors blue and white, while the signified is the blue ocean with the word GREECE signifying white foam waves or the Greek flag, both of which can be seen as signs of Greekness. The word GREECE can also function as Barthes' anchorage, guiding the viewer's apprehension towards the specific country where the sea is a unique characteristic. The phrase ALL TIME CLASSIC signifies the history of the country, Classical Greece, adding the notion of timelessness.

The logo of the National Opera of Greece adopts the same logic, as the choice of the same colours (blue and white) is also used to connote Greekness and connect the cultural organization with the country, as it is an organization supervised by the state. In this case, the foam waves are more evident, as five curvy white lines connect the name of the organization, which is stated twice, at the two ends of the image: one written in the Greek

language at the left side and the other written in the English language at the right side of the image, underlying the international appeal of the brand. Of course, as in the case of the tourist logo, the viewer could identify the white lines with the white lines of the Greek flag. Therefore, the logo of the National Opera of Greece is mainly associated to the country where the cultural organization is housed, rather than the service it offers to its audiences. In the table shown below, we can see the combination of signifying elements in these logos, using Oswalt's model (2007).

	Apple Company	Greece as a tourist destination	The National Opera of Greece
<b>Material</b>	a visual icon	verbal phrases in a blue box	verbal & visual message
<b>Structural</b>	a bitten apple	white classical font in blue	name of the organization in two languages, graphic design in between
<b>Conventional or codified</b>	the bitten apple signifies the company, as well as qualities like knowledge and quality	the combination of the two colours signifies Greekness (flag, sea), while the phrases anchor the viewers' perception	the combination of the two colours signifies Greekness (flag, sea), while the name of the organization written at the two sides of the image underlines the identity of the organization and strongly binds it with the country
<b>Contextual</b>	the place where the logo is situated arises specific connotations (e.g. a usual tool for university	when seen next to Greek images of the sea the connotations become evident, while the very same logo entails memories to	when seen in tourist or cultural brochures its signification becomes evident, while it certainly has more strong meaning

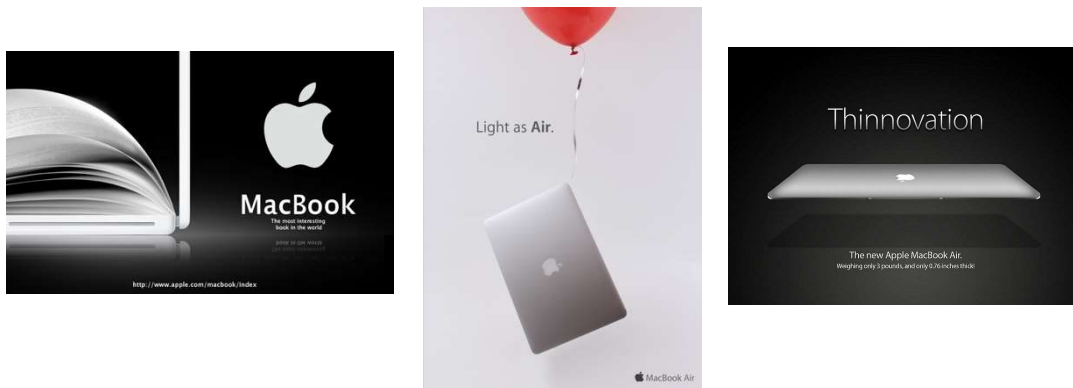
	professors, a sign of wealth for university students)	someone who has visited Greece	for the regular audience of the organization
<b>Performative</b>	communication between consumer/spectators	Communication between consumer/spectators	Communication between consumer/spectators

Table 1: the analysis of the three logos, using Oswalt's signifying elements

#### 4.2 Advertisements – promotional messages

Advertising messages are richer in signs, creating syntagmata of signification. For the purposes of this research, three advertising campaigns will be presented, one from each category of our study, following the same choice as we did for the logos presented above. To be more precise, advertising campaigns from Apple Macbook Air (commodity example), from the official promotion of Greece (tourist destination example) and from the posters of the National Opera of Greece (cultural organization example). The goal is to examine possible similarities and differences in the branding procedure of the three categories of products and services and the value of semiotic tools in perceiving some valuable clues on the construction of meaning through these promotional processes.

Apple is a well-known computer manufacturer, a big brand in the computer market. The products the company promotes are mostly computers and mobile phones. The company has created some characteristic products, easily identifiable as of the specific brand. It has royal customers, who buy only the company's products in the relevant category. The company uses some marketing practices that have created lots of discussion. For instance, Apple do not always pay for the advertisement of a new product, as it relies on product placement, media reviews customers' uploading unboxing videos on YouTube. We will focus on Apple's advertising campaign for the Apple MacBook Air, which seems to be one of its most popular products and has a clear, unique identity image.



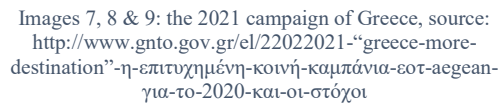
Images 4, 5 & 6: Advertisements of the MacBook Air

In the images shown above, there seems to be a concrete marketing strategy. The same colours, the same font, the same logic appears to be adopted in all three advertisements. In semiotic terms, the signifier is the product itself – the MacBook – while the signifier is a book, pointing to knowledge, lightness and thinness respectively. In all three advertisements the images are clear, simple and straightforward. The codes are easily read and the message passed to the potential viewers. Simplicity is an important notion in branding.

Another common feature of all three images is wordplay, inspired from the name of the product. In the first image the play is around the word Book (MacBook) and therefore an image of a book's turning pages is mixed with the image of the MacBook laptop, so that a new image is created, an illusion, signifying the acquisition of knowledge. The slogan writes "the most interesting book in the world". In the second image the second part of the product's name is used to imply the light weight of the computer. Another illusion is created, as a balloon can easily carry the computer, signifying its extremely light weight. The slogan writes "Light as air". In the third image, a new word is created by connecting the words "thin" and "innovation". The new, synthetic word "thinnovation" comes to stress the thinness of the computer, in a way that seems unique, a high achievement.

In general, the above seen advertisements use simple images and simple words, white classic font on a strict black or grey background. There is no mention of the product's specifications and/or features, as one would expect from an advertisement, but the emphasis is put on those product characteristics that will make the users' life better, more interesting, more beautiful.





Another campaign, run at the same time, in cooperation with Aegean Airlines, show images of specific Greek destinations, which are connected to specific highly valuable situations, such as “freedom” and “rejuvenation”, shown to the specific images. The signifier here is Greece, and specifically the places shown in each image (e.g. Ikaria and Halkidiki in the selected images), while the signified is the emotions and specific actions or processes (freedom and rejuvenation respectively). By putting the word destination above the words of the beforementioned processes and by adding the place’s name with the same typography (font, colour, size) underneath, the viewer simultaneously equals the wished state of mind

with the specific place. Freedom is to be found and felt in Ikaria, where Halkidiki is the place where one experienced rejuvenation. The certain slogan “All you want is Greece” entails all the wishful attributes a place should have to be a dreamy destination. In the next images, the “all” that one wants is divided into several processes: freedom, rejuvenation, and the list continues with relaxation (in Santorini), serenity (in Kythira), joy (in Crete), euphoria (in Peloponnese) and fun (in Rhodes). The final concluding slogan “More than a destination” signifies the many dimensions Greece has and indirectly stresses the fact of the unique experience this place promises to offer to all potential visitors.



Images 10, 11 & 12: posters of performances, National Opera of Greece, source: <https://typografos.gr/oiafises-ths-ethnikhs-lurikhs-skhnhs/>

Regarding the communication policy of cultural organizations, the main media used are posters, leaflets and most recently social media posts. The National Opera of Greece, as a leading cultural brand, develops a consistent design pattern for specific periods of time. In the images shown, the posters refer to its 2007 campaign, which used as a coding letters of the alphabet, in order to connote specific performances. In the three images chosen to be presented here, the three letter π, σ and R are used, the first two coming from the Greek alphabet, the latter is the English R. Every letter is actually the first letter of the performance's title. In the first poster, we see the letter π, from the Greek word πρίγκιπας, meaning prince.

The first poster is designed to promote the kids' opera “The prince is doing a mess”. The crown on the letter, therefore, connotes the character of the protagonist as a prince, while the mud on the letter implies its naughty character. In the second poster the letter σ connotes σταχτοπούτα, which is the Greek word for Cinderella. The clock inside the letter is a sign of the most important part of the story, where exactly at midnight, Cinderella loses her magically created dress and carriage and goes back to her house after the prince's party, dirty and disappointed, in her initial condition.

The third poster is a promotional message for Verdi's Opera *Rigoletto*. It is the only one out of the three posters that uses the English letter R, instead of the Greek P. The assumption is that the English letter has two "feet" to wear the boots in the design. The sign here is the boots which are on fire, underlying the tragic story of the father whose choices lead his daughter to death.

If one compares the communication practices of the three brands presented above, namely a commodity brand, a touristic destination brand and a cultural brand, some important clues will arise. It is evident that all three message producers know their audience and actually talk to their language. Apple stresses design over features, Greece answers to what tourists want, the Greek National Opera uses simple patterns to promote well-known operas. Despite the different characteristics of the products/services advertised, all semiotic analyses showed that the emphasis in all examples is not put on the product or the service promoted, but on the experience that this product/service offers to the potential buyer/tourist/visitor. The "Apple experience", the "Greek experience", the "Greek National Opera experience" is stressed, as all three are recognizable brands in their area of expertise and want to be known as offering unique and memorable experiences. Emotions' arousal is used as a technique in all three marketing strategies, as mentioned above.

The most important point made, however, is that all three communication practices seem to be addressed to a specific, known community of users. Apple's loyal buyers do not need to know about technical characteristics, they already know that kind of information. They wait in big lines to buy the newest product, because they are already aware of the company's quality products, or so the company believes. Greece is a big brand in tourism, as well. The warm Mediterranean climate is well-known, and so is the big number of its beaches and its important historic and cultural heritage. Therefore, the brand in the specific campaign functions as an escape gate, more than a destination, all one wants. The Greek National Opera's messages are more complex, but are still addressed to the organization's stakeholders. One should know *Rigoletto*'s story, in order to understand the reason why being in his shoes is so tragically painful. One should know that when the clock shows midnight, Cinderella loses everything and returns home. In order to perceive cultural codes, one needs cultural knowledge.

It has been widely discussed in brand research that consumers "transfer personal aspirations to brands to enhance their identities" (Belk, 1987, 1988 in Oswalt 2015), or that they are "defined by the objects they buy, by the countries they visit" (Vazou, 2019, p. 464) and the

cultural organizations they visit. People consume commodities, touristic destinations and cultural goods and services, they are photographed with or in them, in an attempt to identify themselves with the brand, acquire some of the brand's characteristics. They then upload the photographs in their accounts in the social media, creating a personal narrative which is deeply signified by their lifestyle choices, affecting the way they sketch their identity.

## 5 Conclusions

Signs are used to create meaning and therefore semiotics can be referred as the study of the structure of meaning (Echtner, 1999, p. 47). This paper showed that logos and promotional messages (advertisements) use certain systems of signs, which are socially and culturally constructed and easily readable. This fact is evident in the case of commodity and tourist branding (e.g. something that is carried by a balloon is light, a person sitting on a castle above a small village, gazing over local architectural tradition over to the sea-view, inspires feelings of serenity, peacefulness, superiority). The sign syntagmata of cultural organizations' messages, however, are more complex, as they are bound to particular cultural contexts and knowledge. The viewer needs to be aware of specific artworks and their codes, in order to fully grasp the message of the poster promoting a performance of the specific artwork. However, one could see these signification choices -designed in the examined promotional messages- as offered to many groups of people, who will try to decode the messages with their own way. These messages can be seen as personalized, able to be signified and perceived in various levels, different for each audience group. As invitations to specific performances, these messages can be informative, but also mysteriously charming. Why are Rigolettos' boots on fire? Let's attend the performance to find out...

It is by now made clear that semiotics can be a useful tool in the creation of the brands' communication messages, general image and sign design. According to Oswalt (2015, p. 2), who proposes that brands should use semiotics in order to clarify and extend their brand strategy, "semiotics should form the foundation of brand equity management, because brands are semiotic assets that contribute to profitability by distinguishing brands from simple commodities, differentiating them from competitors and engaging consumers in the brand world". Brand signs can form tangible assets, can stress or even draw qualities, arouse feelings and wishes, which could aspire promises of unforgettable, valuable, charismatic experiences. This, as shown, is the ultimate goal and the challenge of every big brand.

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