Social Distancing During the Pandemic: A Semiotic Approach to Organizational Response through Commercial Branding

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Abstract

Social distancing is one of the most practical and most widely emphasized non-pharmaceutical interventions recommended globally in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though its efficacy remains debatable, social distancing continues to be advocated as a strategy to "flatten the curve" by reducing individual infections. This study aims to decode the semiotics of COVID-19 pandemic from one side and to show how commercial branding transformations took place from another. Global organizations have aligned themselves with social distancing precautions by adapting their commercial branding for visual messaging. This study takes a semiotic approach to the commercial branding of companies that could transform their branding during the pandemic and those that did. The two questions addressed by the study are: (1) How did commercial branding transform during the COVID-19 pandemic, and (2) what semiotic codes are evident in these transformations? The findings show that organizational branding was separated or reworded or took a two-pronged approach (combining rewording and transformed images).

Keywords: commercial branding, social distancing, semiotics, COVID-19, pandemic

1. Introduction

At perhaps no other time has the emphasis on social distancing been more pronounced than the current period of the COVID-19 pandemic. As social distancing is considered a key measure for reducing the chances of getting infected with COVID-19 (Masters et al., 2020; Sun & Zhai, 2020), messaging has been geared toward enlightening the public on the need to adopt and maintain this strategy. Even with vaccines, social distancing is still considered a safeguard against infections, both among vaccinated (who could be re-infected) and unvaccinated individuals (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). Therefore, various approaches have been devised to help people all over the world understand social distancing.

Social distancing is a non-pharmaceutical intervention against the spread of an infectious disease (Koren & Pető, 2020). It refers to maintaining a physical distance of about two meters (or at least six feet) while in public or when with others (CDC, 2021), or avoiding direct contact with people to reduce the chances of infection (Sun & Zhai, 2020). Similarly, Maragakis (2020, para 1), regarding social distance, observed that

> The practice of social distancing means staying home and away from others as much as possible to help prevent the spread of COVID-19. The practice of social distancing encourages using things such as online video and phone communication instead of in-person contact.

This implies that social distancing relates to intentionally staying away from others to reduce COVID-19 infection. In this study, "social distance" refers both to intentionally staying at home to minimize interactions that might spread COVID-19 infections and to maintaining the recommended six-foot distance while in public places or around those infected.

However, enforcing social distancing has not been easy in many nations because of culture, religious beliefs, lifestyle practices, and socioeconomic factors. According to Yezli and Khan (2020), some of the challenges related to social distancing in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia include the social and religious gatherings that are part of Arab culture. For example, the annual pilgrimage to Makkah and Medina often attracts up to 10 million pilgrims worldwide. However, since crowding is inevitable at such events, the 2020 and 2021 Holy Pilgrimages were suspended for global pilgrims and limited to a few residents (News Agencies, 2021) despite the event's many economic and religious ramifications.

Both mainstream and social media have attempted to drive the message of social distancing home. Specifically, commercial branding messaging has been one of the main strategies adopted to convey social distancing messages to the public (Valinsky, 2020). Commercial branding plays an instrumental role in organizations, often bridging theoretical and applied concepts (Cowin & Matusitz, 2011). Using commercial branding might be one of the most effective ways for organizations to foster attachment and emotional bonding with their fans and customers (Biricik, 2006). According to Oprea (2020), using a social semiotics framework to understand commercial branding, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, is an interesting and novel approach to brand communication.

Semiotics, or visual advertising and communication, is one of the most widely used methods for influencing social behavior and is widely used in the media and advertising industries (Medley, 2012). Aspects such as visual background, image color, and size have been found to affect viewers and probably influence their behavior (Australian Psychological Society [APS], 2016; Shaouf et al., 2016). According to Mandell and Martin (2016, p. 150), in social semiotics, "meaning is understood through the situated design, the production, and distribution of the artifact and through the discourses that provide context for the artifact's development," suggesting that the context in which a logo is situated plays an instrumental role in the interpretation of meaning. Both language and meaning are useful in creating meaning in social semiotics (Oprea 2020).

Some studies have focused on the semiotics related to COVID-19. For example, Chen (2020) examined posters during the COVID-19 pandemic. Han (2020) and Leone (2021) examined new meanings associated with face masks from a semiotic perspective. Hussein and Aljamili (2020) used semiotics to analyze humor in Jordanian media during the pandemic, while Oprea (2020) examined brand communication—specifically, the meaning-making of advertisements. Even so, very few studies have focused on social distancing from a semiotic perspective. Therefore, the novelty of the current study lies in its focus on commercial branding to enhance social distancing in response to COVID-19.

The current study, therefore, seeks to fill this lacuna by addressing two research questions:

How did commercial branding transform during the COVID-19 pandemic?

What semiotic codes are evident in the transformation of commercial branding?

The study data came from branding, which was randomly selected from the following categories: transportation corporations, food corporations, social platforms, and commercial and satellite channels. Purposive sampling was applied to companies that had changed their branding during the COVID-19 period, as well as those that could have changed them but did not, and those whose target messages were on social distancing. A synchronic analysis framework (Sandelowski, 1999) was applied to the transformation of signs during the pandemic, meaning that the logo was shown before and after COVID-19. Qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) was used to analyze the data thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

1.1 Dual-Coding Theory

Paivio (1971) developed dual-coding theory based on the assumption that our brains process images in terms of verbal and mental "codes." Consequently, knowledge of the world around us is acquired through perceptual, behavioral, and affective experiences, becoming the basis for interpreting our worlds (Paivio, 2007). Therefore, images are crucial for memory. As Lwin et al. (2010, p. 318) observed, "pictures enhance memory for verbal (written) information because humans process written information and pictures via two independent cognitive subsystems: one devoted to verbal information and one to imagery-based information." Seo (2020) showed that photographic images could increase memory, and hence persuasion, whereas drawings and cartoons could not, suggesting that different types of images may evoke different responses from individuals.

Thus, this study applies dual-coding theory to understand the possible implied meanings underlying the transformed branding by the selected companies and organizations. In responding to the social distancing mandate, these entities chose to amend their branding to convey certain messages related to social distancing during the pandemic.

1.2 Commercial Branding

Branding, in general, is an illustration that denotes a clear idea/image in the viewer's mind at a glance and helps distinguish one brand from another (Cowin & Matusitz, 2011; Henderson & Cote, 1998). Branding comprises two components: the (unique) brand name and the brand's symbol (De Marchis et al., 2018). The preceding authors observed that logo design affects consumers; hence, branding must be unique and created carefully. Branding appears in various settings, ranging from social organizations and corporate entities to satellite channels.

Commercial branding creates the first impression for viewers and should be carefully designed (APS, 2016). Every detail of the logo is essential and, ideally, should contribute to the logo's meaning, as it defines the company/business. Some branding consists of only a group or shape, word, image, color, or letter, yet remains effective in its impact. Costache (2019, p. 41) observed that "as a consumer, you take a look at the logo of the product you are buying, the place you are visiting, or the service you are using," suggesting that branding is important for consumers. Logo value transcends time, and arguably, some commercial branding is more recognizable than some countries' presidents. For instance, the Coca-Cola logo is the most familiar image globally (Blue, 2003).

Commercial branding means that brands can be easily remembered and identified by a company's customers and clients. Kinsky and Bichard (2011) found that commercial branding was so effective that children between the ages of three and five could identify the products they had seen on commercial even if they did not know their names, which reveals the visual power of commercial branding.

Studies have also examined brand changes and transitions. Cowin and Matusitz (2011) examined the McDonald's logo transformation from the 1950s to its newest version at the time of the study. Although the McDonald's logo has evolved, the authors noted that it has remained relevant to the changing times and the franchise's customers. Grobert et al. (2016) examined the effects of surprise on organizational branding familiarity and attachment. They found that pleasant surprise was likely to increase acceptance of a new logo, which can be achieved through careful planning and advanced communication. Walsh et al. (2019) similarly observed that logo re-design

should be planned carefully, since consumers who are more attached to the brand are often least receptive to logo change. Companies that instituted logo changes during COVID-19, however, may not have had the luxury to engage in all the requisite planning; indeed, such changes were more a response to the rapidly changing external environment.

Electronic platforms (for example, television, Internet, and social media) help relay commercial branding to the target audience. "Virtual brandscape" is a term used to refer to the electronic brands and branding that often appear on all electronic devices (Oswald, 2011). Examples of virtual brandscapes include YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Snapchat. Alternatively, virtual brandscapes can be labeled "digital semiotics" or "computer semiotics." Liu et al. (2012) observed that digital semiotics is useful in designing computer interfaces because computers are by nature multimedia devices where diverse field codes meet and amalgamate.

1.3 Semiotic Codes

Semiotics generally focuses on the meanings of signs and symbols (Cowin & Matusitz, 2011). Within semiotic codes is brand semiotics, tailored to the brand's meaning or the information that the designers/company wants to impart (Oswald, 2011). Notably, Riley (2004, p.295) argued that semiotic codes are systems of signs that we invent to "represent and express our attitudes toward aspects of the world, [and] are conditioned by our perceptual experiences of the world." Although we have created these codes, they are governed by our experiences within our world. To be effective, semiotic codes strive for accurate representations of reality.

Concerning organizations and the business world, Oswald (2011) noted that semiotic codes structure the meaning of a product category and the culture of an organization. These codes also greatly affect the brand persona and symbolism used to represent these meanings in the marketplace. The 1931 Semiotic School of Peirce classified codes into three different categories: iconic, indexical, and symbolic. Iconic codes represent things explicitly (e.g., an image of a bus at a bus stop). Indexical codes are connected to what they represent or show a cause-and-effect relationship between the sign/code and its meaning (i.e., a hole through a wall as a sign of a gunshot). Finally, symbolic codes operate within a wider space of interpretation, depending greatly on context (Cowin & Matusitz, 2011). This study examined the use of these codes in commercial branding.

Some signs send clear messages either verbally or visually. Chandler (2017) observed that while verbal messages mean what they say, image messages mean what they depict. The ideology of signs has been investigated. Every sign has a meaning, and none is neutral—it depends on the receiver/reader of the sign, but the observer is also intertwined with further dimensions. Semioticians see beyond regular advertisements, making them more appealing and suited to the times. As this study shows, ad/logo designers have become increasingly creative (Evans & Harvey, 2001).

A semiotic strategy is instituted when companies commit themselves to aligning their brands to changes in the marketplace. In this situation, semiotics can provide direction. The semiotics compass integrates secondary, "trend" research, competitive analysis, and primary research with consumers into a brandscape of the environment. The semiotic data analysis would highlight the brand's essence, which transcends the culture and the competitive environment, then "translate" this essence into terms that relate to these contexts (Oswald, 2011).

2. Results: Emerging Themes

2.1 Separated or Unlinked Branding

Most organizations adopt separated or disjointed branding, a practice that cuts across all the categories sampled. For example, in the transportation category, the branding of different autos and airlines corporations was separated or unlinked to express the definitive concept of distancing. The lettering in the Volkswagen logo and the circles in Audi's logo are not connected. The letter V was cut shorter and separated from the letter W in the Volkswagen logo, which is typically connected. The Audi logo was transformed by having the chain of circles separated and not overlapping, as is normally the case. McDonald's, the fast food chain, had separate golden arches instead of connected ones. The Olympics logo is known for having five intersecting circles. The transformed logo, however, has separate circles, indicating social distancing. Figure 1 shows these images.

2.2 Reworded Branding

For some organizations, branding was reworded to stress messages related to social distancing, including a revision of the slogans found on their branding. For example, the American airline "United" logo now says "Divided." Burger King also adjusted their slogan, changing the original slogan from "Home of the Whopper" to "Stay Home" with a line across the rest of the slogan. This stresses the need for social distancing by staying at home to minimize the chances of being infected or spreading the virus to others.

The LinkedIn logo was transformed into Linkedout and Lockedin. Linkedout embodies the meaning of social distancing (i.e., instead of having all links in, we can have them out and apart from each other). The second transformed logo, "Lockedin," implies staying at home to social distance or because of an outside curfew. Booking.com transformed its logo into justlooking.com. This reflects the idea of staying at home and wandering online. This again implies the "stay home and be safe" message.

Intel's Inside logo is transformed into "Stay Inside." The message coming out of this logo is similar to that of staying home. The Nike company logo is a checkmark with the famous slogan "Just do it." The slogan was transformed into three phrases: (i) "Play Inside, Play For The World," (ii) "Maybe We Can Do It Later," and (iii) "Just Don't Do It." Finally, US Open logo is an American tennis competition held annually. Because of the pandemic, the logo was transformed into "US Closed." The message was for people to stay home without

the opportunity to play games. Figure 2 shows the images in this category.

Figure 1. Separated or disjointed branding

Figure 2. Reworded branding

2.3 A Two-Pronged Approach to Branding

Some organizations have adopted a dual approach to stress the message of social distancing. In this case, organizations chose two approaches to emphasize their social distancing message: by rewording their original slogans and altering the images in their branding. The Guinness logo showed a couch and a short statement saying, "Stay at Home," suggesting the need to stay home and relax on the couch while enjoying a Guinness. The Mastercard logo is known for its two overlapping circles (red and yellow). The two circles remain connected in the first transformed logo, but with masks on, while the other logo shows the two circles separated. These two images emphasize safety and social distancing during the pandemic. Chiquita is a fruit company originally dealing in bananas, which then expanded to include other fruits. The original logo had a woman with a dress and fruit hat. The transformed logo has the name of the company without the woman in it, suggesting that the woman is staying home to avoid coronavirus. Figure 3 shows the images in this category.

Before	After
Guinness beer	
Chiquita	Chiquita

Figure 3. Two-pronged branding

3. Discussion

3.1 How Branding Transformed during the Pandemic

From these findings, it is evident that as organizations focused on encouraging social distancing among the public, their branding transformed in several ways during the pandemic. These changes embodied a de-linked or separated branding, rewording, or two-pronged approach. As Cowin and Matusitz (2011) observed in their study of the transition of the MacDonald's logo over time, the organizations in this study were careful that their brand messages (in their branding) remained consistent, even as they attempted to emphasize the social distancing message.

Planning is a crucial component of logo re-design and should be carefully executed (Grobert et al., 2016; Walsh et al., 2019). While the planning process in the organizations under study is not known, the results are suggestive. For branding to be reworded, de-linked, or separated, quick planning is necessary. Also, many organizations were defending themselves against accusations of insensitivity to the ongoing pandemic and thus had to "do something." For example, KFC (not part of the study) was criticized for a continued emphasis on "finger-lickin' good" (their established slogan) at a time when hand hygiene was being stressed. This forced them to temporarily suspend their slogan (Del Rosario, 2020).

According to Batista et al. (2020), how organizations responded to the pandemic was critical because this determined how people viewed their brands, products, or services. Actions that supported the public response to the pandemic appropriately and hence saved lives were likely to be seen in a positive light and thus raise the organization's positive ratings. This is in contrast to inhumane or insensitive actions, such as layoffs or flouting COVID-19 protocols at the expense of organizational processes, among other transgressions. Therefore, organizational responses during the pandemic were not just a matter of corporate social responsibility but might have been intended to keep the organizations from collapsing.

3.2 Semiotic Codes in the Transformation of Commercial Branding

Semiotics as a field is useful for examining commercial branding, especially regarding the sign, object, and interpretant, whether through language or symbols (i.e., branding; Manurung et al., 2020). The findings of this study show that the use of semiotic codes was evident in the transformation of commercial branding for the organizations listed. Specifically, this study confirms the use of iconic and symbolic signs in commercial branding by organizations during the pandemic.

According to Cowin and Matusitz (2011), iconic signs "look like" what they represent, while symbolic codes are arbitrary and derive

meaning based on a given context. In this study, iconic signs were used to convey the message of social distancing in a way that the general population could relate to. For example, Audi, Olympics, and Mastercard showed via space in their separated branding that social distancing was important. From a semiotic perspective, therefore, iconic signs used by organizations helped persuade viewers to their minds concerning the coronavirus.

Firmansyah (2015) focused on the semiotic signs in one café in Malang, Indonesia, and concluded that the signs utilized iconic, indexical, and symbolic codes in their commercial branding to attract and retain their clients. In this study, symbolic signs utilized include reworded branding, where the messages were strategically tweaked to emphasize social distancing. For example, by using "Divided" instead of "United" for United Airlines or Linked Out (and Locked In) for the LinkedIn platform, the message of staying home was emphasized during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, Guinness Beer introduced a couch before its traditional logo, suggesting that one could still have the beer while relaxing at home. Symbolic signs must have a shared meaning among their intended audience (Matusitz & Cowin, 2014). Although the commercial branding was online, it was easy to decipher the social distancing message.

Erlyana (2019, p. 408) examined the evolution of Fanta soft drinks and observed that the shape of the new bottle reflected " that Fanta packaging changes affect the buying interest of adolescent consumers", that in turns raised the interest in buying. Cusumano's recent study, based on institutional theory, looked at the branding of private military and security companies from a semiotic angle. The symbols employed by these branding appeared invisible; yet, "By camouflaging the nature of the services they provide, branding contributes to (re)framing the private security industry and distancing contractors from mercenaries no less than written texts" (2021, p. 151). This study found that social distancing messages reflected both physical distance and staying home emphasis in commercial branding studied through iconic and symbolic signs.

4. Conclusion

The current study contributes to semiotics by examining how organizations respond to the message of social distancing through their commercial branding. As organizations had to participate in fighting the global COVID-19 pandemic, the use of commercial branding became one of their visible actions, with possible tangible effects. In line with the dual-coding theory, organizations' change in commercial branding aimed at persuading the public on the need and importance of "social distancing" (Seo, 2020). The findings showed that organizations separated or unlinked their branding, reworded them, or had a combination of these approaches to drive home the message of social distancing in a way that utilized iconic and symbolic signs. Even then, caution needs to be exercised regarding the transformation of branding. For example, while United Airlines had "Divided" instead of "United," this could have negative implications for business clients who might not understand that this was aimed at social distancing.

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Appendix 1

Summary of Results

Brand	Category	Type	Type of message
Volkswagen	Auto	International	Visual
Audi	Auto		Visual
United Airlines	Airplanes		Verbal
McDonald's	Fast food		Visual
Pepsi	Beverage		Visual
Coca-Cola	Beverage		Verbal
Burger King	Fast food	International	Verbal
KFC	Fast food		Both Verbal and Visual
Chiquita	Food		Visual
Guinness	Ireland beer		Both Verbal and Visual
YouTube	Social media		Visual
LinkedIn	Social media	International	Visual
Booking.com	Social media		Verbal
MasterCard	Bank	International	Visual
Intel inside	Technology		Verbal
Nike	Sport		Verbal
Olympics	Sport	International	Visual
US open	Tennis		Verbal

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