



GRIFFITH COLLEGE DUBLIN

**A SEMIOTIC CONTENT ANALYSIS OF ADVERTISEMENT:  
CONTRIBUTION TOWARDS A HOLISTIC COMMUNICATION  
APPROACH TO GLOBAL CONSUMERS**

Research dissertation presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements

for the degree of

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**22<sup>nd</sup> May 2020**

## Candidate Declaration

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## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Monica Kliatsi, for believing in me to get this far. She was my inspiration to pursue my master's degree at the time when the family was going through a lot of difficulties such that my effort was needed to help solve these issues, but she supported me to move on to school abroad far from home. This is for her.

I dedicate this paper to my father, who helped me with all things great and small.

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to Patrick Tamakloe for his encouragement and spirit of positivity,

I dedicate this dissertation to my first lecturer in Griffith College Dublin who broke the ice on how to bring out the best in me with magnificent teaching and lecturing experience.

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**A Semiotic Content Analysis of Advertisement:  
Contribution Towards a Holistic Communication Approach to Global Consumers**

*Gidisu Collins*

Effective communication via advertising is central to the success of a business by encoding brand intended message and values that relevant target stakeholders of a brand can easily decipher and relate. This study showed that there might be a plausible solution to the disagreement between message intended encoded and message decoded in a communication approach via image advertisement. This communication problem and its possible solution were explored from a semiotic school of thought. The objective to explore signs and symbols as a signification system in image advertising was researched with a qualitative case study methodological approach in the context of Zara ad campaigns. A deconstruction of the ad campaign and a thematic analysis of insightful Eye-catcher as a lead icon, positioning of icons and size, choice of colours and image quality and contrast are four key elements that make up a new signification system for communicating via image advertisement if all four key elements are aligned to support each other by a semiotic comprehensiveness. First, eye-catcher as a lead icon commences the journey of meaning formation process by an icon being spotted first to evoke personal attributions and attached with other icons spotted from the image observed. Second, the positioning of the lead icon in a region within the image frame catalyses the ability of the icon to be spotted first, particularly the middle region. Third, the choice of colours of a universal ascription that suits the intended message to be encoded requires great intentionality. Fourth, Image quality and contrast of the overall image needs to be clear, well blended, and bright or dull enough such that it is void of blurriness. The four elements form an emergent signification system for communicating with a holistic approach, extracted from a semiotic perspective of constructing an image for advertising.

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Overview

The problem of communication can be viewed from a diverse perspective resulting to calls to action from different backgrounds of knowledge in order to find a unique way of communication void of barriers to communication particularly the disagreement between the intended message from the sender and the message decoded or deciphered by the receiver. Some scholars argue that the root of the problem, as well as its solution, is found in the process of communication which includes source, encoding, message, decoding, receiver, feedback, and noise (the process school of thought or The Linear School). The opposing scholars argue that communication is a generation of meaning, a mixture of signs, symbols, and messages which the sender wants to convey and expects a specific reaction from the receivers of the messages (The Semiotics School)(Richard, n.d.). This study focuses on the semiotics school approach to communication to address the problem of communication with the research question about semiotics, brands, and communication.

Semiotics as a keyword means the study of signs and symbols and their use or Interpretation. A brand is a term used to identify a type of product manufactured by a particular company under a particular name. Communication is the imparting or exchanging of information by speaking, writing, or using some other medium. These key words joined together projects the content to be explored by this study, simply put, the exploration of signs, symbols, their meaning, and its use by brands to convey messages by imparting or exchanging information to a specific audience. This study stands on the synthesis of the two schools of thought that communication is a process that needs to followed however in the attempt to find the solution to problems of communication, the encoding of signs and symbols to evoke intended meanings requires great intentionality. This chapter briefly asserts what the research purpose is, in light of the problem of communication, the significance of the study, the research question and objectives to guide the exploration of semiotics, brand and communication in order to answer the problem of communication.

## 1.2 Research Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore and discover a semiotic based signification system of communication to address the disagreement of intended message

of a brand and message decoded by its consumers in the context of advertising with image visuals.

### 1.3 Significance of the Study

This part of the research contains the beneficiaries of the research. In order of importance, the beneficiaries include educational institutions in the communication field, all recognizable roles in content creation field, marketers of brands, students of business and brands and the researcher.

Educational Institutions has been placed as the most important beneficiary of this research particularly because teachings of the faculty of business, philosophy, sociology, psychology underpin the success of a business with the assertion that the effective communication with its consumers builds a relationship that guarantees a long term achievement of success. The findings of this study may be considered as resourceful to contribute to the teachings of these faculties in the context of communication.

Content creators such as graphic designers and brand communication strategists are challenged in their discourse regularly to come up with unique crafts of communication for advertisement, and most content creators attempt to capitalize on cultural trends to create something catchy which only lasts during the period of the trend however find it difficult to craft pieces that have a longer-term communication success. The findings of this research, as well as the methodological approach in exploring semiotics, can give them a new lens for their craft exploration.

Marketers of brands challenged with consumer research difficulties in finding useful findings to help develop marketing plans to targeted markets can also find some benefits of this study as the study explores how brands perceptions are communicated with signs and symbols, the ascriptions to signs such as colours and how its composition in adverts is deciphered is a form of consumer research that gives a direction on the kind on information to be sought when doing market and consumer research in order to assist a comprehensive of the overall brand and marketing strategy of the business.

Students of business and brands will also benefit from this study in regard to the curiosity of those who are into communication and the success of business via communication. The findings of this study contribute to the body of knowledge of the disciplines such as business, philosophy, sociology, and psychology.

To the researcher as a beneficiary, the findings help to answer the research question to the identified problem of communication via advertising and also serves as the researchers answer to calls made by previous researchers for the search of a holistic communication approach for business from a semiotic perspective.

#### 1.4 Research Objectives and Question

The following objectives seek to help answer the research question if archived and posits to guide the exploratory nature of the study from the gaps in the literature to the analysis of the primary data collected.

- 1 To explore the encoding process of brand intended messages and values in an advertisement, specifically examining the positioning of Icons as an initiator of the message encoded.
- 2 To explore the decoding structure of brand advertisement from a consumer perspective, specifically examining how consumers notice icons and other themes in an advert.
- 3 To find out if iconic brand intended messages and values in a brand advertisement are easily understood by the consumer.

The main research question of this study is ‘what ideal signification system can communicate brand intended message and values to a larger audience which will be void of barriers of communication?’ The question seeks to address the problem of communication with answers that are from a semiotic perspective hence a signification system of signs and symbols, their meaning, and its use by brands to convey messages by imparting or exchanging information to a specific audience.

#### 1.5 Structure of the Study

This study is structured with a preliminary insight on the problem of communication and encoding from the traditional model of communication as a key stage that requires a robust semiotic perspective in order to explore the problem of communication, the disagreement between the intended message from the sender and the message decoded or deciphered by the receiver. In order to explore the problem, the guide has been reduced to three research objectives to explore the encoding process of brand intended messages and values in an advertisement, specifically examining the positioning of Icons as an initiator of the message encoded, explore the decoding structure of brand advertisement from a consumer perspective, specifically examining how consumers notice icons and other themes in an advert, find out if iconic brand intended messages and values in a brand

advertisement are easily understood by the consumer. This exploration seeks to help answer the research question what ideal signification system can communicate brand intended message and values to a larger audience which will be void of barriers of communication?'

Previous research on the subject matter semiotics, brand and communication show attempts have been made to explore the encoding of signs and symbols as a signification system from a theoretical point of view as well as a practical point of view. Icons, symbols, and signs are perceived to have meanings that contribute to the meaning-making hence require intentionality when used in the encoding process. The theoretical findings of Piercerean semiotics show that perceiving the Icon as a sign in itself to be interpreted as an entity before its relationship with other signs in a given context begins the journey of meaning-making. Positioning intended message to be communicated in different categories such that the desired meaning to be encoded is perceived first. No attempt has been made specifically to show how practically these icons, symbols and signs should be composed in a communication piece to ensure successful communication.

An analytical focus on icons, visibility of icon, propositional positioning of the icon, classification of similarities identified with the icon and clarity of the icon message, a qualitative case study research methodology were employed for the study. The context Zara ad campaigns are used as secondary data to be deconstructed by the researcher and used as a reference in the collection of primary data from purposefully chosen key informants. The primary data is collected with the use of semi-structured interviews asking interview questions such as what symbols can you see from the case study? And what classification of things does it belong to from your background? The data is analysed thematically, and the emerging themes are mapped into a refined signification system as the findings.

The findings are thoroughly discussed and compared with previous findings in order to determine the research question was answered as well as the research objectives achieved. Limitations to the research are also highlighted, and recommendations for practice, specifically for the most important beneficiaries of this study is recommended. The feasibility of the research process and time factor will only enable the exploration of a portion of scope regarding semiotics and its role on advertisement towards a holistic communication approach, the neglected scopes of semiotics in this regard is

recommended to be furtherly explored by researchers for its benefits is highly valued in business communication.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter is of great significance as it spells out previous works done by researchers on the subject matter semiotics, brand and communication contributing to the body of knowledge on effective communication approaches. The previous works in semiotics and advertising as a mode of communication spans across theoretical, conceptual, and practical research knowledge from a premodern to a postmodern era which will be evaluated and synthesized with this research paper. The gaps to be explored in the previous works are synthesized with the purpose of this research paper hence a chapter of great intentionality. All the relevant literature is sourced by the use of the keywords semiotics, brand, and communication in the electronic databases sage publications and ebsco, academic journals of linguistics, communication, and marketing.

A thorough search of existing literature on semiotics and advertisement came up with results refined to the purpose of this research paper leading to the emerging of themes that will be discussed in this section. The themes are both theoretically and conceptually based. In chronological order with respect to the time the theories and concepts emerged, the semiotic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure, Piercerean semiotics theory, the theoretical framework of visual grammar by Kress and Leeuwen and the concept of ‘propositional hierarchy’ of brand values. The approach of discussion in the exploration of these theories and concepts is made through a thematic based approach emulated from using bloom’s taxonomy (Granello, 2001) whereby each theory and concept is introduced as a knowledge related to the research paper, the patterns in the theory and its relevance, the theoretical or conceptual gap and practical gap identified and a constructive argument for the paper written related to the identified gaps. The constructive argument is then supported with evidence from the works of other researchers, which is furtherly argued as supportive of the written paper. Semiotics and the signification system from the theory of semiotics by Ferdinand de Saussure will be discussed first as an introduction into semiotics as a body of knowledge and the other theories and concepts will follow chronologically. The identified theoretical, conceptual, and practical gaps and how it can

be filled by knowledge obtained from counter-arguments by the research and evidence from other researchers is used to establish a conceptual framework which is discussed at the latter part of this chapter.

## 2.3 Theoretical Background

### 2.3.1 Semiotics and the Signification System

The etymological origin of the term 'semiotics' is the Greek word 'semeion' which means 'mark, sign'. The term was first used in the studies of how diseases had symptoms (Beasley and Danesi, 2002). A part of the body that show sudden noticeable signs like redness of skin leads to a diagnosis that is conditioned pertaining to the specific context like a broken finger. The diagnosis of the mark is established based on previously examined circumstance implying that the meaning of a sign is dependent on a subjective view of the world. These interpretations of a semiotics perspective are applied to studies of cultural processes of communication as an actuality of a sign in social life (Yakin and Totu, 2014, p.1; Eco, 1979 as cited in Faizan, 2019). The nature and methodology of semiotics provide a fundamental base on which communication can be processed. Meaning as an end is perceived prior to the crafting of a message to send to a receiver with the intention of making an interaction void of misconception. Applied to the communication of brand values to target customers, the source (brand/ company, business) assumes to know its customers' capabilities with regards to their needs and wants, proposes a value that relieves them via advertisement. The mystery of how the message is communicated with the use of composed content is what semiotics cracks. An attempt to understand the relationship between something signified with a mark or sign and the meaning of that sign (signified) is referred to as the signification system.

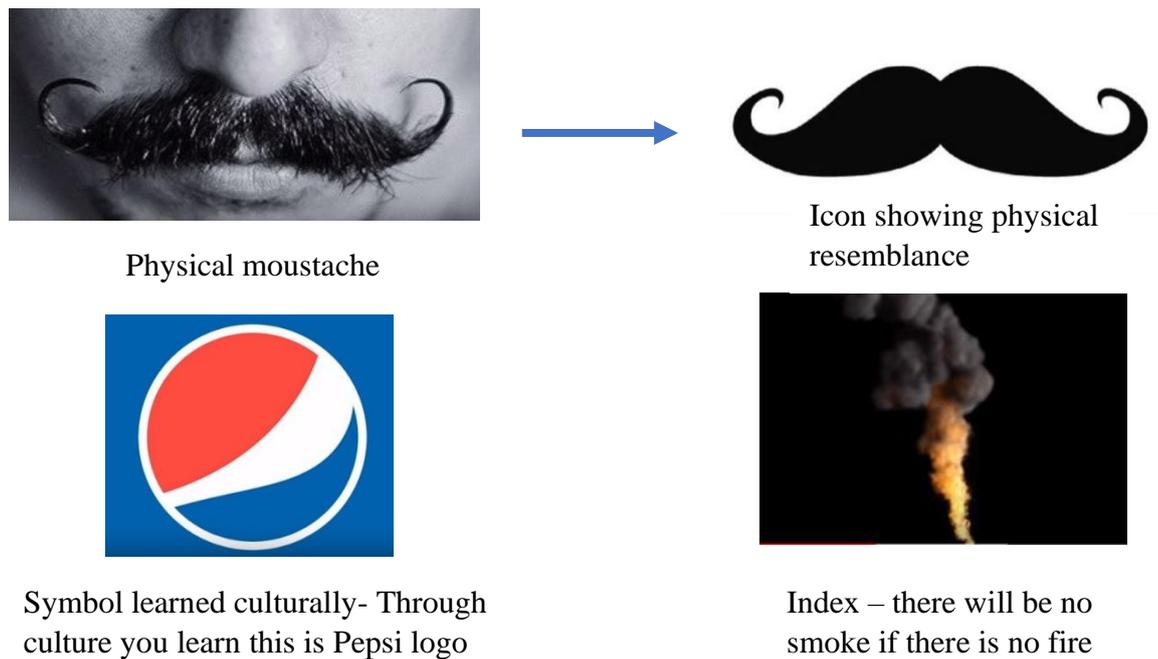
The conceptual gap within the signification system is the root of the research problem in the sense that the processes that contemporary advertisers use to create advertisement are currently non-aligned with the principles of semiotics (Lawes, 2019). Ferdinand de Saussure proposed a semiotic theory that places the sign as the object to be assigned with an attribute thus signifier (sound, word, image) and then perceived as a mental concept (signified/meaning). There are relations between signs and the things they mean such that Saussure identified those relations like (1) semantics, the relations between signifiers and what they stand for thus denotations (figure 1), (2) syntactic, relations among signs in a formal structure such as an arrangement of words to create a sentence, e.g. grammar, (3)



“...the interpretant is actually another sign referring to the same "object." Since any initial meaning can be re-interpreted (and often is), each interpretant is thus a sign leading to another interpretant. And so, on ad infinitum. This double nature of the interpretant—as both the interpreted sign and the interpreting sign— confers unlimited regress or extrapolation in semiosis and led Peirce to conclude that man "is the thought," in fact, "a sign himself” (Mick, 1986).

Based on this Piercerean semiotics, the need to make sense of his obsolete abstract perception about the interpretant, he established three categories of signs which further made the theory more robust towards understanding how semiotics can be applied communication. The three categories include Icons, Indexes, and Symbols (figure 3). An icon has a physical resemblance to the signified (object). An indexical sign relates to its objects by some correspondence of fact, and the relationship is frequently casual. It describes the physical connection between a signifier and a signified. A symbol is the opposite of an icon, and it does not resemble the signifier that is being represented, it is learned culturally.

Figure 3 Icons, index, and symbols



Source: (Google, 2020)

The icons, index and symbols version of Pierce’s semiotic theory and its application to phenomena will be explored fatherly. Its application will be hinted in the upcoming development of the literature. However, there is the need to focus on the semiotics of icons, and symbols, specifically since its illustration as a representation of something physical contributes to my research question.

1. What is the most noticeable sign on this print advert?
2. Does the noticeable sign represent anything you have seen before?

### 2.3.2 Piercerean Signs and Meaning Creation (Denotation and Connotation)

Signs are of three categories, according to Pierce: Icons, index, and symbols. There are some key clarifications about these categories that will explicate the logical understanding path towards meaning creation in this section. Ali and Aslaadi (2016) aptly explain Pierce's perspective of an icon as "a sign that does not own a dynamical contacting with the object it denotes, thus it is not connected with its object, but they share some qualities. On the contrary, the index is actually associated with its object, but the association has nothing to do with the interpreting mind, except signalling it. The symbol is associated with its object according to the idea of a symbol-using mind". What is postulated here is a probability of classification of signs in an advert that may or may not aid in the concept of meaning formation? Hence it is imperative to be alert on the framework used in constructing an advert. This leads to the key terms Denotation and Connotation.

The analyses of the meaning of signs are based on two levels, thus denotation and connotation, which both form an order of signification as established by Ronald Barthes (Ali and Aslaadi, 2016). Denotation is the first level of signification, a primary sign of a natural language that is explicitly unambiguous and signifies what is obvious to everyone, signs such as colours and shades (Marten & Ringham, 2006, p. 62-63; Kim, 1996, p. 24; Nicholas & Price, 1998, p. 3 as cited in Ali and Aslaadi, 2016). The connotation is the second level of signification utilizes the first level of signification (Denotation) as its signifier to and binds another signified to it. It is the dictionary meaning which gains an additional clue resulting from the context from which it is applied. It is subjective and derives from the interpreter's culture and beliefs in order to generate meaning (Marten & Ringham, 2006, p. 62-63; Kim, 1996, p. 24; Nicholas & Price, 1998, p. 3 as cited in Ali and Aslaadi, 2016).

The clarification of these concepts in semiotics gives a clear level of focus on the endeavour of holistic communication by paying attention to the use of icons as lead initiators of meaning formation from a receiver's perspective. What is key is the assertion that we can study the messages (signs in adverts) encoded and to an extent, the interpreters of those messages, but attempting to understand what referent is, is beyond semiotics and

beyond the research objectives as well. It is not the focus of the research explore the connotations of the advert but rather only partially analysed to explore the denotations that were selected as a lead into the possible connotations from the receiver's perspective. With this assertion, I agree with Ali and Aslaadi (2016) that connotation is subjective, and we are unaware of it at the level of semiology. However, the denotation part, which is concerned with the "what" icons, indexes, symbols, frames, camera angle, quality of the picture is of the primary concern of this research.

A theoretical analysis of the research of Ali and Aslaadi (2016) reveals a robust framework that lacks any theoretical gap, however, a contextual and practical gap is evident in their focus of research as far as my research objectives are concerned. The purpose of their research was to examine the extent to which respondents comprehend either textless images or verbal images by selecting a random picture from the internet to produce a textless and a verbal version of it for their study. As far as their purpose is concerned, the results of the research to an extent can be classified as valid thus verbal images are more likely to be understood clearly, and captions in images restrict readers creativity to infer any additional message which is meaning creation. Their research gives me a blueprint on how to go about conducting semiotic content analyses to extract a signification system towards a holistic communication approach to global consumers. The application of this blueprint methodology, however, is questionable because it was dependent on a random picture selected from the internet, which renders a contextual gap in terms application.

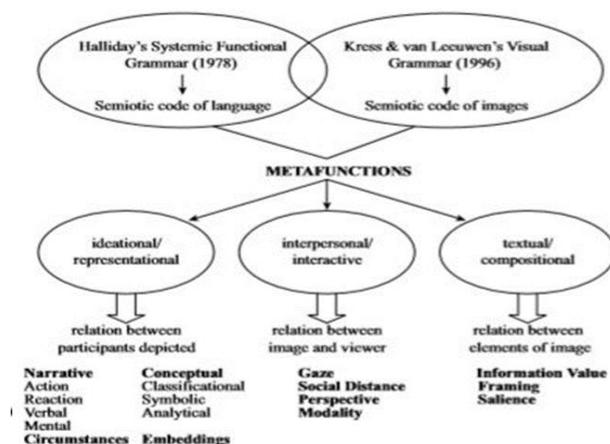
The problem of miscommunication of adverts is apparent, and a contextual application of these theoretical findings in the fashion industry could help solve a problem like the miscommunication of Zara's skinny jeans campaign in 2017 that lead to a social media slander (The Sun, 2017). Gurzki *et al.*, (2019) explored the luxury brand communications and how they craft extraordinary stories in image advertisement paying strict attention to the denotation of icons and frames in the images to find that luxury brands particular in fashion use enrichment, distancing and abstraction icons denoted in image advertisement. This research paper is equipped with this insight from Gurzki *et al.*, (2019) on how to fill this contextual gap in the exploration of encoding of icons in an image which threading on the same theoretical principles of Piercerean semiotics that Ali and Aslaadi, (2016) employed.

### 2.3.3 Semiotics and Modality

A common theoretical framework that is used in the semiotic analyses of an advert is Kress and Leeuwen's theory of visual grammar as used by Faizan (2019) in his semiotic analyses of print advertisement to contribute towards a holistic communication approach that business should attempt. Kress and Leeuwen's theoretical framework of visual grammar holds that "visual structures (like language structure) are culturally and historically determined forms of social interactions; visual design like all grammars of semiosis cannot be universally valid but must contain the concrete rules developed by an individual culture" (Kaltenbacher, 2007).

Faizan (2019) defined what he meant by a holistic approach as paying attention to the unique context in which communication takes place, which is quite unclear. Proceeding to his inquiry, he conducted his analyses using the framework of visual grammar using only two variables (social distance and Gaze) in the interactive metafunction of the framework (figure 4). This leaves me at sea wondering why modality was ignored, signalling a theory-practice gap in the application of the theoretical framework for the exploration of symbolic messages in communication. Almeida (2009), in the semiotic content analyses of toy advertisements, revealed the importance of including modality in the deconstruction framework. It is insightful in evoking subjective feelings from the viewer if the colour saturation of an icon or image is lowered, which is termed sensory modality. This component of the framework is vital to include in the quest of examining print ads to know how its goal to reach a larger audience is met.

Figure 4 Kress and Leeuwen's theoretical framework of visual grammar



Source: (Summary of Kress & van Leeuwen's (1996) framework for Visual Grammar (VG) as cited in Almeida, 2009)

Modality can be defined as the represented '*realism*' of an image, given a domain coding orientation (Bell and Milic, 2002). Bell and Milic (2002) combined content analyses with semiotic analysis to analyse gender advertisements. In the semiotic analysis, Kress and Leeuwen's theoretical framework of visual grammar was used, and a far deeper inquiry in modality was observed as compared to Almeida's (2009) analyses. Types of modality we categorized in dimensions, colour, degree of contextualization, comprehensiveness of representation, nature of the perspective, sources of illumination and degree of brightness. Each of these dimensions is analysed on scale bases running from the absence of any rendition of depth to a maximally deep perspective (Bell and Milic, 2002). This shows how conceptually enriched the component, modality, of Kress and Leeuwen's theoretical framework of visual structures is. However, the purpose of their research was not for the extraction of a signification system for a holistic communications approach. Their use of modality has given me a perspective on how to build on Faizan's (2019) earlier approach to find a holistic communication approach for businesses to reach out to larger audiences.

Sensory modality analyses applied to print advert decoding can be resourceful for identifying the most noticeable icon at first glance depending on the scale at which it is colour is composed. It is imperative to acknowledge that in this meaning discourse pursuit with semiotics, the meaning is not only communicated through spoken and written words but also through other modes such as gesture, gaze, proximity etc. as asserted by Kohrs (2018).

#### 2.3.4 Semiotics and Meaning Formation (Propositional Hierarchy)

The signification structure from the Saussurean semiotic theory is a diadic process that presupposes the sign and the signifier relate with certain preconditioned characteristics from previous experiences that lead to the formation of a mental concept. As critiqued by Pierce, the process of meaning formation is not diadic but rather triadic focusing on the interpretant as a sign itself to be interpreted simultaneously as a sign and object. This tautological conception of the interpretant can only be best understood if you see 'man' with the ability to interpret a sign and not accept that, that first interpretation is final, that there are other interpretations of that same sign, that whatever preconceived meaning was formed is not final but only the beginning of interpreting that sign, and it goes on and on to an ad-infinitum (Mick, 1986). The meaning-making process, as implied by Saussure and Pierce, indicates that for one to make meaning of something, there is the need to see a sign first. That first sight of the sign initiates the meaning-making process. However, as

one moves towards the next level of determining the signifier, the complication starts. This is the point where the interpretant begins to establish a relationship between the sign and the signifier. Any step further is the contextualizing effects on the meaning formation pertinent to visible signs and symbols of other signifieds that are related in the same piece of the subject (print advert).

Barnham, (2019) is of the view that the meaning formation process analyses from a consumer perspective can be made simple if a lead initiator on the print advert is noticeable enough to be seen first before all other signs. He explicitly labels this lead initiator as an Icon. However, his definition of an icon is quite different from Pierce's definition of an icon. Barnham is of the view that if brand values are to be encoded into print ads to a targeted audience, the key representation of what the brand stands for and is well known by its customers should be encoded in such a way that on first sight of the print advert a representation of what the brand is known for is identified by a coded icon which will be the lead initiator. This intentional arrangement of the intended message in order by placing the key representational icon (value) of the brand at the top and encoding it to be notified first before any other related value conditions the audience on a prescribed meaning formation structure. This he terms as the concept of 'Propositional hierarchy'.

A conceptual gap exists in Barnham's concept of propositional hierarchy as he fails to explain the conditions in which the value to be portrayed in order to be deciphered at first sight when the consumers come across a brand advertisement. In the context of the subject matter, making meaning of encoded messages, the possibility of a target audience to misunderstand the intended message is dependent on the positioning of the icons, signs, and symbols in the print advert. This makes his concept of propositional hierarchy quite vital, and development of the conditions in which that value can be portrayed first would be a great step towards the finding of an ideal signification system of communication void of barriers.

Bergkvist et al. (2012) hypothesized a positive relationship between the degree of headline completeness and comprehension and found out that ads with complete headline ads were easily understood by the target audience. This affirms the view that positioning of icons, signs (text from this example) guided a clear meaning formation process. A principal dimension of visual semiosis analyses in relation to an image was asserted by Bell and Milic, (2002) that the value of an element in the top half of a portrait-shaped

frame is different from its value if located in the bottom half. The views of these two researchers extracted from the theoretical framework of visual grammar indicate the possibility of finding those conditions to consider in order to position values in the form of icons such that it can be seen first and deciphered as far as meaning-making and Barnham's concept of propositional hierarchy is concerned.

The focus here is on the lead initiative icon that starts the meaning formation process. Operationalised in the research objectives, the examination of how consumers notice icons and other themes in an advert and how brand values in the advertisement is easily understood by the consumer.

#### 2.3.5 Brand Value Communication

Barnham (2012) posits that in conventional marketing terms, the brand is always distinguished from the product to evoke a sense of belongingness and not to advocate features of a product. In his advocacy of realness of a brand, he argues that the brand needs to be repositioned as something that is real and not objective with the use of texts. Barnham (2012) uses the analogy of what really Starbucks outlet is by identifying the various reasons why a consumer will go to Starbucks; a place to work, a place to get wi-fi, a place to have a snack when shopping, a coffee shop etc. He shows how the brand Starbucks is construed by consumer's concept of 'realness' shifts from a psychological question of what really Starbucks outlet is, to the reality of Starbucks as a text by using text to show that its more than just a physical location.

##### 1. What a thing is (Horizontal dimension).

- A coffee shop.
- A cake shop.
- A place to work.

##### 2. What the thing means to the consumer (Vertical dimension).

- A coffee shop that sells cakes (complimentary oriented).
- A place to work that also serves as a meeting place (multipurpose function).
- A place to have a snack when shopping (Convenience).

This dimensional analysis shows that the Brand name Starbucks as positioned centrally can be construed as meaning an entity that exists for convenience, multipurpose functional or complementary oriented as distinguished from what it is as a thing and expressed by what it means by text from the consumers perspective. This shows how 'propositional hierarchy' of codified brand values into icons in adverts needs to be structured in a manner that clearly guides the consumer in making meaning of the intended message in the advert. Barnham (2010) asserts that there are two versions of the brand, which is how the brand is in the mind of the consumer and the version of the brand that we find in the marketing department. These versions are diverse and serve as the route of miscommunication of brand values if there is no way of aligning these two versions onto a page. This is the same problem that Faizan (2019) is voicing out and advocates for a holistic communication approach that can solve this problem. This section on brand value communication is an extension of the concept of propositional hierarchy by Barham and likewise inhibits the conceptual gap of the conditions in which the values to be communicated as the brand intended message can be portrayed.

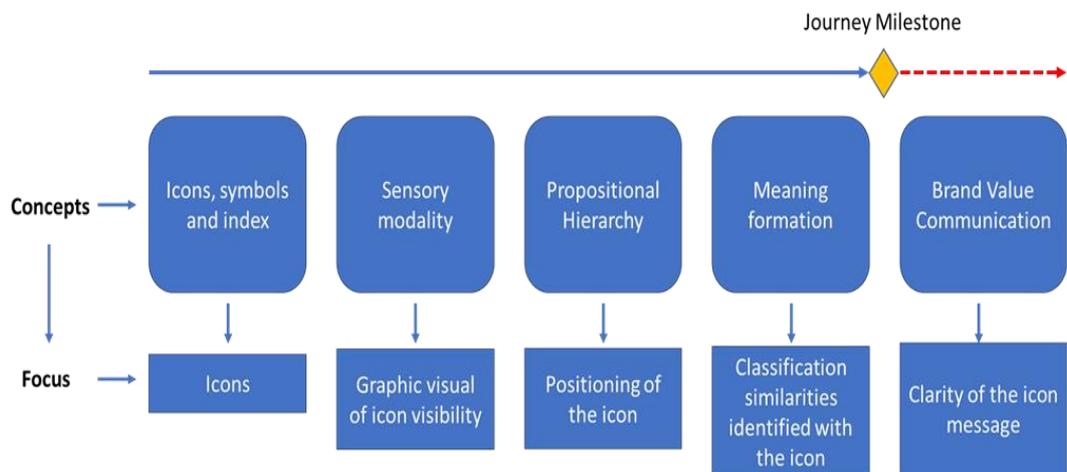
Gurzki *et al.*, (2019) provides an insight into the construction of brand identity in the luxury field of fashion by using semiotics approach to decode fashion brand ad campaigns of different categories and comparing themes used by the brands to find that luxury brands use four factors of communication, enrichment, distancing and abstraction. This finding shows that there are certain conditions which, when in place, brand value communication can be successful in the regard of the content creator purposefully using components that narrowly reflect what is actually intended. This study is the closest research work that attempts to provides insights on an ideal signification system of communication of brand intended message and values because it focuses on the use of semiotics and its composition in image adverts for communication, exploring the components to discover underlying structures and patterns that shape the sociocultural construction of luxury especially the themes and values that luxury brands emphasize in their advertisement. The focus on luxury brands, however, does not guarantee that the findings can be considered as factors to consider when composing an advert for communication void of communication barriers as a luxury in itself is portrayed in such a way that, its audience infer a deeper level of abstraction which cannot be controlled by the content creator in order ensure successful communication of the intended message.

This study shapes the methodological approach to be adopted in this paper as the key focus entail semiotics and brand communication of a specific context, fashion. The theories and concepts that underpin Gurzki *et al.*, (2019) research work include the Peircerean semiotics and the theoretical framework of visual grammar. These theories coupled with the concept of ‘propositional hierarchy’ of Barnham would provide a robust conceptual framework that would align the research question, objectives, gaps in the existing literature and the methodology of the research paper.

#### 2.3.6 Conceptual Framework

A salient attempt to summarize the focus of the research objectives and mode of enquiry of the proposed research is the semiosis conceptual framework of communicating value (figure 5). This framework focuses on the deconstructing print ad with the use of Peircerean model of icons, symbols, and index to determine the explicit icon used in the print ad sample chosen. The deconstruction process is furtherly examined to determine the visibility of the icons situated in the print ad sample analysed. By visibility, I mean the degree to which the icon can be seen by either of the sensory modality variations; highly, medium, lowly graphic pigmentation (contrast and colour). After this has been identified, the icons in question will then be examined by its positioning on the ad; top, bottom or the sides and how it relates with the previous focuses identified in order to establish an order of hierarchy that was subconsciously employed by the ad creator. The remaining parts of the framework evaluate the established hierarchy to determine whether what was intended to be communicated was made clear or not? This is a brief synopsis of how the methodology and data collection and analysis is carried out. The interview is conducted, and more emphases are made on questions that will aid in achieving the journey milestone which is centred around meaning formation and brand value communication in order to achieve the research objective of a holistic communication approach with a signification system.

Figure 5 Semiosis conceptual framework of communicating the value



### 2.3.7 Conclusion

The use of semiotics in establishing this revised communication approach as Faizan (2019) asserts has not been explored adequately to a level of saturation that spells the revised approach being advocated. A holistic communication approach via advertising with the use of Piercerean semiotics theory and Kress and Leeuwen's theoretical framework for visual grammar by the researchers on their various research purpose has granted enlightenment on the operationalisation of the research objectives towards the contribution to a holistic communication approach via advertising with print adverts.

The theory of semiotics by Ferdinand de Saussure and Piercerean semiotics provide fundamental insight into the role of semiotics in advertisement and its significance. A contextual gap that exists in Ali and Aslaadi's, (2016) exploration of how textless image or verbal image is comprehended with the use of the theoretical framework of visual grammar as the image used was a random image from the internet. The contextual gap is filled by Gurzki *et al.*, (2019) in the exploration of luxury brand communications and how they craft extraordinary stories in image advertisement in the context fashion using the same theoretical framework of visual grammar.

The problem as stated clearly by Faizan (2019) is the use of communication approaches by marketers in a digital world that require a clarified holistic approach to marketing via advertising with semiotics has been addressed partially with his findings by using Kress and Leeuwen's theoretical framework for visual grammar, neglecting the modality meta functional analysis aspect of the theory which is a theory-practice gap. Other researchers had pointed out its essence if the objective of the research features a holistic signification

system inquiry (Almeida, 2009). Kohrs, (2018) opinion on the use of ‘modality’ and its types to unravel meanings hidden in gestures, gaze, proximity other than words also show how important the metafunction modality is with regards to the use of the theoretical framework for visual grammar for semiotic analyses of print ads.

The concept of propositional hierarchy by Barnham, (2019) shows the importance of ordering brand values to be communicated by encoding them with icons that can be spotted first from an advert to commence the journey of meaning-making however fails to spell out the conditions in which that encoding can be done. Layout or composition in the image frame as a condition to be considered in encoding extracted from the theoretical framework of visual grammar shows how this conceptual gap in “propositional hierarchy” can be filled (Bell and Milic, 2002; Bergkvist *et al.*, 2012; Gurzki *et al.*, 2019).

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore and discover a semiotic based signification system of communication to address the disagreement of intended message of a brand and message decoded by its consumers in the context of advertising with image visuals. The identified gaps have provided the specific analytic focus to adopt in order to conduct this study (5). The alignment of current research works on semiotics, and brand communication strictly guides the flow of this research. The call for a holistic communication approach for businesses (Faizan, 2019), the ordering of brand values in a hierarchy reduced to encoding icons in an image capable of commencing the journey of meaning-making (Barnham, 2019) and the extraction of patterns and structures (conditions) that underly the use of adverts from a fashion context to form a signification system of communication (Gurzki *et al.*, 2019).

## 3 Methodology

### 3.1 Overview

This chapter looks at the research thinking process that was adopting to embark on the research paper. It talks about the methodological approach, research design, data collection and data analysis approach that was used to conduct the research. A recap of the research question and objectives would be ideal for serving as the justification prerequisite for the methodological approach discussed in this section.

#### **Research Question and Objectives**

The main research question of this study is ‘what ideal signification system can communicate brand intended message and values to a larger audience which will be void of barriers of communication?’ The following objectives seek to help answer the research question if archived.

- 1 To explore the encoding process of brand intended messages and values in an advertisement, specifically examining the positioning of Icons as an initiator of the message encoded.
- 2 To explore the decoding structure of brand advertisement from a consumer perspective, specifically examining how consumers notice icons and other themes in an advert.
- 3 To find out if iconic brand intended messages and values in a brand advertisement are easily understood by the consumer.

Barnham, (2010) in his works on qualitative semiotics and pursuit of meaning advocates the quest of ‘Qualis’ which he defines as a lead in terminology that means ‘what sort of?’ that posits an attempt to analyse phenomena in terms of what sort of things they are. The research objectives indicate the need for analysing how easy brand values in an advert is understood by the consumer by examining a denotative and connotative aspect of the advert with the use of semiotics. The blueprint of transposing the conceptual framework to be the best fit with the research objectives and operationalised in the overall methodological approach will be illustrated in an analytical framework to be shown in the data analysis section. As the purpose of the research is an attempt to explore a signification system that is holistic in the regards of capable of being applied in communication via advertising to global audiences, a mode of enquiry would be required

in order to achieve a robust fundamental approach on which other meta applications can be emulated in order to communicate values in the recent digital era.

The purpose of this chapter is to spell out the scientific research methodology that was chosen and the justification for it being chosen. A roadmap of this chapter begins with the chosen methodological approach, how it is influenced by the worldview of the researcher and how appropriate it is to the research problem at hand. The next to be explained is the chosen research design, its justification and how it fits together with the research question and objectives as well as the conceptual framework. A step by step process on how the data is collected describing the context, sampling procedure, recruitment of key informants and the instruments used to collect the data as well as the justification of the chosen to the overall approach to data collection is outlined. Lastly, the approach to how the collected data is organised, refined, and analysed to extract the findings of this study is explained.

## 3.2 Research Methodological Approach

### 3.2.1 Deductive and inductive research approach

The systematic way meaning is made, is logical reasoning, as Collis and Hussey (2009) defined philosophy as the use of reason and argument in seeking truth and knowledge. There are two known kinds of reasoning employed in philosophy, and these include deductive reasoning and inductive reasoning. In inquiry to build truths on existing truths, deductive syllogism asserts a true propositional truth. From this truth, a case is built, and a result is interpreted as true based on the propositional truth asserted as a rule.

Rule – {It is true that} All the beans from this bag are white.

Case – {We know that} These beans are from this bag.

Result – {Certainly, it is true that} These beans are white (Shank, 1998).

For this systematic way of drawing truths from existing truths, the rule must certainly be an objective truth widely known as a non-problematic truth (like  $1+1=2$ ). Its findings then lead to a high level of certainty because the foundational rule on which it is drawn is true. Inductive reasoning takes an approach that gears towards the creation of truth but from the generalization that is dependent on a result of an observation.

Case – {We know that} These beans are from this bag.

Result – {we have observed that} These beans are white.

Rule –{Probably, then} All the beans from this bag are white (Shank, 1998).

Induction leads to a finding that is probable as compared to a deduction. Abstract conceptualization requires a deep level of thinking and analysing a problem with the use of reflections to develop probable solutions which, when verified and applicable to the phenomena, becomes a generalization/theory.

The complexities involved in the semiotic deconstruction of an advertisement and the in-depth questioning of respondents on the meaning formation process they embark on to understand brand values can be argued that an induction approach is ideal. However, Knox (2004) advocated that an apparent misconception if the use of both logical reasoning in terms of its application needs to be rethought. The logical reasoning to be adopted will be a compromise of both inductive reasoning and deductive reasoning. The reason why this synthetical research approach was chosen is because of the dependent on some truths of icons and symbols as rules and the interpretations of target consumers of those icons towards the formation of a structure of communicating value void of misunderstanding.

### 3.2.2 Research Philosophy

Research in itself is an inquiry to know something that is perceived to be unknown. In his book, *'The problems of philosophy'* Russell (1872-1970 AD) attempts to explore the solution to the question, how do you know you know something. What justification do you have for the claim you have made. This brings up the opposing philosophical schools of thought, realism, and nominalism. Russell's epistemological inquiry brought up the idea, *Sense data*. Sense data are things that are immediately known by the sensation with our five senses that respond to stimulus. These sensations change, but the object or sign in itself does not change. The state of awareness is mental and solely belongs in the mind of the perceiver (man/individual). The sense-datum thus the properties of a physical object seen it private to you in your mind and would not exist if you did not. This reasoning of Russell about the sense data belonging to the perceiver brings up another philosophical positioning about reality by Rene Descartes (1596-1650 AD) in his book *'the first meditations of philosophy'*. His question about how do we know we know something boils down to the conditioning on one's mind to subject all forms of previous knowledge to doubt and begin a long term journey of proving the existing of every piece

of knowledge by attempting to create an exhaustive list of properties that belong to an object in question. This task seemed preposterous. In Descartes' further inquiry, he developed a proposition that perhaps there is an evil being somewhere filling his mind with all that he claims to know which are all deceptions. It is at this point that finally prima facie this proposition, there is only one final truth he has come to observe. Then he, himself, I, exist to be deceived. This epistemological conception of the I as an existing truth is what Russell places a high emphasis on with regards to the 'I' having a private mind to analyse all experience and thoughts. Russell advocated that common-sense belief in the matter is instinctive and leads to the simplest systematic view, so we may accept it, even though we recognize the logical possibility that it is false.

Daniel Kahneman's systems of thinking systems one and two, too fast too slow stipulate that man as a rational being is quick in making decisions without carefully taking time to think things through.

...System one operates automatically and quickly, with little or no effort and no sense of voluntary control. System 2 allocates attention to the effortful mental activities that demand it, including complex computations. The operations of System 2 are often associated with the subjective experience of agency, choice, and concentration (Kahneman, 2013).

This extract shows that man as rational being has a mind that responds to stimuli in two ways, thus automatic and quick with little effort and allocating attention to thoroughly process that responds to stimuli.

The philosophical conception of the existence of 'I' as the only truth places man as a being which can provide evidence of reasoning as to why he thinks he exists. This is the epistemological truth that shapes my research process. The perception of an object and its properties by an individual as it belongs to himself and not known by anyone else is pertinent to the quest in seeking the meaning formation process a consumer adopts to decode brand values in a print advert. An attempt to know what a person knows would require a system two process that pays more attention to detail to ascertain an exhaustive list of attributions to what is being observed (icons).

The philosophical influence in terms of the principal researcher is fundamentally placed in the belief that man as an individual is a thought on itself which cannot be perceived by any other man but can only be revealed if the necessary conditions presupposing the interaction between two individuals are met hence consent. Further, man as an individual

has a habit of responding to stimuli in two ways which include rational and irrational. The rational response to stimuli contains rich information that takes time to process hence the need to create an accommodating context to enable that patience of information to be refined and given as data. This worldview underpins the chosen research approach.

### 3.2.3 Research Paradigm

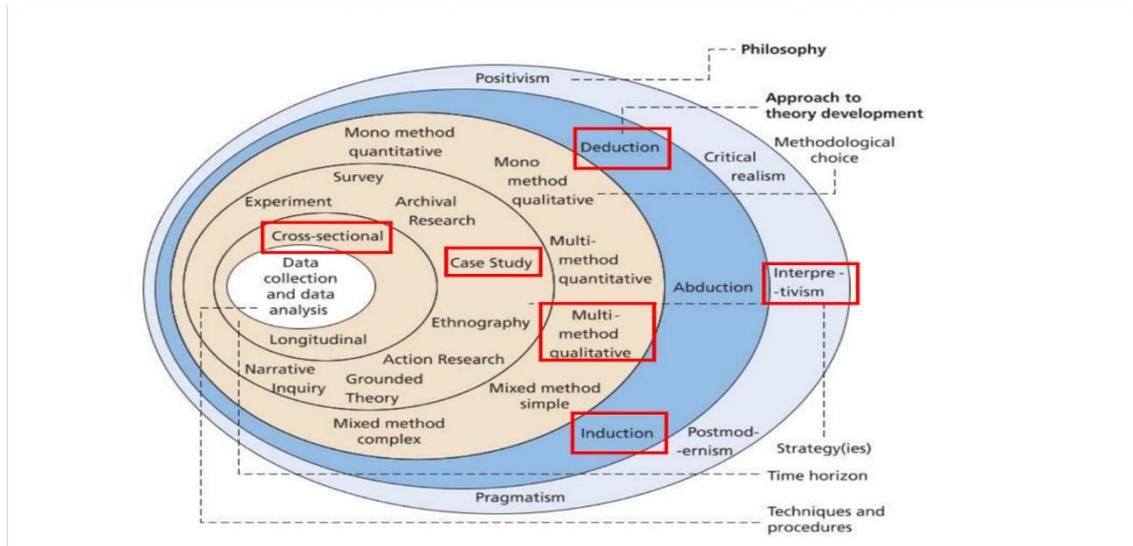
The chosen research paradigm for the proposed research is qualitative or interpretivism research paradigm. Collis and Hussey (2009) defined the interpretivism research paradigm, a framework underpinned by the belief that social reality is not objective but highly subjective because it is shaped by our perception. Any type of research that does not extract its findings from statistical analyses of quantitative data is interpretative research. The focus here is on the richness in the meaning of social phenomena and not the number of times the phenomena is occurring. This research paradigm is qualitative in nature such that its mode of inquiry seeks to extract rich data to be analysed towards the contribution of existing meanings. About the use of semiotics in a print advertisement, Barnham (2019) asserted that ‘Qualitative Semiotics’ from a Piercerean semiotic perspective offers the possibility of seeing how consumer meanings are structured through the sign combinations that create them. The research objectives require an interpretative approach to explore the individual cognitive model of meaning-making. The philosophical influence on this paradigm can be explained as the quest to explore the individual private mind of man to know what existing classifications of matter does he associate the recognition of a noticeable sign with. Question phrases with prefixes "what sort of...?"’ what kind of...’ in questioning respondents in interviews or focus groups provide the perceived truths of the individual which require more time to process and answer.

### 3.2.4 Research Strategy

About the quest on finding a structure of meaning encoding and meaning formation with the use of semiotic tools, an exploratory research strategy was chosen. Using Saunders *et al.*, (2019) onion, ring the highlighted regions show the choices of research paradigm, overall approach, and strategy to be adopted for the proposed research (figure 6). Therefore, the chosen research strategy entails the influence of an interpretivism philosophy, a synthesis of a deductive and inductive approach to theory development in this regard thus the development of a signification system, a multi-method qualitative methodological choice, a case study research design using a chosen case study

as a secondary data, the use of semi-structured interviews to collect primary data and the use of a descriptive analysis approach to data analysis.

Figure 6 Research Onion



Source: (Saunders *et al.*, 2019)

The philosophical influence of interpretivism on the proposed research inquiry arguably, depicts that an exploratory research approach is a best-fit approach. Exploratory research grants the researcher tools and techniques to ascertain a deeper insight into what is being researched. The concept of meaning formation by a consumer is influenced by noticeable signs and symbols that the respondent has classified in his mind which is private to him and can only be accessed if you engage in an in-depth inquiry process with him. The exploratory approach, as insightful as it may be, requires a guide in the form of a road map to the main focus.

The approach to theory development in this regard the development of a signification system for communication void of barriers would require the use of both deduction and induction approach to meaning-making of the data to be analysed. This is because reading on the secondary data chosen to establish what is explicitly asserted as the intended message communicated via the image advertisement is basically stating a defined rule which needs to be considered when deconstructing the secondary data to guide the design of interview questions and comparing primary data, thus deductive approach. The primary data collected is then summarised, and the descriptions of the secondary data by

key informants need to be analysed with a patient process in order to ascertain rich intuition from the descriptions given in the primary data thus induction as influenced by the researcher's worldview and philosophy.

The mode of inquiry with the use of exploratory research requires as context matters with regards to the extraction of a signification system for communication. The use of a case study as a secondary data was chosen; thus, a case study based research design was chosen. Advertising campaigns of Zara fashion brand was explored from a semiotic perspective, how it communicates its values or intended themes to its target audience with the use of icons as the research objective stipulates. A single unit of an image of the advertisement campaign of a brand composes of multiple units of signs, symbols, and icons that play a significant role in the process of meaning formation. Multiple units of the case study (image advertisement) of Zara fashion brand particularly for Man and Woman of the seasons in a fashion year was chosen to be deconstructed with rich semiotic explication on the part of the researcher which requires a questioning mind seeking a deeper understanding of the print ad first, before engaging participants.

The level of exploratory over here is overly sophisticated that the conceptual framework established needed to be robust enough to guide the inquiry process. Such an endeavour can only be achieved with the use of an exploratory approach. The reason why this approach is chosen is that, towards the engagement with the respondents, an exploratory research approach grants the researcher the ability to use multiple devices to collect data which is essential for the use of interviews. Cases studies tend to have certain limitations of which some include access, the definition of the unit being analysed, the definition of context and chronological problem.

### 3.2.5 Zara Case Study

The chosen sample of an image advertisement campaign for a semiotic content analysis towards the outlined research objectives is from Zara fast-fashion brand for Mass-Markets. This choice is richly influenced by the research conducted by Gurzki *et al.*, (2019) in 'Crafting Extraordinary Stories: Decoding Luxury Brand Communications'. According to Gurzki *et al.* (2019). Zara fast fashion brand belongs to the mass-market fashion brand, Zara is well recognized for its size and commercial relevance as well as its unique communication style that generates a large audience set. Roll (2019), writes in an article about the secret of Zara's Success, Zara now has 2266 stores strategically located in leading cities across 96 countries. This can be aligned with the reason why Zara's

advertising campaign was used as a case study by Gurzki *et al.* (2019). In the context of using a best fit case study to pursue the outlined research objectives and as the topic stipulates; a contribution towards a holistic communication approach to global consumers, an ideal sample case study should be that which has a global reach of which Zara assumes. In line with the research strategy selected thus single case study research strategy, it requires the use of one unit of case study to be analysed of which Zara Brand for fast fashion is chosen. However, the likes of H&M, GAP and Mango as used by Gurzki *et al.*, (2019) share the same similarities in terms of selection criteria, so why Zara? Why a fashion brand?

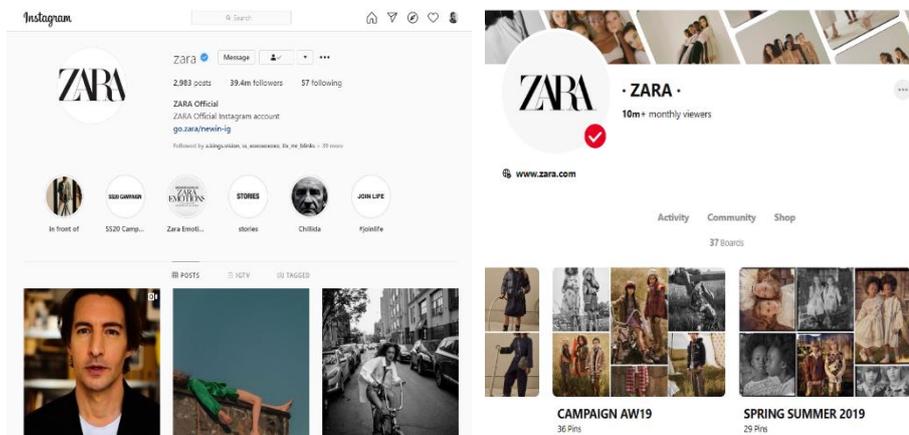
In the context of advertising, fashion stands to be one of the most advertised value propositions in this digital era. The fashion industry today is an international and globalised industry with clothing often designed in one country, manufactured in another and sold in a third as Steele and Major, (n.d.) writes. Roll (2019), The participants in this industry as Gurzki *et al.*, (2019) categorizes Zara, H&M, Gap and mango of the mass-market fashion brand category have a large audience of customers around the world with Zara known to be one of the most prominent brands due to its unique brand management. These brands depending on the advertising of trendy clothes and apparel to continuously refresh their customers with current value propositions is apparent. The most common channel used to advertise by these brands is social media platforms such as Instagram particularly. Statista (2018) reports that there are about one billion active Instagram users as of June 2018. Instagram is uniquely used as an advertising channel by fashion brands purposefully because it is an image centred platform whereby images are posted for followers to see and engage with. Zara currently has thirty-eight million followers on Instagram (figure 7).

Zara, as compared to its competitors, spends a meagre of 0.3 per cent of sales on advertising while its competitors spend 3.5 per cent (Roll, 2019). He furtherly reports that the brand's founder Amancio has never spoken to the media nor has in any way advertised Zara. This makes the case of Zara in regard to advertising quite intriguing. How then has Zara survived as a brand via communication with such a meagre ad spend? It is apparent that the success of Zara can be hunched on a successful brand communication strategy. At this point, it is imperative to acknowledge the reports from BBC and Forbes about the possible means like customer experience in-store and strategic siting of stores in cities,

through which Zara gets its intended message across to its audience other than the use of advertising (Danziger, 2018; Roll, 2019; Patel, 2019).

Advertising in the current digital world is categorised as either organic or inorganic. Organic advertising refers to the use of crafted posts deployed on owned social media platforms that provide active audiences on the page with refreshed intended message whereas inorganic advertising refers to the payment of automated systems to display crafted posts across various channels for publicity to gain like audience attention (Chaffey, 2015). Zara's official Instagram page has periodic posts of images which it uses to interact with its audiences (figure 7). In this regard, the posts on Zara's page will be considered as an inorganic form of advertising. Another reputable social media platform that Zara advertises organically is Pinterest. Zara official Pinterest page records over ten million-plus viewers worldwide (figure 7). The case study of Zara featured the use of posts from their social media pages for the research. The aim is to analyse advertising images by applying a semiotic approach based on a revised combination of semiotic models and theories in order to attempt an extraction of a holistic signification system of communication approach to global consumers.

Figure 7 Zara Official Social Media Page



Source: (Instagram, 2020; Pinterest 2020)

### 3.3 Data Collection Methods

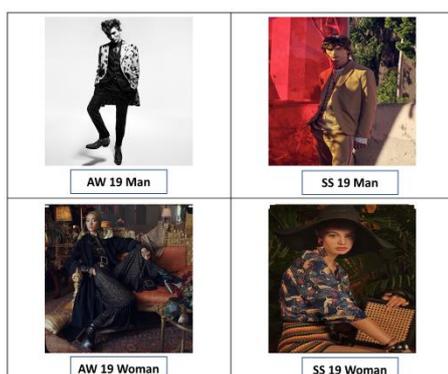
#### 3.3.1 Secondary Data

About the unit of analysis informed by the research objectives, an icon as a representation of a brand value needs to be encoded in a way that is easily deciphered by its target audience. The type of data that possesses what is being examined is secondary data

(advertisement post on social media platform). The criteria for selecting the specific advert was informed by the conceptual framework and literature review. A sample case study, Zara fashion ad campaigns was chosen based on a level of familiarity in terms of the background of the subject piece to be analysed. The criteria that were used to select this case study include, ease of access to the case study, the high level of popularity of the case study as the objectives focus on global consumers, the segmentation of global consumers to which it reaches are young of age category 20 to 30. Fashion brands are the specific epitome of the sample case study to be selected. Image posts for advertisement are free and accessible. The fashion industry is heavily participated by known fashion brands that appeal to a young target audience of the age category in line with potential respondents. The categories include luxury brands, premium brands, mass-market brands (Gurzki et al., 2019). Zara fast fashion brand is also known as a mass-market brand was selected as it is the most likely indulged by the age category of respondents selected in spite of its meagre ad spend. However, the focus is on organic advertising.

Renowned fashion brands generally have seasonal advertising campaigns for Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter. Zara creates its advertising campaign for the season in two compound campaigns called Spring-Summer labelled as ‘SS’ and Autumn-Winter labelled as ‘WW’. The 2019 SS and AW advertising campaigns have been selected for the study. Two image posts on Zara’s official Pinterest Page per campaign was selected, making a total on four images. The selected images are gender-balanced thus ‘women category’ and ‘men category’(figure 8). With regards to the ideal criteria for selecting the secondary data, there is the ease of access to the images to be selected, and there was no difficulty in accessing the images. This is because they are available online on the social media pages for public use. The level of popularity of the chosen ad campaigns as the case study is high as it has been viewed and engaged with by ten million-plus active users.

Figure 8 Zara Ad Campaign



Source: (Pinterest, 2020)

#### 3.4.2 Primary Data

The primary data was collected from respondents that were chosen with the use of purposive sampling method. The key respondents were sourced through the researcher's personal network. The reason why a purposive sampling method was used is that it is a sampling technique that validates the data collected with regards to the specificity of the context of the subject matter, semiotics, brand, and communication. In this regard, the kind of informants that will provide primary data on semiotics, brand and communication includes content creators thus people who are to the field of advertising either by studies (students) or by practice (artists, marketers, graphic designers, communication experts etc.) Reece and Ducoffe, (1987) used purposive sampling to select undergraduate students in advertising class to collect data on meanings of food and diet brand names in order to explore deceptions in brand names. This level of specificity shows the richness and validity of primary data from students who are studying to be content creators and are familiar with the subject matter on how brand names and meanings encoded in those brand names.

The source of the primary data collected will be international graduate students. Access to these potential respondents will be gained via the use of a personal network. A list of criteria pertinent to the research objectives has been used to design an informant sign up form online. The link to this signup form will be shared on class interactive platforms like WhatsApp groups and direct emails. The submitted forms online were reviewed, and twenty-nine potential informants signed up to show interest. The criteria include a postgraduate course in business, communication, and graphic design (content creators), nationality, interest in brand communication, active on social media platforms and interest in fashion. Postgraduate students reading business and communication-related courses do have insightful information to share stemming from their academic background and personal experiences. The topic holistic communication approach is relatable to the sought category of students as informants. Social media marketing through Instagram, Pinterest, Facebook, and other platforms is currently used by fashion brands with the use of regular image posting on pages for the audience to engage. Hence the informant was required to be active on social media and aware of the regular image posting on pages by fashion brands. The interest in fashion is quite essential for the ascertaining of the clarity of the message intended by fashion brand Zara in this regard.

The planned sample size for the data collection was fifteen key informants. Due to an emergent limitation, only nine key informants availed for the data collection.

The instrument of data collection chosen was the use of semi-structured interviews to be conducted face to face. The semi-structured interview provides room for flexibility in order to follow up questions to ascertain clarity on emerging themes within the interview, which is relevant to the scope of the study. The interviews were conducted via online voice calls. The ideal approach to have been used was face to face interview which was discouraged by the ethics committee overseeing this paper due to the uprising of Covid-19 a contagious coronavirus by body fluids, leading to the lockdown or countries, shut down of work activities and closure of schools. Physical contact was not to be adopted in any case in order to collect data.

The interview questions that were used were categorised into main interview questions that had emerging sub-questions that unfolded during the interviews. The main interview questions include,

- What can you say about your social media presence? What kind of fashion brands do you follow on social media?
- What message are you getting?
- What can you list in a description form of what you can see?
- What caught your attention first out of the list of descriptions?
- What are your perceptions of Zara and brand core values?
- Case study flaws and recommendations.

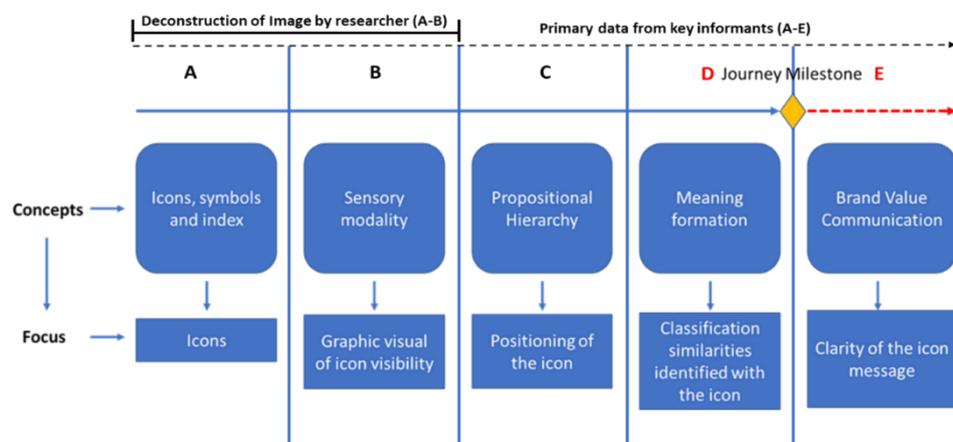
The primary data gathered by interviewing respondents with a semi-structured type of interview implies that the respondents were shown the chosen ad campaigns and were engaged in order to gain an in-depth understanding on how the presented adverts possessed icons that are easily noticeable by the respondent, what positioning of the icon was best noticeable, how it contributed to meaning formation by the consumer, did the meaning formed represent what was intended? In spite of this acknowledgement, Collis, and Hussey (2009) warn that interviews are conducted in a natural setting, you may not have such strong control over compounding and extraneous variables. An audio and video recording tool was used to record all the interviews for further analytical purposes. The primary data collection approach was pilot tested to ensure questions are focused and do

not lead to saturation at an early stage. The duration of the interviews was averagely 45 mins per session. This will ensure the richness of the qualitative data collected.

A multimethod qualitative data collection approach of both primary and secondary data was used. The reason why this was adopted is because of the research objectives seeking to deconstruct a case study which is a secondary data and the use of interviews to question respondents on their meaning formation process to collect primary data. This pertains to the research objective of finding the positioning of leads icons in a propositional hierarchy to guide meaning formation process. The data collection was done within a cross-sectional horizon as objectives did not include the observation of changes in phenomenon over time.

The semiosis conceptual framework of communicating value indicates the layers in which the research process unfolded with regards to the methodology of the research. The modified version of the semiosis conceptual framework of communicating value into an analytic framework shows the deconstruction of the ad case studies (secondary data) based on the knowledge of the researcher (figure 9). Haven read extensively about the fashion campaign and the role of semiotics in the advertisement, the secondary data thus the ad case study had been explicitly explored in a descriptive form to outline the visible items, symbols, objects and icons from the case studies at the neutral point of view to an extent and the intended messages encoded in the ad case studies have been outlined. The overall research methodology entails both the deconstruction of the secondary data and the collection of primary data from purposefully chosen key informants. The primary data to be collected entails sections A to E with the goal of reaching the journey milestone (figure 9).

Figure 9 Refined Analytical Framework



### 3.4.3 Access and Ethical Issues

The purpose of this research requires the collection of primary and secondary data of which measures had been put in place to guarantee an ethically approved approach to gather, collect, and analyse data. A plain language statement and an informed consent form for participants to be involved in the study have been approved by the ethics committee. These documents can be found in the appendixes section; Appendix A – Plain language statement and Appendix B – Informed consent form for participants.

The plain language statement informed the participants about the research study, details of involvement in the study, potential risks that may arise from involvement in the research study, benefits to participants, measures adopted to ensure the protection of confidentiality and method through which the collected data will be made non-existent in the future. The plain language furtherly stated how voluntary oriented participation is demanded as well as a secured channel for any queries that emerge during participation. For more details, see Appendix A in the appendix section.

The participant informed consent form stated the purpose research study and sought to inquire from the potential participants if they agree to partake in the study by filling out sections of the form. Interested participants gave their consent by endorsement and reassured of the protection of confidentiality, for more details, see Appendix B in the appendix section.

### 3.5 Approach to Data Analysis

The approach to data analysis was conducted two folds, and these include deconstruction of the secondary data and using descriptive analysis method to analyse the primary data. Deconstruction of the ad case studies with a descriptive focus was performed by the principal researcher with the aim of explicitly outlining the visible icons, objects, and symbols from each case study from a neutral perspective in order to obtain a premeditated coding pattern to view the primary data to obtained from the key informant to the research. The deconstruction of the ad case studies also aided the principal researcher to get a grounded understanding of the context of Zara fast fashion brand in order to establish the preconceived meanings such as the purpose of the ad campaigns and the brand core values encoded in the ad case studies for future comparisons with the primary data obtained.

A computer-assisted qualitative data analytic software (CAQDAS) assisted with the categorising and sorting of primary data according to the analytics focus. The complexity of the primary data is such that the key informants are of two genders (male and female) giving responses to two ad case studies per gender. The males responded to case studies A (Zara Man AW ad campaign) and B (Zara Man SS ad campaign). The females responded to case studies A (Zara Woman AW ad campaign) and B (Zara Woman SS ad campaign). The analytical framework shows the level of analytical focus of icons visible, the graphic visual of icon visibility, positioning of the visible icon in the image in order of what was seen first, the classification of similarities associated with the identified icon and, clarity of message decoded or deciphered from the image. Gathering primary data from both genders with regards to the number of case studies used and the five levels of analytic focus towards the extraction of a signification system tends to require rigorous analytic processing of the primary data. The time factor also as considered was not feasible if other approaches such as the manual qualitative data analysis were to be implemented hence the choice of using CAQDAS. NVivo CAQDAS was used in analysing the primary data with its functions auto code, framework matrices, framework matrix query, word frequency query and concept mapping.

### 3.5.1 Deconstruction of secondary data

- The chosen cases studies have certain features in common that makes it a thematic based campaign used for both man and woman in order to ensure consistency of the ad campaign (figure 10).
- The autumn-winter (AW) campaign for both man and woman is composed with a level of contrast that can be described as dark as compared to the spring-summer (SS) campaign for both man and woman, composed with a level of contrast which is bright. The details of visible items, objects, signs, symbols in terms of its colour and how clearly it can be seen by sight all contribute to the said contrast description of the campaign images.
- Zara purposefully composed these campaigns to portray a message of seasonal clothing collections for the four seasons autumn, winter, spring, and summer. This will be identified as the intended message as the source of these images were captioned on the published platforms (Pinterest and Instagram) with season titles

“ZARA MAN FALL winter 2019” and so forth with regards to the chosen images respectively indicating the season the collection is assigned to (Pinterest, 2020).

- Ad case study A for man belongs to the autumn-winter campaign, whereas the ad case study B for man belongs to the spring-summer campaign (figure 10).
- Ad case study A for woman belongs to the autumn-winter campaign, whereas the ad case study B for woman belongs to the spring-summer campaign (figure 10).
- Zara purposefully composed these campaigns to portray another level of the message of its brand values that makes it uniquely identified as Zara, and these entail the four core values of Zara: beauty, clarity, functionality, and sustainability.
- As inductive from these layers of deconstruction, it is the case that Zara intends to portray a message about the seasonality of its current clothes at the time as well as being consistent with communicating its brand values.
- Another shade of message that Zara intends to portray as far the fashion year 2019 is concerned is its advocacy for minimalism. As adapted from Zara’s official Facebook page, minimalism relies on understated and subtle details and makes a quiet but powerful statement (Facebook, 2020).

Figure 10 Zara Ad Campaign Case Studies



Source: (Eggertsen, 2018; Fashion Gone Rogue, 2018 Pinterest, 2020)

### 3.5.2 Data Analysis of Primary Data

The primary data collected was analysed with a descriptive analyses approach. This analytic approach was chosen because the key responses from the key informants that are of value were worded descriptions of what could be seen in the cases studies (image description) hence the precise words used to describe the content in the image were the actual data being sought.

#### **The categorisation of Raw Data**

All the nine interviews conducted were transcribed and coded at the participant's attribute level to give the transcript an identity capable of being categorised with regards to its attributes. The key informants were assigned with codes with regards to the adopted recruitment and selection criteria, gender (Male-M/Female-F), nationality (two-letter initials of the country), familiarity with Zara (Yes-Y/No-N), content creation conscious (Yes-1/No-0), active on social media (A) and participant number (01-09). Therefore, a coded transcript with identity: MGHN0A\_01 - Male, from Ghana, not familiar with Zara, not content creation conscious, Active on Social Media, Participant number 01 and FINY1A\_05 - Female, from India, familiar with Zara, content creation conscious, Active on Social Media, Participant number 05.

The valuable descriptive words of the case studies were coded and categorised based on the main interview questions, which was informed by the conceptual framework. Icons, symbols, and index code contained all responses to the questions asking participants to describe extensively what icons and symbols in the form of objects or items are visible from the case study. A textual code 'Description\_A Man' referred to the description of all items and objects that could be seen by ad case study A by all the male participants. This is linked to the interview question, describe extensively all that you can see from the ad case study A in terms of signs, objects, symbols, icons, or anything you deem visible from the image.

Sensory Modality – This code contains the varying descriptions of what makes certain objects from the case studies made the participants see them clearly or gave them an idea of what message is communicated. The code 'kind of editing' emerged from responses attempting to describe the levels of high or low contrasts in colour and also the topography a content in the case study either as heavy or light.

Propositional Hierarchy – This code contained all response indicating what the participants clearly identified as what item or objects was seen first as well as a summary of an explanation of why it caught their attention first. The code ‘Propositional\_Hierarchy B Woman’ refers to all what each female participant asserted as what icon they saw first by looking at the case study B for Woman.

Brand Value communication – This code contained all responses that revealed icons seen from the cases study gave out messages about the core values of Zara (Beauty, clarity, functionality, and sustainability). It also contained the first level of a message received by viewing the picture in a generic sense. By first level message, I mean responses to an interview question, what message are you getting by looking at this case study. This is in regard to all the case studies and response from male and female. A textual code ‘Message\_A Man’ referred to the first level of a message decoded by male participants on Ad Case Study A.

Meaning formation – This code contained all responses about Zara brand perceptions that catalysed their take on understanding what the claim to you received as the message with regards to the brand value communication code and its subcategories.

### **Summary and Tabulation of Categorised Data**

The categorised data was now summarized after a constant comparison with the data from each participant as well as the deconstructed secondary data, to represent what the data is with regards to the analytic focus of the study. These summaries were tabulated with columns of the table contained with data on the analytic focus and rows of the table contained with each case study thus case study A and B for Man and case study A and B for Woman (Appendix D). All the values in terms of descriptions in the cells represent a common response from all the respondents that observed a specific case study and those common responses had an attribution to the analytic focus. For an instance cell A3 posits a unanimous response that ‘Overcoat’ is what icon they could see first by observing the picture in case study A for Man (see cell A3 in Appendix D).

### **Mapping of Themes**

The keyword descriptions in the summarised and tabulated data refined with the analytic focus were used to represent themes that were mapped in order to develop a signification system that was emerging. These keywords were extracted with the use of the word

frequency function of the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software. The themes that emerged as a result of this descriptive analysis include (1) *eye-catcher as a lead icon* in the images of the ad campaign, (2) *positioning of icons and size*, (3) *the choice of colours* based on what those colours denote from a generic world view and (4) *Image quality and contrast* with regards to the blend and use of monochromatic colours vs black and white to qualify and tone the overall image.

### 3.6 Conclusion

This chapter has talked about the methodological approach that was adopted to conduct this research. The chosen methodological approach was qualitative which is underpinned with the world view of the research that belief that man as an individual is a thought on itself which cannot be perceived by any other man but can only be revealed if the necessary conditions presupposing the interaction between two individuals are met hence consent. Also, man as an individual has a rational response to stimuli which contains rich information that takes time to process hence the need to create an accommodating context to enable that patience of information to be refined and given as data. The research strategy chosen includes the use of a case study in the context of fashion which was deconstructed by the researched and purposefully chosen informants were interviewed with a semi-structured type of interview questions to collect primary data. The primary data were analysed by using a descriptive analysis approach by transcribing and categorising of raw data according to the main interview questions, which was strictly informed by the conceptual framework and its analytic focus. The keyword descriptions that were common between the responses of participants were mapped as themes to form a signification system to be discussed in the next chapter.

## 4 Presentation and Discussion of Findings

### 4.1 Overview

Would you believe, if anyone asserts that there is a universal truth of how to communicate a message of any kind with the use a signification system that is void of communication barriers to deciphering or decoding intended messages? This sounds absolutely preposterous since there is an existing debate on the assertion of universal truths as existent or non-existent of which certainty and generalisation of truths are compromised to find a balance worthy of attention. The research question about what ideal signification system can be implemented to communicate brand values to a larger audience, global consumers had been carefully researched, and these are the findings with regards to the use of Zara ad campaign as a case study.

Comparatively to the deconstruction of the case studies conducted by the researcher, the primary data had shown that the purpose of the Zara ad campaign to communicate the seasonal collection of their clothes while maintaining a depiction of their core values beauty, clarity, functionality and sustainability as well as minimalism as a fashion concept, were exactly the kind of messages the interviewees were asserting as deciphered from the observation of the case studies.

Zara communicates its brand values and intended message of seasonal collection of clothes by using (1) *eye-catcher as a lead icon* in the images of the ad campaign, (2) *positioning of icons and size*, (3) *the choice of colours* based on what those colours denote from a generic world view and (4) *Image quality and contrast* with regards to the blend and use of monochromatic colours vs black and white to qualify and tone the overall image. These four elements contribute to what will be described as the emerging signification system of communication from a semiotics point of view. Finally, a key finding which emerged as essential to the four elements is *semiotic comprehensiveness* which aligns the (1) eye-catcher as a lead icon, (2) positioning of icons and size, (3) choice of colours and (4) high-quality contrast together such that all the four (4) elements support and complement each other and are consistently implemented in the ad campaign.

## 4.2 Findings

### 4.2.1 Eye-catcher as a Lead Icon

The case studies, as examined by interviewees, tend to have a clearly projected icon in particular that caught their attention first amidst all the other visible items and objects from the case studies. This was classified as a lead icon in the sense that it begins the journey of meaning formation by the audience. The opinion of what icon caught the attention first would supposedly be thought to be variant from each respondent. However, out of the responses, males were able to identify a unique lead icon which was what caught their attention first in the case study A for Man, the overcoat/over jacket (see cell A3 in Appendix D). Likewise, female respondents unanimously identified the shirt as what caught their attention first in the case study B for Woman (see cell D3 in Appendix D). The reason behind why it caught their attention first, however, was variant with respect to their background and experience (world view). This finding posits that irrespective of the different cultural backgrounds of the target audience of the message advertised, meaning formation explicated in minute exploration, shows five (5) staged journey in which a message is decoded. The five (5) staged journey include spotting of an icon that appeals the most and at first sight, personal attributions to that spotted icon with respect to worldview, spotting of other icons, deciphering of first layer message and lastly deciphering of the never-ending chains of other meanings deciphered.

#### **Spotting the lead icon**

The spotting of an icon that appeals the most and seen at first sight, for instance, the overcoat in case study A for Man as identified by the male interviewees begins the meaning formation process of the case study A for Man (see cell A3 in Appendix D). Likewise, 'the shirt' in case study B for Woman was identified as what was seen first by female interviewees (see cell D3 in Appendix D)

#### **Personal Attributions to the lead icon**

The second level of meaning formation which is the personal attributions to the lead icon, the overcoat was variant with regards to the response by participants when asked why that was the first icon from the case study spotted. Take for an example, the response of a Ghanaian male participant when asked the question about what made the overcoat appeal to him or caught his attention first:

Because all I know about here in this country is that it is just a coat. The black coat black down and an inner shirt. No one really wears an overall coat on it. So, I tried to see whether the overall coat matches the dresses he is wearing.

This is showing a worldview of a potential audience from Ghana with the view that the coat is only worn as an ordinary coat with a jacket and a matching pant. The new introduction of an overcoat on the coat which he perceives seems to be odd and intriguing; hence it drew his attention. In comparison, another interviewee when asked the same question on why the overcoat was what caught his attention first, the comment is indicated as below:

Something that is very distinct is the pattern on the suit that is like, black and white like a Dalmatian dog. I do not know what exactly it is called, but it gives me that. Uh, the, like the spots on the dalmatian dog breed that is very distinctive in this picture. Definitely the black and white colour of the image. That is what got my attention and what is on the image. It is definitely his suit. It is how the jacket has this dalmatian pattern on it (MINY1A\_09).

In comparison, the Indian male respondent identifies the overcoat as what caught his attention first on the reason based on his experience of knowing about dog breeds and their nature of body skin topography. It is imperative to point out here that the bases of the comparison are not attributed to the varying nationality in terms of culture but by the varying personal attributions, not used to seeing overcoat on a suit and knowledge of dog breeds, respectively. This shows how personal attributions to the lead icon identified can be diverse with respect to the worldview of each target audience at an individual level.

### **Spotting of other Icons**

There are other icons in the case studies aside from the lead icons that was spotted at first sight. A list of descriptions of icons, objects and items spotted in the case study A for Man include a young guy, coat, jacket, shoes, white design, shirt, shadow, pose, overtop/over jacket, spots, stripes, trousers, and suit (see cell A1 in Appendix D). All these icons are the other icons that have been spotted and could be identified as seen as the second spotted, third and fourth spotted and so forth. The essence of these other icons spotted after the lead icon is that it shapes the meaning formation process towards what was intended by the creator. The combination of these other icons with what was spotted first and influenced by the personal attributions of the audience leads to the deciphering of the first layer message.

## **Deciphering of First Layer Message**

The term first layer message is referred to as the first level of meaning-making after the audience has spotted other icons aside the lead icon spotted first. The Zara case studies communicate various levels of a message to which the participants deciphered. The first layer of message deciphered from the case studies was categorised as the purposefully intended message of seasonal collections of the clothes advertised. The second layer of message deciphered was the depiction of the brand values of Zara from the case studies. The third level of message deciphered which was classified as the never-ending formation of meaning connotation at an abstract level that cannot be contained within the scope of the research as far as feasibility and time factor is concerned.

The formation of the first layer message begins from the spotting of the lead icon, attaching a personal attribution to the lead icon, spotting other icons aside from the lead icon and attaching it to the journey of meaning formation which was already commenced to decipher a first layer message. Take for an example, this time around let us use a female perspective, female participants unanimously identified the shirt as the lead icon from case study B for Woman (see cell D3 in Appendix D). The personal attributions to the lead icon vary between the participants, in this case, an example is the response from an interviewee when asked why the shirt caught her attention, and the comment is indicated as below:

I love those kinds of images because I am a nature lover, and I love animals. So, I would; I would get attracted to tops, which have or dresses which have some figures on it. Oh, for me it is, I mean, I would love to buy some stuff (FINY1A\_05).

Her love for animals and nature of those kinds of images that is in the shirt is the personal attribution that made her see the shirt as a lead icon from case study B as opposed to another interviewee who asserts that “I saw her, um, her, uh, top like the shirt because I thought the pattern was quite interesting”(FDEY1A\_07). This shows the varying personal attributions to the shirt spotted as the lead icon.

In the journey of the meaning formation being explicated in this example, next on the level is the spotting of other icons in case study B for Woman which include plants, palm trees, bird, flowers, red, blue, a skirt, accessories, a bag, a hat, a woman, yellow, green, white, black, beige, pose, outfit and cosmetic lipstick (see cell D1 in Appendix D) the interviewees deciphered the first layer of the message of case study B when asked the

question, what message are you getting just by looking at his image “...it's more like a beach look wearing, she's wearing a hat, uh, with the palm leaves in the background...her entire modelling is; basically, she's like a beach bright summer day, something like that”( FINY1A\_05) and another interviewee of the same classification claimed “...the outfit when you go into nature, like when you go out for a walk or like, um, on holiday, because it's perfect. A perfect outfit for that...” ( FDEY1A\_07). An underlying theme from the messages deciphered by both participants is a perfect holiday outfit for summer and beach (see cell D5 in Appendix D). This furtherly explicated shows how the spotting of the shirt as a lead icon with the reasons of personal attributions, identified with other icons such as palm trees, the birds and flowers in the shirt, the plants and the shirt give a first layers message cue of summer outfit being depicted. The journey does not end here as there are other layers of messages that had being deciphered by the participants, which leads to the next phase of the journey of meaning formation.

### **Deciphering of a Never-Ending Chains of Connotations**

This last phase of the journey of meaning-making encompasses all other meanings that the audience deciphered after the first layer message. This phase is continuously shaped by the subconscious mind of the audience, which cannot be easily tapped or controlled from a semiotic point of view. It is a result of a continuous attaching of icons (lead icon and other icons) with other icons that are far abstract and not visible in the same image but evoking a memory from the subconscious which generates a multiple of further attributes to be attached to what is seen thus creating a never-ending chain of meanings deciphered from the icons. For an example, an interviewee when asked the question what message you are getting just by looking this image, she responded that “the outfit when you go into nature, like when you go out for a walk or like, um, on holiday, because it's perfect. A perfect outfit for that”( FDEY1A\_07). This is the first layer of message deciphered (summer or holiday outfit). The same interviewee continued with the response on the same question that “...so I feel like it's like giving you a feeling in the hot country, be happy, be free kind of this message”( FDEY1A\_07). A feeling in the hot country, be happy, be free are terms she had introduced as meanings being deciphered in addition to the summer outfit she deciphered earlier. The point here is such newly introduced meanings are highly abstract and questioning her to know what being free is or being happy is and how it qualifies the earlier message of summer outfit will lead to a high level of abstract discussions which philosophers have yet to stipulate a common ground on;

what is happiness? What is freedom? This shows the extent to which meaning-making can move from a simplistic form and transcend beyond abstract boundaries.

The lead icon is of great importance in the journey of meaning formation process as shown that it shapes how the first layer of the message is deciphered by virtue of it been spotted first to evoke personal attributions and attached with other icons spotted from the same image being observed. The journey of meaning formation as elaborated tends to have stages that can be controlled and stages that are non-controllable. The non-controllable stages involve the dependence on the personal attributions and subconscious of the audiences, which varies great and cannot be perceived of precisely when creating content for advertisement. On the other hand, the controllable stages involve the possibility if using carefully chosen icons capable of being portrayed or designed in a manner that can be spotted first. It is classified as controllable because it depends on the choices the creator makes in terms what kinds of icons to use to create the advert for communication. The wonder about 'how' the icon can be carefully featured in the advert for communication has to with the positioning of specific icons in the image (centred in the middle, top, bottom, left or right), the size and style of the specific icon as well.

Carefully choosing of a lead icon to the intention of setting the meaning formation process towards the deciphering of the first layer message which should be the intended message and positioning it in such a manner within the picture for it to be spotted first by the target audience is what is referred to as the eye-catcher. The next finding explains the way the eye-catcher (the overcoat – case study A for Man and the shirt – case study B for Woman) is positioned to capable of being spotted first to aid in deciphering the first layer message.

#### 4.2.2 Positioning of Icons and Size

The eye-catcher, as explored in the previous section, could not be spotted as the first icon on its own if there was not a careful mode of design attention given to it. That careful mode of design attention is what this finding talks about hence the positioning of icons. When you take any image for instance, whatever is shown in the image can be described in terms of its position on the image frame as either placed on the top or bottom, centred, left or right. This positioning is applicable to all icons that can be seen in the image. Furtherly, if a hypothetical image of only two icons (Icon 1 and Icon 2) are carefully observed, icon one can be placed on the top region of the image and icon two could be placed at any of the other regions that are clear thus bottom, centre, left or right regions. It will not be the case that icon one and icon two will be positioned at the same top region

on top one, that will only place one icon at a disadvantage in terms of visibility unless that is the intention the creator or designer. Likewise, the two icons could also be placed on the top region, but perhaps icon 1 positioned slightly to the left or right or even in the corners. This shows that in terms of the region for icon placement on the image, there are so many options to go with and the key point here is which position is that chosen eyecatcher going to be placed which is dependent on the designer or creator.

A dominant position as identified by respondents both male and female participants in the middle or centred positioning of what they identified as the icon that caught their attention first to an extent forms a part of the reason why they saw that lead icon first. Out of the various reasons they gave for spotting a lead icon, a recurring theme of middle positioning of the lead icon identified as being of focus in the picture at some point of the interviews. An interviewee responded when asked to extensively describe what items, objects, or icons he can see in the case study B for Man, that:

That is a lot more to go from because you have the line down the middle in terms of what I am talking in terms of colour. Of course, on the left side, you have completely red, and on the right, you have mostly green, which is separated in the middle and then you have to model that kind of stands on that specific line, which helps to kind of take the focus. Right. And with that line, I know to look somewhat in the middle. And there is the model which they are trying to put the focus on, which is nice. And I think that is important the way they are doing it, because the clothing he is wearing, like this beige light brown and it does not take the focus immediately by itself (MDKY1A\_02).

This quote indicates the participant's assertion of how the middle region of the case study has been used to place a high level of focus on what he can spot as the lead icon the model (see cell B3 in fig). Discerned from this quote is the positioning of the model in the middle or centred region of the region. As furtherly described is the region where two contrasting background colours meet vertically with the model positioned right in the middle of that contrast region as asserted by the participant that it shows that the model is what they are trying to put a focus on and the clothes he is wearing appears as the other icons spotted which doesn't take the focus at first sight hence classified as the other icons and not a lead icon.

Likewise, an interviewee's response when asked why the shirt was the first thing spotted, she said "Because it is really colourful and um, that's the biggest piece in the picture. So that is what is focusing the most, and as its also in the middle"( FDEY1A\_08). Two keywords from both quotes are *focus* and *middle* which is used to explain why the lead icon was spotted first by the participants indicating that the middle positioning of the icon

in the image gives an increased level of focus to the icon rendering it spottable at first sight. As discerned from the same quote of the interviewee's comment "Because it is really colourful and um, that's the biggest piece in the picture. So that is why focusing the most, and as its also in the middle"( FDEY1A\_08). The size of the icon also matters in terms of how big or small the icon is. In her regard, it has to do the big size of the icon, which is the shirt (see cell D0). From an ordinary perspective, it is obvious that icon of big size as compared to other icons will be spotted first, but this is not the case where I am asserting that the lead icon needs to be of big size but considerably of a size recognizable with respect to the nature of the icon itself and long as it is focused enough.

This brings us to the next finding, which furtherly explores the previous findings, particularly the positioning of the icon and level of focus on the led icon. As discerned from some of the supporting quotes of the participants, an emerging theme was the descriptions of colours as bright or dull which bring us to the remaining three findings the *choice of colours* and *Image quality and contrast*.

#### 4.2.3 Choice of Colours

A key finding from the primary data analysis is the meanings participants ascribed to dominant colours spotted in the case studies being explored. During the interview sessions as the interview questions were semi-structured to allow the flexibility on questioning to seek clarity and rich responses, questions like, what does the colours black, blue, gold, green or red depict or mean from your background and experience sought to get an understanding on the perceptions of the said colours spotted in the case studies (see cells A1-D1 in Appendix D) and how it lead to the deciphering of the first layer message. In spite of the various meanings that were attributed to each spotted colour, five dominant colours that had a great influence in shaping the deciphering of the first layer message and to an extent a snapshot of the other meanings deciphered had a recurring ascription of meanings by the participants. These colours include black, blue, gold, green and red. Using these colours as distinct codes with data describing what ascriptions were giving to the colours, a word frequency function was used to churn out the dominant words that were used to describe what ascriptions were given to these colours (Table 1).

Table 1 Colour Ascriptions from Primary Data

Colour	Ascription
Black	Elegance, power, ambience, classic, dark, important. Colder tone
Blue	Riverside, serene, peaceful
Gold	Fancy,
Green	Sustainability, jungle, plants, trees
Red	Daytime, outdoors, warmer tone

These colours depict a kind of meaning that aid in the meaning formation journey. The fact that colours are associated with some meanings universally serves as an advantage on the part of the content creator such that the use of such colours can help portray an intended message. For instance, the colour blue as depicting serene, peaceful, and riverside gives a message about the icon of that colour as having attributes of such depictions. The shirt in case study B for Woman has blue as its colour and gives an impression of a cloth to be worn near riverside as mentioned by an interviewee when asked what objects from the case study makes her decipher the message of being summer-ready that she identified:

“...the shirt is saying so much about the riverside like this is blue. Blue is like I think it gives you a serene, peaceful look. Yes, it is more like a beachy kind of shirt, it's like she's going to the beach...”(FNGY1A\_03).

From this quote, blue as a colour has aided in the deciphering of the first layer message ‘summer ready’, and this is based on the notion that something blue is associated with riverside or beach. It is the case that going to the beach or the riverside is occasionally an exploration that is carried out in the warm season, summer hence an outfit you could wear for that occasion. The shirt could have been of a different colour, perhaps red, yellow, or pink but from a colour attribution point of view, the meaning could have been different. The choice of colour in terms of the blue shirt has a significant role to play in communicating the intended message of season collections. The knowledge of these colour attributions and carefully choosing the right colour combination in the creation of content plays a significant role in communications from a semiotics perspective.

The choice of colours is not independent in the journey of meaning-making; it depends on the icons used in the creation of the content. The lead icon can be easily spotted first if its colour evokes an ascription that serves as the foundation on which the multiple meanings can be deciphered. It is imperative to know what ascriptions are associated with which colours and chosen the one that suits the intended message like summer in regard to case study B for Woman. An interesting comment made by an interviewee with regards to the choice of colours in the content creation of the case studies when asked what colour tones can be associated with winter is indicated as below:

You have the colder tones, and you have the warmer tones and red is a very warm tone. And whereas light blue or whatever is more of a cold tone. So, I guess because red or light blue or whatever can also mean different things. But if you are talking colours in terms of times a year, then it is obvious. Like you do not want to go vibrant red if you are trying to advertise something that's winter style or whatever because that would just contradict itself (MDKY1A\_02).

The mention of vibrant red for advertising winter style as contradicting from his view shows the importance of the choice of colours in content creation as far as the intended message; winter style in this regard is concerned. It is obvious that the winter style cloth being advertised would be of different colour forms however the choice of that single unit of cloth to be used in the advert must be a colour that depicts an ascription that can be an aid in the deciphering of winter style. In the case of this participant, those colours may be light blue, as mentioned in the quote that light blue is more of a colder tone, thus attributed to coldness, cold weather. This brings us to the final finding *image quality and contrast*, which piggybacks on the choice of colours.

#### 4.2.4 Image Quality and Contrast

An emerging theme from the descriptions of the case studies by the participants was their attempt to give a comment on how the overall image looks without paying attention to an order in which they identified icons in the image. A comment like the whole image looks dark or too bright or as having very bright colours all over the picture. Literal comments were passed on the kind of editing used in the case studies indicating the interviewees' knowledge on kinds of editing as sharp or dull from a non-technical point of view. The codes: monochromatic colours and minimalism, royal and luxury were used to contain all data that described the interviewees' overall description of how the picture looked.

A detailed look at what was said in regard to the kind of impression given by the case studies posited a recurring theme of the level of qualities the case studies possessed as

*clear and well blended, high or low, too dark and too bright* which is classified as image quality. By referring to image quality, I am not limiting it to the traditional response to the level of quality of an image, either high or low from a graphic designing point of view. As this finding emerged from the primary data, the participants expressed themselves as explicitly as they could and gave out their take on the image concerning image quality as the image being clear to see all-encompassing icons in the image. Out of curiosity, an interviewee was asked what makes a high-quality picture means and she said “well, being able to see things in detail, nothing blurred well that's for me. Being able to see the picture and not see flaws”( FNGY1A\_03). This means that the case studies were of high quality and void of flaws or icons that could not be seen from her perspective. These levels of quality were expressed in the following sub-themes that were identified.

- **Monochromatic colours and Minimalism** – The use of colours that are from one particular shade of colour which is formed by adding white to it. Using a particular kind of colour in different shades tend to depict an image quality that is considered as clear and less complex looking. The use of a particular and only its shades in a monochromatic way gives an impression that participants identified as minimalistic. Minimalism was explained by a male participant as to when expressing his choice of clothing style based on minimalism as “...not too much design, too many colours. Usually, one plain colour or maybe stripes are okay...” One plain colour and not using too many colours is what minimalism and monochromatic colours are about. The clothes as icons in both the case studies A and B for Man had plain colours that contributed to the clear image quality of those case studies.
- **Royal and Luxury** – Case studies A for both Man and Woman were seen as portraying royal and luxury message on the second layer of message deciphered, and when asked what about the case studies gave that impression, participants used descriptions such as too dark in the sense that the combination of colours in the said case studies had more shades of black. Particularly with respect to cases study A for woman the image was described as having a vintage, old fashioned and royal look by how dark it looked in spite of spotting some icons having attributes of richness and wealth. Case study A for man was seen to be luxurious because of the blend of black and white as well as black and white depicting something old.

The keyword *contrast* was dominantly used in describing how the icons of the images appeared to the participants. By the use of the term contrast, I am referring to the data coded as the kind of editing. By seeing the use of black and white only in case study A for Man, a male interviewee identified black and white high contrast as a kind of editing in the sense that black and white was dominant, and no other colour was seen other than black and white. The same interviewee perceived case study B for man as having no editing with respect to a region in the image when as asked to describe what objects and items can be seen, his comment is indicated as below:

“The first thing I noticed was his clothes, matching colours and then there are some trees behind and the background, the left side is red. The right side is natural with natural colours—no editing”( MGHN0A\_01).

From this quote, it shows that he can see a region of the image which is red and a region which is green and to which he identified as natural colours in the sense that it wasn't placed there by the designer as opposed to the red region which was edited with red. *Contrast* shows a level of focus on the lead icon such that it serves as a form of a highlighter having a casting effect on the lead icon to be easily spotted. Case study B for Man as described by the participants shows a complete contrast of two backgrounds in the middle of the image with the model placed or stationed in that same region drawing the attention and spot of the model at first sight.

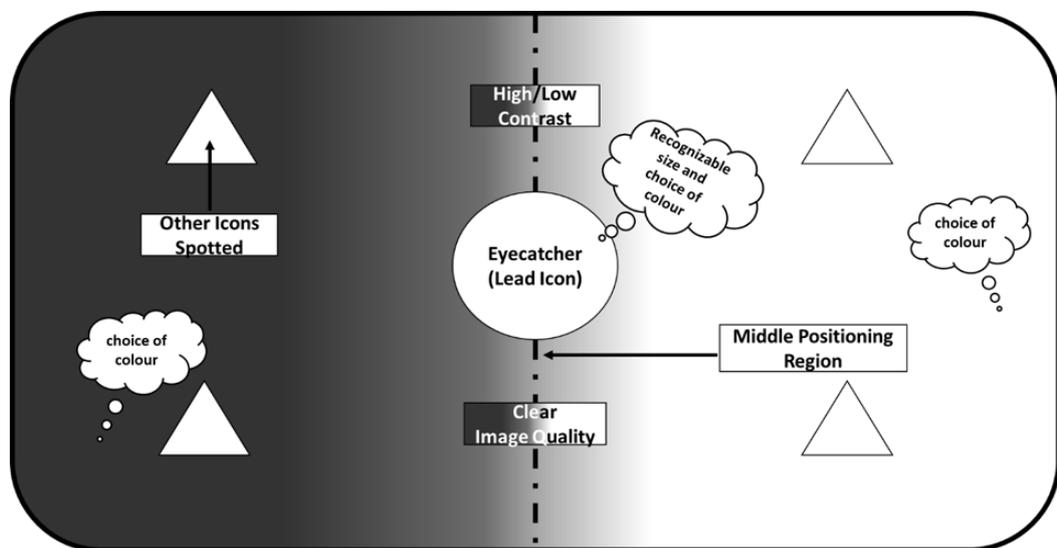
The degree to which the colours are used in terms of how bright or dull it is being applied create a striking difference that either illuminates or shades an icon and the right use of it can aid in content creation with clarity of intended message. With regards to the case studies, case studies B for both Man and Woman were perceived to have very bright colours of high contrast showing that summer is being depicted and case studies A for both Man and Woman were perceived to have dark and dull colours which give a depiction of winter. Image quality and contrast as clear and well blended is perceived when every component in the image seems to align with each other right from the lead icon of recognizable size and unique colour, positioned well in the image of the middle region and clearly visible other icons spotted. An emphasis on the importance of every element being aligned together was made by an interviewee who is content creation conscious when asked why she sees the core value of Zara; Beauty being portrayed in case study A for Woman said:

The woman, how she is dressed, how she is laying there, her view, Um, also how it the whole picture looks like with the sofa in it, which is really elegant. So, with the gold and there the blanket over there and a sort of carpet and the flowers and the picture, like the home, whole thing how it is put together (FDEY1A\_08).

Her emphasis on how the whole thing is put together shows how successful the case study in terms of communicating the brand value of beauty for her to easily decipher semiotically by the attention given to the careful positioning of the lead icon which a woman or the model in her regard, how she is dressed, her posture and the use of other icons that complete the image's overall look.

What has been explained so far in the findings section shows a positive move towards the quest of finding a signification system for brand communication to a larger target audience, global consumers. The emerging signification as explored and extracted from the findings of the secondary data, Image extracts from Zara fashion ad campaign and the primary data from key informants who are of a dominant gender, different nationalities, some familiar with Zara and some not familiar, some who have a background in marketing, art, or communication (content creation conscious) and very active on social media, can be simply illustrated in the diagram below (figure 14)

Figure 11 The Emergent Signification System



The emerging signification system is a contribution towards the communication of a brand message to an audience with ease of the deciphering of the intended message and can be well utilised for communication purpose if the elements in the system are aligned, and this is what will be referred to as a *semiotic comprehensiveness*.

#### 4.2.5 Semiotic Comprehensiveness.

The findings discussed in this chapter shows a link binding all the elements in the emerging signification system together with such that taking out one or not focussing on one could make things go wrong in the journey of meaning formation by the audience. They must align with each other as emphatically to go from what an interviewee mentioned in one of the quotes used in the findings section “... Like you do not want to go vibrant red if you are trying to advertise something that's winter style or whatever because that would just contradict itself...”( MDKY1A\_02). This opinion shows how things could just go wrong in the emerging signification system if attention is not giving to a particular element in the system thus the choice of appropriate colour perhaps using red and attempting to communicate winter clothing style by using other icons that aid in depicting winter and using a dark overall contrast. It will be hard to get that message across just because the right colour choice for the lead icon says the overcoat in this regard was not used. Just imagine right now looking ad case study A for Man, assuming every other component in the image is constant with only the overcoat coloured brightly with red. I cannot tell what the results of your imagination would be, but I am sure it will be far from winter style clothing as this participant attests to.

The assertion that all the elements of the emerging signification system should be aligned with each other in terms of creating content for communication to a larger audience is referred to as *semiotic comprehensives*. This terminology was adapted from Hambrick and Fredrickson (2001) in the article ‘Are you sure you have a strategy’ which explores five elements that are to be considered when creating a strategy for business include arenas, vehicles, differentiators, staging and economic logic. After the exploration of all five elements of a strategy, it is important to know all five elements are important enough to require intentionality. All five elements require certain capabilities that cannot be generated spontaneously, all five elements must align and support each other, and lastly, it is only after the specifications of all five elements that the strategist is in the best position to turn to design other supporting activities (Hambrick and Fredrickson, 2001)—likening strategy to system terms to have similarities in the sense that a strategy from Hambrick and Fredrickson, (2001) is a set of important elements that need to be clearly specified and aligned together to achieve a goal which would be a long term goal of a business.

In comparison, the emerging signification system has a set of elements that are important and need to be carefully chosen and aligned together such that they complement each other to deliver an intended message for communication to be successful. Based on this similarity in comparison with the comprehensiveness of a strategy, there should be a comprehensiveness of the elements in the emerging signification system hence the term semiotics comprehensiveness.

### 4.3 Discussion

The study has undertaken in this research has shown the importance of semiotics as a role in advertising which is assumed to be a communication approach to the target audience at a larger scale, thus global consumer. It used the traditional model of communication, source, encoding, message form content and channel, decoding, receiver and feedback as the foundation on which any form of communication approach a brand will use for its marketing activities. The research process in its earlier phases shows how this traditional communication model tends to have barriers in communication as a result of certain gaps that may have existed in the model as Anderson et al., (2006) pointed out that the sender and receiver do not always arrive at common meanings which is a problem. The study had explored how semiotics has been a resourceful approach to encoding content such that such barriers of communication can be void of as it shows how Zara fashion brand communicates its intended message of seasonal collections of clothes as the first layer of the message intended and the communication of its brand values at the second layer of the message. This complements the previous research that showed that semiotics is a resourceful tool that aids in the crafting of communication pieces such as adverts if it is effectively deployed (Lawes, 2002; Barnham, 2009; Faizan, 2019).

This study shows that eye-catcher as a lead icon in the images of the ad campaign, positioning of icons and size, the choice of colours based on what those colours denote from a generic world view and Image quality and contrast, are elements which when considered when creating content for communication purposes form a signification system which is qualified with the word emergent to make communication void of barriers in meaning-making. The word emergent depicts that it is a system that had only been extracted from the secondary and primary data used for this study which is not final but can serve as a beginning of the journey to find that best suitable signification system. The four (4) elements of the signification system pay significant complements to previous research that has been explored in the research process.

Firstly, eye-catcher as a lead icon in the images particularly the recognising of a specific icon as an icon to be conditioned in such a way that it can be seen first to begin the journey of meaning-making is precisely what Barnham, (2019) asserts that the meaning formation process analyses from a consumer perspective can be made simple if a lead initiator on the print advert is noticeable enough to be seen first before all other signs.

Secondly, the positioning of icons particularly having a lead icon in the middle region of the image and sizes that are recognizable complements previous research findings of Barnham, (2019) that if brand values are to be encoded into print ads to a targeted audience, the key representation of what the brand stands for and is well known by its customers should be encoded in such a way that it can be seen at first sight of the print advert. That manner in which the key representation should be encoded would be the finding of middle positioning of the lead icon and of recognizable size. This finding also pays tribute to the recognition of layout composition of elements such as the lead icon in an image frame (Bell and Milic, 2002; Bergkvist *et al.*, 2012).

Thirdly, the choice of colours based on what they denote from a generic worldview complements previous research on denotation as a level of analyses of sign meaning, that colours are signs of a natural language that is explicitly unambiguous and signifies what is obvious to everyone (Marten & Ringham, 2006, p. 62-63; Kim, 1996, p. 24; Nicholas & Price, 1998, p. 3 as cited in Ali and Aslaadi, 2016). Previous research by Hynes and Janson, (2007) in 'Global Imagery in Online Advertisement' shows that consumers reactions to a certain component in an advert particularly colours as a symbol can play a role in the effectiveness of the advert for communication. Colours tend to have cultural attributions and need to be carefully chosen such that it goes beyond cultural attribution in order to aid in the deciphering of a first layer message before the never-ending connotations of meanings is deciphered.

Finally, Image quality and contrast of images as clear and well blended, high or low, too dark and too bright that gives an overall impression of the image aiding in meaning-making complements the assertion that kinds of modality from the theoretical framework of visual grammar by Kress and Leeuwen (1996) is categorised in dimensions, colour, degree of contextualization, comprehensiveness of representation, nature of the perspective, sources of illumination and degree of brightness. Each of these dimensions is analysed on scale bases running from the absence of any rendition of depth to a

maximally deep perspective (Bell and Milic, 2002; Almeida, 2009). Image quality and contrast tend to be the finding that fills the conceptual gap that exists in the attempt to explore the role of semiotics in an advertisement by Faizan (2019) as he neglected modality in his application of the theoretical framework of visual grammar to understand the strategies that advertisers use to communicate to consumers.

This study has given a more holistic approach to communication from a semiotics perspective which Faizan (2019) sought to explore by advocating that implementing a consistent brand communications program alone isn't enough and rather one (businesses) should adopt a more holistic approach which involves studying the unique context of where the communication takes place. The unique context in this regard is the encoding phase of the communication as far as the traditional model of communication is concerned. Within this phase, semiotics plays a major role such that when explored and applied well, a holistic communication will be achieved. The semiotics exploration in this regard provides the emergent signification system as a result which this study has found taking into account the research question 'what ideal signification system can communicate brand intended message and values to a larger audience which will be void of barriers of communication?'

The relevance of this study has a potential of being adopted in vast contexts of brand communication as semiotics is a sign language which is fundamental and precedes any kind of communication strategy or approach hence its advocacy by Lawes, (2019). Businesses are challenged with the communication of their value propositions to their potential customers in various markets, and a mastery of the signification of semiotics can aid in breaking the ice of communicating or marketing their potential audience. The emerging signification system is that flexible in such a way that whatever is to be communicated, only needs to be reduced to icons, signs and symbols that have ascriptions of a broader scope. Some elements, however, become very difficult to adapt within the sense that it is important to have a fair idea of the perceptions the existing audience have of your brand first before you explore the option of icons to use to encode in the signification system.

#### 4.4 Research conclusion

The subject matter of this study semiotics and communication is a call to attention to solve brand communication problems in the light of recent classification of consumers on a global scale as global consumers due to the spread of common technology (e.g. social

media) requiring the need for a holistic communication approach that businesses can adopt to reach larger audiences, has been explored with the use of a qualitative research methodology to seek answers to the research question ‘what ideal signification system can communicate brand intended message and values to a larger audience which will be void of barriers of communication? Based on this research question, the research objectives became quite clear that in order to find the answer to this question, there was the need to (1) explore the encoding process of brand values in an advertisement, specifically examining the positioning of Icons as an initiator of the message encoded, (2) explore the decoding structure of brand advertisement from a consumer perspective, specifically examining how consumers notice icons and other themes in an advert, (3) find out if iconic brand intended message and values in a brand advertisement are easily understood by the consumer.

The existing literature on the subject matter provided resourceful information on how to understudy semiotics and communication, what some authors have attempted to provide in light of the research question and the theoretical gaps that existed in their attempts. Existing literature also provided knowledge on how to close those gaps and to an extent, shaped the ideas that came to mind on how to develop the study furtherly. The conceptual framework that emerged from the literature review had shaped the research methodology as stood to be the core of the whole research linking the research question, research objectives, gaps in literature and methodology together to produce findings that mirror reflect the conceptual framework in the sense that sections that showed analytic focus as the quest yielded results that were being searched for.

The answer to the research question had been extracted through the use of an interpretative research paradigm which is underpinned by a synthesis of inductive and deductive philosophical reasoning. This paradigm enabled me to find rich and qualitative data from key informants that were potential global consumers active social media users and were knowledgeable on brand communication via marketing and advertising with the use of a semi-structured type of interviews to allow flexibility and clarity of emerging concepts in the interviews. The context that was used thus Zara ad campaigns as the secondary data was deconstructed to give me a fair idea on the intended message and values communicated in order to compare the primary data from the key informants to assess the success of the communication approach to aid in finding that ideal signification system of communication via visuals like print adverts.

A descriptive analysis approach to primary data analysis produced concepts and themes that were categorised in three distinct cycles leading to the re-coding of data that eventually showed how the themes linked and connected to establish that emergent signification system. The overall research process had been quite dynamic in the sense that new discovery in the primary data made me go back to the research design particularly the interview questions to be redesigned to be robust enough to find what is actually being researched. Discoveries in the data analysis also pointed me towards the search of new literature that had not come to mind to search for during the review of the literature. The research process of semiotics at the beginning had only been about the search of icons in adverts and how it contributes to communication, and at the core of the research, the focus had to change to the journey of meaning formation particularly the encoding phase since the other phases of communication particularly decoding is uncontrollable and strictly subjective to the individual deciphering. The emergent signification system as the finding to the research question could only be found through this rigorous back and forth research process which was designed and implemented.

## 5 Concluding Thoughts on the contribution of this Research, its Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

### 5.1 Implications of Findings for the Research Questions

The research findings (1) eye-catcher as a lead icon in the images of the ad campaign, (2) positioning of icons and size, (3) the choice of colours based on what those colours denote from a generic world view and (4) Image quality and contrast as explicated in the previous chapter sought to answer the research question of what ideal signification system can be used in communicating brand intended message and values to a larger audience as far as marketing is concerned. The emergent signification system, as an illustrated finding shows how four key elements composed in a visual print ad or static advert, tends to inhibit some implications for the scope of brand communication.

- Eyecatcher as a lead icon as an element in the signification system is an element that may have been overlooked in the earlier approaches to communication, and this study has brought the attention to its importance such that it requires intentionality in order to begin the journey of meaning-making from the consumers perspective shaped by the content creator.
- The positioning of Icon and Size is another element that some researchers of the subject matter have attempted to point out in mere concept forms asserting the importance communicating brand values in order of hierarchy such that the first layer of message to be deciphered is the intended message however failed to show how practical application of this idea in an image or communication content like a print ad should be composed to illuminate this idea. This key element implies that lead icons that are chosen to represent a piece of the value communicated can be layered by composition in a print ad, particularly in the middle region and of a recognizable size.
- Choice of colours as one of the key elements in the signification system is a component that has been explored deeply in the context of universal ascriptions as well as cultural ascriptions to colours rendering this element as very sensitive. What colour to choose is heavily dependent on the intended message to be communicated. The implication here is that it will be a difficult task to find colours

with ascriptions that are beyond cultural ascriptions in order to use it to compose content that a larger audience on a global scale can relate.

- Image quality and contrast piggyback on the choice of colours such that the blending of the colours of all components in the image being created would give an overall impression as too dark, too bright or dull due to the degree to which regions of the image is edited or inhibits high or low levels of colour contrast, which also give cues to be deciphered in the process of meaning formation.

The emergent signification system posits a communication approach that marketing and content creators will have to work together to narrow down intended messages to these elements in order to compose a static visual for communication. Haven said that this system only emerged from the thematic analysis of a print ad which is static hence providing a strict context in which the emergent signification system can be explored. There are other forms of visuals like motion pictures and videos that are also used by content creators to communicate and may require a different semiotic approach in order to find an ideal signification system of communication. As the term emergent goes, these findings can give an idea on what to focus on at start in the quest to find that other signification system in the context of motion pictures.

## 5.2 Contributions and Limitations of the Research

The case study research design used to explore semiotics and communication required the definition of a case and selecting cases to be understudied. The use of Zara ad campaign for the seasons specifically selecting two cases (autumn, winter, spring, and summer) each for the dominant gender Man and Woman as the secondary data provided a rich context in which communication is core in the context of fashion. Using case studies for research involves being open to a range of methods that can draw out meaning and an interpretative paradigm was the best suitable for this study as the focus of the research geared towards the journey of meaning formation by the key informants who have attributes of a potential consumer of Zara fashion as far as the purposive sampling technique used is concerned.

The nature of the case study chosen and the research question of what ideal signification system can communicate brand intended message and values to a larger audience which will be void of barriers of communication required a methodology that focuses on understanding the dynamics present within the case studies (Zara ads for Man and Man)

from a semiotics perspective in terms of what signs, symbols and icons evoke the meanings claimed to be deciphered. This shows that the study is exploratory and requires a qualitative method of data collection and analysis in order to find that ideal signification system (the emergent signification system). Case study research design in this regard in terms of the context of this study has proven to be resourceful and robust such that its use has been worth the findings produced.

There were certain limitations that had a great impact on the development of the research. However, due to the flexible nature of the chosen research strategy and methodology, these limitations were quickly adapted to rendering the findings of the study contestable.

- Primary data limitation- The sampling technique chosen was purposive based on the selection criteria gender, nationality, familiarity with Zara, active on social media and content creation conscious. A sample size of fifteen key informants of a gender balance was planned to be interviewed, and an online signup form was sent to potential informants on a social network resulting in twenty-nine sign-ups willing to participate. During this period, an uprising of a pandemic Covid-19 forced the initiation of the lockdown of countries, closing of schools, and shut down of working activities to counter the pandemic. This created a level of panic such that face to face interviews was strictly discouraged by the ethics body examining this study. The plan of using face to face interviews had to be adjusted with the use of online interviews via voice call or video calls. This transition made a percentage of participants willing to participate in decline, and only nine key informants out of the fifteen planned sample size were interviewed via the new mode of data collection. Therefore, the primary data collected may be considered as not adequate to support the findings of this study. This resulted in the classification of the findings as emergent.
- Analytic memo limitation- another limitation is the writing of analytic memos during the interview to help in data analyses. Due to the transition to online interviews via voice call and video calls particularly share screen due to the nature of the research design, participants who opted for voice calls were sent the case studies via mail and were instructed to have them opened as the interview was ongoing. None of the participants opted for video calls hence that advantage of controlling the environment in which the interview is conducted to ensure richness

and plausible data was beyond the capacity of the researcher. Not being able to tell the screen brightness of the devices used to view the images (case studies) understudied could have impaired the judgement of the participant to give an opinion that is not contestable. Not being able to see the participants reactions in terms of body and facial reactions to capture in analytic memos was a limitation that may have reduced the richness of the data analysed. Reactions had to be reduced to just short keywords from the tone of their voices which is not that adequate.

The flexible nature of the case study research design and qualitative data collection method was a successful approach that resulted with an emergent finding, however, limitations like the decline of the willingness of participants to partake in the primary data collection due to Covid-19 and the uncontrollable nature of the online interviews that were adapted to cope with the change in data collection methods due to Covid-19 renders the findings of this research highly contestable.

### 5.3 Recommendations for Practice

In the context of brand communication, the relevant stakeholders of concern include, graphic designers, marketers, and brand strategists. From a strategic point of view, businesses are to have a business strategy of a long term duration, and this strategy should be extrapolated in the sub-strategies of the various departments in that business such that it supports the achievement of the overall long term strategy. This means that for the long term success of a business, the overall strategy needs to be broken down in smaller units that can be achievable. This tasks the marketing department to come up with brand strategies that are featured with a good communication approach that will promote the business and having the right communication approach is not that simple.

- At this level, using a focussed semiotic approach may be considered, and the emergent signification system can give an idea on to begin.
- The key prerequisite for any communication approach to be established is consumer research on what perceptions do consumers have about your brand and then crafting of content for communication can be relatable if those perceptions are capable of being deciphered together with the intended message.

- The content creators tasked with crafting communication pieces may consider having an open mind by embracing semiotics in communication by paying attention to these fundamental elements that make up the signification system.
- Consumer researchers, marketing team, content creators and relevant managerial offices must work as a team to support each other in order to ensure a successful communication approach to consumers.

Paying attention to semiotics as an important role in advertising, doing consumer research to be crafted with the intended message and relevant parties such as graphic designers, marketers, brand strategists, consumer researchers and managers working together as a team for the success of a communication approach can be considered as practices to kick start the planning and implementation of a holistic communication approach to global consumers.

#### 5.4 Recommendations for Future Research

The conceptual framework that underpins this study draws its elements from Piercerean semiotics (Mick, 1986), the theoretical framework of visual grammar (Bell and Milic, 2002; Kress and Leeuwen, 2010) and the concept of propositional hierarchy (Barnham, 2019). The key analytic focus that was extracted from Piercerean semiotics was the dynamic of an icon and to an extent symbols by identifying them as items, objects and visuals from the case study images, neglecting the index which is also an element of the signification system. The concept of indexes and its exploration as a significant sign and how it can be embedded in the emergent signification system to make it more robust for successful communication to larger audiences can be furtherly pursued.

The theoretical framework of visual grammar has three metafunctions of analysing static content such as images, and they include representative, interactive and compositional metafunctions. These metafunctions have key elements that are to be considered when analysing visuals such as static images. Modality under interactive metafunction and framing (layering composition) under compositional metafunction was the analytic focus used in this study. The other metafunctions are equally of importance, and further exploration of the representational metafunction with key elements action, reaction and symbolic can throw more light on the identification of eye-catcher as a lead icon.

The concept of propositional hierarchy is newly introduced, and new research on its theoretical implications are underway, and this may render the findings of this study

worth revisiting in order to pursue the answers to the same research question ‘what ideal signification system can communicate brand intended message and values to a larger audience which will be void of barriers of communication?’

### 5.5 Final Conclusion and Reflections

This study introduced communication in the digital era as challenging as the flow of technology across the world has created a form of oneness such that businesses have started to view their customers as one hence attempting to find a unique way of communicating to them. In the context of using advertisement as a communication approach, some researchers had called for the need for a holistic communication approach from a semiotic perspective, and this has shaped the quest of this study. In the first chapter, situation analyses further explored the problem of communication and its importance as well as the disbelief of the importance of semiotics as an approach to make communication more effective.

The second chapter reviewed the existing literature on semiotics as its core focus and several attempts on how its elements have been explored to make meaning of images deducible. The theoretical gaps in Peircian semiotics and its practical application, the neglect of modality from the application of the theoretical framework of visual grammar and the conceptual gap in the propositional hierarchy of brand values reducible to positioning in image frames shaped the development of this study. These gaps were used to build the conceptual framework which structured the flow of the whole research process as it linked the research objectives and research question with the literature, methodology and findings.

The third and fourth chapter reveals the research methodology which entails the use of a case study research design featuring the use of Zara ad campaign for Man and Woman as secondary data and collection of primary data from purposefully chosen informants with the use of semi-structured interviews conducted online. Thematic data analysis was carried out with a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software that resulted in finding eye-catcher as a lead icon in the images of the ad campaign, positioning of icons and size, the choice of colours based on what those colours denote from a generic world view and Image quality and contrast, as key elements of an emergent signification system which may be considered as an answer to the research question ‘what ideal signification system can communicate brand intended message and values to a larger audience which will be void of barriers of communication?’. Uncontrollable hindrances such as the

uprising of the pandemic Covid-19 had affected the data collection plan as face to face interview was the chosen data collection method. Adapting with an online channel of collecting data as a countermeasure proved to have inhibited certain limitation such as the capturing of body and facial expressions in analytic memos rendering the overall analysis contestable. Further research on this study with improved conditions can be pursued in order to find a more robust answer to the research question.

The last chapter provides recommendations for practice that stakeholders of brand communication must work together as a team to pay attention to semiotics in the crafting of adverts as a communication approach and recommendations for future research on this study by the exploration of the neglected elements in the concepts and theories that underpin this study.

The research process that I have undertaken to find this new knowledge of the emergent signification system has been very enlightening. I used to ask myself certain basic questions like how one knows he knows something; what proof I have to support something I want to say. This enlightenment of the research I have undertaken has given me the confidence to assert an answer to such a fundamental question that I followed a scientific process to obtain a finding, and of that, I am sure that I have learnt something unique after completing this dissertation.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A - Plain Language Statement for Research Participants

#### **Introduction to the Research Study**

The research working title is A Semiotic Content Analysis of Advertisement, Contribution Towards a Holistic Communicative Approach to Global Consumers. The research is being conducted by Gidisu Collins, an MSc student in the graduate business school, in Griffith College Dublin. Collins Gidisu can be contacted at [collins.egidisu@gmail.com](mailto:collins.egidisu@gmail.com)

#### **Details of Involvement in the Study**

Participants will be required to be available for a video call or voice call with the principal researcher. It is possible that the researcher may request a follow-up interview; hence preliminary contact details will be requested as optional. Interviews should last no longer than one hour (45-60 mins). The researcher will request that interviews be recorded (audio and video only) in order to facilitate data gathering and subsequent data analysis. Participants retain the right to decline the researcher's request to record an interview. Interviews will take place during the 2019/2020 academic year.

#### **Potential Risks to Participants arising from involvement in the Research Study**

It is not envisaged that there are any risks to participants arising from involvement in the study.

#### **Benefits (direct or indirect) to Participants**

It is intended to that the outcomes of this study will help inform participants on hidden connotations in daily interactions with modern media outlets. Therefore, it is hoped that participants may indirectly benefit from participation in the study in the future.

#### **Procedures aimed at Protecting Confidentiality**

A conscious effort will be made to respect the participants' anonymity. The data collected will be analysed by the principal researcher alone. Participants' actual names will be protected. Interview notes and/or transcripts will be held by the principal researcher and stored in a secure location.

**Data Destruction**

It is planned that the data collected from interviews will be destroyed within three years from the initial date of collection.

**Voluntary participation**

Participants may withdraw from the research study at any point. There will be no penalty for withdrawing before all stages of the research study have been completed.

**Additional Information**

It is envisaged that in total, approximately fifteen participants will be interviewed as part of this study. All participants will be selected through purposeful sampling via a personal network.

If participants have concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person, please contact:

Dr Garret Ryan,

Griffith College Research Ethics Committee,

Griffith College Dublin,

Dublin 8.

Tel 01-4163324

## Appendix B - Participant Informed Consent Form

### **Research Study Title**

The research working title is A Semiotic Content Analysis of Advertisement, Contribution Towards a Holistic Communicative Approach to Global Consumers. The research is being conducted by Gidisu Collins, an MSc student in the graduate business school, in Griffith College Dublin.

### **Purpose of the Research**

The advent of technology has facilitated the globalisation of marketing approaches to consumers of products and services across the world. This research aims to gain insight into the effectiveness of some of these approaches. Very limited research has been done to explore the level at which various cultural perspectives and connotations have been inculcated in these approaches. The study aims to generate new insights into this important area.

### **Confirmation of particular requirements as highlighted in the Plain Language Statement**

As stated in the Plain Language Statement, participants in this research will be requested to

participate in an interview via video call or voice call, which the researcher will request to record (audio and video only).

### **Participant – please complete the following (Circle Yes or No for each question)**

Have you read or had read to you the Plain Language Statement Yes/No

Do you understand the information provided? Yes/No

Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study? Yes/No

Have you received satisfactory answers to all your questions? Yes/No

Do you agree to have your interview audiotaped? Yes/No

Participants' involvement in this study is totally voluntary. As a participant, you may withdraw from the Research Study at any point. There will be no penalty for withdrawing before all stages of the Research Study have been completed.

**Arrangements to protect the confidentiality of data**

Every effort will be made to respect the participants' anonymity. The data collected will be

analysed by the principal researcher alone. Participants' actual names will be protected, and

fake names will be used if direct references are required. Interview notes and/or transcripts

will be held by the principal researcher and stored in a secure location.

**Signature**

I have read and understood the information in this form. My questions and concerns have been answered by the researchers, and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I consent to take part in this research project

**Participants Signature:**

**Name in Block Capitals:**

**Date:**

## Appendix C - Interview Topic Guide

The following are the main areas/questions that will be asked in the interview: You will not be asked about personal or sensitive information, and you will not be asked questions about any other person or any other person's opinion or experience. I would ask that in the course of your participation, you do not name any individual or provide any details on third parties that may be identifiable.

### **Areas of conversation :**

1. Things that appeal to you by sight vision when you see the picture displayed.
2. Abstract things that come to mind about the case study.
3. Description of what you see by sight and how it relates to what you already know regarding the case study.
4. What can you say about your social media presence?
5. What kind of fashion brands do you follow on social media?
6. What message are you getting?
7. What can you list in a description form of what you can see?
8. What caught your attention first out of the list of descriptions?
9. What are your perceptions of Zara and brand core values?
10. Case study flaws and recommendations

Appendix D - Summary of Refined Primary Data Based on Analytic Focus

	A: Case Study A Man	B: Case Study B Man	C: Case Study A Woman	D: Case Study B woman
0: Images				
1: Icons, items, objects, symbols	A young guy, coat, jacket, shoes, white design, shirt, shadow, pose, overtop/over jacket, spots, stripes, trousers, suit.	Red, green, line in the middle, a model, beige light brown clothe, trees, a wall, plants, patterned sleeves, white.	Sofa, plants, lights, a bag, face, scarf, dress, shoes, young woman, belt, blanket, centre table, flowers, pillows, black, carpet, lamps, black heart, orange, vase, leaves, pink, golden colour, pearls, bracelet, ring.	Plants, palm trees, bird, shirt, flowers, red, blue, a skirt, accessories, a bag, a hat, a woman, yellow, green, white, black, beige, pose, outfit, cosmetic lipstick,
2: Sensory modality - kind of editing	black and white high contrast making the overcoat stand out, Highlighted shadow, black and white lightening background.	Matching colours, line in the middle separating red from white, very bright red colours, natural colours on the right.	Picture of high quality and clear, colours used are dark, dark setting, antique setting, limitation of colour choices.	Very bright colours in the skirt, picture of high quality, the use of monochromatic colours, bright and shiny.
3: Propositional hierarchy - what was seen first	The overcoat/over jacket.	The model, colour red.	The model - facial expression, pose, dress worn together with accessories.	The shirt, bag, hat
4: Propositional hierarchy - Where it was positioned	Centred in the middle of the image.	Model centred in the middle of the image and red on the right.	Model centred in the middle of the image.	The shirt is positioned nearly in the middle towards the left.
5: Message deciphered	The selling of a clean fashion professional look targeted at a young audience.	Fancy and professional light clothes that is cool to wear during daytime outdoors.	An old fashioned dressing style which is elegant and royal looking identified as royal and vintage being advertised.	A perfect holiday outfit for summer and beach.
6: Brand communication - values and intended	Beauty, Winter.	Beauty, Functionality, Summer.	Trendy, affordable, beauty, winter, clarity,	Summer, clarity, functionality, beauty, sustainability

purpose of case study			functionality, high quality.	
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