**A Semiotic Analysis of Alcohol Commercials**

**Elaine Foster**

For the purpose of this assignment I will be looking for the *signs* embedded in advertisements, noting the *codes* that these signs operate within and refer to and then review how the users within a *culture* consume these. In order to do this I will be looking at four television commercials for different types of *alcoholic beverage*:

* Carling Lager
* Baileys
* Archers

I will be comparing two commercials for Archers, as they form part of a series.

Advertising’s *purpose* in the sense that I am using it is to promote sales of a product. In the commercials I am using they use a soft sell technique rather than hard sell. They *persuade* the consumer that they need the product by making them “feel dissatisfied or inadequate” (Cook 2001, 2). As well as this they must *distinguish* their product from other products of the same type. The adverts aim to persuade the consumer that they want to belong to the group that the advert is marketed at. They will then buy the product believing that this will bring them a step closer to the goal of self- identification. Vestergaard believes people are “encouraged to define themselves” (Vestergaard 1985, 6) through commercials. He emphasises that advertisers exploit consumer’s social needs, as well as their material needs; this according to Vestergaard is inevitable once people live above subsistence level. Williamson disagrees with this to an extent stating that the consumer doesn’t buy the product to belong to that group, they must already belong to that group to understand the codes that the commercial operates within. I agree with both of these to an extent and both theories are visible within the commercials I will be looking at. For example, the **Archers commercials** are youth orientated so as a consumer you must be part of that group and understand the social codes otherwise the drink might not appeal to you. However, on the other hand it splits this youth group into men and women and then the women into two groups as well; those who want to be like the women in the commercials and a group that don’t.

The myth in both adverts is manufactured within what the women do and what their actions connote. They try to “manipulate people into buying a way of life as well as goods” (Dyer 1982, 5) That is they contain meanings within social codes that if you drink Archers you belong to a group of independent women and that you too can become mischievous, have fun and improve you lifestyle. This factor remains the same whether you are part of this group already and should chose Archers over other, similar drinks (Williamson) or whether you want to join this particular social group (Vestergaard). Both commercials are promoting being a woman; they both feature beautiful women, in control of their lives and of their boyfriend and in the second advert men in general. This connotes that it is drinking Archers that enables this empowerment to occur. The adverts give the “desired identity to a specific commodity so that the need for an identity is transformed into a need for the commodity” (Vestergaard 1985, 72-73).

The *aesthetic codes* in the first advert play a large part, the woman is dressed smartly in a skirt suit and the boyfriend isn’t. This connotes that it is him that is playful and naughty, a binary opposition has been formed. She says she is leaving to go home and thus the myth is enforced. *Textual codes* using framing and the camera are also vital in how the commercial conveys meaning. There is an MCU of the man, as he looks right, then left connoting that he can hardly believe his luck that he has been allowed to stay later and then he looks directly at the camera and gives a wink and a grin. This puts him in a dominant position; however, by the end of the commercial it is her that has exploited the situation. He arrives home late and tries to go up the stairs, however, the first one is creaky and in a bid not to wake his girlfriend up he sleeps on the sofa. The screen then fades to black connoting a passage of time and then she comes home, notices him asleep in the lounge, skips the creaky stair and tiptoes up the stairs with her shoes off. She has obviously done this before and has played him for a fool. The lyrics for the music over this particular section are “You know a girls got to play” which sums up what the advert is trying to connote through its signs.

The woman in the second commercial is also a woman on top. She is dressed in a bikini and walks past a group of men, they breathe in to hold their bulging stomachs from view. She ‘plays’ with the men as she makes them hold their breaths for as long as possible whilst she has a drink of Archers at the bar. She bursts out laughing at the end and then the Archers logo and slogan ‘Come out to play’ appear, all this connotes that Archers is the drink for girls who want to have fun. In both Archers commercials the *meaning of one sign is transferred to another*. However, in the first advert it is the meaning in the social situation that is transferred to the product, the girlfriend being able to deceive her boyfriend and in the second advert it is primarily meaning from the person transferred to the product.

Returning to the first Archers commercial I shall look at the *paradigmatic choices* that make up the final syntagm of the last moments in the advert. She creeps in through the front door in LS, the boyfriend can be seen at the front of the frame. The lighting is blue connoting late at night, this is in stark contrast to the reds and greens used in the bar scene. There is an MCU of the woman looking at her boyfriend, she tilts her head. This connotes sympathy. One shot further on in the sequence she is shown again in MCU shaking her head. This connotes something entirely different, she is happy to be in control whilst her boyfriend is seen as pathetic. The choice of MCU was ideal as it is not too intimate but we can still see into her eyes and visibly notice the slight grin on her face. In LS her exact attitude would not have been apparent but in CU it would have been too personal for the style of the syntagmatic structure for the advert as a whole. He is seen on the sofa in LS so the viewer feels detached from him and identifies with her because we are seeing him from her point of view. This is a good choice of paradigm because the aim of the commercial is for the viewer to want to be like the woman and behave accordingly in their own relationships and choice of drink.

I am able to use the second Archers advert to illustrate how adverts use *encoding* and *decoding.* The advertiser encodes the text in order for the viewer to decode the meaning. For this transfer to occur both sender and receiver have to be operating under the same code: “Our messages and texts become meaningful or signifying because they are constructed with the semiotic substances of codes.” (Danesi 1994, 18)

The transfer of meaning cannot take place without both signs having significant meaning already. So in the case of the second Archers commercial the men holding in their stomachs is significant to young women as it relates to body image, something that most women will probably feel uncomfortable about. However, this time the marked and unmarked have been subverted. The woman is comfortable with herself and it is the men who are conscious of the way they look. It is a *binary opposition* with a difference. The advertisers have encoded it ideologically so only women of a certain type understand the code and thus find it humorous: “Advertisements make use of myth, attempting to attach mythic signification’s to products by taking up already meaningful signs.” (Bignell 1997, 27)

 The final shot of the woman walking towards the camera and bursting into laughter exemplifies the mythic quality of this commercial.

Gillian Dyer believes that the *brand name* is key to the promotion of the produce, it:

“should do more than just label or identify the product; it should also bring flattering associations to mind, associations which will help to sell it.” (Dyer 1982, 141)

This is particularly relevant to the Baileys commercial as it promotes the qualities of the product; taste, texture and appeal in a visual way. So, when the consumer thinks of Baileys these qualities come to mind. Its primary motivation is not like the Archers adverts where they try to give the product an identity and the consumer a social group. Instead it tries to make the viewer visually remember what the drink tastes like and feels like to consume. In other words this commercial is creating a myth surrounding the brand name Baileys.

The creation of myth in this commercial is done without one spoken word, anything that is said is through subtitles. The power of the advert is in the *visual*, how the woman describes what she wants to drink. She is a young woman, beautiful and sophisticated connoted by the cocktail style of her blue dress and the diamond necklace around her neck. Her lips are very red but because of the context this is not ‘brassy’ but instead connotes a sexual potency.

A man joins her in a bar, he offers to buy her a drink but the music is too loud for him to hear her reply. So she decides to mime the drink. Firstly she closes her eyes and mimes smelling the drink. Her facial expression connotes enjoyment. This is in MCU; we are given a chance to almost smell the drink ourselves, or at least to want to because she does it so seductively. In the next descriptive paradigm she caresses her neck in CU, her hands run down by her sides, just skimming her breasts. Her face connotes sexual enjoyment now, mouth is slightly apart, and her eyes are closed. These particular signs and choice of aesthetic paradigms become the signifiers for the myth surrounding Baileys. This sequence continues with a CU of her body as she rubs her hands down her body, swaying from side to side in a sexy dance. Next in the syntagm is an MS of the man, his facial expression connotes that he is completely bewitched by her performance. The music changes, becomes more intense and they kiss sensually. This triggers a connotation of what the drink Baileys means to him and he raises an eyebrow and says, ‘Baileys’ (via subtitles). To him the drink already has this myth surrounding it; connotations of being smooth, sexy, sensual and a bit naughty. These qualities by way of the commercial have now been transferred to the drink for the benefit of the viewers: “Images, ideas, feelings become attached to certain products, by being transferred from signs out of other systems to the products.” (Williamson 1978, 30)

In other words the sexy dance and sensual kiss are part of a social code, these signs are transferred to the product through association, both *explicit* and *implicit.* Explicit because the woman is using these to describe the drink and implicit because she is sexy, sophisticated and sensual, all the qualities that the advertisers want associated with their drink.

The Baileys logo also connotes feminine sexuality. It is curvy and rounded a bit like women’s breasts. The drink is being poured into glasses; it pours smoothly and perfectly. All this emphasises the meaning behind the slogan: ‘Let your senses guide you’. The use of codes and signs within the commercial all add up to how Baileys appeals to the senses; taste, smell, touch, sight but sound plays no part.

The use of *colour codes* in the Baileys advert is significant. A colour palette of blues and reds dominate it. These are sexual colours. Red is a fiery, passionate colour and blue is a cooler, more sensual colour. A colour palette of oranges and browns may have connoted romance but this would not have been true to the tone and style of the advert or how the producers for Baileys want the commercial and product to be decoded as.

Colour, as a code is even more apparent in the commercial for Carling. It plays a significant role in the syntagmatic structure of the commercial. The commercial features a man on an island discovering a fridge full of Carling with the help of a crab. However, the beer is warm. The purpose of the commercial is to show the man trying to make the fridge work; he succeeds with the help of the crab and sits back to enjoy a cool Carling and eats the crab for dinner! It is an advert *aimed at men* and the tone and topic is very different to the Baileys and in particular the Archers commercials. It is fast paced, the shots are rarely more than a second long and it features the need for a man to have a glass of cold Carling. This, like the body image in the Archers advert is a sign that already exists; beer must be cold and this stereotypically is most important to the male gender. The advert uses this existing code to operate within: “The thirty second ad allows little time to give information about anything. Advertisers pretty much have to use what already exists in the imagination of the target audience.” (Leiss 1986, 156)

Returning to the topic of colour, it is very apparent in this commercial. The colour orange reoccurs many times and links the different paradigms together to form a syntagm that has continuity. Before he gets his cold beer the colour palette is of blues and greens but as the objective gets closer the colour orange begins to appear in the frame. It is in the fridge, acting as a glow from behind the beer when it has been cold. This in itself is a bit of juxtaposition. This glow is transferred on to the mans face and then as he is sipping his beer the sunset is glowing orange and there is a little orange fire on the sand. The motivation behind this colour is seen in the final shot: An ECU of a pint of beer, orange in colour. The colour palette has become linked with the actual colour of the lager.

The choice of song in the advert is significant as its lyrics sing ‘Just the Two of Us’ describing the relationship between the man and the crab as they build the contraption to cool the beer. However, the man destroys this reality when he eats the crab for dinner, the music stops dead abruptly as the sound of him ripping the claw from the crab is heard grotesquely. The commercial seems to contain some i*ntertexuality*, it alludes to the film Castaway; a man on a desert island finding a friend in an unusual object/ creature. This grounds the advert in a certain reality and creates meaning for those who have this inside shared knowledge of this particular use of hypertexuality. (Genette 1930)

Commercials are all about shared knowledge and the advertisers tapping into what the target audience knows and what they want to see for them in order to purchase the produce. The 3 types of drink market their individual products very differently. Archers appeals very specifically to young women wanting to be independent of their men and ‘Come out to Play’ alone. Carling appeals very definitely to men who will do anything to have their beer chilled. However, the Baileys commercial is a little more ambivalent as it seems to be appealing to men and women and thus not gendering their produce. It is interesting to note that the man asks at the bar for two Baileys and there are two glasses seen on the bar in the final shot. However, its style alludes more to that of the quirky Archers commercials rather than to the dry humour of the Carling advert, thus appealing to women and their sensuality.

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