

ISOLATION INSPIRATION

Views from Discovery on Semiotics: Analysing signs, symbols and language to decode brand themes

JUNE 8th 2020



Discovery

Discovery Research has been providing the insights that fuel change for clients since 1996. We are here to help combine customer insights with industry knowledge to help move things forward for your brands

Something we discuss a lot at Discovery is the concept of insight synergy. Where placing direct insights from a focused qualitative or quantitative study within a broader context of category and cultural insights, can allow clients to extract more use and meaning from the original, focused insights. Put simply, the cumulative impact from the relevant context allows the findings to become more than the sum of their parts.

One of the most effective ways to do this is through semiotic analysis. This involves examining the signs, symbols and language to decode the cultural meaning behind how brands communicate about themselves and their products to their consumers. How they position themselves, so to speak.



What are these signs you might ask? Well consider for a moment that you see a group of men, all of a certain age, walking down the road carrying colourful scarfs and wearing matching athletic shirts. What might you assume? Naturally that they're supporters on their way to some kind of sporting match, right? You haven't spoken to them, but everything about their clothing, their behaviour, their image and perhaps language, communicates to you implicitly that these are sports fans. This is a basic example of semiotic coding.

Brands leverage semiotic codes to communicate their intentions or convey their image to consumers and analysis of these codes can yield interesting insights into a client's own brand, e.g. are they communicating the image that they think they are from a consumer perspective?



Are their comms and product strategies consistent with their consumers expectations of them? Analysis can also yield insight into the wider category and consumer sentiment. How are they expressing themselves? Are consumers and the key brands in the category aligned? Which brands are the most relevant?

Semiotics in market research is obviously not a new technique. Agencies and semiotic specialists have been offering this service for some time. However, too often it is conducted in isolation, as a separate facet of a project to be overlaid at the end or as a stand-alone approach, where it's expected to deliver all the required insight needed to make a strategic decision. This has led to a wide spread perception that semiotics is an expensive technique, and we have heard several clients question how much it can yield little in terms of actionable insight.

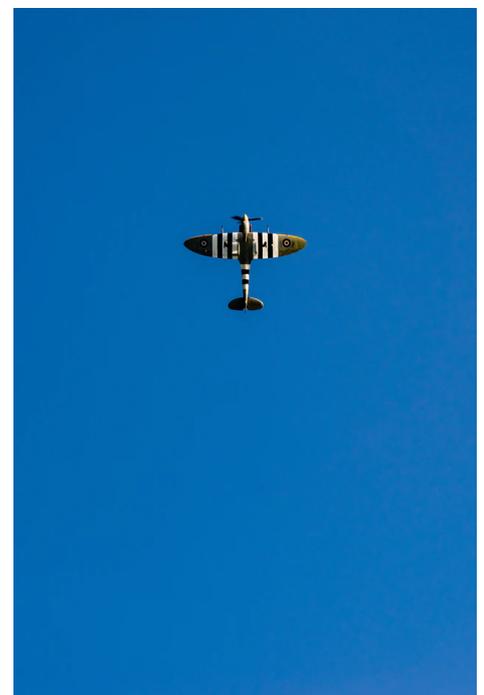
At Discovery, we've long been proponents of semiotics. We feel, when applied to the right project, it can bring a unique lens that allows researchers to identify and decode insights in a way that few techniques can. But, the key is in when, how and how much you use it and perhaps most importantly, how you apply it!

We have had great success over the past 12+ months incorporating semiotic analysis as an integral part of a mixed methodology approach. Using semiotic insights to aid, strengthen and inform traditional qual and quant techniques, we've found it can bring a level of contextual insight, that provides our clients with a more rigorous and comprehensive output, which ultimately, gives them a stronger foundation upon which to base their key strategic decisions.

ALLOW US TO GIVE YOU A RECENT EXAMPLE. ..

Our client came to us with a straightforward question. *'How much should we be utilising heritage in our positioning strategy?' and 'how should we talk about that heritage?'*

Now, you could simply ask consumers how much heritage is important to them and how they like to see it portrayed. But the issue with that approach is that consumers often aren't conscious of their depth of understanding on a concept like that. So gaining predominately system 2 thoughts back on the subject area via traditional qualitative sessions would be limiting. The reality is that much of people's perceptions are driven by system 1 thinking, or subconscious, emotive thinking. Which means, without the requisite tools to unlock, frame and help them articulate their subconscious perceptions, their response to the question will likely fail to yield the nuances that inform their opinion. Nuances that are essential to answering the clients question in a meaningful way.



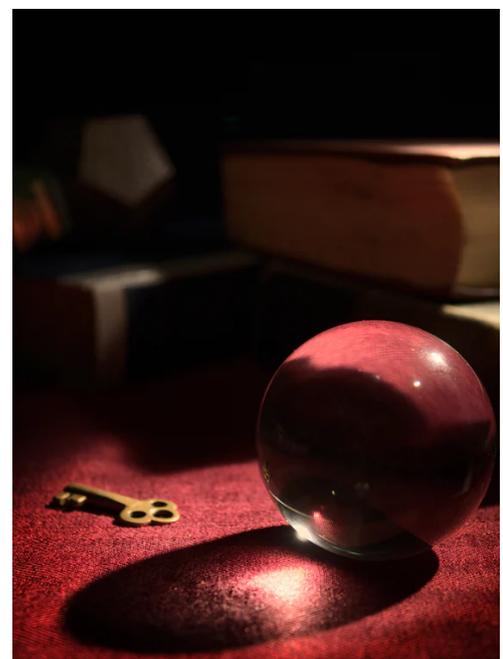
This is where semiotics comes in. We at Discovery, in conjunction with our semiotic partner, conducted an analysis of the cultural ways in which heritage is talked about in modern Britain. This involved a funnel approach, examining heritage first from a broader cultural perspective, then from a brand perspective and finally from a category perspective. This analysis revealed the visual and linguistic signposts we use to talk about heritage. It was clear that there are many different ways we talk about heritage! And that the way our perception of heritage is viewed has evolved over recent years. Utilising these images and language, we were able to create a broad range of clear heritage territories, which were used as stimulus for participants in a series of workshops, giving them the tools they needed to articulate:

- How they saw heritage
- What appealed to them about heritage
- How our clients brand could leverage their own unique heritage in a way that was meaningful and motivating

The stimulus born from semiotics allowed us to not only unlock participant thinking on a much deeper level, but also, to illustrate to our client and their brand team, a clear, concise vision of their brands heritage going forward. It not only had the comprehensiveness delivered by the context of broader cultural insight, but also the rigour of consumer confirmation. The project not only became the basis for our client's long term brand strategy, but was also shortlist for an MRS Excellence award for 2019.

“ Discovery offered us a very different approach that has proved eye-opening. The breadth and depth of the research and its subsequent outcomes have made potentially difficult conversations much easier. It has made my job as a Head of Brand easier. ”

Head of Brand & Customer Communications





Using semiotics as a supplement to traditional research techniques added value to the overall research. Not only was the semiotic insight used in a relevant and actionable way, it also strengthened the ability for traditional research approaches to deliver clear insights. In short it became more than the sum of its parts.

This success has encouraged us to use more semiotics to supplement our tried and tested approaches and has given us the evidence required to recommend that our other clients incorporate this approach when conducting research with us. Those who have, have not been disappointed. The feedback we've received not only praises the level of actionable insight the projects deliver, but also the clear visual and linguistic examples from the semiotics make it highly shareable within their organisations and great for briefing Ad agencies.

At Discovery we use semiotics to complement a variety of qualitative research methods, with brilliant results across the board. If you would like to know more about how we use semiotics in projects, or whether you think it could work for an upcoming project you may have, do get in touch and we'll be happy to give our thoughts on how it may be beneficial to your end goal.

Contact us:

020 73594963

alan@discoveryres.co.uk

