

# THE VALUE OF DESIGN RESEARCH

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## SEMIOTICS FOR SALE

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### ABSTRACT

*In the discipline of retailing there is a lot of research coming from marketing and consumer behaviour. More relating to retail design, topics as store identity, store personality, image, brand personality, etc. are widely studied. In such studies, the link between the identity of a brand, or retail brand, with store personality has been established. Though designers benefit from this valuable input, research as such does not offer insight or skills in how to implement or translate such knowledge into a store design. Therefore, we asked ourselves if we could design a framework based on a well discussed - in linguistics - topic: the study of signs (semiotics). Our research question is 'how can semiotics offer an added value to store design?'. We believe that, in an increasingly competitive market, one way to stand out in the crowd is to use signs in the design of the store to communicate with the consumer on a different level. We studied three 'successful' stores - stores that attract a lot of visitors and have a clear brand image -, ranging from a subtle use of signs to an obvious way of using signs: Apple, All Saints, and Shoe Class. We measured their store personality and analysed the stores semiotically with the theory of Peirce and Barthes. We have found that the measured store personality of each of the three stores, can be explained via semiotics.*

*Keywords: retail design, semiotics, brand personality, store personality*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Retail is about people, interaction and chemistry. Either consciously or subconsciously, every consumer expresses his personal view and appreciation of a shopping experience. Consumers don't only identify with a product brand (Sirgy, 1985), they also identify with a shop brand (van Tongeren, 2013). Moreover, they are not only fans, they also recognize themselves in it. Every individual does so in his or her own way. Linking this individuality to a shop may lead to buying behaviour, as explained by the self-congruity theory (Brenngman & Willems, 2009; Zentes et al., 2008). To create chemistry between the consumer and the shop, the latter can make use of store personality (SP) (Zentes et al., 2008). Over five decades ago, Martineau (1958, p. 47) introduced the notion of store personality (SP), which he defined as "the way in which the store is defined in the shopper's mind, partly by its functional qualities and partly by an aura of psychological attributes". To make sure that the consumer identifies himself with a shop, it is important to know what the shop stands for. Its values need to be translated into a feasible store design, which is interpreted in the same way by every individual. If one person describes a shop as chic, it is relevant that others understand what is meant by the word 'chic' (van Tongeren, 2013). We need to find out the reasons why the consumer attributes this term to the shop. Our aim, therefore, is to look for a connection between SP and the visual translation into a design. Can we use the principles of semiotics to do this?

Semiotics describe how people interpret things. Semiotics is a way of seeing and interpreting that focuses on the relation between image, text and beholder (Coumans, 2011). The from ancient Greek derived term semiotics means 'the science of signs'. In this paper we establish a link between store personality and the science of signs. We start by exploring Barthes's and Peirce's theories (that have been applied to architecture before), after which we will present three case studies, i.e. three shops of which we have measured the store personality and which we analysed semiotically. These case studies were not only chosen on the basis of their commercial success, but also because of their straightforward design language and strong image. They vary from a very explicit visual language to a rather subtle usage of visual signs: Shoe Class, All Saints and Apple.

## 2. MEASURING STORE PERSONALITY

d'Astous and Levesque (2003) developed a scale, which showed to be consistent with the self-image congruency theory, for measuring store personality: the store personality scale (SPS). This SPS comprises five dimensions: Sophistication, Solidity, Genuineness, Enthusiasm, and Unpleasantness. These five main personal characteristics are each subdivided in four more specific subcategories (see table 1). The scale consists of five levels, spanning from "not at all descriptive of this store"/"completely descriptive of this store". By means of a representative number of inquiries a list is produced of the five most typical basic properties that represent the personality of the shop in question, based on the number of visitors that participated in the inquiry.

## 3. SEMIOTICS BY PEIRCE AND BARTHES

We experience visual signs everywhere and all the time, we interpret them and try to give meaning to them. Signs are a beacon, a reference point, a means of creating order in a chaotic world (Pauwels, 2004). As a general rule, they are perceptible and represent something that is not present (Van den Broek et al., 2010). The beholder determines the way in which the significance comes into being, on the one hand through the knowledge of reality and on the other the knowledge of rules, languages, letters, customs,... Also important in establishing the semiotic view is context. Often, the situation, place or surroundings determine in which direction the meaning evolves (Van den Broek et al., 2010).

As far as applying semiotics to Retail Design is concerned, we focus on two theories in dissecting significance levels and connotations by using brand and store identity, namely the two significance layers according to Barthes on the one hand, and the three typical signs according to Peirce on the other. Barthes' theory is based on the presence of two different significance layers regarding the meaning of signs (Van den Broek et al., 2010): denotation and connotation. Denotation or objective/literal meaning is based on the general/common knowledge enabling us to recognize what is depicted or to describe what we see. Connotation or subjective/figurative meaning is based on emotional values, leading to many variations within this interpretation. Peirce differentiates three kinds of signs (Winfried Nöth, 1990), namely (1) the icon or relation derived from similarities (e.g. statue, picture, video, pictograms, ...); (2) the index or relation derived from experience (e.g. hot heating plate, runny nose, black absorbs heat,...); (3) the symbol or relation derived from mutual arrangements, rules or habits (e.g. swastika, thumbs up, green traffic light, ...).

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Both theories are complementary. A sign that is interpreted according to Barthes is subdivided in three subcategories by Peirce (icon, index and symbol). Through their complementarity they form a solid basis for analyzing and interpreting the translation of a retail brand into the design of a store.

### **4. RESEARCH METHOD**

For each of the three stores we started by looking up their brand and store identity. Next, we have measured the store personality through the SPS of d'Astous and Levesque (2003), which is a self-administered questionnaire. 37 Respondents filled out the scale immediately after their shopping experience. We have chosen to conduct the survey on weekdays in order to avoid crowdedness in the shops. Simultaneous, without taking into account the results of the SPS, we have performed a semiotic analysis according to Barthes' and Peirce's theories. In conclusion we have tried to establish a link between the measured SP and the deliberate or non-deliberate use of signs (see Figure 1). Because we are looking for a distinct connection between the SPS and the use of signs, only items from the SPS that had an average score of 3,5 (70%) or more, are taken into account when discussing the semiotic analysis. We have focussed only on the store's interior.

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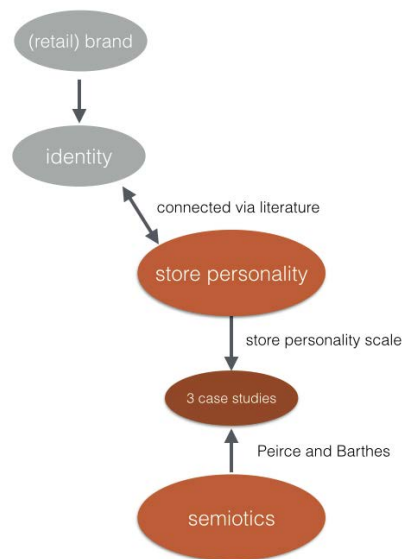


Figure 1 –research method (framework).

## 5. THE CONNECTION BETWEEN SP AND SEMIOTICS: THREE CASE STUDIES

### 1.1. SHOE CLASS

Shoe Class is a sneaker store in Antwerp which sells nine strong sneaker brands, focusing on sporty and young-minded sneaker-lovers, a target group to which the owners themselves (father and daughter) belong. They describe their desired brand personality as snazzy, trendsetting and inspired ([www.ShoeClass.be](http://www.ShoeClass.be)). They try to realize this within a specific theme, namely a classroom in retro style (see Figure 2).

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Figure 2 –Shoe Class, Antwerp.

### 1.1.1. Semiotics

The displays (climbing frames, school desks, a lectern and lockers) and decorative items (a geographical map, a skeleton, books and a blackboard) are genuine and induce an image formation. The primary meaning (Barthes' denotation) of these elements is based on memories of school life in a classroom. Within this primary meaning, following the theory of Peirce, the use of the displays can be seen as icons (resemblance) due to their literal purpose. The decorative items, i.e. the skeleton, the map, the books and the blackboard can be seen as indexes (e.g. skeleton makes people think of biology class, maps refer to geography class, etc.).

The secondary meaning (Barthes' connotation) of the setting (displays and decoration) evokes personal memories to what (within Peirce's theory) can be considered an index (experience). The consumer experiences the (genuine) setting as if he relives his student life. These memories are personal and they will evoke many different emotions (ranging from happy to frustrated, for example).

### 1.1.2. SPS

The store personality items of the dimension Enthusiasm - welcoming, enthusiastic, lively and dynamic - scored extremely high (apart from welcoming which scored 3.76 they all scored at least 4.13) (see table 1). Furthermore also the dimension Genuineness gets high scores. The items honest and reliable reach the 3.5 barrier, but the two remaining items, sincere and true, hardly score any less (3.49 and 3.43 respectively). The same picture can be seen in the Solidity dimension: hardy and solid score above 3.5, while reputable and thriving only just fall short of this score.



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egoistic, impulsive and determined (Nelson, 2013). The store's theme focuses on emanating authenticity. We analysed the Antwerp store (see Figure 3 and 4).



Figure 3 –All Saints, Antwerp.



Figure 4 –All Saints, Antwerp.

### 1.1.1. Semiotics

The shopwindow consists out of a neat display of hundreds of vintage Singer sewing machines, added with old equipment. As a primary meaning (Barthes' denotation) this makes us think of discarded machines. Following Peirce's

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theory, these signs can be labelled as icons (resemblance) which facilitate the feeling of authenticity and express reliability.

The vintage machinery that is also placed within the store, together with the use of a lot of old (looking) metal and eroded wood elicit a secondary meaning (Barthes' connotation) of craftsmanship, metiér and labour because these elements refer as indexes (experience) to the old sewing industry. The entire design of the store is aimed at a look and feel of authenticity and vintage. The lighting consists of (fake) vintage theater spots. Even the walls are staged as real old brick walls with some remains of stucco by the use of brick strips and a specific paint technique.

### 1.1.2.SPS

Table 1 shows that most of the consumers perceive the store personality as Genuine (honest and reliable score on average over 3.5, however sincere and true also score close to 3.5). Also for the Solidity dimension a similar pattern is visible: hardy scores, on average, extremely high (4.22) and solid scores high (3.68), reputable and thriving score just below 3.5. Rather isolated from the other items within the Enthusiasm and Sophistication dimension, stylish and dynamic score more the 3.5.

### 1.1.3.Conclusion

A link can be found between the brand values (tough and robust) of All Saints and the SPS-items awarded by the consumers (hardy and solid) through the industrial and technical look of the store. The items stylish and dynamic fit perfectly the values of the brand. The Genuine dimension can be linked with the aimed at authentic look of the store. Both the image of the store as the measured store personality embody the brand. This is an obvious example of a well thought-through design with a coherent translation of the brand identity into a store identity.

### 1.3.APPLE STORE

For the analysis of this well-known retailer we opted to study the roll-out outlet (rather than the flagship store) in Westfield shopping centre in London (see Figure 5 and 6). In this shop Apple offers, next to selling their products, the Geniusbar as a service. Apple's brand personality can be described as amazement, creative, simple, enthusiastic, stylish, intellectual, modern, differentiated and trustworthy (de Vogel, 2011). Apple's target market is diverse and depends on a specific product (iPod users are quite different from iMac users).



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Figure 5 –typical tables in the Apple store (Westfield).



Figure 6 –Apple store, Westfield.

### 1.1.1. Semiotics

The typical aisles which present the Apple devices get as a primary meaning (Barthes' denotation) the meaning of a table as we know it (to meet people, having meetings, etc.). Because this knowledge of a table is based on experience we call it an index (Peirce). Still as an index, but from the secondary meaning, a table is associated with putting our heads together to find a solution to a specific problem. Apple's presentation tables elicit interaction between product and consumer, between consumer and personnel, and even between consumers.

The overall look and feel of the store is rather sober which leads the attention to the products. Also the materials used (wood, metal, tiles, plexiglass) in the store are rather sober, businesslike and cool. These materials are perceived as durable and firm (primary meaning obtained by experience - index). They might also refer to the design of the products (which can be seen as indexes following Peirce's theory). The secondary meaning of the materials and colors used refers to stylish and neutral, which are again indexes following Peirce's theory.

### 1.1.2. SPS

The results, as seen in Table 1, show that most of the consumers perceive the store as Sophisticated (score in average of 3.48) with the items high class and stylish as most profound. Also the identity is perceived as Genuine (scores 3.48) with the items reliable and true as most profound. The items solid and thriving

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of the Solidity dimension also scored high - thriving scored even extremely high with a score of 4.11.

### 1.1.3. Conclusion

The items high class and stylish can be linked to the interpretation of the used materials and products. The store is transparent and it has a low threshold which might lead to the value of Genuineness. Apple's sleek and solid store design is easily connected to the values solid and thriving, which also connect to Apple's brand values. Though the use of signs is rather concealed, they are present in each element of the store. To get this rather veiled meaning it is necessary to know the values of the brand. This asks for a more 'intelligent' consumer. Once Apple's philosophy of wanting to help and engage their customers is known, the meaning of the Genius bar and the tables is clear.

## 6. CONCLUSION

As previously mentioned, in literature the link between a retailer's identity with store personality is already established. Our contribution lays in connecting the store personality with semiotics. In order to do so, we first explored the link with and applicability of semiotics and retail design. The three case studies offer insight in how signs can be integrated in a design of a store. While Shoe Class might elicit strong feelings (as well as All Saints) with the design referring to an old class room, Apple leaves much more room for interpretation. We carefully state, on the one hand that when an obvious use of signs is opted, everybody understands the design and will have a reaction to it (bad or good). On the other hand, when a more veiled use of signs is opted, like Apple, the understanding of the design asks for a more knowledgeable consumer, with the risk that many people do not understand the design. Having a more neutral environment might therefore lead to less explicit evoked emotions.

To summarize, the use of icons, indexes and symbols, whether it is within a primary or secondary meaning, give a (visual) appearance to the measured store personality. Since we found such a close link for all three stores, we state that (1) our framework can be used by retailers and retail designers as a guidance for translating an aimed at store personality (or identity) into a consistent store design, via the use of signs. And (2), our framework also allows retailers to evaluate their store in terms of semiotics, for example the presence or absence of signs, the way they are interpreted, or when signs might be wrongly implemented.

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