RESEARCH ON MARKETING SEMIOTICS:
IN SEARCH OF THE APPROPRIATE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

In relatively affluent societies, consumer activity has moved beyond basic survival-orientation. These consumers seek the fulfillment of more abstract, higher-order needs through the meaning ascribed to the activity (Burns 1989). Levy suggested that "people buy products not only for what they can do, but also for what they mean" (1959, p. 118). The ascription of meaning to such domains as consumer activity falls within the realm of semiotics. Unfortunately, the inconsistency of the meaning ascribed to products and activities across individuals and over time, and the confusion over the appropriate research paradigm(s) for understanding semiotics, have hampered research efforts in this area (Levy 1971). Also, the abstract nature of the subject has hindered semiotic research (Mick 1986). By examining the objectivist and subjectivist approaches to the study of semiotics, this paper addresses the issue of determining the appropriate paradigm(s) for researching semiotics in marketing.

SEMIOTICS AND CRITICAL PLURALISM

The most reasonable and appropriate framework for research into semiotics in marketing and consumer research may be critical pluralism. Here, both objectivism and subjectivism are utilized. However, each is used independently at a different level of analysis. This is consistent with Olson who suggested that different approaches may be required at different levels of analysis (Peter, et. al. 1983).

The idea of different levels of analysis may be seen in the examination of product meaning. Hirschman (1980) described a taxonomy of product meaning in the minds of consumers, layers which vary in level of tangibility and degree of meaning commonality among members of a society. In addition to products, these levels reasonably appear to apply to other marketing entities (e.g., advertising and store design).

Two levels of analysis for research into semiotics in marketing appear to be appropriate. The first concerns the motive behind ascribing meaning to marketing entities.

Semiotics is an avenue by which individuals can satisfy abstract, higher-order needs through ascribing meaning to such entities. It has been shown that higher-order needs exist, and that many of these needs can be measured in a reasonably objective manner (Snyder and Fromkin 1980; Zuckerman 1979). Thus, since the existence of many of these needs may be determined outside an individual's frame of reference, and since several of these needs are not psychologically or socially constructed phenomena, the objectivist approach would appear to be an appropriate approach at this level of analysis.

The second level of analysis concerns the actual ascription of symbolic meaning by an individual to individual marketing entities. The meaning which is ascribed to marketing entities, although at least in part motivated by a desire to fulfill higher-order needs, is not consistent across individuals nor is it constant over time (Hirschman 1981; Turner 1974). Instead, ascribed meaning is contingent upon a specific individual and/or their existing circumstances (e.g., family, religion). Barthes states "Every image is polysemous; it implies, subjacent to its signifers (the physical traces of the image), a 'floating chain of signifieds (the meaning associated with the signifier) of which the reader (or observer) can select some and ignore the rest (1985, p. 28). Thus, a subjectivist approach seems appropriate at this level of analysis.

CONCLUSION

Using both the objectivist and subjectivist paradigms (each applied at a different level of analysis and consistent with the critical pluralism perspective) should improve research into the phenomenon of semiotics in marketing. What remains unrealized, however, is the importance of utilizing the approach which can produce valid and usable results. The appropriate paradigm to utilize in a particular study is that approach which can better generate knowledge given the object level and goal of the analysis.