

## DIVERGENT USAGES OF SEMIOTICS IN GRAPHIC DESIGN PROCESS.

**AKANNI, DANIEL. O.**

Department of Art, Design and  
Printing Technology,  
The Polytechnic, Ibadan  
[akanniolatundedaniel@gmail.co](mailto:akanniolatundedaniel@gmail.com)  
[m](#)

**DAKYES, S. U.**

Department of Industrial Design,  
Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria  
[sukyes@gmail.com](mailto:sukyes@gmail.com)

**LUCKY JAMES**

Department of Visual and  
Performing Arts,  
Faculty of Arts,  
University of Maiduguri,  
Maiduguri

---

### Abstract

This paper examines and analyzes the use of semiotics in graphic and advertising designs from its functional perspective using Textual Analysis Approach, and how it is used contextually to translate variables to enhance information and message delivery. The syntax on which semiotic theory steams is an observation made by Fairlough (1995) that textual analysis should involve a stronger orientation to context. It is on these contextual frameworks that semiotic is hereby examined. This position agrees with Martin (1992) who opines that cohesion alone in text is not sufficient to define semiotic in graphic design. However, the context within which it is applied is also very critical in its analysis. Graphic design should be a fulfilling one for both the sponsor and the target audience to whom the copy is directed. The significance of the analysis therefore lies in the fact that, it would create awareness among graphic practitioners in all ramifications in terms of its practicability. It is also hoped that, the paper will make important contributions to intellectual and professional discourse in the wide range of design processes. The paper reviews related literature that is relevant to graphic design practices based on theories propounded by experts in the field of graphic and advertising designs.

**Key words: Semiotics, Sign, Icon, Symbol, Copy, Indexical, Interpreting**

### Introduction

Knowledge of semiotic concept are not only useful to advertising/graphic designers in enhancing message delivery, it is often adopted to solve graphic designs problems. Semiotic eases interpretation and understanding. It is however observed that the concept have often been misappropriated within the context of its application by designers thereby misleading in its interpretation. McQuarrie (2005) findings on semiotics in communication designs observe that, communication tends to be misleading, irrelevant and deceptive if misappropriated. The resultant effect of such copy is that, the reader is isolated and the copy loses its qualitative value of relevance and permanent value. The thrust of the paper takes exception to discuss conceptual applicability of semiotic to set a direction on how to utilize the concept to achieve effective design copy without necessarily flouting the intent of the copy especially in Nigeria where majority of the population are unlettered (Taiwo, 2007).

Semiotic is always a sign until meaning is ascribed to it and it is always the paradigm of creating meaning to be understood. Semiotic was developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by two personalities - a linguist Ferdinand de Saussure who lived in 1857-1913 and philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1921). According to Peirce, Semiotic is usually employed by professionals in many fields of human endeavors to represent articles, situations and even language. In graphic design it is used to encode messages or even communicate visually. How the concept is applied in design to make meaning to be understood is the focus

of this paper. Reschke (2005) avers that, a sign has no meaning unless invested with a one. This implies that sign becomes a sign only when it stands for something else. It also means that a sign is anything that stands for something or anything object, concept, idea or message. Messages are coded signs which are conveyed through sign systems. The good use of sign symbols in graphic/design the better the chances of delivering a copy with effectiveness. Any attempt therefore to force unprecedented signs or symbols visually unto unreceptive target audience, usually only meet with cognitive dissonance and the result is failure.

### Concept of Semiotics

Any concept or idea in a message or communication, diagram or advertisement could stand for a sign. In its simplest definition, semiotic is understood as theory of signs. It teaches that, a sign is real in itself invested with meanings. It creates a platform within which a copy is understood. The reality of semiotic concept is not only the intention we put into the work as a designer but interpretation and understanding ascribed to it by people who experiences the work. Bloomer (1976) define semiotics as, "the study of influence on our perception". Since design is a sign written in its own distinctive visual language, communication presupposes that, both the sender and receiver of the message understand the same basic language. To a great extent, the vital context surrounding the visual language gives the "art signs" the meaning (Arnheim, 1974).

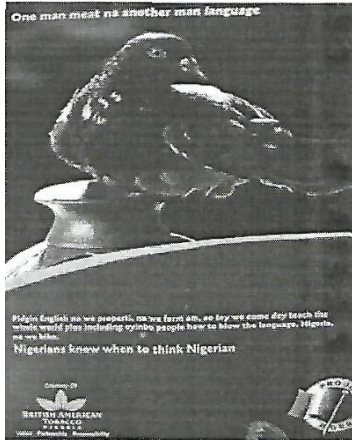
Underwood (2003) emphasizes the usefulness of semiotics by saying that, semiotics provides the conceptual framework for analyzing signs in communication process or advertisement. Understanding the key concept of signs/codes could enable advertisers transmit message with ease for advertising purposes. These signs are those found within the context of social, political, religious and culture of the target audiences.



**Figure 1: The three images of the branded "Coca-Cola" are semiotic, Source: [www.ILVpp.CocaCola.org](http://www.ILVpp.CocaCola.org) (Retrieved: 10<sup>th</sup> September, 2013)**

These signs are conceptualized symbol(s) object, shape, colour, text or images in an advert. A graphic designer communicates messages through these coded signs; applied them on a medium of communication from which the eye and the mind are made to interpret or seek satisfactory explanation or extract information from what it sees.

Designers fashion all kinds of signs, some of which convey the message alone. Such signs or pictographs are visual images that either represents a "word" or an "idea". For example, a Coca-Cola bottle sign (fig. 1) perhaps conveys message better than the words in text; and this perhaps explains semiotic sign better.



**Figure 2: "Dove Bird" is a semiotic -"One man meat another man language, Source: BAT (2012)**

The perched pigeon (fig. 2) for example is a concept or idea that conveys a message of perhaps "sober reflection or humility" depending on who interprets it. The heading text; "One man's meat na another man's language", is perhaps a metaphorical translated Pidgin English which probably means that, "if you will not smoke, another person will". The argument here is that different interpretations might be ascribed to the concept of the "pigeon" and the "text" respectively by different people. The coded symbols which the sign (pigeon) symbolizes are not universally inclined while the text could mean different things entirely to different people. Hewes in Akanni (2015) postulates that, the development of comprehensive message fundamentally resides in the interpreter of those messages through the mental structures that provide the cues to understanding it and how the viewer comes to interpret the picture (sign) used.

### **Theory of Semiotics**

The antics of semiotics in encoding messages can best be discussed against the backdrop of three variables for proper understanding.

1. The sign itself
2. The codes which the sign represent
3. The users of the sign.

Signs often take the form of words, images, sounds, acts, objects and text. Saussure and Peirce postulates that these variables have no intrinsic value until meanings are ascribed depending on the circumstances and intent of the intended message. This theory is based on the concept that, nothing is a sign unless it is

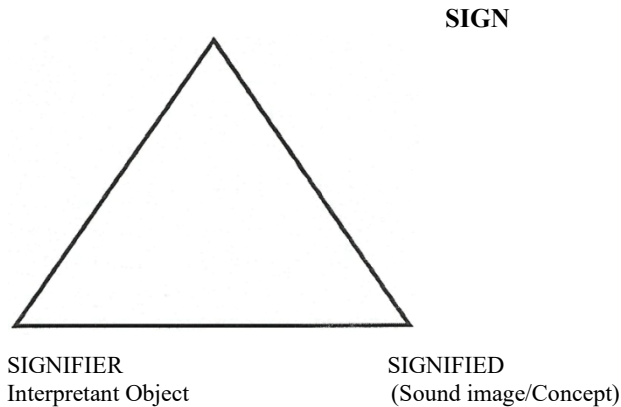
ascribing with one (Rescke, 2005). Chandler (1994) agrees with the theory when he states that, a message remains a sign in its physical probity; and it becomes a sign only until when meaning ascribed to it means something familiar. He reiterates that, anything can be a sign as long as it is interpreted as "signifying" something being referred to or standing for something other than itself. Human beings interpret things as signs exclusively unconsciously by relating them to familiar system of conventions. It is this meaningful use of signs that forms the nucleus that concerns semiotics. Drawing inference from Akanni (2015) contextual analysis of divergent usages of semiotics asserts that:

The word pork and a picture of the animal, both stand for some idea or concept of piggery. The interpretation given to this concept of piggery is based on one's experiences, as well as additional information and description which accompany the sign. The concept of the piggery can as well be interpreted as piglet, piggy, meat, and swine or piggish (dirty)", depending on who interprets it.

The theory of meaning or advancing interpretation increases peoples understanding in diverse ways besides the immediate meaning of the object or content of the sign. The meaning or interpretation ascribes to concept or idea is a basic knowledge and experience that contribute to process of generating a strong flavored description of imagery or statement. Meaning is not transmitted to us; perceiver actively creates it according to a complex interplay of codes or conventions.

De Saussure in Underwood's (2003) definition of a sign is riddled as dyadic model composed of a "signifier" and a "signified": that which results from the association of image and its concept. The relationship between the two variables is referred to as "signification". In this instance, the sign must have both a signifier and signified. A signifier in this instance stands for the sign itself (image) and the signified refers to the concept i.e. mental interpretation invested to the sign or what the concept represents. As a linguist, De Saussure was interested in the way the word "sign" is related to a concept than object signs. To him a language sign (signified) for example would be common to members of the same culture or social entity who spoke and share the same language. He however stresses that, there is no necessary connection between the signifier and the signified due to the arbitrary use of signs. Saussure infers that, in applying the principle to transmission and analyzing advertisements for instance, one would need to make references to the world within the ambit of social contexts. Contrary to De Saussure's view, Peirce's view of a sign is anything which determines something else. Consequently, interpretation within this context will have to be subjected to a situation within which the object is referred to. This implies that, interpretation of a particular sign could mean something else other than itself. In this instance, a sign remains nothing but a sign. To Peirce, everything/anything can be a sign that could determine something other than itself. Buttressing this view, Gorlec (1994) avers that, every diagram, picture, pointing finger,

waving of one's handkerchief, concept, dream, memory, natural cry, sound, indication, letter, token, word, sentence, page, chapter, book, library and insect, anything means a different thing to a different person. In other words, anything that is perceptible, knowledgeable or imaginable can be said to be a sign. He posited that, for interpretation to act as a sign, it must enter into a relationship with its object to be interpreted to produce a new sign (interpretant).



**Diagram 1: Sign - Signifier (interpretant) - Signified (Object-Chandler 2001)**

The interpretation of sign and object can better be explained in triangular diagram of Pierce (1839-1921) in Akanni (2015). In the study of sign symbols by Pierce sign is a three-partied interaction: the sign itself, the object/concept it represents, and the interpreter (interpretant) of the sign. Each variable is dependent on the other and could only be understood in relation to the other. Sign therefore refers to something other than itself (De Saussure, 1857-1913) which in other words, has effect in the mental consciousness of the user (the interpretant).

#### **Discourse on similarities of Peirce and De Saussure view on Signs**

Similarities between Peirce's view on sign and De Saussure's signifier can be inferred that while Peirce's view on theory of sign (signifier) has relationship with the De Saussure's signified (object), De Saussure is not concerned with the relationship of Peirce's object or external meaning. He is concerned about the conceptual meaning of the sign. In graphic design or communication process, cultural conventions, values or variables such as social, political, religion, education for instance are signs (signified) which are perfect tool for a successful advertisement. The objects in our environment, the gestures and words (signs) derive their meanings from the coded (signs) to which they belong. It can be inferred that, values attached to concept by each culture or experience will by no means influence its meaning/interpretation. Designers develop signs for communication process using those things they agree to have value; and they would probably have developed a whole array of signs to draw the distinctions between those things which are of particular significance in a particular culture to achieve their intended messages.

## Signs and Meaning Generation

The primary function of signs' is to generate meaning. The field of semiotics breaks down visuals into categories of icon, symbol and index which convey meanings that have different relationship between the signs, its objects and to which it refers. A specific sign will generate different meanings depending on the culture in which it takes place. For instance, colour symbolizes a lot of things to people in different parts of the world. In ancient China for instance, yellow represent royalty, while in Rome red takes the place of yellow. This implies that colour red and yellow signs convey the same meaning in different cultures.

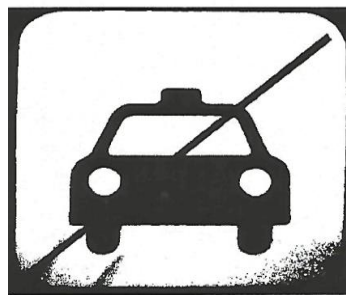
Sign is often artistically employed by designers to convey messages. This perhaps explains why the designer of logotype of the Coca-Cola group of companies (Plc.) applied red colour sign on the whitish background of the brand. In persuasive advertisement which involves two sets of variables (sender and receiver) this theory is relevant. The consumer to whom the advert is directed has to generate meaning from the sign, its relationship with its object, interpretant, and react to that by doing what the advertisement ask of him. Sign is however described either as icon, symbolical or indexical.

### Iconic sign

Icon signs bear a direct relationship to the object being described. The signifier is perceived as resembling something or imitating the signified - looking like the thing it represents. It is perceived as resembling or imitating something it represent. In other words, iconic sign bears a close resemblance to the object they represent. For instance, diagram 2a below shows an icon of a car in silhouette which many society of the world has adopted as a road sign. It is highly iconic in silhouette that looks like a car. A road sign with an image of a car is an icon. A road sign with a slash means "forbidden" which has a culturally accepted meaning. The icon in figure 2b exemplifies a road sign showing "forbidden" or "not allowed" icon.



**Diagram A: Allowed**



**Diagram B: Forbidden**

**Diagram 2a: Allowed: An icon of a car in silhouette without a slash implies allowed.**

**Diagram 2b: Forbidden: An icon of a car in silhouette" with a slash means not allowed.**

### Symbolic sign

The Webster's Eleventh New Collegiate Dictionary explains symbol to mean "something that stands for or suggest something else by reason of relationship, association, convention, or accidental resemblance, especially a visible sign of something invisible. It is a mode in which the signifier does not resemble the

signified but purely conventional. In other words, the sign has no resemblance or connection between it and the object. The symbol's connection with its object is a matter of convention, rule or agreement between the users. An arbitrary or conventional signal used in writing or printing relating to a particular field to represent elements, relations or qualities, operations and qualities. The symbol is a type of trademark used to represent a product or establishment. It represents invisible qualities of a product, reliability, durability, strength or warmth. Bloom (1974) explains that, "symbol shows how an image takes on a culturally accepted meaning that goes beyond its merely recognizable shape". A road sign with a circle and slash in diagram 2b: "forbidden" is an example of a symbol. This signifies "something" is forbidden simply because we have agreed that, that is what it means. Words are also considered symbols of the "thing" or product. The Coca-Cola (text) symbol and the RED colour on a white background represent the invisible quality of the Coca-Cola product. See page 3 for visuals.

### **Indexical sign**

Index is a visual image we have learned to associate with that has a particular meaning. It is directly connected in some way to its objects. For instance, a thermometer is an index of temperature. Semiotics goes on to define an index-as a sign that bears a direct relationship to the object it represents without simply showing that object. A "shadow" of a building for example, indicates its presence. We may also see a "footprint" or "smoke" among others as an example of indexical sign.

### **Semiotics in communication process**

In graphic communication, semiotics allows us to understand the relationships between signs, what they stand for, and the people who must interpret them - the people we design for. These signs are anything capable of standing for representing separate meaning. Semiotics concept are employed to communicate emotion through an expressive treatment of elements and placement of signs to convey a mood, concept or story, using purely visual and images to communicate with target audience. Symbols, icon and index whatever case may be, are however considered a good approaches to creation of visuals of trademark or advertisement. For instance, print advertisement in figure 3 below present cultural dancers with cigarettes product arranged in V-shape on yellowish circled foreground to translate the quality in the product. The V-shape is a semiotic concept of the two figures of smokers. The smiling faces of the dual dancers interpret the merry-making, pleasure and enjoyment in the product. The products at the foreground are symbolic signs. The complimenting caption, "thrills cultural excitement" written in white and yellow colour on prurient - blue background, is indexical representing the product. 'The cultural dancers on the advert symbolize universality of the thrilling excitement in the product. The adopted colours of the advert tell the premium of the product. The concept of the advert allows the viewer to see the product as thrilling: the invisible quality of the product. The overall concept suggests that, cigarette brings togetherness, friendship

and merry making especially in a cultural setting though meant only for adult folks above eighteen years, with the Federal Government of Nigeria warning that, “smokers are liable to die young”.



**Figure 3: " Thrills cultural excitement (Source: Akanni 29"" November, 2015)**

It is important to note that, a sign can be an icon, as well as a symbol. Chandler (2008) explain that, "whether a sign is an icon, symbol or indexical, depends primarily on the way in which the sign is being used." The same signifier may be used ironically in one context and symbolic in another or combination of both. A sign must have both signifier (image) and signified (concept or meaning' ascribed). For example a pictorial of smiling head-tied spinster lady below of Glo advertisement (figure 4) may stand for some broad category of some "women" or may particularly/specifically represent a particular "woman" who is being depicted (signified). Chandler affirms that, a sign cannot be classified in terms of the three modes without reference to the purposes of their users within a particular context. As a result, a sign may be treated as symbolic by one person, as iconic by another and as indexical by a third. According to Grayson (1998), when we talk of an icon, a symbol or an index, we are referring to the viewer's experience of the sign and not the objective qualities of the sign itself. For instance the sign of forbidden (fig. B) simply has a car in black with a slash or bar cross. In any kind of sign adopted in advertisement, the designer has to learn the cultural conventions involved. This is exemplified in the GLO advertisement in figure 4 below that featured a young lady with head-tie to represent what can be described as “virtuous women” in Nigeria who derive satisfaction (signified) using Glo network service. The slogan sign "Glo World" implies that women all over the world patronize Glo network.





**Figure 4: A pictorial of a woman (signifier) and may particularly/specifically represent a particular woman (signified), Source: Glo advert, May 6, 2013**

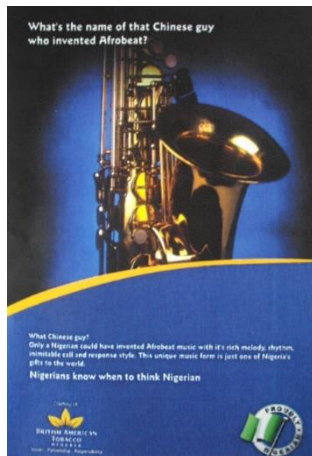
Glo ad in Figure 5 below "Let's celebrate our Uniqueness as a people" is yet another sign which seems to translate Nigeria cultural uniqueness and diversity. Glo network service seems to be proud of "Nigerian cultural diversity" and "independence". No wonder her fraternity with Nigeria's rich culture. To the author, the advertising copy is an interesting semiotic contextual unity of Nigerian and its diverse entities. It could be argued that, the advertisement convey several cultural values, such as unity, oneness, harmony, excitement and joyful Nigeria. The signifier featured predominantly, people from the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria, who patronize Glo network. The image is an icon of the product itself which the trademark symbolizes. It implies that, advertisers use a variety of signifiers featuring people from different ethnic background or groups in Nigeria to pass a message. Below the images on extreme right of the print is the iconic image of the service provider itself - Glo logo (signified) that signifies the service.

On a simple level, it is easy to ascribe meanings to the semiotic variables. Firstly, the advert draws inference from the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria: Yoruba - Hausa- Igbo; whose mood suggests that, they find satisfaction in using the Glo network. Secondly, it signifies unity among the Nigerian ethnic groups. The smiles on their faces suggest the conceptual "unity, oneness and joyful Nigeria which is needed for harmonious and prosperous entity. Expressing a view on pictorial perception across cultures Derewiski (1991) argued that, "most people had problems interpreting signs in unified whole or interpreting pictorial information due to their level of visual literacy or any other variables.



**Figure 5: "Let's celebrate our uniqueness as a people"- GLO advert portraying "mood"<sup>11</sup> among different ethnic in Nigeria (Source: Punch Newspaper: 1<sup>st</sup> October 2012)**

Drawing inference from Derewiski (ibid) point of view, it could be deduce that, not many target audiences will find it easy to interpret, perceive symbols or respond to emotional appeal besides levels of literacy and language spoken. What the semiotic concept saxophone (fig. 6) stands for or meant to the target audience explains Derewiski's point of view. The headline: What's the name of that Chinese guy who invented Afrobeat does not equally give clue to the intent of the sign (saxophone). What the saxophone stands for is individualistic based on their visual and cultural stands.



**Figure 6: What's the name of that Chinese guy who invented Afrobeat (Source: BAT, 2012)**

According to Chandler (2001) cultural meanings are derived from the way society uses and values the signifier and the signified. Meanings are giving by individual drawn from the warehouse of images and concepts which are available in our culture. Be that as it may, designer or communicators must be well grounded in semiotics as a concept in communication process as well as understanding the target audiences and their socio-cultural environment for effective message delivery.

### **Conclusion**

Knowledge of semiotics is important for all advertising practitioners. It allows for understanding the relationship between signs in its application in communication process; what they stand for, and the people who must interpret them-to whom the design is directed. In much broader context, signs include anything capable of standing for or representing separate meaning. Semiotics teaches that, designers work has no meaning outside the complex set of factors that defines it. The deeper understanding and awareness of these factors, the better control over the success of communication created for persuasive advert as designers (Chandler, 2001). Semiotics craves indulgence to take exception as something that simply exist but which is independent of human interpretation. Semiotically, reality depends on not only the intentions the designer put into his work but also the interests of the people who perceive or experience the work. Semiotics also teaches that, meaning is not transmitted to viewers - viewers actively ascribe meaning according to a complex interplay of codes or conventions. We learn from semiotics that, human beings live in a world of signs and symbols - have no way of understanding anything except through signs into which they are organized. When advertisers apply cultural or social values in their adverts, they enhance their chances of connecting the people who draw inference from the message delivery.

### **Recommendation**

There should be a strong and conscious will on the part of all design practitioners to acquire semiotic knowledge even if it is to be acquired from a learned colleague in the profession. This will enable them enhance message delivery to the target audience with effectiveness. Message, they say is a medium of expression (Buruji, 2014). Visual literacy do not necessarily translate ability to read nor write, but ability to interpret a communication to extract a proposition or some meanings from sign which the communication medium consists of. Finally, the strength of any message lies in communication presumptions that, message delivery should be conveyed in a manner that would be easily be understood in a clear language to avoid an average consumer being isolated from the message.

## References

- Akanni, D.O. (2014). Critical Assessment and Redesign of the British American Tobacco Poster Designs in Nigeria: Unpublished M.A Dissertation, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria- Nigeria
- Arnheim, R. (1974). Art and Visual Perception: Berkeley, California University of California Press, p.241.
- Bloomer, C .M. (1976) Principles of Visual Perception, New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold
- Buruji, K. (2014) Chibok Girls: Is Obasanjo a friend or foe? *The Punch Newspapers*, 1 July 2014, p.57
- Buser, T. (2006) Experiencing Art around Us: University of Louisville, USA: (2<sup>nd</sup> edition),
- Chandler, D. (1994). Semiotics for beginners: [http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/\\_54B/semiotic.html](http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/_54B/semiotic.html). Retrieved: 16 February, 2013
- Chandler, D. (2001). Semiotics: The Basics. Routledge <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/documents/54B/semiotic.html>. Retrieved: February 15, 2013
- Deregowski, J. K. (1984). *Distortion in Art: The Eye and the Mind*, Routledge & Kegan Paul Plc.
- Fairlough, N. (1995) *Media Discourse*, London: Edward Arnold.
- Gorlee, D. (1994). *Semiotics and the Problem of Translation*, Amsterdam: Atlanta P50
- Grayson, K. (1998). *The Icons of Consumer Research: Using signs to represent consumer reality*. In Bezuidenhout, I (Ed) A discursive semiotic approach to translating cultural aspects in persuasive advertisement
- Harry, C. T. and John, W. B. (1980) A Hand Book of Cross-Cultural Psychology Methodology, USA: Allyn and Bacon Inc.
- Hewes, G. W. (1978) *Visual Learning: Thinking and Communication in Human Bio-social Evolution*. In: Akanni D. O. (2014). Critical Assessment and Redesign of the British American Tobacco Poster Designs in Nigeria: Unpublished M.A dissertation, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria
- Martin, J. R. (1992) *English Text, System and Structure*, Amsterdam: John Benjamin's Publishing Co.
- McQuarrie, E. F. & Barbara, J. (2005) Indirect Persuasion in Advertising: How consumers process metaphors presented in pictures and words: American Academy of Advertising, *The advertising Journal*. 34 (2), p. 7-20
- Multinational Print Advertisements in Nigeria: An Unpublished M.A Thesis, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. Nigeria
- Peirce, C. S. (1991). *Peirce on Signs*: James Hoppers ed. Chapel Hill NC: University of North Carolina Press: In Akanni, D. O. (2015) Critical Assessment and Redesign of the British American Tobacco Poster Designs in Nigeria: Unpublished M.A dissertation, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria
- Underwood, M. (2003) Introductory Models and Basic Concepts: Semiotics: <http://vwww.cultsock.ndirect.co.uk/MUHome/cshtml/semiomcan/semiol.html> Retrieved: 29<sup>th</sup> March 2013
- Reschke, N. (2005). Semiotic Analysis Product Advert and its Interpretation by Readers: <http://www.abe.ac.uk/media/students/nnr950.htm>. Retrieved: 28th August 2013 Thomas Woodworth, p. 107
- Taiwo, B. S. (2007) Theological education in Nigeria and the question of Bible based Environmental studies Curriculum in Africa. *Journal for the study of educational issues*: (Ajedui): Vol.No.1, pp.62-74. Retrieved from: [www.Ajeduionline.com.ghana](http://www.Ajeduionline.com.ghana). 16 March, 2013