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Semiotic Analysis of Meaning Construction in Vintage Porsche Print Advertisements (1965–1995)

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Abstract

This article discusses the construction of meaning in vintage Porsche print advertisements from 1965 to 1995 using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach. The study employs a qualitative-descriptive method with purposive sampling, analyzing advertisements representing three phases: technical innovation, motorsport dominance, and exclusivity. Each ad is examined on three levels of meaning: denotation, connotation, and myth. The findings show that Porsche ads convey literal meaning through visual and verbal elements that highlight technical innovation and achievement. At the connotative level, color strategy, layout, and slogans construct an image of prestige and elite lifestyle. On the myth level, Porsche is positioned as a symbol of performance, social status, and multi-generational aspiration. These findings indicate that advertisements function not only as promotional tools but also as instruments for constructing culture and a strong brand identity.

Keywords: *semiotics, vintage Porsche ads, Roland Barthes, denotation, connotation, myth*

1. INTRODUCTION

Advertising is one of the most influential mass communication media in shaping brand image and identity, as well as influencing modern consumer culture (Kotler & Armstrong, 2018). In the high-end automotive industry, such as Porsche, advertisements go beyond simply conveying technical product information. They also function as symbolic narratives that link products with values of exclusivity, prestige, and social aspiration (Leffingwell, 2015). The period between 1965 and 1995 was a crucial era for Porsche in establishing and solidifying its brand through structured

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visual and verbal communication strategies.

While it is true that advertising plays a significant role in shaping brand image and consumer culture, the notion that vintage Porsche print advertisements from 1965 to 1995 solely constructed meaning through exclusivity and prestige may overlook other critical factors. Advertising is not just about symbolic narratives; it also serves to inform consumers about the practical benefits and features of the product. Furthermore, the interpretation of advertisements can vary widely among different demographics, with some consumers valuing performance and engineering over aspirational messaging. Additionally, the era in question was marked by significant shifts in consumer attitudes and economic conditions that influenced how brands like Porsche communicated their identity. Thus, a semiotic analysis that focuses exclusively on symbolism may miss the broader context of consumer engagement and the multifaceted nature of brand communication in the automotive industry.

Moreover, the evolution of consumer preferences during this period cannot be understated, as the automotive landscape began to reflect a more complex interplay between brand identity and technological innovation. As the market became increasingly competitive, brands like Porsche had to navigate not only the allure of exclusivity but also the growing consumer demand for performance and sustainability. This led to a shift in advertising strategies, integrating messages of engineering excellence and environmental consciousness alongside traditional narratives of luxury (Context_2). For instance, the introduction of more fuel-efficient models and advancements in automotive technology were communicated through advertisements that emphasized both performance and responsibility, showcasing how brands adapted to the changing expectations of their audience. Consequently, a comprehensive semiotic analysis must account for these dynamics to fully appreciate the multifaceted nature of brand communication within the automotive sector.

Since its inception, Porsche has positioned its products not merely as vehicles but as symbols of performance and personal achievement. The visual details in the ads ranging from image composition, color use, typography, to slogan selection are deliberately designed to strengthen the brand's association with elite lifestyles and certain social identities (Tjiptono, 2005). Therefore, vintage Porsche advertisements can be considered cultural artifacts that reflect transitions and innovations in automotive branding and visual communication strategies.

This research uses Roland Barthes' semiotic approach to analyze the advertisements, focusing on three levels of meaning: denotation as literal meaning, connotation as socially and culturally associated meaning, and myth as the ideological narrative underlying meaning construction in society (Barthes, 2013). This framework aims to reveal how Porsche ads produce layered meanings through carefully crafted visuals and text.

The study aims to contribute theoretically to marketing communication and visual semiotics, and serve as a reference for designing communication strategies for premium brands, particularly in the luxury automotive industry.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

a. Advertising Theory

Advertising is a key instrument in shaping brand perception and value, particularly in the highly competitive automotive industry. Kotler & Armstrong (2018) state that modern advertising functions not only to deliver product messages but also as a persuasive tool that creates emotional value and consumer loyalty. Andrews & Shimp (2018) emphasize that promotion strategies for luxury automotive products often use visual symbolism and layered narratives to strengthen brand positioning in the consumer's mind. In this context, Porsche is known as a manufacturer that consistently utilizes advertising as a medium for identity creation and brand differentiation in the global market.

Advertising is a central instrument in shaping brand perception and value, particularly within the highly competitive automotive industry. Kotler and Armstrong (2018) note that modern advertising serves not only as a channel for delivering product information but also as a persuasive mechanism that builds emotional value and consumer loyalty. Similarly, Andrews and Shimp (2018) emphasize that promotion strategies for luxury automotive products often rely on visual symbolism and layered storytelling to reinforce brand positioning in the consumer's mind. In this context, Porsche is recognized as a manufacturer that consistently utilizes advertising as a medium for identity creation and brand differentiation in the global marketplace.

Advertising operates as a form of *brand storytelling* that goes beyond functional communication, creating symbolic associations that contribute to brand equity. Belch and Belch (2021) argue that the effectiveness of advertising depends on its ability to integrate rational and emotional appeals, thereby generating strong and enduring brand associations. Within the luxury automotive industry, marketing messages frequently highlight notions of prestige, performance,

and exclusivity (Keller, 2016).

Furthermore, the *hierarchy of effects model* explains that consumers progress through sequential stages—from awareness and knowledge to purchase and loyalty where advertising plays a critical role in shaping perceptions and attitudes at each stage (Lavidge & Steiner, 1961). Porsche, for instance, employs narrative-driven campaigns that emphasize *driving experience* and heritage of performance to construct an aspirational brand image (Kapferer, 2012). This approach illustrates that advertising does not merely inform; it symbolically constructs meaning and reinforces emotional differentiation in the consumer's psyche.

b. Branding in Porsche Advertising

Porsche's branding extends far beyond the sale of vehicles; it embodies symbols of engineering excellence, motorsport heritage, and timeless luxury. As Kapferer (2012) emphasizes, luxury brands like Porsche sell cultural and emotional value that transcends functional benefits, positioning their products as expressions of identity and aspiration. Historical Porsche advertisements often highlight the brand's technological innovation and racing pedigree, reinforcing its association with high performance and exclusivity (Schmitt & Simonson, 1997).

Visual components such as the Porsche crest, aerodynamic design language, and concise slogans like "*There is no substitute*" are key semiotic elements that convey status and sophistication. These elements serve not only to distinguish Porsche from competitors but also to evoke symbolic meanings related to social prestige and personal achievement (Keller, 2013). Research on automotive branding underscores that visual storytelling and heritage cues enhance consumer attachment and perceived authenticity in luxury car marketing (Beverland, 2005).

In this way, Porsche's advertising constructs an aspirational narrative in which the car becomes a conduit of self-expression a blend of precision engineering and emotional fulfillment. The consistent use of visual and linguistic symbols across decades exemplifies how luxury branding functions as an evolving yet coherent identity system designed to preserve exclusivity while appealing to new generations of consumers (Kapferer & Bastien, 2017).

c. Roland Barthes' Semiotics in Advertising Analysis

Semiotic theory provides a critical framework for analyzing how meaning is constructed and communicated in advertising. Roland Barthes' (1972/2013) model of signification divides meaning into three hierarchical levels: denotation, connotation, and myth. At the denotative level,

signs are interpreted in their literal form what is visually or verbally presented in the advertisement. Connotation introduces associative meanings that stem from cultural, emotional, or symbolic interpretations of the sign. Finally, myth operates as a secondary system of signification that naturalizes ideological values and constructs social narratives (Barthes, 1972).

In the context of Porsche advertising, Barthes' framework is instrumental in unpacking how visual and textual elements function beyond their literal representation. The image of a Porsche, for instance, denotes a luxury sports car; connotatively, it signifies sophistication, power, and individual achievement. On the mythic level, the Porsche brand embodies broader cultural ideologies—such as technological mastery, masculine performance, and aspirational success—transforming the car into a symbol of identity and social prestige (Chandler, 2017; Williamson, 1978).

This semiotic lens allows researchers to interpret advertising not merely as a promotional tool but as a form of cultural text that produces and reproduces societal values. Through Barthes' model, Porsche advertisements can be read as myth-making devices that reinforce dominant ideologies about modernity, luxury, and human aspiration. As such, semiotics bridges the gap between marketing communication and cultural discourse, offering insights into how meaning operates within visual media to influence consumer perception (Danesi, 2018).

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative-descriptive approach to analyze visual and verbal meanings in vintage Porsche print ads from 1965 to 1995. This approach enables in-depth interpretation of visual signs, narrative structures, and cultural symbols featured in each advertisement (Tjiptono, 2005). Data collection uses purposive sampling to select ads that represent three strategic and historical phases of Porsche: technical innovation (1960s), motorsport dominance (1970s–1980s), and the exclusivity era (1990s).

Primary data sources include archived Porsche print ads found in automotive magazines, official catalogs, and promotional brochures. Each advertisement is analyzed through two key aspects: (1) visual elements such as car imagery, logos, color use, typography, and layout; and (2) verbal elements including slogans, headlines, and supporting narratives.

Data analysis is based on Barthes' semiotic framework with three levels of meaning: denotation, connotation, and myth. First, the researcher identifies the denotative meaning of objects and texts that appear literally in the ads. Next, connotative interpretations are made by

associating visual and verbal elements with cultural issues, social implications, and status symbols. Finally, the analysis explores myth-level narratives, tracking the ideological constructions embedded in the advertisements that cultivate brand identity and elite imagery in society..

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

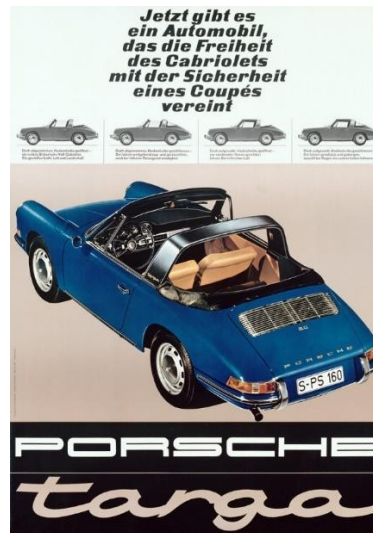


Figure 1. Porsche Targa Advertisement (1964)

The 1965 Porsche Targa ad features a blue sports car with a removable roof and an illustration of four roof configurations from fully open to fully closed. A German-language slogan emphasizes technical superiority: a blend of cabriolet freedom and coupé safety. Denotatively, the car visual, “Porsche” logo, and “Targa” text directly signify the product’s identity. Connotatively, the flexible roof symbolizes individual freedom, while the bold, dynamic typography conveys strength and sportiness. The ad associates the product with prestige and elite lifestyle choices. At the myth level, Porsche constructs the narrative of “controlled freedom” the sensation of open-air driving without compromising safety. The ad also illustrates Porsche’s ingenuity in responding to U.S. car conversion regulations, positioning itself as a postwar automotive innovator.

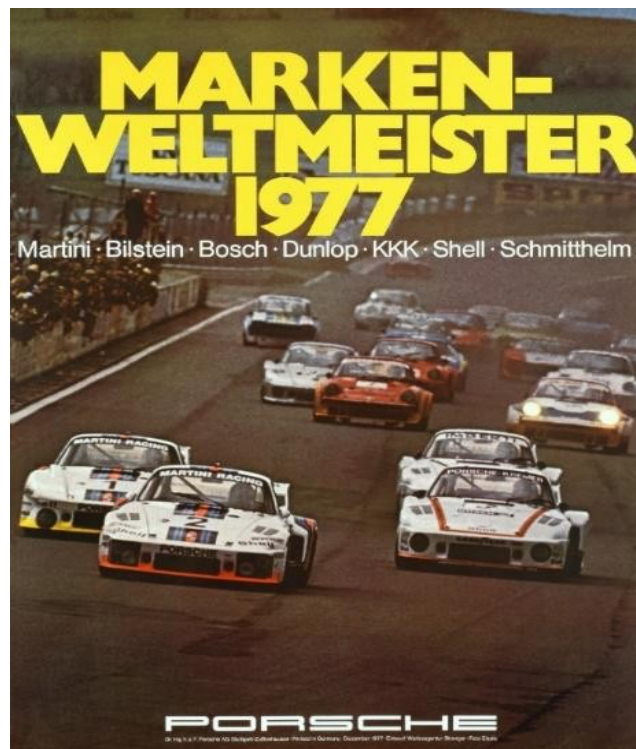


Figure 2. Porsche “MARKEN-WELTMEISTER” Advertisement

In the motorsport dominance era of the 1970s–1980s, the “Marken-Weltmeister 1977” ad showcases a line of Porsche Martini Racing cars dominating the track, accompanied by a bold yellow headline. Visually, it denotes Porsche's dominance in the Le Mans endurance race that year, positioning it as world champion in the manufacturer category. Connotatively, the yellow headline symbolizes victory and glory. The track background and lead position of Porsche cars depict technological reliability tested on the racing circuit. Sponsor logos like Bosch, Shell, and Dunlop arranged vertically reinforce the idea that Porsche's success stems from synergistic collaboration within the automotive ecosystem.

At the myth level, this ad constructs a narrative of Porsche's technological supremacy as a racing icon. The cars are not only the fastest but also symbols of German engineering resilience dominating the global stage. The ad celebrates achievement while reinforcing Porsche's image as a global motorsport leader.



Figure 3. Porsche “MARKEN-WELTMEISTER” Advertisement

In the exclusivity and heritage era of the 1990s, the 1994 Porsche 911 (964) ad presents a unique communicative approach by positioning the sports car as a family vehicle alternative. The iconic Porsche 911 is paired with a German slogan emphasizing time efficiency and family life: *“Sie können länger frühstücken. Sie sind früher zum Abendessen zurück. Gibt es ein besseres Familienauto?”*

Denotatively, the ad presents the Porsche 911 as a high-performance sports car. Connotatively, it challenges conventional perceptions by portraying Porsche as a practical yet exclusive family vehicle. Typography, car body design, and the slogan “This is how a sports car is made” reinforce the brand’s identity as a true sports car manufacturer. The language contains irony and subtle humor, suggesting that Porsche’s outstanding performance makes it more suitable as a “family car” than traditional vehicles. This humor draws attention and builds an image of intelligence, elegance, and exclusivity.

At the myth level, Porsche is depicted as a symbol of modern mobility offering not only performance but also quality of life. The ad broadens the brand’s image—from luxury sports car to a lifestyle icon for active, dynamic families without losing its core sporty essence.

Analysis of Porsche advertisements from 1965 to 1995 reveals consistent visual and verbal communication patterns emphasizing innovation and brand identity. The Targa ad (1965) highlights roof innovation as a technological breakthrough. The Marken-Weltmeister ad (1977)

showcases racing dominance, while the 911 type 964 ad (1990s) uses sarcasm to emphasize engine superiority.

Visually, there is significant evolution in style, background, typography, and audience approach. However, the car remains central in every ad. Communication strategies evolve from factual-technical in the 1960s, to narrative-achievement in the 1970s, to emotional-personal in the 1990s. Despite different approaches, all ads share a common thread: Porsche as a symbol of prestige, technical superiority, and exclusivity.

Through Barthes' semiotic approach, it can be concluded that these advertisements are not merely promotional tools but myth-making instruments constructing Porsche's brand identity and values.

5. CONCLUSION

This research shows that Porsche's vintage ads from 1965–1995 do more than present product information—they shape brand perception and identity through strategically crafted visual and verbal signs. Using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach, the analysis reveals that on the denotative level, the car is always the central visual focus, supporting the communication of technical features and brand image.

At the connotative level, Porsche builds associations with performance, prestige, and exclusivity through bold colors, dramatic lighting, and strong slogans. On the myth level, the ads construct ideological narratives positioning Porsche as a symbol of technological excellence, professionalism, and elite lifestyle. Elements like logos, racing achievements, and high-profile sponsors become . Overall, Porsche consistently positions itself as a global automotive icon that is not only innovative and technically superior but also rich in cultural meaning. Its visual communication strategy demonstrates adaptability to changing times while maintaining its brand essence.

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