



## Symbolism in KFC: A Semiotic Analysis of Branding Through Peirce's Theory

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### Abstract

**Keywords:** semiotics, Peirce's theory, KFC, logo, tagline

In the competitive fast-food industry, KFC's logo and slogan play a crucial role in brand identity and customer perception. This study examines the image of Colonel Sanders in the logo and the tagline, "It's Finger Lickin' Good," through Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory. The analysis explores how these verbal and visual elements engage customers and create meaning. Using qualitative methods such as customer perception surveys, content analysis, and literature reviews, the study finds that the tagline enhances the brand's sensory appeal, while the logo fosters trust and nostalgia. Together, these elements build an emotional connection that boosts customer engagement and brand loyalty. The study highlights the importance of semiotic analysis in understanding branding strategies in the fast-food industry. Applying Peirce's concepts of representamen, interpretant, and object, the research illustrates how KFC effectively navigates brand communication challenges to establish itself as a globally recognized fast-food brand. These findings contribute to ongoing discussions in semiotics, branding, and marketing, offering insights for future research in these areas.

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## INTRODUCTION

Symbols and signs symbolically affect the identity of a brand in contemporary advertising. Nowhere is this more evident than in the fast-food industry, where brands compete for a visual identity that appeals to their own target market. Take the global fast-food chain, Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) as a classic case study – famous for its fried chicken and trademark branding strategies. Along with its slogan: 'It's Finger Lickin' Good,' the KFC logo announced by Colonel Sanders is indeed a compelling example of how a brand can create an effective vehicle for conveying your message and bringing it to life. By understanding the semiotics involved, this journal article will analyze KFC's logo and slogan or tagline relating with Peirce's theory regarding how these lend in developing symbolism of a brand which increases consumer engagement.

A Semiotic Model of Signification Charles Sanders Peirce, an American philosopher, wrote a seminal paper on signs in which he produced a classification framework for understanding their variety and complexity (Peirce 1931). The brand – as a system of signs that refer to other brands, or even itself—could be seen & analyzed by the triadic model, which may help scholars grasp more about how KFC's branding elements work in relation to consumer culture. It must be taboo around the brand even though many claim that The Colonel Sanders figure represents tradition, quality and authenticity. Peirce's framework enables us to look closer at the logo and slogan in order to reveal some of these deep-dwelling meanings and how they interact with one another in consumer perception.

The logo of KFC is an image of Colonel Sanders, a white-clad spectacle wearing man with stick to his wear world string bow. This logo not only acts as a visual point of recognition but also wrapped up the brand history and unmatched craft in it. As a company front, Colonel Sanders is the embodiment of KFC history and its heritage in Southern home-cooking traditions (Rosenbaum, 2018). The target audience for this image is people who want something comforting, traditionally filling with a nostalgic and familiar feel.

Secondly, the adoption of a historical figure as ambassador can invoke consumers' feeling and enhance KFC's narrative about tradition and craftsmanship. As with the logo, KFC's slogan is critical to crafting a sensory trigger that speaks directly to what makes this fast food brand iconic. This tagline encourages people to enjoy the experience of having a meal at KFC and it stresses on how good "fingerlickin' fried chicken" tastes! That slogan is both catchy and reiterates that the brand offers great, tasty feel-good food. The slogan seems to reinforce the overall branding effectiveness, because it speaks directly of consumer emotions and sensations (Holt, 2002).

The hybrid of KFC's logo and slogan, by combining shapes as repetition is using from style, semiotic approach efficiently creates a cohesive identity. Together with its slogan, the logo tells stories about greatness, history and satisfaction – all those values which relate directly to customer emotions. By grasping these semiotic elements, marketers are better equipped to deal with the subtleties of consumer behavior and brand image in a competitive space. We will delve deep into the labyrinth of KFC's logo and slogan. Connection between Peirce's semiotic theory with Kubrat Sinanov Explanation being making about meanings underlying these symbols. Our analysis of KFC will illustrate their effective use of semiotic strategies to construct a strong brand image with connection to its audience. This paper

builds upon research of the cultural and emotional aspects associated with KFC branding, as well adds to a broader consideration of how signs/symbols play in consumer encounters within fast-food.

The link between a sign, its object, and its interpretant is the main subject of Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory. According to Peirce, semiosis is the process by which a sign creates meaning by representing something (the object) in a person's mind. A triadic link between the sign, object, and interpretant is involved in this process. Peirce's theory stresses a more dynamic and interpretative process than Ferdinand de Saussure's dyadic approach, which takes into account the relationship between the signifier and the signified (Peirce, 1998). Icon, index, and symbol are the three categories into which Peirce divided signs according to the relationship between the sign and its object. Signs that physically resemble their objects, like maps or photos, are called icons. Signs that are directly or causally related to their objects—such as smoke signaling fire—are called indexes. However, symbols, like words in a language, depend on cultural norms or agreements. These classifications show how signs might be interpreted in several ways (Danesi, 2007).

Peirce also established the Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness as three universal categories for sign analysis. The term "firstness" describes a sign's instantaneous and intuitive nature, regardless of outside relationships.

For example, the color *red* is used to represent danger. Similar to the relationship between lightning and thunder, secondness refers to the real, physical relationship between a sign and its target. Thirdness includes more nuanced interpretations that rely on social or cultural settings, like the national flag's symbolic meaning (Peirce, 1998). Peirce's semiotic method provides a framework for examining a variety of communication mediums, such as media, art, and cultural phenomena. His theory sheds light on how signals function to communicate meaning by combining the triadic process and universal categories. Because of this, Peirce's semiotics is extremely pertinent to comprehending visual phenomena that are full with symbols and cultural interpretations, like caricatures, ads, or mass media (Danesi, 2007).

The research aims to answer the following questions:

1. How does Peirce's semiotic theory explain the role of the KFC logo and slogan in branding?
2. What semiotic strategies are used in KFC's branding to enhance consumer engagement?
3. How do consumers interpret the logo and slogan in relation to trust, nostalgia, and brand loyalty?

By addressing these questions, this study contributes to existing discussions in semiotics, marketing, and branding, offering insights into the symbolic power of advertising strategies in the fast-food industry.

## METHODS

This study is an attempt to use a semiotic analysis with qualitative method by diagramming the signs used in KFC (Kentucky Fried Chicken) cultural product, namely logo and slogan about Kentucky Fried Chicken within Charles Sanders Peirce's categories of sign. We study those signs in the visual and text corpora with a critical approach unpacking the underlying significations along their cultural implications as part of KFC branding. This model includes of three crucial techniques: text analysis, visual analysis and interpretative analysis.

### a) Textual Analysis

This part is a text analysis of KFC slogan called "It's Finger Lickin' Good. We analyze the language used in each even addressing to slogans involved. In analyzing the slogan, we use a semantic approach by examining its lexical selection and evoke emotions. It encourages consumers to join in a deep sensory experience while making them realize themselves enjoying the pleasure of eating KFC food. To contextualize our results we will refer to prior work on advertising language, for example Cook (2001) who characterizes the use of linguistic tools in persuasion within ads. In this post were going to examine how the wording of that slogan gets its message across, and we are also demonstrating a great example of brand value driving consumer behavior.

### b) Visual Analysis

The second part is a look at the KFC logo, which of course includes image and likeness rights to its founder Colonel Sanders. In this review, I will use the approach of visual semiotics and how did they apply to sign system (Iconography/Logo) presentation concerning brand representation. Visual signs have meanings, can be interpreted through cultural context (Eco 1976), and these theoretical premises will underpin our scrutiny of Colonel Sanders as a sign in that light. To clarify, we will break down the logo into its parts: color, composition and Colonel Sanders on his own in order to understand how each of them build up the brand. For example, red and white colors are very appealing for the food industry as they make people feel that all things are hygienic while yellow color encourages diners because it is a cheerful comfortable color especially in restaurants hotels night clubs premises. What we will do in dissecting these elements is to examine how they serve as a symbol of the brand of KFC.

### c) Interpretative Analysis

The third component is the interpretative analysis wherein we synthesize our textual and visual analyses. This stage is going to be about linking the slogan and logo, seeing them as a collective in how they are used for brand identity building of KFC. In trying to understand what such rhetorical signs convey, given that their meanings are not obvious or transparent in a visual sense (let alone parsed into motivated and unmotivated elements as through language), we drew on Peirce's triadic model of semiotics — composed principally by the 'sign', its object/situation/referent/exemplar ('object'), and an interpretant. It is an important thing to consider as it brings out the greater meaning from KFC and its branding

strategies in general of fast-food industry.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study explored the semiotic dimensions of Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC)'s logo and slogan, applying Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory to analyze how these elements function as symbols within the brand's identity. The findings reveal significant insights into the cultural and emotional connotations associated with KFC's branding strategies, emphasizing how the logo and slogan work together to construct a cohesive brand narrative that resonates with consumers.



### 1. Tagline of KFC

The significance of the logo: Colonel Sanders, as KFC's founder has an extremely good natured image and since everything he stands for is what kfc represents too. Colonel Sanders is part of that history and legends, Colonel is the heritage, quality of KFC ( Kentucky Fried Chicken) as if he were living. His classic white suit, black bow tie and glasses make his image memorable to consumers a evoke some feeling of nostalgia and trust. And the design is very much tailored (pun intended) to be emotive, giving customers a comforting feeling and also making them feel that KFC looks tasty. There has been significance in the colors used, red and white – red is often linked with hunger or arousing our senses whilst White symbolises purity & quality creating a visual that is eye-catching (Holt 2002; Heller 2008).

The tagline, "It's Finger Lickin' Good," works hand and glove with the logo telling consumers that they will love how KFC foods literally taste on a physical level. The slogan is conversational, informal, and it beckons consumers for a more intimate conversation with the brand—as if to suggest that their food items are so good they need you licking your fingers instead of using utensils to enjoy every delicious bite. By using the word lickin, it sounds playful and fun which makes for a more indulgent experience. Sensory language in advertising; prior research facts Sensory terms can improve emotional appeals with advertisements, which predict increased consumer engagement (Lee & Johnson, 2015). The KFC slogan and tag line paints a picture in the reader's mind not only of how good their food tastes, but what kind of fun they will have by eating it.

This association between the logo and slogan is key to KFC branding. Whereas the logo represents brand heritage and provenance via Colonel Sanders, the strapline appeals to your tastebuds. Collectively, they form a consistent narrative that strikes an emotional chord with

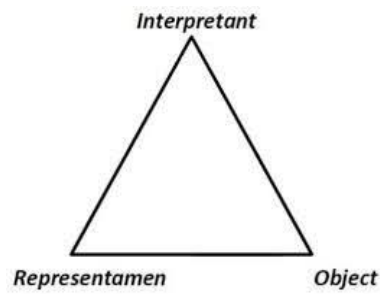
the audience. This turns out to coincide with Peirce theory about semiotics, where signs interplay in a different sign creating a deeper meaning. One of the reasons is that visual and textual blend adding an extra layer strength to overall message in turn it help as a reminder process further making brand reinforcement (O'Guinn et al., 2015).

Looking at KFC through a cultural lense really highlights how the brand can adapt in ways which otherwise may seem impossible. As a global brand KFC adjusts its logo and slogan in way that can reach any culture while remaining true to who they are as the business. For example, in Asian markets KFC has created locally flavored menu items and adjusted marketing campaigns to suit local palates. This cultural adaptability illustrates that the brand is aware of different values in other cultures and this makes it more appealing to customers from multiple backgrounds (Hofstede, 2001).

The KFC branding elements make a signification emotional and psychological impact. His image is a symbol of nostalgia: family dinners and time spent together as consumers. And it is this emotional connection which helps in building a brand loyalty and making people buy your product repetitively. Through the use of emotional branding strategies, increased affinity for a brand can be developed on an emotional level (Thompson, 2006)... These connect the carnal good-ness of KFC's glistening, golden chicken with a real sense pleasure and fulfilment: that it in itself is not just something edible but an experience to be savoured.

Both the logo and slogan are representative of KFC as a brand in terms of symbolism. The Colonel supports tradition and quality, the slogan stands for joy and satisfaction while enjoying an ice prote. The overall effect of the two is to build a strong sense that KFC makes memories not meals. We could say that the reason what is so effective in expressing everything we want to express without using a lot of stuff, are those elements being able to provide such complex meanings from simple signs as proposed by Peirce himself. However, the slogan in return reinforces brand messaging and stimulates consumer comprehension to give a process of sign or interpretant (Peirce 1998).

Semiotics analysis in the context of KFC logo and slogan helps to demonstrate that visual and textual aspects can not be separated when analyzing logos. From its bold, adventurous founder to the comforting and delicious Dippin' Gravy slogan (which heightens sensory appeal), KFC is a brand that taps deep emotional roots within consumers. Combined they all lead to a brand story that works on so many levels and sticks in your gut like...well, whatever happens when you eat KFC! The findings of this investigation underscore the role of symbols in influencing consumer impressions and brand image development through a competitive environment such as fast food, illustrating how KFC strategically utilizes semiotics to attract and maintain its client pool.



## 2. Peirce's Theory

KFC (Kentucky Fried Chicken) has cemented its position as a leading global fast-food brand, renowned for its fried chicken and unique branding elements, particularly its logo and slogan. To fully appreciate the depth of KFC's branding, we can analyze its logo and slogan through the lens of Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory, which revolves around three interconnected components: representamen, interpretant, and object. This analysis not only reveals how these elements work together to create meaning but also sheds light on KFC's brand identity, consumer perception, and emotional connections.

### a) The Representamen: KFC's Logo and Slogan

The logo of Colonel Sanders are the representamen in KFC's branding and the slogan would be "It' Finger Lickin'Good". The logo features the image of Colonel Sanders, in his iconic white suit and black bow tie with glasses on that gives us a feeling of nostalgia & tradition. This is a telling image/scenic view that identifies the KFC brand thorough-out North America from coast to coast. The Colonel Sanders storyline is intentional. He is not only a founder, but he represents the spirit and authenticity of brand itself. The Colonel serves as a representamen, showing quality, consistency and benevolence regarding the product. The tagline works with the logo to focus on how good KFC food tastes. The slogan does this with a light and friendly tone offering people to have fun eating KFC meals: it adds appeal.

### b) The Interpretant: Consumer Understanding

The interpretant is the magic: it's the meaning that consumers take from your representamen. Someone sees the KFC logo with Colonel Sanders, they might think of feeling nostalgic about fried chicken and a comforting trust towards having a quick meal. Colonel Sanders is, after all more than a man – when one sees the image of Colonel Sanders he or she experiences an overwhelming sense of nostalgia; it reflects those fond memories at family reunions or around that dinner table.

The tagline “It's Finger Lickin' Good” also strikes a chord with consumers by appealing to their senses. It evokes impulses of joy and want, making eating KFC more than an act just to keep you going. And in the world of fast food, where decisions are less about rational differences and more driven by emotional connections between consumers and a product. This provides the interpretant a rich layer of nostalgia, trust and taste – making KFC not just another fast-food experience but an actual message.

### **c) The Object: The Reality Behind the Sign**

The object is the thing that the sign represents — in this case, everything both tangible and intangible about KFC. The fried chicken, sides and beverages (the actual food) is the physical manifestation of product. But in addition to the menu, it also extends to KFC's brand values: quality, tradition and a dedication to customer satisfaction. Within Peirces semiotics the relationship between representamen and object is essential. It was only a matter of time before KFC would choose the image and slogan that promised excellence and pleasure — something consumers should get when they decide on choosing food from this brand. It will create dissonance and a sense of misalignment of the signified meanings with experience. This makes even more salient the need to have brand integrity, in such a way that if signage (brand icon and catchphrase) mirrors reality (product/service efficacy plus consumer experience).

### **d) Interplay Between Representamen, Interpretant, and Object**

When all these work together they form a dynamic meaning system. The Colonel's picture (representamen) evokes feelings of nostalgia and trust (interpretant), while at the same time referring to KFC's origins & stamp on quality in fried chicken (object). In doing so, this interconnectedness of rules enables KFC to create a certain brand identity that people can emotionally relate too. By looking at this entanglement of interacts we can understand the clever narrative making a KFC's branding strategy utilising Peirce semiotic concept. The Colonel is the real deal, used as an icon to personify brand authenticity; and “Finger Lickin' Good!” takes what you feel when eating KFC into words. As a whole they tell one singular story that explains not just what KFC is, but makes them feel like.

### **e) Cultural Adaptability and Global Branding**

KFC culture adapts to locals. With its international expansion, KFC found a way to take each of the things different cultures find enticing and make it local. For example, KFC diversified its offerings with region-specific menu items like rice in Asia or spicier food options in Latin America. This adaptability is an example of how perhaps we need to become more conscious of culture in the symbols and meanings that branding can provide. Semiotic analysis highlights reason as an excellent brand can become one that is loved to death if it leverages a few essential things in all its adaptations, KFC has this even today and speaks the language of each unique customer base. KFC not only has a high brand loyalty but also the potential to globalize its appeal due to such flexibility, as it is directly linked with why semiotic strategies work for cross cultural marketing.

### **f) Emotional and Psychological Impact**

This emotional connection that KFC achieves with its logo and slogan play a vital role in building brand loyalty. Colonel Sanders is a powerful symbol of nostalgia — the good ol' days, shared meals and family reunions. In a world where consumer decision-making is as much emotionally-driven (if not more so) than logically-considered, this emotional tie-in to the Smokehouse meats are crucial given how intensely competitive the fast-food marketplace has become.



Emotional branding is intended to forge experiential connections with customers and influence consumer behaviors, based on the premise that these emotional attachment stronger brand loyalty (Thompson, 2006). The branding strategies employed by KFC have proved effective in triggering an emotional appeal around the brand, focussing on not just food but memories. This bond is subsequently enhanced through the tagline which highlights pleasure and enjoyment. Which places KFC in the realm of comfort food, for those looking to eat their feelings as well.

### **g) Symbolism in KFC's Branding**

Both the logo and slogan symbolize KFC's brand ideally. The Colonel represents all that is traditional and true while the slogan speaks to pleasure, satiation and fulfillment. All of these aspects work in harmony to paint a holistic picture of KFC as a purveyor not only food, but memories.

Peirce's semiotic theory example of a three element sign — Symbol represents mental image that stands in for one or more objects. The logo is an iconic representation of the brand in the KFC example, and it gets its meaning each time it moves around which serves as interpreted with every new instance reinforcing the interpretant that creates better understanding for consumer. This is important in the fast-food industry which has so many players that can easily communicate their value propositions.

The semiotic analysis of KFC shows how visuals and text play with one another in branding. The brand heritage and authenticity is captured in the logo with Colonel Sanders while emotion satisfaction is evoked through sensory pleasure. Combined, they tell a universal narrative surrounding KFC that appeals on various degree and reaffirms the brand's positioning of it being comfort food made delicious. This study has shown the importance of symbols in creating consumer perception and brand position, demonstrating a well semiotic appeal to continuously cater their customer

## **CONCLUSION**

This study demonstrates how KFC's branding strategy effectively utilizes Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory to establish a compelling brand identity. The logo and slogan serve as integral components of KFC's marketing, evoking strong emotional and sensory responses from consumers. Colonel Sanders, featured prominently in the logo, represents nostalgia, tradition, and trust, making KFC more than just a fast-food chain—it becomes an experiential brand. The slogan, "*It's Finger Lickin' Good*," reinforces sensory appeal, engaging consumers through the promise of taste satisfaction and indulgence. Together, these elements create a cohesive brand narrative that fosters loyalty and emotional connection. By applying Peirce's triadic model—representamen, interpretant, and object—this study reveals how KFC successfully translates brand identity into consumer perception. The brand's adaptability in different cultural markets further highlights its semiotic versatility, allowing for global recognition while maintaining local relevance. This analysis underscores the significance of semiotics in branding, illustrating how symbols and signs

shape consumer experiences and purchasing behavior. As marketing landscapes evolve, businesses can learn from KFC's approach to strategic semiotic branding to strengthen brand presence and consumer engagement. Future research can explore how semiotic analysis can be extended to other global brands and its implications for cross-cultural marketing strategies.

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