# Color as a Catalyst in Junk Food Marketing: A Social Semiotic Perspective

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## Abstract

Social semiotics has emerged as a framework for understanding how meaning is created, communicated, and interpreted within various social and cultural contexts. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) aim to provide readers with a clear set of analytical tools for conducting social semiotic analyses. This study focuses on exploring the role of color as a catalyst in junk food marketing. The data for this analysis is collected from the official websites of junk food restaurant posters, including Pizza Hut, KFC, McDonald's, Subway, and Wendy's. Additionally, colors positively influence customers' feelings and moods. Therefore, this study sets out to explore and address the following crucial questions: (1) What psychological effects do colors have on community behavior? (2) How does color contribute to the structure and emphasis of the marketing message?

**Keywords:** Semiotics, Social Semiotics, Junk food, Posters, Colors

## 1. Introduction

This section provides an overview of semiotics, discussing its historical background, different schools of thought, and key components, such as signs and their classifications. It also highlights the significance of social semiotics and its subfields. Additionally, it addresses the important role of colors as a catalyst within the context of social semiotics.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Semiotics

People communicate with each other using words and signs. Semiotics is the field that deals with signs and symbols. Barthes states that "semiotic" includes all systems of signs, regardless of form or scope. This encompasses musical sounds, images, objects, gestures, and the complex relationships among these elements that create the meaning of rituals or public entertainment (1967:88). Wardaugh shows that "everyone can express their opinions and knowledge through language." In advertising, the images employed are known as advertisements (1972:3).

Semiotics is the study of signs and their significance in society. It is regarded as a branch of social psychology and, more broadly, general psychology. It is also called "semiology". The goal of semiology is to clarify the nature of signs and the principles that govern them. Although the science is still developing, it has a legitimate place and a right to exist (Jewitt, Bezemer, and O'Halloran, 2016: 18). Additionally, Saussure distinguished two primary approaches in the study of signs: synchronic and diachronic. The synchronic approach focuses on the analysis of signs in the present, while the diachronic approach examines how signs evolve in their form and meaning over time (Beasley and Danesi, 2002: 27).

Semiotics is the fascinating study of sign systems that explores the intricate ways we communicate meanings. Although semiotics and semiology are often confused, they are distinct fields. Semiology, rooted in the pioneering work of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, focuses specifically on the role of signs in language. In contrast, semiotics is enriched by the insights of philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, who first coined the term. As Umberto Eco eloquently puts it, semiotics encompasses "everything that can be taken as a sign" (1976:8).

The study of semiotics goes beyond the common understanding of signs in everyday communication. It includes things that represent something else. Semioticians analyze signs as part of semiotic "sign systems," which encompass different media or genres. They explore the complex ways in which meanings are created and how reality is portrayed. Furthermore, signs can manifest in a multitude of forms- encompassing words, sounds, images, objects, and gestures (Chandler, 2007: 4).

## 2.2 Social Semiotics

Social semiotics is an analytical tradition that originated with linguist Michael Halliday in his book "Language as Social Semiotic" (1976), as well as from the work of Bob Hodge and Gunther Kress "Social Semiotics" (1988). This concept encompasses various approaches that link semiotic systems to social dimensions. These approaches can be utilized to analyze the various systems of signs that shape our cultures (Bal, 1991:73).

Social semiotics is an approach that combines several modern theories to examine social meaning and action. The most prevalent of these theories is semiotics, which examines the resources we use to communicate meaning. Semiotics was developed to provide a scientific foundation for linguistics and is employed to analyze various signs and symbols, including

images, gestures, and hairstyles, to understand how they convey meaning. While linguistics focuses on a specific aspect of language, it is considered a subset of semiotics. The term "social semiotics" refers to a contemporary theory that expands beyond traditional approaches known as formal semiotics. While formal semiotics primarily concerns itself with the systematic study of sign systems, social semiotics takes this further by examining how individuals use signs to build and maintain community life. Although social semiotics is not a new concept, it has long aimed to connect the study of human behavior—especially activities related to meaning-making, such as speaking, writing, reasoning, drawing, and gesturing—with the broader social context (Lemke, 1990: 185).

Social semiotics is the study of how social factors influence meaning and how the human processes of sign-making and interpretation—referred to as semiosis—shape individuals and societies. This field emphasizes the social practices involved in meaning-making across different formats, including verbal, visual, and aural communication (Thibault, 1991:54). Different systems for creating meaning, known as "channels," include modes such as writing, speech, and images. These semiotic modes (or semiotic registers) can encompass a variety of communication resources, including written, verbal, visual, gestural, and musical elements. Furthermore, they may involve various "multimodal" combinations of any of these modes (Kress and van Leeuween, 2001:83).

## 3. Methodology

This study conducts a qualitative analysis focused on colors. This method highlights descriptive and explanatory findings derived from the collected data.

## 3.1 The Model

The following model is an eclectic one based on Kress and Van Leeuwen's work "Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design." This visual analysis employs Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) work for understanding social semiotics. As Kress (2009) articulates, social semiotics emphasizes on the social meanings arise from various semiotic, texts, forms and practices across different anthropological societies. Jewitt and Oyama (2001) argue that studies of the social semiotics of visual communication involve describing semiotic resources, examining what images convey, and exploring how people interpret them. Kress (2009) states, "Social semiotics can address the function of various modes—such as images, writing, color, and facial expression—in multimodal texts; their interrelations; and the key entities

involved" (p. 86). He also notes that a distinguishing feature of social semiotic theory is its focus on sign-making rather than just sign usage. The following principle forms the basis of the visual analysis in this study:

**Color**

Color serves as a powerful means of non-verbal communication and is closely linked to various effects. It typically captures the viewer's attention first and is used to represent people, places, and objects. Additionally, color can signify different social classes and convey broader concepts (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006: 220). Many individuals can easily articulate the meanings associated with different colors and understand their implications. As Scollon and Scollon (2003: 92) state, visual image possesses the ability to convey cultural values and stereotypes. For example, high-modality colors can differ across cultures and may represent social, political, or even commercial values.

The colors employed in restaurant posters convey specific meanings. The red color promotes happiness, grabs attention, and stimulates the appetite. Yellow symbolizes achievement and success. It is related with luxury, prosperity, abundance, prestige, and elegance. Yellow also conveys optimism and youthful energy, serving as an appetite stimulant much like red. White represents purity, innocence, wholeness, and completion. Green embodies growth and balance, inspiring self-love and nurturing care for others unconditionally. Black conveys authority and strength. It is viewed as an elegant, formal, and prestigious color. These color associations play a significant role in how food messages are communicated in marketing.

## 4. Data collection and analysis

This section analyzes five posters from the official websites of KFC McDonald's, Hut Subway, and Wendy's fast food restaurants. At the end, it shows the results of the analysis of these posters.

**Data 1**

**Figure 1: Wendy's Poster**

The image depicts Wendy's new meal with the burger, fries, and cola arranged centrally to highlight their significance. The burger shows its cheese-filled patty, fresh lettuce, and dripping sauce to enhance its appeal. The dominant red color stimulates energy and appetite, effectively supporting fast-food branding. This bold red background contrasts with the golden fries and burger, emphasizing warmth and indulgence.

The use of white and yellow in the cheese, sauce, and text conveys richness and creaminess, highlighting the "cheese blast" concept. White represents freshness and quality, aligning with Wendy's branding. Additionally, the dark brown of the cola adds contrast, enhancing the meal's appeal.

**Data 2**

**Figure 2: Subway's Poster**

The sandwich is the most prominent element in the image. The figures and ladders add a sense of movement and dynamism, which highlights the idea of freshness. The Subway logo and slogan are positioned at the bottom of the image to enhance brand recognition. The green background symbolizes health, freshness, and natural components, aligning with Subway's message of providing fresh food. It also conveys growth and well-being, reinforcing the idea of a healthy meal choice. The yellow color in the "SUB" part of the Subway logo symbolizes energy, optimism, and warmth. It evokes a sense of happiness and stimulates appetite. The white in "WAY" signifies cleanliness and purity, reinforcing the idea of quality components and a fresh experience.

The sandwich displays realistic colors, with brown and beige tones for the bread and meat, which are contrasted with the vibrant greens of the lettuce and the bright reds of the tomatoes. This accurate representation of colors stimulates the appetite and makes the food more desirable. Accordingly, color in this advertisement serves not only an aesthetic purpose but also acts as a communicative tool that reinforces Subway's identity of freshness and health. The green background, yellow branding, and realistic colors of the sandwich work together to engage viewers and highlight the brand's message: "My kind of fresh."

**Data 3**

**Figure 3: Pizza Hut's Poster**

The image shows a non-vegetarian pizza as the central subject, surrounded by herbs, sauces, and spices, which represent freshness and flavor. The background is a deep red wooden texture that conveys warmth, stimulates appetite, and evokes passion. This color also suggests urgency, encouraging quick decisions in fast food marketing. The pizza, with its golden crust, melted cheese, and reddish-brown pepperoni, stands out against the red background. This aligns with Kress and Van Leeuwen's idea of "salience", where color contrast increases the visibility and attractiveness of the subject. The rich red palette, along with fresh green herbs creates an engaging and dynamic visual. The yellow-orange "Pizza" typography adds warmth and deliciousness, appealing to the viewer's senses. Red and yellow are often used by brands like Pizza Hut and McDonald's to stimulate hunger and energy, while dark green, representing ingredients like oregano and basil, signifies natural elements.

**Data 4**

https://www.mcdonalds.com/

**Figure 4: McDonald's Poster**

The image shows a meal that includes two sandwiches, fries, a McFlurry, and a Coca-Cola Zero, creating an appetizing food experience. The strategic use of color evokes emotions, highlights brand identity, and enhances product appeal. This approach aligns with Kress and van Leeuwen's idea that color is not merely decorative but serves as a powerful tool for conveying meaning in non-verbal communication.

The color golden brown represents fried chicken, fries, and buns. It symbolizes crispiness, warmth, and indulgence, reinforcing the sensory appeal of the food. Green, found in lettuce and herbs, adds a sense of freshness, highlighting the presence of natural ingredients and quality, which balances the rich indulgence of fried foods.

The Red of the McDonald's logo and tomatoes stimulates appetite and aligns with the brand's identity. The dark background enhances contrast and sophistication, making the food appear more vibrant. Overall, the warm golden tones create comfort. The contrast between the dark background and the bright colors of the food makes the meal stand out, effectively grabbing the viewer's attention.

The red and yellow logo of McDonald's evokes brand recognition and familiarity, which reinforces trust and loyalty among customers. The Coca-Cola Zero's deep brown highlights refreshment and coolness. Besides, a mix of warm and cool colors creates contrast and guides the viewer's eyes smoothly across the composition.

**Data 5**

**Figure 5: KFC's Poster**

The image conveys a strong persuasive promotional message through its various components. The central element is the KFC chicken bucket. The fried chicken, combined with the visual of a drink splashing, suggests abundance and excitement. The small chili peppers reinforce the idea of spiciness, aligning with the tagline "Feel Hotness in Every Bite." The red and white color scheme is characteristic of KFC's branding, ensuring instant recognition. This aligns with Kress and van Leeuwen's idea that colors serve not only as decorative elements but also as powerful tools for shaping meaning and influencing consumer behavior.

The red "ORDER NOW" button is strategically positioned at the bottom to encourage immediate action. The dominant red color in the design evokes a sense of urgency and represents key elements such as the background, Text, KFC Branding, and chili Peppers to symbolize spiciness, excitement, and passion, aligning with KFC's bold flavor identity. The golden-brown color (which represents fried chicken) suggests warmth, crispiness, and indulgence, making the food appear more appetizing. The white background provides balance, preventing the design from feeling overwhelming. It also signifies cleanliness and clarity, allowing the red and golden tones to stand out. Overall, The color contrast between red, white, and golden brown effectively guides the viewer's eye through the advertisement smoothly.

**5. Conclusions**

Based on the insights of our previous analysis, we can confidently conclude the following:

1. Junk food imagery uses various strategies to convey messages and influence how audiences perceive it. One of the main strategies employed in junk food imagery is the use of colors. This element plays a crucial role in shaping the overall meaning and emotional impact of the images.

2. Colors are extraordinary instruments of communication, capable of signaling actions, shaping our moods, and even evoking physiological reactions. Using color effectively in all types of imagery enhances non-verbal communication by adding meaning to visual messages. This creates an instant impression that is universally understood. Consequently, colors can represent specific people, places, objects, and more general ideas.

3. In marketing, colors play a crucial role in shaping consumers' perceptions of a brand and persuading them to engage with products or services. For example, advertisements for junk food often use a variety of colors to attract attention and encourage consumers to try their offerings. Different colors can evoke specific emotions and associations, significantly impacting consumer behavior. This highlights the importance of choosing the right colors to help achieve business goals, such as increasing sales.

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