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**Online branding and communications – the theories and principles of semiotics:
the case of the Highland Park web site.**

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Date: 6th April 2012

This is a study of online branding and communications, taking into account the theories and principles of semiotics, in the case of the Highland Park web site. The aim of the research was to develop a deeper understanding of online branding and communications by applying the theories and principles of semiotics. The rationale stemmed from Schibrowsky, Peltier and Nill's (2007) statement that the internet as an area of interest within the academic community is strong and growing, signalling the need to once again review the internet marketing literature, particularly in terms of research opportunities. Past research has been dominated by the information-processing and quantitative tradition, and in this study, a semiotic approach was proposed to fully uncover the depth and richness of meaning involved within online marketing communications, and specifically web sites. The semiotic literature highlighted the importance of the contribution from the structuralist approaches of Saussure and Peirce, but also a consideration of the post-structuralist social semiotics approach. An emphasis on the social dimension of semiotics is relatively recent outside of specialized academic journals, and is not yet much in evidence at the heart of the activities of many semiotic researchers (Chandler, 2002). This provided the author with a significant research opportunity, and a gap in the literature within which to try to fill.

The study supported a subjective reality within an interpretivist paradigm, and used the theories and principles of semiotics to delve below the surface to understand what was really happening. Taking a qualitative case study approach, a key factor in selecting the case of the Highland Park web site was the timing of the author's study coinciding with a critical period of development of the brand as it re-developed its online presence. Social semiotics emphasized the importance of the role of the decoder interpreting the message, as well as the encoder creating the message. Using the qualitative semi-structured interviewing technique, the objectives of establishing encoders' intentions and decoders' interpretations were fulfilled. The objective of discovering the effect that viewing online had on interpretations, stemmed from Aaker and Brown's (1972) research on brands, indicating that marketers delivering the same messages to the same audience, can generate different effects depending on the context in which the messages are embedded. Importantly, communicative and

rich environments such as the internet accentuate the complexity of brand meanings (De Chernatony, 2001). The final objective explored the central paradox of semiotics, by ascertaining any differences between the encoders and decoders.

The author created a diagram, highlighting the key areas of semiotic approaches, to refer to when analyzing the interview transcripts. Social semiotics alerts us to the possibilities that connotation allows for the generation of multiple meanings (Eco, 1976), and that there are almost always several interpretations possible (Barthes, 1985). Analysis of the research findings showed not only differences between encoders and decoders, but also differences amongst the encoders responsible for creating the message, highlighting that the chasm is not simply internal versus external as is usually assumed. Marketing communications theory usually assumes that any breakdown in communication is between the organization and consumers, and pays less attention to any lack of integration within the organization. The author then asked: Is semiotics of online marketing communications enough to contribute to the wider implications for marketing theory? Reflecting on the findings, the author was able to build up an original model on the dimensions of the online brand for Highland Park, which can potentially be used with any online brand.

Semiotics is, in essence, an adaptable methodology offering flexible solutions to specific marketing problems, such as identifying gaps and opportunities for brand positioning; showing semiotics has implications for market entry. It can be used to analyze all aspects of branding that communicate the brand to consumers, from advertising and packaging to point-of-sale and merchandising. Semiotics has the ability to make communications successful for brands within their competitive and cultural contexts, and has implications for communications strategy, including concept stretching and enrichment. On focusing on this study, the author has learned that there is a lot more to image and linguistic analysis through the study of semiotics, than was originally thought possible. The use of semiotics has increased the author's awareness of the complex interplay of many factors to create online marketing communications. It is however inevitable that this understanding could be further improved through a number of research directions as proposed by the author.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Introduction to the Study

The aim of this research is: “To develop a deeper understanding of online branding and communications by applying the theories and principles of semiotics.” With regards to the rationale behind this research aim, Schibrowsky, Peltier and Nill (2007) make a key comment in their article: ‘The state of internet marketing research: A review of the literature and future research directions’, in the European Journal of Marketing. They state that the importance of the internet as a topical area of interest within the academic community is strong and growing, and signals the need to once again review the internet marketing literature, particularly in terms of potential research opportunities. Past research has been dominated by the information-processing and quantitative tradition, and with the wide range of issues for internet marketing communications, there is indeed a need for more depth and richness of meaning.

The literature in chapter four, ‘Semiotics and Marketing Communications,’ highlights that communicative and rich environments such as the internet accentuate the complexity of brand meanings (De Chernatony, 2001). A semiotic approach is proposed to fully uncover the depth and richness of meaning involved within internet marketing communications, and specifically web sites. Chapter three, ‘Semiotics,’ discusses approaches to semiotics, and highlights the importance of the contribution from the structuralist approaches of the founding fathers of semiotics, Saussure and Peirce. The review also points the researcher towards a consideration of the post-structuralist approach in semiotics, discussed as social semiotics. Chandler (2002) contends that an emphasis on the social dimension of semiotics is relatively recent outside of specialized academic journals, and is not yet much in evidence at the heart of the activities of many semiotic researchers. This provides the author with a significant research opportunity, and a gap in the literature within which to try to fill.

The literature in chapter two, 'Internet Marketing Communications', highlights that the internet is a fast-moving and rapidly changing environment, and it is important for marketers to understand how individuals engage with marketing communications in this interactive environment. The author is passionate about marketing communications, particularly in an online context, and wishes to apply the theories and principles that semiotics has to offer to provide a richer understanding of these communications. This study seeks to provide a thorough understanding of semiotics and to extend semiotics into this new domain. By offering a deeper and richer understanding of the meanings derived within web site communication, this study intends to contribute to the academic research thus far on online branding and communication.

Thus, to develop this deeper understanding of online branding and communications, this study seeks to explore the extent to which the theories and principles that semiotics offers, contribute to a greater understanding of the use of the imagery and language within the Highland Park web site, the chosen case. Based on this, there are four key objectives to the research, and these objectives determine aspects of the research design:

- Firstly, to establish the encoders' intentions in relation to the use of the imagery and language within the Highland Park web site.

The rationale behind setting this first objective is that the literature in chapter four, 'Semiotics and Marketing Communications,' emphasizes that web design has brought visual issues into the mainstream of strategic thinking, and that marketing communications images, brand images, corporate images and web sites all depend upon compelling visual rhetoric (Schroeder, 2007). Thus, choosing to research the visual aesthetics of imagery and language within a web site, and to do this by firstly establishing the intentions of those who created these visual aesthetics within a web site.

- Secondly, to develop a deep understanding of the consumers' interpretations in relation to the use of the imagery and language within the Highland Park web site.

The rationale behind setting this second objective is that the turn to social semiotics has been "reflected in an increasing concern with the role of the reader" (Chandler, 2002:214). The literature on social semiotics in chapter three, 'Semiotics,' also emphasizes the possibilities that connotation allows for the generation of multiple meanings (Eco, 1976). Similarly, Barthes (1985:262) claims that semiotics seeks to locate the many possibilities of meaning, and as a result, it could be impossible to catalogue all meaningful associations within a particular sign. Thus, consumers' interpretations are also important as well as encoders' intentions of a message, and the literature in chapter three, 'Semiotics,' illustrates that it is imperative to delve deeper and develop a deeper understanding of consumers' interpretations.

- The third objective is to discover the effect that viewing the imagery and language on the internet web site has on the consumers' interpretations.

The rationale behind setting this third objective stems from Aaker and Brown's (1972) research on brands, which indicates that marketers delivering the same marketing communications' messages to the same audience, can generate different effects depending on the context in which the marketing communications are embedded. A key point emerging from chapter four, 'Semiotics and Marketing Communications,' is that brand symbols, colour, packaging, language and images have extended their influence into the online environment. Additionally, the literature highlights that communicative and rich environments such as the internet accentuate the complexity of brand meanings (De Chernatony, 2001). Thus, the literature highlights that it is significant that the encoders' intentions and the decoders' interpretations are being established within the context of an online environment, and that internet web sites heighten the complexity of brand meanings.

- The final objective is to ascertain any differences between the encoders' intentions and the consumers' interpretations, in relation to the use of the imagery and language within the Highland Park web site.

Social semiotics emphasizes the importance of the role of the decoder (consumer interpreting the message) as well as the encoder (company/practitioner creating the message). The rationale behind setting this final objective is that the chapter four, 'Semiotics and Marketing Communications,' highlights that decoders' interpretations of a message (the brand image) may be different from encoders' intentions of a message (the brand identity). Thus, exploring this central paradox of semiotics, and discovering whether decoders' interpretations of the imagery and language within the web site are indeed different to the encoders' intentions in relation to the use of the imagery and language.

1.2. The Study's Research Approach

Ontologically, the author's study supports a subjective reality, which aims to understand individuals' interpretations and perceptions. Epistemologically, the author's study supports an interpretivist paradigm. For the interpretivist the world is socially constructed. Individuals construct their own worlds and give meaning to their own realities (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe, 1994). With regards to people giving meanings to their own realities, semiotic theories and principles offers a suitable way to reveal these meanings and delve deeper into consumers' responses, when in this instance they decode the imagery and language within internet marketing communications. As interpretation is inherent in all human effort to understand the world, specific aspects of interpretation appear in all types of research, although it is most often perceived to be typical to qualitative research (Gummesson, 2003). As mentioned, the author's study supports a subjective reality within an interpretivist paradigm. The essence of interpretivism is an attempt to delve below the surface to understand what is really happening (Remenyi et al., 1998), and the theories and principles that semiotics has to offer can be used for this. Miles and Huberman (1994:1) state: "Qualitative data...are a source of well-grounded, rich

descriptions and explanations of processes in identifiable local contexts.” Thus, a qualitative research approach is proposed due to the research philosophy. The primary purpose of qualitative research is to generate insights and ideas, and it typically involves relatively few respondents (Parasuraman, 1991).

Case studies are a common way to carry out qualitative inquiry. Qualitative methods tend to predominate in case studies (Patton and Appelbaum, 2003). According to Ghauri and Gronhaug (2005:119), it is the research problem and the research objectives that influence the number and choice of cases to be studied. Selecting one brand as a case study fits in with the research purpose, allowing the author to give a deeper and richer understanding within the context of internet marketing communications and semiotics. Focusing on one case study also allows for the author an easier comparison between the encoders’ intentions in relation to the use of the imagery and language within the Highland Park web site, and the decoders’ interpretations in relation to the use of the imagery and language within the Highland Park web site, as set out in the study’s research objectives. This study does not aim to simply describe a case, and as Silverman (2005:127-8) states, your study of a case should be based upon some concept(s) which are developed as a result of your study, which this study aims to do: “To develop a deeper understanding of online branding and communications by applying the theories and principles of semiotics.” The Edrington Group’s brand Highland Park redesigned its core packaging during 2006, which formed part of a complete rebirth of its overall identity across all communications. A key factor in selecting this case is that the timing of the author’s study coincided with a critical period of development of the Highland Park brand as it re-developed its online presence.

With the research aim of this study in mind, Fouquier (1988) states that the essential semiotic analysis concerns how a message is read by receivers as materialized in recordings of interviews discussing the message concerned. Thus, the data gathering technique used in this study is the qualitative semi-structured interview. Interviews allow researchers to have access to detailed and in-depth views and opinions (Bryman, 2001), and to secure vivid, accurate, inclusive accounts based on personal

experience. “The use of interviews can help you to gather valid and reliable data that are relevant to your research question(s) or objectives” (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2003:245). Given that this study’s objectives include establishing the encoders’ intentions and the decoders’ interpretations, in relation to the use of the imagery and language within Highland Park’s web site, the interview is a plausible data gathering technique. The encoders/practitioners are to be selected on the basis of being ‘expert’ respondents (Dexter, 1970), in which they have knowledge and skills in their subject matter. The practitioners are to be selected at a senior level within the company, Highland Park, and the creative agency employed by the company, reflecting their industry and brand knowledge and skills. The decoders/consumers are to be selected on the basis that they are relevant to the study and the research objectives. To achieve this, consumers will fill out a screening questionnaire.

After transcribing all of the participants’ interviews, coding of the data will take place, which will be guided by semiotics. With help from the review of the literature in chapter three, the ‘Semiotics’ chapter, the author creates a diagram highlighting the key areas of semiotic approaches that the researcher takes into consideration. Firstly, is the contribution from the structuralist approaches of the founding fathers of semiotics, Saussure and Peirce. Saussure’s (1960:67) signifier-signified dichotomy shows that the sign consists of a signifier plus a signified that results in the meaning. Peirce (1931-58, 2.306) claimed that his theory of meaning derives from, and is justified by, his theory of signs. Peirce arrived at three types of signs: Icon, index and symbol. Secondly, is the consideration of social semiotics, and in particular, the importance of the instability of the sign, the active role of interpreters (Chandler, 2002), and multiple interpretations being possible (Eco, 1976; Barthes, 1985).

1.3. Organization of the Study

Schibrowsky, Peltier and Nill (2007) state that the importance of the internet as a topical area of interest within the academic community is strong and growing, and signals the need to once again review the internet marketing literature, particularly in terms of potential research opportunities. The literature is reviewed to give an insight

into what these potential research opportunities are. Chapter two, 'Internet Marketing Communications', shows that past research into internet marketing communications has been dominated by the information-processing and quantitative tradition, and there is indeed a need for more depth and richness of meaning. Chapter three, 'Semiotics,' discusses approaches to semiotics. It highlights the importance of the contribution from the structuralist approaches of the founding fathers of semiotics, Saussure and Peirce, and also points the researcher towards a consideration of the post-structuralist approach in semiotics, discussed as social semiotics. Chandler (2002) contends that an emphasis on the social dimension of semiotics is relatively recent outside of specialized academic journals, and is not yet much in evidence at the heart of the activities of many semiotic researchers. This provides the researcher with a research opportunity and a potential gap in the literature within which to try to fill. A semiotic approach is proposed to fully uncover the depth and richness of meaning involved within internet marketing communications, and specifically web sites. The literature in chapter four, 'Semiotics and Marketing Communications,' highlights that communicative and rich environments such as the internet accentuate the complexity of brand meanings (De Chernatony, 2001).

Reviewing the literature allows the author to gain a thorough understanding of the research on internet marketing communications, and on approaches to semiotics. Having built up a clear picture, the 'Methodology' chapter follows. The aim of this research is: "To develop a deeper understanding of online branding and communications by applying the theories and principles of semiotics." Thus, to develop this deeper understanding of online branding and communications, this study seeks to explore the extent to which the theories and principles that semiotics offers, contribute to a greater understanding of the use of the imagery and language within the Highland Park web site, the chosen case. Based on this, four key objectives to the research are established, and these objectives determine aspects of the research design.

Ontologically, the author's study supports a subjective reality, which aims to understand individuals' interpretations and perceptions. Epistemologically, the

author's study supports an interpretivist paradigm. For the interpretivist the world is socially constructed. Individuals construct their own worlds and give meaning to their own realities (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe, 1994). The essence of interpretivism is an attempt to delve below the surface to understand what is really happening (Remenyi et al., 1998), and the theories and principles that semiotics has to offer can be used for this. A qualitative research approach is proposed due to the research philosophy. Case studies are a common way to carry out qualitative inquiry. Qualitative methods tend to predominate in case studies (Patton and Appelbaum, 2003). Selecting one brand as a case study fits in with the research purpose, allowing the author to give a deeper and richer understanding within the context of internet marketing communications and semiotics. A key factor in selecting this case is that the timing of the author's study coincided with a critical period of development of the Highland Park brand as it re-developed its online presence.

With the research aim of this study in mind, Fouquier (1988) states that the essential semiotic analysis concerns how a message is read by receivers as materialized in recordings of interviews discussing the message concerned. Thus, the data gathering technique used in this study is the qualitative semi-structured interview. The practitioners are to be selected at a senior level within the company, Highland Park, and the creative agency employed by the company, reflecting their industry and brand knowledge and skills. Interviews will be conducted between August 2007 and January 2008. The decoders/consumers are to be selected on the basis that they are relevant to the study and the research objectives. To achieve this, consumers will fill out a screening questionnaire, and interviews will take place between July 2008 and September 2008.

After transcribing all of the consumers' interviews, coding of the data will take place, which will be guided by semiotics. With help from the review of the literature in chapter three, the 'Semiotics' chapter, the author creates a diagram highlighting the key areas of semiotic approaches that the researcher takes into consideration. Firstly, is the contribution from the structuralist approaches of the founding fathers of semiotics, Saussure (1960) and Peirce (1931-58). Secondly, is the consideration of

social semiotics, and in particular, the importance of the instability of the sign, the active role of interpreters (Chandler, 2002), and multiple interpretations being possible (Eco, 1976; Barthes, 1985). The wider conclusions and implications of the research findings will then be discussed. This includes implications for marketing practice, and for academic theory, covering semiotic theory and marketing communications theory. Advice to further research will also be given.

1.4. Practical and Academic Benefits of Research

With regards to implications and benefits for marketing practice, semiotics has the potential to become a defining marketing and research methodology. This development will be based on an increasing recognition of how communications can shape consumer behavior and perceptions and interpretations of the world around them. It is fair to argue that this will be driven by a key industry trend. According to Lawes (2002), this being the movement towards global/cross-cultural brand positionings, and the sensitivity this will call for in relation to understanding the implications for local markets, different cultures, and strategies for executing communications. Semiotics is, in essence, an adaptable methodology offering flexible solutions to specific marketing problems. The implications that it can have for brand positioning include identifying gaps and opportunities, which shows semiotics also has implications for market entry.

In addition, it could be argued that it is becoming increasingly risky for marketers not to consider using semiotics. Semiotics can be used to analyze all aspects of branding that communicate the brand to consumers, from advertising and packaging to point-of-sale and merchandising. Semiotics has the ability to make communications successful for brands within their competitive and cultural contexts. It can also be used to decode competitors' category communications, highlighting evolving communication strategies in a rapidly changing cultural context (Lawes, 2002). Further implications that semiotics has for communications strategy is concept stretching and enrichment, for instance, cultural research to deconstruct particular concept areas and expand ideas and images associated with it.

With regards to implications and benefits for academic practice, reviewing the literature in Chapter three, 'Semiotics,' helped the researcher to make the significant decision of interviewing consumers/decoders as well as practitioners/encoders. The literature on structuralism highlighted to the researcher the importance of interviewing the creators of messages to establish what their intentions were in relation to their choices in the creation of the message. However, the literature on the post-structuralist approach of social semiotics alerted the researcher to the importance of also interviewing those that consume the message created. This allows the researcher to develop a deeper understanding of the consumers' interpretations in relation to the created message.

Reviewing the literature on semiotics also helped the author during the analysis of the research findings. The author was able to create a diagram to refer to when analyzing the interview transcripts. This diagram showed the key areas of semiotic approaches that the researcher could take into consideration when analyzing the data. The diagram also highlighted that the existing literature has given little attention to the post-structuralist approach in semiotics, discussed as social semiotics. Chandler (2002) contends that an emphasis on the social dimension of semiotics is relatively recent outside of specialized academic journals, and it is not yet much in evidence at the heart of the activities of many semiotic researchers. As a result, the diagram showed the contribution from post-structuralist social semiotics, in which it maintains that meaning derives from differences internal to the sign system itself, they reject the idea of a single, deep, determining structure, and emphasizes the inherent instability of the sign. Also, social semiotics stresses the active role of the interpreter and the possibilities that connotation allows for the generation of multiple meanings. This helped the author to understand why during the analysis of the research findings, there were many different interpretations of the same message.

In keeping with the thought of multiple interpretations of the same message, analysis of the research findings showed not only different interpretations between encoders and decoders, but also different interpretations amongst the encoders responsible for creating the message. One would think that companies and brands such as Highland

Park, would wish for all company representatives to communicate a cohesive message, but social semiotics does indeed help to explain this. As previously mentioned, it is interesting that there may be significant differences between the encoders, and so the chasm is not simply internal versus external as is usually assumed. This argument leads on to the next section. Marketing communications theory usually assumes that any breakdown in communication is between the organization and the consumers, and pays less attention to any lack of integration within the organization.

Moreover, the literature on semiotics helped the researcher to make the significant decision of interviewing consumers/decoders as well as practitioners/encoders, and also helped the researcher during the analysis of the research findings. However, the author then asks: Is semiotics of online marketing communications enough to contribute to the wider implications for marketing theory? Reflecting on the findings, the author was able to build up an original model on the dimensions of the online brand. This model allowed the researcher to evaluate the research findings against the fourth research objective. The fourth research objective was to ascertain any differences between the encoders' intentions and the participants' interpretations, in relation to the use of the imagery and language within the Highland Park web site. To do this, the researcher devised questions in which to distinguish the responses to each. The questions were devised using the model, and this model can potentially be used with any online brand, not only Highland Park.

1.5. Summary and Conclusions

This introductory chapter has covered the aim of the study and the key objectives of the research. Following this was an outline of the research approach of this study. The organisation of the study was then given, followed by the practical and academic benefits of the research. Having presented this introduction to the study, the next chapter commences the literature review, beginning with the chapter titled 'Internet Marketing Communications.'

2. Internet Marketing Communications

2.1. Introduction

This chapter commences the literature review on the author's study, which is focusing on internet marketing communications and semiotics. The chapter provides an overview of the literature relating to the internet and internet marketing communications. Key sections include the discussion of the internet as a new mediated environment, new versus traditional media, brands embracing online, different type of online marketing communications, and web sites as a marketing communications tool. The chapter ends with a summary and conclusion reinforcing the importance of studying internet marketing communications and potential research opportunities in this area, in which the author proposes taking a semiotic approach to fully uncover the depth and richness of meaning involved within internet marketing communications, and specifically web sites.

2.2. Internet as a New Mediated Environment

This introductory section discusses Hoffman and Novak's (1996) three communication models, in which a critical review is given with respect to the relevance of the models to the author's study. This critical review of the models leads on to discussion on two important concepts in relation to the internet as a new mediated environment, interactivity and navigation. These are particularly relevant to the author's study, which will research marketing communications on the internet, in which consumers interact with the web site and navigate around the site.

2.2.1. Hoffman and Novak's (1996) Three Communication Models

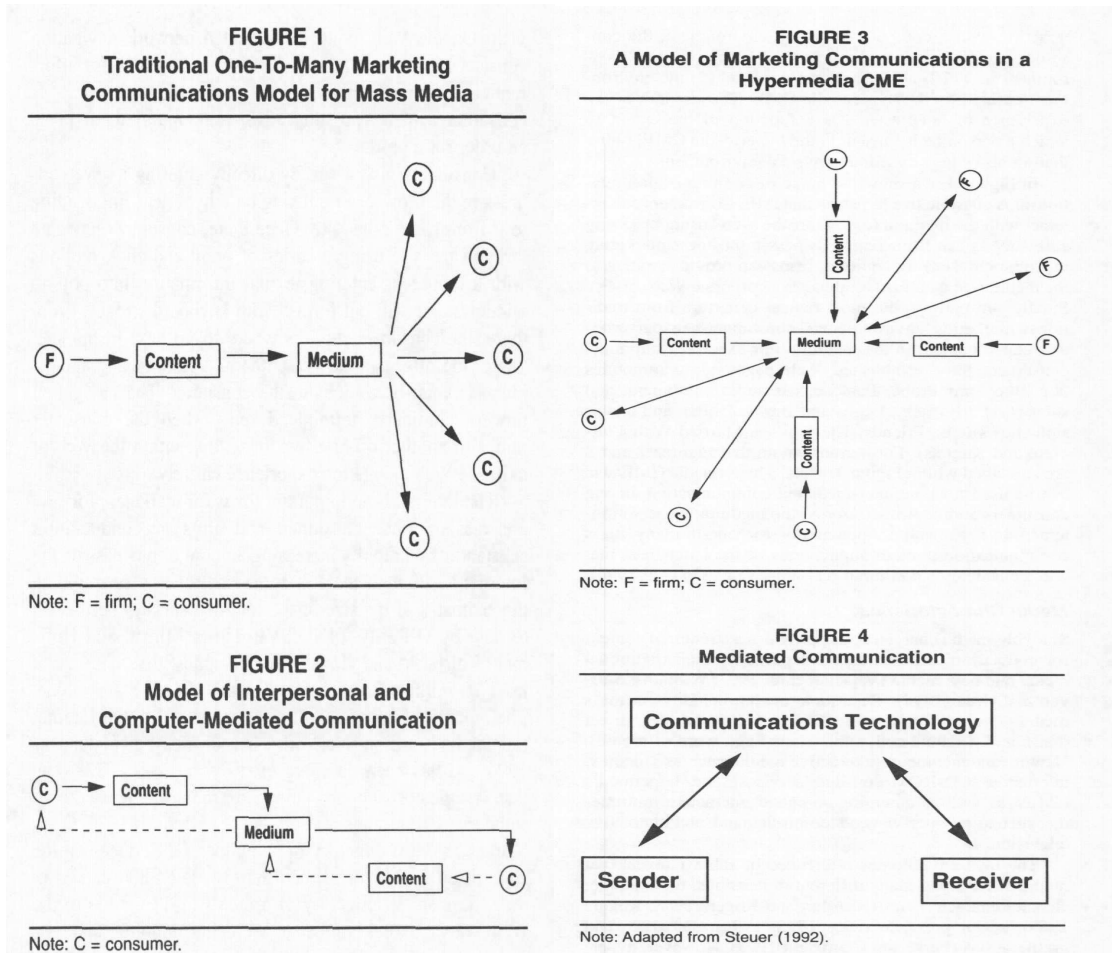
Hoffman and Novak (1996) outline a series of three communication models that serve to identify several unique characteristics of hypermedia computer mediated environments (CMEs) such as the internet. In Figure 1, Hoffman and Novak (1996) present a now

classic model underlying many models of mass communication. The main feature of Figure 1 is a one-to-many communications process, whereby the firm (F) transmits content through a medium to consumers (C). However, no interaction between consumers and firms is present in this model. For the purposes of this study, in which the interaction between consumers and the company will play an important role in the field research, Figure 1 is not helpful to the author. According to Hoffman and Novak (1996), virtually all contemporary models of mass media effects are based on this traditional model of the communication process. Given that this study is indeed researching internet marketing communications, Figure 1 is not helpful to the author because the field research will be conducted within the realms of a new media environment and not a traditional media environment.

In Figure 2, Hoffman and Novak (1996) present a model of interpersonal communication that is based on traditional models of communication from sender to receiver. The solid and dashed lines indicate communication flows through a medium for two distinct individuals. Although Figure 2 is shown here for one-to-one communication between two individuals, the model can be easily extended to represent many-to-many interpersonal communication. According to Hoffman and Novak (1996), person-interactivity, the key feature distinguishing Figure 2 from Figure 1, is defined as interactivity between people that occurs through a medium or is unmediated. In this view of interactivity, media are “important only as a conduit, as a means of connecting sender and receiver, and are only interesting to the extent that they contribute to or otherwise interfere with the transmission of messages from sender to receiver” (Steuer 1992:75). Figure 2 is also not very helpful to the author, because although the concept of interactivity plays a role here, it occurs through the medium. The field research for this study on internet marketing communications will require interactivity to be with the medium, as well as through it. Figures 1 and 2 are shown on the next page:

Figures 1 and 2

Figures 3 and 4



Source: Hoffman and Novak (1996)

On the other hand, in Figure 3, as shown above, Hoffman and Novak (1996) present a many-to-many communication model for hypermedia CMEs. The content in Figure 3 is hypermedia, and the medium is a distributed computer network. The key difference between Figure 2 and Figure 3 is that interactivity can also be with the medium in addition to through the medium. As mentioned in the above paragraph, this key

difference is of particular importance to this study on internet marketing communications. Figure 3 is based on a communication model outlined by Steuer (1992) and shown in Figure 4, on the previous page. The mediated model represented in Figure 4 suggests that the primary relationship is not between the sender and the receiver, but rather with the mediated environment with which they interact. According to this view, information or content is not merely transmitted from a sender to a receiver; instead, “mediated environments are created and then experienced” (Steuer, 1992:75). This comment is significant to the author’s study because not only will the interaction between consumers and the company play an important role in the field research, but so too will the field research be conducted within the realms of a new media environment, in which interactivity will be required to be with the medium as well as through the medium.

Moreover, Steuer (1992:76) goes on to discuss the concept of ‘telepresence,’ in which he defines virtual reality as “a real or simulated environment in which a perceiver experiences telepresence.” Telepresence, in turn, is defined as “the mediated perception of an environment” (Steuer, 1992:76). Whereas presence is the direct experience of reality, telepresence is the simulated perception of direct experience. An individual whose perception is mediated by a communication technology necessarily perceives two separate environments, and telepresence occurs when the perception mediated by the technology takes precedence over the unmediated perception (Steuer, 1992). The strength of the experience of telepresence is a function of the extent to which a person feels present in the hypermedia CME, rather than in his or her immediate physical environment (Hoffman and Novak, 1996). The concept of telepresence may be an interesting one, however, this study aims to research marketing communications on the internet, and all be it an interesting concept, it does not play much of a helpful role in this study.

Closely related to telepresence is the concept of ‘flow.’ Csikszentmihalyi (1975:36) introduced the concept of flow, which he defined as “the holistic experience that people

feel when they act with total involvement.” Flow is a psychological process that can be applied to virtually anything, however, when it is used in relation to internet consumption, flow is “the state occurring during network navigation which is: (1) Characterized by a seamless sequence of responses facilitated by machine interactivity; (2) intrinsically enjoyable; (3) accompanied by a loss of self-consciousness; and (4) self-reinforcing” (Novak, Hoffman, and Yung, 2000:23). Research by Hoffman and colleagues (Novak, Hoffman and Yung, 2000; Hoffman and Novak, 1996) posits that flow is enhanced by telepresence. However, similarly to the concept of telepresence, the concept of flow, for a study that aims to research marketing communications on the internet, does not play much of a helpful role. The reason flow has limited use for this study is because it is an information-processing model, and this study is researching marketing communications on the internet, and the richness and meaning behind these communications, and an information-processing model does not generate the depth of meaning required for this study.

According to Hoffman and Novak (1996): “The many-to-many communication model turns traditional principles of mass media marketing communications inside out, rendering impossible the blind application of marketing approaches that assume a passive, captive consumer. In that new communication model, consumers can actively choose whether to approach firms and exercise unprecedented control over the management of the content with which they interact.” Baring in mind this quotation and the aforementioned critical review of the models, not only is the concept of interactivity relevant to this study which will research marketing communications on the internet, but so too is the concept of navigation because as consumers interact with the web site they are also navigating around the site.

2.2.2. Navigation and Interactivity

Firstly, looking at the concept of navigation, devising a site that is easy to use is critically dependent on the design of the site navigation scheme. Navigation describes

how users move from one page to the next using navigational tools such as menus and hyperlinks. It is governed by menu arrangements, site structure and the layout of individual pages (Chaffey, Ellis-Chadwick, Johnston and Mayer, 2006:328). To achieve ease-of-use, web sites need to be structured in such a way that users can easily navigate. The concept of navigation and whether consumers can easily navigate around a site, achieving ease-of-use, is important to this study which will research marketing communications on the internet, and more specifically on an internet web site. It can be suggested that there are three important aspects to a site that is easy to navigate: Consistency – The site will be easier to navigate if the user is presented with a consistent user interface when viewing the different parts of the site; Simplicity – Sites are easier to navigate if there are limited numbers of options; Context – Context is the use of ‘signposts’ to indicate to users where they are located within the site, in other words to reassure users that they are not ‘lost’ (Chaffey, Ellis-Chadwick, Johnston and Mayer, 2006:328). These three aspects put forward by these authors will be considered in the research finding after the fieldwork for this study has been conducted.

Secondly, looking at the concept of interactivity, interaction helps to engage web site visitors by giving them some two-way communications plus greater involvement and control over their web experience. Basic interactive mechanisms include a simple mouse click on an image or an arrow to find more information or to look at the next item in a sequence, or selection from drop-down boxes (Smith and Chaffey, 2005). ‘Good’ web designers try to enable ‘flow’ on the web site; the degree of control or power a consumer has over the site. If customers can easily find the information they want through clicking on menu options and graphics they will feel in control. Given that the field research will be conducted within the realms of a new media environment, interactivity is an important concept in this study. As highlighted during the discussion of Hoffman and Novak’s (1996) communication models, interactivity will arise with the medium as well as through the medium. Liu and Shrum (2002) describe two types of interaction: user-user interaction and user-message interaction. User-user interaction is most often discussed from an interpersonal communication perspective. The more that

communication in a computer-mediated environment resembles interpersonal communication, the more interactive the communication is (Ha and James, 1998). However, one problem with looking at interactivity from the angle of interpersonal communication is that it ignores the ability of a medium such as the internet to break the boundaries of traditional interpersonal communication.

According to Liu and Shrum (2002), not only do individuals no longer need to be at the same place, they do not even need to be communicating at the same time. With online translation services, individuals also do not even need to understand each other's language to be able to communicate. From a user-message interaction perspective, interactivity is defined as the ability of the user to control and modify messages: "The extent to which users can participate in modifying the form and content of a mediated environment in real time" (Steuer, 1992:84). For instance, this study aims to research marketing communications on the internet, looking at the language and imagery used. Fiore and Jin (2003) focus on one aspect of interactivity, image interactivity, which provides the ability to create and manipulate images of a product or environment on a web site. Consumers have been hesitant to purchase online because they lacked information acquired through direct contact with the product (Lee, 2002). These images enrich the information available to consumers and help them estimate the visual and tactile qualities of the product. Image interactivity appears to be an important aspect of interactivity, to a study such as this one.

In addition to this, new technologies expand both the sensory breadth and depth of mediated experience. New media can incorporate levels of interactivity and vividness that traditional media cannot. Applying the mechanical perspective of vividness to web sites, a site that is described as vivid should have sensorially rich content that appeals to multiple senses. Steuer (1992:81) defines vividness as "the representational richness of a mediated environment as defined by its formal features; that is, the way in which an environment presents information to the senses." According to Steuer (1992), vividness consists of two subdimensions: Sensory breadth, which refers to the number of sensory

dimensions simultaneously presented, and sensory depth, which refers to the resolution within each of these perceptual channels. Breadth is a function of the ability of a communication medium to present information across the senses. Traditional media such as print and television are relatively low in breadth, relying primarily on the visual and auditory channels. According to Steuer (1992), the vividness of a particular mediated representation also depends upon the depth of the sensory information available in each perceptual channel. Steuer (1992:82) states that depth can be described in terms of quality: “An image with greater depth is generally perceived as being of higher quality than one with lesser depth; the same is true for auditory representation. Informationally, depth depends directly upon the amount of data encoded and the data bandwidth of the transmission channel.” With this study aiming to research marketing communications on the internet, and looking at the language and imagery used, the concept of vividness can most definitely be considered, particularly in relation to image interactivity.

Moreover, according to Liu and Shrum (2002), interactive features, such as virtual communities, customization, entertainment, and improving customer service, add value to consumer interactions with brands on the internet. Thus, interactivity may be directly linked to the concept of adding value to brands on the internet. Enhancing the interactivity of a web site is seen as a means of giving the site a competitive edge (Fiore and Jin, 2003). The value concept answers the question as to why anybody would voluntarily go to a brand’s web site. It is not difficult to see that brands need to add unique values to their online communications to make it worthwhile for consumers to go to their web sites. The relationship between web site interaction and value has been pointed out in literature (Breitenbach and van Doren, 1998; Geissler and Zinkhan, 1998). A review of this study’s research findings will consider if indeed consumers’ believed the web site to be interactive when asked about this during the fieldwork stage of this study. As Fiore and Jin (2003) have expressed, enhancing the interactivity of a web site is indeed seen as a way of giving the site a competitive edge.

Finally, interactivity has been described as an important feature that distinguishes the internet from every other medium (Roehm and Haugtvedt, 1999). Therefore, any study on the 'internet' should presumably consider the concept of interactivity, which this study will do. Shimp (2003:394) takes it a step further and includes the concept of individualization as a key feature of the internet, as well as interactivity: "Individualization and interactivity are key features of the internet...Individualization refers to the fact that the internet user has control over the flow of information...Interactivity, which is intertwined with individualization, allows for users to select the information they perceive as relevant and for brand managers to build relationships with customers via two-way communication." An important point here is the idea of companies being able to build relationships with consumers due to the internet allowing for interactivity. Also, the mention of individualization and internet users having 'control' leads on to the next section, discussing the empowered consumer on the internet.

2.3. Empowerment of Consumers

Porter (2001) contends that the internet has the potential to increase the bargaining power of consumers and redress power imbalances. Internet users are active, not passive; they enjoy their power and like to exercise it. The empowered online customer has more knowledge than ever before from sharing information with others and from comparison sites (Smith and Chaffey, 2005:101). Through the internet, consumers not only learn how to evaluate a product but can also access the evaluations of other consumers. This facilitates choice and risk reduction that in turn enables consumers to exercise increasing control over their consumption activities. Consequently, it is believed that consumers are abandoning their former passive roles (Harrison, Waite and Hunter, 2006). Newholm, Laing and Hogg (2006) see consumer empowerment as a process of negotiation partially facilitated by information.

Active or self-paced audience media give the audience the choice of pace in consuming the media content. Bezzian-Avery, Calder and Iacobucci (1998) contend that whereas in traditional marketing communications, the presentation is linear and the consumer is passively exposed to product information, for interactive marketing communications, the consumer instead actively traverses the information. The manner in which interactivity threatens the established way of marketing is to radically change the nature of audiences. Mass media audiences may be characterized by their size, heterogeneity and anonymity. In an interactive age the audiences can be small and addressable. As Buckingham (2000:42) states, these new media are seen as “democratic rather than authoritarian; diverse rather than homogeneous; participatory rather than passive.” The potential audience is global and undifferentiated, but once contact has been made may be individually identified and targeted (Rowley, 2001). Shaw, Newholm and Dickinson (2006) state that marketers would be wise, therefore, to take increasingly account of “empowered” consumers.

According to Rodgers and Thorson (2000), perhaps one of the most basic ways to think about how individuals process marketing communications in an interactive environment is to distinguish between aspects that are consumer-controlled and those that are marketer-controlled. Traditionally speaking, marketers have controlled the marketing communications consumers see, when and how. Of course, consumers always have had the option of not paying attention to, becoming involved with, or ignoring the communications. In the case of the internet, however, the control has switched, for the most part, from marketer to consumer (Rodgers and Thorson, 2000; Peters, 1998).

Increasingly, consumers’ choose the times and the channels through which they deal with companies (Rangaswamy and van Bruggen, 2005). The fact that the customer generally has to find the marketer rather than visa versa, and to a greater extent than is the case with most other media, makes the medium unique. The web empowers consumers, inaugurating new levels of dialogue between marketers and consumers. According to Kaye and Medoff (2001:264): “For perhaps the first time, consumers have

a direct and powerful voice in product innovation and marketing communications strategy.” Marketers, who choose to ignore the changes that advances in technology are bringing, are in effect ignoring powerful ways of reaching and actively engaging their target audience. Wright, Newman and Dennis (2006) argue that far from the popular view of consumers being manipulated by firms, successful firms try hard to and succeed in empowering consumers in their marketing activities.

Finally, Watson, Zinkhan and Pitt (2004) contend that the internet provides a stimulus for renegotiating every power relationship on the planet. Unlike some traditional media, brands cannot expect to ‘push’ their messages to a passive consumer. Brands need to ‘pull’ active audiences to their web sites by providing unique benefits that they cannot get elsewhere. Discussing the empowered consumer on the internet, leads on to the next section, discussing new versus traditional media. This study is researching new media i.e. internet marketing communications, and so it is important to establish the differences between new media and traditional media in relation to marketing and marketing communications.

2.4. New versus Traditional Media

Media context is thought to have an important influence on the value of marketing communications (Ducoffe, 1996). An important component is the message context, or setting, in which the entire transaction takes place. The context in which any message is emitted, transmitted and admitted, decisively influences its interpretation, and visa versa; messages are always more or less context-sensitive. “Context includes the whole range of one’s cognitive systems (i.e. ‘mind’), messages flowing parallel, as well as the memory of prior messages that have been processed, and no doubt the anticipation of future messages expected to be processed” (Sebeok in Blonsky, 1985:453-454). Aaker and Brown’s (1972) research on brands has shown that marketers delivering the same marketing communications’ messages to the same audience can generate different effects depending on the context in which the marketing communications are embedded.

Similarly, Choi and Rifon (2002) contend that context can influence audience perceptions of the marketing communication and the product. Consumer perceptions of a medium, such as the internet, in general, and the particular vehicles, such as web sites, of marketing communications would be expected to have effects on consumer responses to marketing communications. It appears then that the fact that in this study the marketing communication are on the internet, and more specifically web sites, is indeed a very significant and important point. As a result, reference will have to be continually be made to the fact that this study is researching marketing communications within the setting of the internet, and that this specific context may indeed influence interpretations in relation to these marketing communications. Marketing communications do not appear alone, as even research in traditional forms of marketing communications has shown that location or placement is critical. For instance, marketers buy billboard space according to drive-by characteristics. Print marketers choose a magazine or newspaper to target a specific market segment, not to mention a certain section in the magazine or newspaper. Radio and television buys depend on the programme's content and rating (Hofacker and Murphy, 1998).

This 'new' communications environment is continuing to develop around an evolving network of new media such as the internet, which is high capacity, interactive and multimedia. The result is, as previously mentioned, an era of producer-consumer interaction. There are many benefits to new media communications. Marketers benefit by reaching both a worldwide market and a specific group of consumers. New technologies are emerging that enable businesses to reach customers whenever and wherever they are ready to buy. As the internet becomes ubiquitous, companies gain many new ways to connect with customers. As Kenny and Marshall (2000) contend, companies need to use the power and reach of the internet to deliver tailored messages and information to customers at the point of need. Online marketing communications can be posted and changed quickly and are less expensive to produce than traditional media. As Ainscough and Lockett (1996) contend, internet media is dynamic; last minute changes and additions can be made with little effort. Information can be updated

and expanded at relatively low cost, enabling availability of real-time information. Small time marketers who go online can easily compete head-to-head with firms that have 'deeper pockets'.

According to O'Connor, Galvin and Evans (2004:23), by the beginning of the twenty-first century, marketing managers were faced with an array of new challenges and opportunities: "This was when traditional marketing truly started to become 'electronic marketing.'" Joseph et al. (2001) indicated that the internet is growing faster than all other preceding technologies. In particular, radio existed for 38 years before it had 50 million listeners; television took 13 years to reach that volume; the internet, however, took just four years to surpass it (Calisir, 2003). Online beats radio, newspapers and magazines, based on the number of hour's usage per week (McCarthy, 2004). In terms of audience reach, the internet represents one of the most reliable methods of targeting people throughout the day (EIAA.com, 29 November 2005). According to The Internet Advertising Bureau (IAB) key drivers for growth in online advertising spend include the increase in broadband take-up in the UK, and the online retail boom (Marketing Week, 30 March 2006). According to figures from the IAB, online advertising spend is propping up, and driving, growth in the rest of the marketing industry (Precision Marketing, 31 March 2006). Advertising spend in all traditional media except television and outdoor declined in 2005, but online grew (New Media Age, 6 April 2006). Readers and advertisers are turning to the internet, and print brands must follow. "While print products will not go away—any more than radio disappeared when TV arrived—publishers must adapt to serving two audiences, one online and the other offline" (eMarketer, 25 October 2007). Most companies believe that in the long run online communication will increase its share of the total communications budget.

Back in 1994, Rust and Oliver argued that the reason for mass media advertising's impending demise is the advent of new technologies that have resulted in the fragmentation of media and markets, and the empowerment of consumers. However, it is doubtful that online communication will completely substitute all of the traditional

communication channels. It could be argued that television continues to survive because of what it is - a means of being entertained, educated and informed which is low cost, requires no technical knowledge to work it, involves no need to be able to read or write or type, nor any need to make any real effort other than to get into a seat.

Moreover, the traditional media 'giants' are catching up (Ha, 2003) with television networks responding to the growth of the internet by becoming members of the medium. The concept of 'enhanced television' that aims to use the internet to provide a richer and better viewing experience for television viewers has taken off since 2000 and became a primary reason for television networks to continue to add new features on their web sites. It is clear that while web TV is still an emerging medium, it has grown so quickly that it is now becoming mainstream (PR Week, 26 June 2008). In 2000 Buckingham (p.82) contended that "over the coming decade, the advent of digital television, internet set-top boxes, online shopping, video-on-demand, and other developments, will increasingly blur the distinctions between linear broadcast media such as television and 'narrowcast', interactive media such as the internet."

The importance of the internet to modern business strategy was underlined by Porter (2001), who said: "The key question is not whether to deploy internet technology – companies have no choice if they want to stay competitive – but how to deploy it." An internet marketing strategy is needed to provide consistent direction for an organisation's e-marketing activities so that they integrate with its other marketing activities and supports its objectives (Chaffey, Ellis-Chadwick, Johnston and Mayer, 2006:152). Although new media have distinct characteristics compared to traditional media, it does not necessary follow that companies should concentrate communications solely on digital media. Rather, they should combine and integrate traditional and digital media according to their strengths (Chaffey, Ellis-Chadwick, Johnston and Mayer, 2006:354). As Lagrosen (2005) contends, internet marketing communication activities need to be integrated in the overall marketing communications mix. In common with other communications media, the internet may be most effective when it is deployed as

part of an integrated marketing communications approach. Like all interested observers, the author too does not know what impact the internet will eventually have on the evolution of marketing. However, this section has highlighted that at this point in time, it is not a question of choosing one over the other, or online making other traditional forms of media obsolete, it is for just now, integrating online into the overall marketing communications mix. The next section looks at the different types of online communications.

2.5. Types of Online Communications

Chaffey, Ellis-Chadwick, Johnston and Mayer (2006) present a good description of types of online communications, and these are options available in the communications mix for increasing visitors to a web site: The importance of effective *search engine marketing* shows that the higher the rank of a company and its products in the search engine results pages the more visitors will be received. *Online PR* is maximising favourable mentions of your company, brands, products or web sites on third-party web sites which are likely to be visited by your target audience. There are three key types of *online partnerships* which need to be managed: Link building (can also be considered to be part of online PR); Affiliate marketing; and Online Sponsorship. For the advertiser, online sponsorship has the benefit that their name is associated with an online brand that the site visitor is already familiar with. Moreover, given the limitations to banner ads, most media owners, digital marketing agencies and industry bodies now refer to *interactive advertising* which is more suggestive of the range of options for rich-media ads, data capture ads and large-format ads such as skyscrapers.

Also, outbound *e-mail marketing* is where emails are sent to customers and prospects from an organisation. Permission-based email is an effective tool for building relationships with customers online. Email can still drive good response levels, as is particularly the case with in-house lists on which the data are based, so email communications to customers through e-newsletters or periodic e-mail blasts are a vital

communications technique for companies (Chaffey, Ellis-Chadwick, Johnston and Mayer, 2006:373-400). In addition, *viral marketing* is when email is used to transmit a promotional message to another potential customer. Smith and Chaffey (2005:243) claim that viral marketing “harnesses the network effect of the internet and can be effective in reaching a large number of people rapidly.” It is effectively an online form of word-of-mouth communications.

Moreover, mobile marketing is helping to fuel new media’s ‘golden child’ status (New Media Age, 16 June 2005). According to Marketing (15 September 2004), change is the one constant in the digital world, and possibilities created by advances in mobile technology have never been greater. The key selling point with the mobile internet is, precisely, mobility. According to Milne and Rohm (2003), businesses are fast becoming aware of the potential of mobile commerce. The emerging capacity to communicate with any individual, from any place, over any network, and to any device, regardless of time or geographical location provides enormous potential for marketers. The result will be points of customer contact that can be timely, relevant and useful. Consumers no longer need a fixed-location PC to access information or shop online; the mobile internet provides an ever-increasing target for marketing communications and a growing source of consumer information (Milne and Rohm, 2003). Rettie, Grandcolas and Deakins (2005) conducted a study in which an analysis of 26 text marketing campaigns (5,401 respondents) demonstrated the surprising effectiveness of this form of telemarketing.

Whereas the previous sections of this chapter have discussed this move from traditional to new media communications, this section has discussed the developments within new media communication, over a relatively short period of time. This study is researching online marketing communications, more specifically internet web sites, and it is appropriate to highlight the directions in which online communications are moving. The proliferation of the internet and world wide web has resulted in the creation of new social and marketing spaces, and a new form of interaction and identity formation (Ozuem, Howell and Lancaster, 2008). The rise of social networking web sites has

forced marketers to wake up to the opportunities that are being created for their brands (Simmons, 2008). Also, Kim, Choi, Qualls and Han's (2008) study reveals that among online community members, brand commitment is enhanced for active brand users and also non-users of the targeted brand. Clearly, companies have to take account of the opportunities being created for their brands through social networking sites, even if they are successfully utilizing other types of inline communications. This is particularly important when targeting the 'younger' generation, as a great majority use social networking sites.

The next section discusses how Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) brands are embracing online. This begins with FMCG brands in general, then more specifically food and beverage brands, and ultimately onto alcoholic beverage brands. The marketing communications of alcoholic beverage brands on the internet is a research area of interest to the author.

2.6. FMCG Brands Embracing Online

Understanding how consumers perceive marketing activities is important for academic researchers and practitioners alike. TV is still one of the best ways for FMCG brands to reach a wide audience in one hit, but the internet allows a much deeper level of interaction and engagement. Major FMCG brands are finally beginning to see online as a viable channel for engaging with consumers more deeply than TV advertisements can (New Media Age, 4 August 2005). The EIAA's research showed that the percentage of overall media budgets devoted to online are forecast to rise. Internet advertising expenditure will experience a boost by both the higher and lower spenders of the FMCG sector over the next few years, with the higher spenders stating that 64% of this extra spend has come from other media budgets and 57% of respondents claiming the spend has been diverted from TV advertising (EIAA.com, 8 November 2006).

There is significant difference in the importance of roles of web sites by client sector. Improving brand image and awareness rank highly in the FMCG sector. The internet offers new opportunities to build and strengthen the brand (Smith and Chaffey, 2005). Lace (2004) suggests that providing customer service ranks more highly in the automotive-and-durables and financial-services sectors. Selling is the primary or secondary role in the retail, financial-services and travel-and-tourism sectors. In contrast selling is the least important role in the FMCG sector (Lace, 2004). There is also significant difference within each sector in terms of the importance weighting given to the defined roles. Providing entertainment receives its highest score in the food-and-drink sector, suggesting its importance in the marketing of food and beverages. In contrast entertainment is of particularly low importance in the retail and travel-and-tourism sectors. In the financial-services sector there is less difference in scores between the five leading roles (than in other sectors) suggesting the importance of a multifaceted role for their web sites (Lace, 2004). Indeed bulletin boards, chat rooms, competitions and games are all more likely employed by clients in the food-and-drink sector. This supports the higher importance of entertainment as a role, as these features provide the opportunity for a greater degree of person-to-person interaction and entertainment, and highlights the importance of building communities of interest in food and beverage brands (Lace, 2004).

Originally hardest to convince (New Media Age, 4 August 2005), alcoholic drinks brands are now demonstrating strong signs that they are embracing online. This could be because of the level of consumer involvement with the products. The Foote, Cone & Belding (FCB) model (Vaughn, 1980) is based on a matrix that considers the degree of consumer involvement and cognitive or sensory factors. Vaughn (1980) proposes an FCB model which organizes advertising effectiveness theory for strategy planning. This model requires the building of a matrix in order to classify products and services. The matrix has 4 quadrants which are: 1. high (involvement)/thinking (informative), 2. high (involvement)/feeling (affective), 3. low (involvement)/thinking (habit formation), and 4. low (involvement)/feeling (self-satisfaction). Alcoholic drinks, especially premium

product categories and brands, would be classified as high-involvement products, both informative and effective. Therefore, it is not surprising that alcoholic beverage brands are embracing online. Consumers purchasing high-involvement products tend to require detailed information on the products prior to purchasing, and the online environment is an ideal platform to provide this detailed information.

In keeping with the alcoholic beverages industry embracing online, and more specifically the premium product category whisky, Chivas Regal 12 year old rolled out a 'virtual tasting' campaign across China in 2006, aimed at communicating the product proposition in a new and memorable way. The push involved sending out a pack to targeted Chivas customers, who had previously registered online to receive promotions. Their key consumers were interested in the product but had very demanding work and social schedules, and so this presented a resolution. The 'tasting packs' contained instructions, tasting glasses, a mat which doubled as a mouse pad, brochures and three sample-sized bottles of Chivas Regal whiskies. The packs also contained a coded invite to a virtual tasting at an online bar, where recipients first walked through a 10 minute interactive presentation, covering the history of Chivas Regal (Media Asia, 2 June 2006).

Moreover, Laphroaig single malt whisky produced what it believed to be the first live interactive web TV programme delivered via satellite to a global audience (PR Week, 26 June 2008). Laphroaig Live was an event designed to promote the launch of a new premium 27-year-old 'expression' of the brand and engage with the 280,000 registered 'Friends of Laphroaig' on Facebook. They used the latest satellite technology to film, encode and stream the show live and make it interactive for the viewers from 63 different countries. The campaign generated global coverage before and after the live event. It was shown on the Laphroaig site and on 10 third party websites including Harpers, myvillage.com and Tiscali. It was intended to run for 40 minutes but in fact continued for an hour due to the volume of questions and interest it generated (PR Week, 26 June 2008).

Furthermore, creative innovation is a central pillar of Pernod Ricard-owned vodka Absolut's brand proposition and digital platforms play an important role in this. Pernod Ricard, the world's second biggest wine and spirits company, believes that online advertising is a more effective means of communicating with 18 to 24 year olds than television (New Media Age, 12 October 2006). Furthermore, according to New Media Age (19 March 2008), Pernod Ricard-owned Jameson Irish Whiskey has relaunched its website as a one-stop site for information and content on the alcohol brand. The Jameson site offers content that can be browsed via a 3D cube navigation system, a Distillery Team Blog, and Ask the Drinks Experts question section.

In addition, according to the Financial Times (15 February 2008), Diageo is investing more money in online campaigns, such as Smirnoff Experience, a competition rewarding winners with the chance to spend a year travelling around the world, looking for "the most original and unique" nightlife. Over the past few years, its television adverts have also become more sophisticated, meaning that they are more likely to be picked up on websites such as YouTube, giving the company free publicity. Also, The Glenmorangie Company promoted its Ardbeg Corryvreckan whisky with a digital campaign. The campaign aimed to engage the 50,000 members of Ardbeg's customer relationship management programme worldwide to encourage them to go to the Ardbeg website and buy a bottle of Ardbeg Corryvreckan. The campaign starts off with an email push to encourage members to go online to watch a film to find out who "dived and survived" (Marketing, 21 September 2008).

This section highlighted how FMCG brands, in particular alcoholic beverage brands are embracing online. Originally hardest to convince (New Media Age, 4 August 2005); alcoholic drinks brands are demonstrating strong signs that they are embracing online. It was proposed that this could be because of the level of consumer involvement with the products. Consumers purchasing high-involvement products tend to require detailed information on the products prior to purchasing. This section detailed many examples of

whisky brands embracing online, in which the online environment appeared to be an ideal platform to providing detailed information on the premium product category whisky.

2.7. Web Site as a Marketing Communications Tool

Moving on to specifically web sites as a marketing communications tool. As Chaffey, Ellis-Chadwick, Johnston and Mayer (2006:357) stated, the medium changes the nature of standard marketing communications tools such as advertising: In addition to offering the opportunity for one-to-one marketing, the internet can be, and still is widely, used for one-to-many advertising. The web site itself can be considered as similar in function to an advertisement, since it can inform, persuade and remind customers about the offering, although it is not paid for in the same way as a traditional advertisement. According to Shimp (2003:396): “The company/brand web site can be considered a specific form of online marketing communications...”

Moreover, the internet mandates visualizing almost every aspect of corporate strategy, operations, and communication. Web design has brought visual issues into the mainstream of strategic thinking, and prompted research and thinking about perception and preference of visual information (Schroeder, 2007). Design is the visual appearance and audible applications of a site, which includes uses of color animation, pictures, text, format, and sound (Collier and Bienstock, 2008). The measure of appearance and site design measures the visual attractiveness, presentation of information on the screen, and the ease with which the site can be used (Goode and Harris, 2007). From the consumer’s perspective, visual experiences dominate the internet, as they navigate through a computer-mediated environment almost entirely dependent upon their sense of sight (Schroeder, 2007). It is disappointing to learn that only 20% of companies research the brand image (e-identity) of the web site itself (Lace, 2004). In keeping with Schroeder’s (2007) claim that from a consumer’s perspective, visual experiences dominate the

internet, this study aims to research web site marketing communications in relation to the imagery and language used within the site.

The homepage of a web site is particularly important in achieving marketing options; if the customers do not understand or do not buy into the proposition of the site, then they will leave. Gleisser (2001) states that it is important to clarify what he refers to as 'the essentials' of: who we are, what we offer, what is inside, and how to contact us. Since the home page represents the 'first look' at the web site, it plays a pivotal role in gaining and holding consumers' attention, either luring them into the web site or driving them away. Given the rapidly changing, fragmented media environment, capturing audience attention is an increasingly important step in the persuasion process (Geissler, 2001).

Moreover, for web sites to be a successful marketing communications tool, its content needs to be up-to-date, in line with customer expectations. The web is perceived as a dynamic medium, and customers are likely to expect new information to be posted to a site straight away. If material is inaccurate or stale then the customer may not return to the site (Chaffey, Ellis-Chadwick, Johnston and Mayer, 2006:434). According to Smith and Chaffey (2005), 'good' sites are frequently updated and stay 'fresh'; they put up new information that is useful and relevant, high in quality, and timely for their audience. This is where 'content is king' becomes 'context is king' - relevant information available at the right time in the right place (Smith and Chaffey, 2005).

Furthermore, Copywriting for the internet is an evolving art form, but many of the rules for 'good' copywriting are as for any media. Possibly the most important rule is to not assume that visitors have full knowledge of the company, its products and services (Chaffey, Ellis-Chadwick, Johnston and Mayer, 2006:333). Web copywriters also need to take account of the user reading the content on-screen. With regards to font styles, Smith and Chaffey (2005:193) claim that "san-serif font styles such as Arial or Verdana work best on the web, as they look sharper on the screen and are therefore easier to read." Approaches to dealing with the limitations imposed by the customer using a

monitor include: Chunking, or breaking texts into units of 5-6 lines at most, which allows users to scan rather than read information on web pages; Use of lists with headline text in larger font; Never including too much on a single page, except when presenting lengthy information such as a report which may be easier to read on a single page; Using hyperlinks to decrease page sizes or help achieve flow within copy, either by linking to sections further down a page or linking to another page (Chaffey, Ellis-Chadwick, Johnston and Mayer, 2006:333).

Marketers should focus on using the internet's unique characteristics and capabilities to make their web sites more interesting (Calisir, 2003). A site with powerful aesthetic appeal can help communicate a brand's essential values. The use of graphics, colour, style, layout and typography create aesthetics. Together they create a personality for the site (Smith and Chaffey, 2005). The image of a web site is not just a matter of presentation. To stimulate flow, it is important that a similar presentation style is used for all pages within the web site. The presentation style includes the layout, colours, font style and size, mix of text and graphical information, and sort, shape, size and placement of links (Wu and Chang, 2005). Although it has been argued that website appearance and site design are central to online communication, it has also been noted that presentational consistency is an important factor in driving consumer intentions and actions (for example, Ekhaml, 1996; D'Angelo and Little, 1998; Nicotera, 1999). According to Goode and Harris (2007), visual primes and presentational consistency of web pages exerts a powerful influence on the choices of web users. Srinivasan, Anderson and Ponnnavolu (2002) contend that the character of the web site, that is the overall image or personality that the e-retailer projects to consumers through the use of inputs such as text, style, graphics, colours, logos, and slogans or themes on the website, has a significant impact on e-loyalty. According to eSuperbrands Research Report (2006), 39% stated that the logo is the feature that they believe stands out the most when identifying an online brand; 30% stated design/style; 8% stated style and tone of the language; and 4% stated colour.

Having discussed the web site as a marketing communications tool, it is important to review the methods used in the literature to evaluate this.

2.8. Methods of Evaluating Web Sites as a Marketing Communications Tool

The vast amount of internet marketing communications research is dominated by the information-processing and quantitative tradition. For instance, researchers testing content effectiveness have developed scales for measuring attitude toward a web site and other measures for evaluating the design and effectiveness of promotional content on the web (Dreze and Zufryden, 1997; Chen and Wells, 1999). While this research offers some understanding of consumer attitudes toward internet marketing communications, it does not delve into the possible underlying reasons why consumers choose to use the internet over other forms of media (Joines, Scherer and Scheufele, 2003). Initial attempts to discover the reasons why consumers use the internet have mostly applied a uses and gratifications approach (Eighmey and McCord, 1998; Korgaonkar and Wolin, 1999). These studies have tried to gain a better understanding of the user's experience with the web and have provided a more in-depth understanding of web users and their motivations for continued use. This information is valuable for marketers trying to target audiences more effectively. Uses and gratifications are particularly useful in explaining continuing use (McGuire, 1974). Whereas initial use may be a result of accidental exposure or curiosity, continuing use assumes there are underlying motivations driving repeated use of media.

Given that the past research is dominated by the information-processing and quantitative tradition, and with the wide range of issues for internet marketing communications, there is indeed a need for more depth and richness of meaning. An alternative approach could be taken to fully uncover the depth and richness of meaning involved within internet marketing communications, and specifically web sites. To achieve this, a semiotic approach to internet marketing communications could be taken. According to Schibrowsky, Peltier and Nill (2007), the importance of the internet as a topical area of

interest within the academic community is strong and growing, and signals the need to once again review the internet marketing literature, particularly in terms of potential research opportunities. Montoya-Weiss, Voss and Grewal (2003) contend that the ultimate success of internet marketing depends on understanding the way in which customers' interactions with a web site influences their evaluations and behaviours. Thus in terms of potential research opportunities within the internet marketing communications literature, semiotics can play a role in exploring its contribution to gaining a greater understanding of web site aesthetics, and how it may influence consumers' interpretations, evaluations and behaviours.

Perhaps past approaches have been unable to fully uncover the depth and richness of meaning that a semiotic approach could offer. Semiotics is a useful tool for discovering the sophistication and richness of marketing communications. An aesthetically pleasing web site design may attract customers if it generates pleasurable feelings that are associated with the online experience (Montoya-Weiss, Voss and Grewal, 2003). One way to sustain a brand's uniqueness is through endowing it with emotional values, which users sometimes value beyond the brand's functional utility (De Chernatony, 2001:31). Semiotics is concerned with the formulation and encoding of messages (by brand owners), the transmission of these messages through channels (such as internet web sites), and the decoding and interpretation of these messages (by consumers) (Sebeok in Blonsky, 1985:451).

2.9. Summary and Conclusion

As Shimp (2005) argues, marketers are just beginning to understand marketing communications on the internet; more research in this domain is critical. This chapter provided an overview of the literature relating to the internet and internet marketing communications. Key sections included the discussion of the internet as a new mediated environment, new versus traditional media, brands embracing online, the different types of online communications, and web sites as a marketing communications tool. As

Schibrowsky, Peltier and Nill (2007) state, the importance of the internet as a topical area of interest within the academic community is strong and growing, and signals the need to once again review the internet marketing literature, particularly in terms of potential research opportunities. With regards to potential research opportunities, given that the past research has been dominated by the information-processing and quantitative tradition, and with the wide range of issues for internet marketing communications, there is indeed a need for more depth and richness of meaning. An alternative approach could be taken to fully uncover the depth and richness of meaning involved within internet marketing communications, and specifically web sites. To achieve this, it is argued that a semiotic approach to internet marketing communications should be taken. The next chapter will discuss approaches to semiotics, in which an overview of the literature will be provided relating to the theories and principles that semiotics has to offer. This is important because without understanding these theories and principles in detail, the author will not know how semiotics can be applied in internet marketing communications.

This chapter introduced and suggested the possibility of using semiotics as a worthwhile approach to web site evaluation. The next chapter will fully explain and demonstrate why a semiotic approach to web site evaluation is worth doing.

3. Semiotics

3.1. Introduction

The previous chapter provided an overview of the literature relating to the internet and internet marketing communications. The chapter ended with a summary and conclusion reinforcing the importance of studying internet marketing communications and potential research opportunities in this area, in which the author proposes taking a semiotic approach to fully uncover the depth and richness of meaning involved within internet marketing communications, and specifically web sites. In order to do this, the theories and principles that semiotics offers, need to be discussed. This is important because without understanding these theories and principles in detail, the author will not know how semiotics can be applied in internet marketing communications. This current chapter discusses approaches to semiotics, in which an overview of the literature is provided relating to the theories and principles that semiotics has to offer. This 'pure' introduction to semiotics provides the reader with a detailed understanding as to how the theories and principles that semiotics offers, can allow for the researcher to delve deeper into the potential meanings involved within marketing communications. Broadly, this chapter is grouped into three main parts. The first part is a discussion on the structuralist approaches of the founding fathers of semiotics, Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Saunders Peirce. The second part moves on to discussion on the post-structuralist approach in semiotics, discussed as social semiotics. Finally, the chapter ends with a summary pointing the author towards a consideration of both structuralist and post-structuralist social semiotics approaches.

3.2. Founding Fathers of Semiotics

According to Mick (1986), the roots of semiotics trail back at least as far as the pre-Socratic era, where Hippocrates identified bodily manifested signs as conveyors of messages about physical and mental states. As Zakia and Nadin (1987) contend,

semiotics is not a new discipline; it can be traced back to ancient Greek writers, especially Aristotle and later St. Augustine, who distinguished between signs and the things that signs represent. The term ‘semiotic’ was adapted by the Englishman John Locke (1632-1704) from the Greek Stoics, who in turn were influenced by the Greek medical tradition that interpreted diagnosis and prognosis as sign processes. Locke is proposed as the originator of the field of semiotics. In his *‘Essay Concerning Human Understanding’* (1690:4.21.4), he referred to “semiotike, or the doctrine of signs...the business whereof is to consider the nature of signs the mind makes use of for the understanding of things, or conveying its knowledge to others.” Advances were made in semiotic theory during the 17th century, but interest faded with the century and semiotics remained virtually undisturbed for another two hundred years. It was not until the turn of the 20th century that semiotics achieved its identity through the independently developed works of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and the American logician and philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914). They are widely considered the true founding fathers of semiotics.

Peirce was an American “philosopher, logician, scientist and founder of pragmatism”, as the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission states on a sign outside his house. This sign denotes respect and fame not accorded to Peirce during his lifetime. Peirce, described as a “wayward philosophical genius” (Culler, 1981:23), was denied tenure by the Johns Hopkins University at Baltimore, and he remained in obscurity until long after his death. Even so, Sless (1986:143) argues, “we owe Peirce a profound intellectual debt, because of the tremendous scope of his vision.” Sless claims that Peirce’s essential twin achievements were, firstly; “to realize that any developed theory of semiotics would be unlike most theories in that it would entail a complete restructuring of our intellectual framework...; and secondly, to realize that such a framework would have to be open ended because of the nature of semiosis.” Similarly, Sir Karl Popper (1972:212) regarded Peirce as “one of the greatest philosophers of all time.” Peirce (1839-1914), who followed John Locke’s usage, was generous in his praise of Locke saying “we cannot fail to acknowledge a superior element of truth in the practicality of Locke’s

thought, which on the whole should place him nearly upon a level with Descartes” (in Aarsleff, 1982:120).

Saussure was very different in character to Peirce, being a successful, respectable professor, working within the ‘Establishment’. Between 1907 and 1911, as Professor at the University of Geneva, Saussure gave three courses of lectures on general linguistics. The book, ‘*Course in General Linguistics*,’ created by Bally and Sechehaye in 1960, is the source of Saussure’s influence and reputation. As Bally and Sechehaye recount in their preface to the Course, Saussure had kept very few notes, so they had to work from notes taken by students who had attended the various series of lectures. They compiled a unified work, granting precedence to the third series of lectures, but drawing on material from the other two and on Saussure’s personal notes. Thus, it could be argued that Saussure’s importance in linguistics and in other fields may rest less on what he ‘really’ thought than on what is contained in the Course. According to Culler (1976:17), the editors did an admirable job, but “there is a strong case for saying that in three respects they were less successful than one might have wished: Their order of presentation is probably not that which Saussure would have chosen and thus does not reflect the potential logical sequence of his argument; the notion of the arbitrary nature of the sign receives much less discussion than it does in the notes; and in discussing the sound plane of language the editors are much less scrupulous and consistent in their terminology than Saussure seems to have been.”

It has become fashionable among some semioticians to pit the relatively elaborate semiotics of Peirce against Saussure’s. According to Krampen et al. (1987:62), “taking the explicit completeness of a system as a standard for the importance of a theoretical contribution, and not knowing Saussure’s original transcripts, one does not find in Saussure much more than the famous prophecy in the Course in General Linguistics book: “Semiology...a science that studies the life of signs within society... (Saussure, 1960:15).” Similarly, Sless (1986) argues that Saussure only mentioned semiology in a few paragraphs, and then very cautiously, and as a result, Saussure’s contribution was

very slight. However, the fact remains that the effect of Saussure's work was profound. The next section provides Saussure's definition of semiotics.

3.2.1. Saussure's Definition of Semiotics

Before discussing Saussure's understanding of signs, his definition of semiotics will be given: "A science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable; it would be part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology; I shall call it *semiology* (from Greek *semeion* 'sign')" (Saussure, 1960:15). Guiraud (1975) emphasizes that if semiotics is the science of signs, it encompasses all knowledge and all experience, for everything is a sign. According to Saussure (1960:16): "Semiology would show what constitutes signs, what laws govern them. Since the science does not yet exist, no one can say what it would be; but it has a right to existence, a place staked out in advance. Linguistics is only a part of the general science of semiology; the laws discovered by semiology will be applicable to linguistics, and the latter will circumscribe a well-defined area within the mass of anthropological facts...If I have succeeded in assigning linguistics a place among the sciences, it is because I have related it to semiology."

Saussure (1960:17) continues: "To me the language problem is mainly semiological, and all developments derive their significance from that fact. If we are to discover the true nature of language we must learn what it has in common with all other semiological systems...By studying rites, customs etc. as signs, I believe that we shall throw new light on the facts and point up the need for including them in a science of semiology and explaining them by its laws...since human beings make noises, use gestures, make use of combinations of objects or actions in order to convey meaning, there is a place for a discipline, such as semiotics, which would analyse this kind of activity and make clear the systems of convention on which it rests." Culler (1976:90) contends: "Saussure's semiology is based on the assumption that insofar as human actions or productions convey meaning, insofar as they function as signs, there must be an underlying system

of conventions and distinctions which makes this meaning possible. Where there are signs there is system.” Following on from this, the next section details Peirce’s definition of semiotics.

3.2.2. Peirce’s Definition of Semiotics

Before discussing Peirce’s understanding of signs, his definition of semiotics will be given. According to Oehler (1987:2): “The first published sketch of Peirce’s semiotics is found in the essay ‘*On a New List of Categories*,’ which dates from 1867. However, he had already dealt with the subject of semiotics in a series of lectures, which he held at Harvard University in 1865 under the title ‘*The Logic of Science*.’ The manuscripts which have survived of this series of lectures make it clear that Peirce’s chief objective at this stage was to redefine logic, and to reconstruct it as a theory of signs.” For Peirce, semiotics was the “formal doctrine of signs” which was closely related to logic (Peirce, 1839-1914:2.227), and his thoughts on signs were shaped by his thoughts on logic. Peirce defined logic as “...the science of the necessary conditions of the attainment of truth” (1839-1914:1.444), and he “indicated that his system of logic was to regard logic as the theory of signs in general” (in Tursman, 1987:10-11). Peirce wanted to develop a general logic of the sciences because he believed that exact logic had a very important role to play in the search for categories of thought. Peirce declared that “every thought is a sign” (1839-1914:1.538). In Peirce’s book ‘*Logic as Semiotic: The Theory of Signs*’ (1898), the sign is defined as: “Something which stands to somebody for something in one respect or capacity.”

Having detailed both Saussure and Peirce’s definitions of semiotics, the next section discusses Saussure’s understanding of signs.

3.3. Saussure's Understanding of Signs

Saussure regarded language as a system of signs in which noises only counted as language when they served to communicate ideas; otherwise they were just noise. Consequently, in order to communicate ideas they had to be part of this system of conventions, because “for any words or speech characters to have meaning there must be a system that makes it possible to utter and understand them” (Sheriff, 1989:6). Thus, language stands as “the supreme example of a self-contained ‘relational’ structure whose constituent parts have no significance unless they are integrated within its bounds...the very concepts a language expresses are also defined and determined by its structure” (Hawkes, 1977:26-27).

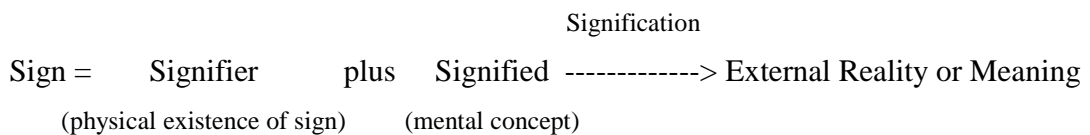
The Saussurean model, with its emphasis on internal structures within a sign system, can be seen as the origins of the structuralist ontology, in that language does not reflect reality but rather constructs it. Saussure contends that signs do not make sense on their own but in relation to other signs. Saussure argues that “concepts...are defined not positively, in terms of their content, but negatively by contrast with other items in the same system. What characterizes each most exactly is being whatever the others are not” (1960:115). According to Boon (1979), relational qualities characterize all of Saussure’s distinctions, most obviously signifier/signified, but also arbitrary/motivated, langue/parole, synchrony/diachrony, and paradigmatics/syntagmatics. In such distinctions, to abstract one side is to precipitate the other.

3.3.1. Signifier and Signified

The smallest unit of analysis in Saussure’s (1960) semiology is the sign, consisting of a signifier and a signified. The linguistic sign unites a concept and a sound-image. Due to ambiguity, Saussure (1960:67) proposes to “retain the word *sign* to designate the whole, and to replace concept and sound-image respectively with *signified* and *signifier*; the last two terms have the advantage of indicating the opposition that separates them from each

other and from the whole of which they are parts.” Saussure (1960:67) opined that “the sign consisted of its physical form plus an associated mental concept, and that this concept was in its turn an apprehension of external reality.” According to Blonsky (1985), to Saussure the sign was the pivotal fact of language, it was the correlation of two sets of difference; a *signifier*, which had potential meaning, but not actual or complete meaning, in order to derive which, the signifier was correlated by culture to items of the culture’s contents: The *signified*. This signifier-signified dichotomy, as shown below, is an artificial, theoretical split which cannot occur in reality:

Figure 5: Saussure’s Signifier-Signified Dichotomy



Source: Fiske (1985:47)

Signifieds are culturally determined and socially negotiated, and as Fiske (1985:49) contends: “The area of reality or experience to which any one signified refers, that is the signification of the sign, is determined not by the nature of that reality or experience, but by the boundaries of the related signifieds in the system. Meaning is therefore better defined by the relationships of one sign to another, than by the relationship of that sign to an external reality.” Saussure refers to the ‘value’ of a sign as depending upon its relations with other signs within the system, and as a result, a sign has no absolute value independent of this context. For Saussure, value is what primarily determines meaning.

3.3.2. Arbitrary and Motivated

When discussing the arbitrary nature of the sign, Saussure (1960:69) states: “The bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, because every means of expression

used in society is based, in principle, on convention.” He continues: “Signs that are wholly arbitrary realize better than the others the ideal of the semiological process; that is why language, the most complex and universal of all systems of expression, is also the most characteristic; in this sense linguistics can become the master-pattern for all branches of semiology although language is only one particular semiological system” (1960:67). Convention is the social dimension of signs: It is the agreement amongst users about the appropriate uses of, and responses to, a sign (Cook, 1992). The arbitrary nature of the sign was, for Saussure, the heart of human language. Structuralists see all signs as systematically organized and the relationship between them as arbitrary, which means that relationships are properties of the sign system; they are not determined by anything external to the system. This arbitrariness is the sign’s fundamental characteristic: “The arbitrary sign is the sign par excellence” (Todorov, 1982:268). Not only is the relationship between the signifier and the signified arbitrary, it is, according to Saussure immutable; “No individual, even if he willed it, could modify in any way at all the choice that has been made; and what it more, the community itself cannot control so much as a single word; it is bound to the existing language” (Saussure, 1960:8).

Saussure (1960:68) continues: “The word arbitrary also calls for comment. The term should not imply that the choice of the signifier is left entirely to the speaker (the individual does not have the power to change a sign in any way once it has become established in the linguistic community); I mean that it is unmotivated, i.e. arbitrary in that it actually has no natural connection with the signified.” The more motivated the sign is, the more its signifier is constrained by the signified, whereas; “The less motivated the sign is, the more important it is for us to have learnt the conventions agreed among the users: Without them the sign remains meaningless, or liable to wildly *aberrant decoding*” (Fiske 1985:57). Boon (1979:91) contends: “If we pursue Saussure’s implications, ‘motivation’ is not just a property of sign-systems viewed from inside; nor is arbitrariness the ultimate outside-vantage on any and all languages. Rather, arbitrary/motivated is a relational pair, each side necessary for posing the other.”

3.3.3. Langue and Parole

Saussure (1960) outlines a further principle, which he considers to be key to semiotics; language comprising of *langue* and *parole*. According to Culler (1976:30-31), Saussure defines '*langue*' as "the social system of language of which we are a part", and '*parole*' as "our individual speech acts." Saussure characterizes *parole* as the superficial aspect of the underlying system of rules that constitutes *langue*; he focused on *langue* - the structure of rules that underpins language, and this focus led to structuralism. According to Culler (1976:30-31), Saussure argued that *langue* must be the linguist's primary concern: "What he is trying to do in analyzing a language is not to describe speech acts but to determine the units and rules of combination which make up the linguistic system." The distinction between *langue* and *parole* thus provides a principle of relevance for linguistics: In separating *langue* from *parole*, Saussure is separating what is social from what is individual, and what is essential from what is accidental. However, Voloshinov (1986:21) suggests the social phenomena of the *parole*, far from being too individual to be an object of theory, is the key to understanding meaning.

3.3.4. Synchronic and Diachronic

Saussure originally inherited the traditional view of "language as an aggregation of separate units called 'words', each of which somehow has a separate 'meaning' attached to it, the whole existing within a *diachronic* or historical dimension which makes it subject to observable and recordable laws of change" (Hawkes, 1977:19). Saussure was, however, unhappy with this view because he felt that his predecessors had failed to think seriously or perceptively about their task. His revolutionary contribution was to reject this 'substantive' view in favour of a 'relational' one where "language should be studied not only in terms of its individual parts, and not only diachronically, but also in terms of the relationship between those parts, and *synchronically*" (Hawkes, 1977:20). According to this view, signs are not autonomous entities but derive their meaning only from the

place within a sign system. According to Saussure (1960:95): “The *synchronic* approach is analytical - it looks at the relationships between elements and investigates systems of meaning at one point in time. Whereas the *diachronic* approach is historical - it looks at the way meaning evolves over time. Synchronic facts, no matter what they are, evidence a certain regularity but are in no way imperative; diachronic facts, on the contrary, force themselves upon language but are in no way general.” Due to Saussure’s main emphasis being on how individual concepts and objects gain meaning through the position they occupy within a network of signs he advocated the synchronic approach, applied to *langue*.

Culler (1976) states that Saussure’s argument here is a complicated one. The claim is that diachronic facts are of a different order from synchronic facts, in that historical change originates outside the linguistic system: “Change originates in linguistic performance, in *parole*, not in *langue*, and what is modified are individual elements of the system of realization. Historical changes affect the system in the end, in that the system will adjust to them, make use of the results of historical change, but it is not the linguistic system which produces them” (Culler, 1976:40-41). It should be noted that this synchronic - diachronic distinction is controversial. By distinguishing rigorously between these two perspectives, and in granting priority to the synchronic study of language, Saussure was ignoring the fact that language is fundamentally historical, contingent and in constant evolution. However, Culler (1976:35) stresses: “It was precisely because Saussure recognized the radical historicity of language that he asserted the importance of distinguishing between facts about the linguistic system and facts about linguistic evolution, even in cases where the two kinds of facts seem extraordinarily intertwined.” Linguists, who oppose Saussure’s distinction between synchronic and diachronic approaches, and wish to envisage a synthetic, panchronic perspective, often point to the entanglement of synchronic and diachronic facts to support their case. According to Culler (1976:40), Saussure is all too aware of the intertwining of synchronic and diachronic facts: “For him the whole difficulty is one of separating these elements when they are mixed, because only in this way can linguistic

analysis attain coherence. Linguistic forms have synchronic and diachronic aspects which must be separated because they are facts of a different order, with different conditions of existence.” For Saussure, a panchronic synthesis is impossible because of the arbitrary nature of linguistic signs.

3.3.5. Syntagm and Paradigm

Saussure gives guidance regarding the analysis of a text and finding the meaning of signs by introducing the concepts of syntagm and paradigm. *Syntagms*: From the Greek word meaning chain; “‘A’ is the message into which the chosen signs are combined” (Fiske, 1985:61). This is ‘horizontal’ combination; sequences forming a chain which produces the *manifest* meaning. *Paradigms*: From the Greek word meaning to show side by side; “‘A’ is a set of signs from which the one to be used it chosen” (Fiske, 1985:61). This means ‘vertical’ selection from different categories is the source of *latent* meaning. Saussure believed that messages were constructed by a “combination of ‘horizontal’ movement which combines words together, and a ‘vertical’ movement, which selects the particular words from the available inventory of the language” (Hawkes, 1977:77). Signs can be put together through two main paths. First, there are combination possibilities, for instance, the prefixes and suffixes that can be attached to a noun, for example, ‘friend’ can become ‘boyfriend’, ‘friendship’ or ‘friendly.’ Saussure calls these patterns of combinations *syntagmatic relations*. Second, there are contrastive properties, for instance, saying ‘yes’ or ‘no’, in which the choice of one term necessarily excludes the other. Saussure calls these mutually exclusive relations *paradigmatic oppositions*. Thus, signs derive their meaning only from their relations with and differences from other signs.

Saussure emphasized that meaning arises from the *differences* between signifiers; these differences are of two kinds: *syntagmatic* (concerning positioning) and *paradigmatic* (concerning substitution). The distinction is a key one in structuralist semiotic analysis. These two dimensions are often presented as ‘axes’, as shown below in Figure 2, where

the horizontal axis is the syntagmatic and the vertical axis is the paradigmatic. The plane of the syntagm is that of the *combination* of ‘this-and-this-and-this’ (as in the sentence, ‘the man cried’) whilst the plane of the paradigm is that of the *selection* of ‘this-or-this-or-this’ (e.g. the replacement of the last word in the same sentence with ‘died’ or ‘sang’). Whilst syntagmatic relations are possibilities of combination, paradigmatic relations are functional contrasts - they involve *differentiation*. Temporally, syntagmatic relations refer intratextually to other signifiers *co-present* within the text, whilst paradigmatic relations refer intertextually to signifiers which are *absent* from the text (Saussure 1983:122; Saussure 1974:123). The ‘value’ of a sign is determined by both its paradigmatic and its syntagmatic relations. Syntagms and paradigms provide a structural context within which signs make sense; they are the structural forms through which signs are organized into codes (Chandler, 1994).

Barthes (1985:63) in his work on fashion, ‘*Systeme de la Mode*’, illustrates the difference between the paradigm and syntagm. A paradigm is “a set of pieces...which cannot be worn at the same time on the same part of the body, and whose variation corresponds to a change in meaning of the clothing: Toque-bonnet-hood etc.” A syntagm consists of the “juxtaposition in the same type of dress of different elements: Skirt-blouse-jacket.” This shows how these concepts need not only be applied in the linguistic sense in which Saussure first envisaged them.

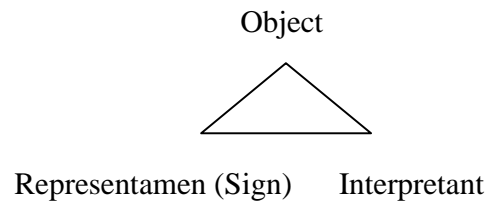
Following on from this, the next section discusses Peirce’s understanding of signs.

3.4. Peirce’s Understanding of Signs

Central to Peirce’s system is the conviction that all thought is conducted through and is even synonymous with sign processes: Although ‘things’ do exist prior to being thought of by someone, ‘things’ mean nothing until they are part of a sign process; they cannot exist in any significant way. In fact, Peirce’s theory of signs is so general as to entail that, whatever else anything may be, it is also a sign. Neither does Peirce limit himself to

this world: “The entire universe is perfused with signs, if it is not composed entirely of signs” (1839-1914:5.448). Peirce’s interest in logical reasoning led him to investigate different categories of signs, and the manner by which individuals’ extract meaning from them. In contrast with Saussure’s binary model, Peirce offers a triad, as shown below:

Figure 6: Peirce’s Triad



Source: Feibleman (1960:89).

In his references to the sign, Peirce speaks of it as involving an essentially triadic relationship between itself, the sign (representamen), the object of the sign, and the interpretant of the sign. Feibleman (1960:89) states: “A sign is anything which determines something else (its *interpretant*) to refer to an object to which itself refers (its *object*). A sign, called the *representamen*, in every case is used to stand for an object independent of itself.” Feibleman continues: “It stands for something, its object. It stands for an object to somebody (or something) in whom it arouses a more developed sign, the interpretant. Finally, a sign stands for an object to an interpretant in some respect, that is, it represents the ‘common characters’ of the object, and this respect is called the *ground*.” According to Hoopes (1991:7), “Peirce held that every thought is a sign without meaning until interpreted by a subsequent thought, an interpretant. Thus the meaning of every thought is established by a triadic relation, an interpretation of the thought as a sign of a determining object.” The interpreter, in whom the interpretant is determined, does not have to be a mind and may not even be a human being. It may be anything sufficiently sentient to receive the impression of a sign and entertain an interpretant. For the interpretant of a sign is always itself a sign. More is involved than the lack of necessity for the interpreter to be a human being; for the actual existence of

the interpretant itself may be only a possibility: “It is not necessary that the interpretant should actually exist” (Feibleman, 1960:130). Thus, since interpretant as well as interpreter may have only a problematic existence for the purposes of significance, it is clear that the relation of a sign to its object is the fundamental one in semiotic; and that communication, or the arousal of one sign by means of another sign, depends upon this fundamental relation (Feibleman, 1960).

According to Boon (1979), Peirce clarified his types more than his concept of sign, which is what they are types of. Boon (1979:95) continues: “Saussure needs a sign-object-interpretant model to valorize his signifier/signified. Also, Peirce needs a signifier/signified model to clarify the internal relationships of his triadic scheme and to get across systems from one language-cum-society-and-culture to another language-cum-society-and-culture.”

3.4.1. Icon, Index and Symbol

Peirce frequently claimed that it is not words or concepts, but rather sentences, which are meaningful. “The fact that the meaning of a concept or term is construed by Peirce in terms of the conditions of its verification, suggests that, for Peirce, talking about the meaning of a concept or a word is in fact talking about the meaning of a sentence or proposition; for only sentences and propositions, and not concepts or words, can be verified” (Almeder, 1980:15). Almeder (1980:22) continues: “Peirce claimed that the problem of what the ‘meaning’ of a proposition is can only be solved by the study of interpretants, or proper significant effects, of signs.” Peirce claimed that his theory of meaning derives from, and is justified by, his theory of signs. As mentioned, Peirce proposed that a sign stands for an object to an interpretant in some respect, and this respect is called the ground. According to Anderson (1987), in dividing signs according to how they stand for their objects, Peirce arrived at three types: Icon, index and symbol. Although it may be ‘easy’ to refer to Peirce’s three forms as ‘types of signs’, they are not necessarily mutually exclusive: A sign can be an index, an icon and a symbol, or any

combination. Peirce was fully aware of this: for instance, he insisted that ‘it would be difficult if not impossible to instance an absolutely pure index, or to find any sign absolutely devoid of the indexical quality’ (Peirce 1931-58, 2.306). It is worth noting that Peirce actually found sixty-six distinct kinds of sign, and hypothesized the existence of 59,049 classes, which he left for others to explore. The three terms are defined as follows:

Icon: “A sign which would possess the character which renders it significant, even though its object has no existence” (Peirce, 1901-5). Thus, a sign is an icon if it resembles its object: “Photographic images look like the thing, place or person being represented. This makes them iconic signs and the signifier-signified relationship one of resemblance or likeness” (Dyer, 1982:124).

Index: “A sign which would, at once, lose the character which makes it a sign if its object were removed, but would not lose that character if there were no interpretant” (Peirce, 1901-5). Thus, a sign is an index if it has a direct causal connection with its object, and draws attention to that object: “Some signs go beyond the mere depiction of a person or thing and are used indexically to indicate a further or additional meaning to the one immediately and obviously signified. For example, the idea of Parisian holidays can be indicated by a picture of the Eiffel Tower” (Dyer, 1982:124).

Symbol: “A sign which would lose the character which renders it a sign if there were no interpretant. Such is any utterance of speech which signifies what it does only by virtue of its being understood to have that signification” (Peirce, 1901-5). Thus, a sign is a symbol when the connection is either arbitrary or conventional: “The relationship between signifier and signified in some signs is arbitrary, based neither on resemblance nor on any existential link...This kind of sign is called a symbol. A rose is a symbol of love or passion not because a rose looks like love or passion or even because the flower causes it. It is just that members of some culture have over the years used the rose in certain circumstances to mean love” (Dyer, 1982:125). According to Saussure (1960), one characteristic of the symbol is that it is never wholly arbitrary; it is not empty, for

there is the rudiment of a natural bond between the signifier and the signified. Whereas, Peirce (1839-1914) claims that it is wholly arbitrary. This is why when Saussure discusses the arbitrary nature of the sign, his discussion weighs against the use of the term 'symbol.'

3.5. From Structuralist Semiotics to Post-Structuralist Social Semiotics

This section details and considers the move from structuralist semiotics to post-structuralist social semiotics. For the purposes of this study, post-structuralist social semiotics should be detailed and considered as well as structuralist semiotics, because without understanding all of the theories and principles in detail, the author will not fully know how semiotics can be applied in this study.

3.5.1. Structuralist Semiotics

Saussure's semiology began structuralism, which in turn began semiology. According to Sturrock (1979:71): "Semiotics or semiology represents the largest possible extension of structuralist ideas into the investigation of human culture." Saussure laid the foundation for the structuralist school in linguistics and social theory. Structuralism arose when anthropologists, literary critics and the like saw what linguistics could do to help them and so took it as a model. Retrospectively they realized that they were developing Saussure's semiology (Culler, 1976). The basic ontological premise of structuralism is that sociological and cultural practices can be analyzed as signifying systems. Thus, structuralism is at the core of not only Saussure's linguistics where it was first developed, but across a broad range of sociological studies, from Levi-Strauss (1970) when considering anthropology, to Lacan (1977) when discussing psychoanalysis. However, it was Saussure's follower, Roland Barthes, a French social and literary critic, whose writings on semiotics made structuralism one of the leading intellectual movements of the 20th century. Barthes (1977:9) declared that semiotics "aims to take in any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits; images, gestures, musical

sounds, objects, and the complex associations of all of these, which form the content of ritual, convention or public entertainment: These constitute, if not languages, at least systems of signification.”

It is difficult to distinguish semiotics from structuralism since both have their origins in the work of Saussure (1960). Young (1981:3) states: “Semiology is not easy to distinguish from structuralism. Strictly, semiotics is a science of signs, whereas structuralism is a method of analysis.” Structuralists engage in a search for deep structures underlying the surface features of phenomena: “Structuralist analysis addresses itself to the system of rules and relations underlying each signifying practice” (Young 1981:3). In short, structuralism sees “codes, rules, perspectives and structure as the ultimate reality” (Manning 1987:31). The structuralist method “assumes that meaning is made possible by the existence of underlying systems of conventions which enable elements to function individually as signs” (Young 1981:3). Structuralism believes that each small element of the system can only be viewed in relation to all other small elements and to the entire system, no matter what the subject for investigation. The structuralists see meaning as deriving from the relational nature of signs; signs do not possess an essential meaning but are defined by relations, which are oppositional. Structuralists then try to pinpoint the codes that generate the meaning; structuralists “take meaning as given, a centre, a point of reference, then try to identify the system of codes responsible for the accepted meaning” (Sheriff, 1989:5).

Some theorists have rejected a purely structuralist semiotics. For example, one of the more colourful critics was Barthes, who was a structuralist during the first half of his career, and later did a characteristic ‘U-turn’, stating that his structuralist phase was over: “I passed through a euphoric dream of scientificity” (in Culler, 1983:76). However, such a rejection need not involve a wholesale rejection of semiotics. Influential as it has been, structuralist analysis is but one approach to semiotics. In the late 1960s, the Saussurean model, and the structuralist semiotics derived from it, came under increasing attack, “an attack associated with the name post-structuralism” (Stam,

Burgoyne and Flitterman-Lewis, 1992:23). According to Harland (1987:125): “It is Derrida’s three crucial books of 1967 that mark the arrival of post-structuralism: *Writing and Difference*, *Speech and Phenomena* and *Of Grammatology*.” Although most post-structuralists maintain that meaning derives from differences internal to the sign system itself, they reject the idea of a single, deep, determining structure, and in Derrida’s (1991,1992) case especially, emphasize the inherent instability of the linguistic sign. This instability is central to deconstruction, the analytical technique for which Derrida is best known. Brown (1995:83) claims that the purpose of deconstruction is to, “demonstrate that there are no hidden truths within a text, that there is no fixed, correct or privileged interpretation...”

The notion that Barthes’ work underwent a radical change in a move from structuralism to a post-structuralism is an idea he helped to foster, but the concerns were evident in his work all along (Culler, 1983:89-90). Much of what was heralded as ‘post-structuralism’ was in fact already conspicuous in structuralist writings (Culler, 1983:78). Post-structuralism may best serve as an umbrella term delineating post-structuralism’s relationship to structuralism: “Post-structuralism traces the trace of structuralism’s difference from itself” (Young 1981:1). Thus, it has to be acknowledged that post-structuralism would not exist but for structuralism. The following section details and considers post-structuralist social semiotics.

3.5.2. Post-Structuralist Social Semiotics

Structuralism has weaknesses and post-structuralism has brought attention to these. According to Hodge and Kress (1988), a post-structuralist approach in semiotics is often discussed as social semiotics, where not only the structures and codes are explored, but importantly the functions and social use of the semiotic systems. Chandler (2002) contends that an emphasis on the social dimension of semiotics is relatively recent outside of specialized academic journals, and it is not yet much in evidence at the heart of the activities of many semiotic researchers. Seeking to establish a wholeheartedly

'social semiotics', Hodge and Kress (1988:1) declare that "the social dimensions of semiotic systems are so intrinsic to their nature and function that the systems cannot be studied in isolation." Social semiotics has moved beyond the structuralist concern with the internal relations of parts within a self-contained system, seeking to explore the use of signs in specific social situations (Chandler, 1994). Structuralist semiotics stresses system and product, rather than speakers and writers or other participants in semiotic activity as connected and interacting in a variety of ways in concrete social contexts (Hodge and Kress, 1988:1). The key point here is that sign systems cannot be studied on their own, consideration should also be given to the idea that participants are interacting within certain social contexts.

Structuralist semiotics likes to assume that the relevant meanings are frozen and fixed in the text itself, to be extracted and decoded by the analyst by reference to a coding system that is impersonal and neutral, and universal for users of the code. Whereas, social semiotics cannot assume that texts produce exactly the meanings and affects that their authors hope for: it is precisely the struggles and their uncertain outcomes that must be studied at the level of social action, and their effects in the production of meaning (Hodge and Kress, 1988:12). Thus, social semiotics is stressing that it is exactly these unclear outcomes that should be studied within social contexts, and the effects these unclear outcomes have on meaning production. Therefore, delving deeper into the exploration of meaning production, and uncovering the depth and richness of meaning involved.

According to Saussure, the linguistic sign is made up of two parts: The signifier and the signified, in which the relationship is completely arbitrary and it is fixed by convention. However, Brown (1995:82) states that this relationship is by no means stable: "If we look up the signifier 'coke' in a dictionary, several potential meanings (signifieds) are available - the soft drink, cocaine - and if any of these signifiers, such as 'drink' are looked up in turn we encounter yet more signifieds and so the process continues indefinitely." Meaning, in short, turns out to be very difficult to tie down. It is

contingent, unstable and very much dependent on the specific use context. As Mick (1987:252) states: “The emphasis on structure stripped of content and context has long been the Achilles’ heel of structuralist approaches.” Thus, precise meaning is very difficult to determine, and should be approached with an understanding on the specific use context in mind.

For Derrida (1978,1987), meaning is not simply a question of differences between individual linguistic signs, as Saussure would have it, but a relentless process of deferral, which he terms *differance* (meaning to differ and to defer), where meaning is constantly flickering, simultaneously present and absent. In effect, “each linguistic sign in a chain of signs contains ‘traces’ of the signs that precede it, inscribes itself on the signs still to come and, even when read in context, the chain may contain echoes of meaning from other, entirely different texts and contexts” (Brown, 1995:82). Thus, it could be argued that while Saussure may be hailed as a founder of semiotics, semiotics has become increasingly less Saussurean since the 1970s (Chandler, 2002).

Unlike Saussure, Peirce sees meaning as intrinsically a process, not a quality of signs or texts, and he sees a place for both the material determinations of meaning, and general social cultural constraints on individual thought (Hodge and Kress, 1988:20). The form of signs is conditioned above all by the social organization of the participants and also by the immediate conditions of their interaction. This shift of focus marks a radical break from structuralist semiotics (Hodge and Kress, 1988:37).

To illustrate some of the implications of this new orientation, take the instance of traffic lights. Structuralists are fond of this example, because it seems a code of classic simplicity. There are three signifiers (red, green and amber) linked to three signifieds (stop, go and stop/go) by a conventional code. If we consider how these systems function in their context, however, we can immediately see that context is a crucial part of their meaning. We can also see that the meaning constituted by the interplay between text (a sequence of traffic signals) and its function is complex, far reaching and

ultimately social and ideological. The traffic signals are, of course, positioned beside roads, at intersections. This is not only their context of use: it contains the information essential to their meaning. They address their message primarily to motorists, and motorists and the cars they drive are included in their meaning. Red, for instance, doesn't simply mean 'stop'. It means 'motorists, stop'. In context, it carries other meanings, as part of its mimetic content. It promises that the behaviour of other motorists at other parts of the intersection will be predictable. It has a mimetic content, then, implying a state of affairs in the physical world even though it is only a claim, which 'some lunatic shooting a red light' could disrupt, making a lie of its claim to power (Hodge and Kress, 1988:37-38).

A sign is a portion of the syntagmatic plane that is treated as a unity. It is fixed by the interaction of both a syntagmatic structure and a paradigmatic structure (or classification system). Paradigmatic structures are organized sets of choices, and the paradigmatic meaning of a sign is derived from the sets of signs that are affirmed or negated by the act of choice in the context of that structure (Hodge and Kress, 1988:262). The material realization of a sign in a message is its signifier, and the referent it constructs is its signified. The structures of message systems are linked to the structures of referents via codes which organize signifieds and signifiers through compatible paradigmatic structures (Hodge and Kress, 1988:262). Semiosis as a material event always exists in both space and time, so that all syntagms have a diachronic dimension. However, where for purposes of interpretation the passage of time in production or reception of messages is thought to be negligible or irrelevant, syntagms can be treated as synchronic (Hodge and Kress, 1988:264-65).

The turn to social semiotics has been "reflected in an increasing concern with the role of the reader" (Chandler, 2002:214). Saussure envisaged semiotics as 'a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life'. However, Saussure 'fenced off' language from its users and the world of existent reality: "He did not really envisage meaning as being a process of negotiation between writer or reader and text," and yet, "the reader

helps to create the meaning of the text by bringing to it his experience, attitudes and emotions” (Fiske, 1985:90,43). In contrast, Peirce at least argued that readers had to supply part of the meaning of signs, because a sign is “something which stands to *somebody* for something in some respect or capacity” (Peirce, 1898). According to Stam, Burgoyne and Flitterman-Lewis (1992:213): “Both structuralism and post-structuralism had in common the habit of ‘bracketing the referent,’ i.e. insisting more on the interrelations of signs than on any correspondence between sign and referent.” Signs do not exist without interpreters. ‘Sign’ and ‘meaning’ are inextricable (Sless, 1986:88); to identify something as a sign is in the next breath to engage with its meaning, for it is the nature of signs to have a meaning. The key point here is that signs do not exist without interpreters, and this is in keeping with Chandler’s (2002) comment on the importance of the role of the reader, which plays a crucial part within the understanding of social semiotics.

It could be argued that meaning is culturally and socially generated and dependant, because we as humans are culturally and socially generated and dependant. In other words, culture and society create our perceptions and equip us with the tools (signs and codes) with which to communicate, as Halliday (1984) states: “Culture *is* a configuration of semiotic systems.” It is important to grasp the point that “people cannot convey ideas. People can convey only signs, sounds and symbols that represent an idea to them” (Deely, 1977). “The audience decides what those signs, sounds and symbols mean”, (Cleveland 1986:227) based on the experiences, attitudes and emotions that they bring to the text (Fiske, 1985). In order to communicate codes must be shared; “*Meaning* (is) neither a private experience nor a divinely ordained occurrence: it (is) the product of certain shared systems of signification” (Eagleton, 1983:107). Meaning is the pivot in semiotics, the point of leverage in the life of signs. Meaning is not an absolute, static concept; it is historically located and may well change with time (Fiske, 1990). Meaning is not transmitted to us; we actively create it according to a complex interplay of signs and codes of which we are normally unaware. Chandler (2002:15) contends that “through the study of semiotics, we become aware that these signs and codes are

normally transparent and disguise our task in ‘reading’ them. To decline the study of signs is to leave to others the control of the world of meanings which we inhabit.”

In addition, Hodge and Kress (1988:1) argue that unlike many academic disciplines, semiotics offers the promise of a systematic, comprehensive and coherent study of communications phenomena as a whole, not just instances of it. Mick (1988:20) suggests that no discipline concerns itself with representation as strictly as semiotics does. Semiotics challenges the nature of social values, discussing them as social constructs that not only vary across time but also differ from culture to culture and some times from family to family. Semiotics can help draw attention to that which is taken for granted in representing the world, focusing on the interpretation of signs, rather than on an accepted reality, which feigns objectivity. If signs do not merely reflect reality, but are involved in its construction then those who control the sign systems, control the construction of reality. Semiotics can thus show ideology at work and demonstrate that reality can be challenged (Hodge and Kress, 1988).

Moreover, Saussure did not really envisage meaning as being a process of negotiation between creators and interpreters. In his book ‘Mythologies’ (1957), Barthes set up a model by which the negotiating, interactive idea of meaning could be analyzed. According to Fiske (1990), at the heart of Barthes’s theory was the idea of two orders of signification. The first order was the one on which Saussure worked, which describes the relationship between the signifier and the signified within the sign. Barthes referred to this order as denotation, referring to the common sense and obvious meaning of the sign. Connotation was the term Barthes used to describe the way in which signs work in the second order of signification. It describes the interaction that occurs when the sign meets the feelings or emotions of the users and the values of their culture. Eco (1972) discusses the wide gap that exists between those who create and generate the material carried by the media and those who receive the material; transmitters and receivers do not necessarily share common codes.

Structuralist semioticians tend to focus on the internal structure of the text rather than on the processes involved in its construction or interpretation (Chandler, 1994). Contemporary semioticians refer to the creation and interpretation of texts as ‘encoding’ and ‘decoding’ respectively. This does, however, tend to make these processes sound too programmatic: the use of these terms is of course intended to emphasize the importance of the semiotic *codes* involved, and thus to highlight social factors. For semioticians, there is no such thing as an uncoded message, so that - for those who argue that all experience is coded - even ‘encoding’ might be more accurately described as ‘recoding’ (Hawkes 1977:104,106,107). In the context of semiotics, ‘decoding’ involves not simply basic recognition and *comprehension* of what a text ‘says’ but also the *interpretation* and *evaluation* of its meaning with reference to relevant codes (Chandler, 1994). Where those involved in communicating do not share common codes and social positions, decodings are likely to be different from encoders’ intended meanings. Thus, the decoding of messages by interpreters may indeed be different from the meanings intended by the encoders – making this the central paradox of semiotics.

Social semiotics alerts us to how the same text may generate different meanings for different readers (Chandler, 2002:215). Eco, a semiotician, literary and media critic, philosopher and historian, embraces Peirce’s trichotomy of sign, object and interpretant in his book ‘A Theory of Semiotics’ (1976). In discussing denotation and connotation, Eco (1976) emphasizes the active role of the interpreter, and the possibilities that connotation allows for the generation of multiple meanings. When discussing ‘aberrant decoding’, Eco (1972) claims that different people bring different codes to a given message and so interpret it in different ways. Thus, no single message or any group of messages may be said to possess or to suggest one and only one meaning in all situations, for all members of society, at all times. Interpretation is indefinite. “The attempt to look for a final, unattainable meaning leads to the acceptance of a never ending drift or sliding of meanings” (Eco, 1992:32), because “the meaning of a sign is in fact the sign for a further meaning” (Eco, 1992:47). As a result, this never ending chain

of signification has powerful implications for the complexity of meaning creation and transmission. A key point here is Eco (1976) emphasizing the active role of the interpreter, and the possibilities that connotation allows for the generation of multiple meanings. This is in keeping with Chandler's (2002) comment on the importance of the role of the reader, because signs do not exist without interpreters, and this comment plays a crucial part within the understanding of social semiotics.

Moreover, in a series of analyses of French popular culture, he stripped away the surface of denotative meaning to expose the second level – the 'what-goes-without-saying' – of connotation and proceeded to examine its underlying ideological implications (Brown, 1995:148). Signs are more 'polysemic' – more open to interpretation – in their connotations than their denotations (Chandler, 2002:140). Denotation may seem to be more fixed and taken for granted, but it is still dependent upon a context of meaning and association. Fiske (1990) contends that one of the main aims of semiotic analysis is to provide researchers with the analytical method and the frame of mind to guard against this sort of misreading. When an audience receives a double message, denoted-connoted (this is the very situation of millions of individuals who consume marketing communications), they must not suppose that the second message (of connotation) is 'hidden' beneath the first (of denotation). In marketing communications, what must be explained, on the contrary, is the role of the message of the denotation: why not simply say, without a double message: buy X? Barthes (1985) contended that the first message serves more subtly to naturalize the second: it takes away the gratuitousness of its affirmation, the stiffness of its communication. It is often easy to read connotative values as denotative facts.

Barthes (1985) argues that there are almost always several interpretations possible, not only between one reader and the next, but sometimes within the same reader. Members of the same culture would broadly agree upon the denotational meaning of a sign, whereas no inventory of the connotational meanings generated by any sign could ever be complete. Connotations are not purely 'personal' meanings – they are determined by the

codes to which the interpreter has access. Certain connotations would be widely recognized within a culture (Chandler, 2002:142). Therefore, not only does social semiotics alert us to the possibilities that connotation allows for the generation of multiple meanings (Eco, 1976), but when Barthes (1985) contends that there are almost always several interpretations possible, he argues that this is not only between one reader and the next, but sometimes within the same reader.

Barthes eschewed the science of semiology, abandoned his search for deep, underlying structures of meaning and in 'The Death of the Author', acknowledged the multiplicity of meanings in a text, the sheer profusion of potential interpretations (Brown, 1995:148). For Barthes, readers are free to enter a text at will, undermine or reject the author's intentions, take 'pleasure in the text' (Barthes, 1990) and generate as many meanings as they like, none of which are privileged. In what is often regarded as one of the crowning achievements of post-structuralist literary criticism, Barthes (1990) conducted an enormously detailed analysis of *Sarrasine*, a short story by Balzac, and demonstrated how a virtually infinite number of different, but equally legitimate, interpretations is possible. Thus there is no 'true' meaning, no 'right' meaning, no 'determinate' meaning, no 'intentional' meaning, no 'single' meaning, no 'final' meaning, even in works which are conventionally regarded as models of transparency (in Brown, 1995:84-85). Barthes (1985:262) argues that semiotics seeks not to classify all meanings of the text, which he suggests would be impossible, but rather to "locate the avenues of meaning." Thus, given that social semiotics alert us to the fact that there are almost always several interpretations possible, and that this is not only between one reader and the next, but sometimes within the same reader (Barthes, 1985), it is only correct to then argue that it would indeed be impossible to catalogue all meanings within a message, and as a result, semiotics seeks to locate the many possibilities of meaning (Barthes, 1985:262). Therefore delving deeper into the exploration of meaning production, and uncovering the depth and richness of the meanings involved.

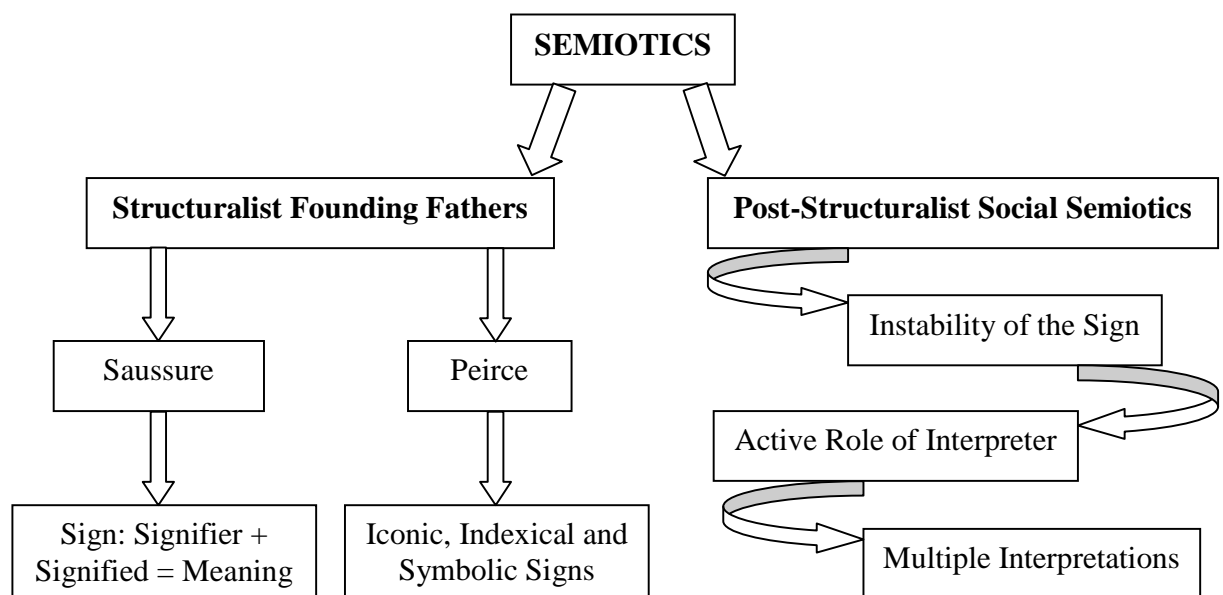
With help from the review of the literature in this chapter, the diagram in Figure 7 on the next page highlights the key areas of semiotic approaches for the author to take into consideration. Firstly, is the contribution from the structuralist approaches of the founding fathers of semiotics, Saussure and Peirce. Saussure's (1960:67) signifier-signified dichotomy shows that the sign consists of a signifier plus a signified that results in the meaning. Peirce (1931-58, 2.306) claimed that his theory of meaning derives from, and is justified by, his theory of signs. Peirce arrived at three types of signs: Icon, index and symbol. They are not necessarily mutually exclusive: A sign can be an index, an icon and a symbol, or any combination. The contributions from Saussure and Peirce are shown down the left hand side of the diagram in Figure 7 on the next page.

The existing literature has given little attention to the post-structuralist approach in semiotics, discussed as social semiotics. As Chandler (2002) contends, an emphasis on the social dimension of semiotics is relatively recent outside of specialized academic journals, and it is not yet much in evidence at the heart of the activities of many semiotic researchers. Post-structuralist social semiotics maintains that meaning derives from differences internal to the sign system itself, they reject the idea of a single, deep, determining structure, and emphasizes the inherent instability of the sign. Signs do not exist without interpreters. 'Sign' and 'meaning' are inextricable (Sless, 1986:88); to identify something as a sign is in the next breath to engage with its meaning, for it is the nature of signs to have a meaning. A key point with social semiotics, the instability of the sign, is shown down the right hand side of the diagram on the next page. In addition, Chandler's (2002) comment on the importance of the active role of the reader, plays a crucial part within the understanding of social semiotics, and is also shown down the right hand side of the diagram. Furthermore, social semiotics alert us to the possibilities that connotation allows for the generation of multiple meanings (Eco, 1976). Similarly, Barthes (1985) contends that that there are almost always several interpretations possible, but he argues that this is not only between one reader and the next, but sometimes within the same reader. The idea of multiple interpretations being possible is

shown down the right hand side of the diagram on the next page. It is only correct to then argue that it would indeed be impossible to catalogue all meanings within a message, and as a result, semiotics seeks to locate the many possibilities of meaning (Barthes, 1985:262). Therefore delving deeper into the exploration of meaning production, and uncovering the depth and richness of the meanings involved.

Overall, the diagram below highlights not only the key contributions from the founding fathers, but also a consideration of social semiotics, and in particular, the importance of the instability of the sign, the active role of interpreters, and multiple interpretations being possible.

Figure 7: Diagram Summarizing Key Areas of Semiotic Approaches



Source: The author, based on the Semiotics chapter in the thesis literature review

3.6. Summary and Conclusion

The author proposes taking a semiotic approach to fully uncover the depth and richness of meaning involved within internet marketing communications, and specifically web sites. In order to do this, this chapter discussed approaches to semiotics, in which an overview of the literature was provided relating to the theories and principles that semiotics has to offer. This is important because without understanding these theories and principles in detail, the author would not know how semiotics can indeed be applied in internet marketing communications. The review highlighted the importance of the contribution from the structuralist approaches of the founding fathers of semiotics, Saussure and Peirce. It also highlighted the importance of a consideration of the post-structuralist approach in semiotics, discussed as social semiotics. This culminated in the author creating a diagram summarizing the key areas of semiotic approaches, based on the literature reviewed in this chapter.

The existing literature has given little attention to the post-structuralist approach in semiotics, discussed as social semiotics. As Chandler (2002) contends, an emphasis on the social dimension of semiotics is relatively recent outside of specialized academic journals, and it is not yet much in evidence at the heart of the activities of many semiotic researchers. This provides the author with a significant research opportunity, and a gap in the literature within which to try to fill.

A key point within the literature on social semiotics is Eco (1976) emphasizing the active role of the interpreter, and the possibilities that connotation allows for the generation of multiple meanings. This is in keeping with Chandler's (2002) comment on the importance of the role of the reader, because signs do not exist without interpreters, and this comment also plays a crucial part within the understanding of social semiotics. In addition, Barthes (1985) contends that that there are almost always several interpretations possible, but he argues that this is not only between one reader and the next, but sometimes within the same reader. It is only correct to then argue that it would

indeed be impossible to catalogue all meanings within a message, and as a result, semiotics seeks to locate the many possibilities of meaning (Barthes, 1985:262). Therefore delving deeper into the exploration of meaning production, and uncovering the depth and richness of meaning involved.

Given that this study is taking a semiotic approach to internet marketing communications, the next chapter discusses the relationship between semiotics and marketing communications.

4. Semiotics and Marketing Communications

4.1. Introduction

Given that this study is taking a semiotic approach to fully uncover the depth and richness of meaning involved within internet marketing communications, this chapter discusses the relationship between semiotics and marketing communications. With regards to semiotics, the importance of the sign is discussed, along with the processes of encoding and decoding. As a result of social semiotics not yet being much in evidence at the heart of the activities of many semiotic researchers (Chandler, 2002), the author is provided with a significant research opportunity, and a gap in the literature within which to try to fill. Social semiotics emphasizes the importance of the role of the decoder (consumer interpreting the message) as well as the encoder (company creating the message), hence why this chapter will be discussing the processes of encoding and decoding. With regards to both semiotics and marketing communications, the concept of branding is discussed, followed by seeking to understand brand communications through the following areas associated with brand communications: symbols, colour, packaging, language and images. The chapter ends with a summary and conclusion on the above.

4.2. Semiotics

4.2.1. Semiotics and the Sign

Semiotics is focused on signs, sign systems and codes – the “latent rules that facilitate sign production and interpretive response” (Mick, 1986:197). It is a familiar tool in advertising, services marketing and consumer research (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1986; 1988; McQuarrie and Mick, 1992; Mick and Buhl, 1992). Semiotics is an approach that acknowledges that “reality” is complicated by an inevitable reliance on sign perceptions, interpretations, and uses (Clarke, Kell, Schmidt and Vignali, 1998). A sign can be a word, a sound, or a visual image. Signs can mean anything people agree that it means,

and they can mean different things to different individuals (Moriarty, 1994). Thus, the sign can, in principle, be anything – a gesture, a logo, an advertisement, a slogan, a product, a package, a narrative, a written text, a set of behaviours, or even an entire persuasive campaign (Christensen and Askegaard, 2001). A key point here is that a sign can indeed be anything.

The concept of code is central to semiotics: “The formation and understanding of messages (encoding and decoding) is made possible by codes – a set of rules or an interpretative device known to both transmitter and receiver, which assigns a certain meaning or content to a certain sign” (Dyer, 1982:131). Dyer (1982:135) continues: “Codes are forms or social knowledge which are derived from social practices and beliefs although they are not laid down in any statute. Codes organize our understanding of the world in terms of ‘dominant meaning patterns’, patterns which vary from culture to culture and from time to time, but which we largely take for granted and which are uppermost in our minds when we interpret things or think about them.” Codes are interpretive frameworks, which are used by both producers and interpreters of communications. In creating communications we select and combine signs in relation to the codes with which we are familiar ‘in order to limit... the range of possible meanings they are likely to generate when read by others’ (Turner 1992:17). Codes organize signs into meaningful systems, which correlate signifiers and signifieds (Chandler, 1994). The conventions of codes represent a social dimension in semiotics: A code is a set of practices familiar to users of the medium operating within a broad cultural framework. Indeed, as Stuart Hall puts it, “there is no intelligible discourse without the operation of a code” (Hall 1980:131). A key point here is that the concept of code is indeed central to semiotics because the understanding of messages is made possible by codes, from both encoders, those that create the message, and decoders, those that interpret the message. Encoding and decoding are discussed in detail on the next page.

Conventional signs based on explicit codes, for example, chemical symbols, are designed for easy and unambiguous communication, and there is an explicit procedure

for encoding and decoding. A code is what makes numerous signifiers (e.g. energy burst, intense physical activity and thirst) hang together in individuals' minds and starts each of us extending the list, filling the gaps and using the cultural software we have acquired as members of a culture and consumers of advertising. These are all signifiers held together by the idea of 'refreshment' (Harvey and Evans, 2001). More complicated than explicit codes are systems where communication undoubtedly takes place but where the codes on which the communication depends are difficult to establish and highly ambiguous or open-ended. Precisely because one is dealing with an extremely rich and complicated communicative system, the semiological study of aesthetic codes can be extraordinarily interesting (Culler, 1976:100). Occasionally communications require one to work a little harder - for instance, by pinning down the most appropriate signified for a key signifier, as in jokes based on word play, before one can identify the relevant codes for making sense of the communication as a whole (Chandler, 1994). In this study, the author proposes taking a semiotic approach to fully uncovering the depth and richness of meaning involved within internet marketing communications, and specifically web sites. This is in keeping with Culler (1976:100) who states that the semiological study of aesthetic codes can be very interesting, and this is because one is engaged with an exceedingly rich and complicated communicative system.

4.2.2. Encoding and Decoding

Having established that codes are interpretive frameworks, which are used by both producers (encoders) and interpreters (decoders) of communications, discussion moves on to the concepts on encoding and decoding. As Blonsky (1985) asserts, semiotics is concerned with the process of encoding and decoding of communication and only in this process is meaning constructed. The phrase *Decoding Advertisements* was first used by Judith Williamson as the title of a book published in 1978, and according to Umiker-Sebeok (1987), the phrase has been echoed widely in courses and publications ever since. The essence of Williamson's approach is to unveil through analysis what she calls the 'real' meaning of the words and images of an advertisement, and the 'real world' to

which the 'unreal' images of the advertisements refer (Williamson 1978:47). Beyond Williamson's (1978) claim that advertising creates meaning, Sherry (1985) contends that advertising also discerns and discovers meaning. Cook (1992:64) argues that there is a tendency for some semioticians to represent communications as a simple process of decoding: "Though the decoding approach on occasion yields interesting results, a drawback of the approach is its hasty satisfaction that such equivalences constitute a complete analysis." Marketing is a rich field for semioticians because so much of the success of marketing initiatives lies in the way that consumers decode the messages within a marketing campaign. In an advertising context, Dyer (1982:118) contends that "an advertisement is the parole, the ordered combination of verbal and visual signs into messages and that the langue is the means (codes) which allow the message to function." Voloshinov (1986:21) suggests the social phenomena of the parole, far from being too individual to be an object of theory, is the key to understanding meaning.

Moreover, to create symbolic systems or codes seem to depend on the author and reader sharing a common social experiences and familiarity with symbols and representations (Curran and Casey, 2006). Hall (1993) highlights the importance of active interpretation within signs, in which he suggests an important role for the decoder as well as the encoder. Those involved in communicating may not share common codes and social positions, and so decoding may be different from the encoders' intended meaning – the central paradox of semiotics. Eco (1976) uses the term 'aberrant decoding', as mentioned in the previous chapter, to refer to a text which has been decoded by means of a different code than that used to encode it. Shimp (2003:83) states: "Fundamental to the communication process is the concept of meaning...meaning is determined both by the message source's choice of signs and, just as importantly, by the receiver's unique social-cultural background and mind-set at the time he or she is exposed to a message..." He continues; "...the consumer is actively involved in constructing meaning from marketing communication messages, meaning that may or may not be equivalent to what the communicator intended to convey. The marketing communication goal is, of course, to do everything possible to increase the odds that consumers will

interpret messages exactly as they are intended.” There is a possibility of a mismatch between sign and meaning (Fletcher, 2001). Customers may interpret a brand differently from that intended by the organisation (De Chernatony, 2001:29). The key point being emphasized here is the so called central paradox of semiotics; decoders’ interpretations of a message may be different from encoders’ intentions of a message.

In social life, codes and signs communicate social meanings that present complex problems of interpretative understanding (Manning, 1987:26). Social life is a field of signs organized by other signs about signs that communicate various social relations. “Every ad aims to make the target audience construe it in the way intended” (O’Shaughnessy and O’Shaughnessy, 2004:25). However, in an ‘imperfect’ world, marketing communications rarely communicates perfectly what it is intended to communicate to consumers (Harvey and Evans, 2001). This ties in with the work of Hall (1993), who argues that meaning is derived not from comprehension but from interpretation. The work the reader has to do entails the transference of signification from one sign to another. Accordingly, consumers interpret marketing communications as a principal way to understanding their world and themselves and, in the end; they become the final arbitrators of marketing communications meanings (Barthes, 1985; McCracken, 1986). Dyer (1982) argues that up to ninety percent of the consumers will misinterpret some element of a marketing communications versus its preferred reading, but suggests that this should not necessarily be seen as a problem because it is wrong to assume that all advertisers would wish for only one interpretation of their communications. The key point being emphasized here is again the so called central paradox of semiotics; decoders’ interpretations of a message may be different from encoders’ intentions of a message. As mentioned in the previous chapter, it is only correct to argue that it would indeed be impossible to catalogue all meanings within a message, and as a result, semiotics seeks to locate the many possibilities of meaning (Barthes, 1985:262). Interestingly, Dyer (1982) contends that it is wrong to assume that all advertisers would wish for only one interpretation of their communications.

This section has highlighted the importance of looking at decoders (readers/interpreters) as well as encoders (creators). As Chandler (2002:214) points out in the previous chapter, the turn to social semiotics has been “reflected in an increasing concern with the role of the reader”. The next section reviews the branding literature and understanding brands from a semiotic perspective.

4.3. Understanding Branding

4.3.1. Brand Meaning

With regards to branding, back in 1955, Gardner and Levy postulated that brand success revolved around operationalizing a selected brand meaning and maintaining that meaning over time. The proposition that a “brand” comprises meanings drawn from different sources can be simplified by classifying them into just two; first the brand identity as codified and communicated by the brand originator (encoder), and second the brand meanings drawn from the users or customer environment (decoder) (De Chernatony, 2001). This difference of meaning between brand originator and customer has a number of implications, not least the potential for ‘drift’ between organisationally determined meaning and user perceived meanings (De Chernatony and dall’Olmo Riley, 1998). Again, this key point of the so called central paradox of semiotics is continually being emphasized, with decoders’ interpretations of a message being potentially different from encoders’ intentions of a message. Communicative environments such as the internet accentuate the complexity of brand meanings, and interactions within internet communities emphasize the co-invention of brand interpretations (De Chernatony, 2001). The important point here is that the internet accentuates the complexity of brand meanings. This is particularly imperative for this study given that the author proposes taking a semiotic approach to fully uncovering the depth and richness of meaning involved within *internet* marketing communications, and specifically web sites.

4.3.2. Brand Identity and Associations

From a branding literature perspective, within the brand culture brand identity forms the strategic heart of the brand. Brand identity is the totality of brand associations including name and symbols that must be communicated (Chaffey, Ellis-Chadwick, Johnston and Mayer, 2006:226). Identity is about the ethos, aims and values that present a sense of individuality differentiating a brand (De Chernatony, 2001:36). Brand associations are driven by the brand identity – what the organisation wants the brand to stand for in the customer’s mind. The literature on branding suggests that a key to building strong brands is to develop and implement a brand identity (Aaker, 1996). Brand associations - perceptions, preferences, and choices linked in memory to a brand (Aaker, 1991) - have been shown to “include perceptions of people, places and occasions that are evoked in conjunction with the brand.” A person’s identity serves to provide direction, purpose, and meaning for that person...What are my core values? What do I stand for? How do I want to be perceived? What personality traits do I want to project? What are the important relationships in my life? A brand identity similarly provides direction, purpose and meaning for the brand (Aaker, 1996:68). A key point here is that brand identity can be regarded as similar to person identity, in relation to providing direction, purpose and meaning.

In addition, according to the branding literature, brand identity is how strategists want the brand to be perceived (Aaker, 1996:71). A brand position is the part of the brand identity and value proposition that is to be actively communicated to the target audience and that demonstrates an advantage over competing brands (Aaker, 1996:71). Brand identity is based on a thorough understanding of the company’s customers, competitors, and business environment (Ghodeswar, 2008). The core identity represents the “timeless essence of the brand” (Aaker, 1996:85). A brand’s positioning sets out what the brand is, whom it is for and what it offers (Harris and De Chernatony, 2001). A vivid, meaningful heritage also can sometimes represent the essence of the brand (Aaker, 1996:85). The brand identity needs to provide a value proposition to the customer. A brand’s value

proposition is a statement of the functional, emotional and self-expressive benefits delivered by the brand that provide value to the customer. An effective value proposition should lead to a brand-customer relationship and drive purchase decisions (Aaker, 1996:95). Emotional benefits add richness and depth to the experience of owning and using the brand (Aaker, 1996:97). A brand can provide a self-expressive benefit by providing a way for a person to communicate his or her self-image (Aaker, 1996:99). An important point here emerging from the branding literature, is that brand identity needs to provide a value to customers, be that through functional, emotional and/or self-expressive benefits (Aaker, 1996).

Moreover, the core identity, which is central to both the meaning and success of the brand, contains the associations that are most likely to remain constant as the brand travels to new markets and products (Aaker, 1996:86). The extended brand identity includes elements that provide texture and completeness. It fills in the picture, adding details that help portray what the brand stands for (Aaker, 1996:87). A brand personality does not often become a part of the core identity. However, it can be exactly the right vehicle to add needed texture and completeness by being part of the extended identity. The extended identity provides the strategist with the permission to add useful detail to complete the picture (Aaker, 1996:88). Brand personality will be discussed later in this chapter, but the key point here is that in addition to brand identity, is extended brand identity, which adds details that help to represent what the brand stands for, and brand personality can be a vehicle for this.

This section has highlighted that brand associations are driven by the brand identity – what the organisation wants the brand to stand for in the customer’s mind. As Aaker (1996:25) contends, key to building strong brands is to develop and implement a brand identity. Extended brand identity has also been discussed, again from the branding theorist Aaker (1996), which adds details that help to represent what the brand stands for, in which brand personality can be an effective vehicle for this. The next section discusses brand image.

4.3.3. Brand Image

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the notions of image and identity were receiving growing scholarly and managerial attention. While social critics have pointed out that we live in a society saturated with images (Baudrillard, 1981; Ewen, 1988), scholars within marketing and organization argue that the quest for visibility and credibility in a cluttered and sometimes hostile environment, has made the questions of identity and image salient issues for organizations in most sectors of society (Christensen and Cheney, 1994; Cheney and Christensen, 1999). As we move into the realm of company identity and image, we move into a world of carefully designed and agreed signifiers – in other words, a world intentionally constructed to elicit quite specific responses and reactions. Identities and images, however, are volatile social constructions that, although seemingly objective, base their existence and significance largely on the interpretive capabilities and preferences of their audiences. Thus, in order to understand the complex interplay between identities and images, one needs to balance the prescriptive and predominantly sender-oriented approaches of most managerial writings with a more consistently interpretive perspective (Christensen and Askegaard, 2001). This again highlights the importance of looking at decoders (readers/interpreters) as well as encoders (creators). As Chandler (2002:214) points out earlier in this chapter and in the previous chapter, the turn to social semiotics has been “reflected in an increasing concern with the role of the reader”.

Furthermore, knowledge of the brand image (how customers and others perceive the brand) provides useful and even necessary background information when developing a brand identity (Aaker, 1996:69). According to Chaffey, Ellis-Chadwick, Johnston and Mayer (2006:224), a brand’s success results from being able to sustain added value in the face of competition. Thought needs to be given to the way customers perceive the brand, since their perception (brand image) may be different from the intended projection (brand identity) (De Chernatony, 2001:38-9). As mentioned in the ‘Encoding and Decoding’ section earlier in this chapter, the key point being emphasized here is the

so called central paradox of semiotics; decoders' interpretations of a message (the brand image) may be different from encoders' intentions of a message (the brand identity).

Moreover, a very important component is the message context, or setting, in which the entire transaction takes place. The context in which any message is emitted, transmitted and admitted decisively influences its interpretation, and vice versa: the context of transactions is continually modified by the messages being interpreted; messages, in brief, are always more or less context-sensitive (Sebeok, 1985:453-454). Muller's (2008) research examines how the perception of consistency between brand image and website image affects brand attitude. With the massive development of the internet, most of the brick-and-mortar companies created their own website. Two prevailing strategies emerged: some companies transposed their brand with the corresponding name, image and values to the website and others created a new brand name to exist on the net. As the representation of a brand on the internet is limitless, it is not certain that brand image perceived by website visitors is consistent with their prior brand image (Muller, 2008).

Furthermore, successful brands must offer superior value to consumers and differentiate an offering from those of competitors (Fill, 2002). This is achieved by building a brand image. Brand image is defined by Keller (1993:3) as "perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory". Brand image is how the brand is now perceived (Aaker, 1996:71). This image may appeal to consumers at a functional or symbolic level. Products bought on a functional basis satisfy immediate and practical needs and decisions are therefore based on objective attributes and criteria, whereas symbolic (intangible) brand components satisfy symbolic needs and emotional wants, such as needs for self-expression and social identification, decisions are therefore based on subjective criteria (feelings and attitudes) (Bhat and Reddy, 1998).

At an emotional level a brand name may allow the brand to serve functions in personal identification, social identification and status (symbol of power or social status, reflection of social approval, exclusivity, contribution of emotional experiences or

technical superiority), product aesthetics may also contribute to this emotional appeal (Simms and Trott, 2006). Brand image, which usually includes the product's name, its main physical features and appearance (including the packaging and logo), and its main function(s), is the key to answer the question of how the consumer chooses among alternative brands after information-gathering processes of buyer behaviour (Ataman and Ulengin, 2003). A commonly held conception is that brand managers should strive for consistency in the marketing communication. Erdem and Swait (1998) suggest that brand value is increased by consistent communication of the brand over time. Haynes et al. (1999) emphasize the importance of coordinating all elements in the marketing communication to ensure a consistent brand image that will appeal to customers (Lange and Dahlen, 2003).

Thought needs to be given to the way customers perceive the brand, since their perception (brand image) may be different from the intended projection (brand identity) (De Chernatony, 2001:38-9). In order to understand the complex interplay between identities and images, one needs to balance the prescriptive and predominantly sender-oriented approaches of most managerial writings with a more consistently interpretive perspective (Christensen and Askegaard, 2001). Brand image, which usually includes the product's name, its main physical features and appearance (including the packaging and logo), and its main function(s), is the key to answer the question of how the consumer chooses among alternative brands. Erdem and Swait (1998) suggest that brand value is increased by consistent communication of the brand over time.

The above section have been highlighting the importance of looking at decoders (readers/interpreters) as well as encoders (creators). As Chandler (2002:214) points out earlier in this chapter and in the previous chapter, the turn to social semiotics has been "reflected in an increasing concern with the role of the reader". With regards to reviewing the branding literature and taking into account brand identity and brand image, a greater understanding of the so called central paradox of semiotics has been

emphasized as: decoders' interpretations of a message (the brand image) may be different from encoders' intentions of a message (the brand identity).

4.3.4. Brand Personality

As mentioned previously in this chapter, in addition to brand identity, is extended brand identity, which adds details that help to represent what the brand stands for, and brand personality can be a vehicle for this. Firms have long used brand personality as a way to create a point of differentiation between their products from their competitors' products, and as a way to create brand equity. By consuming a brand with a certain "personality," buyers of this product are able to express themselves (Belk, 1988) or at least some dimensions of themselves. Furthermore, close identification with the personality of a brand also helps influence consumer choice and usage. Brand personality can serve as a unifying factor in selling to global markets. Consequently, in marketing across cultures, many firms create marketing strategies that emphasize a standardized brand personality. Through the use of advertising, packaging, symbols, and other imagery, firms seek to develop a brand personality that is consistent among brand users and non-users (in Foscht, Maloles, Swoboda, Morschett, and Sinha, 2008). In a market that is culturally homogeneous, the creation of a brand personality that is perceived similarly by both users and non-users is quite plausible because the people share similar cultural meanings (in Foscht, Maloles, Swoboda, Morschett, and Sinha, 2008). "Brand culture refers to the cultural dimensions or codes of brands - history, images, myths, art, and theatre - that influence brand meaning in the marketplace" (Schroeder, 2007:20-21).

Moreover, brand personality is a central component of brand identity (Aaker, 1996) and can be defined as "the set of human characteristics connected to a particular brand name" (Aaker, 1997:347). Thus, brand personality takes on an additional function, so to speak, which allows the consumer to bond with a particular brand in the same manner humans bond with other people (Wee, 2004). For existing brands it is helpful to appreciate if there is a chasm between the desired brand personality and what consumers

perceive. Unearthing consumers' perceptions of a brand's personality can be done through qualitative interviews (De Chernatony, 2001:225). Brand personality represents an efficient summary device for consumers, since, through seeing people associated with the brand, they are rapidly able to recognise the values it stands for (De Chernatony, 2001:224). The same vocabulary used to describe a person can be used to describe a brand personality. In particular, a brand can be described by demographics (for example, age, gender, social class, and race), lifestyle (for example, activities, interests, and opinions) or human personality traits (such as extroversion, agreeableness, and dependability) (Aaker, 1996:142). The style elements can be combined to develop a personality for a site. We would describe a site's personality in the same way we can describe people, such as 'fun'. This personality has to be consistent with the needs of the target audience (Chaffey, Ellis-Chadwick, Johnston and Mayer, 2006:325).

The brand's emotional characteristics are represented by the metaphor of personality, which, amongst other sources, evolves from the brand's core values. Personality traits are further developed through associations with the "typical user" imagery, endorsers and consumers' contacts with the company's employees (Aaker, 1997). Consumer researchers suggest that numerous benefits may accrue to brands with strong, positive brand personalities. A favourable brand personality is thought to increase consumer preference and usage, increase emotions in consumers, increase levels of trust and loyalty, encourage active processing on the part of the consumer, and provide a basis for product differentiation (Freling and Forbes, 2005).

Furthermore, the interpretation of the brand has given rise to a considerable amount of research into brands as symbolic devices with personalities that users welcome. When choosing between competing brands customers assess the fit between the personalities of competing brands and the personality they wish to project. De Chernatony (2001) contends that according to the situation they are in, this may be: a) the self they believe they are (for example, the brands of clothing selected by a manager for daily wear in the office); b) the self they desire to be (for example, the brand of suit worn by a young

graduate going for interviews immediately after completing their degree); c) the situational self (for example, the brands of clothing worn by a young man who is to meet for the first time the parents of his fiancée). When seeking to communicate the emotional values of the brand therefore, it is important to understand the emotional role potential customers expect of the brand (De Chernatony, 2001:33).

According to Elliott and Leonard (2004), self-identity may be influenced by marketing communications, allowing consumers to develop an ideal self-image. Douglas, Field and Tarpey (1967) contended that self-image is one's most valuable possession, and one's actual self-image is less favourable than one's ideal self-image (Alpert and Kamins, 1995; Niedrich and Swain, 2003). Heath and Scott (1998) claim that the image individuals' associate with themselves frequently dictates specific purchase behaviour patterns. The Image Congruence Hypothesis (Graeff, 1996), suggests that consumers should have favourable attitudes and purchase intentions towards products perceived to be congruent with their ideal self-image. As Williamson (1978) argued, it is therefore crucial for advertisements to enter individuals, and exist inside rather than outside their self-image: in fact, to create it. The role of product images has become quite apparent; they can hold the promise of bridging the distance between the consumer's actual and ideal self-image (Piacentini and Mailer, 2004). McCracken (1988) regards products as instances of displaced meaning: if only I could buy that car I would be what I would ideally like to be. The car becomes the fantasy bridging the actual and the ideal. Yet, as McCracken (1988) argues, once the fantasy built around the product has accepted the test of reality, its value to the ego-ideal decreases, and a new fantasy already starts to develop around some new product.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, decoders' interpretations of a message (the brand image) may be different from encoders' intentions of a message (the brand identity). Also previously mentioned was the concept of extended brand identity, which adds details that help to represent what the brand stands for, and brand personality can be a vehicle for this. The brand's emotional characteristics are represented by the metaphor

of personality, which, amongst other sources, evolves from the brand's core values. With brand personality established as an effective vehicle to help represent what the brand stands for, the above section highlighted that unearthing consumers' perceptions of a brand's personality, can be done through qualitative interviews (De Chernatony, 2001:225). As a result, in the following Methodology chapter, the author proposes conducting qualitative depth interviews with both decoders and encoders.

4.4. Understanding Brand Communications

When seeking to understand brand communications, the following areas associated with brand communications can be discussed and considered: symbols, colour, packaging, language and images. This section commences with the discussion and consideration of symbols.

4.4.1. Symbols

Products have a significance that goes beyond their functional utility. This significance stems from the ability of products to communicate meaning (Hirschman, 1981; McCracken, 1986). Products are symbols by which people convey something about themselves to themselves and to others (Holman, 1981; Solomon, 1983). This symbolic meaning is known to influence consumer preference (Govers and Schoormans, 2005). A strong symbol can provide cohesion and structure to an identity and make it much easier to gain recognition and recall. Its presence can be a key ingredient of brand development and its absence can be a substantial handicap. Elevating symbols to the status of being part of the identity reflects their potential power. Symbols involving visual imagery can be memorable and powerful (Aaker, 1996:84). A symbol can be a powerful influence on brand personality because it can be controlled and can have extremely strong associations (Aaker, 1996:148). In keeping with alcoholic drink brands and the premium product category whisky, the Glenfiddich brand has become synonymous with its stag

symbol, which remains a central plank of its marketing strategy (Campaign, 12 May 2006).

Dowling (1994) describes corporate identity as referring to the symbols an organization uses to identify itself to individuals. According to Bernstein (1986), a symbol can become a type of shorthand for the personality of the company and its values. Marketing communications excel in appropriating or borrowing cultural codes and styles (Schroeder, 2007), and semiotic research can help to keep marketers' communications fresh and culturally authentic (Lawes, 2002). For instance, the whisky brand Whyte & Mackay's redesign borrows cultural codes with the intention of emulating the work of Scottish architect, artist and designer Charles Rennie Mackintosh.

Moreover, symbol usage is widespread in marketing communications. A symbol relation is formed when an object such as a brand becomes a symbol of something else (Shimp, 2003). Brand positioning in terms of symbolic needs, attempts to associate brand use with a desired self-image. According to McGregor (1995), each society differs in the meanings and symbols that apply, and it has proved rather difficult to transplant advertisements from one culture to another. As Smith and Taylor (2002) state, if brands are not aware of the subtle meanings of symbols, then they would be liable to communicate the wrong message. "Symbols have the power to affect the way people feel" (Olins, 1989:71). Symbols are powerful tools for communication (Feucht, 1989). Sokolow (1971) claims that graphic symbols are unique, because they can evoke intense feelings and emotions which may result in powerful responses. The two major requisites of a good corporate symbol are for it to appeal on an emotional level and be practical to apply. Thayer, commenting on the receiver end of the transmission, noted that; "successful corporate symbols will be those which effectively evoke the positive and powerful responses already present in the mind of the subject and those which were learnt at a much earlier stage of their cultural education" (1988:442). The closer the symbol gets to an individual's identity, or most deep rooted beliefs, the more passionately he or she will identify with and respond to it.

It has been established in this chapter that brand personality is an effective vehicle to help represent what the brand stands for, and consumers' perceptions of a brand's personality can be unearthed through qualitative interviews (De Chernatony, 2001:225). The section above highlights that a symbol can be a powerful influence on brand personality because it can be controlled and can have extremely strong associations (Aaker, 1996:148). Symbol usage is widespread in marketing communications, and they have the power to affect the way consumers feel (Olins, 1989). The next section discusses colour.

4.4.2. Colour

Colour is one of the many marketing tools that global managers use to create, maintain and modify brand images in customers' minds (Madden, Hewett and Roth, 2000). The meanings associated with different colours are important to marketers because the tools used to communicate brand image are mechanisms of meaning transfer (McCracken, 1988). When individuals' observe colour, they read it rather than just absorb it (Dyer, 1982), and this evaluation goes far beyond the eye; it involves the brain and the human psyche. The use of colour is not significant in itself; it depends upon the significance of the connotations it makes. Colour is an expressive tool (Jenkins, 1991), and can communicate meaningful associations (Franzen, 1994). Shimp (1991) contends that associative learning can be used to explain consumers' responses to colours. In each culture, powerful associations can be learned by individuals, based on connections made between colours and their meanings. In the West, green is associated with hopefulness, white with purity and black with mourning (Kreitler and Kreitler, 1972). According to Madden, Hewett and Roth (2000), colour meanings and preferences are not consistent across cultures.

Moreover, the art of using colour in any promotional activity is to exploit what appeals to target audiences. As with many other food and drink sectors, the emphasis in the

Scotch whisky sector is on moving upmarket. Whyte & Mackay blended whisky re-launched its brand to give it a more upmarket feel. Whyte & Mackay's blue coloured packaging has been replaced by a metallic red-and-black look, while its prestige range uses metallic silver and gold cartons. Lawes (2002) claims that there is a need for ongoing semiotic research because signs change over time, and it is important to know what the language of a particular category or sector currently is so that one can avoid using lapsed or outdated signs in communications, and make use of the most up-to-date or emergent ones.

To this day, cool colours, such as blue, green and violet are considered calming; and warm colours, such as red, orange and yellow are considered arousing (Bellizzi, Crowley and Hasty, 1983; Grossman and Wisenblit, 1999). Warm colours generate more arousal and attention than cool colours (Schaie and Heiss, 1964), and cool colours elicit greater relaxation and pleasure than warm colours (Jacobs and Seuss, 1975). Lee and Barnes (1990) claim that men prefer the colour blue and women prefer red, and younger generations prefer bright colours, whereas older generations prefer calm and subtle colours. The meanings associated with different colours are important to marketers (McCracken, 1988). Wexner (1954:434) notes that "red is more often associated with exciting-stimulating, orange with distressed-disturbed-upset, blue with tender-soothing, purple with dignified-stately, yellow with cheerful-jovial-joyful, and black with powerful-strong-masterful." Madden, Hewett and Roth (2000) found that the colours black and red received high liking ratings. Birren (1973) associates the colour blue with intelligence, sociability and narcissism. Madden, Hewett and Roth (2000) associate the colour blue with wealth, trust and security, whereas grey is associated with strength, exclusivity and success, and orange denotes cheapness.

Furthermore, signs change their meaning depending on what other signs you team them with. For instance, purple is traditionally about royalty, especially when it is teamed with gold. Today, this traditional meaning of purple is still used to try and attach the impression of quality to quite everyday products, such as Cadbury's. However, when

purple is used alongside other colours such as orange or shocking pink its meaning changes and it starts to be about having fun in a wacky kind of way. So there is a need for ongoing semiotic research because when one mixes and matches signs in communications, very specific meanings are produced. Through one's communications one can help to maintain the conventionally accepted meanings of a sign, help it to become lapsed or even push it in the direction of meaning something new (Lawes, 2002). Colour is not an easy matter however. If one uses the term 'colour' to mean the pigmentation of substances in the environment, one has not said anything about our chromatic perception. The chromatic effect depends on many factors: the nature of surfaces, light, contrast between objects, previous knowledge, and so on (Eco, 1985:157). For instance, there is a difference between the red of blood, the red of purple, the red of saffron and the red of gold (Eco, 1985:158).

This section has highlighted that the art of using colour in any promotional activity is to exploit what appeals to target audiences. Colour is an expressive tool (Jenkins, 1991), and can communicate meaningful associations (Franzen, 1994). The use of colour is not significant in itself; it depends upon the significance of the connotations it makes. This is in keeping with a key point within the literature on social semiotics in the previous chapter, in which Eco (1976) emphasizes the possibilities that connotation allows for the generation of multiple meanings. Also in the previous chapter Barthes (1985) contends that there are almost always several interpretations possible, but argues that this is not only between one reader and the next, but sometimes within the same reader. Barthes (1985:262) claims that semiotics seeks to locate the many possibilities of meaning, and as a result, it could be impossible to catalogue all meaningful associations within a particular colour sign. The next section discusses packaging.

4.4.3. Packaging

The marketing literature is rich with illustrations that people buy products not only for the functional utility they provide, but also the symbolic meaning they possess (Levy,

1959; Solomon, 1983; McCracken, 1986; Belk, 1988; Dittmar, 1992). To date, the symbolic literature in the marketing field has focused primarily on advertising as the major instrument of cultural meaning creation and transfer for brands and consumers (McCracken 1986; Mick and Buhl 1992). One marketing element that has been largely overlooked in the theoretical construction and communication of brand symbolism and the self, is product packaging. Packaging acts not only as a communication vehicle for transmitting symbolism, but is important for its own symbolic contribution to the total understanding of the corporation or brand (Rapheal and Olsson, 1978). Many marketers find the results of semiotic analysis insightful, and there is an increased demand for semiotic analysis in research projects on new packaging and brand names and logos, and in the evaluation of advertising creative (Marketing Magazine, 1 October 2001).

The success and endorsement from blue-chip companies has led to semiotics gaining widespread acceptance as a research method for marketers (Marketing Week, 27 September 2001). Commercially applied semiotics is established as a powerful methodology for research and for developing brand communications (Maggio-Muller and Evans, 2008). For instance, since 2001 the UK-based marketing semiotics agency Space Doctors (Evans) has worked with Procter & Gamble (Maggio-Muller) to evolve a substantial semiotic capability within the organization (Maggio-Muller and Evans, 2008). In the context of Procter & Gamble's rational and quantitative company culture, however, semiotics did feel as if it might appear speculative and 'fluffy' in terms of deliverables. However, the case study on the Guinness Competitive Advertising Decoding Kit presented at the Market Research Society's Research 2001 Conference (Harvey and Evans, 2001), in contrast, provided a tangible example of how to apply the thinking with concrete deliverables and measurable results (Maggio-Muller and Evans, 2008). Harvey and Evans' (2001) paper outlines a project in which Guinness and a specialist team from Added Value used semiotics to develop a friendly analytical tool now used by Guinness worldwide to gain a new depth of insight into the competitive environment.

Moreover, packaging communicates brand personality via multiple structural and visual elements, including brand logos (Underwood, 2003). Logos are important company assets, in which firms spend enormous amounts of time and money promoting (Rubel, 1994). The word logo can refer to a variety of graphic and typeface elements. Semiotics views logos as part of the sign system a company uses to communicate itself to internal and external audiences (Zakia and Nadin, 1987). Corporate identity literature treats logos as a company's signature on its materials (Snyder, 1993). Logos should be recognizable, familiar, elicit a consensually held meaning in the target market, and evoke positive affect (Cohen, 1986; Robertson, 1989; Vartorella, 1990). Logos should speed recognition of a company or brand (Peter, 1989). The rationale is that pictures are perceived faster than words (Edell and Staelin, 1983). For instance, a red logo featuring two lions, representing the Lion Rampant symbol of Scotland and the MacGregor/Whyte Clan, was re-introduced by the whisky brand Whyte & Mackay (Marketing, 28 June 2006).

In addition, the package resides in the home, potentially becoming an intimate part of the consumer's life; a phenomenon that represents a type of lived experience between consumer and brand (Lindsay, 1997). For instance, a container modelled on a cigar tube was the innovative new packaging for Chivas Regal 12 year old whisky, to help give Chivas Regal the edge in the market battle with rival Diageo's Johnnie Walker Black Label. The silver substrate, a key part of the Chivas Regal brand identity, is used in a contemporary way yet still reflects the nobility and masculinity at the heart of the brand (Brandrepublic.com, 4 October 2006). McCracken (1986), discussing how marketers use signs, suggests that they begin by selecting key meanings residing in cultural categories, such as gender, and cultural principles, such as manliness. They then transfer these meanings to consumer goods, through their advertisements and brands, until consumers' appropriate these meanings into their lives. Marketing communications, directly or indirectly, use semiotics to invest products with meaning for a culture whose dominant focus is consumption.

Furthermore, package design is generally referred to as having two components, graphics and structure (Hine, 1995). Both graphic (colour, typeface, logos) and structural elements (shape, size, materials) have the capacity to connote symbolism, as these attributes often share a distinctive public meaning in a culture. For example, graphics include name styles. Names are the critical, core sign of the brand; they constitute the basis for the corporate communications programme and for consumers' awareness and images (Aaker, 1991). A brand name is associated with a set of attributes and psychological associations which give a brand its meaning (Keller, 1998). Defining a brand as "a name, term, symbol, design or a combination of them" implies that the name forms the essence of the brand concept (Aaker, 1991:187). The name is a critical, core sign of the brand, the "basis for awareness and communications effort" (Aaker, 1991:187). Structural elements include the shape of products, which can reflect a "great deal about the nature and personality of a product" (Young, 1996).

The shape of a package represents a critical element for the creation of imagery and identity. According to Marketing (18 March 2008), Scotch whisky brand Grant's overhauled its iconic triangle-based bottle and introduced clearer packaging to improve differentiation between its variants. Grant's, which has used a tri-sided bottle since 1957, made the shape more pronounced and put a plinth at the base in a bid to make the bottle more 'masculine'. It has also restyled the brand's watermark, crest and owner's signature. Distiller William Grant & Sons claims the packaging will increase the brand's presence in emerging markets such as Russia without alienating consumers in established markets. Also, Diageo redesigned the bottle and labelling for Bell's whisky to counteract competition from rivals Grant's, The Famous Grouse and Teacher's. The aim of Bell's redesign was to emphasize the time and care involved in blending the Scotch whisky. The revamped bottle shape was intended to broaden the appeal of the drink beyond its traditional older, male market (Marketing, 22 March 2006).

In addition, nostalgia serves as a potent weapon for brand differentiation, especially among consumer nondurables. Social experts suggest that the appeal of nostalgia stems

from a longing for a return to simpler times when product quality and craftsmanship were highly regarded and seemingly more prevalent (Cheskin Research, 1998). Consumers also have a tendency to equate longevity with quality (Naughton and Vlastic, 1998). For instance, the creative brand redesign for Highland Park whisky includes the new 'H' emblem, prominently highlighted on the pack and bottle, to resemble authenticity and integrity dating back to the Orkney's 12th century Viking ancestry (MarketWire.com, 6 November 2006). The redesign is part of a larger initiative by Highland Park's parent company, The Edrington Group, which invested £18 million in a global plan to double annual sales over the next five years and become one of the world's top 10 malts (MarketWire.com, 6 November 2006). The redesign forms part of a complete rebirth of its overall identity across all communications, including the internet, and more specifically its web site. Therefore, brand symbolism and packaging as components of the brand, have extended their influence into the online environment, and the online environment also covers the remaining three components of the brand: colour, language and images.

This section highlights that packaging is also a consideration because the marketing literature is rich with illustrations that people buy products not only for the functional utility they provide, but also the symbolic meaning they possess (Levy, 1959; Solomon, 1983; McCracken, 1986; Belk, 1988; Dittmar, 1992). Additionally, packaging communicates brand personality via multiple structural and visual elements, including brand logos (Underwood, 2003). A key point emerging from this section is that brand symbols and packaging have extended their influence into the online environment. This is also true for the concepts of colour, language and images. This is significant given that this study is taking a semiotic approach to internet marketing communications, and specifically web sites. The next section discusses the use of language.

4.4.4. Language

According to Crystal (1971), linguistics is the scientific study of language. Language is a complicated phenomenon that can be studied from many viewpoints. Language is a system of signs used as an instrument of communication and for the expression of thought. As such, language is a social phenomenon of a special sort, which Shaumyan (1987) calls a semiotic phenomenon. A semiotic approach is crucial for comprehending the essence of language. Language as a network of social conventions is what linguistics is all about (Shaumyan, 1987). There is a long tradition of thought which has been based on the idea that language and reality are closely intertwined. Sless (1986) stresses that in its strongest form, this hypothesis asserts that reality is determined by language; one understands the world through the language one learns. According to Shaumyan (1987:322): “The founders of modern semiotics and linguistics Charles Sanders Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure clearly characterized the unique ontological status of language as a social phenomenon.”

Moreover, Fiske (1990) contends that a paradigm is a set of signs from which the one to be used is chosen, and a syntagm is the message into which the chosen signs are combined. In language the vocabulary is the paradigm, and a sentence is a syntagm. Dyer (1982) understands syntagms differently and argues that a piece of advertising can be taken to be a syntagm which must then be further broken down into individual signs for analysis. The units of human language are comprised of a limited set of sounds called phonemes, and these comprise an unlimited set of words and sentences, which are put together according to a set of simple rules called grammar. From simple units we derive more complex units that are applied to new rules to form more complex structures (themes, characters, stories, genres, style, etc.). The human mind organizes this structure into cognitive understanding. Linguistic signs are words and phrases (Lawes, 2002). Within larger linguistic units such as sentences, meanings are created by choices and relationships of signs. A sentence is itself thus a complex signifier for a complex signified, and may be treated as a complex sign (Cook, 1992). We have moved back into

a period where words have become altogether more important, more central. Also, the reason that words have come back into fashion and moved to the top of the corporate agenda is the development of the internet and the birth of the e-generation (Morris, 2000:55-56).

Furthermore, chosen vocabulary not only describes things, it brings ideas into the reader's mind by communicating feelings and associations. Dyer (1982) claims that adverbs and adjectives are trigger words that can stimulate envy, dreams and desires by evoking looks without misrepresenting the product. For example, in 2006, Glenfiddich invested £1 million on a festive marketing assault in a bid to secure a bigger share of seasonal malt whisky sales. The UK-wide campaign aimed to capitalize on the brand's credentials as the whisky that was first distilled on Christmas Day 1887, and includes the strapline "inspiring great conversation since Christmas Day 1887" (The Herald, 1 November 2006). The campaign was built on previous print advertisements, launched at Christmas 2005, which focused on "inspiring great conversation" with the core objective of getting Britain talking (Promotions and Incentives, 15 May 2006).

In addition, the primary aim of language used in marketing communications is to attract the audience's attention and dispose them favourably towards the product. Dibb, Simkin, Pride and Ferrell (1994) contend that advertisers should use language that is attractive and meaningful to the target audience. For instance, the creative work for the Glenmorangie campaign was built on previous campaigns that were inspired by the Gaelic translation of the word glenmorangie: 'Glen of Tranquillity.' Consumers were challenged to find their own sense of tranquillity. Marketers that address the target audience as individuals use language that is meaningful to the audience (Ogilvy, 1983). Williamson (1978) claims that the word "you" in advertisements strikes individuals separately and they take it to mean them personally. The multiplicity of meanings is still centred on the individual, and links the individual so closely with the product that identity begins to merge with the product. One of the most obvious ways in which individuals are invited to enter an advertisement is by filling an absence.

Moreover, according to Goddard (1998:11): “It is not difficult to see why advertisers should want to make their texts capture our attention. The whole aim of the copy writers is to get us to register their communication either for purposes of immediate action or to make us more favourably disposed in general terms to the advertised product or service.” However, Goddard (1998:11) continues: “But increasingly, written marketing communications have to compete with each other and with all sorts of other texts in our richly literate culture. So copywriters have to find ways to shout at us from the page.” According to Langholz-Leymore (1987:324), each marketer “hunts for the message, the unbeatable message, the memorable message.”

Marketing communications language can have an effect on target audiences by being colourful and imaginative, and this sometimes involves stretching or breaking the rules or conventions of ‘normal’ language (Dyer, 1982). The unorthodox use of language is sometimes called figurative language. “Figurative language is rhetorical language in that it tries to create effects by breaking or exploiting language rules” (Dyer, 1982:152). According to Dyer (1982:139): “Marketing communications language is of course loaded language...Copy-writers are well known for playing with words and manipulating or distorting their everyday meanings; they break the rules of language for effect, use words out of context and even make up new ones.” Dyer (1982:140) continues: “Words not only describe things...they communicate feelings, associations and attitudes – they bring ideas to our minds.” Copywriting for the internet is an evolving art form, but many of the rules for ‘good’ copywriting are as for any media.

In addition, the colourful and imaginative language used in marketing communications can encourage feeling through fantasy and dreaming, persuading people to think in terms of escape from the real world (Dyer, 1982). Individuals are, as Campbell (2002) points out, willing and ready to switch at any moment from dealing with the real world to participating in make-believe ones. Dyer (1982) claims that the appeals associated with dreaming and fantasy can result in the suspension of rational judgement in favour of

indulgent instincts. Dyer (1982) discusses how marketing communications should not be considered in the same way as other sign systems and argues that marketing communications language is deliberately loaded language, that is semiotically thick and so requires an understanding of the distinct ways in which advertisers use language and consumers interpret the meaning of marketing communications.

Stern (1992) noted that in light of legal precedent, the crafty advertiser might well decide to avoid direct claims altogether and instead focus on figurative statements and the like. Hence, metaphors and indirect claims more generally might recommend themselves to advertisers who wish consumers to draw certain conclusions, but who dare not make such claims flat out (Phillips and McQuarrie, 2003). A tightening regulatory environment over time may have driven advertisers toward indirect persuasion attempts to escape the critical scrutiny of both regulators and consumers. Metaphors represent a type of indirect claim because they make claims in a figurative way rather than in a literal way-the marketing communications message is not stated outright but only implied (Mothersbaugh, Huhmann, and Franke, 2002).

There are ways of exploiting language to create particular effects and enlarge it as a means of expression. A metaphor exploits similarity and difference simultaneously and works paradigmatically for imaginative or surrealistic effects. “Wash the big city out of your hair” is an example of a metaphor, where a word acceptable in one context is transferred to another context. Washing the city out of one’s hair is a bizarre proposition unless one interprets the phrase in a figurative, non-literal way. Interpreted figuratively, this metaphor suggests an effective association. Further ways of exploiting language include alliteration, where the same letter or sound is present, usually at the beginning of several words, such as “Guinness is good for you”. Assonance is where there is similarity of vowel sounds, such as “Born to Perform”. Onomatopoeia is where the sound of a word resembles that to which it refers, such as “They’re Grrreat”. Rhythm is where there is a regular pattern of beats, sounds or movements, such as “It’s the air in

your Aero that makes you go O". Repeated use of the above can aid the target audience's memory by promoting recall, and causes sentences to be reinforced aurally.

The rhetorical figure of metaphor, specifically, invites a comparison of two objects by suggesting that one object is like another, even though they come from different domains. To resolve a marketing communications metaphor, consumers must draw inferences that find similarities between the two objects. Consumers will first search for a simple inference that associates the two objects; if no simple inference can be found, consumers will entertain multiple alternatives (Sawyer and Howard, 1991). According to Sperber and Wilson (1986), it is this openness to multiple alternative interpretations, or weak implicatures that may confer a persuasive advantage on indirect claims presented through metaphor. Moreover, puns surprise and entertain, expressing multiple meanings with a single word or phrase, and these qualities may explain why puns and wordplay regularly appear in marketing communications. In fact, the use of wordplay in marketing communications dates back many years, and literary critics have long discussed its character and speculated on its impact (Sheldon, 1956; Kirshner, 1970). However, despite its regular occurrence and uncertainty about its impact, consumer researchers have yet to investigate wordplay in any concerted manner (McQuarrie and Mick, 1992).

Furthermore, Goddard (1998) emphasizes that language can suggest particular qualities as a result of how it appears: writing is a form of image making too. Westerners read from left to right and then continue along each line, working down the page, and the fonts and colours chosen for marketing communications texts can elicit different responses from people (Miner, 1992). Certain fonts can make the text appear elegant or encourage easier readability. The term paralanguage refers to meaningful behaviour, which accompanies language but does not carry it, such as the way text is displayed. The typeface of the text is the equivalent of human body language. Paralanguage has been neglected in twentieth-century linguistics, largely because of the influence of semiotics. Cook (1992) states that many linguists argue that paralanguage is of no concern to linguistics, because language is best understood when isolated from such distracting

phenomena. This is an odd view, as language never occurs without paralanguage. The two constantly interact and communicative competence involves using both together. As Cook (1992) stressed, marketing communications exploits the paralanguage of writing, and an analysis of marketing communications would not get far if linguistics excluded paralanguage.

Colour and marketing communications research suggests that background colour effects are qualified by the contrast between the background colour and the colour of the text (Meyers-Levy and Peracchio, 1995). Several studies indicate that increased contrast between the text and background results in increased readability (Bruce and Foster, 1982; Wang, Fang, and Chen, 2003). A phenomenon associated with successive contrast is the coloured after-image. If one's eye focuses on dark colours, a sudden brightly lighted body copy will appear more blazing (Gerritsen, 1975).

Moreover, although most signs have both iconic, indexical and symbolic qualities, language is mainly symbolic, that is, related to its object through conventions or, as Peirce puts it "by virtue of a law, usually an association of general ideas which operates to cause the symbol to be interpreted as referring to that object" (Peirce, 1897-1910/1985:8). In a dynamic society such associations are constantly changing, not least those associations related to corporate symbols and communications (Christensen and Askegaard, 2001). Symbols are not often, however, sufficient on their own: "In some circumstances, visual messages of a graphical kind can stand alone and are superior to the written word in communicating information...However, in most cases a combination of the graphic and printed message is needed" (Breckon et al., 1987:1) in order to 'anchor' the desired meaning.

In an increasingly visual age, an important contribution of semiotics from Barthes (1977) onwards has been a concern with imagistic as well as linguistic signs, particularly in the context of marketing communications. This is important because research in cognitive psychology provides substantial evidence that in a wide variety of memory

tasks pictures are remembered better than words. Though less plentiful, research in a consumer context confirms this finding (Houston, Childers and Heckler, 1987). Semioticians suggest that marketing communication messages presented in pictures are more 'open' to multiple interpretations than similar messages presented in words (Eco, 1976). As O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy (2004:33) contend, "Pictures can indeed be more persuasive than a thousand words." Several researchers contend that the openness or ambiguity of pictures in marketing communications is what makes them so persuasive.

This section has highlighted that language is a complicated phenomenon that can be studied from many viewpoints. Language is a system of signs used as an instrument of communication and for the expression of thought. As such, language is a social phenomenon of a special sort, which Shaumyan (1987) calls a semiotic phenomenon. As a result, language appears to be an important consideration within this research because this study is taking a semiotic approach to internet marketing communications, and more specifically web sites. The significance here is that as Morris (2000:55-56) contends, words have come back into fashion and moved to the top of the corporate agenda because of the development of the internet and the 'birth' of the e-generation (Morris, 2000:55-56). As the closing sentence in the paragraph above alludes to, the following section discusses images.

4.4.5. Images

In today's highly competitive environment, visual imagery is very important (Arnold, 1992). Marketing communications can encourage feeling through fantasy and dreaming, persuading individuals to think in terms of escape from the real world (Dyer, 1982). According to Boorstin (1963), marketing communications encourage extravagant expectations because they are more dramatic and vivid than the reality. Individuals are, as Campbell (2002) points out, willing and ready to switch at any moment from dealing with the real world to participating in make-believe ones. Whalen (1984) stresses that if

marketers eliminate the fantasy element from their marketing communications, then such marketing communications are bound to fail. People can rarely realise their fantasies concretely and as a result, they express them symbolically through purchases (Settle and Alreck, 1987). Belk and Costa (1998) describe marketing communications experiences as a “blending of fantasy and reality.” Dyer (1982) states that the utopian imagery of marketing communications may encourage passivity. For instance, LVMH repositioned Glenmorangie as a luxury brand with a responsive press and outdoor campaign in 2006. The advertisements featured photographs of diverse and exotic locations, such as the ski slopes of the French Alps and caves in Oman (Precision Marketing, 21 September 2006).

In addition, historical conventions shape communication. This does not imply that all consumers read images in the same way, rather that each image carries with it a historical and cultural genealogy that helps us understand how it produces, reflects and initiates meaning (Schroeder, 2007:22). Semiotics has been called upon to help companies understand cultural contexts better, and find ways to create a buzz around their products. For instance, an example of a semiotics-driven campaign is the series of ads for Pot Noodle, which show the fast-food snack as a sinful indulgence and a lapse of taste. Pot Noodle was difficult to justify on a nutritional basis, so semioticians turned the idea on its head. Instead of trying to insist that Pot Noodle had any health benefits, the campaign said exactly the opposite. Pot Noodle would never be healthy or upmarket - but it would always be the secret vice that you would return to, time and again (Financial Times, 6 April 2004).

Moreover, Dyer (1982:82) contends: “We live in a world of spectacular and exciting images.” According to Boorstin (1963), marketing communications encourage extravagant expectations because they are more dramatic and vivid than the reality – reality cannot match up to the image. As Dyer (1982:82) contends: “Marketing communications present us with images and then make them seem true. As a result they befuddle our experience and mystify our perceptions and experiences of the real world

by offering spectacular illusions which ultimately do not satisfy.” According to Dyer (1982), although people usually think of images, particularly photographs, as life-like and thus real, they should be aware that the meaning of an image is not ‘transparent,’ but like other aspects of marketing communications constructed and manipulated.

In addition, many battles of the brands take place within the visual domain. As previously discussed in chapter two, Internet Marketing Communications, web design has brought visual issues into the mainstream of strategic thinking, and prompted research and thinking about perception and preference of visual information (Schroeder, 2007). From the consumer’s perspective, visual experiences dominate the internet, as they navigate through a computer-mediated environment almost entirely dependent upon their sense of sight (Schroeder, 2007). Marketing communications images, brand images, corporate images and web sites all depend upon compelling visual rhetoric (Schroeder, 2007).

Strong visual imagery used effectively is a powerful tool (Marketing Week, 19 August 2004), and objects and images can unconsciously become linked in the reader’s mind (Williamson, 1978). Barthes (1985) discussed a paradox in which objects that always have a function, in reality, function as a vehicle of meaning. Elliott (1993) claims that object meanings are free-floating as each individual may ascribe the meanings that they desire to the objects. Williamson (1978) argued that an object in marketing communications ‘stands for’ an image or feeling; then the product ‘replaces’ the object and appropriates the meaning of that image or feeling. Thus, the object invokes the idea of an image or feeling and uses this as a sign which points to the product. As La Barbera, Weingard and Yorkston (1998) express, objects may go from representing a feeling, to generating or being that feeling.

This section has highlighted that in today’s highly competitive environment, visual imagery is very important (Arnold, 1992). However, Dyer (1982) argues that although people usually think of images, particularly photographs, as life-like and thus real, they

should be aware that the meaning of an image is not 'transparent,' but like other aspects of marketing communications constructed and manipulated. This section has also emphasized that web design has brought visual issues into the mainstream of strategic thinking, and prompted research and thinking about perception and preference of visual information (Schroeder, 2007). As similarly stated at the end of the 'Language' section, image also appears to be an important consideration within this research because this study is taking a semiotic approach to internet marketing communications, and more specifically web sites. As Schroeder (2007) states, marketing communications images, brand images, corporate images and web sites all depend upon compelling visual rhetoric.

4.5. Summary and Conclusion

This chapter discussed the relationship between semiotics and marketing communications. With regards to semiotics, the importance of the sign was discussed, along with the processes of encoding and decoding. Social semiotics emphasizes the importance of the role of the decoder (consumer interpreting the message) as well as the encoder (company creating the message). With regards to both semiotics and marketing communications, the concept of branding was discussed, followed by seeking to understand brand communications through the following areas associated with brand communications: symbols, colour, packaging, language and images. The literature highlighted that communicative or rich environments such as the internet accentuate the complexity of brand meanings (De Chernatony, 2001). Also highlighted was that decoders' interpretations of a message (the brand image) may be different from encoders' intentions of a message (the brand identity). The concept of extended brand identity was discussed, which adds details that help to represent what the brand stands for. With brand personality established as an effective vehicle to help represent what the brand stands for, the chapter highlighted that unearthing consumers' perceptions of a brand's personality, can be done through qualitative interviews (De Chernatony,

2001:225). As a result, researching the use of qualitative interviews in the following Methodology chapter was proposed as a viable consideration.

When seeking to understand brand communications, the following areas associated with brand communications were discussed and considered: symbols, colour, packaging, language and images. The literature showed that symbol usage is widespread in marketing communications, and they have the power to affect the way consumers feel (Olins, 1989). The literature on colour showed that the use of it depends upon the significance of the connotations it makes. This is in keeping with a key point within the literature on social semiotics in the previous chapter, in which Eco (1976) emphasizes the possibilities that connotation allows for the generation of multiple meanings. Similarly, Barthes (1985:262) claims that semiotics seeks to locate the many possibilities of meaning, and as a result, it could be impossible to catalogue all meaningful associations within a particular sign, such as colour. Moreover, a key point emerging from this chapter is that brand symbols, colour, packaging, language and images have extended their influence into the online environment. This is significant given that this study is taking a semiotic approach to internet marketing communications, and specifically web sites. This chapter emphasized that web design has brought visual issues into the mainstream of strategic thinking, and that marketing communications images, brand images, corporate images and web sites all depend upon compelling visual rhetoric (Schroeder, 2007).

The next chapter reviews the methodology behind this study, including a discussion on the case study approach.

5. Methodology

5.1. Introduction

The previous chapter discussed semiotics and marketing communications. With regards to semiotics, the importance of the sign was discussed, along with the processes of encoding and decoding. Social semiotics emphasized the importance of the role of the decoder (consumer interpreting the message) as well as the encoder (company/practitioner creating the message). A key point emerging from chapter four, 'Semiotics and Marketing Communications,' was that brand symbols, colour, packaging, language and images have extended their influence into the online environment. Additionally, the literature highlighted that communicative and rich environments such as the internet accentuate the complexity of brand meanings (De Chernatony, 2001). It was also argued that it would indeed be impossible to catalogue all meanings within a brand message, and as a result, semiotics seeks to locate the many possibilities of meaning (Barthes, 1985:262). Therefore delving deeper into the exploration of meaning production, and uncovering the depth and richness of the meanings involved. The methodological choices of this study are now outlined below.

The methodology agenda is as follows:

- Research opportunity and aim
- Research objectives and rationale behind them
- The study's conceptual framework
- Paradigm selection and the rejection of the alternative
- Qualitative research approach and the rejection of the alternative
- Case study approach and rationale behind choosing a single case
- Rationale behind the chosen case
- Data gathering technique of the qualitative semi-structured interview
- Practitioner research study, including the recruitment of experts and the procedures for data collection

- Consumer research study, including the recruitment of consumers through a screening questionnaire, the pilot study, and the procedures for data collection
- Coding the data, guided by semiotics, as illustrated in a diagram summarizing the key areas of semiotic approaches
- Rejection of other approaches considered as an alternative to semiotics
- Validity and reliability of the qualitative research
- Summary and conclusions

5.2. Research Aim and Objectives

Research aims emphasize the general intentions of the research and *what* is to be accomplished. The research objectives are statements within the aim and they emphasize *how* the research aim is to be accomplished. The following sections detail this study's research aim and the research objectives within the aim.

5.2.1. Research Aim

The aim of this research is: "To develop a deeper understanding of online branding and communications by applying the theories and principles of semiotics." With regards to the rationale behind this research aim, as previously stated, Schibrowsky, Peltier and Nill (2007) contend that the importance of the internet as a topical area of interest within the academic community is strong and growing, and signals the need to once again review the internet marketing literature, particularly in terms of potential research opportunities.

With regards to potential research opportunities, given that the past research has been dominated by the information-processing and quantitative tradition (see Dreze and Zufryden, 1997; Eighmey and McCord, 1998; Chen and Wells, 1999; Korgaonkar and Wolin, 1999), and with the wide range of issues for internet marketing communications, there is indeed a need for more depth and richness of meaning. The literature in chapter

four, 'Semiotics and Marketing Communications,' highlighted that communicative and rich environments such as the internet accentuate the complexity of brand meanings (De Chernatony, 2001). A semiotic approach was proposed to fully uncover the depth and richness of meaning involved within internet marketing communications, and specifically web sites. Chapter three, 'Semiotics,' discussed approaches to semiotics, and highlighted the importance of the contribution from the structuralist approaches of the founding fathers of semiotics, Saussure and Peirce. The review also pointed the researcher towards a consideration of the post-structuralist approach in semiotics, discussed as social semiotics. Chandler (2002) contends that an emphasis on the social dimension of semiotics is relatively recent outside of specialised academic journals, and is not yet much in evidence at the heart of the activities of many semiotic researchers, and this has indeed changed very little since 2002. This provides the researcher with a research opportunity and a potential gap in the literature within which to try to fill.

5.2.2. Research Objectives

To develop this deeper understanding of online branding and communications, this study seeks to explore the extent to which the theories and principles that semiotics offers, contribute to a greater understanding of the use of the imagery and language within the Highland Park web site. Based on this, there are four key objectives to the research, and these objectives determine aspects of the research design:

- Firstly, to establish the encoders' intentions in relation to the use of the imagery and language within the Highland Park web site.

The rationale behind setting this first objective is that the literature in chapter four, 'Semiotics and Marketing Communications,' emphasized that web design has brought visual issues into the mainstream of strategic thinking, and that marketing communications images, brand images, corporate images and web sites all depend upon compelling visual rhetoric (Schroeder, 2007). Thus, choosing to research the visual

aesthetics of imagery and language within a web site, and to do this by firstly establishing the intentions of those who created these visual aesthetics within a web site.

- Secondly, to develop a deep understanding of the consumers' interpretations in relation to the use of the imagery and language within the Highland Park web site.

The rationale behind setting this second objective was that the turn to social semiotics has been "reflected in an increasing concern with the role of the reader" (Chandler, 2002:214). The literature on social semiotics in chapter three, 'Semiotics,' also emphasized the possibilities that connotation allows for the generation of multiple meanings (Eco, 1976). Similarly, Barthes (1985:262) claims that semiotics seeks to locate the many possibilities of meaning, and as a result, it could be impossible to catalogue all meaningful associations within a particular sign. Thus, consumers' interpretations are also important as well as encoders' intentions of a message, and the literature in chapter three, 'Semiotics,' illustrates that it is imperative to delve deeper and develop a deeper understanding of consumers' interpretations.

- The third objective is to discover the effect that viewing the imagery and language on the internet web site has on the consumers' interpretations.

The rationale behind setting this third objective stems from Aaker and Brown's (1972) research on brands, which indicates that marketers delivering the same marketing communications' messages to the same audience, can generate different effects depending on the context in which the marketing communications are embedded. A key point emerging from chapter four, 'Semiotics and Marketing Communications,' was that brand symbols, colour, packaging, language and images have extended their influence into the online environment. Additionally, the literature highlighted that communicative and rich environments such as the internet accentuate the complexity of brand meanings (De Chernatony, 2001). Thus, the literature has highlighted that it is significant that the

encoders' intentions and the decoders' interpretations are being established within the context of an online environment, and that internet web sites heighten the complexity of brand meanings.

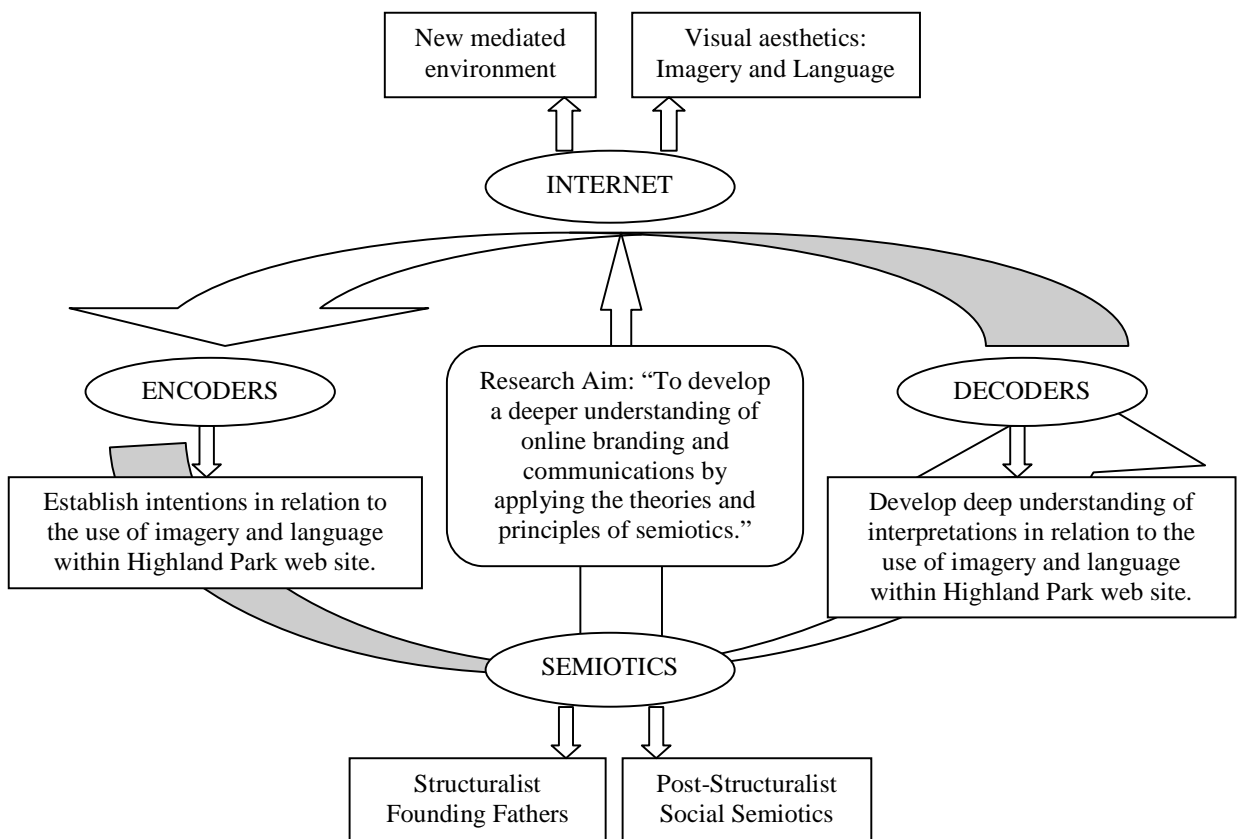
- The final objective is to ascertain any differences between the encoders' intentions and the consumers' interpretations, in relation to the use of the imagery and language within the Highland Park web site.

Social semiotics emphasizes the importance of the role of the decoder (consumer interpreting the message) as well as the encoder (company/practitioner creating the message). The rationale behind setting this final objective is that the chapter four, 'Semiotics and Marketing Communications,' highlighted that decoders' interpretations of a message (the brand image) may be different from encoders' intentions of a message (the brand identity). Thus, exploring this central paradox of semiotics, and discovering whether decoders' interpretations of the imagery and language within the web site are indeed different to the encoders' intentions in relation to the use of the imagery and language.

To help to visualize how the research aim and research objectives link in with the literature from the literature review, the study's conceptual framework in Figure 8 is illustrated on the next page. It shows that with regards to the internet, this new mediated environment has to be considered, along with the visual aesthetics of the imagery and language within a web site. With regards to semiotics, the principles and theories of both the structuralist founding fathers: Saussure and Peirce, and the post-structuralist approach of social semiotics, are to be incorporated. The participants involved in the study include the practitioners (encoders), in which their intentions in relation to the use of the imagery and language within the Highland Park web site are to be established. Also, the consumers (decoders), in which the author wishes to develop a deep understanding of their interpretations in relation to the use of the imagery and language

within the site. The arrows portray the ‘loop’ involved in the study because the literature review highlighted that the views of both encoders and decoders should be considered.

Figure 8: The Study’s Conceptual Framework



Source: The author, based on the concept behind the study having completed the literature review.

5.3. Research Approach

5.3.1. Paradigm Selection

According to Hughes (1990), every research procedure is inextricably embedded in commitments to particular visions of the world and to knowing that world. Ontology refers to the assumptions that one makes about the nature of reality (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe, 2002). Ontologically, this author's study supports a subjective reality, which aims to understand individuals' interpretations and perceptions. Epistemology refers to a general set of assumptions about the best ways of inquiring into the nature of the world (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe, 2002). As Rorty (1979) has observed, epistemology offers a vantage point. Epistemologically, this author's study supports an interpretivist paradigm. According to Kuhn (1962), a paradigm is a set of linked assumptions about the world which is shared by a community of scientists investigating that world. Additionally, this set of assumptions provides a conceptual and philosophical framework for the organized study of the world. For the interpretivist the world is socially constructed. "Reality has to be constructed through the researcher's description and/or interpretation and ability to communicate the respondent's reality" (Szmigin and Foxall, 2000:189). Individuals construct their own worlds and give meaning to their own realities (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe, 1994). With regards to people giving meanings to their own realities, semiotic theories and principles offers a suitable way to reveal these meanings and delve deeper into consumers' responses, when in this instance they decode the imagery and language within internet marketing communications.

Moreover, the essence of interpretivism is an attempt to delve below the surface to understand what is really happening (Remenyi et al., 1998), and the theories and principles of semiotics can be used for this. The interpretivist focuses on the ways that individuals make sense of the world through their interpretation of events, and the different meanings that they draw from these. As Wheatley (1992:34) states: "We inhabit a world that is always subjective and shaped by our interactions with it." Clarkson

(1989) contends that individuals cannot be understood outside of the context of their ongoing relationships with other individuals or separate from their interconnectedness with the world. This suggests that it is indeed significant that the decoders are interpreting the imagery and language within an online context, and specifically internet web sites. Overall, ontologically, this author's study supports a subjective reality, which aims to understand individuals' interpretations and perceptions. Epistemologically, this author's study supports an interpretivist paradigm, in which the author is attempting to delve below the surface to understand what is really happening (Remenyi et al., 1998), and the theories and principles of semiotics can be used for this.

With regards to rejecting alternative paradigms, Arndt (1985) contends that marketing has been dominated by the positivist paradigm, stressing rationality, objectivity and measurement. However, the task of the interpretivist is not to gather facts and measure how often certain patterns occur, but to appreciate the different constructions and meanings that individuals place upon their experience. This is in line with the literature on social semiotics in which Eco (1976) emphasizes the possibilities for the generation of multiple meanings, and Barthes (1985) states there are almost always several interpretations possible. The interpretivist tries to explain why people have these different experiences, rather than search for external causes and fundamental laws to explain their behaviour. Human action arises from the sense that people make of situations, rather than as a direct response to external stimuli (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe, 2002). Critics of the positivist paradigm would argue that rich insights could be lost if such human complexity is reduced entirely to a series of law-like generalizations.

While the positivist paradigm has led to many breakthroughs, even Arndt (1985:11) argues that, "marketing can be enriched by opening up to alternative paradigms that capture subjective experiences, conflicts, and liberating forces." A positivist view is inappropriate when approaching a social science phenomenon that involves humans and their real-life experiences (Healy and Perry, 2000). Positivists separate themselves from

the world they study, but to the interpretivist, the researcher is not independent of what is being researched but is an intrinsic part of it (Remenyi et al., 1998). As Wheatley (1992:34) contends: “No longer, in this rationale universe, can we study anything as separate from ourselves.”

5.3.2. Qualitative Research Approach

As interpretation is inherent in all human effort to understand the world, specific aspects of interpretation appear in all types of research, although it is most often perceived to be typical to qualitative research (Gummesson, 2003). As mentioned in the previous section, this researcher’s study suggests a subjective reality, which aims to understand individuals’ interpretations and perceptions. The study also suggests an interpretivist paradigm, in which the researcher is attempting to delve below the surface to understand what is really happening (Remenyi et al., 1998), and the theories and principles of semiotics can be used for this. Miles and Huberman (1994:1) state: “Qualitative data...are a source of well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of processes in identifiable local contexts.” Thus, a qualitative research approach was proposed due to the research philosophy. Qualitative research involves collecting, analyzing and interpreting data that cannot be meaningfully quantified. The primary purpose of qualitative research is to generate insights and ideas, and it typically involves relatively few respondents (Parasuraman, 1991).

With regards to rejecting alternative research approaches, Deshpande (1983:107) argues: “Qualitative researchers would castigate quantitative methodologists for not understanding ‘shades of meaning’ behind their statistical formulations.” Thus, a quantitative research approach was rejected due to the research philosophy, and the qualitative approach is proposed exactly because the data does provide rich descriptions and explanations. Deshpande (1983) claims that quantitative methodologists would criticize qualitative researchers for low reliability, and the lack of work contributing towards a cumulative body of knowledge. However, in the words of Ernest Dichter

(1983), a pioneer in the area of applying motivation research techniques in marketing: “Too much [quantitative] attitude research is oversimplified. It counts noses instead of trying to explore the complexity of the human soul.”

5.4. Case Study Approach

As mentioned in the previous section, a qualitative research approach was proposed due to the research philosophy. Case studies are a common way to carry out qualitative inquiry. Qualitative methods tend to predominate in case studies (Patton and Appelbaum, 2003). Case study is not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied (Stake, 2005:443). A case study attempts to integrate theory and practice by applying general concepts and knowledge to a particular situation in the real world (Bromley, 1986:42).

According to Ghauri and Gronhaug (2005:119), it is the research problem and the research objectives that influence the number and choice of cases to be studied. Anything from one case to several, even hundreds, can be justified depending on the research purpose and the research questions (Gummesson, 2003). The aim of this study is: “To develop a deeper understanding of online branding and communications by applying the theories and principles of semiotics.” This study seeks to explore the extent to which the theories and principles that semiotics offers, contribute to a greater understanding of the use of the imagery and language within internet web sites, in order to develop a deeper understanding of online branding and communications.

Selecting one brand as a case study fits in with the research purpose, allowing the author to give a deeper and richer understanding within the context of internet marketing communications and semiotics. This is in keeping with the research philosophy, in which this study suggests a subjective reality, which aims to understand individuals’ interpretations and perceptions. Selecting one brand as a case study also fits in with the research questions of establishing the encoders’ intentions, and developing a deep

understanding of the consumers' interpretations, in relation to the use of the imagery and language within the Highland Park web site. Additionally, this study suggests an interpretivist paradigm, in which the researcher is attempting to delve below the surface to understand what is really happening (Remenyi et al., 1998), and allowing the author to give a deeper and richer understanding aided by the theories and principles that semiotics has to offer.

A single case study not only helps one to understand a specific case, but can teach one general lessons about marketing (Gummesson, 2003). Single case is appropriate when a particular case is critical and one wants to use it for testing an established theory. It should be a critical case because it meets all the conditions necessary to confirm, challenge or extend the theory (Ghauri and Gronhaug, 2005:120). In this study the theories and principles of semiotics have been reviewed, and taking a single case study approach may confirm, challenge and/or potentially extend the theory, particularly with taking into account social semiotics. Focusing on one case study also allows for the author an easier comparison between the encoders' intentions in relation to the use of the imagery and language within the Highland Park web site, and the decoders' interpretations in relation to the use of the imagery and language within the Highland Park web site, as set out in the study's research objectives. This study does not aim to simply describe a case, and as Silverman (2005:127-8) states, your study of a case should be based upon some concept(s) which are developed as a result of your study, which this study aims to do: "To develop a deeper understanding of online branding and communications by applying the theories and principles of semiotics."

5.5. Rational Behind Chosen Case

As mentioned in chapter two 'Internet Marketing Communications,' originally hardest to convince (New Media Age, 4 August 2005), alcoholic drinks brands are now demonstrating strong signs that they are embracing online. This could in part be attributed to the level of consumer involvement with the products. The Foote, Cone and

Belding (FCB) model (Vaughn, 1980) is based on a matrix that considers the degree of consumer involvement and cognitive or sensory factors. Vaughn (1980) proposes an FCB model which organizes advertising effectiveness theory for strategy planning. This model requires the building of a matrix in order to classify products and services. The matrix has 4 quadrants: 1. high (involvement)/thinking (informative), 2. high (involvement)/feeling (affective), 3. low (involvement)/thinking (habit formation), and 4. low (involvement)/feeling (self-satisfaction). Alcoholic drinks, in particular premium product categories and brands such as single malt Scotch whiskies, could be classified as high-involvement products, both informative and affective. Therefore, it is perhaps not surprising that alcoholic beverage brands are embracing online. Consumers' purchasing high-involvement products tend to potentially require detailed information on the products prior to purchasing, and the online environment is an ideal platform to provide this detailed information. Significantly, the timing of the author's study coincided with a critical period of development of the Highland Park brand as it re-developed its online presence, again emphasizing a 'critical' case.

With regards to alcoholic drinks brands, the spirits industry remains one of Scotland's most significant, since Scotch whisky is the UK's leading export drink. In relation to Scotch whisky, a large majority of all Scotch sold worldwide is blended; however, world sales of blended Scotch are declining (Marketing, 27 September 2006). On the other hand, world sales of malts have more than tripled in the past decade, albeit from a small base (Financial Times, 12 September 2003). Malt whisky may make up a small percentage of overall Scotch volumes, but it has been the most robust sector within Scotch whisky for over a decade (KeyNote, February 2006). Highland Park is a single malt Scotch whisky, but two brands, Glenfiddich and Glenmorangie, lead the single malt Scotch whisky market, with a combined share of more than 30% (Marketing, 27 September 2006). Glenfiddich is the first single malt to be exported out of Scotland, and the top-seller worldwide ever since. The brand is the world's biggest-selling single malt Scotch whisky (Promotions and Incentives, 15 May 2006). Glenmorangie is Scotland's best-selling single malt Scotch whisky (SMWS.co.uk, November 2006). Scotch whisky

is the UK's leading export drink, in which sales of single malts are on the rise and sales of blends are declining. As a result, a single malt Scotch whisky such as Highland Park belongs within this industry trend.

In addition, there are few countries in the world where single malt sales are not growing. There is still a lot of growth in established markets such as the UK and the US, but the major growth is taking place in Asia and the emerging markets, such as Russia and Eastern Europe (The Herald, 2 July 2008). Just-Drinks (May 2008) states that the year 2008 has seen strong performances from smaller bases by whisky brands such as Highland Park, Bowmore, The Balvenie and niche players such as Arran, Bruichladdich, Speyburn, Old Pulteney and others. The evolution of the product category is also showing a continuing shift to premium. Single malt Scotch whisky continues to be sold on a quality platform to discerning consumers (KeyNote, February 2006). Just-Drinks (May 2008) contends that the bottom-end blended malts are likely to come under pressure as stocks tighten, forcing the base price up. Overall, as opposed to blended malt, single malt Scotch whisky is growing, and is therefore worthy as a product category to study, in which Highland Park has contributed to the strength of performance.

The Edrington Group's brand Highland Park was ultimately chosen as the case. As mentioned in this section, significantly, the timing of the author's study coincided with a critical period of development of the Highland Park brand as it re-developed its online presence. The Edrington Group invested £18 million in a global plan to double annual sales of Highland Park and become one of the world's top ten malts. Their packaging had become mainstream and undifferentiated and sales were struggling in an increasingly competitive single malt Scotch whisky market. The sales performance of the brand had peaked in 2002/03 and slowed dramatically thereafter, with the malt market globally exceeding the growth on Highland Park for the first time in over 6 years. This gradual decline had to be addressed. The catalyst for this change was winning the accolade "The Best Spirit in the World". The accolade was announced in

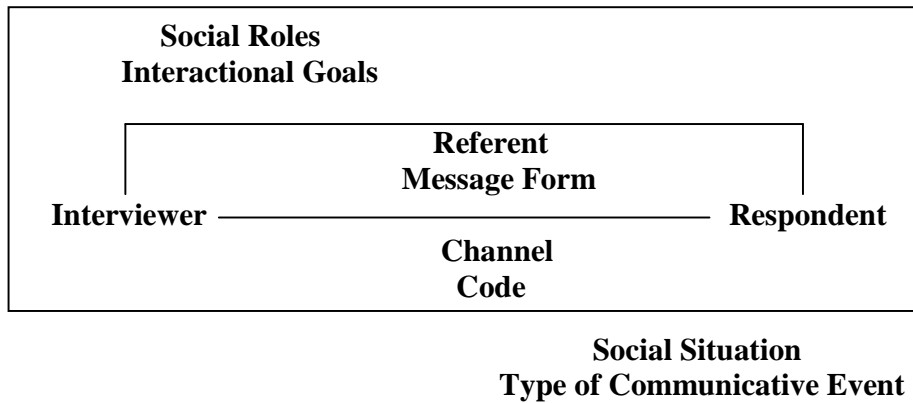
the June 2005 edition of US drinks publication *Spirit Journal: The Independent Guide to Distilled Spirits, Wine and Beer*, and was judged against spirits across the globe. Celebrated independent spirits expert F. Paul Pacult reviewed thousands of the world's finest spirits and selected Highland Park 18 Year Old Single Malt Whisky as the "Best Spirit in the World".

Highland Park felt it had to bring its overall brand communication in line with this global recognition. Highland Park redesigned its core packaging during 2006, which formed part of a complete rebirth of its overall identity across all communications, including the internet, and more specifically its web site. Thus, within the selected single malt Scotch whisky product category, The Edrington Group's brand Highland Park was selected. A key factor in this choice was that the timing of the author's study coincided with a critical period of development of the Highland Park brand as it re-developed its online presence.

5.6. Data Gathering Technique

As mentioned previously in this chapter, qualitative methods tend to predominate in case studies (Patton and Appelbaum, 2003). This study seeks to explore the extent to which the theories and principles that semiotics offers, contribute to a greater understanding of the use of the imagery and language within the Highland Park web site. With this in mind, Fouquier (1988) states that the essential semiotic analysis concerns how a message is read by receivers as materialized in recordings of interviews discussing the message concerned. Thus, the data gathering technique used in this study was the qualitative interview. An interview is a purposeful discussion between two or more people (Kahn and Cannell, 1957). Qualitative interviewing is based in conversation (Kvale, 1996), with the emphasis on researchers asking questions and listening, and respondents answering (Rubin and Rubin, 1995). Briggs (1986:41), in his book 'Learning How to Ask', proposes a schematic representation of the principal components of the interview situation in Figure 9 on the next page:

Figure 9 – Components of the Interview Situation



Source: Briggs (1986:41).

According to Briggs (1986) in this overview of the interview situation, the primary participants are the *interviewer* and the *respondent*, in which the *referent* and the *message form* consist of the signals that serve as sign vehicles in communication. Communication depends on opening *channels* between participants, and it is vital for the interviewer to develop trust and confidence in the respondent (Finch, 1984). A number of *codes*, both linguistic and nonverbal are shared by the participants to permit the encoding and interpretation of messages. It was important that the researcher monitored her own comments, gestures and actions as these may have conveyed meanings to the respondent that may advance or impede the interview. The *social roles* assumed by the participants can impact on how they speak to one another. *Interactional goals* relate to the motivation of the participants for engaging in the interview. For instance, the interviewee must also get something from the interview. “Probably, the greatest value which many interviewees receive – the reason why they enjoy the interview – is the opportunity to teach, to tell people something” (Dexter, 1970:37). *Social situation* and the *type of communicative event* refer to the context in which the interaction takes place.

The social context of the interview is intrinsic to understanding any data that are obtained (Silverman, 1993).

Moreover, the purpose of most qualitative interviewing is to derive interpretations, not facts or laws, from respondent talk (Gubrium and Holstein, 2002). “Interviewing is one of the most common and powerful ways in which one tries to understand our fellow human beings” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000:645). Interviews allow researchers to have access to detailed and in-depth views and opinions (Bryman, 2001), and to secure vivid, accurate, inclusive accounts based on personal experience. The interview is presented as enabling a ‘special insight’ into lived experience (Atkinson and Silverman, 1997), and is an economical means, in the sense of time and money, of getting access to an ‘issue’ (Rapley, 2004). “The use of interviews can help you to gather valid and reliable data that are relevant to your research question(s) or objectives” (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2003:245). Given that this study’s objectives include establishing the encoders’ intentions and the decoders’ interpretations, in relation to the use of the imagery and language within Highland Park’s web site, the interview was a plausible data gathering technique. In addition, relating back to the study’s conceptual model, the interview data gathering technique allowed consistency in method, between encoders’ intentions and decoders’ interpretations.

Furthermore, types of interview differ depending on the amount of structure imposed by the researcher (Remenyi et al., 1998). For this study, qualitative semi-structured interviews were chosen. This is because semi-structured interviews allow for the researcher to have a list of questions or fairly specific topics to be covered, in which the interviewees have a great deal of leeway in how to reply. This is often referred to as an interview guide, and this study’s interview guide was created to ensure that the questions and topic areas helped the author to fulfil the study’s research objectives. Please refer to Appendix 6 for the Consumers’ Interview Guide.

The questions and topic areas proposed in both the practitioners' and consumers' interview guides, flow from the study's conceptual model in Figure 8. The research aim is evident in the middle of the Figure, and in order to complete the loop and 'paint the whole picture,' the views and opinions of both encoders/practitioners and decoders/consumers were to be considered. The coding of these views and opinions of the respondents was to be guided by semiotics, as illustrated at the bottom of the Figure. The communicative vehicle/channel was the internet, as shown at the top of the Figure. Questions were to be asked to respondents on the internet as a new mediated environment, and topic areas were to be proposed on the visual aesthetics, the imagery and language, within the internet web site.

In qualitative semi-structured interviews, interviewers can depart significantly from the interview guide that is being used. They can ask new questions that follow up interviewees' replies and can vary the order and even the wording of questions, depending on the flow of the conversation (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2003). As a result, qualitative semi-structured interviews tend to be flexible, allowing the researcher to adjust the direction of the interview and even the emphasis in the research if significant issues arise. But, by and large, all of the questions will be asked and a similar wording will be used from interviewee to interviewee (Bryman, 2004).

Any literature on interviewing draws the researcher's attention to problems involved, such as leading questions. This author attempted to avoid leading questions by phrasing questions carefully in order to avoid suggesting that certain answers are more acceptable than others (Chisnall, 2005). The author also used probes to obtain elaborated responses, without being overzealous and pressing participants for a response. The direction, depth and detail of the interview were constantly monitored by the author. Moving from one topic to the next is the interviewer's responsibility, and interviews proceed more smoothly if the respondent is signalled that the topic is going to change. The author did this by prompting the respondents and by using the respondent's own words to link a previous response with the next question (Hunt and Eadie, 1987). The flexibility of the

qualitative semi-structured interview is what makes it attractive as a research method (Bryman, 2004). The qualitative semi-structured interview was chosen because it allowed the author to have a list of questions and specific topic areas to be covered, but due to their flexible nature, it also gave the respondents leeway in their replies. This was important when establishing respondents' intentions and interpretations because they gave their own individual responses, but the key questions and topic areas enabled coherent interview transcripts, which could then be analyzed.

This chapter now turns to the practitioner research study in more detail, before moving on to the consumer research study.

5.7. Practitioner Research Study

5.7.1. Recruitment of 'Experts'

The aim of the research is to develop a deeper understanding of online branding and communications by applying the theories and principles of semiotics. The objective set with regards to the recruited experts is: *To establish the encoders' intentions in relation to the use of the imagery and language within the Highland Park web site.* The first phase of the field research was designed to explore what the encoders' intentions actually were in relation to the use of the imagery and language within the site.

Practitioners were selected on the basis of being 'expert' respondents (Dexter, 1970), in which they have knowledge and skills in their subject matter. They were selected at a senior level within the company, Highland Park, and the creative agency employed by the company, reflecting their industry and brand knowledge and skills. Contact details for the Global Marketing Controller at Highland Park were obtained from a personal contact: The Legal Adviser at the Scotch Whisky Association. The Global Marketing Controller was contacted initially by e-mail and then with a follow up telephone call. It was the Global Marketing Controller who provided the contact details for the Head of

Brand Education at Highland Park, and the Head Creative at Mountain Creative Design agency. All three were willing to take part in the researcher's study. The sample was designed to ensure a spread across different roles involved in the re-design of the Highland Park brand across all of its communications. The Global Marketing Controller would give insight from a marketing perspective, the Head of Brand Education would give an insight into the consumer-facing side of the brand, and the Head Creative would give an insight into the creative agency involved in the re-design. The author recognized that viewpoints expressed may differ due to the different job positions held by the 'experts'.

5.7.2. Data Collection Methods

Three qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted between August 2007 and January 2008. Two face-to-face interviews were carried out in Perth, the Head Office of Highland Park. The remaining face-to-face interview was carried out in Glasgow, the office and studio of Mountain Creative Design agency.

5.7.3. Procedures

The interviews were carried out at the offices of the respondents for their convenience. Interview guides were drawn up. The first part was informed by the literature review, in which specific questions were proposed. The second part was informed by the literature review but also by the researcher having interrogated the communications on the Highland Park web site. The researcher interrogated the communication vehicle directly, allowing the researcher to devise specific topic areas to be discussed by the respondents in the interviews. Interviews typically lasted between two and three hours in length. At all times the author was conscious that the respondents may be time pressed due to their jobs. All face-to-face interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed by the researcher, following the sequence within the interview guides.

The following individuals were happy to be named, as expressed in the ‘Practitioners’ Informed Consent Form’ in Appendix 7. The first point of contact was the Global Marketing Controller at Highland Park, Jason Craig. Please refer to Appendix 1 for the ‘Practitioner Interview Guide, Global Marketing Controller’. The second point of contact was the Head Creative at Mountain Creative Design in Glasgow, Andy Bowman, from the creative agency appointed by Highland Park to work on the re-design. Please refer to Appendix 2 for the ‘Practitioner Interview Guide, Head Creative at Mountain’. The final point of contact was the Head of Brand Education at Highland Park, Gerry Tosh. Please refer to Appendix 3 for the ‘Practitioner Interview Guide, Head of Brand Education’. It is also worth noting that all three practitioners gave permission for the company to be named.

The practitioners were welcomed and thanked by the researcher, and confidentiality was emphasized, although all of the three practitioners were happy to have their names quoted. The researcher informed the practitioners of the aim of the research. The practitioners were aware of the author’s objective of establishing Highland Park’s intentions in relation to the use of the imagery and language within the web site. The practitioners were also informed that selected consumers would then view the web site and be interviewed, to allow the researcher to develop a deep understanding of their interpretations in relation the use of the imagery and language within the web site. This was followed by explaining to the practitioners that the author would then ascertain any differences between Highland Park’s intentions and the consumers’ interpretations. Finally, the practitioners were informed that the main areas to be addressed in the interviews were: brand questions; internet questions; and topic area discussions regarding the use of the imagery and language within the web site.

As previously mentioned, the literature review in chapter three, ‘Semiotics,’ highlighted the importance of looking at decoders (readers/interpreters) as well as encoders (companies/creators). A key point within the literature on social semiotics is Eco (1976) emphasizing the active role of the interpreter, and the possibilities that connotation

allows for the generation of multiple meanings. Again, this is in keeping with Chandler's (2002) comment on the importance of the role of the reader, because signs do not exist without interpreters, and this comment also plays a crucial part within the understanding of social semiotics. In addition, Barthes (1985) contends that that there are almost always several interpretations possible, but he argues that this is not only between one reader and the next, but sometimes within the same reader. With these key points from the social semiotics literature in mind, the next section details the consumers' research study.

5.8. Consumer Research Study

5.8.1. Recruitment of Consumers

The literature review highlighted the importance of the role of the decoder as well as the encoder, especially in social semiotics. The aim of the research is to develop a deeper understanding of online branding and communications by applying the theories and principles of semiotics. The objective set with regards to the consumers is: *To develop a deep understanding of the participants' interpretations in relation to the use of the imagery and language within the Highland Park web site.* The second phase of the field research was designed to develop a deep understanding of what the decoders' interpretations actually were in relation to the use of the imagery and language within the site. The consumers were selected on the basis that they were relevant to the study and the research objectives. To achieve this, consumers filled out a screening questionnaire, as discussed in the next section.

5.8.2. Data Collection Methods

The first duty of the interviewer is to locate people who fulfil the requirements of the chosen method (Chisnall, 2005). To do this, an email screening questionnaire was designed: "A questionnaire is simply a set of questions designed to generate the data

necessary for accomplishing a research project's objectives" (Parasuraman, 1991:363). The design of a questionnaire affects the response rate and the reliability and validity of the data collected (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2003). With closed-ended questions, the assumption is that "detailed knowledge is available on the attributes of interest and therefore it is possible to pre-specify the categories of response" (Remenyi et al., 1998:152), and due to the author's knowledge of this study area, closed-ended questions were asked in the questionnaire to enable selection of the relevant participants to interview. Please refer to Appendix 4 for the 'Email Questionnaire to Consumers'. The questionnaire was structured, consisting of a set of structured questions, in the same order, to all respondents.

Pre-testing of the questionnaire was undertaken before it was finally administered. This was done using three personal contacts at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, all of whom were established academics. The objective of pre-testing is to detect possible shortcomings in the design and administration of the questionnaire (Emory and Cooper, 1991). The approach to pre-testing was fairly informal where the researcher consulted colleagues and friends within the Department of Marketing. The pre-testing of the questionnaire was successful, and no amendments were required, and as a result it was ready to be administered.

The screening questionnaire was electronically administered to potential participants by the researcher. The researcher used a snow-balling technique, starting with personal contacts. In this study, there was also the added 'value' to interviewees of an incentive of being selected from a draw to win a bottle of Highland Park 18 Year Old Single Malt Whisky, as selected by F. Paul Pacult as the "Best Spirit in the World" in the June 2005 edition of US drinks publication Spirit Journal. The self-administered questionnaires were completed by the respondents. The researcher chose to create an email questionnaire because they are "relatively low in cost, can be easily administered, eliminate interviewer bias, and provide the opportunity to do instantaneous evidence collection and analysis" (Remenyi et al., 1998:157). Respondents may have been

concerned about confidentiality as the returned questionnaire had their email address attached, but the researcher emphasized that the confidentiality of the respondent would be protected.

All participants were thanked via email for their participation in filling out the questionnaire. The selected participants were contacted initially by email and then with follow up telephone calls, to arrange a convenient date and time for them to be interviewed by the researcher. Please refer to the 'Consumer Sample Grid' on the next page, showing the chosen participants interviewed by the researcher. The criteria for selection were deliberately left quite loose, but the author sought a diverse range of consumers in the sample, as illustrated in the 'Consumer Sample Grid.'

Consumer Sample Grid

Participant	Gender	Age Group	Post Code	Marital Status	Qualifications	Working Status	Job Title	Blend/Malt Drinker	Drinking Behaviour
A	Male	25-34	G74 4UR	Single	Standard Grades, Highers, HNC/HND, 1st Degree	Full-time	Web Promotions Developer	Both	Three or four times a year
B	Female	45-55	G1	Divorced	Standard Grades, Highers, Diploma	Self-employed	Housing Director/Consultant	Malt	Three or four times a year
C	Female	45-55	G41 3DT	Re-married	Standard Grades, Highers, 1st Degree	Full-time	Depute Head Teacher	Malt	Between once a week and once a month
D	Female	35-44	FK7 8FJ	Married (first marriage)	Standard Grades, Highers, 1st Degree, CIMMA	Full-time	Financial Accounting Manager, OI	Both	Between a month and once every three months
E	Male	45-55	G41 3DT	Re-married	Standard Grades, Highers, 1st Degree, Diplomas	Full-time	Depute Head Teacher	Malt	Once a week or more often
F	Male	35-44	G33 1TE	Married (first marriage)	Standard Grades, Highers	Full-time	Account Manager, Construction Sales	Malt	Between once a week and once a month
G	Male	35-44	G42 9UW	Married (first marriage)	Standard Grades, Highers, HNC/HND, 1st Degree	Full-time	Senior Controller, Aviation	Both	Between once a week and once a month
H	Female	25-34	G42 9AF	Single	Standard Grades, Highers, 1st Degree, Higher Degree	Full-time	HR Business Partner	Both	Three or four times a year
I	Female	35-44	G33 1TE	Married (first marriage)	Standard Grades, Highers, 1st Degree	Full-time	Hotel Sales and Events Manager	Both	Between once a week and once a month
J	Female	25-34	G14 0HZ	Single	Standard Grades, Highers, 1st Degree	Full-time	Civil Engineer	Both	Between a month and once every three months
K	Male	25-34	G41 3DU	Married (first marriage)	Standard Grades, Highers, HNC/HND	Full-time	Food Manufacturer Manager	Malt	Between once a week and once a month
L	Male	35-44	G1 4EE	Single	Standard Grades, Highers, HNC/HND	Full-time	Account Manager, Technology Services	Malt	Three or four times a year
M	Male	35-44	G41 3DT	Married (first marriage)	Standard Grades, Highers, HNC/HND, 1st Degree, Higher Degree	Full-time	Director of Manufacturings Operations	Malt	Between once a week and once a month
N	Male	45-55	G76 8LQ	Married (first marriage)	Standard Grades, Highers, 1st Degree, Higher Degree	Full-time	Head of Imaging Physics	Malt	Between a month and once every three months
O	Female	45-55	G76 8LQ	Married (first marriage)	Standard Grades, Highers, 1st Degree	Part-time	High School Teacher	Both	Between once a week and once a month
P	Male	35-44	FK7 8FJ	Married (first marriage)	Standard Grades, Highers, 1st Degree, Diploma	Full-time	Legal Adviser, Whisky Trade	Malt	Between once a week and once a month

Prior to interviewing the consumers, a successful pilot study was conducted in June 2008, using three participants. Having firstly interviewed the practitioners/encoders, the researcher had a clear agenda on how to set out the interview guide for interviewing the consumers. The consumer interview guide was an adjusted version of the practitioner interview guide, and was adapted to ensure that key questions were asked, and key topic areas were discussed, resulting in coherent interview transcripts that could then be analyzed by the researcher. The three pilot interviews provided a rich vein of data despite the small sample size. The adjusted consumer interview guide proved to be a comprehensive way of obtaining rich data.

The researcher identified that there was indeed enough from the consumer interview guide to stimulate the participants from the questioning. The depth of meaning required for this study was evident in the participants' responses, reassuring the researcher that this interview guide would allow the researcher to attempt to fully uncover the depth and richness of meaning in relation to the imagery and language used within the Highland Park web site. Therefore, the pilot interview guide for the consumers was used for field research. In total, sixteen participants were interviewed in the final field research. Iterative sampling was used by the researcher, and theoretical saturation was reached with sixteen participants. The term 'theoretical saturation' by Strauss and Corbin (1998) refers to the stage in data collection where no new insights are divulged.

5.8.3. Procedures

The interviews took place between July 2008 and September 2008. The face-to-face interviews were carried out in Glasgow, Scotland, and at the homes of the respondents for their convenience. The researcher had to ensure that there was flexibility in rearranging interview dates when required, so as to continue the smooth running of the field work. As mentioned in the above section, the interview guide used for the pilot study, was also used for the final field research. Please refer again to Appendix 6 for the 'Consumers' Interview Guide.' Interviews typically lasted between one and two hours in

length. At all times the researcher was conscious that the respondents may be time pressured. All face-to-face interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed by the researcher, following the sequence within the interview guides. All transcriptions took place by the researcher during and after the field research.

Participants were welcomed and thanked by the researcher. Confidentiality was emphasized, and participants were told that the interview would be tape recorded. The researcher informed the participants of the aim of the research. The participants were aware of the researcher's objective of developing a deeper understanding of their interpretations in relation to the use of the imagery and language within the Highland Park web site. Participants were then informed that they could spend as long as they like on the Highland Park web site to get a 'feel' for the site, bearing in mind the research objective. They were aware that they would be interviewed by the researcher directly after viewing the site, but were reassured that they would be able to refer back to the site at any time during the interview. The first part of the interview consisted of questions that arose during the researcher's review of the literature on branding and the internet. The second part consisted of key topic areas for participants to discuss that arose from the researcher having interrogated the communications on the Highland Park web site. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the researcher interrogated the communication vehicle directly, prior to interviewing the practitioners, which in turn helped the researcher to devise the interview guide for the pilot study, and which in turn was then adjusted to become the interview guide in the final field research.

5.9. Coding the Data

After transcribing the participants' interviews, coding of the data took place, which was guided by semiotics. With help from the review of the literature in the 'Semiotics' chapter, the diagram in Figure 7 on page 65 in that chapter, and shown again on page 129 in this chapter, highlights the key areas of semiotic approaches that the researcher took into consideration. Firstly, was the contribution from the structuralist approaches of

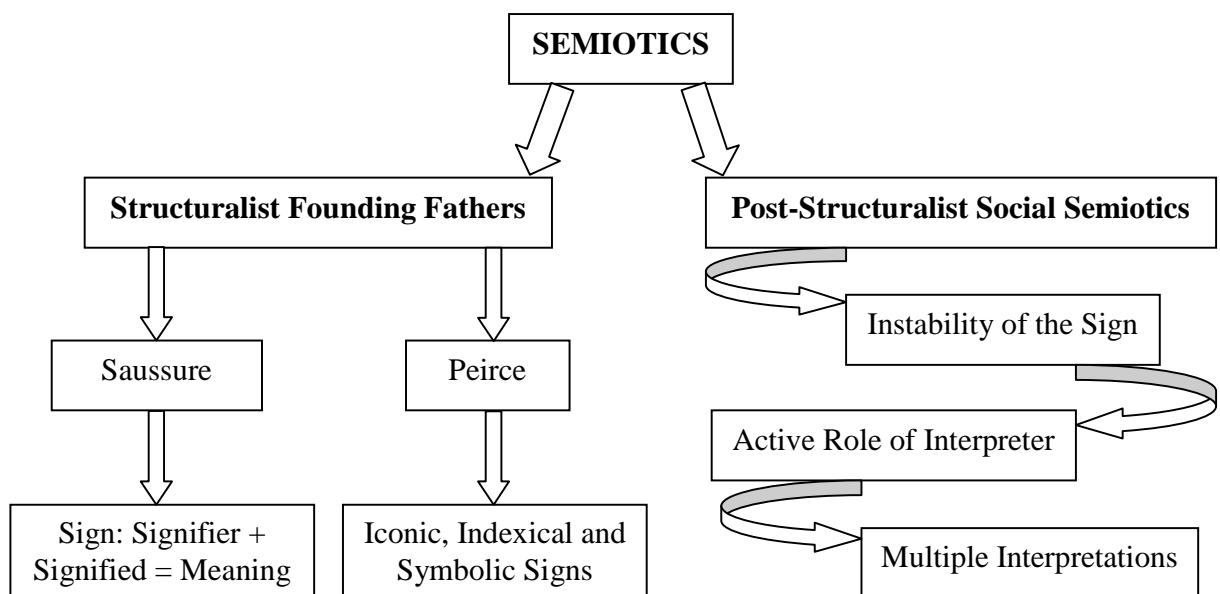
the founding fathers of semiotics, Saussure and Peirce. Saussure's (1960:67) signifier-signified dichotomy shows that the sign consists of a signifier plus a signified that results in the meaning. Peirce (1931-58, 2.306) claimed that his theory of meaning derives from, and is justified by, his theory of signs. Peirce arrived at three types of signs: Icon, index and symbol. They are not necessarily mutually exclusive: A sign can be an index, an icon and a symbol, or any combination. The contributions from Saussure and Peirce are shown down the left hand side of the diagram in Figure 7 on the next page.

As mentioned in the 'Semiotics' chapter, the existing literature has given little attention to the post-structuralist approach in semiotics, discussed as social semiotics. As Chandler (2002) contends, an emphasis on the social dimension of semiotics is relatively recent outside of specialized academic journals, and it is not yet much in evidence at the heart of the activities of many semiotic researchers. Post-structuralist social semiotics maintains that meaning derives from differences internal to the sign system itself, they reject the idea of a single, deep, determining structure, and emphasizes the inherent instability of the sign. Signs do not exist without interpreters. 'Sign' and 'meaning' are inextricable (Sless, 1986:88); to identify something as a sign is in the next breath to engage with its meaning, for it is the nature of signs to have a meaning. A key point with social semiotics, the instability of the sign, is shown down the right hand side of the diagram on the next page. This concept, the instability of the sign, is evident during the coding phase in the next chapter 'Research Findings.'

In addition, Chandler's (2002) comment on the importance of the active role of the reader, plays a crucial part within the understanding of social semiotics, and is also shown down the right hand side of the diagram on the next page. Furthermore, social semiotics alert us to the possibilities that connotation allows for the generation of multiple meanings (Eco, 1976). Similarly, Barthes (1985) contends that that there are almost always several interpretations possible, but he argues that this is not only between one reader and the next, but sometimes within the same reader. The idea of

multiple interpretations being possible is shown down the right hand side of the diagram on the next page. It is only correct to then argue that it would indeed be impossible to catalogue all meanings within a message, and as a result, semiotics seeks to locate the many possibilities of meaning (Barthes, 1985:262). Therefore, delving deeper into the exploration of meaning production, and uncovering the depth and richness of meaning involved. The concepts of the active role of the interpreter and multiple interpretation being possible, was taken into account during the coding phase. Figure 7, extracted from page 65 of the ‘Semiotics’ chapter is shown below. This figure has not changed. Overall, the diagram below highlights not only the key contributions from the founding fathers, but also a consideration of social semiotics, and in particular, the importance of the instability of the sign, the active role of interpreters, and multiple interpretations being possible. These key areas of semiotic approaches are what guided the coding phase.

Figure 7: Diagram Summarizing Key Areas of Semiotic Approaches



Source: The author, based on the Semiotics chapter in the thesis literature review

5.10. Rejection of Other Approaches

Semiotics may have been chosen to guide the coding of the interview transcripts, but there are other approaches that could have been considered as an alternative. In the field of media and communication studies content analysis is a prominent rival to semiotics as a method of textual analysis. However, this was rejected by the researcher because content analysis involves a quantitative approach to the analysis of the manifest 'content' of media texts. On the other hand, in this study semiotics involves a qualitative approach to delving deeper into the exploration of meaning production, and uncovering the depth and richness of meaning involved. Semiotics is rarely quantitative, and often involves a rejection of such approaches. Just because an item occurs frequently in a text does not make it significant; semiotics is more concerned with the relation of elements to each other.

Moreover, content analysis focuses on explicit content and tends to suggest that this represents a single, fixed meaning, whereas semiotic studies focus on the system of rules governing the 'discourse' involved in media texts, stressing the role of semiotic context in shaping meaning. Additionally, social semiotics rejects the idea of a single, deep, determining structure, and emphasizes the inherent instability of the sign. Some researchers have combined semiotic analysis and content analysis (for example, Leiss *et al.*, 1990; McQuarrie and Mick, 1992). However, content analysis also excludes both the author and the reader, concentrating solely on the text. It is not capable of dealing with connotation, but merely with denotation. Social semiotics in particular alerts us to the importance of the active role of the reader as well as the creator of a message (Chandler, 2002). Also, social semiotic evaluation emphasizes the importance of the significance which readers attach to the signs within a text. As Dyer points out, (1982:115) "implicit in this (semiotic) approach is the rejection of much impressionistic criticism and 'scientific' content analysis, which assumes the meaning of a message is evident in its overt, manifest content."

Furthermore, semiotics scrutinizes the various signs in a text in an attempt to characterize their structure and identify potential meanings. Hence, semiotics readily overlaps with an interpretive-hermeneutic approach to consumer research (O'Shaughnessy and Holbrook, 1988), which involves the "critical analysis of a text for the purpose of determining its single or multiple meaning(s)." However, meaning can never be fully specified because each interpreter brings a reservoir of personal interests and experiences that introduce various degrees of non-convergence and idiosyncrasy into the communication process (McQuarrie and Mick, 1992). As continually mentioned throughout, social semiotics alerts us to the possibilities that connotation allows for the generation of multiple meanings (Eco, 1976). It is only correct to then argue that it would indeed be impossible to catalogue all meanings within a message, and as a result, semiotics seeks to locate the many possibilities of meaning (Barthes, 1985:262). The distinctive feature of semiotics relative to other approaches is that semiotics places due weight on the constraints imposed by the structure of signs within a text, on the freedom of the reader to interpret the text in a variety of ways, and on the socio-cultural context that jointly shapes the text and its potential readings.

Moreover, language is the central medium for transmitting meaning, and as such provides a methodological orientation for a phenomenology of social life which is concerned with the relationship between language use and the objects of experience. The meaning of a word is taken to be what it references, corresponds with or what it stands for. Underpinning this is the premise that the essential task of language is to convey information and describe "reality" (Holstein and Gubrium, 1994). Thompson et al. (1990) discuss the application of phenomenology to the research process. The basic assumption is that a person's life is a socially constructed totality in which experiences interrelate coherently and meaningfully (Goulding, 1999).

However, the notion that language is the sole means of describing and communicating constructions of reality is a point of debate. It raises questions over individuals' ability to accurately describe their reality through language, and also the use of language to

distort, manipulate and confuse perceptions of the situation under study. Nonetheless, the words of the informants remain the primary source of data. The idea of being able to capture and describe accurately the nature of reality is a further contentious issue, and one which tends to be confounded, particularly if one adopts the view that individuals' may experience multiple realities and multiple selves (Goulding, 1999). Social semiotics, on the other hand, alerts us to how the same text may generate different meanings for different readers (Chandler, 2002:215). Also, Barthes (1985) contends that that there are almost always several interpretations possible, but he argues that this is not only between one reader and the next, but sometimes within the same reader.

5.11. Validity and Reliability

The evaluation of qualitative data has been the source of consideration controversy for a number of years, often dependent on methodological and more recently epistemological perspectives (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Lincoln and Guba (1985) provided the benchmark criteria for interpretive evaluation criteria based on naturalistic inquiry, when they suggested that efforts should be made to evaluate the 'trustworthiness' of their research. Their criteria included credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Critics of this direction, such as Holt (1991:59) suggested that even these terms are "an attempt to merge interpretive consumer research with positivistic criteria," namely internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity.

However, given the need to demonstrate rigor in the evaluation of data, the criteria outlined by Lincoln and Guba can be looked at. The concept of credibility is important to this study concerning the trustworthiness of the research. For this study, the data collection methods used and the coding used for the data, helps to ensure that the findings of the study can be believed. The concept of confirmability is also important to this study. Again, the data collection methods used and the coding used for the data, provides evidence that the findings presented are rooted in the data emerging from the respondents. The concept of transferability is arguably less relevant for this study,

because the findings occurred from a specific group of individuals, at a specific time and place. The concept of dependability is also arguably less relevant for this study, because it would be virtually impossible to replicate situations and circumstances.

The German sociologist Weber (1946) pointed out that all research is contaminated to some extent by the values of the researcher. “Unless you can show your audience the procedures you used to ensure that your methods were reliable and your conclusions valid, there is little point in aiming to conclude the research” (Silverman, 2005:224). Tests to establish the validity and reliability of qualitative data are important to determine the stability and quality of the data obtained. Despite the advantages of the case study method, there is no single, coherent set of validity and reliability tests for each research phase in case study research available in the literature (Riege, 2003).

With regards to validity, Hammersley (1990:57) states that it is “the extent to which an account accurately represents the social phenomena to which it refers”. Validity is another word for truth (Silverman, 2005). In qualitative research validity concerns whether the researcher has gained full access to knowledge and meanings of respondents: “Does the study clearly gain access to the experiences of those in the research setting?” (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe, 2002:53). In this study the researcher did indeed attempt to gain full access to the knowledge and meanings of respondents through lengthy qualitative interviews. In addition, the researcher ensured to interview not only those practitioners who created the ‘message’, the encoders, but also those consumers who interpreted ‘the message’, the decoders, to ensure that the ‘full picture’ was portrayed. The study’s literature review, particularly the literature on social semiotics, highlighted that the views of both encoders and decoders should be considered. The study’s conceptual framework in Figure 8 on page 107 in this chapter, which the researcher created based on the concept behind this study, uses arrows to illustrate the ‘loop’ involved, ensuring that the ‘full picture’ was portrayed. To fulfil the research aim of developing a deeper understanding of online branding and

communications by applying the theories and principles of semiotics, both encoders' and decoders' views were required to ensure validity in the research.

Internal validity, as it is traditionally known in quantitative research, refers to the establishment of cause-and-effect relationships, while the emphasis on constructing an internally valid research process in case study research lies in establishing phenomena in a credible way. In addition to the researcher considering both the encoders' and decoders' views, the researcher was also in contact with the practitioners and the consumers, regarding the accuracy of the transcripts. All interview transcripts were emailed to the respondents following transcribing, in which respondents were given the option of checking that what was transcribed was indeed what they had said throughout the interviews. This raised no concerns from the respondents and the researcher did not have to clarify any inconsistencies.

Moreover, another question in which a great deal of discussion has centred concerns the external validity or generalizability of case research. How can a single case possibly be representative so that it might yield findings that can be applied more generally to other cases? The answer, of course, is that they cannot (Bryman, 2004:51). It is not the purpose of this research design to generalize to other cases or to populations beyond the case (Mitchell, 1983; Yin, 1984). This is not the purpose of their craft (Bryman, 2004:52). Instead, case study researchers tend to argue that they aim to generate an intensive examination of a single case in relation to which they then engage in a theoretical analysis. Importantly, the guiding philosophy of the researcher's study was never to establish a generalizable set of results implicit in large sample sizes, but to seek out understanding in keeping with interpretive principles.

Moving on to reliability, Hammersley (1992:67) states that reliability refers to "the degree of consistency with which instances are assigned to the same category by different observers or by the same observer on different occasions." Foddy (1994) emphasizes that questions should be understood by respondents in the ways intended by

researchers, and answers given by respondents should be understood by researchers in the ways intended by respondents: “Is there transparency in how sense was made from the raw data?” (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe, 2002:53). Reliability refers to the demonstration that the operations and procedures of the research inquiry can be repeated by other researchers which then achieve similar findings, that is, the extent of findings can be replicated assuming that, for example, interviewing techniques and procedures remain consistent. In case study research this can raise problems as people are not as static as measurements used in quantitative research, and even if researchers were concerned to assure that others can precisely follow each step, results may still differ. Indeed, data on real-life events, which were collected by different researchers, may not converge into one consistent picture. It is important to stress here that because this is a single case study, it is of course context dependent, and therefore, reliability is not necessarily an appropriate measure for this type of research.

However, according to Riege (2003), there are techniques which may be used to increase reliability, such as using a tape recorder, which the researcher did do. This is related to ‘codes of ethics.’ Wells (1994:284) defines ethics in terms of “...a code of behaviour appropriate to academics and the conduct of research.” Codes of ethics include: Informed consent; deception; privacy and confidentiality; and accuracy (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000:138-140). There can be ethical issues involved in the selection, inclusion and exclusion of participants. Issues of privacy and confidentiality should be considered. The Data Protection Act (1998) declares that data can only be processed for a specific purpose and in many cases, only with full consent. Care was taken by the researcher to ensure that consumer email screening questionnaires and the digital interview recordings were anonymous to all but the researcher. Clear guidance was given to participants on the anticipated dissemination of the research findings to ensure that all involved were assured about issues of ownership of data and dissemination of personal information.

In addition, all of the three practitioners filled out ‘Practitioners’ Informed Consent Forms’, shown in Appendix 7, in which they signed that they freely participate to the

research study. The forms gave the nature of the research study and included the steps taken to protect participants with regards to anonymity and confidentiality of information. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, following consent, the identity of the practitioners was made known. Similarly, all of the sixteen participants filled out 'Consumers' Informed Consent Forms', shown in Appendix 8, in which they signed that they freely participate to the research study. Again, the forms gave the nature of the research study and included the steps taken to protect participants with regards to anonymity and confidentiality of information. The important difference here is that the identity of the consumers interviewed was not made known.

Furthermore, Yin (1994) states assurance of congruence between the research issues and features of the study design in the research design phase can increase reliability. Development and refinement of the case study protocol in the research design phase can be achieved by conducting several pilot studies testing the way of questioning and its structure (Eisenhardt, 1989; Mitchell, 1993; Yin, 1994). As mentioned earlier in this chapter, prior to interviewing any consumers, a successful pilot study was conducted in June 2008, using three participants. The depth of meaning required for this study was evident in the participants' responses, reassuring the researcher that the interview guide would allow the researcher to attempt to fully uncover the depth and richness of meaning in relation to the imagery and language used within the Highland Park web site.

5.12. Summary and Conclusions

This chapter began by outlining the research aim and objectives emerging from the literature review, in which the rationale behind the selection was given. The study's conceptual framework was illustrated in Figure 8, in which arrows were used to illustrate the 'loop' involved, ensuring that the 'full picture' was portrayed. To fulfil the research aim of developing a deeper understanding of online branding and communications by applying the theories and principles of semiotics, both encoders' and decoders' views were required. The philosophical foundations for the research approach

were then discussed, justifying the use of a single case study, Highland Park, within an interpretive framework. Following this was the outlining for both a practitioner (encoder) and participant (decoder) based research study. The data collection methods of an initial email questionnaire and lengthy qualitative semi-structured interviews were discussed and justified for use in this study. This was followed by detailing the coding of the data, in which semiotics was discussed and justified as a guide to the coding. The diagram in Figure 7 was again shown, to highlight the key areas of semiotic approaches that guided the coding phase. The validity and reliability of the research was then discussed and defended. Having detailed the study's methodology and research methods, the next chapter will detail the research findings.

6. Research Findings

6.1. Introduction

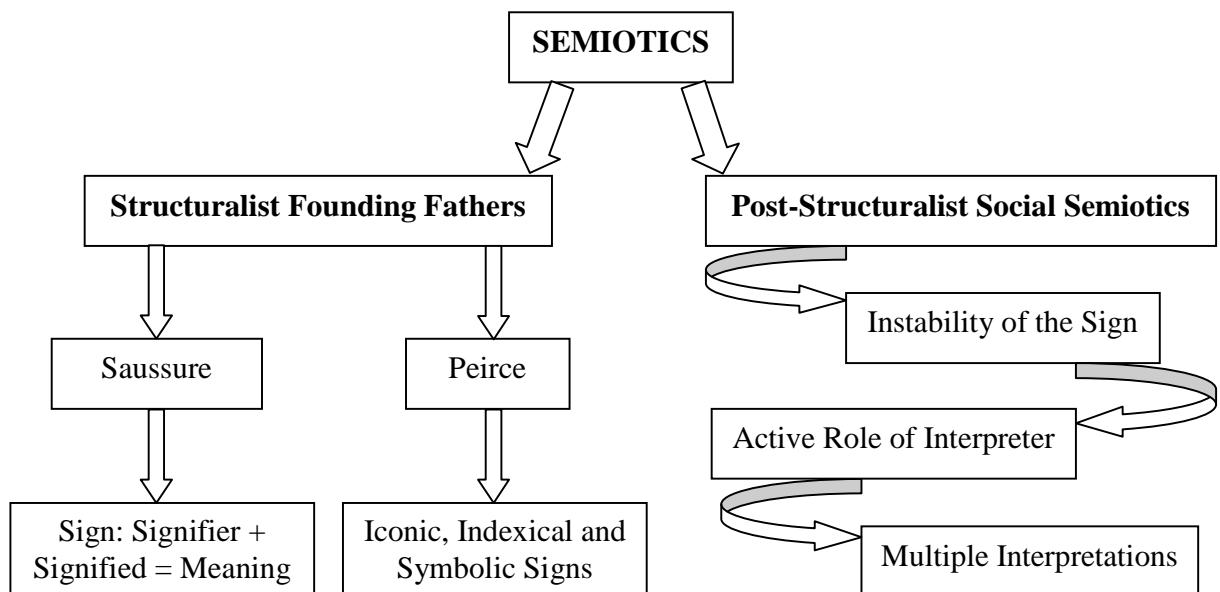
The previous chapter outlined the research aim and objectives emerging from the literature review. The philosophical foundations for the research approach were then discussed, justifying the use of a single case study, Highland Park, within an interpretive framework. Following this was the outlining for both a practitioner (encoder) and participant (decoder) based research study. The data collection methods of an initial email questionnaire and lengthy qualitative semi-structured interviews were discussed and justified for use in this study. This was followed by detailing the coding of the data, in which semiotics was discussed and justified as a guide to the coding. The validity and reliability of the research was then discussed and defended. To fulfil the research aim of developing a deeper understanding of online branding and communications by applying the theories and principles of semiotics, both encoders' and decoders' views were required.

This chapter details the findings of the encoder and decoder interview transcripts. This chapter is broken into two main sections: Findings from the four questions asked to the encoders and decoders by the researcher during the interviews; and findings from the six topic area discussions proposed to the encoders and decoders by the researcher during the interviews. Three encoders were interviewed: The Global Marketing Controller at Highland Park; The Head of Brand Education at Highland Park; and the Head Creative at Mountain Creative Design. Sixteen decoders were interviewed. The 'Consumer Sample Grid' on page 125 in the 'Methodology' chapter shows the selected consumers interviewed by the researcher. When detailing the responses from the encoders, each practitioner is identified clearly by job title throughout this chapter. When detailing the anonymous responses from the decoders, the researcher found that the most constructive way to do this throughout the chapter was to group the decoders' similar responses together. This was decided because semiotics guided the coding of the data. In order to

code the data using semiotics, it was beneficial to group responses together to help the researcher to delve deeper into the exploration of meaning production, and uncover the depth and richness of meaning involved.

With regards to semiotics guiding the coding of the data, Figure 7, extracted from page 65 in the ‘Semiotics’ chapter, and also shown on page 129 in the ‘Methodology’ chapter, is again shown below to portray how semiotics guided the coding of the data. This figure has not changed. Overall, the diagram below highlights not only the key contributions from the founding fathers, but also a consideration of social semiotics, and in particular, the importance of the instability of the sign, the active role of interpreters, and multiple interpretations being possible. These key areas of semiotic approaches are what guided the coding phase.

Figure 7: Diagram Summarizing Key Areas of Semiotic Approaches



Source: The author, based on the Semiotics chapter in the thesis literature review

'Sign' and 'meaning' are inextricable (Sless, 1986:88); to identify something as a sign is in the next breath to engage with its meaning, for it is the nature of signs to have a meaning. In this chapter the researcher aims to delve deeper into the exploration of meaning production, and uncover the depth and richness of meaning involved. The diagram above highlights how this can be done by considering the key contributions of the founding fathers of semiotics and also considering the contribution of social semiotics. Saussure's (1960:67) signifier-signified dichotomy shows that the sign consists of a signifier plus a signified that results in the meaning. Peirce (1931-58, 2.306) claimed that his theory of meaning derives from, and is justified by, his theory of signs. Peirce arrived at three types of signs: Icon, index and symbol. Saussure and Peirce's understanding of the sign was taken into consideration during the coding phase. In addition, a key point within social semiotics is the instability of the sign, and this concept was also taken into account during the coding phase. Finally, social semiotics alerts us to the importance of the active role of the reader (Chandler, 2002), and the possibility of multiple interpretations of a sign (Eco, 1976; Barthes, 1985). The concepts of the active role of the interpreter and multiple interpretation being possible, was taken into consideration during the coding phase.

With regards to interviewing the practitioners/encoders, three qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted between August 2007 and January 2008. Please refer again to Appendices 1, 2 and 3 for the practitioners'/encoders' interview guides. Two face-to-face interviews were carried out in Perth, the Head Office of Highland Park. The remaining face-to-face interview was carried out in Glasgow, the office of Mountain Creative Design agency. The sample was designed to ensure a spread across different roles involved in the re-design of the Highland Park brand across all of its communications. The Global Marketing Controller would give insight from a marketing perspective, the Head of Brand Education would give an insight into the consumer-facing side of the brand, and the Head Creative would give an insight into the creative agency involved in the re-design. The researcher recognized that viewpoints expressed may differ due to the different job positions held by the 'experts'.

Moreover, as mentioned in the ‘Methodology’ chapter, a successful pilot study involving three consumers was conducted in June 2008. The depth of meaning required for this study was evident in the participants’ responses, reassuring the researcher that this interview guide would allow the researcher to attempt to fully uncover the depth and richness of meaning in relation to the imagery and language used within the Highland Park web site. Having firstly interviewed the practitioners/encoders, the researcher had a clear agenda on how to set out the interview guide for interviewing the consumers/decoders. The consumer interview guide was an adjusted version of the practitioner interview guide, and was adapted to ensure that key questions were asked, and key topic areas were discussed, resulting in coherent interview transcripts that could then be analyzed by the researcher. Please refer again to Appendix 6 for the decoder/consumer interview guide. The interviews of consumers took place between July 2008 and September 2008. The face-to-face interviews were carried out in Glasgow, Scotland, and at the homes of the respondents for their convenience.

The next section is split into four areas and details the questions proposed to both the encoders and decoders and the responses they gave.

6.2. Encoder and Decoder Responses in Relation to Highland Park’s Brand Personality, and the Brand Image, Key Objectives, and Navigation and Interaction of its Web Site

Based on the order and content of the interview guides for both the encoders and decoders, the structure to this section has been devised. Covering the questions proposed to both the encoders and decoders and the responses they gave, this section is split into four areas, covering the following: Encoder and decoder responses given in relation to Highland Park’s brand personality; Encoder and decoder responses given in relation to the brand image (e-identity) of Highland Park’s web site; Encoder and decoder responses given in relation to the key objectives of Highland Park’s web site; and

Encoder and decoder responses given in relation to the navigational and interactive qualities of Highland Park's web site. Although semiotics plays an important role in guiding the coding of the interview transcripts, semiotic 'jargon' was not explicitly mentioned within these four questions asked to respondents.

6.2.1. Encoder and Decoder Responses in Relation to Highland Park's Brand Personality

With regards to brand personality and the answers given by the encoders, companies have long used brand personality as a way to create a point of differentiation between their products from their competitors' products, and as a way to create brand equity. By consuming a brand with a certain "personality," buyers of this product are able to express themselves (Belk, 1988) or at least some dimensions of themselves.

The encoders were asked the following question: *Brand personality can be defined as the set of human characteristics associated with a brand. How would you describe Highland Park's personality?*

The Global Marketing Controller at Highland Park answered:

"Substance over style. Integrity, considered, not flashy or showy, knowledgeable, it is the guy you go to ask the question that nobody knows the answer to, but he is not going to ask people to ask him, he just knows."

The Head Creative at Mountain Creative Design answered quite similarly:

"Quiet but inwardly confident."

However, the Head of Brand Education at Highland Park answered quite differently indeed:

"I am tempted to say a young Billy Connolly, but I suppose that would be too outlandish. There is a quirky nature to Highland Park, which I think is the island

people. Orkney is a good, fun place, so almost like a comedian or a story teller. He would have a weather beaten face, but be a kind, old man, who tells a good story.”

Thus, if brand personality is a central component of brand identity (Aaker, 1996), there is clearly conflict here between company representatives. Particularly when the Global Marketing Controller works in-house and the Head of Brand Education has a consumer-facing role, and is the ‘face’ of the company during global travels promoting the brand. Taking into account semiotics, the signifier here is the brand’s personality, and the responses given by the encoders is what they believe has been signified. The Global Marketing Controller and the Head Creative gave similar responses. However, the Head of Brand Education gave a different response. This could be explained through consideration of social semiotics. Social semiotics alerts us to the instability of the sign, and the possibilities of multiple interpretations of a sign (Eco, 1976; Barthes, 1985). In addition, the core identity, which is central to both the meaning and success of the brand, contains the associations that are most likely to remain constant as the brand travels to new markets and products (Aaker, 1996:86).

A brand personality does not often become a part of the core identity. However, it can be exactly the right vehicle to add needed texture and completeness by being part of the extended identity. For existing brands it is helpful to appreciate if there is a chasm between the desired brand personality and what consumers perceive. Although it may be beneficial for Highland Park to communicate a cohesive message on how as a company they perceive the brand’s personality, social semiotics would argue that there will be a chasm between the company’s desired brand personality and what consumers perceive.

This leads on to the answers given by the consumers/decoders. De Chernatony (2001:225) argues that unearthing consumers’ perceptions of a brand’s personality can be done through qualitative interviews, as was the case in this study. The decoders were asked the following question: *Brand personality can be defined as the set of human*

characteristics associated with a brand. How would you describe Highland Park's personality?

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, it was beneficial to group responses together to help the researcher to delve deeper into the exploration of meaning production, and uncover the depth and richness of meaning involved. Close identification with the personality of a brand helps influence consumer choice and usage.

Beginning with the most common answers from the decoders, ten out of the sixteen consumers used similar words referring to *dependability* when answering the question:

“reliable”, “consistent”, “strong”, “solid”, “long-lasting”, “serious”, “honest”, “quiet”, “subtle”, “stand-offish”, “respectable”, and “not ostentatious”.

The next responses came from consumers who were both Highland Park drinkers, and non-Highland Park drinkers. In a market that is culturally homogeneous, such as the UK, the creation of a brand personality that is perceived similarly by both users and non-users is quite plausible, because the people share similar cultural meanings (Foscht, Maloles, Swoboda, Morschett and Sinha, 2008).

Six out of the sixteen consumers commented on *heritage* using the words:

“tradition”, “history”, “classic”, “old-fashioned”, “original”, “authentic”, and “heritage”.

In addition, seven out of the sixteen consumers referred to *age* using the words:

“old”, “historical”, “mature”, “grown-up”, “older”, “adult”, and “middle-age”.

A further six out of the sixteen consumers mentioned *nationality* using the words:

“Scottish”, “Orkney”, “Orkadian”, “Viking”, “Norse man”, “Orkney different to rest of Scotland”, and “Scottish malt but different to rest”.

Comments on heritage and nationality and reference to age, can indeed be applied to single malt Scotch whisky Highland Park, but it could also be applied to any single malt Scotch whisky or blended Scotch whisky. Emotional benefits add richness and depth to the experience of owning and using the brand (Aaker, 1996:97). A brand can provide a self-expressive benefit by providing a way for a person to communicate his or her self-image (Aaker, 1996:99). When seeking to communicate the emotional values of the brand therefore, it is important to understand the emotional role potential customers expect of the brand (De Chernatony, 2001:33).

Six out of the sixteen consumers referred to *socio-economic standing* when answering the question:

“sophisticated”, “middle-class and above”, “well educated”, “articulate”, “interesting”, and “informative”.

Moreover, with regards to less popular answers, five out of the sixteen consumers used alike words referring to *value*:

“expensive”, “high quality”, “quality”, “spend extra money to get quality”, and “premium”.

Comments referring to socio-economic standing and value can indeed be applied to single malt Scotch whisky Highland Park, and can also be applied to any single malt Scotch whisky, more so than blended Scotch whisky. Highland Park produces single malts solely. Heath and Scott (1998) claim that the image individuals’ associate with themselves frequently dictates specific purchase behaviour patterns. The Image Congruence Hypothesis (Graeff, 1996), suggests that consumers should have favourable attitudes and purchase intentions towards products perceived to be congruent with their ideal self-image. When choosing between competing brands customers assess the fit between the personalities of competing brands and the personality they wish to project (De Chernatony, 2001:33).

Only three out of the sixteen consumers used the following rather *admiring* words, which it could be argued are in keeping with an ideal self-image:

“aspirational”, “stylish”, “refined”, and “attractive”.

Similarly, only two out of the sixteen consumers referred to it being rather *defined* using the words:

“distinctive”, “memorable”, and “unique”.

Also, only two out of the sixteen consumers answered referring to *pride* using the words:

“pride”, “self-belief”, and “proud”.

Taking into account semiotics, the signifier here is the brand’s personality, and the responses given by the decoders are what they believe has been signified, which did indeed differ. The decoders’ interpretations of the brand’s personality were varied, with answers referring to the following: dependability, heritage, age, socio-economic standing, value, admiration, defined and proud. Peirce (1931-58, 2.306) would argue that these responses are a symbol of Highland Park’s personality. This is because a sign is a symbol when the connection between the signifier and signified is based neither on resemblance nor on any existential link (Dyer, 1982:125). As with the encoders’ responses, they do of course differ. Again, this could be explained through consideration of social semiotics. Social semiotics alerts us to the instability of the sign, and the possibilities of multiple interpretations of a sign (Eco, 1976; Barthes, 1985).

Overall, this section on brand personality is in keeping with fulfilling the research objectives set out of establishing encoders’ intentions and decoders’ interpretations in relation to the use of imagery and language within the Highland Park web site. The overall message suggested by the encoders’ responses is that there is a lack of consistency among company representatives’ perceptions of how they see the brand’s personality. The Global Marketing Controller at Highland Park and the Head Creative at Mountain Creative Design gave quite similar responses, whereas the Head of Brand

Education at Highland Park gave a rather different response. This was explained through consideration of social semiotics. Although it may be beneficial for Highland Park to communicate a cohesive message on how as a company they perceive the brand's personality, social semiotics would argue that there will be a chasm between the company's desired brand personality and what consumers perceive.

The overall message suggested by the decoders' responses has been that of positive interpretations. The decoders' interpretations of the brand's personality were varied, with answers referring to the following: dependability, heritage, age, socio-economic standing, value, admiration, defined and proud. Peirce (1931-58, 2.306) would argue that these responses are a symbol of Highland Park's personality. As with the encoders' responses, they do of course differ. Again, this could be explained through consideration of social semiotics. The decoders' responses are more similar to the Global Marketing Controller and the Head Creative, however, the decoders do refer to "age" and the Head of Brand Education also referred to this.

6.2.2. Encoder and Decoder Responses in Relation to the Brand Image (E-identity) of Highland Park's Web Site

Following on from the 'brand personality' question, came the 'brand image' (e-identity) question. Within the brand culture perspective, brand identity forms the strategic heart of the brand. Brand identity is the totality of brand associations including name and symbols that must be communicated (Chaffey, Ellis-Chadwick, Johnston and Mayer, 2006:226). Identity is about the ethos, aims and values that present a sense of individuality differentiating a brand (De Chernatony, 2001:36). Brand associations are driven by the brand identity – what the organisation wants the brand to stand for in the customer's mind. The encoders were asked the following question: *How would you describe the brand image (e-identity) of Highland Park web site?*

The Global Marketing Controller at Highland Park answered:

“The brand e-identity is described as traditional, authentic, hand-crafted, raw and simple. It is not to confuse the consumer. It is a very simple process that we go through, and it is a very simple product that we create.”

Similarly, just as in the previous question, the Head Creative at Mountain Creative Design answered:

“Hand-crafted, simple, and honest. I wanted to de-engineer the site so it was simple, almost like reading a book with good quality photos in it. For me the most important thing was no flashy buttons. An easy to navigate site that everyone understands.”

However, again, like before in the previous question, the Head of Brand Education at Highland Park answered differently:

“The site for me serves a purpose. It does everything it is meant to do, but does not really inspire me to do anything else. It embodies the new change and position that we have had, so that it is bringing across one single message, and keeping it nice and consistent. What is lacking is the kind of island humour and story telling ability that comes through.”

Taking into account semiotics, the signifier here is the brand’s image (e-identity) of Highland Park web site, and the responses given by the encoders is what they believe has been signified. Similarly with the brand personality question, the Global Marketing Controller and the Head Creative gave similar responses, whereas the Head of Brand Education gave a different response. This could again be explained through consideration of social semiotics. Social semiotics alerts us to the instability of the sign, and the possibilities of multiple interpretations of a sign (Eco, 1976; Barthes, 1985). Although it may be beneficial for Highland Park to communicate a cohesive message on how as a company they perceive the brand’s image (e-identity) of their web site, social semiotics would argue that there will be a chasm between the company’s desired image

and what consumers perceive. It is also interesting that there may be significant differences between the encoders i.e. between those responsible for communicating the brand's image, and so the chasm is not simply internal versus external as is usually assumed.

Thought needs to be given to the way customers perceive the brand, since their perception (brand image) may be different from the intended projection (brand identity) (De Chernatony, 2001:38-9). The decoders were asked the following question: *How would you describe the brand image (e-identity) of Highland Park web site?*

A brand's positioning sets out what the brand is, who it is for and what it offers (Harris and De Chernatony, 2001). Beginning with the most common answers from the decoders, eleven out of the sixteen consumers referred to the *Scottish connections* in their responses:

“Scottish roots”, “history”, “Scottish”, “goes back to its roots”, “Orkadian history”, “North of Scotland”, “linked with Orkney”, “Scottishness”, “history lesson”, “Visit Scotland web site”, “celtic”, and “celtic emblem - reminiscent of clan broaches”.

A vivid, meaningful heritage also can sometimes represent the essence of the brand (Aaker, 1996:85): Six out of the sixteen consumers referred to *heritage* using the words:

“history”, “heritage”, “extensive time period”, “traditional yet modern”, “slow to change”, “around for long time”, “traditional”, “old-fashioned”, and “updated to have modern look on historic features”.

A commonly held conception is that brand managers should strive for consistency in the marketing communication. Erdem and Swait (1998) suggest that brand value is increased by consistent communication of the brand over time. Haynes et al. (1999) emphasize the importance of coordinating all elements in the marketing communication

to ensure a consistent brand image that will appeal to customers (Lange and Dahlen, 2003).

Three out of the sixteen consumers referred to the brand image on the web site as being *reliable*, using the words:

“strong”, “safe”, “secure”, “trust”, and “good at what we do”.

A further three out of the sixteen consumers referred to it being rather *defined* using the words:

“special”, “unique”, “rare”, and “distinctive”.

In addition, two out of the sixteen consumers commented on its *age appeal* using the words:

“not appealing to younger generations”.

Successful brands must offer superior value to consumers and differentiate an offering from those of competitors (Fill, 2002). This is achieved by building a brand image. Brand image is defined by Keller (1993:3) as “perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory”. Brand image is how the brand is now perceived (Aaker, 1996:71). This image may appeal to consumers at a functional or symbolic level.

Five out of the sixteen consumers commented on the *elemental aspects of Orkney*, using the words:

“natural”, “atmospheric”, “lonely”, “quiet”, “wild”, “scenery”, “not urban Scottishness but native i.e. relationship between land and sea”, “grounded”, “product of the ground”, “cold” and “windy and cold”.

At an emotional level a brand name may allow the brand to serve functions in personal identification, social identification and status (symbol of power or social status,

reflection of social approval, exclusivity, contribution of emotional experiences or technical superiority), product aesthetics may also contribute to this emotional appeal (Simms and Trott, 2006).

Four out of the sixteen consumers commented on the *colours used* with the words:

“black”, “white”, “greyness”, “monochrome”, “monochrome is tired”, “dated colours”, “modern themes of monochrome represent long tradition”, “bleakness”, and “greyness”.

In addition, five out of the sixteen consumers continued discussion on the theme of *colour*:

“considered i.e. not bright and garish colours”, “subtle branding”, “little colour”, “not bright”, “gloomy”, and “not too flash”.

Taking into account semiotics, the signifier here is the brand’s image (e-identity) of Highland Park web site, and the responses given by the decoders are what they believe has been signified, which did indeed differ. The decoders’ interpretations of the image of the Highland Park brand on their web site identified the following key words: Scottish connections, heritage, reliability, defined, an older age appeal, the elemental aspects of Orkney, and colour themes. Peirce (1931-58, 2.306) would argue that these responses are a symbol of Highland Park’s brand image on their web site. This is because a sign is a symbol when the connection between the signifier and signified is based neither on resemblance nor on any existential link (Dyer, 1982:125). As with the encoders’ responses, they do of course differ. Again, this could be explained through consideration of social semiotics. Social semiotics alerts us to the instability of the sign, and the possibilities of multiple interpretations of a sign (Eco, 1976; Barthes, 1985).

As with the section on brand personality, this section is in keeping with fulfilling the research objectives set out of establishing encoders’ intentions and decoders’ interpretations in relation to the use of imagery and language within the Highland Park

web site. Again, the overall message coming out from the encoders' responses is that there is a lack of consistency among company representatives' perceptions of how they see the brand's image on the web site. The Global Marketing Controller at Highland Park described the brand e-identity using the words "traditional", "authentic", "hand-crafted", and "raw and simple." Similarly, the Head Creative at Mountain Creative Design described the brand e-identity using the words "hand-crafted", "simple" and "honest." As was the case in the previous section on the brand's personality, the Head of Brand Education at Highland Park responded rather differently to these two practitioners. Similarly to the response given when describing the brand's personality, the Head of Brand Education gave the following answer when asked to describe the brand e-identity: "What is lacking is the kind of island humour and story-telling ability that comes through." This was explained through consideration of social semiotics. Although it may be beneficial for Highland Park to communicate a cohesive message on how as a company they perceive the brand image (e-identity) of Highland Park's web site, social semiotics would argue that there will be a chasm between the company's desired brand image (e-identity) and what consumers perceive. As previously mentioned, it is again interesting that there may be significant differences between the encoders i.e. between those responsible for communicating the brand's image, and so the chasm is not simply internal versus external as is usually assumed.

The overall message suggested from the decoders' responses has been that of positive interpretations. The overall message suggested from the decoders' responses has been that of positive interpretations. The decoders' interpretations of the image of the Highland Park brand on their web site identified the following key words: Scottish connections, heritage, reliability, defined, an older age appeal, the elemental aspects of Orkney, and colour themes. Peirce (1931-58, 2.306) would argue that these responses are a symbol of Highland Park's personality. These responses are similar to the responses the decoders gave in the previous section in which they were asked to describe Highland Park's brand personality. Therefore, it appears that there is an overlap and that

decoders believe the brand's personality and the brand's image (e-identity) on the web site are indeed very similar, in which the lines distinguishing the two are very blurry.

6.2.3. Encoder and Decoder Responses in Relation to the Key Objectives of Highland Park's Web Site

The internet offers new opportunities to build and strengthen the brand (Smith and Chaffey, 2005). The web site itself can inform, persuade and remind customers about the offering. The encoders were asked the following question: *What do you think are the key objectives of the Highland Park web site?*

The Global Marketing Controller at Highland Park answered:

“To try to bring a little bit of Orkney to your screen. The ambition was not to deliver the Orkney tourist board, but to try to deliver the rawness, harshness, isolation, emptiness. The solitude, and the natural wonder and mysticism of Orkney. It is the kind of island that inspires people.”

The Head Creative at Mountain Creative Design answered:

“To communicate the new brand identity.”

However, the Head of Brand Education at Highland Park gave the following answer:

“Like most things on Orkney for me, it is functionality. The site does everything it is meant to for a whisky company. It does not say I am fantastic, come and see me again, but it does not say go away.”

The three practitioners gave very different answers. The Global Marketing Controller believes the key objective is to bring a little bit of Orkney to the screen. The Head Creative merely states the key objective is “to communicate the new brand identity.” Giving a very practical answer, the Head of Brand Education contends: “Like most things on Orkney for me, it is functionality.” Again, the overall message suggested by

the encoders' responses is that there is a lack of consistency among company representatives' perceptions of what the key objectives are of Highland Park's web sites. Again, this could be explained through consideration of social semiotics. Social semiotics alerts us to the instability of the sign, and the possibilities of multiple interpretations of a sign (Eco, 1976; Barthes, 1985).

The internet offers new opportunities to build and strengthen the brand (Smith and Chaffey, 2005). The decoders were also asked the following question: *What do you think are the key objectives of the Highland Park web site?*

Beginning with the most common answers from the decoders, eight out of the sixteen consumers again referred to *heritage* using the words:

“Scottish”, “Celtic”, “around a long time”, “heritage”, “history of whisky”, “history behind drink”, “too deeply rooted in tradition as opposed to brand”, “tradition”, “buying quality”, “buying Scottishness”, “custodians of distilling process of Highland Park”, and “history”.

Five out of the sixteen consumers referred to the *links with Orkney* using the words:

“links whisky with Orkney”, “promoting tourism in Orkney”, “get across a lot about Orkney”, “links Highland Park uniqueness with uniqueness of Orkney”, and “come and see Orkney and come and visit Highland Park – almost tourist site”.

Also, four out of the sixteen consumers mentioned *unique characteristics* in relation to the web site using the words:

“show they are superior and tell world they think they are the best”, “trying to differentiate from competitors”, “set themselves apart as more aspirational drink than competitors”, “putting itself above competitors”, and “make it more distinctive than others”.

Moving on to less popular answers, three out of the sixteen consumers commented on the *brand's image* using the words:

“enhance image of Highland Park – makes it look sophisticated”, “reliable”, “strong”, “strength”, and “symbolise the strength with the Orkney link because it survives the wild weather”.

In addition, three out of the sixteen consumers commented on *age* in relation to the web site using the words:

“grown-up”, “not for young people”, “for those who recognise it is a decent whisky”, and “older and less fun, needs to be more fun to tap into new markets”.

Finally, three out of the sixteen consumers referred to the *brand awareness* in relation to the objectives of the web site using the words:

“raise brand awareness”, “boost sales”, and “the different types of whiskies they have”.

The overall message suggested by the decoders' responses has again been that of positive interpretations. The decoders' interpretations of the key objectives of the Highland Park web site identified the following key words: heritage, links with Orkney, unique characteristics of the brand, brand's image, age, and brand awareness. Peirce (1931-58, 2.306) would argue that these responses are an index for the key objectives of the Highland Park web site. This is because a sign is an index if it has a direct causal connection with its object, and draws attention to that object (Dyer, 1982:124). Again, there is some overlap with the above sections that asked about the brand's personality and the brand's image (e-identity) on the web site. It appears that the decoders believe the brand's personality, the brand's image (e-identity) on the web site, and the key objectives of the web site are indeed very similar, in which the lines distinguishing the three are quite blurry.

This section is in keeping with fulfilling the objective of discovering the effect that viewing the imagery and language on the internet web site has on the participants' interpretations. The overall message suggested by the encoders' responses is that there is a lack of consistency among company representatives' perceptions of what they believe to be the key objectives of the web site. The Global Marketing Controller at Highland Park believed that the key objective of the web site is to "deliver the rawness, harshness, isolation, emptiness, solitude, and the natural wonder and mysticism of Orkney." Whereas the Head of Brand Education gave a very practical answer and stated: "Like most things on Orkney for me, it is functionality." The Head Creative at Mountain Creative Design, however, merely stated the key objective of the web site was "to communicate the new brand identity." This could be explained through consideration of social semiotics.

6.2.4. Encoders and Decoders Responses in Relation to the Navigational and Interactive Qualities of Highland Park's Web Site

The coding in this section is less guided by semiotics, and as a result, limits the researcher in delving deeper into the exploration of meaning production, and uncovering the depth and richness of meaning involved. However, this section is indeed important in this study. This is because media context is thought to have an important influence on the value of marketing communications (Ducoffe, 1996). An important component is the message context, or setting, in which the entire transaction takes place. The context in which any message is emitted, transmitted and admitted, decisively influences its interpretation, and visa versa; messages are always more or less context-sensitive (Sebeok in Blonsky, 1985:453-454). Similarly, Aaker and Brown's (1972) research on brands has shown that marketers delivering the same marketing communications' messages to the same audience can generate different effects depending on the context in which the marketing communications are embedded. Thus, semiotics does play some form of role here, as this is in keeping with Eco (1976) who contends that multiple

interpretations are indeed possible, and in this case is it dependent on the context in which the marketing communications are embedded.

Following on from the question of the key objectives of the web site, the encoders were asked: *In terms of navigation and interactivity, how would you rate the Highland Park web site?*

The Global Marketing Controller at Highland Park answered:

“I think it feels quite easy to flick through and there are never loads of navigation points, so it is a very simple web site.”

Also, the Head Creative at Mountain Creative Design answered:

“I really like the site, it tells me what I expect to know about Highland Park, and shows me images of what I expect to see.”

Smith and Chaffey (2005) note that a key success factor in e-marketing is achieving customer satisfaction through the electronic channel, which raises issues such as: is the site easy to use, does it perform adequately....? (cited in Chaffey, Ellis-Chadwick, Johnston and Mayer, 2006:9).

The Head of Brand Education at Highland Park answered:

“Ease of use 9 out of 10, because it is very easy to use. Navigation is relatively simple. The only thing we do wrong...you have to scroll down to the navigation points which is a bit annoying...It flows in order of making the whisky and then the shop - this is where the functionality of the site comes through. There is not a massive amount of stuff to enjoy, unless you are a reader. Low in the scale of interactivity, but 9 out of 10 for imagery...”

The general consensus among the encoders is that the site is relatively easy to use, but is lacking in interactivity. The Global Marketing Controller refers to the site as being easy

to use with good navigational links. With regards to interactive qualities, he openly states that the site is not very interactive when he declares that they did not want to “give off too many high tech modernity, technology driven gadgets, because it takes away from what we do.” Similarly, the Head of Brand Education at Highland Park responded using the following words: “Navigation is relatively simple” and “it flows in order.” With regards to interactivity, the Head of Brand Education believes the site to be “low in the scale of interactivity.” The Head Creative at Mountain Creative Design merely responded by saying that he “really likes the site” because it tells him what he expects to know about Highland Park and shows him images he expects to see. Therefore, the Head Creative commented on the content of the web site as opposed to answering the question on navigation and interactivity. Lack of interactivity is presumably something that needs to be addressed by the company, as it aids relationship building with customers via two-way communication.

The decoders were also asked the following questions: *In terms of navigation and interactivity, how would you rate the Highland Park web site?* To achieve ease-of-use, web sites need to be structured in such a way that users can easily navigate. Devising a site that is easy to use is critically dependent on the design of the site navigation scheme. Navigation describes how easy it is to find and move between different information on a web site. It is governed by menu arrangements, site structure and the layout of individual pages (Chaffey, Ellis-Chadwick, Johnston and Mayer, 2006:328).

Seven out of the sixteen consumers commented positively on ease-of-use:

“easy to use”, “headings on homepage takes you to the obvious detail”, “very easy to navigate”, “easy to move around quickly, the navigation is really good because of the order of the links”, “easy to use with headings and sub-headings”, “easy to read and go through”, and “not difficult to use”.

Similarly, encouraging comments were made from the seven consumers on the navigational links:

“sign posts are quite obvious”, “like bottom links because you can jump straight to things”, “good navigation because main links are at the bottom with different links on the right hand side – allows you to progress through site,” “very easy to navigate with lots of options,” “links are placed correctly as you read left to right then onto the bottom,” “good and simple navigation with clear links,” “links at the bottom gives it a classy nature and feel”.

It has been suggested that there are three important aspects to a site that is easy to navigate: Consistency; Simplicity; and Context (Chaffey, Ellis-Chadwick, Johnston and Mayer, 2006). Context is the use of ‘signposts’ to indicate to users where they are located within the site, in other words to reassure users that they are not ‘lost’.

Bearing this in mind, six out of the sixteen consumers commented rather negatively on the navigational links using the words:

“links at the bottom are bad – have to keep scrolling down and it is quite frustrating”, “prefer the links to be at top so they are more visible,” “did not notice categories at bottom at first, they could be further up on page or at the top”, “poor navigation because every time you change page you have to scroll down to the bottom to find the bars”, “the links down the right hand side are a bit confusing,” “links on right hand side confuse you at first before you see the bottom links”.

Moving on, interactivity has been described as an important feature that distinguishes the internet from every other medium (Roehm and Haugtvedt, 1999). Enhancing the interactivity of a web site is seen as a means of giving the site a competitive edge (Fiore and Jin, 2003).

Looking at the responses to the interactivity of the site, six out of the sixteen consumers gave positive comments:

“good interactivity”, “good interactivity because it’s talking to me not at me”, “interactivity fine because I see prices and I am able to purchase”, “interactivity is fine because I don’t really want to interact with the site”, “interactive site because it pulls me in and makes me feel a part of it”, “interactivity is fine because it led me along the story”

From a user-message interaction perspective, interactivity is defined as the ability of the user to control and modify messages: “The extent to which users can participate in modifying the form and content of a mediated environment in real time” (Steuer, 1992:84). Web site content needs to be up-to-date, in line with customer expectations. The web is perceived as a dynamic medium, and customers are likely to expect new information to be posted to a site straight away. If material is inaccurate or stale then the customer may not return to the site (Chaffey, Ellis-Chadwick, Johnston and Mayer, 2006:434).

Bearing this in mind, ten out of the sixteen consumers commented rather negatively on the interactivity of the site:

“you can sign up to the Inner Circle but it should not be hidden at the back of site”, “poor interactivity with old news and the Inner Circle”, “would be better if it was easier to contact Highland Park”, “would be better if I saw more bottles because that’s what we see in shops”, “I was not pulled in by the site; I interacted only with the photography”, “poor interactivity because a lot of reading and not a lot of doing”, “not very interactive because nothing draws me to it or engages me because I could read all of this on a pamphlet as opposed to a web site”, “poor interactivity because the pointer over the words should compliment or extend what is on screen rather than repeat, and poor interactivity because when I move the pointer over the image I would like to see movement, motion or change in the image”, “poor interactivity because site does not help me to reduce the number of clicks to get to where I want e.g. in the Whisky section give me a drop down menu”, “changing the order would improve interactivity.”

This section is in keeping with fulfilling the objective of discovering the effect that viewing the imagery and language on the internet web site has on the participants' interpretations. The context in which any message is emitted, transmitted and admitted, decisively influences its interpretation, and visa versa; messages are always more or less context-sensitive (Sebeok in Blonsky, 1985:453-454). Similarly, Aaker and Brown's (1972) research on brands has shown that marketers delivering the same marketing communications' messages to the same audience can generate different effects depending on the context in which the marketing communications are embedded. Thus, semiotics does play some form of role here, as this is in keeping with Eco (1976) who contends that multiple interpretations are indeed possible, and in this case is it dependent on the context in which the marketing communications are embedded. However, in comparison with the first three questions and responses, the role semiotics played in guiding the coding of this current section was significantly less.

Overall, the general consensus between decoders is that the web site is indeed relatively easy to use with good navigational links. The majority of decoders commented positively on the site's ease-of-use, for example, using the words "not difficult to use." Encouraging comments were made from the majority of decoders on the navigational links, for example, using the words "good and simple navigation with clear links." However, it is clear that the decoders' think that the web site is lacking in qualities of interactivity, using the words "poor interactivity."

In addition, the general consensus among the encoders was the same, in that the site is relatively easy to use, but is lacking in interactivity. The Global Marketing Controller at Highland Park responded using the following words: "I think it feels quite easy to flick through and there are never loads of navigation points, so it is a very simple web site." Thus, it is easy to use with good navigational links, but with regards to interactive qualities, the Global Marketing Controller states: "We do not want to give off too many high tech modernity, technology driven gadgets, because it takes away from what we

do.” Thus, openly stating that this site is not a very interactive site. Similarly, the Head of Brand Education at Highland Park responded using the following words: “Navigation is relatively simple” and “it flows in order.”

With regards to interactivity, the Head of Brand Education believes the site to be “low in the scale of interactivity.” The Head Creative at Mountain Creative Design merely responded by saying that he “really likes the site” because it tells him what he expects to know about Highland Park and shows him images he expects to see. Therefore, the Head Creative commented on the content of the web site as opposed to answering the question on navigation and interactivity. Lack of interactivity is presumably something that needs to be addressed by the company, as it aids relationship building with customers via two-way communication. As Fiore and Jin (2003) state, enhancing the interactivity of a web site is seen as a means of giving the site a competitive edge.

The next section details the six topic area discussions proposed to both the encoders and decoders and the responses they gave.

6.3. Encoder and Decoder Responses in Relation to Highland Park’s Symbol, Name Style, Colours, Packaging, Photography and Text within its Web Site

This section covers the topic area discussions proposed and the responses given in relation to the brand, Highland Park’s, chosen symbol, name style, colours, entire packaging, and photography and text used within the web site of Highland Park. Covering both the encoders’ and decoders’ responses, this section is split into six areas, with discussions on the following topics: Highland Park’s ‘h’ emblem; Highland Park’s name style; Colour of Highland Park’s web page backgrounds; Highland Park’s bottles, labels and packaging; Photography used within Highland Park’s web site; and text used (wording and appearance) within Highland Park’s web site. Similarly with the previous section, although semiotics plays an important role in guiding the coding of the

interview transcripts, semiotic ‘jargon’ was not explicitly mentioned when proposing the six topic area discussions to respondents.

6.3.1. Encoder and Decoder Responses in Relation to Highland Park’s Symbol within its Web Site

Firstly looking at the encoders’ discussion on the brand’s symbol, the ‘h’ emblem. The encoders were shown the ‘h’ emblem on the web site and then were asked by the researcher to discuss their thoughts on it. As mentioned in the ‘Semiotics’ chapter, Saussure’s (1916) structuralist semiotics regards the *sign* as the *signifier* (physical form of sign) plus the *signified* (associated mental concept), which results in the meaning. With regards to Highland Park’s ‘h’ emblem, Saussure’s (1916) semiotics regards the emblem as the *signifier*. The responses given by the encoders are regarded by Saussure (1916) as the *signified*.

The Global Marketing Controller at Highland Park answered:

“Your emblem, your brand identity, should reflect what the brand stands for, and a hand-crafted, jewellery made, Orcadian ‘h’ says what we are all about.”

In this instance, the Global Marketing Controller is saying that what has been signified here is a hand-crafted, Orcadian, jewellery piece, and that this reflects what the Highland Park brand stands for. Elevating symbols to the status of being part of the identity reflects their potential power (Aaker, 1996). The Head of Brand Education at Highland Park did not comment on this.

Similarly to the Global Marketing Controller, the Head Creative at Mountain Creative Design answered:

“It is a piece of jewellery, made in 3 dimensions, out of real silver. A boat in a Viking ship museum in Denmark had an ‘h’ very similar to the new emblem. I then studied all of the knot work and the shapes used, and combined it with my

knowledge of Celtic art, and came up with the new shape. The new shape is both modern and ancient. It is communicating the core thing – ‘h’ for Highland Park. It had to be strong and say we are a modern malt whisky brand with heritage.”

There are a multitude of key points here. The Head Creative is saying the signifier, the ‘h’, is signifying the brand Highland Park. Also, that the signifier is signifying an emblem on a Viking ship. Celtic art has also been signified on this occasion. Finally, the signifier, the ‘h’, is signifying that the brand is a modern brand but with heritage. Furthermore, the Head Creative commenting that the ‘h’ emblem is communicating the core thing – ‘h’ for Highland Park. *Denotation* in which Saussure (1960) worked on plays a part here because it describes the relationship between the signifier and the signified within the sign; the common sense and obvious meaning of the sign.

Secondly looking at the decoders’ discussion on the brand’s symbol, the ‘h’ emblem. The decoders were also shown the ‘h’ emblem on the web site and then were asked by the researcher to discuss their thoughts on it.

Only one of the sixteen consumers responded the same as the Head Creative saying:
“the ‘h’ is clearly for Highland Park.”

This is in keeping with Peirce’s (1931-58, 2.306) *indexical sign* in which the ‘h’ is an index for Highland Park.

However, in contrast three of the sixteen consumers responded saying:

“the ‘h’ looks like ‘n’”, “not obviously an ‘h’”, “it’s an ‘n’ for Norse not ‘h’ for Highland Park.”

Peirce (1931-58, 2.306) states that an indexical sign can indicate further or additional meaning to one immediately or obviously signified. For five out of the sixteen consumers, rather different connotations enter their minds:

“it’s shaped like a Guinness harp”, “it’s a heraldic shield; war like”, “it’s Vikingsque, like from an ancient book or carving”, “it looks like a plectrum”, and “it looks like a bad tattoo.”

Symbols involving visual imagery can be memorable and powerful (Aaker, 1996). The rationale is that pictures are perceived faster than words (Edell and Staelin, 1983). However, as the literature on social semiotics draws upon, meaning is very difficult to tie down; it is contingent, unstable and very much dependent on the specific use context. This is in contrast to Saussure’s structural semiotics that states that the meaning of the sign is indeed stable. This reinforces social semiotics contention on the instability of the sign. The responses from participants have shown that this is indeed not the case.

Symbols are powerful tools for communication (Feucht 1989). As Smith and Taylor (2002) state, if brands are not aware of the subtle meanings of symbols, then they would be liable to communicate the wrong message. Based on the above, only one participant interpreted correctly what was intended, that the ‘h’ emblem stood for Highland Park. Unfortunately for the encoders, three decoders said it is not obvious that it is an ‘h’, or that it in fact looks like an ‘n’. More importantly, five consumers responded nowhere near what was intended by the encoders, with one participant even referring to it as looking like a “bad tattoo.” This is not the best response for Highland Park given that logos should speed recognition of a company or brand (Peter 1989). With reference to social semiotics, discussing ‘aberrant decoding’, Eco (1972) claims different people bring different codes to a given message and so interpret it in different ways. Perhaps this helps to explain why those five participants responded nowhere near what was intended by the encoders.

In addition, the Head Creative of Mountain Creative Design states:

“I studied all of the knot work and the shapes used.”

Eight out of the sixteen consumers commented on the knot work within the emblem using the words:

“rope work”, “feminine twirls”, “curved and gentle knot work”, and “rounded off.”

Similarly, the Global Marketing Controller and the Head Creative referred to the emblem as:

“a jewellery piece.”

Seven out of the sixteen consumers also commented on the emblem as a jewellery piece using the words:

“looks like piece of jewellery”, “piece of Orcadian jewellery”, “ornate”, “silver in line with Celtic theme”, “Celtic broach”, and “piece of jewellery because ‘h’ connected to points”.

According to Aaker (1996:148), a symbol can be a powerful influence on brand personality because it can be controlled and can have extremely strong associations.

The Head Creative at Mountain Creative Design comments:

“the shape is both modern and ancient”.

With regards to the decoders’ interpreting what was intended by the encoders, thirteen out of the sixteen consumers commented on the “ancient” part, not the “modern” part, describing the ‘h’ emblem using the words:

“traditional, historical, sticking to roots, old, old-fashioned, history, mythology, older times, roots, heritage, not modern symbol, old world.”

According to Bernstein (1986), a symbol can become a type of shorthand for the personality of the company and its values. Nostalgia serves as a potent weapon for brand differentiation. Based on the above, the consumers appear to be saying this with words

such as “old world.” Social experts suggest that the appeal of nostalgia stems from a longing for a return to simpler times when product quality and craftsmanship were highly regarded and seemingly more prevalent (Cheskin Research, 1998). Consumers also have a tendency to equate longevity with quality (Naughton and Vlastic, 1998). Again, based on the above, the consumers appear to be saying this with words such as “historical” and “heritage.”

Moreover, a total of fifteen out of the sixteen consumers referred to the symbol’s ‘roots’ and described the ‘h’ emblem using the words:

“Celtic, Orkney, Scandinavian, Scottish, North of Scotland, Pictish, Celtic regions, Norse.”

Dowling (1994) describes corporate identity as referring to the symbols an organization uses to identify itself to individuals. With regards to the Head Creative mentioning the “Celtic” connection, the researcher bares in mind connotation, which describes the interaction that occurs when the sign meets the feelings or emotions of the users and the values of their culture. Marketing communications excel in appropriating or borrowing cultural codes and styles (Schroeder, 2007).

According to Sokolow (1971), the two major requisites of a good corporate symbol are for it to appeal on an emotional level and be practical to apply. The closer the symbol gets to an individual’s identity, or most deep rooted beliefs, the more fervently he or she will identify with and respond to it.

Ten out of the sixteen consumers commented on the emblem’s likeability factor using the words:

“like it”, “really nice logo”, “good idea”, “brilliant design”, “lovely”, “nice symbol”, “nice”, “very pretty”, “very nice graphic”, and “like shape of it.”

Eleven out of the sixteen consumers commented optimistically on its presence on the web site using the words:

“not fussy”, “not overstated”, “simple”, “not intrusive”, “subtle”, “bold but does not obscure from overall picture”, “does not offend”, “blends in”, “not bold”, “does not detract”, and “it’s restrained not garish”.

According to Olins (1989:71): “Symbols have the power to affect the way people feel.” Sokolow (1971) claims that graphic symbols are unique, because they can evoke intense feelings and emotions, which may result in powerful responses.

Four out of the sixteen consumers favourably described the emblem overall using the words:

“sophisticated”, “elegant”, “beauty”, “artistic”, “mystery.”

In addition, a strong symbol can provide cohesion and structure to an identity and make it much easier to gain recognition and recall (Aaker, 1996:84).

With regards to cohesion, eight out of the sixteen consumers commented on the homepage ‘h’ versus the ‘h’ on the rest of the site, using the words:

“silver one in site more inviting than homepage one, more successful on homepage than rest of site – should come through behind like homepage, reminds you whose site you are on, like it throughout site but maybe does not need to be on every page, should be more at the forefront on the homepage, like silver one throughout site, like silver one throughout site, homepage one looks more traditional versus graphic design one throughout site.”

This section is in keeping with fulfilling the research objectives of establishing encoders’ intentions and decoders’ interpretations in relation to the use of the imagery and language within the Highland Park web site. Overall, the majority of decoders’ interpretations were in agreement with the encoders’ intentions. Similar discussion

covered the 'h' emblem as a "piece of jewellery", the "heritage" behind it, the "knot work" used, and the "Celtic" theme. Importantly, ten out of the sixteen decoders commented confidently on the likeability factor of the emblem, and four out of the sixteen described it very favourably indeed. Presumably the company would be very pleased with this outcome.

The only contrast and potential problem arose when describing what the 'h' emblem stood for. Only one out of the sixteen consumers interpreted correctly what was intended, in that 'h' stood for Highland Park. With regards to semiotics, this is in keeping with Peirce's (1931-58, 2.306) *indexical sign* in which the 'h' is an index for Highland Park. However, unfortunately for the encoders, three consumers said it is not obvious that it is an 'h', or that it in fact looks like an 'n'. More significantly, five consumers responded nowhere near what was intended by the encoders, with one consumer even referring to it as looking like a "bad tattoo." This again highlights social semiotics contention on the instability of the sign. As Smith and Taylor (2002) state, if brands are not aware of the subtle meanings of symbols, then they would be liable to communicate the wrong message. As previously mentioned, this is not the best response for Highland Park given that logos should speed recognition of a company or brand (Peter 1989). Perhaps the reference made to social semiotics, in which different people bring different codes to a given message and so interpret it in different ways (Eco, 1972), helps to explain why those participants responded nowhere near what was intended by the encoders.

6.3.2. Encoder and Decoder Responses in Relation to Highland Park's Name Style within its Web Site

Firstly looking at the encoders' discussion on the brand's name style, in which they were shown it on the web site and then were asked by the researcher to discuss their thoughts on it. Defining a brand as "a name, term, symbol, design or a combination of them" implies that the name forms the essence of the brand concept (Aaker, 1991:187). Names

are the critical, core sign of the brand; they constitute the basis for the corporate communications programme and for consumers' awareness and images (Aaker, 1991). Graphics include name styles and graphical elements include typeface and colour. Graphical elements have the capacity to connote symbolism, as these attributes often share a distinctive public meaning in a culture (Hine, 1995).

The Global Marketing Controller at Highland Park answered:

“Consistency and control are key. There are brand identity guidelines on how you can and cannot use the logo, in terms of angles, typography, style changes, size, proportions, and distances from the edge of the page.”

As Snyder (1993) remarks, corporate identity literature treats logos as a company's signature on its materials. The Head of Brand Education at Highland Park did not comment on this, but the Head Creative at Mountain Creative Design answered:

“We merged the ‘h’ amulette together with the name styles, and that is now the current branding.”

Secondly looking at the decoders' discussion on the brand's name style, in which they were shown it on the web site and then were asked by the researcher to discuss their thoughts on it. Semiotics views logos as part of the sign system a company uses to communicate itself to internal and external audiences (Zakia and Nadin, 1987).

A total of fourteen out of the sixteen consumers gave their thoughts on the *font* used. The majority of consumers answered positively using the words:

“nice and classic font”, “like plainness of font”, “like typeface”, “impressive, mature and long-lasting font”, “block capitals carry more impact”, “nice and bold and serious”, “like font because it is straight-forward and simple”, “stands out all in capitals”, “nothing special but clear and nice letters”, “bold font”, “classic Highland Park font”, “standard text”.

Only a couple of consumers answered negatively using the words:

“hate the font because it does not agree with my eyes” and “plain and boring font.”

Logos should elicit a consensually held meaning in the target market, and evoke positive affect (Henderson and Cote, 1998). However, when fourteen out of the sixteen consumers commented on the *positioning* of the name style on the web site, the majority of consumers did not respond encouragingly, with nine out of the sixteen using the words:

“did not notice it”, “it’s hidden”, “it looks like it’s been forgotten about put in at last minute”, “it’s just stuck up there”, “I did not notice it straight away”, “It would have been better if it was below the photo”, “I hardly notice it”, “It’s too subtle”, “it could be placed further down, above the main headings”, and “it’s not obvious.”

On the other hand, seven out of the sixteen consumers did comment positively using the words:

“it’s in the correct position”, “the position is fine”, “it’s noticeable”, “I like the top right position”, “it’s in the perfect position”, “it stands out and is quite clear”, and “it’s striking”.

In addition, two out of the sixteen consumers commented negatively on the name style’s position in relation to the position of the ‘h’ emblem, using the words:

“it’s competing with the ‘h’”, “it’s at odds with the ‘h’”.

A brand name is associated with a set of attributes and psychological associations which give a brand its meaning (Keller, 1998). The name is a critical, core sign of the brand, the “basis for awareness and communications effort” (Aaker, 1991:187). Logos/name styles should speed recognition of a company or brand (Peter, 1989).

Importantly, eight out of the sixteen consumers commented on *recognising* the name style using the words:

“it’s very familiar” and “it’s very recognisable”.

The word logo/name styles can refer to a variety of graphic and typeface elements. Structural elements include shape and size, and these also have the capacity to connote symbolism, as these attributed often share a distinctive public meaning in a culture (Hine, 1995).

Six out of the sixteen consumers commented on the *size* of the name style, with the majority answering negatively using the words:

“it’s small”, “it could be bigger”, and “the overall thing should be bigger.”

A couple of consumers answered quite positively using the words:

“the size is fine” and “it’s neither big nor small.”

The first line of the logo is in block capitals presumably to add visual emphasis and reduce the pace of reading. Nine out of the sixteen consumers commented on the writing underneath the name ‘Highland Park’ in capitals. The *words underneath* are “Single Malt Scotch Whisky,” indicating clearly to consumers what the name ‘Highland Park’ stands for.

Seven out of the sixteen consumers’ comments on the writing underneath were rather negative:

“the text underneath is too small”, and “they do not have to put text underneath.”

However, a couple of consumers answered encouragingly using the words:

“it’s perfectly legible”, “I like that the writing is underneath ‘Highland’ .”

Logos are important company assets, in which firms spend enormous amounts of time and money promoting (Rubel, 1994). The word logo can refer to a variety of graphic and typeface elements.

Only three out of the sixteen consumers commented on the *colour* of the names style, and all were rather negative:

“a different colour would help it stand out”, “the colour is no, no, and “it fits in with the monochrome design but looks dirty.”

This section is in keeping with fulfilling the research objectives of establishing encoders’ intentions and decoders’ interpretations in relation to the use of the imagery and language within the Highland Park web site. Overall, the decoders gave far more in-depth responses than those of the encoders in relation to the Highland Park name style. The Global Marketing Controller at Highland Park mentioned their brand identity guidelines on how one can and cannot use the logo, and the Head Creative at Mountain Creative Design mentioned that the ‘h’ emblem together with the name style is the current branding. Responses from decoders were indeed mixed. Semiotics views logos as part of the sign system a company uses to communicate itself to internal and external audiences (Zakia and Nadin, 1987). The majority of consumers responded positively to the font used in the name style, with words such as “classic”, “bold” and “impressive, mature and long-lasting font.” Logos/name styles should speed recognition of a company or brand (Peter, 1989), and eight out of the sixteen consumers said that they recognized the name style. However, the majority of consumers responded negatively to the positioning of the name style on the web site, using words such as “hidden” and “stuck up there”, and to the writing underneath the brand name, Highland Park.

Moreover, the majority of consumers also responded negatively to the size and the colour of the name style, even commenting that it “looks dirty”. This highlights that perhaps the company may wish to re-look at how they present the name style on their web site, because as Henderson and Cote (1998) emphasize, logos should in fact evoke

positive affect, not negative. However, it would be fair to argue that this would indeed have to be approached with caution and any changes would need to be careful and subtly, particularly because half of the participants commented that they recognized the name style.

6.3.3. Encoder and Decoder Responses in Relation to Highland Park's Colours within its Web Site

As mentioned above, colour is a sign, and the meanings associated with different colours are important to marketers because the tools used to communicate brand image are mechanisms of meaning transfer (McCracken, 1988). When individuals' observe colour, they read it rather than just absorb it (Dyer, 1982), and this evaluation goes far beyond the eye; it involves the brain and the human psyche. The use of colour is not significant in itself; it depends upon the significance of the connotations it makes. As mentioned in the Semiotics chapter, connotation was the term Barthes used to describe the way in which signs work in the second order of signification (Fiske, 1990). Whereas denotation, which Saussure worked on, does not really play a part here as it describes the relationship between the signifier and the signified within the sign; the common sense and obvious meaning of the sign.

Colour is an expressive tool (Jenkins, 1991), and can communicate meaningful associations (Franzen, 1994). Shimp (1991) contends that associative learning can be used to explain consumers' responses to colours. In the West, black is associated with mourning (Kreitler and Kreitler, 1972).

Firstly looking at the encoders' responses when asked to discuss their thoughts on the colour of Highland Park's web page backgrounds, the comments from the Head of Brand Education at Highland Park are in keeping with what Kreitler and Kreitler (1972) say above:

“I think the charcoal colour is a lot better than the matt black, but there is room for improvement. We were in danger of being a funeral brand at one point because everything was black.”

Strikingly here, the Head of Brand Education is saying that the previous colour of matt black was signifying at “funeral” brand. With regards to the literature on social semiotics, the original colour had negative connotations related to it. Barthes (1985) claims that the concept of connotation describes the interaction that occurs when the sign, in this case the colour matt black, meets the feelings or emotions of the users and the values in their culture. Thus, in the Western world the colour black is traditionally associated with funerals. However, Chandler (2002) comments, connotations are not purely ‘personal’ meanings, they are determined by the codes to which the interpreter has access. Neither of the other two encoders refers to the original colour using the word “funeral”.

Moreover, the Global Marketing Controller at Highland Park states:

“The site used to be jet black, matt black, with no variation. Images always looked stuck on and did not look crafted at all.”

Similarly, the Head Creative at Mountain Creative Design comments:

“I did not like the black; it was just too straight forward and unsophisticated.”

It is clear from their responses that none of the encoders particularly liked the matt black colour. However, classic black is a conservative colour, is dominant in the world of business, and is a universal stylish fashion option. It could be argued that by choosing the colour black, a brand signifies a desire for style and a wish to stand out in a conservative environment, perhaps appealing to a gentleman already dressed in a black dinner suit. It is perhaps not too surprising then that although Highland Park changed the colour, it was augmented only slightly to become a dark charcoal, which although is still dark in colour, results in an entirely different projection.

The Head Creative also commented:

“The chosen dark charcoal is one of the colours that tied into the Orkney environment. It is a common stone type on Orkney, almost a volcanic stone.”

Also, the Head of Brand Education also commented:

“The charcoal we have just now comes out a little bit washed out, especially under lots of light. There is too much charcoal. Charcoal is great because it is nice and neutral, and everyone can wear it, see it, touch it, and feel it.”

With regards to the decoders’ responses, fourteen out of the sixteen consumers commented on the colours of the web pages ‘Home’ and ‘About Orkney’:

“‘About Orkney’ is grey”, “‘Home’ is slate grey – I love slate”, “it is a beautiful and natural colour”, “it’s a warm colour”, “it’s durable and tactile”, “it’s dark, slate”, “the grey is fine”, “the dark grey is fine”, “‘About Orkney’ is monochrome and slate like blue”, “it’s a variation of grey colour”, “it’s a tone of grey”, “the grey is awful”, “it does not say whisky”, “they should have used warm and golden colours”, “grey is very serious”, “I do not get why there is a lot of grey and black”, “I prefer dark grey to the lighter colours”, “the charcoal looks good”, “as a whole with the photos it looks fantastic”, “grey is very easy on eye,” “it matches in and tones well with the photos”, “it’s a neutral colour”, “I like grey and black”, and “I don’t like black, grey, white because it is not engaging”.

Patently, the majority of these consumers believed the colour to be grey, as opposed to the encoders who stated it was charcoal. There were also mixed opinions as to the likeability of the grey colour, but the majority gave positive responses. There were no mixed opinions regarding the colour of the black framing around the web pages.

Eight out of the sixteen consumers all commented confidently on the black colour down the sides of the web pages, using the words:

“there’s black down the sides which frames it”, “it’s set against a black background on either side”, “the black down the sides works”, “it is a strong colour and works with black and white imagery”, “the black outside draws attention to the centre of the screen”, “I like the black at the sides”, “I like the black at the sides”, “I like the black down the sides because it draws your eyes into the site”, and “it softens the edges and allows you to look at the rest of the screen for longer.”

The meanings associated with different colours are important to marketers (McCracken, 1988). According to Wexner (1954:434), “black is associated with powerful-strong-masterful.” In addition, Madden, Hewett and Roth (2000) found that the colour black received high liking ratings. The art of using colour in any promotional activity is to exploit what appeals to target audiences, and in this instance it appears that Highland Park made the correct decision when choosing the colour of the black framing around the web pages. Moreover, colour is one of the many marketing tools that global managers use to create, maintain and modify brand images in customers’ minds (Madden, Hewett and Roth, 2000).

The Head of Brand Education comments:

“I like the greens, oranges, reds and blues, and the more that we are using them subtly and utilising other pallets on the island, because Orkney is a beautiful place.”

In this instance, the colours in the Orkney environment are the signifiers, and what is being signified is the beauty of the place. The Head Creative at Mountain Creative Design contends:

“All the chosen colours on the site come from the Orkney landscape. I produced a colour chart of what Orkney meant to me. Colours that tied into the Orkney environment.”

Clearly the theme with the colours of the web page backgrounds, from the encoders' perspectives, is that of the Orkney environment.

With regards to the decoders' responses, eleven out of the sixteen consumers gave their overall thoughts on the colours of the web page backgrounds.

The majority of consumers responded encouragingly using the words:

“inoffensive”, “not annoying”, “subdued”, “subtle”, “upper-class”, “maturity in scaling down the colours”, “muted colours”, “restrained”, “as if I have a palate of colours and thought I would have a bit of variety”, “attracting middle-aged with grey as I associate it with older generation”, “in keeping with everything”, “all similar colours so good in terms of consistency”, “not much colour but does not suffer as a result”, “all colours are in keeping with the imagery”, and “reminiscent colours and in keeping with Orkney”.

On the other hand, a small number of consumers commented negatively using the words:

“as if someone is in a bad mood when choosing the colours”, “it's dull”, “the web site needs to be sexier”, “not happy colours”, “not bright”, “nothing special”, and “it's not really any colour”.

Again, this could be explained through social semiotics that alerts us to the instability of the sign, and the possibilities of multiple interpretations of a sign (Eco, 1976; Barthes, 1985).

To this day, cool colours, such as blue, green and violet are considered calming (Bellizzi, Crowley and Hasty, 1983; Grossman and Wisenblit, 1999). Cool colours elicit greater relaxation and pleasure than warm colours (Jacobs and Seuss, 1975). Lee and Barnes (1990) claim that men prefer the colour blue and women prefer red, and younger

generations prefer bright colours, whereas older generations prefer calm and subtle colours.

Eleven out of the sixteen consumers commented on the colour of the 'Shop' web page. Comments range from the colour blue to a variation of grey, although the majority of consumers agree that the colour is blue:

“‘shop’ is a silver, light grey colour”, “I don’t like the pale blue of the shop”, “‘shop’ is pale, sky blue colour, but still a bit grey”, “it’s a nice contrast”, “the brighter background grabs my attention”, “it helps break up the site”, “it’s a variation of a grey colour”, “the lighter grey in the ‘shop’ is less depressing than the darker grey, but it is not a nice colour”, “the blue in the ‘shop’ looks a bit grey”, “the light blue in the ‘shop’ is nicer”, “the ‘shop’ colour is slightly off”, “the ‘shop’ is a lot brighter and is suppose to excite you and entice you to buy”, “the ‘shop’ is in keeping with the monochrome colouring”, and “in the ‘shop’ there is slightly more blue but not much colour in it”.

Not many of the comments above are too positive, which is quite surprising especially given that Birren (1973) associates the colour blue with intelligence, sociability and narcissism. Also, Madden, Hewett and Roth (2000) associate the colour blue with wealth, trust and security. Perhaps it is the context in which the colour was viewed, be it that it was on a computer screen, or that it was been compared with the darker colours on the rest of the web site.

In each culture, powerful associations can be learned by individuals, based on connections made between colours and their meanings. According to Madden, Hewett and Roth (2000) colour meanings and preferences are not consistent across cultures. In the West, green is associated with hopefulness (Kreitler and Kreitler, 1972).

Ten out of the sixteen consumers commented on the 'Just for Fun' web page. Answers and therefore opinions on the colour are rather varied, although the majority of consumers refer to the colour as green, and the comments are quite positive:

“‘just for fun’ is kaki”, “‘just for fun’ is a sage green colour and is trying to attract the next generation of drinkers”, “‘just for fun’ is wishy, washy, grey, green colour”, “‘just for fun’ is a watered down green, a seaweed colour”, “‘just for fun’ is olive green”, “it compliments the picture but it is more difficult to read the writing”, “‘just for fun’ is earthy and in keeping with the colour in the stones”, “‘just for fun’ is a dull shade of green”, “‘just for fun’ is more sophisticated”, “it’s a nice earthy colour and does not say middle-aged”, “‘just for fun’ is light green, it is about having fun so it lightens things up”, and “‘just for fun’ is green and is ok but the monochrome effect is better.”

In reference to the semiotic literature, the green colour of the web site’s background is an arbitrary sign, symbolizing hope, nature, growth and fertility, and in some instances the reader positively transfers these attributes to the company. Peirce (1931-58, 2.306) would refer to the colour green as a symbol, in which the connection between the signifier and signified is based neither on resemblance nor on any existential link (Dyer, 1982:125). However, according to Saussure (1960:8), not only is the relationship between the signifier and the signified arbitrary, it is immutable; “No individual, even if he willed it, could modify in any way at all the choice that has been made; and what it more, the community itself cannot control so much as a single word; it is bound to the existing language”. This section on colour has shown to reject this comment from Saussure (1960), and in fact, has stressed the propositions made by post-structuralist semiotics. The post-structuralist approach in semiotics discussed as social semiotics, rejects the idea of a single, deep, determining structure, and in Derrida’s (1991,1992) case especially, emphasizes the inherent instability of the linguistic sign. This is particularly evident with colours meaning different things across different cultures. Additionally, the consumers were viewing the same web pages and yet some of them interpreted different variations in the colours.

This section is in keeping with the research objectives set out of establishing the encoders' intentions and the decoders' interpretations in relation to the use of the imagery and language within the Highland Park web site. The overall message suggested by the encoders' responses is that they did not particularly like the original matt black colour, and so augmented it slightly to become a dark charcoal. The Head of Brand Education commented: "I think the charcoal colour is a lot better than the matt black, but there is room for improvement. We were in danger of being a funeral brand at one point because everything was black." Also, the theme with the colours of the web page backgrounds, from the encoders' perspectives, is that of the Orkney environment. The Head Creative at Mountain Creative Design declared: "All the chosen colours on the site come from the Orkney landscape."

With regards to the responses of the decoders', the majority patently believed the colour to be grey, as opposed to the encoders who stated it was dark charcoal. There were also mixed opinions as to the likeability of the grey colour, but the majority gave positive responses. There were no mixed opinions regarding the colour of the black framing around the web pages, as all comments were positive, for example, "I like the black at the sides" and "draws attention to the centre of the screen." Given that the art of using colour in any promotional activity is to exploit what appeals to target audiences, it appears Highland Park made the correct decision when choosing the colour of the black framing around the web pages. Also, the majority of consumers gave positive comments when asked to give their overall thoughts on the colours of the web page backgrounds. The following words were used: "subtle", "upper-class", "maturity in scaling down the colours", and "in keeping with everything."

Moreover, when asked about the blue colour of the 'Shop', links with the colour grey were still made, and overall the comments were not too positive, for example, words used included: "the 'shop' colour is slightly off" and "I don't like the pale blue of the shop." This is quite surprising given the literature's positive associations on the colour.

As mentioned, perhaps it is the context in which the colour was viewed, be it that it was on a computer screen, or that it was been compared to the darker colours of the rest of the web site. Finally, there was overall agreement that the colour of the ‘Just for Fun’ web page was green, and the comments were quite positive, for example, “‘just for fun’ is earthy and in keeping with the colour in the stones.”

This section on colour led to the researcher to comment that the responses made by the decoders’ have shown to reject comments made by Saussure (1960), and in fact, has stressed the propositions made by post-structuralist semiotics. The post-structuralist approach in semiotics discussed as social semiotics rejects the idea of a single, deep, determining structure, and emphasizes the inherent instability of the linguistic sign. This is particularly evident with colours meaning different things across different cultures. Additionally, the participants were viewing the same web pages and yet some of them interpreted different variations in the colours. The literature on social semiotics again alerts us to the possibility of multiple interpretations of a sign (Eco, 1976; Barthes, 1985).

6.3.4 Encoder and Decoder Responses in Relation to Highland Park’s Packaging within its Web Site

Firstly, looking at both the encoders’ and the decoders’ responses when asked to discuss their thoughts on Highland Park’s bottles. Structural elements include the shape of products, which can reflect a “great deal about the nature and personality of a product” (Young, 1996).

The Global Marketing Controller at Highland Park comments on the change in the bottle shape:

“The old bottle was round, very industry standard and was to get costs down. The new shape is easy on the hand, so it is easier to pour than the round bottle.”

Similarly, the Head of Brand Education at Highland Park states:

“The last round bottle was the product of cost saving but we have now put money back into it.”

Four out of the sixteen consumers/decoders commented mostly confidently on the shape of the bottles:

“I understand the history behind the bottles and changing the shape but I’m used to traditional style of bottled so it’s just a case of getting use to it”, “bottles have changed and I like it, makes it more interesting rather than standard round bottle”, “I’m not shopping for a pretty bottle and I guess most drinkers are the same unless for a gift”, “I think it sells at its high premium market because of that tradition which is imparted through the way the bottles and packaging are designed, they are emphasising the fact that it is Highland Park as a brand much more than the fact it is a Scotch whisky.”

The bottle shape of the 40 year old Highland Park is very different to that of all the other bottles. The shape of a package represents a critical element for the creation of imagery and identity (Young, 1996).

Eleven out of the sixteen consumers commented mostly positively on the different shape of the 40 year old bottle:

“looks really individual”, “bottle doesn’t look like bottle of whisky, looks like a bottle of old spice”, “40 changed its bottle shape, must be very special”, “I like the way the ‘h’ is written on the bottle”, “handsome display bottle almost like an ornament”, “40 is a different bottle shape, not sure if I like it”, “they appear to have simplified the bottle and focused on the glass work”, “bottle shape is different, I imagine it would be more costly to produce”, “overall it looks a finer quality”, “40 is a different shaped bottle almost like an antique”, “40 bottle shape is going to be remembered.”

As mentioned in earlier sections, semiotics views logos as part of the sign system a company uses to communicate itself to internal and external audiences (Zakia and Nadin, 1987). Corporate identity literature treats logos as a company's signature on its materials (Snyder, 1993).

The Global Marketing Controller discusses the embossed 'h':

"It has the embossed 'h' so you feel a little bit of tactility when you lift the bottle. If you hold the bottle higher up, there is also embossing on the back."

With regards to the 40 year old, seven out of the sixteen consumers commented very encouragingly on the embossed 'h':

"I like the way the 'h' is engraved in the bottle", "glass is engraved with the 'h', you are getting superior looking packaging here", "the silver effect of Highland Park and the 40 and the 'h' correspond to each other", "'h' really stands out", "embossed and inlaid 'h', the bottle is very classy and upmarket", "40 looks very good, good the 'h' is embossed, at that price they have to make it distinctive", "logo has been used in a more interesting way as it is embossed."

In keeping with the idea of the 40 year olds being superior looking, three out of the sixteen consumers' contend:

"you would be proud to have one of these bottles in your home", "I can't imagine what someone would have to do to receive this from me", and "it's something to present someone at retirement".

Similarly, when discussing the 30 year old, three out of the sixteen consumers' contend:

"nice for someone retiring", "30 is very nice indeed", "very nice gift and very nice item to have and to hold", and "something to present someone at retirement".

On the other hand, five out of the sixteen consumers commented rather negatively on the colour of the liquid:

“bottles look really good because on the web page they suddenly jump out, web pages act as contrast to colourful bottles, colour of whisky looks like Irn Bru and whisky is not that colour so I have no idea why they have coloured it bright orange like Fanta, colour of the liquid is questionable but it does stand out, should show proper colour of whisky because people are interested in the colour of whisky, whisky is not that colour, I don’t like it, it is like the colour of orange juice or Irn Bru.”

It is worth noting that the colour of the liquid was consistently calibrated; it did not change. With regards to the literature on social semiotics, the colour of the liquid had negative connotations related to it. Barthes (1985) claims that the concept of connotation describes the interaction that occurs when the sign, in this case the colour of the liquid, meets the feelings or emotions of the users and the values in their culture. Chandler (2002) comments that connotations are not purely ‘personal’ meanings, they are determined by the codes to which the interpreter has access, and this may help to explain why the words “Fanta” and “Irn Bru” were used.

Secondly, looking at both the encoders’ and the decoders’ responses when asked to discuss their thoughts on Highland Park’s labelling.

The Global Marketing Controller discusses the colour of the labels stating:

“The whisky is king so we do not want to hide it behind green glass or big labels. The labels are authentic, traditional Scotch whisky style labels. They are not too fussy because it is all about the whisky and the place, and Orkney is not a fussy place.”

The Global Marketing Controller continues:

“With the 12 year old, orange is a stone all over Orkney and it is handy that amber is the colour of whisky. The 15 year old is green because it is arable land on Orkney, and the 16 year old is very sky blue or the blue of the sea. With the 18 year old I cannot authenticate the red, it is just a nice, regal colour for the ‘best spirit in the world’. With the 18 year old, red was traditionally part of the old brand.”

Similarly, the Head of Brand Education contends:

“The colours of the labels are reflective of the colours in Orkney. The labels introduce colour to a brand that has always been black, which is nice because it gives you more of a pallet to play with.”

Likewise, the Head Creative at Mountain Creative Design states:

“The colours of the labels are from the Orkney colour chart that I created.”

Similar to the theme with the colours of the web page backgrounds, from the encoders’ perspectives the theme with the colours of the labels is that of the Orkney environment.

With regards to the responses from the consumers/decoders, seven out of the sixteen commented very encouragingly on the overall colours of the labels:

“understand label colours are a good way of distinguishing and I agree with doing that”, “colours make it easy to describe to non-whisky buyers in supermarket”, “they are distinctive as opposed to others which are quite the same, as years go up colours of labels change”, “good way of colour coding especially if buying in supermarket because recognise your one instantly”, “label colours are good way to distinguish them”, “because label colours are different you know who is drinking a good one”, “label colours distinguish them apart, in pub if you saw them in a row you would be able to recognise which one is which from a distance.”

Eleven out of the sixteen consumers commented on the colour of the 18 year old label and gave some very mixed responses:

“18 red jumps out at you”, “18 red is too in your face, looks the cheapest”, “it’s at odds to everything else on site”, “it is the one they want to sell”, “not keen on the red against the amber, yet it does stand out”, “red reminds me of kilts and swords”, “18 won ‘best spirit in world’ and I like the fact they have not made a song and dance of it, but I think they should on the box at least but maybe not on bottle”, “red is identifiable but I do not particularly like it as it looks like bottle of American bourbon like Jim Beam”, “18 year old works because of what it is, it should be bright and bold”, “18 is red and it’s rather garish, 18 do not like the red”, “it grates a bit, not sure what it is trying to say about the whisky.”

Moreover, five out of the sixteen consumers gave mixed comments on the label of the 30 year old saying:

“the white detracts from external packaging, you are paying a lot of money and they have stuck a white label on it”, “the label is very small and understated as if trying to imply it’s older than it is”, “it’s really old-fashioned looking and implies maturity and quality”, “it’s clearly important it’s 30 years old as it’s very obvious on the label”, “consumers buying this are not too concerned with the marketing of the label, as heavy as with the 12 or 18, because they are going for a market that is going to pay for it regardless.”

Four out of the sixteen consumers also gave mixed comments on the label of the 40 year old saying:

“it’s not impressive and it’s a very expensive whisky and it’s just too plain”, “looks more modern than younger editions, it is clean and sharp, best one I have seen”, “the older the whisky the better the quality supposedly and the more expensive it is, but it is still Highland Park”, “the lettering is quite prominent but strangely the brand name has been down graded on the bottle if not the packaging.”

In addition, four out of the sixteen consumers commented mostly positively on the colour of the 12 year old using the words:

“I prefer the complimentary label colour with the 12, the orange and black works well”, “it’s quite bold, you notice instantly it is 12 year old”, “with the 12 I like the orange label, it’s different, it sets it apart from other years”, “I don’t like the orange label colour because I don’t like the colour orange.”

Finally, looking at both the encoders’ and the decoders’ responses when asked to discuss their thoughts on Highland Park’s packaging. Packaging acts not only as a communication vehicle for transmitting symbolism, but is important for its own symbolic contribution to the total understanding of the corporation or brand (Raphael and Olsson, 1978).

Seven out of the sixteen consumers discussed their overall thoughts on the packaging, with very encouraging responses:

“like the packaging, as years go up packaging looks more premium”, “emblem on boxes could be more prominent”, “they do their packaging very well”, “there is purpose behind the packaging and there is quality behind the packaging in that it seems to convey value”, “as you go up the range the packaging has a higher perceived value”, “like new packaging, it is distinctive”, “really like the packaging because as a Highland Park drinker I like the tradition and heritage on it, I like the Celtic ‘h’.”

Ten out of the sixteen consumers commented mostly positively on the 40 year old packaging using the words:

“40 looks more exclusive with its packaging”, “I don’t like the 40, I don’t like the box, it is too dark, any richness in the wood finish is lost in the darkness”, “wood in the lighter 30 is much warmer”, “40 is older but in modern packaging which is strange”, “box has silver work on it, whole thing has to look really

expensive at that price, the 40 is beautiful”, “21-40 year old packaging is just lovely, has air of sophistication and grandeur”, “40 packaging looks phenomenal, 40 is very nice with mahogany box and, more for the discerning gentleman”, “wooden cask with the 40 is all about the presentation”, “the box is almost coffin like, but is nice veneer, I like the wooden effect of the box, says to you a higher quality”, “don’t really like fake wooden box.”

With regards to semiotics literature, Peirce (1931-58, 2.306) would refer to the packaging as a symbol of the Highland Park brand. As Rapheal and Olsson (1978) contend, packaging acts not only as a communication vehicle for transmitting symbolism, but is important for its own symbolic contribution to the total understanding of the corporation or brand.

Appearing to be more popular than the 40 year old packaging, twelve out of the sixteen consumers commented extremely encouragingly on the 30 year old packaging using the words:

“30 looks more exclusive with its packaging, I like the wooden case”, “30 is nice, anything in a wooden box works for me”, “wooden box with embossed silver says it is something special”, “30 packaging is impressive, lovely”, “I like the overall look because it is different, but the box looks like a Viking coffin”, “packaging actually looks more modern than younger years, at the same time, there is something old-fashioned about it like an apothecary jar”, “the wooden casks with the 30 is all about the presentation”, “30 box looks better than 40 as it is less coffin like”, “like wooden effect box of 30 says to you a higher quality”, “I like it very much, it is like a piece of art rather than just a bottle with a label on it, the packaging is very beautiful”, “it’s the nicest looking bottle”, “I like Highland Park embossed into the glass and the ‘h’ embossed on the wood is very nice.”

Six out of the sixteen consumers commented on the 25 year old, again mostly positively, using the words:

“I like it, the emblem is more prominent as it should be, the banner is separate saying this is the 25 year old, it’s got a different cork instead of the traditional foil”, “I like that the ‘h’ on the box in centre as opposed to in the background, 25 year old reminds me of the older style bottle”, “it looks more expensive with clean lines and the off white label, it’s very nice seeing the cork through the neck which gives it a sense of tradition”, “I like the contrast between the lighter and darker labelling”, “25 is an old and expensive whisky and they are not really emphasising it much there”, “it seems less bold than the 18 which is quite strange.”

This section is in keeping with the research objectives set out of establishing encoders’ intentions and decoders’ interpretations in relation to the use of the imagery and language within the Highland Park web site. With regards to the bottles, the majority of decoders agreed with the encoders’ decision to change the shape of the bottles. The bottle shape of the 40 year old Highland Park, the most recent and expensive edition, is very different to that of the other bottles. As Young (1996) contends, the shape of a package represents a critical element for the creation of imagery and identity, and eleven out of the sixteen consumers commented mostly positively on the unique shape of the 40 year old bottle.

Corporate identity literature treats logos as a company’s signature on its materials (Snyder, 1993), and seven out of the sixteen consumers commented very encouragingly on the embossed ‘h’ on the 40 year old bottle. The 40 year old produced the most discussion. This is probably not surprising given it is the most unique edition on show on the web site, being that it is the most recent, the most expensive, and a different shaped bottle to the rest. With regards to the literature on social semiotics, the colour of the liquid had negative connotations related to it. Barthes (1985) claims that the concept of connotation describes the interaction that occurs when the sign, in this case the colour

of the liquid, meets the feelings or emotions of the users and the values in their culture. Chandler (2002) comments that connotations are not purely 'personal' meanings, they are determined by the codes to which the interpreter has access, and this may help to explain why the words "Fanta" and "Irn Bru" were used.

Moreover, with regards to the labels, the encoders' explained that the colour inspiration came from the Orkney environment, and seven out of the sixteen consumers commented very encouragingly on the overall colours of the labels. The colour of the 18 year old received some very mixed responses from consumers, and produced quite a bit of discussion, given that the labelling is red, and not in keeping with the 'Orkney palate' of the rest of the label colours. Similarly with the bottles, the labelling on the more prestigious editions created more discussion than the others. The labels of the 40 and 30 year olds received mixed responses, but the label colour of the 12 year old – the most mainstream of all editions – received positive comments. Moving on to the packaging, Peirce (1931-58, 2.306) would refer to the packaging as a symbol of the Highland Park brand. As Rapheal and Olsson (1978) contend, it acts not only as a communication vehicle for transmitting symbolism, but is important for its own symbolic contribution to the total understanding of the corporation or brand.

When discussing their overall thoughts on the packaging, decoders' responses were very encouraging. Comments made by consumers on the packaging of the 25 year old were mostly positive. Not surprisingly though, discussion again focused on the more exclusive editions. These do indeed stand out on the web site as the packaging is more exclusive with its additional wooden casks. Comments were mostly positive regarding the packaging of the 40 year old. However, the 30 year old produced extremely encouragingly comments. The lighter colour of the wooden cask of the 30 year old was regarded more favourably than the darker colour of the 40 year old.

6.3.5. Encoder and Decoder Responses in Relation to Highland Park's Photography within its Web Site

Marketing communications images, brand images, corporate images and web sites all depend upon compelling visual rhetoric (Schroeder, 2007). Firstly, looking at the encoders' responses when asked to discuss their thoughts on the photography used within the Highland Park web site.

The Global Marketing Controller at Highland Park answered:

“It looks like black and white photography, but is actually full colour black and white photography, because it is a black and white image with a wash through it. You could have purple, blue, slightly green, slightly creamy washes, or just a charcoal black and white image. The wash through the photographs gives warmth to something quite stark. It is meant to be stark because it is a grey, grisly place, and that has got to be reflected. But I didn't want it so stark as to alienate people and switch them off, and make them feel it is very masculine, very harsh and too raw, so there is warmth in some of the imagery. It is all scale; Orkney is vast and that is why the landscape shapes. There is stone everywhere on Orkney and the stones on the homepage are a welcome to Orkney. Extreme close up shots are only to break it up for the viewer.”

The Head of Brand Education at Highland Park did not comment on this, but the Head Creative at Mountain Creative Design, who also shot the photographs, answered:

“At the beginning, we realised we had to not just re-brand, but to re-characterize the brand, and a big part of that was going to be the images we used to re-personalize the brand. Images in classic black and white, art, studio, photography style, with wash through them, so old French style. Nature is artistic and tried to capture that on camera... I encapsulated the panoramic shape, which is a direct reference to Orkney. Everything you look at is ocean panoramic and has a longitudinal shape to it... The perception because it is in an Atlantic environment

is going to be wild, it is going to be tempestuous in terms of weather forms, but it is also going to be incredibly clean, a pristine environment which can only add to the underpinning of a malt whisky. The real star of the whole thing was the Orkney climate. I had to encapsulate all things of Orkney... This is a really big whisky, this comes from a really wild place, this is a pure whisky, and this is a whisky of real character.”

Marketing communications can encourage feeling through fantasy and dreaming, persuading individuals to think in terms of escape from the real world (Dyer, 1982). People can rarely realise their fantasies concretely and as a result, they express them symbolically through purchases (Settle and Alreck, 1987). Belk and Costa (1998) describe marketing communications experiences as a “blending of fantasy and reality.” Secondly, looking at the decoders’ responses when asked to discuss their thoughts on the photography used within the Highland Park web site.

Twelve out of the sixteen consumers commented extremely encouragingly on their *overall thoughts of the iconic images*:

“lovely, really nice, best part of web site”, “well taken, dramatic Orkney images, very romantic, dream like, love it”, “the ruins are wonderful images, like them so much would use them as a series of prints”, “all photography is great and very arty and well done”, “beautiful”, “pulled out the texture well”, “romantic air of Orkney photos, picture postcard, make me want to go to Orkney”, “stunning”, “Orkney landscape is beautiful”, “nice, show what landscape is like, remote, been to Orkney so really appreciate photos”, “very dramatic, lovely compositions, very stark landscape as it should be”, “images are good, show importance of sea, really good, really evocative of Orkney”, “very well done, what I expected to see, natural scenes, grandeur.”

However, according to Dyer (1982), although people usually think of images, particularly photographs, as life-like and thus real, they should be aware that the

meaning of an image is not ‘transparent,’ but like other aspects of marketing communications constructed and manipulated.

Six out of the sixteen consumers commented confidently on the *iconic landscape*, which resembles the Orkney environment:

“love panoramic shape”, “some photos would be better if in portrait not landscape, for example, to get the height of Ring of Brodgar stones”, “pot stills should be portrait”, “I like the shape”, “landscape is the right way, landscape is the way to represent Orkney with panoramic views”, “landscape is correct because Orkney is flat and quite defining, panoramic angles work.”

Moreover, twelve out of the sixteen consumers commented mostly positively on the *colour* of the photography using the words:

“Okay, but could use more colours”, “I like the colours”, “I like the colours as it harks back to tradition, strength, stability and security”, “stormy colours, monochrome effect works”, “eye not distracted by colours that intrude”, “I like the colours and slight colour change helps break up black and white”, “sepia colour is lovely, almost whisky coloured”, “Scottish colours”, “black and white colours make the images more dramatic and mysterious”, “prefer black and white to the brown”, “black and white works for me as it makes it look more dramatic”, “It’s fine, but all a bit the same because of no colour.”

Strong visual imagery used effectively is a powerful tool (Marketing Week, 19 August 2004). Nine out of the sixteen consumers commented on the *elemental elements* within the photography, which according to Peirce (1931-58, 2.306) become an indexical sign of Orkney as an environment:

“elemental, wild weather”, “clean, wild and remote landscape”, “some photos portray the harshness of the weather in Orkney”, “it’s elemental”, “wild landscapes”, “crashing waves make it look empty and lonely”, “it conveys that the water is important to the product”, “I like the crashing waves as it says

Orkney is cold, windy and flat”, “crashing waves are beautiful and represent Orkney.”

In addition, the photography consists of both images of Orkney and images from the Highland Park distillery, with consumers giving mixed comments on them:

“Orkney scenes are more interesting than the distillery scenes”, “not all that impressed with distillery images and there is an element of repetition in them”, “distillery images more interesting”, “find distillery images interesting”, “good distillery pictures.”

According to Dyer (1982:125), a sign is a symbol when the connection between the signifier and signified is based neither on resemblance nor on any existential link.

Seven out of the sixteen consumers commented on the *symbolic effectiveness* of the photography:

“put time and effort in to photos so time and effort put into whisky”, “says a lot about where the whisky comes from”, “like seeing the process of how the whisky is made and hard work has gone into producing Highland Park”, “says Highland Park is natural, historical with a lot of emotion behind it”, “distillery photos show the whisky making process”, “ancient scenes so conveying real age”, “show age of brand and history of island and this is transferred to the whisky.”

However, six out of the sixteen consumers commented on where they believed there was room for improvement with the photography:

“should have shown me something that tells me that it is an attractive, engaging, beautiful place, in which they make beautiful whisky”, “should have shown me distillery is on the high land of a park”, “should have shown entire pot still with swan necks”, “could have emphasised other things about Orkney, for example, Clinker Bow not synonymous with Orkney”, “images of stones do not convey height of them, choose one of the standing stones, could do better because they

are interesting as art works but not imparting much about Orkney”, “not seeing overall distillery in its rural context, everything is very close scale so could show some with wider scale.”

This section is in keeping with fulfilling the research objectives set out of establishing the encoders’ intentions and the decoders’ interpretations in relation to the use of the imagery and language within the Highland Park web site. The encoders’ responses on their thoughts on the photography used within the Highland Park web site were extremely detailed and comprehensive. They explained that the photography was a black and white image with a wash through it. The Global Marketing Controller at Highland Park answered: “It looks like black and white photography, but is actually full colour black and white photography, because it is a black and white image with a wash through it.” The encoders stated that the chosen landscape shapes are because Orkney is vast and these panoramic shapes are a direct reference to Orkney. The Head Creative at Mountain Creative Design, who shot the photographs, wanted to show the Orkney climate and argued: “This is a really big whisky, this comes from a really wild place, this is a pure whisky, and this is a whisky of real character.”

However, according to Dyer (1982), although people usually think of images, particularly photographs, as life-like and thus real, they should be aware that the meaning of an image is not ‘transparent,’ but like other aspects of marketing communications constructed and manipulated. With regards to the decoders’ responses on their thoughts on the photography used within the Highland Park web site, overall, they matched the encoders’ intentions. The majority of consumers commented very encouragingly when discussing their overall thoughts on the photography, with responses ranging from “beautiful” and “stunning” to “evocative” and “dramatic”. The consumers also commented confidently on the iconic landscape, which resembles the Orkney environment, for example, “love panoramic shape” and “landscape is the right way, landscape is the way to represent Orkney with panoramic views.” Moreover, the consumers commented mostly positively on the colour of the photography, using the

following words: “I like the colours as it harks back to tradition, strength, stability and security” and “stormy colours, monochrome effect works.”

Strong visual imagery used effectively is a powerful tool (Marketing Week, 19 August 2004). As the encoders had intended, the majority of consumers commented on the elemental elements within the photography, which according to Peirce (1931-58, 2.306) become an indexical sign of Orkney as an environment. For example, the following words were used: “elemental, wild weather”, “clean, wild and remote landscape”, and “crashing waves are beautiful and represent Orkney.” According to Dyer (1982:125), a sign is a symbol when the connection between the signifier and signified is based neither on resemblance nor on any existential link. Many consumers commented on the symbolic effectiveness of the photography, in relation to the whisky itself. However, six out of the sixteen consumers commented on where they believed there was room for improvement with the photography, for example, “should have shown me something that tells me that it is an attractive, engaging, beautiful place, in which they make beautiful whisky.”

6.3.6. Encoder and Decoder Responses in Relation to Highland Park’s Text within its Web Site

We have moved back into a period where words have become altogether more important, more central. Also, the reason that words have come back into fashion and moved to the top of the corporate agenda is the development of the internet and the birth of the e-generation (Morris, 2000:55-56). Copywriting for the web is an evolving art form, but many of the rules for good copywriting are as for any media (Chaffey, Ellis-Chadwick, Johnston and Mayer, 2006:333). According to Goddard (1998:11): “It is not difficult to see why advertisers should want to make their texts capture our attention. The whole aim of the copy writers is to get us to register their communication either for purposes of immediate action or to make us more favourably disposed in general terms to the advertised product or service.” However, Goddard (1998:11) continues: “But

increasingly, written marketing communications have to compete with each other and with all sorts of other texts in our richly literate culture. So copywriters have to find ways to shout at us from the page.”

Firstly, looking at the encoders’ responses when asked to discuss their overall thoughts on the text used (both wording and appearance) within the Highland Park web site.

The Global Marketing Controller answered:

“There is a lexicon created of Highland Park language. It is for those writing press releases or our public relations agencies. This lexicon works and it gives you an element of control, and people like simple guidelines. The text is deliberately framed so there is space around it, so it does not look as if you are reading full screen and so it does not look as if there is loads of text.”

The Head Creative at Mountain Creative Design answered:

“The average Highland Park drinker falls into the ABC1 socio-economic group, so they are going to like good writing, they like things that are unfussy and that are there for the right reasons. The language has to be quite intelligent and hugely informative. Often it is almost pedantic, but there is an intelligence and style to the text.”

The Head of Brand Education answered:

“The site has done everything it is meant to do and we have done that well. However, none of it is really inspiring me, and that is where the video content will bring it more alive. It is basically as you go through it, big picture and loads of text. It is not even on one page, you have to scroll down if you want to read more, which I find kind of infuriating.”

In relation to semiotics, Peirce (1931-58, 2.306) claimed that his theory of meaning derives from, and is justified by, his theory of signs. Peirce arrived at three types of

signs: Icon, index and symbol. With regards to the wording of the text, although most signs have iconic, indexical and symbolic qualities, language is mainly symbolic. Dyer (1982) claims that adverbs and adjectives are trigger words that can stimulate envy, dreams and desires by evoking looks without misrepresenting the product. According to Dyer (1982:139): “Marketing communications language is of course loaded language...Copy-writers are well known for playing with words and manipulating or distorting their everyday meanings; they break the rules of language for effect, use words out of context and even make up new ones.” Dyer (1982:140) continues: “Words not only describe things...they communicate feelings, associations and attitudes – they bring ideas to our minds.”

Secondly, looking at the decoders’ responses when asked to discuss their overall thoughts on the text used (both wording and appearance) within the Highland Park web site.

Sixteen out of the sixteen consumers commented extremely positively on the *overall wording* using the words:

“well written”, “body of text has been used to suggest maturity and long standing”, “opening paragraph uses interesting words, uses flowery language”, “you are drinking a whisky which is part of this long tradition, and stability and solidness comes through, gives Highland Park an identity”, “headings explain sections, well written, alliteration with “breath-taking beauty” and you associate beauty and clarity with the whisky, word “proud” is predominant”, “confusing at times, flowery language i.e. it is hyped up but they get away with it, wording slightly pretentious”, “opening page very wordy with excessive language, word “honesty” constant throughout, word “proud” prominent”, “big words, for example, “Orkney abundantly rich in heritage””, “very wordy and nothing simply put, pretentious wording”, “in opening page Orkney and whisky come hand in hand, language used makes whisky sound nice”, “like word “we”, word “proud” is prominent” ,”“proud” prominent”, “nice language used, to buy bottle

of Orkney you buy bottle of Highland Park”, “language is not cool or hip, but good words because succinctly capture breadth of Orkney”, “I like “abundantly rich in heritage” because it is true; people are buying tradition, quality and reputation, so they are selling history, tradition and heritage.”

The primary aim of language used in marketing communications is to attract the audience’s attention and dispose them favourably towards the product. Dibb, Simkin, Pride and Ferrell (1994) contend that advertisers should use language that is attractive and meaningful to the target audience.

Twelve out of the sixteen consumers commented on who they thought the language used was *aimed* at, using the words:

“aiming at older, intelligent, educated, middle-class, interesting people”, “not for low reading age”, “expectation of wording of above average knowledge, not for the uneducated”, “hammering home things whisky drinkers would like to hear, appealing to educated reader”, “impress American tourists, trying to encourage drinker to think in beautiful words they use to describe taste of whisky”, “aiming at non Scots and whisky drinkers in gentle man’s club”, “aimed at more affluent and wealthy people, aiming at overseas people”, “opening page too tourist oriented, overseas people who will want to hear expressive words”, “attracting people interested in Scottish heritage”, “aimed at middle-class and overseas”, “words aimed at older audience, words and detail go into for more educated people”, “targeting middle-class in UK and elsewhere.”

With regards to the appearance of the text, Goddard (1998) emphasizes that language can suggest particular qualities as a result of how it appears: writing is a form of image making too. Colour and marketing communications research suggests that background colour effects are qualified by the contrast between the background colour and the colour of the text (Meyers-Levy and Peracchio, 1995). Several studies indicate that increased contrast between the text and background results in increased readability

(Bruce and Foster 1982; Wang, Fang, and Chen, 2003). A phenomenon associated with successive contrast is the coloured after-image. If one's eye focuses on dark colours, a sudden brightly lighted body copy will appear more blazing (Gerritsen, 1975).

All sixteen consumers commented on the *legibility* of the wording against the coloured backgrounds, giving mixed responses:

“legible against the backgrounds, heading and subheadings more legible than main text”, “writing is legible on all backgrounds”, “colours need to be worked at; something needs to be sharper or duller”, “reading on grey slate background is fine but some other colours more difficult to read”, “I can read it, prefer darker text on lighter background”, “bright text for headings is good”, “light text against coloured background not easy to read”, “white text on slate is striking and works, quite easy to read, ‘shop’ is nicest area of site and the black text on lighter background is striking”, “text colours too close to background colours although the dark text on the lighter background is easier”, “off white against grey does not stand out well but the darker text on light background is more difficult”, “light text on dark background works, text easy to read”, “legible, could be more contrast with main text colour like with the headings”, “legible, legible against dark background”, “legible, text colour against background restrained and in keeping with rest of site”, “light text legible on dark background, dark text legible on light background”, “text is perfectly clear, but prefer dark text on lighter background.”

In addition, the fonts chosen for marketing communications texts can elicit different responses from people (Miner, 1992). Fifteen out of the sixteen consumers commented mostly negatively on the *font*, using the words:

“text is not justified, prefer text to be plainer with different font style, for example, the headings”, “dislike curly and rounded font style as it is too fancy”, “font suits me”, “font is not modern, formal font, font is not eye-catching or trendy or stylish”, “not justified so does not look chunky, it's a simple font”,

“headings are brighter and larger and a different font so they stand out”, “difficult font to read”, “boring font, office like text, font is not unique, font style is not in keeping with Celtic image”, “main text should be as bright as headings”, “text is nice, text is plain but not too plain”, “font is pretty good, font is thin and standard”, “question whether there’s a good balance between headings and text below”, “subtle text”, “headings are too bright”, “font says Highland Park stable and strong”, “font is pretty standard.”

In keeping with this study of establishing the encoders’ intentions and the decoders’ interpretations in relation to the use of the imagery and language within the Highland Park web site, web copywriters also need to take account of the user reading the content on-screen. There are certain approaches to dealing with the limitations imposed by the customer using a monitor, for instance, chunking, or breaking texts into small units, the use of lists with headline text in larger font, and using hyperlinks to decrease page sizes or help achieve ‘flow’ within copy (Chaffey, Ellis-Chadwick, Johnston and Mayer, 2006:333). Many visitors briefly scan pages looking for headlines, followed by short, brief, digestible chunky paragraphs, which can be hyperlinked to give further detail to those that want more information (Smith and Chaffey, 2005). Nielsen (1999) claims that rather than cramming everything about a product or topic into a single, infinite page, hypertext should be used to structure the content space into a starting page that provides an overview and several secondary pages that each focus on a specific topic.

Thirteen out of the sixteen consumers commented mostly negatively on the amount of text used, using the words:

“could break up text with images, overwhelmed by all information”, “busy”, “good balance of page used and left blank”, “way text is laid out is fine”, “some pages have many words, sometimes too much text”, “could be more visually stimulating in the way they position the text and images”, “not given a lot of thought into the way the text is framed”, “bit too much text, opening page is important and after reading all of it I would skim remaining pages”, “I like the

way the text is laid out”, “could condense text, squeezing words on a page, should sum it up, too much repetition, too much text”, “could inset something below text on opening page, manageable bite size chunks”, “not too much or too little text, right amount of text on pages, not too much on each individual page”, “want something more immediate for casual browser and then have links to more.”

Furthermore, eight out of the sixteen consumers commented on the size of the text, giving mixed responses:

“ok size”, “if text size is any bigger the site becomes clumsy”, “size of text is a bit too small”, “size fine but could be bigger”, “small size”, “slightly too small”, “if enlarge font it might look as if there’s too much text”, “text is not big.”

This section is in keeping with fulfilling the research objectives set out of establishing the encoders’ intentions and the decoders’ interpretations in relation to the use of the imagery and language within the Highland Park web site. The encoders’ responses when asked to discuss their overall thoughts on the text used (both wording and appearance) were quite detailed. They explained the rationale behind the chosen wording, in which a lexicon had been created and adhered to. The Head Creative at Mountain Creative Design contended that the typical Highland Park drinker falls into the ABC1 socio-economic group, and because they like good writing, “the language has to be quite intelligent and hugely informative. Often it is almost pedantic, but there is an intelligence and style to the text.” The encoders also mentioned how the text appears on the screen, with the Head of Brand Education at Highland Park commenting rather negatively on this: “It is basically as you go through it, big picture and loads of text. It is not even on one page, you have to scroll down if you want to read more, which I find kind of infuriating.”

The decoders’ responses when asked to discuss their overall thoughts on the text used (both wording and appearance) were rather positive for the wording itself but rather

negative for the appearance of the text. With regards to the wording of the text, although most signs have iconic, indexical and symbolic qualities, language is mainly symbolic. According to Dyer (1982:140): “Words not only describe things...they communicate feelings, associations and attitudes – they bring ideas to our minds.” All of the sixteen consumers commented extremely positively on the overall wording with comments such as: “I like “abundantly rich in heritage” because it is true; people are buying tradition, quality and reputation, so they are selling history, tradition and heritage.” Dibb, Simkin, Pride and Ferrell (1994) contend that advertisers should use language that is attractive and meaningful to the target audience. The interpretations of the decoders in relation to who they believed the language used was aimed at, was indeed the same as that intended by the encoders. For example, the decoders commented: “aiming at older, intelligent, educated, middle-class, interesting people.”

With regards to the appearance of the text, Goddard (1998) emphasizes that language can suggest particular qualities as a result of how it appears: writing is a form of image making too. All of the sixteen consumers commented on the legibility of the wording against the coloured backgrounds, giving mixed responses. For example, comments included: “text is perfectly clear, but prefer dark text on lighter background” and “colours need to be worked at; something needs to be sharper or duller.” In addition, the fonts chosen for marketing communications texts can elicit different responses from people (Miner, 1992). The majority of consumers gave mostly negative responses to the font used, using words such as “dislike curly and rounded font style as it is too fancy” and “font is pretty standard.” Web copywriters also need to take account of the user reading the content on-screen. The consumers gave mixed responses on the size, for example, “size of text is a bit too small” and “if text size is any bigger the site becomes clumsy.” The majority of consumers felt that there was too much text on the web pages, as did the Head of Brand Education. This was in contrast to the Global Marketing Controller who thought that the way the text was framed results in it looking like there is not loads of text.

6.4. Summary and Conclusion

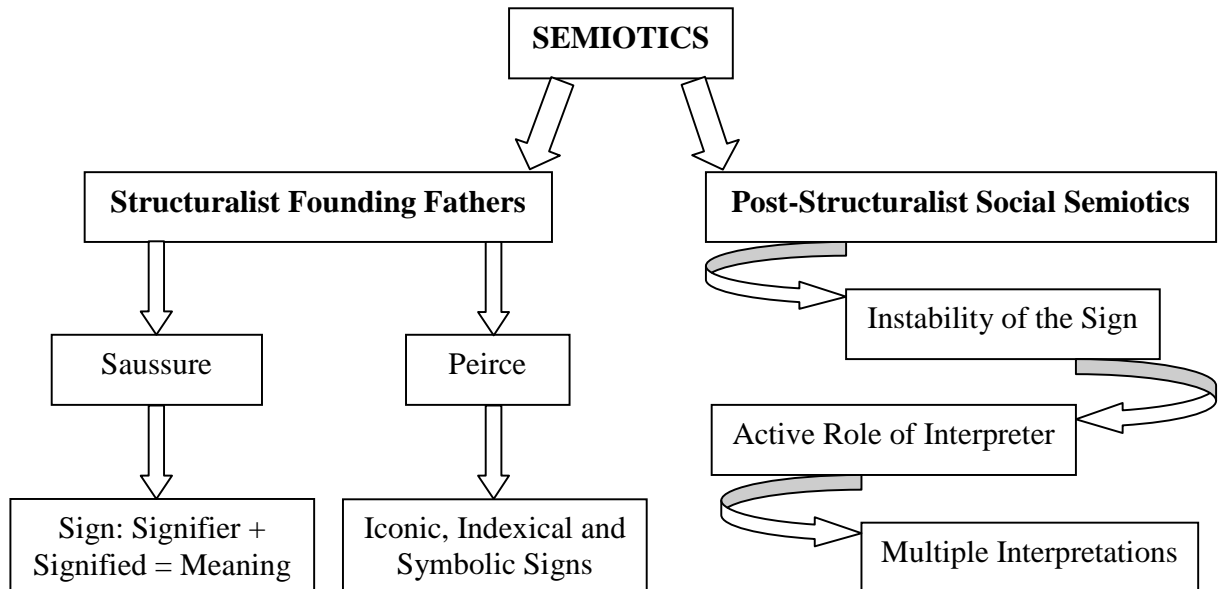
To fulfil the research aim of developing a deeper understanding of online branding and communications by applying the theories and principles of semiotics, both encoders' and decoders' views were required. This chapter detailed the findings of the encoder and decoder interview transcripts. Three encoders/practitioners were interviewed and sixteen decoders/consumers were interviewed. When detailing the responses from the encoders, each practitioner was identified clearly by job title throughout the chapter. When detailing the anonymous responses from the decoders, the researcher found that the most constructive way to do this throughout the chapter was to group the decoders' similar responses together. This was decided because semiotics guided the coding of the data. In order to code the data using semiotics, it was beneficial to group responses together to help the researcher to delve deeper into the exploration of meaning production, and uncover the depth and richness of meaning involved.

This chapter was broken into two main sections: Findings from the four questions asked to the encoders and decoders by the researcher during the interviews; and findings from the six topic area discussions proposed to the encoders and decoders by the researcher during the interviews. The first section covered the following: Encoder and decoder responses given in relation to Highland Park's brand personality; Encoder and decoder responses given in relation to the brand image (e-identity) of Highland Park's web site; Encoder and decoder responses given in relation to the key objectives of Highland Park's web site; and Encoder and decoder responses given in relation to the navigational and interactive qualities of Highland Park's web site. Although semiotics played an important role in guiding the coding of the interview transcripts, semiotic 'jargon' was not explicitly mentioned within the four questions asked to respondents. The second section discussed the following topics: Highland Park's 'h' emblem; Highland Park's name style; Colour of Highland Park's web page backgrounds; Highland Park's bottles, labels and packaging; Photography used within Highland Park's web site; and text used (wording and appearance) within Highland Park's web site. Similarly with the previous

section, although semiotics played an important role in guiding the coding of the interview transcripts, semiotic ‘jargon’ was not explicitly mentioned when proposing the six topic area discussions to respondents.

With regards to semiotics guiding the coding of the data, Figure 7 (extracted from page 65 in the ‘Semiotics’ chapter, and also shown on page 129 in the ‘Methodology’ chapter and page 139 in the ‘Research Findings’ chapter) is again shown on the next page. This figure has not changed. The diagram portrays how semiotics guided the coding of the data. Prior to detailing the findings of the interview transcripts above, the author assumed they would be explicitly discussing the development of the diagram in Figure 7, and describing what could be added to the diagram to accommodate the results of the research findings. However, the diagram as it is did indeed accommodate the study’s results. In this chapter the researcher aimed to delve deeper into the exploration of meaning production, and uncover the depth and richness of meaning involved. The diagram on the next page accommodated this by considering the key contributions of the founding fathers of semiotics, Saussure and Peirce, and also considering the contribution of social semiotics, notably the instability of the sign, the active role of the interpreter, and multiple interpretations being possible:

Figure 7: Diagram Summarizing Key Areas of Semiotic Approaches



Source: The author, based on the Semiotics chapter in the thesis literature review

With regards to the study's research objectives, this chapter was in keeping with fulfilling the objectives set out of establishing the encoders' intentions and the decoders' interpretations in relation to the use of imagery and language within the Highland Park web site. This chapter was also in keeping with fulfilling the objective of discovering the effect that viewing the imagery and language on the internet web site has on the participants' interpretations. Finally, this chapter was also in keeping with fulfilling the research objective of ascertaining any difference between the encoders' intentions and the decoders' interpretations in relation to the use of the imagery and language within the Highland Park web site.

The next chapter discusses the conclusions and implications of the study. The chapter will evaluate the research findings against the research objectives and the research aim.

The wider conclusions and implications of the research findings will also be discussed. This includes implications for marketing practice, and for academic theory, covering semiotic theory and marketing communications theory. Advice to further research is then given.

7. Conclusions and Implications

7.1. Introduction

To fulfil the research aim of developing a deeper understanding of online branding and communications by applying the theories and principles of semiotics, both encoders' and decoders' views were required. The previous chapter detailed the findings of the encoder and decoder interview transcripts. The chapter was broken into two main sections: Firstly, the findings from the four questions asked to the encoders and decoders by the researcher during the interviews, covering: Highland Park's brand personality; the brand image (e-identity) of Highland Park's web site; the key objectives of Highland Park's web site; and the navigational and interactive qualities of Highland Park's web site. Secondly, the findings from the six topic area discussions proposed to the encoders and decoders by the researcher during the interviews, covering: Highland Park's 'h' emblem; Highland Park's name style; the colour of Highland Park's web page backgrounds; Highland Park's bottles, labels and packaging; the photography used within Highland Park's web site; and the text used (wording and appearance) within Highland Park's web site.

The previous chapter was in keeping with fulfilling the research objectives set out of establishing the encoders' intentions and the decoders' interpretations in relation to the use of imagery and language within the Highland Park web site. It was also in keeping with fulfilling the objective of discovering the effect that viewing the imagery and language on the internet web site has on the participants' interpretations. Finally, the previous chapter was in keeping of fulfilling the research objective of ascertaining any difference between the encoders' intentions and the decoders' interpretations in relation to the use of the imagery and language within the Highland Park web site. On the basis of this, this current chapter will evaluate the research findings against the research objectives and the research aim. It is worth stressing at this point that Highland Park is indeed only an example, and more general conclusions and implications about encoding

and decoding will be drawn in this chapter. The wider conclusions and implications of the research findings will also be discussed in this chapter. This includes implications for marketing practice, and for academic theory, covering semiotic theory and marketing communications theory. Advice to further research is then given.

7.2. Evaluating Research Findings against Research Aim and Objectives

This study aimed to develop a deeper understanding of online branding and communications by applying the theories and principles of semiotics.

To develop this deeper understanding of online branding and communications, this study seeks to explore the extent to which the theories and principles that semiotics offers, contribute to a greater understanding of the use of the imagery and language within the Highland Park web site. Based on this, there are four key objectives to the research:

- Firstly, to establish the encoders' intentions in relation to the use of the imagery and language within the Highland Park web site.
- Secondly, to develop a deep understanding of the participants' interpretations in relation to the use of the imagery and language within the Highland Park web site.
- Thirdly, to discover the effect that viewing the imagery and language on the internet web site has on the participants' interpretations.
- Finally, to ascertain any differences between the encoders' intentions and the participants' interpretations, in relation to the use of the imagery and language within the Highland Park web site.

7.2.1. Evaluating Research Findings against the First Research Objective

The first research objective was to establish the encoders' intentions in relation to the use of the imagery and language within the Highland Park web site.

With regards to Highland Park's brand personality, the overall message suggested by the encoders' responses is that there is a lack of consistency among company representatives' perceptions of how they see the brand's personality. The Global Marketing Controller at Highland Park and the Head Creative at Mountain Creative Design gave quite similar responses. The Global Marketing Controller referred to the brand's personality using the words "substance over style", "integrity", "considered", "not flashy or showy", and "knowledgeable." Similarly the Head Creative referred to the brand's personality as being "quiet but inwardly confident." On the other hand, the Head of Brand Education at Highland Park referred to the brand's personality rather differently to the other practitioners, using the words "quirky", "comedian", "kind old man who tells a good story." If brand personality is a central component of brand identity (Aaker, 1996), presumably it would be beneficial for all company representatives to be communicating the same message at all times. Social semiotics would indeed argue that there will be a chasm between the company's desired brand personality and what consumers perceive. However, it is also interesting that there may be significant differences between the encoders i.e. between those responsible for communicating the brand's personality, and so the chasm is not simply internal versus external as is usually assumed.

In addition, with regards to the brand image (e-identity) of Highland Park's web site, again, the overall message suggested by the encoders' responses is that there is a lack of consistency among company representatives' perceptions of how they see the brand's image on the web site. The Global Marketing Controller at Highland Park described the brand e-identity using the words "traditional", "authentic", "hand-crafted", and "raw and simple." Similarly, the Head Creative at Mountain Creative Design described the brand e-identity using the words "hand-crafted", "simple" and "honest." As was the case in the previous section on the brand's personality, the Head of Brand Education at Highland Park responded rather differently to these two practitioners. Similarly to the response given when describing the brand's personality, the Head of Brand Education gave the

following answer when asked to describe the brand e-identity: “What is lacking is the kind of island humour and story-telling ability that comes through.” Again, presumably Highland Park would wish to create a cohesive message that all members of the company communicate, with regards to how they perceive the brand’s image on the web site. Brand associations are driven by the brand identity, what the organisation wants the brand to stand for in the customer’s mind. Therefore, presumably it should be imperative that the practitioners establish a unified message and then express this message to the consumers. As mentioned before, social semiotics would indeed argue that there will be a chasm between the company’s desired brand image and what consumers perceive. However, it is again also interesting that there may be significant differences between the encoders i.e. between those responsible for communicating the brand’s image, and so the chasm is not simply internal versus external as is usually assumed.

Furthermore, with regards to the key objectives of Highland Park’s web site, the overall message coming out from the encoders’ responses is that there is a lack of consistency among company representatives’ perceptions of what they believe to be the key objectives of the web site. The Global Marketing Controller at Highland Park believed that the key objective of the web site is to “deliver the rawness, harshness, isolation, emptiness, solitude, and the natural wonder and mysticism of Orkney.” Whereas the Head of Brand Education gave a very practical answer and stated: “Like most things on Orkney for me, it is functionality.” The Head Creative at Mountain Creative Design, however, merely stated the key objective of the web site was “to communicate the new brand identity.”

Moreover, with regards to Highland Park’s symbol, the ‘h’ emblem, the Global Marketing Controller at Highland Park and the Head Creative at Mountain Creative Design discussed the ‘h’ emblem as a “piece of jewellery.” Symbols are powerful tools for communication (Feucht 1989). The “heritage” behind the design of the ‘h’ emblem was given, and the “Celtic” theme along with the “knot work” used was discussed. The Head of Brand Education at Highland Park did not comment on this.

With regards to Highland Park's name style, the encoders' did not give detailed responses. Defining a brand as "a name, term, symbol, design or a combination of them" implies that the name forms the essence of the brand concept (Aaker, 1991). Names are the critical, core sign of the brand; they constitute the basis for the corporate communications programme and for consumers' awareness and images (Aaker, 1991). The Global Marketing Controller at Highland Park mentioned their brand identity guidelines on how you can and cannot use the logo, and the Head Creative at Mountain Creative Design mentioned that the 'h' emblem together with the name style is the current branding.

In addition, with regards to the colour of Highland Park's web page backgrounds, the overall message coming out from the encoders' responses is that they did not particularly like the original matt black colour, and so augmented it slightly to become a dark charcoal. The Head of Brand Education commented: "I think the charcoal colour is a lot better than the matt black, but there is room for improvement. We were in danger of being a funeral brand at one point because everything was black." Also, the theme with the colours of the web page backgrounds, from the encoders' perspectives, is that of the Orkney environment. The Head Creative at Mountain Creative Design declared: "All the chosen colours on the site come from the Orkney landscape."

With regards to Highland Park's bottles and labels and the overall packaging, the encoders' discussed the reasoning behind it. Packaging acts not only as a communication vehicle for transmitting symbolism, but is important for its own symbolic contribution to the total understanding of the corporation or brand (Raphael and Olsson, 1978). The encoders' explained why they changed the shape of the bottles. The Global Marketing Controller at Highland Park commented on the new shape being easy on the hand, making it easier to pour than a round bottle. The Head of Brand Education at Highland Park explained that the old round shape was down to cost saving and that the company has now put money back in to bottle production. With regards to the labels, the

encoders' explained that the colours of the labels are reflective of the colours in Orkney. The Global Marketing Controller at Highland Park explained the rationale behind the chosen labels: "The whisky is king so we do not want to hide it behind green glass or big labels. The labels are authentic, traditional Scotch whisky style labels. They are not too fussy because it is all about the whisky and the place, and Orkney is not a fussy place."

Moreover, with regards to the photography used within Highland Park's web site, the encoders' responses on their thoughts on the photography used within the Highland Park web site were extremely detailed and comprehensive. They explained that the photography was a black and white image with a wash through it. The Global Marketing Controller at Highland Park answered: "It looks like black and white photography, but is actually full colour black and white photography, because it is a black and white image with a wash through it." They encoders stated that the chosen landscape shapes are because Orkney is vast and the panoramic shapes are a direct reference to Orkney. The Head Creative at Mountain Creative Design, who took the photographs, wanted to show the Orkney climate and argued: "This is a really big whisky, this comes from a really wild place, this is a pure whisky, and this is a whisky of real character."

Furthermore, with regards to the text used, both the actual wording and the appearance of the text, within Highland Park's web site, the encoders' responses were quite detailed. They explained the rationale behind the chosen language, in which a lexicon had been created and adhered to. The Head Creative at Mountain Creative Design contended that the typical Highland Park drinker falls into the ABC1 socio-economic group, and because they like good writing, "the language has to be quite intelligent and hugely informative. Often it is almost pedantic, but there is an intelligence and style to the text." The encoders also mentioned how the text appears on the screen, with the Head of Brand Education at Highland Park commenting rather negatively on this: "It is basically as you go through it, big picture and loads of text. It is not even on one page, you have to scroll down if you want to read more, which I find kind of infuriating."

7.2.2. Evaluating Research Findings against the Second Research Objective

The second research objective was to develop a deep understanding of the participants' interpretations in relation to the use of the imagery and language within the Highland Park web site.

With regards to Highland Park's brand personality, the overall message suggested by the decoders' responses was that of positive interpretations. The decoders' interpretations of the personality of the Highland Park brand identified the following key words: dependability, heritage, age, socio-economic standing, value, admiration, defined and proud. With regards to the brand image (e-identity) of Highland Park's web site, the overall message coming out from the decoders' responses was that of positive interpretations. The decoders' interpretations of the image of the Highland Park brand on their web site identified the following key words: Scottish connections, heritage, reliability, defined, an older age appeal, the elemental aspects of Orkney, and colour themes. These responses are similar to the responses the decoders gave in the previous section in which they were asked to describe Highland Park's personality. Therefore, it appears that there is an overlap and that decoders believe the brand's personality and the brand's image (e-identity) on the web site are indeed very similar, in which the lines distinguishing the two are very blurry.

In addition, with regards to the key objectives of Highland Park's web site, the overall message coming out of the decoders' responses was again that of positive interpretations. The decoders' interpretations of the key objectives of the Highland Park web site identified the following key words: heritage, links with Orkney, unique characteristics of the brand, brand's image, age, and brand awareness. Again, there is some overlap with the above sections that asked about the brand's personality and the brand's image (e-identity) on the web site. It appears that the decoders believe the brand's personality, the brand's image (e-identity) on the web site, and the key

objectives of the web site are indeed very similar, in which the lines distinguishing the three are quite blurry.

Moreover, with regards to Highland Park's brand symbol, the 'h' emblem, the decoders' discussed the 'h' emblem as a "piece of jewellery", the "heritage" behind it, the "knot work" used, and the "Celtic" theme. The majority of decoders commented positively on the likeability factor of the emblem. Only one out of the sixteen participants interpreted correctly what was intended, in that 'h' stood for Highland Park. Three decoders said it is not obvious that it is an 'h', or that it in fact looks like an 'n', and five decoders responded nowhere near what was intended by the encoders, with one participant even referring to it as looking like a "bad tattoo." As Smith and Taylor (2002) state, if brands are not aware of the subtle meanings of symbols, then they would be liable to communicate the wrong message. Perhaps the reference made to social semiotics, in which different people bring different codes to a given message and so interpret it in different ways (Eco, 1972), helps to explain why those participants responded nowhere near what was intended by the encoders.

With regards to Highland Park's name style, the decoders gave in-depth and rather mixed responses. The majority responded positively to the font used in the name style, with words such as "classic" and "bold", and eight out of the sixteen decoders said that they recognized the name style. However, the majority of decoders responded negatively to the positioning of the name style on the web site, using words such as "hidden" and "stuck up there", and to the writing underneath the brand name, Highland Park. The majority of decoders also responded negatively to the size and the colour of the name style, even commenting that it "looks dirty". Henderson and Cote (1998) emphasize that a brand's name style should in fact evoke positive affect, not negative.

In addition, with regards to the colour of Highland Park's web page backgrounds, the majority of decoders patently believed the colour to be grey, as opposed to the encoders who stated it was dark charcoal. There were also mixed opinions as to the likeability of

the grey colour, but the majority gave positive responses. There were no mixed opinions regarding the colour of the black framing around the web pages, as all comments were positive, for example, “I like the black at the sides” and “draws attention to the centre of the screen.” Given that the art of using colour in any promotional activity is to exploit what appeals to target audiences, it appears that the company made the correct decision when choosing the colour of the black framing around the web pages.

Also, the majority of decoders gave positive comments when asked to give their overall thoughts on the colours of the web page backgrounds. The following words were used: “subtle”, “upper-class”, “maturity in scaling down the colours”, and “in keeping with everything.” When asked about the blue colour of the ‘Shop’, links with the colour grey were still made, and overall the comments were not too positive, for example, words used included: “the ‘shop’ colour is slightly off” and “I don’t like the pale blue of the shop.” This is quite surprising given the literature’s positive associations on the colour. Perhaps it is the context in which the colour was viewed, be it that it was on a screen, or that it was been compared to the darker colours of the rest of the web site. Finally, there was overall agreement that the colour of the ‘Just for Fun’ web page was green, and the comments were quite positive, for example, “‘just for fun’ is earthy and in keeping with the colour in the stones.”

This section on colour led to the researcher to comment that the responses made by the decoders’ have shown to reject comments made by Saussure (1960), and in fact, has stressed the propositions made by post-structuralist semiotics. The post-structuralist approach in semiotics discussed as social semiotics, they reject the idea of a single, deep, determining structure, and emphasize the inherent instability of the linguistic sign. This is particularly evident with colours meaning different things across different cultures. Additionally, the decoders were viewing the same web pages and yet some of them interpreted different variations in the colours.

With regards to Highland Park's bottles, labels and overall packaging, the majority of decoders agreed with the encoders' decision to change the shape of the bottles. The bottle shape of the 40 year old Highland Park, the most recent and expensive edition, is very different to that of the other bottles. As Young (1996) contends, the shape of a package represents a critical element for the creation of imagery and identity, and eleven out of the sixteen participants commented mostly positively on the unique shape of the 40 year old bottle. Corporate identity literature treats logos as a company's signature on its materials (Snyder, 1993), and seven out of the sixteen consumers commented very encouragingly on the embossed 'h' on the 40 year old bottle. It is worth noting that the colour of the whisky on the web site was not regarded favourably by the decoders, and although it may have helped it to stand out, it was too orange for the true colour of whisky. The 40 year old produced the most discussion. This is probably not surprising given it is the most unique edition on show on the web site, being that it is the most recent, the most expensive, and a different shaped bottle to the rest.

In addition, with regards to the labels, seven out of the sixteen participants commented very encouragingly on the overall colours of the labels. The colour of the 18 year old received some very mixed responses from participants, and produced quite a bit of discussion, given that the labelling is red, and not in keeping with the 'Orkney palate' of the rest of the label colours. Similarly with the bottles, the labelling on the more prestigious editions created more discussion than the others. The labels of the 40 and 30 year olds received mixed responses, but the colour of the 12 year old – the most mainstream of all editions – received positive comments. Moving on to the packaging, it acts not only as a communication vehicle for transmitting symbolism, but is important for its own symbolic contribution to the total understanding of the corporation or brand (Raphael and Olsson, 1978). When discussing their overall thoughts on the packaging, decoders' responses were very encouraging. Comments made by decoders on the packaging of the 25 year old were mostly positive. Not surprisingly though, discussion again focused on the more exclusive editions. These do indeed stand out on the web site as the packaging is more exclusive with its wooden casks. Comments were mostly

positive regarding the packaging of the 40 year old. However, the 30 year old produced extremely encouragingly comments. The lighter colour of the wooden cask of the 30 year old was regarded more favourably than the darker colour of the 40 year old.

Moreover, with regards to the photography used within Highland Park's web site, the majority of decoders commented very encouragingly when discussing their overall thoughts on the photography, with responses ranging from "beautiful" and "stunning" to "evocative" and "dramatic". The decoders commented confidently on the iconic landscape, which resembles the Orkney environment, for example, "love panoramic shape" and "landscape is the right way, landscape is the way to represent Orkney with panoramic views." Moreover, the decoders commented mostly positively on the colour of the photography, using the following words: "I like the colours as it harks back to tradition, strength, stability and security" and "stormy colours, monochrome effect works."

The majority of decoders commented on the elemental elements within the photography, for example, the following words were used: "elemental, wild weather", "clean, wild and remote landscape", and "crashing waves are beautiful and represent Orkney." Many also commented on the symbolic effectiveness of the photography, in relation to the whisky itself. However, six out of the sixteen decoders commented on where they believed there was room for improvement with the photography, for example, "should have shown me something that tells me that it is an attractive, engaging, beautiful place, in which they make beautiful whisky."

Furthermore, with regards to the text used, both the actual wording and the appearance of the text, within Highland Park's web site, the decoders' responses were rather positive for the wording but rather negative for the appearance of the text. With regards to the wording of the text, although most signs have iconic, indexical and symbolic qualities, language is mainly symbolic. Chosen vocabulary not only describes things, but brings ideas into the reader's mind by communicating feelings and associations. All of the

sixteen decoders commented extremely positively on the overall wording with comments such as: “I like “abundantly rich in heritage” because it is true; people are buying tradition, quality and reputation, so they are selling history, tradition and heritage.” Also, the interpretations of the decoders in relation to who they believed the language used was aimed at, was indeed the same as that intended by the encoders. For example, the decoders commented: “aiming at older, intelligent, educated, middle-class, interesting people.”

With regards to the appearance of the text, Goddard (1998) emphasizes that language can suggest particular qualities as a result of how it appears: writing is a form of image making too. All of the sixteen decoders commented on the legibility of the wording against the coloured backgrounds, giving mixed responses. For example, comments included: “text is perfectly clear, but prefer dark text on lighter background” and “colours need to be worked at; something needs to be sharper or duller.” Additionally, the majority of decoders gave mostly negative responses to the font used, using words such as “dislike curly and rounded font style as it is too fancy” and “font is pretty standard.” Web copywriters also need to take account of the user reading the content on-screen. The decoders gave mixed responses on the size, for example, “size of text is a bit too small” and “if text size is any bigger the site becomes clumsy.” The majority of decoders felt that there was too much text on the web pages.

7.2.3. Evaluating Research Findings against the Third Research Objective

The third research objective was to discover the effect that viewing the imagery and language on the internet web site has on the participants’ interpretations.

With regards to the navigational and interactive qualities of Highland Park’s web site, the general consensus between decoders was that the web site is indeed relatively easy to use with good navigational links. The majority of decoders commented positively the site’s ease-of-use, for example, using the words “not difficult to use.” Encouraging

comments were made from the majority of decoders on the navigational links, for example, using the words “good and simple navigation with clear links.” However, it is clear that the decoders’ think that the web site is lacking in qualities of interactivity, using the words “poor interactivity.” Fiore and Jin (2003) state that enhancing the interactivity of a web site is seen as a means of giving the site a competitive edge.

In addition, the general consensus among the encoders was the same, in that the site is relatively easy to use, but is lacking in interactivity. The Global Marketing Controller at Highland Park responded using the following words: “I think it feels quite easy to flick through and there are never loads of navigation points, so it is a very simple web site.” Thus, it is easy to use with good navigational links, but with regards to interactive qualities, the Global Marketing Controller states: “We do not want to give off too many high tech modernity, technology driven gadgets, because it takes away from what we do.” Thus, openly stating that the site is not very interactive. Similarly, the Head of Brand Education at Highland Park responded using the following words: “Navigation is relatively simple” and “it flows in order.”

With regards to interactivity, the Head of Brand Education believes the site to be “low in the scale of interactivity.” The Head Creative at Mountain Creative Design merely responded by saying that he “really likes the site” because it tells him what he expects to know about Highland Park and shows him images he expects to see. Therefore, the Head Creative commented on the content of the web site as opposed to answering the question on navigation and interactivity. Lack of interactivity is presumably something that needs to be addressed by the company, as it aids relationship building with customers via two-way communication. As Fiore and Jin (2003) state, enhancing the interactivity of a web site is seen as a means of giving the site a competitive edge.

7.2.4. Evaluating Research Findings against the Fourth Research Objective

The fourth research objective was to ascertain any differences between the encoders' intentions and the participants' interpretations, in relation to the use of the imagery and language within the Highland Park web site.

7.2.4.1. Branding Findings

With regards to the branding findings, the researcher wishes to answer the following questions, and then distinguish between the responses to each:

- 1) What are the broad brand associations that the decoders' make in relation to brand personality, and brand image on the web site?
- 2) What are the broad brand positionings used by the practitioners' in relation to brand identity to influence the decoders' brand associations?

In answer to the first question, the researcher can combine the two conclusions from each of the sections above. The broad brand associations the decoders' make in relation to Highland Park's brand personality, are positive associations. The following question was asked to the decoders: Brand personality can be defined as the set of human characteristics associated with a brand. How would you describe Highland Park's personality? The positive associations were highlighted through the identification of the following positive key groupings of responses to the question they were asked: dependability, heritage, age, socio-economic standing, value, admiration, defined and proud. The broad brand associations the decoders' make in relation to Highland Park's brand image on its web site, are again positive associations. The following question was asked: How would you describe the brand image (e-identity) of Highland Park web site? The positive associations were highlighted through the identification of the following positive key groupings of responses to the question they were asked: Scottish

connections, heritage, reliability, defined, an older age appeal, the elemental aspects of Orkney, and colour themes.

In answer to the second question, it is clear that the overall message suggested by the encoders' responses to the following question: Brand personality can be defined as the set of human characteristics associated with a brand. How would you describe Highland Park's personality? is that there is a lack of consistency among company representatives' perceptions of the brand's personality. If brand personality is a central component of brand identity (Aaker, 1996), there is clearly conflict here between company representatives, and presumably they should be communicating the same message at all times. Similarly, the overall message coming out from the encoders' responses to the following question: How would you describe the brand image (e-identity) of Highland Park web site? is that there is a lack of consistency among company representatives' perceptions of the brand image of their web site. Again, presumably Highland Park would want to create a cohesive message that all members of the company communicate. Brand associations are driven by the brand identity, what the organisation wants the brand to stand for in the customer's mind. Therefore, presumably it would be imperative that the practitioners establish and deliver a unified message through all communications. However, as previously mentioned, this could be explained through consideration of social semiotics. Social semiotics alerts us to the instability of the sign, and the possibilities of multiple interpretations of a sign (Eco, 1976; Barthes, 1985).

The two paragraphs above have helped the researcher to begin to fulfil the research objectives of establishing encoders' intentions and decoders' interpretations in relation to the use of imagery and language used within the Highland Park web site. In order to begin to fulfil the research objective of ascertaining any differences between the encoders' intentions and the decoders' interpretations, the researcher can now distinguish between the responses to each of the questions proposed at the start of this closing section. The decoders' responses to the two brand questions asked during the interviews, were more in keeping with the responses given by the Global Marketing

Controller at Highland Park and the Chief Creative at Mountain Creative Design. However, in ascertaining differences, the responses given by the Head of Brand Education at Highland Park, were not only different to the fellow practitioners but also the decoders'. This could be a concern for Highland Park because the Head of Brand Education has the consumer-facing role within the company, and is the 'face' of the company during global travels promoting the brand.

7.2.4.2. Web Site Findings

With regards to the web site findings, the researcher wishes to answer the following questions, and then distinguish between the responses to each:

- 1) How the decoders' engagement with the web site, through accessing the mediated online environment, affects their macro and micro experiences?
- 2) How the encoders' build and design of the web site, through providing the mediated online environment, influences the decoders' macro and micro experiences?

In answer to the first question, the researcher can combine the two conclusions from each of the sections above. The decoders' interpretations of the web site's key objectives are positive interpretations. The following question was asked to the decoders: *What do you think are the key objectives of the Highland Park web site?* The positive interpretations were highlighted through the identification of the following positive key groupings of responses to the question they were asked: *heritage, links with Orkney, unique characteristics of the brand, brand's image, age, and brand awareness*. The decoders' interpretations of the navigational and interactivity qualities of the web site are both positive and negative interpretations. The following question was asked to the decoders: *In terms of navigation and interactivity, how would you rate the Highland Park web site?* The positive interpretations were assigned to the navigational qualities of the web site, in which the general consensus between decoders was that the web site is

indeed relatively easy to use with good navigational links. On the other hand, the negative interpretations were assigned to the interactivity qualities of the web site, in which the general consensus was the decoders' thought that the web site is lacking in qualities of interactivity.

In answer to the second question, it is clear that the overall message coming out from the encoders' responses to the following question: *What do you think are the key objectives of the Highland Park web site?* Is that there is a lack of consistency among company representatives' perceptions of what they believe to be the key objectives of the web site, but that one respondent is continually answering from a personal perspective. The following question was also asked to the encoders: *In terms of navigation and interactivity, how would you rate the Highland Park web site?* Similarly to the decoders' responses to the question, the overall message coming out of the encoders was that the site is relatively easy to use, although the site is lacking in interactivity. Lack of interactivity is presumably something that needs to be addressed by the company, as it aids relationship building with customers via two-way communication. As Fiore and Jin (2003) state, enhancing the interactivity of a web site is seen as a means of giving the site a competitive edge.

7.2.4.3. Topic Area Discussion Findings – Highland Park's 'h' emblem

With regards to Highland Park's 'h' emblem findings, the researcher wishes to answer the following questions, and then distinguish between the responses to each:

- 1.) What are the specific brand associations that the decoders' make in relation to the brand's symbol, the 'h' emblem?
- 2.) What are the specific tactics that the encoders' use, in relation to the brand's symbol, the 'h' emblem, to influence the decoders' associations?

This section is in keeping with fulfilling the research objectives of establishing encoders' intentions and decoders' interpretations in relation to the use of the imagery and language within the Highland Par web site. Both the encoders and decoders were asked to discuss their thoughts on the 'h' emblem shown to them on the web site. To answer the above questions, overall, the majority of decoders' associations made were the same as those intended by the encoders, who used specific tactics to influence the decoders' associations. The Head Creative at Mountain Creative Design clearly expressed where the new emblem came from: "...A boat in a Viking ship museum in Denmark had an 'h' very similar to the new emblem. I then studied all of the knot work and the shapes used, and combined it with my knowledge of Celtic art, and came up with the new shape..." The tactics appear to have worked, because not only were the decoders' interpretations the same as the encoders' intentions, but ten participants stated that they liked the new emblem and four used positive and favourable words to describe it.

However, in distinguishing between the responses to the above two questions, there is one aspect that clearly stands out. The 'h' was intended to be interpreted as standing for Highland Park, and unfortunately for the encoders, this message has not been correctly interpreted by the decoders. However, the study of social semiotics has prepared the researcher for findings like this, as social semiotics has made the researcher aware that different people bring different codes to a given message and as a result, they may indeed interpret messages in different ways.

7.2.4.4. Topic Area Discussion Findings – Highland Park Name Style

With regards to Highland Park's name style findings, the researcher wishes to answer the following questions, and then distinguish between the responses to each:

1. What are the specific brand associations that the decoders' make in relation to the brand's name style?

2. What are the specific tactics that the encoders' use, in relation to the brand's name style, to influence the decoders' associations?

This section is in keeping with fulfilling the research objectives of establishing encoders' intentions and decoders' interpretations in relation to the use of the imagery and language within the Highland Par web site. Both the encoders and decoders were asked to discuss their thoughts on the name style shown to them on the web site. It is difficult for the researcher to attempt to answer the second question, as little response was given by the encoders. The decoders gave far more in-depth responses in relation to the Highland Park name style. Therefore, only the first question will be answered by the researcher. Responses and associations made were mixed. The majority responded positively to the font used in the name style. However, the majority responded negatively to the positioning of it on the web site, and to the writing underneath the brand name. Additionally, the majority also responded negatively to the size and the colour of it. This highlights that perhaps the company may wish to reconsider how they present the name style on their web site, because as Henderson and Cote (1998) emphasise, it should in fact evoke positive affect, not negative. However, the researcher comments that they would need to be careful and make these changes very subtly because there are a lot of consumers who recognise this particular name style.

7.2.4.5. Topic Area Discussion Findings – Colour of Highland Park's Web Site Backgrounds

With regards to the colour of Highland Park's web site backgrounds' findings, the researcher wishes to answer the following questions, and then distinguish between the responses to each:

- 1.) What are the specific brand associations that the decoders' make in relation to the colour of the brand's web page backgrounds?

- 2.) What are the specific tactics that the encoders' use in relation to the colour of the brand's web page backgrounds?

In answer to the first question, with regards to the responses of the decoders', the majority patently believed the colour to be grey, as opposed to the encoders who stated it was dark charcoal. Although there were mixed opinions, the majority responded encouragingly to the grey colour. There were no mixed opinions regarding the colour of the black framing around the web pages, as all comments were positive. Moreover, the majority of participants gave positive comments when asked to give their overall thoughts on the colours of the web page backgrounds. When asked about the blue colour of the 'Shop', links with the colour grey were still made, and overall the comments were not too positive. This is quite surprising given the literature's positive associations on the colour.

There was overall agreement that the colour of the 'Just for Fun' web page was green, and the comments were quite positive. This led on to the researcher commenting that the section on colour has shown to reject comments made by Saussure (1960), and in fact, has stressed the propositions made by post-structuralist semiotics. The post-structuralist approach in semiotics discussed as social semiotics, they reject the idea of a single, deep, determining structure, and emphasizes the inherent instability of the linguistic sign. This is particularly evident with colours meaning different things across different cultures. Additionally, the participants were viewing the same web pages and yet some of them interpreted different variations in the colours.

In answer to the second question, it is clear that the overall message suggested by the encoders' responses was that a specific tactic used by them was to augment the original black colour of the web site to a dark charcoal colour to make it more attractive looking. Additionally, when choosing colours for the web site, the tactics used were to select only those colours from the island of Orkney, and ensure that this was the constant and only theme throughout. In distinguishing between the responses to each of the questions,

differences between the responses arise. The majority of decoders patently believed the colour to be grey, as opposed to the encoders who stated it was dark charcoal. However, the majority did respond encouragingly to the 'grey' colour.

All participants' comments on the colour of the black framing around the web pages were positive. Given that the art of using colour in any promotional activity is to exploit what appeals to target audiences, it appears that the company made the correct decision when choosing the colour of the black framing around the web pages. The negative responses from participant on the blue colour of the 'Shop' web pages was quite surprising given the literature's positive associations on the colour. Perhaps it is the context in which the colour was viewed, be it that it was on a screen, or that it was been compared to the darker colours of the rest of the web site.

7.2.4.6. Topic Area Discussion Findings – Highland Park's Bottle, Labels and Packaging

With regards to Highland Park's bottles, labels and overall packaging findings, the researcher wishes to answer the following questions, and then distinguish between the responses to each:

1. What are the specific brand associations that the decoders' make in relation to the brand's bottles, labels and packaging?
2. What are the specific tactics that the encoders' use in relation to the brand's bottles, labels and packaging?

In answer to the first question, the specific brand associations that the decoders' make in relation to the brand's bottles, labels and packaging are mostly all very positive associations. Unsurprisingly, the 40 year old produced the most discussion, probably because it is the most unique edition on show on the web site, being that it is the most recent, the most expensive, and a different shaped bottle to the rest. As Young (1996)

contends, the shape of a package represents a critical element for the creation of imagery and identity, and a large majority of participants commented mostly encouragingly on the shape of the 40 year old bottle and its embossed 'h'.

Similarly with the bottles, the labelling on the more prestigious editions created more discussion than the others. The labels of the 40 and 30 year olds received mixed responses, although the colour of the 12 year old – the most mainstream of all editions – received positive comments. Moving on to the packaging, it acts not only as a communication vehicle for transmitting symbolism, but is important for its own symbolic contribution to the total understanding of the corporation or brand (Raphael and Olsson, 1978). When discussing their overall thoughts on the packaging, decoders' responses were very encouraging. Comments made by participants on the packaging of the 25 year old were mostly positive. Not surprisingly discussion again focused on the more exclusive editions. Comments were mostly positive regarding the packaging of the 40 year old, however, the 30 year old produced extremely encouragingly comments, in which the lighter colour of its wooden cask was regarded more favourably than the darker colour of the 40 year old.

In answer to the second question, the encoders' purposefully changed the shape of all Highland Park bottles, and this was received well by the decoders who agreed with the decision. Furthermore, the encoders' created an 'Orkney palate' of colours to use on the labels. They explained where the colour inspiration came from, and seven out of the sixteen participants commented very encouragingly on the overall colours of the labels. The 18 year old, however, created quite a bit of discussion, given that the labelling is red, and not in keeping with the 'Orkney palate' of the rest of the label colours. Additionally, the colour of the whisky on the web site was not regarded favourably by the participants because it was too orange for the true colour of whisky.

7.2.4.7. Topic Area Discussion Findings - Photography Used within Highland Park's Web Site

With regards to the photography used within Highland Park's web site, the researcher wishes to answer the following questions, and then distinguish between the responses to each:

1. What are the specific brand associations that the decoders' make in relation to the photography used within the brand's web site?
2. What are the specific tactics that the encoders' use in relation to the photography used within the brand's web site?

In answer to the first question, the decoders' responses on their thoughts on the photography used within the Highland Park web site were very positive. The majority of participants commented very encouragingly when discussing their overall thoughts on the photography, with responses ranging from "beautiful" and "stunning" to "evocative" and "dramatic". The participants commented confidently on the iconic landscape, which resembles the Orkney environment. Moreover, the participants commented mostly positively on the colour of the photography. The majority of participants commented on the elemental elements within the photography, just as the encoders had intended. Many also commented on the symbolic effectiveness of the photography, in relation to the whisky itself.

In answer to the second question, the encoders' responses on their thoughts on the photography used within the Highland Park web site highlight the tactics they employed. They comprehensively explained that the photography was a black and white image with a wash through it. They also gave extremely detailed explanations on the actual photography. They stated that the chosen landscape shapes are because Orkney is vast and the panoramic shapes are a direct reference to Orkney. The Head Creative at Mountain Creative Design, who took the photographs, wanted to show the Orkney

climate and argued: “This is a really big whisky, this comes from a really wild place, this is a pure whisky, and this is a whisky of real character.” With regards to distinguishing between the two responses, overall the decoders’ interpretations matched the encoders’ intentions. However, it is worth noting that six out of the sixteen participants commented on where they believed there was room for improvement with the photography.

7.2.4.8. Topic Area Discussion Findings – Text Used (wording and appearance) within Highland Park’s Web Site

With regards to the text used, both the actual wording and the appearance of the text, within Highland Park’s web site, the researcher wishes to answer the following questions, and then distinguish between the responses to each:

1. What are the specific brand associations that the decoders’ make in relation to the text used within the brand’s web site?
2. What are the specific tactics that the encoders’ use in relation to the text used within the brand’s web site?

In answer to the first question, the decoders’ responses when asked to discuss their overall thoughts on the text used (both wording and appearance) were rather positive for the wording but rather negative for the appearance of the text. With regards to the wording of the text, although most signs have iconic, indexical and symbolic qualities, language is mainly symbolic. Chosen vocabulary not only describes things, but brings ideas into the reader’s mind by communicating feelings and associations. All of the sixteen participants commented extremely positively on the overall wording with comments like for example: “I like “abundantly rich in heritage” because it is true, people buying tradition, quality and reputation, selling history, tradition and heritage.” Also, the interpretations of the decoders in relation to who they believed the language used was aimed at, was indeed the same as that intended by the encoders. With regards

to the appearance of the text, Goddard (1998) emphasizes that language can suggest particular qualities as a result of how it appears: writing is a form of image making too. All of the sixteen participants commented on the legibility of the wording against the coloured backgrounds, giving mixed responses. Additionally, the majority of participants gave mostly negative responses to the font used, felt that there was too much text on the web pages, and gave mixed responses on the size of text.

In answer to the second question, the encoders' responses when asked to discuss their overall thoughts on the text used (both wording and appearance) were quite detailed. The explained the rationale behind the chosen wording, in which a lexicon had been created and adhered to. They also mention how the text appears on the screen. With regards to distinguishing between the responses, the interpretations of the decoders' in relation to who they believed the language used was aimed at, was indeed the same as the intentions of the encoders'. Web copywriters also need to take account of the user reading the content on-screen. The majority of participants felt that there was too much text on the web pages, but they gave mixed responses on the size. This was in contrast to the Global Marketing Controller who thought that the way the text was framed results in it not looking like there is loads of text. However, the Head of Brand Education expressed that there was indeed too much text.

7.3. Wider Implications of Research Findings

There are wider implications of the research findings for both marketing practice and academic theory. This section will draw the wider implications.

7.3.1. Implications for Marketing Practice

With regards to implications for marketing practice, semiotics has the potential to become a defining marketing and research methodology. This development will be based on an increasing recognition of how communications can shape consumer

behaviour and perceptions and interpretations of the world around them. It is fair to argue that this will be driven by a key industry trend. According to Lawes (2002), this being the movement towards global/cross-cultural brand positionings, and the sensitivity this will call for in relation to understanding the implications for local markets, different cultures, and strategies for executing communications. Semiotics is, in essence, an adaptable methodology offering flexible solutions to specific marketing problems. The implications that it can have for brand positioning include identifying gaps and opportunities, which shows semiotics also has implications for market entry.

In addition, it could be argued that it is becoming increasingly risky for marketers not to consider using semiotics. Semiotics can be used to analyze all aspects of branding that communicate the brand to consumers, from advertising and packaging to point-of-sale and merchandising. Semiotics has the ability to make communications successful for brands within their competitive and cultural contexts. It can also be used to decode competitors' category communications, highlighting evolving communication strategies in a rapidly changing cultural context (Lawes, 2002). Further implications that semiotics has for communications strategy is concept stretching and enrichment, for instance, cultural research to deconstruct particular concept areas and expand ideas and images associated with it.

7.3.2. Implications for Academic Theory

7.3.2.1. Semiotics

Reviewing the literature in Chapter three, 'Semiotics,' helped the researcher to make the significant decision of interviewing consumers/decoders as well as practitioners/encoders. The literature on structuralism highlighted to the researcher the importance of interviewing the creators of messages to establish what their intentions were in relation to their choices in the creation of the message. However, the literature on the post-structuralist approach of social semiotics alerted the researcher to the

importance of also interviewing those that consume the message created. This allows the researcher to develop a deeper understanding of the consumers' interpretations in relation to the created message.

Reviewing the literature on semiotics also helped the researcher during the analysis of the research findings. The researcher was able to create a diagram to refer to when analyzing the interview transcripts. This diagram showed the key areas of semiotic approaches that the researcher could take into consideration when analyzing the data. It highlighted the contribution from the structuralist approaches of the founding fathers of semiotics, Saussure and Peirce. Saussure's (1960:67) signifier-signified dichotomy shows that the sign consists of a signifier plus a signified that results in the meaning. Peirce (1931-58, 2.306) claimed that his theory of meaning derives from, and is justified by, his theory of signs. Peirce arrived at three types of signs: Icon, index and symbol. They are not necessarily mutually exclusive: A sign can be an index, an icon and a symbol, or any combination.

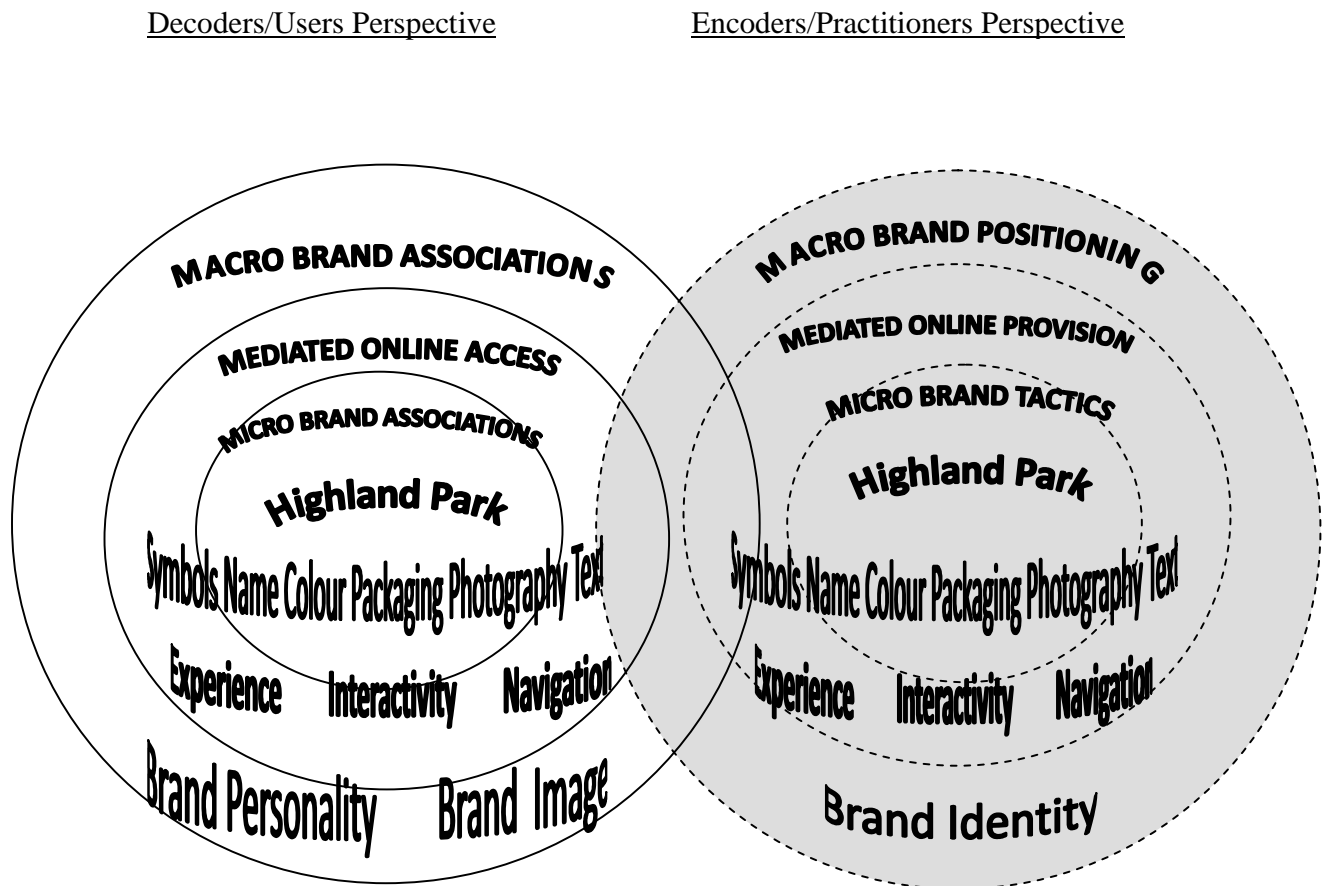
The diagram also highlighted that the existing literature has given little attention to the post-structuralist approach in semiotics, discussed as social semiotics. Chandler (2002) contends that an emphasis on the social dimension of semiotics is relatively recent outside of specialized academic journals, and it is not yet much in evidence at the heart of the activities of many semiotic researchers. As a result, the diagram showed the contribution from post-structuralist social semiotics, in which it maintains that meaning derives from differences internal to the sign system itself, they reject the idea of a single, deep, determining structure, and emphasizes the inherent instability of the sign. Also, social semiotics stresses the active role of the interpreter and the possibilities that connotation allows for the generation of multiple meanings. This helped the researcher to understand why during the analysis of the research findings, there were many different interpretations of the same message.

In keeping with the thought of multiple interpretations of the same message, analysis of the research findings showed not only different interpretations between encoders and decoders, but also different interpretations amongst the encoders responsible for creating the message. One would think that companies and brands such as Highland Park, would wish for all company representatives to communicate a cohesive message, but social semiotics does indeed help to explain this. As previously mentioned, it is interesting that there may be significant differences between the encoders, and so the chasm is not simply internal versus external as is usually assumed. This argument leads on to the next section. Marketing communications theory usually assumes that any breakdown in communication is between the organization and the consumers, and pays less attention to any lack of integration within the organization.

7.3.2.2. Marketing Communications

The literature on semiotics helped the researcher to make the significant decision of interviewing consumers/decoders as well as practitioners/encoders, and also helped the researcher during the analysis of the research findings. However, the researcher then asks: Is semiotics of online marketing communications enough to contribute to the wider implications for marketing theory? Reflecting on the findings, the author was able to build up an original model on the dimensions of the online brand. This model allowed the researcher to evaluate the research findings against the fourth research objective. The fourth research objective was to ascertain any differences between the encoders' intentions and the consumers' interpretations, in relation to the use of the imagery and language within the Highland Park web site. To do this, the researcher devised questions in which to distinguish the responses to each. The questions were devised using the model. Please refer to Figure 10 on the next page for the model on the dimensions of the online brand. This model can potentially be used with any online brand, not only Highland Park:

Figure 10: Dimensions of Online Brand



Source: The author, from the thesis research findings

As mentioned, Figure 10 on the previous page is a model on the dimensions of the online brand, which can potentially be used with any online brand, not only Highland Park. The concentric circles represent the overlaps between the macro and micro environments. The questions coming out of the model are:

- Branding:
 - What are the broad brand associations that the decoders' make in relation to brand personality, and brand image on the web site?
 - What are the broad brand positionings used by the practitioners' in relation to brand identity to influence the decoders' brand associations?

- Web Site:
 - How the decoders' engagement with the web site, through accessing the mediated online environment, affects their macro and micro experiences?
 - How the encoders' build and design of the web site, through providing the mediated online environment, influences the decoders' macro and micro experiences?

- Highland Park's 'h' emblem:
 - What are the specific brand associations that the decoders' make in relation to the brand's symbol, the 'h' emblem?
 - What are the specific tactics that the encoders' use, in relation to the brand's symbol, the 'h' emblem, to influence the decoders' associations?

- Highland Park Name Style:
 - What are the specific brand associations that the decoders' make in relation to the brand's name style?
 - What are the specific tactics that the encoders' use, in relation to the brand's name style, to influence the decoders' associations?

- Colour of Highland Park's Web Site Backgrounds:
 - What are the specific brand associations that the decoders' make in relation to the colour of the brand's web page backgrounds?
 - What are the specific tactics that the encoders' use in relation to the colour of the brand's web page backgrounds?

- Highland Park's Bottle, Labels and Packaging:
 - What are the specific brand associations that the decoders' make in relation to the brand's bottles, labels and packaging?
 - What are the specific tactics that the encoders' use in relation to the brand's bottles, labels and packaging?

- Photography Used within Highland Park's Web Site:
 - What are the specific brand associations that the decoders' make in relation to the photography used within the brand's web site?
 - What are the specific tactics that the encoders' use in relation to the photography used within the brand's web site?

- Text Used (wording and appearance) within Highland Park's Web Site:
 - What are the specific brand associations that the decoders' make in relation to the text used within the brand's web site?
 - What are the specific tactics that the encoders' use in relation to the text used within the brand's web site?

7.4. Advice for Further Research

This study provided a more complete understanding of semiotics because consideration was given not only to the structuralist founding fathers, Saussure and Peirce, but also to post-structuralist social semiotics. As a result, with regards to identifying further academic research to add to the body of knowledge of semiotics, consideration should be given by future researchers to the structuralist founding fathers and post-structuralist social semiotics. On focusing on this study, and particularly taking social semiotics into consideration, the researcher has learned that there is a lot more to image and linguistic analysis through the study of semiotics, than was originally thought possible. The use of semiotics has increased the researcher's awareness of the complex interplay of many factors to create marketing communications on the internet, and more specifically, the imagery and language used. It is however inevitable that this understanding could be further improved through a number of research directions.

The researcher of this study has contributed to the analytical process by looking at the imagery and language within an internet web site at a point in time. Perhaps another researcher may wish to develop a wider range of semiotic findings by taking a multi case study approach and looking at a variety of alcoholic beverages web sites, in relation to the imagery and language used within them. Alternatively, a future researcher could move into another medium, for instance, mobile phones. Another different methodological technique could be used, for example, rather than in-depth interviews, an extensive questionnaire could be created to be filled out as the decoders' view the web sites, allowing time for more decoders to participate. The drawback to this of course, is that the researcher would not be present as in an interview, to help to guide the respondents. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the model on the dimensions of the online brand could potentially be used with any online brand, not only Highland Park, and thus further research may look at another brand.

In addition, the researcher had to make many pragmatic decisions about the research during this study. The study has been conducted within the confines of a Scottish residing audience. Further research could be cross-cultural and be conducted with different audiences. Also, given the cultural aspect to semiotics, if this study was carried out in a different culture, it would be interesting to see if the results would be very different. Perhaps another researcher could go a step further and consider web sites that contain music throughout the web site experience, which would call for not only an analysis of the visual aspects, but also the aural, thus also taking into account the semiotics of music.

Moreover, the dynamic nature of the internet as an area of study resulted in the author having to make the conscious decision of giving a cut off to the literature. As mentioned in chapter two of this study, 'Internet Marketing Communications', the rise of social networking web sites has forced marketers to wake up to the opportunities that are being created for their brands (Simmons, 2008). We have all become mobile data users – sending emails, sharing photos, downloading songs, and using social networking sites (Karakas, 2009). As Palmer and Koenig-Lewis (2009) contend, companies need to address target audiences both directly and also indirectly through social media.

More than half of today's teenagers ("the net generation") are mobile data users and a great majority use social networking sites or Web 2.0 portals (Karakas, 2009). "Web 2.0 describes a robust and growing set of web applications and sites that leverage the participation of many" (O'Reilly, 2006). For instance, in keeping with alcoholic beverage brands, according to Marketing Weekly News (26 September 2009), the Jack Daniel's Distillery launched a month-long celebration of Jack Daniel's birthday. For the first time social networking was being utilized as a major component of the brand's consumer outreach. On September 1st 2009, Jack Daniel's launched its "Give A Toast" application on Facebook and a "Toast Jack" feature on Twitter to encourage virtual and viral celebrations of Mr. Jack's birthday. Also, the Pernod Ricard-owned drink Chivas Regal launched a new website and digital campaign, the first phase of a wave of online

activity which aimed to develop long-term global strategy for the brand. It is claimed the move into digital is not just about appealing to a younger demographic but about finding new ways of pushing the connoisseurship of whisky by generating new content and interest in the brand. (Marketing Week, 18 June 2009). Similarly, creative innovation is a central pillar of Pernod Ricard-owned vodka Absolut's brand proposition, and digital platforms play an important role in this. Mobile applications are another focus, with Absolut's Drinksmaster combining mobile technology with social media interaction via Twitter and Facebook (New Media Age, 25 March 2010). In addition, was the launch of a campaign communicating the relationship between Laphroaig whisky and US bourbon whiskey Maker's Mark. A live and interactive web TV show was placed on specialist sites in the UK and US, and was streamed live into the Laphroaig Facebook group (PR Week UK, 5 March 2010).

According to Karakas (2009), World 2.0 is radically different from the world as we know it: the blogosphere is doubling in size every six months. The new generation internet tools, so called Web 2.0 tools, have fostered the growth and popularization of web-based communities and social networking sites (Karakas, 2009). As Rettie (2009) states, mediated interaction has become a feature of everyday life, used routinely to communicate and maintain contacts. Furthermore, there is already discussion on the next generation. Web 3.0, which will no doubt be followed by many more generations to come, is developing at a relatively fast rate. The semantic web (Web 3.0) will allow applications to "understand" sentences and natural language (Karakas, 2009). Valos, Ewing and Powell (2010) claim that in arguably the most dynamic period in the history of marketing, and in particular the management of marketing communications, the challenges and opportunities presented by online marketing are both immense and unprecedented. Future research in this area may well move on from Web 2.0 and focus on Web 3.0, and so on and so on. The dynamic nature of the internet means that future developments within marketing research will inevitably continue.

7.5. Summary and Conclusion

This chapter evaluated the research findings against the research objectives and the research aim. A model on the dimensions of the online brand was presented in Figure 10 that can potentially be used with any online brand, not only Highland Park, and which proposed many questions. The wider conclusions and implications of the research study were also discussed. This included implications for marketing practice, followed by implications for academic theory, covering semiotic theory and marketing communications theory. Advice to further research was then given.

The author has carried out this study of *'Online branding and communications – the theories and principles of semiotics: the case of the Highland Park web site'* more thoroughly and more focussed than anyone else, and this has indeed been worthwhile in that it has suggested what researchers and marketers could, and arguably should, be doing. The author is passionate about marketing communications, particularly in an online context, and this study has sought to provide a thorough understanding of semiotics and to extend semiotics into this new domain. By offering a deeper and richer understanding of the meanings derived within web site communications, this study intended to contribute to the academic research thus far on online branding and communication.

The aim of the research was to develop a deeper understanding of online branding and communications by applying the theories and principles of semiotics. The rationale behind the aim stemmed from Schibrowsky, Peltier and Nill's (2007) statement that the importance of the internet as an area of interest within the academic community is strong and growing, and signals the need to once again review the internet marketing literature, particularly in terms of potential research opportunities. Past research has been dominated by the information-processing and quantitative tradition, and in this study, a semiotic approach was proposed to fully uncover the depth and richness of meaning involved within online marketing communications, and specifically web sites. The

semiotic literature highlighted the importance of the contribution from the structuralist approaches of the founding fathers of semiotics, Saussure and Peirce, but also pointed the researcher towards a consideration of the post-structuralist approach in semiotics, discussed as social semiotics. Chandler (2002) contends that an emphasis on the social dimension of semiotics is relatively recent outside of specialized academic journals, and is not yet much in evidence at the heart of the activities of many semiotic researchers. This provided the author with a significant research opportunity, and a gap in the literature within which to try to fill.

The study supported a subjective reality within an interpretivist paradigm, and used the theories and principles of semiotics to delve below the surface to understand what was really happening. Taking a qualitative case study approach, a key factor in selecting the case of the Highland Park web site was the timing of the author's study coinciding with a critical period of development of the brand as it re-developed its online presence. Social semiotics literature emphasized the importance of the role of the decoder (consumer interpreting the message) as well as the encoder (company/practitioner creating the message). Using the qualitative semi-structured interviewing technique, the objectives of establishing encoders' intentions and decoders' interpretations were fulfilled. The objective of discovering the effect that viewing the imagery and language online had on interpretations, stemmed from Aaker and Brown's (1972) research on brands, which indicated that marketers delivering the same messages to the same audience, can generate different effects depending on the context in which the messages are embedded. Importantly, communicative and rich environments such as the internet accentuate the complexity of brand meanings (De Chernatony, 2001). The final objective explored the central paradox of semiotics, by ascertaining any differences between encoders' intentions and decoders' interpretations.

The author created a diagram, highlighting the key areas of semiotic approaches, to refer to when analyzing the interview transcripts. Social semiotics alert us to the possibilities that connotation allows for the generation of multiple meanings (Eco, 1976), and that

there are almost always several interpretations possible (Barthes, 1985). Analysis of the findings showed not only differences between encoders' intentions and decoders' interpretations, but also differences amongst the encoders responsible for creating the message, highlighting that the chasm was not simply internal versus external as is usually assumed. Marketing communications theory usually assumes that any breakdown in communication is between the organization and consumers, and pays less attention to any lack of integration within the organization. The author then asked: Is semiotics of online marketing communications enough to contribute to the wider implications for marketing theory? Reflecting on the findings, the author was able to build up an original model on the dimensions of the online brand, which can potentially be used with any online brand, not only Highland Park.

Semiotics is, in essence, an adaptable methodology offering flexible solutions to specific marketing problems, such as identifying gaps and opportunities for brand positioning; showing semiotics has implications for market entry. The author argues that it is becoming increasingly risky for marketers not to consider using semiotics. It can be used to analyze all aspects of branding that communicate the brand to consumers, from advertising and packaging to point-of-sale and merchandising. Semiotics has the ability to make communications successful for brands within their competitive and cultural contexts, and has implications for communications strategy, including concept stretching and enrichment. On focusing on this study, the author has learned that there is a lot more to image and linguistic analysis through the study of semiotics, than was originally thought possible. The use of semiotics has increased the author's awareness of the complex interplay of many factors to create online marketing communications. It is however inevitable that this understanding could be further improved through a number of research directions as proposed by the author.

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Appendix 1: Interview Guide – Global Marketing Controller, Highland Park

Introduction (2-3 minutes)

- Welcome and thank you.
- Emphasize confidentiality.
- Confirm name and position for the tape recorder. Jason Craig, Global Marketing Controller of Highland Park, Single Malt Whisky.
- The aim of my research is to explore the extent to which the theories and principles that semiotics offers, contribute to a greater understanding of the use of the imagery and language within internet web sites.
- The interview will allow me to establish Highland Park's intentions of the use of the imagery and language within the web site. Selected consumers will then view the web site and be interviewed to allow me to develop a deep understanding of their interpretations of the use of the imagery and language within the web site. I will then ascertain any differences between Highland Park's intentions and the consumers' interpretations, of the use of the imagery and language within the web site.
- The main areas to be addressed in the interview are:
 - ✓ Part 1: Brand questions.
 - ✓ Part 2: Internet and web site questions.
 - ✓ Part 3: Questions regarding the use of the imagery and language within the web site.

Discussive Phase (50-55 minutes)

Part 1: Brand Questions (8-10 minutes)

Question 1: Sales of blended Scotch are declining worldwide, whereas world sales of malts have more than tripled in the past decade, from a small number of markets such as the UK, France and the US. What are your thoughts regarding this statement? Why?

Prompt: There is momentum behind the category, consumer awareness is increasing, there is a general trend to premium products, and investment is being put behind the brands.

Question 2: What is currently the emphasis within the single malt Scotch whisky category?

Probe: On what basis do brands differentiate themselves: Authenticity; individuality; discovery; and moving upmarket?

Question 3: What demographic characteristics would you use to identify an individual as a single malt Scotch whisky drinker?

Probe: Strong male bias; ABC1 socio-economic group; over 45s; popular in Scotland.

Supplementary Question: When identifying an individual as a Highland Park drinker, are drinker attitudes more important than demography?

Question 4: What are the current challenges facing the single malt Scotch whisky category?

Prompt: To attract new consumers yet retain popularity among existing drinkers.

Supplementary Question: What is Highland Park doing in relation to these challenges?

Prompt: Make the drink more appealing to younger consumers. Attract females through cocktail culture.

Question 5: Sales of Highland Park are now outstripping the rest of the single malt Scotch whisky category four-fold (Drinks Business Review, 4/9/06). Do you agree/disagree with this statement? Why might this be?

Supplementary Question: What percentage of the single malt Scotch whisky category does Highland Park hold worldwide, in the UK and in Scotland?

Prompt: The Edrington Group invested £18 million in a global plan to double annual sales over the next 5 years and become one of the world's top ten malts.

Question 6: Brand personality can be defined as the set of human characteristics associated with a brand. How would you describe Highland Park's personality?

Probe: Determine rationale behind selected description.

Question 7: What is the core brand positioning for Highland Park?

Part 2: Internet Questions (10-15 minutes)

Question 1: Which marketing agency do you use for your new media communications and also your traditional media communications?

Supplementary Question: What percentage of your overall marketing budget is spent on your internet marketing communications?

Question 2: The internet opened to commercial traffic in 1991, when was the Highland Park web site first created?

Supplementary Question: In your opinion how has the web site changed since then?

Question 3: How often is the web site updated?

Supplementary Question: Will the web site change drastically before the end of this year?

Question 4: What are the key objectives of the Highland Park web site?

Probe: Enhancing brand image and awareness; providing information on products and services; and providing entertainment.

Supplementary Question: How is the web site promoted?

Question 5: How would you describe the brand image (e-identity) of the Highland Park web site?

Supplementary Question: How does the web site link with your overall corporate identity?

Question 6: In the case of the internet, marketers benefit by reaching both a worldwide market and a specific group of consumers. Which target audience/geographic areas is the Highland Park web site targeting? Why?

Question 7: In the case of the internet, the literature suggests brands need to 'pull' active audiences to their web sites by providing unique values and benefits. What do you regard to be the unique values and benefits of the Highland Park web site?

Supplementary Question: Has research been conducted on users' experiences with the Highland Park web site?

Prompt: Measuring attitude towards the web site. Evaluating the design and effectiveness of promotional content on the web site.

Part 3: Questions Regarding the Use of the Imagery and Language within the Highland Park Web Site (30-35 minutes)

Question 1: Have you heard of the term semiotics being used in a marketing communications context? In what way?

Supplementary Question: Have you heard of the term semiotics being applied to internet marketing communications before? In what way?

www.highlandpark.co.uk - Discussion

Home

- ✓ Memory: Graphics, colour, style, layout and typography.
- ‘h’ scandic emblem on every web page.
- Memory: A symbol can become a type of shorthand for the personality of the company and its values.
- Black background and stone visual.

About Orkney

- ✓ Memory: Graphics, colour, style, layout and typography.
- Logo on every web page returns user to home page.
- Black background and dark and medieval visually.
- History of Orkney since 1798 and Highland Park is a part of this.

- Memory: Language should be attractive and meaningful to target audiences. Words not only describe things; they communicate feelings, associations and attitudes - They bring ideas to consumers' minds.
- Gallery of Orkney landscapes and distillery images all dark.
- Memory: Colour can be used to create, maintain and modify brand images in consumers' minds.

The Distillery

- ✓ Memory: Graphics, colour, style, layout and typography.
- The Magnus Eunson Story, founder of the distillery.
- 5 Keystones to making the spirit.
- Best Spirit in the World, Pacult 2006 Spirit Journal.
- The People - Maltman with dark background, the Team and Distillery Manager with lighter background.
- How to get to Orkney - visitorsorkney.com and loganair.co.uk (Loganair Partnership initiative with Highland Park for charter flights and VIP tours).
- Visiting the Distillery - opening times plus address, email and telephone number.

The Whisky

- ✓ Memory: Graphics, colour, style, layout and typography.
- New Packaging: Visual of bottles and labels - Return to authentic colours and designs, redesigned by Mountain Creative Design (web site design and imagery also), including The Amulette (charm) and The Bottle and Label.
- Memory: Very good for semiotic understanding.
- A Brief History of Distilling with a detailed process of distilling and how it all began.

- Core Expressions - Highland Park production and quotes, then detailed tasting notes, accolades and quotes for 12, 15, 16, 18, 25, 30 year olds.
- Limited editions information, quotes, pricing and tasting notes for The Lunar Bottling, The St. Magnus Festival 2006, The Ambassador Cask 2, The Ambassador Cask, 2000, Highland Park Capella, 1974, 1977, 1958, 35 year old Goodwins, 1967
- Ian Rankin 'Rebus 20': Highland Park teamed up with Ian to create a unique whisky celebrating the 20th anniversary of his Inspector Rebus novels. Scots author selected a cask of single malt which is 20 years old and will be used to create Rebus 20 single cask limited edition. Competitions and Links including ianrankin.net due to high demand.
- How to Nose and Taste by Gerry Tosh, Global Brand Ambassador.

Shop

- ✓ Memory: Graphics, colour, style, layout and typography.
- Range of new merchandise to compliment new logo and packaging.
- Highland Park Inner Circle for regular email updates on all goings on.
- The Whisky: 18, 25, 30, Ambassador Cask 2, Lunar Bottling, 12, 15, St. Magnus Festival 2006 - Description, price, enlarge image and buy.
- Clothing Range and Accessories.
- Very detailed Customer Service page.

Just For Fun

- ✓ Memory: Graphics, colour, style, layout and typography.

- Highland Park and food with a master chef creating 6 dishes to compliment the range.
- Wallpaper and screensavers.

News Update

- ✓ Memory: Graphics, colour, style, layout and typography.
- Latest News e.g. 10 April 2007, named 'Distiller of the Year' in the World Spirits Awards 2007, and the Archive on news.

Inner Circle

- ✓ Memory: Graphics, colour, style, layout and typography.
- Highland Park newsletter: Latest mentions Malt Advocate, USA's leading whisky magazine.
- Entered into prize draw to win Limited Edition Rebus 20 goodie bag.

Summarising Phase (2-3 minutes)

- Summary of parts 1, 2 and 3. Check all major issues have been tackled.

Thank you for your participation.

Appendix 2: Interview Guide – Head Creative, Mountain Creative Design

Introduction (2-3 minutes)

- Welcome and thank you.
- Emphasize confidentiality.
- Confirm name and position for the tape recorder.
- The aim of my research is to explore the extent to which the theories and principles that semiotics offers, contribute to a greater understanding of the use of the imagery and language within internet web sites.
- The interview will allow me to establish Highland Park's intentions of the use of the imagery and language within the web site. Selected consumers will then view the web site and be interviewed to allow me to develop a deep understanding of their interpretations of the use of the imagery and language within the web site. I will then ascertain any differences between Highland Park's intentions and the consumers' interpretations, of the use of the imagery and language within the web site.
- The main areas to be addressed in the interview are:
 - ✓ Part 1: Brand questions.
 - ✓ Part 2: Internet questions.
 - ✓ Part 3: Questions regarding the use of the imagery and language within the web site.

Discussive Phase (50-55 minutes)

Part 1: Brand Questions (5-10 minutes)

Question 1: What are your overall thoughts on the Highland Park brand?

Probe: Say anything you like here.

Question 2: Brand personality can be defined as the set of human characteristics associated with a brand. How would you describe Highland Park's personality?

Probe: Determine rationale behind selected description.

Jason: Substance over style, integrity, considered, not flash, not showy, knowledgeable.

Brand vision is to become the most respected single malt in the world.

Question 3: In terms of the brief given to you by Highland Park, what were the key objectives?

Probe: Re-invent the brand's identity.

Question 4: Are you still working on the Highland Park brand? If so, what are you currently doing and what will you be doing in the future, if anything?

Part 2: Internet Questions (10-15 minutes)

Question 1: The literature suggests that FMCG brands are demonstrating strong signs that they are embracing online. Based on your own experience, particularly in relation to alcoholic beverages if applicable, do you agree with this statement?

Probe: Online is seen as a viable channel for engaging with consumers more deeply.

Question 2: The literature suggests that web sites are now considered a specific form of online marketing communications. Do you believe that web sites have a greater number of options than other online marketing communication formats, and in what ways?

Probe: Users seek out a web site, web sites afford greater opportunities to create an emotional experience, and the length of a persuasive appeal located on a web page has no bounds.

Question 3: How would you describe the brand image (e-identity) of the Highland Park web site?

Jason: Traditional, authentic, hand-crafted, raw and simple.

Question 4: What do you believe to be the key objectives of the Highland Park web site?

Jason: Bring a little bit of Orkney to your screen. Over riding ambition was to try and deliver the rawness, the harshness, the isolation, the emptiness. So it's very much the solitude and the natural wonder of Orkney and the mysticism.

Question 5: The literature suggests brands need to 'pull' active audiences to their web sites by providing unique values and benefits. What do you regard to be the unique values and benefits of the Highland Park web site?

Jason: It gives you the opportunity to view Orkney. The on going benefit isn't in visiting the web site, it's signing up to learn more, and our outbound communication is more about knowledge and integrity and almost doing things the right way, the traditional way, when we are talking about brand personality.

Part 3: Questions Regarding the Use of the Imagery and Language within the Highland Park Web Site (30-35 minutes)

Question 1: Have you heard of the term semiotics being used in a marketing communications context? In what way?

Jason: Yes, I've heard of the term semiotics and more and more I've heard of it being applied in a marketing communications context probably over the last year. Semiotics is beginning to emerge and I think it's because consumers are looking for substance behind what they're buying, and therefore imagery, phraseology and brand personality all have to start to emerge from everything, and if you have inconsistency then you by definition are a schizophrenic brand.

Supplementary Question: Have you heard of the term semiotics being applied to internet marketing communications before? In what way?

Jason: No.

- ❖ I am now going to enter the web site and ask you questions regarding mostly the use of the imagery and language within the web site.

In terms of ease-of-use, flow, navigation, interactivity and vividness, how would you rate the Highland Park web site?

Jason: Our target audience remember probably won't be as web literate as our 20-35 year olds would be, so they want ease of navigation, simple structure, they're probably a few years behind the generation that are driving all this interactivity. So if you go into our web site if you're 50 this is good. If you go into our web site when you're 18 or 19 this is a bit dull.

'h' emblem

Jason: I decided with Andy to look at everything, imagery, iconography, brand identity, and all of this was going on at the one time so it was re-designing the packaging, the identity, the brand typography, everything at the one time in 2005.

I sent Andy Bowman to the Viking museums in Finland and Sweden and said go away and come back and justify to me that the old 'h' is relevant. If you think it isn't relevant and can't be authenticated, justify it: Why that colour, why that shape, why that curve, why that typography. Andy came back and said the 'h' wouldn't be in a square box, that's not likely from a hybrid of Celtic and Scandinavian pictures. The reason a hybrid is because in 1471 the King of Norway gifted Orkney and Shetland to Scotland so it was never Scottish. So the history and heritage of the island began at a point in time. So we

can play the Scandinavian, Celtic melting pot hybrid game and we decided we would do that.

Andy said it's going to be a lower case 'h' not a capital, it will have curves, and it will not be straight edged. Everything about Scandinavian architecture, even when you think about the Viking boats, the dragons' heads, the displays on their shields, the decoration on their swords, everything was very curved and natural and almost dragon like.

Charcoal colour

Jason: If you were to go with what works online you wouldn't go black, because white text on black isn't the easiest to read. We are not quite black. We were very black but we are now charcoal and to be honest I'm still tweaking colours.

Label colours

Jason: The orange is in the stone all over Orkney and it's handy that amber is the colour of whisky, and our **12** year old, old pack was predominantly orange in imagery so there's a kind of familiarity for consumers.

The **15** year old is green because there's fields everywhere on Orkney.

The **16** year old is very sky blue or the blue of the sea.

The one that I can't really authenticate is the **18** year old which is red, it's just it's a nice regal colour for the best spirit in the world.

Photography

Jason: Every on the web site that is an image of the island from a distance is landscape, the only shots that aren't landscape are extreme close ups for example of the rocks. It's more to break it up for the watching viewer. It looks like it's black and white

photography but it is actually full colour black and white photography, because it's a black and white image with a wash to give a warmth to something which is quite stark.

Bottle

Jason: The shape is easy on the hand, so it's easier to pour than a round bottle, there's an embossed 'h' so you feel a little bit of tactility when you lift the bottle, if you hold the bottle higher up there's also embossing on the back, so easy on the hand, feels good on the hand, simple imagery, simple labels, and the whisky is the King so don't hide the whisky behind green glass, don't hide the whisky behind big labels.

Logo

Jason: There are two versions of our logo. There's a stacked version and a linear version. Normally you have the 'h' above the words Highland Park, and you also have the 'h' to the left of the words Highland Park as a linear logo. When you're designing an identity you can't always have a square, because if you're doing sponsorship, most sponsorship allows you to fill a strip along the bottom, which tends to be not particularly high but wide, so you can't have a stacked logo or it would be microscopic. So, we use two different brand identities.

Lexicon created of Highland Park language

Jason: I employed a guy who used to be the Editor in Chief for Whisky Magazine. For example, I don't want to say heritage, so I can say authentic, integrity and legacy. The thing that can most often go wrong is layout and language. Certain words don't translate well and we've found that to our cost with other brands, but this lexicon works and gives you an element of control and people like simple guidelines. Again, it's consistency and control. In relation to layout, it's with everything, for instance there are brand identity

guidelines on how you can and cannot use my logo, so angles, typography, style changes, sizes, proportions, distances from the edge of the page.

Summarising Phase (2 minutes)

- Summary of parts 1, 2 and 3. Check all major issues have been tackled.

Thank you for your participation.

Appendix 3: Interview Guide – Head of Brand Education, Highland Park

Introduction (3 minutes)

- Welcome and thank you.
- Emphasize confidentiality.
- Confirm name and position for the tape recorder. Gerry Tosh, Head of Brand Education at Highland Park.
- The aim of my research is to explore the extent to which the theories and principles that semiotics offers, contribute to a greater understanding of the use of the imagery and language within internet web sites.
- The interview will allow me to establish Highland Park’s intentions of the use of the imagery and language within the web site. Selected consumers will then view the web site and be interviewed to allow me to develop a deep understanding of their interpretations of the use of the imagery and language within the web site. I will then ascertain any differences between Highland Park’s intentions and the consumers’ interpretations, of the use of the imagery and language within the web site.
- The main areas to be addressed in the interview are:
 - ✓ Part 1: Brand questions.
 - ✓ Part 2: Internet questions.
 - ✓ Part 3: Questions regarding the use of the imagery and language within the web site.

Discussive Phase (57 minutes)

Part 1: Brand Questions (20 minutes)

Question 1: As the Global Brand Ambassador for Highland Park, very briefly what does your job entail?

Question 2: Sales of blended Scotch are declining worldwide, whereas world sales of malts have more than tripled in the past decade, from a small number of markets such as the UK, France and the US. What are your thoughts regarding this statement, and why do you think this is?

Prompt: There is momentum behind the category, consumer awareness is increasing, there is a general trend to premium products, and investment is being put behind the brands.

Question 3: What is the emphasis and the main challenges within the single malt Scotch whisky category? What is Highland Park doing in relation to this?

Probe: On what basis do brands differentiate themselves: Authenticity; individuality; discovery; and moving upmarket? To attract new consumers yet retain popularity among existing drinkers.

Question 4: What demographic characteristics would you use to identify an individual as a single malt Scotch whisky drinker?

Probe: Strong male bias; ABC1 socio-economic group; over 45s; popular in Scotland. In the UK, 25 years minimum but lion's share is 40-60 years.

Question 5: When identifying an individual as a Highland Park drinker, are drinker attitudes more important than demography?

Probe: It is demographics but also changing drinker attitudes.

Question 6: Sales of Highland Park are now outstripping the rest of the single malt Scotch whisky category four-fold (Drinks Business Review, 4/9/06). Do you agree/disagree with this statement? Why might this be?

Probe: Highland Park grew about 30% and the market was growing about 7 or 8%. This was marketing-led genius: First of all packaging, second of all PR of the packaging, thirdly speaking with all the whisky experts and opinion formers and influencers and advising them what we were doing, why we were doing it.

Question 7: What is the core brand positioning for Highland Park?

Probe: Brand essence is the word flawless. It is the flawless balance between sweetness and smoke.

Question 8: Brand personality can be defined as the set of human characteristics associated with a brand. How would you describe Highland Park's personality?

Probe: Substance over style, integrity, considered, not flashy, not showy, and knowledgeable.

Part 2: Internet Questions (20 minutes)

Question 1: The literature suggests that FMCG brands are demonstrating strong signs that they are embracing online. Do you agree with this statement, particularly in relations to alcoholic beverages?

Probe: Online is seen as a viable channel for engaging with consumers more deeply.

Question 2: The literature suggests that web sites are now considered a specific form of online marketing communications as opposed to being a carrier. Do you believe that web sites have a greater number of options than other formats, and in what ways?

Probe: Web sites afford greater opportunities to create an emotional experience, and the length of a persuasive appeal located on a web page has no bounds.

Question 3: How would you describe the brand image (e-identity) of the Highland Park web site?

Probe: Traditional, authentic, hand-crafted, raw and simple.

Question 4: How does the web site link with your overall corporate identity?

Question 5: What do you believe to be the key objectives of the Highland Park web site?

Probe: Bring a little bit of Orkney to your screen. Over riding ambition was to try and deliver the rawness, harshness, isolation, emptiness. It is very much the solitude and natural wonder of Orkney, and the mysticism.

Question 6: In the case of the internet, the literature suggests brands need to ‘pull’ active audiences to their web sites by providing unique values and benefits. What do you regard to be the unique values and benefits of the Highland Park web site?

Probe: It gives you the opportunity to view Orkney. The on going benefit isn’t in visiting the web site, it’s signing up to learn more and our outbound communication is more about knowledge and integrity and almost doing things the right way, the traditional way, when we are talking about brand personality.

Part 3: Questions Regarding the Use of the Imagery and Language within the Highland Park Web Site (15 minutes)

Question 1: Have you heard of the term semiotics being used in a marketing communications context? In what way?

Jason: Yes, I’ve heard of the term semiotics and more and more I’ve heard of it being applied in a marketing communications context probably over the last year. Semiotics is beginning to emerge and I think it’s because consumers are looking for substance behind what they’re buying, and therefore imagery, phraseology and brand personality all have to start to emerge from everything, and if you have inconsistency then you by definition are a schizophrenic brand.

Question 2: Have you heard of the term semiotics being applied to internet marketing communications before? In what way?

Jason: No.

Question 3: What role did you play in the designing of the Highland Park web site?

Question 4: In terms of ease-of-use, flow, navigation, interactivity and vividness, how would you rate the Highland Park web site?

'h' emblem

Jason: I decided with Andy to look at everything, imagery, iconography, brand identity, and all of this was going on at the one time so it was re-designing the packaging, the identity, the brand typography, everything at the one time in 2005.

I sent Andy Bowman to the Viking museums in Finland and Sweden and said go away and come back and justify to me that the old 'h' is relevant. If you think it isn't relevant and can't be authenticated, justify it: Why that colour, why that shape, why that curve, why that typography. Andy came back and said the 'h' wouldn't be in a square box, that's not likely from a hybrid of Celtic and Scandinavian pictures. The reason a hybrid is because in 1471 the King of Norway gifted Orkney and Shetland to Scotland so it was never Scottish. So the history and heritage of the island began at a point in time. So we can play the Scandinavian, Celtic melting pot hybrid game and we decided we would do that.

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Jason: If you were to go with what works online you wouldn't go black, because white text on black isn't the easiest to read. We are not quite black. We were very black but we are now charcoal and to be honest I'm still tweaking colours.

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Jason: Every on the web site that is an image of the island from a distance is landscape, the only shots that aren't landscape are extreme close ups for example of the rocks. It's more to break it up for the watching viewer. It looks like it's black and white photography but it is actually full colour black and white photography, because it's a black and white image with a wash to give a warmth to something which is quite stark.

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Jason: The shape is easy on the hand, so it's easier to pour than a round bottle, there's an embossed 'h' so you feel a little bit of tactility when you lift the bottle, if you hold the bottle higher up there's also embossing on the back, so easy on the hand, feels good on the hand, simple imagery, simple labels, and the whisky is the King so don't hide the whisky behind green glass, don't hide the whisky behind big labels.

Logo/ Name Style

Jason: There are two versions of our logo. There's a stacked version and a linear version. Normally you have the 'h' above the words Highland Park, and you also have the 'h' to the left of the words Highland Park as a linear logo. When you're designing an identity you can't always have a square, because if you're doing sponsorship, most sponsorship allows you to fill a strip along the bottom, which tends to be not particularly high but wide, so you can't have a stacked logo or it would be microscopic. So, we use two different brand identities.

Lexicon created of Highland Park language

Jason: I employed a guy who used to be the Editor in Chief for Whisky Magazine. For example, I don't want to say heritage, so I can say authentic, integrity and legacy. The thing that can most often go wrong is layout and language. Certain words don't translate well and we've found that to our cost with other brands, but this lexicon works and gives you an element of control and people like simple guidelines. Again, it's consistency and control. In relation to layout, it's with everything, for instance there are brand identity guidelines on how you can and cannot use my logo, so angles, typography, style changes, sizes, proportions, distances from the edge of the page.

Summarising Phase (2 minutes)

- Summary of parts 1, 2 and 3. Check all major issues have been tackled.

Thank you for your participation.

Appendix 4: Email Questionnaire to Consumers

Subject: Participating in research to win a bottle of “The Best Spirit in the World.”

My name is Sarah Cara Grumball, and I am studying for the degree of MPhil in Marketing at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow. The aim of my research is to explore the extent to which the theories and principles that semiotics (life of signs) offers, contribute to a greater understanding of the use of the imagery and language within internet web sites.

I would greatly appreciate you participating in this short questionnaire, which should take no more than 5 minutes of your time. Any information you give me will be used for academic purposes and be treated with the utmost confidentiality. The questionnaire consists of questions about drinking whisky, the internet, your background and finally your interest in a study about website imagery and language.

Simply put a tick in the appropriate box(es) or type the appropriate information in the spaces available. Please return the completed questionnaire at your earliest convenience to sarah.c.grumball@strath.ac.uk, or simply click ‘Reply.’

Sincerely,

Sarah Cara Grumball.

Questionnaire

Whisky Questions

Q1. Are you a Scotch whisky drinker?

Yes

No

If No, please terminate this questionnaire and thank you for your time.

Q2. Are you a blended or a single malt Scotch whisky drinker?

Blend

Malt

Both

Don't know

If only Blended, please terminate this questionnaire and thank you for your time.

Q3. What are your preferred single malt Scotch whiskies to drink? Please specify a maximum of five.

Q4. How often do you drink these preferred single malt Scotch whiskies?

Once a week or more often

Between once a week and once a month

Between a month and once every three months

Three or four times a year

Once a year or less

Q5. What is your favourite single malt Scotch whisky to drink?

Q6. Are you aware of the single malt Scotch whisky Highland Park?

Yes

No

If No, go to Q9.

Q7. Do you drink Highland Park single malt Scotch whisky?

Yes

No

If No, go to Q9.

Q8. How often do you drink Highland Park single malt Scotch whisky?

Once a week or more often

Between once a week and once a month

Between a month and once every three months

Three or four times a year

Once a year or less

Internet Questions

Q9. Do you use the internet?

Yes

No

If No, go to Q17.

Q10. How often do you use the internet?

Every day

Almost every day

Once a week

Once every two weeks

Once every three weeks

Once a month

Less than once a month

Q11. Where do you access the internet from? Please tick all boxes that apply.

At home

At work

Mobile access whilst at home

Mobile access whilst at work

Mobile access whilst on the move

Q12. What internet connection(s) do you have where you access the internet?

Dial up

Broadband

Both

Other

Please specify

Q13. What are the reasons you use the internet for? Please tick all boxes that apply.

Searching for information about goods or services

Using email

General browsing or surfing

Searching for information about travel and accommodation

Playing or downloading games, images or music

Internet banking

Reading or downloading on-line news (inc. newspapers or news magazines)

Activities related specifically to employment (current or future job)

Seeking health related information

Activities related to a school, college or university course

Looking for a job or sending a job application

Listening to web radios/watching web television

Downloading software other than games

Other communication e.g. chat rooms, message boards

Post educational activities (e.g. leisure activities)

Selling goods or services

Telephoning over the internet/video conferencing

Other

Please specify

Q14. Have you ever visited any single malt Scotch whisky web sites?

Yes

No

If No, go to Q17.

Q15. Which single malt Scotch whisky web sites have you visited?

Q16. How often do you visit these web sites?

Once a week or more often

Between once a week and once a month

Between a month and once every three months

Three or four times a year

Once a year or less

Background Questions

Q17. What is your name? First name and surname.

Q18. What is your gender?

Male

Female

Q19. What age group do you belong to?

Below 25

25 – 34

35 – 44

45 – 55

Above 55

Q20. What is your home address and postcode?

Q21. What is your marital status?

Single (never married)

Married (first marriage)

Re-married

Separated (but still legally married)

Divorced

Widowed

Q22. Do you have any children currently living at home with you?

Yes

No

If No, go to Q24.

Q23. What are the ages of the children currently living at home with you?

Q24. Which of these qualifications do you have? Please tick all boxes that apply or, if not specified, the nearest equivalent.

High School Standard Grades

High School Highers

College HNC or HND

First Degree (e.g. BA, BSc)

Higher Degree (e.g. Ph.D.)

No Qualifications

Other

Please specify

Q25. What is your current working status?

Working full time (30+ hours/week)

Working part time (8–29 hours/week)

Self-employed

Not working/unemployed

Looking after home/family

Student

Long term sick

Retired

If Student or Looking after home/family, go to Q29.

Q26. What is (was) the nature of the business at the place where you work (worked) as your main job? Your main job is the job in which you usually work(ed) the most hours. If you are (were) self-employed or have (had) your own business, what is (was) the nature of your business?

Q27. What is (was) the full title of your main job?

Q28. Describe what you do (did) in your main job.

Closing Question

Q29. Would you be willing to view a single malt Scotch whisky web site, and discuss your interpretations of the use of the imagery and language within that web site?

Yes

No

The End. Thank you for your participation.

Appendix 5: Consumer Sample Grid

Consumer Sample Grid

Participant	Gender	Age Group	Post Code	Marital Status	Qualifications	Working Status	Job Title	Blend/Malt Drinker	Drinking Behaviour
A	Male	25-34	G74 4UR	Single	Standard Grades, Highers, HNC/HND, 1st Degree	Full-time	Web Promotions Developer	Both	Three or four times a year
B	Female	45-55	G1	Divorced	Standard Grades, Highers, Diploma	Self-employed	Housing Director/Consultant	Malt	Three or four times a year
C	Female	45-55	G41 3DT	Re-married	Standard Grades, Highers, 1st Degree	Full-time	Depute Head Teacher	Malt	Between once a week and once a month
D	Female	35-44	FK7 8FJ	Married (first marriage)	Standard Grades, Highers, 1st Degree, CIMA	Full-time	Financial Accounting Manager, OI	Both	Between a month and once every three months
E	Male	45-55	G41 3DT	Re-married	Standard Grades, Highers, 1st Degree, Diplomas	Full-time	Depute Head Teacher	Malt	Once a week or more often
F	Male	35-44	G33 1TE	Married (first marriage)	Standard Grades, Highers	Full-time	Account Manager, Construction Sales	Malt	Between once a week and once a month
G	Male	35-44	G42 9UW	Married (first marriage)	Standard Grades, Highers, HNC/HND, 1st Degree	Full-time	Senior Controller, Aviation	Both	Between once a week and once a month
H	Female	25-34	G42 9AF	Single	Standard Grades, Highers, 1st Degree, Higher Degree	Full-time	HR Business Partner	Both	Three or four times a year
I	Female	35-44	G33 1TE	Married (first marriage)	Standard Grades, Highers, 1st Degree	Full-time	Hotel Sales and Events Manager	Both	Between once a week and once a month
J	Female	25-34	G14 0HZ	Single	Standard Grades, Highers, 1st Degree	Full-time	Civil Engineer	Both	Between a month and once every three months
K	Male	25-34	G41 3DU	Married (first marriage)	Standard Grades, Highers, HNC/HND	Full-time	Food Manufacturer Manager	Malt	Between once a week and once a month
L	Male	35-44	G1 4EE	Single	Standard Grades, Highers, HNC/HND	Full-time	Account Manager, Technology Services	Malt	Three or four times a year
M	Male	35-44	G41 3DT	Married (first marriage)	Standard Grades, Highers, HNC/HND, 1st Degree, Higher Degree	Full-time	Director of Manufacturings Operations	Malt	Between once a week and once a month
N	Male	45-55	G76 8LQ	Married (first marriage)	Standard Grades, Highers, 1st Degree, Higher Degree	Full-time	Head of Imaging Physics	Malt	Between a month and once every three months
O	Female	45-55	G76 8LQ	Married (first marriage)	Standard Grades, Highers, 1st Degree	Part-time	High School Teacher	Both	Between once a week and once a month
P	Male	35-44	FK7 8FJ	Married (first marriage)	Standard Grades, Highers, 1st Degree, Diploma	Full-time	Legal Adviser, Whisky Trade	Malt	Between once a week and once a month

Appendix 6: Consumers' Interview Guide

Introduction (2 minutes)

- Welcome and thank you.
- The aim of my research is to explore the extent to which the theories and principles that semiotics (life of signs) offers, contribute to a greater understanding of the use of the imagery and language within internet web sites.
- Please spend as long as you like on the Highland Park web site, getting a 'feel' for the site, based on what my research aim is.
- After viewing the Highland Park web site, you will be interviewed for approximately 30 minutes. The interview consists of four questions, followed by topic areas to discuss, which will allow me to establish your interpretations of the use of the imagery and language within the Highland Park web site.
- Emphasize confidentiality.
- Confirm name for the tape recorder.
- Please let me know if you would like to refer back to the Highland Park web site prior to answering any questions.

Discussive Phase (30 minutes)

Question 1: Brand personality can be defined as the set of human characteristics associated with a brand. How would you describe Highland Park's personality?

Question 2: How would you describe the brand image (e-identity) of the Highland Park web site?

Question 3: What do you think are the key objectives of the Highland Park web site?

Question 4: In terms of navigation and interactivity, how would you rate the Highland Park web site?

Topic area 1: 'h' emblem

Probe:

- Hand-crafted, jewellery made, Orcadian 'h'
- Overlaps onto image
- Size
- Curved shape
- Knot work
- Colour
- Typography (style/appearance of letters/figures)

Topic area 2: Name style

Probe:

- Size
- Shape/layout (single line and stacked version)
- Colour
- Font
- Style
- Typography (style/appearance of letters/figures)

Topic area 3: Colour of web page backgrounds

Probe:

- Colours from Orkney environment

Topic area 4: Bottles, labels and packaging

Probe:

- Each age differentiated by ‘year colour’ with younger years (12-18) having stronger and brighter colours, and older years (25 and 30) having more muted, sophisticated colours

Topic area 5: Photography

Probe:

- Colour – matt black and white image with a wash through it
- Style – wild and tempestuous weather, clean, pristine and natural environment
- Shape – panoramic, longitudinal, powerfully portrays the landscape, with occasional extreme close ups
- Size

Topic area 6: Text (2 pronged – appearance and wording)

Probe:

- Style – Interpretation of chosen words
- Size
- Font
- Colour
- Layout (framing)
- Typography (style/appearance of letters/figures)

Summarising Phase (2 minutes)

- Check all major issues have been tackled, and ask participants if there is anything they would like to add.

Thank you for your participation.

Appendix 7: Practitioners' Informed Consent Form

I, the undersigned.....certify that I freely participate to the research project exploring semiotics and internet marketing communications. The nature of the research project is as follows:

1. The project aims to explore the extent to which the theories and principles that semiotics offers, contribute to a greater understanding of the use of the imagery and language within internet web sites.
2. The interview aims to establish the encoder's intentions of the use of the imagery and language within the web site. It is expected to last no longer than one hour, and with the interviewee's consent, will be tape recorded.
3. The interview will focus on: Brand questions; internet questions; and questions regarding the use of the imagery and language within the web site.
4. The interviewee has the right to refuse to answer any question, and may terminate the interview at any time, without providing justification.
5. To protect participants, the following steps will be taken with regards to anonymity and confidentiality of information:
 - a. In research papers the identity of the interviewee will be known.
 - b. Only the researcher will have access to the interview tapes and transcripts.
 - c. Once the interview is transcribed, and if the interviewee requests, a copy of the transcript can be sent. The interviewee will be given four weeks to communicate to the researcher any transcript concerns or modifications. Once this four week period is over, it will be assumed that the interviewee agrees with the transcript.
 - d. When a draft of a research paper is produced, and if the interviewee requests it, a copy will be sent for the interviewee to review.
 - e. The original tapes will be destroyed after the MPhil has been awarded, as will any transcripts remaining.

6. Research papers and/or presentations will be written from the information gathered, and eventually published in academic and/or practitioner journals.
7. A summary of the research will be sent to participants upon request.
8. The research project is under the responsibility of Sarah Cara Grumball, research student at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow. Supervisors are Dr Ian Grant and Dr Stephen Tagg.

Read and approved on.....

Participant's signature.....

Researcher's signature.....

Appendix 8: Consumers' Informed Consent Form

I, the undersigned.....certify that I freely participate to the research project exploring semiotics and internet marketing communications. The nature of the research project is as follows:

9. The project aims to explore the extent to which the theories and principles that semiotics offers, contribute to a greater understanding of the use of the imagery and language within internet web sites.
10. Each participant will view the appropriate web site, and will be interviewed directly afterwards. Each interview is expected to last no longer than 30 minutes, and with the interviewee's consent, will be tape recorded.
11. The interview consists of four questions, followed by topic areas, which will allow the researcher to establish the interviewee's interpretations of the use of the imagery and language within the appropriate web site.
12. The interviewee has the right to refuse to answer any question, and may stop the interview at any time, without providing any justification.
13. To protect participants, the following steps will be taken with regards to anonymity and confidentiality of information:
 - a. In research papers the identity of the interviewee will not be known.
 - b. Only the researcher will have access to the interview tapes and transcripts.
 - c. Once the interview is transcribed, and if the interviewee requests it, a copy of the transcript can be sent out. The interviewee will be given four weeks to communicate to the researcher any transcript concerns or modifications. Once this four week period is over, it will be assumed that the interviewee agrees with the transcript.
 - d. When a draft of a research paper is produced, and if the interviewee requests it, a copy will be sent out for the interviewee to review.
 - e. The original tapes will be destroyed after the MPhil has been awarded, as will any transcripts remaining.

14. Research papers and/or presentations will be written from the information gathered, and eventually published in academic and/or practitioner journals.
15. A summary of the research will be sent to participants upon request.
16. The research project is under the responsibility of Sarah Cara Grumball, research student at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow. Supervisors are Dr Ian Grant and Dr Stephen Tagg.

Read and approved on.....

Participant's signature.....

Researcher's signature.....