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THE ICONS OF CONSUMER RESEARCH

Using signs to represent consumers' reality

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In consumer research – as in all types of human communication – there is an inevitable link between representation and deception. In articles, monographs, and books, consumer researchers seek to present consumer experiences, behaviors, and general tendencies to readers. However, because experiences, behaviors, and general tendencies cannot be presented directly to a reader, they must instead be *re*presented using words, tables, graphs, diagrams, formulae, and other signs. Thus, a great deal depends on the researcher's ability to choose the most representative signs because they are the only link that a reader has with what the researcher has examined. To the extent that the researcher chooses unwisely – or worse, chooses selectively in order to present a more convincing account – the reader will be left with an incorrect or distorted view of what was researched. Umberto Eco (1979: 59) summarizes this line of reasoning with the proposition that "every time there is signification, there is the possibility of using it in order to lie."

Are lies prevalent in consumer research? The answer depends on one's definition of a lie. Certainly when researchers choose signs to represent consumer experiences, they leave out some things and simplify others. Kenneth Burke suggests that this alone leads to misrepresentation and deception, saying that people search for:

> vocabularies that will be faithful *reflections* of reality. To this end, they must develop vocabularies that are *selections* of reality. And any selection of reality must, in certain circumstances, function as a *deflection* of reality (emphasis his).
>
> (Burke 1945: 59)

Perhaps it is unfair to call consumer research a lie if it "deflects reality" by omission or simplification. Readers undoubtedly would find fault with a consumer research article if it described every methodological detail, discussed every aspect of the raw data, or mentioned every possible exception to a general tendency. Yet, from the perspective of Burke's quotation, there is little difference between a researcher who does not report an outlier in order to make the write-up more general or easier to read, and a researcher who omits an outlier to make the write-up more convincing. Although the motives of these two researchers are different, both write-ups are misrepresentations, and both mislead the reader.

In Plato's "Republic" (1989), Socrates takes a similar perspective on the difficulty of accurately representing reality. Using the example of a painting of a couch, he argues that the painting is "far removed from truth" (Part X: 823) because it is neither an actual couch nor an imitation of a couch, but an imitation of how a couch appears, and thus twice removed from reality. Its inability to do justice to the reality of the couch is highlighted by the fact that it shows the couch from only one angle or perspective and therefore "touches or lays hold of only a small part of the object" (Part X: 823). Paradoxically, although it is twice removed from reality and shows only a small part of the couch, the painting leaves viewers with the impression that they have come to know the real couch, and more than just the small part shown in the picture. Thus, according to Socrates, the painting "associates with the part in us that is remote from intelligence" (Part X: 828). Socrates and Burke therefore make a more absolute connection than Eco: it is not that representation raises the possibility of deception, but that it cannot avoid deception.

As consumer researchers, we are representing not couches but consumer experiences and behaviors. And yet, like Socrates's proverbial painting, our research inevitably touches or lays hold of only a small part of the consumer experience we are studying. How can we maximize the representative power of the signs we use? How can we minimize their potential to deceive? In this chapter, I draw from semiotic theory to explore these questions. To do so, I begin by presenting some key elements of this theory, focusing particularly on the concept of truth in semiotic relationships. I then outline different ways in which truth can be achieved in representation, focusing particularly on the role of iconic representations. Then, using examples of representations from published articles in the *Journal of Consumer Research* and the *Journal of Marketing Research*, I explore the idea of iconic symbols in consumer research.

The triadic semiotic model applied to consumer research

Symbols form a bridge between our consciousness and the world beyond it. They help us to know what products can be found inside grocery-store packages, what sights can be seen in countries we may never visit, and what thoughts lie within the minds of others. We also use symbols to communicate our own experiences of the world to others. Symbols are such a pervasive and useful element of our lives that we do not – and in general, need not – think about how they work. Yet, in order to consider the proposition that symbols are often misleading, the semiotic process must be brought out from the background of experience. This is the purpose of semiotic models: to examine how ink on a page can successfully represent the price of a product, the proceedings of a seminar, or the response of a consumer to an advertising message.

This section describes the semiotic model developed by Charles Sanders Peirce, one of the thinkers who stand at the foundation of semiotic theory. Peirce's model differs from other semiotic models (e.g. Derrida 1976; Saussure 1959) in a number of ways. One of the most important of these differences is Peirce's proposition that a real world exists independently of human text, and that semiotic models need to take this real world into account (Peirce 1940: 38–9; Sheriff 1989; Silverman 1983; Tallis 1995). This is clearly a useful premise when examining how symbols may represent the behaviors of a real consumer in the real world. In this section, I outline the three elements of Peirce's semiotic model and describe how these elements interrelate. This will lay the groundwork for subsequent sections, which define an icon and explore its unique role in representation and in consumer research.

Peirce described the semiotic process in terms of three interacting elements, which are depicted in Figure 1.1. One element, a sign, is "something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity" (Peirce 1940: 99). The "something" that the sign stands for is called the object, which can be an element of the real or social world; or can be just a possibility. In the mind of the "somebody" perceiving the sign, the sign prompts an idea or mental image called the interpretant. (Note that Peirce viewed an interpretant as being a sign in the mind's eye, and the term therefore differs somewhat from the term "interpretation" (Singer 1984: 66–9).) Applying these concepts to consumer research, the object of any research is ultimately consumer experiences or behaviors. These are represented by signs such as words, figures, equations, etc., which appear in

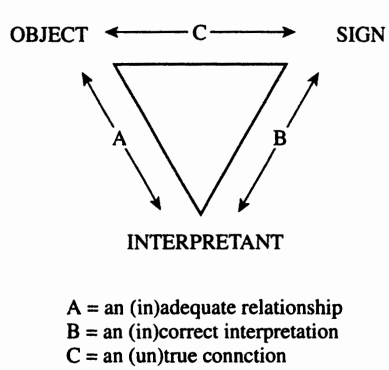


Figure 1.1 The triadic semiotic model
Source: Adapted from Peirce (1940) and Ogden and Richards (1923)

journal articles, monographs and books. These signs prompt in readers' minds interpretants (signs in the mind's eye) of the consumer experience being examined.

Most authors and/or readers of consumer research hope that the interpretants prompted by what they write or read will reflect as accurately as possible the consumer experience under examination. This is what Stierle describes as a desire to "fill the gap between word and world" (Stierle 1980: 84). Although researchers may differ in their methods for filling this gap and in their level of confidence in how well this gap can be filled, few (if any) researchers are in the business of making their texts *un*representative of the consumer experience. Thus, some researchers focus on achieving "construct validity" or "internal validity" (Cook and Campbell 1979), while others seek "findings that correspond to the consumption reality experienced by consumers" (Belk *et al.* 1988: 467) or interpetations that "illuminate, disclose, and reveal the lived experience" of the consumer (Hudson and Ozanne 1988: 515).

Peirce's semiotic model is useful for understanding how texts can be more or less successful in illuminating consumer experience. This utility is best illustrated by examining individually each of the three dyadic relationships in Peirce's triad. Although Peirce was clear in his later work that the elements of his triad "are bound together . . . in a way that does not consist in any complexus of dyadic relations" (1940: 100), he himself examined the relationships among the three dyads (1982: 79–80), illustrating (as this chapter will) that focusing on one dyadic link leads unavoidably to examining the others. The three links in Peirce's triad are marked in Figure 1.1 by the letters A, B and C. Ogden and Richards (1923: 11) respectively describe these links as referring to relationships of adequacy, correctness, and truth:

- Link "A" refers to the connection between the interpretant and the object. A common goal of consumer research is to prompt a symbol in the reader's mind that successfully represents or reflects the consumer experience. Because human communication and cognition always are inexact reflections of reality, the reader's impression of the consumer's experience always will be incomplete or distorted. However, the researcher, the reader, and to some degree even the consumer hope that this link is *adequate*, which means that the interpretant and object are similar enough that the reader gains knowledge about the reality of the consumer's experience.
- Link "B" refers to the relationship between the sign and the sign prompted in the reader's mind. If the reader misreads or misunderstands the signs used by the researcher, then the relationship between sign and interpretant will be threatened. However, researcher, reader, and consumer hope that this link is *correct*, which means that the sign has prompted the interpretant that was intended by the sign's user and/or that is dictated by well-established rules of sign reading.
- Link "C" is the connection between object and sign. Is this connection clear and unquestionable? If not, then even a correct interpretation of the sign

can lead to a misperception of the consumer experience. However, researcher, reader, and consumer hope that the link between sign and object is *true*, which means that the sign is unequivocally connected with the consumer experience.

In an ideal semiotic process, each of the three relationships will function properly. However, it is important to note that the three links are independent of one another. For example, adequacy does not depend on truthfulness or correctness. To illustrate this, consider the example of a novice reader reading an article written by a novice researcher. The researcher has developed a scale to measure consumer experience "X" but, being a novice, does not realize that the scale is extremely vulnerable to method bias (for example, the items are all positive statements, measured using only four-point Likert scales, placed together on the survey, and so forth). The researcher reports that the Cronbach's Alpha for the scale is 0.93 and that responses to the scale are therefore an excellent indication of consumer experience "X." Given the strong method bias, the scale is not an excellent indication of the consumer experience, and so the researcher's statement (sign) is not true. However, the novice reader (being a bit overwhelmed by the technicalities in the researcher's report) misreads the article and comes away with the belief that the scale is not an excellent indication of consumer experience "X." The end result is that the researcher's sign is untrue (link "C"), and the reader's interpretation is incorrect (link "B"), but the reader's interpretant is adequate (link "A").

I have described this dysfunctional semiotic process to illustrate the point that each dyad in Peirce's semiotic triad depends on different conditions that can operate independently. Although the example is extreme, it highlights the importance of two issues. First, for the semiotic process to function properly, both the reader and the sign maker must have a level of knowledge about, if not an expertise in, the types of sign being used. This is an important issue that I will return to at the end of this chapter. Second, the researcher must be exceptionally good at ensuring that he or she chooses signs that accurately reflect the consumer experience under investigation (see, e.g. Shulman 1994). In Peircian terms, this is the relationship between sign and object, which can be either truthful or untruthful, and which is the topic of the next section.

Conditions for truth in consumer research

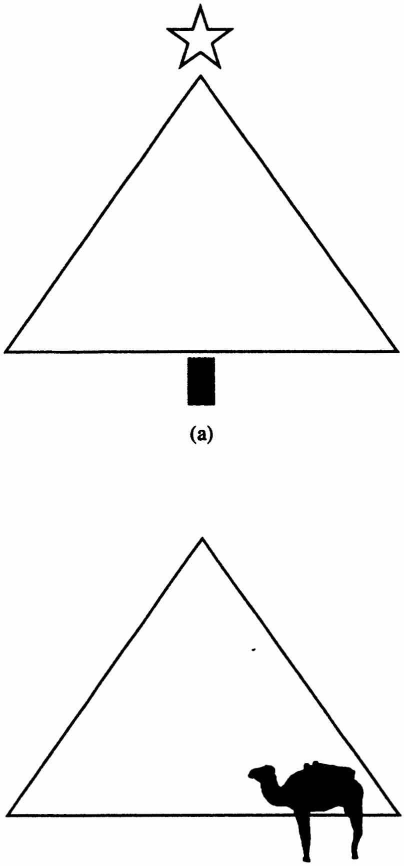
As compared with everyday or literary language, scientific language tends to place more emphasis on the relationship between sign and object. Focusing on sign and object directs attention away from the scientist, thus highlighting the perceived or desired objectivity of scientific activity (Baron 1984: 193, Potter 1996: 116). Most researchers admit that a perfect relationship between sign and object is impossible, yet many of us strive for a language that makes as firm a connection as possible. Peirce describes three types of relationship that can exist between a sign and its object: iconic, indexical, and symbolic. In this section I outline the differences among the resulting three types of sign (icon, index, symbol), and then give careful attention to the first of these, the icon. The next section focuses on the icons of consumer research.

An icon is a sign that represents its object "mainly by similarity" (Peirce 1940: 105). For example, a realistic drawing of a dog is an iconic sign because, to the perceiver, the drawing looks like a dog. In contrast, an index is a sign that "refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of being really affected by that Object" (Peirce 1940: 102) or because it "direct[s] the attention" to its object (Peirce 1940: 108). A dog's bark or its pawprint in the sand does not "look like" a dog, but it was affected by a dog, and thus has an indexical relationship with the dog. Lastly, a symbol is a sign that "refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of a law" or convention (Peirce 1940: 102). The word "dog" represents a dog in English and the word "chien" represents a dog in French. Neither "dog" nor "chien" are icons because they do not resemble a dog, nor are they indices because they are not affected by a dog. Instead, they are symbols because they represent a dog simply because of the conventions of the English and French languages.

In many instances throughout his writing, Peirce presents icons, indices, and symbols as three separate and distinct types of sign. Nonetheless, he also softens this distinction by suggesting that no relationship between a sign and its object is purely iconic, indexical, or symbolic. For example, he notes that although a photograph is similar to the object that it represents, it is also caused by impressions of light on sensitive paper and is in that respect an index (1940: 106). He also writes that although a painting may be similar to the object it represents, it is "largely conventional in its mode of representation" (1940: 105) and is in that respect a symbol. More generally, Peirce writes 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" (1940: 108). Thus, photographs can be both icons and indices; paintings can be both icons and symbols; and in fact, any sign – written, drawn, spoken etc. – has the capacity to be iconic, indexical and/or symbolic (Nöth 1995: 122; Pelc 1986).

Of Peirce's three potentially truthful signs, the icon is often experienced by viewers as having a particularly compelling relationship with its object because of its obvious similarity to it. However, the criterion of "obvious similarity" has been questioned by researchers in disciplines ranging from cognitive psychology to art theory. To illustrate the potential problem inherent in the concept of an icon, consider the two similar signs in Figure 1.2. Many viewers will say that sign (a) looks like a Christmas tree, and that sign (b) looks like an Egyptian pyramid. This undermines the general premise of an icon because both signs are so similar. How can such similar signs also be iconically similar to such different objects?

A potentially useful answer comes from Rosch's foundational work on categorization, which shows that human beings distinguish between objects based on a small and consistent subset of object attributes (e.g. Rosch *et al.* 1976). Based on this work, it could be argued that, for icons, it is the quality of similarity that



(a)

(b)

Figure 1.2 Two potential icons

matters, not the quantity. The star in sign (a) and the camel in sign (b) are small differences, but they could be such critical attributes that they prompt large differences in their respective signs' interpretants. In this light, an icon could be defined as a sign that resembles its object on those critical attributes necessary to define it as a member of a basic category. However, categorization research also suggests that when viewers differ in what they know about objects (for example, because of expertise or exposure to advertising), their criteria for distinguishing between objects can differ (e.g. Loken and Ward 1990: 124; Rosch *et al.* 1976: 430). If the key attributes for category resemblance can differ from person to person, then similarity (the key criterion for iconicity) is based not on objective criteria but on environmental context and cultural conventions (see also Eco 1979: 206).

Thus, a person raised in Cairo who has never seen a Christmas tree might see both sign (a) and sign (b) as icons of a pyramid. Sign (a) might be seen as a pyramid at night with a path leading to it, and (b) as a pyramid during the day with a camel in front of it. This possibility makes it difficult to deny that, to some people in some situations, anything triangular, from a church steeple to a piece of pie might stand as an icon for a pyramid. In fact, given the right perspective and choice of criteria, even non-triangular objects such as an automobile or a Florida orange could be icons for a pyramid. This is Bierman's (1962) criticism of the concept of an icon. Because similarity is in the eye of the beholder, "everything in the universe iconically denotes everything in the universe and . . . everything in the universe is iconically denoted by any other thing in the universe" (Bierman 1962: 245).

Surprisingly, Peirce himself (1940: 102) is willing to grant this extreme when he writes that "anything . . . can be an Icon of anything, in so far as it is like that thing and used as a sign of it." So how might an orange usefully serve as an icon of a pyramid? Imagine that a friend has just returned from researching consumer behavior near the Great Pyramids of Egypt, and that she has invited you over to hear about her experiences. To illustrate the different routes taken by tour guides around the pyramids, she grabs three oranges from a nearby fruit bowl and sets them on the table in relative locations that resemble the relative locations of the pyramids themselves. In this example, the oranges are icons in the sense that their visible physical relationships to one another are similar to the visible physical relationships of the actual pyramids to one another. In Peirce's (1940: 105) words, "there is an analogy between the relations of the parts of each." Such examples of icons only add ammunition to Bierman's attack. If an orange can be an icon of a pyramid then, indeed, anything in the universe can be an icon for anything, and an icon cannot be defined in terms of simple similarity.

Defenders of the icon might protest that the above example focuses on symbolic pyramids (not iconic ones) because the oranges represent their objects more by convention than similarity. Three oranges on a table mean nothing in relation to a friend's research in Egypt until she establishes the convention that each orange signifies a pyramid. In contrast, if someone displays a photograph or a realistic painting of a pyramid, no conventions are required. A photograph of a pyramid is a better example of an icon because it is so obviously similar to its object.

Gombrich (1959) counters this point in his classic book on representation. Viewers of art, he argues, may believe that some paintings, such as da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, are self-evidently iconic while others, such as Picasso's *Guernica*, are more self-evidently symbolic. However, this distinction comes not from inherent qualities of the paintings themselves, but from viewers' understanding of how certain visual artists in their culture make semiotic decisions (see also Scott 1994a). For instance, in the West, a painting showing a side view of a bird is likely to show only one leg because Westerners are trained to understand that the bird's second leg is "hidden" by the one that is depicted. However, when the same bird picture is shown to an Australian Aborigine who is not trained in Western aesthetics, the image is described as being disturbingly unrealistic because a bird really has two legs, not one (Gombrich 1959: 119; see also Goodman 1976: 37). When we perceive a sign to be "obviously" similar to its object, this is only because the sign benefits from a culturally-based semiotic disguise: the masquerade of realistic conventions. These conventions are a masquerade because, unlike the explicit conventions needed to make an orange stand for a pyramid, the conventions of realistic representation are so implicit that we do not usually notice that they are operating.

The foregoing analysis reduces all icons to symbols, because all icons require conventions in order to be seen as icons. But all is not lost for the special status of icons. A useful solution comes from Ransdell (1986), who examines icons from the perspective of the viewer's experience, rather than from the detached perspective of the philosopher or art theorist (see also Baron 1984). Ransdell accepts that viewers must learn conventions in order to read a sign as an icon. However, he emphasizes that once users have learned these conventions, they habitually accept the iconic masquerade at face value. In his words, they have been trained to see the object "in the sign" instead of "separate from the sign," and seem not to be bothered by the idea that conventions, not similarity, lie at the roots of this semiotic experience. Ransdell's conclusion is that the learning required to see an object in a sign is not important to the definition of an icon. More important is the phenomenological fact that sign readers do have the experience of seeing the object in the sign, which is a different semiotic experience than seeing the object as separate from the sign (Ransdell 1986: 68; see also Merrell 1997).

A rudimentary example of Ransdell's "in the sign" versus "separate from the sign" can be found in Figures 1.3 and 1.4. In Figure 1.3, many readers will see a flower on a pedestal, while in Figure 1.4 they will see two English words. In each figure, the same long and thin sign plays different roles in its revelation of the object. We see it as a support in Figure 1.3 because we are familiar with certain conventions of line drawing. As a result, we are likely to see the pedestal as being to some extent on the very page we are examining. On the other hand, in Figure 1.4 we see the same sign as the subject of a sentence because we are familiar with the conventions of the English language. As an English word, this sign stands for something that we cannot see in the sign: the "I" (real or possible) who is saying the statement (Stern 1994).

Because all signs have the potential to be seen as an icon, index, or symbol, it must be admitted that neither Figure 1.3 nor Figure 1.4 are purely iconic or symbolic. However, my aim is not to establish a clearer distinction between the three types of sign than Peirce himself was willing to grant. Instead, I want to use Ransdell's (1986) approach to argue that when we speak of an icon, an index, or a symbol, we are not referring to objective qualities of the sign itself, but to a viewer's experience of the sign. It therefore might be more accurate to refer to iconic, indexical and symbolic experiences instead of iconic, indexical and symbolic signs.

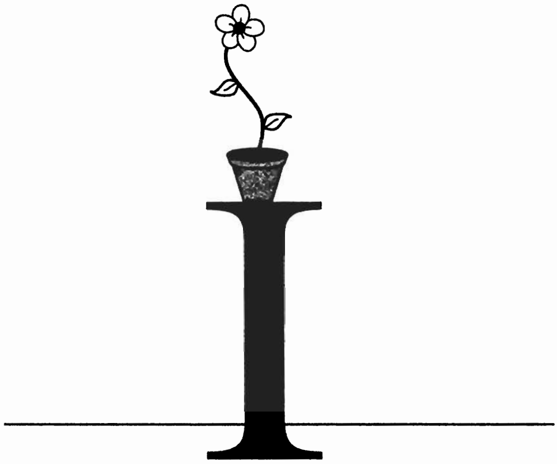


Figure 1.3 Seeing the object "In the Sign"

Figure 1.4 Seeing the object "separate from the sign"

What is an iconic experience of a sign? By definition, seeing an icon is accompanied by a sense that in perceiving the sign we have had a sensual experience similar to seeing the object itself. Because we can see the object in the sign, we are often left with a sense that the icon has brought us closer to the truth than if we had instead seen an index or a symbol. This is what Bernstein (in Bollobás 1986: 279) describes as our "tacit acceptance of the visual as a brute reality." Hasenmuller (1981: 143–4) takes a similar view of religious icons: "An icon of the Virgin *is* the Virgin she is 'present' in it. This dimension of presence . . . consists in a special kind of value." Peirce himself writes that an icon is different from other signs because it reveals "unexpected truths" (1940: 105–6) and has "more to do with the living character of truth" than symbols or indices (Peirce 1991: 252). Peirce (in Ransdell 1986: 71) also describes the iconic experience of a painting saying that "there is a moment when we lose the consciousness that it [the painting] is not the thing," at which point "the distinction of the real and the copy disappears, and it is for the moment a pure dream" (in Ransdell 1986: 71). Even Eco (1979), who sides with Bierman (1962) in arguing against the theoretical usefulness of icons, recognizes the unique potential of an iconic experience:

> Maybe an "iconic" solution is not conventional when it is proposed, but it becomes so step by step, the more its addressee becomes acquainted with it. At a certain point the iconic representation, however stylized it may be, appears to be more true than the real experience, and people begin to look at things through the glasses of iconic convention.
>
> (Eco 1979: 204–5)

The enchanting potential of icons to become substitutes for their real objects is undoubtedly what gave Socrates such concern about the imitative arts, and what drives religions to place taboos on graven images (Mitchell 1986: 32). Iconic experiences promise such a compelling reflection of reality that, in their presence, it is easy to forget Burke's warning that all signs also entail an undeniable deflection of reality.

Textual icons and the icons of consumer research

Representation in science is different in many ways from representation in art. Yet, one of Peirce's main contributions is to highlight that a sign operates via the same mechanics, regardless of whether it represents everyday experience, religious experience, or consumer experience (Merrell 1997: 32). The connection between representation in art and in science is also extensively analyzed by Gadamer (1996), who argues that both modes of communication share a number of critical philosophical underpinnings. But until now my discussion of icons has focused primarily on pictures, while the most prevalent signs in consumer research are words, numbers, and other textual symbols. Thus, in this section, I will embark on a theoretical path from iconic pictures to iconic texts. This path can be made arduous by a tradition of debate over whether texts or pictures have superior representative power (Goodman 1976; Gombrich 1959; Mitchell 1986). Alternatively, it can be shortened considerably by the observation that pictures are "texts" (e.g. Messaris 1997; Scott 1994b), and that some texts (such as Chinese writing) are essentially pictographic. However, rather than arguing about the potential differences (or lack thereof) between texts and pictures, my aim in this section is to show only that what Westerners generally consider to be texts can be iconic.

When Peirce writes that anything can be an icon of anything, he explicitly includes words as potential icons (Peirce 1940: 105). A relatively straightforward example of an iconic word is that representing a non-human sound, such as that of a grandfather clock ("tick-tock") or a cow ("moo"). More subtle examples of verbal icons come from the field of mimology, where scholars draw connections between objects in the world and the shapes and sounds of the words that represent them (for an extensive review, see Genette 1995). For example, the "rough" sound made by the consonants "gr" is said to be iconically appropriate for rough-meaning words such as "grate" and "grind."

Literary critics have also examined the iconic quality of literature and poetry. The visual shape of poetry can be iconic, as with George Herbert's "The Altar," whose words are arranged in the shape of an altar (Morgan 1995: xlv; see Bollobás 1986 for other examples). Alternatively, the sounds and rhythms of literary works can also produce iconic experiences. For example, the "complex and teeming" vocabulary of Charles Dickens is said to resemble iconically the unstructured richness of the modern metropolis that was his object (Nänny 1986: 200–1). As another example, consider the following lines from Robert Frost's "The Span of Life:"

> The old dog barks backward without getting up.
> I can remember when he was a pup.

Bernhart (1986: 216) observes that the halting rhythm of the first line iconically represents the slowness of the old dog, whereas the flowing rhythm of the second represents the liveliness of the young dog. Those unschooled in literary conventions may not see an iconic metropolis in Dickens's prose or an iconic dog in Frost's poetry. But neither will those unschooled in the German language perceive a rooster's crow in "kikeriki," and this is just the point. One must be familiar with conventions – be they pictoral or textual – before one can experience icons. However, this requirement does not diminish the unique impact of an iconic experience.

In discussing verbal icons, I have expanded Ransdell's definition of an iconic experience from seeing the object in the sign to "perceiving" the object in the sign. Unlike seeing a pedestal in Figure 1.4, we do not visually see a dog in the words of Frost's poetry. But thanks to the rhythm of the words and assuming our training as readers of poetry, we may nonetheless perceive the dog in the sign. A more everyday example of a textual icon is a friend's letter which reflects the friend's manner of speaking so well that we can actually "hear" him or her talking as we read it. It is almost as if the friend is talking to us from the page. The experience of perceiving the friend in the text would not be felt by someone unfamiliar with the conventions of our friend's manner of speech. But when it is felt, it is not dissimilar from Peirce's painting experience, where for a moment he forgets the distinction between what is in front of him and what is being represented.

Let us now turn to the textual signs used in consumer research and explore the conditions under which these signs might produce iconic experiences. Under what conditions might we perceive a consumer experience in a consumer-research text? To explore an answer to this question, consider the representations in Figures 1.5, 1.6, and 1.7:

- Figure 1.5 represents via contrasting quotations the difference between the self-images of homeless consumers with previously happy home experiences and the self-images of those with previously unhappy home experiences (Hill 1991).

- Figure 1.6 represents via a multinomial logit formulation the probability that a particular household will buy a specific product on a particular purchase occasion (adapted from Fader and Hardie 1996).
- Figure 1.7 represents via contrasting numerical columns the way that consumers of different ages are differentially sensitive to underlying category structure versus surface cues (John and Sujan 1990).

Each of these figures is a sign chosen by consumer researchers to represent the experience and behavior of the consumer. If you have been trained as a consumer researcher, it is likely that at least one of the figures will catch your eye, and you

> "I miss many of my possessions, especially my teddy bear that keeps me company, and my stuffed dogs that are so real people pet them! Also, my pictures of clowns and bears – my tablecloth even has bears on it! And a picture of the space shuttle given to me by my brother."
>
> "My godson – he's my second cousin. He's one year old and a couple of months. I watch him, change his diaper, bathe him, feed him. I was the first person to turn him onto baby food! I feel good about myself doing that! He usually sleeps with me on the floor and the couch."

Figure 1.5 A representation of consumer self image
Source: Hill (1991)

$$P_{it} = \frac{\exp\left(\sum_{n=1}^{N} m_{in}\alpha_{nh} + \beta_h x_{it}\right)}{\sum_{j=1}^{J} \exp\left(\sum_{n=1}^{N} m_{jn}\alpha_{nh} + \beta_h x_{jt}\right)}$$

Figure 1.6 A representation of consumer purchase behavior
Source: Adapted from Fader and Hardie (1966)

	Number of underlying cues			*Number of perceptual cues*		
	Very young children	*Younger children*	*Older children*	*Very young children*	*Younger children*	*Older children*
Free sort	2.8 (1.8)	3.6 (1.6)	5.7 (1.7)	4.2 (2.0)	3.2 (2.2)	1.4 (1.8)
Cued underlying sort	3.5 (1.4)	5.4 (1.7)	5.7 (2.5)	2.3 (1.3)	0.7 (1.3)	0.6 (1.7)

Figure 1.7 A representation of consumer categorization
Source:: John and Sujan (1990)

will begin immediately to perceive the consumer experience "in the sign." It is also likely that one or both of the remaining representations will seem more distant from the consumer experience, perhaps considerably so.

When we feel that a sign in consumer research is distant from the consumer experience, we must on occasion be in the same position as Gombrich's Aborigine wondering why on earth someone would paint a two-legged animal as if it has only one leg. There are a number of related factors that put us in this position, but one of the most influential is academic specialization. In our work as consumer researchers, we are generally encouraged – by our own personal predilections and by the practicalities of our profession – to focus on a defined subset of theories, methodologies, and applications. By reading and re-reading the works of researchers with a similar expertise, we gain a literacy – or what Potter (1996: 116) calls an "interpretive repertoire" – in understanding their signs and in producing signs like theirs. At the same time, we do not gain a comparable literacy in the signs of other researchers. Our specialized literacy is further encouraged by the fact that it is often accompanied by a rationale: after careful consideration, reading, and discussion, many of us come to believe that certain signs are better representations of the consumer experiences that interest us, and that other signs are a bit too general, too specific, or too artificial.

This is not to say that the work of researchers using other interpretive repertoires will be entirely opaque to us. The Aborigine understands that the Westerner has intended to represent a bird, and the poetry novice understands that Frost has intended to represent a dog. However, our interpretive repertoires do dramatically influence our perception of consumer-research signs as icons, indices or symbols. For example, to a reader who is not quantitatively literate, Figure 1.6 may at best seem like a symbol. The consumer experience will appear to be separate from the sign and the relationship between sign and experience will seem more theoretical than actual. However, a reader truly literate with quantitative modeling techniques will also immediately see the consumer experience in the sign. There on the page, this reader will perceive how product attributes, consumer preferences, marketing activity, and competitive offerings all interact in a real consumer's mind to produce a real purchase decision on a given shopping trip.

Conclusion: signification and deception revisited

I began this chapter by suggesting that signification often involves at least a little deception. One of Peirce's (1982: 79–80) earliest assertions is that signification always offers only a partial truth because if it offered the complete truth it would destroy itself by becoming identical with its object. Similar thoughts from Socrates and Burke launched this chapter's examination of how we might create the most truthful signs, which make a clear connection between sign and object. My central conclusion from this line of reasoning is that the perceived link between sign and object is dependent on the semiotic context in which the sign is presented, and on the facility that a sign reader has in understanding signs in this context (see also Crosman 1980).

However, we cannot conclude from this that researchers who share interpretive repertoires are least likely to deceive one another. Such researchers may be more able to create iconic experiences for one another, but throughout this chapter we have seen that iconic experiences can be the most deceptive of all. Thus, the signs of researchers working with different interpretive repertoires than our own may be least likely to deceive us, because we will approach these signs with a skepticism that naturally precedes familiarity, and we may never experience their signs as icons.

It is not very disturbing to think that unfamiliar signs are likely to make us more critical and therefore less susceptible to deception or misrepresentation. More unsettling is the conclusion that the signs of those who share our interpretive repertoires may be most likely to deceive us. This kind of deception comes not because icons offer explicitly false information, but because they leave us with the impression that we have seen the object in the sign and have therefore come closer to the truth. Instead of drawing our attention to the gaps that always exist in representation, iconic experiences encourage us subconsciously to fill in these gaps and then to believe that there were no gaps in the first place. Of course, as consumer researchers, we have been trained to approach research with a skeptical attitude, and this makes us more vigilant readers of all types of research. But we must not forget to be most vigilant just at the moment when we think we are seeing the consumer experience in the sign. This is the paradox of representation: it may deceive most when we think it works best.

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