

## Unveiling the True Meanings: A Semiotic Analysis of two TIME magazine covers

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### **Abstract:**

*As Aristotle once said, 'There can be no words without images' the purpose of this project was to explore various kinds of signs, symbols and their hidden meanings. For this purpose two TIME magazine covers were selected and analyzed by using semiotics as a tool. Two major theories of Saussure and Peirce were selected and applied on data. Selected magazine covers are having two world famous personalities Sara Palin from America and Malala Yousufzai from Pakistan. The selected covers were chosen for analysis on the bases of many similar characteristics among the two females they have on them. Major similarity was that both of the personalities are social activists and educationists in their own respects. As TIME is globally known, and its target community spreads around the world, so the signs, pictures and meanings this magazine is promoting were worth studying. Analysis of both the covers have shown that the magazine does a lot in manipulating the identity of personalities it has on its covers. Structuring of identity as the magazine wants gets successful because of widely celebrated reputation of the magazine. The research enables people to see beyond what world (specifically media) offers them to see. Research lets people to be able to decode the meanings which cannot be read but can be seen and observed.*

**Key words:** TIME magazine cover, semiotic analysis.

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

Semiotics is the study of meanings behind words and signs and the process of meaning making. Semiotics when called semiology is referred to as a 'science of signs'. Signs have different kinds in the field of semiotics. The research was focused on iconic signs as it analyzed two magazine covers having pictures of two famous personalities on them. Visual semiotics is a sub-field of semiotics which involves the study of visual signs including the analysis of images and videos. Interpretation of signs is a complex task because of their polysemic nature i.e. there is an 'inherent ambiguity or instability of signs (Branston & Stafford, 1996, p. 8). This ambiguity and instability is caused because of two facts about the nature of signs. First is that the signs have no definite interpretation rather they are open to multiple interpretations dependent on individuals as well as on society. Second is that most of the signs we see every day and even the ones under consideration in this article carry multiple elements in themselves including pictures, colors, lights and even typography. More complex it gets when each of these elements can be interpreted in many different ways.

A sophisticated reader then can understand the unsaid meanings through semiotics of visuals but for a naive person it gets harder to probe into what images are actually aiming for. When it comes to such big names like TIME magazine which has been ruling its genre for nearly a century now, readers and buyers take everything for granted and rely on the facts given by the magazine and do not go much far than that is present on its pages. People need to rationalize images as importantly as they do words.

Because of the fact that social semiotics change from society to society and people across the societies have different points of views toward same things, the analysis of images selected could have been criticized for being biased from the

culture this article and Yousufzai belongs to i.e. Pakistan culture. Keeping this factor of difference between societies in mind the research was conducted according to the social semiotics of American society in order to avoid any possible criticism regarding its validity.

## **2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK:**

The word 'semiotics' is derived from a Greek word 'semiotikos', which means 'an interpreter of signs'. Semiotics in general is simply a science of studying signs. Fiske(1982) describes semiotics as

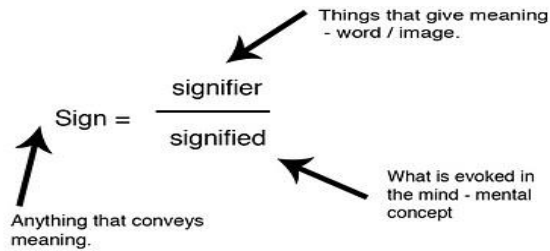
being essentially a theoretical approach to communication, in that its aim is to establish widely applicable principles.

When we talk about 'applicability', semiotics can be applied anywhere either it is language, body language, gestures, facial expressions, morse signs, television, commercials, music, movies, photographs and so on.

As semantic is social production of meanings by signs so signs get their meanings by anything it can be a linguistic entity, body language or clothes. Dyer (1986) declares that,

A sign can be anything which stands for something else and it not only means in and for itself but also through its place in other signifying systems for instance the individual ad within advertising.

Two major approaches covers all semiotics given by Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and Charles Sanders Peirce(1839-1914). For Saussure, signs are physical entities and understandable forms of communication which work within the framework of signifier and signified. Signifier is the sound image or actual word or pattern that communicates and conveys meanings and signified is the concept and the meaning. The relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary. As shown in Figure 1

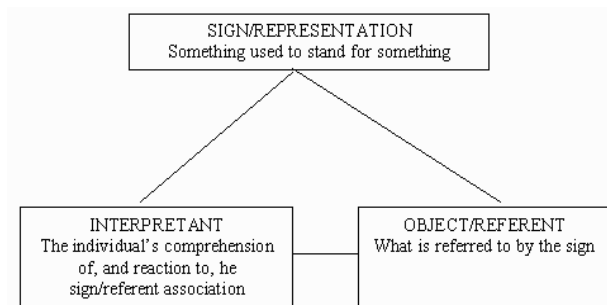


Fiske(1990) further elaborated the Saussurian concept in collaboration with additional concepts of code and culture. For him;

1. Sign - A successful, understandable form of communication.
2. Codes - Are the system and what signs refer to.
3. Culture - Network within these signs and codes operate.

Codes are basically the rules that sender and receivers use when they attach certain meanings/interpretations to a certain sign. And culture is the 'shared knowledge' by which signs and codes get their meanings.

Second major theory of signs has been proposed by Peirce who suggested a triadic model of production of meaning. As shown in figure 1.2



Peirce's signs theory states that;

A sign (In the form of a representamen) is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity.

It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the interpretant of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its object. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the ground of the representamen' (Peirce 1931-58, 2.228).

Signs are both denotative and connotative. Hall (1980) defines denotation as 'literal meanings of signs', and connotation as 'associative meanings'. Denotation is basically the literal and primary meaning of a word, in contrast to the feelings or ideas that the word suggests while connotation is the feelings, ideas, emotions and cultural meanings which are associated with the word or object, not the literal meaning. In photography, denotation is an object which camera is pointing and connotation is camera focus, position of object, lightning etc. Examples of denotation/connotation can be shown in image 1.3;

Denotations	Connotations	
	Positive connotations	Negative connotations
Make up	It really accentuates her features.	She looks really caked.
Overweight	Her curves are beautiful.	She is obese.
Old age	He is a wise man.	He looks very frail.
Toys	Toys are a fun source of entertainment.	Toys are for babies.

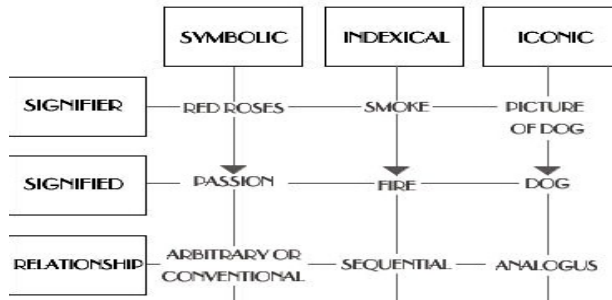
On the basis of connotation Peirce divided signs into three categories.

1. *Iconic signs*: The signifier represents the signified due to an apparent resemblance and likeness. The signifier (denotation) is perceived as resembling with the signified (connotation). For example, a photograph.

2. *Indexical signs*: It deals with the factual and causal relationship between signifier and signified. As example: smoke signifies fire.

3. *Symbolic signs*: Symbols create arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified. It means symbol is only understandable through previous experiences/knowledge.

Figure 1.4 shows the relationship between these signs;



In visual semiotics, iconic signs are objects and motivated signs. Indexical signs are indicators while, symbolic signs are unmotivated and arbitrary. For example, red is a symbol of passion but in different culture this flower may not symbolize passion but instead it signifies love.

Ads and linguistic codes in magazines present contemporary trends and value systems of a society. People behind these codes -senders are well aware of those signs. They also explore what will be the effect of those signs within target community. Thus, marketing of magazine covers is a complex business, so they (transmitters) make receivers to believe certain concepts and ideas and ultimately changes their (receivers') ideologies.

### **TIME Magazine:**

TIME is an American weekly news magazine which gets published from New York City. TIME has world's largest circulation of a weekly news magazine and readership of nearly 2 million people across the globe. After 9/11 attacks on United States, the magazine background cover was changed to black, which symbolizes mourning. TIME's iconic red border

symbolizes a bold and ignorant idea that everything inside the red border is worth knowing.

### 3. METHODOLOGY:

The study will analyze semiotic codes of two front covers of TIME magazine to reveal how media (especially mass media with respect to this research’s aim) promote certain images and change behavioral ideology of viewers. The images on front covers of TIME magazine edition Sep. 15, 2008 and Dec. 31, 2012 were ideal tools for analyzing the sophisticated process of meaning production because their structures were very much appropriate for analysis.

The research questions in this study were;

1. What are the dominant visual signs in selected images?
2. How do visual images carry different types of meanings?

### 4. DOMINANT VISUAL SIGNS:

	<b>Image 1.</b> (See appendices 1)	<b>Image 2.</b> (See appendices 1)
<b>Source</b>	Time Magazine September 15, 2008.	Time Magazine December 31, 2012..
<b>Sign</b>	TIME (Block & Bold)	TIME (Block & Bold)
<b>Signifier</b>	An image of a western woman named Sarah Palin who is an education icon. She is wearing glasses and light jewelry with a very light smile on her face.	An image of an eastern teenage girl wearing “duppta” a cultural and religious piece of clothing. The girl named Malala Yousaf Zai, is an activist of education for girls in Pakistan. She was awarded with the Nobel prize as an Education icon.
<b>Signified</b>	Complete working class looks of a professional lady. The professional look is paired with bright eyes. Confidence smile and eyes make her a perfect intellectual personality and a role model for the world she belongs to.	A half covered face with partial light and one hidden eye emphasizes a character's sinister side. Standing position and arms position indicate her influential and authoritative personality. Title of magazine is also not completely visible only TIE is clear this Tie can even be taken as something that stricts you to do anything by your own choice or a diacritical sign. The background is dark which indicates her own background; the country she belongs to.

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	<b>Image 1.</b> (See appendices 1)	<b>Image 2.</b> (See appendices 1)
<b>Source</b>	Time Magazine September 15, 2008.	Time Magazine December 31, 2012..
<b>Colors</b>	Cover boundary and “Time” title Text color is dark red. Introductory words of signifier are written in white color and are bold. Background color is sky like color. Sarah's shirt is of sober flowery pink color. This entire color scheme indicates brightness and liveliness.	Cover boundary and “Time” title Text color is bright red. Introductory words of signifier are in small colored white and red. Background color is black. Malala's dress also has combination of white and red. This entire color scheme indicates alertness, danger, alarm and evil. Black and white color scheme emphasizes less reality and less truth.
<b>Light</b>	Full bright light.	Partially dim and dark light.

**Symbolism:** The very first thing to be noticed in the TIME magazine cover of Yousafzai is that the girl is standing on the forefront leaving every present and possible object behind which should not be the case for an educationist. Malala has been presented in the forefront and even the name of magazine is at the back. Even Time magazine can be taken in this case for example that such organizations are at her back in whatever she is doing. In fact, they are making her full support and they are providing her full coverage. She is represented as a model for Pakistani young educated girls with full confidence in her standing posture and eyes that are shining bright with bright future in her mind that is simultaneously working in the background. The dress code is Pakistani, which is to make her presented as a Pakistani and follower of Islam but the strings are in the hands of others as it can be seen as she looks like a puppet. In puppet show the scene and lighting is same as is in the TIME magazine cover with Yousafzai on it.

The use of lighting effect is very sophisticated. There is light on not more than half of her head, her face is in light. It can be said that light on her face symbolizes the lime light in which she has been since the diary writing and firing incident. In an opening scene of Desperado, Steve Busconi speaks;

“He was dark, too. I don't mean dark-skinned. No, this was different. It was as if he was always walking in a shadow. I



mean every step he took towards the light, just when you thought his face was about to be revealed, it wasn't. It was as if the lights dimmed... just for him.”

Most of central part is not in light as it shows the dark impact of culture and hierarchical issues of Yousafzai's native society. But her hands are in light which indicate her independence and power of pen and knowledge. The look on her face is very tough which is not in accordance to a girl of her age. A teenager is normally assumed to be soft, sweet and innocent. The shawl is half on her head and it seems it is slipping down. It evokes the notion that she slowly is or will be giving up her own personality of Islamic identity and culture

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