A Semiotic Analysis of Unofficial Campus Advertising

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CSE 271, Spring 2005
2 June 2005

Abstract

We perform a high-level analysis of “unofficial” campus advertising; posters and stickers that have been put up with little or no review by university officials. We avoid great detail in any narrow area in favor of comparative study and presenting interesting aspects selected from many different signs. Roughly following the recommended method for semiotic analysis, we discuss the social context of these documents, including many reasons the genre is interesting, and the sign systems involved and their affordances. We continue with the nature of various elements in the display, and conclude with several real-life examples of interesting and humorous semiotic morphisms/blends.

1 Introduction

This paper studies the use of signs in “Un-official” campus advertising at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD). Such advertising includes posters, banners, and stickers posted on nearly every conceivable surface around the campus. At a high level, we constrain this genre to be printing (by hand or computer) on two-dimensional paper or vinyl displays, appearing on campus, with the “unofficial” classification which we explain in more detail below. A semiotic analysis of the design in these postings is particularly interesting for several reasons.

First, they are generally meant as advertising; used to quickly attract attention and convey some message. Thus they often include interesting uses of text and graphics. Since all one can view is the static display, it must be well-designed to be effective.

Second, they are created by an assortment of different groups, with little or no review by any centralized authority. This means they more directly reflect the culture and social mores of the target audience; allowing us to look at global sign use, those used by different groups, and so forth, with minimal confounding effects. This is what we mean by “unofficial.” “Unreviewed,” “local,” or “small” might fit as well– since we ignore advertising for large corporate products produced elsewhere and posted via agreements with the university.

Third, they are what a lay person thinks of as “a sign,” while each is in itself a complicated assortment of signs and relationships in the technical sense of Saussure or Peirce[3]. They in fact form a sign system, with rich contextual information as we will show in detail.

1There are various approval processes for posting at different sites, but they are rarely used and nearly impossible to enforce.
Fourth, the sheer number of examples available provide a fertile ground for study. In total, we collected 154 photographs across the UCSD campus. Five were discarded due to blur or glare problems. The remainder are shown as a montage in Appendix B. These photos include:

- 25 Large outdoor bulletin boards including all 6 colleges and the school of medicine,
- 12 Large indoor bulletin boards spanning 8 departments (Art, Biology, CSE, Geology, Math, Music, Psychology, Theatre & dance),
- Approximately 1500 posters, stickers, etc., with up to 2/3 of them being duplicates,
- Postings of up to several months old, with the majority being within the last month.

And lastly, we know that “Design principles are semiotic by nature” [10]. Semiotics provide a scientific approach for describing and analyzing the underlying structure found in this small piece of culture, as we have seen repeatedly [4].

This paper is organized as follows. First, we begin by discussing the social context of these signs, including the commonalities and differences at different sites on campus. We then present the key properties of the sign system and the elements in the display. We then cover three prime examples with a more detailed analysis before concluding.

2 Social Context

Posters obscure every possible inch of bulletin boards, lamp posts, and kiosks of colleges around the country. They advertise everything from campus clubs and gatherings to sales, bands to graduate school, jobs to incomprehensible art. The underlying design motivations vary, but all these displays have one common goal: fi rst, to get attention, second to give information, and fi nally to get the viewer, typically a student, to do something.

These tasks are more difficult with a diverse student body, as the signal-to-noise ratio is very low. We can see a distinct difference between the public, outdoor bulletin boards and the indoor department bulletin boards. The former tend toward many inexpensive signs with simple text and large graphics, while the latter tend toward larger more expensive signs targeted toward the specific department. This provides excellent examples of recipient design at a large scale, and is especially true for those bulletin boards with an oversight policy (e.g. theatre and dance, geology) where signs must be locally reviewed before being posted– in other words, signs deemed inappropriate for the given set of recipients are not allowed.

Thus, we observe various forces at work here. Each advertisement wants attention, but only from the “right” set of people. Each costs time, money, effort to create and post. It must be different enough to attract attention, but it must be easily understandable– using enough common signs and
metaphors to facilitate user comprehension. In Section 5 we will discuss these similarities and differences point towards common and different source semiotic spaces.

The above discussion points to these advertisements forming a social space: all communication is visible to everyone and there are certain feedback mechanisms such as review policies, and ripping down, posting over\(^2\), or defacing signs. Ignoring social nuances in such an environment tends to be ineffective. For example, we expected prominent and heavy use of signs such as “Free,” “Cheap,” “$,” etc., which point to incentives for the reader. In fact, this was not the case—they were rare. Possibly these are seen as too blatant (like scams) and might tend to be ignored in favor of more subdued presentations; “Earn Money” was popular and apparently effective (Figure 1).

Finally, knowledge of the social environment affects the design. Each additional post is just one small change on the aggregate sign (the bulletin board or campus advertising as a whole), but the poster generally hopes for it to be seen as the most important item. For example, color is one mechanism people use to accomplish this, by providing contrast with other signs in the system. This exhibits another feedback loop and elements of iterative design.

### 3 Key Properties of the Sign System

There are few common properties between the signs, since they are advertising widely disparate things and are designed to invoke different concepts in the user. All are by definition advertising, so include as part of their source space the basic thing they want to advertise and some form of contact information. These are displayed in the target space in structurally similar way, for ease of constructing the reverse mapping; with a large heading at the top center, commonly with large central pictures, and the contact information mapped into some display of times/locations, websites, email addresses, or phone numbers. Generally posts are in English and use some common headings such as “Lost” or “For Sale.” They all have the same set of perceived affordances.

These affordances are one thing unique to the system as compared to all other forms of advertising. There are three types of affordances: first, rip-off tabs with contact information. Second, rip-off reply cards, and third the “take me” whole cards. Figure 1 shows these three types of affordances. Giving the user a take-away piece of information is critical given the environment of this advertising; students may have only a brief moment passing between classes to view the poster, but it may require complicated interaction (i.e. more than just buying a common product; one might need to go to a certain place at a certain time for an experiment, for instance). This is yet another instance of recipient design.

\(^2\)Covering other signs is normal in this environment due to limited space, the selection of which to cover is partially a social decision, partially based on more preferable ‘eye level’ location.
The first two affordances are arguably perceived affordances; especially if one or more rip-off tabs have already been used, as in the first image. Even so, in an attempt to make the affordances more clear and get more attention, some individuals will rip off one or more tabs and stick them around the bulletin board (as in the first image in Figure 1). Also note how the wind has a tendency to blow the tabs, bringing more attention to the poster.

The third affordance, taking the whole poster, is always an option on these public boards, but when heavily stapled or taped down is certainly not perceived as an option. And yet, the nine smaller ‘gradnite’ cards on the right hand of the image are meant to be taken. Their duplication and size helps to make this clear, as is their attachment only by a single small staple.

Figure 1: Poster Affordances, AP&M Building, Warren Mall Bulletin Board and North Price Center Bulletin Board (Left-Right)

4 Elements in the Display

As discussed in the introduction, we consider only two-dimensional printing on paper or vinyl displays. This physically constrains the elements of the display to certain obvious types, e.g. static two-dimensional images, no user feedback, dynamic content, or other advanced features. Similarly, we have already discussed some aspects of the display in detail; namely the use of color and contrast as it relates to the social context (Section 2) and the ‘take me’ affordances as a key property of the system (Section 3). This section discusses some of the other common elements in the display, and the way in which signs are used.
4.1 Types of Signs in the Display

For our discussion of signs, we focus on the structure defined by Saussure and Peirce [3], using the latter’s terminology of signs being an icon, index, or symbol. We avoid discussion of irrelevant “signals” and focus on the meaningful content. The critical concept that signs occur in systems is implicit in all of this discussion.

Generally, the posters use heavily iconic imagery. This is unsurprising; it is the most effective at prompting memory and understanding, which is important given the brief moments a viewer may see the sign. Figure 2 gives an example of icons in several posters. These are advertisements for a laptop bag, drums, car, and wine tasting; and each has an image of precisely that prominently displayed.

Indexical imagery is often used in cases where there is no well-understood symbolic representation for the concept being advertised. For example, boxes and a truck represent the act of moving, empty pockets represent lack of money (for an investment club) and glasses may represent Optometry (this is arguably a symbolic use for glasses). Figure 3 shows examples of such signs in posters around campus.
Symbolic signs are used in every poster; the text itself is symbolic, as are some images. For example, the light bulb is certainly symbolic of a “bright” idea in the last image, above. We do not include a new set of images to illustrate this, as there are plenty of examples above. We will also discuss the use of symbols in the discussion of semiotic morphisms and blends later in this paper.

### 4.2 Sign Systems and the Display

We know all signs occur as part of a system, and there is some strong evidence of this exhibited in certain elements of the display such as symbolic imagery, or color. These elements are strongly tied to the social context of the signs and we discuss some of that here.

First, the symbolic imagery used varies greatly between different sites. There are pictures of Shakespeare in the Theatre and Dance department, pictures of Bach, Mozart, and Vivaldi in the Music department, diagrams of cell structure in the Biology department. Individuals without the proper shared culture (the same ‘source’ sign system) would not be able to interpret these signs without other cues. Yet another example of recipient design, and the fact that social context is important.

Likewise, choice of color and printing method in a void, absent any other signs or social influences, would reflect only the printing costs shown in Table 1 (Appendix A explains this table in more detail). In such a world, there would be nearly all white posters with others occurring rarely, proportional to those prices and the color distribution of Figure 10.

The above scenario is obviously not realistic. As shown in the overall montage in Appendix B, we see that at most half of the signs are on white paper, the rest using more expensive paper and printing methods. The choice of color is designed primarily to attract attention to a particular poster (away from others) and only rarely is the choice of paper color otherwise relevant to the remaining content of an individual sign.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Format</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Cost/(8.5”×11”)</th>
<th>Cost/foot²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B&amp;W Sheets</td>
<td>Various</td>
<td>White paper– unapproved use</td>
<td>free</td>
<td>free</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imprints</td>
<td></td>
<td>White paper– purchased</td>
<td>$0.05</td>
<td>$0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imprints</td>
<td></td>
<td>“Pastel” paper</td>
<td>$0.06</td>
<td>$0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imprints</td>
<td></td>
<td>“Bright” paper</td>
<td>$0.10</td>
<td>$0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Color, Large</td>
<td>Imprints</td>
<td>Indoor paper+water sol. ink</td>
<td>$3.25</td>
<td>$5.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imprints</td>
<td></td>
<td>Outdoor gloss vinyl+UV ink</td>
<td>$4.71</td>
<td>$7.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Butcher Paper</td>
<td>Office Max</td>
<td>White paper + markers</td>
<td>$0.20</td>
<td>$0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stickers</td>
<td>Office Max</td>
<td>Paper</td>
<td>$0.80</td>
<td>$1.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PsPrint</td>
<td></td>
<td>Vinyl</td>
<td>$1.95</td>
<td>$3.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Document Duplication Cost
4.3 Human Capabilities and the Display

Effective advertisements are attractive and legible, so designers must consider their size and the distance from the viewer. Also, all the affordances discussed in Section 3 were mechanisms to enable a person to take a physical copy of information with them; this is only required because human memory is limited. We return to the affordances in Figure 1 as part of this discussion.

Taking into account human vision capabilities, the first image in that figure is quite poor; the font is too small to be read from any distance, the source structure is complicated and hard to understand even after reading the whole poster, and there are no iconic images to encourage understanding. Nonetheless, while it could be more effective; it has convinced at least two people to take tabs with them. Most likely, the title alone is sufficient to spark interest (it includes “Earn Money”).

It is also interesting to note that this advertisement is for an economics focus group, to understand how people make choices. This is heavily related to the ideas of requirements elicitation and prototyping as we have seen, but applied in another field.

Another aspect of human memory is the excellent capability to recall stories, and short stories are heavily used in other media such as television commercials to attract attention and encourage memory. Such narratives are nonexistent in campus advertisements, most likely due to space constraints and the time required to comprehend any story. The closest relative to narrative is shown in Figure 4; where no story is told but social context and use of a humor may lead the viewer imagine one.

5 Semiotic Morphisms & Blends

We have already seen one blend, namely the reinterpretation of the word “courses” from academic courses, to “courses” from in courses of a meal. This is effective due to the top-down, left-to-right scan of a document, allowing the default of academic courses to be formed in the viewer’s mind (given the social context of this advertisement) before showing the image which leads to a different blended space. In this section, we look at some other more complicated blends found in posters around campus.

3While this is not necessarily a good indicator of overall efficacy of the poster, it provides some information; determining the quality of posters without tabs require more complicated analysis as in in Section 5.
5.1 “Anatomy” Poster

The “Anatomy” poster in Figure 5, (also the second image in Figure 1) creates a blend via the title and dominant image, an Anatomical diagram from Gray’s Anatomy. Figure 6 gives the blend analysis as a diagram.

The most interesting thing about this blend is that one use of the word “anatomy” in this poster is actually related to semiotics; it refers to the structure of the semiotic morphism for dreams. Thus it creates a meta-dream semiotic space referring to the structure of the dream space, which in turn becomes part of the final blended space as the ambiguity is resolved (via the blended actant “you-fulfilled-dreamer”).

The use of a simple complementary red-blue color scheme, where “of your dream” matches the muscle tissue in the anatomy diagram (connecting your dream to anatomy, again) is also well done.

Lastly, there is some extra causal structure in the process from going to medical school, studying anatomy, and becoming a doctor. This has only partially been captured here; a more complete form would be extremely complicated, including several more spaces for Gray’s Anatomy, the educational process, etc. which have been excluded to focus on the important structure.
5.2 “Latina” Poster

Throughout this paper there has been the implicit assumption that all the posters used only English and language-neutral images. That is not actually the case, there were a few signs in Asian languages, and this one in partial Spanish: “¡No Te Limites... Edúcate!” As it turns out, Edúcate is actually an English transliteration. In proper Spanish, educar is to educate, while enseñar is to teach. Neither are conjugated or accented as in this poster. Thus the intended meaning most likely “Don’t limit yourself, get educated!” but also partially “Don’t limit yourself, teach!” This is an excellent example of the principle of economy described by Fauconnier [2]; one four-word sentence brings in knowledge of two languages, along with all their rich contextual meanings and associations.

The target audience is also explicitly named in this poster: Latina students, as are the poster designers, “Phi Lambda Rho Prospective Lambda pledge class” (hand written at the very bottom). ΦΛΡ’s stated goals are to “support Academics and Sisterhood, promote Chicana/Latina Culture, and Serve the Community”[11]. This poster is likely an attempt to achieve those social goals.

The imagery in the poster is unique. The line drawing is intended to be female (long hair, curved lines, and LATIN A text), she is smiling, and she is wearing a graduation cap (unique shape, tassle, scroll at the bottom of the page is likely a diploma). That type of hat is a unique index; it always goes along with graduation; and is worn on the head (above the brain). The tassle also has deep symbolism and associated rituals. In this image, the cap has been modifi ed, creating a new blend space. It has a multitude of flags pasted on it; those flags are for countries with primarily Spanish-speaking citizens. The composition of these features creates a blend space implying all “latina” citizens should get educated, not be limited, become a college graduate, and be happy. Presumably long hair is optional.

This image also features a violation of continuity/closure along the line for her shoulder, implying something is something is missing between her head and hand. That space is curious; it could be intended as symbolizing the lack of a diploma, or it could have been intended to hold the word “Latina” but was misaligned, or it could be stock clip art with some piece removed. It’s impossible to tell without further information, as all are possible valid interpretations.
5.3 “Andre the Giant Has A Posse” Sticker

We now look at a sticker found on a light post by the RIMAC facility. It features a crude image of Andre the Giant, with the text “ANDRE the GIANT HAS A POSSE” along with his height and weight at the time he died.

Initially, it is quite unclear what this sticker is trying to advertise. Even if one knows who Andre the Giant was, who is his posse? Should we join? Why do we need to know his height and weight? And so forth. The selection of fonts and text size is very clear, but finding the inverse mapping to determine the intended structure and meaning in this sticker is difficult. Further research explains why; in fact this hard-to-understand design is intentional.

A search using the Google search engine[6] quickly leads to a website for the OBEY campaign. They have been producing stickers and posters for approximately 15 years, and the one found at RIMAC was one of the first. Consider the following extended quote from the OBEY campaign website[1], which will help to explain Figure 8:

The Obey campaign can be explained as an experiment in Phenomenology. The first aim of Phenomenology is to reawaken a sense of wonder about one's environment. The Obey campaign attempts to stimulate curiosity and bring people to question both the campaign and their relationship with their surroundings. Because people are not used to seeing advertisements or propaganda for which the motive is not obvious, frequent and novel encounters with Obey propaganda provoke thought and possible frustration, nevertheless revitalizing the viewer's perception and attention to detail.

The medium is the message.

This is really a fascinating semiotic argument; saying that they are purposefully designing an ill-defined morphism in order to create the desired effects on the viewer: confusion, curiosity, frustration, thoughtfulness. These are precisely the terms used in McCracken and Wolfe [9] for the effects of bad design on a user. By creating a sign whose structure in the target space (the sticker) is well defined, but whose structure in the source space is effectively arbitrary or random, confusion results. It is interesting and ironic that this sticker is an example of bad design in the traditional sense, and yet it simultaneously meets their stated design goals so could equally well be considered a good or at least effective design.

Figure 8: Andre the Giant Has A Posse Sticker, RIMAC light post #437
Likewise, the choice of emphasizing “The medium is the message” points to the fact that the artists here are saying that the message itself is the choice of display; in other words, the message is the semiotic morphism (or lack thereof) that they are trying to create— it’s more important than the sign itself.

This one image has been so compelling that it spawned an entire class of related “bootleg” stickers; the OBEY website has over 350 unique examples. Here are a few humorous examples; reblanding the “Andre the Giant” space with another space to create an even more intricate blend.

![Figure 9: Somebody Has A Posse Stickers#437](image)

### 6 Conclusion

We have explored various aspects in the rich genre of advertising on campus. Beginning with the overall social context, properties, and affordances when thought of as a semiotic space, we then found excellent samples that fit with Peirce’s sign classification scheme, and have analyzed a few particularly interesting signs in greater depth using semiotics as a tool. This has produced some unexpected results with connections across fields, and the use of semiotics as a common “lingua franca” to comprehend the underlying structure has proven quite effective.
A Document Duplication Costs

There are four major types of printing used for the advertisements in this paper, listed in order of their popularity (but not their cost, which is given in Table 1):

- Simple black-and-white (B&W) printing on 8.5” × 11” paper: this is the most common and can be done inexpensively at the campus Imprints[12] copy shops, via regular laser printers, or at other local businesses. Many people can get a limited number of white sheets printed free; colors available are shown in Figure 10.

- Variable-size color printing: also via Imprints, these posters come in sizes of 24”, 32”, 36”, or 48” wide and may be cut down after the fact to arbitrary smaller sizes.

- “Butcher paper” posters: hand drawn posters using markers or pens for large displays. Such paper can be purchased at any office supply store[7]

- Sticker printing: paper stickers can be printed just like normal paper in most printers, while vinyl stickers can only be done as custom work by a variety of services such as the PsPrint website[8]. Generally, stickers are not permitted due to the difficulty in removing them, so are put up surreptitiously.

Two units are used when selling paper; the cost per page for a given page size (e.g. 8.5”×11”) or the cost per square foot for more arbitrary sizes. One price or the other (exclusive) is used to purchase the paper. In Table 1 we convert the original price quoted to the other for comparison purposes. An arrow is used to show the direction of the conversion, as with original → converted.

![Figure 10: Colors available, Price Center Imprints](image)
B  All Signs Captured on Campus
References


