



A Semiotic Analysis of No-Smoking Warning Labels on Cigarette Packaging

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Abstract. *This study attempts to analyze semiotic elements and messages intended for readers, focusing specifically on the types of signs according to Charles Sanders Peirce. Data was obtained from five cigarette package of no smoking warning labels, which were analyzed using Charles Sanders Peirce's theory of semiotics. This study uses a qualitative descriptive method with the aim of descriptively explaining. The primary data for this study were obtained from Indonesian cigarette packages currently on the market, all of which are actively distributed and available to consumers, ensuring that the data reflects current industry practices and market conditions. The brands collected in this particular study include Glory, Nation Bold, Filasta, Dio, and Sampoerna, representing a range of commonly available products. Based on this study, it was revealed that cigarette warning labels are strategically designed to reduce global smoking prevalence by presenting visual depictions of smoking-related illnesses alongside explicit health warnings. These measures aim to increase public awareness and influence behavior, thereby reducing both the frequency and intensity of smoking.*

Keywords: Cigarette; Semiotics; Smoking; Sign; Peirce

1. INTRODUCTION

Semiotics has several functions in human life, one of which is to help people understand the meaning contained in a sign. Semiotics is important because humans use signs and symbols in everyday communication, whether through language, images, gestures, or advertisements. According to Barthes (cited in Hatam, 2021), semiology has a correlation with the signifier and the signified, which together form the sign itself. In this context, the signifier refers to the physical form of the sign, such as words, sounds, or images, while the signified refers to the concept or meaning represented by the sign. Olurotimi (2022), in his research entitled "Semiotics: A Transdisciplinary Quest for Meaning," explained that semiotics is the study of signs and can be defined as a form of applied linguistics that examines all signs and symbols used as a medium for human communication. This means that semiotics not only studies language but also explores how meaning is created and interpreted in various forms of communication in society.

Semiotics can become a link between the product and the consumer because it provides several benefits in communication and marketing. Through semiotic elements, advertisements can deliver messages indirectly and attract consumers' attention more effectively. The slogan in advertisements can connect consumers with the product indirectly because slogans often

contain implied meanings that influence people's perceptions and emotions. According to Setiawan (2023), in his journal article entitled "Semiotic Study on Cigarette Advertisements," cigarette advertisements are unique and creative because they represent a sensitive product. These advertisements are considered sensitive because cigarette distribution is regulated by the government, and advertisers are not allowed to show the product directly in many cases. Therefore, advertisers are required to be highly creative in publishing these advertisements without losing their intended message. To achieve this, they often use symbolic images, attractive visuals, and persuasive slogans. His research analyzed the types of signs found in the advertisements, namely icons, indexes, and symbols. Icons refer to signs that physically resemble the object they represent, indexes indicate a causal or direct relationship, while symbols are signs whose meanings are based on social agreement or convention.

On the other hand, Purba (2018), in his research entitled "Semiotic Meanings in Cigarette Advertisement Texts," explained that there are two categories of meaning in advertisements. The first category is verbal aspects, while the second is non-verbal aspects. Verbal aspects are usually found in the slogans or written text of the advertisement, which directly communicate the intended message to the audience. Meanwhile, non-verbal aspects are found in the visual elements of the advertisement itself, such as images, figures, colors, gestures, and background settings. These non-verbal elements are important because they help strengthen the meaning of the verbal message and create a deeper impression on consumers. The result of this research shows the relationship between verbal and non-verbal expressions found in cigarette advertisements. Both aspects work together to create a complete message and influence how audiences interpret and respond to the advertisement.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is based on the semiotic theory proposed by Charles Sanders Peirce, particularly the triadic model consisting of representamen, object, and interpretant. Peirce explains that meaning is produced through the relationship between these three components. A representamen is the form of the sign that can be seen, heard, or perceived by individuals. The object refers to the thing, concept, or reality represented by the sign. Meanwhile, the interpretant is the meaning or interpretation that arises in the mind of the reader or viewer after understanding the sign. Through this triadic process, signs are able to communicate messages and create meaning in human communication.

In this study, Peirce's semiotic theory is used to analyze the semiotic elements found in cigarette package warning labels. The representamen in this study includes the visual images,

warning texts, colors, and symbols displayed on cigarette packages. These signs are intentionally designed to attract attention and communicate the dangers of smoking. The object refers to the real health risks and smoking-related illnesses represented in the warning labels, such as lung disease, oral cancer, or other harmful effects caused by cigarettes. The interpretant is the understanding, response, or perception formed in consumers' minds after seeing and interpreting the warning labels. In this context, consumers may interpret smoking as a dangerous habit that can threaten health and even cause death.

This study attempts to analyze semiotic elements and messages intended for readers by focusing on the relationship between representamen, object, and interpretant in cigarette warning labels. The visual depictions of smoking-related illnesses and the explicit health warnings function as signs that aim to create awareness and influence public behavior. Through the interpretant process, readers are expected to understand the seriousness of smoking risks and reduce both the frequency and intensity of smoking behavior. Therefore, cigarette warning labels are not only informative but also persuasive because they are strategically designed to influence people's attitudes toward smoking.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted by using descriptive qualitative design to reveal the main message of cigarette's no smoking warning labels. Descriptive qualitative aims to produce a comprehensive and "direct" description of a phenomenon, event, or experience in everyday language. According to Kumar (2011) qualitative research is study whose primary focus is description, rather than examining relationships or associations. Descriptive studies attempt to systematically describe a situation, problem, phenomenon, service, or program, or provide information about, for example, the living conditions of a community, or describe attitudes based on the issue. Semiotic analysis is used to reveal the meaning of no smoking warning in cigarette packages that have been circulating previously. Charles Sanders Peirce, also known as the Father of Modern Semiotics (1839–1914), stated that signs are classified into three types: the index, the icon, and the symbol. An icon refers to a correlation between the signifier and the signified that corresponds to objective meaning; an index is a sign that reveals a natural connection between the signifier and the signified, characterized by causality; while a symbol is a sign that does not indicate a natural connection between the signifier and the signified. (Pradopo, 1990 in Ambarini & Umayana, 2010).

The primary data for this study were obtained from Indonesian cigarette packages currently on the market, all of which are actively distributed and available to consumers, ensuring that the data reflects current industry practices and market conditions. The data consists of warning label texts that contains a warning about the dangers of smoking. Data collection techniques involving observation and documentation in the form of photographs/images constitute primary data obtained from cigarette packages.

Researchers use a semiotic model by Charles Sander Peirce to reveal the meaning of no smoking warning. According to Charles Sanders Peirce cited in Hartono (2024), semiotics originates from logic, because reasoning is always carried out through signs. Peirce believed that the existence of signs is always related to other signs due to the conventional relationships among them, which enable meaning to be conveyed by signs. The existence of signs allows us to think, communicate with others, and assign meaning to what the universe reveals (Hoseani & Yohana, 2020 in Khairunnisa et al, 2025). Peirce states that semiotics seeks to analyze how signs function in communication through a triadic model (the triangle of meaning): the representamen (the sign), the object (the referent), and the interpretant (the meaning).

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Researchers have carefully collected and documented five different cigarette brands, each of which prominently features a distinct and clearly visible warning label intended to inform consumers about health risks. The brands collected in this particular study include Glory, Nation Bold, Filasta, Dio, and Sampoerna, representing a range of commonly available products. The warning labels displayed on each of these brands are not identical, but instead vary depending on the specific diseases and health conditions known to be caused by smoking. These health warnings highlight serious illnesses such as throat cancer, lung cancer, oral cancer, as well as a variety of other respiratory diseases and related medical complications that can arise from prolonged tobacco use.

This study specifically employs and is grounded in the semiotic theory proposed by Charles Sanders Peirce, which provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how meaning is constructed through signs. According to this theoretical approach, signs are systematically divided into three main interconnected components. The first component is the Sign (representamen), which refers to the physical form or observable aspect of the sign itself as it appears to the senses. The second component is the Object, which denotes the actual thing, concept, or reality to which the sign refers or represents. The third component is the Interpretant, which involves the meaning, understanding, or interpretation that emerges in an

individual's mind when they perceive and cognitively process the sign within a particular context. Based on Saleha & Yunita (n.d) Peirce categorized semiotic analysis into three elements: the representamen (ground), the object, and the interpretant. These categories are known as the trichotomy in semiotics. This relationship is known as semiosis, which is the process of assigning meaning to a sign that begins with a foundation called the representamen or ground, then refers to an object, and concludes with the interpretant.

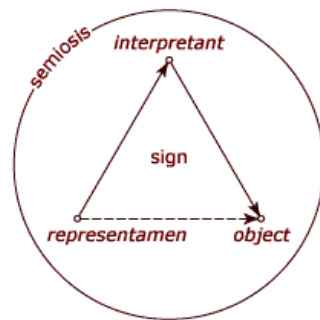


Figure 1. Peirce's triangular model of meaning (Dahlstrom & Somayaji, 2003).

The analytical process based on Peirce's theory, as illustrated in the figure above, can be understood as the process of examining the images of warnings on cigarette packs as visible signs, which are then interpreted as something referred to by the representamen that can generate ideas or concepts. The result of this interpretation is a representamen, or an understanding that arises in the recipient of the sign. In this case, the "No Smoking" sign can be understood by the viewer as the effects or dangers that smoking can cause.

Besides the triangle of meaning, Peirce also classified signs into three categories: icons, indices, and symbols. According to Ovcharov (2024), Peirce divided signs into three main categories based on their relationship to the object in question: icons, which share the same characteristics as the object; An index has a cause-and-effect relationship with the object. Finally, a symbol is the meaning evoked by the sign. Based on the above explanation, the triangle of meaning is highly relevant to this classification of signs, and is supported by Dahlstrom & Somayaji (2003), who state that an icon is a sign in which the representamen is perceived as resembling the object, an index is a sign in which the representamen is directly related to the object, and a symbol is a sign in which the relationship between the representamen and the object is arbitrary or conventional. This study will uncover the meanings present in cigarette packaging based on the triangle of meaning, which will be examined in stages, starting with the representamen, the object, and the interpretant, as explained below:

Representamen

Representamen is a physical form, a perceptible sign (sound, image, word, symbol) that represents something else. It is also referred to as the ground or the basic sign. Based on Atkin, A (2023) Peirce defines the representamen as the physical or conceptual manifestation of a sign that functions as a mediator between external reality and human cognition. As the first element in the triadic structure, the representamen acts as a “vehicle of the sign” that represents an object not in its entirety, but through specific aspects known as the ground, in order to trigger the emergence of an interpretant or mental meaning in the mind of the recipient. Without the representamen, objective reality would remain an incomprehensible entity; thus, through this process of semiosis, the representamen transforms the raw physical world into an organized system of meaning, whether through a relationship of resemblance (icon), a relationship of cause and effect (index), or social convention (symbol). Based on a research conducted by Ramadhani & Dewi (2023) entitled “Semiotic Analysis of Smoking Prohibition Poster” explains the smoking bans depicted in a film, which are then classified into two types of data: visual signs and verbal signs. Meanwhile, this study examines the meaning of smoking ban symbols on cigarette packaging available to the public based on Peirce’s theory; one of the concepts discussed in this section is “representamen.”



Figure 2. Sampoerna Mild.

According to Peirce’s theory, the representamen is the sign itself. The image above shows a sign regarding the smoking ban and its effects. This is the first stage in the analytical process aimed at identifying the concrete form of the sign. contained in the first image is that of a person who has been bandaged due to an illness, followed by the sentence “Cigarettes are robbing me of my happiness one by one”. There is also contact information for those who want to quit smoking.



Figure 3. Dio Kretek.

The second package features two types of representational elements: an image of a person with a throat condition and the statement “Smoking causes throat cancer,” followed by contact information for a smoking cessation service. This is consistent with the initial stage, which defines a representamen as the sign itself or something that can be perceived by the five senses.



Figure 4. Filasta Kretek.

The image above contains a picture that we can see clearly, so it meets the criteria of a representamen that refers to the sign itself. The package shows a representation of a mouth affected by disease, along with the phrase “Smoking causes oral cancer,” followed by information on smoking cessation services.

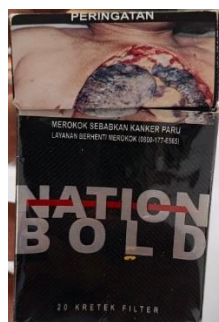


Figure 5. Nation Bold.

The fourth package shows a smoker’s internal organs in a blackened state, followed by the statement “Smoking causes lung cancer” and information on smoking cessation services. Such signs are things that humans can clearly perceive, whether in the form of images or text,

and thus serve as representaments that contain information which can then be analyzed all the way to the interpretant.



Figure 6. Glory Cigarette

The fifth image shows a person with a throat ulcer caused by smoking. This is followed by the sentence “Because of smoking, I developed throat cancer,” and then the contact information for a smoking cessation service.

Another study conducted by Samosir et al. (2019) examined the meanings of no-smoking images that differed from the five images above, as it focused solely on how no-smoking images near young children can convey the message about the dangers of smoking. In contrast, this study aims to uncover the meanings of no-smoking signs found on various types of cigarette packaging currently circulated in the market. The five cigarette packages shown above are representations or visual forms that can be perceived by the human senses, thereby conveying a message that can be understood as a no-smoking sign.

Similar with Bramantio (2020) in a journal article entitled “Analisis Semiotika Peringatan Kesehatan Bergambar pada Kemasan Rokok” showed Roland Barthes’s theory of semiotics by classifying signs into denotation, connotation, and myth on several cigarette packs bearing health warnings. Meanwhile, this study explores the meaning of “No Smoking” signs on cigarette packs based on Charles Sanders Peirce’s theory of semiotics, which categorizes signs according to the representamen, object, and interpretant. This study reveals the meaning of the images and illustrations as warnings that smoking can cause several serious diseases in the body.

Object

Object is the entity, concept, or reality referred to by the representamen. An object is “*something else*” represented by a sign. According to Chandler, D (2017) Within the triadic model proposed by Charles Sanders Peirce, the object serves as the ontological anchor for the sign. In the context of cigarette packaging, the graphic imagery functions as a complex representamen that points toward two distinct types of objects:

The Immediate Object

This is the specific health affliction depicted such as a diseased lung or oral carcinoma as it is represented within the sign itself. It acts as a direct iconic representation of pathology.

The Dynamic Object

This is the broader, independent reality of "systemic harm" and "mortality" that exists outside the sign. The images attempt to force the observer to internalize this dynamic object through indexical cues (the "before and after" implication), suggesting a causal link between the act of smoking and the physical degradation shown.

The cautionary labels and multifaceted health warnings prominently displayed on the cigarette packaging illustrated above operate as a form of visual discourse that systematically communicates the deleterious physiological consequences of tobacco consumption. Through the integration of striking imagery and explicit textual statements, these warnings clearly articulate that smoking functions as a primary catalyst for severe and potentially irreversible systemic harm to the human body.

A study conducted by Dwinugraha & Kristania (2016) entitled "Tinjauan Desain Peringatan Bahaya Merokok oleh Dinas Kesehatan Republik Indonesia pada Kemasan Rokok" reviewed and analyzed cigarette packaging designs and pictorial warnings about the dangers of smoking on cigarette packs. The results of the study revealed a change in smoking warnings from the previous year which consisted solely of text to the current format, which now includes concrete images depicting the consequences of smoking. This study explores the meanings that arise in a person's mind after reading and viewing these warnings.

Moreover, these preventive and educational measures are strategically reinforced through the incorporation of institutional support mechanisms. This is exemplified by the inclusion of a government-mandated smoking cessation helpline, which is intended to facilitate access to clinical guidance and psychological support for individuals seeking to reduce or overcome nicotine dependence. In this way, the packaging not only serves an informative and deterrent function but also acts as a conduit for public health intervention, linking individuals to resources that support behavioral change and long-term health improvement.

Interpretant

The interpretant refers to the understanding or meaning that emerges within an individual's mind concerning the relationship between the representamen and the object. It is important to note that this concept does not merely denote an act of interpretation in a passive sense; rather, it constitutes the generation of a new sign within the cognitive framework of the

interpreter. In this way, the interpretant represents an active and dynamic component of the meaning-making process.

Drawing on the perspective of A. Atkin (2023), and situated within the broader philosophical framework developed by Charles Sanders Peirce, the representamen operates as an essential mediating element or semiotic vehicle that connects external reality with internal mental processes. Without the presence of the representamen, the intrinsic reality of the object would remain fundamentally inaccessible to human cognition, existing only as an uninterpreted and undifferentiated phenomenon.

Accordingly, the representamen serves as a transformative mechanism through which the unstructured and potentially chaotic data of the external world are translated into an organized and intelligible system of meaning. This transformation enables such data to be cognitively processed, interpreted, and integrated within the human mind. Ultimately, this process unfolds through the complex and recursive dynamics of semiosis, wherein signs continuously generate further signs, allowing meaning to evolve and expand over time.

An analytical examination of the cigarette packaging illustrated above reveals that both the visual imagery and accompanying textual elements operate as an integrated semiotic apparatus, effectively conveying to the viewer the severe physiological risks associated with tobacco consumption. In particular, these stimuli highlight the potential development of debilitating respiratory diseases as well as various forms of oropharyngeal and laryngeal malignancies. Through the deliberate combination of graphic representation and explicit warning messages, the packaging is designed to evoke cognitive and emotional responses that reinforce awareness of the harmful consequences of smoking.

Consequently, this form of representation functions as a higher-order cautionary discourse, implicitly encouraging the avoidance of smoking behavior. It achieves this by foregrounding the causal relationship between nicotine consumption and the onset of irreversible systemic damage to human health. In doing so, the packaging not only communicates risk but also seeks to influence individual decision-making processes, ultimately contributing to broader public health objectives aimed at reducing tobacco use.

The above analysis relates to a study conducted by Adiguna (2022) entitled “Persepsi Mahasiswa dalam Menanggapi Label Peringatan Bahaya Merokok pada Kemasan Rokok” which examined students’ perceptions of smoking hazard signs and revealed that students clearly understood the meaning of these prohibition signs and the health risks of smoking. This study examines how these signs are interpreted by observers, analyzed based on Charles

Sanders Peirce's theory of semiotics, which classifies signs into three types: representamen, object, and interpretant.

5. CONCLUSION

The practice of tobacco consumption is predominantly observed among male populations, a phenomenon that is often attributed to the perception that smoking can facilitate psychological stability and provide a sense of physical comfort for certain individuals. In response to the significant public health risks associated with tobacco use, particularly its contribution to elevated mortality rates, sustained and comprehensive public health initiatives have been systematically implemented over an extended period. These initiatives aim to disseminate detailed and evidence-based information regarding the harmful and potentially fatal consequences of tobacco consumption. Furthermore, through the formal institutionalization of stringent regulations, policy frameworks, and health advisories, governments and health organizations play a crucial role in reinforcing public awareness and shaping societal attitudes toward smoking. Such efforts serve not only to educate individuals about the importance of avoiding cigarette use but also to cultivate a broader sense of social responsibility. Ultimately, this coordinated approach contributes to the promotion of healthier behavioral patterns and supports a collective commitment to safeguarding public health and advancing the overall well-being of the community. Based on the findings of this study, it can be inferred that the implementation of warning labels on cigarette packaging is strategically intended to contribute to the reduction of smoking prevalence on a global scale. This objective is pursued through the visual presentation of illustrative cases depicting individuals who have developed serious health conditions as a direct consequence of smoking behavior. Furthermore, these warning labels are supplemented with explicit cautionary messages and informative content regarding the adverse effects and long-term consequences associated with tobacco consumption. Collectively, such measures are expected to play a significant role in influencing public awareness and behavior, thereby contributing to the reduction in both the frequency and intensity of smoking practices among individuals.

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