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SEMIOTICA E DIGITAL MARKETING

SEMIOTICS AND DIGITAL MARKETING

a cura di
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Introduction

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This issue of “Lexia” focuses on collecting and enhancing the most interesting and helpful contributions that semiotics can offer to contemporary digital marketing, also in a professional perspective¹.

In Italy, the semiotic discipline began to work on digital media (which at that time were frequently called “new” media) in the early 2000s thanks to the initiative of Umberto Eco. The first university courses on the application of semiotics to the digital world date back to 2001 and the first systematic publications on this topic were issued in 2003 and 2004. Since then, the semiotics of digital media has always been conceived — and practiced — as “applied” or “specific” semiotics, i.e. as one of the various semiotic field applications, such as the semiotics of the cinema, of the theatre, of advertising, tourism, ecc.

Applying semiotics to digital media essentially means employing concepts, theories and analytic–qualitative methods from general semiotics to interpret how micro– and macro–social groups use and experience digital media, from any digitalized “new” version of pre–existing “old” media (such as television, radio, telephone, postal mail) to the various web versions (from Web 1.0 onward) and the most recent social network sites.

Over the years, the semiotic approach to digital media has spread even beyond the academic world — not only in Italy but also in Europe and the U.S. — to the point that nowadays more and more companies,

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1. Some of the essays included here partly rework the papers presented during a day of study on “Semiotics and Digital Marketing”, held on 1 March 2019 at the Department of Communication and Economics of the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia.

web agencies, and digital marketing professionals hire and promote people with semiotic competencies and skills.

Currently the fields in which digital marketing professionals more or less directly apply semiotically inspired theories, concepts and methods are:

1. Search Engine Optimization (SEO);
2. Web usability and interaction design analyses (and texts) focused on User Experience (UX);
3. Online virality and spreadability studies;
4. Web user profiling (personas);
5. The analysis of online user behaviours and practices in terms of storytelling;
6. New branding strategies;
7. Gamification and videogame design.

The articles in this issue of “Lexia” cover, at different levels of analysis, all the areas listed above, assuming an often complementary position between them and proposing relations between semiotics, digital marketing and their professional applications, which will become clear after having read the entire volume in sequential order. The main subjects of each essay are merely outlined below, so as to provide a sort of tool for guidance in reading the volume as a whole.

In the first essay, which is entitled *New Forms of Textuality in Digital Marketing*, Cinzia Bianchi provides an overview of the different types of texts that semiotics has faced since the Eighties, from the first studies about advertising to the new forms of textuality proposed by digital marketing. On the one hand, the author describes certain application tools while, on the other, she proposes broader-based theoretical considerations showing how the range of subject matters in semiotic studies is continually and rapidly changing.

Giuliana Laurita’s work on *Creating a Digital Strategy Using Semiotics* can be interpreted in a complementary way to that of Cinzia Bianchi. Laurita describes her profession as digital strategist, showing how certain semiotic tools, ascribable to the narrative theory in particular, are effective in outlining a brand communication strategy, especially in the interdisciplinary perspective. The relationship between textual analysis and design is constant in agency work and semiotics must

maintain an ongoing dialogue with all areas of knowledge related to the science of communication and marketing.

Giovanna Cosenza's paper *Narrative Semiotics, Storytelling and User Experience Design (UXD)* proposes combining more recent ideas about UXD with a few concepts from the narrative theory of Algirdas J. Greimas on the one hand, and that of Umberto Eco on the other, reworking these concepts in a way that can be useful for contemporary UXD. Cosenza believes her choice and combination of semiotic concepts can thoroughly and systematically account for the idea of storytelling that, in recent years, both academic research on UXD and professional UXD practices have often used in an impressionistic and intuitive way that lacks a theoretical basis.

In his essay entitled *Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and Semiotics: How to Work on Keywords Effectively*, Paolo Odoardi delves into the organization of the data and hypertext content that users might search for on the web. In parallel with the development of search engines, the foremost being Google, the professional sphere of Search Engine Optimization (SEO) has become increasingly established, has continued to expand and is now a strongly entrenched area of digital marketing. The author discusses certain linguistic and semiotic issues relating to the organization of keywords and describes a case study — online tourism promotion of Sardinia — to clearly explain how semiotics can support SEO professionals.

Digital data are the research focus of Leonardo Sanna who, in *Data-driven Semiotics and Semiotics-driven Machine Learning*, deals with the subject of “big data”. The disciplines that appear to express the best idea of massive quantities of data are computer science and statistics, but Sanna succeeds in demonstrating the utility of a possible joint effort between semiotics and machine learning.

The article entitled *The Formula of Online Virality* by Gabriele Marino analyses another area of digital marketing. The author first examines the concept of virality and then focuses on so-called viral marketing by explaining the semiotic functioning of the main typology of viral content spreading online: Internet memes. In Marino's opinion, a true “virality formula” does not exist: every single user may indeed express him/herself idiosyncratically by either letting him/herself be “infected” or by contrasting broadcasted messages in order to participate in the flow of online discourse.

Marino's work ties into the next one, dedicated to the concept of indexicality in semiotics and marketing. As Paula Almirón-Chamadoira and Gustavo Niklander Ribera sustain in *Online Reviews Indexicality: the Construction of Verisimilitude in Post-truth E-commerce*, in the Internet ecosystem the testimonial statements (linguistic text, sounds, images in motion or fixed) are based on an incremented indexicality referring to a specific time, a self and, in some cases, a place (given by geolocation, the website interface, the dialect or any other specifics in the language). Furthermore, the expanded indexes appear in the online reviews texts as deictics or shifters.

The relationship between digital storytelling and the semiotic theories of narrative is examined in the essay by Ruggero Ragonese entitled *What's at Stake: Narrations, Storylines, Models and the Challenge of Digital Storytelling*. Stories told through the digital media obviously reflect some of the characteristics of the more traditional stories, but there are important differences. Indeed, using new digital tools and platforms to tell stories allows us to introduce personal videos, blogs, podcasts, multimedia games, social media and augmented reality, and all this changes the whole narrative creation process. Ragonese presents *Minecraft* as a case study, which acts as a bridge to the last digital marketing area discussed in this volume, i.e. that of gamification and videogames.

Mauro Salvador's essay entitled *Game-as-a-Service and Free-to-Play: Fortnite as a Semi-ludic Object* presents the battle royale multiplayer and multiplatform video game *Fortnite* in an analytical way, by showing how its success depends on precise marketing strategies. Combining design and marketing is a dominant aspect of the *free-to-play* model, which proposes products that can be played free-of-charge by integrating complex *in-app* purchasing systems that modify the game experience from both the aesthetic and functional viewpoints, very different from the traditional purchase of a complete product by a *one-off* payment. Gamification is analysed to a further extent in *Digital Playful Tourism: Meaning-making between Place Promotion and Gamification* by Elsa Soro and Mattia Thibault. In this case, the focus is on the culture and tourism industry, in which consumer experience is directed by an approach similar to that of games. The analysis of three different case studies (Airbnb, dark tourism and the Assassin's Creed video game series) shows the complexity of the rhetorical and

ideological dynamics that link tourism and gamification, but also the potential they possess in a ludified world.

As this brief overview suggests, the links between semiotics and digital marketing can take very different paths. This issue of “Lexia” presents merely a few examples of a combination of disciplinary and professional capabilities that can be much broader and multifaceted, also because the digital media are constantly and rapidly evolving. Indeed, when it comes to digital media and the Internet, semiotics still has much to do, especially in relation to the so-called “big data”, which challenge the discipline to analyse and interpret large text corpora and to do it with the support of software and statistical analysis tools. In order to face this challenge, which involves using a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods, semiotics must open itself up to continuous interdisciplinary exchanges, firstly with all human sciences involved with digital media (from sociology to anthropology, from psychology to computational linguistics, through to all “digital humanities”) and secondly with information sciences, computer engineering, artificial intelligence and statistical sciences.

Semiotica e Digital Marketing Semiotics and Digital Marketing

Oggi la semiotica può dialogare con il Digital Marketing in molti ambiti. Fra questi, ci sono gli studi e le attività di Search Engine Optimization (SEO), il Digital Storytelling, il mondo della Web Usability e dell'Interface Design, l'analisi della User Experience (UX), le ricerche sulla viralità online, il videogame design, gli studi sulla gamification, le strategie di new branding nella comunicazione d'impresa, l'analisi qualitativa di grandi masse di dati. Questo numero di Lexia mostra, in modo rigoroso e con linguaggio accessibile anche ai non addetti ai lavori, quali teorie, concetti e metodologie della semiotica possano essere applicati in modo proficuo a ciascuno di questi ambiti.

Contributi di / Contributions by Paula Almiron-Chamadoira, Cinzia Bianchi, Giovanna Cosenza, Giuliana Laurita, Gabriele Marino, Gustavo Niklander Ribera, Paolo Odoardi, Ruggero Ragonese, Mauro Salvador, Leonardo Sanna, Elsa Soro, Mattia Thibault.

In copertina

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