Simulating Authenticity:  
A semiotic analysis of Apple’s ‘Think Big’ Marketing Campaign  
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We have at the present moment everybody claiming the right of conscience without going through any discipline whatsoever that there is so much untruth being delivered to a bewildered world.
- Gandhi

While contemporary social fixation with the authentic self seems to be only increasing in magnitude, the nature of reflecting on one’s own self and existence has been a subject of analysis dating back to the Eastern Philosophy of Siddartha Guatama, who suggested that eliminating the ego—one’s selfishness and attachments—is what leads to true being. For the Western Socratic approach, it is the examination of life that renders it meaningful, as only then can one come to know oneself. As philosophical thought became categorized, authenticity came to be a facet of existential thought as it was existential philosophers, such as Jean Paul Sarte and Martin Heidegger, who were among the first to stress the importance of authenticity in relation to modernity. In contemporary Western society, authenticity is considered something to be admired, endeavoured and simulated out of recognition of its desirability. Marketing advertisements often attempt to appeal to the sense of uniqueness in the potential buyer, (Fromkin and Snyder 1980, 110) as a means to “evoke feelings that the advertiser hopes will become associated with the brand being advertised,” (Agres, Dubitsky and Edell 1990, 24). This tendency has exploded into the marketing industry in recent years, and is evident in the marketing campaigns of the most common household brands, such as Coca-Cola, Starbucks, Adidas, Subway, Kraft and, most notably, Apple. Not only do these brands appeal to the notion of authenticity to hook consumers, through their advertisements’ fixation on cultivating the Authentic Self, they further posit authenticity as something to be desired, and thus, impose the role of the Authentic Self onto the individual for one to actualize oneself by using the products and subscribing to the brands being advertised. Although, it is paradoxical that through our compliance to advertisements we may find ourselves actually becoming
more similar to the others we are attempting to differentiate ourselves from. This causes us to ask: How can we be truly authentic when we are always taking on roles determined by brands through particular signs? In order to address this question, this paper will provide a semiotic analysis of Apple’s ‘Think Big’ marketing campaign, and more specifically, Apple’s use of Mahatma Gandhi to sell the notion of the Authentic Self. I will use the notion of Self, as illustrated by Martin Heidegger, as the foundation from which to explore the operating signs in Apple’s advertisement through Peircean and Sausseurean semiotic. I will argue, in a Derridian fashion, that through selling authenticity, Apple is merely further distancing the Self from the Authentic and is ultimately perpetuating a postmodern world characterized by materialistic consumption.

Numerous existential philosophers addressed the notion of Authenticity, however the creation of Heidegger’s concept of Dasein to comprehend such an idea is perhaps most compelling because of the manner in which it is used to denote the particular way of Being of which all humans are of essence. For Heidegger, the Being of Dasein consists of a Self and a they-self that one embodies as a social creature. Heidegger writes: In utilizing public means of transport and in making use of information services such as the newspaper, every Other is like the next. This Being-with-one-another dissolves one’s own Dasein completely into the kind of Being of ‘the Others’, in such a way, indeed, that the Others, as distinguishable and explicit, vanish more and more,” (1962, 127).

This suggests that in society, individuals lose the aspect of a unique self to the “averageness” of the they of which they Be (Heidegger 1962, 127), for it is the common modes of routine and activity in which one naturally takes part in one’s day-to-day life that we all participate in, therefore unifying us by means of our thoughts and actions that characterize the essence of Being that we are all subject to as humans.

This notion of they-self becomes reinforced through its prescriptive nature of referentiality upon sign interpretation, which further distances one from an authentic self; “The ‘they’ itself prescribes the way of interpreting the world...and Being-in-the-world which lies closest. Dasein is for the sake of the ‘they’ in an everyday manner, and the ‘they’ itself Articulates the referential context of significance,” (Heidegger 1962, 129). It is this element of referentiality that becomes both predictable and exploitable when approached with intention, for manipulation of sign exchange and value to appeal to universal human propensities (i.e., emotion) allows one to evoke a particular reaction in others. It would then seem as though the only antidote to such vulnerability and exploitation would be to calibrate the Self to the Authentic Self and manifest the Authentic Self in one’s
interpretations. To Heidegger, however, the Authentic Self cannot be disengaged from ‘they-self’ as a separate entity:

Authentic Being-one’s-Self does not rest upon an exceptional condition of the subject, a condition that has been detached from the “they”; it is rather an existential modification of the “why”—of the “they” as an essential existential. But in that case there is ontologically a gap separating the selfsameness of the authentically existing Self from the identity of that “I” which maintains itself throughout its manifold Experiences. (1962, 130)

To become authentic, then, is not to retreat to the individual and subjective I-Self that differentiates individuals through personal experience, but to modify one’s they-self relative to the average and encompassing they-self that one must first accept oneself to be of. By doing so, one can engage with the world and its signs by means of a logical interpretive nature, introspectively incorporating one’s knowledge of they-self into their interpretation and formulation of belief: “If Dasein discovers the world in its own way and brings it close, if it discloses to itself its own authentic Being, then this discovery of the ‘world’ and the disclosure of Dasein are always accomplished by a clearing-away of concealment and obscurities, as a breaking up of the disguises with which Dasein bars in its own way” (Heidegger 1962, 129). For Heidegger, this is how to actualize the Authentic Self and, more specifically, utilize one’s such authenticity in his or her interpretations of the signs he or she encounters in the environment.

In its most simplistic form, a sign is anything that puts the mind in connection with something (else) upon its interaction with the mind. By this very definition, everything we encounter in our environment is a sign to be interpreted. Media advertisements are among the most obvious examples of operating signs in our society, as they are explicitly designed to be signs, and demand to be interpreted in a particular way. For Charles S. Peirce, this particular interpretation is manifested in the realm of the interpretant of his triadic sign structure—the active translation of a sign into some form of meaning, which is ultimately constituted in how it causes the mind to act. Such interpretive actions of the mind can occur in one of three possible ways: emotionally, energetically (through action) or logically. As a logical interpretant, one enters a state of inquiry whereby mental operations are made consciously regarding the sign. It is in this element of logical interpretation where our natural inclination as humans tends to present a conflict when engaging with signs, for our propensity for affect often provokes an emotional interpretant in the mind. While this is one of the tendencies that exemplifies the nature of the commonality of they-Self, it is its universal nature that poses a certain vulnerability to manipulation, particularly because as members of the collective
they, we know what is likely to evoke the feelings of affect that unify Dasein, and can therefore appeal to this emotional propensity with intent. This is significant in terms of sign exchange, for any time a sign is created, there is an intention for that sign; a precept that regulates the way any given sign is to be interpreted. Peirce addresses this by means of the immediate, dynamic and final interpretants: the quality as demonstrated to be interpreted, the actual interpretation in the mind and the interpretation as by every mind, respectively.

Keeping Heidegger in mind, the referentiality of they determines that meaning and significance is where they deem it to be; one can safely assume that by incorporating elements into signs that appeal to the emotional totality of Being Self, one can appeal to and ensure the action of the final emotional interpretant in the mind. This plunges the nature of the semiotic mind to a great precipice, as the less consciously aware of a sign we are, the greater the rendered effectiveness of that sign. Due to the fact that we are not always conscious of our emotional states, this allows for the opportunity to inject purpose into signs that may not always be recognized, yet still meet its destination.

In Apple’s ‘Think Different’ campaign, featuring Mahatma Gandhi (see Figure 1), the exemplary nature of Gandhi’s disposition (of humility, transcendence, Truth seeking, practice of nonviolence, charity, etc.) instills an admiration that appeals to the final emotional interpretant in the mind. Therefore, as the signifying element of Peirce’s triadic sign structure (the sign, or representamen), in terms of Peirce’s trichotomy of signs, one would determine Gandhi to act as a qualisign, or the representation of a quality. This quality, one must note, is never arbitrary to the object itself, as the object must always embody it. In this sense, because Mahatma Gandhi did embody the qualities his image is used to portray, which ultimately represent a uniqueness of the Self, one can consider the image of Gandhi to be a qualisign. However, because of the conceptual nature of the medium, as well as its message format of a visual image, one must give heed to the reality of the object itself, as the image of Gandhi may be quick to be interpreted as himself, yet “he” functions in the image and the sign as a simulacrum; a mere representation of the real being that was Gandhi. The absence of the real presented as real through its simulacrum perceptually implies a presence of the qualities that the real embodied, and in this way, produces “real” symptoms in the interpretant (Baudrillard 1994, 3). Regardless of possible further technical exploration of the discrepancy between the real being represented by the object and the representation of the object by its representamen, one must also consider the image of Gandhi as a sinsign, which represents its own embodiment. Furthermore, in considering the qualitative instrumental properties of the
object in conjunction with the authenticity its use seeks to both represent and energize in interpretants, the signifying element of the object is most functional as a legisign, which denotes conventional “law” to be manifested by the interpretant. To further reinforce this precept, the advertisement blatantly states, “Think Different.” This imposes an energetic role upon the mind to indeed, think different. In this aspect, the object functions as a symbol to elicit behaviour on the part of the interpretant. The nature of the symbol however, is that it must take the form of either an icon, which denotes an object by characteristics of its own, or an index, which denotes another object by positing itself in relation to it, i.e., if there is smoke, there is fire. To the seemingly logical mind, the subject of Gandhi is an icon, as he represents his own features, which we will refer to as different, or unique; authentic. This is the implied perception of the sign as a whole that is presented to the mind as readily apparent. However, the advertisement would not function successfully as such if this were itself in its entirety, for the crucial element it seeks to put the mind in association with is the Apple brand, and for this, an indexical relation must be present between the qualities represented by Gandhi and the qualities that, implicit through this association, are present in the Apple brand and its products; qualities that an interpreting mind could attain with an Apple product.

To explore this indexical relationship, we must now look to the dyadic sign structure of Ferdinand de Saussure, which posits that a sign is the whole that results from associating a signified with its signifier. In this instance, the assistance Apple can provide in forging an Authentic Self is being signified by its proximal depiction to the symbolic representation of Authenticity by means of the simulacrum of Mahatma Gandhi. The value of this sign then, rests foremostly within the signifier that contains the essence of the quality being associated to the signified. It is the fusion of the

Figure 1: Apple’s ‘Think Different’ campaign featuring Mohandas Gandhi
Source: 2011, reproduced by The Acorn.
The arbitrary bond is where the sign derives its power, as there is no natural association between the separate concepts of Gandhi’s positive attributes and Apple’s enterprise, or even the products it seeks to sell, yet one is fabricated, for “any conceptual differences perceived by the mind seeks to find expression through a distinct signifier, and two ideas that are no longer distinct in the mind tend to merge” (de Saussure 1983, 119). The strongest indexical relationship is one where two unrelated ideas become associated, and, as a result, the arbitrary association between them becomes impossible to diffuse. In Marketing to the Mind, Fulton and Maddock present this very process as a marketing heuristic: A way in which the Silent Side works is in its noncritical acceptance of suggestions (e.g., “the Real Thing”). Another example of how the unconscious works is when two totally unrelated ideas that are outside of consciousness come together in the unconscious and form one unique idea, which then bursts into consciousness and often forms the basis for the solution of an everyday problem. (1996, 35).

This is troublesome because the interpreting mind is being manipulated into designating the sign’s value to the signified: the potential for authenticity that Apple provides. When the signifier becomes the source of meaning to the interpreter, it allows for the symbol to function energetically by first evoking a desire for authenticity, and if successful, further provoking fulfillment of that desire through consumption of the insinuated harbinger of authenticity. This is an issue of even larger magnitude, as it demonstrates inanimate, material commodities being intentionally impregnated with personifications and furthermore, deludes the subconscious mind into believing that only through consumption of external sources can one become authentic.

Considering the profound nature of authenticity, particularly in view with Heidegger and Peirce, such an abstraction is ironic, for if it is the essence of they-self that allows one to determine and predict such propensities, it is the same communal they-self that would fall vulnerable to the ‘they,’ which is demonstrated by the success of the Apple Enterprise. For this matter, the very fact that the advertisements have been rendered effective displaces the centrifugal essence of it, as authenticity is dissolved
in the energetic pattern of the typicality that fuels it to become of concern to begin with. At the core of this phenomenon is the fact that, essentially, there is no core because the authenticity being signified becomes hollow and inexistent—entirely unauthentic through the averageness and common nature of attempting to attain it. In other words, the center is not the center (Derrida 1967, 278). This view becomes further reinforced when we refer back to the signifying element of the object of Gandhi as a sinsign; because the object merely puts the mind into connection with the qualities of Gandhi rather than embody them as himself, it serves as nothing more than a mere simulacrum. Here, the center is lost once again, and the referential object at the center when contemplating the sign from a triadic structure is once again absent. What we are left with is an encompassing they which continues to interpret a sign with a foundation that does not exist. With this in mind, the prevalence of the final interpretant by they further distances the they-Self from Authenticity. Ultimately, this propels society into a postmodern world characterized by hyper reality where the real (with a present center) is no longer distinguishable from the hyper real and its simulacra.

According to Kenneth Gergen, the Self in the postmodern condition is no longer a result of a personal essence, but is relational to the people and world around it (Fine et al. 2010, 152). Through Apple’s marketing advertisements, the Apple brand positions itself even closer to the essence of the individual (the existence of which is arguable) by representing itself as both a necessary and sufficient cause of the Authentic quality. That is to say, the sign functions to cause us not to ask ourselves who we are, but who Apple can help us to be, regardless of the absent Real at the center of the sign. It is in how we interpret the sign as a whole, Derrida contends, that designates its value, not what its signifier signifies, as it need not even be present. This is troublesome, as this interplay between signifiers ultimately creates a facade of the real, causing a disengagement from reality. While this divorcement is what allows the intuitive branding of Apple to be successful, we must ask ourselves: to what end will we allow this to continue? By presenting its brand not as what it is, but as what it might represent if the mind is to interpret it “correctly,” Apple is masking the role of the consumer (which it imposes onto the interpreting mind through this particular sign) as the role of the Authentic Self, perpetuating a postmodern world whereby the individuals in it become further disengaged from that which they seek.

The semiotic analysis presented here is one of importance because it not only puts into question the underlying assumptions and implications of the functioning signs in the advertisements of a dominating brand in our contemporary culture, it extends to the marketing
industry itself and suggests an alternative system of interpretation of all of the operating signs in our culture that appeal to the cultivation of the Authentic Self. By examining the ‘Think Big’ campaign through the trichotomies of Peirce, as well as further incorporating the applications of Peirce into the analysis of the sign using a dyadic Sausseurean structure, I was able to lay the foundation on which to assign a Derridian sign function lacking structure beyond its own web of signifiers to the chosen sign. This Derridian assertion was positioned to further explore the issue from a postmodern perspective in order to suggest and address the pluralistic ignorance being perpetuated by operating sign structures in our society that manipulate and exploit natural human propensities in order to mold the minds interacting with them into consumption engines which, ultimately, function to serve an economic ultimatum. It must be noted that the use of Mahatma Gandhi in the ‘Think Big’ campaign is self-contradictory at best, as the operating sign exploits his image for a purpose which exists in opposition to what he advocated for.

Just as Mahatma Gandhi advocated for self-restraint, humility, forgiveness, nonviolence and simplicity as a means to the realization of Truth, the existential viewpoint contends that to find the meaning of the true Self is to look inside one’s Self and simply be in one’s true nature, for this is the essence of the Authentic Self. It certainly seems disheartening to recognize how frequently the pursuit of the Authentic Self is exploited by advertisers to fuel consumption. Ironically, this exploitation distances people from their Authentic Beings rather than bringing them closer. Any material Thing, external manifestation, or internally fused representation, will never be able to truly emulate the essence of the Authentic, as a structure without any true structure to support it, it will inevitably collapse upon itself. This leads us not to ask how we can be authentic when we are taking on roles determined by brands through signs, but how can we disseminate and eliminate the interpersonal role of materialistic signs created by brands in actualizing the Self?

Works Cited


During my first and second years of university, while reading William Carlos Williams’s *Spring and All*, I made what I considered, then and now, to be my first valuable observation as a student of literature. The book consisted of prose passages and poems. The poems could be further divided into two categories: “easy” and “difficult.” The easy poems were immediately obvious as they possess a stunning clarity. The difficult poems, on the other hand, appeared to have opaque, inscrutable surfaces, the words lifeless on the page. Then, suddenly, it struck me that the easy poems and the difficult poems existed in conversation. The easy poems often played out a single device, concrete