

# OPERATIONALIZING THE CHANDLEREAN SEMIOTIC PROCESS THROUGH THE DECONSTRUCTION OF FIRST BANK'S CLASSIC CORPORATE ADVERTISING TEXT

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## ABSTRACT

Theoretical literature is agog with a variety of semiotic deconstructive approaches. While many of these have been operationalized, Chandler's semiotic analytical method, a fairly well known process, is yet to be brought to life. This operational exercise is accomplished by deconstructing First Bank Nigeria Plc's classic corporate advertising text through a diligent followership of Chandler's stage by stage semiotic process. In essence, the main contribution in this study is the insight given through the deconstruction of First Bank Nigeria Plc's classic corporate advertising text through the diligent followership of the Chandlerean semiotic method of analysis. The pursuit of the stage by stage process provides insight into how managers can deconstruct meanings that are often constructed in texts that personify brands through signs, images etc.

**KEYWORDS:** Chandlerean, Theoretical Literature, Chandler's Semiotic Analytical Method

## INTRODUCTION

Theoretical literature is agog with various semiotic deconstructive approaches (see for instance Oswald, 2012; Berger, 2010; Bianchi, 2011; Noth 2011; Barthes, 1967, 1973, 1988). While many of these have been operationalized to understand the working or process driven nature of semiotics, there is little evidence that other approaches such as Chandler's D.I.Y. semiotic analytical process, which is equally based on Saussure's (1960) dyadic signifier and signified sign model, have been brought to life, especially in business and management studies. This study fills this gap by providing a detailed analysis of the stage by stage processes through which meanings evolve from the deconstruction of First Bank's corporate advertising text through Chandler's semiotic process. The importance of pursuing this exercise is that researchers are given further insights into the process driven nature of meaning generation and deconstruction. This paper has been divided into four parts and this constitutes the first. The second examines the meaning of semiology and its criticisms. The third discusses how meanings are generated through the deconstruction of First Bank's corporate advertising text using Chandlerean ten stage deconstructive processes. Finally, the paper ends with a review of issues discussed.

## SEMIOLOGY: A BRIEF REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Semiology is the study of signs (Chandler, 2002; Noth, 1995). It is often deployed by linguists and structuralists a way of interpreting how signs, within a given context, interrelate to create meanings. In recent times it has been used by brand constructionists to interpret how body copies and images encoded in advertising texts create meanings (Silverman, 1997, 2000, 2001). It is about the use of signs and objects to interpret or produce meanings for things (Marvasti, 2004).

Semiotics was employed because it is not limited to what was originally referred to as signs in everyday speech, but also to anything that stands for something else. This instrument was used because it is concerned with the interpretation of everything that can be taken as a sign, (Eco, 1976) i.e. words, images, sounds, gestures and objects (Chandler, 2002). Thus, semiotics was useful in interpreting corporate identity advertising texts to produce meaning for the concept of corporate identity. Although semiotics has been used in the past to analyze speeches, it has, however, been used recently in marketing and business studies (Umiker-Sebeok, 1987) to interpret corporate and product advertising messages (Bignell, 1997). Similarly in this paper, semiotics is adopted to deconstruct how First Bank Nigeria Plc, one of the two largest financial institutions personifies (Propp, 1928/1968) itself through corporate advertisements.

Furthermore, semiotics was deemed appropriate for this study given its ability to dissect and examine cultural codes sensitively to unearth interpretational subtleties (Merris, 2001; Leiss et al., 1986) as conveyed in corporate advertisements. The greatest attractions to this instrument is its concern with the making of meaning in many perspectives, perhaps most obviously in the form of corporate advertising texts, which bring together words and visual images (Chandler, 2002). Although semiotics may give insight into how banks have been constructing the concept of corporate identity. However, it is however sad to note that there is no guarantee that the analysis of the same texts by external editor (using the same semiotic approach) will produce similar results, (Bauer and Gaskell, 2005). This accounts for the reason why, until the present date, there has been no universal agreement about the scope and methodology of semiotics. Semiotics has been perceived as a loosely defined critical practice rather than a unified, fully-fledged analytical method or theory, making it susceptible to subjective interpretation and grand assertions. Consequently, this instrument has been applied dubiously to anything and everything, trespassing on almost every academic discipline (Chandler, 2002). This makes the use of the instrument to be treated with suspicion of intellectual terrorism (Sturrock, 1986).

## **DECONSTRUCTING THE MEANING OF FBN BRAND OF THE LATE 80S VIA CHANDLER SEMIOTIC APPROACH**

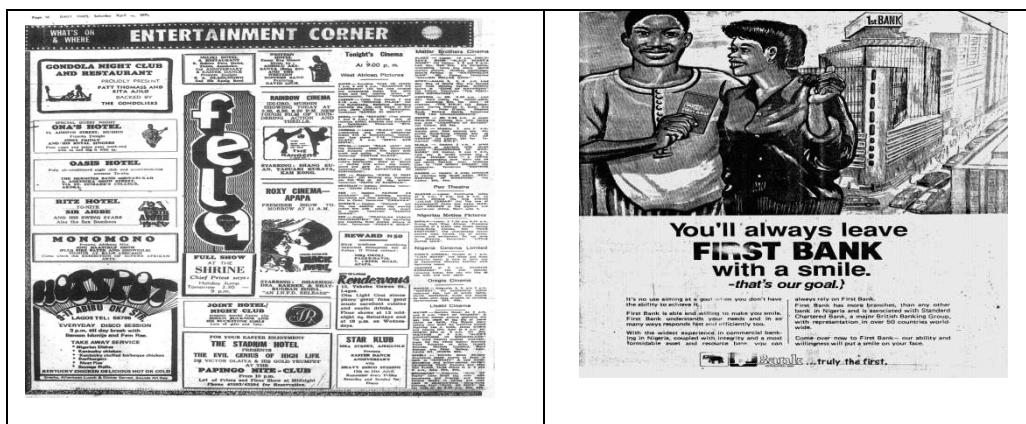
The Chandlerean semiotic method of sign deconstruction is a ten stage process that seeks to provide a stage by stage approach to the deconstruction of signs encoded or constructed in texts. The decision to follow Chandler's semiotic approach is based on the ability of the tool to offer a comprehensive guide that offers a practical demonstration of how a semiotic analytical research can be conducted. Very few semiotic approaches provide detailed insight into semiotic analysis. In order to demonstrate its effectiveness, the author makes a report of how First Bank's corporate advertising text headlined 'You'll always leave FIRST BANK with a smile', was deconstructed to gain insight into how the bank personified itself within an emerging competitive environment.

### **Stage one: Identify the text**

Copies of the texts that the author aims to deconstruct must be located and included in the analysis. Similarly, shortcomings of the text must be identified and discussed. In addition to this, a clear description of the text must be made for easy recognition. Furthermore, the nature of the medium through which the text has been published must be identified was discussed. This must include frequency of medium, size, circulation, coverage, audience, the genre to which the text belong and the context in which the text was found. Take for instance the corporate advertising text in this paper (see figure 1). This text belongs to First Bank Nigeria Limited, now First Bank Nigeria Plc. It is a full page corporate advertisement that appears in black and white on page fifteen of Daily Times of Nigeria on Monday, September 18, 1989.

Daily Times was an elite daily national newspaper.

Established in 1926 (Daily Times, 2012), the newspaper was at the time of the publication of the First Bank advertisement owned by the Federal Government of Nigeria (Daily Times, 2012). Daily Times is a tabloid size newspaper of four to six columns wide (see Figure 1) and two hundred lines deep, making a full page and a column depth of between eight hundred and one thousand two hundred lines. Although there is no exact circulation figure, it is estimated that Daily Times had a strong national audience coverage of about six million people and an estimated circulation figure of four hundred thousand between the mid and late 1980s throughout the country (Eribo, 1997). The success of the newspaper in reaching out to such wide audience between the mid and late nineties could be adduced to the nature of consumer spending power, which though was declining (Pinto, 1986), was nevertheless strong when compared with the state of the Nigerian economy today. Although Daily Times was, then owned by the Federal Government of Nigeria, it covered and presented news stories about events and people from all walks of life (Eribo, 1997). Consequently, Daily Times enjoyed the patronage of people of all classes including low income earners, middle class and the elite (Eribo, 1997). The advertisement being deconstructed is a corporate or institutional form of advertisement designed to promote First Bank's corporate personality. This advertisement was produced with three main signifiers namely pictures (erected at the top section of the copy and covering nearly three quarters of the entire advertisement) body copy (including the headline, sub-headline, specific details) printed at the lower section of the copy, a corporate logo and advertising payoff at centre of the lower end of the copy. However, the black and white state of the text thwarts its beauty, making it less appealing to the audience.



<p><b>Figure 1: A Page in Daily Times Newspaper</b></p>	<p><b>Figure 2: First Bank's Corporate Advertisement</b></p>
<p>Source: <a href="http://www.shadowandact.com/?p=11456">http://www.shadowandact.com/?p=11456</a></p>	<p>Source: Daily Times, Monday, September 18, 1989 p.15</p>

**Stage two: Consider the Purpose of Analysing the Advertisements**

Issues regarding the reasons why a text is chosen must at this point be discussed. Specifically, discussions at this stage must focus on the primary role of the text in conveying a specific message effectively. In order to bring this phase to life, the author assembled a total of one hundred and nineteen editions of corporate advertisements that were syndicated by First Bank in Daily Times between 1986 and 2012. Using judgemental sampling, the copy titled 'You'll always leave FIRST BANK with a smile', supported by a rider: 'that's our goal' was chosen. This copy, which appeared on page fifteen

of Daily Times edition of September 18, 1989, was chosen as the analytical sample for two major reasons.

First is that this is the only corporate advertising text throughout this period that was never re-rendered. Others were. It is a singular edition and this is the only edition. Second, like many other corporate identity campaigns by First Bank Nigeria Plc, this particular corporate advertising text equally laid emphasis on corporate identity factors that give insight into the nature of the bank's personality. These corporate identity factors include core competencies, efficiency in customer service delivery, unrivalled experience in banking services in Nigeria, large and unparalleled branch network, unique strategic alliance, strong asset and resource base. The other one hundred and eighteen advertising texts syndicated in Daily Times by First Bank of Nigeria Limited between 1986 and 2012 were re-rendered using various cues.

### **Stage three: Establish A Relationship Between the text and the type Token Distinction**

The researcher's must establish whether each text is one among many editions or whether it is virtually unique or produced as a singular edition. This exercise could be achieved by making a count of the number of words used in the text as well as the different words used – ignoring repetition. This is to enable the author establish whether the text was of a specific type, which is its own sole token (i.e. unique or original) or simply one token among many of its type ('a copy without an original'). With reference to the First Bank advertising text under interrogation, only one edition of this copy was produced. For reasons best known to First Bank, this advertising text did not appear in any other newspaper of that period.

This makes this advertisement unique. The core message conveyed in this advertisement provides a rundown of signs or identities that appeared in all other editions of the newspaper. This edition is unique for a number of reasons. First, the number of words contained in body copy of the advertisement (when counted) is either less or more when compared to all other editions. Second, the picture contained in the corporate advertisement differs from the pictures in other editions. In addition, the visuals (picture) that appeared in this copy create a synergy with the written signs in the body copy.

### **Stage four: Identify the Important Signifiers in texts and the Ideas they Signify**

The most important signifiers including written words, photographs, visual symbols and the ideas that these signifiers are associated with must at this point be located and identified. Efforts must at this point be made to establish the nature of system or the culture in which the signs in the texts make sense. The First Bank advertisement contains three important signifiers including one large picture, the body copy (including the headline, sub-headlines, details, closure) and a corporate logo, all of which makes sense (mostly) in the Nigerian business environment. The picture in the advertisement, which is of a young man flanked by a young woman – both beaming with smiles and standing relaxed on the balcony of a top floor building. The man (wearing a short sleeved light grey T-shirt over white striped trousers) wraps his left hand around the shoulder of the young woman. The woman wears a dark colour long sleeved shirt and dark striped trousers, permed hair and wearing fairly small hooped earrings with her left thumb-up.

Behind the couple (in the background) is a panoramic view of high rise buildings (including First Bank's architectural edifice) on Marina Street Lagos. These buildings belong to some of major operators of the Nigerian financial services industry. Marina Street is (as depicted in the picture) is adorned by stream of traffic. First Bank's building. First Bank's architectural masterpiece is the tallest in the picture and it stands prominently to the fore of the other buildings. An abbreviation mark (1st BANK) is inscribed at the top of the building.

The abbreviation mark is to give recognition First Bank Nigeria Limited as the owner of the property and also to

convey a message of financial strength, power and confidence to stakeholders and most especially, customers. The man in the picture shows off a First Bank of Nigeria Limited Passbook in his right hand. By showing off the passbook, it implies that customers are incredibly proud of First Bank Nigeria Limited. The implication of the 'show-off' is that First Bank has a very good corporate image or reputation in which customers are proud. The relaxed atmosphere in which this couple are found indicates that customers are rest assured that their savings are secure and in safe hands and that by saving their money with First Bank of Nigeria Limited, 'nothing can go wrong'. It also means that First Bank Nigeria Limited is a reliable institution that can be trusted with the safety and security of wealth. In addition, the 'relaxed atmospheric' sign indicates that by saving with First Bank Nigeria Limited, customers are assured of long lasting and enduring peace of mind regarding the safety of their savings. Thumbs-up by the lady is another sign that (signals and) asserts the confidence which customers have in relation to the safety of their money in the coffers of First Bank of Nigeria Limited. It signals and affirms that the couple (and most especially First Bank customers) are fully satisfied, okay, and most of all happy with the banking services provided by First Bank of Nigeria Limited.

By standing in front of First Bank's high-rise building and state of the art architecture, it is implied that First Bank's customers are backed up solidly by a very big, strong and successful institution that has stood the test of time. The copy headline 'You'll always leave FIRST BANK with a smile-that's our goal' printed with a bold sentence case and uppercase 32, 36, 32, 18 point Microsoft Sans Serif style typeface, respectively, in black ink, is a direct promise headline making a pledge of the benefits of banking with First Bank. The bold Microsoft Sans Serif style typeface aims to arrest the attention of the target audience, gain their interest and desire and invite them to read the text in the copy further. By putting smiles on faces, First Bank ensures that customers' desires (i.e. virtues of safety and security of savings and the provision of efficient customer service) are satisfied. In order to achieve customer satisfaction, First Bank positioned itself as an institution that recognizes the customer as 'King'. Therefore it aims to draw all its resources towards satisfying its customers. This copy opens with the phrase 'It's no use aiming at a goal when you don't have the ability to achieve it'. This means that personal and organizational goals must be set with the hindsight of the skill, ability and competence to achieve it. The intention to make customers smile at all times (see headline and rider accompanying headline) is a goal, which First Bank Nigeria Limited is perfectly capable of accomplishing. The word 'able' in the sentence is indicative of First Bank's ability and core competence (a bundle of integrated constituent skills and technologies) enabling, enhancing and contributing immensely to the delivery of fundamental customer benefit and customer perceived value, which bring about customer satisfaction.

The achievement of customer satisfaction, which inevitably brings smiles to customer faces, is First Bank's major goal. In order to understand customer needs, First Bank had to first adopt a philosophy that recognizes the customer as 'King'. To serve the 'King' satisfactorily, First Bank made customer service and satisfaction the focal point of all its business activities. This philosophy is driven by First Bank's passion to delight its customers. It identifies the varying and ever changing needs of customers and takes decisions to satisfy these needs speedily, proficiently and resourcefully.

The emphasis on 'widest experience' in the above statement is reflective of two of First Bank's distinctive, distinguishing, unique and differentiating features, namely history and unrivalled experience. By positioning First Bank as an institution with the widest banking experience in Nigeria, it means First Bank is the most experienced bank and financial institution operating in Nigeria. Being the most experienced bank in Nigeria, it implies that First Bank Nigeria Limited has amassed the most extensive skill and vast amount of knowledge in Nigeria's banking sector. It has gained

large varieties of experience, offering more product and service choices than any other bank in Nigeria. By developing the widest experience, First Bank Nigeria Limited may also have familiarised itself with the Nigerian market more extensively than other banks and may also have developed a better understanding and unrivalled technical know-how of the financial industry in Nigeria.

First Bank's virtue of integrity implies that it has operated and carried out its financial responsibilities with honesty, truth, honour, veracity and in an upright manner. By positioning itself as an institution with the most formidable asset and resource base, First Bank characterizes itself as a unique bank. First Bank also distinguishes and differentiates itself by making reference to its asset and resource base, which it describes as the most formidable in the Nigerian banking industry. The formidability of First Bank's assets base implies that First Bank possesses the most inspiring and biggest financial and materials resources in the Nigerian banking industry. These unique resources endow First Bank of Nigeria Limited with the ability to provide strong financial backing on which customers and businesses can depend. The sentence 'First Bank has more branches than any other bank in Nigeria' distinguishes and communicates the distinct characteristics, which positions First Bank form others.

With more branches than any other bank in Nigeria, it is evident that first bank has the widest national coverage with a strong network. It implies that First Bank is stronger and has a greater edge and better positioning to provide better banking services (to Nigerians all over the country) than other banks. Being a member of the Standard Chartered Bank, which is one of Britain's major financial institutions, First Bank has access to over 1,500 institutions located in 60 major countries, all belonging to the Standard Chartered Bank group. With such strategic international partnership, First Bank signifies a unique ability to offer strong financial backing to Nigerian personal and corporate customers pursuing various international businesses with an array of financial services including personal, corporate, investment etc. in 60 foreign countries. The implication of First Bank's emphasis on its partnership with Standard Chartered Bank Group conveys a very strong message of its core competence, a unique ability to offer trade and credit information (i.e. contact details of exporters and importers worldwide) to customers proposing to collaborate or partner foreign business on various business projects.

It is also a sign of First Bank's capability to provide customers with information on the nature of foreign markets and potential business associates. This is a unique ability, which other banks cannot match. The closure makes a summary of the core messages in the text. It invokes the bank's core competencies, a unique ability to offer trade and credit information to customers proposing to collaborate or partner foreign business on various business projects, which other banks in Nigeria cannot match. It also draws attention to its competence in identifying customer needs and its ability to deliver these needs, create customer value, achieve customer satisfaction and bring smiles to the faces of its customers. This copy ends with First Bank's corporate logo and pay off (.....truly the first) printed at the centre of the lowest section of the copy.

The logo comprises an agile and nimble 7,000 kilogramme black African Elephant (the largest land animal). The elephant (inscribed in a rectangular box with a white background) moves speedily with its trunk in upward swing. Being the largest land mammal and one of the most powerful animals, the elephant signifies and complements some of the issues discussed in the body copy of the corporate advertisement. The size of the elephant stands for the size of First Bank, proclaimed in the body copy as the biggest bank with the largest branch network in Nigeria. The nimble character of the elephant supports First Bank's ability to respond to customer needs speedily and efficiently (as claimed in the body copy of

the advertisement). The strong and powerful elephant also represents First Bank's power, strength and ability to provide financial backing efficiently to personal and corporate customers.

Printed next to the rectangular box containing First Bank's nimble elephant is a white numeric mark (1<sup>st</sup>) commonly used to denote the word 'first'. This numeric mark in thick font is printed in another rectangular box with a black background. Next to this is the word 'Bank' printed in thick white twenty two font size Bookman Old Style type face and with the date of incorporation of the bank printed at the centre bottom of the word 'Bank'. The entire corporate logo is followed by the bank's payoff '.....truly the first'.

#### **Stage Five: Establish the Modalities in the Advertisements**

At this stage, reality claims made in the First Bank's corporate advertising text was critically examined in relation to whether the claims were facts or fiction and to whom they appear realistic. For instance claims which present First Bank as the financial institution with the 'widest experience' in banking in Nigeria was verified by examining another independent text to validate such a claim (see for instance Ebimobowei and Sophia, 2011). Specifically, the modality markers, i.e. The reality status and reliability of the messages conveyed (Hodge and Kress, 1988) in the advertisements such as the 'widest experience' claims were examined to establish the truth-value of the references made by the organizations that produced the advertisements. In addition, these modality markers were drawn to make judgements about the relationship between the text and the business environment, consisting of the organization that produced the advertisements and its stakeholders.

In this case the claim by first bank was fully substantiated and confirmed in the work of Ebimobowei and Sophia (2011) where it was submitted that First Bank Nigeria Plc, previously named British Bank for West Africa (BBWA) is the oldest financial institution in Nigeria. Thus Ebimobowei and Sophia (2011) work helps the author to establish that truly First Bank's corporate advertisements operates within a realist constructional code and that the bank claims as produced in the corporate advertising text is verifiable, transparent and non-obscure (Butler, 1999).

#### **Stage Six: Conduct a Paradigmatic Analysis of the Advertisement**

The class of paradigm in which First Bank's corporate advertising text belongs was established as the national press media. Similarly, the author examined how a change of medium might affect the meanings generated was established. Specifically, issues relating to whether the message in the advertising text might be more effective if it had appeared in junk, glamour or lifestyle journal outlets with limited regional spread were considered. It was conceived that other media outlets lack the ability to give First Bank national visibility. As such it was thought that Daily Times was a perfect medium for the corporate advertising text because it matches First Bank 'national visibility need'.

**Stage Seven:** Establish the Syntagmatic Structure of the Advertisements syntagmatic structures in the First Bank corporate advertising text, which takes the form of narrative, argument or montage were identified. In case of the First Bank advertising text, this was achieved by establishing the surface structure of the advertisements and the relationships between its parts. Specifically, the author attempted to examine how one signifier relates to others. For instance, the author examined whether some words carry more weight than others. In addition, checks were made to establish whether the sequential or spatial arrangement of the elements influences meaning and whether there are formulaic features that have shaped the corporate advertisement.

#### **Stage Eight: Examine the Rhetorical Tropes**

Figures of speech or rhetorical tropes were identified. These include “its no use aiming at a goal when you don’t have the ability to achieve it”; “First Bank is willing and able to make you smile”. These were located as a way of establishing the ways they are used to influence the preferred reading of the advertisements.

**Stage Nine:** assess the extent of intertextuality of the advertisement: the extent of intertextuality of the advert was achieved via an examination of various links in form and content, which bind the edition of an advertisement to other editions. In the case of the First Bank advertising text under interrogation, no other edition of this text was produced. Consequently, the author could not proceed with the objective of assessing the extent of intertextuality within the advert.

#### **Stage Ten: Determine the Nature of Semiotic Codes that were Used**

Codes with the First Bank advertisement were examined to establish whether they have double, single, specific to a medium or shared by other media. Following a thorough review of First Bank advertising text, it was agreed that the body was unambiguous and that the message in the text was clear.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This paper is developed to offer an operational insight into Chandler’s semiotic analytical process. In order to do so, First Bank Nigeria Plc’s classic corporate advertising text was deconstructed through a diligent, stage by stage followership of Chandler’s semiotic meaning deconstruction process. This provides a useful insight into how semiotics can be deployed. This in essence adds to the list of growing papers that operationalize a variety of semiotic method. Unlike other works in the social sciences, what makes the difference here is the insight given into the process understanding how business organizations construct meanings about themselves. This paper is useful in cases where brand managers need to uncover meanings that are constructed through signs, pictures, words, gestures, objects, and in some cases through sounds.

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