

## A Semiotic Analysis On Film Industry Using Verbal and Non-Verbal Approach: Case Study Joker Movie Poster

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**Abstract.** Movie poster often used as a medium of commercial purposes in advertising a movie. It can deliver what the movie is all about which could attract more viewers to see this movie. Therefore, this study aims to analyse the verbal and non-verbal aspects in Joker movie poster using semiotic approach to increase the ticket sales. The verbal used in this study is shown through the signifier and signified, resulting in denotative and connotative meaning. Meanwhile, the non-verbal aspect is seen through the concept of the sign and the colour used in the poster. This research used descriptive qualitative and literature review to collect the data. This study discusses how a movie poster from Joker can create and deliver its meaning to the viewer through the verbal and non-verbal aspects, which resulted in gaining interest from the potential movie viewers. The results of this study suggest that each symbols and signs used in the movie can convey the meaning thoroughly through its meaning association. Each symbols and signs are effective to increase the ticket sales. This study concludes that the signs and symbols used in the poster movie of Joker has its own meaning and could represent, portray, and convey the meaning of the movie poster well. Therefore, in making the movie poster, we should consider which symbols and signs that will be used so that an effective marketing strategy can be reached.

**Keywords:** Semiotic, Movie Poster, Marketing Semiotic, Advertisement, Signifier and Signified

### 1. Introduction

In doing a promotion, most of company often use images as a medium to advertise their products because it can be used as a communication and promotion tool. Therefore, the image offered by a company should be good and interesting. That way, the customer will show an interest into the products offered. Movie is also one of a product that needs an image to advertise its product to the viewer. In advertising the movie, there should be at least four marketing mix strategy that should be done, which are product, place, price, and promotion (4P) [1]. It means companies need to take a consideration on what products that will be offered as well as a strategic place to start their business. Strategic place is needed because it can help companies to attract consumers. Other than that, company also needs to decide the price that could compete with its competitors so that company must ensure that the price is affordable for the customers. It is because goals would not be achieved if companies do not have a right promotion strategies.

Movie also needs to be promoted to reach a larger audience. One of the forms to promote the movie is by using poster or known as a movie poster. Movie poster is one of incredible ways to gain an interest from the public as it gives us important information regarding the movie along with the tagline [2]. A movie poster should have the ability to make viewers or consumers buy the ticket in one glance [3]. Movie poster usually includes title, important date, illustrator/person, colors, and tagline. From those aspects, the viewer could know the meaning of the movie. For example, a viewer would know the theme of the movie if the poster depicts a ghost or use grey and black as the color background [4]. Therefore, most of company tend to beautify the poster without erasing the meaning of it. Hence, those aspects could be classified as a promotion and communication tool.

In a movie poster, we would not see much of words, clauses, or sentences. It is because every signs, colors, symbols, and paintings are also several forms to communicate with other people. In communicating with someone, we use sign to send our meaning about object to other people. That way, they can interpret it well. It is because signs are the basic of all communication [5]. Through images and signs, we can communicate with each other in this world. A study about sign is called semiotic. According to Saussure, semiotic is one of methods to learn about signs. In his concept, Saussure uses signifier and signified. Sound and object is a signifier, while signified is a concept of the object. The relation between these two called as a signification, which resulted as a sign [6].

Barthes expanded the theory and stated that signification is divided into two parts, namely denotative and connotative. According to Barthes in Hall, signs could be categorized as denotative and connotative. A descriptive sign without content of ideological is called denotative. Meanwhile, connotative sign is the one that has lost its historical meaning. Terminology, culture, and event changes as well as evolution might be the reason of it [7]. Chandler explains further and stated that denotation tends to be describes as literal meaning (dictionary meaning) or obvious meaning of sign, while connotation is an analogue code [8]. In other words, denotation and connotation is what and how the words, clauses, sentences, signs, and symbol photographed. Moreover, other than verbal sign, a movie poster also uses visual sign, which is an image. It consists of company's logo, kind of product, color, etc. Hence, both verbal and non-verbal (visual sign) have an important role as a communication tool for the viewer. According to Wierzbicka, color is definable via seeing and not a universal human concept [9]. Wierzbicka also proposed that there are six color terms that are regarded incompatible in the same way and to the same degree. The colors are black and white (dark and bright), green, blue, red, yellow, and brown.

Juliantari conducted an analysis regarding the semiotic in movie poster *The Conjuring*. It is stated that the poster was divided into two aspects, such as verbal and non-verbal. The verbal aspect referred to the signs such as the title while the non-verbal referred to the visual aspects, namely colors, shape, sign, and background [4]. A study by Burty analyzes the semiotic on movie poster of *Harry Potter* which focuses on the *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. It analyzed the sign that has a function as a promotion tool [10]. Persada also conducted a study about *Gundala* movie poster with a semiotic approach. It focuses on the visual elements of the *Gundala* movie poster [11]. Wirhayati and Sudrajat also conducted a study using semiotic approach for horror movie posters. They proposed that each signs play an important role to convey the meaning of the movie poster of horror movies [12]. He and Shao in their research examined the dynamic effects of advertising their products on social media networking. They stated that social media advertising can improve the effect of mental interaction with the customers so that they can directly engaged with the advertisement [13]. Sobocińska indicated that the use of semiotics in advertising could help in improving the marketing effectiveness because it delivers the message from the company well. It can also give better insight and projection for the offered brands [14]. Ulker-Demirel, Akyol, and Simsek conducted a study that stated actors and directors in a movie holds an impact in customer preferences. Thus, it could also be considered as one of marketing strategies [15]. However, there is only a few literatures that using a semiotic

approach on movie poster, especially on Joker movie poster. Therefore, this study will use a semiotic approach to analyze the verbal and non-verbal aspects of the Joker movie poster as well as its impact in gaining a larger audience.

The aims of this study is to determine the meaning, symbol, and sign in several “Joker” posters movie. Besides, this study also aims to analyze the semiotic meaning of “Joker” posters movie and its impact in increasing the ticket sales. This research used descriptive qualitative method and literature review to collect the data.

## **2. Method**

This study used descriptive qualitative method and literature review to collect the data. The data was taken from a movie poster agency, BOND [16]. The movie poster was chosen by several criteria. First, the poster should have words, phrases, clauses, or sentences. The movie’s poster text also should be written in English. In addition, the movie poster data is also from English. While collecting the movie poster data, we found out that Joker has several movie posters. However, there is only one that could fit into the criteria. The poster is also widely known by people as it was one of a nominee from OSCAR’s best poster. It might be mean that the poster could create and portray the meaning well. Moreover, collecting the data was done through several steps, namely downloading the research object and analyzing verbal and no-verbal aspects, namely signifier, signified, denotative, and connotative as well as colors of the movie poster, respectively. The verbal aspects of this movie poster content analysis was done to identify the behind meaning of several words and clause that written on the poster. Meanwhile, non-verbal aspect is done to identify the correlation between clauses and colors to create meaning in the selected movie posters. This study will use Barthes and Saussure to support the verbal aspect analysis. Meanwhile, Wierzbicka theory will be used to analyze the non-verbal or visual aspect in the poster movie. Other than that, we also use other theories that could help to support this research.

## **3. Results and Discussion**

### *4. Semiotic*

Semiotic is one of the part of linguistics that study about sign. Sign is a communication tool as it helps us to understand each other better. Some people would think that sign only consist of punctuation and the others. However, words are also classified as sign. If we write ‘dog’ on a paper and show it to other people, it would also be classified as sign. It is because the words allow us to understand communicate the idea of ‘dog’. This could help us to have the same perception about dog, which dog is an animal that has four legs. It could be done without us having to go out and bring a dog then show it to other people. The word dog or the picture of dog is the signifier, while the concept of dogginess is called signified. It is because when we use the word or picture of dog, we would have the same perception; dog is an animal that has four legs. However, when we talk about dogginess, we would think about the concept of dogginess itself (De Saussure, 13). Moreover, Barthes and Chandler proposed that semiotic is divided into two aspects, which are denotative (literal) and connotative (beyond the text or image) meaning [7, 8]. It is also applied on a movie poster. In a movie poster, especially in a movie entitled “Joker”, there would be a signifier, signified, denotative, and connotative meaning.

BOND is one of the most well-known agency that mainly focuses on movie poster and photography for movies. They have worked for many well-known movies and series, namely Avengers, Aladdin, Lion King, Joker, and many more. Joker is an American psychological thriller movie directed by Todd Phillips and co-wrote by Scott Silver. The movie was launched at 2019. The movie provides origin story for the character of DC Comics, especially Joker. The movie tells about a man named Arthur that lived with his mother while having a mental issues. After the movie released, Joker is become a hot topic all over the world because its story line and quotes. The movie received

numerous accolades. Some people also could relate to the story line of the movie. Therefore, it is believed that it is one of the reasons why Joker became a hot topic. Not only that, many people also pay attention to the movie poster because it was made neatly. It is because that the movie poster also becomes one of a hot topics (See Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Joker Movie Poster (Adopted from: <http://www.impawards.com/designers/bond.html> accessed on 19:25, Saturday, 26-09-2020.)

Figure 1 shows the movie poster of Joker. The most likely that would captivated our attention is the “JOKER” as it is the biggest word in the poster movie. The text is in the capital letter, bold, and clear. We could see the JOKER text clearly and obvious. It signifies that JOKER is the title and obviously want to be the main focus of the movie poster. The title is stand out. It also can capture and hold the meaning of the movie. Therefore, it is classified as signifier and verbal sign because the joker part in the movie is a text and not a concept. We could also notice how the designer put the actor’s name at the above of the “Joker”, which is Joaquin Phoenix. It means that the designer wants to put a little bit emphasize on the actor. However, we could see that the character is written a lot smaller and fader than the title. It is because this part is not the main focus for the viewer to see or know. It could be said as an additional text only. This part also includes as signifier and verbal sign.

After that, we could see a similar size and text format as the other one. It has a much smaller size and fader font rather than the title one. It could also mean one meaning with the actor’s size. However, the designer puts the text under the tagline of the movie, which make it is more noticeable for the reviewer to see it. It is because this part is one of the most important information regarding the movie, namely when the movie would be released; coming soon. It is also classified as signifier and verbal

sign. Under it, we could see the logo of the company. This is important for identifying the poster's origin and it is identified as the non-verbal or visual aspect [9]. Other than it, we could also see the tagline of the poster, which is "put on a happy face". It is interesting that the tagline and the picture/illustrator provide by the designer do not put any happy face at all. Instead, it shows the joker facing at above while spreading his arms.

The tagline and the picture provide is contradictory. However, it could also depict what the movie is all about. From the poster above, we could know that joker has been trying to put on a happy face like smiling and laughing, while the reality does not like that. In other words, the picture above is the inner's Joker meanwhile the tagline is the how we would see Joker; someone who smiles and laugh a lot or always in a happy mood. The tagline would be classified as signifier and verbal sign while the picture is the signified. It is because the tagline is in the form of text and verbal. Meanwhile the picture is signified because it carries the concept of the joker. However, if we combine the tagline and the picture, it would be classified as signified and non-verbal. It is because we could see the picture and the concept of the movie. The movie tells about how Joker before he changed to be a 'bad' one. He loved to put smiles on his face while he always got something that hurts his feeling. That is why he turned to be a joker.

After identifying the signifier and signified, we would see the denotative and connotative meaning behind the selected movie poster. In the movie poster, we could see several texts or words. These texts would have the denotative and connotative meaning. As we have already mentioned before, denotative could be described as a literal meaning while connotative is the beyond meaning of something [7,8]. For example in the poster, we could see some texts with a lot of font variety. The first thing that we could notice is the title of the movie. According to Cambridge English Dictionary, joker is a humorist. Someone who tends to do something stupid to make other people laugh. Now if we see at the storyline, Arthur; the joker works as a clown that entertain children. He also loves to entertain people, especially children although he is not wearing his work uniform (See Figure 2). However, if we would see it further, Joker has a mental issues, which could be the reason at his actions. He also told his psychiatrist that she would not understand his joke either. Therefore, it could be the connotative meaning and the concept of the joker movie. Another denotative and connotative meaning is shown at Table 1.



**Figure 2.** Arthur (Joker) (Adopted from: <https://www.looper.com/164221/small-details-you-missed-in-the-final-joker-trailer/> accessed on 19:25, Saturday, 26-09-2020.)

**Table 1.** Denotative and Connotative Meaning of the Joker Movie Poster

No	Texts	Denotative	Connotative
1.	Joaquin Phoenix	The actor's name	Letting the viewer knows who will be the joker in this movie. Emphasizing the actor name also could be one of the way to attract the market's interest
2.	Joker	A person who is fond of joking; humorist	The title is placed in the middle. The font used is bold and the biggest. It is the main focus of the poster.
3.	Put on a Happy Face	Smiling	Should put on a happy face, namely smiling, laughing, etc. every day despite having any struggles.
4.	Coming Soon	Released date/will be announce later	Will be released soon. The target market would be anticipating it and wait for the further information regarding the movie released
5.	Movie poster logo	A company logo	The designer puts the company's logo is to inform the viewer that they are the one who made the logo. It is also as an identity. It is also a copyright for the company; that the poster is owned by them

The joker movie poster also uses some colors, which are black, white, and some other colors (See Figure 1). However, the color of white and black is more dominant in this poster. Black and white often referred as dark and light. The color black linked to darkness of night while white referred to day light. The black color is often used to represent mystery, power, elegance, formality, death, and evil. As opposed to black, white is associated with goodness, light, purity, innocence, and virginity [9]. The chosen color that dominate the poster has already shown the big picture of the movie. The black in the poster could represent power, mystery, death, and evil. It could represent power because if we look in the movie, we could see the gap between the one who has power and who is not. The discrimination for poor people or people who do not have power could be seen clearly in this movie. The black color also could described how mysterious Joker is (after he changed and become Joker). Other than that, the black color in the poster also could represent the evil and death that shown in the movie. As we already know, the movie is kind of triggering for some people because it contains a scene where he kills people and become an evil.

According to Wierzbicka, white could represent the purity, innocence, light, etc. in the poster, we could see a white smoke. It could be mean two things. Denotatively, smoke exits for some reason, namely fire or cigarette. If we see it further, in the movie, Arthur (Joker) was seen holding a cigarette

and is a smoker. The white smoke could be mean that he is (when the photo was taken) smoking or referred to the purity and innocence. It is seen in the movie that Joker was an innocence and pure person. He was not an evil, rather, he was a kind person that loves to help people to laugh or be happy (See Figure 2). The purity of Arthur also could be shown from the way he sees world. Although people mocks him and being evil to him, he was still trying to be a kind person. He also was a kind son to his mother. However, society changes him bit by bit. Therefore, we could see the black and white color dominate the poster. The designer also puts the black color under white color. It could be referred to how in the end the society “changed” him and “forced” him to kill people and being evil. Although, the changing of him also could be because of his mental issues.

In the poster, we also could see some other colors such as red. However, it does not dominate the poster. The other color is seen on the actor’s mouth as he claims himself as joker and dressed like a clown. Etymologically, red color is related to blood. However, the English word of red is not synchronically analyzable. Wierzbicka proposed that red is a rich warm color. It is because red is often associated with tire. Many people when said that when they think of tire, red would be the answer. We also need to remember that red is generally used as a symbol of danger or warning. However, dark red is often used to describe anger, vigor, courage, longing, and wrath. As it is shown in Figure 1, dark red was used in Joker’s mouth. When we look at it etymologically, red would be related to blood. It could represent that Author that is now transformed to be Joker killed so many people. As it is seen the red color is not only at his mouth but also at his chin and neck. Therefore, the red represents as the victims’ blood. Moreover, Joker also uses dark red and dark red is associated with anger and wrath. If we look at the movie, we could see that he holds his anger so many times and put his happy face to people. He suppresses his emotions until he becomes the joker. Lastly, red also used as a symbol of danger or warning. It shows that he is, now, dangerous and evil.

#### *4.1. Marketing Semiotic*

In the world of marketing, semiotic is helpful for companies to create an advertisement. It is because the verbal and non-verbal signs and symbols are used in the advertisement, especially movie poster to create emotional response for the viewers. That way, companies can persuade the customers to purchase the movie ticket in one glance. Other than that, marketing semiotic has been widely used to grow the brand value. According to Oswald, there are two systems that could help to grow the brand value and involved in semiotic theory, namely emotional and rational system [17, 18]. The system helps the customer in decision making by making the customers’ subconscious and conscious mind communicates through the Joker movie poster. Therefore, the Joker movie poster value will be growing which lead to the increase of ticket sales.

Furthermore, the system also helps people in creating a creative movie poster. Figure 1 shows that the company’s creativity in providing emotional meaning can make and persuade customers to purchase the ticket. It is because humans’ brain structure are programmed to integrate between creativity and emotion into a rational decision making [19]. Before purchasing the ticket, rational system makes the customers sees and seeks the metaphor that contained in the Joker movie poster before adjusting it with current trends and personal taste. It is because humans’ behaviour are often driven by social changes [20]. It can be said that adjusting signs and symbols is very important in rational decision making of customers. It is because customers are always updated with the newest signs and symbols. Therefore, the Joker movie poster also provide some texts that could be used as a sign to attract customers. The “Put on a happy face” sign on the poster can be considered as trendy slogan and can be remembered easily for the potential customer. Most of the customers, especially young adults, like to use a phrase such as “Fake smile” to show that they are strong despite all their problems. In accordance with this, the text sign on the movie poster showed that Joker is always putting a happy smile on his face despite his mental issues and problems. It also could attract their

curiosity which resulted in them purchasing the ticket just by looking at the sign that is presented on the Joker movie poster.

According to Aaker, consumer's emotional and lifestyle are one of brand's values that could encourage them in purchasing the product offered [21]. In this case, their emotional system is combined with their rational system in order to decide whether they should buy the ticket or not. Their lifestyle also took a part in making the decision. However, since their emotional and rational systems as well as life style are combined as a consideration, the customer will purchase the ticket at one glance. It is proven by the huge numbers of Joker movie viewers. BBC News indicated that Joker movie's ticket sales reached \$1bn (£772m) in 2019 and became the first R-rated film that can make \$1bn at global box office [22]. The use of actor name's in the Joker movie poster as a sign help to attract consumers to purchase the ticket because the consumers' mind tend to associate the sign used with their lifestyle, especially if they are familiar with the sign.

Besides, semiotic approach in marketing influenced the development of marketing strategies because it is able to create paradigms to attract consumers in purchasing the ticket and unify companies' ideology and creativity in the movie poster. Sunardi proposed that visual semiotics can be used as a scientific method approach [23]. First, semiotic focuses on technical things, which visible to the five senses in advertising. In this case, the signs and symbols used beautify the movie poster. Therefore, when the customers look at the poster, they will be interested in purchasing the ticket. Second, semiotics often related to other studies, which make semiotics provide a new knowledge. Visual semiotics are associated with cultural studies, such as marketing management and globalization, especially advertisement. It is one of the reasons why we choose Joker movie poster as our study case since the meaning of Joker movie poster and the movie can make the customers relate with the emotion offered in the product. After that, semiotic is in accordance with art theory. In this case, advertisement has art elements, namely graphics, images, and photos to make the advertisement to be more attractive. Figure 1 presents a combination of several elements, which are texts (signs), colors, and photo (symbols) that combined nicely to attract the customers. Lastly, semiotics also can be used to determine the hidden meaning not only on advertisement, but also in management, business, communication as well as customers' perspective. Figure 1 has a hidden meaning that convey the movie, which can make the customers relate with the movie from just from looking at the Joker movie poster. The sign of "put on a happy smile" used in the Joker movie poster is the main point that attract consumers because it is relatable (that Joker will smile despite his mental issues and problems).

## 5. Conclusion

The used of semiotic is proven to be effective in marketing. It is because signs and symbols in semiotic helps companies to attract customers by utilizing emotional and rational system in semiotic marketing. The signs and symbols used in Figure 1 is successful in conveying its message so that the customers' subconscious and conscious mind can interact. Other than that, each signs and symbols that used in the Joker movie poster are portrayed nicely, which resulted to the increase of ticket sales. Therefore, companies need to pay more attention in making a movie poster according to semiotic marketing because it could help in gaining a larger audience as well as ticket sales.

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