Aspects of Semiotics in Contemporary Design: A Case Study on Dice Brand

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Abstract—The aim of the research is to understand the aspects of semiotics in contemporary designs by redesigning an Omani donut brand with localized cultural identity. To do so, visual identity samples of Dice brand of donuts in Oman has been selected to be a case study. This study conducted based on semiotic theory by using mixed method research tools which are: documentation analysis, interview and survey. The literature review concentrates on key areas of semiotics in visual elements used in the brand designs. Also, it spotlights on the categories of semiotics in visual design. In addition, this research explores the visual cues in brand identity. The objectives of the research are to investigate the aspects of semiotics in providing meaning to visual cues and to identify visual cues for each visual element. It is hoped that this study will have the contribution to a better understanding of the different ways of using semiotics in contemporary designs. Moreover, this research can be a reference for further studies in understanding and explaining current and future design trends. Future research can also focus on how brand-related signs are perceived by consumers.

Keywords—Brands, semiotics, visual arts, visual communication.

I. INTRODUCTION

HUMAN communication, in its widest sense, involves the use of signs to share information and to express oneself. Communication refers to the act of conveying intended meanings from one entity or group to another through the use of a mutually shared set of signs and semiotic rules. To communicate, humans use signs which can take the form of words, images, speech sounds, objects, etc. When humans imbue signs with meaning, they become meaningful because they stand for something [1]. However, research suggests that human is far better at learning and remembering content he has seen in pictures than as text [2]. Therefore, in many cases, visual communication methods are what people have become focused on in many of their affairs, or in other words, in most of them.

Visual communication is achieved by manipulating visible signs to create designed messages. Creating messages is far more complicated than the sentiment of this sentence suggests. To create an effective visual message, one must first learn a great deal about signs and signifiers [3]. Silvia Klettner, a researcher at Vienna University of Technology mentioned in her study that "In this regard, in his famous work *Semiology of Graphics*, Jacques Bertin stresses that visual variables (i.e., shape, color, hue, size, texture, and orientation) must be carefully selected in a way corresponds with the information they represent" [1]. With the diversity and expansion of visual variables, it became necessary to choose the appropriate ones to create the message and then convey it so that it appears to the target audience as required.

One of the composite forms of communication is advertising. As it is known, advertisements usually represent many things such as; lifestyles, relationships, values, and cultural norms. Hence, advertisements take the viewer into enormous world of imaginary. Visual imagery has a role in attracting attention, pointing out product features and benefits, and also establishing visual identity [4]. Advertising that uses visual design elements to subtly highlight the characteristics of the subject being promoted usually has an effect on viewers' perceptions. Advertisers aim to increase audience focus and message retention [5]. Symbolic advertisement or design is one of the contemporary languages which can translate the meaning of images in a way that pushes people to find the meaning even of it is various theoretical vocabulary that can be found in its different elements.

One of the most important tools to use in visual communications is visual cue, which is defined as a signal that our brain focuses on out of everything that crosses our visual path [6]. Visual cueing is a powerful tool for use in any type of visual communication. For example, it can be used to direct the attention to which visual element to focus on or even provide meaning to these elements and how to engage with them.

II. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Due to the reliance on visual advertising to convey the general image about a specific product, and because the methods of transporting them have become more diverse and spacious, we find that contemporary design needs qualitative and quantitative analysis and study to reach the most important visual factors that help to convey the message in an uncomplicated way. By the way, lack of localize identity about fast food brand among Arab countries is one of the problems that this study is trying to investigate and then to come out with design solutions. Dice brand logo and packaging designs have been chosen to investigate in this field of study. Fig. 1 shows samples of some of Dice brand visual identities.

The reason for choosing Dice brand is that it is trendy in its designs. What is more, it is totally relaying on the visual elements to reach to the customer, the thing that its visual identity is updated regularly. In addition, it has a huge number of audience in Instagram platform which reached to more than 240,000 followers. The previous points would help to discover

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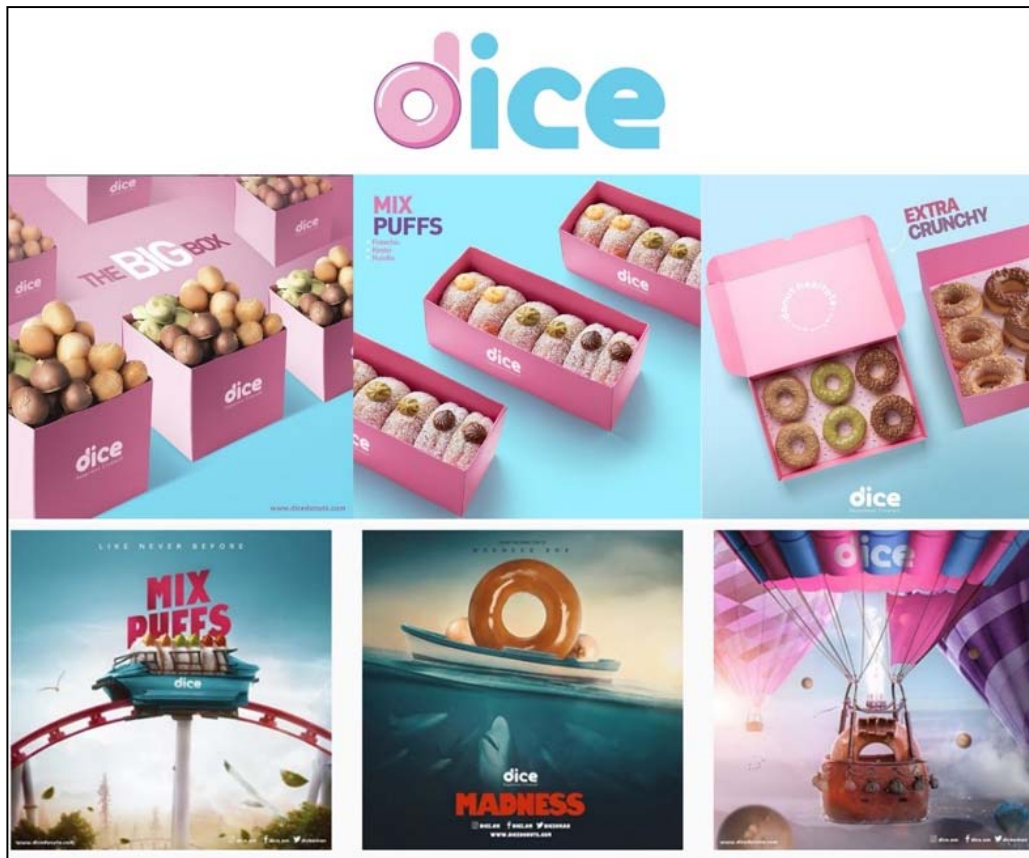the aspects of semiotics as the study is about a contemporary direction in design.

Fig. 1 Dice brand visual identity design samples

A. Research Questions

1- How do the different aspects of semiotics define the meanings of visual cues?
2- How do the visual elements communicate the brand identity?

B. Objectives of the Study

1. To investigate the aspects of semiotics in providing meaning to visual cues.
2. To identify visual cues for each visual element.

C. Significance of the Study

This study emphasizes on semiotics on contemporary design, which provides an outlook on how symbols play an important role on representing a message with the contents of the visual identity itself. Moreover, one of the main objectives of the study is to understand how different usage of symbols and signs in design leads to different interpretations of the meaning of visual cues. Hence, Dice brand was chosen to offer a better understanding of the function or the role of semiotics in conveying the message. What is more, the document analysis in this study will be a way to a better understanding of fast food market in Oman. The analysis of this study may be applicable in further studies of similar field of the research. The given data are not affiliated with design studies only, but rather marketers can refer to it to measure the customer's response and interaction with these signs and symbols and thus recognizing their impact on buying and selling process. Fig. 2 shows the framework of this study.
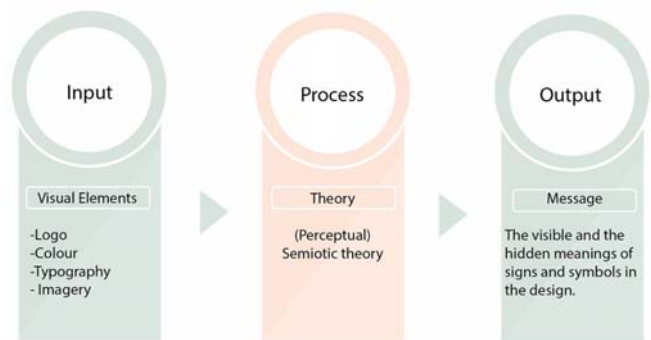

Fig. 2 Framework of the study

III. METHODOLOGY

Due to the nature of the research which requires capturing information at personal level, and according to one of the research aims which tend to investigate how the different

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aspects of semiotics define the meanings of visual cues, research method that has implemented in this research is a mixed method. The insights gained from the interviews which give ideas of what visual element would be the most attractive and understandable by the respondents, and a direction for quantitative research approaches to test how much the visual elements communicate the brand identity. "Quantitative data collection and analysis are then used to test hypotheses and determine a mechanism for the issues uncovered by the initial qualitative methods" [7]. Although it is frequently simpler to describe quantitative results, it is crucial to give qualitative information a voice in the interpretation of research findings because it is about understanding human experience.

Two of the main factors which influence the choice of research approach are; the researcher's personal experience and the study's audience [8]. In particular, the details of research design for the current study are illustrated in Fig. 3.

The data collection of this study has been conducted in Muscat, the capital city of Oman as Dice brand of donuts is located there. However, Addakiliya, Albatinah and Al Sharqiya regions are also included in the study as Dice brand has delivery to those regions. Data were collected from consumers of both genders between the ages of 18 and 55. The consumers with different educational levels were required to respond starting from the high school to PhD level. The study has targeted people who consume fast food in general and donuts in specific.
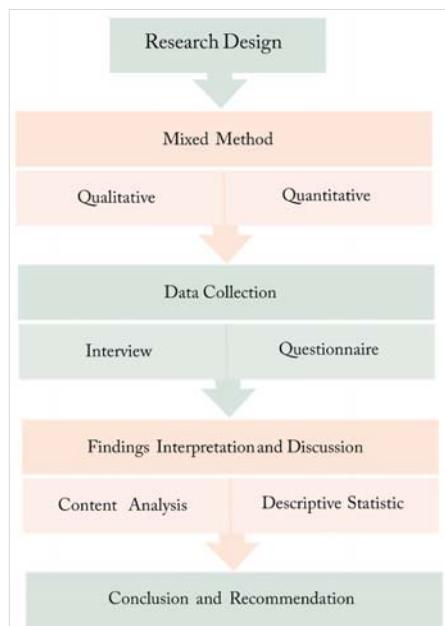

Fig. 3 Research Design

Fig. 3 shows the research design of this study. The mixed method was used by administrating documentation analysis, semi-structured interview and a questionnaire as research instruments in order to collect qualitative and quantitative data respectively. The data were analyzed at the same time using descriptive statistics for the quantitative data and content analysis for the qualitative data. This study was conducted in

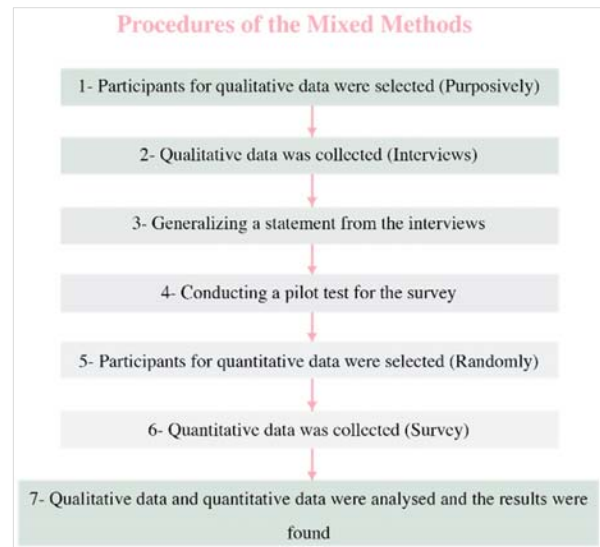one phase. Fig. 4 shows the steps taken for the study as a mixed method.

Fig. 4 Procedures of the mixed methods

IV. FINDINGS

The main findings of the study, from the document analysis, interviews and the survey are as following:

- There is a close relationship between visual design and semiotics, as the design is based on the principle of creating visual signs, semiotic is based on the study of signs and how to use those signs in effective human communication.
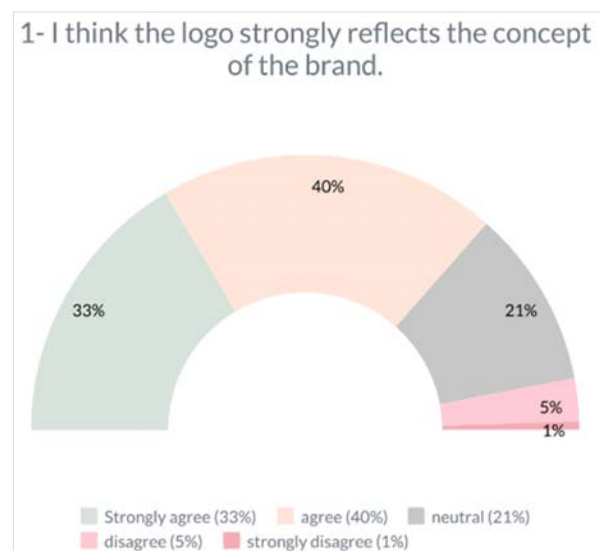

Fig. 5 The results of the first question in the research questionnaire

- About 73% of the respondents agreed that the logo strongly reflects the brand. The high percentage of agreement indicates the strong and obvious role of the logo in representing the concept and the identity of the brand. The logo makes a strong first impression about the brand and it is the foundation of brand identity. Your brand can be

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expressed through a logo without actually saying anything [9].

- As for the semiotics in the elements and their visual cues, it was found that specific colors are widely accepted among the public for their use in the logo and packaging of fast-food brands, especially that 50% from the respondents strongly agreed with that they like the colors of Dice logo which are pink and blue.

- The customer can guess and feel the meaning and the impressions that the colors left on them, for instance about 39% of the respondents agreed that pink color in the logo represent sugar and spice. According to a previous study by Bourn [10] "Pink is a delicate color that means sweet, it represents sugar and spice". Pink is often used in logos for sweet items like ice cream and donuts since it is connected with sweetness in logo design. Pink is seen as a "fun" color as well, and can evoke a sense of playfulness. If you sell food products, they are likely very sweet [11]. In addition, from soft millennial pink to neon magenta, pink can give a brand a modern, youthful, luxurious look [12].
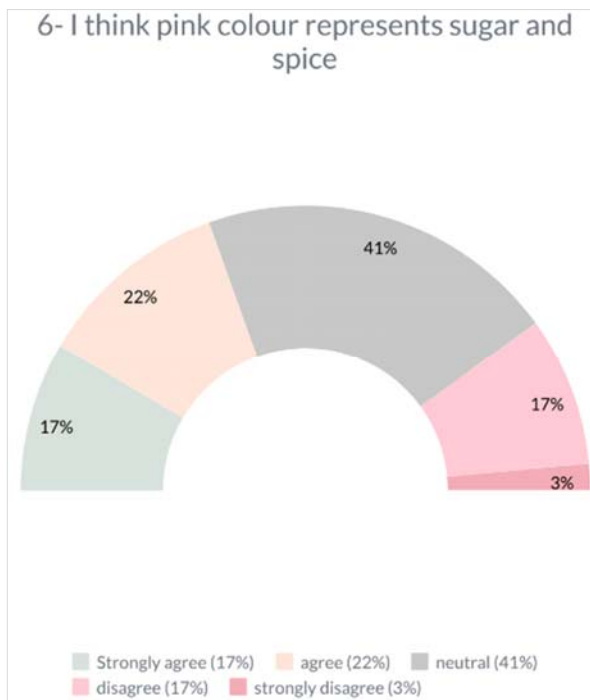

Fig. 6 The results of the sixth question in the research questionnaire

- The respondents were comfortable with Sans Serif typefaces which expresses modernity. Different fonts are associated with different meanings because of the use of the fonts in particular contexts and their association to natural shapes and forms [13]. The impression of Sans Serif font is modern, contemporary, and efficient [14]. Beyond what the words say, the scale, font, and arrangement of the text impact the visual identity.

- Among the respondents, 58% disagreed with adding one more color to the logo and it is the highest percentage for this statement. As minimalism is trendy, people understand

that less is more in many times and situations and many resources supported this rule. According to Harris [15], there are several compelling reasons why "less is more" logo design is preferred. Cleaner, less cluttered logos are more versatile and perform better across the wide range of platforms that modern logos must operate on. In fact, 95% of brands use no more than two colors in their logo, with the remaining 5% using three or more [16].

- Brand identity is a set of visual components that represents ideas, values, feelings and meanings. When choosing the logo, color palette, typography and imagery for the brand, that means it is also about selecting the emotions and associations to be evoked from the customer. Part of building the brand is learning to convey the personality and values of the business through the visual elements aligned for the business.
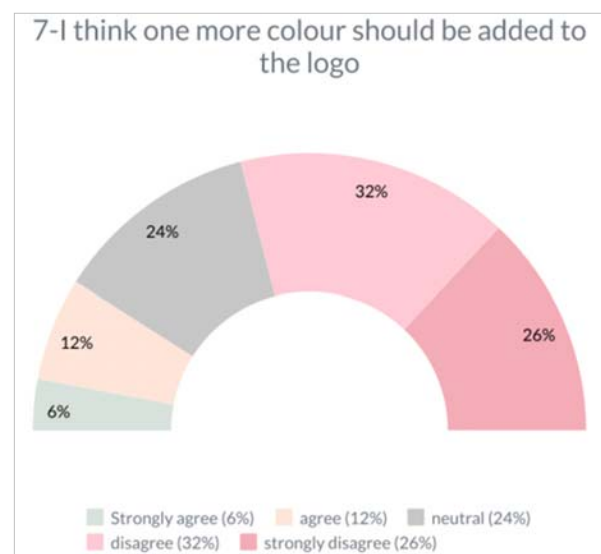

Fig. 7 The results of seventh question in the research questionnaire

- Visual components in design consist of signs, meanings and codes and these are the aspects of semiotics in design. They are what define the meanings of visual cues, because each visual element has a meaning. The meanings of visual elements are defined according to culture or by accepting the visual qualities of the element and also by referring to famous brands' connotations.

V. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to find the aspects of semiotics in contemporary design and advertisements through (1) investigating the aspects of semiotics in providing meaning to visual cues and (2) identifying visual cues for each visual element. Subsequent to the analysis and interpretations of the findings of the content analysis, interviews and survey, the following conclusions were derived:

1. The most effective and fast way to understand a brand is to resort to its visuals. This study demonstrates that the use of semiotics in visual brand identity to promoting advertised messages is an ideal tool for reaching large numbers of

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audience.

2. The future belongs to the visual; images are more effective and memorable, they easily draw attention, and they help people understand, process, and retain the information more quickly. Moreover, the image increases the value of the products and promote economic growth by increasing demand.

3. The strong relationship between the visual elements and the meaning is the key factor to convey a clear message. It is important for the symbols used in the design to fit the context in which a given product is advertised so that the viewer can understand the message and accept the product.

Today's world is a competitive market. The semiotic analysis of logos and packaging serves to explain the benefits of the communicative optimization of graphic symbols. The signs make thinking and communication flexible. However, visual communication designs aim to gain interest, inspire expectations, and motivate people to respond to communication messages by communicating a beneficial impact on consumers' perceptions. The focus of design in general is not necessarily on the product and its quality, but rather on how its brand and brand image can fulfil the vision and meaning that potential customers are looking for.

VI. DESIGN DECISION

Through the analysis of the data obtained from the documents, the interview, and the questionnaire, the most important aspects of semiotics in contemporary design were reached. Hence, decisions were made to design the visual identity of a potential brand of the same type of product, which is donut. The difference here is to design a new local/Omani brand with international specifications. The name of the new brand was changed to an Arabic word helu, which means sweet. Omani landmarks, such as Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque, Aljalali fort and more are the inspiration in the product packaging illustrations. Also, the Omani character in the traditional Omani outfit is presenting the product.

In this project, it has been chosen to add part of the technology in the product designs which is experienced by our current age to be closer to the user. Using AR in products increases the consumer's desire to experience the product and technology at the same time. Augmented Reality (AR) is the utilization of information in real-time that incorporates text, graphics, audio, and other virtual additions with physical items [17]. With the rise of data collection and analysis, one of the main goals of augmented reality is to highlight specific characteristics of the physical world, increase understanding of these characteristics, and obtain intelligent and accessible information that can be applied to real-world application [18]. The technology is used by applying Augmented Reality technology to the packaging design to introduce the visual symbols to the user in a simplified way. Fig. 8 represents the design decisions of potential donut brand "helu".

A. Prototype

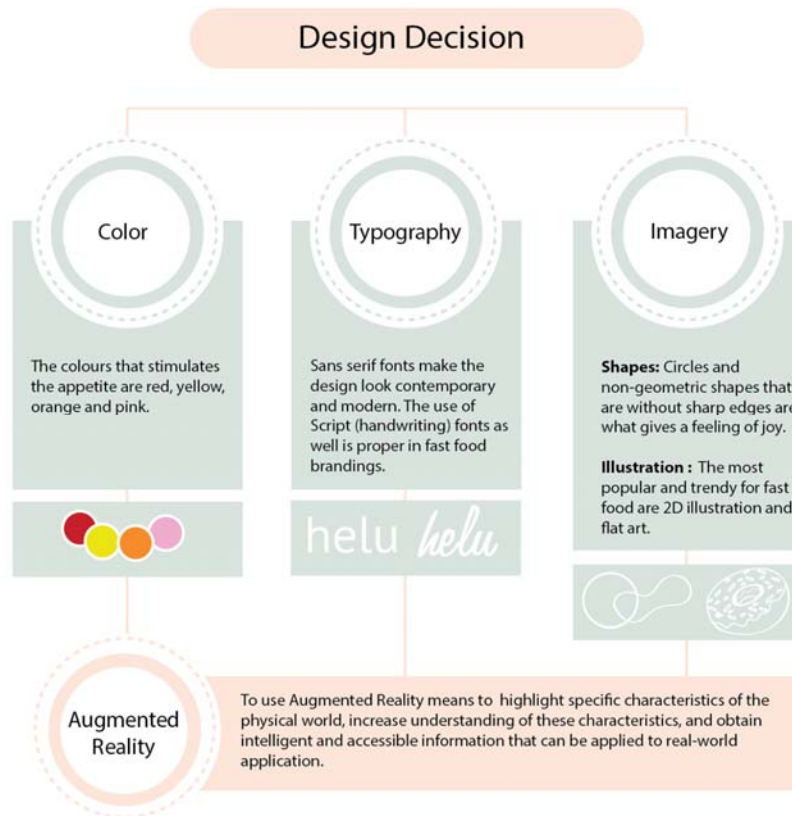Fig. 9 shows a poster design of helu logo and package with instructions, (see Appendix A for more details).

Fig. 8 Infographic of design decision for the logo and the package of helu brand

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Fig. 9 Poster design of helu logo and package

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Fig. 10 helu logo and package

APPENDICES

Appendix A

This appendix shows the visual elements which are on the package, and they are: helu logo, QR code, designs to be scanned (logo and package illustrations) and AR instructions.

Fig. 11 helu logo, package face illustrations, AR using instructions and QR code to be scanned

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