

A Semiotic Analysis of Symbolism and Persuasion as Communication Strategies on Some Educational Billboards in Buea-Cameroon

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Abstract

For many semioticians and cultural critics, it is always difficult to decode the meanings of billboard texts and symbols due to cultural differences. This paper investigates the texts, symbols and persuasive elements on some educational billboards in Buea-Cameroon, with a view to determining the meanings they communicate. The paper employs the semiotic theory of De Saussure and Barthes' theory of myth to highlight the meaning which educational billboards communicate through persuasion and symbolism to lure potential clients to patronize the schools. From a cultural perspective, critics would question the aesthetic aspects of the symbols and texts based on their values. However, semiotics enquires into the way meaning is created by texts and symbols and not simply investigating what the meaning is. In terms of method, fifteen (15) educational billboards were subjected to qualitative analysis using the descriptive method. The findings revealed four semiotic elements viz: textual, plastic arts, iconic, linguistic and contextual. On the textual elements, we discovered that font size, font type and colour are given prominence. Plastic arts consist of construction through shapes, spatial composition, and texture. Iconic elements were revealed by pictures of kids and students on billboards. Linguistic features recognized metaphors and alliteration that couched the meaning of the words graphically inscribed on billboards. Contextual features were represented through symbolic messages silently being passed across based on the contemporary needs of the public. Though persuasive language and connotative symbols are deployed on billboards to project the school's reputation, one still requires basic knowledge of culturally

oriented symbols to navigate through any sociolinguistic landscape.

Keywords

Semiotics, Persuasion, Symbolism, Educational Billboards, Communication, Buea-Cameroon

1. Introduction

It is always difficult to decode the meanings of some billboard texts and signs due to cultural differences because billboard designers face ideological constraints of the target culture that has different values from the source culture (Kappe, 2012). This becomes more complicated and problematic with ideologies, norms and persuasions that are represented through texts and symbols that cut across different cultures. According to Barthes (1972), billboards contain verbal and non-verbal signs. Verbal signs refer to textual features as the name or a slogan of a product, people, infrastructure, persuasion, and sentences. Non-verbal signs are visual images with deep meaning like colour, animation or music, which are meant to support the verbal signs to be an interesting package of the advertisement (Barthes, 1972).

Educational billboards are a form of outdoor advertising and communication that makes the school famous and more attractive to potential clients. Educational billboards are visible representations of languages, slogans, signs and images that communicate meanings and intentions to the public. Such billboards are placed on buildings or streets to give documentations of the physical environment (Pütz, 2020). Billboard messages target road users who are expected to decode them at a glance (Nnamdi-Eruchalu, 2015). Educational billboard texts and symbols persuade potential clients to patronize the school and what it offers. They are made interesting, appealing, and creative to fill the readers' desire. Though they promote products, there are certain messages and symbols that designers intend to communicate to the readers that they may not easily understand or meanings which are difficult to decode. This applies to persuasive texts and symbols on educational billboards in Buea-Cameroon.

Buea municipality refers to a small city situated at an elevation of 3000 feet (900 metres) above sea level and at the southeast slope of Mount Cameroon. Buea is the headquarters of Buea Subdivision and Southwest region of Cameroon. Buea was once the capital of German Kamerun and former West Cameroon (Mbah, 2016). Due to continuous movements for educational, trade and touristic reasons, Buea has become heterogeneous and cosmopolitan. Buea is noted for its legendary hospitality. It is the seat of the first Anglo-Saxon University and the hub of many nursery, primary, secondary, and tertiary educational institutions represented by outstanding billboards that advertise what each institution offers to the public. This paper is limited to Buea municipality to serve as a starting point to analyse semiotics and linguistic features on billboards in

Cameroon.

Hence, visual images, signs, and symbols play a key role as they speak more than words and are the first to attract the attention of consumers. Most educational billboards in Buea are not bilingual due to its Anglo-Saxon characteristic. Designers search for texts and visual images suitable for the Anglophone audience and for their cultural setting. Thus, billboards must be adapted to sociolinguistic and cultural contexts because tastes and fashions change, and the advertiser must change his language to be relevant to the consumers (Oni & Bulus, 2020). From a cultural perspective, critics question the aesthetic aspects of symbols and texts based on their values. However, semiotics enquires into the way meaning is created by symbols and texts and not simply investigating what the meaning is.

Verene (1966) argues that in Cassirer's view of myth and symbol, representation through billboard signs expresses human feelings, looks for knowledge and creates something persuasive. However, not all viewers understand the messages on billboards. Many people have difficulties interpreting the meanings of symbols across cultures to unclear or hidden messages. Thus, billboard designers use signs and symbols as communication strategies to express the meaning within sociolinguistic or cultural contexts. Thus, symbols are successful when they are attractive, catchy, and persuasive, to gain the customer's attention, promote, and represent the business and bring benefits to it. When the billboard text fails to convey the intended meaning, the sign persuades the audience and creates clarity for the text that identifies the brand (Hogan, 2009).

Language communicates useful information and impacts behaviour and decision-making. Advertising is an impersonal communication about products, services, or ideas through various media. Such form of communication is usually persuasive (Bovee & Arens, 1994). It informs potential consumers about products, their benefits, and utilities and persuades them to purchase them (Kannan & Tyagi, 2013). So, persuasiveness is pivotal in educational billboard advertising. Persuasion is a symbolic process where communicators convince people to change their attitudes about messages and cultural signs conveyed through language. Visual content and design are essential, yet only language identifies a product and makes us remember it (Oni & Bulus, 2020).

The main problem of this paper is that within the sociocultural and multilingual context of Cameroon, it is challenging to convey persuasion and symbolism across cultures. In dealing with culturally oriented symbols, ideological, axiological, and normative constraints, pose a problem to users of billboards. Thus, adequate knowledge of texts and symbols from local and foreign cultures, is required to navigate through the Cameroon sociocultural and linguistic landscape. In most cases, such nonverbal and semiotic signs remain untranslated in order not to distort the original meaning they connote in their source cultures. The translator must navigate through the iconic dimension of language and move beyond grammatical norms to get into dialogue with verbal and nonverbal signs since there is a continuous transition from one cultural text to another. Con-

temporary communication is based exclusively on multimodal texts. Sometimes there are arbitrary and vocal symbols that social and cultural groups manipulate and employ to communicate issues, ideas, emotions, and desires. For many semioticians and cultural critics, it is difficult to decode the meanings of billboard texts and symbols due to cultural differences. For Packard (2007), advertising is a hidden persuasion that builds on people's conscious thoughts and awareness, by underlying the hidden motivations of consumers. The question is: can symbolism and persuasion serve both semiotic and communication purposes on educational billboards?

In employing Roland Barthes's (1972) theory of myth and Ferdinand De Saussure's theory of semiology, this paper examines some educational billboards in the Buea municipality with a view to identifying the hidden meaning of the texts and symbols and their ideological implications. Through this, educational billboards may reveal semiotic eye-catching persuasive texts and symbols that project a good image of the schools.

In terms of methodology, the data for this paper compose fifteen (15) educational billboards purposively selected from nursery, primary, secondary and tertiary institutions in the Buea Municipality of Cameroon. These billboards were chosen because they were so outstanding in their graphics designs, catchy colours, icons, and textual elements displayed on them. Each billboard extract was coded BBE with a serial number. From the data collected, the colours, textuality (font size, types), shapes and other graphic features were subjected to descriptive qualitative analysis and discussed as they relate to available literature on educational billboards.

Thus, the main objective of this paper is to do a semiotic analysis of the texts, symbols and persuasive elements on some educational billboards in Buea-Cameroon, with a view to determining the meanings they communicate. After discussing related conceptual, theoretical and empirical data on the topic, the paper presents and analyses educational billboards categorized under persuasive textual and colourful elements, plastic arts based on shapes and spatial composition, iconic features gleaned from the photos on the billboards, linguistic elements through metaphors and alliteration and context represented by contemporary needs of the public. The paper ends with a discussion on the findings and the conclusion.

2. Literature Review

Here, we examine semiotic features on billboards, and the empirical and theoretical reviews provided by other scholars on symbolism, persuasion, and semiotics.

2.1. Semiotic Features on Educational Billboards

Najafian and Dabaghi (2002) define semiotics as the study of signs and symbols that influence communicative behaviour through language and gestures. Signs are physical and perceivable by our senses. They depend on the recognition giv-

en by their users. A sign is only a given relevant meaning by a particular people, culture, attitudes, and emotions (Fiske, 1992). Semiotics, symbolism, and persuasion are key elements in mastering educational billboard communication. Semiotics enables us to understand the arrays of hidden meanings behind signs and symbols whose form can be called signification. Semioticians focus their attention on what an advertising feature means and how it generates meaning (Beasley & Danesi, 2002).

Semioticians examine the tools used to persuade and communicate the denotative and connotative meaning of the symbols. Everything we do sends innumerable messages about us in a variety of codes like music, gestures, foods, rituals, books, movies, or advertisements. Yet, we seldom realize the difficulty in explaining how the rules on which they operate can bring meaning to our consciousness and the target culture. A signification on a billboard refers to the set of meanings generated for a product by various signifiers (brand, logo, ad texts) with implicit signifieds relating to personality, lifestyle, and desires (Beasley & Danesi, 2002).

A billboard advert is interpreted at two levels: surface level and underlying level. The surface level involves the use of specific types of signs and symbols that can create a reputation for the product (images, colours, words) where the concealed meaning of the text lies (Beasley & Danesi, 2002). The surface level is the denotative and the underlying level is the connotative.

The interpretation of signs and symbols depends on the environment of the people who use them. Billboard designers and translators must understand that people may interpret texts and symbols differently. Their persuasion varies from person to person, culture to culture, and from place to place. Hence, they face challenges in conveying persuasive texts and symbols across cultures. For Chandler (2017), the problem of meaning stems from the fact that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary and conventional. Put otherwise, symbols can mean anything people agree on, and can mean different things to different people at different times and places. A billboard designer must ensure that consumers clearly perceive the intention behind texts, signs, and symbols by choosing semiotic features that are appropriate for the target culture and ideology. Different visual symbols must be in synergy with texts (Hogan, 2009).

Visual elements convey cultural values and stereotypes. Sometimes, clear indexical, persuasive, and symbolic relationships can be recognized. For instance, cultures have different high modality colours that may take up political, social, or commercial indexical values that are relevant in one community only (Torelli, 2010). Visual elements carry many connotations as they portray what the user will look like when using a given product. They reflect the images of the consumers who use the products. The higher the number of connotative chains generated, the greater the likelihood that the product will appeal to consumers (Beasley & Danesi, 2002). If consumers cherish what is portrayed through visual elements, they will patronize the product. Educational billboards contain inhe-

rent qualities and attributes of the products and the way they can make these properties mean something to the audience. Understanding any billboard message depends on the user's ability to integrate the multi-semiotic components into a complete whole (Kappe, 2012).

Images and icons are graphically presented on educational billboards. For Eco (1992), the code of graphics (shapes, special marks, lines, fonts) contributes to the generation of meaning since the graphic conventions acquire a different content based on the environment. Both semioticians and communication experts stress the visual dimension of language. Verbal language can suggest qualities as it appears. Writing is a form of "image-making" which has its own paralinguage because of the "clothing" the copywriter has chosen for it (Goddard, 1998: p. 16).

Symbolism is an essential semiotic feature of billboard communication. Symbols are used to invest things with a representative meaning or to represent something abstract by something concrete. Persuasive and catchy symbols convey the vision to the public and enable consumers to differentiate between products. When symbols portray culture, ideology, and preferences, the people will likely accept the product. When symbols do not fit the context in which a product is advertised, they may be rejected. Hence, billboard designers must know which symbols appeal and persuade the target public. For instance, the Coat of Arms is a national emblem of Cameroon symbolizing political authority (Republic of Cameroon, 1996).

Celebrities are used as symbols with semiotic features. A celebrity with a good reputation is credible to the target market and consumers tend to identify positively with them. For instance, MTN or Orange Cameroon prefers to use Samuel Eto'o Fils, the football star and African *ballon d'or* winner, in communicating their advertisements (Pütz, 2020). The choice of a celebrity depends on the culture of the target audience. A scantily dressed female idol may persuade her western audience but would be offensive to a conservative African community or Muslim country. Consumers construct their self-identity through brand choices (Kappe, 2012).

Colours also play an important role in persuasion because they affect the way consumers perceive billboard advertisements. Colours portray different ideas and meanings in different cultures because they are visible and familiar. In Canada and USA, colours have connotations that carry meaning based on culture-specific undertones. Purple connotes nobility, bravery, law and excess while orange symbolises visibility, refreshing and danger. Brown connotes dullness, boredom, fertility, strength, and poverty while white symbolises cleanliness, purity, and elegance (Ortiz-Sotomayor, 2007). For Packard (2007), red and yellow colours are helpful in creating hypnotic effects. Most advertisers of Saint Valentine's Day use red and pink colours to symbolise love. Black and purple symbolise death and sadness. Blue symbolises trustworthiness while orange connotes freshness and health (Kappe, 2012). Blue colour evokes the easy-going lifestyle, freedom and youthful attractions linked with the blue sky (Schiffman & Kanuk,

2004). The symbolic connotation of a colour depends on the situation in which it is used (Dunn et al., 1990). Colours affect people emotionally and physically. They affect the visibility of an object like yellow and white objects looking larger than the same object of other colours (Kappe, 2012).

Human responses are 12% quicker than usual under red lighting other than the responses some colours may stimulate and most of them hold human-constructed meaning or significance as well (Daniel in Kappe, 2012). Colours on logos increase readers' recognition and create a link between the brand (picture) and the message. Colour is a meaningful constant for sighted people and a powerful psychological tool. In France, red connotes blood, passionate love, lust, and virility while yellow symbolises summer and joy. Blue connotes water, reliability, and trust while green stands for outdoor vegetation. Gold connotes decoration, light, and luxury while orange symbolises the earth (De Bortoli & Ortiz-Sotomayor, 2001). All that appears on educational billboards have semiotic or linguistic significance (Oni & Bulus, 2020).

2.2. Empirical Review

A study by Woodside (1990) on the purchasing power of the audience revealed that billboards cut through the media clutter and increase sales. In Ethiopia, Genreselassie and Bougie's (2018) study discovered that the average consumer is exposed to 40 advertisements a day via media such as radio and television. Yet, many organizations use billboards to attract more customers since there is less competition for their attention. A study by Taylor et al. (2006) revealed that travel-related companies, hotels, and small businesses consider billboards as an important element of their media strategy. A study by Kappe (2012) showed that a misused symbol has negative effects in the target setting. For persuasion to be achieved, symbols should attract consumers. However, symbols on logos often remain unchanged because it is the identity of the brand; it is through these symbols that the brand is recognised.

Lithgow's (1999) study revealed that many drivers discuss billboards with friends, and this helps the communicator to send verbal or non-verbal messages to potential consumers. Also, King and Tinkham (1990) discovered that novel messages are more likely to be remembered. A billboard with a memorable and original message is retained after the campaign ends. The combination of size, colour and illumination, attract attention to a billboard. To effectively communicate a message, the viewer must be able to read the billboard regardless of lighting or weather conditions. An effective poster uses a simple visual and a short headline (Yew, 1990).

Similarly, Ahmad et al. (2016) carried a study that revealed that advertisers use figurative words like rhyme scheme to make their ads more attractive and charming. Nnamdi-Eruchalu's (2015) study concluded that the language of advertisements is not a corrupt usage but a deliberate attempt to use specialised expressions to convey messages within a limited time and space. Some word formations are peculiar to advertising language, since time and space are vital on

billboards. Short and jerky sentences, positive, comparative and superlative degrees and figurative expressions are used to pass information within the shortest medium and with ease. Elaborate texts are not suitable for billboards. Language of advertisements uses literary devices and showcases the dynamism in them (Oni & Bulus, 2020). Solik's (2014) study revealed denotative and connotative stimuli. Billboard communication is a two-way process that contains both connotative and denotative meaning. Phonological features on billboards are generally represented by the frequent appearance of alliteration, end rhyme, rhyme of the beginning and the end, and homograph (Yaghubyan, 2020).

2.3. Theoretical Review

The theoretical review focuses on the theory of myth by Roland Barthes (1972) and Ferdinand De Saussure's (1974) theory of semiology.

Barthes (1972) in his theory of myth depicts methods of decoding messages. Myth is a system of communication and a mode of signification. It is a culture's way of thinking about something, a way of conceptualizing or understanding it. Myth enables semiotists to identify the symbolic interaction of verbal and non-verbal signs and how these signs are interpreted to give connotative meanings. For Fiske (1992: p. 88), myth is the "story by which a culture explains or understands some aspects of reality or nature". In this case, myth is very dynamic and not static.

For Barthes (1972), a sign is a combination of a signifier and a signified. Thus, concrete signs are vehicles of culture and ideology. Myth represents the second order meaning of the signified while connotation is the second order meaning of the signifier. Hence, an advertisement text consists of two messages. The first message includes the level of expression and the level of content. It shows the syntactic relation of signifiers and is called the message of denotation. The second message derives its totality from the singular character of its signified: this signified is the same in all messages: it is the excellence of the product announced (Barthes, 1972).

Denotation refers to the permanent sense of a word devoid of all subjective evaluations. It depicts the literal or obvious meaning of the sign—what people see without association to their culture, ideology, or society. A denoted message bears analogical properties and primary to connotation in the process of signification. Here, a sign has the basic meaning independent of context and subjective interpretations as in connotation (Barthes, 1972). The image of sunrise denotes the beginning of the day and the end of night. Sunrise connotes a new day full of hope and the end of darkness and other shades of interpretations (Oni & Bulus, 2020).

Connotation is an idea added to the main meaning. It is evoked by words and images over what they denote. Connotative signs are either individual or universal. Connotation depicts the interaction between signs and emotions of users and the values of their culture (Fiske, 1992). For Barthes (1972), connotation includes signifiers, signifieds, and what unites them to signification.

Ferdinand De Saussure (1974) in his theory of semiology, argued that language is a system of signs (icon, index, symbol) which have meaning by virtue of their relationships to each other. Each sign comprises a signifier (a word) and a signified (a concept). Each sign has meaning only by virtue of its place in the system and how it is known and shared by its users (Cook, 1996). For De Saussure (1974), language is a socially shared system of signs. The elements in the system have no significance outside it. Hand-written letters have a significance that is purely negative and based exclusively on differences. The same person can write using different symbols but what counts is the value of the symbol. Men are Homo Significans (meaning makers) because they make meanings through creation and interpretation of signs and symbols (Chandler, 2017).

Signs and codes are generated by myth and serve to maintain them. Language does not reflect cultural reality but constructs it. We use language to give meaning to anything that exists in reality or not. This reality according to this paper refers to the public space of educational billboards (Chandler, 2017). As different languages have different words to depict the same objects or concepts based on cultural differences, a specific sign expresses a given signifier. Signs gain meaning from their relationships and contrasts with others (De Saussure, 1974).

De Saussure's (1974) semiology influenced Barthes' (1972) theory of myth when he identified three orders of signification like denotation, connotation and order of myth. For Barthes (1972), denotation refers to the ordinary or literal meaning of signs and connotation refers to associated meaning of signs. The order of myth refers to how signs naturalize the cultural or make dominant cultural and historical values, attitudes, and beliefs which are natural, normal, self-evident, timeless, and obvious. Symbols and texts reveal the meanings that are hidden on billboards. This makes denotation and connotation inseparable. No sign is purely denotative lacking connotation (Chandler, 2017). Connotation makes the text so rich that even within the same culture, individual differences may give it different meanings. For Barthes (1972) a photograph on a billboard can denote and connote at the same time. For Fiske (1992), denotation is what is photographed while connotation is how it is photographed.

3. Corpus Analysis and Semiotic Features

This section focuses on the analysis of the hidden meanings of persuasive texts, symbols and signs on educational billboards in Buea-Cameroon. The texts and symbols are subsumed under semiotic analysis and interpretation. From a semiotic viewpoint, many features are decoded or deconstructed. We focus on textual, plastic arts, iconic, linguistic, and contextual features rich in persuasion, symbolism, connotation, metaphor and alliteration which serve as strategies of communication. Billboards have an impact on meaning production in a specific cultural context. The billboard extracts bear the codes BBE with a serial number. The figures of the fifteen (15) billboards are presented at the end of this paper.

3.1. Persuasive Textual Features as a Tactic of Communication

Persuasive textual features include font size, font type, and colour of the background of the text. The billboard extracts represent the deployment of texts as persuasive and symbolic strategies of communication through the following educational billboards.

Figure 1 below represents Government Technical High School—GTHS (*Lycée Technique*). The key element on this billboard is the textual elements that persuade the audience. The English text is in bold and blue colours and abbreviated in red colours. Blue connotes water, reliability, and trust (De Bortoli & Ortiz-Sotomayor, 2001) and trustworthiness (Kappe, 2012). Red connotes blood, passionate love, lust, and virility. The French version (*Lycee Technique*) is in smaller font size and in black colours. Black connotes death and sadness (Kappe, 2012). Both texts rest on a semi-white background. The motto “discipline, hard-work and success”, appears in white smaller font size on a dark blue surface. White symbolises cleanliness, purity, and elegance (Ortiz-Sotomayor, 2007). The graphic elements serve as an eye catcher and information carrier. The bulb, pipe wrench, saw, blocks, hammer, and laptop are tools that connote hands-on activities as carpentry, building construction, electricity, technology, plumbing, etc. The colours of the Cameroon flag (green, red, yellow) symbolize patriotism and loyalty. The logo carries the initials the college (GTHS). The linguistic code “technical”, is directive and informational. It directs and informs viewers that practical activities take place here.

Figure 2 below represents Salvation Comprehensive Bilingual High School (*College Polyvalent Bilingue du Salut*). On this bilingual billboard, the name of the school is written in red capital letters in English and French. The font size and font types for both texts are the same. The abbreviation of the name is embedded in same font size, font type and red colour. Red connotes blood, passionate love, lust, and virility (De Bortoli & Ortiz-Sotomayor, 2001). The name “salvation” connotes a private Christian school. The address and the different



Figure 1. Government Technical High School—GTHS (*Lycée Technique*).



Figure 2. Salvation comprehensive bilingual high school (*College Polyvalent Bilingue du Salut*).

professional options (day and evening) printed in bold and black sit on an ash background. The college offers technical, commercial, grammar and science education. A tiny black arrow shows the distance from the main road to the college campus. The colour black connotes death and sadness (Kappe, 2012). These textual features convey the graphic elements that draw the attention of the audience to choose Salvation college as opposed to other colleges in town. The lexical term “comprehensive” connotes an inclusive school that does not select its intake based on academic achievement or aptitude as opposed to a selective school where admission is restricted based on academic output.

Figure 3 is the billboard that represents Government High School (*Lycee*) G.H.S. On this bilingual billboard, the English text and the location are indicated in bold black colours and the French text is in bold red colours. As indicated above, red connotes blood, passionate love, lust, and virility (De Bortoli & Ortiz-Sotomayor, 2001). The French text is more pronounced, imposing and embedded in bigger font size. The location of the school is in black and smaller fonts. Black connotes death and sadness (Kappe, 2012). The motto carries lexical items like “peace, solidarity and excellence” which connote a serene environment where team learning takes place to achieve academic excellence. The two red arrows point to the direction of the school. Bold and colourful textual elements draw attention of the audience to this school.

3.2. Plastic Arts as Forms of Symbolism and Persuasion

The plastic arts refer to visuals like painting, sculpture, or film as opposed to written art, music and literature which are represented by shapes, colours, spatial compositions, texture, logos, lighting, format and pagination which are molded or modelled to stand in isolation on billboards. On an emotional level, plastic arts allow billboard designers to improve their self-esteem by perceiving their own work with value. Plastic arts boost their creativity and freedom.

The billboard (**Figure 4**) symbolizes College of Applied Medical Sciences. The name is written in bold fonts size and white colour placed on a blue surface and



Figure 3. Government High School (*Lycee*) G.H.S.

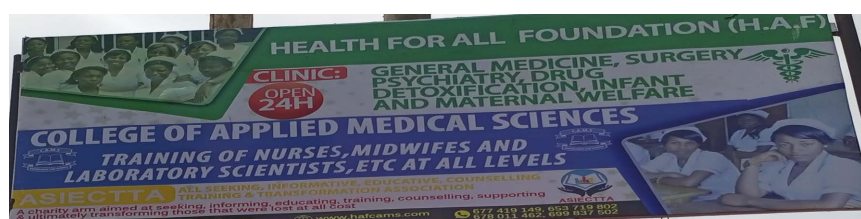


Figure 4. College of applied medical sciences.

connotes that hands-on activities like training of nurses, midwives and laboratory scientists take place there. The picture of female nurses dressed in white gowns and caps and graduating students shows that this institution runs a clinic which is open 24 hours to the public. The logo is a circular opened book held in two hands with the colours of the Cameroon flag-green, red and yellow, connoting loyalty and patriotism. Other texts are placed on blue and white backgrounds. White symbolises cleanliness, purity, and elegance (Ortiz-Sotomayor, 2007) while blue connotes water, reliability, and trust (De Bortoli & Ortiz-Sotomayor, 2001) and trustworthiness (Kappe, 2012). The colour green on this billboard connotes outdoor vegetation (De Bortoli & Ortiz-Sotomayor, 2001). The institution engages in charity and corporate social activities aimed at seeking, informing, educating, training, counseling, supporting and ultimately transforming those that were lost at all costs.

Figure 5 is the billboard of Frankfils Comprehensive College (FCC). The plastic features represent a private secondary school with spatial compositions and texture that are catchy and easily noticeable. The format and pagination fit in a rectangular shaped billboard. The logo has a blue colour with a prominent yellow and red flame. Blue connotes water, reliability, and trust (De Bortoli & Ortiz-Sotomayor, 2001). For Packard (2007), red and yellow colours are helpful in creating hypnotic effects. Yellow also symbolises summer and joy (De Bortoli & Ortiz-Sotomayor, 2001). The logo bears the abbreviation of the school and the motto which is “learning with a vision”, crafted in italics to connote the philosophy of the school. This sign connotes that students focus on future professions. This vision attracts and persuades parents to enroll their children here.

3.3. Iconic Elements as Tools of Symbolism and Persuasion

The iconic or figurative plane is based on the level of recognizing representations of objects and people on billboards. Iconic elements recall the connotative aspects of semiotics where full autonomy is given to the visual register and independent features. Barthes (1972) argues that photos denote what was in front of the camera when the image was captured. But who the image represents and what abstract values are associated with the resultant picture are a matter of connotation. A photo denotes a face, but what it connotes depends on the genre of photography (surveillance, fashion, news, art) and stylistic manipulation of composition and colour. The same face can connote crime, beauty, and super-model. Iconic elements are revealed by pictures of kids and students on billboards.



Figure 5. Frankfils Comprehensive College (FCC).

The billboard (Figure 6) is that of Greenfield Bilingual Nursery and Primary School (GBNPS). This billboard consists of a white frame containing the large headline (title) connoting services like day care, nursery and primary education. The green and red colours project the textual features. The iconic elements of boy and girl with a laptop in hand, connote a co-educational institution and their determination to study with the aid of information and technology tools. The girl has a well braided hair while the boy has low haircut. This symbolic picture signifies that kids are gratified with the available didactic materials. Their smiles connote happiness and satisfaction. These icons signify the beginning of children's adventure in learning. There are pupils on the assembly ground probably for morning devotion. Semiotically, red, green and blue, serve the attention and persuasive catching effect. Blue connotes water, reliability and trust (De Bortoli & Ortiz-Sotomayor, 2001) while green connotes outdoor vegetation (De Bortoli & Ortiz-Sotomayor, 2001). White symbolises cleanliness, purity, and elegance (Ortiz-Sotomayor, 2007) while red connotes blood, passionate love, lust, and virility (De Bortoli & Ortiz-Sotomayor, 2001). The linguistic message "Greenfield" has a role which Barthes (1972) calls "anchorage", referring to the determination of the intended message. The sub-caption "Canadian International School" is catchy and connotes partnership and inspiration from the Canadian education system. The motto "knowledge, virtue, and aspiration" connote moral values and inclusive education through acquisition of cognitive, affective, and psychomotor skills. Semiotically, every graphic feature on this billboard is used as an attention catching persuasive device to enrol kids here.

Figure 7 is the billboard of Remedial Teacher Training College and Remedial Bilingual Comprehensive High School. This billboard represents two institutions whose textual features show they are owned by one proprietor. The catchiest graphic elements are the two icons represented by a boy for secondary school and the girl for the Teacher Training section. It has an associative and similar colour display, with purple, grey, black and dark blue splash. Blue connotes



Figure 6. Greenfield Bilingual Nursery and Primary School (GBNPS).



Figure 7. Remedial teacher training college and remedial bilingual comprehensive high school.

water, reliability, and trust (De Bortoli & Ortiz-Sotomayor, 2001). Black connotes death and sadness (Kappe, 2012), while purple connotes nobility, bravery, law and excess (Ortiz-Sotomayor, 2007). The Teacher Training section is inscribed on bigger font size than the Secondary section. The character of a girl in graduation garb symbolizes positioning in the job market. The inscriptions “Institutions With a Difference” and “A PLACE TO BE” are very catchy and attractive slogans that lure students. There are regular on-campus studies or distant education for Teacher Training and the secondary section offers boarding, day and evening classes. Yet, the figurative name “Remedial” for both schools connotes a philosophy that offers second chances to students. It implies that what the first lesson failed to impact can be remedied by the second chance. Students who fail or who need short-term learning assistance can receive remedial instruction. When challenges in learning are identified, the importance of remedial teaching is realized. Therefore, remedial ensures tailor-made teaching strategies designed to meet and strengthen the unique learning needs of the students.

3.4. Linguistic Features as Symbolic and Persuasive Strategies of Communication

The linguistic feature focuses on the message conveyed and the implication of the figure of the speech identified. It recognizes words graphically inscribed on billboards and register of advertisement whose meanings are not obviously linked to educational parlance.

The billboard **Figure 8** represents Garden of Wisdom International Bilingual Nursery and Primary School. The headline is written boldly in blue and red. Blue connotes water, reliability and trust (De Bortoli & Ortiz-Sotomayor, 2001) and trustworthiness (Kappe, 2012) while red connotes blood, passionate love, lust, and virility (De Bortoli & Ortiz-Sotomayor, 2001). The lexical item “Garden of Wisdom” is a metaphoric figure of speech. Garden and Wisdom are two unrelated words brought together to have common qualities. The name denotes that pupils study in a garden of intelligence or wisdom. Comparing the school to a “garden” boosts the image where kids are nursed in wisdom like plants. The addition of “international” connotatively suggests that pupils have exposure to the international community. The attribute like bilingualism is more attractive. The motto is “education of the total man” which connotes that education focuses on transforming the whole man—the cognitive, psychomotor, and affective elements. Each child is a delicate combination of the physical and spiritual as the focus of learning. Every teacher must know the nature of each child, his strengths, and flaws to harness them to bring out a total person.

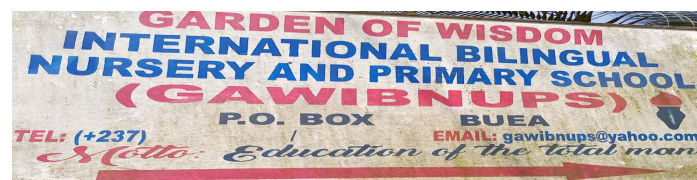


Figure 8. Garden of wisdom international bilingual nursery and primary school.

Figure 9 is the billboard of Summerset Bilingual College (*College Bilingue Summerset*). On this bilingual billboard, there is a mixture of colours like blue, red, black, and orange with bold fonts. The colours red and yellow create hypnotic effects on viewers (Packard, 2007). Black connotes death and sadness (Kappe, 2012) while orange symbolises freshness and health (Kappe, 2012) and the earth (De Bortoli & Ortiz-Sotomayor, 2001). Blue connotes water, reliability, and trust (De Bortoli & Ortiz-Sotomayor, 2001) and trustworthiness (Kappe, 2012) while red connotes blood, passionate love, lust, and virility (De Bortoli & Ortiz-Sotomayor, 2001). The French text is in gold and bold fonts. Gold connotes success, achievement, triumph, royalty, decoration, light and luxury (De Bortoli & Ortiz-Sotomayor, 2001). The lexical element “summerset” depicts an acrobatic feat where the feet roll over the head (forward or backward) and return. As a verb, it means to flip or somersault. The use “summerset” is figurative. It connotes the agility of students in their academic pursuits. The motto is “Education and service to humanity”. This symbolizes that education is meant for the service of the whole human race. General and technical education show their openness to humanity in general.

Figure 10 is the billboard representing Learning Ladder Nursery and Primary School. The texts are inscribed in gold and black colours. Gold is reminiscent of success, achievement, triumph, royalty, decoration, light and luxury (De Bortoli & Ortiz-Sotomayor, 2001) while black connotes sadness and death (Kappe, 2012). Learning Ladder implies that focus on the acquisition of knowledge and skills is through study, experience or being taught. The peculiarity is that the image of a ladder depicts the progress or the different steps through which learning takes place. The ladder symbolizes that leaning progresses as the child climbs from one rung to the next without skipping any step. By implication, there is no double promotion. Each child must take the required years as stipulated by the regulations guiding basic education in Cameroon. Here, the lexical feature of alliteration is used by the repetition of same consonant sound (L) which connotes that the stages in the acquisition of knowledge. The concept of ladder implies that the higher one goes up the rungs of the ladder, the more mastery over different skills. The different levels of the ladder are measured using two indicators: consciousness (awareness) and skill level (competence). These parameters constitute the wood that makes the ladder. The motto is: “The future of Cameroon’s Education. Be a part of it”. For most parents, this school is one of the best in Buea. Semiotically, the ladder connotes the beginning of children’s adventure in learning.



Figure 9. Summerset bilingual college (*College Bilingue Summerset*).

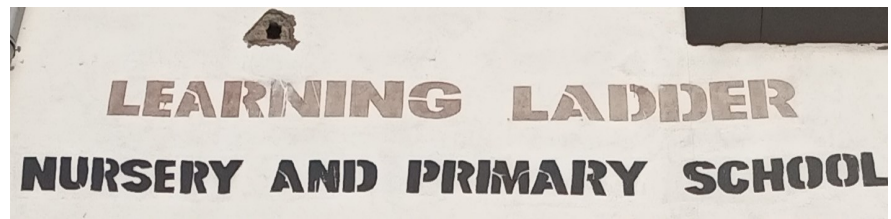


Figure 10. Learning ladder nursery and primary school.

Figure 11 represents Amazing Grace Bilingual Nursery & Primary School (*Ecole Maternelle et Primaire Grace Amazing*). The colourations on this billboard are black and red. Black connotes sadness and death (Kappe, 2012) while red symbolizes blood, passionate love, lust, and virility (De Bortoli & Ortiz-Sotomayor, 2001) “Amazing Grace”, boldly inscribed in red reminds viewers of the popular traditional, religious inspirational song by John Newton (a former enslaver) in 1772 who writes about an immense and amazing grace that “saved a wretch” like him. The proprietor was conscious of its religious background and conversion journey of Newton that led to a tedious and worthy anti-slavery cause. “Amazing Grace” is metaphor connoting that God’s grace will lead all pupils to eternal life in heaven. The name is attractive, persuasive, and catchy as the school seeks to bring pupils, more joy, peace, and tranquillity. As God’s grace builds on nature (their intellectual capacity), hard work and God’s intervention can always lead to good results. It speaks to the heart and soul of parents seeking for faith, forgiveness, redemption, salvation and grace for their children. This name creates a distinctive and imaginative effect on customers. The motto: “Pride in achieving excellence together” connotes collaborative learning where learning tasks take place in a group small enough to ensure that everyone participates or works on separately contributing to a common outcome. From a translation viewpoint, “Amazing Grace” could be rendered into French as *Grâce incroyable* or *grâce étonnante* and not *Grace Amazing*.

Figure 12 is the billboard of Agape Nursery and Primary School. The billboard represents a nursery and primary school. The catchy and attractive headline is written boldly and brightly coloured in blue. Blue connotes water, reliability, and trust (De Bortoli & Ortiz-Sotomayor, 2001). The lexical item “Agape” from the Greek symbolizes the highest form of love or charity. From a Biblical perspective, it is a symbol God’s selfless or unconditional love for humans, as well as the human reciprocal love for God. The transcendent “agape love” is contrasted with eros or erotic love and philia or brotherly love. In naming this school “Agape”, the proprietor employs a metaphor to connoting that within the school environment, unconditional love reigns supreme amongst teachers and pupils. This catchy caption invites everyone to send their kids and wards, because it is there that love conquers all. There is a red arrow pointing to the direction of the school.

Figure 13 represents Excel Higher Institute of Professional Studies (EHIPS). This billboard of a tertiary institution is flooded with dark blue, red and black



Figure 11. Amazing grace bilingual nursery & primary school (*Ecole Maternelle et Primaire Grace Amazing*).



Figure 12. Agape nursery and primary school.



Figure 13. Excel Higher Institute of Professional Studies (EHIPS).

colours inscribed on an ash surface. As seen above, blue connotes water, reliability, and trust (De Bortoli & Ortiz-Sotomayor, 2001) while black symbolizes sadness and death (Kappe, 2012). The school offers courses in Business and Technology. From this crowded billboard, the school offers many courses. The slogan “Excel” is a catchy and persuasive lexical term which connotes an exceptionally good and proficient school. This intransitive verb means to exceed, outdo, outstrip, surpass, or transcend a stated or implied limit or degree. It means that this institute is superior to or surpasses in accomplishment all other tertiary institutes in its environs. It is distinguishable in terms of academic and professional performance.

3.5. Context as Symbolic and Persuasive Strategy of Communication

Context is very essential in interpreting educational billboards and audience’s expectations based on their contemporary needs. Yet, previous knowledge is also needed for contemporary needs of the consumers. The billboard extracts lend credence to the relevance of context that project the acquisition of practical skills as opposed to theoretical knowledge. They fit in the current context whereby pragmatic skills leading to job creation supersede theoretical knowledge that only ends in job seeking. Under this category, we shall analyse two billboards.

Figure 14 symbolises Catholic University Institute of Buea (CUIB). The billboard is flooded in blue colours within the context entrepreneurship services. Blue connotes water, reliability, and trust (De Bortoli & Ortiz-Sotomayor, 2001) and trustworthiness (Kappe, 2012). Blue colour evokes the easy-going lifestyle, freedom and youthful attractions linked with the blue sky (Schiffman & Kanuk, 2004). Entrepreneurship is a contemporary concept that projects the reputation on hands-on activities and prides itself in meeting the job-creation needs of young Cameroonians. The products job creators and not job seekers. There are two logos at both ends indicating that aside conventional teaching and learning, the school provides religious albeit Catholic education. The left circular logo contains the image of Jesus carrying his cross and the other contains two hands joined together in what is depicted as “Economy of Communion”. The university environment gives high regard to Christian teaching and witness. These two visual elements project the vision and mission to train saints and scholars.

Figure 15 is the billboard of Mountain University. This billboard has red graphic representations advertising the school’s activities as driving lessons (*Auto Ecole*), computer training, business studies, transport and logistics. There is a picture of navy or marine officials dressed in white jackets, trousers and berets symbolizing that they are involved in sea transport and logistics. White connotes cleanliness, purity, and elegance (Ortiz-Sotomayor, 2007). The traffic control agent wearing a red beret and a yellow safety jacket. Yellow connotes summer and joy (De Bortoli & Ortiz-Sotomayor, 2001). These uniforms symbolize their professionalism and commitment to the values of loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, esprit de corps, morale, personal excellence, pride, and personal courage. The visual image of a red car symbolizes the context of a practical institutional training potential drivers and transport agents. There is a group of students listening to lectures. Symbolically, learning here is both theoretical and hands-on as represented by the visual images.



Figure 14. Catholic University Institute of Buea (CUIB).

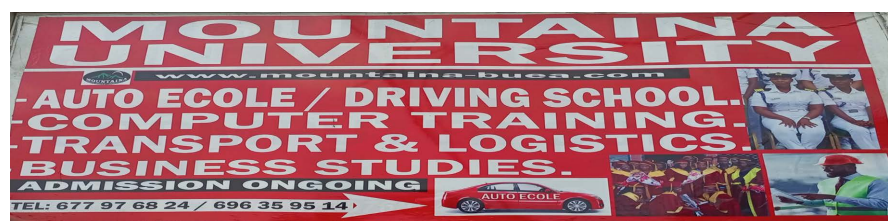


Figure 15. Mountain University.

4. Discussion of Findings

Visual texts, images and graphic elements are important in analysing educational billboards. Every inscription on any billboard in Buea-Cameroon is a product of graphic textual features ranging from colours, fonts size and type, texts, symbols and logos. The attention calling graphic elements used on educational billboards are textual description, plastic arts, iconic elements, linguistic features and the contextual needs of the society.

From the analysis of four billboards (**Figures 1-3**), we discovered that textual elements convey messages via various font types, sizes and bright colours. These bright colours make the billboards to be attention catching. Findings on the impact of bright colours on the audience is corroborated by [Kappe \(2012\)](#) who argued that colours are also persuasive symbols that portray different ideas in different cultures and their meanings are known by consumers. Some colours are visible and familiar. [Dunn et al. \(1990\)](#) validates this by arguing that colours such as red and yellow may create hypnotic effects. For him, such colours have many connotations and therefore can be said to carry meaning. Red and pink colours symbolise love. Black and purple symbolise death and sadness ([Kappe, 2012](#)). The use of colours on educational billboards is further confirmed by [Dunn et al. \(1990\)](#) who noted that the symbolic connotation of a colour depends on the situation in which it is used because colours affect people emotionally and physically. They affect the visibility of an object. Thus, the colours on educational billboard have a semiotic significance.

The study revealed that plastic features on selected billboards (**Figure 4** and **Figure 5**) include visual arts (painting, sculpture, or film) like shapes of logos, format and spatial compositions modelled to stand in isolation. Such signs and symbols represented by paintings connote the hidden emotions of billboard designers and inspire their creativity. The issue of signs and symbols connoting or denoting hidden meanings is corroborated by [De Saussure's \(1974\)](#) semiology that influenced [Barthes \(1972\)](#) to identify three orders of signification like denotation, connotation and order of myth. Referring to ordinary or hidden meanings of signs and symbols, [Barthes \(1972\)](#) argued that denotation refers to the ordinary or literal meaning of signs, while connotation refers to associated meaning of signs while the order of myth refers to how signs naturalize the cultural or how signs make dominant cultural and historical values, attitudes, and beliefs to seem entirely natural, normal or self-evident, timeless, and obvious.

This means that signs and symbols as well as texts can reveal the meanings that are hidden on billboards. Thus, denotation and connotation are somewhat hard to separate in meaning because no sign is purely denotative lacking connotation ([Chandler, 2017](#)). Regarding the connotative signification of signs, it is clear that connotation makes the text so rich that even within the same culture, individual differences may give a text or part of its different meanings.

In this study, we discovered persuasive and symbolic iconic photographs on two selected billboards (**Figure 6** and **Figure 7**). According to [Barthes \(1972\)](#), a

photograph (icon) on a billboard can denote and connote at the same time. To cement this point, [Fiske \(1992\)](#) argued that on a billboard image, denotation is what is photographed while connotation is how it is photographed. This result is also corroborated by [Alaoui \(2016\)](#) who argued that iconicity, symbolism or indexical elements are signs or elements with symbolic meanings that can generate a host of implications by virtue of the awareness to the ambiguity. Individuals do not come prepared with ready-made meanings. Rather, the interpretation of visual images can be initiated by our knowledge and experience which makes them highly subjective and projective. Due to the similarity aspect for icon interpretation and the experience aspect for index interpretation, we may deduce that with visual iconic elements, people are much more on their own, both in learning and interpreting and that makes visual leaning as thought-provoking as verbal learning. That is why [De Saussure \(1974\)](#) argued that language is a system of signs (icon, index, symbol) which have meaning by virtue of their relationships to each other. Each sign comprises a signifier (a word) and a signified (a concept). Each sign has meaning only by virtue of its place in the system and how it is known and shared by its users ([Cook, 1996](#)).

Besides, the linguistic feature encompasses figurative textual features like metaphors and alliteration identified on some billboards ([Figures 8-13](#)). Here, the employment of figurative and symbolic phrases like: Garden of Wisdom, Agape, Excel, Amazing Grace, Remedial, and Learning Ladder, are affixed to the names of the schools to convince and persuade potential customers. They are figurative because such words have no direct relation with an educational environment. This employment of figurative textual features on billboards is validated by [Ahmad et al. \(2016\)](#) who discovered that advertisers use figurative words like rhyme scheme to make their ads more attractive and charming.

This result is further corroborated by [Nnamdi-Eruchalu's \(2015\)](#) who noted that the language of advertisements is not a corrupt usage but a deliberate attempt to use specialised expressions to disseminate messages within a limited time and space. Certain word formations are peculiar to the language of billboard advertising, since time and space are of much importance. Short and jerky sentences and figurative expressions are used to pass information within the shortest medium and with ease. Therefore, elaborate persuasive messages are not suitable for billboard advertisements. Such literary devices showcase the dynamism of language use on billboards ([Oni & Bulus, 2020](#)). The use of alliteration is corroborated by [Toressi \(2010\)](#) who argued that rhetorical devices are used when authors play with sounds through assonance or consonance through the repetition of the same vowel or consonant sounds like alliteration. This is further validated by the assertion that phonological features on billboards are generally represented by the frequent appearance of alliteration, end rhyme, rhyme of the beginning and the end, and homograph ([Yaghubyan, 2020](#)).

The study revealed that context has significant and symbolic messages ([Figure 14](#) and [Figure 15](#)) that are subtly passed across to the public based on their contemporary needs. This is corroborated by [Najafian and Dabaghi \(2002\)](#) who

noted that signs and symbols are elements of communicative behaviour transmitted through language. In this context, such a sign must be given meaning that is relevant to a particular people, their culture, attitudes, and emotions. With symbolic messages subtly passed across, [Beasley and Danesi \(2002\)](#) corroborate that semiotics, symbolism and persuasion are key elements in mastering educational billboard communication as they enable us to understand the arrays of hidden meanings behind signs and symbols. Everything we do in advertisements sends innumerable messages through a variety of cultural codes.

However, [Kappe \(2012\)](#) argued that a misused symbol may have negative effects in the target setting. And that is why for persuasion to be achieved, symbols should attract consumers, but the symbols contained on logos often remain unchanged because it is the identity of the brand; it is through these symbols that the brand is recognised.

5. Conclusion

This paper set out to examine fifteen (15) educational billboards in Buea-Cameroon with a view to identifying the meaning of the texts and symbols and their ideological implications. The findings revealed that these educational billboards have eye catching elements projected through textual description, plastic arts, iconic elements, linguistic features, and context. Most schools use these communicative strategies to project their image and reputation. Thus, meanings of persuasive texts and symbols are denotatively and connotatively represented by semiotic features like font size, font type, colour, icons, and shapes.

Graphic features offer more than mere attention catching roles. Billboards are symbolic representations of the schools to the public whose graphic elements communicate many services to the audience. Apart from textual features, persuasive signs and symbols can be oriented and deployed to project the school's reputation and its ideological stance. Thus, symbolism and persuasion serve both semiotic and communication purposes on educational billboards. Yet within sociocultural and multilingual contexts, it remains challenging to convey persuasion and symbolism across cultures due to ideological, axiological, and normative constraints.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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