Semiotic Analysis of Understanding Violence Signs in Videogame Advertising Posters

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Abstract
In this article the authors analyzed the understanding of violence signs in posters of videogames. For doing so two groups consisting of adults and children were analyzed to show the difference in their understanding of violence signs. According to previous researches, without media literacy children are more attracted to advertising and violence in videogames is one of the main issues in today's life. The aim of this research was to analyze signs that makes violence in videogames posters and the results of this research shows that adults understanding of violence signs differs to the understanding of violence from the children. Also definitions of violence are different in both adults and children.

Keywords: Semiotic, Genre theory, Violence signs, Videogame poster

Introduction: The issue of violence in videogame posters
For the purpose of this article, having a short introduction of the importance of analyzing the violence in videogames is necessary specially in the posters of videogames because it’s the first image of the game and people, including children and adult, usually decide to buy and play the videogame based on the images. According to Battaglini and Dougherty (2014) all kind of media such as radio, TV and printed material like posters is being viewed by many people and some media campaigns is showing some risky health behaviors such as tobacco and kinds of behaviors that contribute to some illnesses, and violence.

As technology has sustained to grow in the modern age, videogames have raised as a new media (Onorato, 2013; Ferguson, 2010; Pyle, 2002.). Violence videogames is the new kid of media that came in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Aderson, et al., 2010). These violence videogames, like violence movies, have also appeared violence at the frontline of the children and makes them more violence (Caron, 2001). Children are communicating with videogames because it allows them to control the horrible violence that arises (Onorato, 2013). Base on Walsh’s research (2001) “Studies measuring cognitive responses to playing violent videogames (compared with cognitive responses to non-violent games) have shown that violent games increase aggressive thoughts. These findings have been found for males and females, children and adults, and in experimental and correlational studies” (n. p.). This could rise the question that whether rules and regulation is a need to control children from this violence source because according to Dunkelberger (2011, p.1659) in United State, “Numerous states and political subdivisions [such as California, Illinois, Louisiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Oklahoma, Washington, the city of Indianapolis, and St. Louis County, Missouri] have passed legislation seeking to restrict minors’ access to restrict minors’ access to violent video games.” Based on many researches done, in almost all countries, people with different ages are affects by violent media, particularly in TV programs, films, and also videogames (e.g., Comstock & Scharrer, 2007; Gentile, 2003; Gentile, Saleem, and Anderson, 2007; Kirsh, 2006; Singer and Singer, 2001). The possibility of negative effects of violence by media have been examined
for around sixty years, and significant results has been gotten on numerous of the most key issues on this importance (Anderson, et al., 2010).

The main question of this article is whether children (between 6 to 12 years old) and their parents have the same perception about violence in videogame poster or not? Because, although in some countries violent videogames are band for children but they still have access to them and parents can control their children to not to play violent games. According to Dupon (2015) 92% of the children between the age 6 to 15 plays videogames and also 3-5% of all people addicted to videogames, and so, “Parents need to keep control of gaming from a young age rather than trying to recover control when children are older. Often there is an underlying mental health problem when young people are gaming excessively. They need mental health support” (www.wcc.vic.edu.au).

After these explanation about the videogames, the authors of this article focused on the videogame posters because the poster is the first picture that children and parents may see and although some posters shows the violence’s elements but in some posters there is no violence shown. For example, the poster of videogame called Minecraft, which is a popular videogame on the grounds, is not showing any kind of violence in the poster, as it is clear in figure 1.

Figure 1: Minecraft’s Poster

But the ministry of Children Services General Directorate wanted the legal process to ban the game to be started, according to daily Habertürk. “Although the game can be seen as encouraging creativity in children by letting them build houses, farmlands and bridges, mobs [hostile creatures] must be killed in order to protect these structures. In short, the game is based on violence,” Habertürk quoted the report as saying (www.hurriyetdailynews.com).

Based on this introduction the authors focused on the semiotic analysis of understanding violence signs in videogame posters and for doing so understanding of violence signs in
videogame posters is divided into three main category which are: the appearance of the characters in posters, representation of violence tools in posters such as gun, sword, and etc., and also the result of violence in posters like blood, corps, and etc.

After given a short review of literature based on Peirce’s triangulation, causal signs, theory of mind and genre theory of communication and media studies, qualitative research method were selected to have a wider information about the understanding the violence signs between children and their parents. Five poster that shows violence and five which are not showing violence (but all are violent videogame) selected and by showing each game’s poster the similarity and differences of understanding violence signs between children and their parents discussed.

**Literature Review**

**Causal Signs**

From the beginning of this part, there is a need to explain why semiotic analysis of advertising videogames posters is related to linguistics and on general why in semiotics analysis there is always a need to understand language signs. According to Dyer (1982), “advertisers employ language and assemble a message to the audiences” (p. 9). In any kind of message transaction which called communication, language is a method of it and that’s why these two are interrelated. “Communication involves at least two persons, the addressee and the addressee, the code, transmitting the information which is to be delivered, and some kind of channel, through which the message will be transmitted. In advertising, the advertisement is this channel and language is the code” (Vestergaard and Schröder, 1985) (quoted from Wejher, 2015, p.2).

The focused of this article is in advertising posters and so the categorization of communication in this article is just advertising videogame posters. But on general in any kind of advertising the language used could be verbal (spoken) or nonverbal (written). According to Vestergaard and Schröder, (1985) advertising is a one way of communication and it engage people because there is always one speaker which give a message to anonymous and sometimes heterogeneous public.

Charles Sanders Peirce’s ideas about signs system is not only intensely prove the theory of the iconic page, (Bornstein and Tinkl, 1998) but also Peirce concentrated on the iconic demand for any kind of sign to be valid and also reliable. “His semiotic, or theory of how human experience grows by means of the mediating structures we create, fully supports those emerging textual-editorial claims” (Keeler, n. d. p.1) in another word: “carried not only by the words (the ‘linguistic code’) but also by the material features of the text such as layout, illustration, size and kind of lettering, use of space, binding, cost, and the like” (Bornstein and Tinkl, 1998, p.1). Peirce’s ideas not only shows the “integration of the iconic or semantic features of the physical text with more traditional and purely linguistic considerations,” (Ibid, p.3) but also it clarify the reasons of why such a broad interpretation of representation is reasonably and pragmatically essential to human vision and also the knowledge development (Keeler, n. d).

“As Gilbert Cohen-Séat says, we live in a universe of icono-sphere” (Solík, 2014, p.207). Nowadays humans are bounded by signs with numbers of kinds and also with numbers of
connection to sign structure. In the case of advertising also it is the same because advertising deals with signs and signs systems for the purpose of persuading people. But people cannot comprehend all sign immediately. As Solik (2014, p. 208) explained: “We may suppose that the recipient and the advertiser have common interests (although their motives are quite different) and one of these interests refers to the need to understand signs in the best and quickest ways possible”.

Semiotics which also called semiology was first introduced in modern age by Ferdinand de Saussure at the beginning of twentieth century. Because semiology was founded within language signs and other forms of signals, it is possible to define semiotic as the scientific study of signs. As Bouzida (2004) defined semiotic as “semiotics is the science of signs that allowed the proliferation of a number of perspectives and paved the way to other cultural phenomena that raised the study of signs through its denotative and connotative meanings” (p.1001). “Semiotics refers to the explanation of mechanisms and functions of the text as well as visual communicators and gives us a chance of better understanding of the nature of the social processes” (Solik 2014, p. 209).

According to Umberto Eco (2009a) there are three semiotic method: interpretation, formalization and language analysis and all cultural output can be include in a semantic. “Due to its interdisciplinary nature, only interpretation is suitable for understanding of such units, on semiotic, as well as on semantic levels” (Eco, 2009b, p.64).

On general, the goal of advertising is to persuade and motivate people for a good and service, give some information, or give new information about a brand. According to Solík (2014, p. 207) “Production and reception of advertisements is linked to characteristic processes of semiotic that are different than in case of other types of audio-visual products. We work with an assumption that the advertising is ‘full of other denotative and connotative stimuli’ for the semiotic analysis”.

By considering Eco’s theory in open work, it is possible to find a relation to Stuart Hall’s statement also about how specific groups and subgroup of the people in society interpreted in variety of ways based on their experiences. For example, the interpretation of an advertising poster could be different based on people’s age, interests, opinion, and also attention to it. Also according to Kahnerman, (2012) and Solík (2014, p. 216) “The involvement of intellect during watching advertisements is limited”.

Theory of Mind
Theory of Mind states to the capability to comprehend the psychological situations and intentions of other people and ourselves (Premack, and Woodruff, 1978; Doherty, 2009; Astington, and Edward, 2010; Miller, 2012). According to Frye and Moore (1991) “Once mature, it enables individuals to explain, predict, and manage others’ behaviors, and is considered to be an integral component for developing the ability to reason logically and abstractly” (LeBlanc, 2014, p. 2020). By the age three in children this ability appears but is not settled until people become adult (Wellman, et al., 2001). Gunter, et al. (2005, p.69) explained that: “children do not interact with advertisements in the same way that they interact with other people and this may be another reason to expect children’s full
understanding of advertisements to lag in behind their understanding of minds and beliefs in other domains”.

As John Dewey and Lev Vygotsky explained years ago the development of children is depends on their experiences that they could collect daily but nowadays the thing that makes the experiences for children is the new context in western world which is mass media and also personal media. And according to LeBlanc (2014, p. 2021) “changing is the thought that the more socially and culturally oriented of theories of Vygotsky and Bronfenbrenner, are considered to be increasingly beneficial in acknowledging that children’s development is influenced by their environment and interactions within this environment, and does not ‘takes place in a vacuum’”.

Astington and Edward (2010) were arguing that theory of mind is more biological instead of social based because it developed with lack of technique. But on the other hand, Livingstone (2007) talked about the factors in the environment of children that increase its development. “If children are able to apply Theory of Mind abilities to electronic tasks, it could equally be associated with required competencies for media literacy… I propose that digital and/or electronic forms could influence children’s understandings of false belief tasks” (LeBlanc, 2014, p. 2021).

Every year companies spend billions of dollars for advertising such as TV commercial, internet ads and also posters and so on just to motivate children. In this regard, Buckingham (2003) says that media is playing with words, images, and sounds to control people in the world in the way that media wants which is troublesome on many ways.

Based on this explanation “Children need to understand the meaning behind language and the interpretations these meanings have for each of us, as consumers. They must learn the tools they need to think critically in response to television advertising” (LeBlanc, 2014, p. 2021). Buckingham (2003) believed that children and adults are both influenced by media but LeBlanc (2014) says children are much more vulnerable because of different perception qualitatively. “Children think differently from adults and there are qualitative differences in the way children of different ages understand the world around them” (Greig, 1999, p. 31). LeBlanc (2014) conclude that “without developmentally appropriate media literacy, children can be enticed into believing what the advertiser wants them to believe” (p. 2025).

**Genre Theory**

According to Williams (2003, p. 137) “ Those who emphasize the role of the media in the ‘construction’ of reality often focus on the practices adopted in the media production process as shaping the nature of representation. Despite apparent diversity, the output of the media can be divided into a number of particular kinds of production”. Turow (1997) talked about the ‘formula’ that media foster it. And “this formulas actively shape content” (Tiffen, 1989, p. 64). “The study of these formulas-labelled as ‘genre’ from the French word meaning ‘type’ or ‘kind’ has become a central part of contemporary media studies” (Williams, 2003, p.137). In every visual analysis of advertising design there is two main question which are: what/how it was saying? Each one of these question lead for different method of analyzing a poster. According to McQuarrie and Phillips (2008) for the question ‘what was saying’ the researches are focusing on the content of advertising and for the question ‘how it was saying’
researchers goes for constitute of communication. “The content of an advertisement contains the sales message the advertiser wants to become across to a target audience, but the stylistic idea and the values behind the sales message equally affect the final message of the advertisement, the sum of these two might be something else than what the advertiser intends” (Vare, 2014, p.7).

Based on M.A.K. Halliday’s works on social semiotics, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006 [1996]) developed a method for analyzing visual communication of social semiotic and also they introduced a structure of ‘multimodality, assigning representational, interpersonal and compositional meanings’ to images. “Thus, any image, beyond representing the world – whether in abstract or concrete ways – also plays a part in some interaction and constitutes a recognizable kind of text” (Moya and Pinar, 2008, p. 1602).

It is possible to categorize advertising posters in different ways but McQuarrie (2008) suggested to categorize advertising images into two look-through and look-at pictures. “Look-through pictures depict specific objects and scenes, onto which the pictures function as transparent windows… look-at pictures, on the other hand, might show many things but only depict themselves as images. They present ideas, which give them their meaning” (Vare, 2014, p. 50-51). Also McQuerrie (2008) suggested to categorize of look-at pictures in to different genres and he determined a ‘tableaux genre’ which images are coded culturally or sub culturally.

The main question in this research is whether parents and their children have the same perception about violence signs in videogame posters or not. Although parents and children have to categorize the genre of the videogame in the common way if they both have the same interpretation about the signs. But if their interpretation about signs are different they cannot also categorize the genre of the games which is shown in the poster.

**Understanding Violence Signs**

In this article, researcher’s categorized violence sings in three main part which are: first, the appearance of the characters in the poster. In some posters the characters in the posters giving the message to the audience that this videogame is violence but in some, viewers cannot easily understand the violence’s in the game. For example figure (1) is not showing any violence in the main character although the ministry of Children Services General Directorate believed that Mincraft is a violent game and it should be ban for children in Turkey.

Second is the representation of violence tools in videogame posters such as gun, sword or any kind of instrument that cause violence. In many posters the main character is a human and it doesn’t show any violence by the appearance but for example with a gun or sword or any kind of tools that cause violence people can consider that videogame as a violent game.

And third category is the result of violence in the videogame posters such as blood, corpse or etc. of course by showing blood in the poster people can easily find out the violence in the game but in some videogame posters which are truly violent, there is no blood or any kind of these violent signs. But the aim of this article is to find out the violence signs in videogame posters and that topic needs another research or researches.
Methodology

According to Newbold et al. (2002) “Within the broad hermeneutic tradition concerned with text analysis, there are two main strands particularly relevant to qualitative content analysis. The first, narratology... and the second draws on semiotics and focuses attention on signs and sign systems in texts and how readers might interpret (decode) those signs” (Macnamara, 2005, p.15).

Neuendorf (2002) says the qualitative research method and the analysis of texts is more properly defined and categorized as rhetorical analysis, narrative analysis, discourse analysis, structuralism or semiotic analysis, interpretative analysis or critical analysis (pp. 5-7). Jensen (1995) introduced the integrated social semiotics theory of mass communication which is a combination of structuralist semiotic research and modern poststructuralist theories. Which means the basics of both de Saussure approach of semiology and Peirce influenced semiotics applied and also each of them ideas is using for comprehensive study of mass media representations. Newbold et al. (2002) perceive: “So in studying media texts … we can use these ideas as they can provide a way of assessing the meaning production in a text” (p. 87). Also Van Zoonen (1994) believed the semiotic analysis of a media text, such as advertising posters, could be identify by the signs in the text. After that Selby and Cowdery (1995), says “these signs can be analyzed as a result of selection and combination” (Newbold et al., 2002, p. 87).

Sampling and Data Collection

Based on these explanation and for the purpose of this research, qualitative research method were selected to have a deep and better understanding of the ideas of parents and their children about violence signs in videogame advertising posters. The sample for this research is convenience sampling method and for doing so 20 mother or father who have children between the ages 6 to 12 from different nationality were selected and researchers asked parents and their child separately because of bias which researchers avoid it. Children may feel not comfortable to answer questions or express their feeling about violence video games in front of their parents. Of course children have more experience about playing games and they may play the videogames that researchers showed them the poster of it, although some parents also played some of those games but researches wanted the pour and truth feelings about violent signs from children.

In this research five videogame posters that have those three violent signs, which explained above, and five posters from other videogames that doesn’t have violence signs were showing in to two group of parents and their children to analyze the perception of signs in posters form these two group. Different nationality in this research selected because of the videogames were distributed globally and around the world, although the written language in all these posters were English but some parents and children preferred to talk and expressed their feelings and understanding in their own language and so the interviews were most in English but also there was some in Turkish, Persian, Germany and French that researchers could speak on these languages but the interviews with different language were all translated into English to have some important quotes from interviewees.

Keeler (1998, p.9) explained Peirce’s idea about questioning and he explained as: “new perspective evolved from his insistence that before we can ask the traditional philosophical
question, ‘how is knowledge possible from experience,’ we must ask how meaning is possible in experience. What are the fundamental conditions for meaning to occur?’

Based on this idea of Peirce, in this research, five poster that have violence signs and five poster without violence sings showed to parents and their children and after each poster the following questions were asked but because the questions were open-ended interviewees could add their ideas openly. The questions were as follow:

1. Do you think this advertising poster is for violent videogame or not?
2. If this poster is for violent videogame show me the elements of violence and if not why you think it is nonviolent?
3. Do you let your children to play this game? / Do you want to play this game?
4. Can you say the genre of this videogame by this poster?

Because the focus of this article is on human perception of violence signs in two group of parents and children, the elements such as sex, nationality and ages is not considering specifically and so, the only division in this article is parents and their children between 6 and 12 years old.

The posters of this article were as follow:

Figure.2 Posters

Data Analysis
After interviewing 20 mother or father that has children between 6 to 12 years old and their children, the answers for the first question was showing that all parents believed the posters
for Gears of War, 3, Star Craft, Halo. 4, Prototype and God of War are all for violent games and only the parents who knows the Bio Shock, Half-life and The Hunger Game’s games knows that these games are violent. Out of 20 parent, only 6 were saying that Fallout. 3 and just 4, who knows the news about Mincraft, were saying it is violent game.

All parents believed that the videogame that has gun on it is the cause of violence that means Gears of War, 3, Star Craft and Halo. 4 and God of War and Prototype are violence game because of the face of the character or better to say, the appearance of the character. The parents who were saying Fallout. 3 is violent believed that because in the image children are throwing stone this game is violence but about Minecraft no one could distinguish the elements of violent. Half-life, Bio Shock and The Hunger Game doesn’t have any violent sign in the poster according to the parents.

Out of 20 parent none of them wanted their child to play any of these violent game but 14 of them who had child above 10 were saying that they child is playing violent game and they cannot control it. One mother were saying that her 10 years old child was telling her that: “This kind of videogames are everywhere, in mobile phone, in game nets and everywhere. This is the new generation of games and you (her mother) cannot understand it. It is not about violence and it’s not affecting me. Also all my friends are playing these games and I also want to play. If you don’t let me to play in home, I will go out with my friends and play in game nets”.

The answers of parents to the last question of this research was also based on the sings used in the posters. 15 parent were saying that while there is a solder in the poster, then it could be war videogame (Halo. 4) and 6 were saying while there is an alien ( Star Craft) then it is a fiction game. But all 20 parent were saying that Gears of War, 3, Star Craft, Halo. 4, Prototype and God of War is just violent game and they couldn’t specify the genre of these games. Out of that 4 parent who knows the news about banding Mincraft in Turkey 14 couldn’t say anything about the genre of Mincraft and 2 were saying this game is Lego game. 3 parent who doesn’t have any idea about The Hunger Game were saying it could be romance and also Half-life is about family but they couldn’t say anything about the genre of Bio Shock and Fallout. 3.

Children but were answering to questions differently and out of 20 child 17of them who were playing Mindcraft were saying that it is not violent game at all and except Mincraft the rest of them is violent game. The judgment of children about the posters were mostly based on their experiences and boys had more experience about videogames than girls and because the majority of girls were not playing these violence videogames, they could specify the violence signs better than boys. All child were believing that Gears of War.3, Star Craft, Halo.4, Prototype, God of War, Half-Life, Fallout.3, Bio Shock are violent games and 3 of them who didn’t watch the film of The Hunger Game were saying its non-violent and the rest (even the ones who didn’t play the game) were saying because the videogame is based on the film, so it is violent.

Children says the appearance of the main character may show the violence in the posters and also according to them the posters of Gears of War.3, Star Craft, Halo.4, Prototype, God of War have the violence signs but Mindcraft and The Hunger Game doesn’t have any violence
sign. 17 child said Half-Life, Fallout. 3 and Bio Shock has dark color in the poster and it gives the feeling of dark and scary environment in the game and 3 of them shows the background of Half-Life and Fallout. 3 and believed that the background is showing the violence.

Out of 20 child, 12 of them wanted to play all these videogames, 4 of them just was interested in Mindcraft and The Hunger Game and 4 of them were not interested on any of these videogames. Only some children above 10 years old know the definition of the genre and out of them just 3 of them could say Halo. 4 is fiction.

**Conclusion**

According to the literature review above, children are more attracted to the advertising because they media literacy is not shape yet and also children in today’s life are so much attach to the videogames and they spend lots of their time by playing these type of new media. Although some videogames is helping children’s mind to develop but the violence in some is the issues that must be consider. Some policy may help to limit the effects of violence in videogames on children but family members and especially parents can control their child to not to play violence videogames. By considering the sensitivity of children and their essences which is not shape but it will shape soon, some organization and policy can help to reduce the effect of violence videogames on child. But the focus of this article was to analyze whether parents or better to say, adults have the same perception of the violence’s signs as the children or they have different understanding about signs of violence. Because humans perceptions is shaping three time and experience, it is not possible to expect children that have the same perception about sign system but on the other hand, children nowadays are so much attach to the media and they learn many things from it.

In this article, researchers shown ten videogame posters to twenty father or mother and also to their child between 6 to 12 years old and found out child perception about violence signs and their parents are different. Children automatically were focusing on their experiences of videogames although parents was focusing on the violence signs such as blood, gun, and the appearance of the main characters on the posters. Also according to children killing an animal in videogames is not showing violence because they repeated this image several times in different videogames but parents believed that killing an animal is also a violence behavior and children should not play the videogames that has this kind of actions.

Unfortunately parents cannot watch all the scenes of videogames that their children play and usually they focus on the images of the poster and in some videogames the poster is not showing any kind of violence but there is some violence on them. Interestingly children believed that the appearance of the main character in the poster may show the violence in the game but it is not a must because they were playing some videogame that players cannot see the face of main character while they are playing and they named some strategic games that while they were playing only the gun is in the screen and not the face of the character. For example according to the children who were playing the videogame called God of War the appearance of the character is not showing fully on the poster but it was the most violent videogame that they ever played.
By considering this new media that is so attractive for the children and it is affecting on their behavior and future life, having more research about videogames are quite necessary and not just the poster. Researchers can focus on the content of this videogames to have wider information about what children are playing and what is the direct and indirect effect of this media on the future generation.

Reference:


