



Jamin **Pelkey**, jpelkey[at]ryerson.ca

Stéphanie **Walsh Matthews**, swalsh[at]arts.ryerson.ca

Ryerson University, Canada



Xtreme Posture: Semiotic Primitives and the Primacy of Movement

The use of X in corporate brand marks is now ubiquitous—from Google X and the X-Factor to X-Games, Xbox and Xtreme sports; but little attention is given in the literature to the socio-cognitive meanings or motivations behind this widespread practice. This study focuses on a specific X-mark type, an iconic legisign in which a face is added above the upper crux of the rhematic symbol to anthropomorphize X as a representation of “spread-eagle” posture. Using multiple methodologies and a mix of semiotic theories to analyze a set of 200 exemplars, we argue that the X mark in advertising is derivative of a gestalt embodied template based in proprioceptive memory, rather than being a mere iconic symbol rooted in habits of literacy. Our findings provide further evidence for identifying the phenomenology of movement (Sheets-Johnstone 2011) as constitutive of primitive semiotic resources such as opposition, markedness and reversals between contraries.

Following a brief overview of operational definitions and data collection procedures, we summarize comparative content analyses of 200 X-posture brand marks and corporate logos, including textual analyses of associated corporate descriptors, visual semiotic analyses applying cultural symmetry theory (Mardsen & Thomas 2013, Washburn & Crowe 1988) and phenomenological analyses using semantic differential applications. A typology of X-posed brand marks is identified, and logos are found to cluster under four thematic types: 1) health and illness, 2) wealth and gambling, 3) championship and training, 4) individuality and isolation – all involving extreme or risky experiences that are prone to reverse suddenly. This suggests that the projected X-posture in advertising commands attention by triggering body memories of performance peak or impending crisis rooted in proprioception.

These findings reciprocate with cognitive semiotic perspectives. Through mimesis, repetition and memory, our immediate, felt experiences of bodily movement, including tensional expansions and linear projections (Sheets-Johnstone 2011), can be identified as instances of primary modeling or semiotic primitives (Sebeok & Danesi 2000, Eco 2000). These are forged forward towards a capacity for third-order modeling, through the filter of secondary structures, including upright posture. The human experience is bipedal and orthogonal, involving distinctive structures of transversalisation, segmentation, oppositional relation, and substitutional forms that shape our relation to, and perception of, the world (Van Lier 2010). A better understanding of the semiotic potency afforded by upright posture will require closer attention to these relations, including the inverse correlations, complex coordinations and relative specializations of the upper and lower limbs in motion.

References

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