This thematic double-issue borrows its title from a turn of phrase suggested by Malcolm Evans (see e.g., 2016), one of the pioneering individuals to first apply semiotic thinking deliberately and systematically to client/consumer-oriented challenges encountered in marketing and branding contexts (cf. Rossolatos 2012: 59–60). As will become clear in the articles that follow, the nature of the topic under consideration is “applied” in keeping with Evan’s approach: i.e., by going well beyond perfunctory musings on potential or general applications of semiotics in such domains. Instead, contributing authors are all first-hand practitioners who each have years of actual industry experience working directly with clients to develop better branding strategies through the application of semiotic theories and methodologies. This reversal of the typical theory/praxis hierarchy featured in academic journals sets the collection apart. As a result, the volume provides an uncommon opportunity to learn from insider insight in the form of six research essays delivered by industry practitioners who are also well-versed in semiotic theories and methodologies of various stripes.

Of the six authors contributing directly to the central theme, four work full time as applied semioticians in the marketing and branding industry, while two others work as full time academics in related fields. Authors in the first group include Maciej Biedzinski of Touchideas, Warsaw, Poland; Mariane Cara of Communicara and SemioticaStudio, São Paulo, Brazil; Mark Lemon of Sign Salad, London, England; and Sónia Marques of Indiz, Lisbon, Portugal. Authors in the second group include Kristian Bankov of New Bulgarian University, Sophia, Bulgaria, and Steven Skaggs of University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky. Bankov is both a professor of semiotics and an active brand consultant, while Skaggs is a professor of graphic design who actively consults with clients on logo and font design solutions. From the United States and Brazil to the United Kingdom, Portugal, Bulgaria and Poland: notably, the six scholar-practitioners in focus here hail from six countries around
the globe. Remarkably, this diverse representation is due neither to co-
incidence nor quota.

The collection's broadly international base is due, rather, to the
centripetal influence of a community of inquirers at the heart of the
contemporary applied brand semiotics movement. The movement,
known as Semiofest, is an international conference series that bills itself
as a “celebration of semiotic thinking”. Established in 2012, Semiofest
is the world’s only annual conference specifically devoted to applied
semiotics, allowing academics and industry professionals to collaborate
and develop new insights into ideas and methods in fields of marketing
design and brand research. The conference’s first event in the Americas
was Semiofest 2017, Toronto, which convened in the historic Gladstone
Hotel from 19–22 July 2017. Five of the six core articles in this double is-
sue were first presented in early draft form to Semiofest 2017 participants.
Their inclusion here follows many successive rounds of careful selection,
peer review and revision.

The conference was arranged by an eight-person local organizing
committee working closely with the standing Semiofest board (Chris
Arning, Hamsini Shivkumar, and Lucia Laurent-Neva). Our local con-
ference team featured close industry/academy collaboration, with three
Toronto marketing industry professionals (Jeff Hecker and Sarah Johnson
of Athena Brand Wisdom and Charles Leech of ABM) partnering with
two Ryerson University faculty members (Jamin Pelkey and Stéphanie
Walsh Matthews, both from the Department of Languages, Literatures
and Cultures); two students from the Ryerson-York graduate program
in Communication and Culture (Michael Pereira and Olivia Dziwak);
and one Ryerson University undergraduate student (Sari Park, in the
Languages and Intercultural Relations BA program). The conference was
sponsored by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council—
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The arrangement of the six core articles in this double issue is mo-
tivated by two layers of thematic contiguity: one topical and the other
theoretical. The three main theoretical lenses we identify in these articles
are (1) structuralist, (2) pragmatist, and (3) experientialist. These per-
spectives or schools of thought are also oriented toward three key topics relevant to applied brand semiotics: (1) authentic grounding, (2) visual meaning, and (3) morphic meaning.


Bankov’s treatment explores the “symbolic added value” of genuinely inspired attitudes evident in the respective approaches of a variety of specific brand managers behind a number of successful Bulgarian brands. In these cases, the “existential values of entrepreneurs with a vision” enables their respective brand mythology systems to be “projected beyond the mere profit motive”—finding grounding, instead, in “their own sacred beliefs or those of their company”. Bankov’s conclusions draw on a three-way synthesis, or dialogue, making rich connections between semiotic and anthropological theories to propose a new model for understanding the nature of legendary brands and their economic value in and through the development of applied brand semiotics.

Biedzinski’s article focusses on authentic grounding to suggests a new model as well but addresses other levels of marketing analysis and brand building that are oriented, instead, to the materiality of a given brand. Shifting into a pragmatist mode, Biedzinkski argues that current Peircean approaches to semiotics of brands and branding are too heavily focused on representamena at the expense of objects and interpretants. The article singles out the Dynamical Object, for special attention, as “the starting point for a non-linear, rhizomatic process of brand-becoming or the creation of a new brand.” The article draws on a first-hand case study to illustrate “a material research phase, a cultural research phase and a phase of expressive anchoring” that can be applied if semioticians are involved in the process of strategic brand creation not as consultants or research professionals but, rather, as “brand facilitators”.

The next article, “Visual Identity: Systems and Semiotics” by Steven Skaggs, also features Peircean ideas, blending them with insights from dynamic systems theory, and shifting the topical context toward visual branding concerns. Skaggs sketches out “the fundamental interactive
forces at play in a brand in the formation of an identity system that signifies a particular hosting entity.” He notes two kinds of iconicity that are in play whenever we are exposed to a visual identity system such as a brandmark: metaphorical iconicity and systemic iconicity. He opts to focus on the latter, describing it as that which “builds the habituated exposure of the elements of the identity system”, and exploring the importance of graphic differentiation for establishing brand identity. Skaggs identifies “two competing pressures” on brand systems: one convergent, the other divergent. The first tends toward static simplicity while the second “has the opposite effect, creating pressure for the system to become variated, large and changeable.” Skaggs invents an elegant analytic notation system to demonstrate related dynamics and closes with important considerations for furthering the development of a general semiotic.

Continuing on-topic with Skagg’s visual semiotic concerns, Mariane Cara’s article, “The Semiotic Layers of Instagram: Visual Tropes and Brand Meaning”, shifts focus to visual branding online, devoting special attention to the ways in which such strategies might respond to the paradigm-changing visual semiotics of Instagram. To better understand the dynamics of this new model of visual representation, Cara applies a blend of semiotic insights from Kenneth Burke’s (1941) theory of narrative rhetoric and Marcel Danesi’s theory of multimodal metaphor known as “metaforms” (Danesi 2013; Sebeok and Danesi 2000). Drawing on specific examples from Instagram Brazil, the article identifies visual metaform relations, visual metonymy/synecdoche relations and visual irony as specific layers of meaning at work in the platform’s characteristic visual displays. Cara’s aim is to “contribute to the understanding of polysemic manifestations, associating their signifiers with the rhetorical and aesthetic potential of visual tropes, ultimately demonstrating overlapping codes that could be relevant for brand management.” To this end she also integrates two concepts, “Instagrammatics” and “Instagrammism”, drawn from literature related to the platform to better understand the influential visual grammar of Instagram.

The fusion of rhetorical analysis with experiential dynamics grows out of cognitive semantics, and perhaps no theoretical construct in cognitive semantics is more widely known and applied than conceptual metaphor theory (following Lakoff and Johnson 2003). In the next article, “Life’s a Circus: A Case Study of Camper Shoes Branding”, Sónia Marques extends Cara’s theme of experientialist rhetoric theory further into semiotic territory while shifting the topic toward the morphic realm of shape, size and situation. The article’s aim is to explore conceptual metaphor, primarily in
non-verbal domains, as a key component for brand facilitators to consider when reflecting on establishing the overall coherence of a given brand. Marques references a wealth of illustrations to demonstrate the hidden importance of this semiotic layer, providing in-depth analysis of one brand in particular: Camper shoes. The article identifies a set of general metaphors that inform a more overarching metaphor that draws on the circus as its source domain. Overall the article provides evidence that any given “approach to brand development needs to overcome verbal-centrism in order to understand brands as affordances, inscribed in design, form, interaction and all other perceptual features.”

The concluding article in this core set of six further extends Marques’s focus on branding issues encountered in morphic qualities of perceptual form by shifting our attention to packaging design and returning our theoretical compass to the realms of structuralist thought (with which this set of six core articles began). “Packing in Meaning: Applying Jakobson’s Model of Communication to Pack Design”, by Mark Lemon shows that Roman Jakobson’s model of linguistic communication “has potential that is currently untapped by semiotics at large”, prominently including applied brand semiotics. Lemon adapts Jakobson’s model “from a person-to-person model, to a brand-to-person model”, arguing that while a brand may mimic or fulfil roles similar to that of a person, in a brand context “there is a slight shift; and overt emotionality is often masked or communicated through a subtler ideological perspective”—one in which “the ability to decode multisensory inputs is of particular importance.” Using a first-hand case study to illustrate, the article shows how “the communication functions detailed by Roman Jakobson can help semioticians focus creative thinking and aid in the understanding and development of novel packaging solutions.”

While, Lemon’s article “wraps up” the six core contributions to the thematic issue, the remaining contributions to the collection also feature tie-ins with its central theme. Barry Stampfl’s article, “Hypothetic Inference as ‘Peculiar Musical Emotion’—Interpreting Hüsker Dü”, applies reader-response theory in a semiotic mode by considering the aesthetics of music appreciation in light of an individual’s personal development or “identity theme”—identifying principles that might easily be mapped on to various unpredictable, non-deterministic aspects of brand interpretation. The two book reviews that round out the collection also feature tie-ins. In “The Greimas Centennial in Review”, Frank Neussel pays tribute to two special issues of *Semiotica* dedicated to A. J. Greimas on the centennial of his birth in 2017. Edited by Stéphanie Walsh Matthews and Thomas
Broden, these two volumes celebrate the legacy of a theorist whose work continues to be drawn on heavily by semioticians working in marketing and branding contexts. And, finally, Gary Shank’s “Visualizing Semiotics and Semioticizing Vision: The Role of Semiotic Theory in Graphic Design Theory” is a book review of *Fire Signs: A Semiotic Theory of Graphic Design* (Shank 2017), a work of applied brand semiotics in its own right, written by one of the contributing authors to the present collection.

Practice-oriented discourses of marketing and branding are clearly undergoing a fresh resurgence of semiotic thinking. Such discourses may seem to stand in conflict with important interests and causes championed by competing (or complementary) strains of academic discourse. In deference to Marxist critiques of capital and class struggle (McNalley 1993), or to Kleinean critiques of corporate globalization (Klein 2000), some will raise eyebrows at this attempt to develop the study of applied brand semiotics. Such tensions are worth acknowledging and addressing; and at least three points are worth considering in reply. First, it is worth considering ways in which such critiques, when put into practice, often result in the perpetuation of the systems they claim to oppose (Heath and Potter 2004; Pelkey 2017: 177–191). Second, it is worth considering that the mere opposition of ideology with ideology does little to improve mutual understanding and growth. Third, it is worth remembering that the actual point of semiotics is neither simply to interpret the world nor simply to change it, but to change it on the basis of interpretations which find their measure in a constant and ongoing inquiry into ‘how things are’ which is not systematically subordinated to ideology of any kind” (Deely 2009: 119).

At its best, applied brand semiotics would approach the study of brands and branding neither as vague, new-age personifications of consumerist desire nor as objects of deception employed in the dramaturgy of class struggle and oppression, but as systems of folk-ontology and semiotic ideology that function both in tension with and in tandem with the economic objects prized by corporate clients (Manning 2010)—recognizing in the process that these same clients are consumers, and that a consumer in one domain is often a client in another. As in all things, then, a semiotic approach seeks neither control, nor allegiance nor certainty (Pelkey 2018) but understanding and development—both of the complex history and zeitgeist of the phenomena in question and of the theory of general semiotic. As Peirce famously remarked, “it has never been in [our] power to study anything,—mathematics, ethics, metaphysics, gravitation, thermodynamics, optics, chemistry, comparative anatomy, astronomy,
psychology, phonetics, economics, the history of science, whist, men and women, wine, metrology, except as a study of semiotic” (1908: SS.85–86). Welcoming brands and branding to the list is only fitting.

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