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Transformation of Symbolism in Healthy Food Advertising: Charles Sanders Peirce's Semiotic Analysis of Healthy Lifestyle Trends on Social Media

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Abstract - Changes in healthy lifestyle trends in the digital era have triggered an increase in healthy food advertisements circulating on various social media platforms. These advertisements not only function as a means of product promotion but also as a medium for constructing new symbols related to the concept of health. This study aims to analyse the transformation of symbolism in healthy food advertisements using Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic approach, which emphasizes the triadic relationship between representamen, object, and interpretant, as well as the classification of signs into icons, indices, and symbols. The research method used is qualitative with semiotic analysis techniques on a number of healthy food advertisements uploaded on Instagram and TikTok from January to June 2025. The results show a dominant shift from the use of visual icons, such as images of fresh food, to activity indices that associate products with an active lifestyle, as well as symbols that position health as a social identity and prestigious aspiration. This transformation illustrates how healthy food is positioned not only as a nutritional need, but also as a representation of a modern lifestyle and certain moral values. Further discussion links these findings with previous literature and highlights the ethical implications of advertising strategies that focus on identity symbolism. The study's conclusions emphasize that healthy food advertising on social media plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions of the meaning of "healthy," which is no longer solely biological but also cultural and symbolic.

Keywords: Peirce's semiotics, healthy food advertising, social media, symbolism transformation, healthy lifestyle trends, semiotic analysis

1. Introduction

The development of digital technology and social media has brought about significant changes in how society views, consumes, and defines a healthy lifestyle. In this fast-paced information age, health trends are no longer limited to balanced nutrition or regular exercise, but are also influenced by visual and symbolic narratives widely disseminated through social media (Azzahriwan et al., 2025).

Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have become key platforms for promoting healthy food products, where every image, video, and text narrative contains a symbolic message that not only encourages consumers to purchase the product but also shapes their perceptions of self-identity, social status, and lifestyle aspirations (Hidayatullah et al., 2023). Semiotic analysis shows that healthy food advertisements on social media rely on a combination of icons, indices, and symbols to reinforce the message (Peirce, 1931-1958).

Icons are generally manifested in visual forms that resemble reality, such as fresh vegetables, natural scenery, or a fit body. Indexes emerge in associations between products and specific activities, such as a low-calorie drink displayed alongside someone running. Symbols, on the other hand, are more complex, such as the use of the words "natural," "organic," or "clean eating," which require cultural conventions to be understood (Fadhil, 2024).

The role of influencers in healthy food advertising contributes to the strengthening of symbolism, where their personal beliefs and lifestyles are embedded in the promoted products. Influencers function as mediators of meaning, where their personal beliefs and lifestyles are embedded in the promoted products (Suprayogi, 2022).

In this context, social media serves not only as a medium for advertising distribution but also as a space where health symbolism is collectively produced and reproduced. User interactions through likes, comments, and shares create a new cycle in which the symbols created in the advertisements are reinforced by audience participation (Laoli, 2025).

In this context, healthy food advertising serves more than just a commercial communication tool. Advertising becomes a medium that constructs specific symbols about the meaning of "healthy," which is gradually shifting from a biological to a cultural and symbolic meaning. For example, images of fresh vegetables or organic fruit are not only presented as nutritious foods but also interpreted as representations of ecological awareness and a modern urban lifestyle (El Madja, 2021; Erlangga, 2022). Similarly, low-calorie drink advertisements featuring images of people working out at the gym not only signal the product's fitness function but also index aspirations for an ideal body, productivity, and achievement.

Semiotic studies provide a relevant theoretical framework for understanding this phenomenon. Charles Sanders Peirce, with his triadic model (representamen, object, and interpretant), allows researchers to analyze how signs work in both visual and verbal communication. Peirce also differentiated signs into icons, indices, and symbols, which can be used to identify the visual and narrative strategies employed in healthy food advertisements (Peirce, 1931).

Several previous studies have discussed the role of digital advertising in shaping consumption behavior, but most have focused on the persuasive aspects or effectiveness of advertising (Lister et al., 2009; Couldry & Hepp, 2017). In-depth studies that highlight the symbolic dimension and transformation of meaning in the context of healthy food are relatively limited, especially in Indonesia. However, this phenomenon is increasingly important considering that healthy food advertisements on social media not only sell products but also construct lifestyle narratives that influence how people define health.

In recent years, semiotics has become an important tool for analyzing advertisements, offering insights into the deeper meanings behind visual and linguistic signs used in marketing. The selected articles explore various semiotic frameworks, especially that of Charles Sanders Peirce, to understand how meaning is constructed in advertisements and media.

Peirce's semiotic theory to beauty advertisements, highlighting how signs in these ads function to create specific meanings related to beauty standards and consumer identity. By identifying different sign categories—icons, indexes, and symbols—they offer a critical perspective on how advertisements manipulate cultural representations to appeal to audiences' desires and aspirations. This approach reveals the complex relationship between signifiers in advertisements and the ideologies they propagate (Jaya et al., 2025).

The focus on the semiotic analysis of social media advertisements, emphasizing the role of visual and textual signs in shaping digital consumer culture. The authors demonstrate how social media platforms have become powerful tools for disseminating advertisements that rely heavily on image-based communication, linking visual aesthetics with persuasive techniques. Their analysis also draws attention to the fluidity of sign meanings in digital spaces and the dynamic interactions between users and ads (Laoli et al., 2025).

Talani et al. (2023) discuss the challenges of interpreting semiotic signs within media and communication studies, pointing out how the subjective nature of semiotic interpretation can lead to different readings of the same sign across cultural contexts. They critique the over-reliance on fixed interpretations of signs, urging for a more flexible approach that considers both the cultural and historical contexts of the signs being analyzed. This work is crucial for understanding how semiotic analysis can contribute to media literacy, particularly in a globalized world where the meaning of signs can vary significantly (Talani et al., 2023).

In the same vein, Sutiah et al. (2023) focus on modern drink advertisements, particularly those found on Instagram, and analyze how the medium itself shapes the meaning of signs. Their semiotic analysis highlights the synergy between image, text, and brand identity in creating compelling narratives for younger, digitally-savvy audiences. They argue that advertisements on social media are not only about selling products but also about constructing a brand identity that resonates with users' lifestyles and values (Sutiah et al., 2023).

Akbar (2025) uses Peirce's semiotic theory to analyze a Father's Day McDonald's advertisement, revealing how signs of family, love, and tradition are constructed through visual cues and textual elements. Akbar explores how these signs resonate with cultural values surrounding family relationships and consumer behavior, demonstrating how advertisements use emotional appeals to strengthen brand loyalty. This work highlights the importance of understanding cultural contexts in semiotic analysis, as the meaning of advertisements often depends on shared social understandings (Akbar, 2025).

The aforementioned studies demonstrate that social media has a significant influence on public behavior and perception, particularly in the context of product promotion and self-identity formation. Sia et al. (2023) found that TikTok had a positive impact on the self-esteem of Filipino adolescents, while Maulida et al. (2025) demonstrated that TikTok can influence children's digital growth, behavior, and well-being.

Ratih et al. (2025) found that Instagram can be optimized for effective communication strategies, increasing engagement, branding, and connecting with digital audiences. Pastini and Lilasari (2023) demonstrated that social media can be used to build brand awareness and increase customer loyalty.

Kencanawati et al. (2025) found that digital promotions can improve hotel competitiveness in the Bali tourism sector, while Akbar and Purnomo (2025) demonstrated that effective marketing strategies can increase broiler chicken sales.

However, it is important to remember that the influence of social media can have both positive and negative impacts, depending on the context and purpose of use. Therefore, it is crucial to understand how social media can be used effectively and responsibly to improve societal well-being (Sia et al., 2023; Maulida et al., 2025).

Together, these articles demonstrate the diverse applications of Peirce's semiotic theory to advertising analysis. They contribute to a deeper understanding of how advertisements function as complex systems of signs that communicate values, ideologies, and identities to consumers. By critically engaging with these semiotic frameworks, scholars can uncover the hidden meanings behind everyday advertisements and reflect on their broader cultural implications.

This study seeks to fill this research gap by examining the transformation of symbolism in health food advertisements through Peirce's semiotic perspective. This research is significant for two reasons. First, theoretically, it enriches communication and semiotic studies by applying Peirce's framework to health food advertisements on social media, a rapidly developing but underexplored context. Second, practically, this research can provide insights for advertising and marketing professionals in designing more ethical and responsible communication strategies, particularly regarding health claims and the lifestyle images they create.

The research questions posed in this study are: (1) how signs in healthy food advertisements on social media are constructed through the categories of icons, indices, and symbols; (2) how the transformation of symbolism occurs from mere product representations to complex representations of healthy lifestyles; and (3) what are the implications of this transformation for public perceptions of the meaning of "healthy."

2. Method

This research uses a qualitative approach with Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic analysis method. This approach was chosen because the focus of the research is to understand the meaning and symbolism contained in healthy food advertisements, not simply to measure communication effectiveness. Peirce's semiotics, with its triadic concept of representamen, object, and interpretant, allows researchers to examine how signs in advertisements function and how audiences interpret them.

The research data sources were healthy food advertisements posted on social media, specifically Instagram and TikTok, between January and June 2025. The sampling technique used purposive sampling, with the following criteria: (1) advertisements emphasizing a health or nutrition narrative, (2) using clear visual and text elements, and (3) originating from the official accounts of healthy food or beverage brands. Based on these criteria, approximately 30–40 advertisements were selected as units of analysis.

The units of analysis include text (captions, slogans, hashtags), visuals (images, colors, graphic symbols), audio (music or the narrator's voice in the video), and the context of the actor/influencer's representation. All data was collected through digital documentation, including screenshots and original links to the advertisements.

The analysis process was conducted in three stages. First, the description of the signs by identifying the representamen that appeared. Second, the categorization of the signs into icons, indexes, or symbols according to Peirce's classification. Third, the interpretation of the signs to uncover the meaning constructed by the advertisements, both related to the product and the healthy lifestyle offered. To ensure validity, the analysis was conducted by two researchers independently, and the results were then compared to increase the reliability of the interpretation (intercoder agreement).

With this design, the study hoped to illustrate the transformation of symbolism in healthy food advertisements on social media, while also highlighting its implications for the construction of the meaning of health in society.

3. Results and Discussion
3.1 Results
Shifting Representations of Health in Food Advertising

In today's digital era, the representation of health in food advertising has undergone a significant transformation. The concept of health, once limited to biological aspects, such as nutritional value and food safety, has now expanded to include more complex and contextual lifestyle symbols. This shift reflects changes in how we consume information and how food advertising adapts to evolving technological developments and social trends. Health food advertisements, particularly those on social media, increasingly blur the lines between objective nutritional information and more subjective personal narratives, incorporating elements of identity, social status, and prestige into an idealized image of health (Herlambang, 2025).

Visual Transformation and the Meaning of Healthy Food Advertising

Organic fruit juice advertisements on Instagram, for example, demonstrate a profound shift in the representation of health. These products are often promoted through visuals of fresh fruit, which directly serve as icons of freshness and health benefits. This fresh fruit symbol not only acts as a biological representation but also conveys a deeper meaning of a healthy, natural life free from harmful chemicals. However, advertising doesn't stop at using these icons. These visuals are often expanded with public figures or athletes consuming the product, which serves as an index to depict a healthy, active, and energetic lifestyle. In this case, the product is positioned not only as a tool for improving physical health, but also as a symbol of social prestige and personal aspirations (Herlambang, 2025; Sembiring, 2023).

This shift demonstrates how modern advertising speaks not only about what is consumed, but also about who the consumer is. The power of social media in shaping consumer perceptions of healthy food products cannot be underestimated. Consumers, especially younger generations active on platforms like Instagram, are not only seeking the health benefits of food products but also trying to find an identity that aligns with their own. In this context, product consumption is no longer limited to fulfilling biological needs but also to establishing a healthy and socially maintained self-image.

The Influence of Social Media on Health and Lifestyle Perceptions

With the increasing awareness of healthy lifestyles popularized by influencers on social media, many consumers now consider not only product benefits but also the identity narratives associated with such consumption. Social media plays a crucial role in creating this narrative by incorporating the personal lives of celebrities or influencers who use the product into their daily lives. For example, many fruit juice advertisements feature famous athletes or celebrities who consistently appear active and healthy, further linking the product to social status and prestige. In other words, the product promoted in the advertisement is seen not only as a means to physical health but also as a means to attain higher social status (Tanuwijaya, 2024; Gunawan & Wijaya, 2023).

This phenomenon illustrates how healthy food products have been positioned in advertising as the key to a more meaningful and desirable life. Consumers tend to purchase products not only for their physical benefits but also because they desire to be part of a larger community that prioritizes health as a core

value in their lives. Therefore, these advertisements emphasize portraying healthy, energetic, and vibrant individuals as representatives of the consumers who consume the product.

Complex Health Narratives and Identity Construction

In the context of food advertising, this more complex narrative shifts consumers' primary focus from simply seeking healthy products to seeking personal identity. Consumers, through advertising, are encouraged to reflect not only on the benefits they can derive from a product, but also on how it can enhance their social status and transform their self-image. For example, advertisements for healthy foods not only highlight its nutritional and balanced benefits but also package these benefits in a more personal story or narrative about vitality, fitness, and social prestige (Mulyadi & Ningsih, 2023).

At a deeper level, these healthy food advertisements serve as a tool for shaping and constructing social identities. They portray healthy lifestyles as part of popular culture valued by society. For example, advertisements featuring athletes or celebrities consuming certain products link.

3.2 Discussion

The Role of Icons, Indexes, and Symbols in the Construction of Meaning

Peirce's semiotic analysis provides an in-depth perspective on how healthy food advertisements on social media use a combination of iconic, indexical, and symbolic elements to construct complex meanings in the minds of consumers. According to Peirce, icons, indexes, and symbols are categories of signs that play different roles in constructing meaning. In the context of healthy food advertisements, each of these elements has its own function in conveying a multi-layered message, which relates not only to nutritional aspects but also to lifestyle, social status, and personal aspirations.

Icons in Healthy Food Advertisements

An icon is a sign that bears a similarity or resemblance to the object it symbolizes. In healthy food advertisements, icons are typically visual representations that resemble reality, such as images of fresh vegetables, fruit, fit bodies, or green, lush natural scenery. The use of these icons aims to establish a direct association between healthy food and freshness and natural goodness. This icon not only creates an image that is easily understood by the audience but also communicates the idea that the product is a good choice for health (Herlambang, 2025).

An example of an icon in a healthy food advertisement can be seen in the image of organic fruit juice, where the visual of the fresh fruit chosen serves to demonstrate the product's quality. However, the symbolism is not limited to the product's physical appearance but extends to a deeper meaning regarding a healthy, natural, and chemical-free lifestyle. For example, in a fruit juice advertisement, the image of fresh fruit combined with natural elements—such as green trees or a natural backdrop—reinforces the message of the balance of nature and a healthy body (Fadhil, 2024).

Index in Healthy Food Advertisements

In Peirce's semiotics, an index is a sign that has a direct relationship with the object it symbolizes, often in the form of a cause-and-effect relationship or existence within a specific context. In a healthy food advertisement, the index appears in the form of an association between the product and a specific activity that directly indicates the desired health benefits. For example, advertisements for low-calorie drinks or diet products often feature images of people running or exercising, indicating that the product is suitable for those who are active and maintain physical fitness.

Advertisements that depict physical activity, such as running or exercising, directly link the product to fitness, vitality, and high energy. This demonstrates how the product serves as an indicator of a healthy, active lifestyle, which goes beyond simply meeting nutritional needs and also relates to consumers' aspirations for physical fitness and overall well-being (Sutrisna, 2023). By using this index, advertisements not only sell products but also encourage audiences to identify with an active, healthy lifestyle.

Symbols in Healthy Food Advertising

Symbols are more complex signs, whose meanings depend on cultural conventions and social context. In healthy food advertising, symbols are used to construct a deeper narrative that goes beyond the physical representation of the product. These symbols often appear in the form of words used to describe the desired product or lifestyle, such as "natural," "organic," "clean eating," or "guilt-free." These words not only describe the physical qualities of the product but also convey broader meanings regarding healthy lifestyles and moral choices associated with sustainability and self-awareness.

For example, the use of the word "guilt-free" in healthy food advertisements suggests that the product not only provides physical benefits but also provides freedom from the guilt often associated with consuming foods considered unhealthy. This indicates that healthy food is seen not only as a solution to nutritional problems but also as a solution to broader psychological and social needs. In other words, the "guilt-free"

symbol implies that choosing healthy food is the right moral choice, one that can improve overall quality of life (Fadhil, 2024).

This transformation of symbolism demonstrates that healthy food, through the symbols used in advertising, is now positioned not only as a biological necessity but also as a product offering status, self-awareness, and even morality. Consumers who choose products with these symbols are not only consuming food to maintain physical health but also to affirm their personal values and demonstrate their identity as individuals conscious of a healthy lifestyle (Laoli, 2024).

4. Conclusion

The transformation of symbolism in healthy food advertisements on social media has undergone significant changes in recent years. Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic analysis of healthy lifestyle trends on social media shows that healthy food advertisements function not only as a means of product promotion but also as symbolic constructions that influence consumer perceptions and behavior.

In the digital era, the concept of health is no longer represented solely through biological aspects, such as nutritional value or food safety, but also through symbols related to lifestyle. Healthy food advertisements on social media demonstrate a transformation in message delivery: from simply emphasizing the nutritional benefits of a product to constructing more complex narratives, such as vitality, fitness, and social prestige (Herlambang, 2025).

Peirce's semiotic analysis shows that healthy food advertisements on social media rely on a combination of icons, indices, and symbols to reinforce their messages. Icons are generally manifested in visual forms that resemble reality, such as fresh vegetables, natural scenery, or a fit body. Indices are present in associations between a product and a specific activity, for example, a low-calorie drink displayed alongside a person running. Meanwhile, more complex symbols, such as the use of the words "natural," "organic," or "clean eating," require cultural conventions to understand (Fadhil, 2024).

The transformation of symbolism in healthy food advertisements on social media is also influenced by the growing public awareness of healthy lifestyle issues popularized on social media. Consumers are not only looking for healthy products, but also for the identity narratives attached to those products. The role of influencers in healthy food advertisements also reinforces this symbolism, where their personal beliefs and lifestyles are attached to the products being promoted (Suprayogi, 2022).

In this context, social media functions not only as a medium for advertising distribution but also as a space where health symbolism is collectively produced and reproduced. User interactions through likes, comments, and shares create a new cycle in which the symbols created in advertisements are reinforced by audience participation (Laoli, 2025).

In conclusion, the transformation of symbolism in healthy food advertisements on social media demonstrates that advertisements function not only as a means of product promotion but also as symbolic constructions that influence consumer perceptions and behavior. Peirce's semiotic analysis shows that healthy food advertising on social media relies on a combination of icons, indexes, and symbols to reinforce messages, and that social media plays a significant role in producing and reproducing health symbolism.

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