



# Reversing The Ontology Of Anthropocene Do Semiotics Of Sustainability Advertising Hold The Promise?

Anand Saxena<sup>1</sup>, Anubha Mukherji<sup>2</sup>, Rita Nagpal<sup>3\*</sup>, Aditi Saxena<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Associate Professor (Commerce), Deen Dayal Upadhyaya College, University of Delhi.

<sup>2</sup> Associate Professor (English), Deen Dayal Upadhyaya College, University of Delhi

<sup>3</sup>Associate Professor (Commerce), Dyal Singh College, University of Delhi.

<sup>4</sup>Scholar, Fashion Studies

\* Corresponding Author

**Citation:** Saxena et al. (2024), Reversing The Ontology Of Anthropocene Do Semiotics Of

Sustainability Advertising Hold The Promise? , Educational Administration: Theory And Practice, 30(4), 4201-4208, Doi:

10.53555/kuey.v30i4.2177

## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

Oxford Dictionary defines the Anthropocene as the epoch denoting the current geological age when human activity has been the dominant influence on climate and the environment. It defines semiotics as the study of signs and symbols and their use or interpretation. In advertising, it refers to the use of a host of audio-visual and verbal cues for invoking awareness, interest and positive action among the target audience / public at large (Johnson, 2012).

The present study, following Benson, problematizes the dominant Anthropocene ontology of considering humans as villains of extinct species, polluted environment and climate change (Benson, 2019). It proceeds from the premise that there is an opportunity to redefine the relationship between humans and the natural world and thus evolve an alternative ontology of humans *in* rather than *to* nature. The research question it addresses is if the semiotics of sustainability advertising hold the promise of developing the alternative, pro planet ontology of the anthropocene.

The study explores the emergent strands of communicating sustainability through the semiotic analysis of select advertising campaigns. It draws on Pierce's triadic system of symbolic interpretation that comprises the representamen, the object and the interpretant (Kadim & Abbas, 2022). For example, a drop is a representamen that signifies the liquid fossil fuel and may thus be interpreted as an indicator of a fast-depleting natural resource. The paper notes that these semiotics - more so when backed by the commitment of purpose- imply the emergence of social and environmental advertising as the mainstay of fostering brand identity as well as stakeholder engagement. In our recent work, we have acknowledged the power of such advertising in influencing people's perceptions and sustainability behaviours (Saxena et al., 2023) and the use of such advertisements as teaching and learning objects. The paper develops a communication framework for fostering pro-planet cognition, affect and behaviours.

**Keywords:** Anthropocene; sustainability; semiotics; social and environmental advertising

## Introduction

The prevalent ontology of the anthropocene predominantly considers humans as villains of extinct species, polluted environment and climate change (Benson, 2019). The paper problematizes such a one-sided understanding of the anthropocene. It delves into the question if contemporary advertising and corporate communications provides robust evidence in support of an alternative, pro planet or ecocentric worldview on the relationship between man (gender neutral) and nature. It does this through the semiotic analysis of select advertising campaigns.

The paper is organised as follows. The present section is introductory. Here we clarify the concepts used in the paper. Besides, we briefly review early and later constructions of the anthropocene to put the relationship between man (gender neutral) and nature. We also elaborate the rationale behind recourse to advertising and corporate communications in understanding this relationship. In Section II we focus on the role of

sustainability advertising in fostering ecocentric perceptions and behaviours among the target audiences and society at large. Here, we draw on the idea of the hierarchy of effects advertising is said to have on the cognition, affect and behaviours of people (Barry & Howard, 1990). Section III is devoted to a discussion of the method of semiotics. Here we illustrate the method with the help of select advertising/communication campaigns. Section IV contains the conclusions and their implications.

### Concepts

**Anthropocene.** The word Anthropocene comes from the Greek terms for human ('anthropo') and new ('cene'). It is a geological concept and thus implies a "new" epoch or age. Epochs can last for millions of years. These are defined with respect to significant changes in the layers of earth e.g. changes in the mineral composition of rocks and the appearance of distinctive fossils. Each variation reflects a major climatic change (*What Is the Anthropocene?*, n.d.). In other words, it is a unit of the geological unit of time comprising eon, era, period, epoch and age in descending order of the length of the time (Contributors to Wikimedia projects, 2023). Earth's history, traditionally, is explained by natural progress alone. However, of late the scientists are getting convinced that it is human activity- agriculture, urbanisation, deforestation and pollution- rather than any natural progress that caused extraordinary changes on Earth. Although, there still is neither consensus nor any official proclamation to refer to the present epoch as anthropocene, yet it has become a popular concept to denote the relationship between man (gender neutral) and nature.

**Semiotics.** Etymologically, semiotics is the Latinized form of Greek *sēmeiōtikos* "significant, portending, worth marking," also "observant of signs," adjective form of *sēmeiosis* "indication," from *sēmeioun* "to signal, to interpret a sign," from *sēmeion* "a sign, mark, token," from *sēma* "sign" (*Semiotic*, n.d.). As a concept it refers to the usage and interpretation of signs or symbols -audio-visual and verbal cues- in linguistics and psychology. It has had a fairly long history of usage in advertising (Johnson, 2012) generally as well as for representation of environmental issues there (Peaverini, 2014).

### Early and Later Conceptions of the Anthropocene

The Earth is 4.5 billion years old, and humans have been around for around 200,000 years or so. Yet the studies on impact of human activities on earth and its environment has been rather a recent phenomenon. In fact, conventionally, philosophers, historians and geologists have separated human history from natural history (Chakrabarty, 2009). Thus, early conceptions of the anthropocene nearly adhered to this separation. This is evident from the fact that though various start dates for the Anthropocene have been proposed, ranging from the beginning of the Neolithic Revolution 12,000–15,000 years ago, to as recently as the 1960s, yet the dominant view is to attribute it to Britain's Industrial Revolution in the eighteenth century. We know that it was powered by the fossil fuel (coal) combustion in steam engines. As the industrial revolution spread demand for fossil fuels (initially coal, later petroleum) increased and so did the carbon dioxide emission resulting in rapid global warming and climate change.

The attribution of the planetary crisis to human activity or "modernisation" is but one of the perspectives for the anthropocene. several responses (Figure 1).

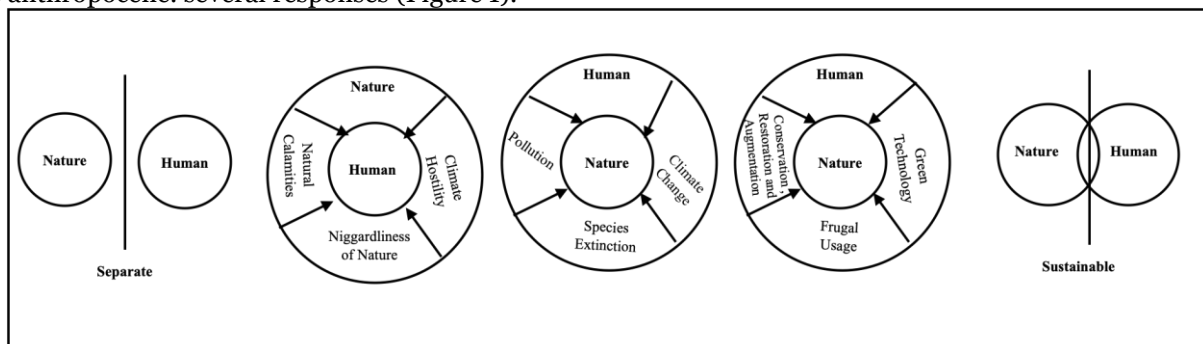


Figure1: Anthropocene- From Separatist to Sustainability Perspectives

In Figure, we problematise the dominant perspective of humans as villains in the material exploitation of nature for it rests on the binary of nature and humans (Benson, 2019). In a relational sense humans, their material culture and nature interact in a myriad of ways that provide an opportunity for communicating anthropocene.

We are interested in seeing if it should be possible to develop an alternative, proplanet ontology. In other words, if it should be possible to distinguish between the good or the bad anthropocene (Kunnas, 2017)? We take recourse to advertising (and the semiotics defining it) in seeing how it may promote awareness, interest, desire and action favouring the planet.

*Rationale Behind Recourse to Advertising*

We define advertising as persuasive communication. Irrespective of whether it is commercial or social communication its power of persuasion is capable of turning its audience toward an ideal or a cause- or- the product or service it represents. In advertising literature, the communication impacts of advertising are hierarchically envisaged as awareness, interest, desire and action toward an ideal or a cause (Barry & Howard, 1990). These impacts are realised through incorporating appropriate appeals in advertising messages (Hornik et al., 2017). Here, our concern is sustainability-oriented behaviours (Peaverini, 2014).

In our earlier work (Saxena et al., 2023), we have argued that the advertising industry is a community of professional practice. Conscious and competent as they are, professionals would be inclined toward incorporating sustainability ideas in the commercials they design for their clients. Because this industry mediates between business clients and their audiences, the potentiality of incorporation of these concerns gets amplified in view of their engagement with sustainability as well. Thus, the marketing concept of the clients has also undergone a change to embrace sustainability. On the one hand. And on the other hand the stakeholders of the clients, more so consumers and investors are also incorporating prosocial and proplanet concerns in their decision-making. In view of the congruence of the values of the advertisement professionals, clients and their stakeholders, environmentally educative advertisements do have a strong potential for reversing the ontology of the anthropocene.

**Role of Advertising in Fostering Sustainability**

We propose two types of effects- direct and indirect- of advertising in fostering sustainability. Advertising directly persuades the target audience via a hierarchy [or variety] of effects of explicit and implicit appeals (Sun et al., 2022). Indirectly, advertisements may be used as learning objects in diverse classroom settings and thus raise the levels of awareness, interest and engagement of the learners toward sustainable behaviours. This in turn will influence their future roles as consumers, employees, entrepreneurs, managers, investors, stakeholders in organisations as well as responsible humans in their relationship with nature.

*Sustainability Appeals in Advertisements*

Ecologically themed advertising appeals more so the ones aimed at influencing the target audience’s belief that he or she can make a difference (Tucker et al., 2012) can be an effective creative strategy that the advertisers may adopt. The use of semiotics such as mother nature smiling back upon an act of its conservation can be cited as an example in this regard.

*Hierarchy of Effects on Consumers*

Creative use of symbols can really impact the effects advertising can have on people’s awareness, intention and desire for sustainability as well as their actions and behaviours (Smith et al., 2008). It may be noted that the informational needs of the target audience may be different and hence the advertisers in the true spirit of the marketing concept begin with an understanding of the customer’s rather than seller’s perspective for greater effectiveness.

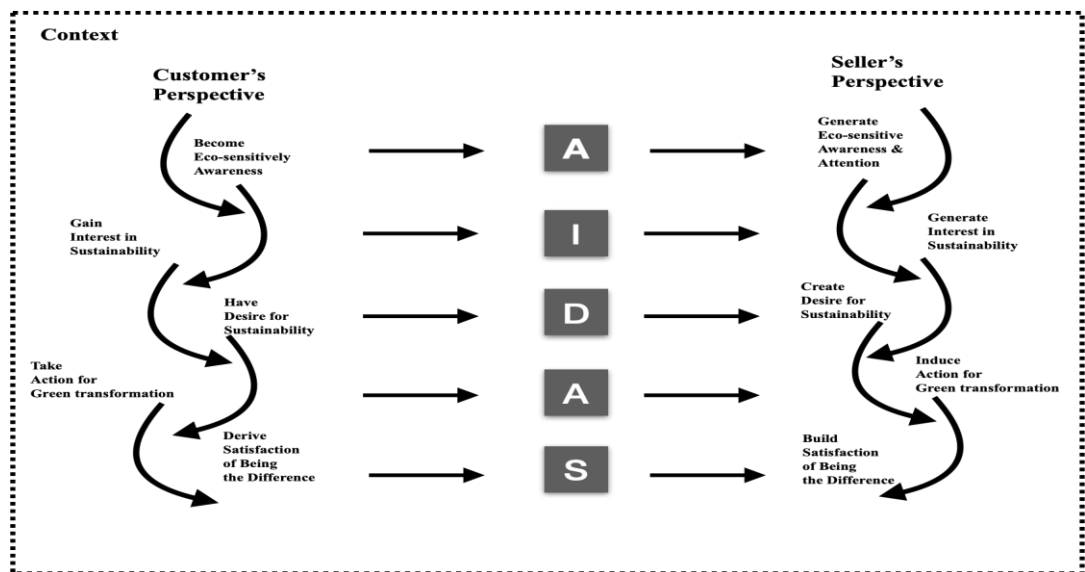


Figure 2: Marketing Concept of Hierarchy of Effects

*Advertisements as Tools for Sustainability Education*

As educators we use advertisements as learning objects in diverse classroom settings. Whether print or audio-visual advertisements draw and hold learner engagement, are short duration learning intervention and

impactful in view of their intensity. We have seen that carefully chosen advertisements potentially are potent pedagogic devices.

In our earlier work we developed a comprehensive framework for the use of advertisements as tools for sustainability education. See, Figure 3 below.

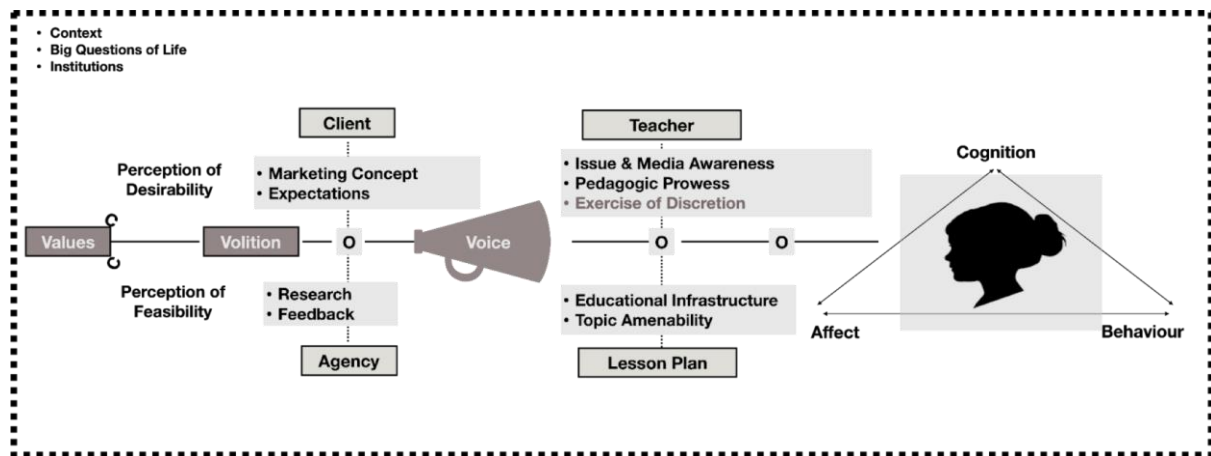


Figure 3: Comprehensive Framework of Advertisements for Sustainability Education  
(Saxena et al., 2023)

While an elaboration of each of the elements of Figure 3 is beyond the scope of this paper, some observations here would be in order. ‘Big Questions of Life’ referred to here are the challenges of sustainability. The institutions refer to the economic, political and socially asserted rules of the game that explain the behaviour of the individual actors and its credibility. ‘Exercise of Discretion’ here means that the educators must subject ecological-themed communications to a careful scrutiny to avoid using content that conveys “green” and “blue” washing (“Green Marketing and Communication and How to Avoid Green and Blue Washing,” 2020). The least that can be done is to place a prominent disclaimer as these learning objects are used in classroom settings.

## Method

Semiotics, the study of signs and symbols is the method used in the paper. In this method, the signs proper as well as the symbolic meanings of words, sounds, metaphors etc. are used for conveying and making sense. The latter aspect, that is symbolic interpretation, lends the semiotic analysis with a postmodern construction that takes the meaning from the objective to the subjective realms. In this tradition, two schools or systems of semiotic analysis are discernible (Kadim & Abbas, 2022). One, the European school and the other the American school, led respectively by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) and the American philosopher, Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914). Saussure developed a dyadic framework comprising the signifier and the signified for conveying and interpreting the symbols. The signifier is the perceptible form of the sign, that is, what we see, hear or read.. The signified is the certain mental idea or “meaning” for which the perceptible form stands. Pierce developed a triadic system comprising the representamen or the sign itself, the object that the sign signifies and the interpretant that explains the relationship between the sign and the object (Contributors to Wikimedia projects, ‘Semiotic theory of Charles Sanders Peirce,’ 2024a). See, Figure 4.

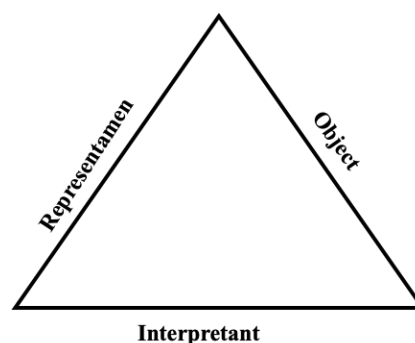


Figure 4: Peirce's Triadic Relation of Sign

In Pierce’s framework, the representamen is the sign itself. It is similar to the signifier in Saussure's dyadic sign theory. The object is the referent to which the sign refers to. The Interpretant is the meaning or understanding of the relation between the sign and the object it signifies. In this paper we draw on Pierce’s framework.

*An Illustration: Apple Campaign, ‘Status 2030 | Mother Nature’*

This professional campaign titled '2030 Status | Mother Nature' was published in the United States in September, 2023. It was created for the brand: Apple, by ad agency: TBWA \Media Arts Lab, a bespoke advertising agency dedicated to Apple Inc. is an American multinational technology company headquartered in Cupertino, California known for its laptops, mobile handsets, smartwatches, etc.

In the advertisement, American actor Octavia Spencer portrays ‘Mother Nature,’ grilling Apple executives including boss Tim Cook on its efforts to become fully carbon neutral by 2023. During what seems like a sustainability review meeting, Spencer probes the suits on their progress on three sustainability vitals, viz., materials, energy and transportation. The five-minute short was created and directed by Rhys Thomas of Stink Films (Houston, 2023). The video can be accessed by scanning the QR Code below.



Figure : ‘Status 2030 | Mother Nature’  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ty-GPNCu1h4&t=202s>

Table 1 captures the text and image capture of the Apple advertisement and Table-2 its semiotic analysis.

Table 1: Text and Image Capture of the Apple Advertisement

In a hurry to reach the meeting	The CEO Tim Cook already in his seat	Mother Nature on her way	Mother Nature, Madam Chair
Welcoming whispers “Mother Nature!”	The CEO wants to say welcome words	Straight to Business. Reminds him of the commitment made in 2020 to bring Apple’s carbon front to Zero	The materials person talks about eliminating all plastics from packaging
Mother Nature, “Let me guess, in fifty years?”	Mother Nature, by the end of the next year (2024)	100 per cent recycled aluminium in the Enclosures of all Apple Products	And electricity?
We are operating on 100 % clean electricity . . . Thanks to your powerful wind and solar energy	All Apple offices are carbon neutral . . . We are committed to removing all greenhouse gas emissions . . .	You are seriously explaining carbon neutrality to Mother Nature? You want me to tell how photosynthesis works too? Don’t!	Also over 300 suppliers have committed to using clean, renewable energy
Next! Transportation	We are transporting More Products by Ocean rather than Air which reduces transportation emission by Over 95%. . . we are investing in projects that protect Earth’s soil and plants and trees.	Everyone says we’re planting trees	We planted forests . . . our aim is to permanently remove carbon from the atmosphere
As you can see , we have innovated . . . to reduce our impact on the planet . . . yet there is a lot more work to do	We have something else to share . . . Apple’s first 100 per cent carbon neutral product	I want to see more of them.	You will. By 2023 all Apple devices will have net zero climate impact

Source: (Apple, UAE, 2023)



Table 2: Semiotic Analysis

Representamen	Object	Interpretant
Women running somewhere with a tablet in semi-formal attire	Assistant	The woman running here symbolizes a busybody or a go-getter. Her attire and the colours she is wearing symbolize the seriousness of the job. Semi-formal clothes symbolize professionalism but also comfort to an extent.
The white coloured tablet that the woman is holding against her dark clothing	Ipad, White	The use of a white iPad cover does not show the logo of the product but is quite evident that it is an Apple product.  The use of the colour white against dark clothing here symbolizes perfection and a clean design.
Change in view, glass walls looking towards greenery	Tress, Transparent Walls	The glass walls symbolize the transparency of a workplace. It may also symbolize luxury. Trees symbolize a clean environment.
The nodding gesture made by the women	Expression	Determination, confidence.
People gather, discussing their part of the presentation. The woman enters mumbling "She should be here any minute."	The climate of the meeting room	Tense, anxious. Signifying the importance of the person who might be joining them and the theme of the presentation.
The assistant notices a dying plant and hides it.	Dead plant	Various symbolic meanings in different cultures but here, carelessness, and lack of attention. It also symbolizes her imperfection, since it was only one plant out of so many that were wilted.
Seating at the meeting table. The CEO is seated at the end of the table.	Conference	Participative cultur Common stakes
Those present in the meeting	Significant presence of women	Sustainability - a matter of feminist ethics
Presence of Tim Cook	The CEO	Tim Cook's presence symbolises the importance of leadership in corporate sustainability endeavours
The objects in the room shake and tremble. Ladybug lands on a glass and everything is calm again.	Arrival of Mother Nature.	The objects trembling in the foreground symbolize the power and incoming of mother nature. The ladybug landing on the glass portrays the literal arrival.
Mother Nature arrives in a black suit with a gold brooch.	Black, Gold.	Usually nature is associated with green but black here symbolises power, seriousness and mystery. Gold pin sets mother nature at the top of the hierarchy.
A man wearing a leather jacket	Leather jacket	Imperfection. Mother nature points toward it and thus symbolically emphasises that sustainability demands integrity of thought, words and action

The tone of mother nature while discussing and asking for improvements in products.	Sarcastic	Symbolizes disguised feelings of disappointment.
Tim Cook speaks	The CEO debrief	Sums up the corporate sustainability innovations & initiatives Accepts humbly that a lot needs be done
Mother nature stands up and says "see you"	Conclusion	The meeting comes to an end. Next review in the next year
Dead plant greens up		Mother Nature's acknowledgment that if one chooses to be discrete, nature nurtures Celebration that the meeting went well

### Conclusion

Every species on Earth adapts to an environment. We humans, however, through technology have modified our environments in ways that are destructive not only to other species, land, air and water but also to ourselves in the long run. Somehow, we came to learn that nature is for our consumption and technical progress is about more efficient ways of "exploiting" it. Good news is that we can [in fact, we must] find a way to heal ourselves and the Earth in the "drama" of the Anthropocene (Schimelpfenig, 2017).

The desacralized and instrumental view of nature is but a one world view that too recently developed. We must aspire for a worldview of civilisations nestled in the lap of mother nature.

The advertisement campaign of Apple Inc. '2030 Status | Mother Nature' is semiotically significant. Reference to nature as mother is suggestive of the possible change in the plot of this drama.

This case study shows that advertising can really help in modifying the narrative and discourse of our relationship with nature. In the advertisement, Mother Nature is in a commanding and demanding situation. And the visual and verse of the CEO of the world's largest company by market capitalization saying that there's still work to be done adds a well-placed note of humility and responsibility (Ankita M., 2023), both represent instances of feminine ethics.

Should not the ethics of our being and becoming be due for a feminist transformation? Traditional ethics prizes masculine cultural traits like "independence, autonomy, intellect, will, wariness, hierarchy, domination, culture, transcendence, product, asceticism, war, and death," and, gives less weight to culturally feminine traits like "interdependence, community, connection, sharing, emotion, trust, absence of hierarchy, nature, immanence, process, joy, peace, and life (Contributors to Wikimedia projects, 'Feminist Ethics,' 2024b)."

The advertising professionals may take note of the whispers of alternative perspectives on the anthropocene. They are therefore advised to reflect upon creative appeals for fostering pro planet and prosocial marketing. Lest these appeals be mere communication objects, the sponsoring organisations be advised to engage with nature with greater humility and responsibility.

Pro planet and prosocial advertisements can be great learning objects. As such they may help the educators in shaping learners' perspectives on the anthropocene.

Even at the expense of repetition, a disclaimer would be in order. Symbolic interpretations are subjective. And that advertisements like any communication evoke substantive and associative responses. In this paper, we have not critiqued the Apple advertisement. For example, the jury is still out and open on whether '2030 Status | Mother Nature' ad is symbolic of greenwashing or earnest climate action (WLT, 2023).

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