

Semiotic analysis of multivitamin advertisements

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Abstract

Associations and visual imagery are frequently used in advertisements and represent a significant focus within semiotic studies. This study aims to analyze the online advertisements of leading multivitamin brands in Turkey within the context of consumer perception, examining how their visual and textual strategies affect the target audience. The main research question is: "How are multivitamin advertisements in Turkey perceived by consumers, and how is this perception related to the use of color, visual symbols, and messaging in the ads?" Here, consumer perception is defined as the combination of users' reviews, star ratings, and impressions formed through engagement with advertisement visuals. The study focuses on the online advertisements of Supradyn, Orzax, Solgar, and Pharmaton, employing Roland Barthes' semiotic framework to analyze color usage, figures, and symbolic elements. The analysis demonstrates that brands produce both denotative and connotative meanings: Supradyn conveys energy and renewal, Orzax emphasizes preparedness and conscious living, Solgar promotes a scientific and gender-specific approach, and Pharmaton communicates inclusive energy and dynamism. Color analysis reveals that yellow and white dominate across all brands, while blue and black appear in some, reinforcing perceptions of energy, trust, and purity. Consumer evaluations show high satisfaction for Pharmaton and Supradyn, while Orzax and Solgar cater to a more niche audience. Overall, the findings indicate that optimizing visual and strategic meaning layers can enhance both consumer perception and brand loyalty.

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1. Introduction

Advertising is one of the most influential communication tools designed to shape audience perceptions and persuade consumers by promoting products and services [23]. In order for such perception to be formed, the target audience must first be aware of the product. Advertising—carried out in exchange for payment—has the power to construct gender roles and alter human behavior [9]. As David Ogilvy famously states, "If your advertising doesn't sell, it isn't creative," emphasizing the importance of accurate positioning for shaping consumer perception. Advertising conveys multiple messages to consumers within a short timeframe. While these messages seemingly aim at informing and persuading consumers to purchase, they simultaneously seek to implant certain meanings in their minds. At this point, semiotics becomes relevant, as it aids in decoding the linguistic and visual layers of advertising messages. Semiotics serves as a positioning tool that helps clarify both explicit and implicit meanings behind the verbal and visual components presented in advertisements.

Semiotic analysis in advertising gained momentum during the 1980s. Semiotics has made significant contributions to marketing and consumer studies, particularly through the models introduced by Saussure and Peirce [6,14]. Mick et al. [24] emphasize that semiotics-based advertising research reveals how consumers interpret and construct meaning from signs within

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institutional, societal, and cultural contexts. Semiotics substantially contributes to addressing methodological challenges in advertising research by simplifying complex messages and ensuring effective communication [25]. It provides a key framework for brands seeking to build strong emotional and symbolic connections with consumers.

This study examines the advertisements of the four most highly rated multivitamin brands on Turkish online platforms, considering their impact on consumer perceptions. Employing Roland Barthes' semiotic framework enables an analysis of how textual and visual elements convey not only surface meanings but underlying ideological and cultural messages. Although semiotic analysis in advertising has a long history, only a small number of recent studies (2021-2025) systematically adopt Barthes' perspective-and those that do are generally limited to certain product categories (e.g., beauty, fast food) rather than nutritional or wellness advertising. By focusing on multivitamin advertising in Turkey and positioning consumers as active co-creators of meaning (rather than passive recipients), this research fills a clear gap in the literature and offers an original contribution: the integration of Barthesian semiotics with contemporary digital advertising contexts to illuminate how wellness oriented brands construct symbolic meaning and how target audiences negotiate it.

2. Roland Barthes' Semiotic Analysis Method

The term semiology originates from the Greek word semeion (sign). John Locke (1632–1704) conceptualized the analysis of signs under the term semeiotics. Later, the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce used the term semeiotic, while the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure referred to the field as sémiologie. Today, the term semiotics is the most widely used. Semiotics is an interdisciplinary field that examines how meaning is constructed through signs, how individuals produce and interpret signs, and how communication systems function within these sign structures. Saussure's linguistic work precedes formal semiotic studies, focusing on language's function, coding, and communicational significance in society. Over time, linguistic research evolved into a subfield of semiotics [22]. Saussure conceptualized the sign as composed of a signifier (expression) and signified (content). While signifiers carry universal meaning, signifieds vary culturally [10,21,26]. Peirce, on the other hand, defined sign processes through the triadic model: the sign itself, the object, and the interpreter [17]. Roland Barthes (1915–1980) significantly expanded semiotics in the second half of the 20th century by applying it in social sciences and across fields such as advertising, architecture, and medicine [20]. Barthes' key contribution lies in distinguishing between denotation (literal meaning) and connotation (cultural meaning). According to Barthes, meaning emerges through the interaction of visual elements, and analysis should proceed through formal description, semantic exploration, evaluation of alternative meanings, and final synthesis [5,13].

3. Roland Barthes' Semiotic Model and Its Use in Advertising Research

Roland Barthes' semiotic model most commonly applied in advertising research involves examining signs within the framework of the signifier and the signified. Signs identified in advertisements are analyzed at both denotative and connotative levels. As the connotative dimension of signs is shaped by diverse subcultural structures within society, researchers are expected to conduct detailed analyses of the historical and cultural context surrounding the signs. Otherwise, they may limit their interpretations to only the denotative level or risk making inaccurate evaluations in an attempt to extract meaning. In many advertising studies utilizing Barthes' signifier–signified framework, researchers also incorporate his other semiotic models into the analytical process. Toptaş [11] for instance, examined how the female image is represented in promotional posters of domestically produced films released in Türkiye. Treating film posters as commercial products that function similarly to advertisements, the researcher analyzed them as advertising texts. Unlike many studies employing Barthes' model in an exploratory manner, Toptaş formulated hypotheses regarding the characteristics of female figures across different film genres and gender norms. These hypotheses were tested by analyzing the denotative–connotative meanings, codes, and syntagmatic and paradigmatic relationships of the signs present in the posters. Similarly, Özkantar [18] first explored the concepts of racism and semiotics and then

analyzed Benetton advertisements using Barthes' approach to ideology as a cultural construct. The study demonstrated that although the advertisements appear to embrace an anti-discriminatory approach at first glance, a deeper analysis revealed the presence of racially charged meanings. The research indicated that Benetton advertisements—selected through purposive sampling and analyzed semiotically—contributed negatively to racial discourse, reflecting implicit racist undertones. Boyacı Yıldırım [7] examined the “Turkcell Fiber Support for Families” advertisement, aiming to identify the associative mechanisms used to shape consumers' cognitive perceptions. Employing Barthes' semiotic method, the study decoded the linguistic and visual messages and revealed that the brand enriched meaning through various associations. The analysis showed how the advertisement employed linguistic codes, audiovisual symbols, myths, metaphors, metonymies, and archetypes to construct rich layers of meaning and influence consumer perception through cultural symbols. Arı [1] applied Barthes' semiotic method to analyze two Elidor commercials, highlighting the influence of modern advertising on gender politics and cultural values. The study demonstrated that the advertisements strongly emphasized themes of female empowerment and challenged traditional gender norms, contributing to broader cultural transformations. In this study, Barthes' model was selected as the most appropriate method for analyzing the online advertisements of four major multivitamin brands. The model allows for the examination of both the messages conveyed to consumers and the cultural and social connotations embedded in the underlying meanings through the use of color, figures, and symbols. Thus, the study enables the analysis of advertisements not only as marketing strategies but also as sites of cultural and social meaning production, contributing to the broader tradition of semiotic research.

4. Method and Materials

The aim of this study is to conduct a semiotic analysis of advertisements published on Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube for the multivitamin brands Supradyn, Orzax, Solgar, and Pharmaton, which operate in the over-the-counter pharmaceutical sector, and to decipher the perceptions created in the target audience. The research employs a non-probability purposive sampling method, frequently used in qualitative studies. In qualitative research, the primary goal is not generalization, but rather developing an in-depth and holistic understanding. Purposive sampling techniques are particularly useful for exploring and explaining phenomena and events in detail [19]. Accordingly, this study adopted purposive sampling and identified four advertisements from the specified multivitamin brands across relevant social media platforms. In the analysis of the advertisements, Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis model was applied to decode the messages embedded within the commercials.

4.1 Findings

Using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework, the advertisements of the four leading multivitamin brands that received the highest engagement on social media—Supradyn, Orzax, Solgar, and Pharmaton—were analyzed. The analysis was conducted across the dimensions of Sign, Signifier (visual representation), Signified (conceptual meaning), Denotation (surface meaning), and Connotation (cultural and ideological meaning). The evaluations are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Semiotic analysis of Supradyn, Orzax, Solgar, and Pharmaton advertisements

Brand	Sign	Signifier	Signified	Denotation	Connotation
Supradyn	A woman running	A woman jogging on a tree-lined path where leaves transition from green to yellow, wearing grey sportswear and fluorescent running shoes	A physically fit and healthy woman	A woman with her hair tied up, wearing a fitness tracker on her arm, running outdoors	Women who use Supradyn can maintain their vitality and perform regular, healthy exercise even during autumn; Supradyn supports energy and renewal

Orzax	A woman walking	A woman wearing a white top, brown-white polka-dot skirt, with long brown hair, black sunglasses, grey boots, standing in front of Istanbul's Maiden's Tower; her phone rings and she removes eight Orzax Ocean products from her bag	A woman preparing for autumn	A woman who stops while walking as her phone rings and places her vitamins on the pavement	A woman who is prepared for life's surprises and carries valuable supplements with her, symbolizing conscious health and readiness
Solgar	Two vitamin bottles	A split background in purple and mint green; the purple background (women) features a small vase with flowers, and a pink bottle with yellow cap and purple tablets in front; the mint background (men) features a coffee cup and eyeglasses, and a blue bottle with yellow cap and green tablets in front	Gender-specific multivitamin products	Multivitamins formulated separately for women and men	Since 1947, the brand has emphasized scientific innovation, sustainable high-quality ingredients, and global production; products reflect a vision of meeting gender-specific daily nutritional needs, reinforcing a premium and science-driven identity
Pharmaton	Appearing multivitamin boxes with orange and yellow bubbles	A background split into orange and yellow with floating bubbles; multiple Pharmaton boxes appear in sequence, featuring male and female silhouettes; the hashtag "Don't Stop Yourself with Pharmaton Vitality" appears	A multivitamin designed for both genders	A product suitable for both men and women	A message of continuous energy and vitality, promoting an active lifestyle and energetic weekends shared with a partner; inclusivity and motivation highlighted

In Supradyn's advertisement, the image of a woman running in a forested area where the leaves shift from green to yellow, wearing grey sportswear and fluorescent running shoes, represents a fit, healthy, and energetic body. At the denotative level, the viewer sees "a woman exercising." At the connotative level, however, she is constructed as "a modern woman who maintains her energy in every season and derives her vitality from Supradyn." The fitness tracker on her arm and her tied-up hair symbolize order and self-discipline. Thus, the advertisement presents the female body as a symbol of health and willpower, while positioning the brand as "the key to resisting seasonal fatigue."

In the Orzax advertisement, the woman walking in front of the Maiden's Tower—an iconic landmark of Istanbul—who pauses when her phone rings and takes Orzax Ocean products out of her bag, constructs the image of a modern individual who takes care of herself amid the fast pace of daily life. At the denotative level, the scene is simply “a woman walking in the city.” At the connotative level, it represents “a lifestyle that is balanced, self-confident, and prepared for life's surprises.” Her colorful outfit and interaction with her phone highlight the brand's reference to an urban, youthful, and active target audience. Orzax positions health not only as a physical state, but also as a form of social empowerment.

In Solgar's advertisement, the vitamin bottles placed against a background split into purple and mint green emphasize a gender-specific approach to health. While the denotative message is “two vitamin bottles,” the connotative layer foregrounds “a vision of personalized health that respects biological differences between women and men.” The purple background symbolizes elegance, while the mint green connotes freshness and naturalness. With a reputation built on sustainable production and science-based innovation since 1947, Solgar reinforces its reliability. Accordingly, the advertisement encodes a message of “science-driven individualized wellness.”

Pharmaton's advertisement, designed in orange and yellow tones, foregrounds themes of energy and vitality. The sequential appearance of multivitamin boxes creates the impression of “continuously renewed energy.” The message accompanied by the hashtag “Don't Stop Yourself” refers to the modern individual's capacity for motivation and renewal amid a fast-paced lifestyle. The denotative image—“a multivitamin suitable for both men and women”—transforms at the connotative level into an ideal of “living life energetically and together.” Thus, Pharmaton constructs an inclusive health image that supports gender equality.

4.2 Semiotic Analysis of Color Use

Colors are among the most powerful meaning-making elements in advertising discourse. Barthes (1977) notes that colors are not merely aesthetic components, but also cultural codes that function as “myths.” Vitamin brands imbue their products with meanings beyond health—such as life energy, dynamism, and modern identity—through their use of color. The colors used by Supradyn, Orzax, Solgar, and Pharmaton in their advertisements, along with the overlapping colors among the brands, are evaluated in Table 2.

Table 2. Color usage in advertisements of multivitamin brands

Colors	Supradyn	Orzax	Solgar	Pharmaton	Colors Used by All Brands	Colors Common to Three Brands
Yellow	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Red		✓				
Blue		✓	✓	✓		✓
Orange	✓	✓		✓		
Green		✓	✓			
Purple		✓	✓			
Pink			✓			
Gray		✓				
Brown			✓			
Shadow tones						
Black	✓	✓	✓			✓
White	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

- Yellow: Yellow is defined as the color of energy and vitality. Kress & Van Leeuwen [16] emphasize that yellow functions as a symbol of “high energy and attention-grabbing appeal,” particularly in health and food advertisements. Present in all four brands, yellow evokes myths of “sunlight,” “life force,” and “optimism.” In Supradyn and Pharmaton advertisements,

yellow is associated with metabolic strength and alertness; in Orzax and Solgar campaigns, it conveys balance, natural energy, and zest for life.

- **Orange:** Orange, a hybrid of red and yellow, symbolizes movement, warmth, and enthusiasm. Heller [15] notes that orange triggers “social energy” and “optimism.” As a shared color in Supradyn, Orzax, and Pharmaton advertisements, orange communicates messages of an “active lifestyle” and “continuous motivation.” In Barthes’ terms [3], this color becomes a “mythic representation of energy.”
- **Blue:** Blue is a signifier of trust and scientific credibility [12]. Used by Orzax, Solgar, and Pharmaton, blue represents “rationality, reliability, and stability.” In Solgar advertisements, it highlights scientific production processes; in Orzax, it symbolizes inner balance and calm; and in Pharmaton, it functions as a metaphor for “scientific energy.” According to Kress & Van Leeuwen [16], blue is the most effective color for constructing “institutional trust.”
- **Green:** Green symbolizes naturalness, renewal, and sustainability. Arnheim [2] states that green creates a sense of “balance and tranquility” in visual perception. In Orzax and Solgar advertisements, green is associated with botanical ingredients, environmentally friendly production, and sustainability values. This positions both brands within a “nature-derived health” ideology.
- **Purple:** Purple has historically been associated with luxury, sophistication, and wisdom [15]. In Orzax and Solgar advertisements, purple conveys meanings of “conscious consumer identity” and “quality.” Solgar’s purple background invokes wisdom and scientific depth, while in Orzax it represents self-awareness and self-care ideals. On the connotative level, purple becomes a symbol of “modern femininity” in Barthesian terms.
- **White:** White appears across all brands, evoking “purity, cleanliness, and trust.” Chandler [8] argues that white acts as a metaphor for “clarity and purification” in advertising. Associated closely with the vitamin concept, white reinforces perceptions of health and freshness. It also functions as a visual balancing element, enhancing the impact of other colors.
- **Black:** Seen in Supradyn, Orzax, and Solgar, black signifies power, professionalism, and authority. Arnheim [2] explains that black generates a sense of “visual weight and seriousness.” In Solgar’s packaging, black underscores the brand’s scientific prestige. Aligned with Barthes’ mythology concept [3], black supports a myth of science-based strength and authority.
- **Other Colors:** In the Orzax advertisement, red signifies “attention and action.” Solgar’s use of pink represents “elegance and feminine sensitivity,” while brown symbolizes “naturalness and roots.” Gray tones in Orzax reflect what Kress & Van Leeuwen [16] describe as the “neutral security of modern metropolitan life.”
- **Shared Color Code Universe:** Yellow and white, common across all brands, converge around values of “energy and purity.” Meanwhile, blue and black shared by three brands represent a semantic network of “scientific credibility and trustworthiness.” This pattern indicates that vitamin brands aim to construct meaning simultaneously on emotional (energy and happiness) and rational (science and trust) levels.

Semiotic analysis of color demonstrates that advertisements are not merely visual compositions but cultural sites of meaning production. Colors are reconstructed as Barthesian “myths” that reinforce the ideological narrative of each brand and establish emotional resonance with consumers.

4.3 Semiotic Analysis of Star Ratings

User evaluations on social media platforms serve not only as indicators of a brand's marketing performance but also as reflections of brand perception in the consumer's mind. Accordingly, star ratings are considered meaningful semiotic markers of both brand image and consumer satisfaction. Table 3 presents the distribution of star ratings for the four brands:

Table 3. Star Rating Distribution of Multivitamin Brands

Star Rating	Supradyn	Orzax	Solgar	Pharmaton
1 ★	86	13	138	487
2 ★★	29	2	15	179
3 ★★★	106	8	6	482
4 ★★★★	226	22	5	1100
5 ★★★★★	1348	178	1	6789
Total	1348	223	165	9037

In the Supradyn brand, the highest concentration of ratings is found at the 5-star level (1348 votes). This suggests that the brand's promises of "energy, continuity, and renewal" are positively received by consumers. The relatively low number of total ratings for Orzax (223) indicates a comparatively limited market presence; however, the high proportion of 5-star reviews (178) demonstrates a strong satisfaction level among its existing users. For Solgar, the high proportion of 1-star reviews (138 out of 165) suggests that the brand's premium pricing strategy and "exclusive" brand positioning may not be perceived as accessible or satisfactory by certain consumer groups. Pharmaton, with 6789 five-star reviews, reinforces its image as a brand associated with "trust, vitality, and consistency." This result indicates that Pharmaton has evolved into a widely internalized "trust myth" among consumers [4].

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

In this study, the online advertisements of four leading multivitamin brands in Turkey were examined through their use of color, figures, and symbols, alongside consumer evaluations, and analyzed using Barthes' semiotic approach. The findings indicate that vitamin brands not only communicate messages about physical health but also construct identity through lifestyle, dynamism, self-care, and cultural layers of meaning. Supradyn conveys the theme of "active energy," Orzax "prepared living," Solgar "scientific personalization," and Pharmaton "shared energy," delivering unique and mythical messages to their target audiences. Barthes' semiotic framework reveals both the denotative and connotative levels of these messages, clarifying how advertisements consciously employ cultural codes and social roles in their underlying narratives.

Consumer evaluation data demonstrates how these meanings are perceived by users. The high five-star ratings for Pharmaton and Supradyn confirm the impact of color and visual strategies on perception, while Orzax and Solgar's more niche user bases indicate the limited effect of their communication and accessibility strategies. These findings show that "energy and trust myths," created through color, movement, and iconography, directly influence consumer perception and can enhance the effectiveness of brand marketing strategies. Theoretically, this study makes significant contributions to understanding the relationship between semiotic analysis and consumer perception. While previous studies [7,18] have examined the layers of meaning in advertisements within cultural and social contexts, an analysis at this level has not been conducted specifically for vitamin brands. By integrating semiotic analysis with consumer evaluations, this study concretely demonstrates both the production of mythical meanings and their impact on user perception, thereby offering a unique contribution to both semiotic theory and consumer perception literature. For future research, similar semiotic analyses could be conducted across a broader range of products and industries to better understand how cultural codes operate in different product categories. Additionally, a deeper analysis of social media interactions and user comments could evaluate the impact of digital marketing strategies on consumer perception. Finally, experimental studies could be designed to measure the psychological effects of color and visual strategies on consumer perception and brand loyalty.

In conclusion, this study provides significant theoretical and academic insights: advertisements shape consumer perception not only as a tool for product promotion but also as part of a cultural and social meaning-making process. Barthes' semiotic model offers a powerful tool for analyzing these layers of meaning and demonstrates the link between marketing and cultural meaning

production with concrete evidence. Within this framework, the findings from multivitamin advertisements offer new insights for the semiotic research tradition and guide future academic investigations.

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