



AN INTERVIEW WITH RHEA COLASO

on semiotics and marketing

Interviewed by

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Introduction

In light of the special issue's themes, pop culture, media, and transmediality, I chose to interview Rhea Colaso, an MA graduate of Tartu University's semiotics department. Rhea has lived in several places, including India, Kenya, the United States, and now Estonia, consequently being exposed to numerous cultural environments. This drove her desire to observe and attempt to better understand how individuals throughout the globe make sense of themselves and communicate their thoughts and emotions. She began her first internships in brand strategy in the eleventh grade, and soon made her way into advertising, marketing, and numerous branding agencies.

During her bachelor's degree at Boston University, she studied economics, biology, and communication concurrently in an effort to broaden her horizons and get a more holistic knowledge of people and their motivations. After receiving her degree, she returned to India, where she achieved one of her biggest accomplishments to date: via her work at Please See, she contributed in changing Indian customers' perceptions about Indian food and their buying habits. However, the search for patterns in human behaviour and the need for a deeper comprehension of meaning brought her to semiotics and Tartu University. Today, Rhea works for Bedford Row Capital, a debt structuring company that helps small and medium-sized businesses raise capital for their businesses or projects. The knowledge she gained in semiotics has made her more effective in the world of marketing and enhanced her existing abilities. In this interview, Rhea Colaso talks about her take on pop culture and modern media, semiotics, and shares her experiences in the field of marketing and advertising!



Interview

EA: *Let us begin with one of the main themes of our special issue. How would you define pop culture?*

RC: I would have to go with Gottdiener's approach of pop culture as a three way relationship among: (1) cultural objects that are produced by an industrial process, (2) a set of institutions that produce and distribute such objects on a relatively huge scale, and (3) a collective or social group/mass audience who use such objects within a setting*. Perhaps it is my love for sociosemiotics which is why this definition sticks most in my mind. Yes, we can go with Disney movies or even Disney Land itself as the prime example; however, for me and through my work in understanding the financial markets I prefer to take it in that setting.

On that note, and in the setting of today's financial markets, we tend to distill financial behaviour as a pure economic one, based on 'profit', or 'selfish interests'; however, I would beg to differ. Financial events do not make sense by themselves, but they need to be interpreted in the light of a specific point of view, and become linked to the surrounding world. We have to recall the essential role of human interaction within financial reality in order to consider each market as a particular language, and the interaction as the sign of social inter-subjectivity. Investors are also shaped by the socio-cultural background they live in.

To bring an example from my work, and simultaneously a very contemporary case, I was able to demonstrate the influence of pop culture and media coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian war on the increasing growth of the green bonds market and the urgent demand for 'energy freedom'. Global warming and environmental pollution have been big issues for many years now, but it is only with the recent war and the present media image of Russia that people are beginning to seek alternate energy sources. However, a long-cultivated link between Russia and communism, spread through pop culture, also contributes to the public's opinion of Russia**. Have you ever thought why the intense search for alternative sources was not initiated after the occurrences in Libya, Iraq, Venezuela, or Iran?

* Gottdiener, Mark 1985. Hegemony and mass culture: A semiotic approach. *American Journal of Sociology* 90(5): 979-1001. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2780086>

** Pop culture and the portrayal of commies: <https://coldwar.unc.edu/film/>

EA: *How about a specific incident in pop culture history? What is an iconic moment that you can think of at the top of your head?*

RC: When the NFT Bored Ape Yacht Club was priced for around 2.9 or 3 Million Dollars***. There is no purpose to this value other than pop culture. Its



importance comes from its celebrity backing (Eminem, Justin Beiber etc.) scarcity, hype, exclusive content etc. I remember looking at it when it was 190\$ thinking why would anyone buy this? Few months later, I realised I could have been a millionaire but missed the chance because I didn't understand the 'culture'. It happens.

*** NFT'S Street 2021. The 10 most expensive bored ape yacht club NFT's ever sold. *NFT'S STREET*. Available at: <https://www.nftstreet.com/top-10-most-expensive-bored-ape-yacht-club-nfts/>

EA: *Would you say that marketing and advertising are an important part of pop culture?*

RC: Yes, of course! If we look at the definition, other than films, advertising is a powerhouse of cultural object creation at an industrial scale. And now, with user generated content being so popular, but also with the desire to create online communities where people discuss these cultural objects, how could it not be?

In my opinion, if something has not been advertised in some shape or form, it cannot be truly part of pop culture. Most advertisements are based on the underlying consumer trends and how industries are catering to them. So, advertising in some way is a summary of it all presented to semioticians on a silver platter!

EA: *Speaking of semiotics, how did you find out about this field, and what motivated you to enroll in the master's programme of Tartu University?*

RC: It was a mixture of finishing a massive project at my previous company and looking for something new, alongside me being sent to the Semiofest conference held in Mumbai that sparked my interest and shaped the direction of my new adventure to Tartu! Initially, I thought semiotics had something to do with marketing or cultural studies before I joined the program.

Honestly, I had no clue about what semiotics was, until Kalevi Kull's class. I remember everyone speaking about Juri Lotman, and Michael Foucault during orientation and me being like "who are these people? Am I that illiterate?"
laughs

However, even though I did not know much about semiotics in depth, I was really keen on learning it, as it focuses on how people operate and think.

EA: *You have more than five years of experience in marketing, and you have been working in this field prior and after your graduation from the MA programme of semiotics; what would you say are the unique aspects or tools that semiotics offer in your industry?*



RC: When you create an experience for the consumer or try to study the motivations of an investor, you need semiotics to break down and then create a lifeworld, like the Habermasian concept. The lifeworld represents the cultural background of the social reality in which the interaction is possible. To recreate that interaction, or induce a particular one, you need to really understand where it all comes from and how to activate that.

EA: *Sadly, semiotics is not popular outside academia; how do you explain the role and significance of semiotics to your work environment, and how feasible is it for a semiotician to flourish in marketing and advertising?*

RC: This is definitely up to the student and their interests and their ability to use semiotics in an everyday setting. Being a semiotician makes you creative in finding solutions, however in marketing you will not find the time to do an entire research paper on a topic. Instead, you need to either implement it in your marketing plan, or do a survey of the landscape and the consumer you are marketing to understand their lifeworld. Accordingly, you change the way you design or speak. Obviously the applications aren't limited to just these two. I am currently looking for project-based interns who can use semiotics to:

- Research the keywords and motivations of today's professional investors
- Conduct keyword research on how Google ranks our regulatory announcements

If this sounds interesting or you would like to know more about using semiotics in finance or financial marketing, please write to me at rhea@bedfordrowcapital.com

EA: *What is your semiotic and generally professional opinion on our modern media culture? How it functions and impacts the market, and how the market makes use of it?*

RC: Modern media culture is far too broad to cover in one answer, so I will focus on one topic: crypto-currency. Crypto is the modern media culture in my opinion; a combination of technology, social media, celebrities, influencers, big money investors, films, etc. It has made the financial market a more public place in comparison to the opacity of stock exchanges, venture capital, hedge funds or mutual funds. Now non-professional actors, so everyday people like you and me can become integrated into the 'social world' of the professional actors. Now we know trading lingo, and we're able sell from our phones. It is also a way for us to participate in the activities of pop culture.

As a result, we are able to examine solely economic reasons of non-professional investors, which are a direct result of the glamorisation of the



financial markets in popular culture. The films *Wolf of Wall Street*, *The Big Short*, and *Bad Money*, amongst others, are all great examples of this. It is easy to see that greed is the driving force behind these occurrences. Therefore, when it comes to the popularity of crypto-currencies and NFTs, everyone engaged hopes to reach with minimal to no effort the life of sex, money, power, and glory that is depicted, promoted, and idealised. Many people all around the world were driven by greed to invest all of their life savings in crypto-currencies like LUNA/TERRA, which had a very quick and abrupt decrease, resulting in many losing everything in a split second. The power of financial culture, which is being fostered and pushed through pop culture makes bank deposits, which are safe but offer low interest rates, a paltry choice that is rejected by our modern society.

EA: *Based on your professional experience and general observations, what are some specific strategies that are being implemented in this era of globalisation that effectively target a broad international audience?*

RC: Social media! It is what makes a brand or a person, and also what can end them in matter of seconds, or in the frame of a few characters. The fact that you can create a post on Instagram, and target it for 30€ to an audience who you are trying to market to, is simply revolutionary. Why waste millions on a television advertisement or newspaper when you can find your exact customer at a click of a button?

Furthermore, social media is allowing the creation of trillions of virtual communities based on a shared interest. Just look at Discord; there are jobs for community managers who just need to talk in a group, and keep the activity levels high. The other day I saw 7,000 people watching a movie together that they voted to watch earlier, via their mobile phones. It might make no sense, but it created a sense of being united.

EA: *Can you try to imagine the future of the media landscape? How do you think it will be 10 years from now? What about pop culture?*

RC: That is a great question, but frankly I have no answer. Pop culture only makes sense in a context, and it is continuously being changed through innovations, geopolitical turmoil, energy prices skyrocketing, etc. Due to the coronavirus we have moved online, and the culture became 'work-from-home', which completely changed the entirety of our habits. Sweatpants with a suit on top became part of pop culture. Who would have predicted Corona? Much less the Zoom culture that followed!



EA: *What do you think is going to be the future of semiotics, and especially applied semiotics? If you cannot foresee any great differences or more recognition for our field, what do you think should happen in order to change that fate?*

RC: To begin with, I must mention the sad reality. Nobody knows what semiotics is, except maybe 103 people on this planet. The future of semiotics depends on how we explain to other people what we do and how we can apply its frameworks and theories, without losing their attention in the first few seconds. To make these changes, we need to be much more present in social media, and do a lot more marketing for semiotics as a subject and probable profession. Only then can it survive and thrive as a field; otherwise, it will be a subject studied alongside communication, literature, or marketing.

EA: *Rhea, thank you so much for your time and all your interesting answers! Is there anything else that you would like to share with our readers?*

RC: Finding a job where you do semiotics 24x7 is difficult as most people have no idea what it is. Maybe finding a way to use semiotics in another field such as marketing, law, economics, animal conservation etc., can be a different route to be in the field we all love.