



## THE ROLE OF SEMIOTICS IN HUMOR TRANSMISSION AND AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT

**Gorbatyi Oleksandr**

*Author of Humorous Scripts for Performers in the Field of Comedy  
Odessa State Medical University  
ORCID: 0009-0006-9647-5052*

**Abstract.** *The article explores the role of semiotic mechanisms in conveying humor and engaging audiences within the digital media environment. The aim of the study is to analyze humor as a tool for audience engagement through the lens of semiotics. The research employed general scientific methods of cognition: analysis, synthesis, induction, deduction, generalization, systematization, and interpretation. The findings show that humor performs a far more complex function than mere entertainment and acts as a powerful mechanism for communicative convergence. The study emphasizes humor's capacity to create emotional, cognitive, and cultural bridges between the speaker and the audience. It demonstrates that humorous elements activate key engagement mechanisms: they capture the audience's attention, evoke emotional responses, foster recognition of shared experiences, and stimulate interpretation processes. The research reveals that the disruption of expectations inherent in humor opens new semantic dimensions for the audience, enabling deeper message perception and fostering a lasting connection with it. It concludes that humor serves as a form of cultural encoding that works effectively only when a shared semiotic field exists between the communicator and the recipient. The article shows that a creative approach to humor, an understanding of the target audience, and the strategic integration of jokes into communication structure transform humor into an effective tool for building trust, delivering information, and entertaining. Within the framework of Charles S. Peirce's adapted triadic model of semiosis, the interaction between representamen, interpretant, and object in the modern digital context is explored, offering new insights into the nature of humor as a communicative mediator between meaning, emotion, and cultural background. The practical value of the research lies in establishing a theoretical and applied foundation for the effective use of humor in media communication, marketing, and public speaking.*

**Keywords:** *semiotics, humor, audience, communication, engagement.*

### Introduction

In today's information and communication environment, the issue of audience expansion has become one of the key objectives in both digital marketing and the broader sphere of sociocultural communication. Brands, media organizations, educational platforms, and independent content creators compete for user attention, which drives them to adopt increasingly sophisticated engagement strategies. Among these, humor stands out as a particularly powerful tool – emotional, cognitive, and cultural in nature – that helps establish a strong connection with the audience, lower perceptual barriers, and stimulate interaction.

Despite its popularity, humor remains a complex phenomenon that defies universal definition. It operates at the intersection of emotional experience, cognitive



dissonance, and cultural codes, which makes it a subject that requires thorough scholarly analysis. What one viewer finds amusing may appear incomprehensible or even inappropriate to another, highlighting humor's dependency on shared systems of values, symbols, and meanings within a specific social group. In this sense, humor can be regarded as a form of sign activity that produces effects only within a particular semiotic context.

This makes the analysis of humor through the core principles of semiotics – the study of signs, their structure, function, and interpretation – both methodologically sound and practically relevant. A semiotic approach allows for an exploration of how humorous elements are encoded, transmitted, and decoded in communication, and how they can be tailored to different audiences to maximize engagement. This interdisciplinary perspective enables humor to be viewed not just as an aesthetic category, but as a tool of purposeful semantic interaction that plays a key role in contemporary cultural dynamics.

The role of semiotics in conveying humor and engaging audiences remains underexplored in academic literature. Although there are individual theoretical works on the subject, comprehensive studies that examine the interplay between humor, sign systems, and audience responses are still fragmented. For this reason, the research drew upon theoretical sources dedicated to the separate components of this topic.

Among the classic theorists of semiotics, significant contributions were made by thinkers such as F. Saussure [6], who laid the groundwork for modern linguistic semiotics, and C.S. Peirce, whose theory was systematically interpreted by T.L. Short [7]. These theoretical foundations provide insight into how signs function in communication, including in the context of humor. Another notable contribution comes from R. Barthes [2], whose concept of “myth” as a second-order semiotic system explains how humorous imagery acquires cultural meaning.

Among contemporary scholars, S. Thompson [9] focuses on the use of visual and textual signs in humor, analyzing internet memes as subjects of semiotic inquiry. M. Turner [10] applies semiotics to the study of comedic art, uncovering the mechanisms behind the creation of comic effects. The article by O. Alvarado, V.V. Abeelee, D.



Geerts, and K. Verbert [1] addresses the semiotic interpretation of algorithmic recommendations, including in the context of emojis, which also relate to humorous elements in digital settings. A deeper understanding of humor's effect on the audience's psychophysiological state is provided by R.A. Martin [5], whose research centers on laughter as a social indicator.

Additional sources were consulted that reflect current perspectives on the use of humor for audience communication, including work by A. Boone [3], who emphasizes the effectiveness of humor in public speaking. A study by M. Krypchuk, R. Nabokov, V. Rozhkovska, K. Chepura, and H. Sukhomlyn [4] plays an important role in exploring the semiotic landscape of theatrical direction, allowing for an interpretation of stage humor through the lens of sign systems.

Despite the availability of literature covering individual aspects of the topic, there is a noticeable lack of systematized material specifically focused on the role of semiotics in the transmission of humor. Therefore, using various scientific methods of inquiry, the information was analyzed, grouped, and systematized in accordance with the study's theme.

**The aim of the article** is to analyze humor as a tool for audience engagement through the lens of semiotics. In order to achieve this aim, the study will address the following tasks: first, describe the essence of semiotics as a scientific discipline and define its structural features; second, identify the semantic and communicative links between humor and the semiotic nature of the sign; third, examine the mechanisms through which humor influences audience engagement in the context of modern media.

### **Research results**

Semiotics as a scientific discipline originates from classical and scholastic traditions of studying sign systems within the frameworks of logic, rhetoric, and poetics. As noted by Sinha C., the term *semion* (Greek – “sign”) likely emerged in the context of Hippocratic or Asclepiadean medicine, which was based on a symptomatic approach and inductive diagnostics, interpreting external manifestations (symptoms) as representations of internal states [8]. This view of signs as tools for uncovering hidden meanings laid the groundwork for semiotics as a metatheory of interpretation.



In the modern era, semiotics was systematized through the work of two thinkers: Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) and American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914). Saussure F. [7] proposed a dichotomous model of the sign, where each sign consists of the signifier (signifiant) – the auditory or visual image, and the signified (signifié) – the concept or idea behind the sign. According to Saussure, meaning arises not from any intrinsic property of the signifier, but from its position within the structure of language as a system of differences [7].

Peirce, on the other hand, developed a triadic model in which the sign is composed of the representamen (the material form), the object (what the representamen refers to), and the interpretant (the mental response generated in the interpreter's mind). He also identified three types of signs:

- iconic, based on resemblance between the sign and the object;
- indexical, characterized by a causal or spatial connection with the referent;
- symbolic, relying on convention and social agreement [7].

Further development of semiotics in the 20th century is associated with the work of Roland Barthes, who in the 1960s applied Saussure's model to the analysis of sign structures in mass culture: advertising, fashion, travel, photography, and more [2]. Barthes remained committed to Saussure's idea of the dual nature of the sign but significantly reinterpreted it. In his approach, the signifier and the signified are not in a one-way relationship, but rather in a dynamic interaction shaped by specific historical and cultural contexts. Unlike Saussure, Barthes did not see signification as a straightforward directional process. Instead, he treated it as an open system in which the signifier and signified can exchange roles or exist in an unstable relationship [2].

This theoretical shift is crucial for understanding humor as a semiotic phenomenon. Since humor often operates by deliberately disrupting expected relationships between signifier and signified, it reveals the sign's potential for semantic shift, play on meanings, and critical signification. It is precisely the instability of the sign system – not its rigidity – that generates the comic effect. In this sense, humor can be viewed as a form of interpretive play that unfolds within culturally determined codes and requires the recipient's active involvement in meaning construction.



According to Charles S. Peirce, a sign represents something else – in other words, it mediates between a sensory stimulus (the representamen) and the conceptual content (the object) [7]. In the context of humor, the sign functions as a semantic provocation that triggers an interpretative process, ultimately producing a comic effect. A joke, visual image, or wordplay acts as a representamen. However, for it to be perceived as funny, the audience must share a certain semantic code or cultural convention that allows the sign to be interpreted in a humorous way. This reflects the symbolic nature of the sign in Peirce's system – meaning is not inherent in form but arises through social agreement [7].

In other words, humor becomes possible only within a shared semiotic field. A clear example of this is intercultural misunderstanding: something perceived as humorous in one sociocultural context may be incomprehensible or even offensive in another. For instance, red in Western cultures is often associated with “prohibition” or “danger” (traffic lights, warning signs), while in Indonesia it may signify “death” or carry other ritual meanings, depending on the region (yellow in Jakarta, white in Central Java) [9]. This demonstrates that signs are culturally determined, and laughter as a response to humor arises only when the interpretant is formed within an appropriate semiotic context.

In the case of digital humor (memes, video jokes, internet idioms), many humorous signs rely on secondary symbolism or memetic constructions whose meanings are accessible only to those within the relevant community. This dependence on the user's interpretive competence highlights the fact that humor is not universal by nature – it is always socially and culturally marked [9].

Additionally, certain phenomena that are not inherently humorous may become comic through re-signification or “semiotic shift.” In cultural traditions (such as those of the Javanese), even natural events can acquire symbolic meanings when interpreted within a particular belief system (e.g., an earthquake as “God's anger,” or a trembling hand as a sign of future profit) [9]. Similarly, in humor, familiar or neutral phenomena may gain comic significance through recontextualization, which occurs in the process of semiosis.



Thus, semiotics makes it possible to conceptualize humor as a sign activity functioning through the dynamic of representation, reference, and interpretation. Humor not only uses signs, but also actively produces them – often through the disruption of expected interpretations or the disjunction between form and content, which creates comic tension.

Based on the research of C.S. Peirce, the significance of semiotics in humor and audience engagement can be summarized through the stages presented in Table 1.

**Table 1** – Stages of the impact of semiosis and humor on audience engagement according to the theory of C.S. Peirce

Stage of semiosis (according to C.S. Peirce)	Function in the humor process (in the context of online audience engagement)	Effect on audience engagement
1. Representamen (the external form of the sign: image, text, sound, video clip, meme, etc.)	Acts as the initial stimulus that triggers a reaction. In the digital space, this could be a micro-video, a headline, a meme frame, or a humorous phrase. It must be instantly recognizable and spark immediate interest.	Generates the first visual or emotional hook. A high level of clickbait potential or aesthetic appeal encourages the user to engage (view, like, share, comment).
2. Object (the meaning indicated by the representamen: event, stereotype, social phenomenon, memetic template)	Establishes the cultural or social context that allows the audience to “recognize” the joke’s meaning. For online audiences, a shared background (current events, trends, media figures, social situations) is essential.	Encourages identification with a community and recognition of collective experiences or feelings. This boosts emotional engagement and willingness to interact further.
3. Interpretant (cognitive interpretation of the representamen and its meaning)	The audience interprets the humorous signal based on their experience and understanding of the context. In the digital environment, this happens quickly—within seconds, the user decides whether it’s “funny” or not.	Triggers an immediate reaction: laughter, sarcastic comment, emotional feedback. The user may share the content or leave a response, which is a form of active participation.
4. Dynamic interpretant (expansion of interpretation; awareness of deeper layers of meaning)	The interpretation deepens—for example, satire, irony, criticism of authorities or cultural practices is recognized. It becomes not just a joke, but a social statement or reflection.	Leads to deeper engagement: the user not only laughs but relates the content to their own values or beliefs. This stimulates discussion, debate, and content virality.
5. Infinite semiosis (each new interpretant generates a new representamen)	Generation of secondary content: remixes, parodies, reactions, new memes based on earlier ones. The audience becomes an active participant in the semiotic process, creating new signs.	A memetic ecosystem emerges. The audience engages in a prolonged cycle of interaction, producing creative variations and spreading humor to new audiences. This engagement is deep and sustained.

*Systematized and adapted according to the theory of C.S. Peirce*





Overall, the theory of humor's influence has been extensively explored by Martin R.A., who in his study *Humor, laughter, and physical health* defines humor as a communicative and aesthetic form that plays a significant role in expanding audiences, especially within a cultural and media context increasingly shaped by visual information and algorithmic content management. In this process, semiotics serves as a key mediator – it provides tools to analyze how humorous elements become understandable and relevant to different types of audiences.

According to Martin, comic enjoyment has an aesthetic dimension and, in many cases, is equivalent to an artistic experience. He argues that comedy, like other forms of art, has the power to change our perception of reality by presenting the familiar in an unfamiliar light, thereby enriching cognitive activity [5]. At the same time, he warns against reducing humor to a purely entertaining phenomenon, emphasizing that it can be painful, sharp, and even critical – capable of provoking an ambivalent reaction, such as laughing through tears. This duality of comic experience makes humor an especially effective tool for cultural engagement, as it operates on the boundary between intellectual reflection and emotional response.

In this context, semiotics enables humor to be viewed not as an isolated effect, but as the result of an interpretive process, in which the representamen (external form – text, image, joke) acquires meaning only through its interaction with the cultural object and the interpretant – that is, the audience performing the interpretation [6,8]. As Martin points out, the aesthetic appreciation of the comic depends on the interpreter's ability to recognize the subtle properties of humorous signs – tension, incongruity, irony, grace, and so on [5]. This sensitivity is not innate but developed through practice and learning and, as a result, can be cultivated in order to expand the shared semiotic field between the author and the audience.

Humor becomes a tool of engagement precisely when it functions as a language with sign structures that can be decoded. According to Turner M., properly evaluating any form of human activity requires an understanding of its symbolic forms. In the case of humor, this means knowing how to read social codes, allusions, and cultural contexts. It is semiotics as the study of signs and symbols that enables the identification



of these codes and reveals how they operate in the communicative space, including the digital environment [10].

The relevance of a semiotic approach to humor is especially heightened in the algorithmic landscape of digital culture, where content consumption is driven by recommendation systems. For example, as shown in the study by Alvarado et al., services like Netflix use algorithmic systems based on personalized interaction scenarios to shape which humorous (and other) products become visible to users [1]. In this context, humor is not merely perceived but constructed in accordance with prior experience, visual preferences, and cultural patterns inferred from user behavior. The interface acts as a mediator in shaping the semiotic field—it is within the interface that humorous codes are either activated or lose relevance.

This highlights another important aspect: audience expansion is only possible when humorous content is designed not as universal, but as semiotically adaptive – capable of incorporating different social, cultural, and individual levels of interpretation. As emphasized by Krypchuk et al., contemporary understandings of directing (and, more broadly, of communicative structuring) are based on an expanded semiotic field, in which meaning is not fixed but constantly constructed through interpretive acts [4]. It is this openness and dynamism of semiotic structures that makes humor a universal yet contextually specific form of engagement.

Thus, humor and semiotics together form a complementary system in which humor functions as a catalyst of meaning, and semiotics provides the analytical framework for understanding how those meanings operate, circulate, and transform within the media space. This combination enables flexible and strategic work with audiences – engaging them, enriching their experience, reinterpreting shared meanings, and expanding communication through access to new codes, new signs, and new interpretations [3].

## **Conclusions**

Therefore, humor emerges not merely as an entertainment tool, but as a powerful mechanism of communicative convergence that helps build emotional, cognitive, and cultural bridges between the speaker and the audience. As the presented material





demonstrates, humor activates key mechanisms of engagement: it captures attention, prompts recognition of shared experience, evokes emotional response, and encourages interpretation. It is the ability of humor to disrupt expectations while simultaneously opening up new semantic horizons that makes it an effective tool for fostering deep and lasting audience connections.

It is important to remember that humor is also a form of cultural encoding that works only in the presence of a shared semiotic field between the author and the recipient. Understanding the audience, creativity in delivery, and the strategic placement of humorous elements within a message structure can turn humor into a highly effective engagement strategy – capable of informing, entertaining, and building trust at the same time.

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