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# The Use of Arbitrary Signs in A-Mild Cigarette Advertising: A Ferdinand de Saussure Semiotic Study

Meiyanti Nurchaerani[1], Ario Pamungkas[2], Alfian[3],
Syahiid Hidayatullah Rizkyka Hartadhi[4]
[1) 2) 3)]Universitas Esa Unggul, Indonesia
[4)]Universitas Padjadjaran, Indonesia

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**CORRESPONDENCE**
E-mail: meiyanti.nurcharani@esaunggul.ac.id

**A B S T R A C T**
This study examines the communication strategy used in the Sampoerna A-Mild cigarette advertisement *"Solusi Lo, Masalah Buat Gue"* within the context of Indonesia's strict advertising regulations. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach and Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic framework, the research analyzes how visual and verbal signifiers such as urban heat, traffic congestion, and the motorcyclists' actions are linked to signified meanings including frustration, pragmatism, and individual initiative. The findings show that these signs are intentionally connected through arbitrary associations that construct a narrative of resourcefulness and non-conformity. The slogan *"Solusi Lo, Masalah Buat Gue"* functions as the central linguistic element that unifies the advertisement's sign system and contributes to an implied identity distinction between individuals who act creatively and those affected by such actions. The study highlights how the advertisement communicates brand identity indirectly, demonstrating how cigarette companies adapt meaning-making strategies to operate within regulatory constraints. These findings expand the understanding of semiotic mechanisms in regulated advertising and show how arbitrary sign-linking serves as a strategic tool for maintaining brand presence without explicit product depiction.



## Introduction

Advertising in contemporary mass communication has shifted from a product-oriented practice to a meaning-making enterprise that constructs identities, values, and ideologies for its audiences (Sobur, 2003). This development becomes particularly significant in industries operating under strict regulatory limitations. In Indonesia, the implementation of Ministry of Health Regulation No. 28/2013 restricts cigarette companies from displaying explicit product imagery or promotional claims, prompting advertisers to rely on indirect and symbolic communication strategies to maintain brand visibility (Kompas.com, 2013). Such constraints create a communicative environment that demands analytical attention, especially regarding how meaning is engineered rather than merely represented.

Prior studies on cigarette advertising have examined symbolic cues, visual representation, and meaning-making processes using semiotic frameworks (Bisri, 2020; Husna & Hero, 2022; Sitompul et al., 2021). However, these works have not fully addressed how advertisers construct *arbitrary* sign relationships—connections between signifiers and signifieds that lack natural or logical links as described in Saussurean semiotics (Saussure, 2013). This gap is important because arbitrary sign-linking offers a distinct mechanism for circumventing regulatory boundaries while still projecting desired brand identities. Despite its relevance, research has yet to explore how cigarette

advertisements strategically employ such arbitrary associations in tightly regulated contexts.

The Sampoerna A-Mild advertisement featuring the slogan *"Solusi Lo, Masalah Buat Gue"* presents a compelling case for investigating this phenomenon. Instead of promoting the cigarette product directly, the advertisement associates common urban frustrations with qualities such as cleverness, individuality, and non-conformity—traits often linked to youth identity and lifestyle (Hidayat, 2021; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Understanding how these associations are constructed through arbitrary links between visual and verbal signifiers is essential for revealing how communicative power operates within regulatory constraints.

To address the identified research gap, this study focuses on the following questions: How does the Sampoerna A-Mild advertisement use visual and verbal signifiers to communicate its message without explicitly displaying the product? How does the arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified function as a strategic tool to promote the company's vision, mission, and values under regulatory limitations?

This research contributes to ongoing discussions in three ways. Theoretically, it extends Saussurean semiotic analysis by applying the concept of arbitrariness to contemporary advertising practices shaped by legal restrictions (Saussure, 2013). Practically, it demonstrates how advertisers craft meaning through indirect, associative techniques rather than explicit representation, showing how brand identity can be preserved in constrained environments (Kurniawan, 2017). Pedagogically, the study reinforces the importance of multimodal literacy in understanding how audiences interpret meaning across linguistic and visual modes, a key competency emphasized in English and media education (Carter & Nunan, 2020; Harmer, 2015). Through these contributions, the study highlights how modern cigarette advertising operates as a sophisticated semiotic system that constructs identity and ideology through carefully engineered, non-literal associations.

## Research Method

This section outlines the methodological framework employed in the study to ensure that the findings are produced through systematic and verifiable procedures.

### *Type of Research*

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design using Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic framework as the primary method of analysis. A qualitative approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of symbolic meanings embedded in visual and verbal signs, especially those that cannot be quantified numerically (Sobur, 2003). Saussure's model, which emphasizes the relationship between the signifier and the signified, provided a suitable foundation for examining how arbitrary meaning is constructed in the advertisement (Saussure, 2013).

### *Time and Place of Study*

The research was conducted between March and May 2024 at Universitas Esa Unggul, Jakarta, Indonesia. Data collection involved accessing the advertisement through publicly available digital platforms, including YouTube and the official Sampoerna A-Mild media channels.

***Research Subjects and Object***

The research object was the Sampoerna A-Mild advertisement entitled *"Solusi Lo, Masalah Buat Gue."*. The subjects consisted of all visual and verbal elements appearing within the advertisement, including images, symbols, gestures, dialogues, and slogans. This advertisement was selected due to its relevance as an example of indirect promotional strategies developed in response to restrictive cigarette advertising regulations in Indonesia (Kurniawan, 2017).

***Data Sources***

This study used both primary and secondary data sources.

- **Primary data** were obtained directly from the selected advertisement, which provided the sign systems to be analyzed.
- **Secondary data** included books, journal articles, and government regulations related to semiotics and cigarette advertising policies, offering theoretical grounding and contextual support (Saussure, 2013; Sobur, 2003; Kurniawan, 2017).
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***Instruments***

The main instrument of this study was the researcher, who served as the primary interpreter of data. In qualitative semiotic research, the researcher plays an essential role in selecting, identifying, categorizing, and interpreting signs based on theoretical frameworks.

Supporting instruments included:

- **Observation sheet**, used to systematically identify signifiers and their potential signifieds across visual and verbal elements.
- **Transcription form**, used to document dialogues, written text, and other verbal expressions that appear in the advertisement.
- **Screenshots**, used to capture and preserve key visual frames to ensure accuracy during the coding and interpretation stages.

***Research Procedures***

The research was conducted through the following steps:

1. Data Collection

The researcher accessed and downloaded the advertisement from a public online platform. The video was observed repeatedly to identify recurring signs and patterns. All relevant visual and verbal elements—including setting, color, gestures, sound cues, and language were documented and transcribed.

2. Data Organization

Identified elements were categorized according to Saussure's semiotic components:

- **Signifier** (the physical form of the sign)
- **Signified** (the conceptual meaning)

A coding matrix was developed to organize and compare the categorized signs.

3. Data Analysis

Semiotic analysis was carried out through three stages:

a. **Sign identification:** recognizing visual and verbal signs within the advertisement.
b. **Signifier–signified analysis:** examining how observable elements correspond to abstract meanings such as cleverness, pragmatism, or frustration.
c. **Interpretation of arbitrariness:** analyzing how unrelated signs were intentionally

linked to construct the brand's message and identity under regulatory constraints (Saussure, 2013).

4. Verification and Interpretation

All findings were re-evaluated to ensure consistency between theoretical concepts and empirical observations. Verification involved repeated viewing of the advertisement and triangulation through literature related to semiotics and media interpretation (Sobur, 2003).

***Data Analysis Technique***

Data were analyzed using Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic model, which emphasizes the arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified (Saussure, 2013). To ensure a systematic and coherent interpretation, the analysis was conducted through the following stages:

1. **Identification of Signs**
   The researcher identified all visual and verbal signs in the advertisement, including elements such as the traffic jam, wedding car, gestures, sound cues, and written text.
2. **Categorization of Signifiers and Signifieds**
   Each identified sign was categorized into Saussure's components:
   - **Signifier**: the observable form (e.g., traffic jam, motorcyclists taking shelter, the slogan).
   - **Signified**: the conceptual meaning associated with each form (e.g., frustration, pragmatism, individualism).
3. **Analysis of Relationships**
   The researcher examined how each signifier was connected to its signified, focusing on the arbitrary associations that linked everyday situations to broader concepts such as cleverness, conflict, or identity-building within the advertisement.
4. **Interpretation of Overall Meaning**
   The final stage involved synthesizing these relationships to interpret how the advertisement's sign system collectively communicated the brand's identity and strategic message under Indonesia's cigarette advertising restrictions.

Throughout the analysis, the researcher maintained consistency by applying Saussure's theoretical framework across all stages and verifying interpretations through repeated observation of the advertisement and cross-referencing with relevant literature. This process ensured analytical rigor and strengthened the trustworthiness of the findings.

**Result and Discussion**

This section presents the findings of the semiotic analysis based on Saussure's signifier–signified framework. The advertisement titled *"Solusi Lo, Masalah Buat Gue"* contains a series of visual and verbal signs that collectively construct its message. The key findings are summarized in Table 1.1 and supported with excerpts from the advertisement.

**1. Identification of Key Visual Signs**

Several dominant visual elements function as signifiers in the advertisement:

1. **Hot daytime scene and crowded intersection**
   The advertisement opens with a wide shot of a congested intersection under harsh sunlight. Drivers wipe sweat from their faces while waiting at a red light.

2. **The number "120 seconds" on the traffic light**
   A close-up of the digital countdown displays "120," emphasizing the prolonged waiting time.
3. **Motorcyclists occupying the turning lane for shade**
   Multiple riders move into the turning lane and position themselves under a shaded area to escape the heat.
4. **Blocked wedding car**
   A decorated wedding car approaches but cannot pass because the turning lane is obstructed. The bride and groom look visibly anxious.
5. **Wedding car horn and facial expressions**
   The loud horn, paired with annoyed facial expressions, signals tension and social conflict.

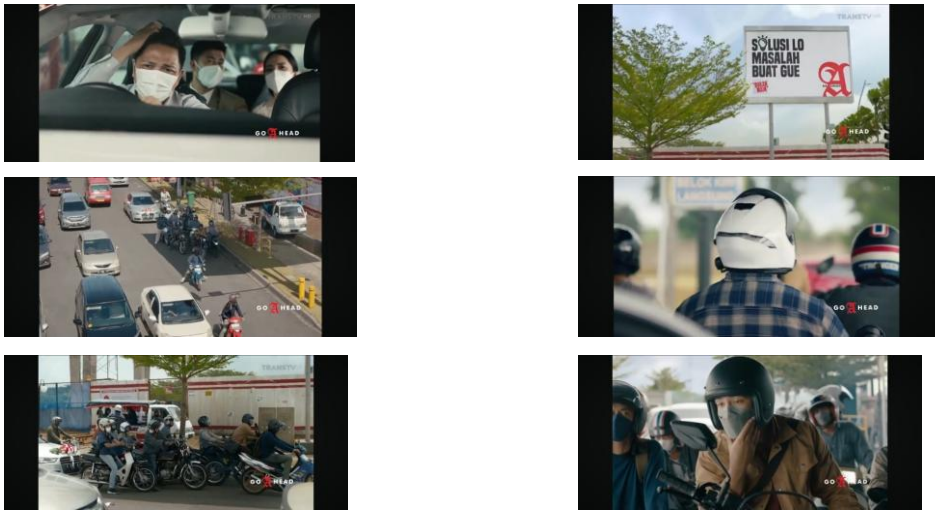


**Image 1.** Pictures from the Ads

## 2. Identification of Key Verbal Signs

The verbal elements further reinforce the advertisement's meaning:

1. **Slogan on the billboard:** *"SOLUSI LO MASALAH BUAT GUE"*
2. **Brand tagline:** *"GO AHEAD"*
3. **Hashtag:** *"#BUKANMAIN"*

These texts appear visually on the screen and operate as linguistic signifiers linking the narrative to the brand identity.

## 3. Summary Table of Semiotic Findings

**Table 1.**Semiotic Analysis of Key Signs

| Signifier | Signified | Explanation |
|---|---|---|
| Hot daytime scene & crowded intersection | Frustration, discomfort | Creates empathy by depicting a relatable urban problem. |
| "120 seconds" on traffic light | Powerlessness, wasted time | Symbolizes constraints affecting commuters. |
| Motorcyclists taking shelter | Cleverness, pragmatism, minor disobedience | Represents an individual "solution" that bends social norms. |
| Blocked wedding car | Hindrance, disrupted norms | Illustrates the unintended consequences of individual actions. |
| Wedding car horn | Protest, anger | Reinforces narrative tension. |

| Signifier | Signified | Explanation |
|---|---|---|
| Slogan "Solusi Lo Masalah Buat Gue" | Individualism, risk-taking, identity | Connects the narrative to the brand's philosophy. |
| A-Mild logo & "GO AHEAD" | Encouragement to act | Associates brand with boldness and agency. |
| Hashtag "BUKAN MAIN" | Uniqueness, cleverness | Reinforces the brand's youthful, standout identity. |

## Discussion

The findings reveal that the advertisement constructs meaning through a set of interconnected visual and verbal signs that engage viewers in a narrative of problem-solving, defiance, and identity formation. The following discussion interprets these findings in relation to semiotic theory, existing literature, and regulatory constraints.

### 1. Arbitrary Meaning Construction and Youth Identity

The results show that the advertisement relies heavily on *arbitrary* associations between everyday frustrations (heat, traffic, social conflict) and broader lifestyle values such as cleverness and individuality. This aligns with Saussure's (2013) concept of arbitrariness, where the connection between signifier and signified is culturally constructed rather than natural.

In this advertisement, the act of moving into the turning lane has no inherent connection to cigarette consumption. Yet the brand uses this signifier to represent traits—pragmatism, boldness—that resonate with youth identity formation. This strategy echoes findings from Bisri (2020), who observed that A-Mild advertisements often link unrelated actions to personal identity markers rather than the product itself.

### 2. Contrast-Based Identity: "Us" vs. "Them"

The findings also reveal a consistent binary opposition. Motorcyclists who seek shade represent a group of clever, pragmatic individuals ("us"), while those who adhere to rules or who are negatively affected—represent the rigid majority ("them"). The textual signs *"GO AHEAD"* and *"BUKAN MAIN"* reinforce this identity grouping.

This aligns with Sitompul et al. (2021), who argue that binary oppositions in advertisements help construct desirable identities for targeted audiences. However, the present study extends their conclusion by showing that A-Mild uses *arbitrary* narrative cues not only visual symbolism to create that division.

### 3. Visual–Verbal Interdependence as a Communication Strategy

The advertisement's meaning is constructed through the interaction of visual cues (traffic, heat, blocked wedding car) and textual cues (slogan, tagline, hashtag). This multimodal strategy mirrors Hidayat's (2021) findings that advertisements rely on cohesive visual–verbal interplay to promote implicit messages. The present study confirms this and demonstrates how such interplay enables brand communication without showing the cigarette product.

### 4. Response to Regulatory Restrictions

One of the most significant insights is the advertisement's navigation of Indonesia's cigarette advertising regulations. Because explicit product promotion is prohibited (Kompas.com, 2013), the brand employs:

- **Narrative-driven metaphor** (finding "solutions"),
- **Identity construction** (clever, brave, non-conformist persona),
- **Arbitrary association** (action → lifestyle → brand).

This strategy reflects Husna and Hero's (2022) argument that cigarette companies increasingly depend on indirect semiotic strategies to maintain visibility. However, the

present study shows a more specific mechanism: **arbitrary sign-linking**, which allows the brand to communicate identity without violating restrictions.

**5. Theoretical Contribution: Expanding Saussurean Semiotics in Regulated Advertising**

While Saussure's theory has been applied in previous visual media studies (Sobur, 2003; Bisri, 2020), few analyses demonstrate how arbitrariness functions under strict regulatory pressure. This study shows that arbitrary associations can become a *deliberate communication strategy*, not just a natural property of signs. This contributes a nuanced perspective to semiotic advertising research.

## Conclusion

This study examined how the Sampoerna A-Mild advertisement *"Solusi Lo, Masalah Buat Gue"* constructs meaning through a semiotic system shaped by regulatory constraints. Using Ferdinand de Saussure's signifier–signified framework, the analysis showed that the advertisement relies on arbitrary associations to communicate brand identity without displaying the cigarette product.

The findings indicate that the advertisement employs visual signifiers such as the hot daytime setting, crowded intersection, prolonged traffic light countdown, and the motorcyclists' decision to stand in the turning lane to represent familiar urban experiences. Although these elements do not have inherent connections to cigarette consumption, they are linked to signified meanings such as problem-solving, pragmatism, and individual initiative. The slogan *"Solusi Lo, Masalah Buat Gue"* functions as the key linguistic element that frames these associations and contributes to the construction of an implied identity distinction between individuals who act resourcefully and those who are affected by these actions.

The analysis further suggests that the advertisement uses narrative-based and identity-oriented strategies to operate within Indonesia's cigarette advertising regulations. Rather than promoting the product explicitly, the advertisement positions the brand within a broader lifestyle narrative associated with boldness, creativity, and non-conformity. This shift reflects a wider pattern in contemporary cigarette advertising, where meaning-making relies on indirect associations, identity cues, and narrative situations rather than direct product presentation.

The study offers several contributions to semiotic and advertising research. First, it demonstrates how Saussure's principle of arbitrariness is applied in modern advertising contexts where direct representation is restricted. Second, it extends previous research (Bisri, 2020; Sitompul et al., 2021) by showing that cigarette advertisements construct conceptual identities through combinations of unrelated visual and verbal signs. Finally, the findings provide insight into how meaning-making processes operate in regulated advertising environments, highlighting how semiotic strategies adapt to legal limitations while maintaining brand visibility.

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