

THE CONSTRUCTION OF SEXUALITY ON SOCIAL MEDIA IN CHINA

A semiotic analysis of Durex condom advertisements

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract  This thesis presents a semiotic analysis of the construction of sexuality in condom advertisements, in particular, it investigates the phenomenon of how Durex constructs sexuality on social media in China. The purpose of the study is to decode sexuality on Chinese social media from Durex's advertisements. It aims to show how Durex constructs sexuality and applies Chinese culture on social media posts. The analysis is adopted through semiotic theories. This thesis applies Pierce's, Roland Barthes, and Chandler's model of semiotic analysis to decode data. Through a semiotic approach, it defines the mode of signs, interprets the meanings, identifies image rhetoric and analyses relationships between verbal and visual signs. To this end, six advertisements are selected from Durex's Chinese social media platform – Weibo. The selected advertisements are related to traditional Chinese festivals or important days in Chinese culture. The findings show that sexuality on Chinese social media is communicated through witty implicitness, heteronormative idealization, cultural continuity and appreciation from Durex's advertisements. Durex builds rapport through creating a celebrative or humorous atmosphere, wordplay, word replacement, and ambiguity connoted by references to traditional culture.	
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## 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background

China has been undergoing dramatic changes since the implementation of Open-Up policy in 1978. In the recent 40 years, the impact of this economical reformation is not only limited to the material level, but also influences people's thinking and mindset, and more importantly, shapes the culture behind. Ever since then, China opened itself to the world, actively participated in global trade and picked up a rapid speed of development. As we can see, plenty of western's brands opened China market at that time and brought new energy to this country. Western TV series, movies, music flooded into China along with the cultural values embedded in them. The young generation born after the 1980s were raised in the cultural environment when the west hits the east. Therefore, it is interesting to study the shifting cultural phenomenon in fast-changing modern China.

However, as big it is, China is still different from any other countries in the world, in any sense. The overwhelming imported western products and culture does not simply disguise the local culture. Along with five thousand years of continuous history, unique philosophy such as Confucianism and Daoism etc., religious influence from Buddhism, Chinese culture is distinguishable from the West. Therefore, if a global company wants to succeed in China, it is essential to have a localized strategy that suits the market. The same campaign or advertisements that have a great impact in the west might not have the equivalent influence in China. No success is guaranteed without adapting to the local cultures.

Along with the progressive globalization and widespread of the Internet, technology is reshaping lives in many perspectives. Take an example: social media. In the past, people have no access to get to know others' life like we do today. Nowadays it is possible to access anyone in the world by a few clicks. Explosive information flow is flooding in modern society. It also changes the way of advertising and branding. Leaflets on roads, billboards in the center of cities, advertisements on TV, are no longer key methods to arouse consumer's attention. Instead, one small device in everyone's pocket is the crucial tool to communicate with consumers, that is the smartphone! Therefore, social media has an inelible impact on people's daylily life, advertising, branding, and even shaping the culture.

Among all global brands all existing in the China market, the one interests me the most is Durex due to the privacy of the products and the sensitiveness of the topic. As a world-wide famous condom brand, Durex links to the topic – sexuality in no question. On the one hand, no matter what form advertisement is, video, poster, and social media campaign, they are supposed to exposed to the public, to trigger discussions, to sparkle thoughts, to arouse interests and to promote sales; on the other hand, condom, sex, sexuality, are private topics that people want to avoid discussing in public. The tension between publicity and privacy become interesting to study. As one of the most successful condom brands in the world, Durex is representative and worth studying. What is more, due to the special historical and political background in China, sexuality research in China has been strongly restrained by regulations. It is of great significance to contribute to sexuality research in China.

There are mainly two questions I am interested in. One is as a global company, how does Durex adapt to China market? How does it utilize Chinese culture elements on its social media? All in all, it turns to the questions that how is sexuality re-presented in “Chinese” way? what kind of understandings of Chinese culture become visible and are reproduced in these advertisements?

Therefore, two main research questions are listed below:

1. How does Durex utilize Chinese symbols and other features of Chinese culture in their social media posts?
2. How is sexuality represented in Durex’s social media posts in China?

### **1.2 Structure of the thesis:**

The chapter about the theoretical background is divided into four sections. Firstly, I will briefly introduce the social context of sexuality in China in order to give background information. Secondly, I will introduce sexuality research in modern China. Third, I will present social media marketing theory; give the definition and situation in China. Finally, I will explain the function of advertising to justify the need for condom advertising.

After the literature review, the thesis continues with the methodology chapter, which explains the constructivist research paradigm and semiotics, which is the method used to interpret the collected data. In the data set, I have selected six advertisements. I describe them in details in the data chapter. The analysis is carried out with a semiotics approach and selected data are fully analyzed in the analysis chapter. Findings of the semiotic analysis are given and discussed in the context of condom advertising on social media.

Finally, the conclusion chapter presents the final notes of the topic, gives managerial implications, limitations and future research suggestions.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter will introduce literature review from four perspectives including social context of sexuality in modern China, sexuality research in 21st Century China, social media marketing, research on advertising and advertisements.

The literature review will help to understand research background and support to answer research questions.

### **2.1 Social context of sexuality in modern China**

The concept of sexual life is always intertwined with the social context. There is a tendency, in both Chinese and Western cultures, to think of sexuality as a natural human attribute and a uniquely private area of life, insulated from wider sociocultural influences (Ho & Jackson & Cao & Kwok, 2018 ). Recent research has also attached importance to the sociality of sexuality, to the cultural influence on sexual desires and practices, the social conventions dominating sexual relationships, and, all in all, the way sexuality is embedded in everyday life (Jackson & Scott, 2010). What is more, one common agreement of sexuality in sociology is sexuality is always gendered (Jackson, 2006). Gender and sexuality are always intertwined in the social context.

Therefore, it is of great significance to study sexuality together with historical, social and cultural influence. This chapter will introduce research on sexuality in modern China since Mao Zedong founded the People's Republic of China in



1949. The sexuality in the social context in China is rather complexed due to communist party's control.

Mao's era was controversial in terms of gender equality and liberalism of marriage. On the one hand, he minimized gender difference, the relationship between man and woman is considered as "*natural*" (Evans, 1997); on the other hand, there was still heavy sexual repression. He made revolutionary actions in mobilizing women to labor work, abolished polygyny. Even though at that time, women typically received lower income (Liu, 2007), there is no question that the Reformation had a positive influence in improving women's social position. However, at the time, the liberalism of sexuality was still highly restricted by bureaucracy. In rural areas, arranged marriage was still common and women had very little financial independence (Yan, 2003). In cities, people working in state-owned enterprises also had very limited freedom. Woman workers were pressured to marry politically right men, allocated to martial homes, assigned to the working system, intervened in marital disputes (Liu, 2007). It is imaginable that privacy is hard to keep.

A conspicuous cultural shift happened after Deng Xiaoping came to power. Due to progressive economic reform, the living standard was raised and consumerism was expanded in a large scale. This helped to boost the individual pursuit of consumption and pleasure, including sexual pleasure (Rofel, 2007). Lisa Rofel (2007) described that the younger generation in China, with no memory from Mao's time, were less interested in politics and more concerned with expressing their feelings and pursuing their own desires and ambitions through consumption, sexual practices and relationships. In her famous book *Desiring China*, she observed the emergence of a new concept of

human nature. Rofel wrote that: “the desiring subject at its core: The individual who operates through sexual, material and affective self-interest” (Rofel, 2007,p.3). What is more, a new formality of feminism and masculinity was formed. Women are masculinized, men are masculinized, which is mistakenly considered as gender equality (Rofel, 2007,p.117).

In contemporary China, constantly progressing reformation has expanded middle class’s scale, so that many more Chinese are drawn into the aspirational culture (Rofel, 2007). The greater sexual freedom era has brought with more offers to men, with fewer costs (Ho et al., 2018). Men don't have the burden of ruining their reputation by asserting their sexual activities or sexualized consumption, instead sex can actually express a man’s status and pinwei (“good taste”) (Song & Lee,2010). The desire for sexual enjoyment can now be articulated and, moreover, sexual potency is seen as central to manhood (Ho et al., 2018 ).

Apart from that, another important contributing factor in the liberalization of China’s sexual mores is the one-child policy, introduced in 1979. One child policy challenged China’s long-existing value of value boys over girls, derived from Confucianism and Chinese history. Because the one-child policy made every child the only “hope” in their family (Fong, 2004). It challenged biases over girls, hence strengthened women social status. The one-child policy also separated sex from reproductive function and emphasized sexual pleasure and satisfaction in marriage (Pan, 1993) .

However, due to the Chinese Communist Party’s political control in all aspects of society, it cannot be assumed that China should be able to follow the West’s path of accepting homosexuality. Research shows that Same-

sex relations are still stigmatized in China (Kong, 2016). China's family-centered morality and its Confucian underpinnings make it unlikely that alternatives to heterosexual marriage will be accepted in the foreseeable future (Ho et al., 2018).

## **2.2 Sexuality research in 21<sup>st</sup> Century China**

The early 20<sup>th</sup> century is the time that China faced invasion and colonization by Western countries. Due to Western's strong power advanced scientific ideas, intellectuals began to learn from the West rather than hold against ideas. The beginning of interest in sexuality research in China can be traced back to the Republican era in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. However, China experienced turbulent time in the Second World War and following the civil war. In 1949, the People's Republic of China has been founded and the Communist party came to power. The society became constrained by the power of government at that time. All of these elements hindered research in sexuality in China. Few publications in sexuality can be found in Mao's era. For instance, Evans H. (1997) published *Women and sexuality in China: Dominant discourses of female sexuality and gender since 1949* which emphasized the "natural" basis of male and female sexuality. After China's open up, China accelerated its modernization and urbanization. Science and technology were fundamentally promoted in a short period of time. As a result, research on sexuality proceeded further exploration. The first survey of the sexual habits of the Chinese population was conducted in 1988 and 1989 (Ho et al., 2018). Survey methods have become the dominant research method about sexuality in China.

There were apparent limitations about using survey in sexuality research. Firstly, research with such topic often lack anonymity or confidentiality since there was no legitimated governance. Huang and Pan (2009) argued that Chinese society has a strong cultural influence of conformity, which means individuals are not encouraged to express ideas and thoughts loudly. In Chinese culture, face is an important concept. People are afraid of losing face if they behave differently according to social norms. The manifestation of individuality can be considered as being left outside the society. Mainstream thoughts have a significant impact on people's mind. As a result, it is of high potential that participants in surveys are likely to answer questions according to their imagined normative answers instead of real answers in mind. What is more, censorship from the government may also lead research to play it safe and present only superficial findings. Zhai (2013) defined sex work as a social problem, discussed the potential for legalization, then suggested that rights for sex workers should be combined with social control in the interests of greater social stability and harmonious development. However, qualitative research might lead to less conformist conclusions, is underdeveloped.

The breakthrough of cultural conformity in qualitative sexuality research was revealed by Li Yinhe, one of the pioneer intellectuals in China. She is a sociologist, sexologist, and activist for LGBT rights in China. Li and her husband Wang Xiaobo, a noted novel writer co-authored *Their World: a Study of Homosexuality in China* (1993). The book is a ground-breaking of sexual minorities in China. During the 1990s, Li continued her research into Chinese sexuality in the context of family and institutional norms. She

published *Love and Sex for Chinese Women* and *The Sub-Culture of Homosexuality* in 1998, both were received high recognition in the society. In 2001, she published *Foucault and Sex*, a study of the institutionalization of sex and the development of sexual politics, based largely on the first volume of Foucault's three-volume study of the history of sexuality in the West (Foucault,1981).

Given the long-standing of historical background and cultural influence in China, sexuality research in China has been strongly restrained by regulations. In the early 2000s, more radical voices have been raised up, such as scholars like Li Yinhe. However, it is still datable that the speech freedom on sexuality is limited (Sigley & Jeffreys,2006). Censorship is tightening up, funding is no longer accessible to overseas scholars, teaching content is controlled, a number of event-based sexuality research have been cancelled (Ho et al., 2018 ). Therefore, it is of great significance to contribute to sexuality research in China.

### **2.3. Social media marketing**

Living in the digital world, Media are to us as water is to fish. I am not claiming that our life is determined by media, nonetheless, we are immersed in media in many ways in our everyday life and media engagement contributes to our decision making.

#### **2.3.1 Definition, features, and theories of social media**

Social media is a platform whereby user-generated content is exchanged in a collaborative, dynamic, and interactive manner (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010;

Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Furthermore, social media channels can be divided into different types by the format and functionality, such as blogs, micro-blogs, social networking sites, content communities, virtual world, collaborative projects, and sites dedicated for feedback (Chan & Guillet, 2011; CIC, 2013; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). With time being, social media has transformed the pattern of communications in mass media. Social media empowers people to participate in the communication, to transfer and recreate content. The pattern of communication transforms from many-to-one to one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-many, many-to-one. (Yang & Wang, 2015)

The function of social media has been evolved with the development of the Internet. In the mid-2000s, social media emerged for private use (Schlagwein & Prasarnphanich, 2014). The first “digital nation” shifted a great amount of free time from reading and watching TV to participate in social media (Davies, Shedd, and Haughton 2009; Shirky 2010). With the widespread of Technology, social media has become a mainstream communication in a very short period of time. More recently, social media are increasingly used for business and organizational purposes (Schlagwein & Prasarnphanich, 2014). It is widely seen that big brands play an active role in their social media platform.

However, theories on social media have not been well developed. A decent amount of number of studies focus on individual behavior on social media (Brown & Broderick & Lee 2007; Jansen & Zhang & Sobel & Chowdury 2009; Rui & Liu & Whinston 2010; Trusov & Bucklin & Pauwels 2009; Wattal & Racherla & Mandviwalla 2010). But fewer focus on the organizational level of social media. Therefore, it is high time to further study

organizations or brands' social media performance.

### 2.3.2 Social media in China

In the western world, it is common to use popular social media channels such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc.. In China, they are all blocked due to special Internet policy by the communist party. Local social media platforms are created inside China to meet people's needs. Those local social media channels form a completed social media ecosystem in China and replace western equivalent social media channels. WeChat and Weibo are two main social media channels in China. Collected data in this thesis are all from Sina Weibo, since this is the major microblogging channel in China and is often considered as the official channel for brands and organizations. According to Xinhua reports, the year 2011 witnessed the most rapid growth of both Weibo users and Weibo influence. According to the update statistics released by Sina, registered users of Sina Weibo have exceeded 300 million, with more than 100 million messages posted daily (Lou, 2012).

There are some articles investigating Weibo and its relation to Chinese culture. Zhang and Negro (2013) co-authored *Weibo in China: Understanding its development through communication analysis and cultural studies*. This thesis provides a brief historical overview of microblogging in China and identifies the social and cultural roles held by Sina Weibo. It examines communication pattern on Weibo in terms of impersonal - interpersonal - hyperpersonal interaction; individual - group - mass transmission fission. In 2011, Louis Yu, Sitaram Asur, Bernardo A. Huberman published *What Trends in Chinese Social Media*. In this work, it examines key

topics that are trend on Weibo and then compare them to what's happening on Twitter.

However, research on sexuality on Chinese social media have not been fully studied. As digital media plays a big role in China, it is of great significance to carry out further sexuality research on Chinese social media platform.

### **2.3.3 Impact of social media marketing**

Social media (SM) are increasingly becoming an indispensable resource for consumer decision making, as well as an important tool for brand–customer relationship development and maintenance (Pentina & Guilloux & Micu, 2018). Social media marketing is defined as “marketing communications via digital applications, platforms and media that facilitate interaction, collaboration and content sharing among users” (Kim & Ko 2012, p. 1480).” Social media empowers brands a new way of marketing, thus social media marketing is different from traditional marketing. Brands can promote products and services, create an online community, provide instant response, interact with consumers on social media. Gunelius (2011) claims that because consumers can share information with others about brands on social media, it is an effective way to enhance brand awareness, increase brand loyalty, and boost brand recognition. That is to say, social media marketing can help brands to build loyalty through networking, conversation, and community building (McKee, 2010). One of the biggest differences between social media marketing and traditional marketing lies in the method of marketing. Traditional marketing focuses on driving sells, while social media marketing is related to



relationship marketing, where brands need to shift from “trying to sell” to “make connections” (Gordhamer, 2009). Erdoğan and Çiçek (2012) investigated the impact on social media on brand loyalty and found that social media marketing is more sincere than traditional marketing in communications with consumers. Social media content try to present what the brand is, what the brand believes in rather than try to sell something in the first place.

However, the influence of social media marketing is still debatable. The engagement for brands on social media doesn't necessarily guarantee business success. Due to social media's transparent and unmediated nature, social media marketing might backfire organizations. For example, in 2017, Dove, a personal care brand published a Facebook post depicting a looped image of a black woman removing a dark brown T-shirt to reveal a white woman. The advertisement is generally viewed to be the racist undertones of the commercial. Because of social media, the advertisement went viral in a very short time and it caused a harmful image to the brand. (Henry, 2017) What is more, low ability to control user-generated-content is also a risk in running social media marketing. The issue is particularly salient for the luxury brands. Pentina & Guilloux & Micu (2018) explored social media marketing engagement within luxury brands by content analyzing of in-person interviews with luxury shoppers.

In conclusion, social media marketing plays a hybrid role in the business world. It helps brands to communicate with consumers through different dimensions, thus it cannot control if the information is interpreted correctly and it cannot control what content will consumers produce either. To achieve business success, brands need to take into different marketing theories

into consideration so that they can help brands to build their image from different perspectives (Heymann-Reder,2012).

## **2.4 What is advertising and advertisement?**

Advertising is a subset of marketing. Advertising is a wide subject of investigation studied in various areas like marketing, sociology, semiotics etc. With the development of technology and widespread of the Internet in modern society, they are spread everywhere in our daily life. Through TV, billboards, magazines, newspapers, radio, theatre, cinema, street hoardings, and social media, advertisements are designed to attract attention. Cook (2001, p.1) noted: “advertisements are normally ignored despite the care, skill and money spent in their creation; people do not take them seriously.” Therefore, advertisements have to use different verbal and visual techniques, disguise the commercial purpose to increase the persuasive power (Al-Momani & Migdadi & Badarneh, 2016).

There are different definitions of what is an advertisement. The word advertisement or advertising is originally from the word *advertere* in Latin language, which means turn around (Goddard, 2002). It can be understood as an advertisement is “a tool for turning peoples’ attention toward the thing advertised, a product, be it, service or idea” (Goddard, 2002, p.9). Beasley and Danesi (2002, p.1) define advertisements as “any type or form of public announcement intended to direct people’s attention to the availability, qualities, and/or cost of specific commodities or services.” Cook (2001, p9) defines advertising as “the promotion of goods or services for sale through impersonal media.” Despite different definitions, the common ground of

advertising is the purpose of persuasion. They are designed to use different techniques to attract attention, convince viewers and then take actions.

The modality of advertisement has been evolved over years. Chandler (1994) states that in the past advertisements usually explicit the meaning through the medium of the written message, but since the 1920s, visual modality has become more common, and the relationship between the written message and visual message has become complementary. Lester (2003) confirms that the combination of both verbal and visual presentations made advertisements more powerful, meaningful and more culturally specific.

What is more, advertising is also a tool to express ideological consensus, reflects values and culture in the society. The purpose of drawing people's attention determines advertisements can reflect sociocultural values. In fact, advertisements provide a perfect expression of ideas, attitudes and perception in every age because they are designed to be understood by the audiences in the time (Arthur, 2000). Advertisements also provide information about daily life and leisure culture, and express the feelings of the 'man in the street' more than any other genre while making it possible to identify values, beliefs and worldviews central to a specific society (Cook, 2001). Thus, advertising and popular culture are closely intertwined and it has been widely investigated in research. For instance, Al-Momani & Migdadi & Badarneh (2016) investigated intergeneric borrowings in print advertisements in Jordan and explained the advertisements' denoted meaning in Jordanian culture.

Nowadays, advertisers are enthusiastically integrating social media into their advertising programs to drive digital engagement (Hilde, 2018). As K. K. Smith (2012, p. 86) noted "Digital Marketing is the practice of

promoting products and services using digital distribution channels via computers, mobile phones, smartphones, or other digital devices. Computers and mobile devices are common tools for Millennials; even regarded as essential". In short, internet advertising is becoming increasingly important to advertising and of increasing interest to researchers.

From studies on social context of sexuality in modern China, apparently, the social context has a significant influence on sexuality. Unfortunately, sexuality research in 21st century China is quite limited due to political, social, academic reasons. Therefore, the need to study the link between culture and sexuality is raised. Apart from that, new format of advertising on social media is reshaping the communications in the digital world. How sexuality is presented on social media platform through condom advertising also becomes an interesting topic.

Therefore, two research questions are raised as below:

1. How does Durex utilize Chinese symbols and other features of Chinese culture in their social media posts?
2. How is sexuality represented in Durex's social media posts in China?

In the next chapter, I will introduce the adopted methodology to answer the research questions.

### 3 METHODOLOGY

The analysis in this chapter will present the methodology of how to read images, decode advertisements, and in our case, how to understand brands' social media posts. The main tool of this thesis is semiotics. Therefore, a thorough introduction of semiotics will be given and specific terminologies will be clarified.

#### 3.1 Semiotics: terminology and scope

Semiotics is relatively a new term for many people. However, the terminology could trace back to the ancient Greek word. Originally the term was *sémeion*, which means “sign”, a medical term for “Symptom ” (Sebeok, 2001). The term “semiology” has been used interchangeably in the literature with the term “semiotics”, however, Sebeok (2001) states, the older term, semiotics, is generally preferred nowadays.

In modern society since the 20<sup>th</sup> century, “semiotics” arises as a science. Nowadays, semiotics has been defined as “the sciences of the life of signs in society” (Saussure, 1916 [1974]). This definition has a breathtaking meaning by combining simplicity and comprehensiveness. In this term, everything in a culture can be seen as a form of communication, organized in ways akin to verbal language, to be understood in terms of a common set of fundamental rules or principles. Semiotics offers the promise of a systematic, comprehensive and coherent study of communications phenomena as a whole, not just instances of it (Hodge & Kress, 1988).

“Semiotics” can be used in both a general way to define the discipline of semiotic study, or in an applied way to describe the sign system

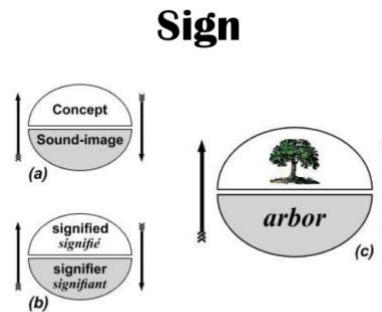
structuring meaning in a given communication context, as in a brand's semiotics. The brand's semiotic system embeds proprietary symbolism such as logos or icons in the culture of a specific segment and/or product category, for instance (Oswald, 2015).

### 3.2 Structuralism and Saussure

Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist who made a great contribution to structuralism and semiotics, is considered as the founding father of semiotics. His ideas laid a solid foundation for many significant developments in both linguistics and semiotics in the 20th century (Harris & Taylor, 1997). *Course in General Linguistics* was posthumously published by his students in 1916 and is considered as his most influential work. Saussure revolutionized the way of viewing the language system by differentiating “*la langue*” and “*la parole*”. “*La langue*” refers to the language system. The language system consists of linguistic signs and rules. The parole refers to an individual speech act. In the end, “*la langue*” is a universal system that makes linguistic communication work. (Saussure, 1916 [1974]) By defining those codes, he developed a diachronic analysis of a text or theory of language. He believed that language is a system of signs that express ideas and semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign.

Saussure emphasized the dialectical nature of the sign by defining “*signifier*” and “*signified*”. In Saussure's definition, “*signifier*” is the material existence of the sign, it can be a sound, a word, a gesture; while “*signified*” is an image or concept to which the signifier refers (Sebeok, 2001). The

relationship between “*signifier*” and “*signified*” is just like two sides of a sheet of paper, inseparable and combined (Chandler, 2017).



*Figure 1.* Ferdinand de Saussure’s binary model

Saussure also claims that linguistic signs are conventional, arbitrary, linear and have value. The value is determined by two factors: the concept and the position of the sign within the system. The sign system is structured according to similarities and differences. (Saussure, 1916 [1974]) It also applies to the semiotics world. Structural semiotics takes concepts from structural linguistics to analyze the structure of meaning in non-linguistic systems, from poetics to the traffic code (Oswald, 2015). Structural semiotics ties the meaning with the culture of the structure. Codes and conventions produce meaning only under certain cultural context. In different cultures, one sign might have opposite meaning because it functions differently in different structures. This approach empowers brands different meaning in different marketplace, provides means of analyzing advertising or brand functioning in different markets.

However, one thing might be arguable, that is structural semiotics differs from structural linguistics in terms of “arbitrariness”. In a linguistic sign, the relationship between sounds and concept is arbitrary. For example,

s/ʌ/n- “son”, s/i/n- “sin”. But in structural semiotics, if the signs are cultural codes or social norms, the system is different from the language system per se. They cannot be decided individually. The meanings in them are regulated by a group of people under certain circumstance.

Some may argue the meaning of a brand is determined by one’s personal experience and understanding rather than the culture behind him. Therefore, Laura R. Oswald (2015) brought up the new concept with “*The code*” and “*The performance*” for a non-linguistic system in parallel with “*la langue*” and “*la parole*” in the linguistic system. “*The code*”, comparable to “*la langue*” refers to transparent, informal, pervasive influence on consumer perceptions and behaviors by social norms in the society. “*The performance*”, comparable to “*la parole*” refers to individual acts under manipulating culture codes.

### **3.3 Pragmatism and Peirce**

A contemporary semiotician lived in the United States is Charles Sanders Peirce. Peirce was a philosopher, a mathematician, a logician, the founding father pragmatism (Chandler, 2007). He developed a new sign system and defined different types of a sign.

One of the major differences between Saussure’s theory and Peirce’s is the structure of the sign. Peirce developed a triadic model instead of a binary one. He defines a sign should represent an object and it should be capable of being interpreted by a mind. Until it be interpreted, it does not function as a sign. Interpretant can become an object and be interpreted into other meaning. It is a dynamic process. The process can always go on but it



doesn't mean it's an infinite process. At some point, it will stop. (Chandler, 2007). Therefore, Peirce's theory includes three elements: 1. The sign itself or *representamen*, 2. *Interpretant* that is the interpretation of the sign, and 3. the reference of the sign that is the *object* (Peirce, 1988,1955). According to Peirce, a sign can be classified into three basic modes, icon, index and symbol depending on the relationship between the *representamen* and the *object* (Chandler, 1994).

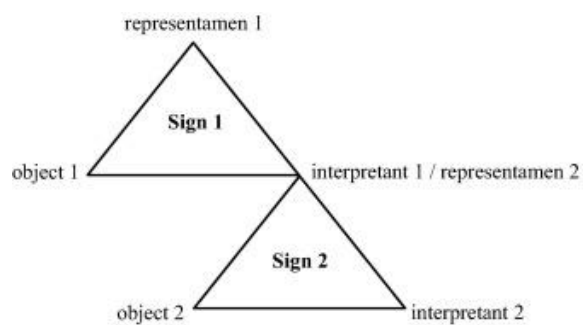


Figure 2. Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model

Index is a mode in which the signifier is not arbitrary but is directly connected in some way (physically or causally) to the signified. Chandler (1994) illustrates that the link can be observed. For example, a natural sign – smoke is an index of fire, echoes are indexes of voice etc.

Icon is a mode in which the signifier is perceived as resembling or imitating the signified. Chandler (1994) explains that being similar in possessing some of its qualities is also iconic, for example: a portrait, a cartoon, a scale-model, onomatopoeia, metaphors, 'realistic' sounds in 'programme music', sound effects in radio drama, a dubbed film soundtrack, imitative gestures.

Symbol is a mode in which the signifier does not resemble the signified but which is fundamentally arbitrary or purely conventional. Chandler

(1994) gives example as language in general (plus specific languages, alphabetical letters, punctuation marks, words, phrases and sentences), numbers, Morse code, traffic lights, national flags etc.

Therefore, the three forms are differentiated by the involvement of conventionality. Symbolic signs such as language required a high level of conventionality to be interpreted; indexical signs 'direct the attention to their objects by blind compulsion'. (Peirce, 1931-58) The more conventional the sign is, to the greater extent the *signifier* can be defined. Saussure (cited in Chandler, 1994) also used the term “motivation” and “constraint” to described the extend relationship between the signified and the signifier. The more a signifier is constrained by the signified, the more 'motivated' the sign is. Therefore, symbolic signs are unmotivated because it is not constrained but the *signifier*. Index signs are motivated because it is constrained. If the sign is not motivated, it requires more agreed conventions. The role of the convention in relation to signs is crucial to define different types of signs.

Despite the different types of signs, it doesn't necessarily mean that a sign can only belong to one category. A sign can combine two or three definitions, depending on its purpose and context. Signs cannot be classified in terms of the three modes without reference to the purposes of their users within particular contexts (Chandler, 2007).

Photograph is always perceived as resembling reality, Peirce noted that a photography is not iconic but also indexical:

“photographs, especially instantaneous photographs, are very instructive, because we know that in certain respects they are exactly like the objects they represent. But this resemblance is due to the

photographs having been produced under such circumstances that they were physically forced to correspond point by point to nature. In that aspect, then, they belong to the... class of signs... by physical connection [the indexical class]" (Peirce 1931-58, 2.281; see also 5.554).

Therefore, from this perspective of view, a photograph can be an index of the effect of light on photographic emulsion (Chandler, 2007). A photograph can also be symbolic. Davis and Walton (1983, p.45) found that a large number of photographs has the relationship to texts. They represent the subject indexically and symbolically.

What is more, in terms of painting, it can also be more symbolic than iconic depending on the style of the painting (Gombrich,1959). For example, Picasso's Guernica is more symbolic, while others, such as the Mona Lisa, tend to be perceived as iconic.

In conclusion, Peirce was fully aware of the exclusivity of each type of sign. He insisted that 'it would be difficult if not impossible to instance an absolutely pure index, or to find any sign absolutely devoid of the indexical quality.' (Peirce, 1931-58) A sign can be an icon, a symbol and an index, or any combination. A map is indexical in pointing to the locations of things, iconic in its representation of the directional relations and distances between landmarks and symbolic in using conventional symbols the significance of which must be learnt. (Chandler, 2007).

Social media posts typically combine language, paintings, photographs, and videos etc. One sign in social media advertisements can combine different modes. By defining the sign, it helps to understand the usage

and the meaning behind the sign, thus to understand the link between advertisement and culture. In the analysis chapter, I will identify different types of signs in the posts, dig into the cultural references behind them, find connections, and use them as evidence to answer research questions.

### **3.4 Roland Barthes: reading image**

Roland Barthes is a French semiotician and cultural theorist famous for his ideologically inflected analysis of images, texts and the “myth” of popular culture (Chandler, 2007). Barthes focuses on studying the meaning of images.

He departs from three questions to read images:

1. How does meaning enter the picture?
2. Where does it end?
3. What is beyond this “meaning”?

Barthes (1967) takes linguistic messages and categorizes them into denotative and connotative meaning. He defines denotation as the simple description of what, or who is represented and connotation as the ideas and values expressed through what was being represented, and through the way in which they were represented. Accordingly, denotation is the literal or obvious meaning. The sign, in this case, consists of a signifier, linguistic elements, and a signified, the represented concept or idea.

However, most semioticians, including Barthes himself, argue that no sign is purely denotative, lacking connotation. There can be no neutral, objective description which is free of an evaluative element. Chandler (1994)

argues that connotation produces the illusion of denotation, the illusion of language as transparent and of the signifier and the signified as being identical. Thus, denotation is just another connotation.

What is more, Barthes (1967) identifies two concepts. The first is “anchoring” which occurs when linguistic elements serve to anchor the preferred reading of the text or image. They direct the reader among various signifieds and guides him/her toward a meaning selected in advance; in this case, the sign acquires an ideological function. The other concept is “relay” which describes the complementary relationship between text and image. This occurs when both verbal and visual signs combine into a higher level of message where both of them are needed to understand the intended meaning. In his significant book *Mythology* (1991), Barthes explains a double theoretical framework: one is an ideological critique bearing on the language of so-called mass culture; another one is a first attempt to analyze semiologically the mechanics of this language.

### **3.4.1 Image rhetoric: metaphor and metonymy**

Metaphor is widely used in our daily life so that it is always used as an umbrella term that covers other figures of speech such as metonymy (Chandler, 2007). However, they should not be mistaken for each other due to its own specific usage. Lakoff and Johnson state that “the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p.5). In semiotics, metaphors involve more than that. Chandler (2007) illustrates that “a metaphor involves one signified acting as a signifier referring to a different signified.” Typically, metaphor illustrates an

abstraction in a well-defined model.

Metaphor is initially unconventional and because it apparently disregards “literal” or denotative resemblance. According to Peirce’s sign modes (1931-1958), *resemblance* indicates metaphor involves *iconic* mode. However, to some extent, a metaphor can also be considered as *symbolic* when a resemblance is oblique (Chandler, 2007). Interpretation is required to understand metaphors and in the process, it may involve social conventions.

Metaphors are not only verbal but can also be visual. Visual metaphor also involves a function of transference, transferring certain qualities from one sign to another (Chandler, 2007). Advertisers often use visual metaphor to explain the meaning that cannot be expressed by words. McCracken (1987) explains that advertisers need to differentiate products from one to another to reach consumers, and they do this by associating with products with certain social values. In semiotics, they create a new signified by associating two signifiers and transfer the signified through the association.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) category three fundamental concepts of different metaphors:

1. *Orientalional* metaphor - - primarily relates to spatial dimension;
2. *Ontological* metaphor - - associates with activities, emotions and ideas with entities and substance;
3. *Structural* metaphor - - interact one concept with another (e.g. time is money).

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that though metaphors are not arbitrary, they are derived from cultural, social context. Dominant metaphors tend to reflect and influence value in a culture or subculture.

Metonymy is another figure of speech that is based on various *indexical* relationships between signifieds, especially by the substitution of effect for cause (Chandler, 2007). Wilden (1987) defines that “metonymy is the evocation of the whole by a connection. It consists in using for the name of a thing or a relationship, an attribute, a suggested sense, or something closely related, such as effect for cause... the imputed relationship being that of contiguity.”

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) draw three types of metonymy as:

*Producer for product* (She own a Picasso);

*Object for user* (The ham sandwich wants his check [bill]);

*Controller for controlled* (Nixon boomed Hanoi).

Like metaphors, metonyms can be verbal and visual as well.

Metonyms are more culturally based on than metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Metonyms are *indexical* and *symbolic*, while metaphors are of mere iconicity or of symbolism.

Jakobson (1956) argues that a metaphorical term is connected with that for which it is substituted on the basis of similarity or contrast, metonymy is based on contiguity or proximity.

Identifying image rhetoric can help to understand how advertisements embed cultural meaning and how do they transfer the meaning from cultural context to products and consumers. In the analysis chapter, I will explain how the selected advertisement use metaphor and metonymy to transfer sex culture to condom advertising.

### 3.4.2 Denotation and connotation

According to Roland Barthes, there is another way to interpret visual signs. Barthes classifies signs into two levels, one is denotative level; another is connotative level (1967). He claims that denotative level of sign stands for surface or literal meaning in a signifier. Denotative meaning can be easily interpreted by its appearance. Give an example, a picture of a dog can be interpreted as dog, not cat.

The second level of sign is connotative level that is harder to interpret and embedded with deeper cultural meaning. The connotative meaning can be determined by the group of people when it is being used. And it might vary from culture to culture. In Chinese culture, the connotative meaning color red is luckiness, while in the West it connotes danger.

What is more, more scholars have extended these signs to a broader system of meaning and ideology. Hall (2001[1980]) designates it the ‘meta code’ or dominant code, and Barthes (1991) refers to it as ‘mythology’. Barthes (1991, p.123) notes that “myth occurs in a ‘second-order semiological system’ established upon a denotive sign, which is the first-order semiological system that comprises signifier and signified.” I will adopt Barthes’s myth into part of analysis in this thesis. Based on the analysis of visual images, semiotics is used to examine and interpret the series’ embedded cultural meanings.

### 3.4.3 Anchorage and relay

Barthes has also explained the relationship between other semiotic elements and text in a multimodal context. Barthes defined two concepts: anchoring and replaying. He notes “Anchorage is the most frequent function of the linguistic



message and is commonly found in press photographs and advertisements. The Function of relay is less common (at least as far as the fixed image is concerned); it can be seen particularly in cartoon and comic strips.” (Barthe, 1967, p.275) In visual images, linguistic elements serve to anchor in images, guide people to receive the meaning. In this case, the sign acquires an ideological function. “relay” explains the complementary relationship between text and image. It means in order to understand the meaning of image, both verbal and visual signs are essential.

Apparently, the two functions of the linguistics message can coexist in one iconic whole, but the dominance of the one or the other is of consequence for the general economy of a work.

### **3.5 Chandler’s semiotic analytical framework**

From a structural semiotic point of view, a sign is perceived under the scope of a certain structure. However, Daniel Chandler (1994) argues that the concept of semiotics is now concerned with the use of signs in specific social situations. From Barthes’s perspective, cultural contexts can be extended to a big range of life. Chandler believes that one can access data limitedly though a semiotic approach.

Chandler (1994) provides a framework of semiotic analysis which includes the following:

- Identifying the text and the signs within the text and the codes within which these signs have meaning (e.g. “textual codes” such as camerawork or “social codes” such as body language).

- Identifying paradigm sets (such as shot size: long shot, mid shot, close-up).
- Identifying the structural relationships between the various signifiers (syntagms).
- Discussing the ideological functions of the signs in the text and of the text as a whole: What sort of reality does the text construct and how does it do so? How does it seek to naturalize its own perspectives? What assumptions does it make about its readers?

The analysis of the data will be carried out mainly with Chandler's framework but combined with other semiotic theories as well. It includes the identification of sign modes, the meaning of the sign, analysis of image rhetoric in the selected advertisements, analysis of the relationship between verbal visual signs in the advertisements. Therefore, it is a combination of different semiotics approach.

#### **4. DATA**

This chapter consists of two parts. The first part is a brief introduction of Sina Weibo and Durex. Sina Weibo is chosen for data collection as one of the major social media platforms in China. Durex is playing an active role on Weibo. The second part is a detailed description of the selected data. The detailed information includes content, color, language translation and other relevant aspects. Durex, as one of the most influential condom brand in China, has a

natural relation with sexuality presentation in China. To avoid confusions, no other brands will be analyzed in this work, even though they might have a different way of showing sexuality. All the posts are originally created in Chinese and targeted in Chinese consumers. Therefore, Durex's social media content has a strong link with Chinese culture and regard they are suitable for China's consumer context.

#### **4.1 Sina weibo and Durex**

Sina Weibo, in Mandarin 新浪微博 (xīnlàng wēibó), is a microblogging site created by Sina Corporation in 2009. This social media platform is often described as equivalent to Twitter, which is blocked in China due to governmental regulation. Weibo has up to 140 character limit and up to 9 pictures for each post. Users hold a "follower-followee" network which means one can "follow" an individual and read their posts, like and repost them without being followed back. Sina Weibo is a versatile platform consists of text, videos, images, and gifs. There are also slight differences between account types on Sina Weibo. In general, they can be divided into two: personal account and company account. Depending on payment, accounts will be offered different functions, e.g. VIP account can view more data analysis of their users.

Based on China's big population, the number of this platform is recognizable. According to its official statistic, Sina Weibo has reached 392 million active users on a monthly base and 172 million active users on a daily base by 2017 (BBC, 2017). Sina Weibo overtakes Twitter users with this number.

Durex is one of the best-selling condom brands across the world, with 30% of the global market (BBC, 2010). The brand name was launched in 1929, standing for "Durability, reliability, and excellence." Since 2010, Durex has started their marketing strategy in China by leveraging Chinese social media platforms and investing in offline and online distribution. The strategy paid off - Durex condom sales increased threefold in China and market share increased by over 10% (Piskorski & Smith, 2014 ). Durex officially started microblogging on Sina Weibo in January 2011. By the time of writing this thesis, Durex's total number of followers was about 3 million and the total number of posts was over 20,000. This is a solid proof that Durex is actively engaged in China's marketing and its social strategy has a positive impact on the brand.

Durex's marketing in China is discrete, with campaigns of their products run subtly to complying with the requirements of social ethics. In Chinese traditional cultural conception, sex is a topic that is not appropriate to be explicitly explained. In the following chapter, I will illustrate how Durex constructs sex and sexuality without touching cultural taboos and even still promotes sex by embedding Chinese culture.

#### **4.2 Data categorization**

The time range for selecting data is Durex's Sina Weibo post within 2017. This guarantees all data is up to date with the current culture, and this frame of time assures that there are no significant cultural shifts. In total, there were 346 advertisements posted on their social media in 2017. But not all of them are relevant to our topic in this thesis. Because some of them are simply promoting

products and serve for the purpose of sales. One critical criteria for choosing the data is that all of the posts were created to celebrate traditional Chinese traditional festivals or have Chinese festival elements.

A festival is an event ordinarily celebrated by a group of people and centering on some characteristic aspect of that community and its religion or cultures. The celebration of a festival offers a sense of belonging for religious, social, or geographical groups, contributing to group cohesiveness. Therefore, festivals stand for condensed representation of cultures and have significant meaning to the belonged cultures.

The selected data is categorized into four groups according to similarities and differences between each of them. The difference is that all of them stand for different festivals, thus they embed different cultural meanings behind them. Some of them are grouped together based on the pattern of communication. I will further explain it with the following examples.

***Example1. Visualization of the product***



*Figure 3. Durex's advertisement during the Chinese New Year*



*Figure 4.* Durex’s advertisement during the Ghost Festival

The first picture was posted on January 27<sup>th</sup> 2017, which is Chinese New Year’s Eve. The post has had 10553 reposts, 2540 comments, 3613 likes on Sina Weibo. Durex published this advertisement with along text: “So wish you best luck in the year of the rooster.” According to the Chinese 12-year animal zodiac cycle, the Chinese year beginning in 2017 is the year of the Rooster. That’s the reason why this advertisement has a strong link with the rooster.

Figure 3 consists of true red color background, flying golden-colored fragments, representation of a condom, and Durex’s logo and slogan. The condom is in white and transparent color, which is a realistic representation. On the top of the condom, there is a small bump and next to it there two pieces of red petals. These two pieces of red petals look-alike with the cockscomb of a rooster. This significant similarity enables condom to have a new image. The shape of the condom, the little bump and two pieces of red petals combine to form a new visualization – a rooster.

In the middle bottom part of the advertisement has three columns of texts. they should be read top to bottom. It is not necessary to follow the order from left to right or from right to left, since each column has independent

meaning and it doesn't change the meaning in any reading order. The first two columns (from left to right) are in a bigger font. The first column in Chinese is “dà jí,dà lì”(大吉, 大力), which the literal meaning is great luck, great power. However, the pronunciation dà jí dà lì is also a typical Chinese greeting during Chinese New Year, which means great luck and great profit. But Durex adds a comma in between and replaces “利”(profit in Chinese) with “力”(power in Chinese). The second column is in Chinese is “dà jí jī”(大吉鸡), which means great luck rooster in Chinese. If the second character changes the tone from rising tone to level tone, then it becomes another commonly seen Chinese phrase “dà jī jī”(大鸡鸡). The literal meaning is “great rooster”, while it is also a slang word for “penis”. The changes of tones and the reasons behind it in Chinese will be further explained in analysis. The third column is “dīng yǒu nián, gōng hè xīn chūn”(丁酉年, 恭贺新春). Dīng yǒu nián is the name of the Chinese New Year in the Chinese calendar, and gōng hè xīn chūn means happy new year.

Below the text, there is Durex's logo and its slogan in English: love sex. In the bottom of the right side, it's Durex's watermark on Sina Weibo. The logo and the watermark apply to all advertisements, so it won't be mentioned repeatedly in the following posts.

The second advertisement was published on 5<sup>th</sup> September 2017. According to the Chinese calendar, that is the Chinese ghost festival. The post has had 165 reposts, 223 comments, 696 likes. The post comes along with the hashtag “ghost festival” and text: “repost this microblog, bless you safe tonight.”

This advertisement uses a completely different color to display compare to the previous. The background shows a dark blue sky in the night with illuminating lanterns flying up. In the middle, there is one big lantern, which becomes the protagonist in the advertisement. The shape of the lantern contains Bulging cylinder and a little bump on the top. This shape again looks alike a blowing condom. Below the lantern, there is text in Chinese: tonight, cautious safety and there is a hashtag: the Ghost Festival.

The reason why these two advertisements are grouped together is that both advertisements directly use the products, meanwhile the image of condom is transferred to culturally relevant subjects: a rooster and a lantern. From a semiotics perspective, they can be identified as the same sign type. Further interpretation will be explained in the analysis.

***Example2. Seductive body representation***



*Figure 5. Durex's advertisement during the Lantern Festival*

The third advertisement was published during the Chinese Lantern Festival. The background uses light pink color. In the bottom of the advertisement, there are two white Chinese dumplings-glutinous rice balls, which is the typical food for this festival. The placement of the rice balls also



can be seen as something else: female breast, buttocks etc. in the top right position: there are Chinese characters in calligraphic style. Follow the reading order from top to bottom, from left to right, the text is “nián nián tián tián, tuán tuán yuán yuán”. In Chinese, the literal meaning is “sticky, sweet, togetherness, round”. Tuán tuán yuán yuán also has the meaning of family reunion. Next to the text, there is one very small red Chinese stamp. On the stamp, it says Lantern Festival.

***Example3. Text and image complemented symbolic sex***



*Figure 6. Durex’s advertisement during the Labor Day*

The fourth advertisement is published on the first of May 2017.

Even though Labor Day is an international holiday, it is also an important day in Chinese culture. This advertisement also consists of red color, but this one is in a darker red color compare to the redness in Chinese New Year’s advertisement. In the poster, three big characters are the main content. The text is “láo dòng jié”(劳动节) in Chinese. However, the text is not in a simple font. Each character has its part be replaced with a gesture. The shape of those gestures looks alike of the original part, so the character can still be understood as long as one can read Chinese. In the bottom part, there is a sentence: “Labor

is the most honorable.” However, gestures are not random gestures, they also relate to sex. The gestures look alike finger sex or the gestures when having sex. The visualization of sex and the meaning of the characters combine to explain what is laboring or working.

***Example4. Traditional custom rhetoric***



*Figure 7. Durex’s advertisement during the Dragon Boat Festival*



*Figure 8. Durex’s advertisement during the Dragon Boat Festival*

The last advertisement was published on 30<sup>th</sup> May 2017. On that day is another traditional Chinese festival – the Dragon Boat Festival. Durex published two advertisements in one post to send greetings. Each picture is

divided into two parts. The upper part shows naked body of female and male's body. The bottom part is the tradition of celebrating the festival. In dragon boat festival, it is a tradition to eat a Chinese dumpling called "zongzi"- bamboo wrapped rice and have dragon boat racing on that day. They are all presented in the pictures in the bottom part in each picture.

The two posts are grouped together because they all use traditions in the festival to link them with sex. I will explain them with more details from a semiotic perspective in the following analysis.

## 5. ANALYSIS

This chapter will present a semiotic analysis of Durex's advertisements on Sina Weibo based on the selected data. The analysis will focus on Pierce's definition of sign and interpreting model, Barthes's view of image rhetoric, and intersemiotic complementarity. I will adopt Peirce, Barthes and Chandler's semiotic approach to a simplified analytical framework in this thesis. The analysis is designed into three different stages: cultural background, semiotic breakdown and explanation. The cultural background provides contextual information about Chinese festivals and cultures relate to it since the selected data all have close connection with the festival culture. I will identify the following questions in the analysis:

- What sign modes are used? What is the meaning of the sign?
- What rhetoric is used in the advertisement and how?

- What is the relationship between verbal and visual signs in the advertisement?

Last but not least, an explanation will be provided to highlight the connections between the semiotic elements in the advertisement and the prevalent socio-cultural values of sexuality in Chinese society.

### ***Example1. Visualization of the product***

#### *Cultural background:*

Chinese New Year, also called Spring Festival in modern China is a very important festival to celebrate the turn of the traditional lunisolar Chinese calendar. The history of the New Year can be traced back to thousands of years ago with different origins or legends. Traditionally, the festival was a time to honor deities as well as ancestors (Chiu, 2018). As we all know, China is a big country with an enormous territory and huge population, the customs and norms of celebrating New Year might vary from region to region due to cultural nuances. However, there are some traditions that travel across the country. Chinese families would gather together to have an annually reunion dinner to celebrate the past, welcome the new, and enjoy the company with family. In Chinese culture, New Year is a time that sweep away illness and bad luck, a time for welcoming "good fortune", "happiness", "wealth", and "longevity". It is traditional for people to give money in red paper envelopes, decorate the house with red couplet on doors, wear red new clothes. Because red is the ultimate lucky color in Chinese culture, especially in Chinese New Year time.

According to the lunar calendar, there are 12 animals representing 12 zodiacs. In order, the 12 animals are: Rat, Ox, Tiger, Rabbit, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Goat, Monkey, Rooster, Dog, Pig. The Chinese animal zodiac is a repeating cycle of 12 years, with each year being represented by an animal and its reputed attributes. 2017 is the year of the Rooster. That is the reason why Durex is playing the concept of rooster in the New Year advertisement.

The Ghost Festival in China, also known as the Hungry Ghost Festival, and zhōng yuán jié (中元节) in Chinese is a traditional Buddhist festival in China. It is celebrated on the 15th day of the seventh lunar month. Traditionally, it is a festival to worship ancestors. But people also believe that hungry ghosts are let out of hell during this time. It sounds superstitious, but people also believe that ghosts attack their enemies and they might be angry or malicious in general. It is traditional to fly lanterns to the sky or float river lanterns to prevent themselves from ghosts and makes wishes. People also light incense and may make sacrifices of food to worship the hungry unhappy ghosts. People believe that the ghosts won't do something terrible to them or curse them after eating their sacrifices and while holding their money.

*Semiotic break down:*

According to Peirce (1931-1958), a sign does not function as a sign until it is interpreted. The meaning of the sign depends on the process of interpretation. He also claims that there is no absolute categorization of sign type (Peirce, 1931-1958). A sign can be an icon, an index, a symbol or any combination of them. In this part, I will define the signs in the advertisements and interpret

them from different levels to answer the question how Durex advertisements embed Chinese culture and construct sex.

The major content in Figure 3 is the product. The sign consists of a transparent-colored condom shape and two pieces of cockscomb.

Firstly, the sign is an icon of a condom. The transparent color on the post signifies the color of condom. The curved shape with the little bump on the top imitates the shape of condom as well. If we take a closer look, we can see that x-rayed color in the margin of the sign. The enlightening x-rayed color signifies extraordinariness, entry luxury, and nobleness. As an icon, it adds extra value to the brand.

Secondly, the sign can be considered as an indexical sign. As I mentioned, the two red pieces look alike cockscomb, which gives index of a rooster. If we look at the sign with this added information, we can interpret the sign as a rooster. However, in this context, the rooster is not simply a rooster itself. As this advertisement is to celebrate the year of the rooster, the rooster as a Chinese zodiac in Chinese year calendar have many symbolic meanings. To name a few, in ancient China, there is no clock to calculate the time accurately. So rooster's crowing in the dawn wakes people up in the morning. For this reason, the rooster has the symbolic meaning of punctuality and honesty in Chinese culture. The second thing roosters symbolize is bravery and competitiveness. This originates with the gamecock in ancient China. People believe that fighting is in the rooster's blood. As a product used by male, Durex links its product value with traditional Chinese beliefs quite well.

Thirdly, the sign can be perceived as symbols. As I mentioned, rooster in Chinese is jī, the pronunciation is similar to jí (吉), which means

good luck. The shape of rooster empowers Durex to symbolize luckiness for their product-condom. In addition, in Chinese language, the pronunciation of rooster is also close to “penis”. Therefore, the sign here combines the meaning of “luckiness” and “penis”, which symbolizes their wish to everyone they can have good sex in the upcoming new year.

In the advertisement of the Ghost Festival, the major content is the lightened lantern in the middle. I will consider this part as a consist sign and analyze it according to Pierce (1931-1958) ’s model. To begin with, the sign is an icon because the shape and the color assimilate a flying lantern in the sky. However, it is not direct drawing from a lantern. With the little bump on the top, it suggests that it is a condom. In this sense, this sign is an index. Last but not least, the sign also has symbolic meaning. The practice of flying lanterns means protection and praying. By designing the lantern into a condom shape, Durex means that using their product can prevent from danger, that is preventing from pregnancy. Durex adds their brand with the value of safety guarantee, trustiness, reliability.

In Figure 3, The semblance between rooster, condom and penis frames the metaphor in this advertisement. In Chinese social media, Durex is not able to represent sex in an explicit way. Therefore, it combines different subjects in one sign. Through dynamic interpretation, the sign has different layers of sign mode and the meaning are transferred. In Figure 4, lantern is also the metaphor of condom due to the similarity in appearance.

In Figure 3 and Figure 4, text plays a crucial role in the advertisements in order to understand them. In Figure 3, the relationship between rooster, condom, and penis is explained by word playing. For

example, by saying *dà jí jī* (great lucky rooster in Chinese ) to indicate “*dà jī jī*” (penis in Chinese), it explains different meaning of the sign. In the Figure 4, text is the key message in the advertisement. It gives the warning of “be careful tonight”, meanwhile it warns people to be careful when having sex. In the Ghost Festival, people fly lanterns to avoid danger. At the same time, by design lantern and condom in the same sign, it delivers the meaning that using Durex’s condom can avoid pregnancy and protect consumers. Therefore, text in both advertisements is the anchorage.

*Explanation:*

In these two posters, Durex presents their product – condom in the advertisement, but they manage to transfer the image of condom into traditions in Chinese culture in the context of different festivals. By creating different layers of sign modes, Durex combines Chinese culture in their communication and also highlights the role of their product in sex. In the New Year’s advertisement, as an icon, condom denotes extraordinariness, light luxury, and nobleness; as an index, condom denotes honesty, punctuality, bravery and competitiveness; as a symbol, condom denotes luckiness in sex. In the ghost festival, condom is a combination of sign modes: icon, index, and symbol. Durex denotes their brand’ safety guarantee, trustiness, reliability by presenting condom in the tradition of a traditional Chinese festival.

***Example2. Iconic seductive body representation***

*Cultural background:*



The Lantern Festival, also known as “yuán xiāo jié” in Chinese, happens on the fifteenth day of the first month in the lunisolar Chinese calendar. It also marks as the last day of traditional Chinese New Year celebrations. The general consensus is that the festival began more than 2000 years ago in the Western Han dynasty. General traditions to celebrate the festival includes: guessing lantern riddles, lion dances, light colorful lanterns etc. What is more, eating tangyuan is an important custom of the Lantern Festival. Tangyuan is ball-shaped dumplings made of glutinous rice flour with different fillings such as white sugar, brown sugar, sesame seeds, peanuts. As the pronunciation of tangyuan is similar to tuányuán in Chinese, which means whole family gathering together happily. Chinese people believe that eating this round shape of rice balls symbolizes wholeness and togetherness. Therefore, eating tangyuan on the Lantern Festival is a way for Chinese people to express their best wishes for their family and their future lives.

*Semiotic breakdown:*

In this advertisement, there is no Durex’s product presented, but Durex still manages to link sex with Chinese tradition. The sign will be analyzed here is the white part in the bottom. I define this sign as a combination of icon and index. From a visual perspective, it is two rice balls placed next to each other. If the interpretation of this sign is two rice balls, then the sign can be defined as an icon. Because this is a direct representation of the original substance. However, I believe that the meaning is not as superficial as it is. The way how they place rice balls gives a clue to interpret the meaning further. Normally, rice balls are put in a bowl and the number is typically more than 2. I suggest

that the shape of rice balls here indicates the shape of female's breasts or buttocks. The shape of two round balls squeeze together with circular curve has assimilation of the shape of breasts or buttocks. Therefore, the sign is also an index.

Additionally, the usage of different colors used in the advertisement is also worth paying attention. It uses light pink as background. The color pink is the color of universal love of oneself and of others. From my interpretation, pink is a delicate color that means sweet, nice, playful, cute, romantic, charming, feminine, and tenderness. I also think Pink denotes friendship, affection, harmony, and approachability. Two rice balls are in delicate white color glowing in the margin. The color white is the color at its most complete and pure. White denotes purity, innocence, wholeness and completion. On the left side of each ball, there are highlights. It denotes rice balls' freshness, softness, maybe also deliciousness. The combination of these two color gives gentle and caring feelings. It enhances the image with the feeling of seductiveness from female breasts and buttocks. In another word, the seductiveness originates from female subject, rather than male.

The similarity between female breast or buttocks and traditional Lantern festival food is the metaphor in this advertisement. The text in the advertisement further illustrate the image, but doesn't takes the anchor. Because without it, the advertisement can still be understood.

*Explanation :*

In this advertisement, Durex presents traditional Chinese food and seductive female body in one sign. Durex borrows meaning from traditional festival and

expresses their wish for the festival with the meaning of family gathering, reunion, roundness. Meanwhile, Durex turns it to a sexier image through the assimilation between rice balls and female breasts or buttocks. Rice balls are essential to the festival, so do breasts or buttocks to this day. Durex embeds celebrative mood to sex through traditional customs. Apart from that, Durex also uses soft color to denote female seductiveness and gives sexual signals. The representation here is dominantly gendered and targets male consumers.

***Example3. Text and image complemented symbolic sex***

*Cultural background:*

Labor Day is an international holiday usually occurs on the first of May, but the date may also vary across countries. The origins of the holiday, also known as International Workers' Day, first came into being in 1891 in Europe. In 1918, twenty-seven years later in China, underground Communist organizations in Shanghai, Suzhou and Hangzhou distributed pamphlets calling attention to the holiday. Emblazoned with the slogan "Labor is sacred", the leaflets are now said to be the first public recognition —however small and isolated — of Labor Day in the country. After the establishment of new China, Labor Day is called “láo dòng jié” in Chinese. During the time of the Culture Revolution, Labor Day was elevated over almost all other traditional festivals, as ancient celebrations were shunned as being too 'feudal'. In 2000, Labor Day became a national holiday that is one week long. But the rule again changed in 2007. Nowadays, Labor Day is downsized to a three-day holiday to make way for three traditional festivals — Qingming, Dragon Boat, and Mid-Autumn — to become national holidays.

*Semiotic breakdown:*

Figure 6 is very different from others since the major content is Chinese characters. In this sense, this advertisement is more symbolic. The character in the advertisement is “láo dòng jié” (劳动节), which is Labor Day in Chinese. The gestures in the character mimic the original stroke in each character. But in my opinion, the gestures also have iconic or indexical meanings. The gestures here either point at something or look like touching something. The gestures look alike gestures of finger sex or gestures when having sex. Therefore, the “labor” here refers to having sex rather than other typical labor in everyday life. Chandler (1994) claims that language is symbolic. Therefore, another symbolic sign here is the sentence in the bottom left. The meaning is “laboring is the most honorable thing.” It echoes with Chinese value of “Labor is sacred” from the origin of Labor Day. By playing Chinese characters and using symbolic signs, Durex claims that sex is an honorable thing to do.

In this advertisement, the text is not the anchor but replays with image to deliver the meaning. From the characters and gestures, Durex refers to labor or working is having sex in this context. And the text further explains that working is the most honorable thing, which means that having sex is honorable. With the further explanation of the text, Durex borrows cultural memory to praise sex.

*Explanation:*

The writing of Chinese language consists of hieroglyphs. Hieroglyphics can be pictures of living creatures, objects used in daily life or symbols. In this situation, Durex applies “labor is sacred”, this classic value of Labor Day in the

advertisement and refers labor to sex by using symbolic characters as well as indexical drawing. By playing the Chinese characters, Durex transfers the concept of working to the practice of having sex. Furthermore, it claims that sex is sacred and honorable by borrowing cultural memory from the festival. Durex twists people traditional perception of sexuality in Chinese mind, from perceiving sex as an obscured “secret” topic to an honorable job. It goes against the traditional concept but also relevant to cultural memory at the same time.

***Example4. Traditional custom rhetoric***

*Cultural background:*

The Dragon Boat Festival, also known as “duān wǔ jié” in Chinese, is an important traditional festival in Chinese culture. It happens on the fifth day of the fifth month in lunar calendar. The origin can be traced back to two thousand years ago from the legend of people paddling out on boats to seek the body of patriotic poet Qu Yuan (343–278 BC), who drowned himself in a River. Later on, people decided to commemorate him on that day. Many traditional customs and activities are held on this day across China. Among all of them, Dragon boat racing and eating Zongzi are the central customs of the festival. Zongzi, is sticky rice dumpling wrapped by bamboo or reed leaves with various filling such as meats, beans etc. Zongzi is often wrapped in triangle or rectangle shapes and tied with soaked stalks or colorful silky cords. Dragon boat racing is named after the shape of the boat. Normally, the fore and stern of the boat are in a shape of traditional Chinese dragon. A team of people works the oars in a bid to reach the destination before other teams. One team

member sits at the front of the boat beating a drum in order to maintain morale and ensure that the rowers keep in time with one another. People also drink realgar wine, hang mugwort leaves on doors to celebrate the Festival.

*Semiotic breakdown:*

The representation in these two advertisements are through pictures, so the signs are iconic. The analysis in this example will be focused on metaphor and metonymy. According to Barthes (1967), metaphor draws a similarity between two things and metonymy draws a contiguity between two things. Metaphor and metonymy are both used in the Dragon Boat Festival's advertisements. The structure of two pictures is based on metaphor. The white triangle bra and the green wrapped zongzi share similarity in shape and outlook. In Figure 8, two parts share the similarity in movement. The upper part shows a male naked body and a hand on its waist. The hand looks small and gentle, which signifies it is a woman's hand. Therefore, the upper part describes the process of man and woman having sex. The movement is horizontal wise. The lower part shows men rowing boat, the movement is also horizontal wise.

The texts on the left side further explain the monotony in the advertisements. They explain the order of doing these two traditional customs, first unwrap zongzi, then row dragon boat. Combined with the metaphor in the picture, the process of celebrating the festival also becomes the process of having sex. Unwrapping zongzi refers to unwrap bra, meanwhile rowing dragon boat refers to the movement during sex. In this way, metonymy is achieved. For the meanings to be conveyed and for the advertisement to have

an effective function, the verbal and visual elements interact intersemiotically to complement each other to produce a coherent content.

*Explanation:*

By applying metaphor and metonymy, Durex transfers the order of celebrating festival to the order of having sex. In this way, not only it euphemizes sexuality but also conveys new meaning to having sex. Sex is not something shameful to talk about in this advertisement, instead it is something connected with traditions. It becomes a cheerful celebration and resonates with old values. Sexuality is represented through heterosexual practice. The beauty of female body and strength of male empowerment are appraised through the metaphor and metonymy to traditional festival.

## **6 DISCUSSION**

In this chapter, the findings of semiotic analysis are brought to the context of Durex's condom advertising on Chinese social media. The purpose of this chapter is to answer the research questions. The results are interpreted and explained based on the knowledge in literature review and analysis in this thesis.

### **6.1 Witty implicitness**

China, as one of the five communist countries in the world, Internet censorship in China is among the most extensive in the world due to a wide variety of laws and administrative regulations. Prohibitions inside China's Great Fire

Wall, the country's system of internet filter and controls are difficult to investigate since it's subjective and even contradictory. However, there is no denying that contents relate to sexuality is under strict control. Words that describe explicit sexual acts are out, of course. So are those for sexual organs. Even euphemisms like "behind" or "bottom" can trigger censorship by automatic software filters or a website's employees. As a condom brand, Durex faces big challenge to promote their products on social media. Therefore, playing in grey area where advertisements can promote sex and do not exceed the line of censorship are of great of significance to Durex's strategy. Playfulness, wordplay, ambiguity, word replacement, and many other funny techniques are common in advertisements. In Durex advertisements, they represent their product or sex with witty implicitness.

In example1. Durex represents the shape of condoms but in different figures. In the New Year's post, a condom is in the shape of a rooster; In Ghost Festival, a condom is in the shape of a lantern. In the Lantern Festival's post, female's breasts or buttocks are represented by rice balls. In the Labor Day's post, finger sex is embedded in symbolic Chinese characters; In the Dragon Boat Festival post, the practice of sex is explained through the practice of traditional celebrative customs. What is more, Durex never directly mentions any word in "sex" or relative body organs in written texts. It plays words in Chinese and replaces the character with different meaning but same pronunciation.

The aim of Durex on social media is to promote their products and to maintain a good relationship with their consumers. By designing witty



implicit advertisements, Durex manages to achieve both, meanwhile avoid censorship from the government.

## **6.2 Heteronormative ideals**

Through analysis, heteronormative issue is apparent among all selected advertisements. Durex's products have close relationship to sex, however, in its Chinese social media platform, communications only link to heterosexuality. In the New year's post, it links condoms with male genital organs and embeds cultural meaning in it. As I mentioned before, rooster has the meaning of bravery and competitiveness in Chinese culture. By linking male genital organs and brave symbolic meaning, it is heteronormative to praise masculinity in the sense. In the Lantern Festival, female body is represented in a soft and gentle image in metaphorical way, which matches people's impression of women being mild and weak, especially in Chinese culture. It targets male consumers by representing metaphoric female body. In the Dragon Boat festival, the custom of the festival indicates the practice of sex. The white bra and male upper body signifies heterosexual practice, leaving no space to linking with homosexual practice.

The only expectation might be the Labor Day's post. According to the hands in the advertisement, it is hard to tell the gender it refers to. One can draw conclusion that the hands in the advertisements would be male's hands because the drawing is rough. What is more, the color is also masculine in the advertisement. However, one can argue that there is no absolute conclusion that this finger sex can only happen heterosexually. It is possible that the finger

sex refers to gay or lesbian sex. But according to the gestures, the possibility of heterosexual activity is higher than homosexual activity.

All in all, Durex's advertisements fail to break heteronormative boundaries. It amplifies male and female's stereotypical understandings. It avoids showing homosexual practice or any scene touches that topic. Even if it does want to include homosexuality, the representation would be extreme vague and ambiguous. This is due to Chinese legislation on the internet. Otherwise, Durex's content might be banned.

### **6.3 Cultural continuity and appreciation**

Advertisements is representations of the brand's (i.e. advertiser's) understanding, views and ideas of society and cultural values. This is because an advertisement attempts to cope with people's needs and their emerging requirements. Durex's social media advertisements adapt to modern communication meanwhile also draw on cultural memory. It links Chinese traditional culture and history with the value of sex, transferring traditional rituals to celebration of having sex.

In the New Year's advertisement, many traditional elements are used. For example, color red, traditional Chinese zodiac, New Year celebration are all applied in on advertisement. By fusing all these elements with condoms, Durex presents sex in a purely celebrative mood. The ghost's advertisement combines the idea of preventing ghosts and the idea of preventing pregnancy. Sex carries sacred meaning from the festival. In the lantern festival's advertisement, the praise of festival tradition and festival food is transferred to the praise of the beauty of female's body. In the Labor Day's advertisement,

sex is celebrated as an honor because labor is the most honorable thing on that day. The Dragon Boat Festival combines the ritual of the festival and the practice of sex in a visible way. The spirit of celebrating festival is embedded in sex.

The elements used in the advertisement call upon the recipients' repertoire of Chinese traditions, which aims to influence the readers in a number of ways. Durex designs its advertisements to tap into cultural memory of the recipients as all these components are chosen to correspond to Chinese culture.

## **7. Conclusion**

This thesis has investigated Durex's condom advertising on Chinese social media within a semiotic framework. The motivation for this study emerged from my passion for semiotics and the call for discussing sexuality in the Chinese cultural context. In order to offer solid background knowledge, the social context of sexuality in modern China is analyzed and research in the 21st Century China is followed up. Also, social media marketing is an important touch point as the paper investigate Durex's condom advertising on Chinese social media platform. Due to China's special law on the Internet, social media in China is investigated. Semiotics offers an approach to analyses the selected. An introduction to De Saussure's, Pierce, Roland Barthes's theories are carried out. The data for the thesis are related to Chinese traditional festivals. The analysis chapter explains how the findings of the visual semiotic analysis

answers to the research questions, thus what elements compose Durex's condom advertising. In the end, findings are discussed. There are three major findings in terms of Durex's performance. First of all, witty implicitness is applied to avoid censorship on sexual topic. Secondly, Durex's advertisements do not break the heteronormative boundary. Last but not least, Durex applies China's tradition with a modern twist and continues cultural appreciation in advertising.

Compare to previous research on China's sexuality, one of the major improvements of this thesis is that the topic of Chinese sexuality has been extended to digital communications. With China's fast-changing speed, the digital world is changing the way of communications. The study on sexuality representation on social media can reflect the young generation's thinking and understanding. What is more, a semiotic analysis offers a new approach to understand the presentation of sexuality in China. Compared to quantitative methodology, semiotics digs into the deeper meaning behind communications. Last not but least, the work is good supplement to the English sexuality research in China since many of them are actually in Chinese.

The findings of this thesis can be utilized in the commercial world. For example, it can be helpful for those foreign brands who want to understand and show respect to Chinese culture but don't know. Due to cultural differences between the West and the East, many westerns brands face challenges in communicating with Chinese consumers. Advertisers, including brand holders, advertising and media agencies, and more widely people responsible for marketing strategies of organizations should acknowledge the all-around cultural awareness. Does their brand advertising relate to Chinese

culture? Can they resonate with Chinese consumers? Culture is a hidden force that can make or break just about any marketing effort. When an international brand understands, the culture surrounding its target audience, the results can be magical. The case study of Durex offers an example of how a foreign brand can localize and connect with their consumers by respecting the local culture.

However, the study conducted and findings are limited. Firstly, the findings and their discussion are just one interpretation, the reading always depends on the viewer. It is impossible for the researcher to step to zone of absolute objectivity but especially, when the study is interpretive by its nature, the interpretation is always rather subjective. However, the statements posed are covered with previous academic research and findings and thus, are scientifically reliable. Secondly, the research is culturally bounded. As a Chinese myself, my opinions about Chinese culture is limited and hard to be absolutely objective. I try to present my cultural knowledge in the thesis in order to help with analysis, but it might be subjective to some extent. Thirdly, this study is only one analysis of limited advertising material, and in order to verify the generalizability of the outcomes, further data of Durex's advertisements on Chinese social media should be collected. Other advertisements with various topics and on different platforms should be studied.

In the future, further studies on Chinese sexuality should be extended notably. Semiotics is an ideal methodology to understand the meaning, therefore further semiotic analysis should be carried out to for more exhaustive data. The digital platform is also worth studying further to understand better modern communications. More studies on Chinese sexuality

through various Chinese social platforms e.g. Wechat, Douyin should be carried out as well. All in all, it is crucial to study the cultural evolvement and discover the cultural truth behind the scene.

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