

Semiotics and Visual Communication III:

Cultures of Branding

Edited by

Evripides Zantides

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REBRANDING MARLBORO WITH COLOURS

MONY ALMALECH

A brief history

Since its inception, Philip Morris and its Marlboro brand have introduced a series of technical innovations to the brand presentation and specific look. To this day, the brand is seen as a leader in design and advertising among tobacco producers, according to data published on the company's website (PMI.com Our Brands). Leaving aside the quality of the product, we explore the technical innovations as the driving force behind the design, advertising, and marketing campaigns for the brand.

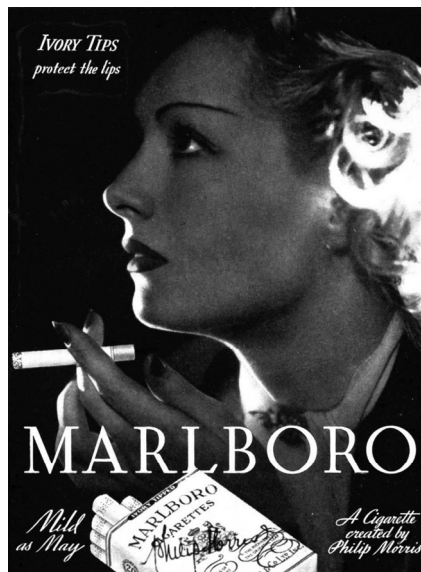


Figure 2-1: Mild as May, 1935.

In its hundreds of years of history, the Marlboro brand has seen several instances of drastic rebranding. When the cigarettes first appeared on the US market in 1920, it was targeted at the female population. Accordingly, the commercials presented the slogan “Mild as May”, to appeal to a gentle and prospective audience. As for the colour scheme, it was mainly red since the cigarettes were designed with red tips, to mask eventual lipstick marks. The slogan “Beauty Tips to Keep Your Paper from Your Lips” reinforced the message of the design. In filmed commercials, black and white was the norm for the period, and both brunette and blonde women were featured.

This approach was successful until the end of the Second World War. After the war ended in 1949, sales fell sharply, and cigarettes for women were withdrawn from the market. Thus, the white packets with the Marlboro inscription in black on the horizontal plane and Philip Morris’s personal signature in red, diagonally placed, disappeared from the market. The early ‘50s saw publications announcing first-time evidence that cigarettes cause lung cancer. This introduced the era of filtered cigarettes when the illusion that tips could reduce the risk of cancer was heavily promoted by cigarette manufacturers.

In the ‘50s the first drastic rebranding of Marlboro cigarettes took place – the brand selected a new target group for its prospective customer: they now addressed men. This is the period when the new colour scheme replaced the previous one. The design was by Frank Gianninoto. The change of the design also affected the packs – in 1955 the hard cardboard box with a flip-top cover was introduced. The red top that flipped open was called *chevron*, an ornament in the shape of a *fish bone*. Despite all the changes to the design through time, this ornament remained untouched. Moreover, it can be considered iconic, firmly embedded in the visual symbolic code of the brand. Indeed, expressions, such as “the red chevron is now taboo” could be heard quite frequently in the comments during the public discussion concerning the Australian law in 2012 that aimed to introduce off-putting photographs of sick people on cigarette packs as a warning against the adverse effects of tobacco. A similar law was enforced in 2016 in Bulgaria. *Apropos*, this type of legislation also recommended changes to the design of the cigarette pack.

The new design of the pack introduced in 1955 was advertised via a completely different type of promotion. Rather than tenderness, lipstick and spring, the new campaign featured men – “macho” from different professions that require physical strength and ability to overcome hardship – ship captains, war correspondents, construction workers, and cowboys. Initially, the commercials also included the new packs. The new carton box was red and gold, inscribed in black letters, such as the colour of the chevron.

The two most popular products were Marlboro Red and Marlboro Gold Original, respectively – in a red white and white gold box.

Gold was selected for the colour of the packet of Marlboro Gold some reasons. The colour gold has two chromatic hues. Warm yellow is iconic for gold because of the visual similarity between the two components. In semantic terms white is synonymous with gold, denoting the concept of purity, i.e. white is a symbolic sign of gold. On the other hand, gold is a sign of its utilitarian value, associated with financial wealth. For chromatic representations of gold, see Almalech 1996: 41-42; 73-77. Later “Gold” became the carrier of the lighter blend of cigarettes (“the lights”), i.e. the “safer” cigarettes.

After gold, Philip Morris engaged the symbolism of another precious metal – silver. It came to embody yet another claim of preciousness and utility: this was the “Ultra-Light”, i.e. “very safe” cigarettes.

A major role for branding the product was played by advertising campaigns. In the 1950s, as was mentioned above, the commercials began to target a new audience: macho males with physical strength and experience in “manly” professions. The cowboy came first in this series, and this image was reinforced and remained unchanged in the ‘60s.

The market share of the brand increased from 1% to 14%, the advertising campaign focused on the cowboy, later dubbed “Marlboro Man”. Because many of the brand's models died, this slogan gained popularity in a parodied urban version – “Cowboy killers”.

Analysis of the colours

It is worth analysing the colours of the new packets, not only due to their novelty, but also because their design, colours and shapes have become legendary.

My approach is interdisciplinary. It is lodged in the domains of linguistics and semiotics. The methodology was developed and presented in Almalech (2011) and the references therein. The approach includes the following tools: Prototype Theory, the Free Word-Association Test, the World Color Survey (WCS), the critique of WCS methodology, the Universality & Relativity issue, Verbal & Visual Color language (Almalech 2017a and the references therein), Cultural aspects of colour (Almalech 2017b with references). The meanings associated with colours are explored via the means of anthropology, e.g. at two rites of passage: a wedding and a funeral (Almalech 1996) because they attract the cultural subconsciousness Turner (1966: 47-84) colour analysis and data for the African tribe Ndembu.

The validity of the Free Word Associations to Basic Colour Terms was unambiguously confirmed in a test with students from different countries (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Estonia, Finland, Italy and Kazakhstan) who used English as a *lingua franca* for their communication. The test was implemented twice – at the intensive Erasmus program “Semiotic Theories and Practices” held at the University of Technology in Cyprus (2014) and the Early-Fall School of Semiotics traditionally held in Sozopol by the New Bulgarian University (2015). Despite the fact that the students did not use their mother tongue, the answers in English showed the same results as in the Bulgarian interpretative norm – the words for the prototypes had the highest frequency. The response pattern reflects personal subconscious knowledge based on individual experience and socially determined meanings. That is why word associations refer both to universal meanings and to the non-universal meanings of colours.

The colour terms obtain lexical meaning in association with the significant qualities of the prototypes – pure, clean, immaculate for light, snow, milk; hot, warm for blood and fire; fresh for all plants; space, infinity for sky, sea, etc. The white and its prototypes are ingrained into various rituals with meanings-features as “purity” (mental and physical) in weddings and funerals (Plutarch 1936 [1957; 1962]: 47-49; Almalech 1996: 89-108).

The interpretative norm, however, adds important, and prominent meanings. For example, black tends to be associated with strictness, formality, and style, all meanings employed in many advertising campaigns.

Various technological and medical advancements also impacted the Marlboro campaigns. These include the finding that cigarettes cause cancer and other illnesses, the development of the internet and digital technologies, and the hike of cigarette prices as a preventative measure against smoking.

Red

According to Kay & Maffi (1999), “red is somehow the most salient of hues” (p. 747). Normally, red has many meanings, some of which are aggression, strength, brightness, beauty, joy and passion, and all of which are suitable for decorating a cigarette box: dangerous, compulsive, irritant, aristocratic, fiery, loved, warm, provoking, dynamic, powerful, throbbing, exciting when coupled with Ferrari and Formula 1 (F 1).

With regard to the advertising campaigns launched since the 1950s, the apotropaic meaning (protective-reproducing significance) of the colour red, universally embedded in the Euro-Asian cultures, serves the lie that red protects and saves from dangers that come with smoking, just as it protects

from various jeopardies in the folklore marriage. Thus, a culture matrix on the apotropaic power of the red colour is activated and works on cultural subconsciousness. In the context of some brand versions – *Lights, Ultra Lights, Medium, Mild, Low Tar, Menthol Lights*, etc. – the apotropaic meaning seems logical, although the packets of these versions come in colours different from the typical red and white variety, while the pattern is the same. So, Philip Morris offered in subsequent decades its own language of colour, where gold, silver, blue, and green or stark white, stark green gain the significance of non-harmful cigarettes.

The transition from women's to men's cigarettes had its impact on the red colour. In anthropology, no findings confirm an automatic association between white or red and any of the sexes (Turner 1966: 47-84; Almalech 1996: 52-60). In everyday life, the colour red is associated with femininity, the mysterious and unknown, the earthly characteristics of the woman. The white colour assumes the symbolism of masculinity, of familiar matters, of the celestial. It is possible to reverse the values and then the red colour becomes a sign of masculinity and aggressiveness, bloodshed. And white becomes a sign of the sublime in women – also of fertility and subservience to the authority of man (see Almalech 1996: 52-60). The campaigns based on the macho image discussed above seem to be informed by those meanings of red.

The effects of the red-white syntagma present a dynamic process in which both colours reverse their meanings, just like such reversals take place in the folklore. They can happen at any moment in time. Thus, at some point red denotes femininity, and the next moment, masculinity. This also applies to white. The entire process has a single unchangeable point that remains constant throughout – the eternal opposition between red and white, as Turner (1966) points out. Reversal of values invariably affects each potential customer. In fact, the reversal of values and its impact depends only on the client's internal impulses. The cowboy campaigns, for instance, whether Marlboro Man or Marlboro Country employ the dynamic white-red structure – be it with a liking for, or (self)-identification with the values. Maybe the secret to the overall success of the brand is this amalgam of vibrant dynamics.

White

The universal significance of white is “purity”, “immaculate condition”, “innocence”, used at wedding and funeral rites, but also in advertisements and logotypes.

The black inscription

The black *Marlboro* inscription should imply a link to English history. The brand originated in London at the end of the 19th century, and took its name from London's Marlborough Street.

In newly emerging America, only recently liberated from the domination of the Crown of the Empire, a special relationship was preserved with the tradition of the culture on the British Isles and with the European continent. Ultimately, stringency, style, formality, elegance are all meanings from the Norm of Free Word-Associations.

The tradition of the inscription employs the name of the English nobleman Duke of Marlborough. The seventh Duke of Marlborough was the grandfather of Winston Churchill, who gained universal popularity after World War II.

Over the last decade, after a period of presenting the package in blue, white or black, the campaign featured red once again where the black inscription was reduced almost to invisibility, with a slight embossing. A psychoanalytic interpretation would detect a connection with the assertion of the United States as a major world power, which, as in the case of gaining independence from the British Empire, unfolds its free spirit. In any case, even if there is no such intent or nuance, the effect of this new packaging is that all (not just smokers) are looking for the familiar inscription. The red chevron takes a leading role in this latest rebranding, in which white also increases its presence.

The syntagma white, red and black

The dynamics of red and white, coupled with the European source of the black brand name in their "dynamic-static" opposition, together with the impact of the advertising campaigns create the success of the brand. Extreme sports, such as Formula 1, along with the red colour of Ferrari (contract from 1973, from 1997 Scuderia Ferrari Marlboro), brilliantly complement the effects of the colours and masculine charm of the brand. In 2005, Ferrari signed an extension of the contract with Marlboro until 2011. The contract was extended at a time when the sponsorship of tobacco companies became completely illegal in the European Union, and other important Formula 1 teams put an end to their relationships with tobacco companies. Motorcycling is also a territory of cooperation (Wikipedia Marlboro cigarette). After the ban on cigarette advertising at sporting events, this legend is fading, but the beneficial effect for the brand remains.

New colours and types

In the 1960s, a range of new products were introduced: Lights, Ultra Lights, Medium, Mild, Low Tar, Menthol Lights, etc., thereby the red-white-black colour scheme was invigorated with new colours. A special “golden blend” within the red-white version appeared, “blend 29” in a completely golden version with the red mark of the brand, and “blend 72” in the design of the golden version. All of those had the *chevron* as their ornament.

Black, White and Gold: Slims for men and drastic redesign in the 21st century

In August 2006, a US District Court banned the use of terms such as “low tar”, “light”, “mild” or “nature” for cigarettes. Then Philip Morris took to using the colour names instead: Marlboro-Red, Marlboro-Gold (Light), Marlboro-Silver (Ultra Light).

In 2010 and 2011, Marlboro Gold Edge Ultra Slim king-size were presented, designed for women along with Marlboro Gold Touch and Marlboro Gold Fine Touch (slims for men) with a new design. The boxes were white and black with a gold chevron contour.

The size of the cigarettes changed as well – from the traditional length of 8.5 mm to 7.1 mm, the filter was also renewed and presented as a “unique double-layered charcoal filter system”. The company claimed to have spent \$12 million on innovation. The production plant had then moved to Russia, not far from St. Petersburg.

With regard to colours, this is a drastic redesign where red (an iconic and symbolic sign of the brand in the previous decades) had completely disappeared.

The meanings of white, black, and gold are synonymous – elegance, style, strictness (meanings fixed in the Norms of Word Associations, Gerganov 1984), with the mystical claim that the presence of gold gives consumers a “pass to the hereafter”, just like the Thracian kings and priests and Egyptian pharaohs. For the power of manipulation of the white-black-gold syntagmatic unit, see Almalech 2009.



Figure 2-2: Gold-Touch.

Blue and silver

The next drastic redesign was the replacement of white and black with light and dark blue. If anyone had said in the 1960s and 1970s that Marlboro would have blue as the dominant colour of their packs, who would have believed it?

In the company blog¹, we see that the blue version of Slims for men quickly replaced the black and white. In the blue-packet version of Marlboro, the ratio and the shapes remain the same, but the inscription turns white as well as the contour of the chevron with a dark blue version.

Different versions exist: some are still called “Gold”, others are “Touch”, “Fine touch”, yet others are “Blue fresh”. “Blue Ice” has a menthol capsule built into the filter. This is advertised as “The Other Marlboro”.

The campaign claims novelty in the qualities of the filter, but also addresses “The New, the Other”. However, these slogans are once again underpinned by the 1960s’ allusion of “Free” or “Marlboro brings freedom”.

My claim is that the switch to Blue Marlboro is a hysterical redesign evoked by the increasing realisation in society that cigarettes do damage health. Respectively, the prototypes of blue are *sea* and *sky* with the characteristic qualities of “expanse”, “immensity” and “vastness”, which are easily transformed into a sense of freedom – a common association of the basic colour term Blue in the Norm. Precisely that association was

¹ see <http://marlboro-blog.tumblr.com/page/3>

sought by the Marlboro Man and Marlboro Country campaign. This time the feeling is projected only by the colour and the urge to “Touch” the blue, reinforced by the nano and pixel concepts in the design.

A year or two before the Blue Marlboro appeared, another redesign of the classic red-white-black had been proposed, with even farther reaching demands on the technological capacity of the filter. These are Marlboro Filter Plus One, Marlboro Filter Plus Extra, with new elements in the box design. They include warnings about the harmful effects of smoking. These inscriptions also appear on the Blue Marlboro, depending on the regulations in the country.

The drastic redesign in atypical colours perpetuates the brand identity and maintains its specific mythology. Despite the drastic change of colours, the meaning “freedom” remains unchanged as a result of the overall impression of the ads. This is a fraudulent freedom beyond any doubt and a brilliant feat of manipulation, which, nevertheless, had a remarkable success, despite the perfunctory volatility during the last decade. The design tools retain the tradition, while also offering completely new solutions, including the Marlboro colour schemes.

The latest redesign of 2015 and the new advertising campaign reaffirmed the focus on personal freedom, accompanied by an appeal for the return of Red Marlboro: “Red is here”. The black inscription has now faded and is hardly recognisable; the contours of the chevron and the white part of the packet are there to catch the eye in search of the embossed, pale, almost invisible, like in watermark, letters. The design seeks to make the reaction concentrate hard on the barely visible elements and ignore the glaring sign “Smoking kills”, followed by a recall of the glorious brand name.



Figure 2-3: Red is here.

All versions (Gold, Silver, Ice, Menthol, Touch, Red Touch) with the latest innovations in the filter are subject to this visual strategy. The advertising campaign invites and reminds that “Red is Here”, “You Decide”, “May be ...”. The appeals to personal choice and the modality of “May be ...” appear at a time when many countries have compelled companies to print horrifying pictures of sick people, in addition to the warning signs on each box. We have to admit that in this context, along with discouraging smoking through higher prices, the campaign is a very successful one. Philip Morris found ways to include its legendary chevron sign under the new conditions. This compelling campaign, calling for personal freedom and personal solutions, finds its opponents who paraphrase the advertisements visually.

Menthol cigarettes

The brand started marking its menthol version in blue in the ‘50s. The following decade saw it replaced by the green colour, which was adopted by various brands to denote menthol cigarettes. The Norm for Free Word Associations postulates a synonymy of white and green with the meaning of *good luck, health*, i.e. these packs contain a double implication of *luck* and *health*.

Conclusions

Philip Morris manages to command interest for the Marlboro brand. It achieves this through advertising campaigns suggestive of *Freedom, Independence and Freedom of personal choice*.

The main target group is men, but the skilful design and convincing campaign also speak to women as well. The design plays with the digital components: the pixels, for instance, change for both the *chevron* and the background.

The design and redesign of the brand include aggressive and bold changes in colours and shapes. They lead to entirely different campaigns.

The manipulation is extremely skilful and varied because it is addressed to important human values – Freedom and Personal Choice.

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