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ELITE's Cultural Relevancy



From a Semiotic Analysis Project by IM Insights Latino



IM Insights Latino

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Abstract

Understanding the usage of cultural meaning is crucial in the multi-cultural content development business sector as we make culture the focal element for insight and story development in the international, U.S. Latino, African American, Asian American, Native American and LGBTQ segment.

The multi-cultural and international film industry is poised to develop true, realistic and un-sensationalized cultural-image-identity in the movie and series production business sector to reflect in-depth cultural nuances that are integral and loyal to a human segment. For this to happen, one must first identify the cultural and temporal context in which activities are conducted and objects used by humans to avoid behavioral assumptions and stereotypical character development.

Introduction

An exploratory research was conducted to identify a film or series that would somehow answer the following question:

What elements does a film and/or series use to create content that is CULTURALLY RELEVANT and realistic to a human segment?

Based on an assessment of several productions, ELITE was selected as the creative asset for a semiotic analysis project as the series brought together and juxtaposed four essential areas structuring a society, the *a) physical environment, b) social characteristics, c) individual's culture and d) language ecosystem.*

Each of the four areas of analysis has sub-areas of deep analysis for a total of nine sub-segments in which the signifier, verbal and visual is deconstructed respectively. For the sake of this article, a synopsis is shared as an introduction to the semiotic project.

The analysis is focused on the sign, which is divided into the signifier (the form it takes) and the signified (the concept it represents) in a specific cultural context.

Physical Environment



The background of the series is never explicitly stated as it is left to the interpretation of the viewer through indexical signs. A variety of signifiers are used to portray Las Encinas International School as the epicenter for leadership and power, while “el barrio,” home for the “scholarship kids” is a metonym for the old part of a city, where generally low-income citizens reside.

Nevertheless, the series relies on Spanish language usage as an association to Spain, which is corroborated by the Spanish accent and Spanish cultural jargon utilized by the characters. Furthermore, through a symbiosis of iconic, indexical and symbolic signs, Elite creates the illusion of two antagonistic socio-economic environments, Las Encinas, a wealthy community, and “el barrio,” a low-income neighborhood.

Social Characteristics and the Individual



Elite uses iconic signs to represent the reality of cultural segments in a social environment to develop the plot and set the tone of the series. More importantly, the series captures culture, sub-culture and social class as the pillars structuring a society and intertwines family and reference groups with the role of characters. This approach allows the characters to

mimic the realities that each member of a cultural segment experiences to find meaning in their lives and define their identities regardless of the sub-culture.



Each character is constructed with a variety of signifiers through iconic, indexical and symbolic signs to signify their role in the plot and are divided into the elite and outcast groups. The construction of the characters’ representation and signified meaning through heritage/ethnicity (Spaniards, Mexican, second generation Palestinian and African) sexual orientation (gay, bisexual, lesbian and heterosexual) socio-economic segments

(upper, middle and low-income) are intertwined with the day-in-the-life of each character.

Each character is carefully assembled with a variety of signifiers to facilitate cultural interpretation for the target viewership, consequently, unifying the viewers’ experience with that of the characters.

The juxtaposition of the characters’ differences, including values, beliefs, goals and emotional responses to activities conducted by the antagonistic character’s culture leads to an evolution from rejection, tolerance and eventually integration among themselves.

The holistic signification of integration exercised by the characters creates a cultural overlap, in other words, layers of different cultures learning to live with each other without sacrificing what makes them culturally unique. Instead, it is the sharing of “cultural uniqueness” that makes them attractive to each other.

Language Ecosystem

Language Codes



The series is originally produced in Spanish and the dialogs are carefully crafted with connotative meaning derived from the Spanish cultural context.

Furthermore, each character is a sign and achieves cultural relevancy through Spanish discourse and specifically by *what he/she says, how and when he/she says it, why he/she says it, and more importantly, the linguistic connotation of what's been said.*

Aesthetic Codes



The characters are constructed with regard to gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and social status to signify a diverse lifestyle in a Spanish speaking society. This conglomeration of signs is supported by aesthetic signs that pursue three inter-related ends to:

Represent the multi-cultural make-up of individuals structuring a society

Exemplify the meaning of cultural overlap in society at large

Demonstrate the intricacies of the process for humans of different cultures to integrate

By the virtue of being created in context of the Spanish culture, the series uses localized language (jargon) and aesthetic codes as part of an organized system of signifiers to set the multi-cultural tone of the plot and emotionally connect with the viewer.

The language and aesthetic codes are analyzed in-depth under cultural character construct in the semiotic project itself. This particular section of the project demonstrates how Spanish language and aesthetic coding is the “cultural axel” of the series.

Sexual Language



Regardless of the gender and sexual orientation, sex is undoubtedly a sign bringing the characters together, signifying desire for one another, indulging erotic pleasures without boundaries and satisfying ultimate carnal experiences. More importantly, the indexical significance of these interactions alludes to the intersection of the characters' diverse sexual and cultural contexts:

gay, bisexual, heterosexual, Mexican, second generation Palestinian, rich, poor and criminal creating a cultural overlap, which in turn signifies human integration, and/or acceptance for each other.

Conclusion

Elite demonstrates itself to be culturally relevant through a symbiosis of signifiers depicting physical elements of a Spanish society and/or environment making the external world real to the viewer. Although this is only the background of the series, nonetheless it becomes relevant to the plot from the outset as indexical signs of exclusivity and marginalization are juxtaposed to develop the context.

The semiotic analysis also demonstrates the relevancy of Spanish language and aesthetics objects usage as the most effective means in the construction of the social environment and the cultural-character. On one hand, this is achieved by using linguistic signifiers in Spanish that transports viewers to prior cultural experiences to facilitate engagement and sympathy for the characters' attitude toward social inequality, corruption, crime, power, greed, discrimination and pleasure, which are key signifiers driving the plot and setting the tone of the series. On the other hand, aesthetic codes signifying homosexuality, bisexuality, lesbianism, heterosexuality, ethnicity, traditional and non-traditional family structure denotes an evolving global trend reshaping a society's values and structure overall.

The conglomeration of linguistic and aesthetic signifiers convey a central signified concept of integration, exercised by the juxtaposition of cultures that lead to acceptance, making Elite culturally relevant and contemporary with changes in society on a global basis.

About the Author

Claudio Perez-Korinko, Chief Latino Consumer Insights at IM Insights Latino conducted the semiotic analysis project on Elite and he is a human behavior researcher with 25 years of experience in the U.S. Latino and Latin American segment. He can be reached at cperezkorinko@imintl.net