

# semiotics, health & the nhs

STRATEGIES FOR RESEARCHERS, HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS & MANAGERS

DR RACHEL LAWES FOR SRA NORTH, APRIL 2019



# nhs long-term plan

## AMBITIONS & CHALLENGES

# NHS ambitions and challenges

- ▶ Move the public away from the perception of doctor-as-mechanic who fixes things when they are broken. Move towards a perception of the NHS as an advice service.
- ▶ Move towards social prescribing, e.g. of exercise.
- ▶ Less rushing to A&E, more consultations with pharmacists.
- ▶ We can't let this be seen as the NHS withdrawing help. It can't be seen as a reduction or denial of service.
- ▶ Most people need encouragement to take full responsibility for their health. Social prescribing may encounter resistance.
- ▶ People underestimate pharmacists, they are seen as a weak alternative to the doctor.



**SEC Amb** @SEC Ambulance · Feb 11

A very busy start to the week for us and the wider NHS. This morning we answered 186 calls between 11am-midday. If you're not facing a life-threatening or serious emergency please consider alternatives to 999 including NHS 111 or speaking to a GP or pharmacist. #HelpUsHelpYou

**NHS**  
**South East Coast  
 Ambulance Service**  
 NHS Foundation Trust



**We're currently  
 facing very  
 high demand**

Please help us, help you  
 and only call 999 if you're  
 facing a life-threatening  
 or serious emergency

**HELP US  
 HELP YOU**  
 STAY WELL THIS WINTER

**Don't wait for  
 it to get worse,  
 ask our pharmacy  
 team first.**

They can help with  
 minor health concerns.

**HELP US  
 HELP YOU**  
 BEFORE IT GETS WORSE

[nhs.uk/pharmacyadvice](https://nhs.uk/pharmacyadvice)

**NHS**

Prameet Shah,  
 Pharmacist

**SECamb** @SECAmbulance · Feb 11

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**We're currently facing very high demand**

Please help us, help you and only call 999 if you're facing a life-threatening or serious emergency

"Don't call us"

"We are currently experiencing high call volume" means "we don't want to take your call".



**Don't wait for it to get worse, ask our pharmacy team first.**

They can help with minor health concerns.

**HELP US HELP YOU**  
BEFORE IT GETS WORSE

Prameet Shah, Pharmacist

This man looks pleasant but not particularly outgoing. He looks slightly self-conscious about being photographed.

The shelves in the background suggest that he is more at home in the back of the shop than at the front, talking to customers.

solutions

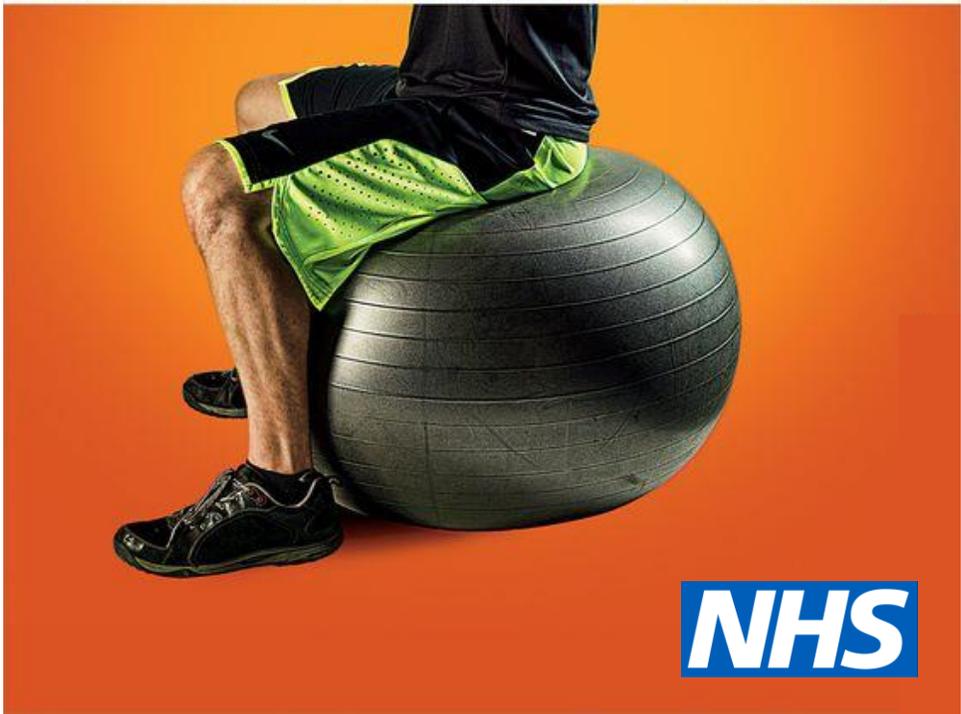
SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

SEMIOTICS: VISUAL & VERBAL  
COMMUNICATIONS

# Fitness Ads

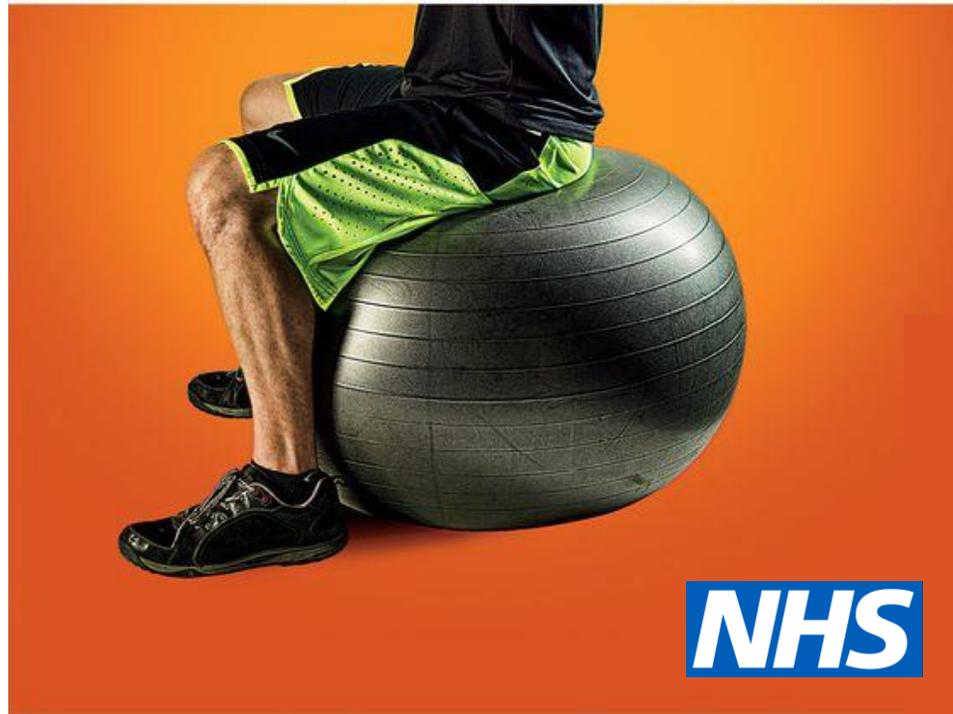
GYMS & FITNESS BRANDS ARE CLEAR THAT YOU ARE THE ONLY PERSON WHO CAN IMPROVE YOUR HEALTH.

THEY CAN ADVISE AND HELP BUT THE CHALLENGE AND THE RESPONSIBILITY IS YOURS.

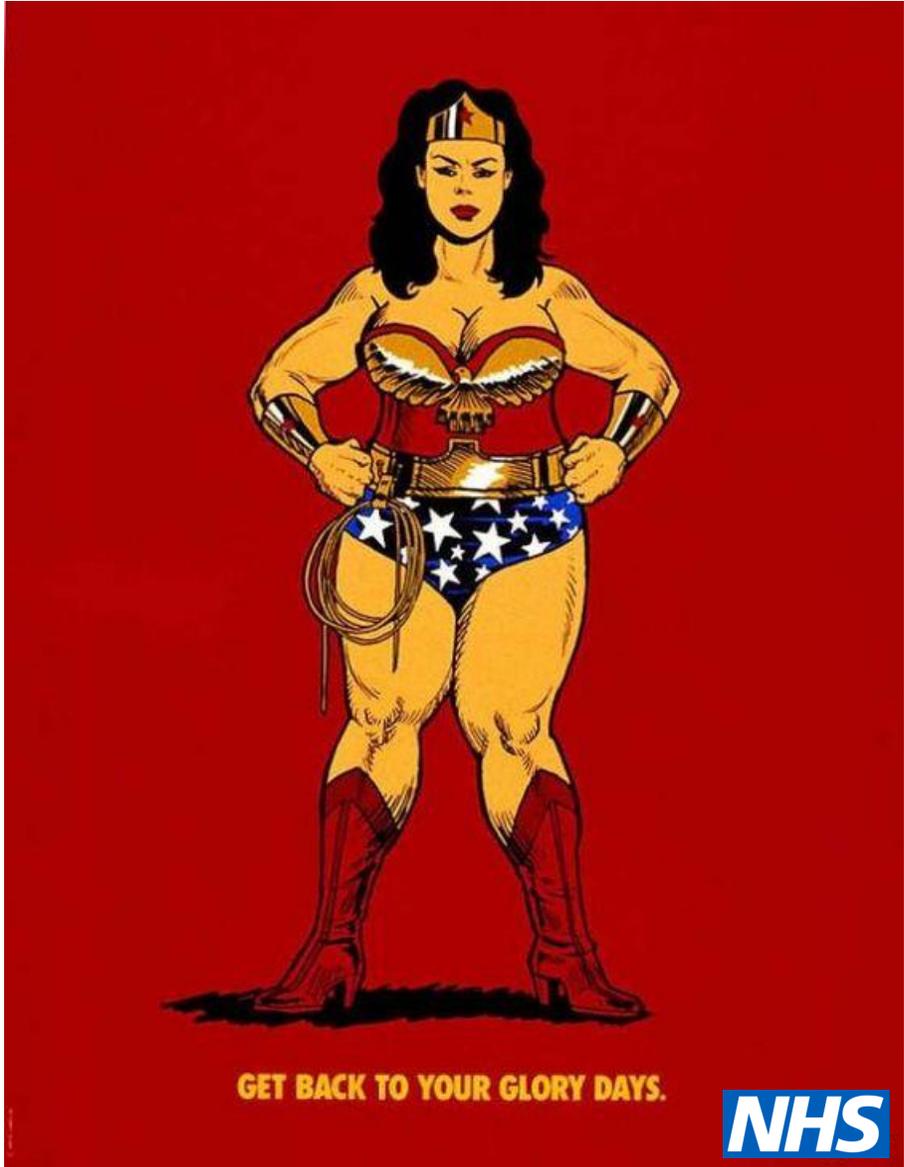


The original ad is for a fitness brand, marketing itself as 'for busy people'.

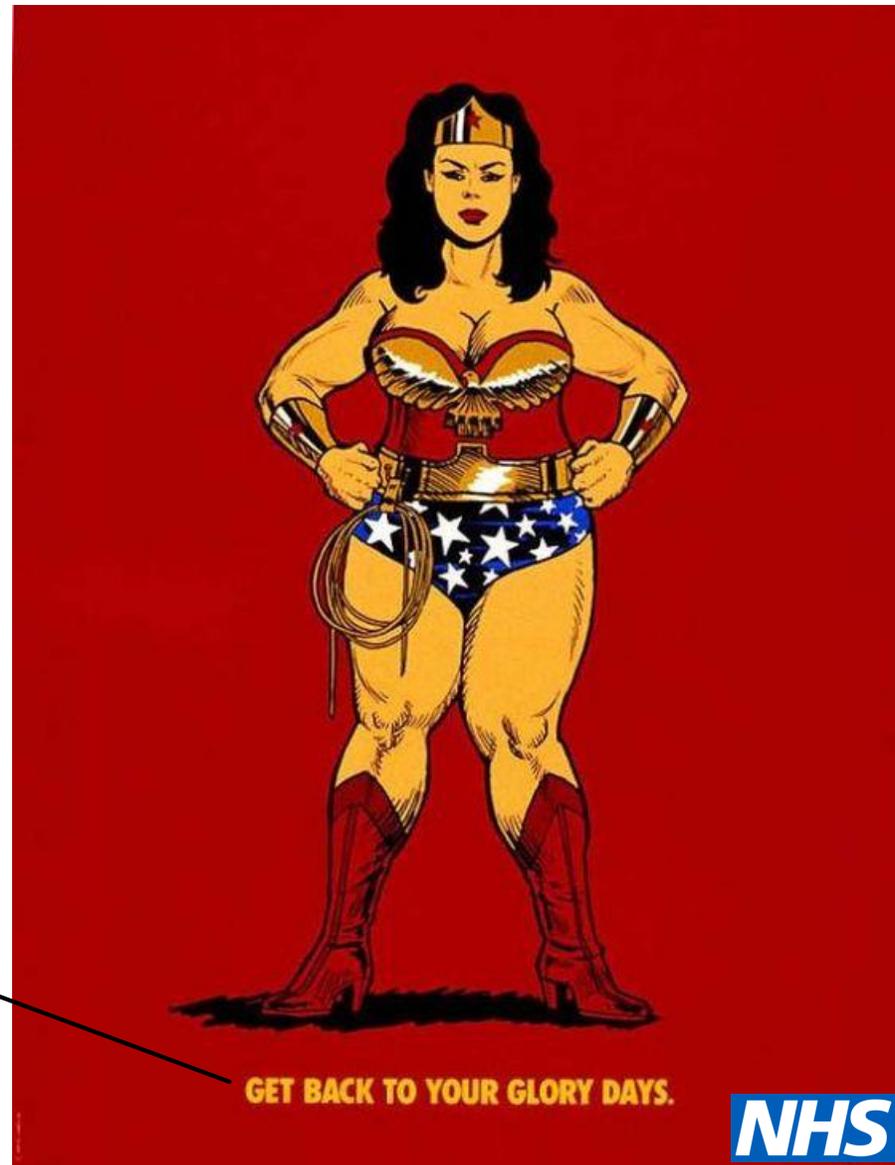
With the NHS logo applied, the meaning changes.



It now means something like "the NHS is behind the scenes, making it easy for you to achieve your health goals, so you can enjoy your life."



Recent semiotic analysis of interview data with chronically ill patients showed this is exactly what they wish for.



Chronic illness is hard to cope with.  
Some patients don't know that their illness can be persuaded into remission.  
They mourn the loss of their real self and their former life.



**YOU DON'T  
HAVE TO  
BE GREAT  
TO START**

BUT YOU HAVE TO START TO BE GREAT



Gyms are great at encouraging people who are nervous and ashamed of their state of health.

**YOU DON'T  
HAVE TO  
BE GREAT  
TO START**

BUT YOU HAVE TO START TO BE GREAT

**NHS**

We almost don't need this latter part of the message. People aspire to be their normal, healthy selves, they don't all aspire to be athletes.

The first part of this message is strong on its own.



This is a Nike ad.



With a NHS badge applied, it acknowledges that illness is a challenge and that it intersects with many other challenges, such as poverty.

The message is that the NHS can help people overcome challenges and become their best selves.



water fits you **NHS**

The original ad is for a fitness club.

Like many clever ads in this category, it acknowledges the barriers to taking up a healthy lifestyle.



The barriers include things like "I'm too fat for exercise clothing."

In this modified ad, the NHS is sympathetic to the problem and has found a solution.

# Personal Trainer Ads

NOBODY THINKS OF  
PERSONAL TRAINERS AS  
WEAK.

THEIR BUSINESS DEPENDS ON  
BEING CONFIDENT &  
OUTGOING.

THEY WEAR THEIR IDENTITIES  
PROUDLY: CLOTHING,  
AWARDS

Don't wait for that health concern  
to get worse. Ask a pharmacist.



Don't wait for that health concern to get worse. Ask a pharmacist.



Introduces the idea that pharmacists are exceptional people who deserve recognition.



Confident demeanour, looks outgoing, ready to talk to anyone. Meets the gaze of the camera.

Confident pose. Stands up straight, shoulders back.





**DAVE  
SMITH**  
PHARMACIST

Pharmacists are specially trained  
to help with health concerns.

**NHS**



# DAVE SMITH

## PHARMACIST

Pharmacists are specially trained to help with health concerns.

This pharmacist is urban, relatable and looks very authoritative.

The assertive pose and heavy text highlighting his name emphasise that being a pharmacist is something to be proud of.

He is ready to take on minor health problems – and win.



Any consumer who's ever been in a gym knows the t-shirts that trainers wear, with 'PERSONAL TRAINER' emblazoned on the back in huge letters.

These shirts establish authority as well as making trainers easy to identify.



This mocked-up ad would be even better if we printed the word on to actual fabric, allowing it to mould realistically around the model's body.

It uses the semiotics of personal trainers to propose that pharmacists are authoritative and available to be called upon.

key take-outs

HOW TO USE SEMIOTICS FOR  
MARKETING SOCIAL CAUSES  
& SERVICES

# How to use semiotics

- ▶ Semiotics is the study of persuasive communications.
- ▶ It stimulates creativity and includes many tools for taking a fresh look at everyday British culture.
- ▶ It helps you to see how ideas like “pharmacist”, “NHS” and “health” are constructed through language and visual images.
- ▶ Use semiotics when you face a challenge in conveying messages to the public.
- ▶ Design communications that meet the needs of organisations and their service users.
- ▶ Strategically leverage ideas and beliefs that viewers already buy into.

# how to get more information

[rachel@lawes-consulting.co.uk](mailto:rachel@lawes-consulting.co.uk)

+44 (0)7939 020 466

@drrachellawes