



THE ADVERTISEMENT WORLD-A SEMIOTIC CAULDRON: WHAT WE SEE IS WHAT WE DON'T GET

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Abstract: The alluring world of advertisement is not as harmlessly simple as it seems to be. It has a multi-layered structure which demands a careful investigation to understand how it propagates certain cultural values and even when it seems to promote certain ideas, it always anchors the hegemonic constructs and artefacts of a society. This paper will attempt to uncover few of advertisement with the help of semiotic analysis.

Key words: Cultural Artefact, Commercials, Hegemony, social constructs.

We all are more or less acquainted with the cauldron the witches use in Macbeth to concoct their magical potion. They put so many unique, dissimilar, unidentified objects in the cauldron that it virtually becomes impossible to fully comprehend the real ingredients of that potion. When one carefully observes the commercials, one is bound to feel perplexed by the flurry of coded information in less than 60 seconds. This paper will attempt to understand the socio-cultural dimension of the advertisement and how these as cultural artefactshold many hidden codes under their 'murderous innocence'.

The American Marketing Association defines advertising as, "any paid form for non-personal presentation of ideas, goods or services by an identified sponsor." Its primary purpose is to create demand for products and services by stimulating the potential customer and it does this by using strategies that appeal to cultural values, creating aspirations and new desires for products. We are living in a society that is highly saturated with media images and these images are manifestations of various facets of our culture. As Rosalind Gill points out, "we have become a culture preoccupied with interpreting itself- discovering or producing meaning in anything and everything".

The ad-gurus over the world understand that an advertisement is not just a promotion of a product. Whenever, an advertisement is created, its social-cultural panorama is very carefully considered. What the commercial presents is important, but what it implies has a deeper significance. It works within a paradigm and without being explicit, it supports or opposes certain values. When a layman viewer watches this advertisement, he or she subsumes these hidden values. That's why an advertisement is not always what you see, it is more often than not



what you imperceptibly imbibe.

If we do a semiotic analysis of a few advertisement, it would become clear how commercials play deep with our collective psyche. For example, we all love, admire and upvote those commercials which deal with messages of women empowerment. It seems that these commercial are doing a good job of creating awareness about an important social issue while promoting a product. No wonder we attach a moral positive sign to such commercials and thus elevating their status from mere mercantile gimmick.

Highlighting the role of advertisements as a cultural artefact, Davidson (1992)¹⁵ defines advertising as “a social language, a genre of spectator/reader experience, a technique of persuasion, almost a world in its own right, with its own languages, customs and history, and one that sets the tone and pace for large parts of our lives. Advertising is a topic which both causes and reveals existing social divisions”. The world of Advertising, due to its pervasiveness, has become an important cultural location where we can witness the swift-slow & overt- covert currents of socio-cultural phenomenon. Advertising content (text and images) can be seen as signifying an array of messages besides its most obvious product promotion motive. An advertisement is nothing less than a discourse, which helps in construction, and proliferation of a socio-cultural construct like gender, class, taste, value among others.

If we closely inspect these very commercials, we can find quite contradictory elements. In one of the commercials, an old father brings his daughter to a construction site and tells everyone that she is the one who shoulders all his responsibilities. There is an obvious exultation as we feel, ‘yes daughters too can take all the responsibilities of parents’, and considers the commercial as a good ‘sign’/example of positive social movement. What we fail to see is that the father calls his daughter, ‘my Beta’... thus indicating a woman who shoulders responsibilities of parents must be like a ‘son’. Such slight references to the orthodoxical society make us feel comfortable and the commercial acceptable to both the parties.

In an another commercial, a mother is seen talking to her married daughter on phone. She is in the messy room of her son who is busy in his own business. We come to know that the daughter has to leave her job as her husband can’t help her in household chores. The mother then realizes that to teach son about household work is equally important. Once again, the message is quite good and creates a very positive vibe. But if we look a bit deeper, we come to a realization that the whole teaching thing revolves round the mother figure. The father, the man is totally absent from the scene. As if it is the duty of a mother only to rear up and teach children.

Almost all the commercials, whatever the product they promote, which hail woman empowerment, it is a noticeable fact that the models in these advertisements are always fair skinned, traditionally clad and carrying



culturally specific emblems. Why can't a woman in 'burkha' or lehenga choli or shorts can be seen as performing the role of a perfect mother. Why all the painkiller ointments show housewives doubling with pain and their caring husband in white kurtas applying balm encouraging her for a second shift of tiresome job. And still we all love these advertisements without daring or caring to look underneath.

Women as a gender stereotype in advertising are very often shown in sexist ads. But it is very important to mention that men are rarely shown in these types of ads. On the contrary men are shown as "macho" who are cool in every moment, who are able to manage every situation and who always know what to do and how to help woman who is at the end of her tether. Television ads go on harping about good mothers who feed their children with health drinks and instant noodles, ideal wives who care about their husband's shirts and cholesterols, mothers who wash their babies with soft soap to ensure soft bottoms and little girls who say they choose certain soap so that it makes them as beautiful as their mother. These are damaging, insulting and humiliating to the woman-image and takes all talks of women's progress, education, political participation, and several steps backwards, going back to where we began.

Advertisements are a sort of data mine for social scientists to investigate because the images they contain are drawn from society and therefore they can be seen as a reflection of prevailing cultural values. They are superstructures that have immense influence over society. According to Goldman advertisements work by constructing myths, in such a way, as to endow products with meanings, which appear to be natural and eternal. They create structures of meaning which sell products not for their use value, their functional value as objects, but in terms of us as social beings. When we have a desire to purchase a product of Apple Company, it is not because it caters to a particular requirement, but because we associate it with certain abstract values like class or elite.

These commercials are actually an extension of our social makeup. They reflect our collective sub consciousness and as such to study them from a semiotic angle provide us with much needed information about the unseen fabric of our society. These advertisements only substantiate our deep-seated dogmas, beliefs and cultural credits, even when they seem to be carrying a bastion of reform, change or rebel it is within the parameters of social acceptance. In fact, most of them feed us with certain assumptions that help the ideological discourse to maintain its hegemony. That is why, what we see in a commercial is not actually what we get. We receive only that amount of information that sits well with us and wash any sense of being guilty of orthodoxical without bringing any iota of change. Thus, they are without doubt a cauldron, and we all are happy deluded Macbeths ready to take in gulps this make-believe world ensconced in our safe couch castles.



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