

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 8 : 4 April 2008

Managing Editor: M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.

Editors: B. Mallikarjun, Ph.D.

Sam Mohanlal, Ph.D.

B. A. Sharada, Ph.D.

A. R. Fatihi, Ph.D.

Lakhan Gusain, Ph.D.

K. Karunakaran, Ph.D.

Jennifer Marie Bayer, Ph.D.

The Semiotics of Visual Communication in Print Advertisements:

How to Read Between the Lines

Gajendra S. Chauhan, Ph.D.

The Semiotics of Visual Communication in Print Advertisements: How to Read between the Lines

GAJENDRA S CHAUHAN, Ph. D.

Advertisements Are Everywhere!

Advertisements are everywhere. On the bus, in the city, in the streets, in the movies, in our mail, in our SMS, these powerful images follow us like Tom chases Jerry wherever we go. A baby crying for its feed, a young executive flaunting a new car, a dusky girl applying a fairness cream and a doting wife desirous of having a new sari are all the



colors of advertisements. They want to communicate, persuade, influence and lead to some action. It has become a strong force in our economic and social lives. Billion of dollars are spent on advertising every year. Out of these billions are born the messages that tell us where to invest, how to dress, what to eat, how to get slim, how to gain weight and they even claim to offer solutions to anything that we find difficult in our life. More than this they shape our everyday plans and decisions.

Advertising Is Subjective!

Advertising, being a study of human behavior and responses, is subject to unpredictability and lack of clear answers. Its answers are at best probabilistic and never ever universal truths.

Intensity of the Imagery

As advertising is a lot about strong images and perceptions, the intensity of the imagery is quite understandable. Apart from the intense imagery, advertising also generates a lot of heated debates and 'opinions' among people. Yet, opinions, likes and dislikes on ads will keep coming from all corners because having opinions and expressing them is part and parcel of being human. The subjectivity of such opinions will also continue. After all advertising is seen and felt by most of us in our 'personal' domain, what we can identify with (what we like) and what we cannot (what we don't like) (Tiwari Sanjay 2003).

The Aim of This Paper

The current paper seeks to find how the visual messages are formed and given meaning through the semiotic analysis of the advertisements.

A Semiotic Approach

The practitioners of semiotic school believe that the meanings of pictures are not in the pictures, but rather in what we bring to them. Since visual interpretation is based upon perception through cognition and language and is affected by social, cultural, and personal frames, we strongly believe that semiotics will help us explain the complexity of visual communication while processing visual information and producing meaning from the advertisements. This concept of semiotics is the major force of the present paper. The primary goal is to establish the underlying conventions, identifying significant differences and oppositions in an attempt to model the system of categories, relations (syntagmatic and paradigmatic), connotations, distinctions and rules of combination employed.

How Does Semiotics Help Us to Understand the Meanings of Images?

Images that we find in the ads are hard to elucidate their meanings. To a humble consumer, the reality always eludes. If we study the ads, we may be able to “look into” them to unfold social and cultural realities. We learn from semiotics that we live in a world of signs and we have no way of understanding anything except through signs and the codes into which they are organized.



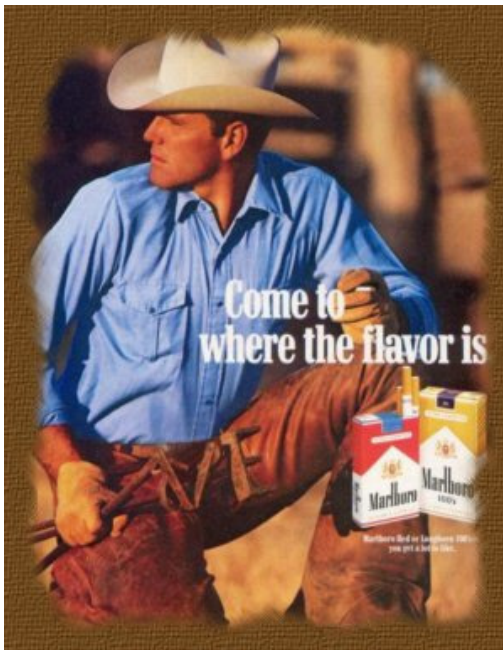
Through the study of semiotics we become aware that these signs and codes are normally transparent and disguise our task in 'reading' them (Daniel Chandler 1985). It is important to mention about the basic theory of semiotics that inspired me to decipher the visual images of the selected advertisements. The writings of Ferdinand De Saussure and Charles Peirce are the fundamental works for the semiotic study of advertising images and help us in reading the hidden meanings and underlying current of advertising signs. A sign can be a word, a sound, visual image. It is an object, which stands for another to some mind. Saussure divides a sign into two components-the signifiers (the sound, image, or word) and the signified, which is the concept the signifier represents, or the meaning. C. S. Peirce, who is characterized as the founder of American semiotics, disagrees with Saussure on the arbitrariness condition. To Peirce, signs are of three types-*icons*, *indexes*, and *symbols*. There are just three ways a sign such as word, a sentence, a picture, a graph or a gesture can have meaning in semiotic theory. It can be a picture of a thing in the world. In that we call it an *icon*. The little picture of a happy face made by email users out of a colon and right parentheses (:)) is an icon. It shows a schematic picture of a smiling face. A sign can also be a completely arbitrary representation of thing in the world. In that case



we call it *symbol*. A green traffic light means we can continue driving. There is nothing inherent in the color green that ‘means’ move ahead or keep going. It is an arbitrary association. Finally, a sign means something because of where and when it is located in the world. In this case, it is called an *index*. An index is a sign. An arrow pointing one direction down a street is an index which shows the exact direction in which traffic should go (Scollon 2003).

Advertising Is a System

Advertising is a system consisting of distinct signs and what an advertiser means depends on how its signs are organized. Semiotics seeks to discover how as the meaning of an advertisement doesn’t simply float on the surface waiting to be understood by the consumers. Let’s take the first advertisement of Marlboro for semiotic analysis. The advertisement predominately features a macho male model in his sporting mood and adjacent to him is an iconic image of the product itself, which is projected as the secret of heroic deeds performed by the male model. In between these images we find the signified linguistic concept in the form of a verbal message: ‘Come to where the flavour is.’ It is



difficult to ignore the powerful iconic image of a typical American cowboy who stands for adventure, freedom and fearlessness. The print ad is designed with a purpose to create an image of a Marlboro Man –an icon that is an antithesis of an ordinary man. A cowboy who signifies an environment that is challenging, natural and relatively stress free. In the given ad, he is his own man in a world he owns. Two images are very prominent in the ad: First that is the subject, (the image of the muscular man) provides a youthful element of glamour and adventure, which serves both the product and the text in which it is being advertised, and second that is the image of Marlboro countryside is a physical acknowledgement of the product name. However, these images alone certainly do not convey this central signified



concept, for this is only guaranteed by the inclusion of the advertisement of the statement: ‘Come to where the flavour is.’ Thus, a strong relationship is allowed to emerge between the ‘signifiers,’ (the photographic image of the Marlboro Man and his physical environment) and the ‘signified’, which is the linguistically expressed: ‘Come to where the flavour is.’ The linguistic sign is very meaningful here to lead the target audiences to the desired results. The word ‘flavour’ has its own layers of meaning. While there is no logical connection between the cowboy and the smoking experience but the composition of ad,

the color scheme, the aura of iconic cowboy, the verbal message depict a realistic world where it acknowledges the pleasant experience of smoking to Marlboro cigarettes. The advertisers work at every stage to create the maximum impact of the advertised product. The striking element I found in Marlboro cigarettes pack where the two letters 'l' and 'b' stand tall in the brand name resembling the very shape of smoke in the black color. Fred Inglis writes that cigarette marketing, packaging and advertising offer a central topic for any study of advertising. Not only are cigarettes utterly expendable and very dangerous, they are dirty, smelly and unsightly. Consequently a great deal of advertising goes in for fresh, wholesome scenery. The associations of this picture (setting aside the subconscious and the economic ones) are clean and uncontaminated. Whatever the reality of offshore sewage, the sea is poetically bracing and salty.

The Aesthetis Clinic

Let's move on to the next set of printed advertisements. It is a print ad of Aesthetis clinic. I highly appreciate the element of creativity shown by the advertiser in communicating a simple business message artistically in this advertisement. The way the entire ad is designed, I feel, it is, probably, the most innovative way to obtain the consumers attention



and lead them to purchase the product in question. The entire visual of Aesthetis clinic ad is extremely eye catching and distinct- the use of colors, text and photography are all key factors to make it persuasive and to awaken the desired emotions, feelings and values in the consumer. We have a very different set of symbols in the visual. The first sign 'e' is a signifier and it

symbolizes the problem of baldness faced by most of the people. The sign is unique and apparently in no way resembling with the concept of baldness, but the moment, we relate this sign to the next sign close to it, we understand that advertiser smartly works on emotional weakness of the target audience and elegantly tries to provide solution in the form of hairy head.

All signs whether they are icons or symbols are indexes. That is because all signs must be located in the material world to exist. Both signs do not have any meaning in isolation unless we see them in context of linguistic message. The simple and straight verbal sign is an index which shows the existence and relevance of the two signs centrally posed in the visual. The advertiser uses just two symbols and does not want to distract the

audience from the overall impact of the advertising message. The ad is set in green background and two symbols and textual sign are shown in white colour. The green colour symbolizes the productivity, prosperity and happiness, that is the ultimate solution offered by the advertisers in the form of new hair on the scalp while the authenticity of the business purpose is further endorsed by white colour that shows purity, truthfulness and an acknowledgement of the advertising claims made by the marketer. Generally colors are used to disguise a fact or to identify the key features of a product. Marketers feel that colors sells and the right colour sells better. Colour is the first thing that emotionally attracts people to a product or a space. It speaks to the subconscious, evokes feelings and meanings and moods, and has an incredible ability to influence buying behavior. It's a huge subject and matter of debate for marketers (Amrita Nair: 2007).

The Coca Cola



The next ad is of Coca Cola. It contains a picture of a hair salon where two people are being given hair cut. Interestingly, the only visible link that we develop between the signifier (the bottle of Coke filled with water) and the signified (the Cooling & Soothing experiences of having taken haircut) is the person holding the bottle of Coke filled with water. It is also evident that we can see the brand name of the bottle when the hair dresser sprays water on the face of a person. Although this print ad appears to be simple, its connotative

meanings allow our interpretation of it to be a pragmatic one, in that its signifiers have particular relevance with regards to the context of the ad. If we observe clearly, we may notice through glass panes that it is summer time and no one is out on street so consequently the linguistic sign: Thanda Matlab Coca Cola is an index, rightly connected to the outside environment. Here the brand Coca Cola associates with cooling impact of the drink and reinforces the verbal message that any activity with Coke in scorching heat may provide comfort and satisfaction. Although the coke bottle is empty but the company highlights the cooling experience that a person may have irrespective of what he does. The advertiser wishes to convey the idea of Thanda Matlab Coca Cola and uses the sign indexically in a social context. As with all indexical signs, there is a bond between the signifiers (the bottle) and the signified (the refreshing experience of having hair cut in summer). The color of the product name Coca Cola is red and it s a



strong connection between the product and its commercial message.

The Hutch

The next ad is of Hutch mobile services. The ad is strikingly visual and with its visual representation, it elucidates the basic message that underlines the entire service of advertising SMS services. The visual consists of different alphabets and their visual forms. The visual signifies that every alphabet stands for a new abbreviated form of spelling that can be used for SMS messages. For example the letter 'A' stands for apple but in the given ad the emphasis is very much on learning the short and simple spellings for the existing standard words. That's why the word 'Apple' is rewritten as 'Apl' and 'Butterfly' as 'Bttrfly' and so on. With the emphasis on having a new experience of SMS language, the print ad encourages the audience to take the message the way it is presented and finally associates the visual with the textual part of the message: "SMS. The new language." What it means here is that the advertiser uses language cleverly in visual image so that he may persuade the audience to buy and accept the new advertising concept, which is the sole aim of the present ad.

The next print ad that I am taking for semiotic analysis is about social consciousness for our environment. The ad comes with a strong visual and a sincere message to keep our environment, especially trees intact. The impact is very high as we can see the scene of natural calamity in the form of flood, where the entire area is submerged in water and the lone man in the picture finally gets a safe refuge in the lap of nature. The entire representation of flood is a prominent signifier that signifies the careless attitude of human being towards Nature. It is interesting



to note that a man sitting on a tree stands for entire human civilization, seems to be desperate and helpless about his own misuse of natural resources. The connection is also forged between the visual and textual message.

On the extreme top right side, the advertiser has a clear message: **Save Trees. Trees Save.** If we care the nature, nature will reciprocate in similar force. The tall image of a tree on which a man sits is indexical to the real world where Nature always cares, protects and guides the human world. Furthermore, the grim photography of the natural disaster and the colour combination of black and white are the additional signifiers of

how the society is moving forward callously without any commitment to Nature. The ad is symbolic to demonstrate that the Man and Nature are closely interdependent.

The Print Ads

The designers of the print ads mostly use pictures, which are coupled with minimal linguistic material. The one print ad, now I am discussing is of *Veja* magazine that beautifully employs ‘one word Image’ to have maximum persuasive effect for the product advertised. When we see and study the ad, we find one single word ‘*bomb*’ in black letter and yellow background. The style in which the word ‘*bomb*’ is spelled and designed in the print ad, it gives a visual impression of bomb in real life. The symbol (bomb) stands in isolation on surface level but what the advertiser expect the audience to

read and trace the hidden image or word ‘*bluff*’ that is enveloped by the first visible image (*bomb*). Once the readers are through these two signifiers, the ad may lead them to the product and its very philosophy signified by these two words. These two signs signify that *Veja* magazine shows the two sides of a story and provides an in-depth analysis of the problem focused in the cover page.



The Foregrounding

The ad doesn't reflect that linguistic sign (*bomb*) is intentionally and systematically designed in such a way that it may also project other sign (*bluff*) within it. It is a common trend in advertising media to achieve an even greater and more pervasive effect on the consumer. One must view the manipulation of linguistic entities as a type of **foregrounding**.

Foregrounding is a linguistic process in which some elements, such as words, phrases, sentences, stressing, intonations, or the like are given prominence or made more meaningfully significant by the communicator/language-user, in this case the creator(s) of a print advertisement (Allan C Harris : 1989).When we index our image (bomb) to the real situation (*Veja* Magazine), we may come to know that magazine talks about North Korea's intention for atomic test and that's the reason that the rest of the world and media



sense a ‘bomb’ and not consider it as a ‘bluff’. The concern of the majority is voiced in the form of ‘bomb’ in bold black fonts.

The cosmetic sector has often been accused of using advertising to impose particular standards of beauty and thereby contributing to problem of self-esteem among women and girls.

Fair and Lovely launched its campaign for ‘fair complexion’ to appeal women whose appearance did not match traditional standards of beauty. The concept of ‘Magic Skin’ is not restricted to the female domain and even the male species is also being targeted. The present ad ‘**NIVEA for MEN**’ shows a sports stadium where a football match is being played. It features a group of footballers, who are in the ground and defending the shot from the opposition. The players standing in the particular position are the major signifiers of the problem posed in the print ad. It’s a rare scene in the football match, where the players are covering their faces instead of protecting the groin, the most sensitive part of the body.

The ad further hints as if the match was played in sunny day in which the players did not take chance with their facial skin. It is also apparent in the visual image that there is not a single stain or spot on the clothes of players. It also further determines their concern to the cleanliness and better facial complexion. Their dressing reveals that they are equally protective about their facial skin. In the ad, the signifier is the bunch of players with face covered and the signified being ‘Nivea for Men’. The signified object is ‘Nivea for Men’ that appears tall in white colour rightly providing the solution for the skin sensitive sportsperson. The one sign in the entire ad is invisible remarkably, but its presence is being felt in absence. We don’t find in the ad that the opponent striker is ready to take the shot or kick the football but the audiences associate the underlying meaning with the understanding of other visible signs.

The Ultimate Object of Advertising

The ultimate objective of advertising efforts is to gain more consumers to ensure growth and long term profits. The magic mirror of advertising works like any ordinary mirror in that it lets the consumers see their own image in the mirror (of advertising). The ‘Magic’ happens only when, unlike in ordinary mirror, they see themselves not as what they are, but as what they want to be. By playing up the wants and aspirations, advertising makes



the brand desirable (Sanjay Tiwari). While maintaining the supremacy in International Markets, the successful global players localize their advertising messages to become unique, saleable and relevant to the local conditions. To win consumers, the print ad of McDonalds, designs its message to local needs and serves a business purpose. The print ad beautifully shows a south Indian pandit with religious marks on his forehead. The sign is a strong indicator of McDonalds' commitment to

the glocalization of an advertising message in which the person's head is marked with McDonalds' ubiquitous logo resembling like 'M'. The sign on the forehead is a signifier that signifies the linguistic sign (The 100% Vegetarian Festival) shown on the top right hand side of the print ad. The brand McDonalds shows its solidarity with the people of the nation while keeping the outlets 100% vegetarian during festive seasons.

The Panadol



The last print ad that I'm taking for semiotic analysis is of Panadol. Panadol is a paracetamol based analgesic and provides fast, effective temporary relief of pain and discomfort. In the given ad, the visual is very attractive and features one most talked about father and son pair that makes headlines everyday in media for some

or other reasons. They are shown in cheerful mood, enjoying the golf. Their very persona shows the power, sophistication and freedom in real life. What is interesting to study here is the linguistic sign (**one is enough**) that these two gentlemen signified. The element of punning is intended to achieve the dramatic effect and gain more consumers' attention. The message (**one is enough**) has two layers of meaning: what it says explicitly on the surface and what it contains implicitly below. It is difficult to analyse and left to the audience to decide which one is enough to get rid of pain or generate pain. Whether one tab of Panadol is enough to release pain or one Mr. Bush is enough to give much pain to

the world, is really the crux of the advertising message. The so-called ambiguous sentences testify to the existence of deep structures. How does one know that a sentence has more than one sense? The surface arrangement is just the same, the signs received are identical, and yet the meaning could be very different. It is Chomsky's thesis that while the surface structure is identical in all interpretations, the deep structure is not. The diverse meanings of ambiguous sentences are realized when the proper and different deep structures are evoked (Langholz Leymor).

To Conclude -- The World of Flirtations and Seductions

Advertising fascinates people. It flirts momentarily with their lives, seduces them and leaves them with wonderful images and dreams. Dreams that to be fulfilled, make people work harder and harder, earn more and more to spend more and more. Advertising is an integral part of our social and economic systems.

In our complex society, advertising has evolved into a vital communication system for both consumers and businesses. The interpretation of visual images is very subjective and thus cannot be conclusive as images are open to different renditions. In order to understand the visual communication, it is expected from the audience or consumer to have sound critical thinking ability. Our senses, instincts, cultural settings, and values greatly affect the process of visual interpretation. Even our personal life, background, moods, needs also contribute significantly to the interpretation process. I find the semiotic analysis of print ads interesting and challenging as no single image has a fixed meaning and it depends how the signs function and organize its value within the ad and in context of its audience and product.

REFERENCES

Chandler, Daniel (1994): *Semiotics for Beginners*. [WWW document] URL <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/>

Hall, Edward.T. *The Silent Language*. New Delhi: East West Press Press.1973.

Harris, C Allan. Sell! Buy!Semiolinguistic Manipulation in Print Advertising. <http://www.csun.edu/~vcspc005/advertis.html>

Inglish, Fred. *The Imagery of Power: A Critique of Advertising*. London: Heinemann.1972.

Leymore, Langholz. V. "Hidden Myth:Structure and Symbolism in Advertising". London: Heinemann. 1975.

Nair,G. Anita. "What does Colour Say about Your Brand?" *Times of India* 20 October 2007, New Delhi ed.:20.

Scoollon, Ron and Suize Scollon. *Discourse in Place: Language in the Material World*. London: Routledge.

Tiwari, Sanjay. *The (un) Common Sense of Advertising- Getting the Basics Right*. New Delhi: Response Books. 2003.

Gajendra S. Chauhan, Ph. D.
Languages Group
Birla Institute of Technology and Science
Pilani - 333031
India
gajendra24@gmail.com