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Fathoming Hidden Strategies of Two Indian Government Print Ads through Semiotic and Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

Copywriters make use of culture of consumers to manipulate them by propagating ideologies. The consumers get carried away by these magical tropes as they know little about how media spreads ideologies.

The present paper addresses this problem and analyses two print adverts issued by Indian Government which appeared on the occasion of National Girl Child's Day but in different years.

It studies power relationship between media and consumers through the way media dominates the mind with the use of ideology. Semiotic and Critical Discourse Analysis have been used as methodological tools.

It has been found that media exploits and re-emphasizes the existing beliefs of people even in those adverts which are meant to bring a social change. In both the adverts under study, woman occupies a limited space. On the one hand the visual of the first ad is effective since it shows how much a woman has to do; on the other, she appears as a woman in clutches without any significance attached to her own being and dignity. The

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

285

11 : 6 June 2011

Piar Chand, Ph.D., Shivani Chaudhary, M.Phil. and I. D. Sharma, Ph.D.

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second advert is highly ironical since in making an attempt to save the girl child, it is only promoting males.

Keywords: Advertising, Strategies, Culture, Semiotic Analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis.

Introduction

Advertising is the essence of capitalist society where abundance exists. Since liberalization, privatization and globalization have given an impetus to the growing competition in selling and thereby promotion of goods and services, advertisers are busy looking for lucrative ways to attract customers. The copywriters try to attain the desired goal through the magical language and paralanguage of advertising. They constantly make use of culture of customers trying to manipulate it in the way they want by creating new demands and needs and also by propagating ideologies which happens at an unconscious level. Customers usually get carried away by these magical tropes since they know little about how media spreads ideologies.

Advertisements appeal to the consumer by reflecting shared values and thus, serving as an index to popular culture. This is so because by and large, consumers are the products of popular culture in which they live.

Advertising works not only on a psychological level but also on a cultural one and it is true that 'the rational and psychological levels in communication can be probed using conventional research techniques but the cultural level is more difficult to access. That is because the culture is 'encoded' in everyday living and the average consumer does not decode his own culture' Budhiraja (2000: 106).

Decoding culture in ads is difficult as well as necessary in order to decipher the hidden strategies of advertisers. "We can only understand what advertisements mean by finding out how they mean" Williamson (1972: 17). Williamson further echoes the view that advertisements' primary function may be to sell the product, but they also create a structure in which they are selling us ourselves. So by relating a way of life through juxtaposition, the advertisements are also selling the viewer a lifestyle that they would like to have. Advertising texts and visuals are cultural and social expressions of how people want to project themselves. So the copywriters create ideas and concepts in a cultural context and convey them through verbal and non-verbal means to manipulate and persuade the receivers in order to simulate consumer behaviours depicted in the advertisements.

Every culture has certain codes associated with it. Cultural codes constructed to legitimate social power relations, form what is known as ideology which works with the interests of dominant class in mind.

Semiology and Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth CDA) decipher these ideologies through various codes. These ideologies either reproduce or transform society. As Norman Fairclough (1992: 65) puts it, 'Discursive practice ... contributes to reproducing society (social identities, social relationships, systems of knowledge and belief) as it is, yet also contributes to transforming society.' This implies that discursive practice like a persuasive advertisement changes or manipulates the receivers in a society or culture to alter their behavior. Though Fairclough states this in the context of CDA, the same holds true in case of semiotics, where linguistic and non-linguistic signs produce meaning, which lead to the creation of social relationships, systems of knowledge and thus cultural identity. Signs and their combinations are worked with to alter the behaviour of receivers accordingly. Thus both Semiotics and CDA are apt for the purpose of analyzing ads and the strategies used by the advertisers to manipulate the consumers.

Literature Review

Malcom, Evans (1999) addressed the contribution of semiotics to cultural and communication analysis in the context of marketing and market research. One of the crucial argument of the study was that unlike qualitative researchers who talk to what they hope is a representative sample of the target market to put together an accurate picture of the market, semiologists view people as decoders of messages and carriers of cultural meanings. The study also focused on the future of applied semiotics which the author concludes is on a roll.

In her essay 'A Semiotic Analysis of a Cosmetics Ad and Its Interpretation by Readers' Reschke, Nadin showed the effects of advertising on the public and offered answers to the introductory question on why so many East Germans were so heavily influenced by advertising in Western culture.

Clare, Alexander in 'A Semiotic Analysis of Magazine Ads for Men's Fragrances' attempted to give a semiotic analysis of advertisements whose signifiers were not only designed to give a favorable and appropriate image of the product, but also, these signifiers were shown to have a strong relationship with the textual context in which the signs were located.

Soar, M (2000) carried out a study of semiotic analysis of advertisements which focused on the expansion of cultural studies to include sustained research into the subjective aspects of commercial cultural production. The author analyzed creative workers in advertising and design, presenting historical notes, theoretical elaboration, and empirical evidence to explore the social stratum defined as the 'new cultural intermediaries'

Gambles, Helen (2003) analyzed a newspaper story using semiosis. Her discussion of several newspapers' representations of the same news item showed how semiotic analysis

could determine the meanings of such news items, as a result of the linguistic and visual signs used within the texts. She concluded with the remark that semiotic analysis could not determine how an individual reader might interpret the representations of the news items in real social context but it did offer an insight into the factors at work in the production of a news item and distinguished the various codes which were employed by different types of newspapers when representing a particular news item.

‘A semiotic analysis of high fashion advertising’ by Rhodes, Alan and Rodrigo Zuloago (2003) focused on the prevalence of sexual identity within High Fashion advertising.

Dattamajumdar, Satrupa dealt with the notions of ambivalence and contradiction in the study of advertising discourse. The findings of the study indicated that advertisements took liberties in modifying the natural order of the language depending upon the product of advertisement and the target group of consumer, and in doing so captured the listener’s or reader’s attention and enabled them to arrive at certain point of understanding, affecting the reference of the product. This motivated the listeners or readers to reconstruct the linguistic organization that was meaningful to the realm of advertising.

Zhang’s (2001) study contributed to understanding of the Chinese language in advertising and advertising theory in general, and could serve as background for cultural studies, business language, education, mass communication and international marketing. One of the conclusions of the study was that the features of advertising language reflected and reinforced the changes in society, where the individualistic consumer ideologies were competing with the more collective traditional ideology in the public discourse. It was found that advertising language was highly culture oriented, which manifested the underlying socioeconomic ideology.

Tessa (2007) studied the construction of masculinity and femininity in alcohol advertisements. The main conclusion of the study was that both men and women were portrayed in limiting ways within alcohol advertisements in men’s magazines.

Godeo, Eduardo de Gregorio studied the construction of visual discourse of male perfume advertising in British men’s magazines. The findings of the paper indicated that the integration of images with the advertised products played a key role in constituting an ideological universe presupposed among the community of consumers. The results of this study were finally placed in the socio-cultural context accounting for the production and consumption of this form of visual discourse on masculinity in contemporary Britain

Magalhaes, Isabel (2005) examined textual and semiotic aspects of adverts according to critical discourse analysis. The findings of the study indicated that both the feminine and the masculine were represented discursively in their heterogeneity: the feminine was represented as a commodified body; it was also frail and pathological. The masculine was

linked with power, but with fashion too. Adverts positioned readers ideologically, so that they could define their gender identities as consumers.

The Focus of This Paper

The present paper analyses two adverts with the help of semiotic and critical discourse analysis in order to trace the re-emphasizing of systems of existing beliefs by the adverts, their reconstruction and resending back into society. It studies power relations between media and consumers through the way media hegemonies their mind with the use of ideology.

Methodological Tools

As stated earlier the paper juxtaposes semiotic analysis and Critical Discourse Analysis to be used as the methodological tool owing to their being complementary. Discourse analysis aims at exploring ‘the context of communication: who is communicating with whom and why; in what kind of society and situation; through what medium; how different types and acts of communication evolved, and their relationship to each other.... Discourse analysis views language and context holistically.’ (Cook, Guy: the Discourse of Advertising , Foreword).

Fairclough identifies three interconnected dimensions that are necessary to focus on while doing CDA. The first dimension is socio-cultural practice. According to Locke (2004: 43) one should look for answers to ‘...such questions as whether the particular text supports a particular discursive hegemony or a particular social practice, or whether it stands in counter hegemonic relationship to certain prevalent condition. Does it serve to reproduce particular social and discursive practices, or are there transformative impulses in the text?’ in the second dimension-the discourse practice- the way in which the text is produced, disseminated, read and interpreted by readers is focused on as well as the text’s relationship with other texts. The third dimension is text. This dimension focuses on how the text positions its readers in relation to it. (Fairclough, 1992;Locke, 2004) thus in analyzing the sample adverts work of Fairclough, Van Dijk, Ruth Wodak, Locke and Huckin informed the method of critical discourse analysis. The method was discussed with deconstruction as the paradigmatic point of reference.

One of the broadest definitions is ‘semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign’. Umberto Eco (1976:7). It can be further added that semiotics not just includes the study of signs but of anything that stands for something else. Barthes (1967:9) declared that ‘semiology aims to take in any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits; images, gestures, musical sounds, objects and the complex associations of all these, which form the content of ritual, convention or public entertainment: these constitute if not languages, at least systems of significations’ It is a field of study involving many different theoretical stances and methodological tools.

Semiology or semiotics originated in Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sander Pearce individually. Besides them, Charles William Morris, Roland Barthes, Algirdas Greimas, Yuri Lotman, Christian Metz, Umberto Eco and Julia Kristeva. Linguists like Louis Hjelmslev and Roman Jakobson, structuralists like Claude Levi-Strauss and Jacques Lacan have also worked within a semiotic framework. Contemporary semioticians study signs not only in isolation but as part of semiotic 'sign systems' such as media or genre. They study how meanings are made covering not only communication but also the construction and maintenance of reality.

The present semiotic analysis in the study is based on Daniel Chandler's (1997) *Semiotics for Beginners*.

Sample

The sample has been chosen keeping in view the paradoxes of adverts meant for bringing awareness and social change. In a bid to raise public awareness on the deep bias against female children in India, The United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government planned to observe Jan 24 as National Girl Child Day. The government hoped it will raise awareness of sex-selection abortion and female infant abandonment among masses.

Families with limited economic means see daughters as a financial liability because of a religious tenet that requires the bride's parents to provide a substantial dowry to the groom's parents. Many couples choose abortion when they learn their unborn child is female. Gender bias also drives child marriage, child labor and child trafficking which may lead to a social disaster. Two adverts which appeared on this issue are being compared and contrasted to gain an insight into the working of copywriters and nuances of advertising.

Proposed Terms for Doing the Analysis of Ads

Owing to the commonality and complimentary nature of the two, terms from Semiotics and CDA have been fused together to propose a model for the analysis of the sample adverts. These terms could be useful to researchers and consumers to explore and understand the world of advertising in a better way. In order to carry out the semiotic and critical discourse analysis of the adverts the following terms from Semiotics and CDA have been made use of:

1. Signs, signifiers and signifieds
2. Icon, index and symbol
3. Verbal and visual signs and connection between the two
4. Framing
5. Omission
6. Double meaning, ambivalence, ambiguity and manipulation

7. Presupposition
8. Rhetorical tropes
9. Syntagmatic analysis
10. Paradigmatic analysis
11. Modality
12. Encoding/Decoding and Agency
13. Codes
14. Context
15. Ideological function of individual signs in the text and text as a whole.
16. Intertextuality
17. Rituals, beliefs, value system, myth, culture



Ad 1

Semiotic and Critical Discourse Analysis of Ad 1

The beautiful metaphor of woman and tree being the cause of creation yet their existence being threatened does not leave the reader unaffected. Visual is very strong and creative thus immediately engages the attention of the reader. Both the tree and the woman are known for the benefits that they give to the others.

Connotation

The ad connotes that ‘she’ gives life to all ... be it an engineer, a doctor, a pilot so on and so forth. At the end of each branch is a blossoming flower indicating sustenance of life. The ad presents woman in relation to somebody else. Though there is a reference in the ad to the various professions that she would like to be in but her importance has been broadly brought about through her roles. The ad does not speak of the woman who should

be allowed to live with self respect not only for the various roles that she has to play but also for her own self. Though the advert largely speaks for its cause, a purely structural analysis of the text ignores the right of the girl child to enjoy her life and to live for her own self with self esteem. It does not throw any light on the infancy of a girl. The girl has been projected as a grown up female who has many responsibilities and roles to play. There is no allusion to the child's world. There is no reference to the innocence of the girl child who suffers in a male-dominated society. Readers hardly notice the implied meaning of such omissions.

Sense of Irony, and Use of Anaphora

'She' is the life-giver, she creates and it is an *irony* that the creator is haunted with the dread of being killed. 'She' sustains but her sustenance is threatened. There is a use of *anaphora* in the ad as the word 'she' is shown to appear n number of times to lay stress on the subject of the ad. Spacing in the ad is highly suggestive. The woman who represents the stem of the tree occupies very little space as compared to the area covered by branches. It is based upon the Hindu mythology where woman limits herself for her family where she is the anchor to everybody. She would fulfill the needs of all while suppressing her own wishes. The woman acquires the entire space and 'she' draws everybody's attention to the ad. The bits and parts of the ad have been carefully constructed to draw an analogy implying the need to take care of those who care for all.

Colour Scheme

Colour scheme is highly suggestive. Green being the colour of fertility, life, productivity is aptly connected with the stance and red here indicates freshness and livelihood as the word 'life' itself occurs in red and the blossoming flowers are also red. The context of the advert is related to the latest demographic trends which indicate that India is fast heading towards a million female foetuses aborted each year. Although foetal sex determination and sex selection is a criminal offence in India, the practice is rampant. Private clinics with ultrasound machines are doing brisk business. Everywhere, people are paying to know the sex of an unborn child and paying even more to abort the female child. The whole advert as a sign catches one's attention to the plight of both woman and tree who create, nurture and sustain. Their contributions are immense. Nevertheless they are denied a breathing space. There is not much effort in making the appeal explicit, just a sign of exclamation 'let her live!' which sets a *colloquial tone* to bring the reader of the ad closer to it.

Echoes of Ecofeminism

The ad echoes the voice of ecofeminists who argue that a strong parallel exists between the oppression and subordination of women in families and society and the degradation of nature. A central tenet in ecofeminism states that male ownership of land has led to a

dominator culture (patriarchy), manifesting itself in food export, over-grazing, the tragedy of the commons, exploitation of people, and an abusive land ethic, in which animals, trees, crops and land are valued only as economic resources. One of the missions of ecofeminism is to redefine how societies look at productivity and activity of both women and nature that have mistakenly been deemed passive, allowing for them both to be ill-used (Wikipedia). Here again women are mainly associated with productivity. So the norms and notions related with femininity remain unchallenged. Upon the analysis of this advert it becomes clear that woman is related to life, productivity but she is nowhere considered as an individual, a human being worthy of cherishing her own life.

The advertisement is a collage of images and text. At the top left, there are two photos of Indian cricketers: Virender Sehwag in a batting stance and Kapil Dev holding a yellow cricket ball. To the right of these are three small portraits of government officials: Smt. Sonia Gandhi (Hon'ble Chairperson, UPA), Dr. Manmohan Singh (Hon'ble Prime Minister), and Smt. Usha Tiwari (Hon'ble Minister of State for WCD). The central text, in large red font, asks: "Where would you be if your mother was not allowed to be born?". Below this, on the left, is a photo of Air Chief Tanvir Mahmood Ahmed in military uniform. Next to it is a red text box with white text: "Suppose your mother was killed before she ever lived... because for many others like her, a lifetime of violence and discrimination begins before birth. Millions of girl children, as evidenced in the 2001 Census, never see the light of the day because they are murdered in the womb itself. Your mother could have been one of them. A declining sex-ratio is the bane of progress. Under the Pre-conception and Pre-natal Diagnostic Technique (Prohibition of Sex Selection) (PCPNDT) Act 2003, it is a crime to identify sex of the foetus. Female foeticide is a curse. It is time to wake up to reality. No girl means no future." To the right of this text box is a purple box with white text: "On 24 January National Girl Child Day, say 'NO' TO FEMALE FOETICIDE". At the bottom left, there is a photo of Ustad Amjad Ali Khan playing the sarod. To the right of this are the State Emblem of India and the logo for "Towards a New Dawn" with the website "www.mwcd.gov.in". At the very bottom, in small text, it says "Issued in the public interest by Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India".

Ad 2

Semiotic and Critical Discourse Analysis of Ad 2

The ad 2 highlights the pictures of Indian cricketers Virender Sehwag and Kapil Dev, Pakistani Retd. Air Chief Tanvir Mahmood Ahmed and the great Indian classical musician Ustad Amjad Ali Khan, the sarod maestro. These pictures are meant to signify the great sons who took birth because their mothers were lucky enough to have escaped female foeticide which is the explicit message of the text in the ad. It is also clear from the text that the ad was issued by the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Govt.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

293

11 : 6 June 2011

Piar Chand, Ph.D., Shivani Chaudhary, M.Phil. and I. D. Sharma, Ph.D.

Fathoming Hidden Strategies of two Indian Government Print Ads through Semiotic and Critical Discourse Analysis

of India on the National Girl Child Day. The National Emblem and the pictures of Hon'ble Chairperson, UPA Smt. Sonia Gandhi, Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh and Smt. Krishna Tirath signify that the ad is of national importance. The dominant images of the so called 'great sons' are in complete contrast with the theme of the advert. Smt. Sonia Gandhi and Smt. Krishna Tirath appear in the ad only by virtue of their position. The use of the picture of a Pakistan General in this ad was noticed only after its publication and this created some discomfiture and bad publicity for the ad!

The relation between the figures who appear in the ad and what the text suggests is highly ambiguous. One gets confused to understand the relation between the two. The ad gives no space to 'great daughters of the nation' as against the 'great sons'. No significance has been attached to a girl. The text with the red background which attempts to speak volumes on why female foeticide should be stopped has been given a very little space as compared to the rest of the features of the ad. The ad has become controversial due to the appearance of a Pakistani Air Chief in an ad by Government of India but it is sad that the other loopholes have been ignored so far.

Damaging Messages of This Ad

The advert subversively promotes the same damaging messages that were always present within the advertisements. There is a central opposition in the ad which says 'no girl means no future' and projects no daughter but only sons. The ad gives no space to women like Kalpana Chawla, Indira Gandhi, Sania Mirza, Sushmita Sen, or Aishwarya Rai. Unlike the previous ad the figure of a woman is completely missing from this ad. The ad has not been carefully scrutinized. Smt. Krishna Tirath as quoted by the *Tribune* says that the pictures in the ads are not of much importance but it is the message which is of the utmost importance. (*tribuneindia.com* retrieved 23/2/2010). But in the discourse of advertising, images do not only have the role of reinforcing the idea of selling a product, but they also have a role in selling a 'worldview, a lifestyle and a value system' (Kellner 1995:127 quoted in Dines). What Smt. Tirath intends to say is still ambiguous on the grounds that an average reader can hardly make sense of the ad and the ad does not effectively drive home the intended message.

Preference for Male Child

Akin to the previous ad, this advert is meaningful in the Indian context where a son is preferred to a daughter and people indulge in practices like female foeticide. So the ad is an appeal to stop the female foeticide. But the irony in the ad is that all the achievers in the ad are sons. The female has been projected as a reproduction machine whose survival is significant only if she gives birth to (great) sons. This highlights the Indian psyche which derives from the rules laid down by the Brahmins in the 18th century. According to the Laws of Manu 'A man can leave a barren woman after eight years and one who only gives birth to daughters'. www.womeninworldhistory.com.

Reconstructing a Wrong and Misplaced Discourse

Though these rules do not apply any more but they still penetrate the psyche of a large majority of Indians. The intended message of the ad is that no one can come into existence and hence reach anywhere if there is no mother. Hence, female foeticide should be stopped to check the declining sex ratio. Contrary to this the producers of the ad are reconstructing the discourse of having sons.

A number of studies have been conducted regarding the declining sex ratio particularly in the age group 0-6 (Das Gupta and Bhat, 1997). The findings indicate that India faces a serious problem of ‘missing girls’ and it is mainly due to female foeticide. With the advent of smaller preferred family sizes the problem has increased all the more because a majority of Indian families believe that position of a mother becomes more prominent in a family if she is blessed with a male child. It is the need of the hour to change this kind of mental set-up and requires the government to implement more laws which strengthen a woman’s position in the society. The advert while overtly setting tones for saving the girl child covertly perpetuates the message of a male being more important and fails to show reasons for stopping female infanticide and foeticide.

Conclusion

It has been found that the adverts to save the girl child focus on the importance of women only by virtue of her being a means of giving life and sustainability to others. She is not rendered as an individual worthy of cherishing life and living with self respect. Her supremacy to man has been established by her capacity to give birth to babies. It is regretted that one of the two adverts which is ostensibly supposed to send the message of stopping female foeticide is speaking of significance of ‘great sons’.

So, both the ads put up woman as a ‘commodity for use’ whether it is in producing sons or otherwise. Though the first advert at least gives a glimpse of a woman’s aspirations, the second one emphasizes only on the notion of her being significant as a mother of great achievers all of whom are male figures. In both the adverts, woman occupies a limited space. On the one hand the visual of the first ad is effective since it shows how much a woman has to do; on the other, she appears as a woman in clutches without any significance attached to her own being and dignity. The second advert is highly ironical since in making an attempt to save the girl child, it is only promoting males.

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