

A Semiotic Study: Cultural Misrepresentation in Pakistani Advertisements

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Abstract

This study analyzes the Pakistani culture's misrepresentation in local brands' advertisements. Three brands have been chosen for this research: Lux (soap), Sunsilk (Shampoo) and Tarang (Milk pack). The research aims at the exploration of various signs, symbols and gestures that carry heavy connotative meaning and symbolic significance for the viewers; simultaneously highlighting the related issues. I will deploy a synthesis of semiotic analysis and critical theories for this analysis. Multiple images from advertisements have been captured for this study and Peirce's model has been used for interpretation of all these signs. This is a multi and interdisciplinary study which is related to the different areas of culture, semiotics, and media.

Keywords: Semiotics, misrepresentation, images, sign, culture, advertisements, symbols

Introduction

In contemporary postmodern era, media is a strong and potent force behind the promotion of certain socio-cultural changes. Advertisements serve as the source of sponsorship for the media as they also introduce new discoveries, inventions, or developments to audiences; playing a vital role in the promotions of these new items and attracts new customers. These advertisements play an undeniably inevitable role in forming customers' needs by creating a sense of need for a particular item by fetishizing and glamorizing it.

Advertising, as a source of infotainment, is "a prominent discourse type" (Cook, 1992). It is either already "well established" or is "rapidly gaining ground" in "virtually all contemporary societies", including ours. The most "distinguishing but not the only feature of ad discourse" is "to persuade people to buy a particular product" (Cook, 1992). Media portrays the discernment about the actual condition in the brain of the watchers with enduring impacts and motivates the audience to render different interpretations to all the anticipated communication.

Media coordinate the general public with its intense impacts and it originates the belief system of all the general public in the coveted way. There have been inebriating impacts on the moral, social and cultural beliefs and values of the general population in Pakistan just due to the impact of electronic media, keeping up a solid spell over the populace. In addition, the effect of the visual scenes on the gathering of people activities more impact than the print media with everlasting impacts as "Dan Laughey" cites, asserting the lawfulness of Meyrowitz's perspectives on electronic media:

"With the advent of television and radio however Meyrowitz claims that access to knowledge and information is shared by all regardless of literacy skills" (Laughey, 2007).

A standout amongst the most noteworthy operators of socio-cultural change in the television is through the advertisements of brands on television. Its basic aim is to provide such a view of the brand which urge and convince audience to buy this brand instead of any other. But, sometimes they gone too far from the cultural and social perspectives and start portraying the wrong images of cultural through these advertisements. Advertisements cannot completely engender the way of life or dispositions they speak to, however some way or another they figure out how to make a rupture in the lives of the audience bringing about constant engagement of the group of onlookers with the content manufacturing certain implications intentionally or unknowingly.

"Media texts wanted to indulge people and to convey some kind of information or to produce reactions in their audiences which justify their continuing production" (Burton, 2005).

Dayer says that advertisement's ideology is very powerful and it is naturalized by the picture and the impartial domain of signifier.

"Ads as a means of representation and meaning construct ideology within themselves through the intervention of external codes which are located in society" (Dyer, 1986).

Ideological powers, as Eagleton (1991) says, "It is not just related to the domain of meaning but it's about making a meaning influential". A sign comprises of anything which creates meaning. Saussure trusts that language is built by self-assertive signs, the most vital development in semiotics; consequently it is considered as a model. For him, sign is a physical thing which comprising of what he named the "signifier" and the 'signified'. The signifier is a term for the sign itself; the pictures as we, the viewers, see it and the individuals from a similar culture, who have a similar language (Fiske 1990, p. 43).

Limitation of the Study

The current research is concentrated essentially on one particular area of the research that is visual components

in the pictures including dress code, gesture, setting and costume. Furthermore, this study only includes semiotic analysis of pictures not about the general concepts of language because this is another filed of research. This paper also focuses on the messages which are being presented through the different visual signs in the advertisements. Three famous brands from Pakistani advertisements have been choose for this study.

Objective of the Study

The basic objective of the current study is to identify the various layers of famous brands' advertisements in Pakistan which are misrepresenting the true Pakistani values, culture and neglecting the actual values of cultural beliefs and norms and this research also tries to identify the effect of all these advertisements' sign on the mind of the viewers.

Research Questions

This study will explore the following research questions:

- 1: How do the famous brands' advertisements in Pakistan represent the cultural norms of Pakistan?
- 2: How do the advertisements promote or demote Pakistani cultural norms or values?
- 3: How do the misrepresentations of culture influence on the people of Pakistan and on culture as well?

Methodology

Three famous brands' advertisements such as Lux, Tarang and Sunsilk have been selected for this research as a visual text and three advertisements from each brand which have been released from few years back taken for semiotic analysis. Still images from all these advertisements have been captured consciously for analyzing the misrepresentation of culture. Systematic selection has been made in images as in all the captured images main character is there and representing against the cultural values. Qualitative mode is applied for the capturing of images and qualitative research strategy is utilized to get an understanding about the perception of the viewers what they accept and belief and what implications they append to different activities. Nine advertisements have been selected as a sample of case study. Process oriented and inductive approach is used in this research. Critical theories such a structuralism and deconstructurism used for discussing the phenomena of cultural identity and cultures diversity in Pakistan. Furthermore, Pierce's model has been utilized for the analysis of all the signs presented in the images.

Significance of the Study

This basic aim of this study is to highlight true picture of advertisements that how they distorted the rich culture and norms of Pakistan and portraying a wrong image in the in front of the people through theses advertisements. This study will make conscious all the actors, directors, writers and all those people who are involve in the making of such ads which are truly against our rich cultural values. Apart from all these thing this research may provide a way to the other researchers to become conscious about the misrepresentation of norms and cultural values which are actually related to our own identity and points out such mistakes and eradicate them.

Literature Review

This research includes different discipline and domains so it is important to define all the terms which are related to this topic. First, I will explain about advertisements and secondly, I will talk about all the terms related to cultural and identity. And thirdly terms related to semiotic analysis will be explained. Studies, which have been done in the past related to the misrepresentation of cultural values, are also seen. Studies on the wrong representation culture in Pakistani punjabi movies, television have been seen but advertisements have been ignored in this connection.

Advertisements and Media

In Pakistan, amid the most recent couple of years, there has been monstrous development and inventions in the field of electronic media. There starts another period for the general population of Pakistan to watch different channels teaching diverse belief systems in their brains.

Media coordinate with the society through its intense impacts over the audience indeed, it makes the belief system of the viewers in the coveted way. There have been great impacts on the social, cultural and moral lives of the general population in Pakistan just due to the great influence of electronic media, keeping up a solid effect over the populace. The influence of the print media blurs out because of the low education level of the viewers all through Pakistan, offering route to the electronic media as it doesn't require propelled proficiency for understanding its pictures and oral correspondence. Also, the effect of the visual scenes on the group of people activities have more impact than the print media field with everlasting impacts. Media has great importance for developing the socio-cultural change in a society. The basic purpose of the media/advertisements is to provide entertainment of the audience without pointing or misrepresenting anything. As Graeme Burton says that;

“Media texts intend to engage people to convey some kind of information and to produce reactions in their audiences which justify their continuing production” (Burton, 2005, P. 45).

Culture/Pakistani Culture

It is difficult to shrink the definition of culture in few words because when we talk about culture it comes all the things which are present in one society. The culture term includes a number of different descriptions of values and beliefs, everyday practices, rituals, and customs, in which all the beliefs of the society are organized and shaped.

Catherine Belsey defines about culture in *Poststructuralism: A Very Short Introduction* “Culture is actually the inscription in stories, rituals, customs, objects, and practices of the meanings in a specific time and place” (Miles, 2007, p. 192).

Culture is not a restricted arrangement of qualities or convictions. It is fairly arbitrary. It assimilates the whole activities and the philosophies by a gathering of individuals or a country as a whole. Belsey defines about culture as;

"Culture indicates the implications we set out to possess and disavow the qualities we try endeavors to live by or challenge, and the dissent is additionally social and it dwells in the portrayals of the world traded, arranged and challenged in a general public" (Miles, 2007, P. 30).

The Editors of “*Culture and Public Action*” give their views over term culture as;

“Culture is connected with identity, aspiration, symbolic exchange and coordination that serve relational ends, such as ethnicity, ritual, heritage, norms, meanings, and beliefs” (Vijayendra Rao & Michael Walton, 2004).

Pakistan is a multicultural country and the “Pakistani culture is actually grown on the Islamic values and norms” (Jalibi, 2008, p. 06). The basic motive of Islam is to follow an ideology which is beyond the concept of the ethnic and cultural differences of colour, creed and race.

In Pakistan, amid the most recent couple of years, there has been enormous development in the field of electronic media. There starts another time for the general population of Pakistan to watch various channels instilling diverse belief systems in their brains. The advertisements business of Pakistan has neglected to check consistency and has turned into a dead business for the financial specialists to create high planned commercials with excellent structures.

Semiology/Semiotics/Pierce’s model

Semiotics is explained as the “systematic study of signs” (Eagleton, 1986, p. 100). It is actually the scientific study of the “sign system”. The most prominent scholars of this specific area were an American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce and Ferdinand De Saussure and

Saussure, in *Course in General Linguistics* (1915), says:

“A science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable it would be a part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology”. He further says that; I shall call it semiology (from Greek *semeion* ‘sign’). “Semiology would show what constitutes signs what laws govern them”(Saussure, 1966, p. 16).

According to the Saussure, “language is one of the most complex semiological systems and linguistics is the ‘master-pattern for all the branches of semiology” (Saussure, 1966, p. 68).

On the other hand, according to Pierce’s theory semiotics has concerned about symbols, the ‘woof and warp’ of all the thoughts. He says that:

“It has never been in my control to study anything-mathematics, ethics, metaphysics, gravitations, thermodynamics, optics, chemistry, comparative anatomy, astronomy, psychology, phonetics, economic, history of science, whist, men and women, wine, metrology-except as a study of semiotic”(Deledalle, 200, p. 35).

These days instead of using both terms such as semiology and semiotics, critics are more interested and commonly used the term semiotics.

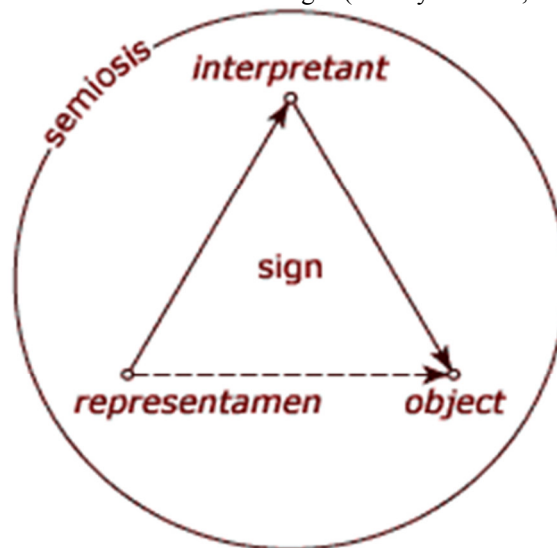
Umberto Eco talks about the term semiotics in the broadest sense and says that, “semiotics is related to everything that can be taken as signs” (Eco, 1976, p. 7). As Chandler says that we can take different sounds, images, words and gestures because all these things have certain meanings depending upon how all these things are being represented.

M. H. Abrams give the definition about sign in his book “*A Glossary of Literary Terms*” and define the meaning of sign specifically in Saussure’s culture; A sign consists of two inseparable parts or aspects, the signifier (in language, a set of sound’s speech, or of marks on a page) and the signified (the concept, or idea, which is the meaning of the sign. (Abrams, 1999, p. 280).

The term “signifier” is actually refer a physical object or entity or the term “signified” refers to the mental perception or the meaning about that specific signifier (object/entity) comes in our mind. Signified can be different according to different people about a same signifier (object). He says that “there is no natural inseparable link between the signified and the signifier” (Culler: 1988:19). According to Hjelmslev, semiotics is

“a science that studies the life of signs within society” (Cobley, 1998, p. 39). Saussure’s says that every language has its own unique and different way of perceiving and organizing the mental pictures of signs.

In fact, signs are actually recognized according to the reader’s mind and “then he goes on to decipher some sort of social, cultural or emotional meanings” (Cobley & Jansz, 1998, p. 50).



Alongside the Saussurean Semiological Demonstrate (as the term Semiology utilized by Saussure, Culler 1986:90), there was out another model exhibited by an American philosopher Charles Sander Peirce as the model of sign, of "semiotic" and of scientific categorizations of signs (Chandler: 2003:32). He gives three section display:

1. The representamen: the frame which the sign takes.
2. An interpretant: not a translator yet rather the sense which made of the sign.
3. An object: to which the sign alludes or refer.

All these three sorts of signs are utilized as a part of visual correspondence or communication. The information of these different sorts of signs can help us in deciphering the content that is created with these diverse sorts of signs. Peirce, in his exposition, "Logic as Semiotics" says that;

According to Pierce; “The word or sign which the man uses is the man himself the language is the total of myself” (1931, V, 189).

With the help of Pierce’s model I will define the most highlighted visual signs in the all pictures how all these signs are defined or explained, what all these specific signs are signify and how all these signs create different meanings and make different perceptions in the mind of the viewers.

Sign, in itself is an intricate term. It doesn't just allude to the implication or connection between the signifier and signified, additionally indicates multidimensional implications present in the signs. I have chosen Peirce's Model for the sign examination or analysis as it permits in-depth analysis of the sign as per its intended implications and nature.

Discussion

Dress, Colour, Setting, Gestures

Dress is the main sign of any society and it shows or represents any society’s cultural, ethnic, ideological and physiological backgrounds. The basic dress code in Pakistan is simple, decent shalwar (trouser) and kameez (a long shirt) with a dupta (long scarf) for women and for men it’s simple shalwar (trouser) and kameez(a long shirt) and men are also wearing dress paint and shirt.

But apart from this thing dresses generally worn by women in advertisements are totally against the culture because the basic ideology behind this code is truly Islamic which says that a woman should cover herself completely and hide her beauty.

The dress function, in “*The New Encyclopedia Britannica*” is “to beautify or maximize the sexual appeal and to supply information about the wearer (i.e., age, sex, social status, occupation)” (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1993, vol. 4. p. 222).

Here, I have discussed cultural misrepresentation in advertisements.

Sunslík



Sunslík Image A



Sunslík Image B



Sunslík Image C

The images A,B and C have been selected from a famous Pakistani brand Sunslík(Shampo) and in all these images there is total misrepresentation of Pakistani cultural values through the dresses, colour, setting and expression/gesture of the actresses and actors. First off all, we can see that in Image A and C female models/actresses wearing jeans and shirts which is entirely against our cultural values and tradition. In B image girl is wearing black long kameez but with a capri (a kind of a short trouser). And in A image girl is also wearing a blue gown with a thin fabric and displaying her legs. The setting of the image A is an airport and a dance stage and setting of scene of the image B and C are outside with an open area along the road side. In image A girl wears dark colour like blue, green or maroon which is displaying her exuberant nature. She wants to do dance, it's her passion which is totally against a Pakistani culture and she is also going to another country for her audition in a dancing competition as we can see she is at an airport, wearing short green shirt and tight jeans with high heels which shows her inner exuberant nature. After that in next scene she is dancing in front of other girls wearing short shirt and short trouser with open hair showing her care-free nature and in the last picture she wears a blue gown with transparent fabric and dancing in front of many people on a stage and displaying her legs and arms with open hair.

As we can see the same situation in image B and C girls are dancing in front of other boys and girls in the middle of a road their hair is open and they both are wearing short dresses and displaying their half legs. We can also see the expression and gestures of the girls and boys which are showing their sensational feelings and displaying a wrong image in the minds of the viewers. All these images are against Pakistani culture because in Pakistani culture women are not allowed to wear such kind of dresses and do dancing in such an environment in front of boys and use such gestures which can attract other boys.

Lux



Lux Image A



Lux Image B



Lux Image C

All three images have been taken from a famous brand named Lux (Soap). All these three images showing cultural diversity through the dresses, colour, setting and expression/gesture of the actresses and actors. In all these images models wear sleeveless silk gown and displaying her body fully. In image A setting of the scene is in bathtub in a washroom and after that the hero is sitting in a huge well decorated room on a moving chair holding a book. In image B we can also see bathtub and a woman putting soap on her body after that she is coming from a long stairs in front of audience with a huge smile and lights are used to prominent her body. In image C actor and actress is in a party with a lot of people, holding each other's hands with sensational expression, which can show their inner exuberance feelings.

All these images are totally against our true cultural values because women in Pakistan are not allowed to show their body and come in front of so many people but in these commercials we can see women are showing taking bath and putting soap on their body wearing backless and sleeveless dresses, holding hands of man and using wrong gestures. The relationship of love is respected in a society but it's not allowed to display such feeling on screen in public and apart from all these things the woman in Pakistan are mostly coy, domesticated and sleek. They don't feel comfortable to show themselves in such a romantic situation in a public. Such kinds of scenes in famous brands advertisements invoke sexual harassment, lasciviousness and brutality in society.

Tarang



Tarang Image A



Tarang Image B



Tarang Image C

All these three images have been taken from a famous milk brand which named as Tarang. All three images entirely against our true cultural values in connection to dresses, colour, setting and expression/gesture of the actresses and actors. The very first thing which we can see in all three images is women are being represented as a dancing girls .In all pictures they are dancing with a boy which is against our culture because in our culture women are not allowed to dance or dance with a boy. Through image A and B a lavish and luxurious style of living is being represented and this thing can create a bad impact in the minds of the viewers because majority of Pakistani cannot afford such way of living. In image A the dress code of the women is not according to the culture she is not wearing dopta and her hair are also free and the way she is looking at the boy showing her sensational and romantic nature. So her gestures are not according to cultural values. Behind the main characters there are some others people as well who are also dancing along with these main characters.

In image B famous Pakistani actors and actresses are being shown and when such celebrities do such kinds things the viewer's start admiring them and try to following them. So due to this thing a bad impression can start prevailing in a society. In image B just like image A, along with main actress other girls are also dancing with her and this is not following the culture of Pakistan. In image C same condition is here girls is represented as an object of beauty and she is seeing to others boys with an object able manner and after that start dancing with these two boys. How can we represent and attract a customers through such kind of advertisements and this is not at all a proper way to sale a milk product.

Conclusion

The basic motive for this study was to expose or explore the misrepresentation of Pakistani true cultural values and norms in a famous brands advertisements and this thing shows through the different images taken from three

different brands of Pakistan. This study explore that what kinds of images or impacts such advertisements put on the minds of the viewers and manipulating the society. A careful semiotic analysis done for showing or highlighting the hidden meanings in the signs which are representing through the advertisements.

The religion in the way of life has additionally given certain normal components, profoundly established in practices of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) and his devotees. Pakistan was formed for the sake of Islam and the way of life it breeds, consequently, must accord to the qualities and convictions of Islam. The general population all through Pakistan have their confidence in religion and it shapes their philosophy. The greater part of the social practices, all through Pakistan like standards and qualities, family setups, connections, the status of ladies in the general public are all according to Islam.

After the detailed analysis of the advertisements I can surely say that all these advertisements are representing an alien culture to the viewers and the makers of these advertisements give no consideration to their cultural values. They all distorted the true images and showing the unreal and fake picture to the audience which make no sense at all. This viable medium of advertisements activities impacts on the viewer's exceptionally the adolescent who has no other medium for culture and they start to perceivers the world as it being projected on the screens. The signs in the advertisements pictures inculcate the viewers and lead them to expect the character of the public in the coveted way. In the end, the perspective of the group of viewers is controlled through the clear excitement and the way of life appeared by the celebrities. Through such representation the ideologies of the people distorted and they get confused to distinguish between what is real or fake.

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