

Visual Rhetoric of Advertisement and its Mesmerising Impact on Consumerism

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Abstract—Culture is “ordinary” and is simply ‘the way of life’. If we try to define the culture of the ‘India today’ we cannot turn a deaf ear to the consumerist culture of our country. Advertisements and shopping had penetrated deep into the mind of Indian people, thereby controlling and influencing their way of life, enough to change their outlook towards modern culture. Advertisements are luring people into buying things, out of their interest rather than necessity. In other words, consumption is taken for granted to maintain comfort in life. Copywriters are in search of new vistas and avenues and are leaving no stone unturned to launch their product pleasingly luring. In this endeavour, they eloquently play with human sentiments, emotions and intellect and create a very persuasive verbal and visual rhetoric to inculcate a consumerist culture in the masses. Advertisement, as a popular visual rhetoric, conveys information about a product or service in general and subtly it creates, perpetuates transfer and manipulates culture or way of life of people.

The visual rhetoric of some selected advertisements as the pivotal, this study, tries to analyse how meaning is encoded and decoded to create a visual impact in the audience to bring about a desired response towards the product or service in the light of visual semiotics. It also focuses on the positive and negative effects on culture which is subtly communicated through the visual rhetoric.

Keywords— Visual semiotics, demonstration effect, culture, visual representation, symbolism, misinformation and misinterpretation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Mass Media is now emerging as the biggest and the largest tool of communication. It uses various media technologies to reach out to the large population of the world. In this world of fast growing technology, media is now inevitable even for common people and is now a big budget industry. Now a day, technology and media has flourished a lot and much of the financial support for these developments is only through industry and business. To make profit in business and industry they need large scale advertisements to introduce their products or services in the market. In this scenario, advertisements spread all over the world massively and have a wide scope. Advertisements are “paid, non-personal form of communication about organization/ products/ services that is transmitted through mass media” (Nair 120). Advertising has the ability to push the demand of a product or service through its ability to control and manipulate consumer behaviour, especially their spending habits. It manages to do this by gaining the trust of the people. “Consumer ads play on emotions, change real human situations into stereotypes, exploit anxieties and employ techniques of direct and indirect persuasion . . . thus they are extremely low on information but high on wit, rhetoric and style” (Kumar 280). So, in the greatest challenge of making an effective advertisement,

copywriters or advertisers make use of effective language and images which is sometimes loaded with emotions, trust, credibility, wickedness, business, and so on. The flexibility in the encoding and decoding of meaning of the language is exploited to the fullest for developing the consumerist culture among people. Loaded words and images are rich in meaning which can sell anything and everything and can create a culture of consumption among people.

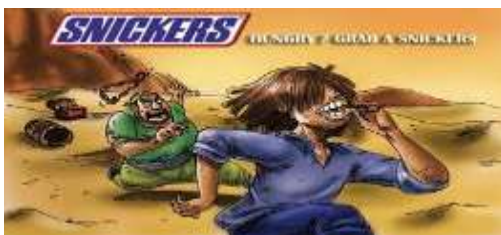
Twenty first century is a visual era in which we are surrounded with images with loaded meanings and words. Now a day, few people are interested in spending time in writing and reading. Most of the younger generation is immersed in the ‘audio visual virtual world’ and are easily carried away by the visuals they see around them rather than the words they read. So, copywriters with dexterity amalgamate words and images to bring about the desired impact on the audience. This skilful usage of images for communication comes under visual semiotics. Visual semiotics is a branch of study that deals with signs and patterns, their interpretation, symbolism etc. Semiotics is nothing but the science of signs. Father of semiotics, Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1985) as defines it as ‘a science that studies the life of signs within a society’. Every sign has a meaning which is socially and culturally constructed or represented. Images always concretise an abstract concept in a set frame. Here, it is easy to distort meanings according to the need of the source at the representation level and images can thus be a symbolic vehicle to carry the meaning to the target audience. Thought processes are blocked at the perspective level audience are forced to accept whatever it is presented before them. In copywriting, the copywriter attributes a meaning to words and images and as symbols they are broadcasted through different media and finally arrives at the audience and message is decoded. So while using images for advertisement, appropriateness is important. For example, image of rose as a sign can signify superficially the beauty of a flower but it can also connote love, freshness, tenderness, passion etc. So, images are dynamic in the case of meanings as it can have numerous connotations and denotations associated with it. It is up to the creativity of the advertising team that how they will hinge image and words together with meaning so that audience can easily understand and get hooked to the product or service.

In the book, *Visual Persuasion: The Role of Images in Advertising*, Paul Messaris (1997), points out that every visual image have some functions. “They can elicit emotions by simulating the appearance of a real person or object; they can serve as photographic proof that something really did happen;

and they can establish an implicit link between the thing that is being sold and some other image(s).” (p. vii). Thus, we can say that meanings are constructed in accordance with the needs and demands of the audience so that they can be lured easily. The most important advantage of image over words or language is that an image is less arbitrary than language. So, to get the desired effect judicious use of image and words is needed for an advertisement. In this technologically advanced industrial world, advertising forms the backbone of the industry that makes products and services accessible to the consumers by making them aware of the choices in the market and ultimately decides the fate of that product. But the very soul and root of advertising and consumerism lies in the unsatisfied nature of man. Man’s never ending desires and lack of contentment is the real trump card of the advertisers and profit thirsty companies. Advertisement plays a major role in promoting consumerist culture among people too.

II. DISCUSSION

Advertisements grew powerful as trade and commerce became powerful and vibrant. Thus as the production increased, necessity of selling product also increased so as to make profit out of it. And due to industrial development more and more companies emerged that produced same products. Thus companies have to create demand among people by exaggerating the good qualities of their products and services. Always advertisements replace the necessity of product by the force of demand and supply. It is this force of demand and supply that drives the market economies independent of whether there is a need for goods or services. Thus, this advertisement reaches the consumer before the product. So for a seller or an advertiser, advertising is very important and plays a major role in the selling of a particular product or service through various forms and means. Some advertisements are so influential that they will create a safe image or status in the minds of the audience than the product that it advertises. As a result, a customer is forced to buy that particular product. They use luring and witty words, mesmerising images as well as phrases to compel the consumer. Most often they simply use incomplete sentences which are capable of exploiting the emotional weaknesses of the audience. They sometimes create insecurities in the mind of the audience or blind the consumer by only providing exaggerations or try to show its inevitability and so on, to attain their ultimate goal, the profit. And for all these they make use of the visual rhetoric and witty language as a tool for communication.



“Snickers” is a chocolate manufactured by the Mars Company, which is popular among people of all ages,

especially children. The advertisement caption, “Hungry? Grab a Snickers” tries to convey a simple idea that, if you are feeling hungry then have “Snickers” (Web). To convey this idea, they used a word ‘grab’ instead of words like ‘take’, ‘have’, or ‘eat’. Because the word ‘grab’ convey many emotions and ideas other than the superficial meaning of the caption. ‘Grab’ is a word that implies aggression and tries to convey that hunger is such a helpless situation that make us feel that we are not the one who ought to be; instead, we feel very angry as the proverb says ‘a hungry man is an angry man’. In such a situation, we not simply ‘eat’ but ‘grab’ from others with greed and selfishness. The emotion behind the word ‘grab’ is intensified and obvious from the cartoon image they used to advertise “Snickers”. The background of the image shows us a desert and the pirate abandons the precious ornaments and things he looted just for snickers. Here this grabbing process sounds more as a repulsive action to the ultimate crisis hunger.

But the irony lies in the fact that, whether a small piece of “Snickers” can really satisfy one’s intense hunger as well as change his aggressive temper to normal. Then why they use the word ‘grab’? It is simply to grab the attention of their audience. The word ‘snicker’ means a half-suppressed laugh in a cynical manner. How can one snicker when in intense hunger? Will a real pirate abandon his loot for a chocolate? This is the technique of visual rhetoric, everything seems so real and clear and this advertisement will grab a glance of the audience as it teases the curiosity of audience.



In this fast moving world, everyone wants to prove that they are best than others. This competitive spirit and emotion is kindled in customer’s mind with the use of comparatives “taller”, “stronger” and “sharper” where in the caption no conjunctions are used in between (Web). Here we can have the instance of parataxis. “Parataxis are short, simple clauses, often without the use of conjunctions and often sharing the same subject” (Nair 124). Here parataxis is of adjective groups like ‘taller’, ‘stronger’ and ‘sharper’.

They claim the product to be clinically proven because; the ingredients used by them in that health drink can make one taller, stronger and sharper. But the reality is that, any child who takes a healthy diet can naturally become taller, stronger and sharper.

Here they manipulated people’s common urge for fast and better results. By simply using three comparatives, they are passing on their competitive strategy to create a demand of the product among consumers. They target mothers and children

emotionally who strive to be the best among others. This competitive mentality is essential for a world that demands the survival of the fittest. So people wish a faster result and opt to be ‘taller’ instead of merely ‘tall’, ‘stronger’ instead of ‘strong’ and ‘sharper’ instead of ‘sharp’. Who will have the guts to say a “no” against these temptations that promise to make one the best?

But if this competition goes beyond a limit, people will forget to see their friends, siblings, and relatives and sometimes may result in the destruction of human values. This competition may evoke insecurities due to mental ego, enmity due to jealousy and aggression that damage the balanced scenario of the society. But these possibilities are concealed by the magical power of language but revealed in visual rhetoric through picturisation, purposefully knowing the inner urge of every man. This small impact comes to audience mind and slowly due to the demonstration effect a new competitive culture will evolve in society. People also follow blindly what advertisements show. We will mix the exact amount of horlicks for our kid as they shown in the advertisement because we want our child to be the best but they want their brand to be the best seller is willingly ignored out of the strong demonstration effect. Similar demonstration effect can be seen in many of the advertisements of cosmetics, toothpaste, detergents, toilet cleaners etc.



“Attitude” is a brand of cosmetic products by Amway International. The caption, “beauty is all about attitude” (Out Look Traveller 23), emphasize the purchase and usage of their cosmetic product which can enhance beauty, a form of attitude. It simply conveys that it is the “Attitude” cosmetic products that make the concept of beauty meaningful. So they stress on two words ‘Attitude’ their product and their claimed ultimate result ‘beauty’. These two words are used logically to attract people as well as to convey their message. Here they target on women who are beauty conscious.

To attain this goal, they use “another feature for advertising – cataphora: first the description of the product and later on the name of the product is mentioned” (Nair 123). Here, beauty is for what “Attitude” stands. So after description we have the name of the product. This gives the audience an impression that this is the only product that can offer you unbeatable beauty. That is why; beauty is all about “Attitude”.

There is a play with the word ‘attitude’ which refers to the product; on the other hand, it means ‘way of thinking or feeling about something’. Beauty has no limit of pleasure; it depends upon the person who contemplates the beauty. So we

can say that beauty arises out of other’s way of thinking or feeling about it. That is what is called ‘attitude’. This truth is exploited in this advertisement to suit their purpose. If beauty is the way of thinking of others then why should one buy and use these cosmetic products is the irony.

They explain their product by saying “an ode to free spirit within, a will to break out of the ordinary, an expression of being yourself.” as if, the product is the source that supplies confidence, courage and freedom to the consumer. They are exaggerating it and making it magical almost like a potion. To enhance this effect, they made use of metaphor where they compare beauty with the product “Attitude” and also the attitude of the person. This sharp attitude to be free and expressive is evident in the visuals they use to support their language. It is a perfect blending of tradition and modernism. At the same time they gave importance to the beauty of tradition and emphasized the importance to be beautiful.



“Dimag ki Batti Jala De” is not a literary expression but it is a simple, common, colloquial expression used commonly among the Hindi operating people of India (Web). This is mainly employed with an objective of establishing an intimacy with the reader. It simply means ‘enlighten your brain’. And “Mentos” is only a candy and it has nothing to do with brain or this Indian expression.

Advertisers of “Mentos” depict through the cartoon of a primitive man eating “Mentos” on a donkey driven cart that “Mentos” made the evolution possible from a primitive, savage man to a civilized, intelligent man who is very much adaptable to technology. Here they use hyperbole or exaggeration. It is also called puffery. It is said that “exaggeration for effect is accepted as a normal practice in advertising” (Nair 120). Exaggeration is so silly and unrealistic but it did attract a vast audience.

“Mentos”, a small and simple flavoured candy is exaggerated or elevated to a status of driving force behind evolution by the use of common Indian colloquial expression. And the customer for sometime feels like undergoing a “willing suspension of disbelief” (Coleridge 92) and believes “Mentos” to be the reason for evolution, as if brain is like a bulb and when we have a “Mentos”, its taste will create electric impulses which are powerful enough to light a bulb. This is the impact of the visualization rather than mere words.

Advertisements are simply to create an urge in audience to buy and use the product. Their sole objective is to establish market and to make money. The rarely used Indian expression “Dimag ki Batti Jala De” has become very popular among the youth and increased its usage along with the demand of the product, “Mentos”. This colloquial expression even

outreached Non-Hindi speakers of India and almost became a culture. This same tendency we can see in the advertisement of Cadbury Dairy milk products “kuch meeta ho jayee” and the advertisement of Kalyan Jewellers “Vishvasam athalle ellam”. Audience will unknowingly mumble in their mind almost like a reflex action the slogan or popular tagline of these products or services just because of the visual impact it created.

They used common Hindi expression in the alphabet of English thereby increasing the currency of new approach Hinglish which is the combination of Hindi and English. Audiences are attracted towards this new approach without considering it deep and advertisers trickily makes out profit from this twisting of two languages. Because they knows how Indian people and very much attached to values, customs, tradition and their mother tongue. All these misinterpretations and misrepresentations are taken for granted and we unknowingly get lured away and end up consuming the product.

III. CONCLUSION

“Advertisement is an art” (Chatterjee 103). And through their artistic capabilities, advertisers try to personify the product to bring in a relationship with the consumer. The main objective of an advertisement is to lure the customers, selling products, and make profit. To commercialize a product, many advertising companies employ experts who can lure audience with words, images and phrases that are exaggerated. Because “a product is the sum total of social, economic and psychological values that are important to the customer” (Nair 120). The very soul of advertising lies in the way the language is cast according to the image and purpose it tries to convey. Language can create desired emotions and visual can bring about the desired impact. It can be made memorable and interesting. It can be twisted and turned in order to suit our purpose. Success of advertisement lies in the way advertisers disclose the information about the product or service. Information should be provided partially and should be

exaggerated to attain the desired impact from the audience. Advertisers simply blind the audience by partial exaggerated truths and mesmerizing words and luring visuals. As people’s desires are never ending advertisement and its scope will also increase drastically and consumerism will conquer the minds of people. As language is growing, its scope will also increase due to its flexible nature. Advertisers will keep on sensing the emotional weakness, present trends, traditions, and will sell all these to create appropriate advertisements to lure the customers, thus saves their market as well as profit. Every market demands an increase in their profit year after year. They use varied marketing strategies to survive themselves and establish in trade. Every product and service are depicted in advertisements with an immense power to persuade every viewer to buy and use them at least for once in their life time and this is availed through the magical power of the visual impact. That is why, we are becoming more consumerist than a productive country quite contrary to our past culture and tradition.

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