
AN EDUCATIONAL INSIGHT OF MEDIA DISCOURSE IN PAKISTANI PRINT ADVERTISEMENTS: A SEMIOTICS STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Media studies has been a significant and trending field in today's world. It is responsible for prevalent ideologies through different means like news, dramas, movies and advertisements. Advertisements occupy large spheres in any society and to understand them is not an easy task. Semiotics is an area of study of signs which provides ground for understanding the advertisements. In the world of advertisements, ideas are mostly represented through signs, signifiers, signified and their association to the cultural context. The study involves the practical implementation of Barthesian approach using qualitative paradigm and explores the two-fold interpretation of meanings laid in the Pakistani print advertisements. These advertisements are taken from Pakistani magazines and are deeply analyzed using semiotic analysis for obtaining the results. The results reveal that the advertisements hold denotative as well as connotative meanings which are opened to interpretation for a wide audience. It is also disclosed from the study that all the basic elements camouflaged in various layers of the advertisement such as colors, characters and taglines play noteworthy role in generating the meanings.

KEYWORDS

Semiotics, signifier, signified, connotation, denotation, media education

INTRODUCTION

Language serves as a fabric to create an occurrence of communication in different contexts. Media advertisement is no exception. Maheshwari, Seth, & Gupta (2014)

defined advertisement as public announcement which is used to spread information among audiences in numerous ways like print ad, social websites and T.V commercials etc.

Now-a-days, we all find ourselves surrounded by a number of signs and signifiers and these form a globally connected village which binds us in a complex process of signification. People see signs and interpret the meaning accordingly. Media advertisement influences people's mind set and draws their attention towards objects and concepts by using signs as it is the best techniques to present ideas. The term "Media" is a collective term which integrates different ways of communication from print media to social media (Mc Dougall, 2012). Signs have contributed a major part in achieving the purpose of advertisement. The field of semiotics plays a substantial role because it has its roots in the field of advertisement. Semiotics provides aid in observing, finding and interpreting the structures of media messages. Print media conveys the message to a broader audience in multiple ways which include banners, pamphlets, flyers, brochures and magazines. There are hundreds of possible ways to convey a message but the right use of signs, signifiers, color scheme, graphics and many other factors decide its impact.

Mc Dougall states that "Semiotics is the science of signs and symbols from linguistics and structuralism. The analysis of 'units of meaning' (signs) in terms of their connotations within cultural myth systems." (2012: 86). The concept of "*myth*" was proposed by Roland Barthes. He defined the term myth as against to reality. The myths in texts are employed for generating the cultural relevance. Basically, myths are used to reflect prevailing social realities in a more comprehensive manner (Tolson, 1996). According to Wells, Moriarty & Burnett (2005) Semiotic analysis is the most important technique which is used to uncover signs and symbols in media studies for finding out the deeper meanings in advertisement.

Semiotics has its roots from the movement of structuralism and influenced from the work of Ferdinand de Saussure who was the main proponent of the structuralism. He put forward the dichotomies of langue and parole, syntagmatic vs. paradigmatic and synchronic vs. diachronic and sign, signifier and signified (Tolson, 1996). Roland Barthes, one of the leading figures of twentieth century and a French critic extended the theory of signs in analyzing media advertisement after Saussure. Barthes' remarkable contribution in the area of advertisement is his influential work, *Mythologies*. His theory assists in comprehending day-to-day cultural affairs as well as mass media too. Barthes' literary work is always concerned with the language representation in any society (Stepanyan). His concept of sign and signifier (structure) in the cultural context is helpful in analyzing advertisements. He believed different signs as a system of one's cultural value having uniqueness in their meaning.

Moreover, Roland Barthes theory of semiotics consists of three components including sign, signifier and signified. Sign is a blend of signifier and signified. For him, everything in a culture is sign. Signifier is the material or physical property of sign on which everyone accepts as it is depicted. Lastly, signified is a broad term that includes theoretical concept based on double-folded interpretation including denotation and connotation.

Durrant and Lambrou (2010) claimed that for Barthes, signified is a broad term that categorizes semantic and pragmatic meanings of the signs too. Barthes exclaimed that “*signified*” possess multiple features. It was explained that images can perform various functions. They are used to represent something through portrayal, create interconnections to generate feelings in the audience and establish communication by integrating the reactions. Moreover, two levels of interpretations were practically recognized by Barthes as denotative level refers for portraying what can be seen by images. Secondly, connotative level which is an indication of traditional or anthropological linked meanings that surround as what is depicted. For most of the photographic images, denotation is basically simplified and easier to understand. The image represents specific elements that need to be identified because of the visual similarity. On the other side, connotation will differ from individual to individual as a matter of perception or belief towards something. (Durrant and Lambrou, 2010). Dougall (2012) believed that to analyze the advertisement critically an individual needs to deconstruct the assemble message. This paper aims to focus on the media advertisement by looking them in relation to semiotics.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Media studies have always been an interesting subject among researchers. A lot of researches in the field of media has been conducted since ages. The subject of media and linguistics is well integrated through the work of prominent semioticians like Barthes. As researchers always have different kinds of focus towards the media advertisement. Sometimes, moving images became the center of attention for linguists during the course of research while some linguists shifted the focus of their researches on still images. Different aspects in media advertisement like syntax, structure and slogan were much analyzed in past by using different theories. In current era, media and society is well integrated and people get influenced through persuasive advertisement techniques. Džanić (2013) asserts advertisement as public announcement which always focus on the ideologies of targeted consumers and prevail the campaign of ads accordingly. This is why they switch from denotative to connotative meaning to allure the audience as each single element from color theme to actual product plays vital role in interpretation of advertisements during the course of research.

Najafian & Dabaghi (2011) conducted study on hidden language of advertising by using semiotic approach. They investigated two Omega advertisements and revealed that photographic style has significant impact on audience. The results also reveal that semiotic reference has its ground roots in media advertisements. Besides; it was also found that media discourse actively play role in changing the ideology of audience and each element like color, signs or visual image take their role in making any ad successful.

Moreover, Ali (2016) studied semiotic insight into beauty advertisements where he explained semiotics as a science of signs. To investigate the denotative, connotative, hidden meaning and color theme behind media advertisement, he used Roland Barthes' approach. The study reveals that ads are shaped according to the cultural and traditional behavior of the targeted audience in order to attract them emotionally. Besides these, Zhang (2019) also analyzes advertisement on the basis of semiotics proposed by prominent scholars like Saussure, Pierce & Barthes. He focused on the successfulness of print advertisement due to the connotative aspects. The study centered on specific semiotic structures that are used to enhance the quality of print advertisement. It was suggested that semiotics help in finding out the improved connections between the ads and audience. Likewise, Majidi & Motiei (2017) supervised a comparative study on semiotics in Radio and T.V advertisement and emphasized that how language serves different functions from conveying information to convincing. Barthes' semiotics was used for the analysis of relative study to measure the rate of connotation and global culture in both the mediums and it was found that cultural associations are major part of T.V than radio advertisement.

To emphasize the above discussed idea, a study by Džanić (2013) portrays a very clear picture that how a discourse and discrete signs used in media advertisement creates broader meaning to the audience. In this connection, the function of discourse for advertisement varies as to create hidden meanings. As it is also claimed by Barthes that sometimes visual images used in advertisements generate mythical meaning as per ideologies of the consumers. The language and signs employed in advertisement try to influence the audience culturally. It is tried to capture the audience in a more psychological manner by targeting the audience in a more connotative manner. Therefore, the lexical units used in ad are well-developed to construct the semantics and pragmatics understanding as they have the broader objective.

The present study makes a constructive contribution towards filling the gap of previous studies by analyzing advertisements of different categories using semiotic analysis such as sign, signifier and signified that further explores the connotative and denotative meaning. On the contrary, previous studies focused more on gender portrayal and deep insights into beauty products from different approaches. The present study has focused print advertisement by utilizing Barthesian approach. The paper aims to observe

various semiotic elements included in print advertisement and to explore the connotative and denotative meaning behind them.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To find out the semiotic elements in the print advertisement to captivate the audience.
2. To observe the cultural meanings associated to the print advertisement.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How the semiotic elements in the print advertisement captivate the audience?
2. In what ways cultural meanings are associated to the print advertisements?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study is qualitative in nature in which semiotic analysis is conducted to explore the process of signification through observing various signs. Qualitative method assists in in-depth studies of the content as it encompasses “*Soft data*” including symbols, photos, words and sentences Neuman (2014). The sample constitutes of six Pakistani print advertisements. The selected advertisements are from 2015 to 2019. The sample belongs to multiple categories in order to portray clearer picture. The advertisements are carried from Pakistani magazines named as “akhbary-jahan”, “zaiqa” and social websites are also used for gathering data. Purposive sampling has been used to collect data. Pakistani context has been used as research locale.

DATA ANALYSIS

The present study utilizes the theory of semiotic as theoretical framework to conduct the study. As it is intended to examine the process of signification by observing the signs, signifier and signified in the ads, this research has been assessed through psychological lens. This lens provides an aid to conduct a study in a more comprehensible manner. The analysis encompasses the semiotic elements used in the advertisement. It also covers the color themes and tag lines that contribute in generating the meanings. The analysis has been done by deconstructing the elements used in advertisements to find out the hidden meanings.

RESULTS

This section deals with the analysis of selected advertisement by using Barthesian approach. This section discloses the findings of the study. The advertisement in appendix one is of the confectionary item. LU Company is presenting its Bakery Nankhatai as a cultural heritage. The *signs* used in the commercial are the pack and slogan line. Furthermore, a photographic caption of biscuit pack is *signifier* in the ad as it is actual material product. In terms of *signified*; the ad can be analyzed in two

possible ways; denotative and connotative.

The literal interpretation i.e. *denotation* can be analyzed by the slogan line “*riwayat se jura khasta maza*”. The advertisement smartly covers two visions in just one sentence. In the first part, it symbolizes the Nankhatai as a traditional gift because Pakistanis prefer products associated with their culture. In the second part of the sentence, they define the crunchy texture of the Nankhatai and mesmerize the audience. The second order signification declares that each element in the advertisement from color scheme to the dress theme of characters portrays the enriched culture and glorious historical traditions to create *connotative associations*. The advertisement tends to sketch the eastern delicacy and royal heritage of the bright Mughal Era by using creative elements such as; shops, horse drawn carriages and dome-shaped gates which give reminiscence of the Mughal era. The advertisement is framed as a window into the glorious past of Mughal era when there were rich tastes and royal aromas prevailed.

The advertisement in appendix two is related to one of the most trending spices brand named as National. In the current ad, the *sign* and *signifier* are simple whereas the signified contains a new message that is the need of present society. As in previous advertisements, here also the signs include the people, text line and the product itself with unique packaging. Moreover, the photographic captions of the packaging can be termed as signifier. Signified can be analyzed on two levels i.e. surface and deeper (myth) level.

Denotatively, the interpretation is plain as we see husband and wife in the kitchen and promoting the product. Whereas, linguistic sign also contains the simple message that new taste develops new thoughts. Connotative analysis allows us to understand another aspect of signified. Here, the ideology of glocalised culture is prevailed as a modern woman is selected to attract broader audience. They innovate the product using tagline which says; “*Nayi Soch kay Naye Zaiqe*”. The idea is supported by showing a man in the kitchen because in Pakistani context, the man must be served everything on the table.

The advertisement in appendix three is of non-food item. It is of Pakistani beauty soap and face wash in which shape of the soap is used as a *sign*. The *signifier* is the photographic caption of the sign. The signified can be understood into denotative and connotative form. In terms of *denotation*, the literal elucidation is very clear. The caption and the signs suggest that these products beautify your skin. On the other hand, *connotative* interpretation of signs allows us looking from the cultural context represented in the advertisement like name or colors. The name of the product is “Chandni” which means “Moonlight” which suggests that their product is best suited

for clear, glowing and whitening skin. Connotative execution becomes more clear by the way in which moon is employed in advertisement as a sign of beauty to make cultural association for Pakistani people. In Pakistani background, the beauty of moon is always used for resemblance with the beauty of women as it is the most prevailing ideology. It is an observed fact that bright light from moon lightens up the sky in the deep shadows of dark night. Thus naming their product "*Chandni*" resembles it with the phenomenal concept of moonlight. Thus the cultural connotation suggests that moon characterizes beauty therefore; the use of soap and face-wash can make your skin as bright as moon in the dark shadows of night.

Lastly, the color scheme also creates great effect of connotation on the audience; they have made an excellent use of colors in the background. The dark blue color in the background naturally symbolizes sky and its stability whereas white color is a symbol of beauty and purity. The under consideration advertisement in appendix four is of non-food item i.e. detergent powder. The signs used in the advertisement are the packets of detergent and slogan (linguistic sign) whereas the actual product is signifier. Now the surface and deep structures are observed for the signified.

The denotative meaning is similar to the all audience in any context which seems that this detergent is the best choice for cleaning clothes. On the connotative level, a strong non-verbal message is depicted by the usage of selective characters (signs). The utilization of a motherly figure and the children used in the advertisement are also the part of represented culture. In Pakistani culture, clean and bright clothes are the chief concern of house wives. Domestic women are always keen in finding the best available detergent. The children are wearing their school uniforms and it can be clearly seen that uniforms are bright and white. Moreover, shining white stars are shown over the dark blue background to symbolize it with bright clothes washed by the detergent powder. They enforce the audience by tagline, "*Super mom ki super choice*". This tagline is creating an ideology that their detergent is the choice of well-aware women. The concept behind super mom can be unrevealed by interpreting in a deeper manner which is to seek the attention of the kids towards their product.

The under discussion advertisement is from appendix five; Jubilee life company. They are promoting their new service, "*Jubilee's Retirement Plan*" in this advertisement. Different signs in forms of characters and tag line (linguistic sign) are used to generate strong persuasive effect for the audience. The photographic caption of the signs serves as signifier. Likewise, signified can be understood on two levels including denotative and connotative. In terms of denotation, the advertisement is spreading a strong message to a general audience that their retirement plan ensures a secure yet colorful future. Some cultural aspects are also created to influence the audience as looking it in terms of connotation. The advertisement covers the most common cultural aspect of

Pakistani society and creates a beautiful association with the service being advertised. In Pakistani society, Male is considered as the patriarch therefore, the financial stability, economical matters, supporting family and progress are his concerns. The advertisement convinces the audience by conventional ideology towards the Jubilee Life Insurance Company which ensures a secure and bright future of its customers. The two characters in the advertisement include a husband and a wife. Their expressions convey a non-verbal message of contentment. The advertisement utilizes various signs to create an emotional approach for captivating the audience as the tagline says, "*She is your comfort. Make her comfortable.*" The ad urges the male audience to care for her wife as she cares for the entire family.

As signs are combination of signifiers and signified, hence they are also presented in advertisement used in appendix six is of PSO (Pakistan State Oil). Signifiers are the actual captions of material products presented in the advertisement including vehicle and road track. Moreover, signified consists of two parts as per understanding, connotative and denotative meaning. Initially, at first occurrence it is vivid that fuel station is beneficial for each of the presented vehicle. Hence, this literal interpretation refers to denotation.

If the signs are articulated more deeply so it seems how signs are added up to make cultural association. Agricultural vehicles, traditional train and grassy field are presented as cultural element. The logo of the company contains a green colored crescent which shows the auspiciousness of land. This creates an association with Pakistani flag and culture. Therefore, the advertisement possesses a strong connotative association for its audience.

DISCUSSION

The study declares that the Barthesian approach serves as a rudimentary theory of semiotics in comprehending the media advertisements. Previously, Saussure considered semiotics as a linguistics theory. Roland Barthes expanded the theory of semiotics to comprehend various aspects of life. It is a key route to have a deep insight into the world of advertisement. The results disclosed that how advertisers artfully use the signs to create deep associations through signifier and signified. The signification of these signs varies from person to person according to their own understanding as well as due to distinct socio-cultural context. It is clearly seen from above discussed advertisement that how cultural elements like dome shaped gates, crescent moon, and portrayal of woman as motherly figure are incorporated in advertisement to create emotional attachments as well as to spread certain ideologies. Sometimes, audience is unaware of these signs but the way these signs depicts connotation and denotation is remarkable. Cultural associations are developed to spread certain ideologies which Barthes called "myth" Ali & Zafar (2015) indicated too that advertisements are the

outcomes of cultural values hence the elements of reciprocity are presented between these two i.e. advertisements and culture. For this purpose, everything displayed in the advertisement matches to the signified including characters, color scheme, setting and locale. The results of the study conducted by Socioint & Uslu (2014) also underpins the current study that Barthesian approach as a qualitative paradigm provides great penetration into media studies. It is evident that Barthesian approach served significantly as a qualitative paradigm in conducting the research.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The research has made several implications for future. As media studies has been one of the most prominent discipline in the field of linguistics in the current era. The current study contributes in clarifying the idea that signs play trenchant role in the field of media studies. It can also be observed easily that Barthesian approach provides great insight in semiotics that aids in the interpretation of print advertisement. The present study unfolds that how Pakistani print advertisement incorporates various signs (combination of signifier and signified) to play with the ideology of the targeted audience by making cultural associations. Furthermore, strong verbal and non-verbal messages can also be depicted through different signs. The color scheme, characters and setting also contribute to make advertisements more effective and related to individual's culture. The above mentioned elements also contributed in the process of signification and helps in deriving the connotative and denotative meanings.

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