



Deconstructing symbolic ideology in contemporary communication strategy in advertising: The case of *Nirma* and *Wheel*

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Abstract The paper reviews the conceptual applications of the use of semioethics—responsible use of symbols—in advertising messages. We adopt an interdisciplinary approach to derive multiple meanings invested in seemingly simple persuasive strategies adopted in advertisements, which in turn can act as complex potent forces shaping the psychological contours of a gendered society. We attempt a discourse analysis of two specific television advertisements, *Wheel* and *Nirma*, as prototypes of contemporary advertising communication. We deconstruct the paradox embedded in their symbolic representations that repudiate the explicit social agenda valorised by these commercials to promote their product ideologies. © 2014 Indian Institute of Management Bangalore. All rights reserved.

Introduction

This research aims at deconstructing the use of symbols in two particular advertisements, one from *Nirma*, broadcast on Indian television channels (available on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3kFRr06pa8o>), and the other from *Wheel*, also broadcast on similar channels (available on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?>

[v=4eLTBJnlnkc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4eLTBJnlnkc)), both aiming to enhance their consumer volume in the same demographic segment, Indian middle class¹ housewives (see box for description of the advertisements).

The objective of the research, apart from presenting the marketing discourse situated in these two popular television commercials in their roles as cultural referent systems, is also to demystify the layers of meanings that underlie the exterior of the advertised messages which not just broadcast their products but also sell ideologies that are capable of making an impact on the shaping of contemporary society.

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¹ The phrase “middle class”, as popularised by theoreticians in several Marxist discourses, has been used in the context of the paper to demarcate Indian consumers with identifiable cultural parameters such as consumption patterns (say, a group of consumers, who would exercise prudence when selecting products/services that give them suitable return on investment).

The *Nirma* advertisement starts with four women driving a car and stopping at a point where they witness an ambulance stuck in a puddle with people (including men in corporate suits) looking on curiously. The men remain mute spectators without participating in the crisis situation as saviour-actors. It is at this stage that the women alight and applying their might, push the vehicle out of the puddle, with an expression of triumph defining their countenance, shaming the men standing around. The advertisement ends with the conventional *Nirma* refrain. On the other hand, the *Wheel* advertisement begins with a homemaker (well-known television actress, Prachi Desai) surprised to see that her old washing powder has been discarded by her husband (the reigning superstar of Hindi cinema, Salman Khan), who introduces a new washing powder (*Wheel*). The husband persuades his wife to accept the change of the product by delineating the qualities of *Wheel* as a washing powder with the power of lemon and the enticing fragrance of flowers. The advertisement ends with husband and wife playing around in the courtyard of their home, amidst clothes hanging out to dry, in a mood of romance, fun and frolic, celebrating marital felicity.

According to Douglas B. Holt, in his work *How Brands become Icons: The Principles of Cultural Branding*: "...brands compete in myth markets, not product markets... [and] compete with other cultural products to perform myths that resolve cultural contradictions" (Holt, 2004, p. 39; Schroeder, Buchanan-Oliver, & Cruz et al., 2010, p. 636). The researchers attempt to show the complex processes of resolving cultural contradictions through *mythicisation*, where myths themselves might be continuations of those very cultural contradictions that they are expected to demolish in their utopian depiction of cultures.

Over the past few years, there has been substantial research on different strategies adopted for marketing communications and their impact on consumer perception. But little research is available on the application of symbol deconstruction in the imagery used in advertisements. According to Schroeder and Borgerson, "...outside of university courses in communication or cultural studies, there is relatively little education about marketing communication's social, cultural, and pedagogical roles, nor about the production, history, and theory of visual representation" (Schroeder & Borgerson, 2005, p. 581). Our research probes into the implications of the use of symbols as vehicles of social discourse. The intention is to examine the promotional vehicles of two popular products, *Nirma* and *Wheel*, found on the work shelf of Indian middle class women and demonstrate how the symbolic portrayal of a commercial can problematise its probable intended philosophy. Such studies can trigger new ways of critical thinking when planning communication strategies so that the aesthetic act of picking suitable symbols and imagery can be seen as an exercise in what Susan Petrilli calls semioethics or the responsible use of symbols (Petrilli, 2010).

Research methodology

The research is an exploratory, speculative and interdisciplinary conceptual review of two specific television advertisements. The review focuses on four representational dimensions, each deconstructing revolutionary social concerns and ideologies, to provide a broader context for recognising and understanding polemical issues in marketing communication representations.² The four dimensions are as follows:

- two competing consumer commodities, *Nirma* and *Wheel* washing powders;
- the consumer symbols (visual and auditory) used in the washing powder commercials;
- the persuasive techniques used to sell the product; and
- the representations of and representations available to the contemporary middle class woman as a consumer of washing powder.

The researchers' review of marketing communication strategies that attempt to persuade the consumer on the grounds of emancipation from the stereotype is informed by Schroeder et al.'s (2010) qualitative analysis of visual imageries used in advertisements (2010) and Petrilli's (2010) understanding of semioethics and responsibility. We attempt to show that the notion of emancipation is an equal participant in the tradition of the stereotype and it unwittingly ends up establishing a totalitarian ideology in a market that already succumbs to a "means end rationality" (Bürger, 1984, p. 9). In other words, the "end" (whether it be the intended profit to be accumulated by the sales of the product/service or the intended behavioural change that the product/service is expected to establish, and thereby enhance its profit margin) is predetermined; and the campaigns and methods of persuasion are initiated and played out to achieve the expected end. Emphasising the primacy of representation, Schroeder and Borgerson (2005) draw attention to the fact that "representation enters into the very constitution of things and categories" since the way we think of ideas and objects is often shaped by their representations. Further, the act of representation involves the production of meaning through language systems, and this includes visual representation. They conclude that "using representation as an analytic tool, researchers have emphasized how cultural practices, such as laws, rituals, norms, art, and advertising, contribute to meaning production within marketing" (2005, p. 584–585).

² The four representational dimensions are significant thematic concerns that we derive from the analysis of the chosen advertisements. The first dimension is a natural parameter of analysis, since the research is about two competing brands for the same product category; the second dimension is about the strategic use of symbols in communicating the message of the commercials (symbols play a significant role in visual communication); the third dimension is about the techniques of persuasion used by the concerned commercials (essentially all promotions are acts of persuasions); and the fourth dimension is relevant for analysis since both the commercials involve female characters as crucial representational models instrumental in unravelling the values of the concerned products to a target audience that comprises Indian middle class women.

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