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.

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=4eLTBJInnkC), 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.

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).
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. 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.

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).
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