



Media and Social Role Perceptions in the Indian Context

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The present paper purposes to look into the impact of media representations on the consumers' mindset. It aims at analysing the language of advertisements - consumerist or propagandist - as a phenomenon influencing the socio psychological, economic and, cultural configuration of Indian society. It begins with the premise that besides being tactically written, ads have to be socially responsible too. Taking into view the global cable-network culture that has cast a spell on the whole nation, advertisements now are exerting a greater influence than ever before.

Advertising people mean business – their sole aim being to sell their products, services or ideas – leaving no strategy under the sun untouched in the achievement of the goal. But at the same time, they can't and should not be allowed to shut their eyes to the social, cultural and moral responsibility towards the society in which they function. Advertising does not happen in vacuum. It involves people on both the sides: the ones who produce meaning through advertisements, others who receive it. Advertising people, as citizens of a society, have a duty to build social values (rather than jeopardize them). Under the pretext of consumerism, they can't afford to turn their back to the social responsibility.

Advertising markets change by rendering it personally desirable for the consumer to act to let the change seep in. Feelings and emotions take the centre stage in triggering the interest and involvement of the consumer towards this endeavour. In fact, advertising is primarily meant to create and strengthen feelings and emotional ties between brands and consumers. It is these emotions that the advertisers/copywriters yearn to touch and exploit by way of a persuasive language and paralanguage. . To analyse ads in semiotic terms, "We need to identify the visual and linguistic sign in the ad to see how the signs are organized by paradigmatic and syntagmatic selection and note how the signs relate to each other through various coding systems.... which social myths the ad draws, or whether these myths are reinforced or challenged."¹ Consumers use contexts, codes, myths and metaphors to decode these signs and establish personal cultural ties with the advertised brand. By and large, consumers respond according to the popular culture in which they function. The persuasive appeal of a message is lost if it tries to address the consumer out of his cultural and social milieu. "The rational and psychological levels in communication can be probed using conventional research techniques but the cultural level is more difficult to access. That is because the culture is 'encoded' in everyday living and the average consumer can't decode his own culture"². Advertisements appeal to the consumer by reflecting shared values and thus, fabricating a new construction of social beliefs and perceptions. As Norman Douglas wrote, "You can tell the ideals of a nation by its advertisements"³.

Advertising meaning should be decoded in the broader perspective - not only as an economic and social force but as a form of communication. A humorous TV



commercial, a catchy slogan, a full-page print advertisement, a polybag with the name of the firm printed on it - all these are different forms of advertising which construct new meaning paradigms.

Advertisers exploit every imaginable appeal to influence the consumers. Some advertisements speak for our personal and psychological needs like prestige and fear. Some epitomize glamour and good life. Some deal in fantasy and reality. To make these appeals work, advertisers associate their product, verbally or visually, with other images, symbols and values that connect with the consumer's psychology. For example, Pepsi's successful 'Yeh dil maange more' (featuring Amitabh Bachchan and Sachin Tendulkar) and Coca cola's 'Life ho to aisi' (featuring a dancing Aishwarya Rai) advertisements show happy, fun-loving, youthful people drinking Pepsi or Coca Cola against the backdrop of melodious music-without saying anything about the taste, nutritional value or price. There is a palpable chemistry between the celebrities involved. Such ads capture an element of fun and frolic - of pure, non-stop entertainment and enjoyment of life and are all time favourites. Lifestyle changes also occur in subtle ways as a result. Earlier, "it was perfectly normal for school girls to have oil in their hair, but with a certain ad which belittles a girl by calling her "Chipku, Chipku," children don't want the oily look"⁴.

Man is a social animal. He is influenced by people around him. Social factors such as peer group, family, social status influence a consumer's behaviour. "A person's reference group consists of all the groups that have a direct (face to face) or indirect influence on the person's attitudes and behaviour."⁵ Groups having a direct influence on a consumer are called membership groups such as family, friends, colleagues, neighbours etc. with whom a person regularly interacts. They influence his lifestyle, his behaviour and his self-concept. They may exert undue pressures on him to conform to a particular life style thereby influencing his product and brand preferences.

Today, we find Indian middle class bitten by the 'possessions' bug. Some of these possessions have powerful symbolic meanings. "The people recognise themselves in their commodities, they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment. The very mechanism which ties the individual to his society has changed."⁶ People feel that happiness may be bought by amassing goods- the more goods they had, the happier would they grow! Such beliefs pave the way for much serious kinds of social transformations. Manners, taste and style become more important than substance.

Advertisement strategies work on the human need for love and acceptance. This psychological need is exploited the most in the ads for deodorants, mouth-wash, toothpaste, aftershave etc. These advertisements play on the fear of personal rejection owing to unpleasant breath/odor etc.

These commercials tell the stories of people who lost their jobs, fiancées, boy friends/girl friends due to bad body odor. Now a days, such themes are constantly shown on TV which, on deeper analysis, lay bare the psychology of a young generation which goes solely by the 'hygiene' mantra, whose sensibility lies in superficiality.

Advertisers also exploit the psychological need for self recognition and self- identity. Advertisements for cars don't only sell cars but something even more costly and precious - freedom. The chance to express ourselves, to be ourselves, to be individualists and different from the rest. The ad for Maruti Gypsi proclaims "There is a Gypsi in everyone." Now a days, we have Honda and Yamaha ring exactly the same psychological bells as Maruti. For the young generation "Motorcycles are some kind of passion,"⁷ says Murad Ali Baig. The Honda bike ad shows the rider roaring off into the sunset, up some lonely mountain cliff-offering him the pleasure to



have bought a very precious commodity—freedom, far from the madding crowd, being his own individual self and doing his own thing. In fact, four stroke bikes today have become a youthful alternative to scooters. ‘When style matters, go for passion’ goes the catchy slogan for Passion Bikes from Honda. Says Atul Sobti, Senior Vice-President, Marketing and sales, Hero Honda, “Passion is directly aimed at the 18-30 segment, but it is broadly targeted at the young at heart, be they students, executives or businessmen. It is basically for image conscious, contemporary people looking for that extra style and colour in their lives.”⁸ The ad for Bajaj Spirit establishes bonds of identification with the students by claiming to be ‘the college bike.’

Advertisers build bonds of association by exploiting the theme of universal brotherhood. The ad for Fuji Film depicts a Japanese family at a little league game and substantiates the universality of human emotions. It says, ‘People are pretty much the same all over when it comes to taking pictures.’ Donald’s and Coca Cola have larger ends in view with their missionary way of advertising, ‘to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony,’ thus establishing bonds of association among people who just go berserk at the sound of popular music. This idea of togetherness lies at the heart of Cola ads. In fact, ‘Universalism is a twentieth century creed, allowing us some relief from the guilt we feel at having lost the ties of family and community, freeing us from the necessity of actually having to involve ourselves in human relationships.’⁹ The ad for Unit Trust of India (UTI) exploits mother–child relationship to motivate the consumer to invest in its mutual fund schemes.

The Siyaram’s advertisement again builds around the theme of ‘homecoming’ and the celebration thereafter. The son returns after many years of studying abroad but has not forgotten any of the rituals of his old home - touches the feet of the parents, even his girlfriend does the same. The whole village joins the saga of fun and frolic. There is a feast and notch dance to celebrate the homecoming. This ad speaks for familial and community ties and associates the individual to his larger surroundings.

Other ads working towards promoting fast food culture may be the ones for Maggi Noodles, Lehar Namkeen, Lays and Lehar Twisteez to name a few out of many. The ad for Lays claims ‘No one can eat just one.’ Lehar namkeen’s ad too understands the snacks loving consumer’s psychology ‘Kya Karoon, Control Nahin hota’ and unfurles a green flag for ‘munching more and more’ snacks without feeling guilty about it all. Such is the taste that one wants to have more and more. “Khaa ke mast ” says the ad for Lehar Twisteez.

Ads for life Insurance corporation offer us a way to gain greater economic security for ourselves and our loved ones. Such ads show the clients as reaping benefits from ‘bonus money’ spending it on family or depositing it in the bank which pays further dividends, and according to old wisdom keeps it ‘safe and secure.’

Ads can also exploit fear appeals in matters related to health. The ad for Springwel Mattresses uses fear appeals in its campaign. Educating the consumers on the ill effects of disturbed sleep, it elaborates on the importance of a ‘good night’s sleep.’ The headlines are rather long but have been aptly supported by visual effect. ‘A bad mattress isn’t usually a problem. Except that sooner or later, you start wearing it on your face’ goes the headline. The visual shows a black and white close-up of a Kathakali dancer’s face, her eyes blood shot red. In fact, red is the only colour shown in the visual against the background of black and white material. The red colour of the eyes here functions as a symbol of agony and trouble. The paralanguage denotes anguish and horror—the ill effects of sleeping on an ordinary mattress that lacks some very exquisite features of Springwel. The body copy speaks of Springwel’s high - tensile steel springs that help the consumer sleep better. The base line promises ‘eight hours of bliss,’ not the ordinary troubled sleep one gets on an ordinary mattress but, ‘blissful sleep.’



Through the analyses of the above advertisements, an attempt has been made to understand how the sure working of advertisements goes towards forming beliefs, stereotypes and social role perceptions.

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