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Brand Mythologisation in the Marketplace: An Analysis of Selected Advertisements

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Abstract: In contemporary society, characterised by an ever-increasing consumerist attitude, the role and relevance of advertising narratives cannot be overlooked. Advertisements have employed various techniques to persuade people to make a purchase. A quick glance at the panorama of Indian advertising reveals many instances in which mythological stories and characters have been used effectively to reach the popular psyche. The advertisements utilise allusions to mythology through characters, stories, themes, and other elements. To make the advertising narrative more impressive. These advertisements draw heavily on the collective unconscious to connect with the target group and redirect the consumer's psyche toward accepting an unfamiliar product. The qualities of a product are presented easily and effectively by associating them with the already internalised attributes of a name or a character with mythical lineage. The incorporation of myths in this manner plays a significant role in increasing brand familiarity, as it provides an opportunity to directly appeal to the collective unconscious. This paper explores how brand mythologisation occurs in selected Indian advertising narratives through semiotic analysis.

Keywords: Advertising, Myths, Branding, Demythologising, Semiotics, Visual narratives.

Introduction

The pattern of alterations in cultural images in the contemporary scenario has been distinctly captured by the multitude of advertisements disseminated across different media, both digital and non-digital. The advertisements always bring forth changes that undeniably reflect the various permutations and combinations in the society's socio-cultural, economic, and political structures. It is impossible for any image to operate without a mask or an ideology that functions as a type of myth. While considering the language of advertising, it can be observed that the naturalised use of a plethora of ordinary-looking, denotative messages effectively conceals the underlying connotative systems associated with the ideological domain.

In an attempt to demythologise the language of advertisements, the present study applies Paul Messaris' principles of visual language to delve deeper into advertising narratives. The initial decoding is followed by an

attempt to explore and reveal the hidden myths in the advertising texts. Paul Messaris, a Professor of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, has proposed a theoretical framework for examining the role of visual images in shaping one's perception of the world. The advertisements derive their capability to elicit emotions from the target group and to fake reality flawlessly through the persuasive use of visual images. Messaris elaborates on the fundamental features of visual communication, including the properties of images, in his book *Visual Persuasion: The Role of Images in Advertising*. According to him,

By virtue of their iconicity, the images in ads can simulate the visual appearance of reality, and they can be used to elicit attitudes and emotions associated with real-world people, objects, and places. ... The indexicality of photography (including film and video) makes it possible for photographic images to serve as evidence in support of the claims of commercial or political advertisers...there is an open-ended quality to visual arguments, and a corresponding fluidity and adaptability to the meaning of persuasive images. (xxii)

Here, iconicity, indexicality, and the lack of an explicit propositional syntax are proposed as the three basic principles of visual communication. While the semantic properties of iconicity and indexicality elicit preprogrammed emotional responses through a perfect representation of the real world, the syntactic indeterminacy opens the possibility for implied meanings and extensive interpretations. Advertisers employ different techniques to capture the attention of the target group in light of these fundamental tenets. Violating reality, use of surreal images, visual parodies, images with direct eye gaze, shots from different viewing distances, and tight close-ups are some frequently used advertising techniques, the logic behind which can be traced to the three integral principles put forward by Messaris.

Another model used by the researcher to analyse and explore the selected advertising narratives, with their vaguely interconnected array of images, is the triadic model proposed by the American philosopher and logician Charles Sanders Peirce. Peirce's triadic model proposed sign as a resultant of 'semiosis', the interaction between its three constituents - the representamen, an interpretant, and an object. The representamen is the form adopted by the sign, and the interpretant refers to the sense made; the third element, the object, which is also referred to as a referent or the 'ground of the representamen', is a direct reference to the material reality that the

sign represents. However, Peirce did not believe in a singular material truth and proposed that semiosis involves a series of interpretations. According to him,

A sign... [in the form of a representamen] is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the interpretant of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its object. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the ground of the representamen. (Peirce 228)

Paul Messaris formulated his three foundational tenets for studying visual images based on Peirce's classification of signs. Among the three types of Peircean signs, while the symbolic signs are highly conventional with fixed/accepted signifieds, the degree of conventionality is lesser in the case of iconic and indexical signs. Despite this categorisation, Peirce insisted that “it would be difficult if not impossible to instance an absolutely pure index, or to find any sign absolutely devoid of the indexical quality” (306). Hence, even when a specific image from an advertisement is categorised as an icon, traces of indexicality may be found in the background.

Daniel Chandler, the British visual semiotician, further elaborates this concept; according to him, “A map is indexical in pointing to the locations of things, iconic in its representation of the directional relations and distances between landmarks and symbolic in using conventional symbols the significance of which must be learnt” (Chandler). The symbolic, iconic, or indexical quality of a sign is not inherent; it depends on factors such as the perspective of the individual concerned and the social and cultural context in which the sign is used. An advertising narrative is a combination of all three types of signs: sound and image have iconic qualities, speech and writing tend to be symbolic, and the film as a whole mostly produces an indexical impact. It is the same for all other audiovisual media, including films. Hence, various film theorists, like Peter Wollen, appreciated that Peirce did not present his typology of signs as mutually exclusive.

The visual signs address their audience from within the code, and in most cases, the ideal audience will have a predetermined positioning within the narrative or text itself. The creator of a text will surely have some preconceived assumptions about the addressee, which shape this subject positioning. Advertisements provide clear instances of such assumptions and subject placements; from the very initial stages of production, an

advertisement will have a target audience. In other words, the relationship between the addresser and the addressee is already constructed within the text; the ways in which this relationship is constructed are referred to as modes of address by Chandler. For example, to understand a particular advertisement, it is necessary to adopt the perspective of the target audience who might desire the advertised product. The narratives usually project a single subject position, presenting it as a homogeneous entity with a single meaning, the meaning intended by its producers.

Myths are intended to provide human beings with a form of meaningful communication with each other and with the world around them. Each culture in the world has had, and still has, some form of mythology. The Europeans are more accustomed to Greek and Roman mythology, while many Aboriginal people also have their own myths. Asian myths, such as those of China and India, are also ancient and rich in variety. Indian mythology includes a myriad of narratives found in Vedic literature, epics such as the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, and widely translated popular texts such as the Panchatantra and the *Hitopadesha*. The mythical stories and characters from these texts are part and parcel of India's cultural psyche. The quintessential meaning of many of the Indian cultural practices cannot be comprehended without a proper understanding of these myths. An all-pervading presence of these myths remains as an inevitable part of life in India despite the onslaught of technological innovations and digitalization. No technology seems powerful enough to replace Rama, Krishna, Shiva, or Sita. All these names continue to evoke awe and reverence in the Indian cultural psyche and remain as epitomes of omnipotence. The characters and stories from mythology are utilised by various social media platforms even today, bringing forth a double benefit: profit-making for the media and the circulation of the myths. Gen Alpha is more familiar with the myths and attributes of mythical characters through the media than through reading written epics.

Brand Mythologisation

The implicit presence of the mythical themes or allusions to such stories, or the explicit presence of mythical characters, is very common in the different types of narratives prevalent in India. It can be print, visual, or auditory narratives. Despite differences in the medium of narration, the content often shows allegiances to mythical narratives in various ways. In contemporary society, characterised by an ever-increasing consumerist attitude, the role and relevance of advertising narratives cannot be overlooked. The advertising firms have been

using print media such as newspapers and magazines, audio media such as radio, visual media such as television, and digital media such as e-magazines, web pages, etc. Through all these media, the advertisements have been pecking at the human psyche, not forgetting to rely on mythical narratives to persuade people to buy. A quick glance through the panorama of Indian advertising reveals many instances in which mythological stories and characters have been used as effective means of accessing the popular psyche. Characters like Chhota Bheem, Ravan, and Hanuman, allusions to incidents like Hanuman's lifting of Dronagiri Parvata, and epic themes like the fight between good and evil can be seen in many Indian ads.

Chhota Bheem appears in advertisements for products such as Horlicks Choco-licks, Parle-G, and Jelimals. The character obviously originated in the children's animated series Chhota Bheem, produced by Green Gold Animation in 2008, and the titular character was created by Rajiv Chilaka, the company's founder and CEO. The series has been playing successfully on various channels like Pogo and Nick Jr., and Chhota Bheem has never failed to fascinate children with his ingenuity, love for laddoos, and magical powers. The character of Chhota Bheem is loosely based on the eponymous character (Bhima) in Hindu mythology, commonly identified as an epitome of strength. The animation series also emphasises Chhota Bheem's extraordinary strength through various adventurous incidents. Bhima is also remembered for his giant appetite, and this trait gets reflected in Chhota Bheem's special love for laddoos in the animation series. Thus, the attributes of the mythological Bhimasena are tweaked and foregrounded to impress the children of the contemporary generation. It serves as an effective medium for regenerating the mythical character and familiarising the target audience with the product.

Chhota Bheem is used as a visual icon to represent the product's attributes. However, all those properties ascribed to the product through the iconic character remain relevant only with reference to the specific referent system within which the character exists. According to Judith Williamson,

. . . the referent always means the actual thing in the real world, to which a word or concept points. The referent is external to the sign, whereas the signified is part of the sign. However, the external 'reality' referred to by the collection of signs in an advertisement is itself a mythological system, another set of signs. These Mythologies I call Referent Systems. (20)

A similar referent system is also referred to by the Parle-G advertisements. The advertisement has presented Bheem as smart, strong, intelligent and honest, and has tried to establish Parle-G biscuits as the source of all those qualities.



Fig. 6 (Green Gold TV, 0:01)



Fig. 7 (Green Gold TV, 0:03)

The advertisement begins with a wide-angle shot of Bheem and friends, which later changes into an extreme long shot with a better view of the surroundings. Bheem and his friends including Kaliya are shown climbing a steep snow-covered mountain (Fig. 6). The shot reveals the toughness of the activity and points to the extreme weather in the Himalayas. Chhota Bheem's love for adventure as well as the curious nature of children is highlighted here. While Bheem leads the group and climbs effortlessly, Kaliya looks exhausted and says that it is impossible to reach the top of the mountain (Fig. 7). At this point, Bheem takes out a packet of Parle-G and announces that nothing is impossible with Parle-G and shares the biscuits with everyone. All of them believe in the power of the biscuit and eat it, as it has been offered to them by their most powerful leader and friend, Chhota Bheem. The close-up shot of a tired Kaliya is followed by a similar shot of the biscuit packet. The desperate Kaliya gets refreshed by having the biscuits. Both the problem and the solution are thus magnified.



Fig. 8 (Green Gold TV, 0:09)

The close-up shot of the biscuit packet being grabbed by different hands (Fig. 8) conveys the product's affordability and prompts the audience to share it with others to keep team spirit high. The close-up shots also help in increasing product familiarity.

The similarity in the colour of Bheem's trousers and the biscuits suggests that the biscuits are the source of Bheem-like strength. After eating the biscuits, all of them, including Kaliya, are able to reach the top of the mountain at a faster pace. The shots that follow are presented at a faster pace to reflect the increase in energy levels after taking the product. The advertisement aims to convey the message that anyone can become as strong and adventurous as Bheem by eating Parle-G biscuits.



Fig. 9 (Green Gold TV, 0:12)



Fig. 10 (Green Gold TV, 0:15)

The extreme long shot from a high angle towards the final part of the advertisement, showing the characters standing at the peak of the Himalayan hills (Fig. 9), once again emphasises the product's benefit. The final close-up shot of Bheem holding a Parle-G packet (Fig. 10) is an explicit exhortation to buy the product. Bheem-like energy at an affordable price is foregrounded as Parle-G's USP. The tagline 'be like the hero by making his choice yours' highlights the easy chance to win the heroic qualities of Bheem further.

The hero-worship among the children is utilised in a similar manner in the Jelimal advertisement as well. Jelimals are bear-shaped jelly candies from Candyman. The advertisement offers the target group a new fun factor along with Jelimals - a Bheem-shaped jelly and Bheem toys. In the advertisement, Bheem joins the tired-looking jelimals and makes them dance. Chutki is shown as playing the music and sharing the energy. The advertisement conveys the message that Chhota Bheem's vibrant presence has made Jelimals more fresh and tastier.



Fig. 11 (Jelimals, 0:13)

The advertisement foregrounded the introduction of Chhota Bheem-shaped jelly candies along with the bear-shaped ones. Most shots are long shots, showing the characters against a very colourful background. The use of bright colours can be associated with the multicoloured jelly candies. The Jelimals, who have been sleepy and lethargic, regain their energy and enthusiasm with the arrival of Bheem. The low-angle medium close-up shot of Bheem eating the red jelly candy is the focus of the advertisement. After that, Chhota Bheem also joins in the 'wiggle wobble' dance of the Jelimals, thereby introducing the jelly candy in his shape. The onomatopoeic qualities of the words 'wiggle' and 'wobble' make them vocal icons, and the wiggling and wobbling Jelimals, with their enticingly jellicious texture, aim to provoke a direct response among the targeted group. The dancing jelimals also act as gustatory icons here. The final shot with Chhota Bheem toys gives the commercial a perfect conclusion.

The advertisements with Chhota Bheem implicitly make use of the classical Hindu mythology related to the *Mahabharata* and the character Bhimasena and explicitly refer to the cartoon series titled 'Chhota Bheem'. A mythical narrative that has been an inevitable part of the Indian cultural consciousness is presented in a new garb through the character of Chhota Bheem. This new version helps inculcate the age-old myth about Bhima in children's minds, along with the images of the products being advertised. In other words, through the advertisement, a new myth-like belief is also promulgated by associating the quality of the products with that of the character Bheem. The image of Chhota Bheem placed alongside the product creates a strong impression in children's minds, leading them to believe the product has special powers. Thus, the 'Chhota Bheem' cartoon series acts as the referent system in the case of these advertisements featuring the character of Chhota Bheem.

Children play significant roles not only in the advertisements of children's products but also in others. One such advertisement for Dabur Neem Toothpaste, replete with mythological allusion, features children as the main actors. The allusive presence of Hanuman and the lifting of the Dronagiri Mountain are evident in this advertisement. In the first part, some kids are shown getting dressed up as different characters, including Hanuman, a lion, a tiger, flowers, etc., for an on-stage performance. The advertisement begins with extreme close-up and close-up shots of the kids getting ready for their performance (Fig. 12). The Voices of children are heard in the background. This creates the impression that there are many children in that room and that an event such as the school annual day programme is about to take place.

Meanwhile, the one dressing up as a lion injures his teeth while trying to fix the artificial lion teeth. Two of his friends gather around him and consider a remedy; one of them recalls his mother's advice that neem keeps one's teeth healthy.



Fig. 12 (Dabur Dental Care, 0:05)



Fig. 13 (Dabur Dental Care, 0:17)

Hearing this, the other friend dressed up as Hanuman swears to bring neem to cure the boy's wound. He then goes around and searches for neem in different places. The boy Hanuman's search for neem is shown mostly in long shots (Fig. 13), till he finally reaches the shop to buy the toothpaste. This series of long shots shows the critical situation at hand and the pace at which the boy Hanuman searches far and wide for the herb neem, to resolve the crisis.

The space time continuum of the advertisement is then disrupted by a shot expressing how the new Babool Toothpaste has the essence of neem in it. The ambience of scientific research in this shot (Fig. 14) further affirms the herbal quality of the product. This instance acts as a referral point to Hanuman's search for mritasanjeevani to save Lakshman's life.

In Lanka, Lakshman was fatally wounded by Indrajit, the son of Ravana. The only medicine that could save him was mrithasanjeevani from the Himalayas. Hence Hanuman went to the Himalayas in search of the herb and brought back the whole cliff on which it grew as he was not sure about the quantity of the herb necessary for curing the wound. There is an allusion to this epic incident in this advertisement.



Fig. 14 (Dabur Dental Care, 0:27)



Fig. 15 (Dabur Dental Care, 0:32)

After a long search, the 'boy Hanuman' who acts as a visual icon, finally brings the Dabur Babool Toothpaste which claims to have the real essence of neem in it. The green coloured toothpaste packets are arranged in the form of a mountain and the way he carries them reminds the audience about the way Hanuman carried the Dronagiri mountain in his hands (Fig. 15). The colour green affirms the herbal quality of the toothpaste and is presented as a lifeline to cure the boy of his tooth problem. It also becomes a solution for the critical situation in the advertisement, as the performance would not have taken place without fixing the 'lion's teeth'. Unlike the Chhota Bheem advertising works, the mythological story of Hanuman becomes the referent system for this advertisement.

Thus, the advertisements utilise mythical allusions by employing mythical characters, stories, themes, etc., in various ways to make the advertising narrative more compelling. These advertisements draw heavily on the collective unconscious to connect with the target group and redirect the consumer's psyche toward accepting an unfamiliar product. The qualities of a product are presented easily and effectively by associating them with the already internalised attributes of a logo, a name, or a character with mythical lineage. The incorporation of

myths in this manner plays a significant role in increasing brand familiarity, as it offers an opportunity to directly tap into the collective unconscious. Moreover, the allusive use of myths/mythical elements in advertisements gives rise to a second-order semiological system, the operation of which leads to the formation of contemporary myths. Thus, advertisements become sites of contemporary myth formation through the allusive use of myths and mythical elements.

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