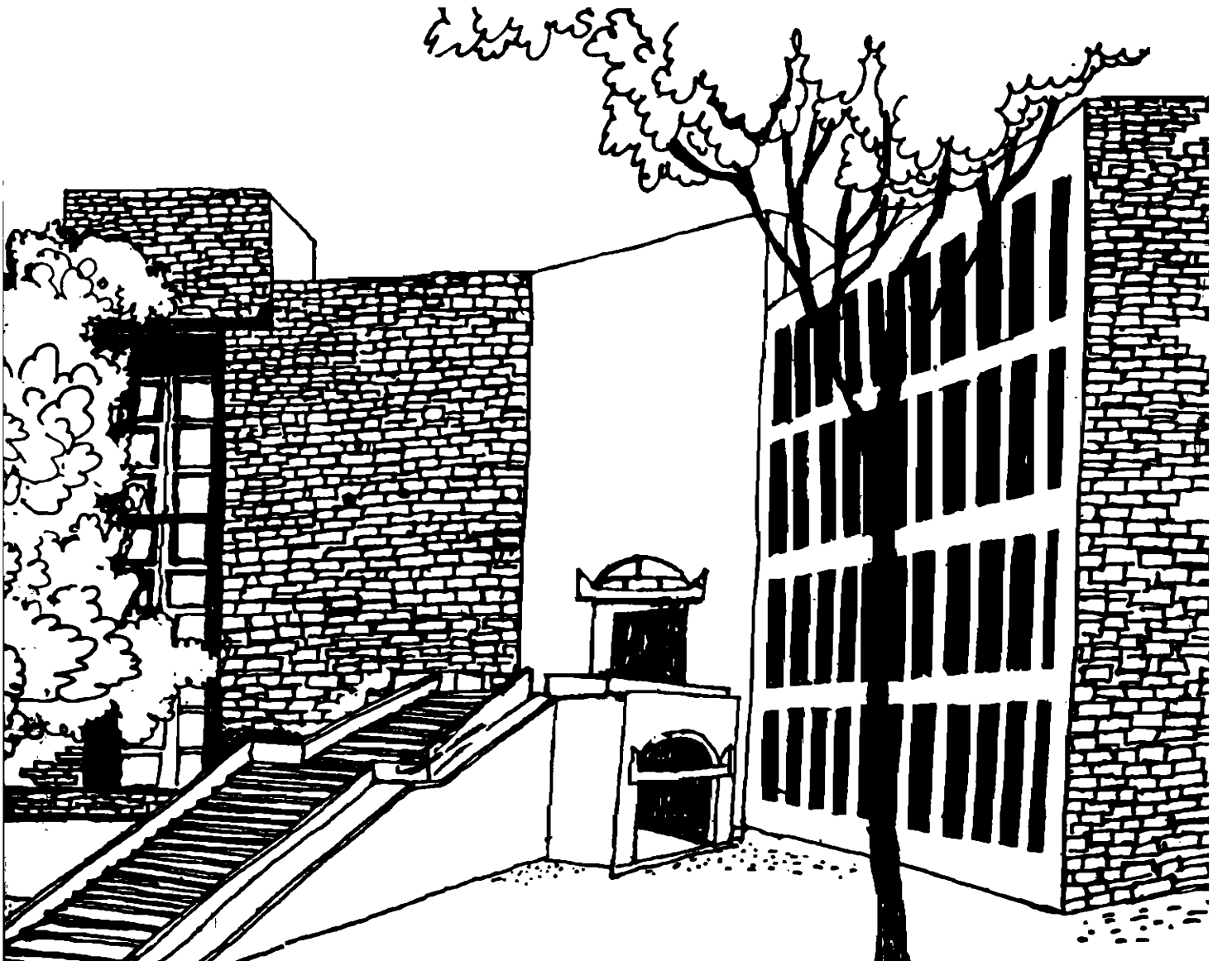




Working Paper



SYMBOLS, THEMES AND LIKING:
A STUDY OF ADVERTISEMENTS

By

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ABSTRACT

Advertisers use various strategies to make an advertisement effective. The use of symbols and themes is one of these strategies. This is a qualitative study aiming to understand whether the presence of some symbols and particular themes in an advertisement affects the liking for that advertisement. 48 subjects were given 20 advertisements to analyze in terms of the symbols present. Themes were then drawn from the symbols mentioned by the subjects. It was concluded that certain themes make an advertisement more likable.

INTRODUCTION

James. W. Carey in his books, 'A cultural approach to communication' pointed out that,

"Communication is a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, mentioned, repaired and transformed".

A common definition of symbol is "something that stands of something else". For the purpose of this study, symbols refer to the representation of cognitive, affective and behavioral aspects experienced by the respondents by looking at a particular stimulus material. And, a theme is the basic idea represented by a set of symbols.

Advertising is recognized as paid, non-personal communications forms used with persuasive intent by identified sources through various media. Advertisers use various strategies to make advertisements effective. Some of these are use of fear appeals, use of humor, and use of celebrities and most importantly use of symbols.

Symbols in advertisements can have various kinds of affect on audience depending upon what it symbolizes. The connection between symbols and what it symbolizes can be of three kinds: conventional, accidental and universal symbols.

Conventional symbols are best known since it is employed in everyday language. If one sees the word, table, the relation between table and the word T-A-B-L-E is that by convention one calls this particular thing by this particular name. The very opposite of conventional symbol is accidental symbol. In accidental symbols, there is no intrinsic relationship between the symbol and what it symbolizes. For example, one has had a bad experience in certain city; when he hears the name of the city, he connects the city with bad mood. It is the individual experience with the city that makes it a symbol of a mood. In contrast to conventional symbol, accidental symbols can not be shared anyone else except as we relate to events connected with symbols. Universal symbol is the one in which there is no intrinsic relationship between symbol and what it represents. For instance, fire as a symbol means aliveness and continuous change. When we use fire as a symbol, we describe the inner experience characterized by lightness, movement, grace, gaiety etc. Thus, in universal symbols, relationship with symbols and what it symbolizes is not coincidental but intrinsic.

J William Ruth (1990) studied the effect of Freudian sexual symbolism in advertising and self reported purchasing tendencies. Findings suggested that symbolic advertisement might unconsciously motivate customers.

Various studies done in the area of advertising revealed that some work was done for understanding the role of symbols in advertisements and the analysis was termed as Semiotic analysis. But, themes still remain an unexplored field, especially in connection with Indian audience. This study was done to get an insight into Indian audience and to understand their reaction to symbols and themes in advertisements.

OBJECTIVES OF THE PRESENT STUDY

- 1) To delineate the symbols present in the advertisements and to derive themes of the advertisements from the symbols present.
- 2) To categorize the advertisements as liked and disliked.
- 3) To explore if symbols and themes contribute to the liking of the advertisements.

METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of this study, a sample of 48 persons (males and females), ranging in the age group of 16-21 was selected from school and college. Respondents selected were chosen from School students (standard 11th or standard 12th) and college students (final year of graduation or Previous/ final year of post graduation). The four groups formed for the purpose the study were males of college, males of school, females of college, females of school.

The study was exploratory and qualitative in nature. The data was collected from primary sources. The data collection methods are:

- 1) Focused Group Discussion
- 2) Questionnaire Method.

The process of data collection started with F.G.D, which was based on the assumption that such a group process would assist the members in understanding the advertisements to a deeper degree and would help the group in emergence of certain symbols. FGD was separately conducted for the four groups. The FGD was aimed at probing the following areas:

1. To understand the kinds of strategies used by advertisers to make the advertisements appealing.

2. To understand the symbols used in advertisements.

3. To understand the feeling that advertisements were capable of arousing. After the FGD, the questionnaire was handed over to each of the twelve members and twenty advertisements were shown to the respondents. Following the screening of the advertisement the respondents were asked to fill the questionnaire.

Following things were found out by the medium of the questionnaire:

1. Symbols seen in the advertisements.

2. Reaction to the advertisements.

The reactions to the advertisements were coded in terms of liking or disliking for an advertisement. "Liking" being a situation where respondents enjoyed the advertisement and "disliking" being a situation where respondents did not enjoy the advertisement.

3. Feelings evoked by the advertisements

Advertisements Used: For the purpose of this study 20 randomly chosen TV commercials acted as stimulus material. The advertisements used were of Asian Paints, BPL Telecom, Bharti Telecom, Britannia Diary Whitener, Siyaram Suitings, OK Soap, Ramdev Spices, Cadbury's Diary Whitener, Cadbury's Tricolor, Vamicol Gum, Kalaniketan Sarees, Farex Child Food, Equal Sugar Substitute, Forhans Toothpaste, Jumping Mango Drink, Hercules Bicycle, Arun Ice-cream, Charms Cigarette.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The following table presents the analysis of the content of the focus group discussion held and the verbatim report by the four groups, viz., College males, college females, school males, school females.

TABLE 1: COMPARISON OF SYMBOLS OF ADVERTISEMENTS LIKED AND ADVERTISEMENTS DISLIKED.

CATEGORIES	CONTENT	VERBATIM REPORTS
STRATEGIES	To take celebrities To exploit family ties Humour Culture Element of joy Aspiration group	"We love Rahul Dravid, so we love everything he uses." "I believe that now instead of marketing brands, they are marketing life styles too".
FEELINGS	Humour/Amusement Happiness/joy Challenge/Aspiration Intimidation Courage/Adventure Confidence Touched/hurt/pity Maternity/Nurturance Exploited Disgusted Patriotism Love/affection	"I feel activated when I see Haywards 5000 advertisement" "Farex ad arouses a feeling of nurturance in me".
SYMBOLS	<p>Youth -Jeans, Pepsi, Bikes, Attraction towards opposite sex, Discotheques</p> <p>Regional -Food, jewelry, dress, shoes, bindi, sindoor, monuments.</p> <p>Religious - arti, diya, sindoor, temple, cross, dastarkhan.</p> <p>National symbols Integration - flag, Indian values, language.</p> <p>Relationship symbols -Joint families, pat on the back.</p>	<p>"A cap can tell whether a person is Hindu, Muslim or even a joker"</p> <p>"Eating dosa means a person belongs to south of India and saag refers to north of India".</p> <p>"Wimpies is preparing vegetarian food, because most Indians are believed to be vegetarians".</p>

Focussed Group discussion (Part III of Table 1) revealed there can be a variety of things which act as symbols:

1. Symbols used to represent youth: These symbols vary from intangible things such as attraction to opposite gender to tangible items such as bikes.
2. Symbols representing a particular region: With Indian audience as respondents and India being a country with cultures varying from region to region, a lot of regional symbols came up.
3. Symbols representing different religions: The study revealed various symbols like swastika, sindoor, temple, dastarkhan.
4. Symbols representing National integration: These include symbols such as tri colour .
5. Symbols representing Relationships: These include symbols such as joint family, pat on the back etc.

The following table summarizes the findings from the questionnaire regarding the twenty advertisements shown to the respondents.

TABLE 2: FEELINGS, RANKING, SYMBOLS AND SYMBOL CATEGORIES ASSOCIATED WITH ADVERTISEMENTS

	Advertisements	Dominant Symbols seen	Feelings aroused	Ranking	Symbol Categories
1.	Asian Paints	South Indian Dresses, Puja, rangoli, finger on the lips, leaves on the door, mother's love, wife's excitement	Positive	Disliked	Regional
2.	BPL Telecom	Mix of culture(South Indian and north Indian etc.),Mobile phone, Stock exchange, enthusiasm at work, call from spouse makes the girl happy, relaxed village life, expression of contentment and joy, festival time	Positive	Disliked	National Integration
3.	Bharti Telecom	Faxing to spouse, young and fun-	Positive	Liked	Youth

		loving look on the faces of model, gestures of embracing, technological advancements, hands in air denoting victory, joy/applaud when India wins, happiness at receiving news unexpectedly.			
4.	Brittania Diary Whitener	Change in the attitude of youngsters, cows milk considered as auspicious, wife's duties include serving husband and touching his feet, just married couples, attitude of newly wed brides, tickling in feet, traditional concept of touching feet adapted to modern life, teasing expression.	Positive	Liked	Youth
5.	Siyaram Suiting	Tribal dances, tribal rituals, car, jungle shot, spear, paint on the face, open gypsy, wild life, open chasing.	Neutral	Liked	Regional
6.	Sahara Airlines	Joining hands, Bharatnatyam dance, colour, combining technology/hospitality, to Indian culture, sholakas, traditional jewellery, hands moving rhythmically.	Positive	Disliked	Regional
7.	OK Soap	Pooja thali, bathing before praying, lotus considered auspicious, temple, arti, Attire(kurta pyjama, sari)	Neutral	Liked	Religious
8.	Ramdev Spices	Dandia dances, dhaba kind of setting, colourful dresses, and festivity.	Negative	Disliked	Regional
9.	Cadbury's Diary Whitener	Girls seen as a free soul, western dances, metropolitan setting, white pigeon denoting peace, Mumbai	Positive	Disliked	National Integration

		backdrop, girls expression when she frees the bird, initial conflict then contentment.			
10	Cadbury's Tricolor	National flag, independence day celebration, college campus, students happy, efforts of girls to open flag spontaneous volunteers.	Positive	Disliked	Relationship
11	Vamicol Gum	Colours, joy of children as they play, use of toys, unity among children.	Positive	Disliked	Relationship
12	Kalaniketan Sarees	Young women, colourful sarees, traditional jewellery, traditional backdrop.	Neutral	Liked	Regional
13	Farex Child Food	Mother- child relationship, Mothers concern to give best food for child's growth and development, love and affection between mother and child, giggling child.	Positive	Liked	Relationship
14	Equal Sugar Substitute	Friendly young couple, exercising health consciousness.	Neutral	Liked	Youth
15	Forhans Toothpaste	Kids playing in the room, cartoon characters focus on kids, feeling of freshness, licking teeth denotes good taste.	Neutral	Disliked	Relationship
16	Jumping Mango Drink	Dancing, enthusiasm, colourful cloths, language bright clothes, a lot of jumping around, young models, rap music	Neutral	Disliked	Youth
17	Hercules Bicycle	Father son close relationship expression of happiness and concern on both father's and son's face, excitement at receiving bicycle, father feeling nostalgic.	Positive	Liked	Relationship
18	Arun Ice-cream	Young model, insensitive to surrounding, active background, model so engrossed that is insensitive to surrounding, he	Positive	Liked	Youth

		steps on things, ecstasy of having an ice-cream.			
19.	Raymonds Cement	Closed fist standing for strength, India's advanced infrastructure industrialization, hand gesture for excellence, industrialization, and mechanical music.	Neutral	Disliked	National integration
20.	Charms Cigarette	Fast life, young people smoking, dussehra celebration, fast life, cock fighting, and billiards table.	Negative	Disliked	Youth

As can be observed from the table 2, eleven advertisements were disliked and (advertisements were liked. Since, the study aimed at understanding whether symbols and themes played a role in liking or disliking of the advertisements The symbols for the advertisements liked and those for the advertisements disliked were separated. Table 3 presents the findings.

TABLE 3: COMPARISON OF SYMBOLS IN THE ADVERTISEMENTS LIKED AND THE ADVERTISEMENTS DISLIKED.

	Advertisements	Symbols in advertisements liked	Symbols in advertisements disliked
1.	Asian Paints		Husband coming home, family happy, house decor, leaves on the door, wife's excitement.
2.	BPL Telecom		Call from spouse makes the girl happy, relaxed village life, expression of contentment and joy
3.	Bharti Telecom	Hands in air denoting victory, joy and applaud when India wins, Happiness at receiving an unexpected news.	
4.	Brittania Diary Whitener	Tickling of feet traditional concept applied to modern life, expression of teasing.	
5.	Siyaram Suitings	African setting, spear, paint on the face, wild life, animal chasing	
6.	Sahara Airlines		Bhartnatyam Dance, Traditional jewelry and dressing, folded hands denoting greeting, hands moving rhythmically.
7.	OK Soap	Temple, arti, attire, bathing before praying.	

8.	Ramdev Spices		Colourful dresses, dandiya dance, festivity.
9.	Cadbury's Diary Whitener		White pigeon denoting peace, Mumbai backdrop, girls expression of happiness when she frees the bird, initial conflict then contentment.
10	Cadbury's Tricolor		College scenario, students happy, independence day celebration, efforts of girls to open flag, spontaneous volunteers
11	Vamicol Gum		Joy of children as they play, use of toy, unity among children.
12	Kalaniketan Sarees	Young women wearing colorful ethnic sarees, classical background music and traditional backdrop.	
13	Farex Child Food	Mothers concern to give best food for child's growth and development, love and affection between mother and child, giggling child.	
14	Equal Sugar Substitute	Friendly young couple, exercising health consciousness.	
15	Forhans Toothpaste		Kids playing in the room, cartoon characters focus on kids, feeling of freshness, licking teeth denotes good taste
16	Jumping Mango Drink		Bright cloths, , a lot of jumping around, young models, rap music
17	Hercules Bicycle	Father son close relationship receiving bicycle, father feeling nostalgic.	
18	Arun Ice-cream		Young model, insensitive to surrounding, active background, model so engrossed that is insensitive to surrounding, he steps on things, ecstasy of having an ice-cream.

19	Raymonds Cement	Industrialization, hand gesture for excellence, mechanical music, closed fist for strength.	
20	Charms Cigarette		Energy, Fast life, dussehra celebration, cock fighting, billiards table

As can be observed from Table 3, no specific symbols seem to contribute to liking or disliking for the advertisements. Thus, themes were drawn from the symbols mentioned by audience and an exploration was made if there is any link between liking/ disliking for an advertisement and the themes present there in. The following table presents the findings:

TABLE 4: COMPARISON OF THEMES IN THE ADVERTISEMENTS LIKED AND THE ADVERTISEMENTS DISLIKED.

	ADVERTISEMENTS	THEMES FOR THE ADS LIKED	THEMES FOR THE ADS DISLIKED
1.	Asian Paints		Pleasant ending
2.	BPL Telecom		Pleasant ending
3.	Bharti Telecom	Achievement	
4.	Brittania Diary Whitener	Traditional Values	
5.	Siyaram Suitings	Fantasy	
6.	Sahara Airlines		Aesthetic appeal
7.	OK Soap	Traditional Values	
8.	Ramdev Spices		Color
9.	Cadbury's Diary Whitener		Concern
10.	Cadbury's Tricolor		Adventure
11.	Vamicol Gum		Pleasant Ending
12.	Kalaniketana Sarees	Colour & Aesthetic	

13.	Farex Child Food	Information Basis	
14.	Equal Sugar Substitute	Information Basis	
15.	Forhans Toothpaste		Novelty
16.	Jumping Mango Drink		Fantasy
17.	Hercules Bicycle	Concern	
18.	Arun Ice-cream		Product basis
19.	Raymonds Cement		Pleasant basis
20.	Charms Cigarette		Excitement

The themes highlighted are the themes that are unique to the category in which they are presented. Thus, themes liked by audience are achievement, traditional value, and information basis. The possible reason could be that the audience is at the stage of life (school and college) where achievement takes priority for them. They also liked advertisements with traditional values, probably because being Indians tradition is deeply rooted in them. When the themes for advertisements were compared it was observed that information based advertisements were liked but product based advertisements were disliked. This might be due to the fact that information based advertisements were thought to be more balanced in perspective than product based advertisement, product based advertisements were considered to be an attempt to persuade audience. For the same reason, pleasantly ending advertisements were not liked. Also, when the advertisers use novelty, adventure, novelty and excitement, the advertisement catches attention but loses familiarity and thus audiences reject it.

Conclusion: It can be concluded that a theme of the advertisement affects the liking for the advertisement. The themes liked by the audience were achievement, traditional values and information basis. The themes disliked by the audience were pleasant ending, adventure, novelty, product basis and too much of excitement in the advertisement.

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