

Use of Semiotics in a Classic Pakistani Commercial: An Empirical Study

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to explore how semiotics is used by different brands in commercials in order to influence the audience and how much is their effect on them. Semiotics is the study of signs, symbols and colors. They all carry meanings which is difficult for a layperson to decode. Some kind of ideology is constructed by using these symbols, colors, and catchy expressions from which the viewer is unaware. The study adopted cross-sectional research design within the qualitative research paradigm. Simple random sampling technique is utilized for selecting the sample and purposive sampling technique is used for the selection of commercial. Interview is used as the data collection instrument. Since semiotics is not studied in Pakistan as a separate branch, hence many people are unfamiliar about this science. They unconsciously use colors, images, music, and other signs regardless of their implications on the receiver. This research shows that semiotics occupies a pivotal role in the overall success of commercials. It gives awareness to people in order to judge and see things through different and broad perspective, give them a critical eye to watch commercials with conscious mind, and to understand the certain ideology behind them (Sajid & Khan, 2020). Therefore, in this way, people can evaluate the implied meanings by paying attention to the ‘minute’ details like colors, sounds, signs, logos, and symbols which they neglect before.

Keywords: semiotics, brands, commercial, ideology, catchy expressions.

Introduction & Background of the Study

A picture is worth a thousand words (Li & Xie, 2020) and we regard our sense of sight more reliable than our sense of hearing. Independent of its size, the pictorial representation is always superior in capturing the attention of the viewer (Pieters & Wedel, 2004). Semiotics is the most powerful medium in shaping people’s perceptions (Chandler, 2007). It covers non-verbal communication as well. All kinds of symbols refer as speech bubbles in a communication. A diagram, a painting or a cartoon is the signifier to its subject's signified in the iconic mode. Semiotics plays a crucial role in understanding human nature both socially and psychologically.

Semiotics is an alien term for majority of people in Pakistan, or you may say that it can only be known to the person who has linguistics background. Since very few have known about this science, so it is an interesting area to research. Through commercial, we can explore the understanding of each participant related to signs, colors, and symbols used in it. How can they relate them and what possible interpretations they bring after watching these commercials? The research in this particular field is unique because it is conducted within our local context where there is not much research available.

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Many people decode different meanings of commercial(s) that are hidden behind semiotics according to their cultural understandings or prior knowledge. These interpretations show the attitudes of people towards any sign, color, symbol and linguistic code and construct their social or cultural identities.

Semiotics encourages creative individuals to think more critically about the information they already have and how do they act instinctively upon it. This research will help people in evaluating things critically. It will aware them about how the use of semiotics can lead to some kind of ideology construction from which they are unaware. It will also help in focusing the problems that are faced by the participants in getting the insight of the commercial(s).

Objectives

- To analyze the perception of viewers about the use of semiotics in a classic Pakistani commercial.
- To interpret the meanings viewers have perceived by watching different signs, colors, logos, and symbols in a commercial.

Research Questions

- How do viewers perceive the use of semiotics in a classic Pakistani commercial?
- What possible interpretation viewers have made by watching different signs, colors, logos, and symbols?

Rationale and Significance of the Study

The aim of the study is to analyze the understandings of the viewers and their interpretations about the use of semiotics in Pakistani commercials. How they perceive them and how much they relate them. Semiotics has not been studied in Pakistan as a separate branch that is the reason majority of people are unaware about this science or having less knowledge about it. Nonetheless, there has not been enough studies conducted on this particular topic pertaining to Pakistani context which is why the researcher has decided to explore this undiscovered land.

The findings of the study will help to judge where the problem lies in terms of defining semiotics. Are the interpretations of the viewers solely based on their personal judgments or it is based on some kind of social or cultural knowledge they have related to each symbol, sign, or colors specifically. It will also aware viewers in understanding the implied meanings of different signs and symbols use in commercials. It will give them a critical eye to watch commercials and will improve their understandings of semiotics in general.

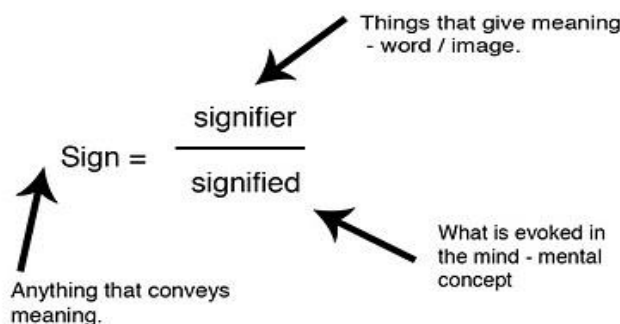
Literature Review

Symbols and signs are part of everyday life and people respond to them in different way but the question is why? Those that wish to answer should look into semiotics. However, you might ask what semiotics is and in its most simplistic definition is the study of signs (Chandler, 2007).

When studying semiotics, you might come across a couple of problems because semiotics is alone a strange concept to research. The first problem being that when asked for information on semiotics, people

will often not be able to help because they do not understand what the word means. Therefore, it would be difficult to get information when first studying semiotics. The next problem is what one actually means by signs and how one would be able to study signs. Studying semiotics is important in order to understand that we do create meaning and create it according to a complex interaction of codes, symbols, gestures, and linguistics that we would otherwise be unaware if one did not study semiotics. According to Barthes (1974), certain connotations and myths interact to create social meanings at the language and semiotic levels. These meanings are then associated with social representations.

There are many people that have been attributed to the study of semiotics and its study can be traced back to Hippocrates and Aristotle. Hippocrates and Aristotle laid the groundwork for semiotics by defining the sign as the physical sign itself, the referent, and the meaning it evokes (Van Lier, 2004, p.58). It was used for the first time in the medical field in order to diagnose the ailment. From then, linguists and philosophers alike have elaborated it on. Two key figures were prominent in the study of signs because of the models they applied to semiotics who were Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914). Saussure was a Swiss linguist while Peirce worked on theories of human behavior. These two people worked independently of each other and thus came up with different ways to approach semiotics.



Ferdinand de Saussure's basic model of semiotics (1969)

Language definitely plays a significant role in human civilizations and is widely regarded as the primary mode of communication. However, it is equally obvious that humans interact nonverbally. These nonverbal approaches have the potential to expand our understanding of language. Investigation of such extending is one of linguistics' greatest achievements. Jakobson (1975) defines semiotics as a metalanguage. According to Kristeva (1969) every speech act includes transmission of messages through the 'language' of gesture, posture, clothing, hair style, perfume, social context, etc. In Sapir's (1921) words, every cultural pattern and every single act of social behavior involves communication either in an explicit or implicit sense. There can be no finality in deciphering semiotic discourses since semiotics are contextual and have diverse meanings in different settings (International Journal of Research in Linguistics & Lexicography, 2012).

Semiotics may be applied to any item that can be interpreted to mean something. Semiotic analysis can be used to analyze any media text, including television and radio shows, films, cartoons, newspaper and magazine articles, posters, and other advertisements. It is also used in naming brands. A brand is a collection of perceptions and images associated with a company, product, or service. A brand is much more than a logo, tag line, or audio jingle, as many people believe. A brand encapsulates or promises what will be delivered or experienced. "Through the lens of semiotics, we can determine whether a name is the best fit in its native form or should be changed, and whether a brand's visual identity and messaging are in alignment with its overall proposition" (Vasilache, 2012, p.1).

Semiotics exists in this medium, a fluid universe of representations, a galaxy crisscrossed by codes, discourses, and signs. Semiotics has developed from linguistics through anthropology, literature and cinematic criticism, history and law, and now modern media and cultural studies. Barthes uses a rose as an example: a rose is ordinarily simply a flower, but when a young guy offers it to his lady friend, it becomes a symbol because it speaks to his passionate desire, which she perceives.

"The human world is full of signs, some natural, some culturally manufactured, some expressly formulated for communicative purposes. Everything we see, hear or feel can become a sign." (Van Lier, 2004, p.57)

Since commercials have become the spine of television and radio. These are the visual advertisements that fascinate viewers towards a specific brand or product. They take the help of semiotics in order to accomplish in their desired goals. However, the viewer is unaware of the deliberate use of certain signs, colors, symbols, and other expressions and they caught in the glitters shown by commercials. "To some degree, viewers get the commercials they deserve, that is, commercials to which they respond" (Geis, 1982, p.110).

These commercials also lead to some kind of ideology construction using signs, colors, and symbols. According to Louis Althusser, ideology is a "system of representations" (1971). This system underlies our social and cultural lives by mediating people's relationships to society as well as their social identities. In certain schools of thought, meaning is heavily dependent on the sender's intentions, whereas in semiotics, "the message is a construction of signals that, via interaction with the receivers, generate meanings." The sender, defined as a message transmitter, loses relevance. The focus is now on the text and how it is "read" (Fiske, 1990, p.3). Hence, the viewer through his/her prior knowledge constructs the meaning. In this paper, I will explore and analyze these notions that are essential for the understanding of semiotics by conducting research in our local context.

Methodology

Nature of the Study

Since the research is exploratory in nature, it comes under 'qualitative' research paradigm. It helps to identify detailed description about the problem and community attitudes, preferences and beliefs (Creswell, 2014). Within qualitative research paradigm, it is cross-sectional research design because the

plan is to collect data at a single point in time. The research questions do not demand for causal inference, so the aim is just to collect data and analyze the findings.

Sampling Plan

Purposive sampling is used for the selection of a commercial because the purpose is to conduct a research on a specific characteristic, feature or function. This selection helps in gathering relevant information and avoiding wasting time taking samples that have nothing to do with the research topic. Therefore, through this sampling technique, I selected a one of the best classical commercial of all time that Pakistani television has ever produced which is 'Rhythm of Unity' by Marvin Gold. This commercial is band now, but it is one of the best classic commercial of Pakistan's history that was aired in the mid 1990's on PTV (Pakistan Television Network) (see references section).

Simple random sampling technique is used in order to select the population for this research. The reason of opting for this sampling technique is that anyone can be the part of the study whether children, adults, homemakers, working people, old or retired citizens, or even illiterate people. It made the scope of my selection broad. The main reason of choosing simple random sampling technique is that everyone watches television so as commercials; therefore, it is a best chance to get their views about the use of different signs, logos, colors, and symbols they have come across in commercial(s).

The sampling size is 10 participants, so that it accumulates the sufficient data in order to judge the familiarity of people with this science. The gatherings are highly subjective and everyone gave their own interpretations about the signs, logos, colors, and symbols according to their values, beliefs, culture, and background knowledge.

Tool for Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews are used as a primary tool to collect data. As semi-structured interviews provide in-depth information about a speaker's behavior, attitude and ideology holistically (Creswell, 2014). This is a very good way of collecting data because there is no rigidity in it and we get more information from our interviewee on asking less in a natural setting.

Before conducting the interview, the objectives of the study were shared with the participants. After the formal consent of the participants, interviews were conducted as per the convenience of the participants. The commercial has been shown to each participant one by one on mobile phone and then the semi-structured interviews were conducted with them about the commercial. The interview questions are the same but their sequence may vary according to the interviewee's responses or understandings. The interviews were recorded with the prior permission of the participants.

Data Analysis

The reflections of the participants were noted and afterwards, thematic analysis was applied. Hence, thematic analysis was utilized for identifying the themes from the raw-data after the interviews. The similarities that are found among the interviews are highlighted as they show where the problem lies.

Although it is a small-scale research, it accumulates sufficient data in order to judge the effective use of semiotics in the commercials. The gatherings show that how semiotics plays an integral role in analyzing the overall meaning of the commercials.

Findings

Understanding of Symbolic Representation

One of the major objectives of the study was to analyze the perception of viewers about the use of semiotics in a classic Pakistani commercial. Most of the participants reported that they watched this commercial when they were young but they never focused on such minute details. Respondent SC1 narrated that, *"I have watched this commercial in my childhood. It's a cigarette ad, and I guess most of the cigarette brands back then used red and yellow color but I didn't notice why they did so"*. Similarly, SC3 said that, *"because I know that it's an advertisement of the cigarettes, they used the symbolic colors of their brand, why? No idea"*. Their responses show that they are unable to draw connections with the colors that are mostly used in the TV commercials. Although they are well aware about the brand but still unable to figure out the reason of choosing these specific colors for it.

On the contrary, SC10 figured out it as, *"to me, red and yellow colors represent passion and the dance and music in the commercial show the unity among the people. They show the strength and courage of Pakistani people. How well they transform their energy into fun and happiness. They represent the positive side of Pakistan."*

Ideology Construction

The most important element behind the use of any kind of symbolic representation is always the construction of some ideology. Now these ideology constructions can be based upon social, cultural, religious, rational, or linguistic diversities and backgrounds. Hence, many of the participants were unable to identify these implied ideological constructions behind the use of signs, colors, logos, and symbols as SC2 narrated that, *"this commercial was actually reply to gold leaf episodes involving junaid jamshed salman ahmed etc., so basically cigarette unites people of Pakistan then was key aspect, later we moved on to tea"*. Similarly, *"the dance, music, and other colors are may be used to represent the positive use of cigarettes"* responded by SC5.

Contrastively, SC7 said that, *"they try to depict unity from different cultures, and probably their agreement over the taste of cigarettes. This is also depicted in the type of music and colors used"* which is very much near to the exact ideological representation these symbols tried to create on the minds of the viewers.

Multiple Interpretations Drawn on Different Symbols

The second objective of this study was to interpret the meanings viewers have perceived by watching different signs, colors, logos, and symbols in a commercial. There are different ways of looking at the same symbol which are based upon the one's background knowledge, level of education, and exposure. As SC10 explained in detail that, *"the possible meaning that I have interpreted from this ad is that no one*

is bigger or shorter to anyone. Everyone is equal on this land. Everyone has its rights and duties. If everyone fulfills their duties and their rights are secured, then this is the best place to live on. As in the past we have seen how people have symphony and they were living with uniformity. Everyone respects each other in those times. There was equilibrium among the people. Everyone respects and follows the rules of State with dignity". SC10 further added, "this music shows the reality of the Country of that time. The people and musicians worked hard in those times to make the best music of all time. They worked with full authority and for the love of the nation". Another respondent SC2 replied that, "we all are one when comes to this brand". So, mostly concluded that the reason behind using these symbols are unity, harmony, peace, and prosperity.

Recognition of Meanings

SC8 responded to the overall commercial that, *"it is very difficult for a common person to identify and interpret each signs and symbols as there is no logo used in the whole commercial. Everything is represented by dance and music. Since there isn't any product shown in the advertisement, so it is not easy to guess the product unless the person knows about it".* In the same way SC3 said that, *"a person will not be able to find the true motive behind this ad as it shows no brand".* These comments show that people can only recognize some meanings behind the commercial if the product or brand has been shown in the advertisement or they know the product already. Another response from SC1 which confirms it that people will not be able to recognize the true meaning of the commercial or they interpret it wrongly as *"there is no product visible in the commercial, people would make wrong interpretations or they might skip if the audio/visuals are not interesting enough even for a common person".* These responses clearly show that how important semiotics analysis are in generating the meanings of the commercials and also in the overall success of it.

Ethical Consideration

- No one is forced to become the research participant.
- The names and identities of each participant kept secret and confidential.
- Formal consent is taken from the participants before recording their interviews.
- The research is objective in nature and it is free from any biasness and subjectivity.
- The research is free from fabricated data or overgeneralization.
- The research does not harm the participants in any way.
- The results are used to aware the viewers regarding the issue related to semiotics.

Limitations of the Study

The researches mentioned in the reference list are all based on semiotics, but they are not specifically related to the context of commercials. Therefore, this research is different because it has been conducted within Pakistani context particularly on classic Pakistani commercial. There has not been any benchmark study on the topic available that can be selected to explore in the local context. Therefore, it has been a challenging task to research and provide guidance and awareness to the people about this science.

Conclusion

This study talks about the problems related to the understandings of signs, colors, and symbols which vary person to person because of their own individual perceptions related to each of them. This is because of their social or cultural backgrounds, education, awareness, and prior knowledge. So, the findings are purely based on the issues that have been faced by each participant while watching the commercial. Hence, the study aware the viewers and give them a critical eye to watch commercials with conscious mind in future by paying more attention towards semiotics which they ignored before.

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