

ADVERTISEMENTS AS SOCIO-SEMIOTIC TEXTS:**Case Study of Cosmetic Commercial Fair & Lovely**

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Introduction

The term semiotics derives from its Greek root 'semeion' that stands for 'sign'. Signs that form the bases of semiotics are affected by the social context in which they exist and from which they are sourced. Halliday argues "that the grammar of a language is not a code, not a set of rules for producing correct sentences, but a 'resource for making meanings'"¹ Semiotic resources not only deal with the language mode, but pressed into service for understanding various meaning generating contexts and modes.

The evolution of semiotics, especially its Barthesian variant, thus opened up a possibility for its application in study and analysis of cultural representations like advertisements. The methodology and its underlining reading praxis opens up a possibility of approaching advertisements as narrative texts, and analyzing its various components in their relatedness and totality as signifying spatio-temporal codes and structures refer back/reflect to their engendering locations. This methodology helps us arrive at a coherent and thoughtful description and analysis of the language of advertisements. It helps us situate advertisements as narratives in the field of semiotics and analyze the structure of ads as a system of signs. It helps us unfold the politics and poetics of the advertisement and packaging, elucidating how meaning is constructed and communicated through the components of ads.

As a form of communication advertising, unlike ordinary communication, is usually intended for a complex range of addressees and often include a whole array of messages targeting myriad groups of audience and facilitating consumer-location specific decoding of meanings embedded in the text of the advertisement. This complex and layered encoding is carried out through complex semiotic maneuvers that span the cultural, social, psychological and cognitive domains. It is a communicative strategy that hinges on, what may be termed as 'art for market' sake aesthetics.

Aim & Objective of the Study

In order to understand and analyze this 'art for market' aesthetics, the study seeks to read a select portfolio of consumer advertisements, culled from Indian and international socio-cultural and market scenario. The aim is to examine how advertisements inter-weave a complex range of signifiers that delineate, impact, and alter the patterns of cultural praxis. It also intends to examine how advertisements use popular social codes to convey a range of meanings, how they propel and

¹ Halliday quoted in Theo van Leeuwen (2005), *Introducing Social Semiotics*, London: Routledge, p 3.

sometimes break stereotypes, how they use images and sounds and wield the tool of language to deliver their message. It will further scrutinize how advertisements become simultaneous repositories and indices of cultural and consumeristic change – or a kind of historical spectrum of market, media and material reality and reflection over time. This purpose is sought to be achieved in the present chapter by studying the changing versions of the advertisement campaigns or commercials over a period of time.

Cosmetic Commercials

The idea of beauty, especially female beauty, is one of the most potent and most frequently used medium for packaging desire in advertisement for the consumer. The idea of beauty, more often than not, is based on masculine notions of feminine ideal, its lure and autonomic perfection. This gendered mystique is a function of the male gaze that supplements the cultural and consumeristic notions of masculinity and draws its rationale from both history and contemporary mindsets.

The idea and the ideals of beauty that fashion related advertisements sponge upon and spawn are configured around a plethora of sources. While it draws on Indian cultural and mythical sources for ideas of feminine vulnerability and virtue, its idea of fairness, especially in the form of complexion and skin, is a colonial implant. This mythical-colonial inheritance mingles with the feminist and consumeristic notions of agency and objectification to create a representational-advertorial-infotainment, a consumeristic-cultural palimpsest around women and the product that such packages endorse. Meenakshi Thapan in her book, *Living the Body: Embodiment, Womanhood and Identity in Contemporary India* surveys and sums up various contours of this notional-normative debate on body and beauty thus:

Grewal has examined English ideas of beauty on the basis of Edmund Burke's work at the time (1764) which was meant to reproduce an 'aesthetic status quo' that 'could teach taste and judgement to the upper classes' (Grewal 1996: 28). Burke's idea of beauty was racialised and imbricated in class to the extent that the qualities that symbolised beauty such as 'small bodies, weak bodies, a smooth bed, fragile flowers, a dove' could only be found in a single 'object: a white woman' (ibid.: 30). Similarly, Mitter finds that nineteenth century Europeans resorted to the use of 'scientific objectivity' to highlight 'European beauty' as opposed to 'African ugliness'. He adds, 'By the 1850s, black had come to symbolize evil and degraded, the very opposite of chaste white' (Mitter 2000: 45). He significantly concludes, referring to the contemporary supermodel Naomi Campbell in whose embodiment 'the Western canon has not been dislodged in the least,' that not only did Western ideas 'construct a knowledge system to control the other but that the scientific discourse of the nineteenth century enabled the West to rationalize its cultural preconceptions, which, in our postcolonial age, we have not been able to shake off' (ibid.: 49). This preoccupation of eighteenth and nineteenth century European intellectuals with aesthetic preferences was squarely located not only in maintaining the order and hierarchy of European society but also has had an added effect of establishing a perspective that has become part of the postcolonial habitus and, in contemporary India, acts as a trope of idealised beauty in the recolonisation of women.²

As a result skin colour became one of the major indices of beauty and status in Indian society and advertisements in India tend to exploit fairness-swarthiness tension as an existential-cultural binary to sell cosmetics and other beauty products. While dark connotes a distinct gendered

² Meenakshi Thapan (2009), *Living the Body: Embodiment, Womanhood and Identity*, New Delhi: Sage, 73.

disadvantage, white connotes status, superiority, sophistication, seductiveness and ‘salability’ or in other words a gendered asset.

Case Study: Fair & Lovely

Fair and Lovely advertisements – both at the level of textuality and discourse – become apt case studies in this context. They constitute textual and ideological extension of this socially embedded desire and commercially exploit this cultural anxiety through objectification and idealization of the notion of beauty and perfect identity. Fair and lovely ad campaign sources into the innate and obsessive middleclass desire for fair or white skin of a woman/man and appropriate and in turn represents consumers’ desire to refurbish their feminine or masculine self-image so as to proximate its idealized representation. In other words the Fair and Lovely ads exploit and perpetuate the social and the semiotic underpinning of beauty - as a concept, image, text and a discourse – to package, brand and sell itself in the beauty market and perpetuate a beauty myth in an ever expanding culture-consumer industry.

Avinash Mulky and others in their article, “Fair and Lovely: Redefining Beauty,” (Mulky and othet. All) have also underlined this aspect of advertisement, commerce and culture collusion and its commercial and representation efficacy thus:

Hindustan Unilever's star product in the fairness creams segment had evolved into one of the most successful brands over three decades in as many distinct phases. Phase 1 saw the launch of the product in 1976 on the basic premise that “younger women wanted to have fairer skin in order to attract a better looking husband.” HUL marketed this brand as a beauty cream capable of providing fairness within 8 weeks. The value proposition lucidly communicated to the consumer base read, “Get noticed by the man of your life.

During Phase 2 of Fair & Lovely's evolution, the brand talked to a younger college going woman who is self confident and more modern in her outlook and believes home remedies for facial care to be old fashioned. In Phase 3, this further metamorphosed into a brand offering emotional benefits for achievers who actively seek solutions and do not look at marriage as the ultimate source of personal achievement. Fair & Lovely thus became a brand which communicated a message that Fairness leading to Beauty leading to Good husband to Fairness leading to Self-confidence leading to Good career.³

The fairness creams, through their aggressive and at time provocative advertisements constantly capitalised on the anxieties (peer pressure to conform to the norms), aspirations (to be presentable/to impress) and age of its consumers to retain its niche. Based on the market research, Mulky and others have identified and portrayed a typical consumer profile thus:

Characteristic	Customer Profile
Income	1-5 lakhs
Age	12-50
Education	High school and college educated
Geography	Anywhere in India (higher probability of South)

³ Avinash G. Mulky et al., “Fair & Lovely: Redefining Beauty” at <http://tejas.iimb.ac.in/articles/36.php>.

Loyalty Status	Loyal
Personality	Wishes to take charge of her destiny
Benefit Expected	Fairness, general utility cream, special ingredients

(The table is sourced from: "Fair and Lovely: Redefining Beauty," at <http://tejas.iimb.ac.in/articles/36.php>)

As is evident from the data and its attendant inferences above, the fair and lovely or complexion enhancing cream advertisements build up this myth and market of beauty through a niche targeting of customers. These ads approach and influence them through a creative-discursive and commercial-cultural interplay of visual images or photographs and textual representation (slogans, headlines, articles) of different kinds. The aim is to harness the aspirations and create beauty fulfillment prepositions and stereotypes that would ultimately veer towards setting up of aspirational and aesthetic standards. While the virtues of fair skin are lauded and celebrated, dark skin gets exoticised or hierarchized as its other. The advertisement, through this manipulative play of signs, turns into an effective business preposition and a commercial-cultural strategy to penetrate those markets where consumers are 'dark skinned as well reminiscent of the colonial concept of eroticizing the native'. The product through its advertorial, ends up juxtaposing 'fair' as an ideal and 'dark' as the exotic and, in the process, overtly and covertly manipulating and the objectifying the readers/consumers.

Background:

Fair skin is an obsession in India. Women face discrimination due to the colour of their skin, particularly in the marriage market. A fairer skin determines women's social status and desirability. Traditionally, women are viewed as subservient to men; their role is to attract the attention of men through their physical beauty. Companies selling skin-lightening products send a message that their product will make a woman more desirable. The woman wonders if her image of herself is good enough, because she sees herself through the eyes of others. She feels pressured to use these products not only to improve her own opinion of herself, but also that of others.

In 1919, India saw her first fairness cream ad in Afghan Snow, manufactured by E S Patanwala, a native of Jhalrapatan in Rajasthan who had set up his business in Mumbai. The cream was named after King Zahir of Afghanistan, who is said to have commented that it reminded him of the snow in his country.

In 1978, Hindustan Levers (now Hindustan Unilever) launched a fairness cream that promised to be soft on skin unlike bleaching creams. The product is today available in almost 40 countries.

Fair & Lovely's ad started off by marketing dreams and desires, switching to being the key that'll get you the man of your dreams, upheld stereotypical notions of beauty, and distorted reality.

Post liberalization, several other brands launched fairness cream – Emami Naturally Fair Herbal Fairness Cream in the early 1990s, CavinKare's Fairever in 1998, Godrej's FairGlow in 1999. To oust competitors, Fair & Lovely shifted its narrative from the dream man track to woman empowerment and the cream as a confidence aid to skill development and to get the perfect job. Though it is a fact that both physical beauty and material success are transient, the ad manipulated ideology by forcing a point of view that the product would give everlasting beauty. While the earlier

ads equated fairness with beauty, now it was equated with success; these were case studies of how virtues and values were being commodified through beauty product ads.

Message

Not only do ads attempt to sell us products through their implicit and explicit ways of making meaning, but they also make the audience feel that they are lacking something. Ads portray women with dark skin as insecure. The dark skin women have sad facial expressions, they do not look directly at the camera, and their body posture is poor. On the other hand, women using fairness product are portrayed as confident. The misconstrued images attract women who want to avoid negative attention. One Fair & Lovely ad presented colour swatches ranging from white to dark brown, implying whiteness as the goal and darkness as the problem that women need to get rid of. The model placed colour card next to her face to prove her transformation from darkness to lightness, and from ugliness to beauty. The ad associated negativity with darkness marking the skin as a problem with negative consequences if they did not seek a solution.

Advertisements: Fair & Lovely

The advertisement (Figure 1) is configured around semiotic interplay of visual and textual signifiers rooted in the rational, emotional, symbolic and the cultural. The pink colour connotes femininity, tenderness and grace and creates a commensurate aura, mystique and associations around the product. This aura is further reinforced by the model's face that blends with and peeps through this pinkish mistiness. The face is contrasted against another face that is shade darker and is set at an angle from the one advertising the benefits of the cream not only as a twist and turn of the fortune (symbolized by the spiral structure), but also as a kind of preferred genetic code.



Figure-1 source: (internet/Google photos)

The Fair & Lovely ad has gone through changes since the 1980s. In the first two decades, ads suggested darkness was a problem; the product positioned itself as a beauty cream that increased fairness within six weeks and turned a dark girl into a fair, beautiful and desirable one and thereby, fulfilling her dream of getting married.

The next phase of ads focused on ‘empowering’ her – Fair & Lovely Foundation promised skill development and loan for career with a new tagline, ‘shadi se pehle apni pehchan banani hai; banana hai na?’ The aim was to exploit the aspirations of middle class woman who wants to build a career for herself. She does not have confidence in her abilities and hence, needs a fair skin to achieve her goals.



Figure-2 Source: <http://www.brandsynario.com/wp-content/uploads/fair-n-lovely>

Advertisements are media discourse involving language and social processes. Whiteness is traditionally associated with positive attributes like goodness, while darkness is associated with evil and impure.

In these ads, the second person pronouns are extensively used. For Example: ‘Every time you use it, your fairness gets enhanced... Ready to take fairness bet with us?’ The use of first and second person pronoun indicated that the company was making sincere promises.

Further, the pronoun “we” is regarded as authoritative and implies power while “you” reflects a personal engagement as the reader or viewer is addressed directly. In addition, the use of “our” reflects a certain “us” versus “them” feeling.

Questions were asked to draw readers’ attention: “Who says beauty fades over time?” Such questions established a close relationship with readers/ recipients and gave them a sense of inequality between producers and consumers.

Multinational companies often use specific tools in their ads to persuade their receivers to change their attitudes and choices, by dominating their cultural values and beliefs. A study of ads in Femina, India’s largest circulated women’s magazine in English, found a strong emphasis on body and sensuality in defining the ‘ideal’ modern Indian woman. Through textual and visual aspects, fairness cream ads present a stereotypical “ideal” woman to persuade the audience.

Who is this ‘ideal’ woman in Fair & Lovely ad? She is young, pleasant looking, caring, domesticated and somewhat low on confidence.



Figure 3 source <http://www.wowfashions.in/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/fair3-642x336>

In one ad, the girl is upset when she sees her father, a make-up artist, being yelled at by an actor. She asks her father to do her make-up instead. His advice: Lasting beauty comes from Fair & Lovely. The girl heeds his advice and goes on to become a big star, winning an award where she gives the credit to her father. The tagline: Beauty lasts forever. The ad is all about achieving success thanks to fairness crème (not acting skills) with father-daughter relationship and family pride playing in the background.



Figure 4 source: <http://www.wowfashions.in/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/fair3-642x336>

In 2007, the company had to withdraw an ad that showed a dark-skinned woman, who was neither getting a job nor a boyfriend, suddenly becoming talk of the town after she started using Fair & Lovely. The company tried to change this 'kaale ko gora bana de' positioning to show those who use Fair & Lovely are achievers in their life.

The next ad to hit the market showed a girl achieving her dreams of becoming a cricket commentator and meeting Kris Srikanth. Now what has Fair & Lovely got to do with becoming a good cricket commentator is a question no one can answer?

In the Effies 2015, Mullen Lowe Lintas won Gold for its Fair & Lovely 'Delay Marriage' campaign. Here, the girl, who wants to take up a job and is being forced into an arranged marriage, does not rebel against her father. Instead, she gets a 'bright idea' after using Fair & Lovely and tells her father, "shadi kar lungi... par teen saal baad ... tabhi to hoga equal equal". Apparently, she needs three years to upgrade herself to the prospective groom's level in terms of professional and material success. The groom is obviously not just an ideal for her father but for her as well. Though the campaign is apparently focused on delayed wedding and career first, marriage, rather arranged marriage, and is suggested as the final goal for the 'ideal' girl. After all, in our ads, as in our society, the woman belongs to the man, home and hearth.

Conclusion

As is obvious from the textual analysis of the succeeding ads, successful communication triggers certain responses in/from the intended viewers: Emotional (i.e., getting the target audience to feel and respond emotionally to message); intellectual (i.e., to cogitate on the message); and motivational (i.e., induce them to take action, such as purchasing a particular product.) This threefold trigger helps invoke an impression, an image, identity or what is termed as branding or perception of/for the product. Once established the brand– that is generally encoded through a name, sign or symbol and by which the consumer identifies with seller's goods or services – helps establish/etch the product in the consciousness of the consumer and convinces the consumers as to product's uniqueness, desirability and utility. A good brand delivers a clear message, reflect credibility, connect with the consumer emotionally, motivate the buyer and build loyalty. Advertisements help strike an optimal balance between the product's brand potentials and the consumer satisfaction by building up an eye and intellect catching narrative around it. Ads as brand narratives inspire an emotional response and are thus able to draw loyalty in consumer and a successful following. Emotion is powerful in a brand because it is an effective way to connect with the audience. Brands such as Fair and Lovely, Fair and Handsome, Ariel, Prestige etc., have used Indian normative values/expectation as emotional appeal for making their audiences feel good about their products.

The advertisements discussed above, beside emotional also build in a rational appeal in advertising. It has been famously said that people buy on emotion then justify their decision with facts. They all underscore consumer benefits rather than product features. The language they use is so graphic that it evokes the narrative as a tangible reality, where ad turns into simultaneous act of seeing and believing and ads take the form of a product demonstration.

In addition the emotion-based advertising speaks the primal tongue. It communicates through design and colour, spatial organization, motion and stagecraft, music and tonality. While the rational mind acts on logical relationships, the primal mind seeks symbolic relationships. Advertisers use symbols as the vocabulary of emotional marketing and instinctive communication.

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