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Constructing Myths Through Coding: A Study on Idealized Body Images and Indian Women

When the world is a global market, advertisements rule the psyche of modern man. The immense power of advertisements over the masses has made them important tools of persuasion and manipulation by the hegemonic class. Advertisements appear everywhere and the images creep into the lives of men, often unknowingly. These images exist in our consciousness, appealing to man at a deeper level. Reading these texts help us understand the manipulative power of these messages and its impact in reinforcing the power structure in society.

Exposing the control of representation is one of the chief concerns of Stuart Hall and Culture Studies. According to Hall, when we look at the advertisements, we see communication beginning with the production practices. They translate into a message, dense with myths and symbols of culture. This message gets circulated through a material substratum. This transmission process requires certain material instruments as well as a set of social relations. This is received and understood in relation to the cultural practices. This communication is dynamic and involves a process of coding. Three hypothetical positions may be taken by the decoder from the televisual discourse - the dominant-hegemonic, the professional, the negotiated and the oppositional. Advertising uses stereotype gender specific roles of men and women reinforcing existing clichés. Activities are depicted as typical male or female (stereotyping). The body images created and the readings it offers to Indian women will be the thrust area in my presentation.

John Fiske in his essay "Television Culture" states thus:

A code is a rule-governed system of signs, whose rules and conventions are shared amongst the members of a culture, and which is used to generate and circulate meanings in and for that culture. Codes are links

between producers, texts and audiences, and are the agents of intertextuality

through which texts interrelate in a network of meanings that constitute our

cultural world. (1088)

Encoding and decoding are therefore fundamental processes in the communicative exchange. Reality is understood by the codes of our culture. What passes for reality is the product of that culture's codes. When 'reality' itself is already encoded, any message in its natural form must be encoded by the source and decoded by the receiver so that a symbolic exchange is produced. The rules of language (langue) predominate in each process, despite the fact that each process occurs at fixed moments. Hence, Hall supports the view that the audience is paradoxically both the source and receiver of the message.

This can be understood better with the advertisement of Virgin Mobile. The title of the advertisement "Think Hudke" itself suggests that there is something 'different' here. Though the thinking is lateral, the conventions and myths mentioned are clearly part of the hegemonic culture. The girl in the advertisement tells her parents defiantly that she doesn't like boys. Silence follows and the father turns to the mother blaming her for the homosexual preference of the daughter. The mother says it is the father who insisted on sending her to a girls school and the father accuses her of not letting her play with boys in the colony. The girl gets a call from a class mate named Tensing, clearly suggesting the boy is from the North-eastern region of India. She says she does not wish to go to Goa with him. Father encourages her to go with him and the advertisement ends with her calling Tensing to tell him that her parents have permitted her to go to Goa. A semiotic analysis reveals the intertextuality and the various codes hidden beneath the seemingly funny advertisement. The power relations within the family, the patriarchal roles assigned to the family members, the rigidity in the daughter's upbringing are all part of this text.

According to Hall, our understanding of audio-visual texts is being reshaped because we begin to change our perception of audience reception, reading and response. Hall proposes a new area of media studies which is called "the use of semiotic paradigm" (Hall, Encoding 131). This deals mainly with behaviorism and it helps in our understanding of content in the media. The televisual sign is complex according to Hall, and it is "constituted by a combination of two types of discourse, visual and aural" (Hall, Encoding 131). Nevertheless, the televisual sign is not a complete representation of reality because reality exists outside of language.

Some codes are presumed innate instead of being constructed by a community or a particular culture because they are learned from an early age. Although natural visual codes

are culture specific this does not mean that no codes have intervened; rather that the codes have been profoundly naturalized …. naturalized codes [have] a degree of habituation produced when there is fundamental alignment and reciprocity - an achieved balance- between the encoding and the decoding sides of an exchange of meanings. (Hall 132) Objects which are iconic are more realistic because "they look like objects in the real world" (Hall 132).   Therefore, iconic signs usually seem more realistic or somewhat natural because they have a wider distribution and are less arbitrary than the linguistic sign.

Hall believes that signs are not always organized in a discourse to signify only their literal meaning but a combination of both denotation and connotation.   Therefore, the distinctions between these two notions are "largely a matter of analytic value" (Hall 133). Connotative signs have an ideological value; hence, there is no fixed meaning and "their fluidity of meaning and association can be more fully exploited and transformed" (Hall 133). "So it is at this level of the sign that situational ideologies alter and transform signification" (133), at this level we can see the intervention of our ideologies depending in and on discourse.   Hall further explains that the level of connotation of the visual sign, of its contextual reference and positioning in different discursive fields of meaning and association, is the point where *already coded* signs intersect with the deep semantic codes of a culture and take on additional, more active ideological dimensions"(Hall 133).

Connotative signs have semantically different meanings depending on the context of reference and the ideologies of a culture at a particular point in time.   These kinds of codes are what Hall refers to as "'maps of meaning,' into which a culture is classified" … and, "if you like, 'fragments of ideology'" (134).

Hall reinforces that there are two levels of televisual signs, the denotative and connotative. In any given society or culture, one is aware of connotative codes which impose classifications on the social, cultural and political world. Within the society there are also discursive domains, which are organized into dominant or preferred meanings. These dominant meanings are mapped out in social reality through institutional, political and ideological order, which eventually become institutionalized.

Of greater concern for broadcasting is that the audience has failed to take the message as they intended. This is because while encoding imposes limitations on decoding which prevents audiences from simply interpreting the message as they like, it cannot actually determine decoding. This is why we have an imperfect circuit. In other words, this leads to misunderstandings which deal with the reciprocity between the encoding and decoding moments, which makes up the communication model. Moreover, four hypothetical

positions may be taken by the decoder from the televisual discourse. The first code is the dominant-hegemonic position, where the viewer takes the encoded meaning. The message is decoded in reference to the dominant code.   The second position is the professional code which refers to the conventions used by media professionals to encode meaning by remaining within the dominant code. The third position is the negotiated code. This is where the audience both adapts to and opposes the hegemonic view. A 'misunderstanding' may consequently arise as the meaning of the decoder contradicts the meaning of the encoder. Lastly, the oppositional code is where the viewers totally ignore the encoded message even though they understand it. While understanding advertisements most of us take different positions but we continue allowing ourselves to be manipulated into compulsive consumers.

A careful observation of the advertisement for Airtel reveals these theories in action. Several strong symbols are used and they are interlinked with historical events to give a sense of reality. A sense of nation is aroused in the consumer and several values and rituals celebrating Indianness is showed against the most shattering and emotional moments from history. Analysing the advertisement by taking different positions will help us understand the process of coding in a better manner.

To comprehend our consumerist behavior pattern, we need to dwell deep into the concepts put forth by Althusser. Althusser states that all ideology has the function of constructing concrete individuals as subjects to the material practices of the ideology. This is done by interpellation, forcing individuals to generate meaning out of it and to participate in the practice. The ideology of consumption (which is, undeniably, the most material of all practices) uses advertising to transform individuals to subjects (=to consumers). It uses advertising to interpellate them. The advertisements attract attention, force people to introduce meaning to them and, as a result, to consume.

The most famous example is the use of "People like you (buy this or do that)" in ads. The reader / viewer is interpellated both as an individual ("you") and as a member of a group ("people like..."). He occupies the empty (imaginary) space of the "you" in the ad. This is ideological "misrecognition". First, many others misrecognize themselves as that "you". Secondly, the misrecognized "you" exists only in the ad because it was created by it, it has no real world correlate. The reader or viewer of the ad is transformed into the subject of (and subject to) the material practice of the ideology (consumption, in this case).

The mass media message calls out, to the viewer and as attention is gathered and solidified, subjectifies the viewer through their total acceptance of the ideological

proposition, and in doing so interpellates them into the ideological system. Ultimately, successfully interpolated subjects do not realize their subjection, only that they have freely chosen to become part and parcel of the dominant ideology. Advertisements thus become loaded with meaning at the socio-political and economic levels and tend to reinforce the hegemonic power structure.

Since all forms of media are composed of language, and because language is a cultural system, media constructs the subject or reproduces ideology in people by interpellating them (Fiske 1088). Specific texts are directed toward certain people, for instance, an advertisement for volumizing shampoo being directed toward a woman. If the woman viewing the advertisement responds by paying attention to the message of the text, even slightly, she is indirectly responding in terms of her social position as a woman who desires beauty, with all of its associated cultural connotations. The woman has been hailed by the advertisement, and her identity as a woman has been affirmed.

Advertising often uses stereotype gender specific roles of men and women reinforcing existing clichés and it has been criticized as inadvertently or even intentionally promoting sexism, racism, and ageism. At very least, advertising often reinforces stereotypes by drawing on recognizable 'types' in order to tell stories in a single image or 30 second time frame. Activities are depicted as typical male or female (stereotyping). Airtel advertisement featuring Saif Ali Khan and Kareena Kapoor points out that man is techno savvy where as women are merely distractions and idiots. In addition, people are reduced to their sexuality or are equated with commodities and gender specific qualities are exaggerated. Sexualized female bodies, but increasingly also males, serve as eye-catchers. In advertising it is usually a woman that is depicted as

1.   a servant of men and children that reacts to the demands and complaints of her loved ones with a bad conscience and the promise for immediate improvement (wash, food)
2.   a sexual or emotional play toy for the self-affirmation of men
3.   a technically totally clueless being that can only manage a childproof operation
4.   female expert, but stereotype from the fields of fashion, cosmetics, food or at the most, medicine
5.   as ultra thin, slim, and very skinny.
6.   doing ground-work for others, e.g. serving coffee while a journalist interviews a politician.

Body images are created by advertisements leading to perpetual problems for women. A woman of seventeen years would have been exposed to approximately 250,000 advertisements and most of them feature woman as the ultra-slim body an epitome of confidence and success. Explicit references to the slim body are plenty and almost all images of women implicitly state it. The images result in women losing their self-esteem, confidence and life becomes a perpetual striving to attain this constructed image. By reproducing ideals that are absurdly out of line with what real bodies really do look like the media perpetuates a market for frustration and disappointment. This results in body mutilation, eating disorders and face lifts which disturbs the woman emotionally as well. But this helps sustain several industries like the cosmetic industry. In fact, this is the perfect situation for the diet industry since it generates $33 billion in revenue.

Reading advertisements in India helps us understand the values implied and the stereotypes used to reinforce them. It is not merely messages to the consumer to help in the growth of a capitalist market, it is an integral part of popular culture. Advertisements ought to be read as documents ensuring the perpetuation of the ideology of the hegemonic culture. A close reading of the encoded messages helps us trace the history of Indian culture and the political, social and economic power structures in action.

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