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Demystifying Ideology: A Socio-Semiotic Analysis of Billboard Advertisements

Abstract:

The aim of the present study is to investigate the hidden ideologies in the billboard advertisements in the landscape of Lahore. The following questions have been designed: How do the billboard advertisements represent different ideologies in the landscape of Lahore? What types of ideology are implied in the billboard advertisements in the landscape of Lahore? The nature of the research is descriptive and qualitative. The sampling of the study is based on four billboards displayed in the main boulevard of Pakistan International Airline Society Lahore. The socio semiotic theoretical framework of Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996-2006) has been used. Those meta-functions such as representational, interactive and compositional have been investigated in this study. The study revealed that certain ideologies have been implied in the advertisements by the advertisers in order to achieve their aim which is to make their products popular, hence, the fulfilment of economic interests.

Key Words:

Ideology, Billboard Advertisement, Social Semiotic, Critical Discourse Analysis

Introduction

Advertisement plays a vital role to develop a connection between the product and the target population. The advertisement agencies are using different strategies and use different platforms such as the internet, social media, billboards, and television. Advertising has a crucial function to assign representative meanings to consumer products, and it constitutes an indispensable part of cultural and social life. The powerful impact of advertising on societies has attracted many researchers to investigate the relationship between the consumer's ideology within a culture (Williamson 1978; Jhally 1987). The purpose of the present research is to explore the ideologies implied in the advertisement billboards in the landscape of Lahore. Many researchers have focused on advisement from numerous disciplines, for instance, cultural studies, marketing, semiotics, mass communication, social psychology, sociology and cultural anthropology.

Goldman (1992) has given the advertising the status of key social institution. It produces and reproduces the material and, at the same time, the ideological supremacy of commodity relations. This is a kind of system which is called commodity hegemony. It tries to reproduces among society a sense of commodity relations and portrays them as an unavoidable and legitimate component of the consumers' life (Sare et ai. 2007). Williamson (1978) states that advertising direct the viewers to see themselves and the world ideologically. In order to get consumers' attention, the advertisers agencies are using different strategies, and a great number of images.

Kress & van Leeuwen (1996-2006), have been associated with the development of social semiotics probing ways to analyze visual images and giving consideration to the multi-semiotic characteristics of most texts in present-day society. The method of the social semiotic technique was used in order to study the visual imagery. This approach has made it easy to make interpret the implied meanings in the images. They have developed a mixed model of visual codes with a verbal structure. According to them, visual structures pertain to the specific explanation of forms and events of social contacts and relations just the way linguistic structures do.

Significance of the Study

This study will be an addition to the new information related to the meanings present in contemporary billboard advertisements. It will reveal how different brands are constructing meanings which are bringing changes in the culture and shaping society. It will make the readers cautious about what type of transformation is happening in their lives through these advertisements. This study will develop readers' awareness of decoding ideologies by providing them the knowledge to sharpen their analytical skills which they can apply on different types of semiotic resources they come across in their daily life. Next time, when they plan to buy any

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product they will be in a position to analyze the item critically and sensibly rather than becoming the prey of magical qualities suggested by such advertising.

Objectives

The objectives of the study:

- this study identifies the types of semiotic resources used in the billboard advertisements in the landscape of Lahore
- It investigates how meanings are produced in billboard advertisements through semiotic resources
- It examines what types of ideologies are hidden in the billboard advertisements

Research Question

1. How do the billboard advertisements represent different ideologies in the landscape of Lahore?
2. What types of ideology are implied in the billboard advertisements in the landscape of Lahore?

Literature Review

Cook (1992) says that advertising is an assertive sort of discourse in contemporary societies. According to him, the significant and distinctive attribute of the discourse of advertisement is its function which is to convince consumers to purchase the specific product. According to Macdonal (2003), Fairclough (1995) and Manjula Kalliat (2013), the texts used in advertisements are the discursive construction of ideology. Eagleton (1991), states that ideology is a subject of discourse and it deals with how language is actually used between particular individuals to create specific effects. In order to investigate any kind of ideology in a specific statement, it is important to examine it in its discursive context. According to his point of view, the term ideology is precisely an accessible way to classify many different things which we do with signs under one heading.

In his study Chaudhri (2001), analyzed the influence of the change of economic policy in India on the public discourse as it was evident in the media. The results showed that many images of Indian women were new and few were still traditional. Now male models can be easily noticed in ads. So it can be argued, that liberalization brought new ideas for the male hood and inculcate conventional the modern ideology of success and power. Both genders were represented on the basis of their powerful image in the culture. The lifestyle, the success, and glamour of both powerful gender were displayed from the public discourse. Most of the time the famous actress/actors and both gender from the sports were highlighted in these advisements.

Messaris (1996) says that the pictures in the ads whether they are television ads, magazine ads or any other type of advertisements frequently carry meanings in such a powerful way that the words and music might fall short. McQuarrie and Phillips (2005) indicate that indirect persuasion strategies are common in advertisements. They claim that the consumers become more receptive to the ideas presented by the particular brand if they are provided with indirect metaphorical claims. Hills (1997) says that positioning statement plays a significant role from the promotion standpoint because this is how a business's product is made different and distinguished from those of the key competitors'. For instance, the magazines of fashions are used to showcase ads; they are the best examples of powerful media because they have the ability to have an impact on women on a regular basis. Such kind of magazines provides us with evidence by famous international and local models that use the products. Sometimes, they tend to give us the comparison of their products with others regarding quality, price and miraculous results.

According to Courtland L. Bovee and William F. Arens (1989), advertising is a bundle of values that enable the consumers to identify themselves with those values. The representations of advertisements may emphasize masculinity, femininity, sex, humor, romance or science; the consumers must be able to believe in whatever the product portrayal.

During that process of decoding the message, the addressees not only notice the meanings of the sign but at the same time they try to recreate the meanings according to their own interpretation and understanding. These are the messages which are encoded by the advertisers who carefully design and shape their material which is in accordance with the culture and demand of the consumers. The researcher has used the term meta-structure for the process of advertising products and has related it with a structural and cultural analysis of advertisements. According to Bovee and Arens (1986), viewers of advertisements try to get the meaning by looking at the illustrations.

The aim of Najafian and Kitabi's (2011) research was to use a social semiotic approach to investigate the ideology behind choosing different resources to make ads attractive. They worked on the verbal as well as the non-verbal resources. They examined the examples of advertisements that were taken from the magazine 'Time' and studied visual and textual signs present in the advertisements. The results of the study showed that social semiotic resources support advertisers to communicate hidden ideologies through tempting and plausible messages. The color, image and word analyzed in this way are the outcomes of social practices. These are only three examples among many other social modes. In fact, semiotic modes are used to code the social meanings of advertisements.

In another study conducted by Tsotra and Janson (2004), it was proved that semiotics is a powerful tool to disclose hidden meaning in internet marketing. Semiotics is concerned with any type of symbols and signs which may be in the form of text or picture and works on to reveal their underlying meaning.

Methodology

This section contains a theoretical framework, data collection and sampling techniques for the present research.

Theoretical Underpinning

The theoretical framework for the present study has been adopted from the socio-semiotic method presented by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996-2005). The socio-semiotics method is one of the Critical Discourse Analysis models. CDA provides a framework to study the relationship between power and language, society and discourse and text and context (Fairclough, 2001). According to Van Djik (1993), Critical Discourse Analysis gives a perspective to do linguistics semiotics or discourse analysis. Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996, 2006) have been engaged in creating and developing social semiotics exploring ways of analyzing visual images. They have also been involved in paying attention to the multi-semiotic features of most texts in modern society. According to them, social semiotics is concerned about the role of human agency and social context in the creation of meaning.

This method has been derived from Halliday's (1978) systemic-functional linguistics which was introduced by Halliday (1978) into linguistics. It says that language is a semiotic mode and it represents three communicative meta-functions. Later it was developed to analyze different types of social processes of meaning-making (O' Toole, 1994). In Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) point of view, the three meta-functions of linguistics can be extended to visual communication. According to them, music, image, typography, color and other visual modes are similar to language. All the visual modes can realize the communicative functions as a language performs.

The notion of semiotic resources is central to social semiotics which incorporates all the artifacts and actions that people use to communicate. Semiotic resources are framed in the context of particular interests and purposes and they are the products of cultural histories. They have no fixed meanings and they keep on changing according to the people's representational needs (Jewitt & Oyama, 2001; Van Leeuwen, 2005).

The interactive meta-function is concerned about the relationships between all the participants associated with the processes of image-producing and viewing such as represented participants and interactive participants. The compositional meta-function deals with the way through which all the previous elements are integrated into a meaningful whole. For the purpose of the present study, only those strategies of Kress and Van Leeuwen's socio-semiotics approach will be used which are relevant to the research.

Sampling

The sampling of the research is purposive and based on four billboard advertisements. In this sampling technique, the units that are investigated are based on the judgment of the researcher.

Data Collection

The data has been collected by taking pictures of the billboard advertisements. The pictures have been taken from the billboards displayed in the main boulevard of Pakistan International Airline Society Lahore. This is a newly emerging market so it portrays the latest trends as new shops are opening. The billboards with the human image are making a direct connection of communication with the audience.

Data Analysis & Discussion

This section contains data analysis and discussion. For the purpose of the research four billboard advertisements have been selected for investigation this is a conceptual image because it represents the model in a fixed and constant spatial order. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2000), state that the conceptual processes portray the represented participants in terms of their generalized and more or less stable and timeless essence. They do not depict the actions and events just like the narrative processes. This image shows an attitude of the participant towards the viewers while he is in a long-standing and constant position. He is providing the information through his attitude and offering style that if the viewers want to be "Look Sharp, Live Smart", Charcoal brand will be a suitable choice for them. In this way, the advertisers are instilling their own ideologies in the minds of the viewers that it is very important for them to be looked like the represented participant to excel in their life. This is the demand of today's men to keep fit and remains attractive.
They should seem elegant, stylish and intelligent by wearing Charcoal products.

This is a medium close shot because it cuts off subject approximately at waist level. It shows that the participant is one of us and wants to socialize with us. This element of closeness invites the viewers to identify themselves with the participant by wearing the same cloths. The background of the advertisement is of very light green shades so it is of low modality. This is a contextualized image as the participant is standing on a beach where green flowing-water can be seen although it is not very much clear. According to Van Leeuwen (1996), colors have underlying connotations so they produce specific relations in particular contexts and associations that can help advertisers in their quest for even more accurate targeting.

This context is a representation of reality that if the viewers want to "Walk along the Summers", this will be a comfortable choice for them just like the cooling effect of water in summer. In the scorching heat of summer, the viewers will be magnetized by this message.

The representational meaning of the advertisement shows that they add is dense with signs in various forms such as objects, symbols, images, and writing. The above given visual is an interactive visual. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), in a visual when there is an interactive participant in the form of the viewer and

Figure 1

the represented participant are displayed, such visual informs us about the interactive relationships.

In this image, it can be seen that the participants are having no direct gaze as they are wearing sunglasses so it means that they are not demanding anything from the viewers rather they are offering information regarding the product. They have been represented as a specimen to display the products. The participants have been represented as substance and the products are given more emphasis as the products have been given more space in the frames. Every item such as shoes and bag is given its own frame which makes it more prominent for the viewer. It means that the products have been given more magnitude as compared to human beings which highlight the materialist approach. According to Marx (1979), the product and the act of producing cannot be separated. Therefore, the analysis of the advertisement cannot be detached from the economic processes. There is a definite relationship between monopoly capitalism and media (Mardoch & Golding, 1979).

This is a medium close-up shot that portrays the close social relationship. It is due to the certain size of the frame that the represented participants seem to depict an attitude. This attitude shows that by socializing with the viewers they are giving a message to have such kind of appearance is the best way to "accelerate your day" as it is written by the side of participants. Both verbal and visual codes seem to express similar meanings but by using different methods that draw on different semiotic systems (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996). They are fantasizing the young generation that this can become the reality of their own life to seem energetic and smart and they can attract their partners if they use Starlet products.

In visual images, the attitude expresses a 'point of view' or perspective (Kree & Van Leeuven, 1996). In this image, more emphasis is given to the main features of the advertisement as compared to its background so the visual has selected the subjective point of view for the viewers. The background is shown blur with grey and black shadow and the participants are fore-grounded. So there is a lack of modality and contextualization which makes it more imaginary. It projects the frontal angle which gives a message

The producers of this advertisement are portraying the ideology of that particular social way of living by projecting participants being a part of that particular society with their western style. Beasley and Danesi (2002) state that the ultimate aim of producing a suitable image for a product is to embed it in the social consciousness of the viewers.

The compositional function tells that it is the viewers' right to enjoy their life. So the use of all the products of this brand enables them to "enjoy every moment" as it is written inside the frame with a bigger font where the represented participants are providing the information. The name of the brand is written in two places. It can be seen in the outer frame on the blue color surface which is the identification of Starlet brand and secondly it has been reinforced by writing on the top of the inner frame. The use of the English language indicates the influence of globalization ideology which means sharing of knowledge, culture and communication around the world simultaneously; hence the element of modernization can be seen.

The advertisement analyzed is a snapshot depicting a famous Pakistani celebrity Atif Aslam (singer) displaying a mobile phone in his hand. It is a "narrative representation" which portrays the participant in terms of 'doing' and 'happening'. It is a large colored image given in the central frame which occupies most of the place and the relatively small place is given to the verbal signs. It implies that this human image is the central means of conveying the meaning. Advertisements are endorsed by celebrities to make the product more reliable (Beasley & Danesi, 2002). This is one of the tactics of how the advertisers convey their message forcefully.

From the point of view of framing, a disconnection is observed between the photographed image of Atif and the name of the mobile phone company. The image has been placed in the central frame while on both sides of the central frame there are two other frames that provide coding information 'Q Mobile' about the mobile phone company which is an international brand. According to Armstrong (1998), globalization is a discourse that is related to the new social construction of cognition, identity and meaning based on global conditions.

The coding orientation in the central frame gives technological information about the mobile '   i10'. The verbal signs 'I am Atif Aslam and me……..' shows that Atif is identifying himself with that mobile. Atif belongs to a specific class of people who have a glamorous and rich image so he is reflecting the ideology of that typical social class. If the viewers want to become part of that social class, they should use this kind of technology as is used by Atif. According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996), visual communication and language have equal importance to convey the fundamental meanings which are present in a culture. Each of them has its own specific systems and forms.

Figure 2

Figure 3

The left and right frames, providing 'Q Mobile' information, have been given red color which represents ideational function because red color is used to denote the company which makes Q Mobile and red signals its identity. According to Poynton and Martin 91985, 1992), colors are the mode in their own right and they play a major role to make the adverts attractive and successful. Guilfor and Smith (1959), say that this is an accepted view that red is an exciting color. It creates pleasant feelings that lead towards a favorable attitude among the viewers. Colors are selected to reflect specific brands so they become the identity of that particular class of people, products and places (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006).

As far as the social distance is concerned, the image is medium close up shot suggesting a combination of intimate and social relationships. It signifies the social nature of the image as the represented participant wants to socialize with us. It shows the

connection between the participant and the viewers. The image has a frontal angle that shows his head, shoulders, part of his hands and one hand. The frontal angle is the angle of maximum involvement. This is an eye-level shot that implies an intimate and fantasized bond between Atif and his fans. This is an action-oriented frontal angle where Ali is showing a mobile phone in his hand. The viewers can identify themselves with Atif on a personal level. The participant wants to convince us that he is one of us. Such kind of message makes the viewers think that the use of this product has become an indispensable part of the people of this society. According to Sherry 91987), advertisement has developed into a strong cultural system which works to shape and reflect consumer's sense and judgment of social reality.

It is an 'offer' image because the gaze of the model is not towards the viewers. The viewers' role is that of the invisible onlooker. The model is unaware of being looked at and seems to be offering information. The gaze seems to be looking into infinity and is having symbolic power on us. His attitude has a strong influence on the viewers as symbolic meanings are generated by the advertisers (Feathstone, 1991).

The background of the picture contains the images of high-rising buildings which can be seen as a symbol of progress and advancement. Such high-rising buildings are very few in Pakistan and if they are present they are not in the form of a cluster. It shows that this scene is taken from a developed country which is an indication of technological advancement and globalization. It depicts that the model is present there and identifying himself with the advancement of that place and conveying a message that the people around the world are using this mobile so it is an international product. According to Lie and Servaes (2000), people's perceptions of time and space are changing due to the process of globalization.

This is a contextualized image that provides us with the details of the background. We can see no abstraction in the image as both foreground and background are represented. The background has some degree of brightness and light colors while in the foreground the colors are sharper and brighter which gives more representation to the mobile and the model. Atif is wearing a black and grey dress which gives important modality cues that make the model seem natural and give the viewers a sense of closeness to reality.

This visual is a narrative image because it is unfolding action and transitory spatial arrangements. The participants are engaged in physical activity. This is a transactional process where three participants are involved and as a result, the reactional process is going on. The direction of the glance and action of one participant is enabling the other two participants to react in a certain way. Two participants are shown riding on a vehicle which is given red color, the color of the Engine brand. So, in a way they are sitting on an engine that is providing them liveliness and enjoyment and they are identifying themselves with the brand. This idea attracts the viewers to use the products of this brand if they want to make their lives happy and cheerful. The red color is the color of excitement (Smith, 1959), so it conveys meanings. According to Kress and Leeuwen (2006), the use of appropriate colors is the quickest way to enhance mood without even saying a word.

The frame size is medium long as it shows full figures which means that participants are maintaining general social relations with the viewers. The background of the

Figure 4

image shows high modality as it has colors. Shades of light grey, dark grey, light blue and dark blue can be seen. There is no contextualization of the image as the background is blank. This is a naturalistic image. The participants have been fore-grounded. In this way, they have been given importance and they carry most of the message of the products to influence the viewers. The participants do not belong to this society as they are from a foreign background so it represents the foreign culture. Therefore, the advertisement carries the message of globalization. The words of 'EnginePakistan' can be seen in the right lower corner of the advertisement which depicts that it has become part of Pakistani society. If the youth of Pakistan wants to become part of these globalized trends, they should follow these styles as they are world-famous. According to Giddens (1990), globalization is a process that strengthens the international social relations which create links among distant localities. Consequently, the events occurring far away shape the local happenings.

Conclusion

This study was conducted to investigate the advertisements on the billboards present in the semiotic landscape of Lahore. To fulfill the purpose of the research, the semiotic resources, employed in the ads, were explored by applying the social semiotic methods of Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996-2006). The findings of the study revealed that certain kinds of messages were generated under the categories of representational, interactive and compositional meanings.

These messages were embedded in the ads through the use of different types of semiotic resources such as objects, images, symbols, writing, etc which were highlighted through different strategies such as, a certain color, gaze, framing, angle, font, illumination, contextualization, etc. With the help of these strategies, the producers of the ads were able to make the signs as carriers of certain ideological meanings. As the semiotic resources used in the ads form messages, so they have the ability to change the viewers' point of view about the products and shape their culture accordingly. Meyers-Levy and Malayiya (1999) stated that the designs and strategies used by advertisers are the processes of processing advertisements. They say that in this way, people experience serendipitous sensations that are the result of the process of processing the advertisement. As it is important for the advertisers to attract their target viewers so they select the medium and strategies very carefully.

It can be concluded in these ads that the ideological influences of class, style, glamour, modernization, technological advancement, globalization, romanticism, westernization, materialism, etc have been emphasized through different semiotic resources. All these messages intend to create the viewers' identity and present the products in a way that makes them seem necessary to maintain that identity. According to Sedivy and Carlson (2011), it maybe looks like to respond to an advertisement is a consumer's personal choice, but it is beyond our conscious control of awareness when we process information. This is how advertisers make their products more popular among consumers to achieve their economic goals. As Beasley and Danesi (2002) indicate that semiotics enable us to sort out the implied meanings present in the advertisements that flow through us every day and make us active interpreters of the sign rather than the passive victims of a situation.

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