



# A CROSS-CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF PRINT ADVERTISING IN INDIA AND ENGLAND

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## INTRODUCTION

Everyday, we are bombarded with advertisements, which seep into our systems both consciously and sub-consciously. Advertisements come in various guises targeting us from every conceivable angle. Print advertisements, television commercials, radio spots, ambient advertisements, direct marketing, packaging, product placing in films, internet ads, promotional activities, advertorials .....etc, etc. the list is endless. Generally all these forms of advertisements are broadly divided into two categories, above the line (ATL) activities and below the line (BTL) activities. Print ads, TV commercials and radio spots constitute the ATL activities and the rest coming under the BTL activities. Generally it is the ATL activities which the mass perceive as advertisements. But there are no clear cut boundaries between the ATL activities and the BTL activities; one can just about become the other.

An advertisement is a communication with a certain purpose. The purpose may be a commercial one, a social one, a political one or anything that aims to propagate a particular propaganda. In advertising the audience is most vital. The communication is constructed after a particular audience is ascertained.

The successes of advertisements have scripted the success stories of many a brands and companies, with some brands even gaining an iconic status. But these communications are not created in ivory towers; they are in fact created with a feel of the pulse of the intended audience. Millions are invested in the study of the target consumer, his habits, his dreams, his beliefs, his fears, and so on.

A company can either have an in-house advertising team or employ an advertising agency to do their advertising. In the case of hiring an advertising agency, the company traditionally invites a few selected agencies to do a presentation. This process is called the "Pitching", wherein the invited agencies come up with strategies and ads that the agencies feel will best work for the company. The company then decides the agency most suitable to their needs and finalizes the mode of payment and period. The payment can either be a percentage system or payment on work to work basis or any other way the two agree upon. And as according to the selected strategy spaces in the media will be bought. This is either done by a media space buying team in the agency or by a separate media planning company hired by the company. The spaces bought could be in the newspapers, magazines, internet, TV channels, radio channels etc. The mix of the spaces will be decided by the demands of the strategy employed.

Advertising today is very much dominated by visuals. In its early stages, advertising was virtually hand led by the words. There was very little room for ambiguity much in contrast to the present scenario where the communication has become much cryptic. There has been much hue and cry in the advertising fraternity over the gradual disappearance of the copy based ads. The debate over the reasons of this disappearance is endless, but there are a few logical reasons. One reason cited by a Brazilian advertising guru, Marcelo Serpa, is that in countries of low literacy rate, such as Brazil, it is the visuals which strike the chord and cuts across through all socio-economic segments. Another reason is the explosion of the various medias fighting for the attention of the consumers every moment. If the advertisement is not arresting enough it loses out to another, and visuals are indeed most powerful for this deed.

Here in my paper, I will be undertaking a cross-cultural analysis of print advertising in India and England. The reason I have chosen these two countries is because of the many similarities and dissimilarities the two countries share. On one hand is the use of the English language and the cultural influence England has had and still continue to have on India and on the other hand is the economic disparities of the two countries. There has been much interflow of culture between the two countries but the cultures of the two countries are distinctly different.

The methodology I will be applying herein is Semiology. Semiology or semiotics is the study of signs. The Swiss linguist, Ferdinand De Saussure (1996) defined semiotics as "the science of signs". The sign can either be a linguistic sign or a non-linguistic sign like a photograph or a sketch. The focus of my paper will be on how the linguistic signs and the non-linguistic signs in a communication interact to convey a message. The French theorist Roland Barthes was the first to employ the semiotic approach in the study of advertising. According to Barthes there is much more to signs than mere denotations. For instance a linguistic sign 'Che Guevera' or a non-linguistic sign 'a picture of Che Guevera' would denote a particular man. But beneath this denotation lies a world of connotations. This sign would bring in connotations of courage, truth, freedom, selflessness, revolution, compassion, manhood, power, camaraderie, sacrifice, fight against capitalism and much more. Barthes calls this social phenomenon of invoking a world of connotations as the making of 'myth'. No wonder this mythic meaning is exploited to the maximum by advertisers. A particular picture of Che Guevera is the highest selling picture in the world. And not just ads this picture virtually present everywhere, it is printed on t-shirts, mugs, caps etc. This picture

is also one of the most favoured pictures for tattooing also.

Advertisements are loaded with signs. On the surface the signs are just denotations of what they represent or refer. But scratch it a little and we find a world of connotations hidden beneath the signs. To start with let's take an advertisement of the perfume "NINA RICCI". In this advertisement we have a beautiful young white woman in a pink flowing gown looking longingly at a NINA RICCI bottle that is hung like an apple on an apple tree. There's a pile of apples behind her and some more lying in a trail from in front of her. Here the photo of the female acts as a sign which have numerous connotations. She stands for feminine beauty, youth, sexual desirability and innocence. There is an ethereal look in the image of the model but she is not dressed in white which acts as a sign of heavenly beauty and human qualities. The background is a resplendent interior which is all in white which connotes a heavenly world. The NINA RICCI bottle hung is a sign that has numerous connotations. The intended connotation here is the biblical apple, the fruit of knowledge and temptation. The connotation here is of Eve and her succumbing to the temptation of the forbidden fruit. But there is no sly Satan around with his sophistry. The woman here is one who is not a victim but one who decides what she wants. Beneath the bottle is written, NINA RICCI with the tagline, "the new magical fragrance". This linguistic sign complements the above said connotations. The result is that the perfume also gets associated with the connotations of feminine beauty, youth, sexual desirability and innocence. This advertisement appeared in the January issue of the Indian edition of ELLE magazine. The intended audience of this magazine is the educated Indian woman who is or wants to be in charge of her life. She is able to decipher the underlying message of the advertisement. It is a compliment to her knowledge as well as a celebration of her beauty, spirit and independence. There is no blatant attempt to make the consumer to try the product, giving the subtle message that her thinking mind is being acknowledged. This advertisement would have the same appeal to the educated woman of England. This advertisement points out the influence of the English on India. The biblical allusion would be easily deciphered by the Indian women. The question that arises is would the reverse be true? Would the English women be able to decipher an Indian epic allusion just as easily? The answer is a straightforward 'NO'.

The above discussed advertisement is a full page ad, and on it adjacent page is an article that discusses 'Beauty news from across the globe'. This context further strengthens our idea of the product speaking to the Indian women of global dreams.

India is a land of festivals and this aspect is exploited to the maximum advertisers. Take for instance 'Diwali' or the festival of light. On this occasion huge discounts are given on products. This is a period of big spendings by consumers as families. On the advertisements it is the happiness of the family that is projected. Then newspaper along with television is the main mediums in the advertisements of this festival. For example in an advertisement in the 'Delhi Times, 27th October, 2008' there was an advertisement for the discounts available at the 'Big Bazaar' outlets. In the advertisement besides the product

shots and the corresponding discounts we see a picture of a family comprising of a couple, their parents and their son and daughter. This is an icon that is considered the perfect family. The connotations that comes alongwith is happiness and well-being. The connotations here too merges with the products. And the intended message that goes is, buy 'Big Bazaar' products and gain health and happiness for your family. The linguistic sign that comes along with is the offers available with various products and most importantly the headline of the advertisement. The intended consumer is the educated but not necessarily rich class. The offers are upfront with the prices in bold and highlighted. This is to attract the price conscious consumer. The headline reads, 'DHAMAKEDAR OFFERS JAGMAGAATE TYOHAR KE LIYE'. This is significant because even though the alphabets are in English the language is Hindi. The Times of India is a newspaper meant for family reading. This makes it the perfect vehicle to bring about a family oriented communication. The point I want to highlight here is that in Indian ads the projection of the family plays a key role. Whether it is cooking oil, or a pressure cooker, or a car, the happiness and well-being of the family is a myth most taken advantage of.

But an ignorance of culture can be disastrous to the product also. For instance the swastika symbol as a sign is part of India's traditions. It is an auspicious symbol of much positive connotations. Its use is quite common in Indian advertising. The very symbol when used in the western world would instantly invoke connotations of Hitler's madness. The connotations would be extremely negative.

Advertisements of beef are quite common in the western countries. But such an ad if featured in an Indian ad would be hara-kiri for the company. In a British edition of Hello! magazine, there is an ad full page advertisement of beef. In the ad there is a sketched picture of a smiling Ian Botham in cricket gear, lying down on a rug of a tiger's skin. In front of him is a glass of wine and behind him a fireplace is burning. In his hand he is holding a plate of beef dish. To break down this visual signs, we have at the heart of it Ian Botham, the connotations that come along with is the pride of England, manhood, the man who successfully took on arch rivals Australia in cricket, adventurous and a man who loves his food and his drink. These connotations are furthered strengthened by the visual signs of the wine glass and the animal skin rug. And complementing the visual signs is the linguistic sign that reads, 'delicious beef is impossible to resist'. This sign is in quotes with the signature Beefy beneath that ends with a sketch of the heart. Combining this sign with the relaxed smiling face of Botham and we get a connotation of big-hearted hero of England enjoying his food. On the bottom left hand corner is the website of the company. The mythic meaning gets transfused into the product. Another linguistic sign at the bottom of the ad reads, 'for tender and succulent beef, look for the mark of quality.' And besides this is the visual sign that is the marker for good quality. The visual sign is also encoded with meanings. It is of a picture of a meadow on the left with the linguistic sign on the right saying, 'QUALITY STANDARD beef English'. Followed by a picture of a flag of England. The visual sign of the meadows here

connote cows raised in the open and grazing on natural food.

In another issue of the British edition of Hello magazine there is an ad for chips. Here the ad is a copy based one. The linguistic sign that dominates the ad goes as such, 'Without warning the gentle nudging fork thrust itself deep into the glistening depths of the chip with almost clinical expertise. Impaled and helpless I eagerly devoured in all its beef dripping glory.' Here the description drawn is of the process of having the chip with a fork. But there is an implied imagery behind it. The imagery is of a sexual act. The deliberate use of the words like 'gentle nudge', 'thrust', 'glistening depths', 'helpless' and 'dripping glory' creates an image of an intercourse. The result connotation is of an act as enjoyable as a sexual act. And this connotation is transferred to the visual sign of the McCain chips package that is placed beneath the linguistic sign. The intended audience is the young adult and above who are interested in fashion and the lifestyle of the famous. As the result the ad does not strike a jarring note.

In Indian ads the focus is on the collective and less on the individual. The celebration of the success of the country in numerous fields or the happiness and well being of the family is a recurrent motif. The success of the Indian cricket team rides along with its huge investment of ads. The success of the Indian cricket team under Mahendra Singh Dhoni's captaincy has elevated him to the status of a demi-god with offers for endorsements piling up on his doorsteps. Dhoni along with Sachin Tendulkar are the faces of a number of brands. Here one can draw a comparison to the success of Vishwanathan Anand in the field of chess. He has single-handedly taken on the might of the formidable forces of chess and come out victorious as a world champion in all formats of the game. The trail he has blazed is much bigger in scale and noteworthy, but his market value as compared to the cricketers is minimal. Or take for instance the success of boxers and wrestler in the recently concluded Olympics, the conversion into endorsements has been very little. If one were to search a reason for the huge popularity of the cricketers with the mass, what could be it? If it is the pride of bringing laurels to the country the Olympics would beat hands down any sports event in the world except maybe the football world cup. The answer would lie in the Indian psyche's emphasis on the collective. The success of the Indian cricket team is a triumph of the collective Indian spirits. But here one can argue about other team games like why not the women's hockey team which has brought much laurels to the country. The answer to this would be our gender-biased attitude because during the successful period of the men's hockey team the players too got the kind of attention the male cricketers are getting now. As Mary Kom, the women's world champion in boxing rightly pointed out asking how many more world titles she needs to bring home to get her due recognition.

In an ad for Bosch dishwasher that appeared in a British edition of Good Housekeeping we see the use of the visual sign of a camel and a Bosch dishwasher side by side. And on top of the dishwasher visual the linguistic sign reads, 'When it comes to managing scarce resources, Bosch leads the way'. And beneath the dishwasher visual the linguistic signs give the facts and

figures of how the dishwasher saves water as compared to hand washing and how its use is also hygienic. In this ad the connotations of the camel are reliability and its rare quality of efficiency with very little water intake. These connotations are transferred to the Bosch dishwasher.

In ads in England the word 'you' and 'your' is most emphasised. This linguistic sign 'you' brings along a whole lot of connotations. It brings along the idea of the success and well being of the individual. It points out to the English psyche and the importance they put to their individuality as compared to the collective. For instance in an ad for Electrolux washing machine, the headline reads, 'We were thinking you should set the time your wash takes, not the machine.'. In an ad for holiday package, the headline reads, 'Go on, - treat yourself!'

Humour in ads in England is much more subtle. Take for instance the ads for 'The Economist'. In one of the most famous ads the linguistic sign reads, 'I never read The Economist' and beneath the line is written within brackets, 'Management trainee, aged 42'. Here the humour is aimed at the intelligent audience, the ones who read The Economist. The intelligence of the idea is being appreciated by the message in the ad. A gap is left in the loop of communication for the reader to connect. The message in the ad is very simple, it means unless you read The Economist you won't be successful. It is the subtlety of the humour that the audience enjoys. There is not even a logo of the product. The template is a certain shade of red in the background with the line on it. Here the template becomes the non-linguistic sign; it connotes a whole lot of meanings. It connotes understatement, subtlety, sophistication, intelligence, minimalism and a sense of humour. All these connotations projected by the product is then identified with by the readers. All of The Economist ads work on this same template. Either the message is through a simple line or a simple visual. This is an ad that ran in England for years. It has become one of those classic ads whose spoofs have even gained much success. For instance one of the spoofs of this ad was ran in an ad of Wonderbra. Here the template was the same, even the line, "I never read The Economist" was the same. But beneath this line was written, 'Linda Foster, CEO Aged 29'. And in the right hand bottom corner was the logo of the Wonderbra. Here the sophisticated subtle humour of The Economist is mocked at in a light hearted banter.

In Indian ads the humour is more slapstick, especially the ads targeted at the mass. And the lines mostly tend to be in a combination of Hindi and English. In India certain ads are also made with the international audience in mind. The motive behind is to get one of the most prestigious international ad awards. It is much like movies in India made to cater to the Oscar sensibility. And the Oscar of the advertising industry is the Cannes awards. One such award that won the gold in Cannes award is an ad created by Piyush Pandey, one of the pioneers of Indian advertising. The ad is an awareness message saying that second smoking is also lethal. In the ad the visual signs dominate the message. There is the picture of a western cowboy in his traditional gear, of boots, hat, jeans, a handkerchief round the neck and so on. In the background is the wide desert. The connotations associated with the cowboy is one of toughness,

tamer of wild forces, silent man of action and so on. These according to Barthes is the mythic meaning created by this icon. The twist in the visual lies in a dead horse lying down by his feet. The horse is visual sign which connotes faithfulness, strength, companion, beauty and valour. But the horse is dead here. The expression of the cowboy is of a quizzical look with his right hand rubbing his chin and looking at the dead horse. And complementing these visual signs is a linguistic sign that reads, 'Second hand smoke kill'. The reader is left to connect the message between the visual signs and the linguistic sign.

The emotional factor in the Indian ads is also quite high. For instance the tagline for HDFC STANDARD LIFE goes as 'Sar Utha Ke Jiyo'. And the headline of one of the ads goes as 'No matter what, my family will live with pride'. The visual that comes with the line is of a smiling father looking on with pride, a smiling mother looking with happiness and pride at their son who is jubilant with a won Cup in his hand. Another example would be an ad for Coca-Cola India. Here the ad shows a couple with their two kids enjoying a picnic. And the headline goes as "We can't make holidays go on forever. But we sure are a part of memories that last a lifetime. Here in the visual signs we see Coca-Cola products amidst the eateries spread out.

The element of tradition is also quite high in Indian ads. In ad for ING (a banking, insurance and life investment company) we see a young woman seeking her blessings from an elephant. The head of the woman is bowed, her palms clasped in the praying mode. The trunk of the elephant holds a twenty rupee note and is over the woman's head as if giving her the blessings. The headline that goes along with the visual goes as, 'Money is more than just money. It is someone's blessing.'

In advertisements for alcohols there is a big difference. In India drinking alcohol is not a part of family cultures. Nor is it seen in a positive light. Even the government directives are quite strict. There is ban on alcohol advertisements in fact. But the advertisements are still done through surrogate advertisements. For instance the ads for Bacardi is as ads for Bacardi Music CDs. To take one of the Bacardi ads, we have a young couple in each others arms and in the background is a strawberry tree. And the headline goes as 'Get delicious with the flavoured mix'. The message is implied here. The visual sign of the strawberry connotes the strawberry flavoured Bacardi drinks. This connotation is built further by use of the phrase, 'flavoured mix' in the headline.

The portrayal of gender in the advertisements of the two countries is quite similar in some area and quite different in some other areas. To start with the differences, the portrayal of the Indian women in ads for household products is most of the time the all-rounder mother, who plays all her roles to perfection. She is the perfect mother, the perfect host, the loving wife, the adorable neighbour and the career wise woman.

This is not so much the case with British advertisements. The focus is most on the individuality of the woman, her personal dreams, career success and so on.

In terms of similarity, this is much evident in fashion advertising. Say for instance in ads perfumes and dresses. In both Indian and British advertising we see the men as in control of himself. Even if he standing alone, the posture would be erect and show signs of independence and self-reliance. His hands if holding something would hold it firmly Whereas the woman is projected as needing a support. Her body language would be one of leaning on, holding onto something or lying in a state of surrender.

In ads where there are both man and woman. The visual would be one where the man is in charge and the woman leaning or holding on to him. It is not to say that all gender portrayals in fashion advertising are like this. There are even brands that thrive on the opposite, like Kookai, a fashion brand for women, the advertisements of which show the subjugation of men by women.

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