Semiotic Insight into Cosmetic Advertisements in Pakistani Print Media

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Abstract

Roland Barthes, key theorist of this study, defined semiotics as study of all signs including words, pictures, music, sound, non verbal expressions and their interrelationship. Research in hand refers to problems and research questions about understanding of denotative, connotative, deep and symbolic meanings of brand name, text, slogan, logo, picture, art work, colour scheme, linguistic and cultural changes generated by advertisements. To answer these questions, Barthes’ Semiotic Theory comprising linguistic, denotative, connotative, Coded Iconic and Non Coded Iconic Messages, was employed in semiotic analysis phase of this research. In qualitative analysis of print media ads, exploratory and interpretive research approaches were applied to investigate participants’ responses. Overall objectives of this research were focused on elaboration as well as exploration of brand name, linguistic message, logo, monogram and photographic meanings of five print media cosmetics advertisements. Moreover, all ads are based on well planned semiotic techniques to convince viewers. Present study strengthened the view that ads are basically by products of cultural norms and adherent to prevalent customs of society. Fulfillment of objectives led to contribution to existing knowledge in diversified aspects like academic, cultural, social and language change at global and indigenous levels. At global level, this work highlighted Pakistani products, cultural values, work of advertisers and their semiotic analysis.

Keywords: Semiotics, Coded Iconic Message, Non Coded Iconic Message, denotative, connotative, props.
Introduction

It sheds light on semiotics, significance, objectives and research questions. Semiotics inculcates learning about sounds, words, signs, logo, monogram, pictures and their analysis, quite naturally, an advertisement is replete with them. The word advertisement was French word “avertissement” whose meaning was “public notice” (Harper, 2001). Advertisements have magical charm to capture attention and convince mind to purchase advertised products and services. Ads mesmerize us and lead us to derive the meaning which are yearned by the advertiser (Williamson, 1978). Advertisements build a fascinating utopian world rich with luxurious paraphernalia, consequently, people idealize it to be a part of elite class and dream world.

As significance of this study is concerned, advertisements surround us in form of print media, electronic media, sms, mms, audio, hoardings, web based ads etc. Everyday a person watches three thousand ads (Kilbourne, 1999). Moreover, advertisements mould our culture, life style, priorities, fashion, psychological makeup and language style etc. Main research problem is that many people look at ads and buy things under its influence but they are unaware of connotative, denotative and symbolic meanings of features of certain ads, hence, this study will fill this semiotic and information gap. Focus of this study is to expose semiotic features of five cosmetic ads.

Main objectives of this study are to infer and elaborate meanings of brand name, captions, photograph, icon, logo and monogram. To fulfill them, one primary and four subsidiary research questions were raised.

1. Which semiotic interpretations of features of certain ads make them symbolic piece of art?
2. How are semiotic aspects of brand name interpreted in certain ads?
3. Which semiotic perspectives are found in text and slogan of ads?
4. What are semiotic interpretations of “rhetoric of image” or photograph in ads?
5. How do Coded Iconic themes, monograms or company logos transmit the multidimensional aspects of semiotics?

Literature Review

This section presents snapshots of some prominent developments in semiotics. Plato opined that that verbal signs are unable to convey complete idea and message of sign is indirect (Coseriu, 1970 as cited in Noth, 1995). Aristotle believed that utterances can be named signs of thoughts. He was of the view that structures of signs were different but modern semioticians opposed it (Kretzman, 1974). Saussure studied signs with psychological lense, hence, signifier and signifieds were developed in mind. Ground, object, interpretant and representament structure a complete sign (Peirce, 1902).
Roland Barthes presented yard stick of analysis of advertisement while he himself analyzed Panzani ad. Theoretical Framework of this study is based on Roland Barthes’ semiotic theory. Its constituents are: Linguistic Message for example brand name, slogan or any statement. Coded Iconic Message shows picture of performer or prop. It carries denotative and connotative messages. Non Coded Iconic Message refers to cultural meaning and it makes a link between a picture and a linguistic message (Barthes & Heath, 1977). The Linguistic Message comprises words, labels, slogans and captions, thus, it has rooted in the image (Barthes, 1967). Furthermore, literal and figurative messages strengthen myth and propagated idea of the advertisement. The Literal Image is shaped with random ordered signs. The first sign consists of the panorama, slogan and cultural shades to persuade the target customer. The second sign possess typical colour scheme, assonance and message which lead to home country of the product (Barthes, 1967). Study in hand integrated colour symbolism. The third sign has compilation of pictures, images and diagrams to convey the idea of the product. The Iconic or Symbolic Image has images or photographs of signifiers (Barthes, 1967). Abovementioned four signs generate an absolute image of a product.

Under the impact of Barthes Semiotic Theory, Katherine Frith propounded tripartite theory, advertiser’s semantic layer, apparent expression of meaning and cultural meaning, to analyze advertisements (Frith, 1997). It is just replica of Barthes Semiotic Theory.

Methods

Primary and subsidiary Research questions of study in hand chalked out a plan to research methodology, required data, tool, data generation and data analysis. Barthes Semiotic Theory comprising of Linguistic, Coded and Non Coded Iconic Messages, was applied to unveil denotative, connotative, symbolic aspects of five cosmetic ads as he did in analysis of Panzani ad. Qualitative Research Method was applied because of exploration of semiotic perspectives of participants about ads. Moreover, exploratory and interpretive approaches were applied. Exploratory research approach relies on word form data and it tests theories (Armstrong, 1970). Interpretive research approach analytically discloses meaning making practices of participants. Five cosmetic ads were selected from Mag the weekly and the News from January 2011 to December 2012. To generate data, fifteen open ended questions were raised in the questionnaire and to generate data, two questionnaires were specified for each ad. Ten research participants were chosen from M.Com students of UCP sub campus of Rawalpindi and Islamabad.

In Data Analysis procedure, First of all, qualitative responses were read minutely. The second point was to codify responses of participants for analysis. “Setting Code” (1) informs basic knowledge about the brand etc. “Perspective Code” (9, 10) elaborated general understanding of meaning and cultural values. “Subjects’ Way of Thinking Code” (4, 5) was applied to study understanding and interpretations of ads. “Relationship and Social Structure Codes” (7) led to understand tendencies and behaviour of participants about characters and
cultural values portrayed in the ad. Third step was to place full or partial response in the relevant category. It included “narratives directly from the respondents” in inverted commas to validate data (A Brief Guide to the Analysis of Open-Ended Questions, April 25, 2013). In fourth stage, all generated data was summarized, explained and interpreted. Lastly, the researcher filled semiotic gap, logical views, semantic perspectives, historical insight, symbolic dimensions, logo, monogram information, innate psychology, colour symbolism with website of the product and some other authentic sources, consequently, five cosmetic ads were analyzed on the pattern of Barthes’ analysis of Panzani ad which worked as a model for semiotic analysis. In this research, analysis was categorized in fifteen answers of the questionnaire to comprehend the ad analysis easily.

Results and Discussion

1. Poly Color

1. Denotative layer of word Poly Color shows “many colours.” Connotatively a person should smarten himself/herself with a variety of hair colours. Schwarzkopf is a brand name of Henkel, a German company, was founded in 1876 by Fritz Henkel. Henkel earned prestigious name in beauty care products, laundry and home care (Company History – Henkel, 2013).

2. Its slogan is “Poly Color makes me a Pretty Woman.” Poly Color is not only for aged persons but it is also used as a means of hair adornment with many colours. Now a deficiency is converted to beauty. Advertisers want to enhance use of hair colour creams, so they entrap fair sex that hair colour should be according to taste and personality.
3. The background of logo is purple while foreground consists of golden coloured image of head suggesting that Poly Color is applied on head. Below it, golden coloured word “Schwarzkopf” is written. Underneath, brand name “POLY COLOR” is written in white hue. Moreover, it is written in upper case to seize concentration of viewers. Below it, “Cream Hair Color” has been written between two parallel lines which suggest that colour will penetrate into hair roots.

4. Coded Iconic Message shows charming lass wearing white jersey. She has golden dyed hair and she is smiling with feeling of prestige and esteem. Her hair is lying on her shoulder, back side and front side. Non Coded Iconic Message exhibits that the world has become a global village where golden hair style is being copied by Asian girls. On the other hand, Western women prefer black hair colour and jewellery like Asian girls. Again golden hair gives fairer look to Asians and they feel accomplishment to be westernized. Moreover, props are shown in the bottom of the ad to recognize Poly Color easily.

5. Golden, grey, white and purple colours have been used artistically. Golden colour is associated with prosperity, ultra modernism and monarchic class. Grey symbolizes diffidence, fortification and staunch belief. Purple colour is symbol of dignity, holiness, lucidity and dominance. White shows wholesomeness of ingredients, perfect appearance and free from harmful chemical effects (Symbolism of Color: Using Color for Meaning, n.d).

6. Her face expresses laughter so that her several teeth are visible. Her happiness, confidence, beauty, charm and smile satisfy aesthetic sense.

7. She is taking side pose and showing her golden hair with status and “happiness” in golden hair because she has become an attractive girl.

8. Her makeup and dress are conforming to our socio cultural pattern. Natural colour of Pakistani women’s hair is black but ultra modern women started to dye their hair in golden colour and in other different shades to emulate appearance of blondes.

9. This ad prepares women that colour is not for those who have grey hair but colour is for beautification. As rainbow scatters colours, likewise, women pick those colours for their hair.

10. Golden hair practically shows beauty of hair and sense of foreign appearance to impress other women.

11. Smiling pure image of model, her golden hair and German origin of the product attract mind and soul towards this ad.
12. According to one participant, “the ad doesn’t convince me.” Divergently, second participant opines that linguistic message, “special creamy formula”, “deep long lasting color”, “more beautiful, more shiny” and “healthy hair” persuade to purchase it.

13. Primarily its audience is women as the pure image indicates but men also use this product.

2. Pantene Pro-V

1. Denotatively, Pantene name is given after its basic ingredient of panthenol. Pro means proclivity. “V” refers to vitamin. Connotatively, it is replete with nutritious “vitamins and nutrients” which are part and parcel of hair strength. One participant opines that “it has been designed of some special type of chemicals, herbs that are necessary for hair.” Originally in 1945, Hoffman-LaRoche prepared aromatic Pantene shampoo in glass bottles in Switzerland. Later in 1985, Procter & Gamble became its owner (Dyer, Davis, 2004).

2. One participant opines that panthenol coloured slogan of ad shows research percentage that “89% choose Pantene for less hair fall.” Actually statistical figures speak clearer and louder than verbosity. “89%” implies that 89 % population apply Pantene to decrease hair fall. Connotatively, it shows that data was acquired with trustworthy research. One participant wrote, “I interpret the slogan of such product will strictly prevent hair fall and also prevent from dandruff.” Another view about slogan is that “Women across Pakistan have seen the proof.” Most of women idealise beauty charm of some celebrity. Here actresses, hair expert, editor of magazine, TV host, TV star and famous model express their personal responses that Pantene shampoo lessens hair fall. Moreover, their signatures authenticate their remarks, henceforth; it can be considered an affidavit.
3. Celebrities are beauty icons for Pakistani women. Following similes are associated with celebrities thus, “strength like Asma’s”, “shine like Aamina”, “just like my hair” and “long hair like mine.”

4. Its logo shows three golden wavy hair strands while three indicates infinity as hair is numerous. Brand name “PANTENE PRO-V” is written horizontally touching the lower part of golden strand. Furthermore, “logo is clearly indicating shiny” “long and fresh hair.”

5. Analyzing Coded Iconic Message, in first picture, Indian “gorgeous” artist Shilpa with “beautiful and shiny hair” wearing white skirt walks exposing her bouncy and lively hair. In second pure image, Barza’s split ended hair got natural brilliance by use of Pantene. In third pure image, Asma’s healthy hair is covering her shoulders. In fourth image, TV actress Ayesha exposed her top secret of super soft silky hair which is result of Pantene. In fifth picture, hair expert Meher recommends use of Pantene for most beautiful, long and strong hair. In sixth picture, model and TV star Aamina’s lustrous hair are outcome of Pantene. One participant remarked that “famous actors (actresses) are greatly attractive and inspire and convince the customers.”

In the middle, a hair brush is shown without falling hair. Non Coded Iconic Message is that use of Pantene will finish hair fall completely. Red, green and silver diamonds in flower form have been shown to ornament hair with them. Non Coded Iconic Message is that after use of Pantene, hair will brightness and gloss like diamonds. Furthermore, hair will be so beautiful that every female will desire to ornament them with diamonds.

A picture shows that some panthenoles or vitamin B5, basic ingredient of Pantene shampoo, are coming out of a bottle.

In the bottom of right corner, three panthenoles and two Pantene shampoo bottles are exposed as props. Their lids are black and on front side Pantene logo is shown. Beneath green coloured foam shows its natural vitamin ingredients.

6. One participant posits about colour scheme that “the black colour compares the fresh hair and the green colour shows the clean environment.” Yellow colour is taken from panthenole. White colour is also extensively used in the ad. Yellow symbolizes jollity, confidence, romanticism, anticipation. Moreover, shine in hair resembles sunshine. White is symbol of admiration, purity of ingredients, birth of new hair, cleanliness young-looking appearance for all types of hair (Symbolism of Color: Using Color for Meaning, n.d).

7. “By looking at the pictures of models, they dominate feelings of a person because of shine and beauty of their hair.” In other words, “The performance of Shilpa Shetty influenced my feelings because I know that she cares her hair in reality.” All performers satisfy aesthetic sense and influence all women.
8. “Top models of Asia are chosen for ad with fantastic body postures in which their hair are prominent, so one immediately gets attracted.” Discussing Shilpa’s posture, “right hand on neck, hair on left side (chest) and smile on face gives complete message.” All performers in the ad are smiling in sensuous as well as sensual style and they feel pride in beautiful hair.

9. The tint of linguistic message of ad resembles with colour of panthenole. Shilpa’s dress is thoroughly Western and it is not conforming to Eastern culture. Performers’ sleeveless dresses are not matching with conservative pattern of our society. Their hair style and make up are conforming to our neo modern “socio cultural traditions” and values.

10. This product changed old way of cleaning hair with soaps and now commoners shampoo their hair. People have become conscious of hair care and their fall. They strive to keep their hair bouncy, silky and healthy. Another cultural change occurred that now women prefer short hair rather than long hair of olden times. Shilpa’s dress is skirt which gives an alien and attractive feeling to be emulated. In craze to westernize Pakistanis, dress designers have designed such apparently Pakistani dresses which are replica of English skirts.

11. “Scenery and brand are related to each other in colour scheme...” “All things are related with hair and their beauty” for instance Pantene bottle is white and background of the ad and dresses of Shilpa, Ayesha and Asma are also white. The reason behind is that “the white colour shows cleanliness and the background displayed the fresh environment.”

12. Cat walk of Shilpa exhibiting vivacious bouncy hair, “attractive colours” of the ad and inclusion of gorgeous models, TV stars with super soft silky shiny hair seize interest.

13. “Top models are chosen for this ad, so by their grace and beauty, it definitely convinced me.” Their inspiring look and remarks, sharing of beauty secrets convince viewers to buy it.

14. Its consumers are those who aspire to have lengthy and strong hair without hair fall.
3. Care Fairness Vanishing Cream

1. Denotatively, care means tending complexion. Its linguistic message is that Care has covered full day needs regarding fairness, beauty and “fashion”. It doesn’t present oily or sticky feeling which resembles with application of ghee. Its frequent use makes skin fair and milky white which are considered beauty in Asian countries. Asian countries interact with sweltering temperature, so, Care Fairness Vanishing Cream is the best remedy. The word three refers to triple protection of skin and guarantee fairness.

2. Its Urdu slogan meant, “What else is better than Care!” No product can excel it in fairness results.

3. Its monogram is circled ‘C’ which is first letter of Care cream. It is written with red colour on white background and its connotative meaning is white colour with pink complexion.

4. The ad has three categories of Coded Iconic Message. First is picture of model, second group of three pictures show prominent characteristics of Care and third group shows three props of packing, jar and sachet.

5. “White, pink and red colours” are used in the ad. White symbolizes purity, spotlessness, fairness, chastity and innocent beauty. Red shows euphoria, thrilling, “unity” and magnetism. Pink stands for “girlish” look, unrestricted adoration and nurturing nature of glamour which demands constant care (Symbolism of Color: Using Color for Meaning, n.d).

6. Fairness of performer attracts spectators and satisfies their aesthetic sense.

7. Her posture is raising right hand with bended elbow indicates oath style which promises fairness and beauty to users. This oath taking style is adopted by players in the international Olympics. Furthermore, her facial expressions show confidence, smile and beauty of fairness.
8. Her makeup, hair style, three metal bangles on right hand, two rings and sleeveless dress mirror Pakistani traditions and cultural values. This ad shows “Pakistaniity”. Urdu and English linguistic messages are comprehensive for global and local customers as well as educated and Urdu literate individuals.

9. Beauty industry is ever flourishing industry even during the worst economic recessions. The ad affects fair sex to adopt Care fairness Vanishing Cream to enhance fair colour which is a speciality of beauty. Care has become need of women. One participant commented about performer’s picture thus, “The picture of a girl which is very bad in socio Islamic society.” Linguistically, we observe that husbands ask wives to take care. Its connotative message is to enhance fairness and attraction. In dresses, her sleeveless dress is being adopted by ultra mod girls. Consequently, ads influence dress, language, selection of products and elite class icons.

10. In its background setting, camera film roll of well-known actresses have been publicized. Its connotative meaning is that all showbiz celebrities use Care Fairness Vanishing Cream. It is mere spell and beauty enhancing effect of Care cream that now they are earning name, fame and money in showbiz. The background of ad is white and pink. Its first connectivity is with white and pink skin caused by Care products. Its second alliance is with cream jar’s pink lid and white and pink jar.

11. Exaggeratingly, Care cream declares fulfilment of all beauty needs “all day.” Practically it just seems hyperbole.

12. Beautiful rosy face, fair skin of face, hands and arms and beaming eyes attract our attention to this ad that how this beauty has been attained. Then answer of this inquiry is Care Fairness Vanishing Cream.

13. Its positive and fair results on model’s face and mentioned benefits on its label “Oil free moisturising, extra fairness and triple sun screen” induce viewers to purchase it.

14. Its chief consumers are mostly female.
4. Swiss Miss

1. Swiss Miss is a “popular cosmetic brand.” Denotatively “Swiss” is a citizen of Switzerland. Generally “Miss” refers to a young girl who is a winner of beauty competition. This beautifying product is used by beauty contest winners and it can enable others to be miss world.

2. All ladies are ambitious to remain young and beautiful forever, so advertisers exploited their ambition to sell cosmetics, hence, beauty industry never collapse even in worst economic conditions of the world.

3. Its slogan is “Beauty is swiss miss.” It suggests that if a lady wishes real fascinating beauty, she must use swiss miss products. “After using it, we are looking like a Swiss lady” or the most beautiful lady of Switzerland. Beauty has been personified in the form of Swiss Miss. Swiss Miss products enhance beauty in common women and make them special even crown winner of beauty contest.

4. Its monogram is shown with white coloured full word of “Swiss Miss” in Blackadder ITC font face.

5. In pure image, a charismatic and gorgeous girl with red lipstick and red nail polish is shown in face close up. She is keeping her left index finger on her lips in vertical position as a silence gesture. “Makeup of the girl especially her lipstick is associating the brand. Nail polish is also essential part of it.” “The nails of girl are looking like the bud of flower.” Non Coded Iconic
Message shows that after visualising such attraction, women must use products of Swiss Miss Company.
Two props are shown in the ad. The label of the nail polish shows slogan “GET, SET, GO.” Its connotative meaning is that a woman ought to “get” or buy Swiss Miss products, apply them or “set” them on the relevant body part and “go” to any function with confidence and sense of superiority.


7. Presence of “beautiful model is enough” because “she is attracting us” to her bewitching charm.

8. “With bright makeup, lipstick, nail polish, it is carrying the message of beauty.” Her facial expressions show confidence and tranquillity. She is hushing others by placing her index finger on her lips. Her posture also exhibits lips and nails adorned with cosmetics. Quite ironically, women always spread the secret about which they are told never expose before others.

9. Her makeup and hairstyle are in compliance with Pakistani elite class social and cultural fashion.

10. “Ladies do makeup on every happy event and festivals” to make it special and rejoicing.

11. In its widely covered black background, red coloured nail polish, lipstick and appearance of the artist look stunning. On right side, red and white spots are perceptible which show association with Swiss Miss products.

12. “Its photo and slogan” capture participants’ concentration.

13. “Quality of brand” compels me to purchase Swiss Miss products.

14. Women and girls are its target customers because they are fond of beauty enhancing products.
5. Stillman’s Skin Bleach Cream

1. The name of this cream is “Stillman’s Skin Bleach Cream.” “Stillman” means such an extraordinary and impressive prettiness that any man will stand still under its magical spell. Bleach cream scrubs and cleanse black dull skin and gives a whitening effect with suppleness and beauty. “It can make the face fresh.”

Stillman is an American cosmetic product which is being prepared since 1900’s (Green Stillman’S - Skin Light Cream - Best Skin Whitening Products - Stillmans, 2009).

2. Its slogan is “Stillman’s Beauty” to detain glances of any man with admiration. It has been observed that some men see a bewitching beauty and stick there. It carries the main linguistic message consisting of “The ultimate fairness cream.” Fairness is considered charm in our country. Consequently, becoming fair is a reverie of every female. Exploiting this weakness of Asian women, fairness creams are sold with price hike.

3. Its logo shows an American origin hummingbird which is the smallest and fastest bird (The Hummingbird Facts and Information, 2010). In its back, there is a double bordered oval shape with white background. White oval shape is a mark of fairness which is the chief object of this product.

4. Coded Iconic Message is shown with half picture of a girl with fair and gorgeous complexion. “Smile on the face and beauty of the face” show her age less than “16 years.” “Whiteness of face” is certainly linked with results of Stillman’s cream. Non Coded Iconic Message is to get such mesmerizing fairness is possible with permanent use of Stillman’s Skin Bleach Cream.
5. “White face is symbol of joy and pleasure” and they are dominating in this ad. Green colour shows natural ingredients, healthy skin, windfall, renewal, and youthful appearance, advent of spring and jealousy of other girls. White colour refers to fairness, cuteness, marriage, spotlessness, simplicity, sanitation, peace, virtue, youth, snow and excellence (Symbolism of Color: Using Color for Meaning, n.d).

6. Her good looks, smile, innocence, fairness of face as well as neck and aquiline features please aesthetic sense and women idealise her fair complexion.

7. Her direct eye contact with camera shows her trust in her beauty and style. Her smiling face wins hearts of all viewers.

8. Her dress, hair style and makeup are conforming to our social fabric. “Pakistaniicity” is evident in her appearance and gestural signs.

9. This ad promotes frequent use of bleach creams to whiten complexion. Women prefer to use chemical cosmetics to be fair rather than home made things like UBTAN etc.

10. Background aqua marine green colour has semblance with costume colour of the performer and its dark colour is found in pack and jar of cream.

11. A comic statement is written in the form of an advice to buy it from “your trusted shopkeeper.” To evaluate a “trusted shopkeeper” is a complex liability for a consumer.

12. “Colour, beauty of brand and beauty of woman” catch viewers’ concentration.

13. “Colour and woman” with beauteous and fair complexion convinced to buy it.

14. In the bottom, in right corner of the ad, comparison between original and fake Stilman’s cream have been exhibited in order to buy original product.

Conclusion

Major findings of this study are: i. All features of ads are replete with symbolic and multidimensional messages. ii. Ads are basically by product of cultural norms and they also reciprocally influence that culture. iii. Slogans of ads are catchy, memorable, full of poetic devices, combination of English and Urdu. iv. Logos, monograms of companies showed multidimensional meanings which reflected philosophy and corporate image behind an ad. The results of this study suggest a number of new avenues for research which have been divided into word, sound, picture and interdisciplinary studies. In words, speeches, titles of books, films, plastic discourse and literature can be analyzed semiotically. Voices of poems, announcements,
special stress to create meaning by newscasters and showbiz celebrities and utterance of non-verbal expressions can be studied. Pictures of flags, postage stamps, civil and military awards, election signs and zodiac signs can be studied semiotically. In interdisciplinary studies, researches based on semiotics and archaeology; semiotics and anthropology and semiotics and forensic can be conducted.
References


