

Semiotic analysis of anti-aging product advertisement

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Abstract

This study is aimed at analysing the advertisement of beauty anti-aging cream. The global anti-aging market is growing at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 7.8% between 2013 and 2019. With the market's value being 122.3 billion in 2013; it is expected to reach US\$ 191.7 billion by end of 2019. The demographics of anti-aging cosmetics are changing rapidly and market penetration is pursued digressively. With a flurry of marketing communication about these products, print advertisements top the list, starting from lifestyle to women's magazine across different cultures. There is an interest about what they contain and what they suggest to the curious reader.

Introduction

Anti-aging creams are predominantly moisturiser-based cosmetics skin care products marketed with the promise of making the consumer look younger by reducing, masking or preventing signs of skin aging. These signs are sagging, wrinkles, and photo aging, which include redness, dye pigmentation solar yellowing, abnormal growths, and poor texture.

The anti-aging product print advertisements are loaded with visual cues in order to captivate consumer psychology and appeal to the consumer. One qualitative research technique to study and evaluate such marketing communication is Semiotic analysis. The term „semiotic“ is derived from the Greek word “Semeion” meaning sign, a mask and is defined as any object or word that can produce meaning. It was first said to be used in English by Henry Stubbes (1672) to denote a branch of medical science relating to the interpretations of signs.

Semiotic analysis or Semiology is the study the study of signs and sign process. It is closely related to the field of linguistic which studies the structure and meaning of language more specifically. Semiotics can be studied under the categories such as Semantics that is the relation between sign and the things to which they refer – meaning, Syntactic – relation among science informal structures and Pragmatics that is the relation between science and the effects they on the people who use them.

Charles Sanders Pierce known as the founder of American semiotics approached semiotics from a more philosophical and psychological perspective. He focused on the perception of people about the phenomenal world and how they communicate it through their representation like visual and verbal mode of communication. He defined semiotics as a „quasi – necessary or formal doctrine of signs...“ and therefore in one sense by no means necessary, as to what must be the characters of all signs used by a scientific intelligence capable of learning by experience. (Marsen, 2006)

Umberto Eco (1986) stress on communication done by a representation of ideas and emotions through words, images, colours to draw a picture of something we can sense or imagine. In his opinion, a sign never really tell the truth in a direct and objective form. They mediate reality by allowing us to select aspects of the perceptible world and create stories with them through which we communicate ideas about the world.

Study of Semiotics in the field of Humanities is a recent one. Only in 1960s Semiotics study legally established itself in the area of human concern. It studies the common elements in all systems of signification and it forms part of the system of thought that led to the philosophy of language, which is an extended form of rhetoric and philosophy.

Importance of Semiotic Analysis

Semiotics study has helped to increase awareness of the fact that we know the world by means of signs, whether these are verbal or sensory. In material form of reality there is semiotic existence too. The way we understand and perceive objects, ideas or other people and the meanings, we give to them are mostly influenced by the way they are represented and the medium through which they are represented. Terms like denotations and connotations are used by scholars like Roland Barthes (1964) to indicate primary meaning of a sign and connotation as secondary meaning of a sign (that is, the added meaning of a sign).

Semiotic analysis as a tool for ad analysis

Print advertising works according to the combination of illustration and copy. By way of comparison of these elements from semiotic study, we can trace the basic units of meaning that connects them into a coherent whole. Gunter Kress (2006) in his co-authored work with Theo Van Leeuwen, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, dwell on visual and verbal semiotics. He analyzes the compositional interpretations of experience and different forms of social interactions.

We live in a world full of symbols where we build meanings from these images. Semiotic school of thought believes that the meanings of the pictures are not in the pictures but what we bring to them. Visual interpretation is rooted in the perception through cognition and language and it is influenced by social, cultural and personal frames. Thus semiotic analysis can help us explain the complexity of visual communication while processing visual information and producing meaning from advertisements. There are subtle conventions and major differences and opposite positions if we categorize the system of relation in terms of connotations denotations or in combinations. The various images and meanings we perceive in the advertisement depend on how and when we try to analyze to uncover the social and cultural realities.

Advertising system consist of distinct signs and meaning of the advertisement in how the signs are organized. Semiotic analysis helps us discover that it may not always be the surface appearance and its meaning is the real motive in the advertisement.

Research objectives

1. To know about the signs and gestures shown in the anti-aging commercial.
2. To study the qualitative phase of the advertisement and to identify the message given by it to the customers.

Research methodology

Semiotic analysis is the tool used for analysing the select print advertisements. The inclusion criteria for the advertisements are their regency in popular lifestyle magazines and appeal to the women segment of the market. The selected advertisements represent brands such as **L'Oreal Revitalift**, **Olay Total Effect** and **Dove Pro-Age**. They represent a multi-brand, multi-cultural context. The analysis tries to identify both the common and unique values that these brands convey.

Data analysis and interpretation

This paper analyses each of these selected advertisements in terms of semiotic status assigns whose related meanings not only reveal the positive aspect of the product but also the finer notion that vibes with feminine beauty which conveys cultural and traditional signification. The advertisement sends out its message through the iconic representation. It reveals the product and what it should stand for. So the analysis of the mentioned advertisement will centre on the images and the ways in which these images manifest and create the signified concepts which in turn vouches the image of the product. A close analysis of the nuances of these advertisements will also help highlight the pros and cons of their media representation and how they manage to captivate consumer psychology and appeal to the consumers.

Advertisement1.



Figure - 1 L'Oreal Revita Lift

L'Oreal Revita Lift ad is catchy and trendy in terms of making awareness, appeal and assurance though the ad is not perfect in the aspect of being attractive. Still, the adverts make good, further in its choices of colour for the main image. The colour red is also suggestive of

the youthful vigour and the vibrancy which the product will bring. The sign on the forehead of the celebrity model is suggestive of the deep penetration the product is capable of doing. The verbal appeal too though is made in very minute font yet has a sure impact in terms of choice of words. The advert's claims to 'target wrinkles, even the one that ages you most' which is absolute in terms of assurance and makes a hit of a consumer appeal that gate-crashes into the hard truth about aging yet creates a sidelong bridge that seems to fill the gap of aging through a fantastically non-aging using the product L'Oreal Revita Lift. The fact about the process of aging seems to be lightened by the quality of assurance which is conveyed through the verbal gimmicks. The verbal impact is crucial and intense here which seems to be meant to markedly assuage the anxiety of aging in the consumer psyche. The ad though is not so impeccable after all; still it is not erroneous to refer to it as balanced in terms of image and verbal portal. For at a point where the image fails to reach perfection, the verbal impact compensates thus allowing it to retain standards of being rated as simply a good advert.

Advertisement2.

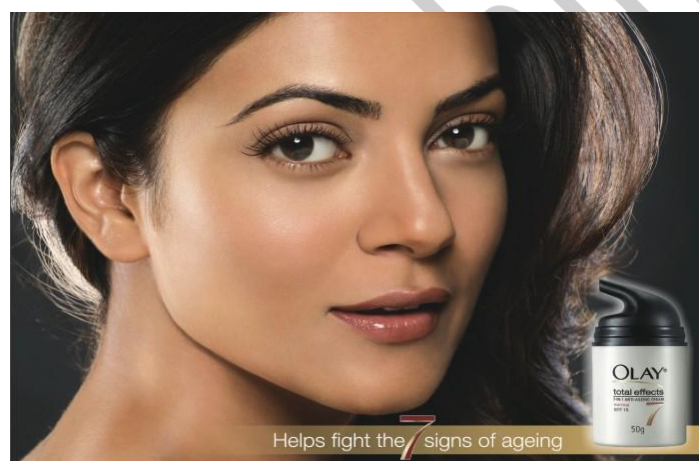


Figure -2 Olay Total effects

Olay Total Effects ad features a celebrity model and actor Sushmita Sen. Her popularity and skin tone speaks for the ad by itself. The ad also conveys a clear-cut image with an open boldness, „Helps fight the 7 signs of ageing“ which relates a sense of down-to Earth honesty about the reality of aging process. Still, the spirit behind the product and the text is convincing and persuasive enough owing to the suave yet appealing sex-appeal the model makes to the customers. The image is encrypted in layers of signifiers. At one level it would signify that the product is meant for both young and the middle ages or 40 plus. At another level it indicates a sense of femininity that emits out of the radiant smile. Another dimension of the bold verbal assertion would mean that the product is mainly targeted for the younger generation who would use preventive measures to keep themselves young and beautiful. In all these levels of signifiers, there is one common desire – that is, to remain young and beautiful. Hence there is a co-ordination between the sign and signifiers to attain signification. Another aspect of the image is the presence of ideology. The fact that the ad

uses well known celebrity has its own purpose. Sushmita Sen comes across as a face of modern Indian woman who is a sophisticated combination of bold, beautiful and brainy. So there is a presence of ideology. Where there is a sign, there is an ideology too. In a nutshell the image of Sushmita Sen. adds to the credibility of the brand in the Indian market and appeals to the mindset of the customers who would like to emulate the ideologies of what she stands for in relation to the effectiveness of the anti-aging product. The association of the image and the character too get encapsulated into the psyche of the reader who would take her as their role model. There is both fantasy and reality in the projection.

Advertisement 3.



Figure -3 Dove pro-age advertisement

Usually when this anti-aging products are promoted, middle aged and famous personalities are taken in as brand ambassadors. This tactic assigns a national or community or cultural value to the product. The woman in the image is delicately feeling her skin with her finger tips, the smiling and revealing face does not leave any room for fantasy or imagination. There seems to be a conscious attempt to project the woman and her skin as innocent and delicate. The tag line and the product range have been associated by the use of the colour. So the colour is not necessarily associated with the aged but its presence allots to the context, sensuality and youthful vigour. The ad also seems to hold a positive note in its linguistic message and the product receives its stress only through the expression of a simple, direct statement as „It’s not Time but me who decides how delicate my skin is“. The bold and the revealing image are complemented with the assertive verbal signifiers. The words and the message show the determination and the attitude of the persona which seems to defy the causes of time and age. The word “pro-age” indicates “time” which means the product is meant for the customer running with time. The Brand promoters however seem to have overlooked the implicit impact a visual could carry especially when both the verbal and visuals two are placed parallel on the same visual portal. However the emphasis is would

have been more effective if the verbal addition to the product had been made bolder and given greater or equal prominence as the image itself. In analysing the verbal message, the word “me” could have been given the same stress as “Time” to convey its spirit more clearly. All the same, the verbal message that the advert conveys needs to be given its due appreciation as by itself it proves to be significant as the statement signifies a profound challenge to Time itself which quite conspicuously defies the precincts of mortal limitations. Besides, the words are also meant to be appealing to the values of any aging woman and seem to reinstall a great deal of confidence in aging women. But the advertisement make one to think how vital it is for brand promoters and advertising media to balance both visual and linguistic representation as they need to maintain a sense of cognition from the consumer stance too.

Conclusion

Marketing and advertising have grown by leaps and bounds. It is no longer a question of message and its authenticity but how we develop meanings into those messages. Semiotic analysis brings about varied dimensions to the understanding of advertisements in beauty products segment and its target customers. The basic concept in marketing reveals that it is all about satisfying consumer wants and needs. All appeals are credited for the purpose of advertising human needs and wants and projecting how the advertised brands can satisfy those needs and wants. Denise Shiffman, the author *The Age of Engage* (2008) says that in this new emerging era of advertising, hearts, no eye balls, count. Dan Hill, the author of *About Face: The secrets of emotionally effective advertising* (2010), too talks about three people-cum-customer-centric P’s. They are Passion, Purpose and Personality. The first P indicates “Passion,” which deals with the subconscious reaction to an advertisement that comes out as a result of our sensory perception. The second P stands for “Purpose” which could be about the offers that are given by the company with strings attached to market supposed to be laden with values and beliefs in the society. And the third P indicates “Personality W” in brands which are emotionally engaging, unique and authentic and have made inroads into the marketing mind. By this, Dan Hill tries to drive home the point that focusing on passion, purpose and personality, marketers can connect and relate to the target customers. Anti-aging beauty products too have penetrated into the psyche of human mind the eternal urge to keep one young and beautiful. So the construction of “Beauty” is no more confined to facial looks, it includes the attributes that we give to the apparent appearance and semiotic analysis plays an important role. Ads also trade on values such as one’s culture and tradition, status, social concerns, sense of nationalism, love and so on.

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