

## **Challenges in Cross Cultural Marketing Communication- Effective Approach Using Semiotic Lens**

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### **Abstract**

India is unlike Western/European markets where cultural homogeneity is higher to the extent that marketing communications and branding solutions can be developed and seamlessly applied to large populations with greater efficacy. Communicating to culturally diverse groups using a common creative theme could be challenging.

Communication serves multiple purposes, e.g. awareness and/or recall building, persuasion, comparison, response generation, image building etc. However a different way to look at them could be as a form of cultural communication, an approach drawing on theory and research in popular culture and anthropology, semiotics and structuralism.

Advertisers use myths to evoke meaning in the minds of audiences. Many advertising campaigns merely suggest the meaning and the audience join the dots, with images and themes that are drawn from their own shared culture.

This paper through a case study highlights how thoughtful use of symbolic elements can result in communication that effectively cuts across geographical and cultural boundaries. It presents a semiotic approach applied to communication and shows how the Interpretant/Signified, i.e. the sense made of the sign could carry meaning in what is the Referent/Object, what the sign stands for, which in turn is influenced by the Socio cultural orientations.

**Keywords:** Branding, Communication, Semiotics, Advertising, Marketing, Cross Culture.

## 1. Introduction

Gender portrayal in communication is a reflection of the cultural and social norms. However, there are certain themes which evoke consistent response, almost universally. E.g. male female romance, mother child love and care, parent's family affection and bonding, nature's soothing effect, enjoying meal with near and dear ones, grooming to look and feel good etc.

India, unlike Western/European markets, where cultural homogeneity is higher to the extent that marketing solutions can be developed and seamlessly applied to large populations with greater efficacy, represents a unique market as it is actually a melting pot of multiple cultures, languages and ethnicity.

Communicating with such a diverse group, which is always a challenge for marketers, could serve multiple purposes, e.g. awareness, persuasion, comparison, response generation, image building etc. However, a different way to look at them could be as a form of cultural communication. This type of approach draws on theory and research in popular culture and anthropology, semiotics and structuralism. This has been used to analyse many mass media messages, both print and broadcast advertising. (Barthe, 1972)

A brand association is anything "linked" in the memory to a brand. Of course, the features and benefits of the product or service, together with its package and distribution channel, are central to brand image. A brand image is a set of associations, usually organised in some meaningful way. Certainly, the advertising effort is a direct contributor. (Aaker, 1991)

Male-Female interaction has many themes, including that of care, romance, protection, possession, love, flirting, tantrums, passion, seduction etc. One bolder manifestation of male-female encounter is that of predator-prey, where typically male is a predator and female, a prey. The advertisements chosen for analysing the content and identifying semiotic cues have based their TV campaign, which is full of symbolic cues, on male-female predator-prey relation, however, the interesting point to note is that it works both ways!

In light of the socio cultural and socio economic change taking place, e.g. increasing levels of women education, better health and hygiene levels, growing financial independence, emphasis on gender equality and influence of West, where women have already started playing a significant if not an equal role in the society, be it corporate, politics, law and administration, industries, sports, media and entertainment and even clear male bastions of past like defence services, a change in stereotypical portrayal of women in communication was only a matter of time.

Have the images of men and women in ads softened over time, blurring the stereotypes, or have they hardened? A study published in the November 2000 issue of *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, revealed along with other interesting findings that- Overall, men and women in Indian ads are also portrayed in stereotypical ways, however the stereotypes in India also seem to be changing and softening, albeit slowly. (Das, 2010)

There is a slow but gradual surge in creative expressions where women are shown breaking/challenging the norm imposed on them in the name of gender bias/stereotyping. This paper attempts to do a content analysis of select Indian TVCs with respect to gender stereotyping and breaking away from it. Also, how symbols can be effectively exploited to connect with communication target audience, create the right associations for the product/brand across cultures.

## **2. Objective (s)**

**2.1 Content analysis** of Titan Skinn Perfume ads with respect to portrayal of male-female predator-prey relationship and vice versa.

**2.2 Semiotic analysis** of Titan Skinn Perfume ads to decode the hidden/layered meanings of symbols used to unearth the meaning they convey subconsciously.

## **3. Methodology**

**Content analysis** is an increasingly popular method for communication researchers. Modern content analysis developed primarily as a way for analysing mass communication messages. In content analysis, elements (called the units of observation) of the phenomenon under study (called units of analysis) are coded and analysed to reveal information. Therefore, content analysis was chosen as the method of inquiry for this study.

**Semiotic Analysis** involves three main parts of the structure of semiotics; the representamen or signifier (the symbol/form of the sign), referent/object (what the sign stands for or represents) and interpretant/signified (the sense made of the sign). Meanings are conveyed not just at denotative level (obvious, straight forward interpretation of sign) but also at connotative level (meanings that are in context of a social-cultural backdrop). These connotative meanings can sometimes be recognised consciously, however, they often have to be looked for, and i.e. they act at sub conscious level.

Semiotic Analysis is usually applied to images or visual texts. (Berger, 1987, 1998 a) This method involves putting in to words how images work by relating them to the ideological structure which organises meaning. One of the key advantage of Semiotic analysis is that it demands relatively few resources. Because the method is interpretive, it does not have to be reliable in the sense of being applied to a large number of specimen. The generalizability of semiotics is not always relevant, making this method appropriate for studying a limited number of samples. (Stokes, 2003)

### **3.1 Sample**

In this paper, a television campaign comprising of 2 TVCs from Indian advertising of recently launched SKINN range of perfumes by Titan are taken.

## 4. Review of Literature

**4.1 Bangalore:** Titan Co. Ltd has launched a range of fragrances called Skinn, adding another lifestyle product to its portfolio and entering a largely unorganized market that it estimates is growing by over 30%. Titan, which sells watches and Tanishq jewellery, wants to diversify earnings and reduce dependence on jewellery, where margins may be hurt by rules curbing gold imports. The company will sell six variants of Skinn for both men and women that will cost Rs.990 for a 50 ml bottle and Rs.1, 790 for a 100 ml bottle. Titan worked for more than three years to create and launch the fragrances, it said. The local perfume market is worth Rs.2, 000 crore and is growing at a compounded annual growth rate of over 30%, Titan estimates. (www.livemint.com, 2014)

**4.2 Designed in-house** and created by six world-renowned master perfumers including Harry Fremont, Michel Girard, FabricePellegrin, NadegeLe Garlantezec and the celebrated Alberto Morillas and Olivier Pescheux, these French-made perfumes are the international interpretation of him and her. It portrays a young woman's sensuality in SKINN Imera; her warm seduction emitted by violets, roses and Venezuelan tonka bean oils in SKINN Nude; the womanly charms and complexity defined by the orange flower and jasmine drizzled in SKINN Celeste. Made from vanilla sourced from Madagascar, SKINN Extreme celebrates the sporty vitality of a man whilst SKINN Raw defines raw masculinity lent by the citrusy bergamot and mandarin and SKINN Steele is a power trip of complex spices, pink pepper, pimento and nutmeg. (www.tata.in, 2014)

4.3 While sports and athletics sported more men than women in the past in India and in the West, today however, real achievers like Sania Mirza have changed all that. Also, you may see a cricketer like Mahendra Dhoni as often as you see Mirza, never mind the product they are posing for. Women in Indian ads are being presented in less dependent roles than they were before. An ad for a leading women's fortnightly recently carried a delightful image of an ageing woman in bridal attire. It later transpires that her daughter is getting her married again! This is an example of positive advertising that subtly carries a social message. (Rashidi, 2006)

**4.4 A study authored by Mallika Das published in Sex Roles:** A Journal of Research, revealed interesting findings.

The Sex Roles study drew similarities and differences in the way women and men are portrayed in Indian magazine ads and the way they are portrayed in other countries.

The similarities, according to the study, largely borne out by fact seem to be that

4.4.1 Overall, men and women in Indian ads are also portrayed in stereotypical ways;

4.4.2 The stereotypes in India also seem to be changing and softening, albeit slowly;

4.4.3 As in the case of western ads, women and men appear for different types of products in Indian ads; and

4.4.4 Role portrayals seem to be affected by the nature of the product in the case of women, as in other nations. (Das, 2010)

4.5 The term that is used to refer to the cultural meaning of an image, theme, or any other type of sign is Myth. (Barthe, 1972). Myths are expressed in many different ways and each individual expression of a myth is related to and depends upon other variables. For this reason, myths need to be analysed through qualitative, critical methodologies, e.g. content analysis similar to ones used by anthropologists to understand other cultures as they are. Moreover, the need for quantitative methodologies is reduced when one is dealing with relatively small universe of content.

4.6 Worn every day, perfumes transform from an accessory which completes your identity and so, the perfume ritual becomes second nature and this fragrance becomes your second skin. Gifting has been of utmost relevance with Titan watches and jewellery with their chic designs and superior finish. With the launch of luxury perfumes, SKINN equally becomes relevant for an ultimate gift or treasured self-purchase. (www.indiaonline.com, 2014)

4.7 Advertisers use myths to evoke meaning in the minds of audiences. They generally do not invent them, but they do reinforce them and reshape them. The way in which the myths are presented, the elements that are emphasised, and the way in which they are associated with a particular product, we have the potential to influence the attitudes and behaviour of intended and unintended audiences. (Strate, 1991)

**4.8 Stages in Semiotic Analysis-** There are no rules about which precise text one should focus on or how many texts are necessary. Roland Barthe wrote a very stimulating essay based on the analysis of just one advertising image, whereas Judith Williamson discussed dozens. It is up to the analyst to determine how many enough to make the case?

Define your object of analysis, gather the texts, describe the texts, interpret the texts, draw out the cultural codes, make generalizations, and make conclusions. (Stokes, 2003)

4.9 Customers often discount or disbelieve factual information. Worse, they usually lack the interest and ability to process it, and thus, never even get exposed to it. They cope by using signals or indicators-one attribute or association can imply others. It is important to know which associations are to be created. However, it is also necessary to address this questions- What are the key signals of the associations that are to be formed-how can the perception be influenced? Perceived quality is not the only association influenced by signals. Tom Peters tells of an airline that was convinced that a stain on the seat of a plane is a strong erroneous signal of poor safety record of the pilot and aircraft. (Aaker, 1991)

## 5. Analysis

### 5.1 Titan SKINN for Him (www.youtube.com, 2014)



**Fig. 5.1**

**Table 5.1:** Content and Semiotic Analysis of Skinn Him TVC.

Shot no. L-R, top to bottom, row wise	Denotation Literal/ straight forward meaning [Content Analysis]	Connotation [Semiotic Analysis] derived through Signifier/ Referent/ Signified
1 & 2	A man dressed in black formals in the corridor	Black formals (signifier) indicates dark (referent) which stands for sinister/evil (signified) While long pillars (signifier) suggest colonial architecture (referent) which hints Roman/English/French setting known for high quality perfumes-category gets established later (signified)
3, 4, 5, 6 & 7	Young lady also appears in the frame, wearing a classy party dress exposing her body. It also cues that some interaction is going to take place between the two characters.	Party gown with exposed back (signifier) stands for sensuality (referent) which cues an encounter sexual in nature. (signified) In series of shot 4 to 7, the man with stubble and confident looks (signifier) indicates macho, erotic (referent) connotes predatory instinct. However, the lady in a frail frame (signifier) looks weak (referent) and submissive as prey (signified)

8, 9, 10	Flower bud blossoming	Flower bud (signifier) represents lady's sexual status which is yet to be explored (referent) and the act of blossoming connotes sexual pleasure coming alive in a fantasizing manner (signified)
12	Rubbing of match stick and lighting of spark	Match stick (signifier) rubbing against rough surface shows lady's desire to indulge in sexual activity (referent) and lighting again connotes sexual pleasure coming alive in fantasizing manner (signified)
13, 14	White Pigeon flutter wings in slow motion	White pigeon (signifier) personifies lady, fluttering of wings shown in slow motion indicates her state of restlessness (referent) to eventually grab the man she is attracted towards (signified)
16, 18	Fireworks and sea wave	Fireworks in the sky or rising sea waves (signifier) both mean lady's sexual arousal state (referent) which leads to satisfaction/orgasm.
11, 15, 17, 18, 20, 21, 22	Series of shots show the lady with dilated pupil, wet lips agape, exposed chest area, twining hair with finger	All these signifiers represent heightened sexual state of the lady (signified)
23, 24	Man confidently walks past. He is shown applying the perfume	Man with predatory looks (signifier) walks past with a smile (referent) meaning he is well aware of what he has done to the lady (signified). Product application further signifies who gets the actual credit.
25, 26	Product shot and name	Product shown (signifier) in black, frost and a coloured bottle with wide V shape and ribbed design indicate a man's well sculpted body (referent) connoting masculinity. Even the sign off with black background with product name in basic bold cues manliness. The name SKINN cues sensuality, desire, intimacy.

## 5.2 Titan SKINN for her



**Fig. 5.2:** (www.youtube.com, 2014)

**Table 5.2 Table 5.1** Content and Semiotic Analysis of SKINN Her TVC

Shot no. L-R, top to bottom, row wise	Denotation Literal / straight forward meaning [Content Analysis]	Connotation [Semiotic Analysis] derived through Signifier/ Referent/ Signified
1	Lady shown from behind, only her stylish hair do and petite neck and back visible	Back portrait of lady (signifier) with petite neck and stylish hairdo (referent) suggest attractiveness. This connotes desire, sensuality.
2, 3	Lady in pink gown, and her reflection along with that of colonial pillars in white marble floor. A man is shown walking in	Full portrait of lady dressed in pink gown (signifier) in the fore ground looks tall (referent) This cues her dominance over the man who walks in. Again, like in Skinn for him TVC, corridor and pillar architecture look colonial (English/Roman/French) locations which epitomise premium perfumes (category gets established later though)

4, 5, 6, 7, 8	Lady and Man shown approaching and crossing each other	Lady has light coloured big eyes, curvy body (signifier) and she exudes confidence and killer instincts (referent). This connotes predatory action and the man looks rather nervous and unsure (signifies Prey)
10-19	Man is shown followed by a series of shots of match stick igniting, goose bumps, filament of a bulb lighting up, lump in throat gulped, neuron dendrite firing, fireworks in the sky followed by man's sweaty forehead.	All these symbols like are signifiers-match stick igniting, goose bumps, filament of a bulb lighting up, lump in throat gulped, neuron dendrite firing, and fireworks in the sky. They suggest man's sexual arousal/erection (referent) which leads him to a rather uncontrollable fantasy on his encounter with the lady. All this makes him reach a climax/orgasm symbolically depicted through sweaty horsehead and loosening of tie.
20, 21	Same as frame 1, lady's back is shown followed by frontal looks	Lady exudes confidence and accomplishment in her eyes (signifier) which means she knows well the condition of the man (referent). This cues predator has hunted the prey.
22, 23, 24	Lady is shown applying perfume. Her impression along with the background is shown on the product	It establishes beyond doubt as to who is to be credited for the lady's victory over the man, it is the product. Further, the lady and her background (signifier) as shown as impression on the bottle (referent) and finally the product is shown (signified) which connotes that the product is originally foreign/European in origin.
25, 26	Product shot and name	Product shot (signifier) shows slim, slender and curvy product in bright colours (referent) cuing feminine. This signifies the user and user imagery. Also, the name Skinn as in case of him, cues, sensuality, desire, intimacy.

## 6. Conclusion (s)

In the campaign consisting of 2 TVCs, male female interaction is shown with role reversal.

It is rather bold and progressive to show woman as a predator, confident of her sensuality and going for the kill (not just playing a receiving object)

Both the above point seem relevant considering the market at which the product is targeted, which is young, urban, upper middle class, working professionals, as they are well exposed to the idea of equality and find West aspirational.

The above points are cleverly with in seconds captured using symbols in the TVC. The mental and emotional imagery of lady in case of SKINN Him TVC is depicted using a series of symbols, like blossoming of flower, wet and agape lips and a high wave of ocean. Similarly, man's heightened level is expressed through lighting of filament, goose bumps, neural dendrite firing and sweaty forehead in the end. There are a few common symbols used, like lighting of match, fireworks to connect the two creative executions.

In each case, the models and the setting is very European/Colonial to suggest exotic place of origin, which has a positive rub off on the product category as well as brand.

### **Limitations and Future Directions-**

6.1 The study is based on Qualitative content analysis and Semiotic analysis and is not supported by Quantitative validity of findings. Further, the findings could be put to Quantitative test for validity.

6.2 Only select advertisements, 2 in number are purposively selected.

6.3 The essential factor in semiotic analysis is that one has to have a high level of knowledge about the chosen object of analysis. One needs to be a part of the interpretive community using the relevant media to be able to fully understand the conventions in operation. (Stokes, 2003)

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