

Strong Visual and Psychological Messages in Advertising: Is the Brand becoming Secondary?

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Abstract

Several advertisements with strong visual and psychological content are appearing on Indian television. The psychology of the viewer is being rigorously coded and decoded in order to make advertising more and more effective. Visually appealing and even visually stunning is often the USP of several advertisements. The psyche of the viewer is effectively moulded to identify with the psychological message and the visual feast that the advertisement builds creates an emotional narrative and thus fulfils the aim of the advertisement on the poignant plane. However the strong visual and the emotional content often obliterate the brand as the viewer is lost in the fog of enjoying the advertisement. Thus the purpose of the advertisement is lost as the brand name becomes secondary. The paper will examine two advertisements in order to understand the psychological and the visual effects that they have upon the viewer and the subsequent unimportance that the brand name has as a result of these powerful messages. The two advertisements that I will examine are Benani cement, endorsed by Amitabh Bachchan and the advertisement for Titan Edgwatch range endorsed by balance artist Maedir Eugster. I will take each of them as a prototype of advertisements with psychological and visual appeal respectively.

Key words: Advertising, consumer psychology, visual messages, brand.

Introduction

HG Wells once described advertising as the art of teaching people to want a thing and that so aptly brings out the essence of the aim of advertising (Gill, 1954, p13). Advertising has become big business and it no longer remains the domain of casual or accidental encounters with ideas. An advertising house will

follow a well structured model of advertising so as to maximize the sale of their product or service. The first formal advertising model was probably AIDA (Attention'!Interest'!Desire'!Action) attributed to E. St Elmo Lewis in 1898. These types of "hierarchy of effects" models have dominated the literature ever

since (Vakratsas & Ambler, 1999, p 26). The psychology of the viewer is constantly under surveillance in order to understand the effects of advertising. Psychology involves the accumulating, sifting, classifying and checking of mass information regarding the mental life of the people. (Gill, 1954, p 10, Introduction). In several important aspects we “may view the psychology of advertising as the psychology of influence or persuasion”. (Pelty & Cacioppo 1986, pg 3).

In India, television advertising has undergone a revolutionary change. Smart packaging, using famous people as brand ambassadors and hiring of Advertising Agencies for advertising has made the whole business goal oriented and professional. Gone are the days of the unappealing Vicco Vajradantior the unprepared Kapil Dev who declared in monotone “*Palmolive kajawabnahin*”. Advertising in India is veering towards the power of the psychological and the visual which are powerful mediums in themselves.” Visual rhetoric can be described as a form of communication that uses images for creating meaning or constructing an argument. Hence, an analysis of visual rhetoric considers how images work alone and collaborate with other elements to create an argument designed for moving a specific audience.” (Koksea, 2013).

However, as a viewer of several such advertisements, I feel that in the process of viewing, I am so often lost in its detail that I often have to recall with difficulty the brand that the advertisement

was really trying to endorse. My paper is an attempt to examine whether strong psychological and visual messages blunt the brands that they are attempting to endorse. I will examine two popular advertisements frequently appearing on Indian Television- Benani Cement and Titan Edge.

Objectives

1. To examine how extremely visually appealing and psychologically loaded advertisements have chances of failing to be remembered for the brand that they are owing to the viewer’s preoccupation with content.
2. To study how some advertisements which are only meant to entertain and not persuade make the viewer lose sight of the product that they are meant to advertise.

Benani Cement: “Quality, Strength, Reliability, Performance, and Consistency are words that are synonymous with Binani Cement, the flagship company of the Braj Binani Group. In ‘cement’ matters, these qualities make Binani Cement the preferred choice for engineers, builders, and contractors. Binani Cement forms the foundation of some prestigious projects in India and abroad – Dubai Metro (fully automated rail network), and the state of the art Port Khalifa at Abu Dhabi” (Campaign India). These are the lines that advertise Benani Cement on its official website. Thus Quality, Strength,

Performance and Consistency are the words that are synonymous with the brand. Amitabh Bachchan thus becomes the natural choice as his life and career have been marked by consistency and performance, with quality of work and strength of character (read Coolie, politics and Bofors). His ever growing popularity as a brand ambassador makes him the preferred choice for several advertisements. "After topping the Screen Annual Survey 2012 on the biggest legend of all times, Amitabh Bachchan tops the Screen Annual Survey 2013 yet again" (The Indian Express). Like a true traditional advertisement, the value of parental love is invoked through the visuals and the dialogues. "*Ma a b a a p k a h i n n a h i n j a a t e , w o h y a h i r e h t e h a i n*".

The attachment that an average Indian has towards parents who are dead is the USP of the advertisement. Advertisers capitalize on the value of trustworthiness by selecting endorsers who are widely regarded as being honest, believable and dependable people. This probably explains why Sachin Tendulkar is used as the brand ambassador of Aviva Life Insurance. He simply appears to be an individual who can be trusted (Srikanth, 2013, p 61). The Benanai advertisement is tailor made for Amitabh. The advertisement has a large number of beautifully framed photographs of Amitabh Bachchan's parents with Amitabh Bachchan as well as photographs of Amitabh with son Abhishek in his childhood (Interestingly, there are no photographs of his daughter?).

The advertisement is emotionally captivating as it touches on the 'nature nurture' debate, stressing the importance of how individuals inherit characteristics of their parents, thus making them live in us even when they are gone. A culture's social norms, tied to its social values act as rules for judging what is socially appropriate and acceptable, as such they influence reactions to persuasive communication (Shaugnessy, 2004, p10). The writer further goes on to say that even Socrates followed Greek societal norms when he chose death over dishonour. So the legacy of Harivansh Rai Bachchan with Madhushala in the background and Teji Bachchan's lovely black and white snapshots create a kind of mesmerizing environment which captivates the viewer. Piyush Pandey, executive chairman and creative director, Ogilvy & Mather, South Asia, said, "A film for Binani Cement which has a lot more to do than cement. It is about enduring values that matter to all of us and will matter to us forever. It also gives the strong brand promise of '*Sadiyon Keliye*' (for centuries) a terrific emotional dimension." (Campaign India). Thus in all this frenzy Benanai seems to have been left behind. The brand that is being endorsed becomes like an 'add on', a supplement to the advertisement when it should be the other way round. Thus the psychological message is so heavily loaded that it nearly obliterates the brand. Even if the brand is remembered, it is remembered faintly in relation to the advertisement and the brand ambassador.

Titan Edge

When Titan decided to enter the fragmented watch market in India, its strategy was to create a larger than life brand. Titan hit upon the concept of “unique customer experience” – a popular concept now, but a very novel one in those days. Titan set up an array of exclusive Titan outlets (Pattabiram, 2009). Titan has moved from strength to strength and has carved a niche for itself in the market. So when they decide to advertise for a new range of watches, they keep the uniqueness of their brand in mind. Earlier Aamir Khan was the brand ambassador of the brand.

Titan Watches CEO Bijou Kurien expressed “There is a perfect fit between Aamir Khan and Titan - their stature, timelessness, and the love and trust they both share with the people both nationally and internationally, makes this an ideal partnership”(Indian Television.com, 2004). Similarly for the latest range of Titan Edge watches, world renowned balance artist MaedirEugster has been used as the brand ambassador. Well known for his breathtaking balancing acts, the artist is at his best in the Titan advertisement. “More than just a simple test of stability, Maedir depicts a visually mesmerising look that justifies the ideology of Titan Edge, which is ‘Mastery beyond belief’ in the TVC. The artist’s criss-crossing pattern leaves one astonished, especially against the white backdrop which makes it seem like the materials are simply floating in mid-air” (Sen, 2013).

The campaign designed by Ogilvy Bangalore has been crafted with great skill and goes to prove that both the master of the craft and the creator of the visually enchanting advertisement are unmatched in their art. However, the advertisement is so rich in visual and auditory character that the watch and Titan become secondary in the bargain. In fact the name of the brand and that of the range appear in a tiny font that is not even clearly visible on the screen. Thus the halo effect that Maedir creates stays on and the viewer is mesmerised by the balance art and the impossible taking shape through the balance artist. The advertisement aims at showcasing fine balance and precision. The idea behind the Titan Campaign was to “lend a human association to the watch – one that stands for lightness, precision, skill and elemental simplicity” (Ibbonline, 2013). The long search eventually led to Swiss balance artiste, MaedirEugster. Eugster’s incredible act of ‘kinetic sculpting’ and soon became the perfect metaphor for the mastery that goes into a Titan Edge. The craft of the act and the craft of the advertisement leave little scope for attention to the new range of watches and the brand.

When we watch TV, we misunderstand approximately 30% of what is shown to us. Our emotional state, our mind set at the time, and our prior experience seem to “conspire against seeing things as they really are” (Barry, 1997, p 16). So watching the Titan advertisement which is visually stunning and crafted so cleverly only makes us feel

a sense of confusion as to whether it is an advertisement for Maedir's craft or the perfection of a watch.

So is the brand becoming secondary?

The packaging of the advertisement in recent times has become the sole occupation so much so that the brand is quite often forgotten in the bargain. In the book *Brand Bubble* written by John Gerzema, the writers say that consumers no longer care about most brands as they buy and switch easily between them. They are too busy to invest time and money in brand loyalty. Therefore they only care about brands that excite them for both current and future products (Ehrlich, 2009). Thus an advertisement which has an extremely strong visual impact or an evocatively thought of emotional message runs the danger of being forgotten as the consumer is not always obsessed with brand loyalty and to top it all, the contents of the advertisement and not the brand is remembered. Roy Williams says that graphic artists will often create a visual style and call it "branding." This is fine if your product is fashion, a fragrance, an attitude or a lifestyle," but God help you

Conclusion

The Benani cement advertisement uses strong psychological messages to convey an Indian family value of parental love. This value is highly regarded by children of Indian families and where the memories of parents are those of ones that live no longer, the sentiment is even more

if you sell a service or a product that's meant to perform" (Williams). He says that there are several mistakes that advertisements make and two of them are relevant to my study:

1. Entertaining without persuading
2. Decorating without persuading

When an advertisement does both of the above or even any one of the above then there is a likelihood that the impact sought will not be achieved and hence the brand becomes the secondary consideration when it should be primary focus. Advertisements can be skilfully designed and produced and they can be attractive, entertaining and funny. However, "we should not lose sight of their ideological function which is linked to their economic function, nor of the real messages that lie behind their specific goals" (Dyer, 1982, p 2, Introduction). The reason why an advertisement goes on air is so that the product or the service it promotes should be bought by the viewer. Foxall says that consumers do not buy products that they do not need. However, he goes on to add that what they need is a 'complex subjective assessment based on their inherent motivations and on their perceptions' (Foxall, 1998).

heavily emotional. Amitabh Bachchan as a doyen of his craft, a pioneer of the industry and the patriarch of his illustrious family becomes a suitable choice for the advertisement. But since the message in the advertisement is so emotional, the viewer gets swayed. (I hardly think anyone thinks of buying Benani cement at that

time or at any time afterwards because of the advertisement). Similarly, the Titan edge advertisement seems to fail to make its mark in so far as remembering the brand, as it is so aesthetically done that only Maedir and his famous balancing act is what is the focus. Thus as a viewer, I feel that I would be able to pay more attention to the product if the advertisement were not so engaging. Attractive, yes it must be but relevance of what is being shown to the product is essential. The balancing act in Titan should not be made so absorbing and visually so strong that the viewer just loses focus of the product and its features. Similarly the

Benani Cement advertisement is too personalised and heavily loaded with a message that it almost appears to be an advertisement made for Amitabh Bachchan and his family. The viewer gets involved in the family tree and the nostalgia of the actor that cement does not seem to have any relevance at all. Thus toning down of the visuals and diluting the psychological message would be important in order to retain the message of the advertisements. Advertising will be successful after all if the viewer is tempted to go out to the market and buy the product soon after seeing it.

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