Microanalysis of an Advertisement Through Semiotic Interpretation:
A Study Presenting an Ad Heptameter Schema and its Resourcefulness to Practitioners

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to understand how a semiotic analysis can spell out implications for practitioners in the advertising industry. The article presents a microanalysis of a television commercial, frame by frame, based on constructs identified from literature proposing a schema called the ‘Ad Heptameter.’ This schema through its seven units - signs, codes, myths, syntagm, paradigm, denotation and connotation, facilitates in the questioning of meanings and serves as an entry point to engage with the advertising content or message. This work presents a theoretical overview of semiotics to practitioners and is also proposed as a venue for effective partnership between academia and practitioners in advertising. A semiotic Ad Heptameter is put forth to address the theory-practice gap. It has the potential to evaluate, assess and revisit storyboards, pre-production or production phases thereby enhancing the effectiveness of the advertising message.

KEYWORDS

Academic Industry Collaboration, Ad Heptameter Schema, Advertising, Content Analysis, Frame by Frame Analysis, Industry Practitioner, Semiotics, Single Narrative Data, Television Advertising

1. INTRODUCTION

The inquiry is an attempt to analyze and consider a number of considerations, sensitivities and concerns to interpret and understand a television commercial. This study explores how a semiotic content analysis could be used to arrive at a deeper understanding, exploring the nuances of an advertisement produced by the creative industry. This case study examines a particular advertisement to use it as a platform to present a semiotic lens of analysis through a theoretically derived schema, proposed as an Ad Heptameter. The Ad Heptameter, recommends seven key constructs to analyze an advertisement frame by frame. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the value in understanding content analysis and how emotive connections are derived as a process of reviewing advertisements.

The advertisement chosen to analyze, was based on a spontaneous discussion with peers and the immediate nostalgic connect with the Airtel’s ‘Dil Ki Baat’ (speak from your heart) campaign. It has over 110,771 views ever since it was uploaded on YouTube in 2009. It substantiated a reasonable recall value, which also implies that revisiting old advertisements has the potential to give an insight into what’s done right to influence its recall value. The antecedents or precedents for recall value is

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not within the scope of this article, but is a latent direction for impending investigations in relation to the schema presented. The nature of this work has its importance in qualitative content analysis as it engages with a single narrative data and aims to provide valuable practitioner-oriented insights. Such investigations can help practitioners formulate meticulously planned and well-informed advertising campaigns. This work would best be posited as an experimental paper, with the first part of the paper situating the field of semiotics in academia, its theoretical attributes and makes headway in proposing an Ad Heptameter to aid practitioners in the advertising and related creative industries.

Airtel’s Express Yourself campaign unveiled a popular TVC almost a decade ago. It used poetry as a narrative technique and used ordinary people in its casting to create powerful visuals through emotional appeal. The advertisement was for the company’s mobile services, both in the pre-paid and post-paid domains. They had positioned their brand in such a way that it highlights “expressiveness” of a person, which was a shift from their earlier campaigns that persuaded their target audience to “speak out”. The brand personality revolved around being expressive - “Express Yourself.” So innately the consumer using their service will express himself or herself freely with confidence & candidness, was the underlying symbolism propagated. The advertising typology can be best understood as brand advertising, a promotion for all of the brand’s services, integrating a notion of national advertising with regional flavor by adopting Hindi² lyrics. The visual transition and the television commercial’s format focused on capturing the mood and image of the characters to suggest ‘expressiveness’.

2. UNDERSTANDING SEMIOTICS: A THEORETICAL OUTLINE FOR PRACTITIONERS TO SITUATE THE DISCIPLINE

Semiotics is a discipline by itself. One of the many definitions of semiotics describes it as “a science dedicated to the study of the production of meaning in society” (Keir, 1980). The discipline's quest in studying meaning, reality or knowledge, mostly inferred through arrangement of signs or symbols, makes it accommodative, characteristic of having a wide-ranging relevance transcending disciplinary boundaries and enabling inter-disciplinary applications. Semiotics is used in a number of disciplines like linguistics, advertising, marketing, cognitive science, social science, anthropology and it is not uncommon to come across cyber-semiotics, film semiotics, biosemiotics, ethnosemiotics, organizational semiotics, musical semiotics, food semiotics or urban semiotics while wading through the scholarly texts on semiotics. The overwhelming conceptualizations and trajectories time and again, possibly poses a challenge to scholars and practitioners who would see value in using semiotics to aid their research.

When definitions are a plenty, the shortest definition of semiotics being “a study of signs”, could begin the quest for understanding the discipline (Chandler, 2002). In advertising especially, a sign is ‘something that stands for something’ and referent is ‘what is referred to by a sign’ and the signification holds the sign and referent together, making us cognizant to an overall meaning creation for a product through its brand name, logo and the modes of advertising (Beasley & Danesi, 2002). The semiotics discipline is broad and expansive, hence giving a prescriptive model for advertising practitioners is not an ideal way forward, although that’s exactly what this work culminates to. There is potential and merit in interpreting and transitorily modifying the proposed schema, as per the geo-location, environment and study purpose, appreciating the perceptively considered constructs the Ad Heptameter embraces. The theoretical review too, may not be a thorough summary yet attempts to assert a prefatory sense to semiotics as a discipline, subject and approach. Chandler (2002) acknowledges and elaborates on the difficulty of producing a comprehensive work.

As Chandler (2002) encapsulates, “no treatment of it (semiotics) can be comprehensive” due to which – “my attempt to offer a coherent account of some key concepts is in some ways misleading: there are divergent schools of thought in semiotics, and there is remarkably little consensus among contemporary theorists regarding the scope of the subject, core concepts or methodological tools. In part through terminology such as signifier, signified and code, this account reflects the influence of
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