

ADVERTISEMENTS: THE ARCHIVE OF SOCIAL DISCOURSE ON POWER

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Abstract

Advertisements are a major form of modern social communication. In principle, the ‘objective’ function of ‘selling goods’ is still the fundamental purpose of advertising. But the place of advertising in modern society goes beyond this commercial context. Spinning fantasies and writing for itself a role in our lives, advertising has become involved with the teaching of social and personal values, defining and determining the psyche of modern society. As a discourse, advertising participates in a general historical process. Advertisement as a discourse negotiates between the sayable and the visible by archiving statements which ultimately participate in the production of power in society. The paper analyses select advertisements to explore the ways in which the statements that constitute the discursive function of advertisements form an archive that continues to replenish dominant ideologies.

From a simple strategy to sell goods, advertisements have metamorphosed to become an effective social discourse. In principle, the ‘objective’ function of ‘selling goods’ is still the fundamental purpose of advertising. But the place of advertising in modern society goes beyond this commercial context. Spinning fantasies and writing for itself a role in our lives, advertising has become involved with the teaching of social and personal values, defining and determining the psyche of modern society.

Discourses have the power to convince people to accept statements as true and thus shape and create meaning systems that gain the status and currency of truth. They determine how subjects define and organize both themselves and the social world. Some discourses start exerting power and gain control over the modes of cultural behaviour while other alternative discourses are marginalised and subjugated, though all discourses potentially offer sites where hegemonic practices can be contested, challenged and resisted. Discursive fields, such as the law or the family, contain a number of competing and contradictory discourses with varying degrees of power to give meaning to social institutions and processes. Foucauldian notion of discourse joins power and knowledge, and its power follows from the subjects’ casual acceptance of the reality with which they are presented. The paper studies a number of advertisements using the

Foucauldian notion of power to understand how advertisements functions as agents in the construction of dominant discourses.

As a discourse advertising participates in a general historical process. A general history according to Foucault is a history that does not totalize, that does not look for patterns and overarching principles in an epoch, but focuses instead on describing differences, transformations and mutations. Looking at general history means looking at the way certain statements and their interactions determine social formations. A Foucauldian analysis becomes an archaeology of these statements:

Archaeology helps us to explore the networks of what is said, and what can be seen in a set of social arrangements: in the conduct of an archaeology, one finds out something about the visible in ‘opening up’ statements and something about the statement in ‘opening up’ visibilities’....In his discussion of the birth of the prison, *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault’s central task is to show how the prison as a form of visibility (a visible thing) produces statements about criminality, while statements about criminality produce forms of visibility which reinforce prison. (Kendall and Wickham 25)

An archaeology involves an analysis the relation between the sayable and visible in a society. It also analyses the way statements and subjects of statements interact with each other. Genealogy, on the other hand, describes these statements from the point of view of power. Archaeology is set to work by genealogy; it describes statements as an ongoing process. Advertisement as a discourse negotiates between the sayable and the visible by archiving statements which ultimately participate in the production of power in society. Thus a Foucauldian analysis of advertising takes the form of a genealogical study of the archive that informs the present; an analysis of the history of the present which is the focus of all Foucault’s studies.

The first advertisement under study is a print advertisement of Premier Appliances, a kitchen appliances company in India. The advertisement is set in a white background with a considerable space left blank. The whole advertisement can be divided into two sections, horizontally. An image of a plate laden with some toasts, slices of apple, banana, lemon, orange and some berries occupies the upper half. To the left is the brand name and the logo in red and to the right, in bold letters is the text “Great Mornings. Made in Minutes.” In the lower half, five reduced images are placed side by side: a cup of coffee, glasses of juice, a tray of strawberry and chocolate, pieces of toast, sandwich, all boxed with black outline. Below are the images of a number of appliances to be advertised: stainless steel toaster, sandwich maker, stainless steel kettle, coffee maker and juicer, all placed side by side. Sandwiched between the two rows of images placed horizontally is the text “Bring home these Premier Day starters to live a healthy life and surprisingly you’ll find more time to share with your lovable family.”

The attention of the viewer first falls on the plate laden with food, which is the largest image in the page and then moves to the main text “Great Mornings. Made in Minutes.” placed to its left. The text immediately hooks the attention of the upwardly mobile middle class that cannot afford leisurely mornings. The attention is then caught by the five boxed images and the text, which is in the form of a direct address to the viewer that reads “Bring home these Premier Day starters to live a healthy life and surprisingly you’ll find more time to share with your lovable family.” The denotation is that consuming the food items displayed would ensure health

and that using the advertised products would make work easier and simpler and save time so that more time can be spent with one's family.

But it can be noted that the advertisement while trying to sell the product is implicitly telling the customer what his breakfast menu should be. The main text when linked with the images conveys the message that great mornings are possible only when the items shown in the picture are consumed. And the items shown are thoroughly Western. The advertisement serves hegemonic purposes. Antonio Gramsci thought of hegemony as domination by consent. It is an internalized form of social control which makes certain views seem 'natural'. The advertisement insidiously works to convince the Indian customer that western culture is superior because it can better afford leisure and by distention pleasure and that it represents universal civilization. The advertisement attempts to replace the Indian breakfast pattern by proposing an alternate pattern. This they do by manipulating the viewer's concern for family and health. By saying that the food items shown are "healthy", the advertisers are exerting their proposal that the western style is healthy. Since the Occident and the Orient form a binary opposition in which the two poles define each other, by saying that the Western pattern is healthy, it follows that the Eastern pattern is unhealthy. The text further says that following the western breakfast pattern would ensure "more time to share with your lovable family". The Indian consumer for whom family is of paramount importance would get more time to spend with the family by switching on to the Western style. Statements such as "The West can offer better life, better health, and better family life through greater technology" are part of the archive that naturalizes western domination that invades even the citadels of Indian family. The ad seems to uphold, even as it drains the value of, India's tradition and history. The advertisement however is not completely devoid of anxiety since health is interpreted in the problematic field determined between nature and culture: the raw and the cooked. The extreme unnaturalness of technology is contrasted with the naturalness of raw fruit.

Not only the western food pattern is deemed superior, the western concept of beauty is also sold to the customer through the different commercials for cosmetics. The advertisements of Fair & Lovely are telling examples. Fair & Lovely's heavily aired television commercials typically contain images of women who are depressed, lacking confidence, rejected at job interviews or teased by friends all because of her dark coloured skin. Initially she has very few prospects, but gains a brighter future after becoming markedly fairer by using Fair & Lovely. The advertisement under study is one of the first Fair & Lovely television commercial. The scene opens into an ordinary apartment and an old man is seen drinking his morning coffee. He complains about the tea and his wife, who is busy in the kitchen, speaks of how they cannot afford the luxury of milk with his sole pension. The husband mentions that he wishes they had a son to support them. Their dark-skinned daughter overhears the conversation. On returning to her room, the daughter spots an advertisement in the newspaper for the recruitment of air hostesses. However, she is apprehensive about her chances owing to her dark skin colour. Just then, the television airs an advertisement for *Fair and Lovely*. The commercial continues, showing the various properties of the cream. The camera then shifts back to the girl who is now dressed in all pink and is walking confidently in a hallway with her back to the camera. She faces the interviewers and instantly dazzles them with her beauty and fairness. She doesn't need to show them her resume and has no trouble in getting the job. The advertisement ends with the girl returning home and surprising her parents by taking them to an expensive restaurant.

The advertisement lays bare a common Indian reality by rooting itself on the Indian concept of family system where sons are privileged over daughters. When the father laments his

fate of not having a son, the viewer learns of a code that signifies that daughters can do no more than housework and raise children and that they cannot support their family financially. It is into this very concept that the story is grafted. The advertisement apparently depicts the evolution of a middle class Indian woman into an independent self. The girl in the advertisement proves that she is as good as a son, capable of supporting her family financially.

But underneath this transparent denotation, there are more translucent areas. Rooting itself on the existing norms in the society, the advertisement invariably proposes a new norm for the Indian woman- that fair skin is a social and economic step up. Product is juxtaposed with images of power to suggest that that the product is an extension of the owner. It is only when the girl in the commercial is 'fairer' and 'whiter' that she is noticed, that she gets a job. It is neither her qualification nor her qualities that finally fetches her a job- it is just her fair looks. The advertisement doesn't really depict a new woman- in fact it is dictating new standards for Indian women. The advertisement consciously depicts woman as a product of the male gaze. The girl in the advertisement impresses the interviewers and gets the job only after becoming fairer. The connotation is that education will not make her liberated, nor will her qualities if woman isn't fair enough. Her success in life solely depends on her skin colour and her Indian skin tone is insufficient to open before her opportunities in life. Success in life is solely dependent on her 'whiteness'. The advertisement is giving a message to the women that their value lies in their appearance. The fair skin of the model and the expensive restaurant act as indexical signs which lead the viewer to believe that fair skin is the reason for her wealth. The advertisement, in addition to selling the product is invariably selling the ideology that however educated or capable a woman is, she can succeed in life only if she is fairer and thus more favourably positioned in an economy of male gaze. More over the very name of the product is aimed at redefining the Indian concept of beauty. There is a paradigmatic relation between the two words 'Fair' and 'Lovely'. The words fair and lovely are signs that define each other. It is signified that those who are fair are lovely or those who are lovely are fair.

Another advertisement of diamond jewellery (Nakshatra Solitaire) can be seen as dictating an almost antithetical statement. Upon initial viewing of the advertisement, one sees a woman, a famous film actress, turned sideways, with three-fourth of her profile facing the viewer. The photograph is paired with a set of diamond jewellery- a chain with a pendant and two studs- and a brand logo on the right. A few lines of text run at the bottom of the photograph. The whole photograph is given a black tone and the model and the jewellery in silvery white are projected out.

The creators have used the rules of design and leading lines to direct the viewers gaze: when viewing images, one's eyes gravitate towards identifiable shapes like human faces and towards the brightest part of an image. In this image the gaze first falls on the face of the model that is radiating like a diamond. From the model, the gaze travels to the jewellery which is placed to the right of the model at a point below the model's eyes and then to the top where the brand name and logo is displayed. The model appears to be standing at a place from which light rays are sent upwards. The logo is strategically placed at the end of one of the light rays that is fading out. From this point, the gaze runs back to the starting point of the source of light where the text placed in a darker area. The text reads: "For all the milestones of life, we've got you an exclusive destination." Thus there is an anti-clock wise movement of gaze- from the model to the jewellery to the brand to the logo and finally, to the text.

On analyzing the advertisement, it can be noticed that the advertisement is primarily targeted at women and speaks directly to them. The model is a familiar celebrity and the viewer

immediately links the model and the product. The viewer identifies the model as an independent woman capable of buying her own jewellery. Even when the viewer does not identify herself with the model, she is someone whom the viewer looks up to.

The text at the bottom which reads “For all the milestones of life, we’ve got you an exclusive destination” directly addresses the viewer. The ‘you’ calls the viewer immediately into the story. The text plays a crucial role in conveying the message of the advertisement. The text is imploring the viewer to buy diamond jewellery for all the milestones of life. Since the target audience is women, the text can be read as an invitation to independent women to please themselves by buying jewellery. The idea that the liberated woman no longer needs someone to buy things for her, that she is capable of earning and buying things for herself is implicit. Also by asking the viewer to buy diamonds for all the milestones of life, the advertisement sends the message that life is to be celebrated and that, a woman has the freedom and the right to celebrate her life.

The advertisement, while rooting itself on the existing knowledge of women’s love for diamonds is generating a new code for women- it is asking her to forget being the passive sufferer and celebrate life. However, the visual frame also tells another contradictory story. Instead of the woman reflecting the glow of diamonds, it is the jewellery that is in the afterglow of the woman. The woman appears to radiate light which fades into the dark areas of the periphery. Contrary to normal practice, the woman does not even display diamonds: the only article of jewellery she is seen to wear is one of the studs, which is barely seen. The woman is not displaying jewellery that might mark each milestone in life; she is displaying herself. Since the diamond is also a stone the woman appears to be the destination, the final desirable object determined by the dynamics of gaze. It is the desire that the woman generates that is transferred through juxtaposition or contiguity to the diamonds: desire for woman generates desire for diamonds. Thus the intended audience of the ad is not women but men who might take the decision to invest in diamonds to celebrate each milestone—read a new incentive or increment cheque. Whatever it appears to say at the surface, the advertisement draws from an archive of capitalist and patriarchal statements that does not disarrange but distends conventional bastions of social power.

Advertisements, as discourses conceived and articulated within dominant social practices appeal to an archive of statements that are generated by those practices and in turn articulate the statements that will determine future practice. Even as they appear to exploit transformations in society, they tend to undermine those transformations that are detrimental to the perpetuation of ideological formations that are in agreement with the interests of the dominant classes. Advertisements thus perform the double function of taming rebellion and perpetuating the power of the dominant class.

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