

From Busch to Thums-Up: The Global Interchange

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Keywords

Cultural grammar, ideological logic, global interchange, myths, commercials

Abstract

The researcher attempts to establish the global impact of the cultural logic of the American beer commercials on the ideological logic underlying the Indian soft drink advertisements of Thums-Up. The researcher adopts the research findings and methodologies of Lance State's qualitative research on American beer commercials (1991). State uses "theory and research in popular culture and anthropology, semiotics and structuralism, and critical and cultural studies" (1991) to unearth the cultural grammar of beer commercials of the American brand, Busch. The researcher applies similar analyses while studying Thums-Up commercials in the light of State's research, post the global impact of multi-nationals on Indian soft-drink products. In the process, the researcher reconstructs the underlying cultural ideology of Thums-Up as an instance of global extension of the American myth of the Frontiersman that underscores their alcohol commercials.

Introduction

Let us first examine Lance State's qualitative research that attempts to unfold the underlying *cultural grammar* of beer commercial campaigns played in the primetime slot on US channels (1991). His research helps us understand his argumentation, and the process of derivation of his proposition; both the process and the derivation significantly inform the paper under consideration. State understands an advertisement as "a form of cultural communication, and the objective is to uncover their cultural meanings" (1991). The researcher, here, urges the readers to understand the impact of cultural packaging; packaging that would eventually allow a product to be *naturally* acceptable to a cultural psyche, notwithstanding its ethical impact. For instance, alcohol brands are hugely successful with their audiences due to their cultural connect, notwithstanding the health concerns of the product.

The ability to derive a cultural meaning that *unconsciously* governs an entire diaspora of product positioning in advertisements is what interests the current researcher. State's methodology of research is therefore hugely significant. His analysis has imbibed from "theory and research in popular culture and anthropology, semiotics and structuralism, and critical and cultural studies" (1991; as per State, also see Barthes 1972; McArthur 1984; McLuhan 1951; Williamson 1978). He is commendable in his paper for two reasons

- for defending his approach;
- for highlighting a cultural meaning that would make a *dangerous* product acceptable in society.

Literature Review for State

State uses several big names to defend his critical studies approach towards understanding of advertisement communications as cultural communications. He uses Tony Schwartz to establish his *cultural grammar* logic: "The critical task is to design our package of stimuli so that it resonates with information already stored within an individual and thereby induces the desired learning or behavioral effect" (qtd. in State 1991; also see Schwartz 1974, p. 24). The "information already stored within an individual" is the *cultural grammar* that the product packaging in the advertisement stimulates or hints at or suggests. State also used educator E. D. Hirsch: "We know instinctively that to understand what somebody is saying, we must understand more than the surface meanings of words; we have to understand the context as well... To grasp the words on a page we have to know a lot of information that isn't set down on the page" (qtd. in State 1991; Hirsch 1987, p. 3).

State merely does not end with an educator. He continues to stress on the force of impact that television advertisements have on audience using stalwarts who have worked on social impact of advertising and television, like Gerbner dc Gross 1976; Gerbner, Gross, Jackson-Beeck, Jeffries-Fox, & Signorielli 1978; Signorielli 1987; Bandura 1977; Meyrowitz 1985:

I would also argue that advertising, like any form of mass communication, performs the function of socialization, that is, the transmission of cultural values, beliefs, and attitudes, and influences the way we view our world. [. . .]. Theory and research on social learning indicate that television programming can teach children specific behaviors, and whether those behaviors will be rewarded or punished. [. . .]. In the same way, television provides instruction on social roles, and the cultural rules pertaining to them. [. . .]. (1991)

Thus, the defense for analyzing the *cultural logic* of an advertisement is well established.

Cowboy and Frontiersman: Myth in Busch

State then uses two examples to establish the significance of context in cultural communication; context that allows for the prevalence of alcohol products as buyable commodities in the particular culture. He takes into consideration the image of the “Marlboro Man”: “the image of the cowboy as a historical type and as a fictional character in the Western genre” (1991). He understands the act of using a *cultural grammar* for persuasive stimulation in advertisements as the use, reinforcement and reshaping of myths to “evoke meaning in the minds of audiences” (1991). From his own research, and also from Postman et al. (1987), and Strate (1989), he analyses the use of myth in beer commercials. He explains the myth of the cowboy and the frontier. The frontier is the untamed landscape that has paradoxical value: on the one hand it is free from civilizational contamination, it is pure; on the other it is a scene of danger through the power of nature. The frontiersman has to be able to overcome the power of nature: “Unaided and unrestrained by civilization, the frontiersman is able to demonstrate, without equivocation, his mastery over nature. That is why the cowboy is seen as the archetypal man’s man” (1991).

State shows how the myth of the cowboy as the frontiersman is used in the Busch beer campaign:

In one commercial, we see a cowboy on horseback, herding cattle across a river. A small calf is overcome by the current, but the cowboy is able to withstand the force of the river and come to the rescue. The voice-over says: “Sometimes a simple river crossing isn’t so simple. And when you’ve got him back it’s your turn. Head for the beer brewed natural as a mountain stream.” As this last sentence is said, we see a six-pack pulled out of clear running water, as if by magic. In this ad, the power and danger of nature takes the form of the river, but nature’s gentler aspect is also present in the form of the mountain stream. The beer is presented as a form of nature, more or less identical with the stream, both in the voice-over and in the image of a hand pulling the six-pack from the water. [. . .]. Drinking beer then is a relatively safe way of facing the challenge of nature. For those of us who do not wish to get our feet wet saving a calf, drinking beer is a way to symbolically re-enact the taming of the wilderness.(1991)

Now let us move from State and beer to India and soft drink commercials. The harmful effects of drinking and driving have always been “common” knowledge. Yet, the “symbolic re-enactment of challenge” through the beer commercial is attractive to a cultural psyche, particularly, the youth. So how do we use “the symbolic enactment of challenge” without worrying about safety protocols, to sell a product: the soft drink commercials are an interesting play of such sentiments, particularly in an era when India opened up to global market of the multi-nationals in the early 90s?

Thums-Up: A History

Let us consider Thums-Up as an example. It was introduced in 1977, when the Indian Government banned the American giant Coca Cola. The Parle Brothers launched their flagship product Thums-Up. The logo (thumbs-up), the color in the logo (red/blue), and the picture on the bottle are/were interesting: the Manmad Hill or the Thums-Up Mountain or the Thums-Up Pahaar (mountain) was a popular sight from

the trains; it resembled the thumbs-up on the logo. But the significant observation is the change of the slogan from “Food, Friends, and Thums-Up” and “Happy days are here again” in the 80s to “I want my thunder” and “Taste the thunder” in the late 80s and early 90s, and till today.

It was in the nineties, when the Indian Government opened to multinationals, that Pepsi initiated intense competition with the “by-then” established Indian cultural soft drink; a competition which continued with the entry of Coca-Cola. In 1993, Parle sold out to Cola for US\$60. Coca Cola, the American brand, used Thums-Up to compete with Pepsi in a big way, with renewed and vigorous advertising campaigns: “strength” and “macho” were prime qualities used to re-position the drink in the “Grow up to Thums Up” campaign. From sports like World Cup Cricket and Formula One, the brand has been a sought-after sponsor of “macho” and popular sports. The nicknamed version “Mahacola” in the 1990s gained tremendous popularity in small towns. Celebrity endorsers included/include action heroes like Akshay Kumar, Salman Khan, Chiranjeevi and Mahesh Babu, to name a few, and even sportsmen in its pre-global avatar in the 80s.

If we look at the early Thums-Up ads in the 80s, there was a sense of group enjoyment, family, fun and frolic, which included adventure, holidaying and having a good time. See the 0.53rd moment of the presentation uploaded in YouTube (available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CDebbvBFU0>). It gradually started representing the national sense of winning sports with Indian players like Gavaskar et al. However, the adventurous nature of Thums-Up started changing from its national as well as its family flavor to a more individual agenda.

Discussion: Unearthing the Cultural Logic of Thums-Up via Busch

Now let us carefully analyze a few recent Thums-Up commercials and compare it with Busch beer campaign in the light of State’s analysis. Let us look at Mahesh Babu’s 2012 Thums-Up ad(also available on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zlmfIolUdqU>). He is one of the reigning superstars of the Telegu Film industry (India). His 2006 blockbuster *Pokiri* (Ruffian) was a game changer, re-positioning him as a commendable entertainment icon. The movie was a game-changer in dialogues, screen-play, commercial success and records. It was remade in Tamil and Hindi, both doing very well at the ticket counter. One of its strongest essences was its popular dialogue (translated): Once I have made a commitment, even I do not listen to myself.

Let us contextualize the dialogue in details. Commitment to save the world against gangsters, to the extent that the commitment is unquestionably reliable (the hero was an undercover Indian Police Servant); commitment to never quit love, to the extent that the commitment becomes an unquestionable statement of loyalty (his undying commitment to the heroine); such commitments went on to become the rhetorical motif of the movie (the dialogue is literally repeated several times). Yet, throughout the movie, until the climax, the cop serenades the world, the heroine and the gangster as a ruffian, an uncivilized man, a “pokiri.”

The image of the ruffian as “uncontaminated by civilization” or the “natural rogue,” and the paradoxical responsibility of a “ruffian” to protect civilization from gangsters (ruffians that harm civilization) establish the paradox of the Busch beer logic: pure like nature, yet the ability to overcome the challenge of nature: you drink pure nature, yet overcome the turbulence of it. Moreover, the commitment re-plays the cowboy myth from Busch: like the cowboy frontiersman, the committed hero overcomes the power of unruly nature (gangster) at the end. The myth of the “hero” as the committed protector and taker of unruly challenges becomes the screen persona of Mahesh Babu. There have been many films later, but *Pokiri* remains Babu’s ultimate game changer-identity.

Now the persona is manifested in the Thums-Up ad as a creator and player of challenges. The difference between the movie and the commercial is the positioning of challenge. The movie is set up with a context of evil that needs to be irradiated. The protagonist then has to take the challenge of eradicating the necessary evil: the archetypal mythical structure: there is a villain, a hero is sought to deliver the

villain to justice, and society to resurrection. In the commercial, there are no villains, no distressed calves that need to be protected from torrents by a frontiersman. Yet, in a map-setting context, Mahesh Babu has a desire to cut short a three-minute travel plan to a one-minute path, and urges his friends: "Today, let's do something thunderous." He and his friends fly over terraces and buildings in daring acrobatic styles and stunts to reach their destination in a minute.

Each lyric-sentence in the background score reverberates with various synonyms of thunder: "adventurous (translated from Hindi *joshilay*)," "daring" (the word is used in English), "sparkles" (translated from Hindi *chingariya*), and the tradition continues. It ends with the hope, dream and plan: "Tomorrow, will accomplish another thunderous feat." In short, Thums-Up becomes the symbolic translation of the alcohol masculine courage in to a non-alcohol, yet masculine fun feat. Thus, the youth drinking a Thumps-Up, safely (literally) enacts a frontiersman venture, without drinking alcohol, while still living up to the masculine franchise; he is not saving a calf, but he is jumping terraces for the sake of adventure. The context has changed, where adventure for the sake of adventure takes over the mythical structure of the hero over the villain; the challenge remains the same: adventure!

Thums-Up re-positions the frontiersman's role and the challenge from nature, with the underlying grammar of nature and challenge still remaining the same. The challenge now is no longer the turbulent torrent; but *there is* challenge. The challenge may not look imminent like the calf hanging (which needs to be saved immediately); the challenge here would be a three minutes travel plan, nevertheless, burdened by the "concrete jungles" developed by civilization. And Babu and his friends jump skyscrapers and other forms of concrete jungles to reach their destination in a minute!

A new meaning of the frontiersman and challenge is created, however flimsy it might appear when compared to the hero saving an entity in distress. Thus, State's analysis still holds true: "Drinking beer then is a relatively safe way of facing the challenge of nature. For those of us who do not wish to get our feet wet saving a calf, drinking beer is a way to symbolically re-enact the taming of the wilderness" (1991). Here, we do not need to worry about the realities of alcohol; we do not need a distressed calf; we face the challenge of nature (the concrete jungle) by drinking Thums-Up, such that we symbolically re-enact the taming of the concrete wilderness, this time. Using Plato's concept of the twice removed from the Ideal, the researcher contends that the soft drink commercial of Thums-Up is a symbolic imitation of the cultural logic of alcohol commercials (America); and the alcohol commercials are in turn, the symbolic imitation of the mythical context of their culture: the myth of the cowboy frontiersman, nature and challenge.

Research Proposition 1: Thus, the American myth of the cowboy, nature, challenge, frontiersman, and masculinity infests the Indian psyche.

Let us now concentrate on the other current superstar who endorses Thums-Up, Akshay Kumar. Thums-Up came to him when he had started re-positioning himself in the industry after a slew of box office failures. The emphasis is on the repositioning angle. That Akshay Kumar has been called "khiladi kumar" or the "player kumar" is a well known "myth" for Indian movie audiences. The brand harps onto the myth of the "khiladi kumar" in another game dominated advertisement. Interestingly, the starting visual of the advertisement reminds us of the huge flat barren descriptions of the "archetypical" natural North American landscapes: barren, desolate, huge and never-ending. This is the 2011 advertisement available in YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2T68SY4Wxs>). One would think of the Yellow Stone Park, or even Arthur Conan Doyle's description of the American landscape in *A Study in Scarlet*:

In the whole world there can be no more dreary view than that from the northern slope of the Sierra Blanco. As far as the eye can reach stretches the great flat plain-land, all dusted over with patches of alkali, and intersected by clumps of the dwarfish chaparral bushes. On the extreme verge of the horizon lie a long chain of mountain peaks, with their rugged summits flecked with snow. In this great stretch of country there is no sign of life, nor of anything appertaining to life. There is no bird in the steel-blue

heaven, no movement upon the dull, grey earth—above all, there is absolute silence. Listen as one may, there is no shadow of a sound in all that mighty wilderness; nothing but silence—complete and heart-subduing silence.

Or remember the lines from *Gone with the Wind* or the landscape pictures from the motion movie *Brokeback Mountain*? The “myth” of the American frontier is maintained. A girl (probably a girlfriend) asks Kumar (who is sipping Thums-up) against the landscape backdrop, “what *all* has he done for *his* thums-up?” He reminisces in his mind (silently), and each memory has a visual equivalent in the ad:

- Jumped from multistoried glass buildings and great heights
- Jumped through fire
- Waded through water and cascades of storming water
- Ran from bunch of people chasing him for thums-up
- Escaped from an alligator when snatching the drink from its mouth.

And finally, when the girl throws his thums-up from the mountain, he answers “nothing much” and jumps...

The frontiersman concept is still maintained: overcoming nature’s challenge. The subject of challenge is now the ownership of thums-up, rather than saving a distressed. Thus, the adventure and challenge of nature continues; where thums-up becomes the object of desire. To be distressed is not having Thums-Up!

Research Proposition 2: In other words, in the earlier Busch ad, the product was the symbol of re-enactment of machismo; my drinking the alcohol was equivalent to my saving the distressed. Here the product is the prize that I need to win, possess, and take care of. Thus, symbolically the product stands for machismo and it itself is the cause of distress and glory simultaneously! It is no more the enactment; it is itself the act!

Conclusion: The Thums-Up Fetish

The change in Thums-Up campaigns, featuring the contemporary mega star Salman Khan in the early 90s as a direct imitation of the legacy of the saving of the distressed (Busch ad), to the contemporary heroism generated by and through the possession of the drink, is interesting. The early 90s ad had a newly emerging heartthrob, Salman Khan, trying to save a kid hanging from the top of the building. Remember the Busch ad in this context. It is interesting to note that the actor’s contract was terminated in the early 2000s, when he was embroiled in a hit and run case for alcohol consumption while driving! As stated in proposition 1, the connection between machismo, alcohol, and Busch ideology is possible here. And as also stated in proposition 2, the change today from Thums-Up being a symbolic enactment of saving the distressed by overcoming natural challenges to becoming the object of challenge itself is significant. It is no more a symbolic re-enactment of cowboy feats; it is itself the creator of challenges; not merely used to overcome existing challenges. It has intrinsically owned the quality of the cowboy and the frontiersman.

Research Hypothesis: The American frontiersman myth underlying its beer ads (Busch) has interesting similarities with Thums-Up ad campaigns strategically re-designed in the 90s when India opened its gates to multi-nationals. It was Cola, which bought Thumps-Up then; an American brand buying an Indian one; reshaping it, and re-delivering it to an Indian market. The global impact of the “theme of challenge” underlying beer ads in America seems to continue as the cultural logic of Thums-Up in a new global era of India. India opens market for America, America barter its cultural psyche; the result is a global exchange of culture, market, and product.

Research Limitations

The research is constrained by its cultural studies and critical thinking interpretations. The intention was to understand deeper cultural influences rather than ascertain statistical performance. The objective and quantitative findings have been overshadowed by subjective and qualitative interpretations. The research follows interpretative methodologies, and accepts the possibilities of interpretations being

further constructions of meanings. Yet, the attempt for interpretative construction is also to unearth probable constructions of established meanings; to understand processes as interpretations rather than establishments.

Direction for Further Research

Post entry of multi-nationals in India, it would be interesting to observe the exchange in cultural context, which is also a powerful category of market exchange. To make comparative observations between advertising psyches of multi-national products and the impact on the packaging of national products that have developed direct relationships with the multi-national products makes for interesting research on the impact of the global as a game-changing phenomena for nationals and multi-nationals. The transfer of research focus from product-positioning to ideological positioning would reveal the politics of globalization strongly and emphatically, thus enabling marketers to strategize more diligently and deeply and culturally!

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