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## Semiotic analysis of Indian television. Advertisements and its impact on consumers: an exploratory study

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**Abstract:** Everyday consumers are exposed to a huge and wide variety of advertisements. These advertisements fall into different categories of communication media such as television, print media e.g., magazines and newspapers, cinema or billboards, radio etc. Advertising now reaches far more people than it used to with traditional media since it has major presence in new digital media which has also transformed immensely in recent time. These advertisements deliver and also utilise a wide range of meaning, symbols and messages also called semiotics in their advertisements. Importantly, large part of any individual is surrounded by lot of signs and symbols, however, the way they comprehend these sign, symbols and meaning differ from one to other individual. Since, India is a vast country with vivid and varied culture and demographics, it becomes a challenge for advertisers to target and attract right consumers through their advertisements. In such a situation it is essential for advertisers to understand the choice consumers have for advertisements and the differential impact it has on the consumers. Our study shows the differential impact advertisements have through their themes, colours, to be more specific, impact that semiotics have on consumers and how it can be made more effective and targeted by understanding the language and impact of semiotics on consumers in India.

**Keywords:** semiotics, India, television, advertisement, communication, signs and symbol

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*Analyse sémiotique de télévision indienne: publicité et son impact sur les consommateurs: une étude exploratoire*

**Résumé:** Notre étude montre l'impact différent que les annonces ont à travers les thèmes, les couleurs, plus exactement, l'impact que la sémiotique a sur les consommateurs et la façon dont elle peut être rendue plus efficace et ciblée par la compréhension du langage; Le cas des Indes est discuté dans le présent article.

**Mots-clés:** sémiotique, Inde, télévision, publicité, communication, signifier et symboles

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### **Introduction**

Advertisements have a potential to influence the consumers and their social and cultural surroundings. There are lot of approaches engaged in study of language, sign, symbols used in advertising. Many sociological, cultural studies and sociolinguistic approaches highlight the ways the symbols are used in advertisements. These different signs, images and symbols used in ads are integral part of their communication process. These images are reflections of society which shape the thought process of the consumers to interpret meaning of the advertisement. The study of semiotics provide platform to understand how advertising reflect and shape experiences of consumer's everyday life. However, various fields have different data and they ask different questions to consumers. In recent times the study of semiotics is increasingly considered as important part of advertising.

As India is a mutli-cultural society, there is high possibility that consumers may have different interpretations for the same advertising message. For the marketers it is very crucial to understand how consumers interpret the visual messages in advertising. This perspective can be examined by a 'Semiotic analysis' on consumer's responses to identify patterns of meaning construction. The meaning of all verbal and non verbal communication used in advertising are differently analyzed by consumers.

A few consumers are influenced by the color used in ads; they interpret differnt meaning of the color according to their liking and preference of the color. Similarly, if the ambience of the ads is liked by the consumer and storyline built in ad connects to the consumer's lifestyle then their interpretation of the message is influenced by the same.

### **1. Flashback of Indian television advertising**

Indian television has gone past the times when television transmission was mainly in black and white. During those times Indian television viewers had no other choice but to watch 'Doordarshan', the Indian national channel. The programmes broadcasted in Doordarshan were largely non-commercial in nature and dull. They

were also directed and focused towards socio-economic development and educational programs. Later with the broadcast of satellite television (TV), international as well as domestic channels such as Star TV and Zee TV came into Indian homes and viewers were exposed to more than 50 channels by mid 90's.

In India, post the year of 1992, when cable Television business started flourishing in Indian television market, television viewers were also looking for more entertainment options apart from state-owned broadcaster Doordarshan (DD). During that time with the launch of Zee TV and Star TV through spread of cable TV, Indian marketers got more space and frequency on television to advertise their products. This helped marketers to connect better with the consumers. By now they had power to increase the frequency of ads and get more ad space in different channels apart from Doordarshan. With the high visibility and availability of more options for channels, Indian advertising business also started to flourish. At present it has come to the state where every advertisement counts for the marketers as it costs them heavily. While the advertising industry in India has started growing, advertisers spend their money wisely and leverage every bit of it. They make sure that they influence consumer purchase decisions and build brands.

In television advertising, semiotics like signs and symbols are associated with displays, symbols, colors, themes, verbal announcement, voiceover, bold images, sign language, lighting and art frame work of television commercial etc. Every aspect of these symbolic terms connects the customers to their products. It is important to understand how consumers interpret the information quoted in an advertisement. The intention of sender and receiver should match and fall in one line. Scott (1994 pp.252-253) quoted in his paper that "the sender crafts the message in anticipation of the audience's probable response, using shared knowledge of various vocabularies and conventions, as well as common experiences. Receivers of the message use this same body of cultural knowledge to read the message, infer the sender's intention, evaluate the argument, and formulate a response."

The consumers often support the interpretation of the message in their own ways, where cultural, social and ethical values play major part in it. Advertising is largely reflection of the society, it creates imagery through various signs, visuals and symbols around the consumers. Through semiotic analysis we can interpret the consumers' preferences and responses towards these various semiotics. When TV advertisement portrays a specific theme in commercial, consumers instantly connect with it. They get amazed by these fantastic images shown in the commercial and various situations which are similar to their own that further makes the consumer feel connected to the ad.

India is rich in its cultural values, bounded by many social classes, and takes great care of its ethnicity. In India, languages and local dialects change at every 100km. Food choices change from north to south and east to west. Even with so many differences it stands as one entity. Therefore, conducting semiotic analysis of ad preferences of Indian consumers is a challenging task. For any advertising agen-

cy, the target is to create commercials for consumers across India and still have positive effects on consumers buying behaviour.

O'Barr (2008) mentioned in his article that Indian advertising has the challenge of speaking to one of the world's most diverse populations. English is the only common language throughout India; however, people from many sections of population are unfamiliar with it. All the interactive media like television, radio, and newspapers rely on more than two dozen languages across India. English is used in advertisements which address India's elite strata. While targeting masses advertisers use local languages. Now-a-days, a very common practice among advertisers is to mix English and Hindi, which can be termed as 'Hinglish (Kothari and Snell 2011). The use of hinglish is very common in Indian movies as well. Hindi- English code-mixed is indicating the popularity of the use of Hinglish in India (Sailaja 2011). *{Hindi (modern standard Hindi) is a standardised and sanskritised register of the Hindustani language. Hindustani is the native language of most people living in Northern and Central part of India. Modern Standard Hindi is one of the official languages of India.}*

The idea is to analyze the ads in terms of the signs being used, their status along with the associative meanings which not only give positive impressions about the product but also portray that they are complementary and compatible with the society. In the present study, for example, researchers analyzed some successful ad campaigns shown to Indian consumers, such as 'Amul' with the tagline of Amul "The taste of India". This ad campaign portrays different cultures, social classes and people belonging to different ethnicity using Amul India products. Amul jingle has Indian theme and tries to keep a hold on consumer's mindset, while, the tagline attracts the patriotic side of consumers and creates a sense of belongingness.

In the literature review the role of semiotics in advertising is highlighted. A discussion on the published works on semiotic analysis is done with reference to pervasive ways of thinking about signs, symbols and images, and social, ethnic and cultural aspects.

## 2. Review of Literature

Advertisements are not just a way of sending information about a product but are meant to relate to the sensitivities of consumers they are aimed at. Since India is a huge country with complex social structures and cultural systems, tapping on individual and cultural sensitivities and creating an impact is definitely a big task for the companies making and selling the products.

One of the interesting tools used by advertisers is the "Semiotics" that they utilize to organize, and create images in such a way that consumers make meaning out of these constructs to fit their realities. Bignell (2002, p.1-3) quoted that 'Semiotics' (or semiology) is one of the most powerful and influential ways of thinking about media. The name semiotics and semiology derives from the ancient Greek word 'semeion', which means 'sign'. Semiotics is a way of analyzing meanings by look-

ing at the signs (like words, pictures, symbols etc.) which communicate meaning. There are two rubrics of studying semiotics, one being general study of semiosis which comes under the rubric of biosemiotics, the other being study of human semiosis, in specific cultural contexts, covered under cultural semiotics (Posner et al. 1997–2004). Now the question arises, are all the realities similar, or more specifically do we know who likes which part of semiotic and which semiotics has more impact than the rest and on whom?

According to Bignell (2002), print media is able to blend together color, the sense of the sign and intertextuality and the beauty of all the forms like a magazine which he claims only to be a collection of signs. Since, advertisements have meanings and interpretations attached to the objects and everything that they show in it, understanding how meaning is formed and how it is interpreted is important. Dyer (1986, p.129) mentions that ads as a means of representation and meaning, construct ideology within themselves through the intervention of external codes that are found in society. According to Eagleton (1991, p.195), ideological powers are not just a matter of meaning, but of making a meaning stay or stick. One of the main source of meaning generation is culture. Culture is the aggregate processes by which meanings are created, stored and transferred, and norms, values, codes and sign, both material and non material, are constituted. Culture gives us tools to interpret the world around us (Mortelmans, 1998). The signs for example, are created within social interactions also called transfunctionalisation (Krampen in Mortelmans, 1998). This phenomenon differentiates between the first order and a second order creation of meaning. The first-order imputation of meaning, at the level of denotation, produces the sign function of the object — i.e., it's meaning according to its immediate function. The second-order imputation of meaning, or the connotative meaning, signifies its social context. It is this level that transfunctionalizes the object to socially prescribed meanings (Gottdiener 1995, p.174).

Nazafian and Dabaghi (2011), mention that anything that causes the reader to assume a meaning is a sign in the advertisement. By using signs and colours the advertiser is better able to market his audience the product and make it popular among them. There is a certain regularity that can be found in advertising. Image, word and colour are a few of the many semiotic modes that are used to code social meanings of ads. Semiotic analysis is therefore, perhaps the basic building block in constructing ideologies.

Mick (1986, p.196) mentioned that “the consumer world is a web of meanings among consumers and marketers woven from signs and symbols ensconced in their cultural space and time.” He argues that the importance of signs and symbols has been widely recognized, but very few researchers working on consumers have developed theory and research programs based on semiotics, the doctrine of signs. He also mentions that “the strengths of semiotics is, it positions meaning at the nucleus of consumer behavior, which provides a rich meta-language for semiotic consumer research, and recommends a multi-paradigm philosophy of science” Mick (1986:196).

Williamson's (1978) as mentioned by (O'Barr, 2008) proposes a strategy for interpreting advertisements ideologically. Using semiotic theory, she argues that ads communicate in many ways beyond the strict, overt messages they offer. According to Williamson, messages encourage consumers to accept the dominant ideologies of the power of corporations, the values of consumptions, and their role as purchasers and consumers of products.

Bignell (2002) mentioned that, the combination of linguistic sign with visual, often photographic signs in advertisements allows us to explore the terms and ideas. The television ads are composed of a syntagmatic sequence of images, sounds and words. It is always difficult for consumers to immediately interpret the meaning of the ad shown on TV. It gives very less time to them for articulation of the complete message in their terms.

Rubio-Hernández (2011) discusses about use of sports stars as the new gods who can influence consumers. She analyzes how media shows players as objects of worship and devotion. She focuses on the most successful Spanish sportsperson, the tennis player Rafael Nadal. She also looks at the players of the national soccer team. The researcher discusses how these sportspersons are depicted as national heroes in advertising. Her findings suggest that sports has taken over religion as an object of worship due to its importance in popular culture and therefore in advertising.

Colours according to various studies represent many emotions. They are said to engage powerful emotional reactions. Online advertisers therefore position them high in advertising as colours present strong symbolic value. They tend to influence human beings and induce various emotions such as happiness, sadness, etc, in them. They also have the power to influence how people perceive an object or even an idea (Nahai, 2013). It is mentioned that both in online and offline advertisements entire spectrum of colour is encountered.

Black, for example, is said to transmit complex and symbolic messages (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 2009). Black can stand for mystery, unlimited, nothingness, unconsciousness, fear, death, evil, sin, jealousy, mourning, abuse, antagonism, vice, sickness, censorship but also eternal life, power, knowledge, strength. It also stands for stability, wisdom, prudence, humbleness, elegance, refinement, luxury, fine taste, prestige, dignity, femininity, sensuality, seduction, etc., (Petrovici, 2014: p.721).

Advertisements tend to also influence gender stereotyping in a society. Television advertising is found to be even more significant in a country like India where television was introduced as late as early 1970s (De Souza, 2006). Even then very little research is done on gender role portrayal in Indian television ads (Das, 2011). According to study by Jha Dang and Vohra (2005) as compared to men, women more often featured in ads for household products, or beauty products while they were less likely to be shown as working women. Similarly, Das (2000) found that men are featured more often in ads for automotive, financial services, and electronic products than did women.

### 3. Research Methodology

In our study we have tried to understand the parameters of semiotics used in advertisements and the variation in its choices, appeals and values among consumers. We further analyze which of the semiotics help the consumers to connect with the brands. Our main objectives of the study therefore are:

1. To identify and analyze which semiotics/symbols have differential impact on consumers.
2. To find out whether difference in demographic and socio-cultural background of consumers lead to difference in their choices of semiotics in advertisement.
3. To analyze on whom the impact of the symbols/semiotics is high.

To achieve these objectives we have collected data by conducting online survey through structured questionnaire adopting simple random sampling technique. We collected 165 sample responses from 112 males and 53 females. Age of our respondents ranges from 19 years to 56 years. Data are collected from respondents belonging to almost all parts of India, covering Northern, Southern, Eastern and Western part of India. We have used quantitative methods to analyze the data as well as qualitative methods of interpretation. The data has been collected following a five-point Likert Scale demonstrating the intensity of choices of semiotics used in advertisements, broadcast in Indian television among the viewers. The intensity of choices has been scaled from 1 to 5, where 1 stands for 'least preferred' and 5 stands for 'most preferred'. We have used ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) techniques to assess the statistical differences in mean score for choices among groups (Boone, Jr. and Boone 2012).

The semiotic analysis is an age old concept, however very less research has been conducted, specifically, on Indian Television ads. This research study surely adds value to existing literature in Indian advertising. Although, we have come across some empirical studies conducted on Indian market, they mainly highlighted on print ads. This study is an attempt to explore and evaluate various variables which affect the consumers pertaining to their choices in television advertisements. The research topic has significant practical application in the world of Indian advertising.

### 4. Data Analysis

In this study various symbolic communications are used to analyze the impact of each signs and symbols on Indian consumers. *Table 1* shows us those symbols and symbolic communications largely used in Indian television advertisements and were also used in this study.



**Table 1:** *Various Symbolic Communication used in Indian television advertisement*

Symbolic Communications	Examples
Symbols	Objects, Images, Social Symbols, Shape, etc
Colors	Red, Black, Green, Brown Yellow, Blue etc
Language of the Ad	English, Hindi, Local /Regional
Ambience of ad	Adventure, Family Drama, Festivals, Light Loud, Lazy, Noisy, Fun & Happiness, etc.
Cultural aspects & values	Gender equality, Family values, Youth oriented, Mix of Culture, Social
Ad Message	Words, Storyline, Tagline, Musical, Choice of Words & Dialogue, Storyline
Type of ad	Male oriented/ Female / Family oriented
Brand Characters	Brand mascot
Brand Personality	Celebrity
Moods/Emotions in ad	Happiness, Patriotism, Fun, Anger, Sadness, Togetherness, Erotic, Sex & Ecstasy

*Source: Categorisation made by authors.*

In the data analysis, Figure-1 portrays the mean scores for different signs and symbols by gender along with its upper and lower limit. Our analysis did not find any statistically significant difference (95% confidence interval) in mean scores attached by males and females. Image of a product however, as portrayed in an advertisement, has higher potential to draw its viewers as compared to portrayal of objects, shapes and sizes and social class shown in the ad.

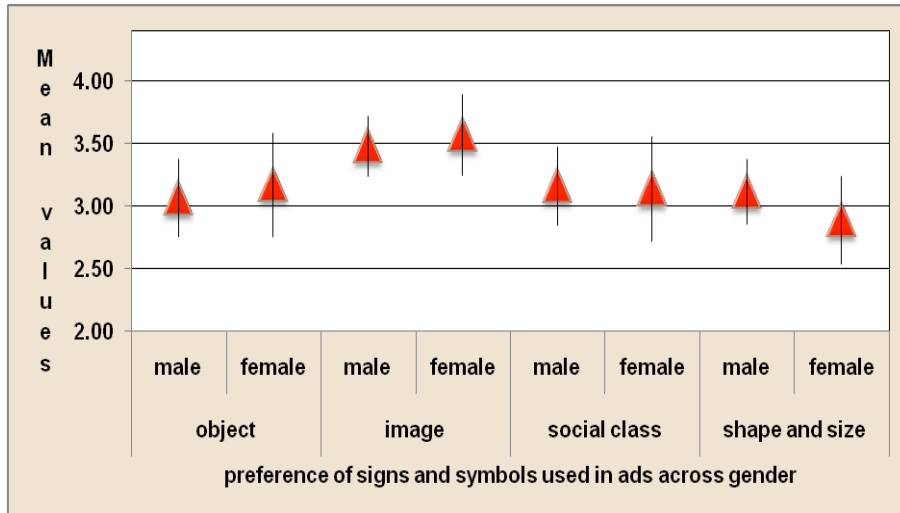


Figure 1. Mean values of preference of signs and symbols used in ads across gender, with respective upper and lower limits

Figure 2 depicts that the difference in mean has not been much between the two genders in terms of choice of colour, signs and symbols, language, ambience, culture and message in ads. Even though the difference has been more prominent for colours and ambience of the advertisements as compared to other entities, the F statistics reveal that the differences across the genders for these six entities are not statistically significant. Nevertheless, message rendered by an advertisement seems to be a very important aspect to draw an audience to it.

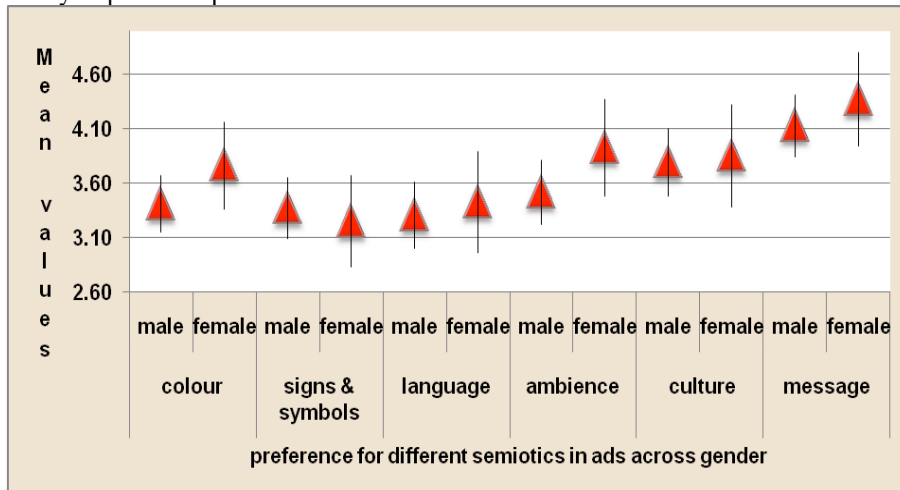


Figure 2. Mean values of preference for different semiotics in advertisement across gender, with respective upper and lower limits

The following figure (Figure 3) does not show much variation in mean scores between the two age groups regarding advertisement's colour, signs and symbols, language, ambience, culture and message delivered by the advertisement. However, higher aged respondents apparently showed a higher preference towards the signs and symbols, language and culture.

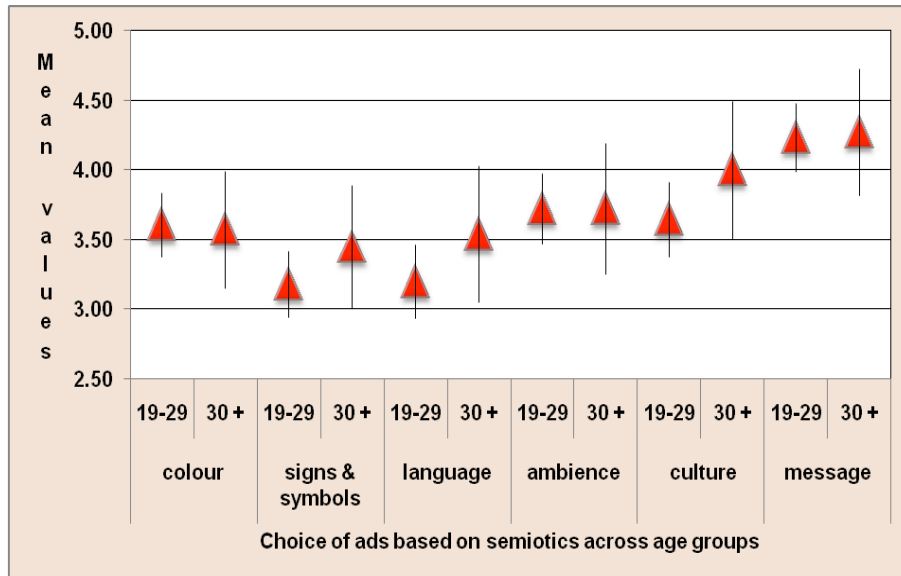


Figure 3. Mean values of Choice of ads based on semiotics across age groups, with respective upper and lower limits

Figure 4 reveals that there is considerable difference between male and female respondents in terms of preferring an advertisement based on either celebrity or animation. Females, nevertheless, put higher preference on these aspects, where the F-statistics also justifies the result as a statistically significant one. On the other hand, there has been no significant difference between the genders regarding preference for an advertisement based on members-orientation, characters in that act and also moods and emotions. Importantly, the mean scores highlight that on an average people judge an advertisement based on the moods and emotions associated with it.

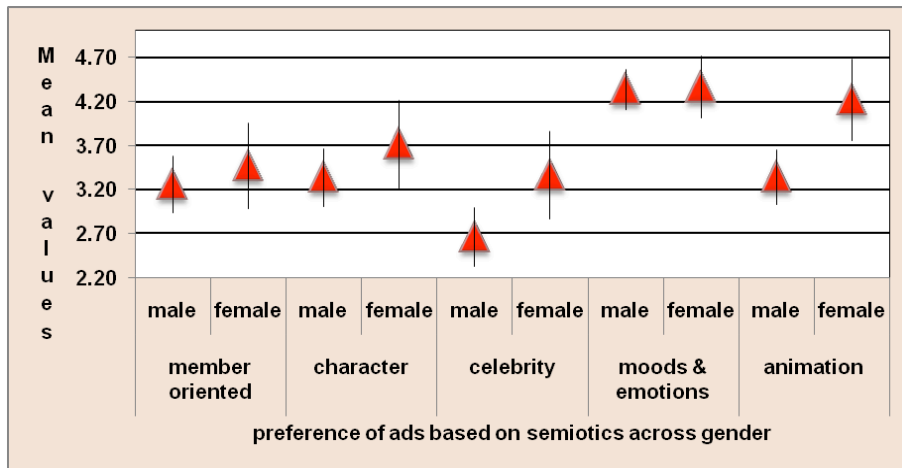


Figure 4. Mean values of preference of ads based on semiotics across gender, with respective upper and lower limits

Figure 5 depicts that moods and emotions showed in an advertisement are attributed with higher scores, while celebrities do not earn a considerable importance. There has been a statistically significantly ( p value = 0.05) higher preference score for higher aged respondents as compared to their younger counterparts in terms of member oriented advertisements, moods and emotions and animated advertisements.

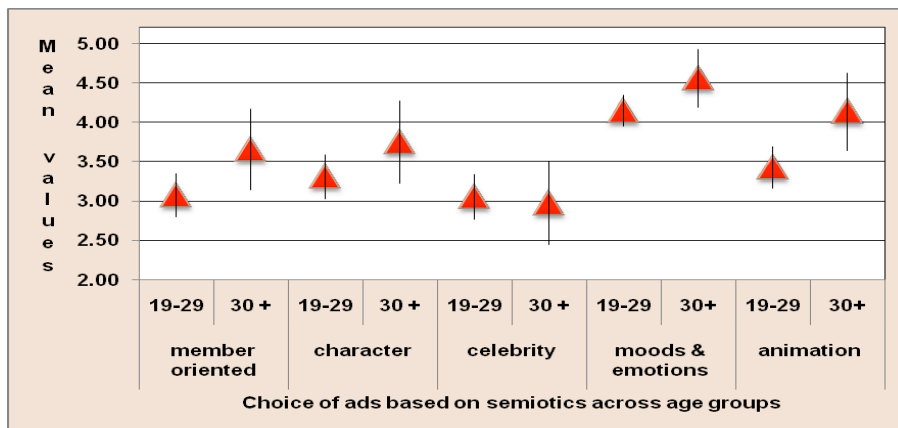


Figure 5. Mean values of choice of ads based on semiotics across age groups, with respective upper and lower limits

Figure 6 depicts the mean preference for colours as valued by the respondents. The mean difference between the genders is highest for purple, as compared to other stated colours, where females showed a higher preference for this particular choice.

The preference is highest for blue for both the genders, while brown is the least preferred colour.

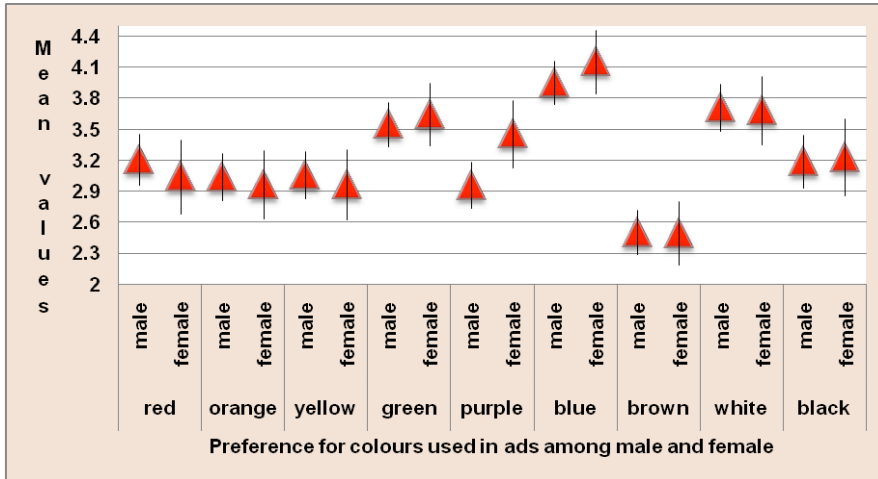


Figure 6. Mean values for preference of colours used in ads among male and females, with respective upper and lower limits

The following figure 7 shows that between 19-29 years aged and 30 and above aged respondents the difference in scores is much broader considering few specific colours, namely yellow, green, purple and black. The F- statistics show a statistical significance. The preference for black is higher for respondents belonging to the younger age group. On the other hand, for all other significant cases, the mean score has been higher for the 30+ years aged respondents.

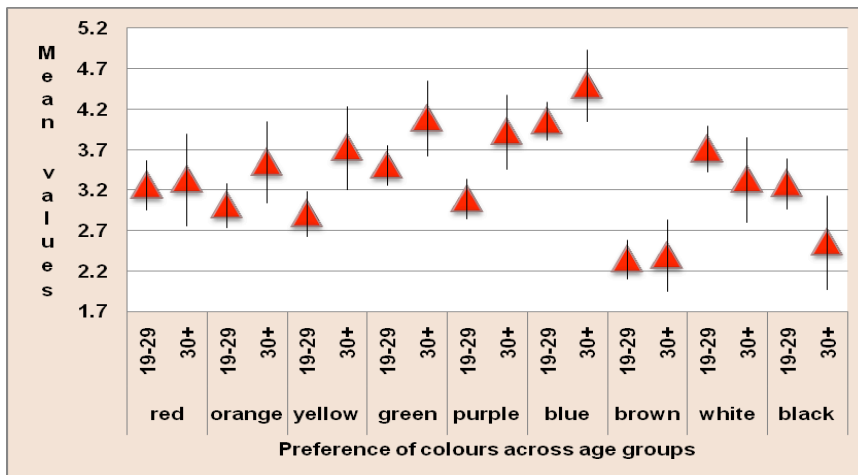


Figure 7. Mean values for preference of colours across age groups, with respective upper and lower limits

The following figure 8 shows difference in scores between 19-29 years old age group and 30 and above age group in their choice of ad message. The F- statistics show a statistical significance at 95 % confidence interval for tagline/punchline used in advertisements. The mean score and therefore preference for tagline/punchline is higher for respondents belonging to the older age group i.e 30 and above aged.

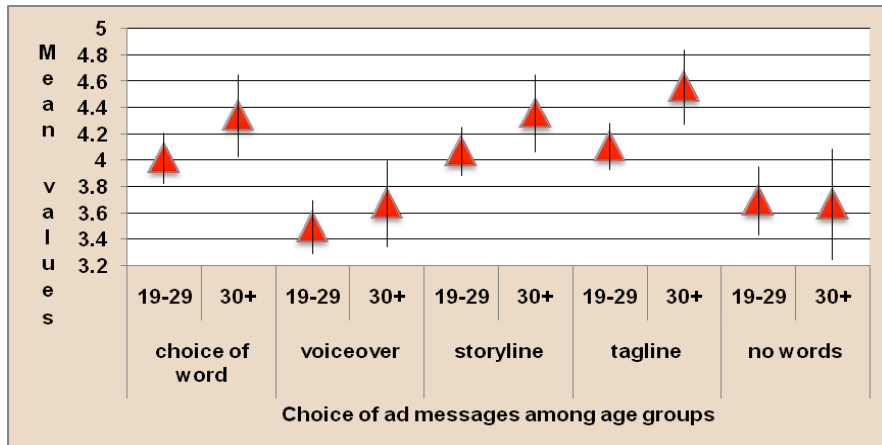


Figure 8. Mean scores in choice of ad messages among the age groups, with respective lower and upper limits

The following figure 9 depicts that the mean score of preference for an advertisement has a considerable gender dimension for kids oriented advertisements; higher score attached to the females has been found to be statistically significant at p value of 0.05.

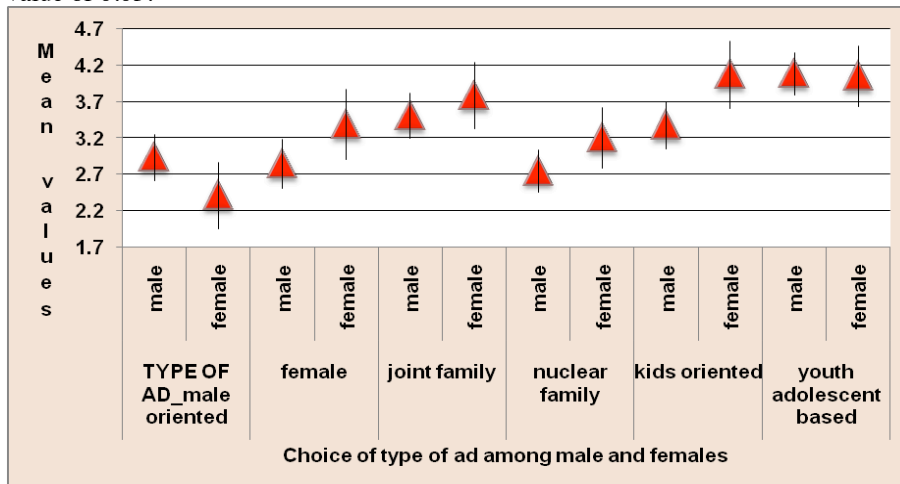
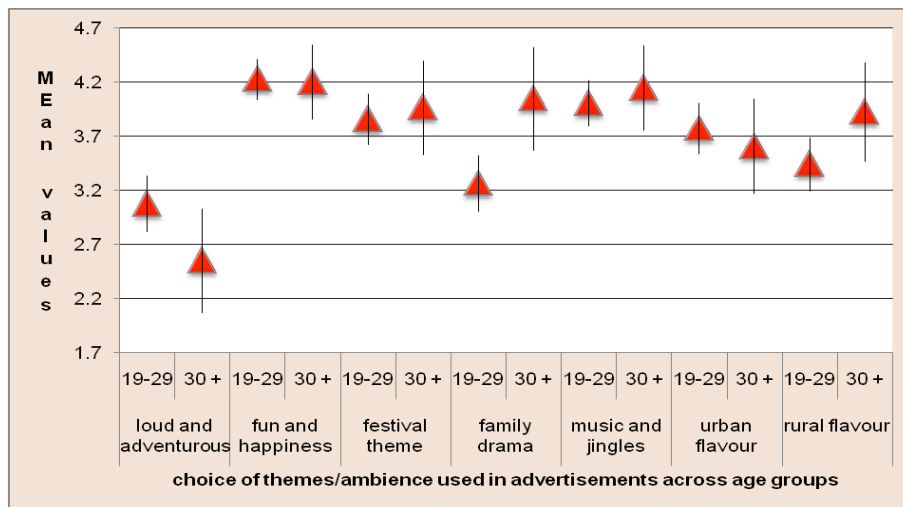


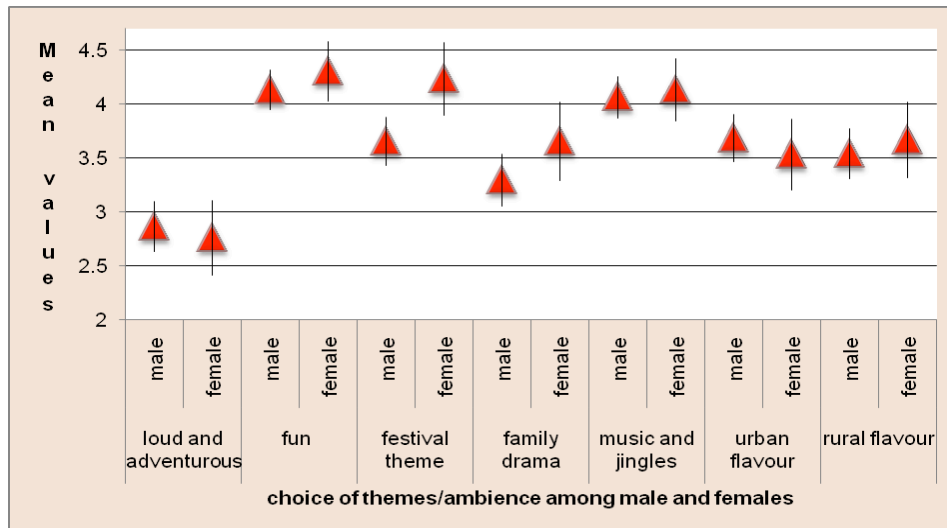
Figure 9. Mean difference in choice of type of ad among male and females, with respective lower and upper limits

Figure 10 depicts that respondents belonging to 30+ age category have stated a higher preference for family drama theme used in advertisements. The F-statistics proves its statistical significance at 95 % confidence interval. In terms of mean difference, loud and adventurous ads got the least preference from both age groups. Other themes or ambience do not demonstrate a significant difference in choices by age groups.



**Figure 10.** Mean difference among age group in their choice of themes/ambience used in advertisements, with respective lower and upper limits

The following figure 11 depicts that there is a significant difference between males and females' choices based on festival theme used in advertisements. The mean score for preference for festival theme in ads is much higher for female respondents. This means women preferred festival theme in advertisements much more than men. In terms of mean difference, loud and adventurous ads got the least preference from both the genders.



**Figure 11.** Mean score in choice of themes/ambience among male and females, with respective lower and upper limits

Figure 12 portrays that the mean score for preference for gender equality displayed in ads is much higher for female respondents, while the F- statistics also proves statistical significance for this aspect of advertisements. This means women preferred gender equality displayed in advertisements much more than men. On the contrary, advertisements focusing on family values, socio-cultural diversity, youth issues, loyalty, trust and moral values and ethics hardly garner any particular gender's preference over other.



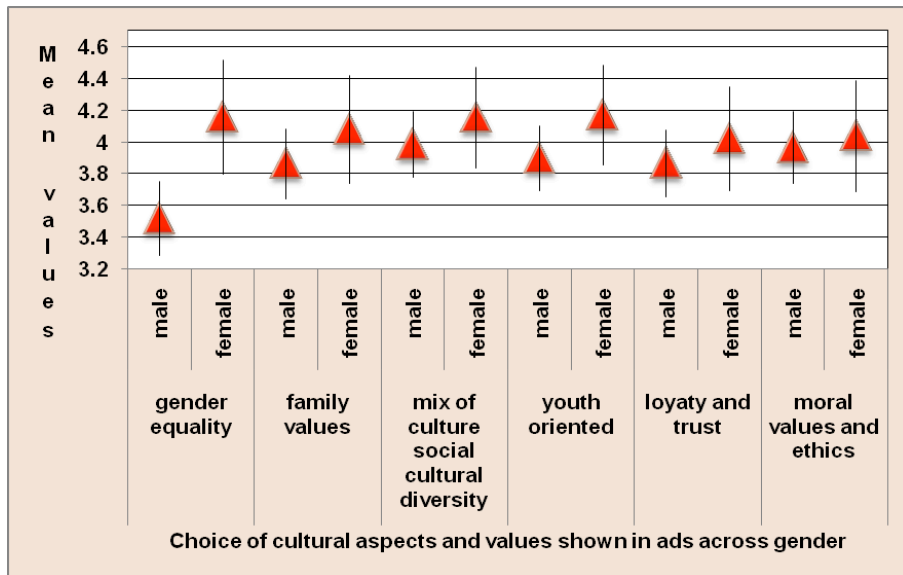


Figure 12. Mean difference in choice of cultural aspects displayed in advertisements among gender, with respective lower and upper limits

Figure 13 depicts the mean score for preference for moral values and ethics displayed in ads is much higher for respondents belonging to older age group i.e. 30 and above years old than the younger ones in 19-29 year's age group. F- Statistics is significant for moral values and ethics displayed in advertisements.

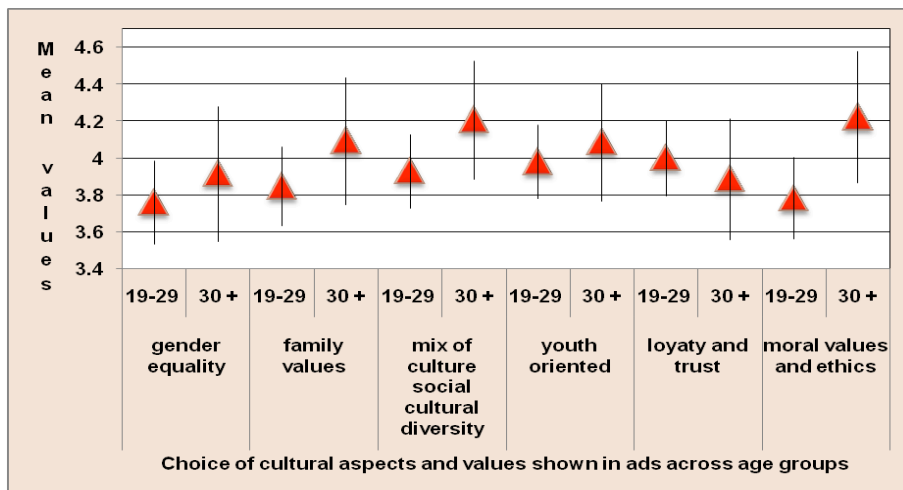


Figure 13. Mean values of choices of cultural aspects and values across age groups, with respective lower and upper limits

Figure 14 depicts the mean score for preference for moods and emotions displayed in ads among the two genders. The mean scores show men have higher preference for erotic and sexual toned advertisements than women. F- Statistics is significant for gender difference in erotic and sexual tones in ads. However, both men and women prefer happiness based advertisements. Advertisements depicting jealousy are also preferred by men more than women and F- statistics is significant for this difference.

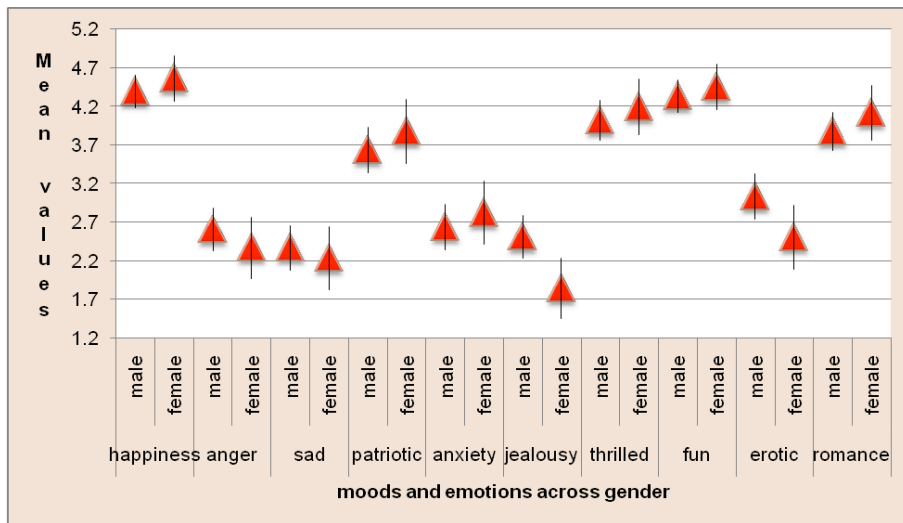


Figure 14. Mean difference in choice of moods and emotions among gender, with respective lower and upper limits

Figure 15 depicts the mean score for preference for thrill and excitement displayed in ads is much higher for respondents belonging to older age group i.e. 30 and above years old than the younger ones in the age group of 19-29 years. F- Statistics is significant for advertisements based on thrill and excitement. In case of other options such difference could not be statistically established.

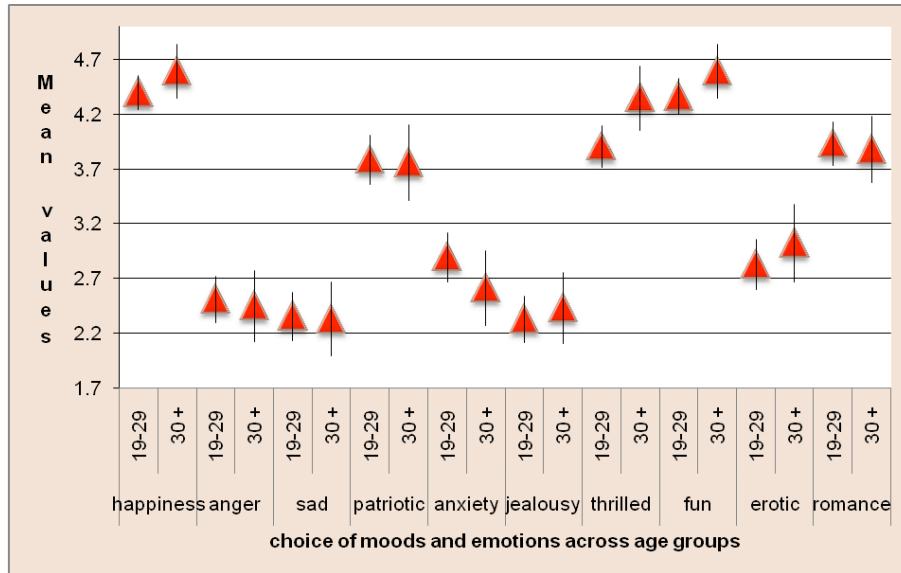


Figure 15. Mean values of choice of moods and emotions across age groups, with respective lower and upper limits

**Discussion et conclusion**

In our study we intended to understand the variation, if at all exists, across different socio-demographic groups among our respondents in the choice or preference they have with relation to different semiotics that are used in Indian television advertisements. We found that age and gender has significant and varied impact on the choices that are made in relation to semiotics used in Indian television ads. However, belonging to any particular ethnic group or language group does not have any significant impact on the preferences made in terms of choice of theme, ambience, colours, moods, emotions etc. The major pattern that has emerged is that some semiotic have higher and varied impact on gender and age of the population. While gender difference is predominantly seen in choice of ads based on colour, orientation of ad, for example, kids oriented ads are liked by women more than men; family drama based and gender equality based ads are preferred by women viewers; the choice tilts towards, jealousy based, erotic and sexually tuned ads being preferred by men more than women.

When we looked at the age difference and their choice of ads, we find family oriented, language based, culture based, festival theme based and moral value and ethics based ads are preferred by older generations. The preference for use of tagline/punchline in ads is higher for respondents belonging to the older age group i.e 30 and above aged.

With regards to colours used in ads, we found, younger ones have shown their choice of colour as black. Women showed a higher preference for purple colour in ads. The preference is highest for blue for both the genders, while brown is the least preferred colour.

There has been considerable difference between males and female respondents in terms of preferring an advertisement based on either celebrity or animation. Females, nevertheless, put higher preference on these aspects. In terms of gender, females show tendency to choose value and family based themes, while men are more interested towards non family based themes such as jealousy and eroticism which are more individualistic themes than family or culture based themes.

Our study concludes that the assumptions on which advertisements are made in India are generally proceeding on the correct path with ads such as axe deodorant using jealousy to attract men to buy their product or festival themes to attract women or elderly viewers. However, certain themes used in ads do not seem to not fall in line with our findings and therefore may not be effective, for example, if advertisers aim to attract younger generations the existing ads based on family, drama, moral values, animation, etc do not seem to attract younger consumers. Also our study finds that the impact of advertisements in general has been less on younger generations than it has been on older ones. Importantly, our study finds that on an average people judge an advertisement based on the moods and emotions associated with it. Loud and adventurous ads are least preferred by both genders.

Almost all the semiotics which show potential to attract consumers, have higher impact on the older age groups than the younger ones. Nazafian and Dabaghi (2011), mention that a certain set of signs don't make up a single comprehensible meaning and certain signs always appeal to certain readers on specific occasions.

Advertisement viewership seems to have a varied impact and is more influenced by the gender and age groups of people than region or ethnic identity of consumers. This means ethnicity based or region specific ads do not have as much potential to influence choices of consumers as those which target gender and age groups of people. Over all our study shows the impact advertisements have through their themes, colours, to be more specific, impact that semiotics have on consumers. Our findings also suggest that by understanding the language and impact of semiotics on consumers in India, ads can be made more effective and can have higher influence on consumers.

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