Reproducing and Subverting the Global Hierarchy: Revisiting Advertising in a Postcolonial Setting

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Reproducing and Subverting the Global Hierarchy: Revisiting Advertising in a Postcolonial Setting In uncovering the creative process through which ‘auto-orientalism’ is employed, I argue that extant theorization based on the post-colonial framework has overemphasized the ‘orientalist’ discourse and has failed to comprehend two other significant features embedded in Indian advertising texts. First, I show that a subversive discourse of ‘occidentalism’ is an important part of comprehending the relationship between advertising and otherness in India. Second, my research shows that Indian advertising cannot be sufficiently situated within the post-colonial framework and requires insights into other possible historical processes. In particular, I highlight the role of social class in Indian advertising that has emerged from the society’s experience of capitalism.

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Yet, the construction of body and the experiences lived through it in this symbolic realm are affected by consumers’ FL selves and vice versa. In SL, consumers engage in experiences they can(not) immerse into FL (e.g., flying, skydiving), and experiences they symbolically (e.g., death, suicide) and literally immerse into (e.g., having the sense of blood rush while the avatar is falling down). They gain the ability to engage in bodily experiences that they couldn’t engage with their FL bodies because of physical or psychological constraints. Nevertheless, consumers build higher levels of empathy with their avatars, which strengthens the feeling aspect of experiences. Thus, SL experiences are not purely separated from those of FL and vice versa. FL selves are reflected on SL selves and vice versa during avatar (re)creation. In continuous (re)construction of bodily experiences, the paradoxes of segregation (e.g., SL gives the opportunity to do things one can’t do in FL, and help mask FL appearances through avatars making socializing easier than FL) and inseparableness (incorporation of SL in FL or vice versa), and possible and proper are further intensified. SL consumers reflect their FL selves on SL selves and vice versa (e.g., keeping social distance in SL just like in FL; making avatars look like their FL selves and reflecting their SL selves on their FL selves, gaining skills through SL and reflecting that self-esteem gained in SL on FL experiences).

In SL, self-presentation is enhanced by immersion into SL experiences involving symbolic (re)construction and experience of several bodily selves. Symembodiment, a process in which consumers (re)construct and playfully engage in the symbolic creation and experiencing of their avatars, replaces the concept of disembodiment. Consumers reconcile their urge for physicality with the non-physicality of cyberspace in symbolic forms. They are devoid of bodily constraints, and are embedded in the scheme of symbolic forms (Venkatesh 1999). A person can become a mermaid and all of a sudden, grows a tail and experiences the transition into a leopard. A half-human cyborg changes his deep voice into a soft female voice while reading poems in SL. The body is experienced for the sake of itself rather than solely being used as a medium of self-presentation. “The boundaries delineated by cultural constructions of the body are both subverted and given free rein in virtual environments. With the body freed from the physical, it completely enters the realm of the symbol” (Reid-Steere 1996, p. 36). Hence, the continuous (re)construction of body through avatars becomes a symbolic experience, in which the body is present, not with its constraints but with its symbolic significance.

References

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Both consumers and marketers draw upon extant sociocultural discourses to give meaning to the products they consume or sell (Belk 1988; Costa 1998; Thompson and Haytko 1997; Zukin and Maguire 2005). Advertising is an important tool employed by marketers to draw upon the culturally constituted world to establish symbolic equivalence with dominant sociocultural discourses (McCracken 1988; Sahlins 1976). Several studies in the past have drawn upon the post-colonial framework (Bhabha 1994; Breckenridge and Van der Veer 1993; Chakrabarty 1992; Guha 1998) and have highlighted the role of orientalism in advertising (Cayla and Koops-Elsom 2006; Mazarella 2003; Rajagopal 2001). My research adds to this body of knowledge by offering an understanding of the manner by which advertising draws upon extant sociocultural discourses of ‘self’ and ‘other’ to give meaning to products.

In order to understand the socio-cultural codes embedded in Indian advertising, I conducted content analysis of print and television advertising. This helped me to understand the representations and discursive practices of some of the advertising firms. My data base comprised of around 500 advertisements, which were collected over a period of one year. In order to understand the process of creation of advertisements and deployment of extant sociocultural codes, I conducted indepth interviews with executives working in the Creative area in advertising firms. I conducted these interviews with 13 Creative Executives working in the domains of copywriting and art direction from three large advertising firms in India. My sampling was purposeful and involved interviews with junior and senior creative personnel from Indian and Multinational advertising firms. This also helped me to achieve triangulation that is necessary for the trustworthiness of data.