



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**The Portrayal of Cross-Cultural Aspects in Digital Toothpaste Advertisements: A Semiotic Study**

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**ABSTRACT**

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Contemporary life has been governed by advertisements that have cultural depictions to attract region bound target customers. Multinational companies design different advertisements for different cultural settings, and although it increases the advertising cost, yet the survival of multinational companies depends on fascinating indigenous cultural elements in advertisements. This study aims to unravel those hidden cultural signs in advertisements of two toothpaste brands Oral-b and Sensodyne across six continents. It explores the cross-cultural aspects through the lens of Roland Barthes' semiotic theory. This qualitative study reveals that advertisements are designed keeping in mind the socio-cultural aspects of the target audience. These ads become appealing to the target customers of that culture, but the same advertisement may not influence the audience of another culture. The study contributes to a better understanding of cross-cultural advertisements; hence, it motivates to avoid cultural shock elements which can ruin any industry.

**Introduction**

Semiology is defined as the study of signs which includes verbal and non-verbal signs. Previously only signifier and signified have been studied in semiology, but later on, Barthes has introduced all types of signs which include linguistic, coded iconic and non-coded iconic signs (Barthes, 1967). He introduces connotative and denotative meanings in the semiotic analysis. Daniel Chandler (2017) defined semiotics as the study of signs which are having embedded meanings in them. These signs help to build artificial reality. Moreover, Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce were also known as co-founders of semiotics. Eco (1976) perceived semiotics as the study of signs which can be in any form i-e visual or written, verbal or nonverbal. Semiotics played an important role in advertising.

The current study is significant because this study tends to analyse the cultural meanings of advertisements so this study benefits in understanding the hidden agenda of advertisers while making advertisements more attractive and appealing.

Moreover, it facilitates other researchers to look at other hidden aspects of advertisements.

### **Literature Review**

Ali and Yusaf (2017) noted that our daily life had been influenced by advertisements which had a great impact on our lives. It formulated our opinions about the world around us as well as our way of perception, thinking, and lifestyle were affected by advertisements. An advertisement was defined as any news which was spread among people for gaining certain hidden benefits. Baudrillard (2004) claimed that the main purpose of advertisements was to convince customers to buy products. Similarly, the more convincing an advertisement accomplishes more socio-cultural and financial objectives. Featherstone, (2004) noted that advertisements carried cultural meanings with them; hence, their consumption and their design had been rooted in the culture. Keeping in mind the cultural norms of particular people, advertisers inculcate those cultural signs into their advertisements. This cultural meaning was explained by Barthes with the term connotation.

Barthes (1967) included denotation and connotation into semiology which was applied to the present study. He introduced two levels of meanings: denotative and connotative meanings. Denotation, according to him, was the first level of meaning. It had been the literal or surface meaning of an object. On the other hand, connotation according to Barthes was the cultural meaning which was the hidden meaning of an object. Its cultural signs or symbols are associated with a particular object.

Different signs in these advertisements depend on social and cultural norms as semiotics is the study of all these signs while analysing the hidden, social and cultural aspects of these signs and their implicit meanings. Semiotics plays an important role in unravelling hidden aspects of advertisements; hence, this study has analysed signs used in advertisements and their denotative as well as socio-cultural semantic shades.

Nowadays, an advertisement is a very powerful tool for selling different products and services. Moreover, advertisements have the power of moulding people's opinions. It shapes opinions through its hidden agenda and narratology. For making their product popular and attractive, advertisers inculcate certain symbolic meanings in their advertisements. So, this research reveals cross-cultural aspects found in toothpaste advertisements.

De Mooij (2021).analysed in his book, cross-cultural differences in advertisements of divergent cultures. He also examined how these advertisements reflected different cultural norms and which of these norms tend to be highlighted in different societies by comparing advertisements in the United States and India by applying the cultivation analysis method. The advertisements of both countries had been different from each other depending on the type of audience who was consuming these advertisements. It depended on the audience's lifestyle, religion, cultural norms and social norms. After analysing these factors, it provided a better understanding of cross-cultural advertisements as well as how to make advertisements effective in different cultures. Some previous research projects have

been done to analyse cross-cultural aspects in different countries but no study is done on a larger scale involving continents. This study has analysed cross-cultural aspects of toothpaste advertisements across continents of the world.

American, Polish, Russian and Japanese print media advertisements have been studied with respect to the motifs and visuals. Their similarities and differences were studied through survey technique (Gliniecka, 2022). This study was showing deficiency of representing six continents because only four countries were selected. To fill this gap, the study in hand covered six continents to depict cross cultural variations.

## **Material and Methods**

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework employed in this study was Roland Barthes' semiotic theory which focused on the linguistic message, coded iconic message and non-coded iconic message. A linguistic message constitutes any linguistic entity while a coded iconic message constitutes aids used for gaining particular goals. The non-coded iconic message consists of mythical meanings associated with a particular sign. Which is basically the denotative and connotative meaning of advertisements (Barthes, 1977). Analysing the connotative meanings of ads facilitates the researcher to unravel the cultural aspects found in ads.

### **Research Design**

The research used the qualitative method while focusing on the signs and symbols used in toothpaste advertisements as an object for analysis because selected advertisements were analysed by looking at their denotative and connotative meanings with more focus on connotative meanings based on Roland Barthes theory.

### **Research Method**

This research was descriptive in nature because the exploration of the semiotic perspective of the audience about advertisements was the main inquiry into the present research.

### **Data Generation Tools**

The current study compiled images of toothpaste advertisements from representative countries of six continents. Roland Barthes' theory of semiotics (1977) was employed in these advertisements to analyse connotative and denotative meanings found in these advertisements.

## **Results and Discussions**

### **Asia (India)**

#### **Sensodyne**



Figure 1. Sensodyne (AdAge India Bureau, 2017, p. xx)

### **Denotative meaning**

Figure 1 shows a picture of Anurita Chopra, GSK consumer healthcare India's area marketing lead for oral care, wearing a white dress and having an ice lolly in her hand which shows that she is eating it but her facial expressions show that she is experiencing pain while eating it. The background of the advertisement is white and the dominant colours are white and blue moreover, on the white background something is written in blue colour that is "DON'T IGNORE TOOTH SENSITIVITY." This is an advertisement for Sensodyne toothpaste which helps in decreasing tooth sensitivity. Moreover, in order to impress the audience, it is written "WORLD'S NO.1 SENSITIVITY TOOTHPASTE."

### **Connotative meaning**

Figure 1 reveals its connotative meanings, and it shows that a woman is wearing a white kurta which is among one of those dresses worn in India and the problem she is facing is tooth sensitivity which is a very dominant problem that's why the question which is tagged "KNOW THE FEELING" is left unanswered because this feeling is supposed to be known to everyone. Furthermore, to attract the audience to buy that product different cultural norms are also inculcated in this advertisement such as the white dress of the woman and her hair colour. As Indians have a strong affiliation with religion and white colour plays an important role in their religion. It is significant for its followers. The white colour is symbolic of purity, cleanliness, peace, and knowledge. The goddess of knowledge- Sarasvati is also shown wearing a white dress, and sitting on a white lotus. The Brahmin- the highest social caste is also associated with white (Nityananda, 2019). In this way, the woman shown in the advertisement is shown as knowledgeable and truthful. The white colour also represents the white colour of teeth.

In spite of some of these cultural aspects in this advertisement still language of the advertisement is not Hindi which is the official language of India. This advertisement is in an international language.

## Oral-b



Figure 2. Oral-b (Afaq news bureau, 2014, p. xx)

### Denotative meaning

Figure 2 of Oral-b toothpaste advertisement a famous Indian actress Madhuri who is an Indian actress, producer, and television personality is shown with two rows of doctors favouring Oral-b toothpaste. On the top, these catchy phrases are used to attract the attention of the audience. The doctor at the front and Madhuri are smiling as it is a smile India movement and dominant colours are blue and white.

### Connotative meaning

The connotative meaning of figure 2 shows a woman who is famous Indian actress Madhuri with the doctor in front and two rows of doctors behind and they are smiling in such a way that their teeth are visible they are doing so to show the brightness which is because of using Oral-b toothpaste. It shows that everyone has to be careful about their smiles as well as their family's smiles. They should protect their smiles by switching to oral-b toothpaste. Writing about the dentist shows the authenticity of the product.

Moreover, with the dentist a famous actress Madhuri is standing. It is a celebrity endorsement where celebrities are used in advertisements to make it more famous and appealing because these celebrities are having an influence on common people. It also varies among social and cultural settings such as consumers of some societies idolize their celebrities which in turn increases sales rate. In addition to this, at the bottom of the advertisement, it is written "TALK TO MADHURI AND BECOME YOUR FAMILY'S SMILE OFFICER." This shows that instead of calling and talking to dentists would prefer to talk to celebrities to know what these celebrities are using because people are impressed by their beauty.

Finally keeping their culture in mind this advertisement is designed such as to attract the audience by appealing to families such as by saying "PROTECT YOUR FAMILY'S SMILES." As in India joint family system is more preferred. This technique of family incorporation might not appeal to people of other cultures where there are no strong family connections such as in the West. All these cultural aspects are incorporated in this advertisement to make it appealing to people of Asian culture.

## Europe (UK)

### Sensodyne



Figure 3. Sensodyne (GSK group of companies, 2017)

### Denotative meaning

This is an advertisement for Sensodyne toothpaste in the UK. In figure 3, Sensodyne advertisement, the background is white and prominent colours are white, blue and red which are colours of the UK flag. It has an image of a tooth having half part of it in blue colour and another half part in red colour. These two halves represent the dual action of this toothpaste which is "sensitive teeth" and "gum problems." It means that this toothpaste cures two problems in which one is tooth sensitivity which is written in blue colour and gum problem which is written in red colour. Moreover, the phrase "clinically proven" is written at the top of figure 3 to prove the authenticity of this product.

### Connotative meaning

Figure 3 of Sensodyne toothpaste advertisement has profound meanings such as colours of the flag of the United Kingdom are red, white and blue (Becker et al., 2017). So, flag colours manifest the colours of this advertisement. These colours of the flag are based upon the saltires and crosses of the patron saints of England, Ireland and Scotland (Eriksen, & Jenkins, 2007).

Furthermore, this advertisement has a white background as in western culture white symbolizes purity, elegance, peace and cleanliness. This white background is symbolic of the purity and cleanliness of teeth caused by this toothpaste. On the other hand, red symbolizes energy passion and danger in western cultures (Lenclos, Lenclos, & Philippe, 2004). Here in this advertisement, it stands for danger because

among both of the dual actions the second one "GUM PROBLEMS" is written in red colour which symbolizes that it is serious problem and it must be sorted out. On the contrary red colour is not always a sign of danger in other cultures. Furthermore, in Europe blue colour represents trust, security, soothing and peaceful effect (Lenclos, Lenclos, & Philippe, 2004). In figure 3, one of the dual actions is written in blue colour "SENSITIVE TEETH" representing that it has a soothing and peaceful effect on teeth. Figure 3 has no model because of the reason that people of the UK do not idolize their models so celebrity endorsement is not a successful technique for advertising here.

### Oral-b



Figure 4. Oral-b (Poulter, 2012, p. xx)

### Denotative meaning

Image 4 is an advertisement for Oral-b toothpaste where the background of the image is blue and from behind the box, some white rays of light are coming to show the brightening power of the mentioned product. On the left side, there is a picture of a model Holly Willoughby: a television presenter, model, and author. She is smiling to show her sparkling teeth. The prominent colours are blue and white.

### Connotative meaning

Figure 4 has profound and multi-layered. An image of a model is very bright and her teeth are also bright to show that this brightness is because of Oral-b toothpaste. White rays coming from behind the toothpaste box show that this brightness of teeth is because of the mentioned product. As in the West, white represents purity and cleanliness and this product advertisement is also rich in white colour because it's a product related to cleanliness.

Moreover, the model on the left side is typical of people in the UK. She has blonde hair. She has got very bright complexions. All these traits are typical of most people in the UK. The blue background of the image is symbolic of the soothing and peaceful effect of the mentioned toothpaste as in west blue symbolizes trust and

security so it is also symbolic that the mentioned toothpaste gives you the security of teeth and it also gives you a soothing peaceful effect.

## Australia

### Sensodyne



Figure 5. Sensodyne (Gsk group of companies, 2017)

### Denotative meaning

In figure 5, there is a man eating a white coloured ice lolly having a facial expression so disturbed showing that he has some problem while eating this ice lolly. On the left side, there is something written: "BEAT SENSITIVITY PAIN FAST." It has a white background and prominent colours are white and blue.

### Connotative meaning

As Australia is a multicultural country so there is no specific cultural representation in its advertisements but still there are some elements. The man in the advertisement does not show a typical Australian man because it is a multicultural nation so different types of people live here. It shows the diversity of African culture.

### Oral-b



Figure 6. Oral-b (Procter and Gamble, 2019)



### Denotative meaning

Figure 6 is an image of an Oral-b toothpaste advertisement and it has a blue background and prominent colours are blue and white. On the left side, there is a woman smiling having her fingers on her teeth to show the brightness of her teeth. On the right side, it is written "STRENGTHEN INSIDE PROTECTS OUTSIDE" to show that it is not only for one purpose but it has a dual action of strengthening inside and protecting outside as well.

### Connotative meaning

At the connotative level, figure 6 has profound semantic shades. On the left side of the mentioned image, there is a model wearing a blue shirt. As blue colour is used in products and services to symbolize cleanliness. In figure 6, it also symbolizes the cleanliness and brightness of teeth caused by the mentioned toothpaste. On the right side, dual action of the product is mentioned which is strengthening inside and protecting outside. It shows that only protecting the outside should not be the target.

As Australia is a multi-cultural nation because of this multi-cultural aspect characteristic traits of models of Sensodyne and Oral-b toothpaste have no resemblance. Furthermore, at the bottom of the advertisement, it is written: "NO.1 TOOTHBRUSH BRAND USED BY DENTISTS WORLDWIDE" to show that it is accepted and used by dentists worldwide regardless of their ethnic differences so it should be used in Australia regardless of its multi-lingual and multi-cultural nature.

### South America (Colombia)

#### Sensodyne



Figure 7. Sensodyne (GSK, 2019)

### Denotative meaning

In this figure 7 of Sensodyne toothpaste in Colombia, the language of advertisement is Spanish. It is written in Spanish as "RAPIDO ALIVIO DE LA SENSIBILIDAD" which means "FAST RELIEF FROM SENSITIVITY." Another sentence is "ALIVIO CLINICAMENTE COMPROBADO EN 60 SEGUNDOS" which translates as "CLINICALLY CHECKED RELIEF IN 60 SECONDS." At the top of the

left side, it is written in Spanish with the red colour “NUEVO” which means “NEW” (Masculine and feminine nouns in Spanish, 2019). On the left side, there is a man eating yellow coloured ice lolly and he is feeling sensitive pain. The prominent colours of this advertisement are white and blue and there is a blue line in the middle of the advertisement.

### **Connotative meaning**

This advertisement has profound meanings linked to the culture of the country. First of all, the colours in this mentioned advertisement such as red, yellow and blue symbolize the colours of the national flag of Colombia. Red and yellow colours have been taken from the Spanish flag. The strip of blue colour symbolizes the ocean; the same blue strip is present in this advertisement.

The culture of Colombia is also influenced by the culture of colonial Spain. Instead of resisting these influences, the people of Colombia adopted these influences. They have also adopted Spanish as their national language during the colonial time but English is also used in the upper class. Still, in major cities, English is used and understood and the language of this advertisement is also Spanish. Although there are different kinds of people in Colombia belonging to different ethnic groups and having different colour complexions but superiority is based on education, wealth, and whiteness. The model chosen for this advertisement is also white. They associate being white with being wealthy and superior because of the reason that fair skin is associated with Spanish people. Because of the mentioned reasons, there is social inequality where “whites” are considered superior (Wade, 1999).

The use of the Spanish language and the use of a model having Spanish traits in this advertisement show their socio-cultural preference, the superiority of white people and the historical influence of Spanish culture on the culture of Colombia. All these aspects of this advertisement represent the history and socio-cultural norms of Colombia.

### **Oral-b**



Figure 8. Oral-b (Procter and Gamble, 2019)

### **Denotative meaning**

When figure 8 is analysed denotatively, first of all written language is Spanish. It is written

here "BLANQUEAMIENTO QUE FUNCIONA" which translates as "WHITENING THAT WORKS" and "REMUEVE HASTA 100% DE MANCHAS SUPERFICIALES EN 3 DIAS" which translates as "REMOVES UPTO 100% SURFACE SPOTS IN 3 DAYS" (Masculine and feminine nouns in Spanish, 2019).

The advertisement is split into two parts. On the left side, there is a model who is smiling to show her teeth and it is on white background. While in another half portion it is with blue background and in Spanish it is written: "whitening that works" and "removes up to 100% surface spots in 3 days." In the middle, there is a logo of Oral-b which is attached to both parts. Its half part is in white background and another half part is in blue background.

### Connotative meaning

This advertisement has profound semantic shades. The blue colour is associated with depth and stability and the light blue colour symbolizes health and healing (Lenclos, Lenclos, & Philippe, 2004). In the advertisement, it symbolizes coolness and cleanliness. In this way, this advertisement symbolizes the coolness, cleanliness, and stability caused by this toothpaste. It also symbolizes the healing power of this toothpaste. All these qualities show the perfection of toothpaste.

The language of this advertisement is Spanish which reveals the history of Colombia. It takes us back to colonial times when the people of Colombia were influenced by the Spanish. As a result of this influence, they started adopting their traditions. They made Spanish their national language (Wade, 1999). Still, some people speak English but Spanish is the language that is widely used and understood in Colombia. To attract the audience many strategies are used such as the use of catchy phrases and the use of models. A beautiful model is shown in the advertisement to make it attractive.

The use of such kind of models also reveals their socio-cultural beliefs of associating white with being wealthy and beautiful. In this way, white people are considered superior because of their association with Spanish people.

### North America (USA)

#### Sensodyne



Figure 9. Sensodyne (Braulio Carollo, 2017)

### **Denotative meaning**

Figure 9 is an advertisement for Sensodyne toothpaste having prominent colours blue and white. On the left side, there is a Dentist who is smiling to show his teeth as it is an advertisement for toothpaste. On the top right corner, "New Advanced Formula" is written. Below this, a tooth is shown having a blue strip covering it showing the protection against sensitivity. In the middle of an advertisement, it is written "I recommend Sensodyne for all day everyday sensitivity protection" which is said by Dr Denike from New York. Moreover, at the bottom, there is a product box and it is written on it "9 OUT OF 10 DENTISTS RECOMMEND SENSODYNE" it is written in bold to attract the attention of the audience.

### **Connotative meaning**

In figure 9, instead of showing TV celebrities, a doctor is shown because of the fact that Americans are experts in all advanced medical and pharmaceutical fields. So, a dentist is chosen for this advertisement because he is an expert in that field. Catchy phrases in the advertisement attract the attention of the audience. As blue colour symbolizes health and healing (Lenclos, Lenclos, & Philippe, 2004). So, the blue stripe around the tooth is symbolic of the healing power of the mentioned toothpaste.

### **Oral-b**



Figure 10. Oral-b (Joybuy, 2019)

### **Denotative meaning**

In figure 10, Oral-b toothpaste has prominent colours blue and white. At the top right corner, there is a flag of the USA. On the top left corner, there is a logo of Oral-b. In the middle, it is written here "DAILY 2-STEP GUM CARE SYSTEM" in capital to attract the attention of the audience. Below this phrase, two pastes of Oral-b are shown and they represent two steps which are reducing gum bleeding and swelling. On one toothpaste, step 1 is written and it is "GUM CARE FLOURIDE TOOTHPASTE." On another paste, step 2 is written which is "GUM CARE WHITENING GEL."

### **Connotative meaning**

Figure 10 exposes multi-layered semantic shades. It shows an image of the USA flag which is a very potent national symbol. Thirteen colonies are represented by stripes in the flag and fifty states are represented by fifty stars on the flag. The flag is also a powerful historical symbol. It represents the effort of thirteen colonies to get freedom from the tyranny of the English king. The red colour of the flag symbolizes valour, courage, and hardiness. White strips represent innocence and purity. The blue colour represents justice and preserving elements (Eriksen, & Jenkins, 2007).

As gum bleeding and swelling are major problems of teeth so it is mentioned on the box to attract the audience as it cures both of these problems. There is no model in this advertisement as Americans do not follow models blindly so there is no need of celebrity endorsement. The Blue and white colours of the advertisement are representative of the colours of the flag which represents the purity of toothpaste.

## South Africa

### Sensodyne

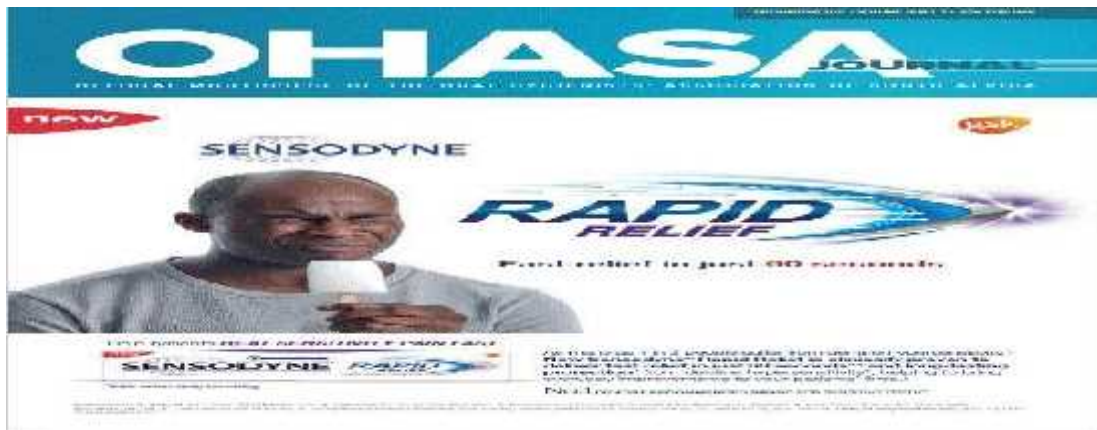


Figure 11. Sensodyne (OHASA, 2017)

### Denotative meaning

This image of the Sensodyne advertisement has been taken from the OHASA journal which is the official mouthpiece of OHASA. In this advertisement, there is an African man who is eating an ice lolly, and having sensitivity pain which is a hindrance in enjoying eating any food. Moreover, "RAPID RELIEF" is written in capital to make it significant its time is also mentioned that it gives relief in just 60 seconds. At the bottom of the advertisement, it is written "1 in 3 people suffer from dentine hypersensitivity" which shows the severity of the mentioned problem.

Moreover, the sentence "new Sensodyne rapid relief is clinically proven to deliver fast relief in just 60 seconds and long-lasting protection from dentine hypersensitivity" is to show the authenticity of the product and it is clinically proven. Another sentence at the end "helping to bring everyday improvements to your patient lives" is about the improvements caused by this toothpaste which is better for the patients of sensitivity. At the bottom of the left side, there is also a box of the mentioned product.

### **Connotative meaning**

The prominent colour of the advertisement is white which symbolizes peace, purity, and goodness in African culture (Brooks, 2019). So here it symbolizes the purity and goodness of this toothpaste. It also indicates the peaceful effect of applying the mentioned toothpaste. On the other hand, the man in figure 11 is black African which indicates the majority black population of southern Africa.

### **Oral-b**



Figure 12. Oral-b (Clicks, 2019)

### **Denotative meaning**

This is an advertisement for Oral-b toothpaste in south Africa. The prominent colours of the advertisement are blue and white. On the left side, there is a logo of Oral-b and it is written "Brush like a Pro." In the middle, there are a variety of products by Oral-b. these include Oral-b toothbrushes and kinds of toothpaste to show that it not only offers kinds of toothpaste but it also offers new electric toothbrushes.

On the right side, there is a doctor, and it is written "no. 1 toothbrush brand recommended by dentists." On the right-side bottom, it is written "Endorsed by OHASA" which is an oral hygienist Association in South Africa that promotes oral health. All these things are mentioned to show the authenticity of the product being advertised.

### **Connotative meaning**

In this advertisement of Oral-b variety of products, the advertisement is symbolic of South Africa which is known as the rainbow nation because of its diversity of cultures. Secondly, the doctor in the advertisement is a male who represents the male-dominated society of south Africa where male members of the family are considered bread earners and are considered the head of the family who controls the family (Afolayan, & Afolayan, 2004). Thirdly, this advertisement is

endorsed by OHASA which is an oral hygienist Association in South Africa. The dentist and OHASA endorsed advertisement is mentioned to make it authentic and attractive.

Major findings of this research are the following:

- 1 Advertisements were designed keeping in mind the socio-cultural aspects of the target audience as some advertisements might attract the audience of a particular culture but the same advertisement might not work well in another culture. One celebrity endorsement was a successful technique in Asian cultures, but it was not so much successful in Western countries.
- 2 Colours used in advertisements carry particular meanings that attracted the audience to a particular socio-cultural setting. These colours were to attract the audience as well as have profound connotative meanings.
- 3 The dress code, hair colour and other traits of models used in advertisements also portray the particular culture of the target audience. For example, the model used in USA advertisements had been completely different from the models used in Indian advertisements.
- 4 Catchy phrases, models and some other techniques were also employed in advertisements to show the authenticity of the product such as the display of a doctor in toothpaste advertisements enhanced its authenticity. The use of phrases in favour of the product by some experts also enhanced its authenticity.

Moreover, these cross-cultural aspects were not only present in these advertisements. Most advertisements were consistent with cross-cultural aspects some of which were analysed by Biswas, Hussain, and O'Donnell (2009) and several others listed in the literature review section.

Further research can be conducted on advertisements by analyzing further aspects that are hidden and needs to be unravelled. There are so many advertisements and they are an integral part of our lives. They shape our opinions and all these advertisements have symbolic signs so the reader should be more careful in understanding these denotative and connotative signs.

## **Conclusion**

Semiotics is the study of signs; and signs play an important role in advertisements. The sign system consists of a primary and secondary sign systems which are termed as denotative and connotative by Barthes, the professor of semiology. These signs are inculcated in advertisements to get the attention of the public. Keeping in mind the cultural aspects of a particular country, those aspects have been incorporated to make ads appealing and effective.

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