

# The Psychosocial Aesthetics of Food Advertisements

## Abstract

The anthropological view of considering food as human beings' primary need to survive on the earth, is quite manifest in the instances from daily life. But food is not only a substance for nourishment and survival. It assumes deeper implications in the social sphere by acting as a sign system. Every culture selects a set of highly nutritional things from a wide variety of materials as "food", thus leading to a close knit connection between the social behavioural patterns and the food culture. In other words, food has progressively emerged as "a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior" (Barthes 1961), and thus becoming a code expressing cultural identity (Lévi-Strauss 1965). Hence food is not just for eating anymore; it has been transformed into a memory, a situation or a culture. The present paper is an attempt at the semiotic analysis of selected Indian food advertisements with an aim of exploring their psychosocial aesthetics. Advertisements have become a part and parcel of the present 'branded' age. Contemporary foodspheres can be identified very clearly in the media, especially in the ads. The advertising firm makes use of the psychosocial implications of food in an effective manner by impinging on the cultural identity of the prospective buyers. Taste does not come from our genes but is taught, learned and performed. Tastes change, and such a change has the capacity to alter the cultural identity thereby transforming the individual.

## The Psychosocial Aesthetics of Food Advertisements

Culinary practices have become a kind of biocultural phenomena during the past few decades. The subject of food has been widely studied within the fields of Anthropology, Sociology and Cultural studies. Food substances are composed not only of nutrients but also symbolisms. They are good for eating and sustenance as well as for examining cultures. Anthropologically food is considered as human beings' primary need to survive on the earth; but food plays an even more significant role in the social and political issues and has turned out to be a bastion of popular media. During the recent years there has been a substantial rise in the food focused media and culture. This food explosion is very much visible in TV shows like Master Chef India, health diet magazines, organic products and food festivals. It implies the presence of an increased awareness of food's significance within the contemporary society and culture.

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When someone thinks of, or mentions food, the first thing that usually comes to mind is: where does it come from and how does it taste, and what is the story behind it? Giving answers to these questions, people usually refer to a set of images, situations and contexts which lie deep in the cultural milieu of a place.

Food acquires myriad set of meanings while it is used as a tool to explore culture. The food item, its source, the way it is acquired, persons involved in preparing it, the persons for whom it is prepared and who eats first is a form of communication which is rich with significations. Along with nourishing the body, the food one eats has the capacity to instill and strengthen the bonds among individuals and communities. Food also plays a significant part in defining the roles and rules in a family. Who cooks food, who eats first, who sits at the head of the table, who all share the table and who serves food, all such details together form the base of the familial and societal interactions.

Similarly, when a person buys a food item and serves or eats it, the very act constitutes information and leads to the rise of significations. Thus food can be considered as a functional unit of the system of communication. In this context, advertisements can be used as an effective tool in analyzing the implications and significations set forth by food items. Advertisements have become a part and parcel of the present 'branded' age. They enclose the viewers in a world of significance. In most cases ads are noted only for their 'overt content'; the 'content of their form' is usually ignored. The content of form of the ads remains invisible unless the audience relates it to relevant reference systems. The referent systems, according to Judith Williamson are those ideological systems which draw their significance from areas outside advertising and provide ads with their basic meaning material (Williamson 1978). An analysis of food ads in connection with relevant reference systems manifests the fact that it is possible to identify contemporary food spheres in the media, especially in the ads. The advertising firm makes use of the psychosocial implications of food in an effective manner by impinging on the cultural identity of the prospective buyers. "... the product as bought – that is, experienced by the consumer is by no means the real product; between the former and the latter there is a considerable production of false perceptions and values" (Barthes 1961). However, though advertising provides only a projected image of reality, from a sociological point of view advertisements are considered as the reflections of the collective psychology.

"By being faithful to a certain brand and by justifying this loyalty with a set of 'natural' reasons, the consumer gives diversity to products that are technically so identical that frequently even the manufacturer cannot find any differences" (Barthes). These reconstructions regarding product attributes, along with individual prejudices, reflect a veritable collective imagination. The explication of food advertisements, hence will render it possible to have an in depth exploration of the signifying system of food. According to Roland Barthes, a quick glance through food advertisements manifests three groups of themes. In each of these groups, food acts as a functional unit referring either to a memory, a situation or information. The food product in the ad is capable of creating these kinds of connotations because the image/thing/emotion shown

side by side with the product in the ad get linked with each other in the viewers' psyche through an unconscious process, based on relevant referent systems. In other words, the food product becomes an objective correlative for an image/a thing/an emotion through a process of unconscious linking. Thus the inevitable connection between food and the age old traditions of a land can be brought about effectively through the ads. Such ads showcasing the commemorative function of food help to decipher the existence of an aristocratic and a flavourful tradition and thus manifest the culinary being of a community or nation.

Food advertisements re-create an image of the past with affectionate mothers preparing food for their children who are being trained for civility and good health around the family dinner table. Many a food ad communicates the significance of 'grandma's recipes' in the course of the visual portrayal. This act of commemoration is carried out in different manner. While in some ads the character refers directly to the memory, in some others the deployment of the flash back technique serves the purpose. Among the local brands, Kitchen Treasures is a label which obviously refers to those 'treasured tastes' of our land. The food products of this brand are popularized for having the same taste as that of the secret recipes of the grandmothers and great grandmothers. The various ads of Kitchen Treasures products claim hundred percentage purity and original taste.

The advertisement for Kitchen Treasures Sambar Powder brings about a comparison between the old and young generation sambar, only to establish the fact that Kitchen Treasures product creates the same taste and smell as that of the treasured sambar recipes in an easy way. In the first part of the ad, the sambar prepared by the mother acts as an objective correlative and the taste and smell of the traditional sambar is transferred to it. The same attributes of the traditional sambar is linked with Kitchen Treasures sambar powder in the second half of the ad, and thus the product finally turns out as the objective correlative of the traditional taste and smell. The product here becomes the signifier that signifies the traditional taste. In Kitchen Treasures Beef Masala ad, after tasting the beef fry the character enquires whether the preparation was sent by his mother. The very query has a commemorative signification and it acts as a tool in transferring the originality and uniqueness of taste to the Kitchen Treasures products. In other words the aforementioned products are marketed as an easy way to access the secrets of the grandma's kitchen. Thus the products in the ad signify the memory of a taste from the past days and act as signified in the ads.

Nirapara is yet another brand which portrays its products as representatives of a cultural memory. The latest Nirapara ad is an amalgamation of the varying cultural traits that constitute Kerala. The ad has frequent references to referent systems that exist outside its own realm. It can even be said that the ad shows a Christmas breakfast, an Onam lunch (sadya) and a Ramzan dinner; and ends with the remark from Mohanlal, the popular Malayalam cine actor, that Nirapara has been the name of a culture of love, passed down from generation to generation. However each meal shown in the ad is identified and understood by connecting it with the referent systems of culture and religion. The dress code of the characters, the art

forms shown and the type of dishes served are clear pointers towards certain specific cultural identities. The ads create emotional pleasures not necessarily related to food texture or nutrition, but with respect to certain lifestyle and cultural traits.

An advertisement of Ashirvad Svasthi Ghee also provides instances for the commemorative function of food. In the ad, the product reminds the character of her school days. She tells that her school days are still remembered for the enticing fragrance and taste of the pure ghee carefully prepared by her mother. Thus the product is presented as an epitome of purity and mother's love and the most significant ingredient of mother's recipes. The ad is able to form a world of significations based on the mother-daughter relationship and the practice of considering mother as an embodiment of unstinted love in the Eastern culture. The same product acts as a bond among the family members in another ad, wherein, the delicious smell of the Ashirvad Svasthi Ghee draws the parents and kids alike to the dining table, leading to a fun filled and yummy family time.

There are also ads which highlight the situational function of certain food items. Kitkat series of ads form a very good instance for the same. The tag line of the product "Have a break; Have a Kitkat" itself becomes a clear indicator of the situational function of the product. In the ads the Kitkat breaks are portrayed as short and at the same time so very relaxing and enjoyable. Obviously the product in this ad gets connected with the people and situations shown side by side with product and becomes an objective correlative for them. The ad thus leads to the formation of a close knit connection between the product Kitkat and the busy schedules of the modern life, which acts as a significant referent system. The set of Britannia Marie Gold Biscuits ads has similarly endowed the biscuits with a situational significance; the ad portrays the biscuits as an inevitable accompaniment of tea and thus refers to tea time.

The food items like biriyani/sadya signify party time while chappathi/roti implies daily routine. Implications of this kind are made evident in ads like India Gate Basmati Rice, Nirapara rice, Ashirvad atta etc. India Gate ad displays the product within the background of a wedding function while Ashirvad atta is shown as the perfect and regular choice of a mother for the family. While the first ad is shot with the ambience of a wedding ceremony, the latter shows a normal meal time in a family. The increase in the number of cake ads during Christmas season and ads of sweets during Dwali further emphasizes the situational and cultural significations inherent in food products. Such ads act as a treasure chest of cultural significations with apparent references to one or the other cultural referent systems. The outfits wore by the characters, the background setting, use of props like Christmas trees or diyas and the kind of slang used by the characters serve the purpose of linking the ad as well as the product with external referent systems. The usage of 'fun time', 'party time' or 'masti time' in certain food advertisements too are pointers to the fact that food items are potent enough to signify specific situations. The series of ads for Lays provide an apt instance for the same.

Food plays a very relevant role in establishing a kind of bonding or relationship among individuals; it may be within the family or among strangers. In the Dominoz Pizza ad, which begins with the scene of a son leaving his mother in an old age home, the product becomes the agent that brings the mother and son together again. The mother's reluctance to drink the tea offered at the old age home and the way she makes her own special tea with elaichi (cardamom) obviously presents her as the representative of the flavourful aristocratic tradition. Another such ad that shows food as a connecting link between people is that of Shan Food Products. The Chinese girl, in the ad, is accepted by the native community due her skill in cooking. The acceptance is marked by a change in her attire too. The mouthwatering biriyani she makes with Shan biriyani masala does the magic.

Moreover, in *Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption*, Roland Barthes discusses about ads that bring forth some kind of nutritional consciousness too. Ads referring to the nutritional value of a food product are informative, owing to the formulation of certain health myths. Tropicana ads present the different flavoured juices as sources of various vitamins; the ad also upholds the fact that the juices do not have any added sugar in them. Moreover the ad penetrates the referent system of modern life and presents a set of busy scheduled and at the same time health conscious people. The Tropicana juice is thus portrayed as the choice of a set of modern health conscious people. The Nescafe ads depict coffee as the source of energy necessary for the multifaceted modern life. The product in the ad thus signifies liveliness and vigor. All these health myths are produced in response to the modern life conditions and such ads create representations of contemporary existence.

Most of the ads that spread nutritional awareness focus on food supplements for children like Cerelac, Complian, Boost, Bournvita etc. Even the products like biscuits and chocolates are advertised for their vitamin or mineral value. The tag line of Horlicks ad "Taller, Stronger, Sharper" indicates the nutritional value of the product. The ad makes an attempt to make people aware of the nutrient necessity in kids and ensures that all those requirements in growing children will be met by the product Horlicks. The ad refers to a testing process in which the doctors/scientists divide children into two categories and observe for few months. One set of students are given horlicks daily while the others are served with plain milk. The result claims that those who had horlicks everyday in their diet became taller, stronger and sharper. This type of a background of experimentation is used as an indicator of authenticity of the ad's claim. Thus the situations within the ad act as a potent signifier in the series of Horlicks ads.

Paediasure is yet another ad of a similar kind. It too focuses on the growth nutrients necessary for children. The ad claims the ordinary food stuff and irregular eating habits among kids as insufficient and poses Paediasure as a proper measure for the physical growth of kids. Modern life style and the increased awareness in the field of medical care have rendered people more health consciousness. This very fact has been utilized to its extremes by the multitudes of food industries and advertising firms. The nutrient quotient

has become an inevitable part of the food ads and products like iodized salt, sugar free biscuits, low fat milk, cholesterol free Mayonnaise etc. have become significant ingredients of a healthy diet.

The exploration of the psychosocial aesthetics of food ads thus reveals the layers of myths and meanings inherent in them. Food has always been a vehicle for expressing friendship, smoothing social intercourse, and a universal medium for expressing sociability and hospitality. The emotional link between eating and being gets established at the dining table, which has been a microcosm of the society itself. One gets the opportunity to learn self-restraint, sharing, consideration, taking turns and the art of conversation while eating together. Meals at the dinner table strengthen and maintain family solidarity and socialization. Families eating together at home promote unity, affection, self-expression, discipline, emotional health, and nutritional eating habits. It cultivates friendship, warmth and security of companions. Meals at home nurture the psychological security of a child and “heighten the children’s cognitive abilities along with their linguistic competence in later years. Parents talking to children at mealtime can improve their vocabulary.

The food eaten as well as the circumstances in which it is eaten is equally significant for good health. The psychological and social factors play a very relevant role in determining a person’s choice of food and it appears that it is the arrangements surrounding the preparation and consumption of meals, rather than the food itself, which requires attention. In other words, Psychology and nutrition are inter-related concepts. Digestion begins in the mind even before the food is eaten. The appetite is in the eye which sees food, room furnishings, tableware and rituals of service. Food is a commodity with emotional and cultural values. Hence in a food business, to attract customers, the design of foods and beverages has to be set on the basis of information on the psychology of eating and drinking. Food also connects individuals with the outside world and helps to understand it. The language also makes an extensive use of food metaphors; life is ‘sweet’, disappointments are ‘bitter’, a lover is ‘honey’. Truth can be easy to ‘digest’ or ‘hard to swallow’. Ambition is a ‘hunger’ and pleasures are ‘appetites’. Indeed, language itself may have originated when mouths opened for food in a shared act of the primitive family.

Advertisements utilize the powerful symbolic meanings of food products. Hence what is being sold is not just a product, but a lifestyle, a dream and a source of emotional fulfillment. The producer not only need to manufacture the product, but has to make the customers buy it through advertising. This refers to the act of selling the family’s cultural eating “experience” rather than selling food or nutrition. When food is consumed symbolically, its taste is of relatively less significance. It is the image around the food product that is most important. Thus food advertisements can be considered as very effective and apparent instances for a McLuhanesque process wherein the marketing medium becomes the message.

In short the present generation has been transformed from one that ‘ate to live’ to one that ‘lives to eat’. The eating habits and food choices extend beyond the construction and reconstruction of individual

identities and turn out to be cultural and social signifiers. They communicate beliefs, cultural and social backgrounds and experiences. Food has a number of meanings and functions – social, psychosocial, religious, cultural, and economic. It is entangled in relations of power and gender; it is also connected with kinship and social structure. Hence the Cartesian maxim may be rewritten as “I Eat; Therefore I Am”.

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