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Iranian advertisements: A postcolonial semiotic reading

Azra Ghandeharion*, Leili Badrlou¹

Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Letters and Humanities, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a postcolonial reading of a number of Iranian brands and logos to discover the influence of Western hegemony on the design of Iranian advertisements. The advertising's pivotal role in supporting the brands has made producers employ creative strategies. Benefiting from the tenets of semiotics, we aim to uncover the hidden meanings within different advertisements, brand names, and logos as the paragons of the products' identity and image. The brands and logos discussed in this study belong to different companies and categories (food, cosmetics, airline, clothing, and bank). The measures of their Westernization level is analyzed according to Homi K. Bhabha's definition of mimicry which signifies imitating some famous Western brands (iconic mimicry), using English language (linguistic mimicry), utilizing Western-looking models or celebrities, and displaying female bodies (visual mimicry), and resistance. The results show the effect of Western supremacy, the negotiations of Iranian and Western culture, and cases of resistance in Iranian advertisements.

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Introduction

Different experts have applied diverse approaches like semiotics towards advertisement planning and analysis, because it shows how specific words, images, and colors form the vocabulary of persuasion in advertising (Beasley & Danesi, 2002, p. 26). A semiotic analysis also takes a systematic approach towards the investigation of different signs to discover whether they are culturally significant or they just imitate those of a more dominant culture.

This article is a postcolonial semiotic reading of some Iranian brands and logos to discuss their relationship with a major postcolonial term, mimicry, which was first introduced by Homi K. Bhabha. The reason behind this choice is that Iranian advertisements have not been extensively

analyzed and there is a dearth of literature related to the postcolonial reading of contemporary Iranian logos/brands. Hence, we aim to fill this grave gap. The semiotic analysis of the advertising logos of Iran governed by anti-colonial administration proves that the signs are not wholly relevant to anti-colonial stance. They may belong to the realm of Western signs which have been changed to a great extent to fit the Iranian context. It implies that Iran has also been under the influence of the West in this realm, because instead of resistance, logos and brands mostly negotiate with Western hegemony.

There have been many ups and downs in Iran's relationship with Western countries, specifically the USA. The anti-colonial Islamic Revolution (1979) made relations extremely hostile, leading to the occupation of the U.S. Embassy (1979–1981) and a dramatic 444-day-long hostage crisis, U. S. supporting Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussein in Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988), and shooting down an Iranian passenger airline, which caused the death of all its 290 passengers (1988). The viewpoints of well-known Iranian politicians like Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1902–1989)

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: gandeharion@um.ac.ir (A. Ghandeharion), leilibadrloo@yahoo.com (L. Badrlou).

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and thinkers like Ali Shari'ati (1933–1977) and Jalal Al-Ahmad (1923–1969) also verify this anti-colonial attitude, because they rejected Western supremacy, wanted Iran to return to its true self, and showed their antagonism towards the increasing Western, specifically American, hegemony in Iran (Abbas, 2006, p. 3). However, after twelve years of negotiations, in 2013, during the presidency of the moderate Rouhani, Iran and world powers arrived at an agreement to lift international sanctions in exchange for curbs on Iran's nuclear program (Tharoor, 2015). Since then, the two countries have increased their trade volume to USD 30 billion by 2015 (Parsi, 2014, pp. 47–54).

The advertising omnipresence as a central feature of the modern culture and a window to the culture of consumers is an undisputable fact in today's world. The rise in the number of advertisements and the establishment of websites exclusively related to advertising like *Media Archive* or TV channels like *Bazaar*, both founded in 2012, have proven that Iran is not an exception in this regard and advertising has started to hold an important role.

In the global market, rapid technological progress in the broadcasting industry has further highlighted the influence of Western culture upon other cultures, specifically in developing countries. This concept of 'hegemonic culture' suggests that cultural values are appropriately forced by those in power as the dominant cultures upon other cultures. Although cultural values are assumed as major factors in determining consumer lifestyles or product choices, Western cultural values may often interfere and overcome those of a native culture (Cutler, Javalgi, & White, 1995, pp. 23–24). Advertising is also influential in the transition from Western cultural values to developing nations (Frith & Frith, 1989, p. 180). The influence of the Western hegemony links consumer culture to Bhabha's mimicry, the double enunciation, and a multifaceted policy of reorganization. This double-vision is well mirrored in how the advertisements both negotiate with and resist the Western hegemony.

This research has attempted to embrace an eclectic manner in selecting logos of different brands which are among the oldest or the most popular products in Iran. The first grouping of logos/brands (food, cosmetics) discusses the case of iconic mimicry in the imitation of the foreign, especially American companies. The second classification (airline) discusses a logo in which the inclusion of English language as a sign of linguistic mimicry is an indicator of prestige, modernity and international quality. The third group (clothing) analyzes the brands that benefit from the presence of Western-looking celebrities or models to consider how a brand applies visual mimicry to shape the image of ideal male or female beauty. All logos cover a history of 83 years (1933–2016) though most of the advertisements belong to the 2010s. The influence of Western hegemony and negotiations can be observed in all these subjects. The last logo (bank) is one of the rare cases that represents strong resistance to Western superiority.

In all these logos, excluding the last one, Western culture has influenced the design of Iranian logos extensively. Although Iran is an anti-colonial country and its producers might have done their best to design logos typical of the Iranian culture, they often behave like Westernized Easterners, and show diminutive interest in using their

country's customs whether consciously or unconsciously. They mostly prefer negotiation with rather than resistance to the Western hegemony.

Literature Review

The literature has a gap in the postcolonial semiotic approach toward advertisements. "Trinidad and Tobago television advertising as third space: hybridity as resistance in the Caribbean Mediascape" focuses on the postcolonial reading of Caribbean advertisements and their resistance to Western hegemony; it claims that television advertising functions as a space of hybridity and plays a dominant role in the establishment of resistive identity (McFarlane-Alvarez, 2007). "The negotiation of U.S. advertising among Bengali immigrants: A journey in hybridity" scrutinizes the production of advertisements by Bengali migrants from East India and exhibits the hybrid existences of diasporic groups, placing themselves at the intersections of international and national aspects (Dutta-Bergman & Pal, 2005). "Mimicry and postcolonial advertising" proposes a comprehensive study of "emulation" as an ambivalent act and interprets it as postcolonial mimicry (Varman, Cayla, & Hari, 2011). Both "The semiotics of advertisements: Reading advertisements as a sign systems" (Bati, 2007) and "A semiotic reading of advertisements" (Lawlor, 1992) explain the sign system relations. They reveal the current product representations and its match or mismatch with the links that the receiver relates to the advertisements.

Bhabha's "Location of culture" (1994) as the most important source for this study inspects the dislocation of the colonizer's real cultural identity. It also discusses the most significant theories of Bhabha, like mimicry which he has defined as the imitation of the values of a colonial society. In "Of mimicry and man" (1984), Bhabha's analysis of mimicry is largely based on the Lacanian vision of mimicry as camouflage resulting in colonial ambivalence. He sees the colonizer as a snake in the grass who, speaks in "a tongue that is forked," and produces a mimetic representation that "emerges as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 122). Huddart (2006) covers the most important ideas of Homi K. Bhabha, including 'ambivalence', 'mimicry', 'hybridity', and 'translation'. He employs series of contexts like art history, contemporary cinema, and canonical texts to explain the practical application of Bhabha's theories.

Literature related to Iranian advertisements is scarce. "Mixing English in Persian print advertising discourse" discusses the role and influence of English in magazine print advertising in Iran. It concludes that applying English stands for persuasion, reputation, modernity, globalization, top quality, fun, novelty, and creativity (Shooshitari & Allahbakhsh, 2013). "Sociolinguistic aspects of Persian advertising in post-revolutionary Iran" inspects the different types of socio-cultural values which have been reproduced and constructed in Persian advertisements in the post-revolutionary era (Amouzadeh & Tavangar, 2008). In spite of much research in the realm of semiotics and postcolonial studies, advertisements have remained a marginal area of inquiry in the realm of Iranian studies. The last two articles investigated merely some old print

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