

## Can Advertising Nurture an Ecocentric Vision?

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### Abstract

Advertising as the mouthpiece of capitalism backed by technological enhancement, over-production and marketisation is well established. In the last two decades advertising as an institution has been under tremendous criticism from the cultural and ecological critics. This paper strives to deconstruct the broad categories of value orientation to nature manifest in a handful of print advertisements and moves ahead with the core question that despite the daring proclamations of green advertising, if advertising can nurture an ecocentric vision at all. The present study is an eco-critical reading of a purposive sample of six advertisements selected from *Business World*, one of the leading business magazines of India. The methodology is based on verbal and visual analysis. The findings of the study reveal that the advertisements are trying to induce the fantasy of freedom from nature and control of one's own destiny through certain goods or services backed by science and technology. The paradox arising out of the clash of latent values in advertising and manifest values in society is discussed. The study contributes to the domain of knowledge in two ways. First, while the mainstream research has been devoted to expand consumerism, the present study is devoted to rouse sensitiveness, with particular response to nature and its ecosystem. Second, it crosses the disciplinary borders by taking clues from semiotics, rhetoric and literary hermeneutics to arrive at a deeper understanding of marketing communication.

**Keywords:** Advertising, Anthropocentrism, Ecocentrism, Nature, Technology, Values

### I. Introduction

In the recent years, there has been a surge of green advertisements backed by green marketing strategies displaying sensitivity to nature and ecological issues. The development is primarily seen as a drive to better hold the market by strategic brand positioning by titillating the emotions of a class of consumers who are steadily awakening into a consciousness of the vulnerability of our ecosystem under capitalistic and consumerist advancements. It has also been criticised as a tactics by corporations and marketing forces to avoid a negative public image and to cover up their nexus in the degradation of our ecosystem (Stauber, 1994; Stauber and Rampton, 1995; Rampton and Stauber, 2001). According to Nakajima (2001: 334-35) "green advertising and green PR are pervasive and misleading; they provide society with a distorted view of corporate environmentalism."

Beyond the issue of deception and propaganda embedded in advertising, this paper moves a step ahead so as to ask the question "Can advertising, foster any ecological wisdom?" It conceives the very concept of green advertising, the mouthpiece of capitalism (Galbraith, 1958; Schumpeter, 1964; Harvey, 1989) and consumerism (Sahlins, 1976; Douglas and Isherwood, 1978; Bourdieu, 1984; Rushkoff, 1999) as a paradox in itself. That is because capitalism promotes technological enhancement, overproduction, marketisation and consumerism, which promotes conspicuous consumption, which can hardly be achieved without disturbing nature. In this context, the paper studies the response to nature embodied in

a purposive sample of six print advertisements taken from *Business World*, one of India's leading business magazines, to understand whether advertising can nurture an ecocentric vision at all.

## 2. Conceptual Frame

We live in an age of rampant production and consumption where our primary experience of day-to-day life is grounded in marketscape. Technology has rearranged the world so much that we do not have to experience it directly. We live awash in products and immersed in supermediated environments. That makes us unaware of the destructive consequences of our consumer behaviours (Sherry, Jr. 2000). Mass media in general and advertising in particular are the most potent links in the unreflective nexus of overproduction and mass consumption. With its fanciful presentations of goods and services supported by alluring rhetoric and executional cues, advertising has hypnotised people, prevailing upon their spontaneous urges and redirecting them in favour of blatant consumerism (Jhally 1978).

The materialistically advanced nations of the West have proved their complicity in the degradation of the ecosystem, imposing a human-centric interpretation of the universe over the holistic co-existence of fellow creatures and nature. The disastrous consequences of too much of interference in the balance of nature have been widely warned by ecologists and scientific communities. In this context, what is required is a holistic knowledge of the world that transcends our nested faith in the beauty of marketing and rabid consumerism anchored by the scientific sensibilities of the day (Soper, 1987).

The mission can be possible if we can refurbish our faculties with an ecocentric view of the world by shedding away the built-in egos of anthropocentrism (Eckersley, 1992). The anthropocentric view of the world constructs human supremacy and neglects the inclusiveness of all beings and elements of nature, including humans. It exalts rationality and utilitarianism over intuition and holistic living. It maintains that empirical-analytic science is the only valid way of knowing and nature is just a resource to be exploited for comfort and accumulation. An ecocentric view of the world maintains that nature is far more complex and self-sustained than humans can know. It is an autonomous life-supporting system where too much of human interference is unwarranted. It believes that ecological tragedy is both human and non-human. In spite of the stand, ecocentrism does not challenge the human claim for autonomy, but nobly strives to extend the notion of autonomy to encompass layers of inter-relationship between the personal and societal drives of humans and the cycle of life including the rest of the biotic community and elements of nature (Eckersley, 1992).

Against this backdrop, the present study strives to unfold the anthropocentric values mediated in advertising by deconstructing its rhetorical and symbolic elements manifest in the visual and textual content and to thereby substantiate the importance of ecocentric judgment.

## 3. Review of Literature: Advertising and Rhetoric

Since advertising possesses many of the properties of literature such as writing, figurative language, narration, character, imagery, value systems, author, text, reader, historical and

contemporary context and so on, a postmodern definition of literature is broad enough to include advertising, which can be analysed by a range of methods drawn from literary criticism (Stern and Schroeder, 1994). Several studies by Belk (1986), Holbrook (1987), Hudson and Ozanne (1988), and Sherry (1987) have also indicated a mounting interest in the humanities as a fresh approach to discuss critical issues in consumer behaviour. Scholars such as Stern (1988) have tried to tap the relationship between language, meaning and consumption. Linguistic, psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic approaches to consumer research have often been found to be useful consumer behaviour (see Harris et al., 1986; Percy, 1982; Thorson and Snyder, 1984).

The strongest contribution of literary criticism to consumer studies lies in the area of definition, classification, analysis, interpretation and evaluation of texts. Many New Critics of literature such as Cleanth Brookes, L C Knights and others use the method of explication or close reading to analyse words and word groups in a schematic fashion. The irony and paradoxes underlying the specific rhetorical constructs helped sort out total effects of the texts. This methodology promised a take-off point for consumer research (Stern, 1988, 1989) because it facilitated the deconstruction of verbal elements in consumer discourses.

Scholars such as Greenberg and Garfinkle (1963) have since long stressed the role of imagery in shaping consumer response. However, visual elements have, of late, received critical attention (Childers and Houston, 1984; Edell and Staelin, 1983; Meyers-Levy and Peracchio, 1992; Miniard et al., 1991; and Scott, 1994a).

The study of consumer behaviour has taken clues from semiotics too (see Holbrook and Grayson, 1986; Mick, 1986; Sherry and Camargo, 1987). Sherry (1987, 1988) conceived advertisements as constructed word-views and adopted linguistic tools to unravel the meaning embedded in consumption. The study of symbols, archetypes and ironies has further helped to decipher meaning from the advertisements. The semiotic studies have highlighted the contradictions between the dreams and fantasies manifest in the language and imagery of advertisements and the concurrent ironic tension with relation to the impossibility of the same.

Rhetoric, based on semiotics, has offered a lot of insight to differentiate various visual styles (Durand, 1987). A rhetorical figure is an ingenious and artistic deviation in relation to audience expectations and demonstrates a pattern beyond the specific occasion where it is used (McQuarrie and Mick, 1996). Because of its deviant characteristics, rhetoric has proved to be a stylistic device to engage audience attention in advertising.

Unfortunately, bulk of the studies in the text-interpretive tradition has concentrated on visual metaphor and has neglected other figures (e.g., Forceville, 1995; Kaplan, 1992; Kennedy, Green, and Vervaeke, 1993; Phillips, 1997). What is required is a polyrhetoric design inclusive of metaphors, puns, antitheses and rhymes, which can help us study the visual content of advertising with greater power.

#### 4. Gaps in the Studies and Research Questions

The present study departs from the mainstream advertising research in both approach and method. First, most prior research has viewed advertising as a means of commercial communication meant for promoting goods and services by powerful vistas of persuasion. They have paid particular attention either to the analysis of persuasive content of the ad or to map the impact of the persuasive stimulus on the cognitive, affective and conative states of the consumers. The present study views advertising as a type of commercial literature communicating certain values and vision of society and nature through its ultimate quest for socialising people to pattern of consumption. Therefore, although the mainstream research has been devoted to expand consumerism, the present study is devoted to rouse sensitiveness, with particular response to nature and its ecosystem. On the whole, it is a breakaway from the anthropocentric study of advertising to an ecocentric one.

Second, prior research has basically focused on quantitative or ethnographic study of ads and their impact on people. This paper crosses the disciplinary borders by taking clues from semiotics, rhetoric and literary hermeneutics to arrive at a deeper understanding of marketing communication. It goes beyond the positivistic consumer research of advertising images and messages as persuasive stimuli to a holistic research exposing the value drives and corruptive urges manifest in the ads. It is proposed that increased awareness of the ulterior motives eminent in advertising and other commercial literature through a whole range of humanistic body of research may help us sustain a better life. Against this backdrop, the paper moves forward with the following two research questions.

**RQ 1:** What are the broad categories of responses to nature found in the advertisements under study?

**RQ 2:** Can advertising nurture an ecocentric vision?

#### 5. Methods and measures

##### *Sampling*

Initially 52 ads were collected from the weekly issues of the magazine Business World, January-August 2008. The ads were selected on the basis of their portrayal of or reference to nature either in the visual or in the text. A pilot study involving a content analysis was carried out using Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck's (1961) value orientation to nature. The three values were subjugation to nature, harmony with nature and domination over nature. The pilot study revealed that the value subjugation to nature is not used in any of the ads. Interestingly, some of the ads were seen promoting a new value, i.e. protection from nature. Six ads representing each of the three values were selected for this paper.

##### *Measure of visual rhetoric*

The visual-rhetoric model developed by McQuarrie and Mick (1999) is used for analysing the ads' response to nature. This is quite useful for studying the property of artful deviation and its contribution to the total effect. At first step, the figurative modes of the ads are

studied. Here schemes are distinguished from tropes as two different modes of figuration. Schemes deviate by means of excessive regularity. Tropes deviate by means of an irregular usage. Metaphors, with their literally false but nonetheless illuminating equation of two different things, and puns, with their accidental resemblances, are tropes.

At the second step specific rhetorical operations, which may be simple or complex, serve to construct schemes or tropes. Repetition and reversal are the simple and complex operations that construct schemes (examples are rhyme and antithesis, respectively), while substitution and destabilisation are the simple and complex operations that construct tropes (examples are ellipsis and metaphor, respectively). In the aggregate the four rhetorical operations provide four different opportunities for adding artful deviation to an ad.

The specific visual-rhetorical figures such as visual antithesis, rhyme and metaphor are tapped in the third round. The fourth round unfolds the iconic, indexical and symbolic relation among the key visual elements. The fifth step of the model is the contribution of this paper that reveals the ad's value orientations.

### **Critical discourse analysis**

The textual and the visual features are discussed. The ad-centric views of nature and the nature-centric views of ads are contrasted. The salient dilemmas of our society and the resultant paradox in the ads are deconstructed.

## **6. Results**

### **Value orientation towards nature in the ads**

The ads work against the ecological knowledge and assumes that nature does not exist to cater to human desires and that we are in fact deeply dependent on technology to get the best of life. This view try to induce the fantasy of freedom from nature and control of one's own destiny through certain goods or services backed by science and technology. This constitutes a violation of ecological knowledge about the integrity and interrelation of all parts of the global ecosystem. Table I can be studied as a miniature summary of advertising's value orientation towards nature:

### **Discussion**

One common trait with these ads is that with their all-important mission of promoting goods or services, they reveal a deep, perhaps only semiconscious, ambivalence towards nature. The first two ads analysed above are of B L Kashyap and PPL. The core value promoted in these ads is domination over nature. They endorse that technology will allow mastery over the natural constraints. Arguably they may not be exaggerating it, since technology has often helped us win the best of nature. The portrayal of the modern man, master of technology, is only marginally concerned about the consequent ecological collapse that environmental theorists have established.

The foreground text 'CONFIDENCE AT WORK' and the background visual of mountaineering in the B L Kashyap ad nurture the appeal of work. But an in-depth semiotic reading of the key elements suggests the value of triumph over challenging nature through the use of technology. The sprawling rocky heights in the backdrop of the vast, dim sky in the

Table 1: Visual rhetoric and values in the ads

The Ad	Figurative Mode	Rhetorical Operation	Description of the Rhetorical Figure	Semiotic Relation Among Key Elements	Value Orientation Towards Nature
B L Kashyap Construction Engg.	Scheme	Reversal	Visual Antithesis-contrasts a daring human being trekking the height of mountain with an expert doing the same with proper technical support	Iconic relation contrasts two human beings climbing mountain Indexical relation contrasts spirit of ordinary man with discipline of expert Symbolic relation between technology and winning	Domination over nature
Paradeep Phosphates Limited	Scheme	Repetition	Visual Rhyme-Compares the diving young man with the half-bent wheat spike	Iconic relation between wheat spike and young man Indexical relation between wheat spike and fertility Symbolic relation between the diving man and spirit of higher achievement	Domination over nature
First Flight Couriers	Trope	Destabilisation	Visual Metaphor-Projects smiling lady doctor against the odds of nature	Iconic relation between the stethoscope and the genteel fingers of the doctor Indexical relation projects the smiling doctor against the devastations of the tsunami Symbolic presentation of the doctor emphasising care and concern	Protection from Nature
Crompton Greaves Everyday Solutions	Scheme	Reversal	Visual Antithesis-Contrasts the small burning bulb and the vast glove full of darkness	Iconic relation between the small bulb and the vast globe Indexical relation between the light-giving bulb and darkness around Symbolic relation between burning bulb and human expectations	Protection from Nature

<b>The Ad</b>	<b>Figurative Mode</b>	<b>Rhetorical Operation</b>	<b>Description of the Rhetorical Figure</b>	<b>Semiotic Relation Among Key Elements</b>	<b>Value Orientation Towards Nature</b>
ACC Wind Energy Farm	Scheme	Reversal	Visual Antithesis-Contrasts strong, earthy maroon-colored wall in the foreground with the surge blue sky in the background, in between stand the lively wind fans	Iconic relation contrasts the wall with the sky Indexical relation projects the fans as the link between the earth and the sky Symbolic relation between fans and innovation and sustainability	Harmony with Nature
Brother Printers, Scanners and Faxes	Trope	Destabilisation	Visual Metaphor-endows the printer with ruggedness and solidity of nature	Iconic relation between the printer, the SUV and the journalist Indexical relation between printer and beauty of the wilds Symbolic relation between the printer and the imperishability of nature	Harmony with Nature



visual read with the text "dreams reach...sky" and "a partner to be your wings" propel the twin gospel of our days - "work" and "win". The advertiser ingeniously intertwines the contradictory emotions of fear of nature with the pleasure of adventure.

Coming to the PPL ad, the slogan on the top 'RISE ABOVE THE ORDINARY' is presented with the picture of a young man diving in style over a long spike of wheat. A consumerist reading should certainly strike us with the appeal of rising productivity. But a better-guarded observation would enable us to ask "but how long and how much?" The calming effect will prevail when we start comparing our 'strive' for 'additional income' through 'scientific practices' with the laws of nature. Even here another paradox emerges out of the interplay of the unlimited 'motivation' for higher productivity and the ultimate limits of nature versus the limitations of technology and unlimited wants.

The First Flight Courier and Crompton Greaves ads promote the value of protection from nature. The First Flight Courier ad builds up the brand proposition over the old myth of life and death. It presents a smiling lady doctor occupying almost 50% of the page. At the bottom is narrated the story of a tsunami when 'villages were washed away' and the courier served 'a miracle' by delivering medical supplies 'against all odds'. The visual of the caring lady doctor is juxtaposed with the verbal tale of a malignant nature. The concluding line "we even deliver life" unleashes the tension between an anthropocentric claim of delivering life on the one hand and an ecocentric vision of nature as the ultimate lifegiver. The facade continues to the next stage where the dark pranks of an awfully vast globe beset with a myriad sky are lighted by a blazing electric bulb in the Crompton Greaves ad. In many ways it is a photographic counterpart of the First Flight narrative. The bulb symbolises the brightness of technology and the globe, the enigmatic nature.

By and large, the four ads discussed here, chanting the glories of technology, endow humans with a God-like mastery over nature. The convergent message is that we no longer languish under the limits of nature or the fear of her destruction, and that all our problems will be solved as soon as we buy a particular product being advertised.

The last two ads analysed above promote the value of harmony with nature. To a great extent they seem to have been inspired by the latest drive towards green advertising. They empower the products with the imperishability and delightfulness of nature. The ACC ad positions the sizzling wind fans vertically between the serge blue sky embodying freedom and endlessness with the solid brick wall embodying earthiness and stability. The slogan on the top right sums up the R&D accomplishments of the farm as 'champions in sustainable development'. The narrative on the bottom outlines how the company has moved from thermal power to wind energy generation. The 'vision' of the company is mellowed with the imagery 'a gust of fresh air'. On the whole, the ad is a perfect example of commercial literature emphasising harmony with nature. The Brother International ad positions its printing and faxing gadgets alongside a nature journalist standing against the background of the wilds of nature containing vast grazing fields full of trees and builder beasts. The effort is to associate the products with enduring properties of nature. The brand logic is further strengthened by the descriptive write-up on the bottom projecting the gadgets as 'sturdy, robust and hardworking'.



These ads are replete with images of nature embodying infinitude and freedom. Most apparently, the ads seem to reveal an envy of nature. Nature both represents and withholds freedom. The ads promise that technology grants both freedom from nature and the freedom of nature. They illustrate how the modern men tend to rely on technology to deny the limits that we perceive nature to impose upon us. At the same time, technology is to provide us with the limitlessness - the openness of possibility, the room to manoeuvre - that we perceive as inherent to these wilderness landscapes.

### **Anthropocentric versus ecocentric reading of the ads**

The realisation of the short-term quality of life promised by advertising and its link to the degradation of ecosystems plunges humans into a moral paradox. A view of nature from the lens of advertising and a view of advertising from the lens of nature would further our existential dilemma over the craze for a cute, cozy car at the personal front and the craving for cleaner air and environment at the social front. Table 2 reveals how these ads superimpose the anthropomorphic philosophy over the ecocentric view of nature.

**Table 2: Nature from ads' point of view versus ads from nature's point of view**

Advertisings	Nature From the Lens of Advertising	Advertising From the Lens of Nature
B L Kashyap Construction Engineering	B L Kashyap as partner to those who passionately 'brave the toughest odds' and whose 'dreams reach for the sky'	Both the rock climber and the toughest odds are parts of nature. In between, B L Kashyap is the unnatural other and the imposter
Paradeep Phosphates Limited	Fertiliser helps extract better productivity	Nature has its own green fertiliser. The difference with human enterprise is ruthlessness only
First Flight Couriers	First Flight Courier works despite the odds of nature. Is as caring as a doctor who delivers life	The doctor delivers life in the lap of nature, which is the greater and the ultimate life
Crompton Greaves Everyday Solutions	Crompton Greaves offers protection from the mazy vastness and sprawling darkness of life	Vastness and darkness are ultimate reality, understood in patches of time and space only
ACC Wind Energy Farm	Wind as the infinite source of green fuel. Wind energy farm is eco-friendly	Nature is always there to sustain all developments
Brother Printers, Scanners and Faxes	Sturdy, robust and hardworking printing machines are like the wilds of nature	Nature is as it is, neither sturdy nor soft, or may be both

## **Discussion**

It is time some critical discussion was made on whether a range of ecocentric thoughts and feelings can be loaded with the brand logic of all products and services being advertised. During the downsizing process of my ad samples I have seen services such as Travels and Hospitality and goods such as Herbal Cosmetics being widely advertised with the green tag. Even an excavator was presented as eco-friendly. The paradox is that travel industry lures the prospective sojourner to the solitary hinterlands of nature and, by default, contaminates its serenity. Soaps and face creams claim to have preserved the purity and superior hygiene of nature, ultimately destroying nature through mass production and release of toxic wastes into it. The absurd and the irony combine in the most socking drama of advertising, which projects an excavator as friendly to nature.

Nurturing an ecological vision may be possible in a sparse range of advertisings according to the type of product being promoted. But by and large, the institution called advertising as a whole cannot develop a holistic stand to the greater life called nature. The oppositional point of view tabulated above indicates that advertising as the byproduct of our capitalistic-technocratic society is inherently vulnerable and a challenge to all sensible humans seeking redemption from the ghastly deluded life around.

## **7. Conclusion**

The discourse unmade above in two phases may not be sufficient to answer the enormity of the challenge undertaken. It is established that domination over nature, protection from nature and harmony with nature are the three basic values promoted by advertising in its response to nature. Moreover, it is quite difficult to nurture an ecocentric vision within the fabric of a commercial literature catering to the interests of a market-driven community. Even ads proclaiming harmony with nature are self-constrained to foster ecosensitivity, as they try to interlink the oppositional forces of technology and nature. Yet, it may throw some light on a partial resolution of the issue. We, the people of modern days, cannot dream of relinquishing technology nor can we think of living off nature. But somewhere an equation has to be fought out between the warm utopia of technology and the cool arcadia of nature.

## **8. Contribution**

The study contributes to the domain of knowledge in two ways. First, although the mainstream research has been devoted to expand consumerism, the present study is devoted to rouse sensitiveness, with particular response to nature and its ecosystem. Second, it crosses the disciplinary borders by taking clues from semiotics, rhetoric and literary hermeneutics to arrive at a deeper understanding of marketing communication.

## **Limitations and future direction**

Besides space limitations, an analysis of this type is bound to study a limited number of ads. Researchers can do a quantitative content analysis of a large sample of ads to draw a better conclusion on the highly sensitive issue of advertising's response to the ecosystem. An improvised design can be framed merging together the tenets of literary hermeneutics, quantitative survey and qualitative focus group discussion.

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