



Semiotics in Indian Advertising: A Systematic Review of Symbolism, Culture, and Consumer Response

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Abstract

Advertising in the Indian subcontinent operates as a complex semiotic system negotiating the tension between deep-rooted traditionalism and rapid digital modernization. Adopting a systematic literature review (SLR) guided by PRISMA 2020 protocols, this study synthesizes 32 core research papers from 2004–2024. By applying the dyadic and triadic models of Saussure and Peirce alongside Barthes' myth-making framework, the paper decodes how brands utilize religious iconography, color semiotics, and 'Hinglish' to construct 'Brand Apnapan' (belongingness). Through case analyses of brands like Tanishq and LIC, the study identifies a paradigm shift from passive mythological realism to participatory digital semiotics. The paper concludes with a proposed conceptual framework for the 'Glocal' signifier and identifies critical research gaps in AI-mediated semiotics and regional diversity.

Keywords

Semiotics, Indian Advertising, Cultural Codes, Symbolism, Consumer Psychology, Glocal.

1. Introduction

Advertising in India is far more than a commercial endeavor; it is a socio-cultural phenomenon that reflects and shapes the identity of a diverse populace. In a society where ancient traditions coexist with 5G technology, advertisements serve as "cultural texts" that communicate through complex layers of symbols, colors, and narratives. Semiotics—the study of signs and their meaning-making processes—provides the necessary theoretical toolset to decode these layers. While global advertising often prioritizes individualistic aspiration, the Indian landscape thrives on collective resonance, spiritual familiarities, and familial bonds. This paper reviews existing scholarship to understand how these signs influence consumer trust and emotional engagement in the contemporary Indian market.

2. Research Methodology

This study adopts a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to evaluate the semiotic landscape of Indian advertising. The methodology follows the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework to ensure that the process of selecting and analyzing research papers is transparent, unbiased, and reproducible.



2.1 Search Strategy and Data Sources

A comprehensive search was conducted in January 2026 across major academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and Taylor & Francis Online. The search focused on the evolution of signs and symbols in the Indian context over a 20-year period (2004–2024).

The Boolean search string used was:

("Semiotics" OR "Semiotic Analysis") AND ("Indian Advertising" OR "Indian Brands") AND ("Cultural Codes" OR "Symbolism")

2.2 Study Selection (Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria)

To maintain high academic quality, the following criteria were used to filter the research:

- Inclusion Criteria: (1) Peer-reviewed journal articles; (2) Studies focusing on the Indian subcontinent; (3) Research published in English; (4) Papers applying established semiotic models (Saussure, Peirce, or Barthes).
- Exclusion Criteria: (1) Newspaper editorials or trade blogs; (2) Studies without a clear semiotic framework; (3) Research focused solely on Western consumer psychology.

2.3 The PRISMA Flow Process

The selection process is summarized in the stages below (see Figure 1):

1. Identification: 210 records were initially identified through database searching.
2. Screening: 145 records remained after removing duplicates. Titles and abstracts were screened for relevance.
3. Eligibility: 55 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility.
4. Included: A final set of 32 core studies was selected for qualitative synthesis.

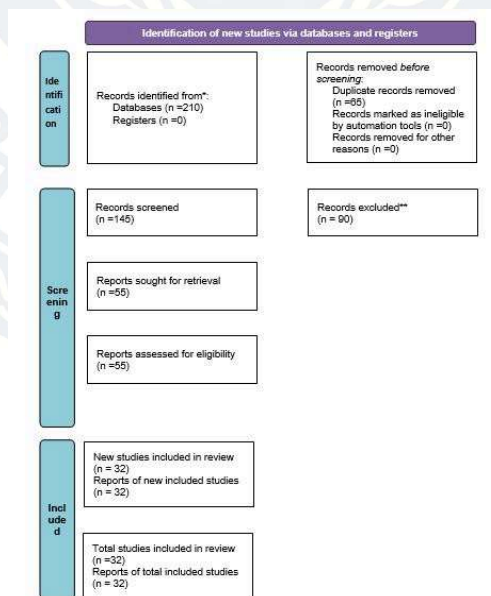


Figure 1: PRISMA 2020 flow diagram for the selection of studies.



OPINION TODAY

National Bilingual (Hindi-English) Quarterly, Peer-Reviewed and Refereed Journal

Vol. 02, No. 02 (2026): April-June

ISSN No. : 3108-2661

2.4 Data Summary Table

The following table represents the distribution of the literature reviewed based on the database source: (see Table 1)

Database Source	Initial Results	Papers Selected for Review
Scopus	85	12
Web of Science	45	8
Google Scholar	60	7
Other (Handpicked/Cross-ref)	20	5
Total	210	32

2.5 Analytical Framework: The Triadic Decoding

The selected literature was analyzed using a three-level decoding process based on the work of Charles Sanders Peirce:

- **Level 1 (Denotation):** Identifying the literal visual/verbal signs (e.g., a saree, a specific color, or a Hindi slogan).
- **Level 2 (Connotation):** Mapping these signs to underlying cultural meanings (e.g., tradition, trust, or modernity).
- **Level 3 (Myth-making):** Synthesizing how these signs create the "Glocal" identity of "Brand Apnapan."

3. Theoretical Framework

The analysis of Indian brand communication requires a multi-layered theoretical approach to decode how meaning is constructed and transferred to the consumer. This study utilizes three foundational pillars of semiotics:

3.1. Saussure's Dyadic Model

Ferdinand de Saussure's model allows for the examination of the relationship between the Signifier (the physical form of the ad, such as an image or sound) and the Signified (the mental concept it represents). In the Indian context, a signifier like a "diya" (oil lamp) goes beyond lighting; it signifies "hope," "purity," and "festivity."

3.2. Peirce's Triadic Model

Charles Sanders Peirce's model is more complex, involving the Representamen (the sign), the Object (the product), and the Interpretant (the cultural meaning) (see Figure 2).

For instance, an Indian celebrity's face (Representamen) endorsing a brand (Object) creates a sense of trust and aspiration (Interpretant) based on the celebrity's public persona.

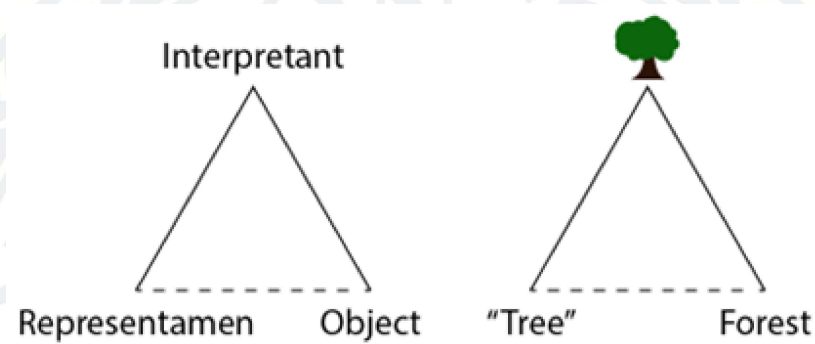


Figure 2: Peirce's Triadic Model (1931) applied to advertising signs.

3.3. Barthes' Myth-Making

Roland Barthes' framework explains how advertisements move from literal meaning (denotation) to cultural myths (connotation). In India, brands create "Modern Myths," such as the idea that certain products are essential for "Sanskaar" (values) or "Apnapan" (belonging).

4. Thematic Findings

4.1. Religious and Mythological Iconography

Indian advertisements frequently utilize "Mythological Realism" to bypass cognitive barriers and trigger deep-seated emotional responses. The strategic use of deities, such as Goddess Lakshmi in financial services, acts as a semiotic shorthand for ethical reliability and prosperity. By employing these epic narratives, brands utilize religious iconography to establish immediate trust with the consumer base.

4.2. The Semiotics of Color and Space

Color semiotics in India functions through a distinct cultural lens that differs significantly from Western minimalism. For instance, while white may symbolize simplicity in global markets, the Indian context prioritizes red and gold to signify Shubh (auspiciousness) in high-value sectors like jewelry. Furthermore, the color green serves as a critical regulatory and cultural signifier for "pure vegetarian" products, a code that remains unique to the Indian dietary landscape.



OPINION TODAY

National Bilingual (Hindi-English) Quarterly, Peer-Reviewed and Refereed Journal

Vol. 02, No. 02 (2026): April-June

ISSN No. : 3108-2661

4.3. Linguistic Hybridity: The "Hinglish" Signifier

The emergence of "Hinglish" represents a significant semiotic shift toward the "Glocal" consumer. This linguistic blending signifies a consumer base that is globally aware yet remains rooted in local sensibilities. Within this framework, code-switching between English and Hindi acts as a signifier of a social status that is both elite and culturally accessible.

4.4. Semiotic Analysis of Iconic Indian Campaigns

To understand the practical application of the aforementioned theories, this review analyzes three distinct semiotic patterns observed in contemporary Indian advertising:

Case 1: The 'Shubh' Signifier (Visual Semiotics in Luxury) In campaigns by brands like Tanishq, the strategic use of Red and Gold transcends mere aesthetic appeal. Within the Indian cultural matrix, these colors function as signifiers of 'Auspiciousness' (Shubhta). Applying Barthes' framework, the advertisement transforms jewelry from a material commodity into a 'Modern Myth' of family legacy and purity. The jewelry becomes a sacred signifier of transition, such as marriage or festivals, embedding the brand into the consumer's spiritual life.

Case 2: The 'Mata-Pita' Index (Relational Semiotics in Services) Financial and insurance sectors (e.g., LIC, SBI) frequently utilize the imagery of elderly parents. According to Peirce's Triadic Model, the presence of parents acts as an 'Index'—a sign directly connected to the concepts of security, duty, and intergenerational responsibility. By highlighting the 'Mata-Pita' (Parents) dynamic, brands bypass individualistic benefits and instead appeal to the collective Indian psyche of 'Dharma' or moral obligation.

Case 3: The 'Jugaad' Iconography (Digital and E-commerce Semiotics) Modern digital platforms like Amazon, Flipkart, and Zomato have increasingly adopted the iconography of 'Jugaad' (frugal innovation/clever workarounds). This serves as a semiotic shorthand for the intelligence and resilience of the Indian middle class. In these ads, the protagonist is often a 'smart navigator' of life's daily hurdles. Here, the brand is positioned not as an outsider, but as a facilitator of this inherently Indian trait of resourcefulness.

5. Transition to Contemporary Media

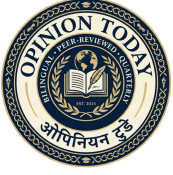
The evolution from traditional print to digital platforms has fundamentally altered the role of the consumer from a passive decoder to an active co-signifier. In the era of participatory semiotics, platforms like Instagram allow users to re-signify brand messages through personal content. Within this ecosystem, influencers function as "Living Signs" where their personal lifestyle becomes the signifier, and the brand itself becomes the signified concept of authenticity or relatability.

6. Discussion: The "Glocal" Semiotic Model and the New India Paradox

The synthesis of reviewed literature reveals that Indian advertising does not merely reflect society; it actively constructs a "Glocal" identity. This identity is built on a three-tier semiotic architecture:

6.1. The Traditional-Modern Binary

Indian brands successfully navigate the tension between tradition and modernity. While global brands often focus on the "Self," Indian semiotics focus on the "Self-in-Society." For example, a smartphone is not just a gadget (Signifier) but a tool for



OPINION TODAY

National Bilingual (Hindi-English) Quarterly, Peer-Reviewed and Refereed Journal

Vol. 02, No. 02 (2026): April-June

ISSN No. : 3108-2661

a granddaughter to teach her grandfather (Signified: Connection/Tradition). This "Modernity with Values" is the core myth that Indian advertising sells.

6.2. The Rise of Participatory Semiotics

With the shift to digital media, the "Sign" is no longer static. On platforms like Instagram and YouTube, influencers act as "Living Signs." The semiotic process has become a loop:

1. Brand creates a sign (e.g., a catchy hook-step in a reel).
2. Consumer recreates the sign (User Generated Content).
3. The Sign becomes a Cultural Meme. This democratization of signs means that "Brand Apnapan" is now co-created by the audience, not just dictated by the agency.

6.3. Ethical Challenges: Colorism and Stereotypes

A critical discussion of Indian semiotics is incomplete without addressing its shadows. Literature suggests that despite progress, many ads still use "Fairness" as a semiotic shorthand for "Success" or "Marriageability." Similarly, "Gendered Spaces" (e.g., women in kitchens, men in offices) continue to be dominant visual codes. Future practitioners must decode and dismantle these biased signs to stay relevant to the socially conscious Gen-Z consumer.

6.4. AI and the Future of Meaning-Making

As we move toward 2026, AI-mediated semiotics is the new frontier. Generative AI can now create "Indian-looking" content instantly. However, the challenge remains: Can an algorithm understand the deep emotional nuance of a 'Kala Teeka' (black dot to ward off evil) or the sentiment behind 'Pehli Kamayi' (first salary)? The future of Indian advertising lies in the balance between Artificial Intelligence and Cultural Intelligence.

7. Research Gaps and Future Directions

Future research must address AI-mediated semiotics, specifically how generative algorithms interpret and replicate "Indianness" in automated content. Furthermore, there is a significant opportunity for neuro-semiotic studies using eye-tracking to validate how consumers decode sacred versus secular symbols. Finally, scholars should move beyond the "Hindi-Heartland" focus to explore the distinct symbolic codes found in South and North-East Indian markets.

8. Conclusion

Semiotics is the invisible architecture of Indian advertising, allowing brands to navigate a fragmented market by speaking a cultural language that transcends literacy. As India moves toward an AI-driven digital economy, the fundamental cultural codes of family, faith, and celebration remain the primary anchors of brand communication. Decoding these signs is essential for both practitioners and scholars to understand the psyche of the contemporary Indian consumer.



OPINION TODAY

National Bilingual (Hindi-English) Quarterly, Peer-Reviewed and Refereed Journal

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ISSN No. : 3108-2661

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