

From Poster to Post: Visual Transition from Traditional Advertising to Meme-Based Brand Identity in India

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Abstract

This paper examines the visual transition from traditional advertising to meme-based brand communication in India. Employing Roland Barthes' visual semiotics and Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism, it analyses how six Indian brands - Amul, Zomato, Swiggy, Blinkit, boAt, and Fevicol - construct identity within participatory digital culture. The study traces a shift from fixed authorially controlled signs to polysemous user-co-created meme-texts. Brands with deep pre-digital semiotic capital better manage this instability. The paper identifies three strategic typologies: reactive topicality, template appropriation and proprietary meme creation. Results have significant implications for both communication design practice and brand identity strategy.

Keywords

Visual Semiotics, Meme Marketing, Brand Identity, Barthes, Kapferer, Digital Advertising, India

Introduction

The relationship between visual communication and brand identity has always been historically contingent. In India, the mid-twentieth-century poster constituted the dominant mode through which brands inscribed themselves into public consciousness. Amul's topical billboard girl, Fevicol's adhesive metaphors, and Liril's waterfall imagery each encoded complex semiotic messages fusing product utility with cultural aspiration. These visual artefacts were produced within a top-down communicative model: the advertiser controlled the sign, the medium, and the context of reception.

The emergence of social media platforms has disrupted this asymmetrical logic. In its place has arisen a participatory ecosystem in which users are simultaneously audiences, content creators, and brand co-producers. Within this ecosystem, the internet meme has emerged as a defining visual genre: a remixable, iterative image-text hybrid that circulates with minimal friction and maximal cultural immediacy.¹ India presents a particularly compelling site for examining this transition: with over 700 million internet users and a median age of approximately 28 years, Indian brands must negotiate the tension between controlled brand messaging and the organic logic of meme virality.²

This paper addresses three interrelated questions: how memes function as a semiotic system of brand communication; in what ways Indian brands deploy memes to construct or transform brand identity as defined by Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism; and what strategic tensions arise from the transition from poster to post.

Theoretical Framework

1. Visual Semiotics: Barthes and the Rhetoric of the Image

Roland Barthes' foundational essay 'Rhetoric of the Image' (1977) provides the primary semiotic lens for this study.³ Barthes identifies three levels of meaning in visual communication: the linguistic message, the coded iconic message (connotation), and the non-coded iconic message (denotation). Through the process he terms 'myth', culturally specific meanings are naturalised, presented as timeless rather than historically constructed.

In the context of advertising, Barthesian analysis has been applied to reveal how brand visuals encode aspirational values and cultural norms beneath apparently neutral product representations.⁵⁶ The internet meme, by contrast, operates as a site of maximum semiotic productivity. Meme templates function as pre-loaded connotative matrices onto which new textual layers are superimposed. When a brand appropriates a template, it inherits the cultural memory of all prior uses, creating a layered palimpsest of meaning that no single author fully controls.⁷

2. Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism

Jean-Noël Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism (2012) offers a structural model for

analysing how brands construct identity across six facets: Physique, Personality, Culture, Relationship, Reflection, and Self-Image.⁴ Applied to digital communication, the framework illuminates how individual visual texts contribute to or disrupt cumulative brand identity. A single meme cannot carry the full weight of a Brand Identity Prism; however, patterns across meme campaigns reveal the facets a brand chooses to foreground, and those it vigilantly protects against semiotic drift.⁸ The transition from traditional advertising to meme-based communication thus represents not merely a channel shift but a fundamental restructuring of which facets remain under authorial control, enabled by the participatory culture Jenkins et al. (2009) describe.⁹

Table 1: Comparative Framework: Traditional Advertising vs. Meme-Based Brand Communication

TRADITIONAL ADVERTISING	MEME-BASED COMMUNICATION
Authorship: Singular (brand)	Authorship: Distributed (brand + users)
Sign type: Anchored (Barthes)	Sign type: Floating / polysemous
Semiotic control: High	Semiotic control: Low-to-moderate
Format: Fixed, high-fidelity	Format: Remixable, low-fidelity
Dissemination: Scheduled / broadcast	Dissemination: Algorithmic/viral
Audience role: Passive receiver	Audience role: Active co-producer
Prism facets: Physique, Culture	Prism facets: Personality, Relationship
Examples: Poster, TVC, print ad	Examples: Template meme, reaction post, viral remix

Note. Prism facets are drawn from Kapferer (2012).³ Semiotic categories derived from Barthes (1977).⁷

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative semiotic case study design. Six Indian brands - Amul, Zomato, Swiggy, Blinkit, boAt, and Fevicol - were purposively selected on the basis of documented meme marketing activity (2018–2024), a pre-digital advertising legacy amenable to diachronic comparison, and sectoral diversity across FMCG, food delivery, quick commerce, and consumer electronics. For each brand, traditional advertising visuals and official social media meme posts were subjected to a two-stage analysis: Barthesian semiotic coding at the levels of denotation, connotation, and myth,¹⁰ followed by mapping of cross-corpus patterns onto Kapferer’s Brand Identity Prism. The study aims for analytical rather than statistical generalisation.¹¹

Traditional Visual Advertising in India: Semiotic Foundations

The Indian advertising poster developed across the colonial and post-independence periods into a form characterised by saturated colour fields, figurative illustration, and

integrated vernacular and English typography.¹² Its semiotic architecture was hierarchical: a dominant image established the connotative field whilst typographic anchoring directed the viewer towards the brand's preferred reading - a closed semiotic circuit in which the advertiser controlled sign, medium, and context of reception.³ Amul's billboard series, inaugurated in 1966, exemplifies this logic at its most refined: the recurring topical girl functions as a stable denotative anchor, encoding a myth of Indian domestic warmth and irreverent civic participation that persisted with remarkable consistency for over five decades.¹³ Fevicol's campaigns offer a contrasting strategy - a recursive visual metaphor of adhesion deployed across rural Indian narratives - in which brand identity was constituted through semiotic world-building rather than product demonstration.¹⁴

Meme-Based Brand Communication: Structure, Strategy, and Semiotics

1. The Meme as Visual Genre

Internet memes are units of popular culture that propagate online through imitation and remixing, characterised by multimodality, intertextuality, and participatory reproduction.¹ Börzsei (2013) distinguishes between 'intentional' memes crafted for virality and 'organic' memes that emerge from grassroots user creativity before being appropriated by brands.¹⁵ Crucially, meme templates constitute pre-loaded connotative frames: any brand occupying a template's structural slots inherits the cultural valence of all prior uses, creating a palimpsest of meaning that may support or subvert the brand's preferred reading.⁷

2. Strategic Meme Typologies in Indian Brand Practice

Analysis of the selected brand corpora suggests three broad strategic typologies. The first, 'reactive topicality', involves creating memes in response to trending cultural events. Zomato and Swiggy have been particularly adept at this strategy, with their social media teams producing memes within hours of significant cultural events.¹⁶ The second, 'template appropriation', involves brands adopting established meme formats and substituting their own messaging into the template's structural slots. Blinkit's consistent use of comparison templates encodes its core promise of quick commerce efficiency through a pre-existing cultural lens.¹⁷ The third, 'proprietary meme creation', involves brands developing original visual formats that, through repetition, become associated with the brand itself. Amul's adaptation of its traditional billboard format to social media represents this strategy at its most sophisticated, leveraging decades of accumulated semiotic capital.¹³

Case Studies: Mapping the Visual Transition

1. Amul: Semiotic Continuity Across Formats

Amul presents the most compelling case of semiotic continuity across the traditional-to-digital transition. The Brand Identity Prism facets of Physique, Personality, and Culture were established through decades of poster and outdoor advertising and have

been successfully transferred to social media without significant semiotic disruption. The Amul girl's distinctive visual coding functions as a master signifier that subordinates the variability of topical content to a stable brand identity.¹³²³ The Relationship facet has shifted most significantly: where the traditional billboard invited passive contemplation, the social media post solicits active engagement - likes, shares, and user-generated variations - enriching the Relationship facet without destabilising the other five.

2. Zomato and Swiggy: Personality-Led Meme Strategies

Zomato and Swiggy represent a contrasting semiotic strategy in which brand identity is constituted almost entirely through meme-based communication, with no significant pre-digital visual legacy. Both brands foreground the Personality and Relationship facets whilst deliberately underspecifying the Physique and Culture facets.¹⁸ Zomato's posts operate primarily at the connotative level, positioning the brand as a relatable, food-obsessed entity encoding the myth of urban Indian millennial food culture.¹⁶ Swiggy's 'What India ate in 2023' campaigns and its practice of publishing food-order trend data as infographic memes constitute a form of participatory brand-building in which consumer data becomes the raw material for brand content, activating what Arvidsson (2006) terms the 'brand commons'.¹⁹

3. Blinkit: Quick Commerce and the Aesthetics of Urgency

Blinkit's social media strategy is characterised by memes that encode urgency, surprise, and the subversion of temporal expectation, reinforcing the connotative field of its service promise.¹⁷ A notable feature is its willingness to engage with competitor brands within meme formats, exploiting intertextual logic to assert competitive differentiation. Mapping Blinkit onto Kapferer's Prism reveals an asymmetric identity structure: the Physique (yellow brand colour, lightning-bolt logo) and Culture (speed-as-value) facets are consistently expressed, but the Self-Image facet varies considerably across executions, suggesting an identity still consolidating during a rapid-growth phase.⁴

4. boAt: Youth Culture and Aspirational Signification

boAt's social media posts frequently deploy the visual grammar of aspirational youth culture - festivals, sporting events, music concerts - as connotative backdrops positioning its products as accessories to an enviable lifestyle.²⁰ The semiotic operation is Barthesian: the denotative sign (a pair of earphones) is anchored within a connotative field (youthful energy, cultural participation) encoding the myth of accessible aspiration. What distinguishes boAt's approach is its management of the Self-Image facet, constructing the identity of the 'Boathead' - a culturally engaged, tech-savvy young Indian who expresses identity through sound - reinforced by a community management strategy that recruits consumers as co-producers of the brand's meme ecosystem.⁴

5. Fevicol: Heritage, Humour, and Semiotic Resilience

Fevicol's pre-digital brand identity was constituted through high-production-value television commercials encoding a distinctive visual and narrative world difficult to replicate in the low-fidelity meme format.¹⁴²¹ The semiotic challenge is structural: the brand's myth - the metaphorical omnipotence of adhesion - was constructed through extended narrative formats that allowed the metaphor to develop through story. The meme format's compression of narrative into a single image-text unit does not readily accommodate this complexity. Fevicol's most successful digital executions strip the adhesion metaphor to its most elemental form - a simple visual pun — depending on the depth of the brand's pre-existing semiotic capital for consumers to complete the meme's meaning.¹⁴

Table 2: Brand Identity Prism Mapping and Meme Strategy Typology Across Six Indian Brands

Brand	Physique	Personality	Dominant Meme Typology	Culture / Relationship	Semiotic Stability
Amul	Butter; iconic girl; blue/yellow	Witty, irreverent, topical	Proprietary meme creation	Indian cooperative values; civic dialogue	Very High
Zomato	Red brand colour; app interface	Self-deprecating, food-obsessed	Reactive topicality	Urban millennial food culture; informal	Moderate
Swiggy	Orange palette; delivery iconography	Playful, data-savvy	Reactive topicality + proprietary data memes	Consumer behaviour as cultural artefact	Moderate-High
Blinkit	Yellow; lightning bolt; speed imagery	Urgent, competitive	Template appropriation	Speed-as-value; competitive rivalry	Moderate-Low
boAt	Bold colours; earphone imagery	Energetic, aspirational	Reactive topicality + UGC	Music, cricket, digital youth culture	High within youth segment
Fevicol	Elephants logo; adhesion metaphor	Humorous, rustic	Template appropriation (constrained)	Indian practical wisdom; rural social life	High legacy; moderate digital translation

Note. Prism facets are drawn from Kapferer (2012).³ Meme typology categories are proposed by the present study. Semiotic stability ratings are analytical assessments, not quantitative scores.

Discussion

Across the case studies, a consistent semiotic shift is observable from anchored signs - in which typographic or contextual elements constrain polysemy - to floating signs whose meanings are actively produced and contested by users within the meme's intertextual ecosystem. This shift has contradictory implications: floating signs generate greater audience engagement because the act of interpretation is itself pleasurable and participatory,⁹ yet they simultaneously expose the brand to semiotic appropriation that may actively damage brand identity.²² Brands with deep pre-digital semiotic capital appear better equipped to manage this drift, because master signifiers such as the Amul girl function as anchoring devices even within a floating sign economy.¹³

This shift is inseparable from a transformation in brand authorship. Traditional advertising operated within a model of singular, corporate authorship; meme-based communication disrupts this in two ways. First, official brand memes are deliberately styled to simulate user-generated content, performing authenticity by effacing the corporate origin. Second, users routinely appropriate and remix brand memes, producing derivative texts that circulate alongside or in competition with the brand's preferred readings. The facets of Kapferer's Prism most vulnerable to user reinterpretation are Personality and Relationship; those most resistant are Physique and Culture, grounded in stable, multi-channel visual codes.⁴

The analysis collectively suggests a need to extend Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism to account for the dynamics of participatory digital culture. Specifically, the Prism's implicit assumption that brand identity is authored by the brand and received by the consumer is inadequate for the meme communication context, in which users are co-authors of brand meaning. A modified framework might add a seventh facet - 'participatory co-production' - that captures the extent to which brand identity is actively constructed through user-brand interaction.⁴

Conclusion

This paper has traced the visual transition from traditional advertising to meme-based brand communication in India through the dual lenses of Barthesian semiotics and Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism. The analysis of six Indian brand case studies reveals that this transition is neither uniform nor unconditionally beneficial: brands with deep pre-digital semiotic capital are better positioned to manage the floating sign economy of meme culture, whilst digitally-native brands must construct coherent identities within an inherently unstable visual environment. The study identifies three strategic meme typologies - reactive topicality, template appropriation, and proprietary meme creation - which offer communication design and marketing practitioners a conceptual vocabulary for strategic decision-making, and proposes a seventh Prism facet to account for participatory co-production in digital brand identity.

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