

Iconography: A Study of Transition from Cultural Icons to Digital Icons

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ABSTRACT

Iconography, a sub-branch of art history deals with the study and interpretation of images. The term 'Icon' comes from the Greek word 'eikon' meaning "image." An icon can be a picture, image or any such representation which is culturally associated and mark a prominent space in the society. A cultural icon is characterised through its close proximity to a certain culture and hence, can be identified by norms, values, symbols, ideals and beliefs of a particular group. Cultural icons are the symbolic representations of any religious group or elements of popular/mass culture and therefore, are ubiquitous in nature. It comprises an object or idea with great cultural significance to a wider cultural group. This paper deals with the transition of cultural icons towards a digitized construction of icons and culture. The prime example of which is the advertising mascot used by quite a popular dairy brand – Amul. This celebrated India's Ad icon is a chubby girl wearing a polka-dotted frock that satirizes the current events and criticizes the loopholes of society through her derisive remarks. A noticeable shift is surely visible in the making of 'icons' as a representative symbol with the digitization of platforms of debate and expression and thus, is able to receive tremendous popularity worldwide.

Keywords: Iconography, Cultural Icon, Symbol, Popular Culture, Digitization.

Cultural Studies emerged as an academic discipline in the 1960s at Birmingham in the United Kingdom which is primarily the centre for Contemporary Cultural studies. The works of Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams, E.P. Thompson, Richard Hoggart, amongst others have been

considered fundamental in the field of Cultural Studies. Richard Hoggart's book *The Uses of Literacy* is considered as the quintessential in the domain of cultural studies. He analyses everyday working-class life, their norms, values and traditions as if they are literary texts. Raymond Williams's take on culture as 'culture is ordinary' is yet another description of culture where every society has its own shape, purposes, values, meanings and a particular art-form and which according to R. Williams forms 'a whole way of life.' Hence culture is the mode through which meanings and ideas generate and which are in turn, governed by power relations.

Etymologically, the word 'culture' comes from a Latin word 'Cultus' meaning 'cultivation or to produce something'. Culture subsumes the belief, custom, art-forms, traditions, values, symbols, and knowledge which is produced and eventually shared and passed on by a community/group to the succeeding generations. The branch of cultural studies is an interdisciplinary field of study which has intertwined discipline of social studies and humanities along with law, science, economics and commerce. Cultural studies examines how representation functions in a particular society while explicitly drawing the role of cultural identity and the symbolic embodiments. Andrew Milner and Jeffrey Browitt in *Contemporary Cultural Theory* assert that the study of culture:

used to refer to: interdisciplinary studies of culture, based primarily in the older disciplines of literary criticism, anthropology, history and sociology; radical political interventions into existing academic disciplines; a new discipline devoted to the study of popular culture; and a loosely 'social-scientific' theoretical paradigm for the study of all systems of textualised meaning-literary and nonliterary, elite and popular (227).

A culture is a way of life consisting of implicit and explicit patterns of behaviour which get transmitted as symbolic embodiments having values attached to them. However, culture changes with time as human beings repeatedly battle over the representation and production of meanings. And this is what forms the cornerstone of the discipline of Cultural studies. There is

no fixity attached to the nature and function of culture and therefore it is dynamically charged. The paper tries to delineate the change or transition from the making of cultural icons to the production of digital icons in a particular culture.

Iconography is the branch of knowledge which deals with the interpretation of art-forms present in the form of pictures, drawings, images, icons, sculptures or effigies. According to Michael Kelly, “The icon is a story in images, though it is not a story about the events of daily life, but of events that are unique, miraculous, and significant for the whole of humankind. It contains nothing contingent, transient, or insignificant: it is a generalized, laconic image” (449). ‘Icons’ are more than recognizable people who are culturally appropriated and are complex symbolic categories. They are duly celebrated and adulated in a certain group of society and are ideologically charged and significant. The iconic category in India draws back to the sites of the Indus valley civilization which is considered as the hub of ancient art-forms including flora, fauna and various ritualistic sculptures.

In the discourse of Iconography, cultural icons foreground the base of popular media/culture which articulates a certain form of identity before the masses. They are the structurally complex images/representations which last subconsciously in the human psyche in the form of collective or cultural memory. For instance, when we see khadi (an Indian manufactured handloom), oval-shaped glasses and a stick, the image of Mahatma Gandhi, a great ‘cultural icon’ resonates in our psyche. His image has been strictly imbedded in our memories from the stories which have been passed avowedly from generation to generation via books and other printed texts, from the mass-media (films), from our ancestors (family lineage) and various other mediums. As per Mike Parker (a Research Scholar from School of Education and Social Sciences), “Cultural Icons contain meaning that reflects the deeply held desires and concerns of receptive communities world-wide and over time” (12).

Cultural Icons are globally renowned images or symbols that are immensely circulated among the masses, and which draws the idea of a national/pop icon as a

representation/embodiment of elements of our cultural heritage. Bishnupriya Ghosh in her seminal text *Global Icons: Apertures to the Popular* (2011) argues that global icons or the iconic figures are the result of our mass-mediated society and are therefore heavily dense figures with 'symbolic accretions.' She puts forth her idea of 'Bio-icons' through the portrayal of three iconic figures which are duly acclaimed in our society – Phoolan Devi or Bandit Queen, an Indian dacoit turned politician, Arundhati Roy, a human right activist and Mother Teresa, a spiritual figure for the distressed. Ghosh studies these icons in light of the knowledge disseminated, the effect caused by them on the decoders/viewers and the collective memory associated with them.

A cultural icon is a symbolic manifestation of any form and can be a picture, name, artifact, personality, monument or other image. It is representative of an idea and has a symbolic interpretation in a certain group. Contemporarily, the word icon can now be applied to pop icons which are represented in terms of music, popular brand special events, movies, and viral images of any person or event. And one such popular icon on the digital platform is the well-liked Amul girl who had made her first appearance in the 1960s. The blue-haired girl wearing a red polka dot dress has become the nation's favourite and most appreciated advertising icon. The sketch of the cartoon was designed by Eustace Fernandes, the art director of Amul brand and the catchy phrase "Utterly Butterly Delicious" was coined by Nisha Da Cunha who is a fantasy fiction writer. The tongue-in-cheek humour and clever wordplay presented by the witty ad character on the print medium of communication is appreciated widely and ubiquitously.

While mapping out the trajectory of cultural icons, it is imperative to study cultural studies in corroboration with visual culture. Visual culture can be defined as a sub-discipline of cultural studies which study culture in terms of expression of visual imagery. It analyzes images in everyday life and phenomena and delves deeper into the politics of representation. The politics of portrayal and representation is a contested practice which tends to explore various constructs of society via which meanings are produced and disseminated. Nicholas Mirzoeff, a well-known visual art theorist talks at a great length about visual art-forms and how mass-mediated societies have undergone a great shift from the traditional art-forms and beliefs, where everything is being

scrutinized under the lens of the capitalist regime. The human experience is becoming more visualized from the clicking of a perfect selfie, vlogging a daily routine to attending virtual conferences and webinars at one's own comfortable spot. This mediation of our daily acts and performances have steadily influenced the culturally-coded notions of representation and meaning.

N. Mirzoeff in *An Introduction to Visual Culture* outlines that “In this swirl of imagery, seeing is much more than believing. It is not just a part of everyday life, it is everyday life” (1). Hence, visual or graphic designs like poster, graffiti, paintings, cartoon design, advertisements and many such pictorial or visual forms construct the matrix of digital art that is being highly consumed by a huge mass of people in a specific culture. These mass-mediated icons are having a crucial economical and commercial aspect and are under the continuous glare of publicity. All in all, the digitization of icons is a multifaceted approach which subsumes the culture intermediaries and their role in the production and consumption of meaning. The cultural intermediaries act as a link between the two parties and evaluate how the consumers perceive the goods which are ‘naturalized’ and hence ‘legitimized.’

We are now living in the digital era where technological advancements have resulted in the evolution of a new lifestyle and form. The mass media has set up a new trend and hence replaced the older forms of living and meaning. The change countered by this new advent of technology and digitization is irreplaceable. The way technology has advanced into human lives, cannot go unnoticed. Today, everything is feasible and thus attainable, if not physically then virtually, under one umbrella. The online medium of interaction and visual constructs for intellectual discussions have greatly influenced our existence. It has indeed become the ‘extension’ of man which is truly free from the flaws of our physical society. With the advent of globalization, the world has thus shrunk into a ‘global village.’ The binaries have been challenged (as confronted by Derrida in post-structuralism) with the coming up of the new media. Pramod K. Nayar in his book *An Introduction to Cultural Studies* published in 2016 is of the opinion that;

Cultural Studies of the media begins with the assumption that media culture – and here we are speaking of a wide range of media, from print to the internet – is political and ideological. Media culture reproduces existing social values, oppressions and inequalities...they articulate issues we see every day in our own lives and read about in newspapers (39).

Advertising in print forms of media shows a remarkable development since the last few decades and brought a great change in the quality of the commercials and advertisements. The signification system involves the use of an icon, symbol, mark or a logo for the creation of a personality and associating that with a particular product or brand/company. The Amul girl is the symbolic representation of Amul products which is presented with a satirical punch line. The face of this digital icon is common among the masses of India which satirically delineates the loopholes of our society and criticizes them. It picks up a strong issue from the socio-political dimensions of our contemporary society and makes a satirist remark or comment following the popular tagline – “*Utterly Butterly Delicious Amul.*” This universal digital icon has traversed across while putting forward the new and current events through time. The humour is equally juxtaposed with the social issue and presented as per the need of the hour.

This digital icon marks the new face of the visual platform in India and can be eventually traced in the successful transition of cultural icons towards digital icons. These virtually marked figures mark their space on the print media which are widely read around the nation. They are not mere sources of amusement and fun but are trying to make people aware of what is happening around them through their exemplification as an ‘Icon.’ It has itself become a part of our culture and society and is readily observed by the people. Also, along with the icon, ‘Amul’ as the dairy brand of India is consumed and bought on a large scale in India because of its healthy and diverse dairy products.

The advertisement tries to cover all the dimensions of our social, cultural, political, economic life from environmental disasters and epidemics to the creation of a new form on our planet. Also, the taglines published are quite catchy which are mostly written in a rhythmic couplet. For instance, on the successful win of P. V. Sindhu, an Indian professional badminton player in 2017 the ad was titled – **SINDHUSTAN HAMARA! Amul SHUTTLEY BUTTERLY DELICIOUS!** Similar comments and jibes have been witnessed during the past few years. While addressing the heart-wrenching incident of rape in New Delhi, the Amul Girl icon was seen in an avatar of Mother India. It says – **Please remember, it's Mother India ! Amul Nirbhaya bano.** In this manner, while taking a jibe at corruption in the society, celebrating any festival or occasion, or publishing on any contemporary issue, the Amul girl via her representation as the most loving and popularized digital icon has been accepted openheartedly as a part of the family in our country. People thoroughly enjoy the comments and the ironical remarks, whether made good or bad.

Also, Jay David Bolter in his seminal work “Theory and Practice in New Media Studies” discusses how the new media is challenging the older forms while assimilating both theory as well as practice and how the academic disciplines are continuing their research processes in this new domain. Hence Bolter has remarkably presented the shift from the traditional and conventional style of writing to the digitized formats which would further strengthen the base of my research paper. Thus, the transition from cultural icons to digital icons is what we are witnessing in this age of digitization and techno culture.

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