India, as an emerging power in South Asia, has recently attracted a lot of attention among many advertising researchers and practitioners. With a large and growing middle class population (recent estimate 250 million strong), many have viewed India as a promising market with as similar importance as China. Although there are many books on how to conduct successful international advertising campaigns, none of these books addresses the intricate relationships between international advertising, globalization, consumerism, and cultural politics that have been so provocatively argued as in Mazzarella’s book.

*Shoveling Smoke* is an ethnographic study of globalizing consumerism and the role of advertising in mediating such a process. Mazzarella theorizes that the practice of advertising can be conceived as “public cultural production, centered on a distinctive form of commodity production, the production of commodity images” (p. 4). The book provides detailed and thought-provoking analyses on the rise of mass consumerism in India since the 1980s. It also explicates the challenges of “the commodity image” that faces Indian advertising professionals, due to the invasion of global brands and multinational corporations (MNCs) during the 1990s. Although very dense in contemporary critical theories, the book has been made easier to read by Mazzarella’s thorough argumentations on how national consumer goods advertising was planned and implemented in metropolitan India and by his analyses of why famous global brands (e.g., Coke) failed to succeed.

The book is a collection of eight chapters that are logically organized into three parts plus an introduction. The introduction presents the theoretical foundations and assumptions used to analyze representative advertising campaigns in India, which, as the author argues, are important to decipher the intricate role of advertising in creating cultural meanings for the advertised brands. Two chapters included in the introductory section also offer a brief overview of modern India in terms of its politics, culture, and society. Readers not familiar with India will find these discussions useful in providing the context for understanding and assessing the author’s arguments in the later parts of the book.

Part 1 deals with the successful KamaSutra advertising campaign that, the author argues, combines two seemingly paradoxical discourses: aspirational luxury consumption and public service (pp. 97-98). Such a union allows advertising to enhance its image “as a universal language” on the basis of eroticism and family planning (p. 100). This approach has allowed the advertising business in India to position itself as “an alternative social ontology” (p. 145). Employing both historical analyses and in-depth interviews during his field work in Bombay, the author offers persuasive evidence on how the Indian advertising industry evolved in the 1980s and what technological and socio-economical factors contributed to changes in Indian advertising practices. Through these arguments, the author explains clearly how the commodification of “Indianness” has helped achieve the intended communication effects and commercial success of a local condom brand in spite of the globalizing consumerism in modern India.

Part 2 discusses how “Indianness” has been used by advertising professionals in India as a differentiator in brand positioning. It also explains how the globalization of consumer markets has influenced the commercial application of “Indianness” in India. The author argues that the globalization of markets, as Theodore Levitt envisioned after seeing the potential of telecommunications technology, contributes to both the localization and globalization of Indian cultural manifestation in the contemporary Indian advertising industry. Furthermore, by placing modern advertising practices in the context of cultural politics, consumerism, globalization, and visual aesthetics, this book also provides a different and innovative perspective on standardization and localization debates in international advertising literature.
The final part of the book summarizes previous argumentations and, at the same time, surmises how advertising professionals in India will deal with a rising mass consumerism. With Indian consumers in mind, the author further argues the dynamic, yet controversial, construction of global Indian consumers under “the ambivalent effects of the globalization on locality” (p. 249) will face more challenges and need further elaboration. In conclusion, the author reiterates his main thesis about the role of modern advertising practices in India as a production and circulation of commodity image that can only be comprehended through evaluating the complicated web of forces in present-day Indian society.

The book follows the tradition of critical/interpretive studies of advertising of Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, Judith Williamson, and others (p. 21). For readers not versed in critical theories, they will find this book a challenge, but hopefully an inspiration for them to delve into works written by these authors. Advertising researchers in North America will find this book useful to expand their terrain of exploration into a country that is so rich in history, culture, and traditions, yet similarly influenced by the globalization of economy and advertising. The perspective of the book can also be extended to the study of advertising practices in modern China as both countries have been experiencing similarly rapid economic growth and cultural and societal consequences in recent decades. Although the book is not intended for advertising practitioners, they will definitely find insightful the information voiced by key advertising professionals in India and the analyses so well argued by the author.

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