



JOURNAL OF NARRATIVE AND LANGUAGE STUDIES | ISSN: 2148-4066

Journal of Narrative and Language Studies June 2024, Volume 12 – Issue 24

Identity and Nation in Coca-Cola's Thanda Narratives in India: A Semiotic Study

Rakesh Tripathi

Faculty of Arts, Communication, and Indic Studies

Sri Sri University, Cuttack

rakesh.t@srisriuniversity.edu.in

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5950-3492>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59045/10.59045/nalans.2024.43>

APA Citation:

Tripathi, R. (2024). Identity and Nation in Coca-Cola's Thanda Narratives in India: A Semiotic Study. *Journal of Narrative and Language*, 12(24), 71-84.

Abstract

When Coca-Cola re-entered the Indian market in the era of government-initiated liberalization, privatization, and globalization in the 1990s, one of the major challenges it faced was to again penetrate the Indian soft drinks market and acquire a considerable market share over a period of time in view of the fact that it was a foreign brand which had pulled out of Indian market owing to unfavorable legislations in 1977. Given this scenario, Coca-Cola, despite being a global brand with a high recall value, faced tough competition from popular Indian brands like Thums Up, Limca, and Gold Spot, which enjoyed a larger market share during the early 1990s. To meet this challenge, Coca-Cola launched a series of television commercials in Hindi, the national language of the country, featuring its brand ambassador, Aamir Khan, a popular Indian actor. Considered to be one of the most creative and popular advertisement campaigns of its times, the commercials specifically aimed to create a favorable narrative for Coca-Cola in the minds of Indian consumers. All the different versions of the commercial had a common but powerful punch line, which played a major role in positioning the brand at par with the long-standing Indian brands in the market. This research article undertakes a semiotic analysis of the commercials, particularly with the aim of establishing the narrative(s) they offered and how that narrative was instrumental in giving Coca-Cola the makeover it needed to compete with the Indian brands.

Key Words: Advertisement, Competition, Semiotic, Narrative, Indian

In India, there is a tradition of hospitality wherein a guest, upon arrival, is asked - *Aap thanda lenge ya garam?* (Would you like to have something cold or hot?). The word *thanda* means cold and is generally used for common summer drinks such as *sherbet*, *lassi*, *chhaachh*, *nimbu pani*, *aam panaa*, or a cold drink that provides respite from harsh summers. It is a

generic term synonymously used for cold drinks, and the commonly used expression *Ek thanda dena* (give a cold one) does not refer to any particular brand of cold drink.

Coca-Cola (referred to as Coke), the global beverages giant, entered the Indian market for the first time in 1956 and remained operational with hundred percent of its equity till 1977. The company ceased doing business in India in the wake of unfavorable legislations introduced by the Janata Party-led Government, which demanded that Coke share its secret formula and also dilute its majority stake. It re-entered the Indian market in 1993, two years after the initiation of economic reforms in India in 1991. By this time, the Parle-owned Indian beverage brands like Thums Up, Limca, Maaza, and Gold Spot had established a good foothold and consolidated their position in the market.

During the initial phase (1993 – 2003), Coke relied extensively on bottling partners for its operations and established its foothold in the Indian market through a string of advertisements featuring Aishwarya Rai (Miss World, 1994) and Hrithik Roshan (a famous actor), who had a great fan-following among the youth, the target segment Coke was aiming at. The Coke advertisement with the punch line “Jo chaho ho jaye, Coca Cola enjoy” (Whatever you wish happens, enjoy Coca-Cola) appeared regularly in print and on television. In 2003, Coke signed for Aamir Khan, another actor “riding the crest of popularity” (Majumder, 2014, p. 60) as its brand ambassador who featured in the popular “Thanda matlab Coca Cola” (Cold drink means Coca Cola) series of television commercials which became quite popular among the masses.

This research article undertakes a semiotic analysis of the *Thanda* commercials so as to establish the narrative(s) they created. It also studies how the narrative was instrumental in giving Coke the push needed to compete with the Indian brands.

Literature Review

Solík (2014) refers to semiotics as “... the explanation of mechanisms and functions of the text as well as visual communicators and gives us a chance to better understand the nature of the social processes. It studies how the signs produce meanings while presuming that such meanings depend on the structural alignment of signs that come into existence through the processes of signification” (p. 207). The goal of semiotics in the study of advertising is, ultimately, to unmask the arrays of hidden meanings in the underlying level, which form what can be called *signification systems* (Beasley & Danesi, 2002) which can be defined as the set of meanings that are generated for a product by a systematic association of various signifiers (brand name, logo, ad texts, etc.) with implicit signifieds relating to personality, lifestyle, desires, etc. (Beasley & Danesi).

The particular kinds of meanings that the association of a *signifier* with a *signified* (or set of signifieds) generates in social situations is called *signification* (Beasley & Danesi), also occasionally termed *interpretation*. Peirce's (1955) triadic model of three different kinds of signs – *icon*, *index*, and *symbol* plays a significant role in this regard.

While Barthes (1977) inspired the first true semiotic works analyzing the implicit messages of advertising by categorizing the messages existing in advertisements into linguistic, denotative, and connotative, as a theoretical approach, the social semiotic approach was conceptualized by Valentin Voloshinov (1973) and Michael Halliday (1978),

and it argues for the creation of social meaning within a text and within society. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) adapted this approach to develop a research framework for a study that favored their social semiotic research method as it provided the interpreter/researcher with dimensions, or “tools”, to explicate and deconstruct textual meanings.

Bell (1990) observes that the semiotic notions used in the study of advertising are powerful because they allow us to bring to the surface the hidden meanings of advertising texts:

Advertising, as a linguistic phenomenon, has become entrenched into social discourse by means of its widespread diffusion throughout societies all over the world (Beasley & Danesi, 2002, p. 15).

Advertising is all about meaning. In marketing terminology, much advertising research has been concerned with the “message taken out” from the commercial. In other words, what did the consumer understand from the commercial? What did it mean? More important than that is how it means (Beasley & Danesi 2002, p. 38). Belk (2007) further observes that advertising can also be decomposed into indexes, icons, and symbols, and the subtle manipulation of their characteristics exposes the rhetorical influence that these distinctions carry in the meanings set up and evoked” (p. 42). With regard to contemporary practices in the field of advertising, Beasley and Danesi opine that “... advertising today has ... ventured ... into the domain of persuasion, and its rhetorical categories have become omnipresent in contemporary *social discourse* ... messages of advertising have ... permeated the entire cultural landscape” (p. 1).

Dyer (1982, p. 32) talks about the use of a “more colloquial, personal and informal language to address the customer,” which involves the use of “rhetorical devices” of “humor”, one which can be suitably used to draw the attention towards the product persuasively in the form of an advertisement as a social discourse (Beasley & Danesi). Such discourses are also marked by intertextuality.

Semiotic studies in the field of advertising and marketing by Zakia (1986), Seiter (1987); Umiker-Sebeok (1987); Umiker-Sebeok et al. (1988); Umiker-Sebeok (1989); Alexander et al. (1995); Harris (1995); Goldman & Papsen (1996); Berger (2010); Warren (1997); Todenhagen (1999); McQuarrie & Mick (1999), Beasley et al. (2000) can be considered meaningful instances of the application of semiotics, with broad similarities in their methodological approaches.

McQuarrie & Mick (1999) use a similar framework to establish their interpretive analyses for a set of visually oriented advertisements. In Zakia’s, and McQuarrie & Mick’s work, Peirce’s distinctions helped to highlight the potentialized meanings in select advertisements and formed the foundations for understanding actual consumer responses (p. 41). Belk (2007) argues in favor of “Peirce’s sign-object distinctions” for these “have also been useful in theorizing and researching advertising”, as seen in the work of Zakia for Schnapple liquor (p. 40).

These aspects of semiotics at play have been instrumental in turning Coca-Cola from being a soda fountain at Jacob's Pharmacy in downtown Atlanta to becoming a global brand with a presence in two hundred countries through an advertising history of more than 125 years. In this backdrop, Coke’s re-entry into the Indian market seems interesting as it has brought some interesting turns in the history of its advertising in the Indian context.

There have been many researches on Coke’s strategy for penetrating the Indian market. Of these, the significant ones include Kaye's (2004) study of Coke's advertising

strategy in the Indian market over the years and Kadri's (2007) study of aspects of localization as pursued by the company, among others. According to Kaye (2004), when "the industry grew 23% nationally" (p. 7) around 2002, the company did reasonably good business as "Coca-Cola India achieved 39% volume growth" at that time. It was for the first time that "the Company reached break even profitability in the region ...". However, within a decade of its re-entry, Coke realized that this was just a small percentage of the market share and more than seventy percent share comprising the middle class was left untapped. Johnson's (2009) study of *American Advertising in Poland* also presents a similar scenario with regard to the gap Coke faced in Poland and the strategy adopted for a turnaround.

In this regard, Kadri (2007) points out that "The Thanda campaign attempts to embed Coca-Cola in local tradition rather than inserting a foreign one. Rather than highlighting aspirational distance, it focuses on proximity to the familiar with the intention of appealing to rural sensibilities (n. pag., emphasis in the original). On the one hand, the "appeal" to the "familiar (ity)" of "rural sensibilities" that Kadri cites is an example of (conceptual) localization "using local language and idiomatic expressions" and further observes:

Another way in which Coca-Cola visual marketing has become localized ... (is through) local sign writers who also produce numerous advertisements ... Signwriting of Coke advertising in India tempers the brand standardization and consistency evident in more affluent countries while firmly anchoring in a (sic vernacular style of the Indian streetscape ... hand-painted typography is still commonly sighted in India in the array of competing signs, and Coca-Cola is apparent in such displays (Kadri, n. pag., 2007).

This points towards Coke being "subsumed by Indian-ness" as a brand as the "global" tends toward, and collapses into, the "local" (Majumder, 2017, p.62). O'Shaughnessy (2009) states that "Coca-Cola when seen, mouthed or spoken is the signifier while the concept of a soft drink that comes to mind is the signified. A *marked* signifier occurs when the signifier is modified or qualified in some way."

So far as the context of the *Thanda* campaign is concerned, Majumder in *Representations and Re-presentations* undertakes a detailed study of these advertisements in light of the Anti-Coke visuals in India. His study gives an insight into how a global brand slowly worked its way up for localisation in a complex socio-economic setting. In this case, Coke constantly strives for a distinct identification with the different shades of Indian ethnicity. Some of these, as he points out, "seem to play off comic portrayals of the same in mainstream Hindi ("Bollywood") cinema effectively employing one of the stars of that cinema-industry (Khan) to great comic effect" (2014, p. 64).

The ethnic identity so created has suitably been localised through the use of the appropriate dialectal variety, as exemplified by the *tapori* from Mumbai, the *paanwala* from Hyderabad, or the Punjabi youth, which serves to bring in a comic element. The localisation in this manner – bringing in the key components of language and cultures within easy-to-relate specific locales makes it comprehensive and effective in the application as it inserts Coke in the "everyday Indian space". According to Egan (2022, p. 34), "... These connotative associations, based on socially derived meanings, form the basis of the narratives and myths behind much iconic advertising (e.g., Coca-Cola ...)".

While these studies are significant, there are important aspects of language and culture that have been instrumental in shaping Coke's strategy in India but have not been adequately researched in the Indian context. Even when certain aspects such as localization or even adaptive advertising are touched upon at the surface level, none of the studies focus on the cultural specificities and idiomatic use of language or even the linguistic coding of

the advertisements, particularly from the viewpoint of their comprehensive semiotic analysis. In the absence of such studies, it becomes difficult to understand the reasons behind the underlying success or failure of the narrative and its impact. This article attempts to fill such gaps.

Methods

The essence of the semiotic method lies in identifying how signs are used to represent something. In the case of advertising, that something is usually a need or a desire. Since it is a well-known fact that “Semiotics can help to demystify advertising creativity” (2002, p.158), a semiotic analysis of the Coca-Cola television commercials has been undertaken by fleshing out *signification* relations between *signifiers* and *signifieds* in terms of the Peircean triad - icons, indexes, and symbols. In this study, the creativity of the commercials, with reference to the culturally vibrant characters assumed by the protagonist, shapes Coke's textuality in different versions of the campaign. Through these analyses, the following two dimensions will be particularly emphasized:

- (i) Textuality and Intertextuality in the different versions of the advertisements,
- (ii) Meaning and interpretations at deeper levels established the use of verbal (rhetoric and figures of speech, other rhetorical devices such jingles, slogans, imperatives, tone, alliteration, idioms, and proverbs), and non-verbal signifiers (visual signifiers) used for this purpose.

Data

The primary data comprises six different versions out of some ten-eleven versions that exist. These advertisements featuring Aamir Khan were produced by Prasoon Joshi, creative head of McCann-Erickson, Coca-Cola's worldwide advertising partner, and aired on Doordarshan, the state-run broadcaster with maximum coverage during those years, and also privately owned television channels at the national level such as Zee and Sony. These are also available on YouTube and other such platforms. The following versions have been considered for this article:

- (i) Television Commercial 1: This advertisement shows a couple being taken around a popular hill station by a Sherpa tourist guide. The husband asks for something cold to drink, and the wife takes out a chilled bottle of Coke from an ice box and take one herself as well. The guide also asks for it. The husband prompts her to give him something else. He is disappointed getting a juice tetra pack, so he starts behaving weirdly. He points in different directions, saying this is Taj Mahal, that is Qutub Minar (both are very famous historical monuments in India), which bear no resemblance to what the guide shows. Finally, pointing towards a sheep, the guide says this is a tiger. Mocked by the husband for being out of his senses, the guide amusingly retorts - if this tetra pack can be considered a cold drink, then why not this Taj Mahal, that Qutub Minar, and also the

sheep a tiger? Finally, the wife offers him a Coke, which pleases the guide very much, and he spontaneously breaks into a dance commonly seen in the hills.

- (ii) Television Commercial 2: This advertisement shows a *Tapori*¹ intimidatingly asking for a cold drink at a local eatery in Mumbai. He says “e paan ki dukan, chal ek thanda de” (hey betel shop, give me a cold drink). Somewhat scared, the assistant at the counter fetches one and offers. He is rebuked a number of times by the *tapori*, saying different odd things to him until he finally gets to understand that Coke is the only *thanda*. Finally, the assistant at the counter happily says *thanda matlab* Coca-Cola as the *tapori* gives an assenting smile.
- (iii) Television Commercial 3: This advertisement shows a young girl asking for a Coke at a *paan* (betel) shop in Hyderabad while she addresses the shopkeeper as *Bhaiya* (brother), which upsets him, and he objects to it, saying, “O Beauty! What have you said right at the time of starting the business for the day.” Just then, a few other young girls turn up and ask for *thanda*. He takes out bottles of Coke for them, and while giving it to them, he tells the first one that girls come and asks for a *thanda*, and give them Coke. Grabbing a bottle, the first girl thanks him and again sarcastically addresses him as *bhaiya* (brother) just to have fun by annoying him. As she leaves, the *paanwalla* (betel-leaf seller) sings a couplet in Hindusthani, a variety of Urdu-Hindi combined spoken in a distinct manner in Hyderabad: “who thanda peeko nikal gayen, mere ko pyaasa chhod gayen” (she drank the cold drink and went by, leaving me thirsty), as if he was charmed by her. At the close of the commercial, the *paanwalla* drinks a bottle of Coke as the jingle “Thanda Matlab Coca-Cola” is played.
- (iv) Television Commercial 4: This advertisement shows a Bengali *Bhadralok*² at a restaurant with his family for refreshments who tries to reason with his wife as to why they should not drink Coke. While the family is seated and is about to place an order - *thanda* for all, the husband objects, saying, “nahi, no thanda” (no, no cold drink), but both his wife and daughter question as to why not. He replies with “usme kuchh gadbad hai (there's something wrong with it) in the backdrop of laughter. The wife insists for the waiter to bring one and further questions her husband, “kya gadbad hai” (what is wrong), to which he replies “usme kuch hai, wohi log bola na” (there's something wrong in it, those people said), which is mocked at with a “Hunh” by the wife. Following this, an argument between the two ensues wherein she tries to reason out in a logical manner until the husband is outwitted. Thereafter, the wife taunts the husband, saying, “has heard about the test but hasn't heard of the results”, and further mocks his intellect saying that “it has been tested in the laboratories of so many other countries and okayed”. The husband then says that I will test it again myself and, on this pretext, drinks all four bottles one by one, not leaving any for the family members, to their utter surprise. Finally, with a burp, he looks amused and tries to cajole his wife, singing a popular

¹ *Tapori* is commonly said to be a street-smart rowdy or a vagabond. According to Ranjani Mazumdar, the *tapori* is “a stylized figure representing the streets of Mumbai; the *tapori* has primarily been a cinematic invention” (*Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 36, No. 52 (Dec. 29, 2001 - Jan. 4, 2002), pp. 4872-4880).

² A Bengali gentleman dressed in *Dhoti-Kurta*, also considered well-bred.

Coca-Cola launched this advertisement in response to a report released by the Centre for Society and Environment (CSE), an NGO, in late 2003 on the quality of Pepsi and Coca-Cola beverages in India.

parody showing his agreement that it is safe to drink Coke as everyone joins in the chorus with “thanda matlab Coca-Cola” as the punch line appears stamped on the screen.

- (v) Television Commercial 5: This advertisement shows three young and fashionable city girls approaching a rustic farmer in the fields as the tire of their car has run flat, to ask for a cold drink as they are very thirsty. Hardly expecting anything as the place is surrounded by sugarcane fields, when they are about to ask him for something to drink, he is surprised by their beautiful presence and feels out of the world. Finally, when one of them says that they are very thirsty and another one asks if they could get cold water, the farmer assures them that he will get them anything as the unexpected has happened. He starts singing a parody while pulling out a bucket of water from the well as it appears, which finally turns out to be a bucket full of chilled bottles of Coca-Cola. The girls are absolutely delighted to have Coke in a desolate place like this, while the farmer terms it as his style of reciprocating their request.
- (vi) Television Commercial 6: This advertisement shows a waiter who turns up with a bottle of Coke in a tray in a coach of a running train when most of its passengers are relaxing. The train suddenly enters a dark tunnel, and when it comes out after a short while, the waiter is surprised to see that the bottle is almost empty. He tries to make out as to who could have possibly finished almost the entire bottle so quickly. No one really seems to care for his curiosity but then, a sudden belch from one of the passengers, followed by another one, then another one, and finally, the waiter himself, gives the clue that each one of them had quietly taken a sip when the train passed through the tunnel. This is followed by a jingle “O dikhte hain hum alagh alagh par andar se hain ek, o aaja aaja khud se bahar sab ka thanda ek, o sabka thanda, sabka thanda, sabka thanda ek, Coca-Cola”, followed by the punch line “sabka thanda ek Coca-Cola”.

Analysis & Findings

The tourist guide version of the advertisement is marked by the use of a fairly good number of metaphors, such as – *Ye Taj Mahal hai, Ye Qutub Minar, Ye Tiger hai*, to drive home the message that if just any other cold drink can be considered a Coke, then why not the most trivial things be considered the most monumental such as, the Taj Mahal and the Qutub Minar which are considered symbols of cultural heritage. The contrastive alliterations by the guide place Coke in focus - as a cold drink of distinction in comparison to other cold drinks that are there in the market through metaphorical significations.

During the version in which he asks a Coke at the counter, the *tapori*'s tone changes as he sounds more emphatic while saying *thanda matlab coca cola*. As the tone falls, it is the counter assistant who is projected as if he lacks enough common sense to understand that Coke is the only cold drink, and no other, thereby positioning Coke as THE *thanda*. The *tapori* also enquires whether the assistant has understood this or not, which is duly reciprocated saying “ohh” as if it wasn't clear to him earlier. This is followed by iterations of *thanda matlab* by the *tapori*, and Coca-Cola by the assistant, only to establish that this is a common-sense fact now.

The years 2002 – 2003 remained a matter of concern for the company owing to anti-Coke protests by farmers in Plachimada (Kerala) and Mehndiganj (Uttar Pradesh) against

depleting water levels, and also its contamination because of the bottling facilities of Coke, making it unfit for irrigational purposes, followed by the report titled “Analysis of Pesticide Residues in Soft Drinks” (Mathur et al.) released by Centre for Society and Environment (CSE), a non-governmental organisation in August 2003 which claimed that Coke, among others, contained pesticide residues in excess of the limits prescribed by the European Economic Council (EEC).

It meant a considerable loss of business to the company. According to Kaye (2004), “Within two weeks of the public appearance of the report (on 5th August 2003), sales of Coca-Cola dropped by 30-40%. She further states, “The Coca-Cola Bottling Company (Coke) stock dipped by five dollars on the New York Stock Exchange from \$55 to \$50 in the six sessions following the August 5 disclosure, as did shares of Coca-Cola Enterprises (CCA)”. Further, a report in *Business Standard* magazine stated Coca-Cola reporting “a decline of 11% per unit case during the third quarter of 2003”, followed by a similar trend in the subsequent quarters of 2004. As a cumulative impact of these controversies, the image of Coke as a leading global cold drink brand suffered and affected its business in India.

To mitigate the impact of such narratives building up around its brand image, Coke initiated damage control by launching a commercial featuring a Bengali family to salvage its image. The commercial revolves around a husband-wife argument when their family goes to a restaurant. It depicts the husband behaving irrationally as he believes in rumors regarding the pesticide content in Coke and stops the family from drinking Coke for the same reasons. The argument gets intensified as she reasons out with him saying that Coke has more than a 100-year-old legacy, it is consumed in so many countries of the world, and has also been tested in the laboratories of other countries, and so on, until the husband gets outwitted. Speechless, he pretends to test all the bottles of Coke meant for his family and, in the process, gulps down the other bottles as well to his satisfaction. Dressed in a white *dhoti-kurta*, as is Kishore Kumar³ in the movie *Padosan* (1968), when he sings “meri pyari bindu”, the Bengali *bhadralok* tries to flatter his wife ‘Bindu’ with the parody of this song. The commercial ends with the punch line flashed on the screen as if stamped.

This commercial also marks an attempt to re-establish the image of this brand in a positive light. The context being husband-wife interaction, it shows an argument between them owing to which the wife throws tantrums at her husband, which is quite common and relatable. However, as a change of strategy, it shows the wife trying to reason out with the husband beyond the tantrums, to arrive at the logical conclusion, contrary to the common perception that the husband should be doing it, that Coke is safe for consumption. Interestingly, such localization on the part of Coke suggests a departure from its previous strategy as in this case, it falls back on its global legacy and reputation to defend its position and discredits the CSE laboratory reports as hearsay.

The sixth commercial brings forth the inherent intertextuality ensconced in this series of advertisements in connection with all others through the punch line “*Thanda Matlab Coca Cola*” as the main text. While the sub-text of each version is context specific and is drawn in a culturally significant manner, along with the right mix of rhetoric in terms of humor and logic, the punch line is used only as an imperative and Coca-Cola is retained in its trademark font as it is intended to be positioned as THE cold drink in the Indian market. This is

³ The song is taken from a popular comedy, *Padosan* (1968), in which Kishore Kumar, a popular singer-actor, plays a prominent role and sings the actual song based on a character in the movie called ‘Bindu’.

achieved by strategic code-mixing (Hindi-English) of the expression so that its reach can be maximized effectively and adds to the acceptance of the narrative.

This commercial is also marked by the prominent use of symbolism, which is conceptualized around a train journey. The image of a train in the commercial is a symbol of unity as Indian Railways connects people from different parts of the country, thus uniting the diversity India has. It projects a diverse India united by a common taste - Coca-Cola. The bottle gets almost emptied as the train passes through a tunnel, leaving the waiter confused about who could have sipped it. Only when the belching sound from passengers seated in different places is heard, he comes to realize that all of them have enjoyed it, and this is possible only when all have a common taste. The commercial ends with all passengers smiling together as a different punch line is played at the end – *Sabka Thanda Ek* (Everyone's cold drink is one).

What adds punch to this version of the advertisement is the idiomatic use of language as it strongly resonates with *Sabka Malik Ek*, an expression commonly used in a spiritual context, meaning 'There is only one Master of all' (or God is the only Master). Thus, Coke has suitably identified the spaces in the everyday lives of Indians for cultural appropriation and its orchestration through "a series of affective visualizations, which attempt to reconfigure and *re-present* globalizing Indian "space" (Majumder, 2014). This is a very powerful narrative in its own way.

Borrowing from India's diverse cultural landscape, Coke has effectively used "distinct creative visualisations" to create a brand narrative for itself in a globalizing India and consolidate its position in the Indian market. Etched in the memory of the masses even today, these narratives are considered classics in advertising when it comes strategizing marketing plans as these continue to influence businesses even today, and inspire them to evolve and innovate along similar lines.

Discussion & Conclusion

In the *Thanda* advertisements, Majumder sees an articulation of "... a narrative of nation-making through consumption ... celebrating "Indian diversity". In his view, the brand realization thus possible can be done at two levels; first utility wherein Coke is meant to satisfy thirst as a cold drink; second "exchange value" where nothing but Coke is acceptable as a soft drink.

Contrary to his argument, it may be recalled that the term *thanda*, as initially used, never signified any particular brand. It was rather the representation of a prototype, which had a set of attributes, meant for a specific utility to fulfill a certain purpose only. As such, the Indian masses were not really conscious whether it was a Thums Up, or a Limca, or a Maaza, or a Gold Spot that quenched their thirst as long as it satisfactorily did so. Coke, which lacked this standing, needed to establish its identity at par with its peers in the market as they were leading the market. It was no less than a priority for Coke as it had remained out of business in India for a long time.

After about a decade of its operations, Coke realized that its initial narrative of a cold drink offering delight upon consumption did not break the ice with the Indian masses as it lacked utility function, and its value realization was insignificant. As a global brand with a

marginal presence, Coke reinvented its narrative, where its functionality symbolized its brand identity. This narrative was, in essence, one that aimed to forge an identity for Coke among the pre-existing Indian brands.

It is interesting to note that the manipulation of this linguistic strategy, albeit with a difference, has come to notice in the case of an Indian product.

Amul, India's biggest dairy company, projects a summer drink of Indian origin as "Hamara Cold Drink" (our cold drink) in its television commercial. The product Amul Lassi⁴ is easily available at an affordable price and does not require a straw for consumption, as the advertisement claims. The punch line in this advertisement is "Amul Lassi – Hamara Cold Drink". Just as Coca-Cola competed with India's indigenous summer drinks and cold drinks using the word "Thanda", Amul relies on a similar approach to create a counter-narrative through reverse code-mixing.

Given the dynamics of the Indian cold drinks market, it can be reasonably stated that Coca-Cola expanded its customer base using the "Thanda" narrative and has become a market leader in its segment. In the present context, with prospects of strong growth in the carbonated beverages segment in India from 44-unit cases in 2016 to an estimated 84-unit cases in 2021, and Coca-Cola registering a strong growth in 2022 in the Indian market despite a decline of 1 percent for the quarter in its unit case volume for the Asia Pacific market under which India falls (according to a report published in *Outlook* magazine), the cold drinks industry in India is poised for a boom.

Yet, for Coke to become 'THE' *Thanda* of India, newer narratives will have to be explored as Amul Lassi is likely to pose a major challenge for Coke in the long run so far as the position of India's preferred cold drink is concerned. While factors like its Indian origin and better match with traditional taste patterns will be influencing factors in its favor, the easy availability of a variety of substitutes, changes in consumption patterns, climate change and sustainability issues relating to PET bottles, and finally, competition from other brands will continue to push companies like Coca-Cola to explore more innovative and creative ways to woo the masses and expand their customer base.

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⁴ Lassi is sweet buttermilk. It is a common refreshment during summers.

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