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Understanding slogans through symbolic interactionism

Siddhartha Mishra *

Department of Humanities-Social Sciences, Dr. Ram Manohar Lohiya National Law University, Lucknow-226012, Uttar Pradesh, India.

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Abstract

This paper uses Symbolic Interactionism approach to explore how slogans as a reference point influence our understanding of society, guide social discourse, and reshape individual realities. Through analysing real examples from social protests and advertisements, this article highlights the transformative potential of slogans in raising awareness and in social change by influencing interpretations at both the individual and the social levels by shaping our perception and meaning construction.

Keywords: Slogan; Symbolic Interactionism; Symbol; Advertising

1. Introduction

Slogans are an integral part of our civic imaginary (1), they have been an essential part of our public life. As concise expressions, they serve as powerful tools for socialization, influencing the way in which we perceive and interpret issues. As a potent symbol, they act as a focal point for campaigns and movements, they inspire action, stir emotions, and reflect the values and ideologies of a group. They have played pivotal roles in driving movements and causes throughout history. For instance, the slogan “The personal is the political” has been instrumental in advancing feminist agendas since the 1960s (2). Recent examples such as, “Believe Women” and “Black Lives Matter” have emerged as powerful rallying cries for social justice movements, crystallizing the issues into concise calls to action (1,3).

Slogans as “significant symbols” offer insights into social norms and values by reflecting cultural and ideological foundations of groups. They function as symbols of identity and resistance, reflecting the aspirations and demands of communities and groups (4,5). Reboul has mentioned that rhetorical function and belligerent etymology make slogans a sine qua non of public discourse and an integral part of the ‘world of advertising and political propaganda’ (6). Scholars across disciplines such as linguistics, psychology, advertising and marketing have explored the linguistic, psychological and sociological dimensions of slogans (7–9).

From a symbolic interactionism perspective, slogans serve as reference points shaping the way in which individuals perceive and interpret the world around them. In this paper we will see how slogans provide direction for advertising campaigns as well as movements by acting as a potent tool for socialization and meaning construction. In addition, this paper also tries to explore the mechanism behind this interplay of language and social interaction.

2. Symbolic Interactionism, Socialization and Slogans

Symbolic Interactionism assumes that people construct selves, social worlds, and societies through interaction. As a micro perspective, it offers a lens for looking at ourselves, everyday life and the world by focusing on how people construct and negotiate meanings and actions in their everyday lives. Blumer has devised the name “symbolic

* Corresponding author: Siddhartha Mishra

interactionism” and gave three premises forming the basis of its perspective. According to him, meanings precede action, meanings are developed in social interaction, and through an interpretative process, meanings influence how people define and make decisions (10). Therefore, meanings have consequences, as the meaning of an object derives from what people do with it.

Symbolic Interactionism views socialization as a dynamic two-way reciprocal process that makes us learn the ways of thinking, acting and feeling of the groups to which we belong and internalize them as our own. Through interaction and interpretation which are crucial dimensions of socialization, we learn the norms and values along with the requisite ideas and skills to become functioning members of society. The context, form, content and emotional tone of interaction affect the interpretations for presumed socialization agents and their recipients. (11).

Shared symbols including spoken and unspoken shared languages are used for interaction with other members of communities. Language as a significant symbol provides common ground, where socialization takes place and meanings are constructed; it also serves as an avenue for modification of meanings through interpretation.

Though Blumer recognizes the significance of socialization (10), however, Charmaz and Snow contend that much of life is routine and people do not engage in interpretative processes actively (12,13). Experiencing new or problematic situations makes them engage in the interpretative process and this process under the right influence makes them change prior meanings that they hold. This is where slogans come into play.

3. Slogans as a reference point for facilitating socialization

Any advertising campaign or social movement can be seen as a place where socialization takes place with two main aims:

- To socialize people who are unknown or have little knowledge regarding current events
- To resocialize those of opposing groups or those with ambiguous attitudes through modification of meaning that they held.

The symbolic interactionism perspective sees language as a ‘significant symbol’ that facilitates socialization and interpretative processes (14). Slogans as an effective use of language act as a catalyst in socialization, meaning construction and modification through the interpretation process. Many linguistic features inherent in slogans such as superlatives, parallel structures, and an exact number of words make them effective thereby facilitating memorization and chanting. Lippman has stated that slogans being short, rhythmical, presenting a one-sided view and emotionally charged are useful during critical events where fast action and immediate understanding is needed from the public (15).

A group of people experiences order in an indefinite, unpatterned situation through a common range and a common reference point within that range, both built up during group activity (16,17). As a reference point, slogans act as a stimulating agent, reorganizing the whole pattern or structure around them. As ‘significant symbols’ of society, slogans facilitate socialization by simplifying complicated ideas, expressing group ideology and goals, creating identification and full hopes for the future (4). Slogans are used in the commercial world to promote a product or a service. In addition to this slogans are also used in social movements, protests and elections as a ‘rallying cry’ in order to simplify complex issues and make them unquestionable and self-explanatory. They realize and confirm essential aspects of social, cultural, and psychological life by acting as a source of identity construction (18), by modelling of social roles, by self-reflection, and by redefinition of interpersonal relationships. As an influence mechanism slogans highlight problematic situations, new possibilities as well as probable solutions for the necessary motivation for social action.

Another important function that slogans serve is to shock by challenging the former socialization process that helps maintain or has led to the status quo. Symbolic interactionism perspective recognizes that meanings can change and our interpretation can spur those changes (11). Therefore, the challenge to the former socialization process is important as it awakens people from their slumber to an alternative reality. It captures their imagination to reflect upon the social processes and their dynamics for a change; the shock also leads to publicity. In the age of contemporary mass media and social media, anything that challenges status-quo or the process that led to status-quo gains publicity. Slogans contribute significantly in this regard as they serve a cause by becoming an integral part of an image, acting as short-hand identification, providing continuity across different media and coordinating messages across all forms of communication (19).

Acting as a crystallization point in the confusion of crisis (20), slogans guide the interpretative process. As a reference point, slogans can be positive or negative depending on the former socialization process of an individual or group. As a

positive reference point, they motivate to move in the direction they are pointing to and as a negative reference point, they do the opposite. Simply, a positive or negative reference point depends upon whether one wants a particular idea that a slogan signifies to happen or not. For example, the slogan 'No Smoking' is positive for those who are against smoking but negative for those who smoke. At the same time, for those who belong to neither of these groups, it acts as a socializing 'indicator' to follow the former group. From a Symbolic Interactionism perspective, this slogan confirms the former socialization process of those who are against smoking, challenges the former socialization process of those who are for smoking, and tries to resocialize them into the former group and socialize the ambiguous group to join the first group.

4. How slogans are used for socialization in the real world can be explored from the following two examples:

Case 1 - Roubal, in his article, discussed the advertising slogan "No Limits," which depicts social change to a world where no limitations exist and humans are free to explore and realize their full potential. He has stated that the brands should be communicated as 'contexts' that anticipate the reality of everyday life's social, cultural, and psychological aspects. These contexts are usually communicated in concentrated forms (e.g., via slogans and catchwords), which actively transform the consumers' relationships to the products where they identify the branded products by their individually defined, socially determined, and shared symbolic meanings. (21).

In the above mentioned case, the slogan 'No Limit' acts as a positive reference point by indicating its potential audience and a boundless society with unlimited potential. It acts as a catalyst for action by actively shaping consumers' perceptions, encouraging them to associate themselves with the narrative of self-discovery and empowerment that the particular brand seeks to promote. By endorsing limitless opportunities as a positive reference point, it provides a framework for consumers to reinterpret their experiences, aspirations and self-concept by aligning themselves with the marketing message that a particular slogan seeks to promote. This also aligns well with Roubal's assertion that "The marketing messages usually initiate active and fast actions; they refer to 'life without limits', offering life in the world of unlimited opportunities and endless adventures. On the contrary, it is hard to imagine commercial marketing messages that would motivate the consumers to restrain themselves, be careful, postpone decisions, and be modest and self-repressed. (21)."

Case 2 - Articles (22,23) published in The Atlantic and The New York Times, discussed how the slogan "Defund the Police", which gained prominence during the Black Lives Matter protests, is interpreted by various people with various purposes. For many activists and supporters, it is seen as a call to reallocate funding from traditional policing toward community services in order to effectively address systemic inequality and violence. However, opponents often interpret this slogan as an extreme demand to eliminate police forces entirely, viewing it as a threat to public safety and societal order.

In this case, from a symbolic interaction perspective, structural conditions shaped by various social, historical, racial factors and media framing have influenced both groups' socialization process. For those who have experienced systemic discrimination, "Defund the Police" acts as a positive reference point for justice and transformation. While it is negative for those who associate safety with policing, since for them this slogan functions as a symbol of chaos or threat. But, apart from positive or negative, as a reference point, it draws one's attention to a phenomenon and stimulates one to gain insight and be somehow entangled with the issue. Entanglement is important because once that is achieved, socialization becomes much easier. Slogans spark the socialization process or resocialization, depending upon one's social self's socialization level.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this research paper tries to comprehensively explore the role of slogans in shaping social understanding and behaviour through the lens of Symbolic Interactionism. By demonstrating through real-world examples from advertising and social movements, it highlights the significant impact of slogans in increasing awareness and driving social change. Slogans acting as reference points aid individuals or groups in interpreting and modifying previous meanings that they acquired through socialization. With the advent of new media, their potential to raise awareness and draw attention has increased exponentially. Therefore, sociology as a discipline can complement the studies of slogans through symbolic interactionism. By having a deeper understanding of slogans and their symbolic power, we can gain insights into the intricate interplay between language, culture, and society, paving the way for future exploration and analysis in this field.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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