

SELLING DREAMS: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF EMOTIONAL APPEAL IN INDIAN ADVERTISEMENTS

Kapil Chowdhury

Assistant Professor

Department of Fine Arts, Graphic Era Hill University, Dehradun

ABSTRACT

Advertising does more than just sell products in India: it sells belonging, aspiration, nostalgia, and moral virtue. Why do Indians respond so powerfully to ads with emotional appeal? And what specifically makes Indian ads resonate? Answering these questions required that I not simply “measure” Indian ads’ emotional appeal but rather closely examine how emotional meaning is both constructed and attached to products through the strategies of branding. This paper will present a qualitative investigation into the cultural logics behind successful emotional appeal in Indian ads based on thematic analysis of three Indian advertising case studies — Amul, Cadbury Dairy Milk, and Hindustan Unilever’s Surf Excel detergent ads — drawing conclusions about how emotional appeal functions and resonates in Indian contexts. Five key registers emerged from analysis: nostalgia, familial togetherness, moral virtue and generosity, humour and wit, and festival-anchored belonging. Overall findings suggest Indian ads with emotional appeal succeed by mixing apparently “universal” emotions with culturally specific language referencing shared rituals, celebrations, and social textures. Further research and practical implications are discussed for those who wish to utilise emotional appeal in brand advertising campaigns while avoiding ethical or cultural missteps in a plural society where poorly received ads can damage customer relationships.

Keywords: Emotional Appeal; Indian advertising; Brand Storytelling; Consumer Culture Theory; Cultural Branding.

1. INTRODUCTION

Few Indian homes have not heard the catchy jingle, seen the symbolic logo, or tasted the milk-solid-rich sweetness of Amul butter. First introduced to Indian markets in 1946, the white dairy butter packaged in a red tray with a photo-ready farmer selling from his truck has become a household name by consistently anchoring its advertisements in humour, festivals, and colloquial language. Whether imagining kids dramatically staging a protest to demand butter on their toast or dramatising national news events with a spare cow-headed hero, Amul advertisements speak to Indian consumers with an understanding of how they laugh, how they relate to one another, and how they engage with current events. This sense of intimacy and belonging cultivated by Amul advertisements is no accident: it is instead the product of careful brand management and an understanding of India’s markets as not just consumers of goods, but participants in culture through rituals, festivals, and shared meaning-making. This paper takes Amul as its starting point, using qualitative investigation to answer three research questions: What emotional registers dominate Indian advertising? How do advertisers translate particular emotions into concrete advertisements? What ethical lines must advertisers stay aware of when making emotionally charged appeals? To address these questions, I draw on three popular Indian advertising families — Amul butter advertisements, Cadbury Dairy Milk chocolates, and Hindustan Unilever Ltd.’s Surf Excel detergent ads — as emic examples of effective advertising campaigns that speak directly to Indian audiences through emotional appeal. Discussion of why these advertisements work and how these

advertising strategies can be implemented by other advertisers offers implications for brand advertisers hoping to connect more deeply with Indian consumers.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Effectiveness of Emotional Appeal Advertising: Research shows that emotional advertising campaigns are more effective than appeals to logic or fact for recall, persuasion, and behavioural intention, particularly for low involvement purchases and lifestyle products and brands (Dubey, 2024). By linking a brand to positive feelings beyond those associated with product consumption—joy, nostalgia, fear, security and belonging among many others—advertisers can access deeper patterns of consumer behaviour and emotion (Panchavarnam, 2024). Brain and eye-tracking studies provide neurophysiological evidence of emotional appeal effectiveness: one study measured viewers' EEG and eye-tracking data while watching non-profit ads with either positive or negative emotional valence. Results suggest that “emotionally positive” ads were associated with stronger generation of favourable attitudes, while “negative” appeals drove behavioural intentions to act more quickly, concluding that “the emotional tone used by advertisers should be determined by the intended persuasive outcome” (Sandoval & García-Madariaga, 2024).

2.2 Indian Cultural Context: India's diversity demands ads that speak to cultural nuance as well as emotion. The relevance of Indian festivals, family rituals, and cultural iconography is thought to engender advertising resonance—particularly for ads that appeal to emotion—in ways that cannot be replicated by merely positive or sentimental cues (Limbu & Mukherjee, 2024). Positive emotions embedded in culturally specific meaning has been found to resonate particularly well with millennial Indian consumers, who tend to highly identify with Indian tradition while also leading increasingly globalised and urban lives (Panchavarnam, 2024). There is consensus among researchers that successful emotional advertising in India can serve as an invitation to connect across the traditional-modern, rural-urban dichotomies that are emblematic of the nation's diversity.

Festivals like Diwali are considered opportunities in particular for advertisers to capitalise on positive emotional associations. As holidays when families gather together and exchange gifts, Indian festivals are frequently marked by advertising that ties iconic brands to the traditional rituals celebrating them (Panchavarnam, 2024).

2.3 Challenges Posed by Emotional Appeal Advertising: As powerful as emotional branding can be, care should be taken to avoid alienating audiences who respond negatively to perceived artificiality. The literature warns of a potential “emotional fatigue” that audiences can experience when the sentiment of ads outpaces their genuine emotional connection to the brand or product being advertised (Dubey, 2024). Consistency between the promised emotions and actual product experience is also thought to be crucial not only to purchase, but to long-term brand trust as well (Dubey, 2024). An advertisement such as Surf Excel's Diwali campaign must walk a tightrope between spreading positive festive messages and deeply connecting with Indian consumers on an emotional level that feels earned and authentic. This is especially true in a rapidly changing social landscape: as Indian consumers and society evolve, so too must the emotional rules that advertisers follow if they want to maintain positive brand associations.

2.4 Research Gap:

Where prior research focuses on South Asian advertising effectiveness overall, there are few studies that deeply explore how and why individual ads or ad campaigns succeed at triggering emotional responses over longer periods of time. Though many studies interviewed Indian

consumers or analysed ad content, few studies contextualised emotions like joy within the socio-cultural moments that produced them. Thematic analysis across multiple campaigns from different time periods could illuminate patterns of emotional appeal while offering micro readings of ads as part of a longer narrative. This paper aims to address this gap via qualitative analysis of three advertisements spread across two decades.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A cultural- brand perspective frames advertisements as texts that encode common cultural meanings, rather than transparent messages about product attributes. Three conceptual lenses animate this analysis. First, emotional register is the dominant feeling-tone cultivated by a campaign-nostalgia, pride, humour, tenderness, anger, moral superiority, etc.—which serves as a lens through which brand stories are told. Second, cultural anchoring is the mechanisms (festivals or holidays when ads appear, regional languages used, gendered or familial roles shown, ritual objects displayed) through which universal emotions are given local specificity and thus credibility with Indian audiences. Finally, narrative risk is the chance that the emotional resonance of an appeal- one that invokes identity, religion, or social status in particular will be interpreted differently by audience segments, sparking harmful polarisation rather than robust engagement with the brand story. Emotional register, cultural anchoring, and narrative risk therefore frame the discussion of each campaign, allowing them to be read not merely as “successful” or “failed” ads but as complex intersections of affect, culture, and risk-taking.

4. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES & METHODOLOGY

The study has mainly focused on the following objectives-

- To identify common emotional registers (nostalgia/ familial bonding/ moral righteousness/ generosity/ humor/ festival-based belonging) used by Indian advertisements today.
- To explore, through a qualitative case study of Amul, Cadbury Dairy Milk, and Surf Excel advertisements, how brands make their broad appeals specific using Indian festivals, traditions, and family dynamics as cultural anchors and storytelling devices.
- To critique emotional appeals, especially the limits that these types of advertisements have in culturally diverse markets connected by social media. Using the recent Tanishq Ekatvam advertisement as a case study, discuss how the same marketing strategy can be used to win customer loyalty and provoke public ire.

Qualitative interpretive case studies are well-suited to examine phenomena that are closely bound to social and contextual influences, such as emotional appeals. Qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis are the most frequently used methods to study culture in advertising: they allow scholars to interpret how campaigns communicate meaning beyond surface-level measurements like word frequency (Limbu & Mukherjee, 2024; Enago Academy, 2024).

The primary data for this project- public advertising campaigns, industry critique or “case” discussions of those campaigns, trade commentary, and corporate public relations about campaigns-were drawn from secondary sources. Data collection proceeded in three stages, once for each case. Implementation of pubs is a purposive sample of three widely discussed Indian-brand campaigns: Amul’s current affairs humour brand platform, Cadbury Dairy Milk’s holiday campaigns, and Hindustan Unilever’s Surf Excel “ Daag Achhe Hain ” campaign. Criteria for inclusion were 1) longevity (campaigns that had been run or discussed

for multiple years), 2) known inspiration in emotional or cultural appeals, and 3) availability of sufficient secondary discussion to allow triangulation. Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-step process for reflexive thematic analysis using an analytical approach tailored to thematic analysis of qualitative text (Braun & Clarke, 2024). In brief, campaigns were read multiple times to build immersion, after which initial codes related to emotional register and cultural anchors were noted. Codes were subsequently collated into themes, at which point data-supported discussion of each campaign proceeds below. Theme development was informed by a recursive process that allows thematic analysis and qualitative content analysis methods to be integrated (Alejandro & Zhao, 2024). Steps taken to establish trustworthiness of findings include source triangulation and acknowledgement of researcher positionality. Limitations: the use of publicly available secondary data means that this discussion should not be read as statistically generalizable but rather as an interpretive effort to build understanding.

5. CASE STUDIES

For this analysis, three distinct companies were selected, each representing a different product sector (dairy/ FMCG, chocolate, and detergent), but united by advertising strategies that lean heavily on emotional or culturally ingrained themes.

5.1 Amul – Nostalgia, humour and the “Taste of India” :

Arguably India's largest dairy company, Amul has been selling Indian consumers on more than just milk since it was established in 1946. Famous for its “Amul girl” billboard advertisements, which are changed daily to humorously comment on current events, Amul has built more than 50 years of Marketing on maintaining brand awareness while rooting itself in Indian culture and tradition. (IIDE, 2026) These ads rarely feature the packaging or use direct product-promotion language; instead, the brand sells nostalgia, nationalism, and family values, linking everyday activities like drinking milk in the morning with images from the consumer's childhood (Young Urban Project, 2026).

In particular, Amul has been praised for its continued brand consistency. This can be applied to both its humour and larger imagery. The core “Amul Girl” logo has remained unchanged for decades, with industry experts saying this allows consumers to trust the uniformity of quality across product lines, from butter to ice cream (Hypercontent, 2025). Additionally, within its national brand strategy, Amul creates regionalised flavours and advertising materials to cater to local tastes without sacrificing its broader emotional branding as a trustworthy, omnipresent part of Indian life (Young Urban Project, 2026; CompleteEra, 2026). Emotion-wise, Amul occupies a nostalgic yet participatory brand space: many of its advertisements, such as “Amul Doodh Peeta Hai India” (Translation: India Drinks Amul Milk) tie the brand into being a wholesome part of the Indian experience from childhood onward, tying product consumption to national strength and pride (MIT School of Distance Education, 2026). What makes Amul's famous “tatkaal” or topical humour different is its cost-effectiveness – the brand has maintained its strategy for under one per cent of its marketing budget year-on-year, relying instead on earned fame and customer familiarity to sustain its emotional appeal.

5.2 Cadbury Dairy Milk- Celebration, Sharing and Culture:

If Amul has built its national emotional resonance through nostalgia and humour, Cadbury Dairy Milk's advertising strategy has focused on inserting itself into Indian culture's celebratory practices. Cadbury Milk Milk began by attempting to drive sales by emphasizing flavor and texture; however, early campaign franchise “Kaqoom” faced consumer backlash

for implying Indian cuisine was too sweet for chocolate, and was rebranded to “Kuch Meetha Ho Jaaye” (Translation: Let’s Have Something Sweet), a campaign that positioned Dairy Milk as an anytime replacement for traditional Indian desserts during family celebrations (Marketing Monk, 2025). Dairy Milk advertisements depict scenes from everyday Indian life during which characters experience joy from having Chocolate: marriage celebrations, festival lights, new beginnings, and other culturally embedded contexts for sweets consumption.

This ubiquity was further evolved with the launch of Cadbury Dairy Milk’s “Shubh Aarambh” campaign in 2013, which aimed to position chocolate as a necessary prerequisite to beginning any auspicious activity in Indian life. The campaign featured scenes of parents encouraging their children to eat something sweet – specifically Cadbury Dairy Milk Chocolate – before embarking on journeys or celebrating new educational opportunities (Afaqs!, 2025).

Building on these relatable cultural scenarios, Cadbury launched a campaign in 2019 titled “Generosity”. Depicting scenes in which someone else’s achievement or joy is cause for the main character to break out a chocolate bar, Cadbury took to Instagram to promote sharing Dairy Milk with friends and family rather than solely indulging oneself. Campaign imagery, according to industry analysis, created a “feel-good factor” around the brand and was directly correlated with an increase in sales (Future Vision Computer Institute, 2025).

Examples of hyper-localised emotional marketing from Cadbury include commercials that specifically play into festivals celebrated primarily by one region (e.g., offering Pongal-related narratives to Tamil Nadu markets) or redeploy the “hero child” concept to regional traditions like Bhai Dooj in North India. (Young Urban Project, 2025) The brand has also leveraged India-wide celebration moments like student academic successes to drive connecting themes – whether a boy covering his sister back with a puddle so she does not miss school, or a mother feeding her daughter freshly-baked cookies before a board exam, Cadbury has positioned Dairy Milk as a rewarding complement to positive life events (International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts, 2024). When Cadbury faced a consumer trust issue in 2021 over contaminated packaging, its response strategy included leveraging popular comedy celebrities and maintaining these positive, emotional themes.

5.3 Surf Excel – “Daag Achhe Hain” and positive messaging:

Surf Excel laundry detergent represents one of the most successful transitions from traditionally functional-advertising product categories into emotional branding in India. Launched in 2005 with a campaign cheerfully titled “Daag Achhe Hain” (Translation: Stains Are Good), Surf Excel challenges consumers to rethink what they’re buying when they purchase detergent: instead of selling the avoidance of stains, Surf positioned its brand around the idea that parents purchase its detergent to let their children get dirty. (Chandan, 2025)

Clips from the campaign showcase children actively getting “good stains” from playing and exploring – scraping knees, covering uniforms in mud, painting faces – and reassure parents that while “those daags [stains] will be cleaned by Surf Excel”, the memories children make while getting them will stay with them forever (CliffsNotes, 2024). Effectively, Surf sold Indian consumers not on the purity of their wash but on the permission Surf gave their children to go outside and experience childhood.

While initially launched ahead of the summer festival season, when children are out of school and more likely to engage in messy outdoor activities, Surf Excel has come to particularly

associate “Daag Achhe Hain” with Holi, India’s festival of colours. In one popular deepfake example of the campaign, a young girl shields her Muslim friend by letting him stain her clothes with colour as he rides home to the mosque, earning applause from onlookers. The commercial closes with the tagline, “Agar kuch achha karne mein daag lag jaaye, toh daag achhe hain” (“If stains happen from doing good things, then the stains are good”). (Social Samosa, 2024).

Building on its existing emotional weight, Surf later incorporated older citizens into its messaging with an advertisement showing a boy dipping clothes onto a neighbour’s balcony to colour her without getting her dirty. (MarkHub24, 2026a) In both cases, and others since, Surf Excel has leveraged a single emotional concept – empowering children to be good humans by getting dirty – to apply its brand message to new social issues each year, from gender norm-breaking to religious harmony to elderly isolation (MarkHub24, 2026a; Adspyder, 2026). Industry experts describe these advertisements as “structured emotion”: component parts of human conflict, children overcoming it through acts of bravery, and stains to symbolise not misbehaviour but emotional decisions (Surf Excel Laundry Detergent, 2026).

6. DISCUSSION: CROSS-CASE INSIGHTS

6.1 Emotion registers: Five registers recur across our three central cases. Nostalgia grounds Amul’s consistent-with-age messaging and Cadbury’s invocation of childhood. Familial warmth or togetherness informs Cadbury’s festival campaigns and Surf Excel launches around siblings and parents washing their children’s clothes. Virtue and generosity characterise Surf Excel’s reframing of stains as joyful accidents and Cadbury’s “Generosity” platform series. Humour or playfulness allows Amul to remain relevant through current events without compromising its overall sense of warmth. Belonging through festivals, finally, recurs across Cadbury, Surf Excel, and Amul, suggesting that Indian festivals may serve as especially rich “emotional occasions” wherein brand storytelling overlaps with ritual and familial life. (Panchavarnam, 2024; Limbu & Mukherjee, 2024) Consumer surveys bear this out: majorities of Indian consumers report consistently higher expenditures during festive seasons year-over-year; indeed, recent research conducted during one of the nation’s biggest festive seasons found that despite high overall product demand, Indian families overwhelmingly value intimacy, warmth, and familial togetherness over public display (or brandsubsidized celebration) when choosing how to spend time and money with family—a callback to the emotional register developed by Cadbury and Surf Excel during festivals. (Afaqs!, 2024; Market Xcel, 2025) Advertising industry interviews find related evidence: the success stories of recent festive campaigns tend to be those that centre joy, family, and sharing within culturally resonant narratives, rather than leaning only on nostalgia or religious ritual. (Experience Commerce, 2025)

6.2 Cultural grounding matters: One of the central takeaways from our cross-case discussion is that emotional resonance is not enough; for an emotion to resonate, it must be culturally grounded in recognisably Indian traditions, festivals, foods, and so on. All three campaigns leverage festival timing; regional language; religious, familial, or gender roles specific to Indian culture; and ritual objects common to multiple Indian traditions, whether sweets, colours, or milk. This supports prior research surrounding brands’ localisation of advertising messaging in India and other emerging markets: emotionally resonant messages that lack local specificity do not earn Indian consumers’ trust. (Limbu & Mukherjee, 2024; Dubey, 2024) While Amul grounds its message in India’s national familiarity with its comic format and rumours of family argumentation around festival milk purchasing, and Cadbury and Surf Excel ground theirs in festival and familial gift-giving rituals respectively, each

brand treats these cultural details as foundational to constructing a trustworthy emotional message.

6.3 But emotional appeals are precarious: Our cases also suggest that successfully grounding emotion is no guarantee of endurance. Indeed, the branding literature warns that emotion-centred appeals which become too salesy, feel inauthentic to consumers, or otherwise fail to adapt to evolving contexts risk invoking “emotional fatigue” against the brand. (Dubey, 2024) What’s more, scholars conducting neurophysiological studies of advertising efficacy find that not only does the emotional valence of an appeal matter to how consumers receive it, but that specific emotions elicit different consumer responses. (Sandoval & García-Madariaga, 2024) While this article’s cases support the general principle that emotional appeals in Indian advertising needn’t shy away from positive emotion to build trust, the need to strategically match emotional appeal with communication objective suggests that “refreshing” an emotional message’s cultural particulars while maintaining its emotional continuity may be more effective than abrupt reinvention or unlimited repetition.

6.4 Permanence and recurrence: Finally, across our longest-running and most resonant cases, we see that emotional messaging tends to accrue rather than accrue value over time. Rather than radically reinventing their ad creatives each year, Amul frequently changes the headlines of its daily comic, Cadbury has sustained “Junno” and “Tasha” as lightweight icons of festival joy for over a decade, and Surf Excel continues to sell stain-commitment by invoking memories of parental bonding across multiple screen sizes and under multiple mascot designs. This supports previous research into advertising frequency in India, suggesting that Indian consumers may prefer repeated iterations on a brand’s emotional promise to inconsistent shifts in emotional positioning. (CliffsNotes, 2024; IIDE, 2026)

7. LIMITATIONS AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The study’s primary limitation is its scope: derived from qualitative insights across three publicly available cases. First, while each case was selected for the richness of publicly available commentary surrounding it, our analysis is limited to secondary source material and advertising texts themselves, rather than interviews with campaign viewers. Second, the cases were purposively selected to span India’s advertising landscape across advertisers’ size, market tenure, and campaign objective, but being high-profile, nationally televised campaigns, they may not represent brands that market solely regionally or in languages other than Hindi and English. This research could be deepened by future case studies of lesser-known brands that do not sell advertising space on national television. Third, like all interpretive qualitative research, the themes identified in this analysis represent the researcher’s reasoned judgement and are intended as informed perspectives on the available data rather than objective or complete descriptions of those data. (Braun & Clarke, 2024)

In ethical terms, this research likewise reiterates the duty of advertisers themselves toward their audiences: that brands whose selling narratives connect with audiences on emotional levels involving family, childhood, or shared cultural ritual have a responsibility to handle these topics with respect. The critique leveraged against Amul’s “Donate Milk” campaign parallels academic scepticism around manipulative affective persuasion.

CONCLUSION

In trying to understand how emotion sells in Indian advertising, this paper has taken a qualitative, case-based approach to studying Amul butter advertisements, Cadbury Dairy Milk Festive campaigns, and Surf Excel’s fabric cleansing ads. Three insights have risen to the fore. First, that advertising consumers in India respond to emotional messaging when it

reflects universal human emotions—nostalgia, familial love, generosity, humour, belonging—but is grounded in Indian culture through specific festivals, traditions, and family rituals. Second, this same necessity for cultural grounding makes emotional appeals unusually fragile, in that their credit with consumers must be maintained through continual adaptation and refinement if they are to avoid becoming stale, repetitive, or otherwise incongruous with consumers' lived realities. Finally, emotional appeals in Indian advertising may pay off over the long term, rather than requiring consistent reinvention from year to year. Of course, this paper has raised more questions than it answers. How do advertisers strike the right balance between consistency and novelty in emotionally resonant advertising? How do consumers perceive sponsored vs. earned cultural participation, such as Amul's contribution to public archives vs. Surf Excel sponsoring positive environmental narratives around colouring with fabric paint? How might these ideas translate to brands that market primarily in languages other than English or Hindi, or to consumers in states or regions with identities or practices distinct from national retail culture? Ultimately, the study of advertising in India and emotions' place within it would benefit from further primary research into how Indian consumers interpret these messages for themselves.

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