

# Telco-Ads: Double Fetishism and Commodification of Values

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**Abstract**— *Technology is a trend of postmodern culture and one of the instruments of this culture is media where a within weapon is advertisement. The study examines telecommunication advertisements of this age from a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspective with a view to exploring how the capitalist group uses advertisements to manipulate, exploit and influence their consumers to buy their product by 'commodifying' national and social values. A qualitative research was conducted, on telecommunication advertisements of Grameen Phone and Banglalink that are made based on nationalist, cultural, personal emotions of the country and of individuals, in five popular local television channels in Bangladesh. This study is guided by Marxist theory of 'Commodity Fetishism' to explore the underlying agenda of the projection of the advertisements. The findings of the study suggest that telecommunication advertisements of this era are using exceedingly heartrending incidents as the marketing policy to shape our ideology and belief to buy their products. Thus, commodification multiplies from product to values.*

**Keywords**— *appearance and totality, commodification, fetishism, false-consciousness, hegemony, ideology.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The word 'technology' is no longer a trend; rather it has become an inseparable as well as an essential part of our existence. This existence is shaped by technology, 'made' for technology and is ruled by technology. However, in this postmodern civilization one of the apparatus of cultural hegemony is media where a within weapon is advertisement. Here this paper excavates to understand the underlying politics of how telecommunication advertisements of this age get a fetish life to sell a fetish "commodity" by being a fetish character itself through 'commodifying' our beliefs and values. Parallely it also inquires the hypocritical discourse of media politics. Thus, Tele-communication advertisements, in real, are promoting consumerism under the mask of patriotism and other national, social even individual values.

According to Alan W. Watts, "*We seldom realize, for example that our most private thoughts and emotions are not actually our own. For we think in terms of languages and images which we did not invent, but which were given to us by our society*" (Watts, 2011) in other words culture is not what we do; rather it is an interpellation that is forced upon us by (the ruling class or bourgeois of) the society. Accordingly, anything and everything around us is a reflection of the interests of the ruling class, and is named

as 'culture' just to give 'us', the mass, a sense of inclusion. This pseudo sense of inclusion is created to dominate and oppress the interests of the proletariat class. To rephrase it, culture is a new form of slavery as we become the slave of our simulated creation; i.e. culture. This bourgeois culture is everywhere as we cannot deny its presence in our social, political or apolitical, economical life. We ensure our everyday existence by performing and obeying a set of culture. Therefore, it can be easily said that through study of culture one can submerge into a deeply ingrained existence of inequality in the society. However, technology has become a principal weapon to manifest this modern slavery of the postmodern culture where an in between assassin is advertisement. This essay inquires that how telecommunication companies are using television advertisements to sell their products by using our beliefs and values. In order to sell their products, the companies are 'thingifying' an abstract thing into a product; a product which gets exchange value to compete in the market. Nevertheless, this fetishistic behavior of the telco-ads is making us the 'subject of our subjugation'. In the entire essay reader will repeatedly encounter the terms: 'commodity', 'commodification', 'thingification', 'reification', 'appearance', 'totality', 'fetishism', as well as various CDA tools such as: fallacy, implicatures,

intensification, mitigation, and agenda are conscientiously used to analyze the central objective of the paper. Each of these terms and tools will be explicated and coupled to the core context of the paper.

### **1.1 Scenario**

Culture Industry often generates illusions of autonomy and reality. This paper intends to discover how contemporary Telco-ads promote consumerism under the mask of patriotism and other social values such as; family orientation, social gatherings, festivals, occasions etc. It is, therefore, important to explore how ideological concepts like nationalism or patriotism and different social values are misused and 'reified' by the culture industry to support the culture of consumerism. This paper foregrounds the politics inherent in any product of the culture industry. However, the politics is almost always dubious and ambivalent.

### **1.2 Objectives**

The objectives of the paper are (i) to study the current trend of Telco-ads with a view (ii) to explore if and how the values like nationalism, patriotism and other social values are getting fetish character through reification and (iii) to inquire if these fetish products are giving birth to another fetish product which apparently are promoting different values; which is meant for boosting up consumerism.

### **1.4 Significance of the Paper**

Advertisements have evolved themselves and have turned into skits and short stories or biography of certain social or motivational figures to grab the attention of the viewers. They are made in such a way which conceals the reality of the commodities. Culture industry is spreading in a mode that collective morality, emotions, different types of social issues are now "commodified" in order to sell the actual product. According to Marx, one thing becomes a commodity when it has got a use value along with an exchange value (Lawrence and Wishart, 2010). These abstract ideas such as morality and emotions are being 'commodified' in order to hide the actuality of their intention, and are rather used in fulfilling their agendas, i.e. money making for private corporation.

## **II. METHODOLOGY**

Qualitative and descriptive method has been used in this paper. The concern of this paper is to read the visual (the moving images that constitute a film) in the context of visuality (the discursive regime in which visuals are culturally constructed and consumed). In reading film visuals, such as television advertisements, this paper adopts one visual methodology: discourse analysis. To garner the

argument reached through discourse analysis, the project incorporates, various CDA tools such as fallacy, implicatures, intensification, mitigation, and agenda and a short non-participant observation of recent time Bangladeshi Telco-ads, especially advertisements by Grameen Phone and Banglalink (two of the renowned telecommunication companies in Bangladesh). The advertisements are critically dissected in the discussion chapter.

A number of theoretical frame works have been used to foreground the underlying politics of Telco-ads constructed by culture industry. The theoretical frame works include: Marx's idea of 'appearance' and 'totality' along with his theory of 'commodity fetishism', Hegel's idea of 'false-consciousness', Gramsci's idea of 'hegemony'.

## **III. DISCUSSION**

The idea 'appearance' may emerge as simple but it holds in a grander meaning within it. 'Appearance' means the concrete experience of the world. Things are essentially different from how they appear. It is always difficult to understand the actuality of something. Actuality or essence is always different from appearance. According to Marx, appearance always conceals the reality (Goldway, D. 1967). Through proper analysis we can reach to the bottom of the problem to sort out the actuality or the reality of the thing which has been 'commodified'. Physical commodity is not the actual thing rather it hides the essence and the actuality of the real character of that commodity. Appearance of a commodity is made in such a way which leads to mystify. However, through philosophical meditation it is possible to reveal the actuality of a commodity. To understand appearance we need to understand how commodity hides the real problem of 'commodification' as well as, how Capitalism helps to hide the reality of a commodity. Furthermore, 'Totality, on the other hand, is another term which refers the meta-narrative as well as the base structure of today's world, i.e. Capitalism. Looking into Hegel's time, it is seen that his major observation was on "Ontology" which means the philosophy of "self"; meaning construction of "self" and knowledge of "self". According to Hegel "the rational alone is real" (Hegel, 1831). However, Marx talked about content and form to understand totality. Content means the subject matter and structure means the narrative conjunction of the text. In philosophy as well as in the society, there are structures of experiences. Often these forms or structures are localized and are interconnected to each other, which create a massive form, a labyrinth of [f]orms. The general idea about this massive form is called

the “Totality”; a bigger structure which produces life and is similar in the entire globe, for example Capitalism is the “Totality” of today’s world. Telecommunication companies are the best example of the torch bearer of this ‘Totality’.

Now one may wonder how these are connected to this paper. In order to understand fetishism, appearance should be understood clearly. When a product is made fetish, it hides its actuality and becomes a strange thing. A fetish commodity has its own life and own language. In the electronic media the advertisements of this era are given this fetish character. These products have their own language and own life as these products create their own new world where this fetishism becomes a totality. As defined by Marx, ‘commodity fetishism’, it, is simply mistaking the “thing”—first of all commodity, and later all the other “things” of which capitalism consists (Goldway D., 1997). Moreover, when this commodity attains fetish character it starts spreading on the consumer of the commodity. Then it becomes a law or an ideology. It starts its journey by creating certain ideologies. Consumers start consuming the products by accepting the ideologies and thus, they become the slave of their own consumption or creation: become the subject of their subjugation. This ideology works as the way Althusser’s ISA (Ideological State Apparatus) works (Althusser, 1970). This implicit ideology is everywhere not only as a discourse for the consumers, it works but also as a ‘panopticon’ (Jeremy Bentham, 1700) -- constant surveillance – for the consumers of the products.

Marx says in his *The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret* that “A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing” (Fowkes, 1979, p.163). In other words, before taking the valuation process the commodity remains as an obvious thing. However, when the valuation process takes place, it goes out of the control of human being. It achieves a ‘mysterious’ character, and when a thing, which has its use value, is ‘thingified’, it becomes a fetish character. Through valuation process commodity attains fetish character. When a commodity attains fetish character it also attains metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. “So far as it is a use-value, there is nothing mysterious about it” (Fowkes, 1979, p.163) but when it gets an exchange value it attains its strange fetish character. Instead of human controlling commodity, commodity starts controlling human. When a product is ‘thingified’ the amount of labor cannot be equalized with its exchange value. When it is tried to be equalized with an exchange value it becomes mystified. According to Marx, when quantification creates the norm, it creates its own world. He says that the form of valuation

process is historically determined. The production and the ‘thingification’ of a commodity have done in such a way that it has to be co-opted in the capitalist world. For this estrangement, there occur many conflicts; conflicts between the forms of production, conflict between the labor and the amount of labor, and conflict among the fetish products in the market. It is, therefore, revealing the strange relationships between one commodity to another commodity as well as, between commodity and human being. Surprisingly this commodity fetishism determines the social relation of human being in a society.

In accordance to the above discussion, Telco-ads, which are made centering the idea of our local customs and values, can be analyzed from CDA perspective to identify the underlying meaning of the politics of corporation.

Considering few of the recent advertisements created by the Giants, Grameen Phone and Bnaglalink, it can be seen that their advertisements are made in such a way they conceal the actuality of their product. As for example, the advertisement named “Aunubhuti” by Banglalink, a baby girl is complaining about her close people to her dead mother by sending her mother a letter through balloons. It is a real sensitive advertisement; nevertheless, the intention of this advert gets clear when it reveals the real intention of this ad, i.e. to sell their talk time. The add advocates fallacy, as it is not creating a bond or connection between the departed mother and the saddened daughter, rather they are marketing their product. They are mitigating their hidden agenda, i.e. making money, by showcasing and intensifying the death of a dear one. That is rather a bizarre way of showcasing the product if we truly deconstruct it. However, people tend to buy their emotions through advertisements since these ads indirectly create a substantial impact on human emotions. Nevertheless, under this sensitive expression of the child what has been exposed is the brand name Banglalink. Through the physical [a]pppearance of a commodity, the total idea has been made mystified. While we are viewing these delicate matters in front of our eyes we forget to sort out the actuality of their ambition and become a target of their products. Indeed, these advertisements are successfully working as an instrument of capitalism.

Another marketing strategy was created by Banglalink through a series of festival oriented and wedding themed ads. These ads displayed the colorful culture of Bangladesh along with the rich tradition of weddings. They were termed as ‘Banglalink Desh’, the word ‘desh’ means ‘country’. In accordance to the name of their ad series, they made sure that the ads were appealing to the mass. They used catchy tunes, easy rhythmic words and well synchronized dance sequences, good looking male and

female models. They pulled out all the tricks from within their sleeves to turn this 'Banglalink Desh' series into a massive tool of exposure for Banglalink. That is exactly what happened, as people all around the country were humming their tunes, dancing on their choreographies and even ended up using them in real weddings. The entire package was dazzling and blinding. It was blinding to an extent that it did not seem like an ad of a telecommunication company, but rather a trailer of an upcoming family drama / movie. The viewers could barely connect it with the product. That is how through 'caricature' the reality was exaggerated and the reality of the product was concealed. Also, the entire process of making the ads and marketing the product is executed through a hidden agenda of selling their product by creating a doubly commodified identity of our emotions through merging it with value exchange.

A range of emotional, motivational and biographical advertisements have been made under the popular telecommunication company Banglalink. The ads promote a sense of hope and try to sell the audience the idea that change is possible if you put your unbreakable effort into it. The ads focused on portraying the life struggle of different entrepreneurs who started their career from nothing and through hard work and dedication they slowly but surely climbed up the ladder of success and how their sob stories turned into success stories. The examples of such ads are the ads made on, one of Bangladesh's biggest food chain owner, Fakruddin Baburchi from Fakruddin Foods Limited and Mr. Abul Kalam Azad from Azad Products. They both have a similar back story full of struggle, tragedies, odd jobs, shifting from rural areas to urban areas. They were showcasing the life stories of these two individuals but they associated their struggle and their success by connecting it with the product of Banglalink. They focused on the adamant nature of these two entrepreneurs and highlighted how Mr. Fakruddin and Mr. Azad changed their lives. The key word was 'change' and then the company added their tag line 'jekhanei din bodoler cheshta shekhanei Banglalink' (wherever there is a desire to bring change there is Banglalink). The company associated the promotion of their product with human struggle and determination. They did not sell or promote the products of the companies that the individuals own but rather they took the struggle of their lives and gave their product a human life. This is how a commodity gets a fetishistic transgression.

Also, there is a range of ads solely dedicated towards the dreadful and extensive war of independence of Bangladesh. Each and every individual of this country feels a great sense of emotion towards the liberation war and

regardless of their age, gender, race, and religion. The telecommunication companies target this vast emotion of patriotism to make ads, surrounding the heart wrenching stories of what life must have been like during the war. People could easily associate themselves with these ads because they can feel the catharsis from these spectacular representations. One ad specifically strikes the heart that is called "Babur Babuta Kemon Hoto?" (How would have the baby of Babu been like?). In the ad a sister describes how she lost her brother at a very young age as they were crossing the river during the war period, where a boatman asked for the young girl and women to crossover first. The moment they crossed the river the 'hanadar bahini' opposition attacked the men and young boys standing by the river bank. That was the last day she saw her father and younger brother. She imagines how her brother would have been like, he would have been 45 years old, how many babies would he have had, and how would they have looked like. The ad ends with these emotional questions and a voiceover appears saying 'the sacrifice of yours motivates us to move forward' and a writing appears on the screen saying "amra tomader bhulbona" (we will not forget you). Banglalink successfully attached their agenda of promoting their brand with the emotion stricken story and saddening sacrifices surrounding the liberation war. A similar type of ad was made 'Salam Bangladesh' based on the event of 16<sup>th</sup> December. The ad targets the same patriotic notion within the people, however, at the end promoting their brand and product at the expense of the emotion of people.

Now, let's take a look at the other known and popular telecommunication company of Bangladesh that is Grameen Phone. They must have gone into another path right? Well that is where the fascinating fact starts. They also took on a similar approach as their competing group. They also focused entirely on bagging in money, based on the expense of the mass emotion. They focused on similar subject matter centering around 1971. They have a mentionable number of advertisements where the focal point is 1971 and the patriotic sentiment of the people. One mentionable ad from this genre is "Prothom Bijoy Ullash" (First Victory Celebration) where they focused on "Enclaves" of Bangladesh who received their independence in 2015. People living in those areas got to celebrate their victory on 16<sup>th</sup> December, 2015. Grameen Phone partnered with a popular local TV channel 'Channel i' and streamed the celebration live all around the country. They promoted their brand throughout the program with their tag line "Cholo bohudur, Grameenphone" (Let's go far, Grameenphone). A noticeable element in the ad was the music used in the background. A tune of a very popular

patriotic song was used in the background of this advert. This tune itself invokes a sentimental essence in the ad and also in the hearts of the audience. A similar approach was taken while making another ad based on patriotism. This ad also grabs the attention of the audience with a very popular patriotic song. This ad centered around 21<sup>st</sup> February, which is the International Mother Language Day. A day every citizen of Bangladesh is proud of and connects themselves profoundly with it. The ad shows that everyone is singing or humming or playing one tune or one song about our country Bangladesh. Regardless of the race, gender, profession, place, everyone is singing the same song in the ad, and at the very end they bring in their tag line 'kachey thakun' (stay close). This concept creates a sense of togetherness and belongingness among the audience as they can relate to the concept. Through this intensification of national or patriotic sentiment they are targeting the entire mass. Also, they are mitigating their product in a subtle way so that the focus does not fall upon their product, rather to gain faith for their product. One more advertisement named "shobai diyechhe anek, aneke diyechhe shob"(everybody has sacrificed something, but many have sacrificed their everything). This is an advertisement, also made based on the situation of the war period of 1971. The advertisement highlighted the sacrifices we, the mass, make in our daily lives. We have sacrificed so many things for the sake of our country. So we can call ourselves patriotic. However there are some people who have sacrificed everything for the country. Through our minor sacrifices if we call ourselves 'patriot' then what should we call those who have selflessly sacrificed everything? Grameen Phone remembers those who are the real patriots. They are offering proper and the pure respect towards them. The idea they chose is brilliant. The concept they produce is heartwarming, nostalgic and factual. The question is not towards the idea or execution; rather the question is why? Why are these sensitive patriotic emotions used to promote as a medium of branding of their products? They came to this country with the intention to do business, not for arousing patriotism. Why are they observing social responsibility, where as there are lots of social institutions to look after these issues? In reality they are taking the advantage of the social emotion of the people of the country. 1971 is such an issue on which all the people of this country are equally emotional. Grameen Phone is taking advantage of this delicate and raw emotion of the people of this country. They are advertising their SIM card and talk-time under this false manifestation of patriotism.

One of their recent works includes an ad based on the isolated or quarantined life of the people. They show in the

advertisement that even though we are all captivated in our households and some are living alone in the city while their families are in their village homes, we are all connected. We are connected by heart and emotion and these emotions always find a way to reach our loved ones regardless of the devastating pandemic. The background song that they chose for this ad talks about how our dreams will go home. The repetitive line is "shopno jabey bari amar" (my dream will go home). At the very end of the ad they promote their 4G internet. That regardless of how far you are, even if you cannot physically go home, we can help you reach your loved ones with our fast 4G internet. That was the selling point of the advertisement. They intensified the isolation of people and mitigated their agenda, which is promoting and selling their internet packages.

There are plenty of TV-adverts which are made by the telco-groups on the different national occasion. They made advertisements on Pahela Baishakh, 21 February (The International Mother Language Day), 16 December (National Victory Day), 26 March (National Independence Day) Bangladesh Cricket Team, several ads on 1971 – Liberation War.

The multinational telecommunication companies like Banglalink and Grameen Phone are looking forward to do the best business in an under developed country like ours. They are hiding the reality of their ambition in front of us. We the ordinary people are kept under a false consciousness and gravitate towards their products. By wearing a pseudo mask of different social and personal emotion they are actually marketing their products. When they do it, the advertisements attain fetish character as it hides its reality and reveals something else which creates a conflict as it goes entirely against the aim of the product. Above all, the product itself turns into a fetish product as it has been made to gain capital in the "multinational capitalistic" world. Furthermore, these products start to compete with each other to prove them as the best in the market. The more they conceal the reality from the actuality the more they become successful. This is how a commodity based market creates its own world where they – the products communicate with themselves, contend with themselves but in a very strange and peculiar way. This commodity based fetish market transcendent itself to the new world of the fetish product, and gains its own metaphysical and theological footing. Yet again, these advertisements are working as ISA works. Althusser in his essay that "*Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*" says that "Ideology is a Representation of the Imaginary Relationship of Individual to their Real Conditions of Existence" (Althusser, 1971). He added that to run a state

the reproduction of the productive forces should be there. For reproducing these forces states use Ideology. The advertisements are maintaining a system which can touch the emotional compartment of the people of the country. They make the advertisements in such a manner which essentially compels us to consume the advertisements with open jaws and popping eyes, and let them dominate our minds along with our perception about the appearance of the product. We devour their ideology and help them gain more capital. We consume their products solely based on the emotional impact or engagement created by the advertisements the companies have made. As these multinational Telecommunication companies are selling mobile SIM cards and Talk-time, they fabricated it into fetish as soon as they put an exchange value on it. Alongside this, to attract the masses of the state, they craft their product more as a fetish by making the advertisements fetish, where the advertisements show respect for the emotions of the country, underneath they promote their products. As a result dual fetishism occurs where the deception becomes obvious. Thus, these created ideologies and nurturing shapes the life of general, believing in the false manifestation of truth.

On the other hand, once these fetish products, e.g. the advertisements, make the custom of the state they create their own territory. We are constantly being observed by the multinational companies and thus they are making their advertisements according to our needs. First they create a need or emptiness among us and they supply the object which satisfies our crafted need. Alike ‘panopticism’ they are successfully observing us through their gaze; the gaze of multinational capitalism. “To gaze implies more than to look at – it signifies a psychological relationship of power, in which the gazer is superior to the object of the gaze” (Schroeder, Jonathan 1998).

Now if we focus on the ambiguity that how are they making consumers of their product, we can see that, first of all, they are making their selling product fetish by giving it an exchange value. At the same time as one may wonder that how much money one should to pay for one minute to talk over phone? How would you fix the exchange value in terms of the services they are providing? As we are unable to identify that they are determining the exchange value in terms of the market. They analyze market and keep an eye on the competitors and their services. Side by side they constantly keep an eye over the consumers of their products. Their vigilant takes place for two purpose, first they must create a certain need to consume their services, and second they have to ensure the consumption of their services. Hence this constant surveillance is working as ‘panopticon’, and simultaneously making the product fetish

twice: first, when the companies come up with their services and second, when they bring it in the market in the course of advertisements.

### **3.1 Scenario**

The telecommunication companies are justifying the needs of the mass by pursuing the benefits of using their services. This manifestation creates a discourse which enables the mass to inquire, if they are purchasing the better services or not. To set instances, they create notion through advertisements about the use of their services. Thus, we become nothing but a simulation of their commands.

## **IV. FINDINGS**

This study shows that the current trends of Telco-ads are being ‘thingified’ in order to sell their products. Grameen Phone and Banglalink two of the largest and dominating telecommunication companies in Bangladesh are attaining fetish character of our collective values as well as good practices along with making their products fetish. However, by concealing the reality of their agenda, they are focusing on their presentation of the products to attract the mass people to ensure consumption. The manifestation of their products through advertisements they make the mass a part of their advertisements. Thus, the audiences sense an emotional bond to the Telco-companies’ projection. Thus, they are selling their product by making their product mystified. Though these Telco-companies are wearing a mask of serving the nation by committing themselves into social work by comprehending the sacrifices done by our freedom fighters or the hidden urge to talk to a departed mother – are nothing but the instrument to sell their products. Thus, these companies are becoming the fetish of our collective emotions. Moreover, these products are in a continuous competition with the other products in the market. Therefore, each company has to keep an eye on the consumer society. As a result, products achieve their own language to communicate. To this extent the Telco-companies are transacting with dual fetishism which seemingly displaying of different values and collective emotions but are meant for boosting up consumerism.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

They are providing their consumers free talk time by putting them under a false consciousness, where the consumers are paying money to get free talk-time and are using it by expending money. Thus these private companies are making money as well as power and are turning us into slaves. We recognize ourselves the way

they teach us to be recognized. We are being controlled by their fetishistic ideologies and constantly being observed by the multinational capitalistic gaze. They are providing us the opportunities to perform or to show respect to our collective emotions. However, in return they are compelling us to accept the presentation of the product as real and manipulating us to consume their goods. Hence, we are recognizing ourselves through misrecognition. They have synthesized the situation in such a persistent way that there is no way out of this mystified double fetishism.

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