

Ambiguity of Images: Visualizing Ethnic/Racial Differences in Indonesian TV Advertisements during the New Order and the Post-New Order Era

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Summary

Advertising imagery relating to ethnicity/race can provide significant cues to reveal the prevailing discourse about ethnic/racial relations in a society and, most importantly, about a perceived majority's assumption in relation to a perceived minority. This study is concerned with the ways in which TV advertisements construct discursive strategies to define and represent ethnic/racial differences in Indonesia. By means of social semiotics and narrative analysis, this study examines how Indonesian TV advertisements rendered overtones and undertones of the ethnic/racial differences existing in Indonesia during the New Order (particularly in the period from 1993 to 1999) and the Post-New Order era (particularly from 1999 to 2005). A close examination of the advertisements demonstrates that TV commercials have articulated and reproduced relations between the ethnic/racial majority and minority existing in the country. It has been revealed that Indonesian TV advertisements employ two kinds of discursive strategies to define and construct ethnic/racial differences in Indonesia, viz. the ambivalent function of cultural tradition and cultural appropriation by mainstreaming the minorities. In line with the shift in the socio-political climate in Indonesia and in the face of globalization, TV commercials tend to change their discursive strategies in visualizing ethnic/racial relationships in Indonesia.

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It has been argued that the mass media play a significant role in articulating, underpinning or subverting racism. Stuart Hall, for instance, asserts, "The media are not only a powerful source of ideas about race. They are also one place where these ideas [of race] are articulated, worked on, transformed and elaborated" (2000, p. 273). The media work to construct a certain definition and meaning of race through their imagery and narrative. They are inclined to highlight differences between ethnic/racial groups and by doing this may evoke prejudice either within or towards certain groups. Power relationships are actually involved between ethnic/racial groups even in entertainment programmes and advertising, which are areas that presumably do not have any explicit political agenda. Advertisements do not simply contain messages attempting to sell products, but, more than that, they