

DECODING THE VISUAL LANGUAGE: A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF YOUTUBE THUMBNAILS

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ABSTRACT

YouTube thumbnails are the small, clickable preliminary viewing images that viewers see before clicking on a video. This study examines YouTube thumbnails to identify the common signs and symbols present in these images. It aims to answer questions like what visual elements are frequently used in YouTube thumbnails to draw viewers in and how these elements differ across various types of content. It also discusses the cultural or social meanings these signs and symbols have. In this study, the researchers have explored how various elements, such as colours, images, text, and composition, are strategically employed in YouTube thumbnails to engage viewers. This study uncovers the underlying messages, ideologies, and persuasive techniques embedded in these visual representations by applying semiotic theory. The study used a qualitative approach focussing on thematic analysis to examine sixteen thumbnails collected randomly from different Pakistani YouTube channels. In thematic analysis, we identify and categorise recurring visual elements and symbols in thumbnails to find patterns and meanings. The data is analysed using a method that examines how different forms of communication, like words and pictures, work together. This method was created by Kress and Leeuwen (2006) and helps us understand how these elements work together to convey meaning. Different societal factors were considered, such as religious, cultural, and social, and how these aspects affect the viewer's overall perception so that the YouTuber might get more views. It has been found that thumbnails with bright colours and big text are more likely to grab the user's interest. This helps us understand which design features work best for getting more viewers and making content more noticeable. It helps us understand the purpose of thumbnails, which can make them more effective at attracting viewers. This research is highly beneficial for YouTubers who want to construct professional thumbnails because it may seduce a large audience. This study shows what's popular in YouTube thumbnails and which type of content grabs viewers' attention. Knowing these trends can help content creators make better thumbnails as trend changers.

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INTRODUCTION

A language is used to share information and express feelings, beliefs, and desires. Basically, visual language refers to the system of communication using visual elements, including signs, symbols, colours, shapes, layout, and composition, all of which combine to create meanings that are interpreted visually by

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an audience. A sign is a tangible entity that is deliberately made or interpreted that represents a concept, entity or an event (Sebeok 2001). Communication is the exchange of ideas. Signs and symbols are also used in communication, and the study of signs is called semiotics. An image is a kind of one-way communication because through an image people can convey the meanings. Semiotics explores how meaning is created and communicated through various sign systems. The Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) founded semiotics. The basic scope of semiotic is the creation of meaning and signification. There are two types of signs: one is linguistic signs, which are related to language, including words or sentences, and the other is extra-linguistic signs, which are not related to language, including images, gestures, or symbols. Therefore, extra-linguistic signs are different from linguistic signs. While studying these signs in semiotic analysis, we look at them as a whole. This means we consider all the different ways that can convey meaning (Wang 2020).

YouTube thumbnails are small, clickable images that viewers see before clicking on a YouTube video. Researchers have examined how symbols, colours, and images in YouTube thumbnails play a crucial role in attracting viewers and conveying meaning. Semiotics concerns everything that can be recognized as sign. This research is for the semiotics analysis of YouTube thumbnails, and the hidden meanings can be identified through signs and symbols. Semiotics is about understanding how we communicate and make sense of the world using all kinds of signs, not just through spoken or written language. (Thomson and Bock 2023). The use of symbols, colours, and texts in thumbnails can influence the audience's perception, engagement, and decision-making processes. Creators strategically design thumbnails to evoke emotions, convey information, and entice viewers to click on the video. Signs are the components in communication that can be decoded into meanings (Dweich and Al Ghabra 2020). Researchers have also investigated the relationship between thumbnail designs, click-through rates, and audience engagement, shedding light on the impact of visual elements on viewer behaviour.

Semiotics studies how we recognize and understand signs through a series of steps, considering their meaning in different contexts and interpreting what they mean. (Siddiqui, Abbasi et al. 2023). Overall, the semiotics analysis of YouTube thumbnails provides visual insight into the visual strategies employed by content creators to capture audience attention, communicate messages effectively, and enhance the overall viewing experience (Chowdhury and Varala 2023). In semiotic analysis, we look at how these simple visual patterns can carry multiple meanings and how different people might understand them in various ways. The semiotic analysis of YouTube thumbnails reveals an area of investigation for the complex language of visual communication on digital platforms. Medhurst and Desousa (1981) believe that in semiotic analysis, we study how these visual elements are carefully chosen and combined to convey powerful messages and persuade people in specific ways. It provides a multifaceted understanding of how YouTubers utilise the power of signs and symbols to fascinate their viewers (Sajid, Buzdar et al. 2019).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What semiotic strategies are being employed to create more effective and ethical thumbnails that enhance the user experience?
2. To what extent do cultural factors influence the semiotics of YouTube thumbnails?
3. How do misleading thumbnails affect viewers' trust and satisfaction over time?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To identify techniques for creating visually appealing and informative thumbnails that accurately represent video content.
2. To explore the impact of cultural context on the interpretation of semiotic elements in thumbnail.
3. To evaluate the effect of misleading thumbnails on viewers trust and fulfilment.

SIGNIFICANCE OF RESEARCH

This research can guide YouTube creators in developing more authentic and engaging thumbnails that accurately represent their content, thus improving the overall viewer experience and sustaining viewers' trust over time. This will also help them to acknowledge how people from different cultures adore thumbnails so that they can make thumbnails that appear appealing to most people from different cultures.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

YouTubers are earning a lot of revenue from their views, but sometimes videos with good content are overlooked just because they don't have eye-catching thumbnails. Similarly, videos with low-quality content gain viewers' attention because of their captivating thumbnails. This highlights the importance of creating captivating thumbnails; however, using misleading thumbnails can erode users' trust.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A social semiotic analysis of the YouTube channels of Barack Obama and Mitt Romney explains the study's investigation of how visual elements such as images, colours, layout, and design contribute to conveying political messages and shaping viewer perceptions (Trosky Jr 2013). He examines the types of broader functions that help to appeal to context, communication, and audience engagement. His research explores the in-between relation of visual communication, basically in political discourse and especially in digital media in contemporary election campaigns. Sabahat (2023) researched the ideological binaries in the documentary, which was made about Pakistan by the famous channel National Geographic. In the documentary, the primary organisational structure revolves around four key modes of expression: "expository, observational, interactive, and reflexive." This documentary is about constructing binaries about Pakistan. Only three cities Karachi, Lahore, and Hyderabad have been visited by the author, and he only shows the extreme sides of Pakistani society. Through analysis of the documentary using the Peircean semiotic model, the researcher has concluded that this documentary is not a real representation of Pakistan; in fact, it is promoting only negative things about Pakistan (Parveen, Jahanzaib et al. 2023). Furthermore, another study looked into how women are objectified in Pakistani advertising. Gender advertisement refers to marketing visuals in ads that portray traditional gender roles (Jha, Raj et al. 2017). Semiotic analysis was used as a research tool to discover how multiple meanings and convictions are made in a society by advertising sex. Different advertisements from TV channels and newspapers were selected to explore how they use models due to their attention-grabbing nature because they sometimes evoke certain emotions and desires in the audience. The findings of the research revealed that advertisements in Pakistan focus on the physical beauty and illustration of women's bodies for the target audience (Ahmed, Tariq et al. 2019).

The semiotic study of cover pages for Pakistani dramas was the subject of additional investigation. The purpose of this research was to extract the hidden meanings from the cover pages of Pakistani dramas

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through semiotic analysis and to impact major aspects of society through semiotic analysis as well. In this research, six cover pages of Pakistani drama were selected, and the size, colour, facial expressions, and background of these cover pages were thoroughly analysed. After analysis, it is proven that there are many hidden meanings in a single cover page that are conveyed to the audience through signs and symbols. This research revealed that semiotic analysis helps the audience understand the hidden meanings of cover pages, and it also helps to know what the theme of the drama is (Arslan, Fatima et al. 2023).

In another research, the author did a semiotic analysis of cigarettes. To advocate for theory, the writer has used some expert theories, using Bouzid (2004) and May (2013). The writer did an in-depth analysis of the semiotic signs on a cigarette pack. The outcomes of the study showed that the symbols on a cigarette packet effectively conveyed the message that it is contagious for smokers, but they were not impactful enough to stop them from smoking as they were already addicted. This analysis concluded that the visual images on the pack of cigarettes are messages for the smokers to show their negative impact (Prasojowati, Natsir et al. 2018).

Kristeva opines that every speech act delivers a message but may be done through the language of words, posture, gesture, clothing, or any other means in a social context (Derrida 2000). In an analysis, advertisement is considered successful when it can attract audiences to engage in understanding the message conveyed. This research uses Pierce's semiotic theory, which includes the mechanisms of signs, objects, and interpretants, and is carried out using a qualitative descriptive approach. Semiotics are derived from the Greek words "semion", meaning "sign," and "seme", meaning the "interpretation of the sign". In this study, every sign contains different meanings, both in the form of language, images, goods, colours, and others that can be studied with semiotics. Based on the semiotics analysis of these two ads, which contain gender bias, the social codes in both ads describe the reality that exists in the community and are used as a reference element of advertising (Putri and Undiana 2022).

Elisabetta Adami examines the continuous and changing nature of YouTube, focusing on the impact of digital technology and social media on semiotic processes. She explores the in-between relationship between producer and consumer, considering their engagement in the online environment through likes, shares, comments, etc. She enlightens us on the transformation of digital platforms and their way of communicating through the use of different techniques of persuasion (Adami 2009). By analysing the semiotic strategies employed by YouTubers and their audiences, she explains the complex interplay between text, image, sound, and user interaction in shaping contemporary modes of expression and discourse. Overall, she describes the value of the interaction of a digital platform like YouTube through the changing perception and adaptation of its users. We live in a world full of signs, and we have no other method of understanding anything than through signs and the codes into which they are structured (Sagheer, Malik et al. 2023).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The random sampling technique was used to select the sample for this qualitative descriptive research. Two categories of YouTube thumbnails were selected for the sample of the research. The first is attractive thumbnails, and the second is misleading thumbnails. The YouTube thumbnails were analysed to understand the multiple hidden meanings and the techniques for creating visually appealing and

informative thumbnails that accurately represent the video content. A semiotic analysis was conducted for this purpose, and the model of multimodality designed by Kress and Leeuwen (2006) was used as the framework for the analysis. Each and every aspect of the thumbnails was investigated. The images, scheme of colours, text, symbols, backgrounds, characters, size, facial expressions, gestures, and dresses in the thumbnails were analysed to understand their multiple meanings (Zhao 2023).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Kress and Leeuwen (2006) presented a model of multimodality in which they described different dimensions of the analysis of design. It was highlighted how visuals can be analysed from different perspectives (Agustian, Syamsiah et al. 2023).

They stated the three dimensions of analysis:

- Representational meanings
 - Interactive meanings
 - Compositional meanings
1. The first approach to defining a thumbnail is from a representational perspective, where images are scrutinised to explore elements representing various aspects of life. This examination helps in understanding the type of representation being portrayed. Researchers delve into the symbolic meanings of these elements. Signs and symbols are analysed to grasp the significance attributed to specific items within the thumbnail.
 2. The second perspective involves interpreting meanings from different angles, covering the relationships between these elements. This analysis highlights all the present elements and their impact on the audience.
 3. The third perspective is from a compositional viewpoint, making it easier to comprehend how elements are arranged. Considerations such as colour schemes and object sizes are emphasised to underscore their importance in conveying the overall meaning. Thus, the composition of all elements is analysed from a compositional perspective.

DATA ANALYSIS

Attractive Thumbnails



Fig. 1

By semiotic analysis of the thumbnail, we can effortlessly find the content of the video without witnessing it. In this thumbnail, if you observe the primary picture, a girl is displaying a straightener. It is made bigger in aspect ratio so that all of the focus should be confined to it. It is evident that half of her hair is straightened and half of it is curled, which demonstrates that you can use it as a multi-purpose iron and the results will be satisfactory. The smile on her face represents that she is satisfied with the product, which is a good approach to make the thumbnail more captivating and engage the viewers. However, if we discuss her white and sophisticated dress and light makeup, they both create a sense of positive influence among the viewers. The five stars in the top right corner are demonstrating that the device rating is also appreciable, and she also used a red colour in the thumbnail to make it more appealing for the users. If you observe her hands, you could witness that in one hand she is holding a straightener, and with the other one, she is making a symbol, which demonstrates that the results of the product are highly appreciable; therefore, it makes the thumbnail more irresistible for the viewers, which compels them to click on it. Moreover, she also displayed two demo pictures, one of fully curled hair and the other of fully straight hair, which represents the versatility of the product and can make it trustworthy. Meanwhile, she also expressed her feelings with the word "wow," which is written in a cutting with a pink background to make it more tempting, showcasing that pink is for girls. The background of the thumbnail is mostly in light colours, so all of the focus should be confined to her hair, yet her overall body language shows viewers that the product is worth buying, which attracts them. In addition to this, she wrote the word "best" in such a stylish way that the size of the alphabets is increasing in an order that greatly influences the viewers, and she uses the red colour to make it more prominent, and for the straightener, she uses the black colour. Moreover, on the top, she wrote straightener + curler, so that the audience will have an idea of its adaptability at first glance, and eventually they will click on the thumbnail to get the specs of the product.



Fig. 2

This is another analysis of the thumbnail that is from the channel "Reality Stories." We can immediately identify that it is something related to the balloons and a man. The title in the image leads to a combination of three colours, including red, black, and blue. First of all, the YouTuber has used red to highlight the important words that appear to be larger in size, such as Japan, balloons, or the sky, or to highlight the fact that it is a strange story for the viewers. Then black and blue for sentence completion; the blue ones are slightly smaller than the red ones, so apparently they are used as a second priority, and the black ones are mainly smaller than the blue ones, which are used for compiling the title. However, they are used against a white background, so they appear to be more distinguished. It's the audience's psychology that

red colour appears to be more attractive because it represents emotions and excitement, on the other hand blue and black colours are more like formals and are not that attractive in the human eye. In contrast, the YouTuber has used a bright yellow colour so that the title appears to be more catchy, and therefore, these colours show the main importance of the relevant title, so the viewer has the main idea of the video just by glancing at the thumbnail, and they will eventually click on the thumbnail to know the story. The editor includes an image of a man to develop trust and convince the audience that it is a real story. The arrow represents a type of strategy through which most people attract and mainly focus on that part of the thumbnail, as shown with the highlighting and bright colour yellow. If we look through the thumbnail, we can see the representation of the language "Urdu" as a title that welcomes the Pakistani audience, as the Pakistani audience is attracted to these kinds of shocking titles, which develops more interest in the opening video. Overall, this ad shows the interest of the public these days. The audience's approach to the things that are far from reality and hard to believe.



Fig. 3

By observing this thumbnail, we can find out that the famous Pakistani YouTuber "Iqra Kanwal" has stuck outside her house with her husband, "Areeb Pervaiz." In this thumbnail, we can see that there are three pictures, of which one is comparatively smaller than the others. In the right picture, the girl is shown holding the gate of her house from outside with her one hand, and her other hand is on her head, which is showing her in a very distressed state, and her facial expressions are also very disturbing. From her body language, it is clear that the gate of their house is locked, and they do not have its keys. It might be possible that she and her husband have forgotten to keep their house keys with them, and now they are facing a lot of difficulties. Then, in the next picture, her husband is shown sleeping on the car's seat, from which it is clear that they must have slept in the car. Moreover, the other thing we can see from the car window is the night sky, which demonstrates that they have spent much time outside their house, which is increasing people's curiosity. In the last small picture, the boy is trying to jump over the gate in order to escape from this trouble by himself opening the gate, but near it, the phrase "got stuck" is written in white with a black outline with a crying emoji and an arrow, which is actually grabbing people's attention and creating confusion. The arrow in red between the phrase and the small picture is creating a relationship. The phrase says that they are being stuck and the picture is showing that the boy is trying to jump the gate and it is not clear by the phrase neither from the picture if they succeeded or not and this approach is creating the suspense for the audience to see the final outcome. Finally, we can infer that when he tries to jump the

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gate, either he will not be able to do so or if he jumps the gate and opens it, then the inner gate will be closed. Because of this, they will get stuck, which makes this thumbnail interesting enough. The last thing is that this video was uploaded during Ramadan, so it is also very unexpected for the viewers as to whether they will be able to do the Sehri or not. This thumbnail is very attractive, as it greatly convinces the viewers to click on it and lessens their curiosity by watching what will happen next.



Fig. 4

In this thumbnail, we can effortlessly witness that there are two pictures: the first one is before using the foundation, and the second one is after using the foundation. The main purpose of the girl is to show people how you can avoid cakey foundation and make it flawless, yet you can distinctly discover the purpose of the video just by looking at the thumbnail, and if you witness the first picture, you could evidently perceive that her face in the picture is very dull as compared to the second picture, in which her features are enhanced and her face is more glowing. However, if you compare them and keenly observe, you will witness that in the first picture, she has very light makeup coverage with poor results and cakey foundation, but her second picture appears to be more alluring with her flawless makeup, well-prepared hairstyle, and fascinating jewellery to make the results more enticing. This technique is often used in promotions and advertisements of makeup products to highlight the perks of the product, which may captivate the viewers. In the bottom, she displayed a thumbnail of foundation so that the viewers will eventually acknowledge that in this video she is informing about hacks of using foundation. Moreover, if you compare the backgrounds, the theme in the first picture appears to be very repulsive, yet if you observe the second picture, the background appears to be very lustrous with a brighter theme, which may engage the viewers, and if you observe the bottom of the thumbnail, she has written the purpose of the video in black colour, which can make the text more prominent, giving it a more professional appearance so that all the focus of the viewers would be confined towards the main objective of the video. However, she also displayed an arrow with a red colour between the before vs. after pictures so that the viewers

would acknowledge the modifications in their faces after following her steps, and they would eventually click on the thumbnail to watch the video.



Fig. 5

By analysing this thumbnail, it can be clearly observed that the famous YouTuber “Kainat Faisal” is doing something with her hair. If we analyse the thumbnail semiotically, there are many elements that describe the actual content of this video. The picture on the right side of the thumbnail shows a mannequin, and someone is cutting its hair which is showing the procedure of cutting very clearly, moreover the setting of hair is in such a way that it is understandable easily. Then, if we look at the picture in the middle, we can see that the YouTuber herself is cutting her hair in the same way as the mannequin. There is an outline of this picture as well, which makes the viewers click on the video as it builds their trust that the YouTuber is cutting her own hair, so it will be real. The last picture on the left side of the thumbnail features a YouTuber, in which she looks satisfied, and her hair also looks good. She is wearing a white outfit, and her makeup is so natural that the overall appearance of the thumbnail creates a positive impact on the viewers. The other elements include the text used in the thumbnail. The three main words used here are “TikTok, viral, and haircut,” which describes the theme of this video. It is about a viral TikTok haircut trend. Moreover, on the left side, the word “wow” is written in blue, and the hearts around it show that this hack is real and useful. This thumbnail is very attractive as it is convincing enough for the viewers to click on it, and TikTok trends are very popular among the young generation, so this also makes this thumbnail appealing.



Fig. 6

In this thumbnail, the creator has written "people during Ramadan" in a horizontal strip at the top, which makes it clear that this thumbnail and video are related to Ramadan. After that, the creator has placed a mosque image to give a Ramadan vibe in the background, which makes the thumbnail look more fascinating and attractive. This thumbnail shows a difference between the 90's on one side and now on the other side, in which the maker has taken four people on both sides. The 90's side is shown in black and white with a mother, a father, an elder brother wearing a hat, and a younger brother holding a bat. Comparatively, the maker has shown the people of today to be colourful. In which there is a mother and a father, and from the expression of the mother, it seems that she is very serious. Besides this, there is a brother who is seen smoking, which may indicate that the purity of Ramadan has decreased, and a sister who is seen carrying a jug of Jam-e-sheeren and a plate of samosas. In this thumbnail, the most amusing aspect is that males are portraying females. On the left, a male wear a skin-coloured shawl to mimic a female, retaining his beard and masculine facial features. On the right, two males did female roles with different shawl colours, maintaining their masculine features and creating a humorous element in the thumbnail. Through semiotic analysis, the researcher highlights another point: the male wearing the green shawl on the right side appears slenderer, resembling a daughter in the video, while the slightly chubby second man portrays the role of a mother. It also has 90's vs. Now written on the V-shaped red colour strip at the bottom. Moreover, from the facial expressions of the 90's people in this thumbnail, it is clear that they have patience, tolerance, good morals, and treat people well. While the people of now are showing that anger issues, hatred in their hearts and bad habits like smoking are common in them by their expressions. This is getting viewer's attention because these things are very relatable in society these days. Furthermore, the combination of light and dark colours makes the thumbnail more attractive and interesting.



Fig. 7

By performing the semiotic analysis of this thumbnail, we can see that there are some words written in Urdu, and the picture of the famous personality "Sahil Adeem" is also presented. In this thumbnail, mainly black and yellow colour contrast is represented, and it can also be seen that "Sahil Adeem" is sitting on the sofa, which is also yellow in colour. There is a section on "how to choose the right person for marriage," in which "the selection of the right person" is written in yellow with a black background to

make it more prominent and attractive. The thumbnail is written in Urdu so that a large Pakistani audience could be engaged, even if somebody is not that educated. They can easily understand the context of the thumbnail. The background of the picture is also fascinating, which introduces a sense of purity and calmness. The thumbnail is very alluring to the youth, especially as marriage is a concerning matter for the young people because it is a basic need for living a life and this topic is also very excitement related for the youth. They need proper guidance about this. Furthermore, males and females both need to know about this matter to authenticate the person who is coming into his or her life. Moreover, a young scholar with a good personality, wearing western dress representing the broadness of Islam, is describing the issue. He has long hair reaching his neck, which demonstrates the Sunnah. He is a critical thinker and an experienced person, so people are attracted to this thumbnail to know his sayings on this matter, and he looks so comfortable sitting in an elegant manner, which is an assurance that all his sayings will be authentic and catch the attention of viewers.



Fig. 8

In this semiotics analysis, it is evident that the thumbnail is highly attractive, which is why the video has garnered millions of views. The thumbnail showcases a creator experimenting with 10 different hairstyles, making it particularly appealing because many people prefer content that offers detailed information. The focus in this thumbnail is primarily on the girl trying out hairstyles, which is a predominant aspect of enhancing one's personality. In the upper left corner of the thumbnail, there is a twist with a braid in one hairstyle, followed by the use of two white clips with open hair in the next image. In the third image, the girl has opted for a short hairstyle while leaving the remaining hair open. In the fourth image, she has tied a band and made a side braid, leaving two side sections of hair open. Looking at the lower left side image, she has created a short ponytail with the front hair section and, along with it, a bun at the back. In the eighth image, she has styled the front section and left the hair open. In the second last image, she has made a side section braid while leaving the hair open, and in the last image, she has incorporated a side twist with a braid. These hairstyles appear very elegant and decent, making it easy for viewers to recreate them after watching the video. The uniform size of all the images contributes to the catchy nature of the thumbnail because all these pictures have different hairstyles, and they all are of the same importance and are equally beautiful, and the girl appears very confident in all the hairstyles, as reflected in her pose. She is wearing a light pink kurta, a brown watch on her right hand, and a golden necklace around her neck, enhancing her overall appearance. The light pinkish makeup complements her beauty, and the white

background of all the images adds to the attractiveness of the thumbnail. These factors collectively make the thumbnail appealing.

Misleading Thumbnails



Fig. 9

In this semiotic analysis of the thumbnail, the researchers can readily find out that this is a deceptive thumbnail. First of all, if you analyse the title, the YouTuber has accentuated it with bright colours, i.e., black and red, with enormous words to make it even more prominent, and has highlighted the headline with a yellow strip to gain the consideration of the viewers. Moreover, the thumbnail contains three pictures, two of which are fake and the third authentic. The first one shows the fight between the umpire and the bowler, which is not standard because this act can ruin the player's whole cricket career. The YouTuber edited the images of Umpire and Bowler and manipulated them in such a way that it looks like Bowler is holding Umpire's shirt and is about to hit him. He also wrote the word "fight" on the top of this image, suggesting an imminent altercation between the two. The second picture shows the fight between an Indian bowler and a Pakistani batsman. It is also a manipulated picture, and they are creating an atmosphere that they are about to start a fight. They have used pictures of famous players from Pakistan and India to show rivalry between them because there is already a lot of controversy going on between these two countries. The third picture is between the players of Pakistan and Afghanistan, who are seen to be about to start a fight in reality in a match because these two countries are rivals due to some political reasons. Although it is a real picture, it looks like there will be a severe fight between them, but there was nothing like that. All the four persons in the first 2 pictures are individually real but they are blended in such a way through photoshop that they are giving a different interpretation. The reason is that viewers are always intrigued to know whether a fight is possible or not in such a professional environment between players because these players are role models for many people and their fans always try to know everything about their lives. However, if you observe the background, you may witness that it is green in colour in all pictures, which suggests that the fight is during the game, which makes it even more tempting for users to click on it. Therefore, YouTubers made these alluring thumbnails to fascinate a large audience nationally and internationally, and due to this, people with a lack of wisdom will ultimately click on the thumbnail to know the truth because they believe in instant information and gratification. When they see that the content of the video mismatches with the thumbnail, it leads to viewers' dissatisfaction, which deteriorates their relationship with the content creators.

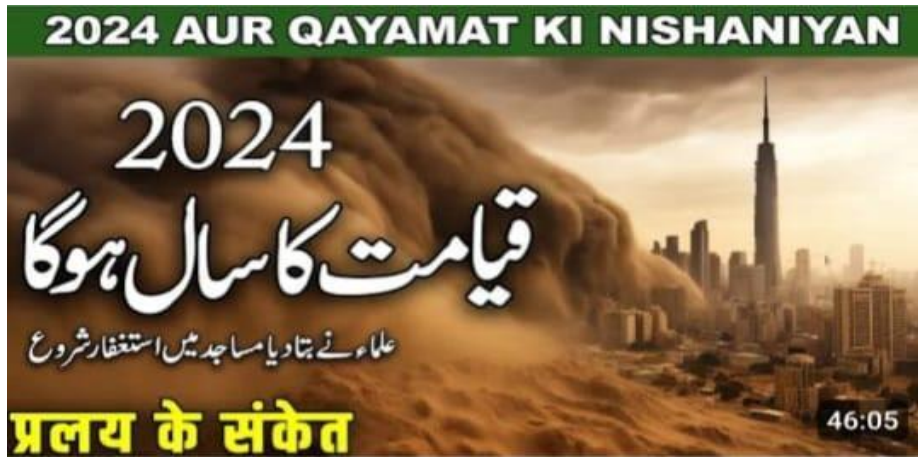


Fig. 10

This thumbnail was created by the channel named "Noor Islamic." Through the analysis of this thumbnail, we can clearly see that the editor uses an image that is breath-taking and creates a sense of eagerness about what is happening. From the Islamic point of view, we can see buildings in the picture, which is also a sign of doomsday as the editor plays with the emotions of the public and tricks their minds. In this thumbnail, the YouTuber has deluded the audience by giving the title "Signs of Qayamah in 2024, which is according to Muslim beliefs, so obviously he is misdirecting the Muslim audience. First of all, he bolded the main headline in white against a green strip so that it appears to be more illustrious; however, if you focus on the main title, which appears to be bigger in size and bolded with white, it declares that 2024 will be the final year of Qayamah. This label is made bigger in size so that it appears to be more significant, and therefore viewers will perceive it at first glance. Besides, it is inscribed in Urdu to target the Muslim audience. Moreover, just below the main title, there is a statement that appears to be somewhat smaller than the main title; it focuses on the fact that scholars have confirmed this disclosure. In Muslim beliefs, Islamic scholars have immense importance, and when they validate something regarding Muslim beliefs, it appears to be more authentic and trustworthy for Muslims. So, YouTuber has deceived the Muslim audience by giving such a statement, and if you observe the background, you will witness that a huge storm is covering huge buildings and they are demolishing, which is one of the biggest signs of Qayamah, that everything will be devastated until there is no more life on earth. Moreover, the YouTuber has also mentioned the title in Hindi words to target the Muslims living in Hindu culture, mainly in India, so the overall look of the title creates a sense of fear and eagerness in the Muslim audience because the doomsday is one of the most important days in Muslim which is said to be very long and hot and on that day humans will be held accountable for their doings in this world. The one whose sins will be higher than his good deeds, will get punishment from God. So, to know the reality the viewers will eventually click on the thumbnail.



Fig. 11

By performing the semiotic analysis of this thumbnail, we can easily find out that the YouTuber is deceiving the viewers by showing the manipulated pictures and fake dialogues of famous Pakistani actress "Hania Amir" and cricketer "Babar Azam." In this thumbnail, the first thing that grabs the attention of people is the headline in black, on which it is written that Hania Amir said that she loves and wants to marry Babar Azam, which is written in yellow and white to make these words prominent. Moreover, we can see that three large pictures and four small pictures of them are used to mislead the viewers about their relationship. The YouTuber is trying to attract the viewers' attention to its content by showing that they are in a close relationship and are going to be married soon. In the middle, the manipulated picture is shown in which they are sitting together on a car, which is not taken in reality and is completely fake. Then, the first picture is taken from the show, in which she answers a question about whether Babar Azam is cuter than her, and then there's also a small picture of him at the bottom. Similarly, the third picture is taken from the show in which Babar Azam replies to a question that he would like to work with Hania Amir, and then there's also a small picture of her at the bottom. The aim of adding these pictures along with their dialogues, as they separately said in the show, was to grab the viewers' attention because both have talked about each other in different shows. So, everyone was confused about their relationship, which the YouTuber has taken advantage of. Then a white box is added at the bottom of the thumbnail, in which it is written that "a new bond between Hania Amir and Babar Azam" greatly influences the people. Furthermore, the creator has represented fake dialogues in black colour writing that appears in a yellow dialogue box, which shows that they are confessing openly about their love. The reason to use these colours is that black and yellow colours create a sense of something unusual like warnings and yellow is the most prominent colour and is so attention grabbing that the viewers will definitely click on the video to know the truth. Moreover, two small pictures are shown on the top in which they are in wedding dresses, which cause concern among people, and some viewers with a lack of wisdom ultimately click on such misleading videos, which causes an increase in deceptive YouTubers' views.



Fig. 12

Through the semiotic analysis of the thumbnail, viewers can easily recognise that it is a deceptive thumbnail. In this thumbnail, the YouTuber has given the concept of strawberries being a prohibited fruit in Islam; he also displayed the headline in a red strip to engage the viewers. Youtubers often use this strategy because the red colour is more prominent, especially against a white background, due to its attention-grabbing nature. However, the YouTuber has written the main title in green with a red

background to make it more eminent because red and green are completely opposite colours in the colour palette and they make a really good contrast with each other to grab the attention of the viewers. Moreover, red and green both colours are present in the strawberry and the creator is also talking about the same thing, so these colours are playing a very effective role in the creativity of thumbnail, and just below the headline, the YouTuber displayed words in green and red to make it more distinguished. He also displayed three pictures, two of which are of strawberries, and in the third one, there is a man with his hands raised around his face, eyes wide, and his mouth open. His facial expressions are exhibiting that he is surprised, yet his overall body language and facial gestures are demonstrating that he is in a state of great surprise and astonishment due to this news. Moreover, the background in the picture is very light to show the prominence of his facial expressions, and in the other two pictures, the background is also in very light colours and is not very focused because the main focus is on the strawberry, and viewers will simply click the thumbnail because they are fascinated by such news. By observing this thumbnail, some viewers with a lack of wisdom may click on it due to its intriguing features, but this is obviously an illusory thumbnail because there is no evidence of this news, and the YouTuber has made such a context to mislead the viewers so that they will consequently click the thumbnail to know its authenticity, and Youtubers will ultimately get more views.



Fig. 13

By analysing this thumbnail, the first thing that grabs the attention of the viewers is the headline of this video, in which it is said that famous Pakistani singer “Shazia Manzoor” gets angry and slaps someone. It is written in Urdu, which could be a trick used by the creator so that people from all backgrounds in Pakistan get attracted to it and click on it. Moreover, two different colours are used in this headline. The words “Shazia Manzoor” and “slap” are written in bright yellow so that they look prominent and catchy. If we carefully examine the three pictures used in this thumbnail, we can see that Shazia Manzoor is aggravating the comedian “Shahri Nana” during the TV show “Public Demand,” hosted by “Mohsin Abbas Haider.” In the first picture, there is a dotted red circle around both of them, and it seems like Shahri Nana has said something wrong to the singer, and she is getting frustrated with him. In the second one, the host is also shouting and saying something. The last picture shows that maybe the comedian has left the show and the host and the other comedian are calming her down, as a red arrow symbol has been used facing towards the singer. This thumbnail is actually quite misleading, as the whole situation was a prank, and both the singer, the comedian, and even the host were part of this act. Such thumbnails show how a thumbnail can mislead people by just being created in such a way that it seems to be real. By using bright colours, symbols, and intriguing pictures, one can easily create a misleading thumbnail. The purpose of such thumbnails is to deceive the viewers and earn more money by fooling people and breaking their trust.



Fig. 14

In this thumbnail, the creator has written a line in the form of a headline in Urdu wording in a strip of blue, and in this line, it has been written that I will not play under the captaincy of Babar Azam, a dangerous fight between Shaheen Shah Afridi and Babar Azam. From this, the reader will think that Shaheen Shah Afridi is very angry, and Babar Azam must have treated Shaheen very badly, due to which Shaheen has spoken like this. And because he is a sports enthusiast, he must watch this video. Apart from this, Shaheen Shah Afridi is shown on one side, where Shaheen's facial expressions make people feel that he is very angry. And the way Babar Azam is a useless captain is written in the red strip with a yellow arrow, angering the players. With this, the maker wants to prove that Shaheen has said so, while in reality there is nothing like that, and the maker is misleading people. And on the other hand, by placing a red arrow towards Babar and making a circle in dotted form around him, it is shown that he is angry with the players. While the fact is that Pakistan's players did not perform well in the Asia Cup match, Babar Azam was talking to all the players in the dressing room after the match, and he was saying that I did not like the performance of you guys, on which Shaheen Shah Afridi said that those who have given a good performance should at least be appreciated, to which Babar Azam replied that I know who has given a good performance and who has not. But the creator has portrayed the thumbnail as if they have had a lot of fights, and people who are not literate watch the video with such thumbnails. And at the end, nothing happens, as shown in the thumbnail, and people get misled. This benefits the content creator by increasing his watch time and views, but it wastes the time of viewers.



Fig. 15

In this semiotics analysis, it's evident that the thumbnail is misleading, depicting two girls with an image of Ambani's family in the background, clearly aiming to capture viewers' attention. However, when audiences open the video, they don't find the expected content, leading to trust issues. The creator has inscribed 'Ambani's Wedding' on the lower side, further emphasising their content. On the left, one girl wears a blue hoodie with a maroon scarf, her facial expression and stance indicating surprise and happiness, as if she genuinely attended Ambani's pre-wedding event. Additionally, the other girl wears a white hoodie with an orange scarf; her expression and posture reflect disbelief and concern, as if she's questioning her presence at the wedding. In the background, the entire family stands for a photoshoot, with men in traditional attire and women in lehngas, although the background remains blurred. The creator has merged two pictures, highlighting their primary focus on merely gaining attention rather than providing authentic content. A drawback is the casual attire of both girls, which is unsuitable for a wedding. Despite this, viewers are intrigued by the Urdu wording in the English script, compelling them to click. Through semiotic analysis, researchers note that both girls, despite being young, resemble older women in facial expression and posture. While the Ambani family members appear joyful despite the blurred picture, their attire and expressions are discernible. However, only those familiar with semiotic analysis can recognise the misleading nature of the thumbnail. An ordinary viewer, enticed by the thumbnail, clicks without verifying, leading to distrust due to the discrepancy in content. It reflects on other content creators as well.

**Fig. 16**

Through semiotic analysis, the researcher easily discerns that this is a misleading thumbnail solely designed to attract audiences without concern for reality. The thumbnail itself reveals the context of the video, indicating a need for money. Analysing the detailing in the thumbnail, three colours are prominent: purple on the left, black in the middle, and blue on the right. In the bottom left corner, there's an image of a 5–6-year-old child wearing a red shirt and black glasses, with a smile indicating extraordinary confidence and sharp-mindedness. On the right, a man in a checked shirt wears a satisfied smile, suggesting contentment in life, with money visible behind him and his hand gesture implying, "You can earn this too," enhancing the thumbnail's eye-catching aspect. Urdu is used in the thumbnail for easy readability, ensuring millions of views for the creator, despite the video lacking substance compared to the thumbnail's depiction. The first line, "Give this job to children," is written in yellow and highlighted in purple, with a white arrow on the right-side directing attention to the next line, which further explains the first line, written in a larger font size: "80 thousand monthly." The number 80 is in red, while the remaining

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words are in white, highlighted in black. The font size of the third line matches the words of the first line: “They will earn too.” This line is written in white and highlighted in blue. The use of two English words in the next line, “WITH PROOF,” written in black and highlighted in yellow, grabs the audience’s attention. Dark colours are employed to make the thumbnails attractive. However, this thumbnail not only misleads but also breaks the audience’s trust, leading to potential disappointment and depression. In this era, people are easily attracted to such things, as everyone desires to earn money. Hence, creators design such thumbnails to prompt viewers to open the video quickly, despite the unrealistic portrayal. Even a 5- to 6-year-old child can supposedly earn money, but this is far from reality; it’s merely a tactic to capture attention and misguide the audience.

CONCLUSION

This semiotic study is highly beneficial for the analysis of thumbnails because it helps to understand the complexities of meanings rooted within the YouTube thumbnails, whether they magnetise the audience or delude them. The researchers conducted a semiotic analysis to distinguish between attractive and deceptive thumbnails. This analysis provides insights into key strategies for designing engaging thumbnails while highlighting the negative impact of deceptive thumbnails on audience trust and satisfaction. Additionally, cultural factors play a significant role in the semiotics of YouTube thumbnails. By examining a diverse range of YouTube channels, from Kainat Faisal to Public News, the analysis identifies key display techniques used to create captivating and accurate thumbnails. Moreover, it has been observed that multiple things are mandatory to make a thumbnail tempting, including images, colours, facial expressions, and background themes. For example, bright colours are used to attract attention; large or stylish fonts emphasise key messages; symbols convey emotions; and blurred backgrounds highlight the main subject. Multiple characters are often included to capture the interest of a broader audience. The size of a person or any of the things in the picture shows their importance. Including diverse characters in thumbnails can increase viewer engagement, although the effectiveness of this strategy may vary depending on the content and target audience. Furthermore, comparing ‘before’ and ‘after’ images in product promotions effectively engages viewers and builds trust, especially when they can relate to the initial problem and aspire to achieve similar results.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As our study shows that making misleading thumbnails and not providing related content as described in thumbnails is so unethical and damaging for our society as it breaks people’s trust, so we need to demote them because our views and likes are the reason why they are making more misleading content. Here are some recommendations how we can relegate them.

- Disliking the video serves as a means to express dissatisfaction and can also impact their algorithm, resulting in decreased visibility for their content.
- Reporting the video under the category of misinformation or misleading content can help maintain platform integrity.
- Reporting the entire channel for spreading misinformation or misleading content is crucial for combating fake news.
- Supporting authentic content creators encourages the production of reliable information.
- Engaging in the comment section to voice concerns about misleading content can raise awareness among viewers.
- Educating others by discussing which channels disseminate misleading content and which ones offer authentic information fosters a more informed audience.

Advocating for stricter policies against misleading content on platforms is essential for safeguarding online credibility and trustworthy.

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