

Advertising: Need to Break Gender Stereotypes

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Abstract: *Advertisements are the ghosts from whom a common man just cannot escape. We wake up to advertisements and they continue to haunt us till we hit the bed. Whether we like it or not; one cannot escape advertisements. We are forced to witness them in some form or the other. The level of bombardment by advertisements is high today with the increasing amount of advertisements in every media. Our day starts with a hot cup of coffee and a newspaper. On most of the days, it is a full-page advertisement on the front page of the newspaper that welcomes the reader rather than news content. Television and Radio consists of more advertisements than creative or news content. Step out of the house and the huge hoardings greet us to wide variety of goods and services. While surfing some serious content on the net, advertisements continue to pop up on the screen making an attempt to draw attention. While we are at theatre watching a movie, or walking down a street; our eyes cannot escape advertisements at all. Moreover, mobile phones have been the latest target of advertising companies. Cell phones are bombarded with calls and messages by various service providers. As we are drowned in these advertisements, one important matter we all need to think about is the impact of these advertisements on the society, specially the youth. What are the kinds of advertisements created today? What kind of message are these advertisements passing on to the society? If one closely observes, it is clearly evident that advertisements continue to pass on stereotyped messages to the society.*

Keywords: Advertising, Gender, Media, stereotypes, patriarchy, commoditization, bombardment, women, men, influence.

Introduction

Advertisements are the ghosts from whom a common man just cannot escape. We wake up to advertisements and they continue to haunt us till we hit the bed. Whether we like it or not; one cannot escape advertisements. We are forced to witness them in some form or the other. The level of bombardment by advertisements is high today with the increasing amount of advertisements in every media. Our day starts with a hot cup of coffee and a newspaper. On most of the days, it is a full-page advertisement on the front page of the newspaper that welcomes the reader rather than news content.

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The younger generations who mostly are victims of 'Imitation culture' take the stereotyped messages for a fact. This can do untold damage to the society and a whole generation. Gender stereotypes will reinforce the roles to be played by men and women; thereby creating a clear rift

between the various tasks to be performed. The danger of tasks being branded based on 'gender' cannot be neglected.

A simple thirty seconds commercial can make thousands change their perception about gender roles, stereotypes, beauty, etc. But in India the change in the minds of the viewers is mostly negative, thanks to the repetitive stereotypical content of the media industry. Says Komal Gesala in her article "Everything wrong with Indian Advertisements/ safecity – <https://safecity.in>

Piyush Pandey, chairman, O&M India, feels it is time the ad industry stopped portraying women as being submissive and meek. He says, "Advertising tends to imply that women have no existence without 'X' brand. Yes, I do agree that a woman has a role as a mother, a wife and a daughter, but then we can show these things only up to an extent. We can't keep pushing it. People are not dim-witted, they can see through clichés." (http://www.afaqs.com/news/story/12614_Jassi-to-Jessica-The-changing-face-of-women-in-Indian-advertising)

Women being depicted as weak, submissive and restricting her capabilities to just house hold responsibilities has been an unwritten norm in Indian advertisements. Very few advertisements make an attempt to break these gender stereotypes and attempt to portray women as independent, confident, responsible, bold and efficient. Statistics however reveal that former advertisements overtake the latter advertisements in number.

No surprise that the Indian advertisements over the decades have been male dominant as Patriarchy is the rule here. Economic dependence of the women folk on their better half is one of the dominant reasons for advertisements showcasing men as the decision makers of the family. Women are merely the implementing puppets while the strings are in the husband's hands. Which car should be brought? Where should the investment be made? Where and when to invest on property? How many kids should the couple have? All these so called 'important' and

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'intellectual' decisions are to be taken by men. Whereas the brand of various products, which tea powder, soap, detergent should be brought; how to control insects at home; how to keep the floor clean, how to do multi-tasking without complaining, how to balance husband and children; are the only decisions which women can take.

Women are always depicted as perfect home makers who can brilliantly handle all the household chores with a smile. Why is it that a woman is shown to continue performing family chores despite ill-health? Why do the advertisements time and again scream out that washing dishes, cleaning diapers, cooking, toilet cleaning, shopping and taking care of the baby is sole and whole duty of a mother? Such advertisements will continue to reinforce the roles to be played by men and women. It can be perceived the wrong way. 'Men are to rule the world and women are to monitor the house' is a dangerous stereotype. It is ironical that the current day advertisements still continue to pass on the same message.

Each gender stereotype component can lead to negative consequences that restrict life opportunities, particularly for women. Physical characteristics can lead to reduced self-dignity, role behaviors may lead to restricted opportunities of self-development, and stereotyping of occupational roles may lead to disadvantages in women's careers.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender_advertisement

Though women are economically independent and has moved much ahead of the roles of a mother, wife, and a daughter; Indian advertisements hardly makes an attempt to bring in the concept of 'task -sharing'.

Beauty can be defined largely as a perception. It is a group of social norms that interpret a particular form of appearance that is valued. Since almost four decades ago, women have been expected to conform to a particular body image and to behave in a certain manner of which would ultimately decipher and enforce their femininity (Bordo, 1997, p. 94).
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender_advertisement

The slogans or tagline of advertisements can misguide the young generation and set wrong ideas in their minds. Advertisements which say that they offer loan for education of son and marriage of daughter cannot be accepted as it passes a message that girl's final role is to get married and involve in household chores. Indian weddings are known for their lavishness and crores are spent on marriage of a son too. Why not say that the bank offers loan for education of daughter and marriage expense of a son?

Women are commodified in advertisements. They are used as a pawn to draw the attention of the crowd. So, called 'fair' and 'Beautiful' girls are considered as mandatory for an advertisement. If we closely observe it is clearly evident that girls are not necessary in majority of the advertisements. Is it necessary for a female model to be a part of men under garment advertisement? Will girls in reality run behind men just because he drowns himself in 'Axe' perfume? Will a lady lose her senses and surrender herself to a man as soon as he sprays a perfume? What is the necessity of a female model to sell a shaving gel, razor or a bike?

Advertisements are designed to pass on a message that the sole purpose of a lady is to allure the opposite sex. Sex appeal is very high in advertisement. The sex appeal is highly made use of in advertisements even where it's highly illogical. The advertisements also carry masculine and feminine virtues. They try to reinforce the masculine and feminine characteristics either directly or indirectly.

Femininity in advertising – portrayal of women in advertisements

- Touching self
- Caressing an object
- Lying on the floor
- Sitting on a bed or chair
- Eyes closed
- Not alert
- Confused
- Vulnerable
- Body contorted
- Dressed like a child
- Holding an object or a man for support
- Sexy and sexually available
- Seductive
- Playful
- Careless

Masculinity in advertising

In advertising, men are often portrayed in the following ways:^[13]

- Alert and conscious of surroundings
- Standing upright
- Eyes open and looking around
- Bodies are controlled
- Mean expression on face
- Gripping things tightly with hands
- Hands in pockets
- Serious
- Physically active

Though there are innumerable advertisements which are biased towards women, beauty bars go a step ahead. A question that always arises in my mind is that why men are never showed bathing in advertisements? It is always women who drown in rose petals and spend hours bathing in the tub. Why cannot we have the 'santoor daddy' advertisements? Is it that Santoor can make only the mommy look young?

MTR – A woman is shown with 6 hands preparing variety of dishes to please each member of the family.

Harpic – This ad makes a 9-10-year-old girl declare to a visitor that Sunday is her mother's 'Toilet day'. The advertisement not only passes on the stereotyped message that toilet cleaning is a woman's task but also has the danger of instilling this wrong idea in the mind of young girls.

Fair and Lovely – What is beauty? Who decides the parameters of beauty? Every ad of Fair and Lovely very strongly and deeply reinforces the concept that 'Fair is

beautiful'. The advertisement very dominantly brushes aside the dark skin tone as unacceptable and as the sole reason for failure in career, love, relationship and so on. It instills a pessimistic attitude and inferiority complex in the hearts of teenage girls with dark skin tone. It also completely neglects the talent, intelligence and capabilities necessary to go up the success ladder. These advertisements try to communicate that a girl can achieve her goals only if she is fair. One cannot neglect the psychological impact of these advertisements on women who are dark, fat and acne faced. There lies a danger of these advertisements pushing women into depression and low self-esteem.

Kellogg's Special K – perfect body – this advertisement stresses on the need to possess a perfect body by women. This ad cannot be acceptable as it showcases a husband feeling ashamed to be accompanied by his wife who possesses a body not in perfect shape. It further suggests that all fat women can attain 'perfect shaped bodies' in just a week by consuming Kellogg's Special K. This ad highlights the sexist appeal which will not have a positive impact on the society.

Slice – 'aam sutra'- 'Sabr Ka Phal Meetha Hota Hai' – from the tagline to the picturization, this advertisement which stars Katrina Kaif drinking slice has nothing more than sex appeal to be communicated. The visual depiction of the advertisement goes beyond the normal body language of juice consumption by an individual. The advertisement carries the sensuous, lecherous, naughty expression of Katrina Kaif through out the advertisement and the 'aam sutra' is deliberately used and sparks the thought of 'Kamasutra' in the mind of the viewer.

Sex sells. And it sells at a rate of knots—at least in the psyche of the viewers (let's call them prospective customers). The speed at which they translate into active consumers is directly proportional to the effectiveness of the sex appeal of the advert. This makes sex in advertising a potential instrument for tapping the attention of the better half of the television audiences. Of course, you cannot positively correlate this with the sales quotient, but sex in advertising does serve as an emotional trigger which allures the customers to try out the offering. (<https://introspectmarketing.wordpress.com/2013/12/23/does-sex-in-advertising-sell/>)

Few advertisements come as a relief in between the dominant gender biased advertisements. The industry is drowned in advertisements with patriarchal messages. The percentage of advertisements which depict women as self-sufficient, independent, bold, efficient, responsible and tough are very few in number.

Biba is one such advertisement which is definitely welcoming. This ad tries to convey that cooking is not only the duty of a girl. A father questions the culinary skills of his son-in-law to be. As the groom's mother proudly boasts of her son not even capable of boiling water and noodles; bride's father makes a statement that his daughter deserves something better than noodles. The best part of the ad is where the groom invites the bride's family for dinner after 10 days' time to master the cooking skills

Ariel detergent – This ad carries a positive outlook too. A father after visiting his daughter's house witnesses her multi-tasking, balancing work and family, child and husband while the husband easily relaxes in front of the TV. He later introspects on his duties and feels guilty. Back home we can find him helping his wife.

Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) can be considered as the watchdog of advertising. In March 2018 it received around 269 complaints were received in March 2018 on the grounds that they do not comply with the standards of advertising and its ethics. ASCI upheld 114 advertisements in the health care, 24 in education, 35 in food and beverages category, 7 in personal care and 11 in various other categories.

According to white paper issued by Engendered, only 21% of advertisements released over Diwali broke stereotypes and portrayed women in positive light. It further states that though 37% of rural women are making purchase decisions, 20% of leadership positions are occupied by women, only 17 out of 80 advertisements attempted to break confines of traditional gender roles.

It is a great relief that the current day advertisements are more sensitive and are breaking the gender stereotypes. Advertisements can create newer identity and image for women. Advertisements have a huge social responsibility. Breaking stereotypes and depicting women as independent strong individuals is the need of the hour.

References

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