

PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN ADVERTISING

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ABSTRACT

Advertisement is one of the major media that affect our daily life consciously and unconsciously. It is also responsible to play a significant role in shaping the society in a much broader perspective. There is a lot of dispute on the issue that whether advertisements depict what is prevalent in the society or the society embraces in itself what is portrayed in the advertisements and other media. Over the last few decades, there has been a great socio-cultural change in the society especially in the context of role and position of women in the society. There are increasing numbers of women pursuing careers of their choice, changing role in the family structure, negative attitude towards sex-role stereotypes etc. But has the representation of women in advertisements changed over a period of time? Or does it still confirm to some traditional notions about women and their role in the society? Such stereotypes projected about women go a long way in deciding what the society thinks about women and how the society treats women in the long run. The present paper is an attempt to study the different projections of women roles in various print and audio-video advertisements in India and how does it define the social acceptance of women in the society and the treatment they are met with.

KEYWORDS: *Media, Advertisement, Women, Stereotypes, Societal Response*

INTRODUCTION

Advertising is one of the major media that affect our daily life consciously and unconsciously and are responsible to play a significant role in shaping the society in a much broader perspective. Advertisements are messages paid for by those who send them and are intended to inform or influence people who receive them. Advertisers use different ways to affect the consumers' perception of the product. Storylines, taglines and portrayal of women are some of the tools used to touch on the specific emotions and make the consumers feel that they are missing out on some things by not using the products.

The new man and new woman might be present in today's society but to what extent are advertisements an accurate account of this new picture is a question to ask? Has the representation of women in advertisements changed over a period of time? Or does it still confirm to some traditional notions about women and their role in the society?

There is a stark contrast between how males and females are portrayed in advertisements. This difference in portrayal has nothing to do with biology or natural traits, but with how our culture defines feminine and masculine (Goffman, 1976). The gender roles that women play in advertisements are the decorative role, recreational role, independent career role, self-involved role, carefree role and family roles. Women are generally found in advertisements for home products, baby items, cosmetics and food items.

They are also generally portrayed stereotypically in the advertisement of entertainment, clothes, and cosmetics but are portrayed non-stereotypically in ads for tobacco, travel, food and financial services (Mitchell and Taylor, 1989)

Since ages, women have been reflected in stereotypical roles. She has been highlighted as “her place is in the home, they don’t make important decisions, are regarded as sex objects by men and as being dependent on men (Courtney and Lockertz, 1971). Women were stereotyped in the advertisements in the aspects of “objectifying women”, “showing women as subordinate to men”, and as “mentally withdrawn from the larger scene” (Lindner, 2004). This is known as retro sexism in social terms i.e. the communication of culturally sanctioned aspects of femininity related to notions of dependency, attractiveness, and adherence to household tasks.

Gradually this portrayal of women changed shape and in later 70’s, 52% women were reflected as employed, 77% in non-working roles and only 6.67% were depicted in a family environment (Sullivan and Connor, 1988). Representation of women in advertisements has been experiencing a shift from the housewife centric advertisements to the career women advertisements. But female models are increasingly shown in advertisements to sell products that may or may not be directly related to them (Kang, 2002). The images of women are always attractive – who provides the desirable image for the advertisement, irrespective of her importance to the advertisement. Despite the changes in this 21st Century, by far men still like to fit in the role of masculinity, but for modern women, being and fitting into the role of femininity has not been a very important need. “Femininity is now not a core values for them rather a swishy kind of glamour, utilized by confident women who know exactly what they are doing” (Gauntlett, 2008). Sex is an emotion that has been successfully employed by advertisers in promoting jeans, perfumes, alcohol, watches, personal products and cars (Chatterji, 2006). Sexism and gender stereotyping are still prevalent in the advertising industry. They are still portrayed as if they have been created only to man’s comforts (Schaeffer, 2006). Even today, the images of women found in advertisements and commercials have the touch of the traditional homemaker or the sex object. Women are seen as the beloved wife when she is able to cook good food, excellent daughter-in-law when she follows the traditions of her mother-in-law and a great mother when she takes good care of her children.

There is the difference in the portrayal of women in Asian countries as compared to that in the US and other western countries. While the portrayal of women in non-working roles is consistent with the findings of the studies conducted in China, Thailand, Hongkong and Turkey but the recent studies in America revealed the predominance of work-related roles of women in the advertisements (Kumari and Shivani, 2014). In the Indian context also, there is a lot of difference in the projection of women as compared to other nations as the common stereotypical portrayals seem less prevalent in Indian advertisements. Women were portrayed in neutral ways and less likely as sex objects (Das, 2000). Although there is the difference in the product categories advertised by women, but they are still portrayed more in traditional and stereotyped roles (Moorthi et al, 2014).

The latest advertisements on health drinks, detergent cakes and powders, soaps, medicines, cosmetics, mobile advertisements have represented women in a very rigorous way – very energetic, dynamic, strong and enthusiastic. Majority of modern Indian advertisements present a more realistic and balanced picture of a woman. There has been a general shift whereby advertisements have moved from showcasing women merely as tradition bound homemakers to those playing modern roles (Fatima, 2016). There is a shift in the portrayal of the woman in advertisements from a mere housewife to a career-oriented and professional with the independent identity and multiple identities, who is a super woman successful in balancing her personal and professional life (Sukumar & Venkatesh, 2011). But not a single of these progressive advertisements shows a woman with a family or long-term relationship, subtly implying a sort of mutual exclusivity between independence/empowerment and family life. The depiction of women in Indian magazine advertisements is in a more modern manner these days but the patriarchal norms still work behind the changed depiction (Mishra, 2015). Women are treated as a trophy or a gift which will be given to the person who uses the advertised product. They are shown as being easily attracted to or influenced by the person who is using the product being advertised (Raina, 2014). They are used as an attractive and eye-catching element to capture the attention of viewers.

The masses like ads showing women in the role of mother or a working woman but they do not like the ads showing a woman in the traditional role of glamour girl (Bhullar, 2000). Also, men, women and children did not appreciate advertisements that exposed the body of a man or woman. The sexual content in advertisements is harmful for women as it promotes objectification of women's body, the sexualisation of women, discrimination against women and supports a society that accepts violence against women very easily (Perse, 2001).

Advertisements in India are not fulfilling their duty towards the society. The projection of women in Indian advertisements can be done for highlighting the real issues of women lives, for their upliftment, for the awareness among people about the rights of woman, for the empowerment of women etc is being left out. Advertisements where women were treated merely as an object to sell need to be abandoned and women need to come up openly and boldly against their degrading presentation (Nagi, 2014)

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