
Representation of Women in Advertisements of Men's Products: A Study of Indian Television Commercials

Shaswati Das &
Prakriti Sarkar

“Advertising is a very powerful form of social communication in modern society. It offers the most sustained and most concentrated set of images anywhere in the media system”(Jhally, 1989, p. 1). Advertisements today have far surpassed its general objective of selling products with the use of texts and images. They are now crafted to appeal to their target audience in several ways. The number of television commercials has increased in manifold ways in last few decades and they have assumed a significant position in influencing people's aspirations. In their pursuit of selling product the images that advertisers create often possess strong socio-cultural dimensions. In fact these images have strong connotation pertaining to different constructs like class, religion, ethnicity, gender and sexuality among many others. When we talk about images, the images of female bodies in advertisements become an important area of study. Women and their body parts are used to sell almost all kinds of products. They are even present in advertising of the products that are meant for men. Female models are often found in advertising products like men's razors, men's cream, men's wear etc and the manner in which they are portrayed remains a topic of critical analysis. The present work will study the ‘politics of representation’ of female models in television advertisements which are meant for men.

This is a study of both the visual and verbal language of Indian television commercials that are meant for men's products. It is about how these advertisements communicate the advertiser's message and ultimately represent the connection with the culture itself. The study is carried on with the following definition of the term 'culture': "The social production and reproduction of sense, meaning and consciousness."(O'Sullivan et al., 1994, p. 68). In this sense any cultural text represents a 'way of life'. So for the purpose of the study data have been obtained through observation of Indian television commercials over the years and from other secondary sources.

To examine the identity of Indian womanhood feminist scholars often use the theoretical framework of masculine domination which is very much pertinent while talking about the relationship between advertising and Indian culture. To elaborate the idea of domination we are focusing here mainly on the notion of "hegemony". Antonio Gramsci introduced the word 'hegemony' in his 'Prison Notebooks'. There are various interpretations by different academicians and practitioners of it. It is understood that he used the term to denote the predominance of one social class over others (e.g. bourgeois hegemony). This represents not only political and economic control, but also the ability of the dominant class to project its own way of seeing the world so that those who are subordinated by it accept it as 'common sense' and 'natural'. Hegemony involves persuasion of the greater part of the population and Media is often employed to adhere to a social system that appears natural. Advertising being a cultural institution sells a great deal more than just products. It sells values; it sells images; it sells concepts of love and sexuality, of romance, of success and perhaps most important, of normalcy. "To a great extent, advertising tells us who we are and who we should be"(Kilbourne, 1999, p.74). Advertising is considered to hold a great deal of power in shaping how people view others and themselves, and thus, in shaping society itself (Kilbourne, 1999).

According to Hall (1997) the term ‘representation’ can be interpreted from three different approaches: Reflective approach, Intentional approach and Constructionist approach. (i) In Reflective approach meaning lies in the object, person, idea, or event in the real world and that representation reflects these meanings as in a mirror. This was used by the Greeks as mimesis where representations through drawing and painting mirror or imitate nature. (ii) The intentional approach reverses the first approach and asserts that the writer, artist or speaker “imposes his or her unique meanings on the world through language” (Hall, 1997, p. 25). Words mean what the author intends they should mean. (iii) The third, the constructionist approach, recognizes the public, social character of language. “It acknowledges that neither things in themselves nor the individual users of language can fix meaning in language” ((Hall, 1997, p. 25). This theory draws a clear distinction between the material world where things exist and the symbolic world of modes of representations. It is in the symbolic practices that meaning is constructed. Thing doesn’t have any meaning in itself; we construct it, using our concepts and signs. Hence it is called the constructivist or constructionist approach which recognizes the existence of the material world but emphasizes on the representational system through language and other forms. While discussing about the representation of meaning through language (also visual language) Hall (1997) stressed on its close connection with culture. Media, especially advertising symbolically reproduce the codes and conventions of the culture and the portrayal of women in them speaks of the existing power structure of the society and the position of women in that.

The otherwise diverse Indian cultural system becomes homogenous when it comes to the question of women. As a major social and economic institution advertising strives to maintain cultural hegemony like any other form of media. So, it continually dwells upon the dominant ideological structures to maintain and reinforce the existing power structures denying alternative and oppositional

views. Advertising perpetuates the patriarchal ideology by continually reinforcing the distinction between men and women by locating men in the public sphere and women in the private sphere. Women are mostly shown confined to a life of domesticity and family. These ideological constructs are presented to us as "commonsense" through visual and verbal symbols. Among the various medium of advertisements television advertising is more appealing as it involves sets, lighting, editing, voice-over and sound effects along with actors and texts. Keeping a continuation of Indian tradition a woman is often depicted as being engaged with the domestic chores. Women are shown to serve her husband, children and family happily negating her own desires and demands.

There are several previous literatures which show that in the early days of Indian advertising women were mainly portrayed in advertisements of beauty products and products of domestic uses. After the independence the ideology of 'nation building' became very much prominent in the advertising narratives. Women started appearing in advertisements of consumer durables but were often portrayed as "ideal housewives". According to Wright (2001) "Throughout the 1980's and early 1990's Indian womanhood was a crucial site for the construction of national subjects that centered on the importance of the Indian family. The linkages between women and family remain strong in advertising's address to Indian women" (p. 168). Women were featured predominantly in products for beauty and personal grooming, health products, food and cooking products, products for household cleaning and home appliances. They even appeared in advertisements of mosquito repellent, light bulbs, wall paints and so on. But Women were seldom found endorsing high-tech products such as mobile phones or computers. Thus these advertisements for a long time supported the stereotype that women are only interested in products related to cooking or the household and have no interest or ability in the machines or high-tech Products which are often considered as products of "masculine" domain.

But women are being increasingly portrayed in advertisements of men's products where they mostly act as sex objects whose main purpose is to seduce the buyers (men) in buying a product. While beer, bike and car symbolize "maleness" most of these ads show women in provocative poses. The inherent meaning of such images is to portray women as an object of sexual pleasure for men. Through such images male domination and female servitude are often promulgated and normalized. The earlier stereotype of an "ideal housewife" has been replaced by an "attractive object". The commercials which publicize the female anatomy to sell the products are mounting day by day. As Dasgupta et al. (2012) says "explicit sexual images are used with subtle sexual innuendoes, as the Wild Stone male fragrance commercials and those of male underwear where a man has lipstick marks all over his body, smiling smugly after being attacked by a female gang"(p. 134). The recurrent portrayal of women as sexual objects in advertisements of men's products affects both men's perceptions of women and women's perception of themselves. These advertisements symbolize a flattered form of discourse which concerns the modern society.

To discuss this we need to trace few anecdotes of Indian Television. Television was introduced in India to support the state as developmental machinery. So the state continued to control over television's content. During mid 90s as the Indian economy got liberalized the change from monopoly to competition made broadcasting market-driven. New indicators for measuring success such as advertising revenues became important comparing to public service Doordarshan in the earlier era. The contents of advertising also started getting redefined with sexuality being increasingly used in them. As a result of unregulated transmission from abroad a lot of "undesirable" (inconsistent with the national culture) became available to the Indian audiences and gave the impetus for increasing use of sex in the advertising. The Indian parliament passed the Cable

TV Network (Regulation) Act of 1995 to regulate the airwaves but it could do little to the already existing situation.

In general definition, Sex is a biological discrimination between male and female. But 'sex appeal' in advertising is used to sell a particular product or service. The use of sex in advertising can be highly overt or extremely subtle. It ranges from relatively explicit displays of sexual acts and seductive behavior to the most subtle hints. Sexuality in advertising has been proved as an extremely effective means in attracting consumer's attention and making them remember the message of the advertisement. Though law has been passed for prohibiting indecent representation of women in advertisements still the advertisers trick their way out of this stringent law and manage to commodify women in several men's product advertisements. If we follow television commercials we come across a handful number of ads where women are being used to sell products that are purely meant for men. Among these advertisements ads of Deodorant, Perfume and Soap pose the most unrealistic and obscene representation of women. The prime example of this is Axe advertisements which have topped the list in promoting sexiest ads over the years. In these advertisements female characters are intentionally portrayed as sex objects. Usually "Axe" body spray ads feature an adolescent guy who uses the "Axe" spray and within a fraction of second becomes a "women sticking magnet". For example: "Axe Dark Temptation" body spray ad used to show that several scantily dressed women are jumping, lusting and drooling and even biting over an adolescent boy who is using this fragrance. Female characters are depicted with an element of voyeurism in ads like Wild Stone Deodorant and Soap. Example can be given of "Wildstone" soap advertisement where the male protagonist is found to be playing football with few small kids, while their mothers' seductive look toward his bare body is captured in the camera and a song is played in the background to suggest some sexual innuendos. When the game is over the kids are given the soap

to clean themselves up but the male character's half bare body excites these women to such an extent that they start giving him a personal bath. Similar kind of visuals can be found in "Euro" brief's advertisement. This brand is followed by a unique tagline as "Accepted by Women Worldwide". In this particular ad a woman is seen filling up fuel tank of a car. Once she sees the owner of the car wearing "Euro" brief the woman starts expressing her lust and desire and when the man asks her how much he has to pay for the fuel, the woman replies "For you it's free". The obvious meaning is conveyed that the woman is willing to be paid in this kind rather than in cash. All these advertisements stand for sexual objectification of women.

Apart from such projections female characters are used decoratively in other ads like Gillette razor, Gillette shaving gel, Emami Fair & Handsome cream and so on. For instance the Gillette Guard razor ad where the target audience is supposed to be men we find an unnecessary presence of a woman who is seeking her husband's permission to buy a saree while he is busy in shaving. It presents woman as a dependent member of a family whose urge to buy stuff for herself depends on her husband's sanction; thus showing men in an authoritative position. Like the above mentioned ads there is a never ending list of these kinds of advertisements where the presence of a woman is purely decorative, without any functional relationship with the advertised product. Her sexuality is exploited not only to sell a variety of products but also to provide visual pleasure to the viewers. Women's presence in these advertisements is not justifiable by any means. The woman has no relation with the product, nor is she capable of inducing men to buy the merchandise that is advertised. In order to entertain the audience her character is solely put down. It should also be mentioned here that few ads of men's products have started avoiding this 'Sex sell' strategy to promote their brand. In fact they are trying to use the product's competitive advantage over other products to target the audiences rather than falling in the same line.

Over the years the prevalence of sexuality in advertising is escalating though most of the ads show that the sole purpose of a woman's life is to satisfy men (in the form of father, husband and son); thus following the codes of a patriarchal society that depicts women as "others". But sexualized representation of women in advertisements can be looked at as a different empowering "space" for women. Several scholars have commented that advertisements seem to convey the idea of an empowering modernity and pose a challenge to the stifling, repressive, sex-negative dominant culture. But the critics feel that this often legitimizes men's domination and control through objectification of women. The paper has also attempted to show that how women's representation in advertisements of men's products supports the rising sexism and simultaneous objectification of women bodies rather than allowing them a "space" to be subjective and agents of their own lives.

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