

# Women and Advertisement : A Feminist Perspective

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## *Abstract*

*The paper highlights how the advertisement industry is dependent on the human body or to be more precise on sexualized women's body. Without relying on the human body it is quite doubtful that the business of advertisement would thrive. The present paper would highlight the implications of depictions of women in such advertisement.*

**Key words :** *Advertisement, Women, Body, Agency.*

## **Introduction :**

Advertisements are the most innovative tools for promotion of goods and products. It is an effective tool to reach out the audience. In this age of globalization, a capitalist market is unthinkable without the means of advertisement. This explains why multinational companies spend millions of dollars every year for promotion of their brands and products through advertisements. Advertisements use all sorts of conceivable means from the most fancy ones to voyeuristic, from serious to utterly hilarious ones to capture the attention of the target audience or the customers. Commercial advertisements generally pretend to be apolitical.<sup>1</sup> The advertisements have become part and parcel of our quotidian life. It is important to bear in mind that though advertisements are commercial techniques for promotion of products, they have got certain social impact as well. These advertisements which are shown repetitively through print and electronic media have psychological impact on the audience. The way advertisements depict women needs rigorous scholarly analysis. A closer inspection reveals that advertisements raise certain issues about gender, identity and socio-economic scenario and cultural dimensions as well. Advertisements reflect how the female body is used for promotion of products by the multinational companies.

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They very often portray women as sex objects and reinforce gender stereotypes. Advertisements bring to light the behavioral expectations of a capitalist society. Advertisements are always for someone and for some purpose.<sup>2</sup>

We often take advertisements for granted and do not delve deeper into the implications they may have. Julie M. Stankiewicz and Francine Rosselli (2008: 579) have argued 'Advertising is a pervasive form of media to which people do not often give conscious attention and, therefore, its social messages are likely to be remained unquestioned.' However, as stated in the previous paragraph, the implications of an advertisement are immense. Advertisement reflects which fashion trend is in vogue now. They 'provide a gauge for what is desirable and what is normal.' (Ibid: 580) It portrays what a consumerist capitalist society wants our life style to be. It promotes that the more we consume, the more happiness we have. Advertisements thus endorse consumerist values. Reflecting on the impact of advertisements, Indhu Rajagopal and Jennifer Gales (2012: 3333) have noted that

The power that advertisements carry with them is sensational. They have the ability to change and shape people's opinions of themselves with one picture of an image that is technologically modified to represent the advertiser's perspective of what is seen as perfect by viewers.

Thus, they shape people's beliefs and life styles. Chris Frazendin notes, 'One common aspect of advertisements today is extremely thin women as the focal point.' (Frazendin 2010) Advertisements set certain beauty standards such as that a girl must have a skinny figure, beautiful face, flawless skin etc to become a model. To put in a different way, such advertisement creates certain stereotypes regarding the 'ideal' feminine physique. Two authors have found in their study that:

The effects of advertising are not limited to the idealization of beauty standards. They also include spreading of the gender role ideology of the feminine body. In these ads, women are often depersonified and their bodies are reduced to an aesthetic object to be looked at or to serve as an object desire for men. (Jung and Lee 2009: 275)

The images that advertisements transmit have a psychological impact on the viewers. Gender stereotypes are reinforced through advertisements. Advertisements assign specific roles to boys and girls. In this context Monica Brasted argues,

Girls are presented in traditional roles such as playing house and cooking. Girls are also shown playing with dolls and being concerned with being popular and beautiful. Girls are also portrayed as being cooperative and more passive and less aggressive and competitive than boys. Boys on the other hand are shown seeking power, speed and physical action. Aggressive behavior is almost exclusively limited to advertisements targeting boys. Boys are also shown as being more independent than girls.

[Brasted 2010]

Thus stark segregation of gender based roles is one of the most common themes in ads.

The most of the deodorants advertisements reduce women to instinctive creatures that cannot act on logic. An ad shows if a man sprays deodorant of a particular brand over his body, the girl or the woman forgets everything. Just the fragrance of that deodorant makes her orgasmic and drives her crazily towards the man whoever has used it. Ridiculously it does not matter who the man is, whether he is a stranger or whether he has any feelings or not towards the lady. While some other brand shows that if a cricket fielder uses its spray, the crazy girl chase him in the field also. And the ad convinces the audience all that is responsible for the sudden wild behavior of the lady is the scent of the deodorant.

The luxury car companies hire 'sexy' female models to launch their brand new car models. The viewer would find the lady provocatively standing in front of the car or sleeping on the hood of the car in a sensuous manner. The car company virtually transforms the lady too into a machine-a sexy machine. To increase the sale of the car thorough this advertisement, the company has not only utilized the specialties or the special features of the car, but also on the sexualised body of the model acting in the ad. Probably this would be a classic instance of what Pierre Bourdieu and Loic Wacquant have called as 'symbolic violence.' They have defined symbolic violence as a form of violence that is 'exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity.' [Bourdieu and Wacquant in Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois (eds.) (2004): 272, emphasis in original]

One of the most interesting aspects of advertisements is that tagline they emphasize. Some taglines are so witty that they easily catch our attention. They also reflect the creativity of their creators. However there is an inconvenient truth as well.

The tagline of most commercial advertisements carries a patriarchal tone if not misogynist. Take for example the tagline that Bajaj Pulsar used for quite some time once. As shown in figure 1, the tagline said --- definitely male. Thus it makes clear that Bajaj Pulsar is a bike which is 'masculine' in its design and thus its rough and tough design is quite different from the two-wheelers used by the females. It tries to propagate that the bike is definitely male and not female by any stretch of imagination. The ad makes a stereotypical depiction of men was the dominant class and the women as submissive. However, some ads also endorse female centric tagline. For instance, Hero Honda Pleasure's agline confidently claims 'why should boys have all the fun.'

Some advertisements are inherently racist. Take for example the ads of fairness creams. These ads slowly poison your mind that you have to be fair at any cost because ultimately it is your fair skin that would determine your destiny. Your job, your life partner, your social circle everything depends on your fair skin. And fairness creams are here to in your rescue to make your dark skin white just in a matter of weeks and you live happily thereafter for ever like a fairy queen. (See Fig 3. )Now the point is ---why does a black skinned lady have to be fair? Is fairness a sign of racial or intellectual superiority? Isn't it just another form of racial exploitation of dark skinned women? Such ads will invariably infuse in the minds of dark skinned females a sense of inferiority complex. Again the models chosen for such fairness skin ads are white skinned girls. Thus racial prejudice is crystal clear in the fairness cream ads. The story does not end here. Some fairness cream brands have even different products for male and female. In the ad of Fair and Handsome (a fairness cream for men), its brand ambassador Sahruxh Khan ridicules the hero for using 'ladkiwali' (feminine) creams.

This brings us to a controversial issue concerning the indecent representation of women. The issue is a dicey one. It is noteworthy that there exists an Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986 in India. The Act defines 'indecent representation of women' as:

'the depiction in any manner of the figure of a woman, her form or body or any part thereof in such a way as to have the effect of being indecent, or derogatory to, denigrating, women, or is likely to deprave, corrupt or injure the public morality or morals.'

The definition provided by the Act is highly ambiguous. So it should hardly come as surprise that this Act has ended in a fiasco. It may be mentioned here parenthetically

that Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Amendment Bill, 2012 also covers internet and social media along with television and print media. But the bill is still pending. (Venkatesan 2014)

The benchmarks of so-called decency and indecency are highly ambiguous and may be different from society to society. What and who determines what is indecent? Is it again the men folk? The questions are not easy to answer. Moreover they are highly opinionated. The post-modern feminists may altogether denaturalize the categories or binaries like 'decency' and 'indecency'. It may also be mentioned that norms are context and time specific. A norm which is considered highly acceptable today may not be so fifty years down the lane. So we leave it there. Furthermore what if women themselves want to be represented that way? What if they voluntarily choose to clad scantily in the way that the multinational brands want them to? They may argue that ads are providing employment avenues to many. The aim of this paper is not to solve these puzzles. But let us not shy away from saying three things. First of all, advertisement as a means for promotion of goods and products is going to stay. Secondly, how women choose to be represented is at the end of the day a question that can only be decided by the women themselves. Finally, if the multinational firms are portraying women as sex-objects in commercial ads, then the problem has a structural dimension to it. And such a structural problem cannot be resolved merely through means like censorship.

#### Notes/References :

1. However there are exceptions to it. A careful look at the *Amul* butter ads reveals how commercial advertisements can be explicitly political at times. Again in spite of the apolitical character of most commercial ads, they do have political implications because questions of gender, identity and representation which are quintessentially political issues are involved in these ads.
  2. I have reframed it from the much quoted phrase of Robert Cox (1981:128) that 'Theory is always *for* someone and *for* some purpose.' Cox used the phrase in a different context to mean that the act of theorizing is not an impartial act and that elements of interests and subjectivity are intertwined in it.
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