



International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Development



Volume: 2, Issue: 8, 646-649
Aug 2015
www.allsubjectjournal.com
e-ISSN: 2349-4182
p-ISSN: 2349-5979
Impact Factor: 3.762

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Representation of Women in Television Advertisements

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Abstract

Issues such as gender stereotyping, devaluation, marginalization, silencing of women perpetuated by television advertisements, the impact of male gaze on the visuals and the audiences are discussed scientifically in this paper. Hence the paper is about the portrayal of women in advertisements in television by looking into various issues of women like gender stereotyping, devaluation and marginalization perpetrated through the constructed depiction of women in the Television advertisements. The purpose of this study is to assess the portrayal of women in advertisements in the television. This paper centers on the current scenario with regard to the perpetuation of stereotypes in images and representation solidifies women's traditional roles and unequal gender relations in multiple ways in the advertisements of television in terms of male gaze.

Keywords: Women, Media, Television, Advertisement, Society, Representation.

Introduction

The power of the media can be used constructively or destructively. It could be a binding force for bridging the gap between equality of opportunities by helping to shift the societal mindsets that have become deeply ingrained structural barriers to the advancement of women. Women are generally portrayed in a limited number of roles. Sexualized images of women are ubiquitous, and women tend to be defined in terms of their physical appearance, not abilities. When women are not being portrayed as sex objects, they are most often shown as victims of violence and homemakers. Although, in accordance with the culture and religion the stereotyping of women as a caregiver has some positive connotations, they are nevertheless stereotyped, which certainly do not reflect women's complex experiences and aspirations. In addition to appearing in a limited number of roles, women are often simply missing in the media.

Media has played a pluralistic role in the image construction for entertainment and for marketing and at other level; women have been presented in an attributive traditional role assigned by societal hierarchy. Women have entered into media into several ways through advertisements, serials, articles, fictions and news reporting etc. Women have also been presented in modernizing manifestations outside home, working in offices, playing games and participating in international tournaments. The contemporary media reveals not merely projection of what is going on in the society but have created role models for the emerging women's body and greater sensuousness in representation of themselves and situation involving men and women in various Medias like Magazines, Televisions, and Cinema (Nicholas, 2000) [1].

Gender and media

The relationship between gender and media associates understanding of certain conceptual distinction for clarity and effective discourse. Generally, three basic terms require clarity in relation to their different meanings. The first term is femaleness, the second is femininity and the third is feminism (Craig, 2002) [3]. The term 'femaleness' focuses on physical and biological differentiation between man and woman. The term 'femininity' refers social cultural construction of women where are shaped differently not only in terms of representation of body but also in relation to institutionalized role performances, internalization of specific values and conformity to certain cultural practices. 'Feminism' is an ideological position which emphasizes the equality of gender and advocates maximization of potential of women (Craig, 2002) [3].

Though various media constructions, representations and repressions of women take place in several ways such as cultural constructions of women's body, gender hierarchy (status, role, relationship, nature, emotions, attitudes, temperament), power relations, devaluation of women, oppression, violence, discrimination, inequality, marginalization etc. including the institutional representations of women (marriage, family, polity, economy, worked) and the various women's issues (dowry, purdah, prostitution, child marriage etc.). The media constructions, even though

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art films and prescriptive documentaries are the forms of debate representations which are closer to the reality than the liberal discourse denouncing 'certain problems like Sati, Devdasi, child marriage, widow-hood or the religious and sectional discourses glorifying these (Abraham, 2002) [4].

The media has neglected the real basic and deeper issues of women's empowerment, equality, justice and has consequently reinforced the subjugated images of women albeit in different discourses, symbols and modes of representation. Media thrives on salability not significance, and on market forces not morals. There is a shift in presentation, representation and signification which is geared to commoditization and certainly of concern. The cultural manipulation of sex and reproduction, in fact is at the root of subordinated and oppressed social position of woman (Abraham, 2002) [4]. It is even worse for certain categories of women, who receive less attention in the media such as women from minority ethnicities and religious groups, rural women and poor women.

Ever since media boom has taken over India, it has tried to see realities through its own perception. But the representation of the reality is entirely different particularly in the case of media advertisements. Most of the advertisements seem to have carved out of notion of femininity that is very much unlike that of the 80s. "The relationship between the media and about 51% of our population is two way traffic: the access of women to the media or the lack of it, and the cognizance by the media of women or the absence of it" (Agrawal and Kamla, 1998) [5]. The presence of women in media in terms of numbers, whether absolute or in comparison with men, and their status in terms of the position they occupy is strongly influenced by scene, not of their choice, but on account of the social and religious taboos which operated as legal sanctions, and even today operate as such, in many regions and communities, the constitution and laws notwithstanding. Even in those regions and communities where the social and religious taboos can no longer be enforced poverty, illiteracy, discrimination and male domination keep a vast majority of women away from the attention or coverage of media. As regards the electronics media, even where the community radio and television are available, either they are crowded out by the men, or on account of social inhibitions, women are unable to view or listen. So media has therefore largely come to be confined to the women in the middle and the higher classes, whether in the rural or urban areas, and more particularly in the urban areas- whether as passive consumers or as active players.

Television: as a Medium

Television is the medium of communication which covers the globe. It is easily accessible to the people of every stratum. It is the only media which telecasts about three fourth of the advertisements in comparison to the other medias. As there is no such barriers and hindrances to the television viewing pertaining to age, class, caste, gender and educational status, the present study is focusing on the representation of women in advertisements in television. The advertisements in the television have an appeal and impact on a set of viewers that is very wide. The immediate impact of direct visual appeal can produce both negative and positive consequences among the audience.

The notion of the woman as the other, as the quite different from the normal male counterparts who is considered as the standard and the proper, whereas the woman is the deviant, exist even among the educated and the intellectual. It is these

notions that are reinforced by the media and particularly from the Indian television channels as well as commercials. The conventional role of women is depicted graphically in *The Second Sex* (1949) by Simone de Beauvoir, the French thinker, in the following words: She is simply what man decrees; thus she is called 'the sex', by which is meant that she appears essentially to the males a sexual being. For him she is sex- absolute sex no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute- she is the other (Brooks, 1997) [2].

Advertising in Television

A television advertisement or television commercial is a span of television programming produced and paid for by an organization that conveys a message. There are a broad range of programming types that entertain, inform, and educate viewers. Advertisement revenue provides a significant portion of the funding for most privately owned television networks. The vast majority of television advertisements today consist of brief advertising spots, ranging in length from a few seconds to several minutes (as well as program-length infomercials). Advertisements of this sort have been used to sell every product imaginable over the years, from household products to goods and services, to political campaigns (Kumar, 1995) [8]. The effect of television advertisements upon the viewing public has been so successful and so pervasive that it is considered impossible for a politician to wage a successful election campaign, in the United States, without use of television advertising.

Many television advertisements feature catchy jingles (songs or melodies) or catch-phrases that generate sustained appeal, which may remain in the minds of television viewers long after the span of the advertising campaign. Some of these ad jingles or catch-phrases may take on lives of their own, spawning gags or "riffs" that may appear in other forms of media, such as comedy movies or television variety shows, or in written media, such as magazine comics or literature. Advertising agencies often use humor as a tool in their creative marketing campaigns. In fact, many psychological studies try to demonstrate the effect of humor and indicate the way to empower advertising persuasion.

Women in advertisements

Technological advancements causes a wide reach advertising mediums all over the world - newspapers, magazines, billboards, pavements, sides of buses/ vehicles, radio, television, and the Internet. The power of advertising lies in persuasion and its ability to influence people's behavior. This ability has been enhanced by globalization. Globalization and the advancement in new media technologies are transforming how sexuality is viewed and treated around the world.

The result is the beaming of homogeneous images in the media and the tendency towards increased cultural and social uniformity. This is exemplified by the way films and glitzy advertisements have helped the spread of sales of products. The result can be seen in discriminatory advertising, and the spread of imposed images of femininity and female roles, in a way of androcentrism or keeping the male/man at the center (as the prime concern) and the female/woman aside.

Great concern has been expressed about the role of the media especially as an agent of socialization. Critics often blame the policy of pandering to the audience's desires and prurient tastes on the competition between media corporations for the

advertisement dollar. Advertising is very important to profit-driven media conglomerates more interested in delivering viewers to advertisers than in serving the needs of the public.

Realizing the enormous problems women face in this regard, the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, China in 1995 identified the continued projection of negative and degrading images of women as a critical area of concern in the Platform of Action. Yet, five years after Beijing, some of the same concerns still remain (Kataria, 2007) ^[9].

Formulating and applying ethical codes for the communications media and for advertising might go a long way in promoting respect and common good. This is particularly so for television, which beams homogeneous images right into people's homes and around the world. However, confronting the negative effects of the new media on women requires focusing on the entire spectrum of media representations that limit, demean or degrade women. This includes the Internet. Internet advertising is growing bigger by the day and the medium is greatly increasing the influence of media corporations, and the opportunity for pornography considered by many feminists, as degrading to women.

In earlier days of electronics media boom women were portrayed as becoming about how clean they have got their loos with a magical bathroom cleaning liquid, dishing up wonderful meals, swooning over macho man or modeling men's beliefs, crying over a forgotten wedding anniversary etc. One would come across a hundreds of such retrograde depiction of women in advertising in TV. The enormous reach of the television is a well-established fact. But the manner in which it has influenced life styles, cultural standards, and aspirations of the people, especially women in this relatively conservative society, is the question that this enquiry addresses. The Indian television programs on women are generally based on the lives and cultures of urban society. In quantity there have been very few, but in quality very poor programs are concerned with the problems of women in rural areas.

The Television affects the perception of people in the society. Television is the medium of mass communication that is of extreme interest and consequence to the society and is providing to be a boon to women in particular. TV occupies a private and personal space of home and regarded as the domain of women subscribers whether she is a housewife, student or working lady. But as of today the most dominating narrative of the television advertisements revolve around juxtaposition of tradition and modernity, be it beauty soap, kitchen ingredients or detergent powder. Woman in advertisements are found to be more concerned about beauty, cleanliness, family and pleasing others. The picture that emerges is that of a woman who never produce knowledge wealth but always consume and remain a sort of hanger-on her male. In addition to this advertisement is blatantly anti-woman, treating her as a sex symbol (David, 2008) ^[10]. Even though the television presents largely traditional gender images there is mixed evidence about the impact of such images on gender attitudes and behavior. It is difficult to isolate the role of the television, since people are influenced by their whole environment, although there is fairly widespread agreement that over time the television seems like to influence people's ideas about gender roles.

Advertisements are the financial driving force of media and media plays an important role in shaping public opinions, personal beliefs and self-perception. The pure consumer orientation in the market logic has rather overlooked the situation of women. In its present form women-centric

advertisements depict situations that little to educate but much more to titillate. TV advertisements are said to have promoted a culture of consumerism by inspiring the viewers to buy new, varied and sometimes non-utilitarian things through commercial advertisements. Advertisements for various products seek to project housework usually enjoyable and easy. So far the products like soaps, creams, shampoos, oils, etc. usually equate good health with beauty. We have also seen that women in commercial advertisements are made out as mere objects and appendage to the products to attract the attention of the consumer.

To most advertisers women are not the mere models to be used on the TV screen for the sale of the product but they are the targeted consumers also. The relationship between the media, products and women is a circular process. The advertisements try to gain the attention of the consumers by showing women's today and glamour unnecessarily.

Erving Goffman in his book *Gender Advertisements* (1979) found that in media advertisements men tend to be located higher than women' and 'women are pictured on floors and walls more than men. He noted that "lowering oneself physically in some form or other of prostration is a classic stereotype of deference". It effectively presents women as inferior to men (Goffman, 1979) ^[11].

The Impressions of Patriarchy

The most prevalent discourses include patriarchy and emphasized femininity. Patriarchy, a web of psycho-social relationships which institute a socially significant difference on the axis of sex... is so deeply located in our very sense of lived, sexual identity that it appears to us as natural and unalterable (Chatterjee, 1988) ^[6].

The emphasized femininity is defined around compliance with female sub-ordination and oriented accommodating the interest and desires of men (Chatterjee, 1988) ^[6]. The cultural truisms promulgated by these discourses designate certain modes of behavior, occupations and social roles as feminine. For example, femininity tends to be associated with passivity, emotionality, the body, and caring roles. In contrast, masculinity is associated with activity, nationality, the mind and productive roles. So gender stereotyping of women in their roles as dutiful daughters, wives, mothers, housewives, nurses, and unpaid domestics- looking for reward of any sort.

Media has a replication on society

Indian society is full of diversified cultures, traditions and beliefs. Role of mass media as a social constructor and representative of people has greater responsibility in binding these complexities of culture and processes with people of the society. As the society and the media are consistent to each other, so both have a spherical means of collision on each other. On the one hand the media tries to animate a concept which affects the present societal phenomena and on the other hand the society captures the footsteps of media patriotically. Over the years, especially during the last decade, India has developed a fairly extensive communication infrastructure. The subject of portrayal of women in Indian media has drawn the attention of media critiques in the present times. It arises especially when our society is going through a period of social change. Women have been portrayed as men would like to see them; beautiful, submissive mothers of their children, efficient house keepers, but nothing else. The positive sides of women's progress and their contribution for national development have not been adequately discussed in the media of communication. The emphasis on stories about women,

about their struggle for recognition is only the surface trimming. The actual message to audience still is that society opposes the liberation of women.

Media paid scant attention to the women's issues till 1975. It perpetuated the stereotyped image of women as a homemakers and as the transmitter of traditional value systems. After the declaration of women's year and women's decade in 1975, suddenly women's issues and concerns attracted a great deal of importance and wider coverage was given to them. The government of India also came out with its report on the status of women titled, 'Towards Equality Report' during the same year women's specific programs were evolved at the combined initiative of government of India and some of the international agencies (Kaptan and Subramanian, 2001) [7].

Conclusion

Media is a powerful mode of communication for generating awareness and creating knowledge among people or in the society. It has the power to enact a healthy community through a healthy presentation. It has its roots in society from the very ancient period. It has been continued by various ways such as paintings, stone carvings, oral announcements, meetings, gossiping etc. But after the advancement of technology many particular mediums came up such as radio, television, satellite, electronic mail and now this is called the era of computers and internet, which has made life more easier and comfortable. Media has become a supplementary powerful source in sharing the world's perception of itself, an individual's struggle to maintain a unique identity and self-understanding art from the media influence becomes increasingly difficult. The wide reaching impact of media in general and television in particular possess the power to both construct and deconstruct the normativity of the society.

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