

BABY IN THE CORNER: REINFORCING GENDER STEREOTYPES THROUGH BRAND POSITIONING IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

It has been widely accepted that advertising – as a means of communication – is also a purveyor of sociological and psychological connotations; it mirrors society's body of values, beliefs, and aspirations. Thus, it is fair to say that advertisements help in promoting and re-enforcing the norms that any society holds. The production and distribution of these norms, either explicit or subtle, is quite rampant in the modern world, and concern an array of social problems such as gender, caste, class, race, and sexual orientation. This paper focuses on how advertisements code and disseminate gender norms, be it socially progressive messages around gender or stereotypes. It will also study contemporary Indian advertising industry's relation to the feminist movement, and draw wider connections with the success or failure of 'femvertising' by engaging in textual and market-level analyses of products that brand themselves under the banner of women empowerment.

Keywords: gender segregation, gender stereotypes, brand positioning, baby in the corner

INTRODUCTION

Advertising is the most powerful means of social communication. In terms of business, it helps in generating sales and revenue by making commodities more attractive to the product's target audience. However, advertising does not come without immense sociological and psychological connotations because it mirrors society's body of values, beliefs, and aspirations. Thus, it is fair to say that advertisements help in promoting and re-enforcing the norms that any society holds. For example, stigma around dark complexion in India propels the high demand for fairness creams, which leads to an increase in the number of advertisements that further vilify dark skin. Such a connection between society, business and media helps in perpetuating the idea that a fairer complexion holds more social and aesthetic value than darker ones. The production and distribution of these norms, either explicit or subtle, is quite rampant in the modern world, and concern an array of social problems such as gender, caste, class, race, and sexual orientation.

This paper, however, will focus on how advertisements code and disseminate gender norms, be it socially progressive messages around gender or stereotypes.

According to early Vedic texts (some of the most important scriptures in Hinduism) women were given an equal role in society. Women are depicted as goddesses and worshipped as symbols of wealth, knowledge and power. However, the rigidity of the caste system changed everything. To preserve the 'purity' of a caste, women started being viewed as instruments of reproduction and not equal members of the society. Laws were similarly amended by medieval kingdoms so that women could fit roles similar to that of a homemaker. The invasion of the Mughals brought in rigid Islamic Laws. When these interacted with the Indian sociological structures, the position and rights of women faced major setbacks. Things such as the parda (practice women covering their faces in front of unknown men), dowry, sati (the practice of the wife immolating herself after the death of her husband) came into practice. Though the British Raj tried to take some steps, such as banning sati, it couldn't counter much of the oppression women were facing in society. After independence, women were given the same rights as men in free India, including the right to vote and right to hold property. These policies were extremely progressive even when compared to western standards.

However, the rigid sociological structures prevented women from accessing most of these benefits. Centuries of conditioning led to the internalization of strict gender roles even within women. With the economic liberalization of India in 1991, the country moved towards a more capitalistic and free market economic set-up. The advertisements perpetuated all of what the society stood for, in terms of toxic masculinity, toxic femininity and gender roles.

History of Indian Advertising Industry's Engagement with Gender Issues

Gender has played a very important role in modern day advertising, which not only shows the socially constructed disparity between men and women but also the stereotypes of masculinity and femininity. In a survey conducted by Lundstrom and Sciglimpaglia (1970) to study the role of gender in advertising, it was found that women were seen as sexual objects, objects that were beautiful but inferior and subordinate to men. Historically, there have been two distinct ways in which women have been portrayed in advertisements: either as stereotypical homemakers to sell products like cosmetics and cooking appliances, or as oversexualised dancers to sell commodities as vague as matchboxes. On the other hand, though there has been a rampant use of toxic masculinity, men in advertisements seem to be much more human. Historically speaking, one of the most explicit forms of sexism was in campaign launched in Doordarshan TV by Usha (an Indian company that makes household appliances like sewing machines) that depicted a mother and her daughter (both of whom were played by Bollywood actresses) near an Usha

Sewing Machine with the caption “train her to be an ideal housewife”. An early MTR commercial showed a woman with six hands whose sole purpose was to cook food for the family. Be it photos or captions, the obvious symbolism in such advertisements is that of the patriarchal society, which necessarily directs and restricts all women only to be homemakers who can sew clothes and take care of their husbands. Such advertisements were seen as a setback to the feminist movement in India that were trying to break these stereotypes by showing how women could be just as accomplished in worldly affairs as men, that restricting a women to households was not just a waste of their talents but more importantly an infringement on their right to self-actualisation. These were also harmful to men, though the degree of harm caused was lesser and the manner in which it was caused was subtle and implicit. When advertisements feature men only engaging in hyper-masculine physical activities, those who do not subscribe to these patriarchal stereotypes are stigmatised by the society. Thus, the problem of sexism in the Indian advertising industry is historical and deep rooted.

Comparative Study of Advertising and Gender Representation

The academic study of gender representation in advertising began during the 1960s, with Bardwick and Schumann empirically proving that advertisements depicted women to be more domesticated than their male counterparts. Most of these studies took place in the United States, and, despite the minor sociological differences, the conclusions of these experiments remain relevant in the Indian context even today. In 1974, Courtney and Whipple investigated images of women in television commercials and found significant differences between men and women; women were sexualised and occupied dependent roles in cosmetics product advertisement and were less likely to be used in advertisements for cars, trucks and related products. Seventy-five percent of all advertisements using women showed them in house settings rather than business environments. McArthur and Resko (1975) claimed that women were most likely to be defined not by occupational or other types of roles, but in terms of their relationships with others, i.e. as spouse, girlfriend, parent or friend. These studies hold even if tested across cultures; Usha Sewing machines’ advertisements are evidence of a global stereotyping of women in advertisements. Even today soap and shampoo brands like Lux and Liril show only cisgender women in over-sexualised roles with their femininity wired for the male gaze. In the western world, advertising has witnessed a significant transformation by presenting a more realistic and balanced picture of womanhood. There has been an increase in the number of female-oriented ads. An example of this is Serena Williams’ Nike campaigns, a step that acknowledges the presence of successful women in a sport that has been long dominated by men. The studies of Munshi (2000) showed similar positive changes in the Indian advertising industry as well, with the more number of advertisers being open to cast women in male dominated roles being more in the year 2000 as compared to the 1990s.

Contemporary Problems in Indian Advertising

The present decade has witnessed a change in the world of commerce. The market for many commodities shifted online, which has caused a major change in the advertising industry as well. The younger generation, given they mostly controls the supply and demand of content online, has made attempts to reform the narratives that advertisements disseminate about gender. In a recent commercial by Dove, the soap brand attempts to normalise and glorify all women and their bodies irrespective of age, skin colour and socio-economic background. The reclamation of the idea of beauty from something perfect and unnatural to something unique and empowering was a major shift from how soap brands have conventionally behaved as the practice was of glorifying some body types and shaming others. Despite these minor changes and improvements, advertisements across different media forms continue to perpetuate misogyny and toxic masculinity and femininity. The examples discussed below will show the social messages these ads encode and their impact on societies.

A commercial advertisement by Nando's India reads "We don't mind if you touch our buns, or breasts or even our thighs. Whatever you are into, enjoying any Nando's meal with your hands is always recommended." By way of innuendo, this advertisement compares the bodies of women to pieces of meat and goes on to promote rape culture, a systemic problem that a country like India is already struggling with. It reduces female anatomy as something that is at a man's disposal, to be used at his discretion. There was a huge outcry after this advert was published, which prompted Nando's to take it down and issue a public apology. However, it proved how the ignorance of marketing departments (even those of multinational companies) promote misogyny and rape culture. A Jack and Jones advertisement similarly went on to promote sexual harassment in the workplace by featuring a male employer carrying a woman on his shoulder who is presumably his employee, with the caption reading "Don't hold back. Take your work home." At a more subtle level, Snickers (a chocolate brand) casually implies that women are 'drama queens' unable to handle serious situations. These advertisements are highly contemporary, and were produced alongside the prevalent discourse of feminist advertising.

Veet, a company that sells products used by women for hair removal has been responsible in perpetuating high levels of toxic femininity. A recent ad featured three women who turn into heavy overweight men, just because they do not use hair removal products. Their lovers are disgusted and taxi drivers refuse to offer them services. This advertisement dehumanises women with body hair. By showing that clean-shaven women are rewarded more by society, it further stigmatises and marginalises all other women who already struggle with patriarchy and the norms of toxic femininity on a daily basis. Kellogg's goes down the same path and repeatedly shows overweight women as unproductive in their home and offices. Advertisements such as this

lead to depression and low levels of self esteem amongst women, apart from circulating unhealthy and unrealistic notions of womanhood.

Toxic masculinity presents an entirely different problem altogether. While misogynist advertisements have started being pulled down, brands that promote toxic masculinity is rarely called out. Products like Old Spice, whose advertisements are considered to be iconic, suggest that the normal male has nothing short of an Olympian's physique. Axe, another deodorant brand goes a step further by showing a model lose weight and achieve the perfect body form after applying axe deodorant. Fairness creams by brands like Emami stigmatise dark skin tones for both men and women. However, these ads have not received as much censure as compared to their female-oriented counterparts.

These ads are perfect examples of the current trends of gender representation in the Indian advertising industry. Axe, Old Spice, Kellogg's and Snickers make millions in revenue and spend a significant part of it in adverts to gain more market share. However, a by product of these actions are increasing rates of anxiety and a proliferation of unrealistic ideas of masculinity and femininity among the consumers that shape their market. However with growing social consciousness and the emergence of an educated younger generation, adverts are forced to go through higher levels of introspection and scrutiny, which has resulted a shift in the way consumers receive notions of gender through advertisements.

“Feminist Marketing” that Reinforces Gender Stereotypes

Recently, feminist advertising, or “femvertising”, has gained currency internationally; by endorsing ideas of gender equality, many corporates have begun positioning themselves as socially conscious and responsible. The alignment of advertising and feminism has promoted a variety of responses from consumers and producers alike. Some think that corporate endorsement helps the cause of gender rights, while others believe that advertising firms are leveraging feminism as a marketing tactic. A popular example an advertisement released by Bianco Footwear — a Danish shoe brand — on Youtube in early 2017. The concept behind the campaign was to promote equal rights between men and women. It pointed out that almost all commercial products ranging from shampoos to clothes were available to men at a cheaper rate than women. The ad made it clearly evident how women had to pay more to purchase products - thus endorsing an important change feminists have been trying to bring about - until the women in the advert started jumping on cars and attacking men with high heels and coffee cups. Many have read this ad as not feminist, but something that reinforces the stereotypes of women being irrational, emotionally unstable, or even hysterical.

Similar trends are observable in Indian advertising and popular culture. Indian cinema, particularly Bollywood, has had a very shaky stance toward feminism. In the U.S, Hollywood actresses like Emma Watson have been pioneers of feminism at the global stage; in the subcontinent, however, some Indian actresses refrain from calling themselves feminists. For example, Tabu, Kareena Kapoor and Katrina Kaif denounce feminism, but still proclaim that they stand for equal rights for women. Unsurprisingly enough, these women also serve as brand ambassadors of Lux, Veet and other companies that have released several sexist advertisements, some of which have been discussed in this paper. Actresses are often criticised for not using the label, but that ignores larger complexities. It is difficult for them to take stances in an industry which is extremely male dominated. However, the industry is taking a more progressive stances. A BIBA advertisement released in 2016 depicted role inversion in a scene where an arranged marriage is being negotiated between two families. Although the bride is evaluated based on her cooking and coyness, the groom too undergoes a ‘screening process’ that only focuses on his ability to be a homemaker. This is an ironic and perhaps even radical take of situations that women in India go through. But it is the prospective bride’s father that screens the prospective groom; the former is not allowed to ask questions directly to the latter, and her opinions are mediated through her father. This demonstrates a complex tension between feminist advertising and traditional assumptions about femininity. Why are brands not radical enough to represent fiercely independent women? What is the line that firms are not willing to cross? Does the coyness on the part of the ads step from a gender bias or from an urge to establish the authenticity of the modern Indian household?

The Indian urban market has unlimited commercial potential. The feminist movement and its allies occupy their well deserved place in popular culture with which the burgeoning youth associates itself. There is no doubt that corporates have tried to capitalise on this by commercialising activism. However, the companies themselves rarely follow up on what they preach. Unequal wage and lack of representation in top level management are things that have not gone unnoticed. Feminist narratives are often clouded by profit motives of capitalists, both inside and outside their products’ advertisements.

CONCLUSION

Feminism in India is extremely nuanced which is why acts of gender discrimination (and its remedies) must be seen and studied in the context from which they emerge. Western epistemologies remains relevant, but doesn’t apply in absolution. Sociological factors such as religion and culture play a much bigger role in shaping the life of an individual. Therefore, individual behaviour must also be judged in context of the Indian cultural and sociological climate. It is extremely impractical to fight against all patriarchal norms since they are a major

part of lives of almost all Indians. However, the principled idea of a fully non-patriarchal world must be kept in mind as an ideal whilst designing. Thus, advertising agencies must attempt to take concessions from the orthodox view of what gender actually means. The Dove ad celebrating beauty only had cisgender women despite it making genuine attempts to normalise and celebrate diversity. Such ads play a huge role in not just changing how people feel about themselves, but also create room to question the stereotypical understanding of beauty. Dove held surveys and interacted with people who form their consumer base in order to test ideas for their ads, an approach often used by American brands to understand the psyche of all their consumers, given the diversity that exists in the United States as well. Cosmetic companies in the United States employed these techniques to understand the needs of African American women, in order to be more inclusive in their marketing campaigns. As brands are becoming more progressive in their campaigns, a more consistent and healthy feminist narrative is being constructed. It is not possible for a brand to advertise misogynist and feminist content at the same time. The brand then has a choice either to reform and apologise or to face public outcry. Companies, in order to protect their consumer base and market share, show a much higher tendency to choose the former option.

India will soon be the youngest nation; the median age of its population will come down to 29 years by 2020. It is also the world's second fastest growing economy. The emerging middle class widened the outreach of markets to an unprecedented level. Commerce plays a major role in the socioeconomic life of people. Advertisements in the twenty-first century impact the psychology and behaviour of markets in addition to their basic task of informing consumers about a commodity. In a society that believes in equality, advertisements have the burden to be sensitive and introspective in terms of the content they spread. There has been a surge of progressive movements across the urban centres in India, and businesses must partner with and supplement their growth. Feminist discourse has prompted several online media companies in India to adopt a more inclusive policy in terms of the content and advertisements that they publish. An IAA-Hansa Research study shows positive mindsets in the Indian markets around work distribution according to gender; 89% of men and 97% of women in urban hubs believing that women can take up equal responsibilities as men in households. It cannot be concluded if and when mainstream advertising will reflect this attitude, but if it does, it would be no less than a social, psychological and commercial revolution in the Indian society.

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