

Construction of Body – Image through Advertisements

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Abstract

In India advertisements are the primary revenue resource for both print and audio-visual media. So the advertisers and their policies control the media and fulfil their agenda of ‘brainwashing the consumer’. Advertisements through the use of signs and symbols create an ‘image’ of the product or service and try to manipulate the consumers. Advertisements take the glimpses of real life and make them richer to transport the consumers to a ‘make-believe world’. This construction of image becomes an important area to focus in case of advertisements of cosmetic and beauty products which give assurance of ‘image-makeover’ to the women consumers. In these advertisements women are found to consolidate the prevalent patriarchy of the society and the reference to contemporary liberated women is very rare. The paper tries to show this celebration of ‘body – image’ as a means of subjugation and powerlessness on the part of women and raises question on its behalf.

Keywords

Advertising, women consumers, image, appearance, illusion.

Introduction

Advertisements though are supposed to be used for the marketing of products, have become an integral part of our culture. It is no more ‘just a business expenditure undertaken in the hope of moving some merchandise off the store shelves, but is rather an integral part of modern culture’ (Leiss et al., 2005). Customs, traditions, lifestyle practices, social norms which constitute culture also ‘contribute to the construction of advertisements, which therefore emerges as a powerful tool of capitalism that inscribes cultural flows and effects that seduce, provoke, control, and determine consumer desires’ (Dasgupta et al., 2012).

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Multinational companies mostly from the western world are targeting developing economies like India to market their products and this marketing is chiefly done through advertisements in different media like- in print, in electronic media and the latest addition that is through 'new media'. It is needless to say that among these three types of media through television advertisement advertisers get access to a vast audience of potential consumers and 'the combination of sound and vision ensures the message great force and impact' (Dyer, 1986). So in this paper the focus will be mostly on the television advertisements.

Background

Advertisement was first telecast on Indian television in the year 1976. Though initially public service advertising dominated the media scene, gradually with the advent of private players advertising for the merchandise got a spur. Technological improvements and innovations in the production of advertisements over the years have made them more sophisticated and persuasive. As Dyer says in his book 'Ads present us with images and then make them seem true. As a result they befuddle our experience and mystify our perceptions and experiences of the real world by offering spectacular illusions...'. This construction of illusion becomes particularly important in case advertisements by the manufacturers of cosmetic and beauty products.

The cosmetic industry mostly market its image-enhancement products 'that have constructed body images, sexuality, docile bodies to achieve non traditional body images, processes that have impacted Indian culture, primarily in the urban and suburban areas'(Dasgupta et al., 2012). Women in modern urban and suburban India are 'empowered and not passive dolls' (Maitrayee Chowdhury) and there is a 'growing awareness of the body by urban, upwardly mobile Indian woman (Maitrayee Chowdhury).

As elaborated in the book 'Consuming identities: global advertising, marketing and cultural identity in India' how advertisers find it difficult to do demographic profiling of the consumers because of the various diversities of the subcontinent. Even psychographic profiling which defines groups of consumers along the lines of lifestyle and taste rather than variables such as age, gender and household income proves insufficient to place an individual in any specific psychographic category. Wright has also explained because of these diversities the whole concept of 'mass marketing' in India becomes somewhat absurd and 'mass' becomes a fairly specific group of people. Image-enhancements mostly target upper-class teen girls who are 'directed toward their role as members of a global community'. While they maintain their Indian cultural values they engage themselves with global lifestyles.

As mentioned by Dasgupta 'advertisements of cosmetic products in India have changed the body images and sartorial preferences. Of course the "thin is beautiful" body image has become the desirable targets for youngsters

leading to gyms and fitness parlours mushrooming in every locality, with facilities in these outfits matching the economic ability of that particular area.’

Role of body communication

Human beings communicate with each other through verbal and non-verbal means. While words form the verbal communication, body language which comprises of facial expression, eye contact, posture, gesture, body shape etc. communicate ‘feelings, social meanings and values’. Richardson and Robinson have mentioned in their book ‘Introducing Gender and Women’s Studies’ that groomed, slender, attractive, make-up (mostly white) women’s bodies are mostly used to sell products. If we carefully look at each of the term we will find that the manufacturers of cosmetic products target these features and create a desire in the mind of the consumers to possess them.

As elaborated by Gillian Dyer appearance is an important medium of communication and appearance consists of the following attributes:

Age: Age is an important factor in a person’s appearance. For the image-enhancement advertisements the emphasis is on ‘youth’.

Hair: Female hair is largely presented as an object of sensuality for the opposite sex and an object of self-admiration for the women themselves. The colour, length, texture and style of a person’s hair are important qualifiers of their overall appearance. So the advertisers are found to come up with the promise to add something to the above-mentioned features of a woman’s hair.

Body: As stated earlier body can be thin, fat, short, and tall. If we give a careful look at the advertisements of the products starting from energy drink, breakfast cereals to treadmills we will find that the advertisers are working towards rewarding us with a ‘perfect body shape’ and quite naturally the target is the female bodies in most of the cases. Women in advertisements of lipstick, eye make-up, shampoo, nail-polish, tights etc. are often represented by bits of her body – eyes, head, hands or legs and so on.

Looks: Looks are related to the overall style and impression created by a character and it is needless to say that ‘good looks’ is emphasized in the advertisements which has been equalled with light skin tone, smooth hair-free skin and of course thin structure of the body.

Advertising as an image initiator

Advertising creates images larger than the reality and constructs a myth of perfect body shape among the teenage girls. As women enter their teenage years they pay increasing attention to the size and shape of their bodies, to the clothes, styling and make-up. Advertisers play on this psychology in building an illusion. As pointed out by Dyer ‘Not a few advertisements are based on appeals made to scientific ‘fact’ and on the technique of ‘before-and-after’ using the product. And another powerful

technique of persuasion is to play on guilt feelings and worry, the fear of being lonely or socially ostracized or of old age'. He further exemplifies that the same person can be called as: obese, fat, chubby, well-built. As words not only describe a person or an object rather they convey feelings. Advertisers exploit this power of the words in giving their opinion about a body shape and sell their products on these premises.

'Advertisements thus create myths and construct icons and dominant images as the model to follow...' (Dasgupta et al.2012). Body shapes have a specific physiological and biological origin but advertisers provoke women to rectify and enhance the body-image and also teach to hate the natural body-type. Carol Munter has given a list in the article 'Fat and the Fantasy of Perfection' what generally women hate in their bodies. Some of them are:

'my fat tummy fat around my waist

.....flab, arms, legs

Wrinkles on neck...Signs of age around mouth and eyes

...oily skin being too pale...the way my body makes me feel like a mistake in general...

My hair (at times)...wattles under my chin....my hands....my appetite...my nose...'
(Munter, 1984).

While appreciating and celebrating feminine beauty these advertisements reproduce certain power relationships and ideologies that already exist in the society. One can notice that 'throughout the 1980's and early 1990's Indian womanhood was a crucial site for the construction of national subjects that centred on the importance of the Indian family' (Wright, 2001). The emphasis on the body image started gaining currency with wave of Globalization. Richardson and Robinson has said in their book – 'Globalization has led many companies to target wealthy elites in an ever-expanding number of countries – China, Japan, Korea and India, for instance - who represent eager consumers for high end products' (Dasgupta et al., 2012).

As a result wife and mother caring for their husbands and children which were the prototype of 'idealized versions of women' and the most favourite category of women consumers for the advertisers are no longer as simple and straight as they were in earlier times. Many women of 40's and 50's are successful, independent working women and advertisers target them with products to hide their age, to keep them fit and healthy.

Another important segment of women are housewives and advertising thrives mostly on the idea that being unappreciated means 'unattractive and embittered housewives' (Wright, 2001). We often come across the advertisements

of fairness creams, body lotion where women's endeavour to care of her skin is actually an effort to receive her husband's attention.

As Wright explains 'in these cases the women's role as wives are to take care of and please their husbands.' Dasgupta also added 'professional woman is still shown as one who feels success lies not in intellect and in skill but fair skin and glossy, silky long hair'. The advertisers are found to make promises that a perfect image not only earns the appreciation of male counterparts but can help in getting 'a good job or even a break as a model or film star' (Dasgupta et al., 2012).

Conclusion

The myth of perfect body has fuelled the mushrooming of beauty parlours, massage parlours, Gyms and clinics for 'aesthetic surgery'. The message that are repeated by the advertisers that unless and until a woman is thin, she has a fair-skin; she looks gorgeous with the usage of cosmetics she is 'unacceptable, unworthy of admiration, unable to be loved, unsuitable as a sexual partner' (Munter, 1984).

Advertisers mostly assign women a position which seems that their 'survival rests on pleasing' men. The question arises here is this an attempt by the media players to assign women 'to the realm of fantasy and to magic, not to life?' (Munter, 1984). As Dasgupta said in the book quite categorically that women continue to be regarded as the second sex, "Women thus have been treated as the other, marginalized in mainstream media representation by the powerful men who control media industries, with media content help in to systematically reproduce that unequal gendered social relationship" (Creedon & Cramer). The representation of the "new woman" who has the power to make choices about their lives is very rare in the advertisements. Women are generally portrayed as attractive, an object of desire, as a submissive human beings who are looked at, who are to be taken care of, to be appreciated and to be chosen.

The concept of transformation has become the key and realities like disability, aging and weight have become the vehicle for fantasies about a perfect body image which can be best illustrated by the advertisement on the India television. Every human being has limitations and imperfections. The advertisers try to create awareness about these limitations and create a 'perceived need' for their products. As Carol Munter says women are taught to shape their bodies and not the world.

The question arises do the women get admiration only for their bodies in the real world? Should they rely on the false hope offered by the advertisers for the attainment of bodily perfection? Or 'does this imply that advertising not only consolidates but also continues to construct gender inequalities despite atypical subversions?' (Dasgupta et al., 2012). In spite of the cultural freedom of women and equal power relations between men and women advertisers continue to depict them as 'the chosen and not the choosers, the sexually acted-upon and not the actors'. Munter further states that 'the fantasy of transformation starts from a sense of

powerlessness' and advertisers construct 'imagined flaws' in a woman's body to position their products. Munter has given a beautiful list of illusionary perception centring around the perfect body image which advertisers normally reiterate – if a woman is thin she will be popular, she will turn people on, she will be admired, she have power, she will be loved, she will be envied so on and so forth. So we can raise the question with Munter that isn't the fantasy with perfection of body image is the real fantasy about the rejection of the self? Doesn't the desire for perfection turn out to be the ultimate in subjugation: the eradication of the female self? So the women need to understand that what is important is what they feel about their bodies, not what the advertisers dictate.

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