



Gender Justice in Advertisements: Study of Indian Commercials

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Abstract

Television commercials have more to convey than any other media of communication in the present day scenario. Very short, straight yet creative messages are conveyed to the target audience with a messenger. To convey any message women are used irrespective of the fact that they are the part of the product or utility. However, the stereotyped notions still get reflected even in the modern societies especially with respect to women. This paper analyses the select cases of Indian commercials with the content analysis from gender sensitivity perspective. It is an attempt of qualitative analysis along with the recent debates and reactions from the institutional perspective.

Keywords: Gender, justice, advertisements, commercials.

Introduction

Advertising has a long history and particularly in the Post Industrial society. Advertising has become more or less an inseparable part of our daily life. In a way, it has embedded our routine life and thoughts. We cannot go spend a day without reading a newspaper, listen to FM radio or watch television channels, which are loaded with some advertisements or commercials. Advertising presently is being understood from various angles, as every aspect of our life is full of various dimensions. The present day commercial is multidimensional. It is the latest form of mass communication and an excellent marketing tool. Advertisement is a component of the larger system wherein economic system is a part, a means of financing the mass media. Advertisement is a social institution, an instrument of business management, a field of employment and a profession¹. These advertisements are targeted towards men and women, who are living in the social world and advertising is only a sub system of economic system, wherein economic system is again a sub system of large social system². As advertising is a part of larger social system, it is essential to look at these marketing tools from a different angle. However, marketing and advertising theories and concepts deal with the various segments of the society like class, demographical, psychological, etc., it has given little importance to sociological categories like gender, caste, community, religion etc. Here in this context one has to find out the gender justice in advertisements. A sociological understanding of advertisement is very much needed in the Indian context and at this juncture particularly.

Advertising do not stop with the flow of information among the actors of market, idea or product from one entity i.e., seller to another i.e., buyer; it goes further to influence and influences people to act and belief. This is, however, only the communication point of viewing function. There is another way

of viewing the advertising function; and that is the marketing point of view. Each organization has marketing objectives and a marketing plan to achieve them. An organization also identifies the segments of the market it intends to serve. In the process of achieving its marketing objectives, the organization uses several marketing tools like four 'P's (product, price, promotion and place). Thus advertising is apart of the marketing mix under the major variable of promotion. Advertising as a part of the total marketing mix influences the sale of the product, as do the other variables of the mix. As a marketing tool, advertising is a business approach, but as communication, it is a creative approach. The business approach comes from the business mind, whereas the creative approach comes from the operation of the creative mind applied to the advertising function. The business mind is concerned with sales and profits, whereas the creative mind is concerned with the artistic and intangible field of communication. There has been a growing awareness of the effectiveness in recent years of advertising. This refers to a system of feedback to eventually determine the effectiveness of advertisement efforts. The principles of why and how advertising succeeds or fails must be evolved to make advertising a more useful marketing tool. It is also important to know and understand the success rate and the failure as it is targeted to the people of the society who belong to various sub systems, groups, communities, religion, region, caste, gender, class and various other social segments. Further, the success or the failure of any advertisement depends on the perception of the 'viewers' who are the targets, the receptors and the understandability of the public is very much essential.

Rationale: In this process, few important questions need to be answered carefully with a thorough enquiry like who is advertising? What is being advertised? To whom it is being advertised? Where and how is it being advertised? And finally, what response was intended and what response is received? In other words, while developing an advertising programme

marketing agents must always start by knowing, understanding and identifying the target groups and buyer motives. After this, the team can move towards to make the five major decisions of developing and advertising programme known as five 'M's like Mission, Money, Message, Media and Measurement.

Objectives: i. To understand the recent trends in the contents of commercials with reference to the gender roles and projections. ii. To carry out the content analysis of the select commercials to understand the gender sensitivity. iii. To assess the general public and institutional reactions.

Methodology

Sociologically, the researcher is concerned about the Mission, Message and Measurement of the advertisements as they cover the social aspects. In this paper researcher is making an enquiry into several advertisements in relation with gender aspects and into a particular T.V. commercial, M.T.R. Jamoon Mix. Here, the researcher seeks to find out the advertising objectives, what message is being sent, how, in what way, to whom and finally, the success of the commercial in terms of acceptance, popularity and rating by the viewers and ultimately resulting in the increase or decrease of sales of the product. Success of any commercial or advertisement depends upon the acceptability of the same by the society because ultimately, they are the decision makers and thus society is important.

Review of Literature: As one knows the literature of any given society reflect upon the conditions, situations, thought and various other aspects of the concerned society and thus gives a clear picture of the social history. Similarly, the advertisements that we regularly read, hear and visualize through various print media, radio, visual media, also have some reflection upon the society. Advertising is social, in which it operates³. Advertisements promote goods and services through its own mechanism. From an in-depth and as a whole perspective, the ways in which messages are presented in advertising, they reach deeply into the most serious concerns of interpersonal and family relations of individuals in society. The feeling of happiness, contentment, sex roles and the uses of stereotyping affluences the fading away of older cultural traditions. The present advertising tremendously influences the younger generation, the role of business in society, persuasion and many other issues like personal autonomy. Advertising represents a privileged form of discourse, which concerns our modern society. It portrays special significance and plays special prominence of our lives in form of minute and incremental movements. Further, these advertisements project our most personal settings of our lives at home and in leisure activities. It is just those times and places in which we relax and have the opportunity for self expression and has almost embedded in our daily life.

Further, studies are being made on consumer behaviour. Whereas, regarding impact on the society and various social

complications are not dealt much in detail. There are few theoretical observations made in this direction, like Herbert Marcuse, "... perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery of injustice. Most of the prevailing needs to relax to have fun to behave and consume in accordance with the advertisements, to love and hate what others love and hate belong to this category of false needs. Such needs have a societal content and function which are determined by external powers over which the individual has no control. No matter how much such needs may have become the individual's own they continue to be what they ever from the beginning products of a society whose dominant interest demand represses"⁴.

In the present setting roles in ads are clearly defined for both men and women. Some of them are stereotyped, traditional notions, societal establishments, unnecessary portrayals and expectations. The same is more clearly shown and depicted in the present ads. Women continue to struggle with the perception of an ideal body which is construed by the newly designed and imposed ideals. Goffman gives a different dimension and analyzes advertisements according to gender stereotypes of men and women. He describes the advertisements with contents and containments imposed upon women. They are advertisements where women's body images are unattainable. The male ideal is imposed upon women through advertisements. The stereotyped and submissive role are imposed not only in the regular daily lives but are depicted through these medium. Such acts exist solely for the purpose of the male sexual fantasy at all levels. Goffman points out, women are treated as objects and must use their appearances to find worth. Further, he expresses the idea that women have been oppressed in their role in society where they serve only to please men. Their roles are meant to please men in their nudity, their purity, and their body size as they enact in the advertising⁵. He points out that advertisements considered as "pictures", are not viewed as unnatural, abnormal and peculiar. Most of the time it is this taken for granted aspect of advertising fascinates, for the believes that a close inspection of ads soon reveal much that is peculiar both in their form and content. He turns his attention to gender representations in the present day thought as how males and females are shown and the way in which the receivers of message through commercials is expected to construct 'gender meaning' from what appears in advertisements".

By projecting and portraying certain groups of individuals in certain roles in the advertising promotes stereotypes. Women for example, are usually portrayed in the conventional characters as housewives or mothers. A study reveals that majority of advertisements, apparently relegating them to a secondary role, as being featured, women along with other persons, they were shown as mothers, wives or companions to man. Rarely, women were shown as business executives⁶. Even in the present social networking sites, the presentation of women in stereotype roles is visible⁷. The international television channels continue to portray such reduced roles especially of women⁸. Several studies indicate as they are a

global phenomena, which is surprising⁹. Though women have been competing with men in almost all sectors they have to face multiple challenges like dual and multiple roles both at work and home¹⁰.

Analysis: After reviewing few literatures available, reveals that these are few advertisements, which affect the society, sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly also. There are some commercials and advertisements, which either were banned or were asked to stop airing and publishing and in some cases alterations were made. These trends show that there is a social awareness among the public regarding advertisements, messages, misuse, etc.,

In fact, the Advertising Standard Council of India has a code of conduct for advertising, self-regulatory in nature which includes the following:

Advertisements shall not be framed to abuse the trust of consumers or exploit their lack of experience or knowledge. No claim made should be exaggerated as to lead to grave or widespread disappointment in the minds of the consumers.

Special Care and restraint has to be exercised in advertisements addressed to those suffering from weakness, any real or perceived inadequacy of any physical attributes, to ensure that claims or representations directly or by implication, do not exceed what is considered prudent by generally accepted standards of medical practice and the actual efficacy of the products.

The Declaration of Fundamental Principles tries to safeguard the social aspects. It says, 'to safeguard against the indiscriminate use of advertising for the promotion of products which are regarded as hazardous to society or to individuals to a degree or of a type which is unacceptable to society at large'. In spite of such safeguards an awareness not much research is being made in terms of advertisements affecting social categories and larger groups like religion, race, caste, class, gender, community, etc.,

In spite of such declarations and also code of conducts in most of the Indian Advertisements women are shown as just a show piece, and in some cases they are shown half nude to attract the attention of younger generation. In most of the liquor, cigarette ads women are shown just as a guest appearance, or as a show piece, or as a success for the man who consumes the above said, again reduce the role of women to a secondary position or those who can be obtained, possessed, attained etc. Women are not paid on par with men, women are not treated equally with men, and they are not even rated same in the industry. In such scenario, where is gender justice? are we trying to look at the 'women empowerment' in terms of being used because of the beauty attached to them or the nudity attracts more attention, or the new profession that is modelling which means many things?

Different Cases: Here in this context we can throw some light on few cases where commercials were either banned or made to change, as it affects particular communities. 'Lee Girls' jeans commercial was created and launched but unfortunately the commercial was asked to stop publishing. In the commercial, a girl is laying down on the middle of the three railway wagons, spreading her arms apart and open towards air to be nailed. Further, her legs stretched downwards and are one upon the other. Further, a cap showing the crown with thorns. All these clearly give the picture of Jesus Christ on the 'cross'. On the top of it, the caption of the commercial was 'Let the Worship Begin'. This definitely would hurt the sentiments of one community, particularly, Christians. As a matter of fact, when the advertisement got published there was an unhappy response from the Church fathers and Bishops asking the Ad agency to stop this advertisement being published. Now the point is, imagine the amount being spent on it, time, energy, ideas, and creativity spent which is a waste now all went astray. Had there been a little sociological enquiry, then it would have been different. In fact, in this advertisement the girl is 'used' in contrast with Jesus Christ in a very different manner denegrating the religious sentiments and also the sanctity behind it.

Union Information and Broadcasting Minister banned at least two commercials from being aired in all channels of state-run broadcaster Doordarshan, since the ministry considered them "offensive to public taste and morals," but advertising professionals say the move will affect their creativity. Ministry asked Doordarshan not to air a toothpaste commercial, which depicts a uniformed guard "kissing" a condemned prisoner to grant his last wish, as also another that depicts a man caressing a motorbike while fantasizing about the female form.

In case of M.T.R. Jamoon Mix commercial, also respondents did mention about the presence of caste identity and also the role of women was only confined to the role of cooking and that is how it is reduced to secondary position. In most of the television commercials unfortunately the gender sensitivity is found absent rather being conscious. Had there been a little sociological enquiry, then it would have been different. In these connections one has to look at various fields and dimensions of the society for gender justice, because even today in many cases gender justice is far from reality and is being abused, used and misused.

Conclusion

Commercials are not devoid of society and are not aired into people less world where social identities are still prominent and matter a lot. Under such circumstances, ideas which hurt gender sensitive issues, projections, portrayal should be avoided to avoid the further embarrassment both by the public and public institutions. Sociological insights throw a great deal of light into such scenario which can be better utilized.

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