

Shifting Paradigms of Culture: Women and Empowerment in Advertisement

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Abstract

Advertisement plays a significant role in reflecting and transmitting cultural values of any part of the society. Projection and dissemination of cultural practices have become a quintessential part of advertisement. The advertisers reflect and intervene culture and cultural practices and values prevalent in the country to create an impact upon the viewers besides promoting consumerism. In recent times, the exploration of advertisement - both print and visual – enhances better understanding of changing ideals of social norms, lifestyles, beauty, vogue, relationship, sexuality, gender roles beyond promoting new products. The advertisement also informs and makes the viewers aware of the changing cultural practices and trends in the contemporary society. Thus we have been encountering different paradigms of stereotypical representation and changes of cultural roles, values, milieu, fashion, since its inception to the contemporary. This paper focuses on such shifting paradigms of the representation of Indian women particularly in cultural practices, and changing roles of gender from the past to the present by lime lighting a few illustrious advertisements from the Indian context.

Keywords: Advertisement, Visual Representation, Indian Women, Decoding, Culture Implications, Subversion, Gender Roles, Representation of Diversity, Unconventional, Empowerment, Newwoman.

Introduction

The present article aims to explore the stereotypical representation of women in media particularly advertisement in the Indian scenario, and the changing cultural representations from the past to the present. Women and culture are interpreted by many critics as interconnected because women are most often seen as carriers of cultural tradition of their society. Marketing strategy exposes women being the embodiment of various cultural elements like cultural values, customs, rituals, language and symbols to localize the product in a way representing them in a subjugated position of the patriarchal Indian society. Though women and culture in advertisement is an extensively researched area, the persistent changes in representing women pertinent to the changing society open up more and more insightful and intriguing matters to discuss and research. The 21st century has seen a tremendous and phenomenal transformation of women in both western and Indian society. Gone are those days where women were subjugated as weaker sex, subjugated, submissive, the other and such like. Also gone are the discourse on equality of gender and gender related roles and discrimination. Now it's the high time to limelight women as more of an empowered sex and discuss how far they are empowered? Are women accepted as an empowered self and How empowerment differs from individual within the cultural contexts?

Literary Review

Advertisement which has become an integral part of our daily life plays a significant role in the campaign to elevate women to achieve their empowerment. Even before Television came into existence, advertisement started to pop up in radios. Once ads changed its form from the listener to the viewer, it engrossed the whole mass of people with its stringent portrayal of social norms of the Indian society, especially the intact gender roles of the patriarchal system besides promoting the product. Henceforth, advertisements by reinstating gender roles, propagates gender disparity, inequality and discrimination down the lane and subsequently stereotypes were created and disseminated through media.

It has been since 1970s, that Advertisement gained popularity as a new field of research to explore and to decode the socio, political and economic implications pertinent to the society, “ the visual culture also analyzed the significant process of the production of the commodity images which transformed the advertisements into public cultural production. They also envision that advertisements are essential components of the process of the creation of national as well as racial identity.” (Kaushik, Shubhneet, “Viewing advertisements doing history: Advertisements in AJ, 1935-1938, *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 74 (2013), pp. 587-593 (7 pages) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44158861>)

Kaushil states that predominantly advertisements are seen as a ‘visual hegemony’ established by the nationalism and colonialism. In India, research in advertisement actually began in post 1980s and it widely explored in modes of communication, consumption practices and behaviours and formation of Indian middle-class’s participation. Over the years this visual hegemony has taken a twist and turn as women gained education and entered the field of advertisement. A new perspectives of visual communication came into existence as they created a space or a platform for women to share in the media in all aspects besides just being a model. It really created a great tremors among the patriarchal hegemony, who tried to curtail such changes but unfortunately they could not succeed.

The emergence of Women’s Rights Movement and the wake of various feminist movements across countries were agitated, and condemned against such obscenity and vulgarity in framing women, which as a result has taken a new set of stereotypical framework claiming as ‘superwoman’ or ‘newwomen’, who are equal, multitasked, and vibrant. Consequently, this did brought changes in some urban space alone and not widely. In the year 2000, a contingently educated women had a discourse on empowerment, where the shifting paradigms evolved to a different representations, which embraced women in diversity – class, caste, creed, religion, race and so on.

Subsequently, the contemporary society predominantly discuss women as more empowered sex and exuberantly extenuate women in all true colors. Their potential has been recognized, their ability has been valued and thereafter trying to create an identity as an empowered self in the society.

Methodology

This paper tries to celebrate the inclusive diversity of the empowered women by substantiating and analyzing the cultural implications and the representation of gender roles in a few ads chosen for the study. The article also tries to contests discourses like “These industries like media, advertising, fashion and beauty are controlled by men and aimed at women” (Kaushik, Shubhneet, 591). The methodology used to It is so alarming and distressing to know the facts that quiet a good amount of forces working together to control women’s bodies globally like “setting up impossible standards about what their bodies should look like and how they are expected to present their bodies.”.... “For women, being stripped of their reproductive freedom and autonomy over their bodies contributes to an environment where women are expected to present their bodies in a certain way ...” (www.buzzsawmag.org)

Changing Stereotypes of Women in Advertisement

On speaking about the advertising models, women had always been the victim of any patriarchal society since ages. Particularly speaking, the objectification of women as a sexually appealing object in advertisements has ingrained in the society and discussing and debating on such issues in the present society has become a cliché. Way back in 1960s and 1970s women entered the advertisement less in number and they were represented in sexual roles and passive roles as housewives, caretakers, a mere dependent and submissive being. After the surge of feminist movements in India, in 1980s and 90s there was a gradual change in the representation of women. They were portrayed into a different set of stereotyped image, the image of ‘new woman’ as professionals, self-reliant and multitasked woman who could manage both house and workplace together. This “new woman” (Fillipow, Sonia) was not only expected to succeed in the workplace, but also expected to keep up with domestic chores at home and keep her husband happy. This new stereotype created a new type of pressure for both working women and women at home. The pioneering activist, speaker and writer Jean Kilbourne explained how this stereotype “was really a problem” because “she created an impossible standard that added to the stress women felt and normalized that women were supposed to do this effortlessly without any help from their partners.” (<https://jeankilbourne.com/>)

Again after the radical feminists came to the forefront with their radical thoughts to reform women in India, the representation took a different dimension/paradigm. Thereafter, the ads of 21st century depicted women in a new framework as an individual independent self who could prove their diligence and bravery and could exist and survive without the support of their male opponent. These changes are expected to act as a stimulus for the real women in the society to bring in changes as the subversion of gender roles, equality of gender roles, independent and rational thinking among women and their equal participation in every field.

Image Making

The images advertisements allude to can influence and shape a woman’s perspective of herself. But as far as representation is concerned, women are always misrepresented to the public. As it was discussed earlier, degrading and objectifying women has become a cliché in spite of vociferous accusations from various movements that support and uplift women but one cannot deny the transformations of perceptions and the phenomenal changes in the depiction of women through various powerful campaigns led by women agencies in and across the countries.

In one of the articles titled “Portraying Women in Advertisements: An Analogy Between Past and Present,” provides a clean chart of sexual division in roles played in ads during 80s and 90s which are as follows

Product Category	Sex Portrayed	Ratio of ads
Cleaning Products	Female	.00
Food Products	Female	.45
Beauty products	Female	.60
Drugs	Female	.66
Furniture	Female	.71
Clothing	Female	.76
Home appliances	Female	.86
Charity	-	1.00
Travel	Male	1.30
Cars	Male	1.37
Alcoholic beverages	Male	1.63
Cigarettes	Male	1.90

Banks	Male	2.11
Industrial products	Male	2.17
Entertainment and media	Male	2.33
Institutional ads	Male	2.50

There is an increase in ratio of Women in all fields in the 20th century marking the empowered women.

Most of us would become victims to the advertisement in replicating and mimicking things that the models bring before us. It is so powerful that the user of the product, if he or she becomes user friendly would spread the product to their fraternity thus carrying the advertisement more 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.” (1-5)

One of the critics, Matlin (1987) explains how the media’s misrepresentation of women in advertisement has created plenty of stereotypical representations of women. She lists seven empirically documented stereotypes that have been created by advertisements. Sexual roles - Women are often shown in a sexual or vulnerable position in order to sell the product, whether it is an ad for shaving cream or alcoholic beverages (Pepsi, Cola). Matlin illustrates how, when women look at ads showing beautiful female models she begins to judge herself keeping it as an yardstick and strives hard to replicate the model. Familial Roles – A perfect and ideal image of a family women and women as professionals and at last the stereotypical representation of the empowered women.

Thus, Matlin describes how the medium is an important force in shaping reality. It is these stereotyped representation that help to shape women’s opinions of what they should look like. Both the genders were unreasonably affected by these unrealistic images of women depicted in ads leading to often unattainable expectations and goals, “The power of ads shapes men’s expectations for finding women who are over 5 feet and 6 inches tall, but still but who are weighing less than 100 pounds, who look great in tight clothes, and demure and submissive.”

Not much of a change has occurred over the years in the way women’s roles are portrayed. Advertisements have consistently confined women to the traditional role of a mother, or beauty, or sex symbol, and these do not represent women’s diversity [Kang 1997: 981]. This is similar to what Matlin refers to as gender stereotypes in ads.

Stereotypes and generalizations in ads continue to objectify women, and place stress solely on their appearance, thus devaluing their innate worth. A University of Michigan study from the early 80s found that sexual stereotyping did not change at all from 1960 to 1979. During two decades of social change, advertisers consistently portrayed women modelling clothes or performing domestic work, while men were depicted on the job and rarely in the home (*The New Woman in the Eyes of the Media*, 1984).

Women, Cultural Paradigms and Empowerment

According to Cambridge English Dictionary ‘empowerment’ means ‘to authorize’. In the context of the people, they have to be authorized to have control over their own lives. When applied in the context of development of the particular segment of population, the women have to be ‘empowered’ to have control over their own lives to better their socio- economic and political conditions. Thus, women empowerment can be interpreted as totality of empowerment including political, social, cultural, and other dimension of human life as also the physical, moral and intellectual. Empowerment of women unlocks the door for modernization of any society. Participation and control over resources of power are critical indicators in the process of development. Women especially in rural areas possess least proportion of these resources and are therefore dependent when compared to the urban women.

Perception differs now with men and women fuelled by numerous political and social movements that support and empower women like Women’s Liberation Movement, Feminist Movement, #Me Too and

Time's up Movement. The education, understanding and awareness of these movements gradually changes the perception of perceiving women in a bad light rather women are encouraged to feature in distinct dimensional role that features women not only as a home maker, a submissive self-sacrificing nurturer, and subservient but as white collar professionals, semi-professionals, entertainers, sport figures/athletes, disabled and LGBTQ too is of no exceptional and such like, "Encouraging women to be fierce and fearless with their fashion choices rather than typically 'ladylike', the campaign was designed to break down gender norms and encourage self-expression.". It raises slogans like "sell your product and not her body" (www.actionaid.org).

Various organizations have cropped up to challenge the objectification of women in advertisement globally. Organizations like #Me Too and Times Up India are the recent movements emerged in US and dispersed across the countries like India to challenge men involved in rape, sexual harassment and objectifying women in media. The emergence of these movements created uproar in nook and corners of India and most of the victimized women, particularly in media daringly and aggressively burst out their suppressed pain publically. This act of women has slashed the wicked nature of men in higher positions which consequently led to their defamation in their society. Likewise *Fe-Male in Lebanon* created such agitation among the Lebanese men. However, the primary goal of such movements is to change the image of women in media and to ensure women, equal and fair treatment and gender equality.

Diversity

Subsequently, in the present milieu women present themselves forcibly and invariably in unimaginable and incredible roles in variant shapes, size and colour instructing the male viewers to accept women as they are and not to expect them to become what they want the women to be. However, by doing so, women do really value their body and claim autonomy in willingly accepting such daring roles instead of presenting it erotically and to embrace what makes them unique. Women are trying to control their body constraining men to control it and thereby propagate gender equality.

In the contemporary times, the advertising industries, fashion and modelling are no more associated with a male-centred or patriarchal institution of mass media that used gender oppressions against women. It is said that, 40 to 60 % of advertising companies have women agencies and they involve women models from all fields without confining women only to the kitchen. For examples, one can witness women being depicted as a brave athlete, acrobat, and gymnastic, managerial or administrative skills with leadership qualities occupying different professions and also as a home maker. This is where women deny to be the object of men or to please them sexually. They are portrayed as to be smart, breadwinner, strong, aggressive, and dominant. (*Dissenting Voices* Volume 6 | Issue 1 9-7-2017 "Sexual Objectification of Female Bodies in Beauty Pageants, Pornography, and Media", Kelsey Wright. (125 -142)).

In fact the reversible of roles like men found in kitchen with ladle introducing kitchen appliances. To name a few, Preethi Zodiac Mixer Grinder, Butterfly Gas Stove, Idhayam Edible Oil, Modular Kitchens and such like bring men to the once private domain of women. In addition to it, men are often depicted as baby sitters for the wives at office. To illustrate a few ads are as follows, the coffee ads then and now shows the difference of changing roles. The LEO COFFEE ad which came in the year 1980s depicts a joint family, where wife gets up early does her morning routine and then goes to kitchen to make coffee and offers to all members of the family with all smiling and pleasing face. Contrarily, the BRU coffee, NESTLE SUNRISE ads shows husband preparing coffee in the kitchen and the aroma wakes the wife in the bedroom. So, it is now the husband who offer or serve coffee/morning drink for his wife depicts subverted gender roles and men in kitchen.

Earlier washing powder and detergent ad involves women and children (NIRMA WASHING SOAP), contrarily now the same detergent ad involves mostly men folk and less women, - ads like SURFEXCEL, ARIEL MATIC, POWER, TIDE and etc., - The ads on vessel cleaning detergent and liquid like VIM AND EXO makes men in the process of cleaning vessels to surprise their partner or the chores are shared.

This is carried out more fiercely by women who are flourishing as stakeholders or agencies and directors and high powered creative roles in the field of advertising. They preferably choose media to use advertising as a tool to campaign for the betterment of women in future society and to erase gender disparity. More powerful campaigns in advertisement have attracted huge population throughout the world. There are many powerful ad campaigns that empower women with strong messages like “I am a woman hear me roar”, “I Will What I Want”, “See What’s Possible”, “Imagine the Possibilities”, “Ladies First”. (landt.co/2024/12/female-empowerment-ad-campaigns) Pro-female ads like REEBOK “#FitToFight” & “#BruisesCanBeGood” are important for younger generations to see. The ad Sabhyata (Clothing), celebrates the change in gender role and significantly it depicts how the mother of a son has taught him cooking and expects him to cook for her and her daughter-in-law without much hue and cry.

Adweek has conducted a survey on how ads empower women, boosting sales and bettering advertising industries globally. *Fem-vertising* is a movement that encourages and supports and welcomes women with pro-talents. *Thursday’s* Session in New York defined the movement as “advertising that employs pro-female talent, messages and imagery to empower women and girls” (www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/). Adweek intelligence survey has conducted/studied the changes in the depiction of women in ads. Strangely it has come up with sparkling feedbacks where, the changing ads and perceptions towards the depiction of women has proved to be hits with consumers and highly effective at generating sales.

They are no more the traditional model before the wider public, they are no more emotional or gentle as they were once. The subjugated self has now liberated and extricated. At this juncture, a new perspective of empowerment came into existence and created an awareness among the public, the whole lot of the consumer world. Therefore this project discusses a new paradigm of empowered women, which includes women from different categories, shape, size, colour and intention. They actually challenged the very basic depiction of women in media. The zero size figure, the slim and sexy women representation is now replaced by faces which were once neglected and hatred by the media and public. The body shame is itself questioned as much as the women try to experiment on their body. The mere fact of acceptance of reality deconstructs the illusionary or unrealistic depiction/representation of women earlier in the media. They are no more pleasing, they have ceased getting portrayed as a sexual object they are now into the content making women with scares, wrinkles, wounds. They also appear to be disfigured, distorted, deformed and physically and visually challenged obese, short and stout, wheaty and black in complexion and such like.

From the perspective of legal changes, the association of National advertisers has launched a SeeHer movement which strives toward the accurate portrayal of women in advertisements, media and entertainment. They have used a data driven methodology to identify gender bias in media. The GEM quantifies the four key measures in women in Advertisements.

- Presentation
- Respectfulness
- Appropriate manner of presentation
- If the female character is being view as a powerful role model or not.

Acts like Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986 (IRWP Act) prohibit the indecent and obscene representation of women in advertisements. The Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act, 1995 (CTNR Act), one among the various media regulations in India, “prohibits the transmission of advertisements on the cable network which are not in conformity with the Advertisement Code.”¹⁴ The problem with these regulations is that it only prohibit obscenity in ads but cannot prevent the ads which reinstate the social norms unless they are indecent.

Judicial changes are coming up like ‘15replacing phrases like “adulteress” to “ a woman who has engaged in sexual relations outside of marriage” and “chaste” woman, “dutiful” wife, “housewife” to a plain “woman”, “wife” and “homemaker” respectively.’ (Katkamwar, Maithili)

Then women empowerment is seen as a distant dream but now with the implementation of different plans, programs, policies, women live to their dream as a liberated and independent sex in the society. Though women still being victims of patriarchal oppression, discrimination, harassment, sexual assault, negligence, they also try to empower one another and then the nation. One cannot conclude that the era of oppression and subjugation has come to an end with regard to women and they were completely in the forefront as a successful empowered being. The former is gradually settling down while the latter is gliding in a slow phase

The popular cultural media like ads are more powerful vehicle to instill knowledge about gender disparities and equality in any society and it even changes ones perception towards women and empowerment. Media and the powerful influences that they create demonstrates the power stratification in any society and many activists and critical thinkers like Klein and Marcus believe that this power pictures would transform the actual society and would bring changes among the viewers. Marcus believes that such powerful images of women should socialize and influence the young minds. These images have the power to create an impression, a desire and a reality that may not always be true. As they shun their conventional image and as the association of cultural implications loses its contextual meaning, a new meaning emanates creating a new identity which is far removed from the stereotypical representations and associations. Subsequently, creating a possibility, a hope and a dream, where women reconstruct themselves to be a more empowered self that connects a woman's identity and value to beauty, elegance, and desirability. Thus women have evolved to a new paradigm through consumption and appearance, and so they need to celebrate the differences and uniqueness of each individual instead of generalizing all under one typical framework.

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