

Gendered Advertisements: A Narrative Review of the Representation of Women in Masculine Product Advertisements

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Abstract

Many discussions and arguments have been focused on the subjectification of issues relating to women in India. Talking about rural India and the issues of women encircling it, we could hardly reach a conclusive finding that a new issue would be jolting to join the puzzle of intertwined issues that prevail. Putting a step back and not venturing into the realm of rural India, women, and its issues, this paper will focus on urban India glaring at the issue of women and their objectification under the purview of media in the country. Media is a vast umbrella under which the studies could be undertaken. Be it in journalism, films, or advertisements, the presentation of women in the mediums and the understanding that has been created in the minds of the audiences leading to the further proliferation of a redundant narrative of viewing women as a sexual commodity had been constructed effectively. Lots of studies on the narrative have been accepted and further research has been made to understand the effects, causes, and possible solutions to end the unfortunate narratives that have been set. Yet, a detailed review of whether the situation remains the same today or certain developments in the regard have been made remains to be of particular interest. Hence, this paper seeks to evaluate the advertisement narratives through the lenses of perfume advertisements for men, taking into view the subjects of masculinity and the pacification of the male gaze and seeks to review whether changes have truly been made or remain in talks taking into account the development standards set by an urban society given attitudinal and behavioral development of the outlook towards women.

1. Introduction

Masculinity has been an underlying phenomenon and a pivot point around which a lot of advertisements have been constructed previously. Until today, advertisements have always been categorical where thorough research is carried out on the society and its set of practices around which the product could be placed in a directly appealing manner for purchase. The issue of consumerism is at the frontline where corporates could easily exploit the needs and desires of the consumers and reap benefits for their products. Any society is made up of individuals who have etched in them their set of values and beliefs picked up from their immediate surroundings while growing up. Unfortunately, talking about the Indian context the patriarchal standards set up by the society, and the taboos and obligations under which women had and continue to function have been a particularly disturbing trend that continues to dominate shaping the society. What we find in advertisements is just a reflection of society and nothing more than the classification and framing of women into roles that they have been expected to play in the eyes of a hugely dominating male gaze and male ego. However, with certain changes and developments happening in the realms of understanding the identity of women beyond the confines of the household and towards

a progressive and independent outlook advertisers too are looking at the changing narratives and constructs that seek to define society today.

Human sexuality could be considered as the patterns of freedom that individuals have in unveiling themselves sexually. A web of parameters that govern the human body such as the physical nature, the emotional states, the spiritual underpinnings, the biological needs, etc. all contribute to the idea of sexuality. While speaking in the context of gender, gender could be understood as the social constructs of behaviors, roles, identities, etc. that govern the principles of distinguishing between the established constructs of determining boys, girls, gender-diverse people, etc. A lot is based on the biological framework that constitutes the establishment of gender but a lot more is determined by the socio-political constructs that have come to find acceptance. Gender could be understood as a choice that a human being feels to identify itself in the background of a multi-dimensional development paradigm. A lot has altered in the spheres of emphasizing individual choices and freedom and it would be simplified to say and mean gender in the present epoch should lay with the choices of an individual that the person wishes to associate with. However, a lot more also depends on the socio-political and cultural aspects of society such as

the effects of mass media, and the politics of a nation which heavily influence the formation of social norms. Speaking in the context of advertisements the work of Berger must be undertaken in an attempt to understand the dynamics that come into play. Berger scrutinizes advertisements and symbols within the framework of cultural studies and goes about to explain how advertisements produce meaning and what they echo about society. He suggests that “advertisements work by ‘striking’ responsive chords in us and not just by giving us information” (Berger, 1991). Every deed, appearance, and work of art holds a symbolic meaning. Ball opines “a sign is always thing-plus-meaning” (Ball & Smith, 1992). Entities such as products or objects hardly carry a meaning or objective in themselves but the culture which denotes and gives shape and meaning is a process that disseminates the meanings to the masses through the media of advertisement. As Baudrillard defined “if we consume the product as a product, we consume its meaning through advertising” (Sezgi, 1994). Hence, advertisements control and calibrate in giving meanings to objects and create a consumer society.

The binary system of gender is emphasized in specific spaces, resulting in the othering, subordination, and exclusion of women, leaving them disadvantaged while men maintain positions of power, dominance, and authority. Homes, workplaces, volunteer work, and spaces of recreation and entertainment act as sites for the reproduction of binary differences and gender inequalities. Structures of the gender regime uphold and trap individuals in traditional gender roles, with no way to subvert or challenge the system. These roles are enforced through social construction and the performance of gender. People conform to cultural expectations to build relationships and maintain an acceptable or normal appearance. The perpetuation of traditional gender roles creates an imbalance of power relationships (Hall & Way, 2019). Women are viewed as objects that may be easily wooed by a guy with the right perfume. Women are shown as the delightful aspect to which they attempt to relate the product, causing the target audience, which includes both men and women, to regard women as objects of pleasure. Perfumes are rapidly becoming symbols of uniqueness and sexual orientation for those who wear them. Television commercials promoting various perfume companies emphasize this trait by employing partially stereotypical forms of representation for their protagonists, particularly women. After a brief theoretical contextualization of the verbal and visual signification modes in television advertisements, the present paper will look at these changing narratives with an eye toward the changing identity of women being a sexual commodity for selling male perfume products in advertisements and reviews the changes that have happened if at all there have been developments taking place in this regard.

2. Literature Review

In trying to characterize the television communicative process, Stuart Hall said that the institutional structures of broadcasting, with their practices and networks of production, their organized relations, and technical

infrastructures, are required to produce a programme. Production, here, constructs the message. In one sense, then, the circuit begins here. Of course, the production process is not without its 'discursive' aspect: it, too, is framed throughout by meanings and ideas: knowledge-in-use concerning the routines of production, historically defined technical skills, professional ideologies, institutional knowledge, definitions and assumptions, assumptions about the audience and so on the frame the constitution of the programme through this production structure. Further, he maintains that, though the production structures of television originate from the television discourse, they do not constitute a closed system. They draw topics, treatments, agendas, events, personnel, images of the audience, and definitions of the situation from other sources and other discursive formations within the wider socio-cultural and political structure of which they are a differentiated part. Hall called how values and assumptions are inscribed into texts and then translated from them, encoding and decoding (Hall S, 1980). Reviewing sexual attitudes and practices is a particularly interesting field of sociology because sexual behavior is culturally universal. Each society, however, interprets sexuality and sexual activity in different ways. Many societies around the world have different attitudes about premarital sex, the age of sexual consent, homosexuality, masturbation, and other sexual behaviors (Widmer, Judith, & Robert, 1998). At the same time, sociologists have learned that certain norms are shared among most societies.

Power is intrinsic to sexuality; that much has become clear in the burgeoning literature on eroticism and social life. From the work of Anthony Giddens to that of Catharine MacKinnon, Gayle Rubin, and recent scholars of cyber sexuality, questions of power and sexuality form the focus of a considerable quantum of social theory, while researchers ask how power makes an impact on sexual violence and young people's educational experiences. Libertarians have sought to free sexuality from the shackles of restraint and 'moralism', radical feminists have argued that sexuality and domination are mutually informing, and poststructuralist scholars have explored the mesh of power relations through which sexual subjects are constituted (Brickell, 2009). The projection of sexuality in advertising can be understood with the way of objectifying women in advertising to help sell a particular product or service. This use of sexually appealing imagery does not necessarily link to the product or service being marketed. The earliest record of the use of sexuality in advertising is by the Pearl Tobacco brand in 1871, which presented a naked maiden on the package cover which was followed by W. Duke & Sons in 1885 – who inserted trading cards into cigarette packs that featured sexually provocative starlets. This brand grew to become the leading American cigarette brand by the year 1890. There are records of other early forms of sex appeal in advertising such as woodcuts and illustrations of attractive women adorning posters, signs, and advertisements for saloons, tonics, and tobacco. Over the past decades, the use of such appeals in advertisements has been increasing (Mager & Helgeson, 2011; Reichert & Carpenter, 2004). Advertisers knowingly sexualize the products and brands in advertisements to make them more attractive to consumers and to influence their behavior (Gould, 1994).

A possible effect of such use could be that sex appeal in advertisements evokes emotional responses such as arousal, excitement, or even lust, which in turn can create stimulation and the desire for the product (Reichert, Heckler, & Jackson, 2001). There is also evidence to support that using sexual appeals in advertisements results in a higher level of persuasion than using nonsexual ads (Dudley, 1999; Reichert, Heckler, & Jackson, 2001). Explaining why sexual advertisements attract consumers, a study indicates that sex has a powerful psychological appeal and explains how advertising takes advantage of human biological and social evolution to use sex to sell products (Tekvar, 2004). However, the differences in male and female psychology cause different approaches to and perceptions of sex, both the act and its outcome. Whatever the genders and sexual tendencies are, whatever society, culture, and subculture that advertisements address, one of the goals of media is to channel consumers or readers for more consumption while creating ideal images such as ideal body, ideal femininity-masculinity, ideal sexuality, etc. (Tekvar, 2004). There occur various consequences including stereotypes and certain ideological transformations. Thus, the condensed form of communication in advertising lends itself exceptionally well to an examination of the portrayal of women and sexuality to analyze the content that is showcased to the audience. The women in the advertisements are often portrayed from the perspective of the male gaze and as symbols that satiate the desires of men and such advertisements are targeted at male consumers where seduction is used to popularize their brand to attract men (Chaudhuri, 2001).

Women tend to become a 'subject' in the capitalistic market. Power marks society with narcissistic foundations and society derives narcissistic pleasure, arising from identification with a male protagonist and his gaze. To be more precise desire plays a vital role in sanctioning these norms through the tactics of power (Deogirkar, 2015). The primary concern of feminism has been men's sexual dominance over women, justifying sexual violence and limiting women's expressions of sexuality (Halley, 2006). Later, feminist thought differentiates between sexuality and gender oppression, but many feminists still connect these concepts to women's subordination (Rubin, 1984; 2011).

3. Analysis of men's perfume advertisements

For analysis, a few of the case studies have had to be taken under the purview to draw conclusive evidence of the developments. For that matter, advertisements for popular perfumes for men such as 'wild stone' and the now-defunct product 'Zatak' would be studied and analysis would be made to review the advertisements in the Indian societal context. The once-popular 'zatak' advertisements showed hypersexuality in terms of the commodification of women. The tagline of the brand itself showed how women could be objectified as sexual objects with the tagline being "Just Zatak her." Such advertisements glorify the idea of men being masculine enough to attract women into seduction and appeal to the viewers to accept their masculinity through the purchase of the product.



Figure.1

In one of the advertisements from Zatak Perfumes (pic 1), the bride is shown to be newly married and is waiting for her other half to arrive. She however is drawn to the perfume and finds her way to a man who applies the perfume just opposite the window of her room. She is then shown to be slowly seduced and starts unbuttoning her depicting the sensuous process of seduction. However, The Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) deemed the ad "indecent, vulgar and suggestive" and it was taken off the air. The ad pretty much sums up the idea of masculinity and shows how women could be seduced at the drop of a pin, just by the application of perfume. This advertisement categorically disregards the identity of a woman who is newly married and throws light on the gross misrepresentation of women. If an altered reading of progressiveness could be looked at from the perspective of the woman, an alternative understanding could well be that of a woman who goes against the traditional conventions of a duty-bound wife, yet the reading would be shallow talking in the context of a perfume ad product exclusively for use by men and talking about the progressive women would prove to be futile in this ad. The ad nowhere shows openings for an alternative discourse and sticks to placate the male gaze and the viewing of women as merely sexual objects starving to get the better and fulfilling capacities of men. The alternative reading would however open up the scope for more discourses on the idea of progressiveness and women and further research could be carried out on the topic.



Figure.2

In a similar advertisement from Zatak (Picture 2), the advertisement shows a young boy having a dental issue and going to the dentist by applying perfume. The dentist in the clinic is a woman thereby reflecting the multifaceted professions that women profess and the places where women have been able to succeed. The nameplate carries the name of a woman who earlier used to be a space decorated for men. However, an important aspect to be noted is the fact that advertisements have hardly recognized women occupying serious professions such as lawyers and doctors or corporate professionals for that matter, and whenever there has been a representation, it has either been an attempt to sell women empowerment attempted at glorifying the products or bottling it down to the commodification of women such as in the advertisements of Zatak. In this advertisement too, a repeated pattern is observed as the dentist forgets to carry out her responsibility with her profession and indulges in seducing the boy with the perfume which seems to attract her to the boy. The imagery that ensues is all representative of the sexual connotations that have been reflected in the advertisement. Such narrowing of the binaries in terms of men and women has furthered the scope for viewing both genders in an appalling manner whereby men are shown to be attractive and masculine and women are merely identified as objects who play second fiddle to the pacification of the desires of men. The advertisements would be deemed inappropriate if the roles were reversed in the strategic processes of ad-making as the advertisements would have resonated less with most of the target markets that which the products are bound to be catered.

The overtly popular wild stone advertisements also reflect the same narrowed idea of confining women to mere objects and popularizing the idea of the masculine appeal in males. The advertisements run on the principle of attraction whereby the only message that gets passed on to the audience is that by application of perfume, it is obvious that women would get attracted to you. Such oddities that ads propagate also supplement the ever-increasing acts of violence and crimes committed against women. The ads should come under stringent scrutiny as to what message they intend to convey and the potential repercussions that seek to corrupt the already beleaguered fabrics of the cultures and values in society regarding the viewing of women. In the Wild Stone perfume advertisement, it was observed that there was a slight deviation in terms of the direct sexual appeal strategy that was used earlier, yet the message that was wished to be conveyed remained the same. In the ad, a woman seems to occupy a corporate position where she is making a presentation to a group of members in a meeting. She was carrying out her responsibilities just as a new executive enters the meeting who is a man and carries the smell of the perfume of the product. One of the members introduces him to the woman and what follows next is an outrightly bizarre if not a repugnant narrative that seeks to define a woman in the workspace. She immediately forgets to carry out her responsibilities of leading the presentation and starts stalking the individual

who has just entered social media in an almost irresistible manner. She stands exposed in front of the panel members as her actions on the desktop are all visible on the big screen which was being used for the presentation to be delivered. The tagline of the brand stands to be "People will notice, come what may" and thereby shows the absolute disregard in terms of viewing the modern women as the woman in the ad defiantly stands her ground acknowledging there is nothing inappropriate to be attracted to the man and sends forward an invite to befriend him in front of the members with aplomb. There is however a space provided for accepting the woman as having multifarious roles and identifying her as a free-spirited woman such as happening in the recent advertisements for the Wild Stone advertisements. However, there is no justification for the promotion of the same ideas that are used to sell perfume ads for men repeating the same set of narratives of viewing women as being subservient to the masculinity in the males. Rather, such narratives do less to demystify the fanciful and jargon terms of women empowerment and identification not throwing enough light on the aspects of where the boundary must be set for actual empowerment and identification to occur.

In one of the ads from the yesteryears, the situation was further demeaning. In an ad by Wild Stone Perfumes, it was noticed that a woman draped in a saree is seen playing hide and seek with a bunch of children with a cloth being tied around the eyes as is required in the game of hiding and seek. There is no reference however to the identity of the woman as to who she is and what she does but a mere subject who, again gets drawn to a man who has just arrived home from his office from what potentially could be inferred from the narrative of the advertisement. The man is again carrying the scent of the perfume and the woman with the cloth put on her eye forgets to be involved in the game and starts 'hunting' the man. The rest of the message could be understood from the caption as published by the company on the official YouTube page of the brand. The caption reads, "A game of Hide and Seek transpires. A mere whiff of Wild Stone leads her away from the game and into his den. Blindfolded, she treads without a doubt, following him as he moves. This is when the Hide and Seek ends and a passionate tale begins." The words 'leads her away,' 'into his den,' 'treads without a doubt,' and 'following him as he moves' need to be read precisely as the words casually estimate the subservience of women and the attitude that is being projected on women towards men. The message entailing the visuals and the words satisfactorily appease the idea of the male gaze of how men look at women through the lenses of sexuality and corresponds to the standards set by society concerning the viewing of women.

4. Conclusion

Advertising can be an effective medium for passing information to the public, but it is also a powerful means by which sexuality and gender roles are portrayed, and in cases when they are simplified to ease the delivery of the message and make them easy for viewers to understand. Generally, the sex aspect that is portrayed is relevant to the advertised product and is likely to be accepted because sex is seen as part

of the product argument. It can either be highly overt or extremely subtle. It varies from explicit displays of sexual acts and seductive behavior aimed at the viewers to the use of underlying and double-meaning sexual references that are more implied. Talking in terms of sexuality and the sex appeal used in advertisements, a thorough examination of these facets will disclose how “ideal” identities and personalities are assured to consumers through the products also looking at how products are made desirable through the advertisements. In the area of sexuality, sociologists shift their attention to sexual attitudes and practices away from physiology or anatomy. Talking about advertisement narratives for products of men, especially regarding men’s perfume products, the strategy of using sex appeal as read in the books on creative ad-making strategies needs to be introspected. The usage of the appeal has only brought along with it a deluge of indifferences in attitudes and behaviors towards women and has further aided the sustenance of dominant narratives in the ways of looking at women in society. With the changes taking place in the socio-political and cultural realms concerning women and the proliferation of terminologies such as empowerment, development, identity, independence, etc. many spaces for deliberation and consideration remain to be looked through by the ad-makers and the corporates promoting the products. Thus, a lot more needs to be done and amended in the domain and there remains an absence in the progress of the identity of the women and their respectful representation in the advertisements of products exclusively meant for men.

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