

Sexism in contemporary advertising

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Abstract

Sexism involves gender discrimination and stereotyping of genders. Women and men are not given equal position in many aspects. Both the genders are discriminated based on their roles in personal and professional lives. Sometimes women are depicted as individuals with nothing going for them except for being servile, with their contributions amounting to nothing worthwhile. This happens in the case of men too, with them being portrayed as brutish and violent with very little sensitivity associated with them. Unfortunately both the images are incorrect. To what extent does this sexism permeate and what is the nature of sexism? These are some pertinent questions that this paper seeks answers to by looking at sexism in contemporary advertisements through the prism of social responsibility.

Keywords: *Gender portrayal, Gender stereotyping, Gender discrimination and Reverse sexism*

1. Introduction

Sexism has been used for advertising various products for many years now. Sexism has many forms and shapes. It includes gender stereotyping, negative portrayal of men and women and comparison between genders. There are advertisements which include gender talks to advertise and promote their products. There were many such ads in the olden days and exist even now, where gender is looked from stereotypical angles. There is this concept called 'gender talk' that includes comments, dialogues and voice-overs which insult a particular gender. Gender is also objectified through song and music. The song which is played in the advertisement may include certain words which objectify a man or a woman. Things are wrongly

portrayed when it comes to gender representations and portrayal. Women are portrayed as weak and helpless such as a woman tormented by either the husband or her children; and men appear in dominant or leading roles such as the boss in office, the powerful dictatorial father /husband/son. In some cases, reverse sexism also happens where men are stereotyped on the basis of their roles and responsibilities through certain dialogues or conversations. Thus, gender is depicted in skewed ways leading to sexism or sexist content.

Sexist content or sexism has been a persistent problem in the field of advertising. Often products are promoted by targeting a particular group of people and sometimes this may lead to discriminatory/sexist messages conveyed in the process of trying to attract a certain section of the audience. To make a product look worthy of women men have to be distanced and the reverse works well when it comes to products meant for men. This dynamics of wooing by praising and distancing through discrediting creates gender discriminatory advertising messages. If it is a product meant for the good health of the entire family it is largely seen from the lens of the woman of the household, meaning the wife or mother, with praise being sung on her capacity for love and affection, to limitless levels; while the male is seen as devoid of the emotional quotient. On the other hand if it is banking or insurance or investment options the product is largely pitched to the male audience where things mathematical, logic and reasoning become fodder for presentation.

The menace of sexist stereotypes in advertisements is a problem that most advertising professionals find difficult to deal with. There are advertisements which are seemingly modern and progressive on the surface, but if closely observed the traditional mindsets are clearly present. A sexist attitude may be conveyed indirectly and oh so subtly in the advertisement. On

occasions both genders may be discriminated, degraded and discouraged and on other occasions only one of the gender may be portrayed poorly. Despite the changes in gender roles in every society and the inroads made by individuals to change, gender hierarchies continue, with certain stereotypes in gender representations being apparent. Generally a man is shown as extremely masculine, flirty, bold and courageous and the woman is shown as delicate, kind, affectionate and gentle. Women continue to be weak and spineless and men continue to be the knight in shining armor. The silver lining in an otherwise dark cloud is the attempts by many to rectify the situation by actively saying no to sexism in advertising, which is an encouraging move.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Gender Stereotyping

Stereotypical issues are a commonly occurring phenomenon in media. In advertisements, there are many stereotypical concepts being shown. Women are often portrayed as home-makers who take intense care for their family and their house, while men are always shown as strong, independent individuals who are engaged in non-domestic occupations. Men are always meant to be highly professional busy with office work. Women just takes care of their home and are portrayed as weak and dependent. They are also meant to appear in jobs with low socio economic status. It is also found that stereotypes vary according to the culture of a particular society.

Mithchell Gresham and Dr Vigilant conducted a study titled '*A Content Analysis of Racial and Gender Stereotyping in Advertising.*' It was a study conducted to analyze the racial and gender stereotypes in the super bowl commercials of the US from 2003 to 2013. The duo say this about sexist Super bowl ads "advertisers and companies do not see the woman as the member of the family with purchasing power"... "a key component in advertising is the fact that when the viewer looks at the actor's portrayal, the viewer should see himself/herself in that actor's portrayal. Therefore, since advertisers and companies are not targeting woman by giving them a representative of themselves in the commercial, it can be concluded that they still see a highly patriarchal society; wherein the family member that needs to be influenced is the man and not the woman"...

Diana Popova through a study titled '*Gender Stereotypes in advertising*' has added further insights into sexism in advertising. The main thrust of the paper is the power of gender in advertising. It clearly

establishes the traditional views held by advertising professionals with regard to the issue of gender, since the portrayal of gender is often wrong or highly exaggerated. Advertisements continue to harp on the tried and tested approaches to gender representation in advertisements; which is to portray men as overly-masculine, strong, aggressive, dominant, rational and active. Whereas, women are portrayed as being-excessively feminine, submissive, weak, emotional and passive. The paper concludes that media spaces continue and most probably will continue to bombard people with such advertisements which consist of mere gender stereotypes.

There is another study conducted by YLR Moorthy, Subhadip Roy and Anitha Pansari, titled '*The changing role of women in Indian TV advertisements: a longitudinal content analysis*'. This paper makes a claim that, women are being portrayed differently nowadays from earlier times for several reasons, one of which is employment. Not only are they portrayed differently, there is a change observed in the categories of products that women are portrayed as purchasing. The researchers concur that this is mainly due to the entry of women into the workplace. The dynamics is bound to change with more number of women becoming educated and entering the professional world of workplace giving them the confidence that they rightfully deserve. Further, the financial independence adds a new dimension to the scheme of things. As a result of financial independence, women in reality have gradually begun to procure themselves the much needed agency that has been spoken about a lot but has always eluded most women. This change influences the portrayal of women too. In-fact the supposed 'male' products such as alcoholic beverages, travel related goods and automobiles are being purchased by women too and women are shown purchasing these commodities in large numbers. This shows that, the portrayal of women is gradually changing though not at the rate one would like it to be.

Nichole J Thurm's study titled '*The portrayal of women in advertising: Reflection or Creation of values*' reveals how women are portrayed in advertisements and how this portrayal stands comparison to the actual presence & status enjoyed by women in America. The research uses Cultivation theory and Social Expectation theory for studying the portrayal of women in the US media.

2.2 Concept of sexism

Sexism is prejudice or discrimination based on sex or gender, especially against women and girls. The term sexism emerged from the so-called 'second wave' feminism of the 1960's. Sexism can be a belief that one sex is superior to or more valuable than the other sex. It imposes limits on what men and boys should do or what women and girls should do. The concept of sexism was formulated to raise consciousness about the oppression of girls and women, although by the early 21st century it had sometimes been expanded to include the oppression of any sex, including men and boys, intersexual people and transgender people.

The Public International Law and Policy Group made a study titled '*The Legal Frameworks regarding Sexism in Advertising: Comparison of National Systems*'. It addresses the legal and regulatory framework applicable to advertisements containing gender stereotypes and sexist media content under various domestic systems. The study analyzed the following states: Bulgaria, Denmark, France, Germany, Norway, Sweden, the UK and the US. The study found that, while many of these countries prohibit sexist advertising and some countries like Sweden and the US declined to enact laws prohibiting or regulating sexist advertisements. The study also elaborated on the way in which the relevant regulatory bodies in each system deal with sexism in advertising.

Diana Rodriguez Dussan's study called '*The Role of Women in the Creative Process of Advertising and the Creation of Sexist Ads*', studied advertisements in countries like United States, Canada, Spain and Peru. Through an exploratory research method the study tries to know about women's experiences, their involvement in the creative process of advertisements, the challenges they encounter in the job and their relation with clients and colleagues in the advertising world and how all of this impacts the advertising content, especially content related to gender portrayal. The findings of this research are expected to be helpful in bringing about a change in college curriculum & education with regard to advertising and also influence the mindsets of advertising & marketing professionals, while conceptualizing advertising messages.

3. Methodology

The present research will be using qualitative content analysis to lay thread bare the elements of the advertisements/TVCs under discussion. Through the content analysis the varied aspects of sexism in advertising will be made apparent leading to further

scrutiny of advertising content. Qualitative content analysis though perceived as subjective in comparison to quantitative content analysis, affords greater freedom for analysis and interpretation to the researcher. The study is grounded in Social Responsibility Theory as put forth by the authors Siebert & Peterson. Just like the press in any society is not devoid of responsibility so too the advertising industry and profession. Both the press and advertising industry have a powerful impact on the audience, thus care must be thus taken by both when placing information or promotional content on public domain.

The present research will be looking at select TVCs that have garnered media mileage for being extensively sexist, creating an unfavourable opinion in the minds of multitudes of people who find sexist content offensive and in bad taste. Using the following parameter such as music, voice-over, costumes, language, positioning/framing, the story line and theme of the advertisement, the sexist elements will be zeroed in and observed, to enable inference.

The two objectives of this study are to explore sexism in contemporary advertisements and to analyze the level of sexism in advertisements. Some of the questions that this research will be seeking answers to are as follows- Does sexism still exist in the television advertisements/commercials? Is sexism still used as a tool by advertisers to promote a product? How far is sexism used in contemporary advertisements/TVCs? Is there a change in contemporary advertisements with regard to sexism? Let it be noted that the term advertisements or advertising is a broad based umbrella term used in the present study to signify promotional content on TV. It is not a reference to print advertising. Advertising and TVC are being used synonymously in the present paper.

4. Discussion/Analysis

4.1 Best Ever Sunlight

This advertisement is an attempt to draw the viewers' attention to certain stereotypical mindsets that still exist in Indian society regarding chores done by people for personal needs and for family/ home and bring about a change in peoples' perception regarding one's individual role & responsibility towards home/family. The woman/wife is seen shopping for her family and is portrayed as burdened with a number of bags, while the man/husband is seen walking in breezily to meet the wife. The man is clearly late, he is in office attire and is unapologetic

about being late. He doesn't even bother to help the wife with the heavy bags. The wife though chides the husband, carries the bags as though it's her bounden duty to do so while the husband walks alongside her jauntily. The wife finally reminds him of his uncaring attitude towards her at which point he offers to pick up his share of the weight/burden by picking up his wife. With this gesture the wife turns putty, melts ingratiatingly and easily forgives her husband his earlier uncaring attitude.

The ad/TVC is disappointing in its premise because in trying to ward off old stereotypes ends up creating new ones. It abounds in the usual stereotype, that women cannot negotiate heavy bags on their own; they need their men to do it, that men are expected to carry heavy loads; that men loathe shopping and will often give the reason of work to avoid shopping. In terms of appearance too there are stereotypes in plenty. While the man played by the male model is attired in workwear clothes looking busy, professional and important, the woman is shown wearing frilly feminine clothing, as befits a pretty wife, a home-maker who doesn't do much except shop and doesn't even do a good job of that since she needs the help of her husband to carry the bags. In framing too there are the visual stereotypes- the man walks ahead with the woman following a couple of steps behind, till she reminds him of his responsibility towards her. The dialogues too are reminiscent of traditional mindsets where women have to remind the menfolk that to love means taking care of each other's needs- from the most intimate & important ones to the most banal & everyday needs. Further, dialogues get very trite & corny towards the end of the TVC with the husband mouthing formulaic lines like 'you are the colour in my life' while picking her up instead of the packages and the wife adding that 'you are my sunlight'. A little too pat & cheesy to be accepted in these days of fast paced relationships.

Urban Indian family set-ups have changed remarkably the past two decades, especially post the LPG era. Traditional equations of human relations like the ones in the past, with women not working, the men in the family being the sole earners, women largely being relegated to doing activities related to cooking, taking care of children, shopping for the family, have given way to varied changes in the family set-up. In contemporary times most urban families have both men and women working, the strongly water tight compartments of gender roles have given way to fluid understandings regarding the same. Both share each other's burden when it comes

chores at home. Very rarely are chores judged from the gender perspective in reality, since it is accepted that both are adept at doing all the chores at home without gender related judgements made. So you have both men and women quite comfortable doing work such as- cooking, taking care of kids, doing financial investments on-line, travelling, taking care of aged parents, taking to sport and so on. On the other hand despite such changes in gender roles in reality if promotion content on mass media continues to perpetuate age old perspectives, it is a tragedy of enormous proportions. Advertisers, like journalists have a social responsibility towards the viewers; they need to reflect the changes in society and not be rooted in the past. In order to sell a product if advertisers have to take recourse to traditional thinking leading to entrenchment of people's thinking in archaic ideas, then it's a move that is regressive not progressive. Old stereotypes need to be shunned and progressive thinking encouraged. Gender chauvinism, which the Best Ever Sunlight portrays, needs to give way to positive images.

4.2 Aditi Sunflower Oil

The one single word that comes to mind while watching this TVC is 'Tokenism'. The advertisement promotes the benefits of Aditi sunflower oil and this is done by focusing on a man who is the cook for a day (in actuality it is not even a day but an hour to prepare lunch); and there-in lies the problem. To appear inclusive and accommodating of gender issues, advertisers often choose to pitch a sales idea from the point of view of gender progressiveness; unfortunately in the Aditi sunflower TVC such a move is done as a one off activity and not as a genuine move. This becomes apparent when a sense of 'lip service' is obvious from the story-line of such advertising content. The TVC shows a 30 something man (essayed by Fahadh Fazil, popular Malayalam actor) in the kitchen trying his hand at cooking. He states loudly for the viewers' benefit that he has taken a lot of trouble to get 'the ladies cub' out of the kitchen for a short duration of an hour to rustle up something. The 'ladies club' here is of course a reference to the women folk in the family-mother/sister/wife, who are constantly heard giving him advice but are never shown in camera; the inference being the kitchen is usually a woman's domain with men having little or no presence there. A stereotype that is constantly used to represent gender roles in a family- women cook and men work; women know better about cooking than the male counterparts; men are clueless about cooking and

require constant tips from the women-folk of the household; stereotypes about gender that are liberally showcased in the TVC in question.

The TVC by portraying the man as a cook for just a day's duration is in fact doing a disservice to the issue of gender gaps in society. The fact that in Indian urban centers, both men and women are comfortable in the kitchen in contemporary times, unlike earlier times when largely women were the masters of this domain, is an obvious one. Despite this tacit knowledge the ad/TVC shrugs its responsibility towards honest depiction of the changed gender equation in society and chooses to go with stereotypes. To show a man taking to cooking not because it is imperative for his most basic need, but to fit some agenda, is trivialization of the problem of gender stereotyping. It is just a token show of change and not a reflection of reality and a clear indication of relegating social responsibility to the back burner. Further, the constant comparison of genders with regard to cooking is again a perpetuation of stereotypes rather than create new narratives in gender issues.

4.3 Wild stone deodorant

A TVC that faced maximum criticism for its overtly sexual stance, Wildstone perfume advertisements, represent the worst kind of sexist content. The advertisement shows a man spraying himself with Wildstone perfume and walking into a traditional Bengali home where some form of ritual or traditional ceremony is taking place in a huge old style Bengali mansion. There are people everywhere, the mansion is decked up with flowers and lights and the place generally wears a festive look. As the male model continues to walk into the interiors of the huge mansion his perfume seems to draw female attention. The man whilst walking suddenly collides with a woman who is clearly seen as awestruck by the fragrance of the man's perfume. The camera captures the woman's instant sexual fantasy involving the man who is unaware of the effect he seems to be having on the lady but is certainly not averse to having a sexual dalliance if the chance arose, which is obvious from the smug expression he wears. Ironically, the perfume bottle gets very minimum camera time and much of the focus is on the explicitly sexual interplay between the couple. The woman who is clearly married is jostled into reality by the sight and sounds of everyday noise and chatter, but the message is clear, that the perfume has the capacity to tempt a much married woman into fantasizing about a complete stranger without a thought about the

consequences- so potent and powerful is Wildstone, a must have for men who want to add to their list of female conquests.

According to an article in wordpress.com titled 'Selling Sex or Scent'- "In today's competitive industry, full of new ideas, brands, and products the advertising business has been forced to go further than to simply campaign their creations, they must sell another yet more desirable product, this product is sex. The sad truth about the industries' desire to appeal to the general public is the means they will go about selling products by use of an ultra-sexualized or submissive woman who is so willing to be viewed as this 'sex item'...the marketing campaign for perfume products has become more and more sexualized to a point where it is almost more corrupt than engaging"...

5. Conclusion

Sexism still exists, in fact it finds a strong resonance in many product advertisements and TVCs in India. In contemporary advertisements, the manner and approach to sexism is different from earlier times but the instances of sexism continues to be alarmingly high despite efforts by many to thwart such practices. Women continue to be objectified; they are used for their exotic value and rarely for concrete reasons. We see umpteen number of advertisements that revel in content that present women as merely low-brow non-intellectual entities. Further, women are often represented in the most sexual and debased manner; be it the lingerie ads that focus on the woman's body or perfume ads world over that show women desperate for male attention and sexual escapade of some kind. Perfume TVCs often have women clad in next to nothing, looking forward to making the instant connection with the man who wears the right perfume or body spray. They are shown as eager and pliant subjects ready to the bidding of the perfume user. Such representations cheapen the status of women and women are seen as easy to manipulate. These advertisements are subversive to gender equality and undermine the efforts towards women empowerment. Paul Sugget, advertising expert and critic in his article 'How Advertising Often Treats Women As a Commodity' says "Since the introduction of advertising many centuries ago, women have been objectified, and in some instances, insulted or degraded. Despite the efforts of many people, it's apparent that society is still seeing the same patterns of objectification and the mindless use of sexualized women in advertising campaigns".

Besides the sexualized portrayal of women, contemporary advertising is troubled by gender stereotypes. The negative impact of such gender stereotyping is manifold. In an era when people are trying to break the yoke and power of stereotypical images, a bane to gender equality, these stereotypical images perpetuate traditional perspectives and standpoints. Women continue to be represented as mothers/wives/care-givers and men are shown as adventurers/risk takers/non-family people. Such stereotypical representations of people is corrosive in nature. It undervalues the worth of individuals in society since it does not into consideration the efforts taken by people to fight such stereotypical perspectives. It is wrong to portray women as merely care givers or nurturers because women are not limited to only that. Similarly Men ought not to be shown in poor light when it comes to parenting or taking care of children. Gender roles have changed in contemporary society and is constantly changing. The changes and trends need to be portrayed realistically by keeping in touch with ground realities.

The need of the hour is reflection and contemplation by advertising professionals, to prevent the churning out of content that is strongly laced with sexually biased viewpoints. A firm step needs to be taken to discourage such sexually discriminating content that seeks to create dissonance in the minds of people regarding gender identities and roles. Policy moves like that done in the UK to bring down gender stereotype in advertising is a welcome move. From June 2019 the Advertising Standards Council (UK) is set to ban all advertisements that perpetuate problematic gender stereotypes. This move comes in the wake of the efforts of Committees of Advertising Practice (CAP) in the UK that looked into the harmful effects of such questionable advertisements on people. According to Ella Smillie, who led the gender stereotyping project for CAP, adds: "The evidence we published last year showed that harmful gender stereotypes in ads contribute to how people see themselves and their role in society. They can hold some people back from fulfilling their potential, or from aspiring to certain jobs and industries, bringing costs for individuals and the economy."

In India too efforts are on towards improving the advertising content that is put in public domain. D Shivakumar, Chairman, Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) said his objective as ASCI chairman was to increase awareness about the council and expand engagement with ordinary consumers... "My vision is to increase

awareness about ASCI among consumers... ASCI has excellent collaboration with the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (MIB), and Department of Consumer (DoCA), Food Safety Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), Ministry of Health (expert committee for HFSS), AYUSH. My goal would be to strengthen the eco system and ASCI's role in it. We would work towards getting more industry participation and working closely with the government, regulator and the ecosystem. New-age industries should also participate in this eco system..." Such moves in India will hopefully nix the inappropriateness in advertising content in future and give way to messages that are wholesome, creative and worth consumer time.

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