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ADs, Attitudes and Sex Sales

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Abstract:

The study entitled "Ads, Attitudes and Sex sales", attempts to analyze the influence of advertisements and the biased views or discrimination they communicate against women. The paper discusses the advertisements that promote both sexist culture and gender equality. The impact of advertisements on our lives - not just in terms of lifestyle but also our psychology, behavior and aspirations is evaluated with real examples. The study seeks corporate social responsibility from advertisers / brands and urges people, NGOs, legal authorities to honor the advertisers that bring positive change and to penalize ad companies which objectify women.

Keywords: Advertisements, attitudes, behaviors, stereotypic roles, new age Ads.

This paper attempts to analyze the influence of advertisements and the biased views or discrimination they communicate against women. Science has not provided any concrete solution to why an intelligent species seems so nasty, self-destructive and hurtful in the case of the very half which gives birth to entire human race. There are many influencing factors to aggravate such behaviors, and advertising is one among them. Nowadays, advertising has reached a level where the brand has become a part of life and we live in a world of advertisements. It stretches into a world of our very own making, affective conditioning of our feelings, attitudes and mindsets. When we look at our favorite newspaper, magazine or TV channel, there are glossy ads for clothes, shoes, cars, beer, food items, hotels, hospitals, politicians and the list is endless. If we don't pay attention to the ads, then they won't have that much of affect on our behavior. But, the makers of commercials try to jack up the volume to catch audience's attention, at least to reduce sound.

The primary function of advertising is to persuade people to buy the product. Therefore, the most effective persuasion techniques are used in advertising to trigger buying decisions. Persuasion techniques can be either rational, irrational or a combination of both. Moreover, the communication, whether it is positive or negative, influences and nurtures our behavior and mindsets. Obviously, advertising has created a strong impact on our lives - not just in terms of lifestyle but also our psychology, behavior and aspirations.

However, some opine that advertisement does not have much influence on people's mindsets. But that does not explain why the advertisers spent \$592.43 billion in 2015 around the world. According to the statistics conducted by eMarketer, globally, the expenses shoot up to 6.0% over 2014. Though, India is not as rich as the US, China and Japan (the top three Ad spending countries), the expenditure in India is Rs. 49,000 crores in 2015. It is estimated that Indian advertising industry pays out Rs 63,000 crore on both print and TV, having a share of 38-40% each by 2017. Digital advertising, video games, and broadband will continue to be the fastest-growing segments over the next five years, with projected compound annual increase of 12.7 percent, 8.1 percent, and 7.8 percent, respectively by 2019.

Now, the study focuses on what and how advertisements do. Most of the advertisements promote a product along with lots of other things that make us feel positively about. For example, an ad for detergent may show greenery with fresh flowers, cute, dancing babies, and sunshine in it. These things are the ones that we usually enjoy and feel good to watch. By showing the detergent along with other things that we feel good about can make us feel good about the detergent, too. This kind of transfer of our feelings from one set of items to another is called affective conditioning. Advertising, at its best, is supposed to contribute to culture and popular mindset. Therefore, these omnipresent advertisements are not non-personal anymore. Some advertisements are just more than promotion of goods and services, familiarizing product, brand recognition or life style identification. Their objective is to provide an experience to "the target group" considering 'sex sells' whether it is a car or chocolate bar. As the saying goes "sex sells," advertisers display sexy women next to cars, let handsome actors tell how great a product is, or have women in bikini showing how great the beach is.

It is true to the quote of American author, Elwyn Brooks White, "Advertisers are the interpreters of our dreams... Like the movies, they infect the routine futility of our days with purposeful adventure. Their weapons are our weaknesses: fear, ambition, illness, pride, selfishness, desire, ignorance. And these weapons must be kept as bright as a sword." The advertisers play on the weaknesses of people targeting their age and sex.

Therefore, if the target group is men, sexy and attractive women in ads grab their attention without a need to explain anything. Children encounter advertising in many forms - TV, radio, billboards, magazines and newspapers - and new kinds of advertising are developing all the time. Advertisers make products attractive to this target audience and they are highly confident about children's 'pester power'. Billions of dollars are spent worldwide to sell products to children. Advertising affects children in different ways. How children react to ads can depend on several things, including their age, what they know or have experienced, and how much opportunity they've had to question and talk about what they see in the media. However, children are the extremely vulnerable target group. At young ages, children are searching for images that will help them develop an identity. Toy advertising limits a child's ability to discriminate between who they want to be and what they are told they should become. This limited freedom in shaping their identity is going to have an impact upon their future. The unresponsive and indifferent trend exhibited by teenagers of today may be due to an identity crisis caused by the inability to develop a character on their own during childhood. Children must be given more freedom to determine who they are without the strong influences that advertising places upon their minds. For example, in recent ads on Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network, there are lots of highly gendered toy commercials.



Figure 1

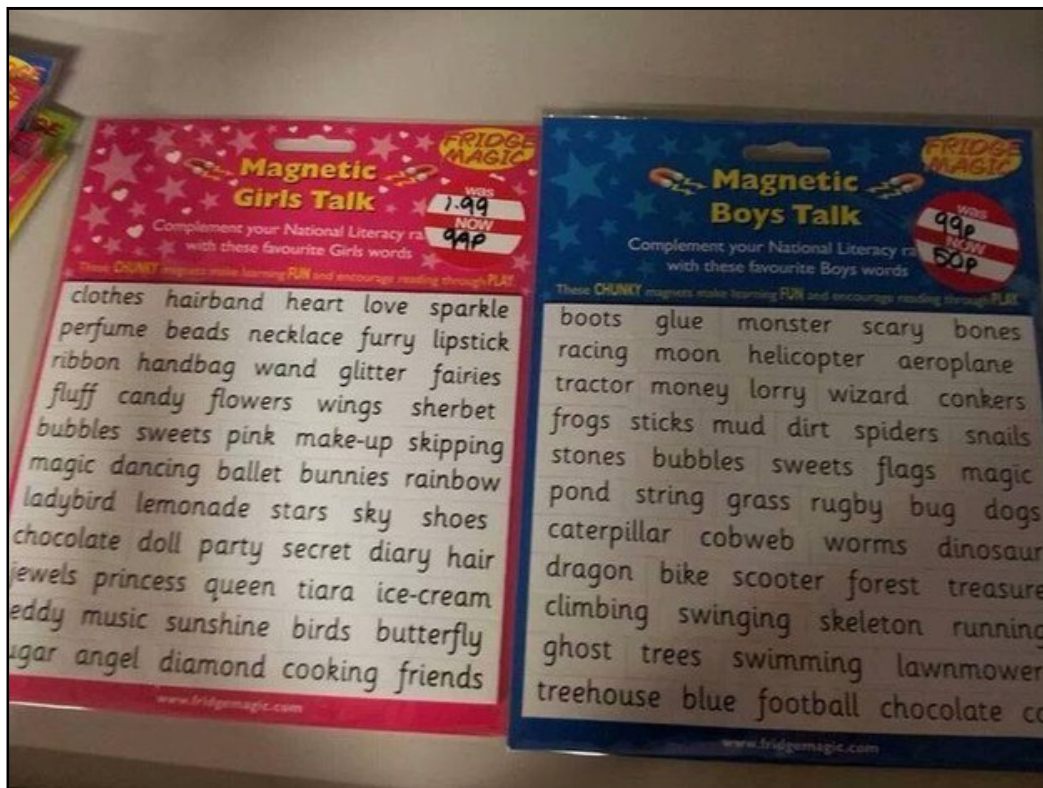


Figure 2

<https://in.pinterest.com/pin/455989530994400267/>

The above ad clearly shows what girls and boys have to learn or play at very young age, which is highly ridiculous. To name a few, Girls Talk has hair band, beads, necklace, lipstick, cooking etc., while Boys Talk has helicopter, aeroplane, swimming, football etc. Such ads not only market toys to children but also promote and encourage gender specific values that are very limiting to girls in different ways. The values and skills promoted in these commercials can play a critical role in the socialization of youth and their development of emotional expression, conflict resolution, the confidence to pursue various careers and the ability to maintain healthy relationships as adults.

Some advertisements show women as dumb consumers who need advice and endure the suffering inflicted by family members. Their stereotype entails show-casing of women as wife or a mother, submissive, suffering women or so to speak exclusively for the home. For example, the “Mother Dairy” (Hindi) Kid and Mom ad (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BpGEeL4la1U>) opens with a man scolding his wife for having broken an old trophy of his school days. In that whole one-minute ad, the husband rages about 35 seconds and she keeps mum and fiddles around guiltily as if she has committed a sin. Finally, he leaves the dinner table in disgust, while she mumbles a ‘sorry...’ Their little son, who surreptitiously watching till then, comes out saying ‘sorry’. She brushes him off in a mild tone meant for good Indian mothers, telling him not to play cricket in the house again. That’s how it is revealed that the kid is behind the broken trophy. This ad does nothing to glorify a name like Mother Dairy. On the contrary, it shows that the Indian mother has to blindly, deafly and dumbly endure husband’s detestation to be given a trophy “Maa Jaisa koyi nahi”. (none equals mother) Is there any logic between all this emotional fuss, unnecessary guilt, intentional miscommunication and selling milk? The fact is that a child must drink a glass every day to stay strong and healthy. But, such ads most likely influence the son to grow and throw up anger on his mother or wife as it is a very common sight at home. And to “take care” of her, he’ll probably start scolding her just as he saw his father do. He’ll follow the same tendency with his wife, sisters and the other women in his life. Moreover, he never takes responsibility for his actions and owning up to his mistakes.

In another case, Mercedes-Benz S-class cars ad proves Simone de Beauvoir’s concept of women as “the other” by portraying female bodies as sexual objects in order to sell other objects through the power of association. In 2015, the so called famous Mercedes Benz car ad plunges into display of sex sells. When looking at this ad for the first time, it is almost impossible to discern what it is attempting to sell. An ordinary consumer will surely be confused about the real intentions of the company.

In the Mercedes car ad, the majority of the photo is dominated by four disembodied, identical sets of breasts; only on closer examination the viewer can find the words “8 airbags.” The viewer can finally see the name of the product and the company, followed by the phrase “smooth & safe” at the very bottom of the ad. The purpose of the ad is to sell Mercedes-Benz cars by emphasizing their safety. This is done by explicitly comparing breasts to airbags and reducing women to one body part. The tagline, “smooth & safe,” not only reduces women to pairs of sexualized breasts, but also implies that they should look and feel a certain way for the enjoyment of men. However, the actual car appears nowhere in the advertisement.



Figure 3

<http://www.coloribus.com/adsarchive/prints/mercedes-benz-s-class-8-airbags-3994555/>

This is nothing but sex-ploitation of women. Otherwise how can they relate their car’s features with four pairs of breasts? Sigmund Freud claims that we, humans, are driven by our sexual energy that we often try to oppress in order to be accepted in the civilized society. However, these desires do not dissipate; instead they are recycled and are the main reason behind our frustrations and

complexes. Ads with the “sex sells” slogan, like Mercedes airbags, try to communicate with these basic instinctive desires by infiltrating their messages indirectly through connotations. And since we, humans do not reign on our subconscious, even the most vigilant and watchful minds may fall in the dark trap set by the advertisers.

Another example is Max shoe paper add, released in March 2009, displays a woman lying on a shoe, tied by shoe laces.



Figure 4

<http://www.coloribus.com/adsarchive/prints/max-green-kimono-13016605/14Dec 2015>

(Advertiser: Karl Vogele AG, Brand name: Max, Agency: Jung Von Matt/Limmat Zurich, Country: Switzerland, Category: Apparel, Clothing & Footwear, Shoes Released: March 2009. Credits & Description: Company: JUNG von MATT/LIMMAT, SWITZERLAND, Zürich)

The above ads illustrate the male urge to have power and control over women and most women throughout the world have been enslaved by men. The ad satisfies the men’s ego and desire to oppress women by tying up to their shoes. Such ads aggravate the maltreatment of women and spread a notion that enslavement of women is acceptable to society. Further, they encourage more deep-rooted psychological disorders.



Figure 5

<https://thegenderblenderblog.wordpress.com/2009/05/19/lets-objectify-women-to-promote-organ-donation/>

Here is one more of such notorious ads that is for a noble cause, “organ donation”, which displays a big picture of scantily clad young lady. And the message, “Becoming a donor is probably your only chance to get inside her” is put in bigger letters and even reads better than the name of the foundation itself. Both, the ad and tagline are too shameful to solicit donors.

However, recently the trends have been changing for better, as advertising has evolved in nature. The communication is impacting lives in such a manner that they prompt a change of attitudes and challenge old patriarchal views. Further, to promote these ‘new age’ ads, ‘Cannes Lion glass award’ is established to necessitate and recognize the advertising industry with regards to gender. At Cannes last year, the Ariel ad won a Glass Lion which is a special prize for ads that addresses issues of gender inequality. The detergent takes the idea of men helping women with the laundry to new heights through its latest “share the load” ad.

The ad, (Hindi) opens when an elderly man playing with his grandson in a picture of domestic bliss. His tired young daughter walks in from office, enquires about her son’s homework, gives travel tickets to her dad and attends an office call. Then, she rushes to the kitchen to make tea for her husband and the old man remembers (via a voiceover) how, his daughter, who at childhood used to play with her doll house, now manages her own house. And, he goes on to think, ‘I am so proud of you - and I am so sorry.’ He feels sorry, because he has never stopped her from playing doll-doll to remind her that she should not be minding the house alone. Because as a child, she has never seen her own father help her mother. Just as the old man’s son-in-law - oblivious to the chaos around and happily watching TV – probably has never seen his own father help his mother. “I am sorry on behalf of your husband's father and I am sorry on behalf of myself and on behalf of all other dads who set a bad example.” Then, the old man returns home and starts helping his wife with the washing, much to his wife’s shock. The ad ends with the caption: “Why is laundry only a mother’s job?(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wJukf4ifuKs>)

Few others joined the campaign “Dads #Share The Load” which at once goes viral and is shared and appreciated by many, as people can somehow relate to it and have seen a similar situation in their own homes. What is different about this ad is again the emotions which are not fabricated and all of this resonates well with the audience at large. This will definitely make them consider what they are doing, while a woman in the family is doing all household chores. It also ends on a very touching message where the father decides that it is still not late and takes his first step in action towards sharing the load. Such ads shatter a deep-rooted social insight: household chores like cleaning and washing are solely considered to be a woman’s department; instigate men to stop taking women for granted; and emphasize gender inequality.

Another such ad that challenges conservative mind sets is the Tanishq remarriage ad that wins the fourth place in Adweek’s most inspiring campaigns for women in 2013. In India, for many decades, widowed and divorced women are socially treated as abnormal and outcasts. But, this ad brilliantly rejects and overthrows the very idea of woman’s remarriage. It celebrates a woman’s second marriage to a man who treats her and her daughter with love and respect. The ad depicts new age weddings in the form of a remarriage of a mother having a young daughter, while dressing up for her second wedding. The excited daughter expresses her wish to be a part of the wedding ceremony where the bride and groom walk around a fire seven times, while taking their vows. While the elders try to dissuade her, the groom picks her up in his arms and carries on, much to the bride’s happiness. The film ends with the girl asking the groom if she can address him as father. It ends with a voice over saying, “A wedding to remember - Tanishq”.

Nowadays, Unisex dress, a clothing designed for both men and women is created to eradicate gender norms in fashion industry. Over the last couple of years, fashion has been obsessed with the androgynous aesthetic, showcasing men dressed as women and vice versa. Now, designers are creating entire collections of unisex garments that can be worn by both the sexes. By eliminating gender norms in clothing, these collections pave the way for a completely new approach to style that underscores the idea that fashion is more about expression and art than it is about gender. These styles present ‘Venus as a Boy’ with masculine and feminine aesthetics creates a new trend bypassing the gender binary.

In media, usually the positive sides of women’s progress and their contribution for national development have not been discussed much. They only emphasize on the negative stories of women which destroy their self-esteem. The ads discussed in the beginning, carry a message to audiences that the society considers woman as playing object and propagates the idea. The fact is reflected in car, shoes etc. ads that can influence and mould the attitudes of young minds. These ads are enjoyed and encouraged by the people who suffer from an underlying psychological disorder. The oppression and abuse of women is a symptom of disorder. Their behavior is not at all a sudden outburst or accidental, but is inherently nourished earlier. Allowing such ads make young minds to habituate and then internalize male chauvinism, autocratic behavior and discrimination against women, inflicting brutality and degradation on women.

Therefore, it is a quite welcoming step by rewarding advertisers of gender equality who challenges stereotypical judgments and patriarchal understanding. Recently, there is a clear change in women-empowering ads which are instantly appreciated in social media. The Cannes Lion glass award, ame awards, Laadli Media and Advertising Awards for Gender Sensitivity (LMAAGS) etc. are some of the honours to promote the advertising industry against gender bias. They scrutinize various subjects that seek to empower women- gender stereotypes, sexism, cultural repression, encouraging women to be kinder to themselves, making girls to celebrate their own strength, showcasing the truth about periods to young girls etc. Government and legal authorities must not allow people to

believe that sex sales fall within the bounds of social acceptability as they are allowed to do so without any check. Therefore, stringent actions should be taken to penalize advertisers for prompting women discrimination; people and NGO groups have to oppose the brand on social media, deface their posters on the street, even boycott the products until the brands change their ads. To begin with, the advertising industry has to take up Corporate Social Responsibility of expanding the theme of gender equality in at least 50% of its advertisements. And a periodical research/ survey has to be conducted to discern the influence both on their product sales and people's attitudes with their new age ads.

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