

The Politics of Portraying Body and Beauty: Unveiling the Unreal in Advertisements

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Abstract— Advertisement has always been a reflection of culture, both of the contemporary time and it keeps changing with the coming years. It plays a crucial role in communicating ideas. Being a product of popular culture, advertisements are the best way to connect with consumers. It helps the customers to know about the new brands available in the market and the variety of products useful to them. The variegated colours, background, shape, attire, people who are appearing, language, all determine the influential power of advertisements.

The concept of beauty seems to be quintessential in the world of advertising. Beauty is the quality of being pleasing; especially to look at something that gives great pleasure. The impact of beauty in advertisements has transformed since ages from the concept of being confident in one's skin to the achievement of the so called dominant fair skin and the portrayal of female body into victims of objectification or as a mere custodian of male gaze. Thus, advertisements today can be analysed in terms with culture industry. It treats women or female body as a commodity to be sold and purchased in the market. Drawing on the recent findings in advertising, the paper strives to put in perspective how advertisements represent the ideological concept of beauty and how they use female body in terms of commodity fetishism.

Index Terms: culture industry, objectification of female body, commodity fetishism, deception, male gaze.

INTRODUCTION

Advertising has become an integral part of our culture. One of the characteristic features of human culture is that changes occur and people most commonly do accept changes over times. We have witnessed various styles, fashions, food varieties, new products and are still going through changes. Advertising promotes more than mere marketization of products. Images that are portrayed in advertisements are often idolized without even knowing the quality or usefulness of the product. Just

by watching the people acting in it; immersed in the fantastical portrayal that is pleasing to the eyes, consumers blindly develop a wish to have the product.

Theodor Adorno in his work, *Culture Industry Reconsidered* argues that the consumption of easy pleasures of popular culture makes people docile and content. Thus culture identity in a way represses the true psychological needs of freedom, creativity and genuine happiness.

He also argue that culture industry creates a false sense of need that can only be satisfied by the products of culture industry. The products of culture industry are in fact manufactured according to a plan. The plan is to maintain the society's status quo. It fuses together the high and low culture so as to serve the interest of all. But it is only a show. The only concern of the culture industry is profit. Hence, in culture industry the consumer is only an object and not the king. It is a true fact that the world wants to be deceived. In advertisement too, what happens is the same. The consumers act as mere puppets in the hands of the marketers.

In advertisements, the concept of beauty holds a prime position. Most of the advertisements deal with beauty or cosmetic products because they know that it really works. And people believe using that product might give them a flawless perfect beauty. Earlier, dark skin was also considered equally beautiful. But today having dull or dark skin is being considered as inferior and acts as a reason for low self- confidence even to the children at a young age. Since the white supremacy is already instilled in the mindset of the children through such advertisements, later on, they will also have a constant urge to have fair skin, which is the accepted or superior one in our so called civilized nations. There are no brands that claim us to be confident in your own skin, instead all tries to

repeat that come and have your fair skin with their perfect, effective product.

Even in selfie camera advertisements of various mobile companies, many of them focus on the effectiveness of it to clear off the blemishes and scars and have a picture perfect skin. Thus many go beyond such phones with a high quality camera capacity in this selfie era. Primarily, man's passion for the fair and flawless skin has begun from the colonisation itself, after the European invasion, we had a set of mind that European products are all good, rather than the products made in India. The concept of Euro centrism that anything European is dominant also had lead to the supremacy of the white skin, which is considered as the trait of Europeans. And this is what that still continues even in this twenty first century. At the same time, the cosmetic or beauty industries make out maximum profit from it that any item which is claimed to enhance one's beauty, it will be blindly accepted by the Indian consumers, mostly women who are more conscious of their beauty and skin.

There are many advertisements that claim to give us youthful and fair skin tone. One among them is Fair and Lovely, one of the largest selling skin whitening creams in the world, launched in India in 1929 by Lever brothers. They argue that ninety percent of the Indian women wanted fair skin, since fair skin was considered a necessity being a woman. They claim that using the product, one can attain fair skin just within six weeks. Most of the Indian women are after this product as it affordable too. This is also one of its reasons for the acceptance of this product. But on the same time we can also come to an extent that it even promotes racist segregation throughout the world. The advertisement also carries the idea that being dark hinders women in attaining success in their love life and married life. While, on the other hand, having fair skin gives one better opportunities in work place, love life and married life. Hence, white skin is portrayed as the desired skin colour. And it is also considered as a prestige matter in one's life. There are also other advertisements which claim to give white skin. Olay Natural White Cream, Garnier White Cream, Lotus Herbal White Glow, Himalaya Clear Complexion Whitening Daily Cream and so on. In many of the beauty products, women appear as main actors. Why has woman become the centre of attraction or centre figure in all these advertisements?

It is always visual pleasure that gives one of the greatest happiness. Thus portraying female body and beauty has become the most rated advertisements of all times. Apart from masculine beauty, feminine beauty is widely pleased and glorified. Hence most of the advertising companies prefer women to act the shots. One of the most definite characteristic that portrayed in beauty commercials is woman's body shape. It is discovered that all of them depict women of slim body shape as idealized beauty. The image of women in mass media send out a message that a female must be tall and ultra thin to be considered attractive by the society. Not in a single beauty advertisement one could see chubby, fat girl or woman being the central figure of any advertisement. Even if they use portraying a woman in her early thirties or forties the woman is presented as still young, slim and beautiful. For example, take in case of the Lux beauty bar, which was first launched in India by Levers brothers in 1929, was branded as 'filmi sitaaron ka saundarya sabun' (The beauty soap of film stars). Lux is a Latin word meaning 'light' and is also a symbol of luxury. It is believed that the name was actually derived from the word 'luxury'. The brand was advertised mainly using top Bollywood actresses' like: Madhubala, Saira Bano, Rekha, Zenat, Hema Malini , Sridevi, Jayaprada, Madhuri Dixit, Juhi Chawla, Karisma Kapoor, Rani Mukherjee, Kareena Kapoor, Katrina Kaif, Aishwarya Rai Bachan, Asin, Alia Bhatt and so on. From this lineage itself we could understand that how after ages the advertisers managed to change the beauty icons with the loss of the actresses' beauty.

Another important aspect is of the objectification of the female body and in this point of view, women is insulted, degraded and commodified. Advertisements, has now created a new type of woman that does not exist in the real world. Barbie dolls are widely popular around the world and is considered as the most popular and marketised dolls. The instant popularity and fame of Barbie dolls depend upon several other factors that there is something beyond its looks and features. It is also discovered that Barbie dolls has no blemishes, scars or wrinkles and has blushful, chubby cheeks with perfect skin. She also has long and appealing legs. Barbie also has ample breasts and butts. Her small waist and smooth silky hair are yet other appealing traits. Her bright, alluring eyes and her shining

pretty, white teeth add to her beauty which any girl or women envies.

Here, the hard reality is that at very younger age itself, children's mind is hardwired with such misconceptions of beauty. Girls, from the time then, try to become like these Barbie dolls with perfect skin and shape. While young boys are eagerly waiting for their lady love -future wife to be someone with the Barbie doll features. The problem here is that, such a woman does not exist. And it is for beauty that most of the women go after and spend hours in parlours, trying various cosmetic products and even end up with plastic surgeries for the perfect outlook that the world desires.

Many advertisements today have become sexist. Since they discovered it as an effective marketing tool, for the acceptance of the advertisement, they must capture the consumer's attention, keep their interest, produce a desire and constantly tempt people to purchase the product. An effective marketing tool that conquers consumers mind is sex. Advertisers have been using sexualized ads to sell their products. It is found that when a sexy, semi-naked woman appears on screen, it surpasses a male actor, even though he is a popular one. Such advertisements always do depict women as objects of desire or a seductress. These kinds of ads are today common and such images are consciously or sub consciously embedded in our psyche.

One of the prime examples of an advertisement which uses objectification of women is the Lynx Shower gel advertisement. The advertisement is directed towards male consumers, where a female dressed in bikini is in showers and she has the word "wash me" written in her stomach. Here the female is just seen as a desirable plaything. Her face is even not shown in the shot as it is not considered as a necessary factor. What works is not the face but the body. Again in beauty based advertisements, the half-naked female body is showcased to attract the consumers. In the body spray commercials like Axe perfume, they feature hyper-sexualized women drooling over men who smell great with the perfume. Even though there are ads which portray women as degraded and submissive ones, there are also some ads which break the stereotypical roles of women as a loving mother, obedient daughter and faithful wife. Such ads picturize women in her new roles of having equal status with men. In Ariel's 'Share the Load' ad,

an aged father watches his daughter busy doing all the household works, while her husband constantly interrupts her for his needs. Seeing this, the man, who is the father of the woman remembers about the same incidents happening in his own home and in the next shot we are shown that the father helps his wife in doing laundry duties. This is also interestingly named as 'share the load with your partner'.

Another ad which showcases the bond between husband and wife is the Airtel's advertisement which ran successfully a few years ago and featured a modern day couple, where the wife is the boss at the same office where the husband is her employee. The ad depicts a scene where she demands her husband to complete the job at time. Later, while the boss leaves the office, the husband still works even night. At home, she calls her husband to come home earlier to which he replies that boss has ordered to complete the work at time and reminds her to tell the boss about his departure to home. In the next scene the wife is seen happily cooking for her husband and send him a picture telling him come home ... she'll be waiting. The ad thus portrays a working woman who is liberated from the male dominated patriarchal world. On the other hand, it can also be viewed that even if you are a working woman, you need to be an obedient wife to please your husband.

Thus ads are always a mirror to our surrounding world. Whatever media reinforces will be instilled into the mind of human beings. Therefore, it can have both negative and positive aspects in the society. Media, through the years has already let out the message that women should just be fair, pretty and dependent than being powerful and independent. If advertisements and media could portray women as empowered and strong focusing on their attitudes and achievements, we could definitely make changes at least for the coming generation and save them from these stereotypical images of being a 'woman' and a 'man' without being hardwired into their little brains.

REFERENCE

- [1] Adorno, Theodore, "Culture Industry Reconsidered" *New German Critique*, vol.6, Fall. 1975.