

Female Body and Sexuality: Representation of Women in Television Commercials

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Abstract

Women are stereotypically advertised in television commercials either as mother-homemaker figures or as sex symbols as promotional strategies. These two roles patriarchy has insisted and enjoyed assigning to them over the ages. But in this postmodern condition, female body and sexuality are subjected to explicit exploitation, which leads to their commodification, objectification and also dehumanization.

English writer John Berger famously sums up role of men and women in media in his book *Ways of Seeing* (1972): “Men act and women appear.” With a minimum of voiceover and maximum show off of body, women are most cared for their beauty, glamour and sexuality. Television commercials are especially instrumental behind this as female body is represented as sex symbol, that too to promote olfactory, auditory, visual, gustatory etc. sensations. The commercials somehow convey the message that if the male folks buy those particular products, they will be able to attract and seduce women.

To sell products varying from mobile phone, car, deodorant, fairness creams women; particularly their body and sexuality are sold. Patriarchy has turned them into sellable products to sell products. The advertisers believe that if they are to sell certain products to male consumers, the best way to do so is by appealing to their sexuality. All these are highly unjust and inhuman in a decent civilization and very misleading to the next generation. This sexist malpractice is indeed a serious threat to the society.

My paper focuses on television commercials to highlight exploitation of female body and sexuality and it shows how women are represented there as sexual commodities.

Keywords: Female body. Sexual exploitation. Television advertisement. Commodification.

Television is a very influential medium and the advertisements have lasting influence on its viewers. Representation of women in the television advertisements is highly stereotyped. A stereotype is a social construct. It is what the society considers to be acceptable. It ignores the diversity and does a sweeping generalization of values, behaviours, beliefs of a community. No matter what type of life a woman lives, there will always be a certain stereotype about her within the society. Media is very effective in creating stereotypes because they are sometimes the only source of information we have about certain communities or commodities and the problem is that they often represent a distorted view of them.

Women are subjected to stereotypical representations for promotional strategies in the television commercials. It assumes limited role of a woman in society. They are mostly stereotyped as mother, homemaker, decorative asset, sexual object etc. These portrayals highly conform to their societal stereotypes. To sell commodities, women are commodified and objectified. Their individuality is ignored. They are presented the way patriarchy has wanted them to be. It is highly assertive and pressing.

My paper focuses on the stereotyped representation of female body and sexuality in television commercials and how the body becomes the identity of a woman.

Women are mostly represented and may be over represented in advertisements of household and beauty products. There they are portrayed as authority. In the rest of the advertisements where they share the screen with men, they are rarely given importance. There women are mostly represented not for their independent roles but in terms of their relationship with others, i.e. as spouse, girlfriend, parent, or friend. Women are depicted as product users in 86 % commercials and as product authorities in only 14 % of the commercials. This does not happen with men who are mostly portrayed overwhelmingly as authorities. Thus by conforming women to household and beauty product related advertisements, the television commercials limit their role in society.

The women used in television advertisements are mostly young with well-shaped and sexually attractive bodies which are meant to allure the male customers to buy certain products. We very rarely find physically challenged or even unattractive women in advertisements. So instead of focusing the actual product, the advertisements emphasize the models who are promoting the products with the camera highlighting their seductive body parts. Since an advertisement is all about selling a product in a convincing and attractive way, the female body is highlighted to attract people to buy the products varying from car to body spray.

The advertisements have deep impact on the viewers and play a major role in moulding a culturally biased opinion. The representation of fair, well-shaped, thin, glamorous body creates a

negative impact on the female viewers. The major ill effect is the pressure on women to get fair and perfect body. It works like obsession and turns the ordinary women into inferiority complex and they suffer from disease like anorexia. These commercials also lower the self-confidence of women. The standard of female beauty and sexuality is imposed by the male centered advertising world. Over representation of slim and beautiful women in commercials reinforces the confusion that ‘physically attractive’ and ‘sexually attractive’ means being slim, well proportioned, and fair. Sometimes, due to this kind of portrayals, it becomes difficult for women to break out of the sexist stereotype promoted in the media.

English writer John Berger famously sums up role of men and women in media in his book *Ways of Seeing* (1972): “Men act and women appear.” Women are much more seen than heard. They are not valued for their voice; they are valued for their body. In a research conducted with 1055 television commercials published in ‘Communication and Critical/ Cultural Studies’, it has been found that male voiceovers are used in eighty percent advertisements. Male voiceover outnumbers women by 4:1. This lack of voice is highly humiliating and dehumanizing. It reinforces the fact that men are the subjects and women are the objects. With a minimum of voiceover and maximum show off of body, women are most cared for their beauty, glamour and sexuality. Deodorant commercials and even few of the mobile, car, burger commercials are especially instrumental behind this. Invariably all of them highlight female body as sex symbol, that too to promote olfactory, auditory, visual, and gustatory sensations. The promotion of these commodities somehow conveys the message that if the male folks buy those particular commodities, they will be able to attract and seduce women. Women are shown in skimpy clothes and in exotic moods; ready to subjugate to sexual attractions.

There are advertisements where women have hardly any role to play. They just appear for decorative purpose or to serve the role of ‘cheer leader’ as the IPL puts it. For example car advertisements like ‘2015 Indian Roadmaster Motorcycle Commercial’ and ‘I 20 Active - Live Active - Hyundai India Official TV Commercial 2015’ feature men who are awed by a two wheeler and a four wheeler respectively. They soon start driving and seconds later we find women as their co-passengers. In these advertisements those beautiful women have these much roles to play, to happily accompany their male partners.

This inactiveness is further reinforced or rather exploited in other advertisements where women are stereotypically shown vulnerable to be easily attracted and seduced. The products be it a bike, mobile phone, or deodorant so attract them that they irresistibly run after them. In this regard I refer to commercials named ‘Allu Arjun Hero Glamour 125 cc Bike Ad (2015)’, ‘Intex Aqua Speed TVC’, ‘Axe Effect – Women Billions’, ‘Q.RO’. It is easily understandable that male customers are the target of these advertisements.

‘Allu Arjun Hero Glamour 125 cc Bike Ad (2015)’ shows the bike is so glamorous that girls are running after it irresistibly, breaking their engagements. A couple is seen very happy and smiling but as soon as the bike is seen, she leaves the hand of her partner and runs after the bike. The background score plays ‘ek jhatka me status mera single ho geya’ and several other girls whoever see the bike also do the same. All break their engagements and run after the bike. The ad ends with eleven girls caressing the bike in awe and taking selfie with the biker.

‘Intex Aqua Speed Television Commercial’ shows a young man called ‘Mr. Bhaskar’ walking in a flaunting manner with his mobile phone. It so attracts the girls around that they come to him to take a selfie with him. He is later found celebrating with girls; few of them make seductive comments like ‘my God, kitna fast hay’ (my god, so fast), ‘Bhaskar mera peyar hay’ (Bhaskar is my love). The mobile increases his confidence factor and all the women around get attracted to him due to it.

The ‘Axe Effect – Women Billions’ advertisement begins with a girl in bikini smelling something and running like anything through a forest. Seconds later we find innumerable girls, all in bikini are also running like her. Women are running across the forest and swimming across the sea desperately to reach somewhere. At the end we see that they are running to where a boy is spraying deodorant to his body. Girls are rushing to him to get him in a competitive style. The screen shows ‘Spray More, Get More, The Axe Effect’. As the title of the commercial shows Billions of Women irresistibly get attracted to a man who sprays Axe Deodorant. Most of them show that men spray the deodorants and women can’t help rushing to them to subjugate to their seduction.

The Q.RO deo commercial shows a man spraying the deo and a woman in a seductive look comes to him and caresses. The background score plays “I will come to you. Right at you and mix to you...I just wanna hold you now, it’s time to play...” She soon undresses and they get physically intimate.

Women in these commercials have no specific roles to play but to be sexually submissive to men for the products they use. A woman running after a man is very authoritative for men and humiliating for women. We hardly come across commercials where men are running after women for the products they use. The stereotype is that men attract and women subjugate to the attraction.

Fairness cream commercials are particularly humiliating for women. It is mean and dehumanizing. Invariably it shows that a dark-complexioned woman does not find any groom. After using fairness creams, she gets fairness and also the groom. Sometimes the woman is neglected by a man for not being fair and then praised and adored by the same man after she gets fair with the effect of the fairness cream.

I here refer to 'Fair and Lovely' advertisement which I have selected from many due to its short duration. Only the Nepali version of the commercial is available. Here is a young man named Rajesh who has returned from America recently. In the temple he happens to meet a girl named Rita and her sister-in-law (Bhauju). Bhauju and Rajesh greet each other but when she talks about Rita, Rajesh ignores her and leaves. It disheartens Rita who sitting in front of mirror blames her skin complexion for Rajesh's neglect. Her sister-in-law appears and suggests her to use Fair and Lovely fairness cream. After using it for six weeks she gets a glow in her skin. One day, again in the temple she happens to meet Rajesh who is standing in a long queue. As she reaches near him, her shawl blows up by wind which makes Rajesh notice her fair complexion but she ignores him and goes at the last and stands in the queue. Rajesh feels an irresistible charm and comes to her to stand behind her in the queue. Rita says smiling, "we may need to wait for a long time to get our turn". Rajesh now replies, "I don't mind. Now I am ready to wait for a whole life". Both accept each other with smile. The advertisement says, "Fair and Lovely, world's no. one Fairness Cream.

These portrayals are now quite as unrealistic. Does a woman really rush to a man just for his attractive mobile phone or car or perfume? Valuing a woman only for her physicality ignores and humiliates the individuality and integrity of a woman. It is a serious sexist malpractice which needs to be stopped. The assuring thing is that advertisements are also coming up where the sexual stereotyping of women is lessening. Women are respectably portrayed for their individual identity. In this regard I will again refer to one of the Fair and Lovely advertisements called 'Fair & Lovely - Dad and Daughter Ad'. It shows a father convincing his daughter to marry a man, but the daughter wants to do job before marriage. The father convinces her saying that the groom has 'good job, own house' which are traditional criteria of a groom. He suggests "it is a perfect match; such proposals don't come very often." The girl finally announces that she also wants to marry but three years later because she needs three years to be well settled to have 'good job, own house'. Only then, according to her, the match will be 'perfect' and 'equal equal'.

I conclude my paper with a commercial called 'Gillette Venus- #Use Your And'. It is very reassuring and radical. The narrator addresses women saying, "You could be anything, beautiful astronaut, a soccer playing Valerina, a superstar... forget it if someone labels you this or that, use your and to take a stand. With your legs and your voice and your head and your heart. If someone says "you are smart" say "yes and", if someone says "you are pretty", say "yes and", help them understand your polished nails and a polished mind, raw and refined, shy and bold not just what you are told. Your warmth and wisdom and grace and guts. No ifs or buts, just ands." The screen shows the message 'one-dimensional labels limit your potential'. Venus invites women everywhere to #Use Your And to take a stand against labels."

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