
Sexual Objectification of Women in Indian TV Ads of Men's Deodorants from 2000 to 2018

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Abstract: *The portrayal of women in advertising has always been a subject of much discussion. Women are often associated with stereotypical gender roles, concerned with their attractiveness, used to add glamour, subservient to the males, and sexually objectified. Male deodorant companies are known for the sexist nature of their advertisements. In India, the TV ads of men's deodorants are infamous for sexually objectifying women. However, some companies in the past few years, seems to have brought in a few changes in the themes of their ad campaigns. The paper attempts to study various Indian television advertisements of men's deodorants from the year 2000 to 2018 and note the evolution of the advertisements in their portrayal of women.*

Keywords: *sexual objectification, gender stereotype, portrayal of women, television advertising*

1. INTRODUCTION

Advertising is a powerful and persuasive form of mass communication. With mass production and mass consumption, advertisements have become an indispensable tool for producers to increase their sales, to improve their brand image, to attract the attention of the people towards their products, services and ideas and to remain in the minds of the masses. With the increase in the presence of mass media, we are continuously bombarded by the advertising messages. In such a scenario it becomes important to analyse and examine these advertising messages. Since media messages are known to have a socio cultural impact and shape our views about the society.

Television due to its audio visual nature and popularity is a powerful tool of advertising. Over the years, several studies have shown that portrayal of women in television advertisements have not been satisfactory. Women are often associated with stereotypical gender roles, sexually objectified, subservient to the males and used to add glamour to the advertisements. The advertisements of a product category which has been known to show women in a derogatory manner are the advertisements of men's deodorant ads. In India too, the trend of showing women as sexual objects and conquests has been observed. The concept in such ads has been the portrayal of women as sexual objects, as sexual rewards to the user of the product.

2. OBJECTIVES

- i. To understand the portrayal of women in television ads of men's deodorants.
- ii. To understand the changes in the portrayal of women in the past two decades.

3. METHODOLOGY

The paper basically is an attempt to analyse the portrayal of women in television ads of men's deodorants and tries to investigate the changes observed over the past two decades through content analysis. Besides this, the varying degree of changes observed in the depiction of women has been analysed. The work extensively relies on different literature and tries to draw its linkage with the present form of advertisement and tries to analyse the objectification of women by the competitive firms in the global world.

The American Marketing Association in 1948 defined Advertising as "any paid form of non personal presentation and promotion of goods, ideas and services by an identified sponsor".

Advertising is a persuasive form of mass communication which according to the AIDA model of hierarchical effects, has the ability to turn the attention of the potential consumers to a particular good, service or an idea, to change the attention into interest, transform interest into desire and finally convert desire into action (intention of purchase or consumption). Advertising can be classified into various types on the basis of the medium of mass communication

used to convey the message of the advertisers, namely: print advertising (newspaper, magazines etc), radio advertising, television advertising, outdoor advertising (through hoardings, billboards etc), indoor advertising (Kiosks, window displays etc), and online advertising. Of all the mediums, television due to its reach and popularity is considered to be one of the impactful mediums of advertising. Television is an audio visual medium of communication and its penetration and reach in India is unparalleled to any other medium of mass communication. According to the findings of the Broadcast India 2018 Survey conducted by Broadcast Audience Research Council (BARC) India, 197 million out of 298 million homes in India have television sets and television continues to *remain the most effective platform for both content creators and advertisers to reach their audiences*. (The Economic Times).

With such massive exposure granted by television it becomes important for one to study the messages carried by advertisements to households, since advertisements not only carry messages that can increase sales or improve the image of a brand they are also known to reflect and shape the socio cultural norms of the society. Jaggi (2013) has pointed out how advertisements act as *catalysts and reflection of a society's aspirations* and how advertisements have the power not only to *influence the attitudes and behaviours of the consumers but also integrates socio cultural narratives and also shapes them*.

The manner in which women are portrayed in advertisements has often been a subject of discussion. The sexual objectification of women in advertisements is a cause for concern. The advertising industry has earned a reputation for utilising images of female bodies to sell a variety of products from automobiles to soft drinks to fast food. Women are also featured in ads where the bulk of the target audience comprises of the male population. In such advertisements, usually the female bodies are objectified, products compared to a woman's body and often women are portrayed as mere sex objects or are featured for ornamental purposes.

4. SEXUAL OBJECTIFICATION OF WOMEN IN ADVERTISING

Bartky (1990) defined sexual objectification as *when woman's sexual parts or functions are separated out from her person, reduced to the status of mere instruments or else regarded as if they were capable of representing her*. Sexual objectification of women can be defined as the viewing of women as an object or commodity of sexual desire.

Pollay (1986) emphasized that since its inception, advertising has always sold sex in one form or the other. It sometimes promises *seductive capacities* and sometimes grabs our *attention with sexual stimuli*. Though more subtle than pornography, sex has been used in various forms to advertise for a variety of products, frequently and more publicly through mediums that are difficult to ignore.

Several studies over the years on the portrayal of women in advertisements have revealed that women are often shown in stereotypical gender roles, concerned with their attractiveness, inferior to men and as sex objects. Zimmerman and Dahlberg (2008) observed that since the women's movement in 1960s the portrayal of women in advertisements through various mediums have been discussed and criticised. From the mid 1960s women have been overtly portrayed as sex objects in advertisements.

Advertising through the medium of television can have more of an impact as it is an audio visual medium and unlike print advertising, television ads can be more demonstrative and can indicate more meaning than a single image. Television advertisements usually employ a storyline to their ads and much can also be expressed through innuendoes. In addition to this, television is also a popular medium, with unsurpassed reach and penetration.

According to George Gerbner's Cultivation theory developed in 1967 as cited by Jaggi in (2013) heavy exposure to media especially television can lead an individual to perceive reality on the basis of the distorted image of reality portrayed by the repetitive and dominant messages conveyed by television. The individual tends to view the world through the distorted perception of reality created by television. The long term effect of heavy exposure to television tends to impact the attitudes and beliefs of an individual. Therefore, the sexual objectification of women in the bulk of the television ads, may potentially affect the audiences and their perception of women. It could lead to audiences' viewing of women as commodities or objects of sexual gratification. It could lead audiences to have a distorted perception of women.

Furthermore, The Objectification Theory by Fredrickson and Roberts (1997), as cited by Ullah and Khan (2014), states that in a culture that sexually objectifies women, women tend to view themselves through an observer's perspective, they *internalise an observer's view as the primary view of selves* and can lead to *habitual body*

monitoring, shame and anxiety as well as lead to mental health risks like unipolar depression, sexual dysfunction and eating disorders.

5. TELEVISION ADVERTISING IN INDIA AND SEXUAL OBJECTIFICATION OF WOMEN

Advertising in India too have not shied from portraying women as sex objects. They have often been portrayed as objects of sexual gratification and been featured in advertisements merely to add glamour. The portrayal of women in advertisements mainly targeted at the male population cannot be neglected. Female models and actors are featured in such advertisements to appeal to the males and lure them in order to increase the sales of the products.

Advertisements for beauty soaps like Lux and Liril, for a very long time have featured female celebrities and models frolicking underneath a water fall, or in a bath tub filled with rose petals, that disturbingly seems like it was meant to titillate the audiences rather than advertise the product. Katrina Kai's "Aamsutra: Pure Mango pleasure" Slice advertisements can also be recalled not for the product or brand that was advertised but for the sensual close up shots of Katrina Kai's lips and other body parts. The audiences may not be able to recall whether it was an ad for Slice or any other mango drink but will surely recall the unnecessary close up shots of Katrina Kai suggestively licking her lips.

The controversial ad for Amul Macho, showing a young bride conjuring images of conjugal bliss as she washed her husband's clothes was full of sexual innuendoes and was distasteful. The condom ads in India too seem to showcase condoms not as a means of protection or family planning but focuses more on close up shots of the various body parts and suggestive expressions of a female celebrity.

Sexual objectification and commodification of women is very much prevalent in advertisements in India and is utilised to sell a variety of products from biscuits, to soft drinks to men's perfume and innerwear.

One of the product categories that have earned a reputation for sexually objectifying women in their advertisements is the Men's Deodorant advertisements.

The male deodorant market in India has a share of Rs1000 crore of the total 1400 crore deodorant market, making the male to female deodorant market ratio at 70:30. The market is dominated by Hindustan Unilever (Axe), Mc Nroe Chemicals (Wild Stone), Marico co. Ltd. (Set Wet), Emami (He) and Vini Cosmetics Private Limited (Fogg). (The Times of India)

6. ADVERTISING CAMPAIGNS OF MENS DEODORANTS IN INDIA FROM THE YEAR 2000

Ever since its foray into the India market in 1999 Axe deodorants have popularised in its advertisements the tagline "The Axe Effect". The Axe effect refers to the effect the wearer of the deodorant has on the female population. It claims to attract a multitude of women to the man who has sprayed himself with the Axe deodorant. The numerous television advertisements as part of the Axe effect campaign more or less presented the same theme with slight variations-that of the women inexplicably being attracted to the wearer of the deodorant. These advertisements portray women simply as sexual beings, lusting after men, who seem to lose their logic and rationality once they get a whiff of the advertised product. Other Men's deodorant ad campaigns followed the trend set by the success of the "Axe Effect".

Wild Stone Men's deodorants also showcased the same idea, that of women being attracted to the man who had liberally sprayed himself with the product. One of the advertisements by Wild Stone which portrays women in the same light, broadcast in the year 2007, is that of a sari clad Bengali woman against the backdrop of Durga Puja. The women gets a whiff of the deodorant as she collides with a stranger wearing the deodorant and catches herself fantasizing about being intimate with the stranger. The advertisement emphasises on presenting shots of the woman and the stranger in an intimate setting rather than focussing on the product. The product is featured in the advertisement for merely 6 to 7 seconds towards the end of the 45 sec advertisement. The advertisement courted a lot of controversy and the company released a heavily censored version of the ad to be broadcast on television. Wild Stone over the years has released quite a number of advertisements with similar themes - of women being seduced by a man's fragrance, of fantasies of sexual encounters with strangers, with close up shots of a woman's bare back and stomach, lustful stares, tousled hair, suggestive body language and has even featured well known celebrities like Dia Mirza and Huma Qureshi in its ads.

The trend continued and in 2010, Zatak male deodorants also courted controversy with its ad of a young bride on the night of her wedding, who after smelling her neighbours deodorant starts removing her jewellery as her neighbour watches, ending with her removing her wedding ring and the tagline of the product “Just Zatak her” echoing at the conclusion of the advertisement.

The 2011 ad of Zatak showing a young boy going to a female dentist, who inevitably gets seduced by her patients’ deodorant and is shown unbuttoning his clothes also faced a number of complaints for being indecent and vulgar. The advertisement implies that a woman once she smells the product will inevitably lose her rationale and behave like a lust struck being, overcome by desire, irrespective of her profession or the situation. The advertisement also indecently shows the buttons of the woman’s clothing “pop out” towards the end.

In 2014, the Wild Stone deodorant ad featuring actress Tapsee Panu though not overtly sexual and graphic, did carry the same message of women being seduced by a man’s deodorant. The advertisement, however, seemed more subtle than the previous ads by the same company.

In the advertisements produced by most of the men’s deodorant companies the message remained that the purchase of the product would lead them to be irresistibly attractive to the female population.

Masaru (2007) has stated that many advertisers emphasise on the reward dimension, to convey certain assumptions about the product and the benefits of using the product. The advertising campaigns of men’s deodorant companies seem to be relying on the reward dimension to sell their products.

The year 2014 also saw the launch of ‘He’ Men’s deodorant ads with Hrithik Roshan as the brand ambassador. The ‘He’ ads took a different route than its predecessors when it came to its ad campaigns and focussed more on the long lasting effects of the product. With its tagline of “Be Interesting”, it emphasised more on the personality aspects of the wearer of the product. It claimed to be the preferred brand for the “interesting” male. Though the ads by ‘He’ in the “easy is no fun” advertisements did feature women, the emphasis lied on the long lasting, body odour fighting attributes of the product.

In the year 2016, ‘He’ Deodorants launched an advertisement featuring Vir Das, which seemed a welcome break from the bulk of the ads produced by men’s deodorant companies. The ad mocked the sexist nature of Indian advertisements. The ad seemed to mimic the well known Indian ads where women were objectified, with Vir Das replacing the women in those ads. The advertisement talks about how one does not need to objectify women to sell a product and claims how ‘He’ deodorants are for men who respect women. The ad seems to cater to the increasing number of audiences who are waking up to the sexist as well as the sexually objectifying nature of various ads.

In the year 2016, Unilever’s Axe decided to get rid of advertisements where women were mere conquests and focussed on creating a new image for the brand by tackling issues of toxic male stereotypes in its ad campaigns. The brand now focuses on liberating men from ideas of toxic masculinity and “finding their magic”. Following immense criticism it faced over the years, on its axe effect ad campaign the company had now perceived that in order to be the number one brand in men’s grooming products, it needed to change its approach.

In India, in the Axe Signature Gold advertisements the focus seemed to have shifted from swooning women to men who seemed to be confident and seemed to celebrate their culture and tradition. With the tagline “For the men who rock tradition”, the ad featured a man donning a fusion of western and traditional attire in a formal setting, daring to stand out in a crowd.

In the year 2017, Wild stone with its “Kunal is Back” ads attempted to build a story over a series of ads. Though the focus was on people noticing and remembering the fragrance, the fact that the father in the series was angered because he could smell the fragrance on his daughter, and the mother insisting “Kunal” call him by her name can be termed a bit sexist. However, the company’s ads seem to have veered away from the overtly sexual ads.

7. REGULATION OF ADVERTISEMENTS IN INDIA

In India the indecent representation of women is prohibited under The Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986. The Act prohibits the *indecent representation of women through advertisements or in publications, writings, paintings, figures or in any other manner and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto.*

Any person/company that violates the provisions of the Act is punishable with imprisonment up to two years and fine up to two thousand rupees in case of first conviction, and in case of subsequent convictions the imprisonment term may extend to five years and a fine of not less than ten thousand rupees which may extend to one lakh rupees.

The Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) is a self regulatory, voluntary, non profit company set up in 1985. It comprises of 16 elected members from advertising agencies, advertising, media and other allied professions. It is committed to the protection of the interest of the consumers, guide/ monitor commercial advertising communication and ensure that advertisements are legal, decent, honest and truthful, with a sense of social responsibility to the consumer and to the rules of fair competition.

The consumer complaints council has been set by the ASCI to look into the complaints received by the ASCI. Any person can file a complaint to the CCC through online or printed form. Each year the CCC receives approximately 150 complaints.

Over the years, the ASCI received a number of complaints against the “indecent and vulgar ads” produced by Men’s deodorant companies. For example, in the year 2008, the ASCI following complaints against the Axe Dark Temptation ad (featuring women taking bites of a man made up of chocolate) for being indecent and objectionable, banned the ad. In 2011, the ASCI upheld cases against ads by Set Wet and Zatak men’s deodorant and the ads were consequently pulled off air. In 2013, the ASCI upheld an ad by Wild Stone featuring Dia Mirza. Advertisements by male deodorant companies in almost all the complaints filed against them have been accused of being indecent, vulgar and overtly sexual. These advertisements are found to be demeaning to women.

When an advertisement is upheld by the ASCI, it means that the advertisement needs to be removed by the advertiser within 48 hours and then the advertiser has the option of either completely withdrawing the ad or of modifying it. The ASCI may not have necessarily upheld all the complaints it receives against the various deodorant ads, but the advertisements were restricted from being aired between 6a.m and to 10 p.m.

8. CONCLUSION

The sexual objectification of women in men’s deodorant television ads is a reality.

The theme of these ads since 2000 has consistently been the same- of women being sexually attracted to the wearer of the product. The advertisements of the major players of the men’s deodorants have been demeaning to women and portray them as sexual conquests and sexual rewards to the consumer of the products. Women in these ads are not portrayed as complete individuals with intellect, personality and morals but only as sexual beings. The advertisements are overtly sexual and focus more on the physical attributes of the female model than on the product.

However, since 2014 ads of some new products decided to take a different route and more ads seemed to focus on the features of the product. Brands infamous for its sexist ads too moved towards a subtle depiction rather than “in your face” sexuality. The ads seemed to be more subtle than shocking.

Brands like Axe dropped their previous theme altogether. They seemed to understand that their sexist ads were no longer being well received by the audiences and that they needed to bring about a change in their approach to keep up with the changing sensibilities of the audiences.

Over the last few years, minimal changes seem to have crept into the themes of the ads by men’s deodorant companies.

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