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Understanding Gender-Role Reinforcement through Television Advertisements in the Indian Context

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Abstract:

One of the greatest fault lines in human society has been the divide on the basis of gender. The established norms and expectations from each gender result in their ideological orientation in defined lines. Beginning from the experiences of a child at one's home and later moving into the different stages of adulthood and facing the world with pre-defined images of expected behavior, it is not surprising that the world of commerce and advertisement should utilize the ideas associated with gendered behavior to their benefit. Consciously and/or unconsciously, the world of advertisements has fed to the strengthening of the stereo-typical image of genders in real life. Television, in this context, has played a very important role in introducing such images in almost every household. This paper aims at analyzing the way in which television advertisements in the Indian context play upon the dynamics of expected gender-based behavior and relationships to understand the social and economic implications of the same. It will also try to understand how some advertisements are moving towards the creation of a more egalitarian gender images.

Keywords: gendered behaviour, performativity, ideological orientation, television advertisement.

Human societies, at any given point of time, consist of a myriad network of structured relationships that decide all human activities – ranging from the social to the political – and cover the private as well as the public spheres. These structures, to a great extent, condition and decide the manner in which individuals think, decide and perform as socio-political animals. Further, if the Althusserian concept of individuals as ideological constructs as discussed in his essay ‘Ideology and Ideological state Apparatuses’ (1970) is accepted as true, it strengthens the argument that the individual is never a ‘free’ subject and non-ideological and apolitical positions are myths. Also, the very fact of the existence of the margin is an indication of the existence of structures. These structures and ideologies basically aim at the establishment of hierarchies and control over the human individual as the ultimate cellular units of power politics.

One of the very contentious yet undeniable tools for ensuring the status quo of ideological and political structures has been the defining of gender roles which leads males and females to perform differently as per the custom and convention of their particular societies. Ensuring such gender performativity in any society, in the sense Judith Butler uses the concept in her essay ‘Performative Acts and Gender’ published in 1988, is dependent on several tools and strategies which reiterate accepted gender-specific images through intermittent, constant or even cyclical reproduction of the same in various forms; thus, often leading to the formation of the stereotype in diverse areas of human activity. Through a constant flashing and heaping up of images, various agencies, in any given spatio-temporal context, are constantly engaged in moulding individual identity either into subject or object positions. This process is well reflected in several activities ranging from the world of art and literature to common day activities, reinforced by the response of the people to such productions and representations and their unconscious assimilation of the values propagated through such representations.

One of the very subtle and useful ways for promoting gender roles has been the world of visual representation which includes movies, soap operas, billboards, hoardings, signboards and advertisements that are published in magazines and telecast on small screen. This paper intends to examine some of the innumerable advertisements that are aired on Indian television and show how they are based to a great extent on the so-called ‘normal’ and accepted gender-roles in the society and cash on them, while at the same time reinforcing gender-performativity.



This paper/presentation examines some advertisements telecast on the Indian television screen as examples of how television advertisements effectively engage in reinforcing gender roles for commercial reasons. Some of these advertisements run the risk of being labelled as gender biased yet the companies benefit from such charges because the advertisement or the product gains in its popularity immensely, albeit for the wrong reasons. Of course, there have been instances when products have been taken off the shelves following public outcry. One important feature of television advertisements and their relationship with normative gender roles in patriarchy is dependent on the method of repetition; much in the manner of the establishment and reinforcement of Orientalist discourse as discussed by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978).

The advertisements that are discussed here belong to the mixed bag of advertisements of different products ranging from products of household consumption to two-wheelers. While a good number of these ads are based on the gender-divide, there are ads that try to navigate between the lines and arrive at points of negotiation and present a more gender-bias free points of view by critiquing the established gender-discourse in the society.

A basic point on which most of the advertisements agree is the role of the mother in taking care of the child/children's life. This obviously raises the question whether father's, or by that matter, males, are not capable enough in taking care of the children. Examined from another angle, it can also be very well argued that these advertisements rely on the customary function of the mother as the caretaker of the family and reinforce one of the conventional roles of women in society. This trend of focusing on the mother as the custodian of health and well-being of the family along with playing the role of either a 'super-mom' or 'new woman' is a conspicuous feature of advertisements of most health drinks for children, detergent powder, cooking oil, noodles, biscuits and even chocolate. The figure of the concerned mother worrying over the health and fitness of her child or children is a conspicuous presence in several advertisements. The role or the presence of the father is usually pushed into the background in such cases. For example, in the advertisement of fabric stain remover 'Surf Excel' – "Pour, rub, pour" – every person that the mother in the advertisement encounters tells her that it would now take hard work to remove the stain from her son's shirt, thereby implying that it is only the mother or the wife, or for that matter, only woman in the family who are, or should be, solely responsible for washing and cleaning. This is further enforced when even the father of the boy hints at the hard work that may be needed to

remove the stain. The same is applicable for advertisements of toilet and bathroom cleaners where the endorser may be a male but the target audience or the consumer is the woman in the house. It is precisely because of the fact that it is the womenfolk who are the target consumers of domestic products and cleaning products that leads the companies to put their image forward in advertisements, as it has the advantage of leading the women to identify themselves with the women on the screen. It is also interesting to note that in the advertisements for pain relieving ointments like Volini, Moov and Iodex, normally the woman is shown as working or performing the household chores while the man lounges about in an arm chair, often reading a newspaper, thus sending the message that the burden of household activities is rarely the concern of the males. The expectation that women will perform the household chores is endorsed by other images too; for example, in the advertisement of Vanish, one can see an audience, comprising mostly of women and a few men who are told about the stain-removing property of Vanish by a man (actor Aparshakti Khurana). When he says that the white clothes after every wash look more yellowish, the husband looks at his clothes and then at his wife as if accusingly, and the wife looks embarrassed thereby implying that it is the woman who has washed the clothes of the husband. This enforces the idea that after all it is the women who wash clothes at home, hence continuing the gender-specific roles and duties.

It is equally important to understand that the indoctrination into gender-based roles is often reinforced from the stage of childhood. In the advertisement of Kinder Joy the toys are gender-specific, which fall into the societal norms of binary divisions as male and female. In the advertisements of Kinder Joy, the children who are the target consumers are lured with interesting toys but what is noteworthy is that the toys are divided on the basis of binary and in a very specific manner. The male children are shown with toy cars and female children are shown with dolls. It should be noted that the children in the advertisement belong to a very tender and impressionable age group, and this stage is crucial for them to imbibe knowledge of the society we live in. At such an early age where they learn from the environment, the world projected through advertisements and images becomes the model for them to emulate and to develop their worldview and form opinions of the real world. It is noteworthy to mention here what Flerx, Fidler and Rogers have observed on the growth of gender consciousness among small children. They write, “By age three children can correctly apply gender labels and can correctly associate sex-typed objects like articles of clothing with the appropriate sex.” (1976, 998) The dividing line between the reel and



the real world is blurred for them. The advertisement industry through their propagation of such a gender-based idea seems to enforce the idea that boys should play with cars and girls should have dolls. Hence the association of the masculine and the feminine present in the social canvas is made to seep into the supposedly unmarked consciousness of the children.

It is with the advertisement of the fabric conditioner Comfort and that of Hero Pleasure that a challenge to enforced gender roles is put forward. The advertisement begins in a typical gendered manner with the brother telling his sister that it is her duty to learn how to wash clothes. It shows a young boy comfortably reading on the sofa who asks his elder sister to learn washing clothes from their mother by saying “*Sikh lo, kaam aayega*” (translated into English as “Learn it, it will benefit you.”) (*Translations mine*), implying the idea that girls will have to perform the household chores after marriage. The twist comes when the mother asks her son to help her dip the clothes in the conditioner and leads him to understand that men, here a boy, can also perform these activities irrespective of their gender. Here the mother’s approach towards the chastising of her son’s ‘male ego’ is an indication of how the social division of labour on the basis of gender has fault lines, and that the great gender divide should be first addressed at home. The message in the advertisement can be interpreted as an attempt at bridging the socially defined gender roles thereby asking the target audience to educate the male children also to start lending a helping hand in household duties. It is an indication of the progressive attitude of the Indian society in the context of gender roles. However, the attitudinal change seems to be primarily targeted at the progressive urbanite audience. Again, here the initiator is a mother. So, the mother figure looms large in television advertisement in the Indian context.

In the advertisement of Hero Honda Pleasure featuring Priyanka Chopra, one can see traces of progress towards a gender egalitarian society. House et al define ‘Gender Egalitarianism’ as “the degree to which a society minimizes gender role differences while promoting gender equality” (2010, p. 30) and it is in this view that this advertisement and that of the fabric conditioner Comfort should be understood. The advertisement shows a boy leaving home and no one questions him but later when a girl leaves, the mother asks her where she was going and the younger brother asks her when she would return. Two neighbouring women also try to guess if she has any program that day. The girl leaves on a Scooty and poses the question “Why should boys have all the fun?” This advertisement puts forward a lot of questions such as why the inequality amongst the genders

exists and why girls and women should not be allowed to have fun like men and boys. It also hints at the different approaches adopted towards male and female in a society, esp. when it comes to questioning women and not men when they go out. When the girl goes out without answering any of the questions put to her, and poses her own question stating that girls should also have fun, is an indication towards achieving gender egalitarianism. Though this advertisement is aimed at capturing the female consumers, it does contribute to the progressive idea of the society in its movement towards gender equality.

At times, myth is also resorted to create gendered images. The advertisement of Raymond's fabric is a wonderful example in this regard. The tagline of Raymond's – 'The Complete Man' – later supplemented by 'Feels like Heaven', uses the idea of the so-called 'Complete man' by focusing on the male ego. Some products advertised in this manner move on to become cults. A fine example in this case would be Royal Enfield motorcycles which about a decade and a half ago had the tagline – 'Let the Boys have their Toys, but for a Man like You, You need a Man's Bike'. This is a clear example of how the company aims at inflating the male ego. In the context of Indian motorcycle industry, two very sexist ads have been that of LML Daelim Adreno and Bajaj Pulsar Generation I non-DTSi motorcycles. In the beginning of the Bajaj Pulsar advertisement, two nurses walk by and the bike without the rider turns its headlamp towards the nurses with the tagline 'Definitely Male' which brings into play the idea of heterosexual norms. It is understood that if anything is attracted towards the female, it can only be a male; thereby negating the idea of homosexuality where sexual preferences within the same sex is approved. Also, in the beginning of the advertisement when the nurses excitedly proclaim 'A boy, a boy', they seem to imply the idea that a male child is preferred to a girl child in the Indian society. In the advertisement of LML Adreno, the bike is equated to a woman's body which is an objectification of the female body. Further, the line 'What Riders Ride' emphasizes this very idea of objectification where a woman is also projected as an object, which like the bike, can be ridden on and taken pleasure from.

In conclusion, it can be held that advertisements rely heavily on the prevalent notions of gender performativity for the sale of products. In doing so, they consciously and unconsciously reinforce the ideas and notions associated with gender divide in the society. It is also to be understood that there are some advertisements that also seek to challenge the prevalent gender



stereotypes and present a more progressive attitude of the society. Both categories of advertisements aim at achieving their objectives through visual and auditory images.

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