

Gender Schema in Pakistani TV Commercial Ads

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Abstract

Majority of Pakistani TV commercials debase women and objectify them as intellectually retard oriented in lookism. The commodification of women invalidates the modus operandi of modern feminism which appreciates career-pursuing women. This trivialization of women is in cognizance with the gender schema theory which proposes that people have implicit cognitive structures that provide them with genderized expectancies when processing information. Our paper examines women identity in Pakistani TV advertisements and premises that they follow gender schema theory. The study contends that the advertising agency commercializes the patriarchal orientation of the society and propagates gender-based roles for the individuals. The study attempts to show that advertising industry is, at heart, only a reflection of societal values, hopes and expectations.

Keywords: TV Commercial Ads, Gender Schema Theory, Cultural Relativity

Introduction

In his famous book, Alvin Toffler (1970) describes various types of messages one receives from the outside world every day. He differentiates between uncoded messages and coded messages (p. 146). Much of the messages we come across on television are coded. They exist in the context of our society. They are carefully engineered and ruthlessly purposeful. Due to mushroom growth of channels, people are exposed to a great deal of advertising messages each day. People are literally swimming in a sea of information. It would not be an unqualified statement to say that TV channels are more in the business of selling audiences than in the business of giving people news or entertainment. Jean Kilbourne (2000) voices the same concern when she says that TV channels are in fact hucksters at heart (p.36). The degree of gullibility one sees in ads cannot be compared with any other aspect of life. Furthermore, the advertising agencies might provide information, support worthy causes, and encourage competition and innovation but they are not without their darker sides. According to Pontifical Council for Social Communications, in their desire to attract larger audiences, advertising companies “set aside high artistic and moral standards and lapse into superficiality, tawdriness, and moral squalor”ⁱ. One such ethical quandary is the belittlement of women.

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It is a well-recognized fact that advertisements are always about money. And as O'Neill (2009) says that they might sacrifice truth, virtue or any societal values in order to sell their products, they use different tactics in order to extract money from consumers' pockets (p. 401). Their emphasis on the affluent segment of the society and the invisibility of the poor points to the same fact. All the time, famous actors/actresses or sportsmen are shown in advertisements. By identify a brand with the popular star; they make the person buy the products not for their intrinsic values but for the star who becomes their ambassador. So Q mobile featuring Karina Kapoor, a famous Indian actress, very proudly recommends a Pakistani mobile. What Kilbourne says about American advertising companies that they spend over \$200 billion a year, can also be safely said about Pakistan. According to a local newspaper, the Q mobile company paid 50 million Rupees to Karina Kapoor in order to be their brand ambassador. The advertising agencies sell products irrespective of the means they take. They can apply very unethical tools in order to make people consumers. One such tactics is the use of feminine charm and beauty to captivate the customers for spending money.

This study looks at women identity crisis within the world of advertisements. It attempts to show that hucksters consciously manipulate the societal perspective for commercial purpose. The glamorization of women's appearance and the deglamorization of their intellect are motifs of most of Pakistani TV commercials. This point of view fits to gender schema theory which argues that people are socialized into believing that gender differences are significant and worth maintaining and that femininity and masculinity should be divided into watertight compartments.

Literature Review

It is an undisputed fact that advertising industry is an inescapable part of modern life. John O'Toole (1981) in *The Trouble with Advertising* considers advertising a salesmanship functioning in the paid space and time of mass media. Toole develops a strong case for the legitimacy and creative role of advertising in the modern economy saying that there is no reasonable substitute for advertising in the economy. At the same time, he also denounces it for its transgression and criticizes it for violating the limits of the implicit contract between the advertiser and consumer.

Dan Laughey (2007) explains the vital role that media plays in the structuring of viewers' minds. According to him, media and what are shown in media are now the deciders of consumers' destiny. Similarly, Paul Lutusalso examines the nuances of consumer culture and asserts that advertisers make us believe the big lie. They propagate false consciousness and dupe people into believing that they can buy happiness for them. He defines consumerism as the voluntary suspension of disbelief in the value of material goods. He takes the shopping world as a fantasy world for the simple reason that the things on display cannot meaningfully be compared with reality.

Vance Packard (2007) discusses the ideological effects of the advertising industry. According to Packard, commercial advertising passes into our hearts and minds without our seeing it or knowing it. He calls advertisements as Hidden Persuaders for their efforts

always take place beneath our level of awareness. They mesmerize the masses into squandering their hard -earned wages on a lot of glittering junk (p. 10).

The same ideological interpellation can be seen in TV ads which paint women as lookists or mediocre species oblivious to the intellectual currents of the modern world.

Gender Schema in TV Commercials

Schema for Yule (2010) is a structure of conventional knowledge about any aspect of life that resides in the memory of a person. Barbara Johnstone (2008) defines schema as a set of preformed expectations about structure and content that simplifies information processing. Gender Schema means that there are patterns of meanings or web of schemata that process the incoming data through gender-oriented software. This mental process makes individuals sexist in their thinking mechanism. The sexism in turn is transmitted through multiplying effect to the upcoming generation. Moreover, individuals vary in the degree of gender schemata. These differences are manifested in accordance with the coloration of mental screen painted with sexist contents.

Womanhood, Thy Name is Lookism

As stated that TV commercials are always designed with the sole purpose of attracting the buyers, so the fine-tuning of the messages is done in order to play with the emotions and psyche of the people. They either present women as animus-possessed or as merely a showpiece to furnish the ad. Hence, in a face wash ad, girls get fascinated by the good face of the man after having washed his face with the product. What is the implicit message or warrantsⁱⁱ in the ad? Certainly, the message that it delivers is that women are quite superficial in their outlooks. Otherwise, they would never admire the man solely on the basis of his good-looking face. In a similar fashion, the heroic performance of the male character in the Service Tyre ad has been contrasted with the beauty obsession of the female model. The famous Pakistani actor Shan rides the bike and the female character sits behind him. At the end, Shan tells us about the utility of the tyre while the female goes straight to the make-up dresser and starts putting on make-up. Her universe seems to be the beautification of face and complete disinterest in the utilitarian affairs of the world.

In another ad, a male enters a house and starts enlightening a thoroughgoing domesticated woman about the cleanliness of bathrooms. The first question he asks is about cold water. His “move” is reciprocated by the household with another question. In “adjacency pairs” discussed by Barbara Johnston (2008), a question calls for an answer. (p. 102). The cross questioning and the subsequent unexpected move happens due to the failure of the woman to properly comprehend the communicative context of the question. She is instructed in household affairs which as a matter of fact is her area of expertise. She is presented as a passive listener and learner whose only job seems to be learning from the higher intelligence of men. This demonization of women intellect can rightly be attributed to cultural values. Advertising mirrors the fears, quirks and aspirations of the society that creates it, says Charles A. O’Neill. Bell states the same idea when he says

that discourse is designed with both actual addressees and potential referees in mindⁱⁱⁱ. Cultural values are used as smokescreens in order to legitimize gender-biased ads. T.E. Hall categorization of culture as high and low- context cultures may be used another template to elaborate the gender issue in the ads^{iv}. Cultural sensitivities are mostly touched unmolested in advertisements for the simple reason that the buyers may not reject the products on the basis of cultural values. Pakistani media always presents ads within low context culture.

Feminism as Eroticism

Ads promote and export the popular cultures of consumerism, sexism and eroticism contend Reichert and Lambiase (2003). The language of advertising is saturated with sexual angles. These ads sexualize the female bodies. Hence, Karina might appear with a Q mobile but the focus is more on her revealing dress, aphrodisiac bodily movements and the slim contours of the body. The slimness of her body has been objectified in the slimness of the mobile. In the same fashion, in closed-up ad, the ad seems less of the toothpaste and more of physique exposure. In a soda drink ad, male characters are presented with all sorts of adventurism and chivalry. Risk and undertaking unattainable challenges seem to be masculine attributes and the drinking of Dew or Sting catalyzes their adventurous characters.

Interestingly, the females in the Sting ad get stuck and start shouting. It is only the boy who can be their savior just by drinking the soda bottle. The females witness the chivalric acrobats of the male and wait for him to rescue them. In the same manner, the appearance of girls in Sprite cold drink is to add romantic flavor. The drinking of the soda which makes males courageous and adventurous, the same soda makes the girls romantic and makes them start singing songs embedded with romantic themes. Love is shown as the exclusive property of women while men are not only immune to it but also show interest in Meta love activities. This insensitivity to female intellectual caliber reaches to an extreme in Cornetto ice cream ad where romantic liaison is ensued through the ice cream. The ad brilliantly demonstrates the viewpoint that advertisements “turn lovers into things and things into lovers (Kilbourne, 1999, p. 27).

Bormann’s spin doctoring effect can easily be seen in these ads. According to him, events are mostly architected. Only that side of the story or event is shown to the audience which is beneficial to them. Hence, women are shown as the subjects as well as the objects of amorous passion. These are the prospective patterns that society expect and impose upon them. Preoccupation with marriage is yet another area of feminine interest. In one commercial, a girl eats a brand of cookies just because the cookies guarantee her engagement. She is stereotyped as a husband-hunting woman with no other concern. The idea of a working woman is quite strange to the TV ads. Her universe lies in her home. In most of cooking oil ads, women are portrayed as servants whose sole concern is winning the heart of their husbands or fathers-in-law. They are depicted as types and never as individuals with their own minds and feelings. Their business is to stay at home and try to win the favor of their husbands or in-laws by preparing delicious food.

Most of these males-saturated ads follow a very weak type of compositional reasoning. The most frequent form of logical fallacy is the faulty use of authority. Celebrities are asked to endorse products they may have no special expertise or any interest apart from the sizable cheque they might receive for their services. For instance, Wasim Akram, famous for his contribution as a cricketer, becomes a spokesperson for Volta battery. He recommends this brand of battery and very proudly declares that now Pakistan will be prosperous due to Volta. His reference, of course, is to the existing terrible load shedding problem. But as a matter of fact, his achievements in cricket don't give him any authority in this area than any other person. Yet, because of his reputation people might be more willing to listen to him than to others who are less-known. This is a hard pill for the ad agencies to swallow for they always use faulty authority to promote their products. Even the faulty use of authority is demonstrated through male stars keeping in view the schemata of Pakistani culture.

Conclusion

It goes without saying that we live in the age of consumerism and advertisement. Every single day, we are showered with advertising images and messages. They consciously or unconsciously exert their immense influence on the consumers' lives. They have made their version of reality soundly acceptable through diverse means. Cultural sensitivity is mostly used as a tool to make masses consumers. Just as Goshgarian (2009) argues that consumers are literally hooked in the intricate web of influence and are manipulated through words and symbols to be the buyers, the marketers target the demographic structure, geographical, age, gender and the cultural background of the consumers. They take for granted what is being presented in ads. Gender dynamics is the dominant marketing marker which is employed in order to appeal to the popular taste of the consumers.

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Notes

ⁱ Pontifical Council for Social Communications, “Ethics in Advertising,” published 2/22/97(www.Pccs.va).

ⁱⁱ The word is used by Stephen Toulmin (1958) in his book *The Uses of Arguments*. By warrant he means the underlying or hidden principles in a message.

ⁱⁱⁱ Quoted by Barbara Johnston (2008) in *Discourse analysis*. P. 147.

^{iv} T.E.Hall (1976) classifies cultures into high-context and low-context. In high-context cultures, people tend to emphasize interpersonal relationships and prefer group harmony and consensus over individual achievement. It is a type collectivistic culture where People generally share a high degree of commonality of knowledge and viewpoints. High-context cultures are typified by long-lasting social relationships, spoken agreements, and mutual trust.

^v On the other hand, low-context cultures tend to be individualistic and goal-oriented; people from low-context tend to value directness with discussions resulting in actions. People from low-context are usually straightforward, concise and blunt. European countries are typically classified as low context cultures while many Asian, Middle Eastern cultures are classified as high-context cultures.

^{iv} For more details see Symbolic Convergence Theory of Ernest Bormann discussed in *First look at communication theory* by EM Griffin (2012) (eight edition). New York: McGraw Hill Company.