

The Dilemma of Women's Identity in Pakistani TV Ads: A Case for Beauty Myth

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Abstract

Commercial advertising is more systematically designed, and more ingeniously disguised as something else. Vance Packard accurately observes that advertising hides more than it reveals. Advertising is not only about selling products but also about selling values. It has characteristically become an unavoidable shaping agent of our identities in the modern digital world. John O'Toole correctly assesses its significance when he observes that there is no other effective way of communicating packaged information about products to prospective consumers with adequate speed without advertising. Kilbourne, on the other hand, considers advertising as the key purveyor of cultural and social climate. Pakistani TV Ads construct women along stereotypical lines showing them in the positions of powerlessness, submission and subjugation. The commodification and objectification of women's bodies are at the heart of most of the ads. The ads portray women as beauty-obsessed, highly gullible and less astute, oriented in lookism whose basic existential code seems to be physical beautification and a complete disinterest in intellectual concerns. The concept of power extended to women is highly superficial and the powerful women, by and large, are either portrayed as excellent cooks or as inconsiderate and rude housewives. The empowerment of women is associated with beauty appeal and their existence is dovetailed to the procurement of appreciation from their family members. This paper attempts to examine some of the Pakistani TV commercial ads within the framework of "The Beauty Myth" by Naomi Wolf. It attempts to show that advertising manipulates and challenges the intellectual credentials of women for commercial purposes. The study makes a textual analysis of some of the selected TV ads broadcast on different channels during peak hours of transmission.

Keywords: beauty myth, TV commercials, gender dynamics, women's identity

Introduction

Advertising has attained a driving seat in the creation of socio-cultural environment. It has widely been hailed as the creator of identity. One of the erroneous beliefs that advertising disseminates is that consumers can expect transformation via products. The tantalizing messages of advertising have a scheme of beliefs that products can ensure self-realization, can make us feel unique about ourselves and can develop ideal understanding between ourselves and others. While Zyman (2002) may defend advertising contending that it has made human life more

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hygienic and more enjoyable, the fact remains that it has never been without the dark sides.

The gender dynamics in the advertising can be traced along stereotypical lines wherein men are presented as autonomous beings entitled to be cared of while women are assumed to be dependent on men and operate in a context in which they are associated with emotional and physical nurturing and caretaking. The world of advertising recognizes women as experts in domestic chores, created to bear babies and to dance to the preposterous urges and demands of men. When women are commercialized to promote commodities from rice to mosquitoes-killer, from shaving razors to opening an account in a bank, it's hard to imagine that women can really be awe inspiring or can unify two souls. The cumulative effect of women in ads is highly degrading and devaluating. The objectification and the consequent dehumanization of women in the world of advertising render women porn symbols and the way products are fetishized are doomed to disappoint the consumers because products imbued with erotic images can neither satisfy their emotional nor their sexual needs.

The current study attempts to highlight some of the dark sides of Pakistani TV advertisements with a special reference to women's identity. The study takes occasional help from Wolf's (1991) *The Beauty Myth* wherein she believes that women's identity is mythologized as beauty and she is cast into this myth by the dominant patriarchal ideology. According to Wolf (1991), women have been drilled into the beliefs of beauty icon, glamour and wearing makeup. The study tries to show that advertising disregards any possible social and ethical code for commercial purpose. One such discrepancy can be seen vis-à-vis the construction and mythification of womanhood.

Literature Review

Advertising has always received an ambivalent response from critics. Pakckard (1980), for instance, in his book *The Hidden Persuaders*

attempts to unmask the true face of advertising. The book shatters the complacent and innocuous views about advertising by baring the dark side of it. The insights gleaned from “depth approach” are being implied in advertising which mesmerize people to the extent that they squander their hard-earned money on the glittering junk. The depth probes explore consumers’ attitude toward products at subconscious and unconscious levels. That is why messages of advertising go deep into the hearts of consumers without being realized by them. Packard, therefore, warns consumers to keep their wits about them if they want to resist the overt solicitations of advertising. He implicitly claims that people are routinely and successfully manipulated by manufacturers.

O’Toole (1981), on the other hand, attempts to answer some stereotypical notions about advertising. He defines advertising as “salesmanship functioning in the paid space and time of mass media (p.15)” and believes that advertising has a very legitimate and creative role in the modern world. It has both attainments and future prospects under its belt. He, however, denounces its transgression and laments the ingenuity with which the consumers are persuaded to buy the products.

Benett and O’Reilly (2010) describes consumerism as the inevitable order of modern day. The homogeneous and totalistic nature of consumerism has brought out a lifestyle that adds to the existing stress of modern life. Moreover, consumerism does not effuse far-reaching impacts; its effects are fleeting. It does not take very long to start craving for another product the moment the first one is brought home and put in the closet. As a matter of fact, buyers never feel satiated with stuff; they always feel hollow from inside. This is partly because consumerism takes a great deal of time and the buyers subsequently are hardly left with any time to care for personal relationships and to manage other activities that are keys to enlightenment and inspiration.

They further agree that modern merchandizing is analyzed and streamlined by the prosumers. As leading consumers, they disturb the scales of power and foreground themselves by backgrounding the manufacturers and retailers concomitantly. The beginning of decluttering

movement, which states that the less the things, the more the happiness, stands in sharp contrast to the existent squandering of precious resources and a much desirable change from indiscriminate consumption placed in immense dissatisfaction.

Methodology

The study proceeds along qualitative lines. Commercial ads from different TV channels have been taken as samples and have been analyzed within the perspective of gender dynamics. The textual analysis of the selected ads generates diverse views about the focus of the study. As the commercial ads are being aired round the clock on TV channels, therefore the study does not require running the photographs/videos in its presentation.

Discussion

Women's Identity at Stake in Ads

At the heart of advertising lies objectification of people, trivialization of intimate relations and sensationalization of products. Everything in nature-- animals, people, nature-- is used to sell us something. Our emotions are commercialized, and we are emotionally blackmailed to buy products. Our wish to make our children healthy is leveraged to make us buy *Dettol*[§] soap or *Dalda* Cooking oil. A marriage provides the occasion for *Molty* foam. A painful reunion between parents and estranged children is dramatized to sell us *Telenor* network. The remedy for every human problem lies in the products. Life is really exciting and full of fun with products, and very monotonous and dreary without them. But the more shadowy side of the picture is the presentation of women in ads. They are objectified and, in some cases, featured as walking emotions having no individuality.

Women as Materialists

[§] All brand names have been italicized in the paper.

Majority of the ads feature women as highly materialistic and worldly. They are very expedient flies for men to catch in their nets. And in order to trap them, men just need to have certain products. Love at prima facie is sure to happen provided that the man has Cornetto ice cream. The ad features a young girl and a young boy riding a bus. The romantic feeling that the girl develops for the boy is purely based on his being possessor of the ice cream. Moreover, the initiative for love comes from the girl. What is the implicit message of the ad? Women are highly prone to material possessions, and they can very conveniently surrender their hearts provided that they are promised the prospects of material objects. The ad also implies the vulnerability of women's passions which can pretty easily cave in at the very first sight. The ad defuses the sublimity of feminine character and highlights the susceptibility of female emotions. *Nan Khatai* cookies perpetuate the same fantasy. The ad shows that the only thing needed to gain the love of a woman is *Nan Khatai* cookies. Nothing else is needed. No personality, no character and no moral stature.

Advertisers often argue that advertising simply reflects cultural attitudes and values but, according to Kilbourne (1999), it does more than that. Advertising has become a very powerful means to persuade and influence consumers and this effect is characteristically unconscious. It creates and perpetuates dominant attitudes, ideology, social norms and myths which govern people's behavior. It creates an environment wherein certain attitudes and values get flourished while others find no presentation at all.

Women are always stereotyped as ones who just gather, prepare or serve food. Food advertising normalizes and glamorizes obsession with foods. The paradoxical approach towards food is abundantly clear in a number of ads. On the one hand, women are told to give in to food, and, on the other hand, they are told to be thin and there is no greater sin on earth than being fat. That is why the ad for diet Green tea features a young girl only; no male character is shown in the ad. The message of the ad is exclusively intended for girls. It also points at the fact that overweight is the problem of women and men are beyond such worries. Women are

especially facilitated to reach for food in order to find peace, an oasis in their hectic schedule. Most of the ads like *Kurkure* snack, *Shezan* prickle ad, *Tops* juice feature mere women. The themes of the ads substantiate the obsession of women with food.

Kilbourne (1999) accurately points out that “food is intertwined with love” (p. 109). Love is the domain of women and this love is exemplified through various types of food served or prepared by women. In *Blue Band* ad, the mother's affection for her child is expressed through the food. Women are assigned physical labour and are rarely presented as mentors. In the given ad, the mother's job is physical nourishment for the boy and there is no mention of mental nurture. In most of cooking oil ads, the woman's job is to please her kith and kin. She is presented as a type having no individual identity. Her life finds accomplishment in the smile that she can elicit from her family members. The implications of the ads, of course, are that women would get love and attention of their husbands and children provided they serve them delicious foods. *Dalda* cooking oil also guarantees the same promise. The copy says, “Jahn mumta wahan *Dalda***” It means motherhood is oriented in the cooking oil. The new concept of motherhood, of course, belies any possible common sense. The rationale of the ad is not only unethical but also very unsightful. An interesting situation is shown in a noodles ad where the child initially writes her name on the cloth. Later, she adds “Sara loves mum.” This addition is actuated by the presentation of noodles. The implied message of the ad is that the child won't love her mother unless she gets noodles. The children's love and their heartfelt connection to their parents are annexed to products.

There are ads that claim that products can enhance the self-worth of women. Women are told to demonstrate your self-worth by spending a little more on their hair color. They can boost their self-esteem and confidence by eating *Sooper* cookies. The commercial demonstrates the power of cookies over women's confidence and change of mind set. The

** Dalda oil is actual motherhood.

voiceover in the ads illustrates this theme: "Eating *Sooper* isn't about feeding yourself but feeding your self-esteem." The ad also describes that women's minds are highly malleable and their problematic attitudes can be normalized through such products.

Women as Lookists

The gender dynamics yet find expression in another aspect in ads. Boys in the ads are highly agile and rambunctious, while the girls are beauty obsessed and their appearance seems to be their sole universe. Obsession with weight is also one of the motifs frequently depicted in the ads. In most of the ads, fat women are shown as either funny or ridiculous. The implicit messages one can derive from these ads is that obese women are less intelligent and lack self-esteem. Most of the beauty cream and beauty soap ads feature thin and slim girls.

Characteristically, ads show girls as beauty obsessed. The concept of beauty has been connected to thinness. Business and career related ads skip women. Women have been kept at arm's length from the practical and utilitarian affairs of life. Their jurisdiction seems to be either the four walls of the house or beauty parlor. In one commercial, four skinny girls are dancing and are feeling highly excited as they have used the beauty products and have attained the required results: beauty. Career and success are fields unknown to women. Their greatest anxiety and concern is their physical beautification. Clothing, cooking, beauty and thinness are the areas women should be worried about and should direct all their energy in order to survive. These mundane concerns deflect their focus and energy from those things which can really make them empowered. They should express themselves through their bodies, not through their actions or achievements. Most of the ads glamourize women's bodies and encourage a very cavalier attitude towards sexual behavior. Also, what was known to be unethical stuff is now very boldly advertised on TV. *Always* ad very systematically tells girls how to handle the menstrual period. Hair removing cream *Veet* shows the legs and armpits of Katrina but the smart audience can easily guess the intended message of the ad. Toffler (1970),

therefore, very judiciously contends that “nothing, indeed, is quite so purposive as advertising,” (p.148).

Advertising can very seriously puncture human relationship especially those which involve women. Food can nourish us but it cannot be a substitute for human connection. In the world of advertising, food numbs the pain and contains not calories but ingredients that can cure the inner void of the consumers. *Sooper* cookies make life really worth living. The voiceover says that those who don't enjoy life just because they have not experienced the cookies. The slogan of the copy that “*Sooper* hai Zindagi^{††}” makes one think whether life really is contingent upon the cookies. *Vital* tea makes you really lively. The message of the ad is that the soul of life lies in vital tea. The ad seems very silly when one pays attention to the ingredients and their nutritional values. In *J1 Samsung Galaxy* ad, Ali Zafar leaves a girl for the phone saying now I have the phone, so I don't need her. Discarding the female model for the smart phone speaks volumes about the dignity and prestige rendered to women in advertising.

The Intellectual Shallowness of Women

Some of the ads show women as playful clowns and kiddish. The ads hint at the fact that women should not be taken seriously. In *Nestle* juice ad, the tagline “kuch naya Kartey hain^{‡‡}” is implemented on a girl. The mechanism for befooling the girl obviously stipulates the low intelligence of the girl. The very excuse of saving the cat demonstrates the fact that boys are excellent improvisers and the girls excellent dupes. When the same boys are shown in another ad trying to dupe a male professor, their uncanny designing backfires and they become the victims of their own trickery. It is also interesting to note that male intellectual supremacy is shown in domestic affairs as well. Waseem Akram recommends *Ariel* detergent for washing the clothes. The skeptic women

^{††} Sooper is life.

^{‡‡} Let's do something new.

feel convinced when the cricketer highlights the virtues of the powder. In another ad, a door-to-door salesman demonstrates the power of *Harpic* cleaner by proving that it could pull the dirt out of the toilet of the lady she mistakenly believed was pretty clean.

In *Gillete* razor ad, the man is busy in shaving while his wife asks for buying clothes. The potential threatening nature of the different razor brand makes the man exclaim “yes” to his wife. The ad strikingly illustrates the involvement of women in mundane affairs of life. Their world seems to consist of buying and spending money they borrow from their husbands. They also in some cases are presented as bottlenecks interrupting the smooth practical life of men. In *Dew* ads, the adventure clearly is the exclusive domain of boys. In the same fashion, the *Sting* ad also portrays girls as passive spectators while the boy carries out amazing acrobatic feats. The fault of the ship gets fixed due to the rambunctious performance of the boy. Once again women are pushed to the corners and are shown as mere onlookers specializing in nothing but in extending appreciation to men.

Tarang ad focuses on the cat-and-mouse type of marital couple. The shivering husband sitting on the roof acknowledges his misdirected appreciation for his mother which, in fact, should have been attributed to his wife. The expulsion of the husband from the room happens due to his inability to praise his wife. One again the ad verifies the shallow nature of women. They can exhibit abnormality if they are deprived of the much-sought hallow compliments of the husbands. *Homage UPS* can soothe the vulnerable women. The emotional outburst one witnesses in the ad pictures women in despicable colors. Their life is bound to products, and the absence of them can expose the vulnerable sides of their existence.

Ufone ads teem with gender issues more than any other. Women are frequently depicted as ruthless, violent or threatening wives or as passive creatures who wait upon their males for survival. In one ad, the decision of the wife to visit her mother home makes the husband ecstatic. The two days relief package is advertised as two-day relief from the tiresome company of the wife. The powerless women are duped into

power but always in a negative manner. Another ad features the wife as feisty, sassy and as a wild and atrocious person who gets incensed the moment the husband enquires about the spending of the home budget. This passivity of women finds expression in another *Ufone* ad which features the male as captain *Ufone* and the female as a hanging woman who while in a life-threatening situation cannot keep herself silent. When the hero goes to avail *Supercard* package, the girl falls down with a bump. The interesting thing about the ad is the fact that the man at the end says that he will now go to rescue the girl. It is the shopkeeper who remind him that the woman is his wife. And the crunch line of the ad smells of excessive sexism: "If you save the wife, you will not save money." The ads provide implicit messages that it is perfectly normal to treat women as sub species having no individual identity and thoroughly dependent upon their husbands.

Eroticism and Women

The sexualization of women's body is the general template being followed in advertising. Wolf (1991) aptly observes: "Consumer culture is best supported by markets made up of sexual clones, men who want objects and women who want to be objects.... (p. 144). Cell phones are usually personified as females. The objectification of women is particularly chilling in *Q* mobile ads. The slimness of the female models is characterized as mobile body. The *Q* mobile ads quite often feature famous Bollywood actresses like Karina Kapoor and Priyanka Chopra. When one watches these ads, one feels the ad is strikingly about the vivacious curves and the aphrodisiac movement of the models. In the spots, the features of the mobile are shown through the features of the endorsers. *Q* mobile brand is epitomized as feminine. And the mobile does not appear as much as lascivious actresses with their tantalizing looks and erotic body language appear. The ads almost condone the functionality of the mobile phones, and delve instead into contours of the models. One of the most erotic ads in Pakistani context is the commercial ad of cookies. The sensual close up of the husband and the wife is suspended by the

waking son. The cookies are sleep-inducing for the child and problem shooter for the couple.

In some of the ads, women are treated as the objects of gratification. They are preparing themselves to be looked at, to be the targets of male gazers. They use *Lux* soap so that the male may dance with her and enjoy the freshness of her body. The prime objective of applying sundry beauty creams like *Golden Pearl*, *Fair and Lovely* is to be the object of male's obsessive attention. Some of the ads imply that women could make their male mates more responsive by changing their hair color and using a different shampoo or soap. Women are presented as sexualized commodities who provide instant gratification to men. Their bodies are equated with products. Some ads feature identical models parading, caressing and stroking their delicate bodies, hugging their sensuous bodies, shaking their long and silky manes, and in some cases quite sensually applying moisturizing cream and soaps and then praising their beauty almost like narcissists standing before the mirror. In some cases, the woman's body morphs into the advertised product as in the ad for *Huawei* cell phone. In *Veet* ad, a woman is shown who caresses her throat and experiences the throes of orgasm. Her head is tossed back and her eyes closed, as if she is in the throes of orgasm. The poses and postures of women in advertising are quite pornographic. One can safely contend that women are sexualized for commercial purposes.

The sexual appeal can be seen in another way that only young, thin, scented, depilated, sprayed, carefully groomed, made up girls are featured in ads. One cannot see the eroticized images of old people or people with physical disabilities. The most shocking side of the story one witnesses in advertisements is that sexual appeal is something exterior, not interior. Products excite us and make us vulnerable to each other. Advertising preaches a culture that is beauty-crazed and saturated with sensuality. It overtly and mostly covertly exhorts women to focus more on their appearance than anything else and to trade in all virtues for getting new products. They are rarely advised to join in affairs which can guarantee them power, status and dignity.

Conclusion

The deceit and the uncanny suggestions in advertising create a threatening climate in our society. It not only demonizes and belittles women to a shocking extent, but also creates very unhealthy environment for our children. The grand perception that our culture propagates about women gets a downright reversal in advertising. Women are projected as addicts. They are food addicts; beauty addicts, product addicts and are completely naive to the intellectual side of life.

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