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A Critical Analysis of the Select Advertisements with Reference to Beauty Stereotype

*–Saroj Kumar**

Abstract

In the twenty-first century, advertisements have changed drastically worldwide. The contemporary popular and effective advertisements not only try to promote and sell their products, services and ideas but also convey some sense of social responsibility. The Indian advertisement industry witnessed a reformation in 2008 when the advertisement of Tata Tea, (*Jaago Re*) was launched. It was, to a great extent, a type of rejoinder to the criticism of the then prevalent television advertisements. However, the basic purpose of the advertisements remains unchanged. Some of the advertisements, in the recent past, played a decisive role in raising some of the fundamental social issues, like issues related to gender, education, health, etc. It has been observed that some of the advertisements are loaded with messages which question the orthodox and conservative social practices, values and beliefs. It seems academically viable to examine some of the select advertisements in order to see how and to what extent they influence society and its culture. The present study deals with the critical analysis of some of the select television advertisements in relation to stereotypical social values in India. The study looks at the advertisements as texts and it analyses them with the perspective of literature. As we know advertisements not only work as a catalyst to gradual social change but also hint at the change advertisers try to suggest overtly or covertly.

Keywords: Advertisements, Culture, Stereotype.

Introduction

Undoubtedly society is wider elastic thought/notion than mass media once we discuss the importance of mass media in relation to society. Media cannot exist in isolation. However, in and after the second half of the twentieth century, mass media started playing decisive role in shaping society in different ways. These days one can easily

* *Assistant Professsor of English, Centre for Foreign Languages, Central University of South Bihar, Gaya, Bihar - 823001, INDIA. Email: sarojkumar@cusb.ac.in*

observe the enormous impact of mass media on our life. It influences, in one way or the other, directly or indirectly, positively or negatively, our behaviour, attitude, beliefs and ideologies. For example, we may take television. Some pieces of research suggest that the more we watch television, the greater the effect (Signorelli & Morgan 1990). Another research suggests that one of the reasons behind aggressive behaviour is of watching television (Huesmann 1982). The mass media has continuously been accused both the unfair standards of beauty for women as well as for negative representation of women. It would not be an exaggeration to say that mass media, to an extent, control our perception of the world. It seems it is mass media that set criteria for what is beautiful and what is not beautiful, what is acceptable and what is not acceptable, etc.

Since the very inception of mass media, business houses and firms have started using mass media to let a large number of people know about their products and services. There is no harm in using it as a tool to reach to masses. It disseminates information about the new, innovative and modified products, services and ideas which enhance people's standard of living. However, with the progress of time the competition became tougher in the market. Consequently advertisement industry witnessed robust changes. It, almost globally, created and promoted consumerism in such a way that people started considering luxurious products and services as their necessities. Almost the same have been observed in India as well.

In the twenty-first century, advertisements have changed drastically worldwide. One of the reasons may be that the people in general have become more sensitive to and aware of issues related to gender, race, nationally, etc. The contemporary popular and effective advertisements not only try to promote and sell their products, services and ideas but also convey some sense of social responsibility, for example, the Thai Life Insurance advertisement. The Indian industry witnessed a reformation in 2008 when the advertisement of Tata Tea, (advertisement *Jaago Re*) was launched. It was, to a great extent, a type of rejoinder to the criticism of the then prevalent television advertisements. However, the basic purpose of the advertisements remains unchanged. Still one can observe majority of the Indian advertisements have some contents that establish stereotype in our society.

One of the very difficult social concepts to define is beauty. Therefore, we will not try to discuss what beauty is rather we will shift out attention to how the standard of beauty is set in our society. It is also said that the media does control our conceptions of beauty. However, it does not show its own perception of beauty rather it just dictates who we the people in general find are good-looking. It does not seem problematic who we consider good-looking and attractive. It becomes problematic when we have an assumption that the people who are good-looking and physically attractive only and also possess socially desirable personality traits. According to Andreoni and Petri, "Attractive people earn 15% more than unattractive people" (Andreoni and Petri 2006: 90). It can be observed that people struggle with the way they look. They want to achieve the stereotypical look in terms of skin colour, body type, height, etc. The present study discusses how some of the recent television

advertisements try to reconstruct the concept of beauty and attack on the stereotype of beauty. The purpose of the present study is to analyze some of the television advertisements that are critique of stereotypical social values in relation to beauty. It deals with some of the select advertisements that campaign against beauty stereotype established by advertisers.

Methodology

The study takes into account three television advertisements namely: *Joy: Beautiful by Nature*, *Anouk: Bold is Beautiful,* and *Mayur Suiting: Nawazudding Mayur Siddiqui*. Keeping in mind the aim and objective of the study, these advertisements have been selected with the help of 'convenience sampling' (Bryman 174). The study looks at the advertisements as texts and it provides their analyses with the perspective of literature. The purpose of the study is to look at the select advertisements in relation to society and culture. These texts have been analyzed qualitatively. The study does not focus on the commercial aspect of the advertisements. It does not talk about how much these advertisements are successful in terms of persuading their respective potential customers.

Analysis and Interpretation of the Data

The first advertisement that we will discuss here is of *Joy: Beautiful by Nature*. The advertisement begins with an introduction to the body lotion. At the beginning of the advertisement, it describes distinctive qualities of the body lotion with the help of fair and attractive skin. Here the identity of the lady has not been revealed. Deliberately the body type of the lady has also not been completely shown in order to arouse curiosity in the viewers' mind. As per the convention we expect "a beautiful girl" but suddenly we are shown Bharati Singh (an Indian stand-up comedian and actress) who is not considered "beautiful" by the people at large as she possesses fat body. As viewers, we feel jolted. It compels us to rethink about concept of beauty. However, Bharati's "peculiar" body type may also be considered one of the attributes in her personality that helps her to gain popularity as a stand-up comedian. She can frequently be seen mocking her own fat body.

In order to further attack the stereotype of beauty, Bharti takes charge. She also mentions what are the derogatory terms that have been used since her childhood to address her because of the fleshy body type. She here represents all the people who are, according to the societal perception and assumption, not considered "beautiful". She mentions in this advertisement that she turned the derogative remarks of the society into her identity and she became "the queen of comedy". It may be concluded that Bharti has managed to compensate her supposed body deformity with her extraordinary talent but a large number of people have to bear insult and a sense of inferiority only because of their physical features which are solely a biological phenomenon.

One of the features that makes this advertisement distinctive is it is an advertisement about advertisements. We may call it a meta-advertisement. There may be two obvious

reasons behind making it a meta-advertisement. The most obvious one is to criticize the advertisements which promote beauty products by the other companies since the advertisements of beauty products are severely criticized for promoting racism, stereotyping, etc. It has supposedly tried to prove itself unique by not supporting beauty stereotyping. The other purpose is to give a jolt to the expectation of the viewers about the advertisements of beauty products as it is generally expected, since it is an established convention that an advertisement of a beauty product will have a stereotypical good-looking and attractive person to endorse it, by the viewers in general that there would be a stereotypically beautiful girl. One of the purposes may be to persuade a large number of people who have been struggling for their look by providing a sort of relief with the help of criticism of stereotypical concept of beauty. The advertisement provides a kind of enlightenment to the viewers.

Another important aspect of this advertisement is its verbal and seemingly the situational irony. It criticizes beauty stereotyping, at the same time it apparently tries to support and promote it. It verbally propagates the idea of nourished skin and visually propagates fair skin. However, it seems relatively less prominent in the advertisement. The skin colour of Bharti Singh has been shown relatively fairer. Additionally it can also be said that the advertisement criticizes all the aspect of beauty stereotype other than skin colour and its quality as it tries to sell a beauty product related to skin.

The advertisement suggests a cultural change and apparently it does not want to take credit for the change rather it wants to be part of the change and wants to spread awareness of the prevalent misconceptions about beauty. As we know advertisements not only work as a catalyst to gradual social change but also hints that the society is prepared to digest the change the advertiser tries to suggest overtly or covertly. It can also be interpreted here that such type of social campaigns may not be their intention and their responsibility rather it may be their marketing compulsion. In the recent past it has been debated a lot in both the print and the electronic media along with social media that advertisements of beauty products are also responsible for promoting racism and stereotyping in India. For example, NDTV has started a campaign against such advertisements by not showing any advertisement of fairness cream. Such types of advertisements can also be interpreted as fear of the advertisers and the companies which manufacture such beauty products. The fear comes from their foresightedness. Once people understand with the help of mass media and social media debates that such advertisements are one of the responsible factors for promoting racism and stereotyping, people will have negative image of such beauty products. Therefore, it seems, the present advertisement we are discussing, has some defensive mechanism for the entire beauty industry. We can also sense a type of compensation for the damage that has been done by some campaigns (like NDTV initiative). We can also say that the advertisers try to maintain their positive image in society.

If we try to critically analyze the verbal message of the advertisement, it tries to provide justification for establishing beauty stereotype. The advertisement quite cleverly shifts the blame on society itself. In other words, it can be interpreted here that the advertisements of beauty products have been showing stereotypically beautiful people

because the people in general had this misconception about beauty. It has been explicitly told in the advertising that Bharati has been given a chance in an advertisement of a body lotion because the perspective of society about beauty has started changing positively. At the superficial level, it seems that the advertiser is humble and modest by giving credit to the viewers for the change it tries to bring. Even the modesty that has been shown here by the advertisement has a commercial purpose to persuade the potential buyers.

The advertisement of Joy body lotion directly addresses and explicitly criticizes the beauty stereotype, but the advertisement of Mayur Suiting has nothing which explicitly talks about it. The advertisement of Mayur Suitings has been selected for the study since Nawazudding Siddiqui has been shown as its brand ambassador. He is one of the actors who has struggled a lot in order to secure a reputation and fame in the Hindi film industry because he does not have the stereotypical physical feature. It would not be an exaggeration to say that it is only his extraordinary acting skills which brought him stardom. His talent had not been recognized by the industry because of the stereotypical mind set of the directors and producers. However, it can also be said that the directors and the producers only want to show what the audience want to watch. If we take into account the biography of the actor, the film industry took about ten years to recognize his talent. One of the reasons was the stereotypical mindset of the people. The people who are stereotypically handsome or beautiful have to struggle relatively less in his or her professional life. It is a general perception that people who are not "good locking" are not intelligent, smart, skilled, etc. Studies suggest that beauty and gender play decisive role in people's professional life and significantly affect their earnings. Hamermesh and Biddle (1994) find in their study that attractive people earn more money than unattractive ones.

The advertisement tries to portray the professional life of the Nawazudding Siddiqui. An attempt has been made to show his acting journey, from a struggler to a star. The advertisement may be interpreted as an attack to beauty stereotype. The first rationale behind this interpretation is that this is the only advertisement of a product that is related to "beauty" by Nawazudding Siddiqui so far. It can be understood as a bold initiative by the advertiser to choose Nawazudding Siddiqui in the advertisement instead of any relatively more handsome Bollywood male actors. If we take into account the dialogue of the advertisement, Nawazudding Siddiqui is asked by one of crew members that how he performs the role of different types of characters so easily. He enquires, "Easily?" This dialogue can be interpreted as the long period of struggle he faced to reach his stardom.

The third and last advertisement that we are going to deal with is an attempt to redefine the concept of beauty that we have in our society. The slogan of the advertisement is "Bold is Beautiful". Like the advertisement of Joy Body Lotion, it unambiguously and overtly attacks the beauty stereotype. Myntra's exclusive ethnic wear brand Anouk launched this campaigning in a series of advertisements to address some sensitive issues like homosexuality, single parenting and being single, especially in relation to women. However, the present study is limited to the advertisement that

deals with the issues and problems related to pregnant women. It talks about how pregnant women are perceived as "not beautiful" and "handicapped". The baby bump is considered a sort of body deformity.

The advertisement narrates a story of a pregnant professional woman. On the basis of the analysis of the beginning of the advertisement, it seems that she has designed a building and it has been presented to the client. Professionally she should have been part of the presentation as she has designed the project. She might have been shunned from the presentation because of her pregnancy. She receives praise for her design from a colleague. Later on it has been shown that the woman has been relieved from her professional duties because of her pregnancy. Her expectation was that she would be promoted for the work she did. She is being consoled by one of her senior colleagues. However, she was completely aware that she would be relieved since she knows how a pregnant woman is perceived at a workplace and in society. She had already decided to start her own business. At the end of the advertisement there is a role reversal. Her senior colleague who represents stereotypical thinking, receives jolt when she sees her new office.

The biggest predicament that has been highlighted in the advertisement is how a female looks another pregnant woman. The pregnant woman in the advertisement seems quite disturbed since the female members in the management have not supported her appraisal and consequent promotion rather it seems they showed their agreement to the management's decision. One of the important dialogues to support this argument is : "… you should just focus on your baby now." At superficial level it seems a relevant and sensible suggestion to a pregnant lady by her colleague but at deeper level it talks about how even females look at pregnancy. It can be interpreted that one of the biggest hurdles in the ways to women's equal status in society is women themselves. It seems they also look at the issues and problems related to women from a male perspective.

If we critically look at some portion of the dialogue of the advertisements, it suggests that how at work places people are judged more on the basis of how they look than those of their works, especially in terms of female employees. The pregnant woman in the advertisement says, "They are judging me by my pregnancy; not by my work". She has not been offered the project since she is pregnant. The advertisements clearly portray the suffering of the working women during their pregnancy due to the stereotypical thinking of people.

Conclusion

On the basis of the analysis of the select advertisements, it can be concluded that the notion of beauty or good looking we have in our society is faulty. These advertisements provide a fresh insight for people to rethink the concept of beauty they possess. They question their stereotypical way of thinking. The analysis also suggests how people in general are ready to accept the change the mass media wants to bring in society. In other words, it can be said that our society and culture have witnessed positive changes which helps us to be a developed world. The analysis leads us to conclude that the

change propagated by the advertisers is not an outcome of their social responsibility rather they are compelled to campaign such social changes in order to sustain positive image in the market. These advertisements, it seems, have some defensive mechanism for the entire beauty industry.

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