

CONVENTION OR INNOVATION: GENDERING THE DEBATE OF INDIAN COMMERCIALS

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Abstract: The world of visual culture involves (re)presentation of the 'body' for the enjoyment and consumption by the opposite sex. Glistening images, flirty gestures, and provocative body languages are incorporated to attract the consumer's attention. In an effort to normalize sex and its logical inclusion in public distribution, many companies have often attempted to insert boldness in their campaigns and went to extreme depictions in the process. Such commercials are often called off by the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) or the concerned television authorities. It bears the responsibility of putting bans on advertisements on lines of promoting unethical issues and immoral depictions. Taking instances of few such controversial commercials among which Amul Macho tops the list, this paper attempts to explore the obscure territory through a dense study of relevant concepts, taking a range of advertisements that profuse inter-textuality and culture specific themes.

Keywords: Consumerism, Controversy, Eroticism, Gender Stereotype, Visual Culture.

Introduction: The society we live in today is highly infiltrated with urban culture. We create and impress our social identities as per the demands of commodity standardizations. We are mused with the lurid techniques adopted by companies and we participate in the carnal bliss of acquiring goods often beyond our level of necessary subsistence. We give shapes to our objectives in the most unrealistic formulations, and are most convincingly assuaged by the luminous declarations by the advertising agencies. We love them, we grab them, and we add to the rat race of acquisition, of turning human emotions and fragilities into commodity. Advertising firms make use of this sentimentality and implant enigmatic ways to give us a promise of escape from our dolorous lives. Display of nude figures renders a deliberate triggering of passion. Sex is presented to the viewers in a fusion of arousal and denial. The nakedness of the body serves as a treat to the eyes alone, and the viewers are denied access to real possibility of an erotic fulfillment. Aroused desire in the consumer makes him crave for the product, in an attempt to reach a completion to the satisfaction of his desire. The whole method creates a realm of hyper-real-sexuality and we come across reconstructed concepts of eroticism in an age of advanced capitalism. In order to create sensation among the consumers, ads take expedient methods to reach the public and in the process often get extremely carried away. In the list of launching controversial ads, Amul Macho bags the highest votes in the Indian scenario.

Is popular culture therefore the storehouse of all kinds of negative values, and as Adorno would have suggested the very medium through which the masses get indoctrinated? Do the tools of mass culture entail an individual's playing her/his subordinate role in silence as assigned by the mass producers? How does one treat advertisements- should we see them as a way of fooling ourselves, making our cognitive faculties dumber as ever; or should we adapt our own selves as they show us the right way to mould our fashion statements in accord with the updated versions? How do we cope with the constant objectification of sexism or gender stereotype in the television commercials?

Starting from the scratch, I would like to engage with the very first example of Fair & Lovely, a Hindustan Lever product that has ceaselessly balanced consumer's expectations and results till date, and which was launched in India in 1975. It all started in the wake of Doordarshan when fairness cream was a total alien to the Indians. Until the mushrooming of the globally imported products Fair & Lovely gave tough competition to other companies like Vicco and Ponds in distributing female grooming products. The first ad was in English and the intention was to project a girl in her early twenties getting appreciation from her college friends after using the beauty cream that convincingly made her complexion fairer than before. Within a couple of years, Fair & Lovely became a household name and women started investing their faith in the promise of a tube. The second phase of advertisement was targeted towards women in their early thirties who were planning to get married or settle down in life. The ad, in its theme, ventured taking up fairness as an essential eligibility for a bride. The possibility of rejection for a dark skinned woman in an institution of arranged marriage is astutely

clouded by Fair & Lovely's intervention. Disputably the advertisement exhibited a message that without Fair & Lovely's wonder, many dusky women could still be spinsters.

The third phase in the fairness project talked about women's changed notion and asserted that the cream is produced for the courageous woman of the modern times who takes pride in reinventing herself and initiates stepping forward to achieve her passion, the agenda of the user still being acquiring a man's attention, primarily. Whether a bride to be or simply dating, Fair & Lovely invulnerably provides rapturous beauty to your skin and all your panicking is erased within two weeks or a month, the stipulated time interval of restoring skin fairness promised by the company. By the fourth phase, Fair & Lovely changed its ingredient which was previously maintained to be essential chemicals of American origin and declared resorting to Ayurveda to make full use of Indian sentiment and faith in traditional herbal treatment. The famous 'Kummkumadi Tailam' ad was targeted to the bunch of liberated women who would not compromise with their destiny because of beauty dearth in their looks. Fair and Lovely promised to redirect their fate and to return a dejection free confidence, and yet again the scoring aim was to mesmerize a man by the dazzling looks. Fair & Lovely's main theme has always been very orthodox in its statement. The whole idea of a dark skinned woman unable to grab men's attention, to get a boyfriend or a husband, to earn a handsome living, or to achieve her dreams, is downright extreme gender stereotyping and promotes the unhealthy obsession of Indian sentimentality with fairer skin.

Advertisements are often designed to pull our chains, tease our senses and lead us to believe the fanciful concoctions. Women might have been the target group of such fairness cream advertisements, but it did not take long for these companies to realize men's equal obsession with fairness. Taking this as a lucrative opportunity, Emami, Ponds and many other companies launched their fairness creams and declared them to be exclusively for male use. Emami's Fair and Handsome claimed to be 'World's number one fairness cream for men', the central theme of the product's advertisement being just the same, to become adorable to the opposite sex. In order to frame infectious curiosity and to maintain an acceptable degree of emblematic stereotype, the initial ads had to maintain this question to the audience, "*mard hoke ladkiyon wali fairness cream kyun?*" The product however now retains the tagline "*kyun ki mardon ko chahiye zyada se bhi zyada*". This acclimatization of advertising according to the need of the hour accounts for a successful profit in the market shares for the prominent brands. Featuring one of the most celebrated actors, Shah Rukh Khan, Emami however did not feel the need to show much interest in introducing male nudity to the screen.

However, every time one sees a ravishing woman getting undressed onscreen or signaling an invitation to devour her one perceives that it is either an advertising campaign for Kama Sutra or Wild Stone perfumes. These ads preach women not to desire the male body or the product. It, in fact, injects in women the desire to become desirable, to submit to the urges of men's desire, as if sex is her only salvation. We are enthralled by the prompt insertion of sex in every commercial and by the amplification of depicting carnal pleasures in every alternate projection of our daily activities. Starting from accessories, apparels, shoes, soft drinks, energy drinks, to the extent of advertising a plain mineral water, erotic representations are impelled everywhere. Who would have wondered that savoring a simple mango could be so erotic until Slice came up with its seductive 'Aamasutra' ad featuring Katrina Kaif in a very sensual avatar, smacking her lips and fingers in a way that hardly anybody imagines of eating a fruit?

Indian commercials are inundated with visuals of celebrating sensuality since the wake of print and television advertisements. An initiator in this attempt was VIP Frenchie in the 1980s, when the company advertised its inner garment collection with a boisterous man in his brief who defiantly blows away a man dressed up in a suit, in a heroic attempt to save the girl. An aggressive commercial alluding to the fact that good men do not need to dress up while wicked persons come in polished wrap. The advert also propagates the idea that people wearing good quality underwear is always ready to combat against any amount of danger and is probably the messiah in all his guileless innocence, in saving the honor of the weaker segment in the society, namely women. The commercial delineated that evil comes in disguise, perhaps an unacknowledged reference to the mythological character of Satan. The caption of the advert, 'things begin to happen in style with a VIP Frenchie under your belt' was obscure and disapproving. The commercial was massive for the daily Indian viewers and brought loathsome responses in bulk. This could be a total mistranslation of the whole idea regarding what the brand wanted to promote but the instrumentation was surely an attempt to imitate the absolute notion of brave superheroes in their fancy costumes always with a visible underwear worn on the outside, saving the dignity of the women in distress. The ad reminds me of a spectacular combination of the chivalrous knights

saving the princesses in Disney's fairytale with gallant Marvel comics' superheroes winning over the worst of villains, with an underwear punch line in the actual reality. Undeniably, most of the movies that we consume every day also exhibit the same illusory philosophy in plenitude. Inarguably the overpowering exposure of male body is effective enough to win the girl as well, as of speaking about female viewership.

The most famous pulled advertisement of all time, the ad campaign launched by Tuff shoes in 1995 had the worst overall rejection and was immediately banned by the ASCI. The ad featured Milind Soman and Madhu Sapre embracing each other with a python circled around them, wearing only a pair of shoes. The bold depiction of the commercial was released for the first time in Bombay News Mid Day and was immediately picked up by critics. The peculiar stand taken by the company to endorse its product would have infused a sense of absurdity in people's mind. The couple had indulged in the nude act, never knowing that would bring them a lawsuit of 14 years. Condemned for its ecstatic vulgarity and obscenity, the ad received loathsome responses from the concerned patrons. Its rebellious depiction of nudities resulted in women activists¹ protesting outside Sapre's house and donating free sarees to her father as an attempt to show their disgust against the dauntless nude act. The utter meaninglessness of the depiction would raise questions like, who wears sports shoes with nothing on; when do people need to wear these shoes, while going out or while going naked to the bed; what is a python doing in the ad, does it symbolize anything or is projected without any reason at all? There was more menace when the ad also had to bear scornful protests from the animal welfare organizations. The ad's rapid ban prevented many companies to come up with such obscene commercial in public media.

Redefining offensive campaigns, the 2011 ad of Amul Macho underwear with its 'Crafted for Fantasies' positioning, dropped a bombshell on the Indian viewers and ever since then it has been regarded as the most sensational ad campaign promoted by any underwear company so far. A freshly enticing campaign with suggestive amorosness created dissension by launching its "Yeh to bada toing hai" ad. The ad agency had devised two campaigns for the project, one with the orang-utans and the other with a woman washing her husband's underwear. The brand met with its fair share of controversies in the past few years owing to the explicit imageries of sexual overtones.

The ad with the woman washing her husband's underwear stimulated much disagreement among the television authorities and had a tough time with the ASCI after the Consumer Council of India received numerous grievances from the public. A campaign for promoting men's product for intimate parts without the projection of a single man onscreen is obscure but not new. Yet the male presence is aggressively felt as the wife fantasizes that her husband is still wearing the underwear. The ad had no nudity, even the locale was set against a village backdrop, with the women draped in traditional attire and rarely any exposure on the female part too. But the suggestive expression of an orgiastic sexual encounter going on in the woman's mind was enough to grab the eyeballs. A newly-wed woman scrubbing her husband's underwear while other women in the village watch her curiously was indeed provocative. Not only the woman fantasizing her husband still wearing it stimulates an orgasm, even others present in the ad seem to be witnessing the whole act of indoor cajolery.

The target group for the ad was married men and women who most likely are devoid of extracting sensual pleasures out of their conjugal lives, women who hardly enjoy self-indulgences because of the burden of daily chores which keeps their lives occupied. The woman in the ad is a subject of envy to the other women. The setting also prominently adds to the contentious flavor of the commercial. The rural setting makes it more of a taboo by alluding to the fact that rural inhabitants are more restricted on discussing sensual encounters in public domain where as an open urban culture lets one celebrate sex freely. That is why ads with erotic messages and provocative depictions always concentrate on affluent settings. Identification with the situation brings urge to satisfaction and luxurious backdrop adds to the mental advancement of today's consumers. Convincingly enough, Amul Macho inner garments recorded a high number of sales after the much debatable ad was banned in public screening.

The ASCI in 2008 showed strong objection to the promotional campaign of Axe's Dark Temptations deodorant which focuses on an Axe user transforming into a chocolate man who is stalked and chased by women, licked, gulped and devoured voraciously. Axe, inevitably has huge potential at the lucrative deodorant market and the company recorded a huge turnover after promoting this product in an effective campaign.

As evident from these advertisements, the ad makers throw the ball to the audience's court. The challenge to bring the innovation must aim to reach the back of beyond in the consumer's mind, but many do not accept it in a positive way. The informed spectators carefully ponder and assess the merits and demerits of any advertising campaign. No brand wants to advertise its product to have sullen projections that gives a morose reflection of life. An effective projectile is created to insert vignettes of phantasmagoria in advertisements. Backdrop or props should not interfere to distort the sense that target group wants to get rid of. In order to use sensual elements which are adequate to evoke both men and women, the devise needs to combine realistic projection also, coupled with aura of fantasy and opulence.

I would like to conclude my paper by quoting Adorno, "Under monopoly all mass culture is identical, and the lines of its artificial framework begin to show through. The people at the top are no longer so interested in concealing monopoly: as its violence becomes more open, so its power grows. Movies and radio need no longer pretend to be art. The truth that they are just business is made into an ideology in order to justify the rubbish they deliberately produce. They call themselves industry and when their director's incomes are published, any doubt about the social utility of the finished products is removed."

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