

The Dynamic Role of Advertisements in Creating Appearance Culture in India

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ABSTRACT

Advertisements are potentially outreaching and highly persuasive forms of social influence. Not only it is an important tool of marketing and brand recognition, but also a very strong cultivator of ideas, concepts, trends and stereotypes. It is therefore imperative, that the content broadcasted by media is positive, holistic and pragmatic. This paper focuses on analysing the role played by advertisements in setting appearance culture and the dynamic and evolving nature of modern advertisements against appearance stereotypes. The paper intends to make use of information derived from secondary data.

Key Words: Advertisement, Body Image , Appearance culture.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST DECLARATION

The authors declare that they have no competing Interests. We warrant that this paper is the authors' original Work .

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Introduction

Humans, from a very young age are influenced by the cultural norms of the society. What is followed by “all”, usually becomes a norm. There are many ways through which an individual is influenced.

Advertisement is a channel of Communication, through which a product or service is recommended and endorsed. It is helpful in making the community aware of new products, services and commodities available in the market. It also provides the consumers with a wide variety and choices of products, and informs them about the features of various products at the comfort of their home. The consumers can also compare the features and prices of the products by the information provided by advertisements at the comfort of their homes. Not only it is essential for the consumers, as it increases the variety of products offered to them, but also the sellers and service providers, as it helps in boosting the business, increasing brand recognition and widening the customer base. It also motivates sellers to perform their best and produce new innovations. Advertising is a very strong means of influence – It has a convincing power, the power to Persuade, and encourage consumers into buying a particular product. In the recent past, the occurrence and effectiveness of Advertisement has increased manifolds. Also, it has become accessible to a much larger audience than before. One can see a diversenumber of products advertised on Television, in Magazines and on Internet. And though advertisements are helpful in more ways than one, they also establish certain norms, standards and trends of the present. In today's time, when technology is widely accessible to all individuals alike, advertisements play an inevitable role in setting stereotypes. According to Englis et al. (1994), Advertisements portraying attractive looking individuals were likely to effect consumers' perceptions of their own facial attractiveness. Individuals are exposed to different forms of advertising in our daily life, without consciously being aware of it.

Very often advertisers appoint celebrities, who are generally fit and attractive looking- with beautiful skin , toned body , tall with attractive features , to endorse their products and services. And eventhough ,the primary function of advertisement remains endorsement of products and services, it also contributes in setting stereotypes and expectations for the society. Such Advertisements , passively and with an unconscious effort, endorse the idea of thinness , fair complexion and ideal body features. It is to be considered, that though some advertisements do play a role in inculcating

stereotypes into the minds of individuals it is exposed to, others often play a crucial role in promoting and encouraging positive sides of certain social issues. With technology at its peak of invention, and ease of accessibility, children are exposed to media from a very young age. Statistics from several longitudinal studies show that over-exposure of media can have detrimental effect on the health and cognition of young children. According to Levine & Smolak (1996), children, on average, spend more time watching television than in any other activities, besides sleeping. As children approach adolescence, the choice of content on television, internet and magazines also undergoes change. With children becoming more conscious of their bodies, and that of the opposite sex, the content of media gradually shifts, largely based on themes that revolve around sexuality, appearance and fashion. As pre-adolescents get more aware of societal norms of appearance and fashion, there is an urge to be “liked”, and accepted by peers and other significant others. Furthermore, the problem lies in the fact, that children in this age bracket, lack the concrete judgement skills, of distinguishing the concepts portrayed by media from reality. Much of the appearance and beauty ideals, as portrayed by media are unrealistic, cosmetically touched and unattainable by most individuals, hence, causing frustration and decreased self esteem.

Appearance Culture as a by-product of Advertising

Repeated exposure to standard beauty ideals and images, Appearance related conversations with one's peers and friends, Societal stereotypes of Ideal beauty norms and Media's promotion of certain beauty dimensions, all give rise to Appearance Culture, which in the simplest form, can be defined as a set of stereotypes, norms and expectations of Ideal appearance, that are propagated by diverse forms of societal influence. Many socio-cultural models have concluded that our culture and society encourage an appearance culture, which favours physical attractiveness across genders. For instance, Feminine beauty is associated with Thin and slender body as its primary defining feature, whereas Masculine body is associated with Muscular and ripped body. From a very early age, children are exposed to societal influence, with pre-school books portraying and labelling dark and fat as ugly, and slim and fair as attractive. Recent studies have shown that children are influenced by societal pressures. One such study by Ricciardi, McCabe, Holt & Finemore, 2003; Smolak & Levine, 2001), examined the role of factors contributing to body image issues in young children, and concluded that parents, media and peers play a major role in the development of a child's body image, apart from biological factors such as Body Mass Index (BMI), Age and other factors.

Advertising, as a medium, promotes, endorses and markets Products and Brands. It also propagates and initiates trends, beliefs and ideas. Advertising heavily for a product has been shown to form an overall opinion in general public, that the brand is confident about the product in question and has invested heavily in it. This is the primary reason; brands often spend hefty amounts on the advertisement of their products. The aim of advertisers' rests at endorsing the products enough to make their products, a household name. In most cases, Advertisers employ well known celebrities to endorse their products, rather than non-celebrity models, since most celebrities have loyal fan following and higher persuasive power in comparison to non-celebrity models. Also, it is an established fact, that advertisements, often emphasise more on the beauty and appearance features of the celebrity, and less on the product being promoted. A very noticeable instance of this implication is an advertisement of famous branded waxing strips- which not only suggests being hairy as undesirable, but also portrays the celebrities' personal beauty features extravagantly. Thus such an

advertisement is setting stereotypes in two ways- Firstly by promoting and encouraging a belief that women should not have hair on their bodies, and secondly by emphasising the beauty features of the tall , fair and pleasant looking celebrity , endorsing the waxing strips and implying these characteristics as pleasant and attractive.Modern Advertisements are promoting and inculcating a culture of belief that implies that women and can enhance their appearance by using the advertised products, which more often than not, portray enhanced beauty levels, that are realistically not attainable.Advertisements indirectly create a collective unconscious image of what ideal beauty and perfect appearance should be. In a report titled “Beauty at any cost” (2008), by YWCA, United States of America, which is a non-profit organisation , dedicated to Social Service , it was implied that American women and young girls spend alarmingly huge amount of money on cosmetic surgery alterations , and follow extreme steps to achieve physical perfection .Studies have indicated that both men (Pope, Phillips ,Olivardia 2000, Agliata& Dunn, 2004) and women (Stice& Shaw,1994 ; Heinberg& Thompson ,1995 ; King,Touyz& Charles , 2000) ,having repeated exposure to advertisements , tryto imitate the models as their role models , by using the products being endorsed.

Though , both , women and men are increasingly becoming more conscious of their appearance , multitudes of studies have concluded that females are more vulnerable to body image issues, with girls being more conscious about how their weight affects their appearance, in comparison to boys , even during childhood(Shriver et al. 2013)

Evolution of Indian Advertisements

The outreach of advertisements is huge. And while In the last few decades, People have inherently become conscious of their appearance , with more and more people joining gyms, Fitness programs and undergoing cosmetic treatments, A small section of designers , Reputed brands and Advertisers have also come to realise the impact of portraying cosmetically beautiful and ideal body features in creating stereotypes of body shaming and Body image concerns , and have hence , started portraying women of all shapes, sizes and colours as beautiful and accepted.Dove , for Instance, is one such brand. It is a renowned and widely used brand of creams , shampoos and soaps. In their recent advertisement campaign , “Stop the Beauty test “, Dove endorses the fact that all women are different , and yet unique. The theme of the advertisement revolves around the message of giving away with stereotypes around ideal body image , and accepting and respecting women of diverse and varies body shapes , height and complexion.



#StopTheBeautyTest

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Another Very recent advertisement , which has been created against the established stereotypes, is that of designs created by world famous Indian fashion and jewellery designer , Sabhasachi Mukherjee. For their latest 2021 collection , Sabhasachi designs have chosen plus sized models to endorse and model for their outfit designs. A plus sized women , with side rolls and curves , has been portrayed while wearing a red Sabhyasachi saree. The model has also been kept natural , devoid of any extensive makeup or filters– the way women dress routinely. Not only has this picture gathered massive applause and appreciation , for showing pragmatic standards of beauty and acceptance of the natural beauty of women , it has also encouraged women to accept their bodies as it is and being comfortable in their own skin.



Another popular clothing Indian Brand, Biba , released an advertisement in the year 2017, endorsing it's range of clothing "BIBA GIRLS" for girls between the age range of 2-15 years, with a digital campaign titled "Change the Question". It is a video advertisement portraying a couple, with a little daughter, who has observed and imitated her mother's cautious attitude towards appearance . The theme revolves around the fact , that how the adults of the society, unconsciously transmit the idea of being fat as unpleasant and undesirable to young children. In the advertisement , it has been hinted , that the mother often asks the question "Am I looking fat?", which it appears , her little daughter has picked up, and hence the campaign has been titled "Change the Question". The parents come to the realisation after their daughter's innocent question – about how they were unintentionally conditioning their little girl to be under-confident of her body and creating a body image in her mind, gradually inclining her towards the urge of attaining physical perfectionism. Towards the end of the advertisement , a very thoughtful tagline sums up the message –“ Let's love ourselves enough to be the women we want our daughters to become. The advertisement gives two strong and direct messages that implies, That parental influence, however indirect it may be, can inculcate appearance consciousness amongst young children. The second message, implies that all women are beautiful , as and how they are, and they should be confident and respectable towards their bodies.



Conclusion

Advertisements are briefest, quickest and highly approachable channel of communication and transmitting ideas. Besides playing the role of an important marketing medium, advertisements also play a very important role in setting social standards and trends. And though research has suggested that advertisements and other forms of media, when portrayed otherwise can create undesirable stereotypes, positive advertisements in the recent past have created an impact and thrown light on some very important social issues. It is therefore important that advertisers understand the impact of content broadcasted to the masses, and create advertisements with more positive and pragmatic messages.

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