

Antifeminism in Pakistani Advertisements

*Shumaila Shafket Ali**

Abstract

The projection of certain ideas, presented as facts can bring a change in one's world view. The distinction between how we perceive reality and how it ought to be perceived is often blurred when we see the world through the lens of media. Being a strong force in formulating ideologies, media can also perform the task of reformulating some of the existing beliefs, while playing an active role in the process of ideological deconstruction. As far as Pakistani media (electronic and print) are concerned, they have a very strong impact on the minds of their viewers and readers influencing their thought patterns. In fact, the influence of electronic media is far more powerful than print media, as because of the low literacy rate of the country, majority of the people are exposed to the world outside through the medium of TV. However, the role of both electronic and print media is crucial with regard to the portrayal of male and female gender. The focus of this paper is particularly on the antifeminist element that is promoted through these advertisements. It aims to analyze those advertisements which reflect gender bias through the language employed, especially, in the tag lines along with the pictorial images, which leave a long-lasting impression on the audience, resulting in a shift in their way of thinking.

Introduction

Language, being a strong and powerful medium, often reflects the implicit ideologies that can not be understood at surface level. The language used in media acquires more power, as it appeals to the masses and affects their thought process. Bwewusa¹ puts it rightly: 'As media

* Shumaila Shafkat Ali is Lecturer, Department of English, University of Karachi & Stephen Anderson Professor Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Canada.

¹ W. Bwewusa, 'The Representation of Gender in Media: Role of Media in Reinforcing Gender Stereotypes', *EPU Research Papers*, pp.1-20.

has become more and more powerful in shaping the world's perception of the self, the struggle to maintain a unique identity and self-understanding apart from media influence becomes increasingly difficult. This has led to the increase of gender stereotyping in our society'. One cannot deny that this gender stereotyping is actually female stereotyping.

The projection of women as sex symbol is not uncommon in western media, but their projection in this light through Pakistani media is indicative of the strong influence of globalization, which can be seen as a euphemism for cultural imperialism. Women in Pakistani electronic and print advertisements have begun to be presented as sex objects which is evident not only from the way they are projected but also from the language that is employed to refer to them. The central question of this research paper is: How is gender represented through the tag lines used in advertisements that we find on Pakistani TV channels, newspapers, magazines and billboards? Besides this primary question, there are a few secondary questions, like: How do pictorial images accompanying the tag-lines of some of the advertisements convey gender bias? And finally, what roles are assigned to men and women in these advertisements?

Literature review

A substantial amount of research has been done on the connection that is established between the tagline and a feminine image used to promote the product. Although a large body of literature is available on research conducted on the language of TV and magazine commercials, owing to the limited scope of this paper, it is sufficient to mention a few research studies that aim at exploring the gender biased language used in commercials as marketing strategy. A number of studies conducted on the language of printed and electronic advertisements report the promotion of negative portrayal of women, in the sense that they are either portrayed as less powerful than males or are presented in a subservient role. Courtney and Lockeretz² did a statistical analysis of TV commercials. They analyzed 729 advertisements and discovered that not even a single commercial projected women as independent and in a professional capacity. This deliberate attempt at underestimating women's capacity to lead an independent life promotes gender bias.

² E.A. Courtney and W.S. Lockeretz. 'A women place: An analysis of the roles portrayed by women in magazine advertisements,' *Journal of Marketing Research*. Vol.08, 1971, pp.92-5.

Harker et.al.³ conducted a study to find out the Australians' attitude towards the portrayal of female gender in advertising and the relationship of such attitudes to feminist consciousness. With reference to commercials of fairness creams, Shahid⁴ conducted an exploratory study in Rawalpindi to find out the views of females about the fairness creams and their advertisements. Total 96 females, ranging from 19-28 years, participated in the study, out of which 64 were university students while 32 were from three vicinities of the city and belonged to the lower socio-economic group. The findings of this study reveal that the female participants did not approve of the way their gender is portrayed in advertisement.

The findings of many research studies also indicate that women are often exploited in advertisements, both print and electronic, as agents of seduction.⁵

Methodology

The data consist of tag lines taken from the advertisements of different products. Besides doing linguistic analysis of these advertisements, the pictures are also analyzed, as in many advertisements there is a strong link between the pictorial images and the tag lines, reinforcing gender bias. The advertisements are analyzed within the framework of Discourse Analysis to reveal the implicit ideologies that do not harmonize with Pakistani culture, resulting either in the obliteration of the already existing values or reinforcement of the stereotypes affecting the social fabric of our society.

Discussion and analysis

Although women have always been a victim of exploitation and discrimination in different fields, their exploitation reaches its peak, in the field of advertising, where they are sold as commodities. The analysis

³ M. Harker, D. Harker and S. Svensen, 'Attitudes Towards Gender Portrayal in Advertising: An Australian Perspective,' *Journal of Marketing Management*, Westburn Publishers Limited, pp.21, 251-64.

⁴ S. Kamran, 'Potential issues of skin fairness creams: TV advertisement in Pakistan,' *Electronic Journal of Business Ethics and Organization Studies*. 15:1 (2010), pp.15-20.

⁵ M. Barbercheck, 'Mixed messages: Men and women in advertisements in Science'. in M. Wyer, M. Barbercheck, D. Geisman, H.O. Ozturk, & M. Wayne (eds.), *Women, Science, and Technology* (New York: Routledge, 2001), pp.117-131; M. Harker, D. Harker and S. Svensen, *op.cit.*; S. Zubair and A. Sheikh, 'Female images', *Quarterly Journal of Gender & Social Issues*, 3:34 (2004), pp.61-77.

of the tag lines of various advertisements proves that they are used as a net to trap consumers for buying different products. The tag line: '*vah! kya cheese he!*' in the advertisement of Mozzarella Cheese, for instance, is highly suggestive, as one can notice the pun on the word *cheese* which is used with reference to the picture of a young and attractive lady on the billboard. By calling a woman *cheese*, she is denied human status, as the Urdu word *chiiz* is used to refer to a nonliving entity. The choice of this lexical item is indicative of the extremely negative attitude towards the female gender. It mirrors the general conception that members of our society, males as well as females, have with regard to the status of women. The fact that women's existence as humans is not acknowledged is enough to make one realize the extent to which they are exploited. The tag line of Omore Icecream: chocolate temptation that states: 'Nothing but Chocolate' along with the seductive picture of a female model, seems to promote the same nonhuman image of women, equating them with eatables, like chocolate.

It would not be an exaggeration to state that women's role in many commercials is limited to seduction. They are mostly shown seducing men, which is highlighted through the use of sexual imagery. This point can be better explained through the analysis of the advertisement of Firdous Lawn, in which different tag lines are used, which instead of referring to the fabric, refer to the female model wearing dresses of different shades. In one of the tag lines that states: 'Sizzling Hot!' the model is dressed in yellow and red. In this commercial, it is not the dress but the model, an Indian film actress, who is referred to as 'sizzling hot'--- an expression that is highly seductive. Another tagline of the same fabric that states: 'Take a chill pill with Kareena' seems to endorse the view that women are mere agents of seduction. Weatherhall and Gallois⁶ have observed that: 'A fundamental assumption made by psychologists taking a social-cognitive approach to gender identity is that language is both a medium for expressing gender identity and a reflection of it'. The language employed in the advertisements analyzed in this paper supports these psychologists' assumptions, as it has a shattering effect on women's identity.

Besides presenting women as sex objects through employing suggestive language, in some commercials they are also portrayed in such a way that the stereotypes against them are further reinforced. 'A stereotype is a generalization about an entire class of phenomena based

⁶ A. Weatherhall and C. Gallois. 'Gender and Identity: Representation and Social Action', in J. Holmes and M. Meyerhoff (eds.), *The Handbook of Language and Gender*, Blackwell Publishing, 2005, pp.487-508.

on some knowledge of some members of the class...Relying on stereotypes can lead us to overlook some important qualities of individuals and to perceive them only in terms of what we consider common to a general category'.⁷ Stereotypes categorize 'individuals by predicting their behaviour based on their membership of a particular class or group'.⁸ In the advertisement of Care Cream Bleach, for instance, the tag line: '*ab jalna chhoRo aur apnaao!*' the feeling of jealousy is associated with the female gender. There is a pun on the word '*jalna*' which in Urdu could either mean being jealous or a burning sensation, and it is the former meaning that is actually implied. By presenting jealousy as gender-specific, women are stigmatized. The tag line also carries the implication that it is only women who are the victims of jealousy; men are saved from this negative feeling and thus saved from the stigma that is attached to their female counterparts. Talbot rightly asserts: 'Stereotypes tend to be directed at subordinate groups (e.g. ethnic minorities, women) and they play an important part in hegemonic struggle'.⁹ Anti-female commercials stereotyping women are not difficult to find in the world of advertising.

Moreover, by showing women indulged in petty activities, like shopping, attending social gatherings, chatting with friends on phone for endless hours, the stereotyping against them becomes more obvious. There are very few advertisements that show women in nontraditional and meaningful roles.

It is quite ironical that women in commercials are overrepresented, but this overrepresentation has negative implications. Pictorial representation of women in many commercials also conveys prejudice against them. In some advertisements, one finds highly provocative images. These advertisements lead to undermine the role of women and ruin their image. The basic ideology promoted through these advertisements is based on making women extra-conscious of their looks. The advertisements of different fairness creams and soaps, particularly promote the belief that fair complexion is a sign of being beautiful and successful. There is too much emphasis on surface level beauty. The tag line of Skin White Goat Milk Whitening Soap, for

⁷ T.J. Wood. *Gendered Lives: Communication, Gender, and Culture*, Thomson, Wadsworth, 2007.

⁸ Courland, Boovee, John V. Thill, P. George, Dovel and Burk Marian, *Wood. Advertising Excellence*, McGraw-Hill, 1995.

⁹ M. Talbot. 'Gender Stereotypes: Reproduction and Challenge,' in J. Holmes and M. Meyerhoff (eds.), *The Handbook of Language and Gender*, Blackwell Publishing, 2005, pp.468-86.

instance, makes the claim: '*sar se paau~ tak goray pan ke liye!*' Similarly, the tag line of White Gold Whitening Cream: '*ho gaya na rang gora*' shows female gender's obsession with achieving fair complexion. All such commercials of fairness creams and soaps associate women with superficiality. Through such commercials, women who do not have fair complexion are made to believe that they are not likely to get any success in life. Most of these advertisements carry the implication that all that matters for a woman is her looks, which can be used to seduce the opposite gender. Whether it is the tag line of Al-Karam Lawn, which states: 'She's got the look!' or the tag-line of Lux Beauty Soap that asserts 'Play with Beauty', or the tag line of Fair & Lovely, which states: 'The Power of Beauty' seduction seems to be the only purpose. It is true that some people remain unaffected by the advertisements and do not see media figures as models for their own lives, but it is equally true that a great majority does get influenced by the representation of unrealistic ideals through commercials, especially commercials with catchy phrases, and it is quite interesting to note that the female gender tends to be influenced by these commercials more than males.

In the advertisement of Fair and Lovely, there is a supplementary text along with the tag line which goes like this: 'Believe in the power of beauty. Believe that beauty is a means to an end. With beauty you can change the world. Believe that change begins with you. Believe.' These lines ardently promote the idea that surface level or superficial beauty is all that a woman needs for success, and she needs this weapon to entice men. Advertisements of such products seem to promote inferiority complex in those women who are not physically attractive, resulting in either the loss of confidence or the failure to attain any. The statement 'With beauty you can change the world' promotes the belief that only beauty has the power; everything else is powerless, whether it is knowledge, talent, or creativity. If a woman is talented but not physically attractive, the doors of success remain closed for her; she cannot bring any change in society. The repetition of the word 'believe' is indicative of the explicit pronouncement that nothing else is worth believing except the power of beauty. Grammatical analysis of this supplementary text also carries the same meaning. The use of the imperative structure signals the commanding tone with which the message is conveyed to the audience, strengthening the point that only beautiful women have the power to succeed.

The tag line of Lux Beauty Soap 'Play with Beauty' being ambiguous can be interpreted in two ways and both the interpretations carry sexual connotations. It could either mean that women can use their

beauty to mesmerize men or men can exploit women. The imperative structure of this tag line could be taken as an open invitation for men to treat women as mere toys to derive sexual pleasure¹⁰ believes that: 'Advertisements for makeup, cologne, shampoo, and clothes often show women attracting men because they have used the products to make themselves irresistible.' Wood's observation is advocated by the tag line of Bigen Hair Color that states: '*aap par rukay nazar sab ki*', which actually means that by using this hair colour, a woman becomes so attractive and gorgeous that everybody is drawn towards her and is captivated by her looks.

By presenting women as agents of seduction and by employing gender biased language, an attempt is made to degrade them and change people's views regarding the multiple roles women play in our society. Whether it is biscuits' advertisements or chocolates', cigarettes' commercials or any other product, women are made a part of the promotion campaign, but ironically this promotion is at the expense of their self-image, which ultimately gets mutilated. In almost all beauty products' advertisements, the emphasis is on women's need for improvement, repair, rejuvenation, and makeover, conveying a very strong message, which almost sounds like a warning, that if women do not use these artificial beautifying products, they would fail to allure men, who use them for the gratification of their physical desires.¹¹ Most of these commercials lead to the objectification and dehumanization of women.

The female gender has begun to be seen as a group belonging to a class of society that does not have the ability to engage in meaningful roles for bringing social reforms. The function of women seems to be limited to beautifying themselves and their surrounding by their mere presence. The tag lines of many commercials carry both explicit and implicit assumptions about the roles women are expected to play in the male-dominant society we live in. Discussing gender role stereotypes in advertising over the past three decades, Harker *et al.* summarize the

¹⁰ T.J. Wood, *op,cit.*

¹¹ M. Kang. 'The portrayal of women's images in magazine advertisements: Goffman's gender analysis revisited,' *Sex Roles*, 37, 1997, pp.979-97.

J. Kilbourne. 'The more you subtract, the more you add: Cutting girls down to size,' in J. Spade and C. Valentine (eds.), *The Kleidoscope of gender: Prisms, patterns, and possibilities* (Belmont, CA: Thomson/ Wadsworth, 2004).

C. Lont. 'The influence of media on gender images,' in D. Vannay (ed.), *Gender Mosaics*. (Los Angeles: Roxbury, 2001).

functions women are made to play in commercials. According to them: Women are more often portrayed as young and concerned with physical attractiveness than their male counterparts; women are less likely than men are to be portrayed as authority figures and more likely to be shown as product users; there is a tendency for women to be shown as subordinate to men, as decorative objects, or as alluring sex objects.¹²

It is quite interesting to find that in many commercials aimed at women, male voice is used in the background. Commenting on this aspect, wood states: 'Male voice-overs reinforce the cultural view that men are authorities and women depend on men to tell them what to do.'¹³ In most of the advertisements women are projected as passive creatures; they are shown doing nothing but posing for the product. One can have a look at such advertisements on TV, magazines and billboards, like the advertisements of Al-Karam Fabrics, Gul Ahmed's Fabrics, Firdous Lawn, Mozzarella Cheese, Lux Beauty Soap, Diet Coke. The tag line of the advertisement of Diet Coke with the picture of a female model stating 'looking good, feeling even better' promotes the idea that being physically attractive leads to a better feeling. Instead of directing consumers' attention towards the product by highlighting its health-related benefits, the advertisement aims at focusing on the physical appearance that can be maintained through the consumption of this beverage.

An advertisement of a garment brand Outfitters having the tag line: 'erase your limits' along with the pictorial image of a young woman sitting in a casual style wearing jeans and T-shirt gives the message of rebellion not just against the traditional dress code but is also an attempt to instigate women to break their socio-cultural and religious boundaries.

The gender bias is not limited to the tag lines employed explicitly for women or the pictorial images used along with the tags, but are also reflected through the use of tags that address men. The tag line of one of the commercials of men's saloon, for instance, goes like this: 'Men deserve better'. Apparently, the advertisement seems to address men, but it is an indirect attack on women, as it aims at making them feel inferior to the opposite gender. Analyzed within the framework of Discourse Analysis, the advertisement aims at promoting male chauvinism. It is actually an endorsement of male superiority---the reinforcement of an ideology that is already prevalent in many societies,

¹² M. Harker, D. Harker and S. Svensen, 'Attitudes Towards Gender Portrayal in Advertising: An Australian Perspective,' *Journal of Marketing Management*, Westburn Publishers Limited, p.254.

¹³ T.J. Wood, *op.cit.*, p.270.

in both the East and the West, and Pakistani society is no exception. Then there is another advertisement of Hamdard Suduuri (a cough syrup), that has the picture of a male model showing his muscles along with the tag line: 'tough on cough'. This tag line is an open assertion that men have the power to combat every problem; they are not only socioeconomically and politically powerful but physically as well. Jacobson and Mazur¹⁴ are of the view that males are presented in advertisements in such a way that it inculcates in men a very strong desire to assert their physical strength, power, and dominance. Any commercial that portrays men in an unconventional role, like doing household chores or being less dominant, is not only disliked by male chauvinists but is equally disapproved by the majority of women, who are so used to looking at men as powerful and authoritative figures that they simply refuse to accept them in submissive roles.

Even in commercials that promote men's products, female models are taken and their role is that of a filler, just to add a touch of glamour. In some commercials that seem to address men, as mentioned earlier, women are made the target of attack. There are numerous examples of such commercials. One example is that of the advertisement of Fair Menz Cream. The tag-line of Fair Menz: men's fairness cream which claims: 'yu~ set *hogi*...☺...life!' accompanied by a female model standing beside the male model is actually an attack on the female psyche. The pause along with a smiley, before the word 'life' in the tag line indicates that it is not life but a woman who is being referred to. It implies the poor judgement of women, as they are attracted towards men on the basis of their appearance and not their personality traits and moral values. It simply means that men can befool them through their good appearance. In such commercials women are presented as empty-headed creatures that get carried away by men's looks. The same theme dominates almost all the advertisements for male consumers, be it a shaving cream ad, a cigarette ad or a gel advertisement. All these commercials aim at making men believe that the use of these products can change their fate, and they can get the woman they want; and the same holds true for women who are made to fantasize about their 'Mr Right', for they end up believing that a man actually becomes a hero by using a certain product that portrays men as heroes. All such advertisements actually present a very low image of women as creatures with superficial qualities, as creatures that are intellectually empty and

¹⁴ M.F Jacobson, and L.A. Mazur, *Marketing Madness: A survival guide for a consumer society* (Boulder, Co: West view, 1995).

devoid of intelligence, which is, of course, not the case with every woman.

Conclusion

The advertisements analyzed in this paper prove that the language used for promoting different products does not merely aim at promoting these products but also in propagating a certain ideology, which the audience unconsciously begins to idealize, even if that ideology obliterates the identity of a certain group. It also strengthens the already existing stereotypes in people's mind with regard to the roles that male and female members are expected to perform in our society. So, ideological reconstruction and deconstruction are in progress simultaneously and in both the cases women's identity is at stake.