

Commodification of Women in Advertising: The Social Cost

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Abstract

Advertising has become an essential marketing activity in the modern consumer world. Organizations rely heavily on advertising to draw consumer attention to their market offering. Besides being a profit making gizmo at the hands of marketers, advertising also plays an important role in influencing social attitudes and moral standards. However, today's ad world has been less sensitive towards health of the moral fabric of society and has been accused by many for objectifying women. Unfortunately, women have been transformed into commodities to be marketed. Commodification of women has been happening at a subliminal level. This paper examines how advertising transforms manifold attitudes towards women turning them into mere objects to be looked at. The paper also aims to highlight the arguments ethicists have given against using a woman's body and desirability to sell various products. They also warn that this kind of portrayal can have serious repercussions for the society, as it strongly influences how women are being viewed.

Keywords: Advertising; Commodification; Marketers; Social attitude

Introduction

Advertising is an essential requisite of the marketing strategy of any product or service. It is an elementary part of a capitalist society and has become part and parcel of our daily life. President of the marketing firm Yankelovich, Jay Walker-Smith says, "Everywhere we turn, we're saturated with advertising messages trying to get our attention. We've gone from being exposed to about 500 ads a day back in the 1970's to as many as 5,000 a day today". Companies constantly try to amplify returns and surpass rivals through ads. According to Advertising Age, a global source of news, intelligence and conversation for marketing and media communities; 36 companies in the US alone, spend more than \$1 billion a year on ads.

However, most people are hardly aware of it and assume that advertising has no effect on them. "That's one of advertisements most brilliant accomplishments to get us to believe that we're not affected by it," says Bernard McGrane, sociologist and a former Associate Professor of Sociology at Chapman University, California. Its influence is subtle, passive, covert and highly cumulative.

Although the benefits of advertising are manifold, however, there is no denying the fact that the benefits are accompanied with grave social costs. Companies desperate to make a buck, easily ignore the price society pays when marketers cross the moral limits. This effect is particularly pronounced when ads portray women as fetish models. There is a constant abuse of a woman's appeal and attractiveness to sell all kind of products. Its detrimental effects are so adverse that they are capable of completely misrepresenting human understanding of femininity and gender-roles [1-3].

Objectives

The study was conducted with the following objectives in view;

- To explore the aspects of women commodification in the ad world.

- To investigate various instances of this misrepresentation and how it reinforces sexism in the society.
- To identify the major social costs associated with objectifying women through ads.

Methodology

In the present study mostly secondary data have been used. Secondary data have been collected from various journals, articles, newspaper archives etc. The research is also based on various referred sources-published, unpublished and electronic.

Analysis and Discussion

Women objectification- an insight

There is a universe of female symbolization in adverts. Ranging through pictures of women on fairness creams to eroticized depictions adorning magazine covers; women's charm and charisma has been unfairly used to market various products. The following layout presents a number of instances of how woman have been exploited by the commodity market as "cash-cows".

The artificial look

Women are glorified as ideas of flawless beauty. Studio lighting, photo doctoring, air brushing glamorize women into beautiful ornaments. This unreal exactness in form of perfect pearly teeth, deep blue eyes, silky hair and wrinkle free face; transforms woman into something like a doll or puppet, rather than a real human being shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1: The artificial look.

Dismemberment

A woman is broken down into parts, with each part packaged as an attractive and alluring good. Images of eyes, lips, legs etc. show women as fragmented creatures with each part being presented as a bait to attract customers shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2: Dismemberment.

Commodification

Media imagery of women in the guise of women emancipation, positions females simply as objects of male gaze. Associations are often made between a woman's body and some product; and in doing so morality and ethics are often sacrificed shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3: Commodification.

Objects of desire

The ad world is flooded with images showing provocative and alluring female images to grab viewer attention. Ads transgressing the limits of morality, present woman as objects of sexual stimulation triggering desire among the male viewers shown in Figure 4.



Figure 4: Objects of desire.

The beauty myth

Advertisers create a fake image of what it means to be a 'desirable woman'. Such is the influence that many girls and women try hard to look like the women in ads. From dreams of getting the perfect hair to getting rid of unwanted tummy fat; ads are often accompanied by lost self-esteem and confidence shown in Figure 5.



Figure 5: The beauty myth.

Woman's body and face continues to be an instrument of grabbing attention and triggering needs. Marketers hope that this attention and desire will be transferred to the products they sell. However, in doing so a woman is degraded and promiscuously presented.

Misrepresentation of women-The social cost

Commodity feminism has become ubiquitous and inescapable in the modern world. However, this commercial culture has a huge social cost associated with it.

Crime and violence against women

Eroticized images of women in adverts can escalate incidents of violence against women. Such imagery fuels the perception that women are inanimate objects designed for male pleasure. Pictures of women in provocative and progressive roles often culminates into victimhood for the entire woman-folk.

Women as non-thinking decorative objects

Women have always been measured against age-old ideals of beauty and unfortunately modern advertising reinforces this notion. Actors and models are shown as divine beauties. This unreal image of the "little miss make up" forces many to think that women are nothing more than non-thinking decorative items.

Limited view of women

Number of ads show women portrayed in traditional female roles like cooking, cleaning, caring for kids etc. Some are depicted as housewives obsessed with spots on dishes and blots on clothes. Others are presented as supermoms who can juggle magically between household and office. The real woman is never portrayed. This falsification also puts women's capacities under a myopic view besides measuring them against inhuman ideals.

Distorting women's self-image

One of the aims of advertising is unarguably making people dissatisfied with what they have. This idea of establishing a defect often has serious consequences on a woman's self-image.

They often feel unattractive when they compare themselves with unattainable standards of beauty set by ads. As a result they experience a sense of disappointment, guilt and embarrassment for no fault of theirs [4-8].

Recommendations

Feminist virtues of beauty, desirability and appeal have been widely misused as 'goods for sale'. The battle between feminist virtues and advertising malpractices is still an ongoing encounter. Nevertheless, much can be changed if we wake up to the alarm bells in time.

- Start a resistance towards female exploitation in advertisement. Initiative by pressure groups against inappropriate presentation of women can go a long way in curbing the menace of woman commodification.
- Creating a culture which is woman positive and inclusive. A society which views woman with respect and dignity and shows no tolerance towards woman exploitation for profit.
- Empirical studies aimed at issues concerning the differences between how men and women are portrayed so as to create considerable awareness regarding the issue.
- Creation of a re-think agency which pushes for rejection of the existing dualism and a dignified representation of gender and sexuality.

Conclusion

Lurking behind the blatant commodification of women are enormous social costs. The need of the hour is to show no acceptability and lenience towards commodification of women through advertising. Endorsing it will lead the society towards licentiousness and immorality. It is the ethical responsibility of every society to come up with antidotes for such corrupt practices before we find ourselves neck deep in such malpractices.

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