Virtual Discrimination - Advertisements and Self Image

Corrine Rita War  
Assistant Professor  
Department of Sociology  
St. Mary’s College  
Shillong  
Mail ID: corrinefeegrade@gmail.com

Abstract: The internet has taken our world by storm. Personal branding and self-image, the way we think we need to look is always a passing thought for everyone of us. Advertisements have a way of grabbing the attention of a target audience and are so catchy that they linger in our thoughts long after we first see them. Many of them dictate the way we often see and portray ourselves. They advocate the use of certain products, cell phones, branded apparel, and footwear – all in the name of conspicuous consumption that can set a tone for our image and personal branding which is regarded as ‘acceptable’ by society. Only in recent times, however, have many of these advertisements been called out for their sexist and racial overtones/undertones that have a mental, physical as well as an emotional effect on the lives of individuals. Adolescents and adults alike, people are becoming more and more aware that the way the media portrays their models overshadows our everyday lives. This study aims to examine and investigate how advertisements can influence the way human beings see themselves. It will trace the influence of advertisements over the years and the role it plays in today’s world – one where access to information is so easily available and at a time where people are questioning so many archaic norms. With special reference to Erving Goffman’s famous work – Gender Advertisements (1976) – and other secondary sources of data like journals and articles, this study seeks to correlate theory with real life examples from the Entertainment Industry.

Keywords: Gender, Discrimination, Media, Advertisements, Feminism

Introduction

There is a fine line between what can be deemed creative or controversial in the advertising world. The internet has taken our world by storm – this, however, is not a new
phenomenon – it has been this way for a long time. Media has been in existence long before our country gained her independence and advertisements have been used for so many purposes – to foster feelings of equality, freedom, liberalism, or purely for entertainment. Technology has evolved but beliefs of many remain orthodox. For the longest time, this has been the way of the world. We accepted what has been fed to us without question. While passive acceptance of established norms may have been prevalent throughout much of history, a recent shift is observable. Individuals are increasingly engaging in critical reflection, challenging previously unquestioned societal constructs surrounding concepts like "normal," "beauty," and "handsomeness."

**Gender: A Brief Understanding**

According to the **World Health Organization (WHO)**, “Gender refers to the socially constructed characteristics of women and men, such as norms, roles, and relationships of and between groups of women and men. It varies from society to society and can be changed.” According to **GLAAD**, which was formerly known as the **Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation**, gender identity is “one’s internal, personal sense of belonging at some point on or off, of the gender spectrum. Most people have a gender identity of man or woman (or boy or girl). For some people, their gender identity does not neatly fit into one of those two choices.”

Gender is regarded as a social construct and is the way that an individual identifies oneself. This individual can choose to do so anywhere within this broad spectrum or even outside of it for that matter. When someone identifies themselves with the gender they have been ascribed with they are known as ‘cisgender’. There is the individual’s natal sex and as they mature, they can feel as though they are ‘outside’ themselves almost as though they do not belong to the body that they were born into. They can choose to identify as **transgender or gender expansive** – which means that they change their gender from male to female or vice-versa and want to broaden society’s views of what gender may be, there is also the **gender-neutral and non-binary** which means the person does not experience gender within the gender binary. The term ‘trans’ is a more inclusive term that covers those who identify as nonbinary and those who are genderless, according to the LGBTQIA Resource Centre.
We tend to think that these gender terms are limited only to ‘modern society’ as such; however, in 1990 at the Indigenous Lesbian and Gay International Gathering at Winnipeg, the term ‘Two Spirit’ was coined which was specifically used to distinguish and distance Native American/First Nations people from Non-Native Peoples. It referred to a person who identifies as having both a masculine and a feminine spirit and is used by some Indigenous people to describe their sexual, gender and/or spiritual identity.

**Gender Commercial Categories by Erving Goffman**

A thorough examination of Erving Goffman’s noted work – *Gender Advertisements*, reveals that men and women are mostly ‘placed’ into certain categories when it comes to gender commercials. Six of these can be mentioned below:

(i) **Relative Size** – Men are generally portrayed as being taller and bigger built than his female counterparts. There are, however, a few exceptions that can ‘prove the rule’ – for instance, if a woman was seen as taller or larger than the man in the advert – it was probably because she was from a higher social status than him. He may be portrayed in this situation as ‘the help’.

(ii) **Feminine Touch** – Women are very often portrayed as being soft and gentle and meek, holding any object that she interacts with in the photo with maternal care. Women who meet this criteria of ‘being feminine’ are chosen as hand models, face models or modelling in general while men may be seen as carrying on a more rugged appearance.

(iii) **Function Ranking** – Based on gender – men and women model for certain adverts and play a particular role accordingly. For instance, a man poses as the doctor and woman as the nurse or the mother holding her child who is being examined by the doctor. Interestingly, these roles are also portrayed by children as well – to quote Goffman, “‘a level of ‘cuteness’ is involved.”’ (1976:34) Further, in the domain of traditional authority and competence of women – men are seen as taking the subordinate role in the ‘female task’. If pictured, he would be seated reading a newspaper or engaging in his own activity.

(iv) **The Family** – When we think of the image of the family – ideally – what comes to mind is that of two parents and a daughter and a son. Even when pictured, the
way they stand and interact with each other has a significance – the father interacts with his son and the mother with her daughter.

(v) **Ritualization of Subordination** – Advertisers draw on this concept – the use of stereotypical behaviour that portraits inferiority and superiority accordingly. Goffman gives us several examples of this – one of which is when we picture a person lowering themselves to greet a superior out of respect.

(vi) **Licensed Withdrawal** – Women in most commercials are seen to be withdrawn or almost preoccupied with other things and appear as to be mentally unaware that a photo is being taken of them – photographs are shot in a candid manner and they are not usually the dominant one in the photograph.

But how many of these categories still hold true to this day? When we talk about the first category – that of ‘Relative Size’, many modelling agencies have now switched this up and make women come to the forefront and make men look the subordinate or the standby model in the frame. As with ‘Feminine Touch’ ‘Rosie the Riveter,’ the famous poster lady icon of World War II whose tagline – ‘We Can Do It!’ challenges the very idea that women are supposed to be feminine and gentle by their very nature. The magazine cover was meant to change the entire spirit of the people and push for a ‘can-do’ attitude among people, especially women. Seeing the popularity of this campaign, the United States government took advantage of Rosie and were able to promote women in the workforce that was previously dominated by men. To this day, Rosie the Riveter is still considered the most successful government advertising campaign in history. Under the category of ‘The Family’, in India the idea or notion of a family is so far and beyond from what was pictured by the First World countries. Here, an ideal and happy family is seen as one where numbers are many – grandparents, parents and children all coming together in one frame – usually with the eldest ones in the family seated at the centre, their children almost standing guard behind them and their grandchildren strewn across the floor seated on the ground.

**Stereotypes - Why they exist**

As Schudson puts it, “the promotional culture of advertising has worked its way into what we read, what we care about, the ways we raise our children, our ideas of right and wrong conduct, our attribution of significance to 'image' in both public and private life”
(1984:13). It is no secret that before an advertisement is put out in the newspaper or played on the television the company collects data through questionnaires and today, even keeps track of the content we view through our devices. This tactic, added with the ‘voice-recognition’, feature is precisely why so many times no sooner we merely utter that we want a holiday or would like to buy a certain product, than the pop-up adverts on our phones are already showing us their suggestions. It’s almost as though our devices are secretly listening to us. But this is in fact the way advertising works. In this Post-Industrial age, data is easily gathered from our mobiles and the kind of content we browse. Algorithms are designed to pick up feelers from the music we listen to on Spotify, the apparel we search for on Myntra and the household and electronic goods we scour through on apps like Amazon and Flipkart.

Marianne Wex, wanted to document gender differences in media throughout history. After collecting some two to three thousand photographs from advertising agencies as well as some taken by her in ‘natural settings’, ““Wex saw few if any differences between ‘unconsciously assumed postures’ she observed in naturalistic settings and the ‘consciously assumed poses’ of advertising.”” (1979:6) Although Wex worked independently of Goffman, she arrived at one fundamentally similar conclusion: women seem to rehearse subordinating poses and also represent as subordinate to men. By their very nature then, women in the past had accepted society’s norms that they were the weaker sex and how they were to present themselves in public in a refined manner.

Katharina Lindner also used Gender Advertisements as the foundation for her study, Images of Women in General Interest Fashion Magazine Advertisements from 1955 to 2002. ““[Goffman] emphasized that advertisements often contain very subtle clues about gender roles and may operate as socializing agents on several levels. Because advertisements are publicly broadcast, the men and women portrayed are often perceived to represent the whole population, and men & women in the advertisements seem to accept these portrayed behaviours, thereby validating the stereotyped roles.”” (2004:409) When commercials are aired, meaning is created through what is shared on the platform. As Williamson states, ““Meaning is created through the audience rather than directed at audiences.”” (1978:43). How we understand and subsequently exchange that meaning is based on our cultural knowledge.
It is without a doubt then that stereotypes – the widely accepted idea of a particular thing exists because we let it.

Back in the day, women were seen as the one who cooks, cleans, and maintains the house while her husband – the stereotypical breadwinner of the family goes to work and when his long day is done, he comes home to a fresh and hot home cooked meal prepared by his stereotypical housewife. Therefore, commercials were made and there were even television shows that were screened for young women to watch and learn how to be a ‘good housewife’. This norm, however, changed with the rise of feminism.

**Waves of Feminism**

The first wave feminism (1900-1920) focused on securing voting rights for women, challenging the notion of women as passive objects. The 19th Amendment granting suffrage in 1920 marked a significant victory. The second wave feminism (1960-1970) broadened the fight, questioning traditional gender roles and demanding access to male-dominated spheres. It saw the rise of different types of feminism like Liberal Feminism, Radical Feminism and Cultural Feminism. The third wave feminism (1990s) emphasized intersectionality, recognizing how race, class, and other factors intertwine with gender oppression. Kimberle Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality played a key role. The current wave utilizes social media and movements like #MeToo to address sexual harassment and gender-based violence. It also includes LGBTQI+ rights and the fight for transgender recognition.

**Gender Roles Through an Advertising Lens**

“‘The last several decades have seen changes in the role of women in society, both as those who earn money and those who spend money.’” (Sheehan, 2014:89) Not only this, but their power as consumers has also grown in the past few years. Since men and women perceive information differently, naturally, then, advertisements and commercials will be trimmed and curated for both genders specifically. Even though the models appear on television as almost unreal with their glossy hair, clear skin and six pack abs, yet there is a certain understanding that those models pictured in the very same advertisement are the picture of what society believes an individual should look like or would look like if they use their products.
The very same beliefs apply to children’s shows and cartoons alike – a handsome prince who is seen as tall and fair and a princess pictured as an innocent being, or Snow White – ‘the fairest of them all’. Heroes and Villains alike, a stereotype exists and the reason they exist is because society, let alone individuals like us, have allowed them to. Peer pressure runs rampant for children and adolescents alike, so every time a new iPhone or Samsung mobile is released, a new club jersey or pair of sneakers that claim to do wonders to their buyers – young and naive adults believe every word and feel the need to have to fulfil society’s demands of them possessing these expensive items.

But with the onset of the third wave of feminism as mentioned above, people began questioning these stereotypes. Nowadays, appearance is not all that matters for one’s beauty, but one’s physical as well as mental being. Taking examples that hit closer to home, there was a point in time where almost every woman in India became obsessed with Bollywood models and celebrities alike and the fact that they were a walloping size 0. The female notion of a ‘desirable’ body had hit rock bottom. Nowadays however, plus sized models are sought after in order to pose for a more realistic image and allow women to not only accept the body they have but also embrace it entirely.

Men are equally stereotyped by advertisements – they are always pictured in the adverts as the one who signs the insurance papers or is the breadwinner of the family as a doctor, banker and so on – when there are a lot of house husbands and male nurses in existence too. The landscape of women's representation in advertising has shifted dramatically, while men are still pictured as the ‘macho man’.

Through the use of these non-verbal cues and symbols, advertisers try to portray emotions, feelings and even popular ideas in a very sophisticated manner and are thus able to persuade people into believing what they want them to. In July 2020, Karthik Srinivasan, a communications strategy consultant called out the popular household Indian brand ‘Scotch-Brite’ for its age-old logo of a woman with a bindi. This logo was seen as a gender-marker in a day and age where women are no longer confined to the four walls of their home and men help with household chores alike. Interestingly, to quote Karthik, “While a lint roller does not carry this, other products like scrub pad/sponge, sink brush, broom, bathroom wipe, stainless steel scrub and the toilet brush do carry it.” This is a classic example
of how women are seen through the lens of a household company who after being called out for their error, have promised to replace it.

**Conclusion**

Many young boys are brought up to believe that ‘big boys don’t cry’ but grown-up men show emotions too and forcing this notion upon young and fragile minds can lead to disastrous consequences later because these children are made to believe that they cannot show any emotion. On the other hand, young girls have heard the phrase ‘girls should be seen, not heard’ all their life, prompting them to believe that they have to be silent and cannot speak up unless spoken to. Contemporary society witnesses a growing movement towards the deconstruction of traditional gender roles and behaviors. This dismantling of established norms manifests in various ways, including the societal acceptance of male emotional expression and the amplification of female voices. Ultimately, these efforts aim to dismantle the metaphorical "glass ceiling" that restricts advancement and shatter the limitations imposed by sexist ideologies.

**References**


Bionote: Ms. Corrine Rita War, Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, St. Mary’s College, Shillong, is currently pursuing her Ph.D at North-Eastern Hill University under the supervision of Prof. D.V. Kumar.