



# Objectification of women in mass media advertisements

Sriya sarma

Department of English , Tezpur University Napaam, Assam

*Abstract:* Simone de Beauvoir asserts “One is not born, rather becomes a woman”. It is absolutely true. The position of women in society is secondary. They are categorized as other. They are never be considered as subject like men rather they are converted into a mere object. The aim of this article is to examine how media objectifies women in numerous advertisements by making derogatory remarks. It depersonalized the individuality of women.

*Keywords:* Advertisement, Media, Object, Subject, Women

## INTRODUCTION

*Masculine and feminine roles are not biologically fixed but socially constructed* – Judith Butler. It is an obvious fact that gender identities are constructed by society. There are certain roles which are assigned to these sociological orientations of masculinity and femininity. Masculine roles are equated with rationality, active mind, and productivity; however feminine roles are associated with passivity, emotionality, effeminacy, nurturing etc. Men women have been performing these roles assigned to them by the society since time immemorial. Gender is fluid which is mediated between numerous subjectivities. But most of the advertising studies believe that gender identities are monolithic. Therefore these categories are existed outside of representation. Mass media is a globalized phenomenon which illustrates any medium of communication. It encompasses anything from printed paper to digital data comprising art, news, educational content and numerous other forms of information. Social media such as Facebook, what’s app, twitter etc as well as printed media like newspaper magazines provide a platform for everyone to show their talent as well as artistic ability. The fourth wave of feminism emerged around 2013 centered on the empowerment of women and the advantages of internet devices. By implementing print, news or social media fourth wave feminists try to speak against the oppressors and postulate equal opportunities for women.

## OBJECTIFICATION OF WOMEN IN MASS MEDIA

The study of gender stereotypes has been a prominent theme in both the gender and advertising literatures since at least the 1970s (Maher and Childs, 2003). Specifically the depiction of femininity is a matter of concern because women are portrayed on a controlled set of hyperbolized roles, personalities and body types. The rules for femininity have come to be culturally transmitted more and more through standardized visual images. As a result, femininity itself has come to be largely a matter of constructing .....the appropriate surface presentation of the self.....we learn the rules directly through bodily discourse: through images that tell us what clothes, body shape, facial expression, movements and behavior are required (Bordo, 1997, p.94). So far as gender roles are concerned the representation of woman in most of the advertisements is seen in the form of a kind mother, loyal wife and a hyper sexualized object. Moreover in their study of magazine advertising Wiles et al. (1995) indicates that women were shown in non-working roles in 92.3 percent of the US advertisings, 90.7 percent of the Swedish advertisings and 91.5 percent of the Dutch advertisings under investigations. This study also shows that women in the US 81.5% and in the Netherlands 57.4% are depicted in decorative roles (Maurice Patterson, Lisa O'Malley, and Vicky Story). There is a great difference between the depiction of men and women in advertisements according to their socially constructed gendered roles. We can see how men are always engaged with bigger opportunities like advertising car companies or marketing products with a sophisticated business surroundings. Whether women are seen in the advertisements of household products along with a fabricated domestic environment. Besides men are always pre occupied with authorial power. Most of the television commentaries are done by the male and female voice is heard in the advertisements of female goods only. With regard to their personalities women are shown as dependent on their male counterpart by diminishing their independent self. They are portrayed as unintelligent, non-rational, ignorant consumers only. On the other hand men are represented as intelligent, decision makers who possess higher authority. Advertising industries transformed female bodies into a mere object in front of the consumers to consume which made it exchangeable. Sometimes they are presented as fragmented object made up of its integral parts that are not united together orderly to make any personality. For instance the erotic images of legs, hips, lips, eyes etc. Throughout history we have seen that media is dominated by the patriarchal society. Women are presented from the perspective of man. They are only objects to be viewed. Feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975) inaugurated the concept of "male gaze" or "scopophilia" dealing with the objectification of women in media. It is inspired by the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. Mulvey demonstrates that "the gender power asymmetry is a controlling force in cinema and constructed for the pleasure of the male viewer which is deeply rooted in patriarchal ideologies and discourses". It denotes the idea that men are targeted spectators therefore their necessities are met first which originates from a conventional patriarchal society. Besides Mulvey presumes the idea that in reality women are only "the bearer of meaning and not the maker of meaning" which insinuates that women don't get any role where they can take control of a whole scene rather they are emplaced to be perceived from a materialized perspectives. It emphasizes the age old idea that "men do the

looking and women are to be looked". Women is spectacle and men are the look bearer. This masculine voyeurism empowers male or objectifies female. In a nutshell the "male gaze" or "scopophilia" signifies the sexual pleasure involved in the looking. Here women are presented visually as an object of heterosexual male desire where her emotions, conscience and sexuality become secondary than of her image being framed by the point of view of male viewers. Now a days advertising industries considered female bodies as an object to be used in sponsoring new products ranges from weird clothes, perfume to alcohol. The erotic depiction of women in the fashion world becomes an archetype to be followed by others in the future also. Advertisements often moves away from selling a product to promote an idealized lifestyle. French feminist theorist Simone de Beauvoir in her magnum opus *The Second Sex*(1949) writes "One is not born , rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in a society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature indeterminate between male and eunuch which is described as feminine" (Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* 1949 trans .ed.vintage 1997). I think Beauvoir was right in her opinion in building the concept of femininity.

Advertisements constitute some libidinous and quixotic perfect female body norms by promoting images of the body beautiful, instructing consumers in the creation of image and self-representation (Finkelstein,1997) and encouraging them to take the responsibility for the way they look (Featherstone,1991) . Models, supermodels are trying to reinforce the impractical idea that women must have a perfect figure, beautiful spotless face and silky hair by wearing tights, short revealing provocative dresses along with over make up with multiple colored hairstyle. Parents and kids are also become victims of those brands. Pregnant women are also part of these advertisements. Commodification of female body in mass media advertisements dehumanize the identity of women. Therefore we all had experiences of the nature of how gender displayed in television, cinema, radio as well as magazine advertisements. Television advertising offers audiences different femininities and masculinities simply as a means of targeting different audiences at different viewing times(Craig,1993).Daytime advertisements (for which there is a large traditionally female audience) tended to construct femininity as caring and nurturing centered on activities such as cleaning, cooking and family care. Advertisements on weekend afternoons (For which the audience is predominantly male) constructed femininity as loaded with sexuality and positioned women as taking care of the needs of men. At a deeper level, we can approach the issue from two contrasting viewpoints. (Currie, 1997)(Patterson, O'Malley and Story). These benchmarks are set by advertisement industries for defining femininity which becomes a textually mediated discourse alternately. Instead of determining femininity; advertisement industries become makers of it which are internalized by women. After having seen image framed in media, women start to utilize this image of soft, delicate, fashionable, submissive, domestic woman as a guidance for their self-presentation which affects their behavior and attitude also. Analysts believe that advertisements turned into a powerful socializing agent among young women. Women start to follow these codes of femininity blindly which lead them spontaneously to become subordinate to men and to present themselves more feminine which reproduces patriarchal oppression indirectly.

## IMPACT ON MENTAL HEALTH

Various researches reveal that mass media has made negative impact on the psyche of young girls. The mental health of young women deteriorated. A sense of internalized patriarchy predominated among women. It has long been the case that ‘the ideologies that have defined woman’s nature (what a woman is) and her competencies (what a woman can and should do) have historically relied on the physical materiality of the female body (Reischer and koo, 2004, p.311) (Patterson, O’Malley and Story). Women have been following the hyper real image of sexually desirable female body and viewed that to become an attractive woman one must be refined, zero sized, aromatic having velvety hair, hazel eyes etc. With this idealized image of female beauty young girls start to compare their own life with it and in the journey of achieving this unrealistic goal they are ended up with depression, severe health issues, low self-confidence, insecurity and criticizing their own body. For young girls external physical beauty becomes the measurement of the quantity of love, respect and attention they should receive. According to Jess Wiener, the cultural expert for the Dove Self-esteem project, “viewing unrealistic and unachievable beauty images create an unattainable goal which leads to feelings of failure. This is especially true of young girls who have grown up in a world of filters and airbrushing” ( Sen). Ironically women in most of the western countries now a days everywhere, are increasingly accepting this objectification of mass media by participating in multitudinous advertisements showing the empowerment through self-objectification. Undoubtedly they fall under the grip of hegemonic role of patriarchy.

## MEDIA INDUCED HARASSMENT ON WOMEN

Many researches on mass media unveil that media normalizes violence against women by showing them as an object of pleasure. There are some advertisements where physical assault scenes are casted in a fabricated way where three perspectives are seen one of the perpetrators, the victim or woman’s reactions and the third one is the bystander’s intervention. According to most psychological research, harassing behaviors can be classified into three related categories: gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention and sexual coercion (Fitzgerald et al.1995a; Leskinen et al.2011). Erotic comments, vulgar jokes and humors, memes are entered into the category of gender harassment whether forced touching, unintentional dates, male gaze those unwelcomed behaviors are part of unwanted sexual attention. Lastly behaviors like blackmails, threats, bribes are examples of sexual coercion. Media induced sexual harassment, pornification of women, glorification of masculinities have deep impact on shaping up the perverted mentalities of men which results on dehumanizing, harassing, exploiting and expecting more from women. In the subconscious mind men viewed women as an object of pleasure which creates hindrances to continue a healthy relationship.

## CONCLUSION

Mass media creates a hyper real world for all, a world which is more real than the real world. Hyper reality is a postmodern concept developed by a French sociologist, philosopher and cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard. In his early semiotic study found that “today’s consumer society exists as a large network of signs and symbols that need to be decoded”. This ideology becomes the basis for his work *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981). It furthered the concept that our current society has replaced all reality and meaning with signs and symbols and therefore the human experience is a simulation of reality. Baudrillard defined hyper reality as “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality”. It is a representation, a sign without original reflection. In this postmodern world we are unable to differentiate reality from a simulation of reality. Our perception towards media induced artificial world like Disneyland and the actual world merged together and we become the followers of this hyper reality. Pretty Hurts is an excellent case study of post modernism as it follows the aspect of postmodernism that says that reality and media have blurred together and we live in an unrealistic world that is defined by what the media presents to us hyper reality. Even within the lyrics, Beyonce displays the conflict in the media of what makes a woman perfect: “Blonder hair, flat chest TV says bigger is better south beach, sugar free Vogue says Thinner is better”. Therefore we can see how objectification of women in mass media tuned into a disease in the present society which need to be cured.

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