

Chapter 4

Contemporary Indian Television Commercials: An Exposition or Creation of Values?

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ABSTRACT

The famous ‘cultivation’ theory proposed by Professor George Gerbner suggests that people are influenced by jingles and catchlines, and a good deal of their conceptions of social reality depends on their exposure to television. The impact of incessant exposure to similar messages engenders cultivation, or the consolidation of a persistent conception, conventional roles and pooled standards, often involuntarily. The present study intends to explore cultivation theory by considering Indian commercials aired on television since 2001 till date and by critically examining and exploring marketing strategies employed by companies from the standpoint of gender-based portrayals and their consequent impact. The conclusion is that assigning particular traits to genders only restricts individuals from choosing who they want to be. It creates boxed expectations, and judges those who step outside them. Gender roles are nothing but an unrealistic expectation, which limits people from being their true selves, an aspect that needs realization by marketers.

INTRODUCTION

A popular adage says: What we see precedes our act, what we hear precedes our words. This suggests how all that we see or hear impacts the way we act and respond. Furthermore, this is regularly exploited by advertisers to induce a group of people (viewers, pursuers or audience) to buy or act upon items, opinions or services. The aforementioned adage stands in conformity with the well-known ‘cultivation’ theory, which maintains that people are influenced by jingles and catchlines, and a good deal of

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their conceptions of social reality depends on their exposure to television (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorielli, 1986). The influence of television upon an individual's life begins from the formative years through predispositions and predilections that otherwise could have been acquired from other primary sources. A majority of the programs aired on television are guided by commercial necessity and are intended to be viewed by almost everyone in a reasonably compelling fashion. The cyclical and recurring pattern of television's bulk-produced messages and imagery constitutes the mainstream of a widespread symbolic environment. The impact of such incessant exposure to similar messages engenders cultivation, or edification of a persistent conception, conventional roles and pooled standards, often involuntarily.

One of the most recognizable deductions from media and cultivation studies is that amplified television viewing results in stereotypical views, principally of gender (Scharrer & Blackburn, 2017; Sink & Mastro, 2016; Neto, 2016; Kay & Furnham, 2013; Lauzen, Dozier & Horan, 2008; Valls-Fernández & Martínez-Vicente, 2007; Kim & Lowry, 2005; Coltrane & Adams, 1997; Signorielli, McLeod & Healy, 1994; Craig, 1992; Furnham & Voli, 1989; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986). Earlier studies have further inferred that television advertising which stereotypes women in particular, but men as well, can shape instinctive and indiscreet attitudes towards women and their abilities in society. Goffman (1974) sets forth the idea that individuals draw sense of the world using cognitive filters, or frames, and that infomercial depictions factually build widely held interpretations. The main question, however, is whether advertising really affects our lives to the extent of reinforcing stereotypes and whether it is a mirror or a mould for society (Grau & Zotos, 2016).

According to the cultivation theory, television neither merely 'engenders' nor 'portrays' imagery, views and dogmas. On the contrary, it is a fundamental attribute of a dynamic process. Institutional requirements and objectives have some bearing on the fabrication and dissemination of mass-produced messages that construct, accommodate, exploit and nourish the needs, ideals and attitudes of the general public. Symbols, signs, and frames are intentionally used by marketers to position their products and to communicate definite realities (Baran, Mok, Land & Kang, 1989). The public, in turn, obtains definite and distinct identities partially through exposure to the ongoing flow of messages.

The authors of this chapter intend to explore the cultivation theory by considering the Indian commercials in recent years, particularly those aired on Indian television since 2001 till date. The study assumes significance from the standpoint of the fact that men and women in India enjoy typical societal roles, often reflected in television advertisements in various ways. To be more specific, women are shown as homemakers, rarely having any occupational roles compared to men. Although the trend is gradually shifting towards portraying them as working women, they are depicted, however, coming home from work to perform household duties. They are majorly paraded as dependent, requiring protection and financial support from men. Additionally, they are shown as being concerned mainly with physical appearance. On some occasions, women are also shown as bemused, impassive, deadpan, in a flight of fancy and having blank expression on their faces, as though they are not thinking about anything substantial. Men, on the other hand, are depicted as determined, enterprising, goal-oriented, high-reaching, go-getters, more likely in their professional attire. They are customarily shown as tough and independent, authoritative, likely to be voiceovers — perceived as informative and trustworthy. Advertisements can play a critical role in the process of stereotyping gender by illustrating how we suppose men and women behave rather than how we actually behave as men and women (Goffman, 2012). The present study shall show up such cases in an attempt to highlight the influence of media on gender roles in society.

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