

Chapter 9

Unconscious Branding: How Emotional Advertising Affects the Self-Perception of Women

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ABSTRACT

Advertisements are on billboards, on TV and in newspapers, and on mobile phones. However, very little thought is given to the opposite effect of advertising – the effect on the self-perception of people. This chapter discusses unconscious effects of advertising – the self-image formed by consumers by seeing repeated images in advertisements. Gender roles are reinforced when ads show people in different roles. In particular, it describes the effect on society when images of women are shown in domestic roles. Subconsciously, an image is formed in the minds of people that both men and women have specific gender roles to play in society. The chapter further discusses how advertisements need to be more sensitive towards subliminal messages received by society. The advertising industry needs to move a step ahead and assess the impact of their work before releasing it on an unsuspecting public. Since people tend to believe what they see, reinforcing traditional roles in advertising images prevents women's emancipation and limits girls in their quest to become independent.

INTRODUCTION

Advertising is a powerful medium to create brands. While it is used to promote and sell products, it also creates a reverse effect – when people absorb the culture and way of life shown in the ads. This affects the self-concept of the people, both men and women. They tend to copy what they see. This is reflected in what they wear and consume, in which case advertising succeeds. However, when the reverse happens, or when people try to become like the people they see in the ads, consciously and subconsciously, advertising imposes limits on society.

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Ads can encourage women's empowerment by showing them as independent consumers. When they continue to reinforce society's traditional gender roles through their images and messages, they create a world in which progress is not possible. Women's education, freedom and empowerment thus suffers and the society is unable to advance and modernise. Advanced countries, on the other hand, give equality and respect to women, as is reflected in their high gender development index (GDI) figures. Developing countries remain at the lower rungs in the GDI table. Countries on the whole too suffer because women cannot contribute in the economic life.

This chapter discusses the role of culture in advertising with particular reference to gender roles. It also shows how gender roles are reinforced subconsciously as people absorb ideas through subliminal perception. The chapter also discusses portrayal of women in advertisements, describing the common roles of women as seen in Indian advertising. Since people tend to copy what they see, this portrayal affects the self-perception of women.

Common themes in advertising include motherhood and dedicated wives who keep the house clean and the children fed. But this becomes a vicious cycle, preventing women from advancing and achieving their potential.

Significance of the Chapter

Emancipation of women frequently suffers because media images reinforce gender roles on society. People form strong beliefs at a very young age about the roles and behaviour of men and women in society. Advertising reinforces such images through constant presence on billboards, TV and social media, thereby affecting the self-concept of young girls. It is firmly believed in many developing societies including India, that the place of the woman is in the house, looking after the roles of cleaning, washing and rearing children only. This chapter calls for more conscious advertising that does not impose traditional roles so that women's education and careers do not suffer.

CULTURE AND ADVERTISING

Advertising is both part of the culture it operates in and it also influences popular culture. Kumar (2012) writes that most advertising shows culturally acceptable images for fear of creating a scandal. In India, advertising images must be within its acceptable culture, as cases are filed in courts for the most frivolous reason of "hurting sentiments".

On the other hand, advertisements also tend to impact culture. For example, "two minutes" has entered everyday popular language in India, thanks to the advertising tagline of Maggi noodles. In the same way, advertising can create messages that impact local cultures and can be an agent of change. It is therefore important to understand the effect of advertising on society and culture.

Abel and Angelo (2018) describe culture as an umbrella term which encompasses social behaviour and norms. It includes the knowledge, beliefs, arts, laws, customs, capabilities and habits of the people. Advertising operates within a culture since consumers may not like to buy products that are not in sync with their culture and mindsets but it is also in a position to influence culture.

Culture is described as "software of the mind" by Hofstede (2010) and is in the title of his celebrated book. It consists of ideas, beliefs, objects and activities held by a society. Advertisers use culturally accepted symbols to add meaning to their messages to make them more acceptable and attractive to

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