

**THE ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY OF PROJECTING CORRECT MESSAGES:
A CRITIQUE OF SELECT TELEVISION ADVERTISEMENTS ADDRESSING
GENDER ISSUES**

by

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Abstract: *The paper is based on the author's analysis of recent television commercials addressing gender issues. All the chosen advertisements have been acknowledged on various platforms for their efforts towards addressing gender issues and breaking gender stereotypes. This paper attempts to go beyond the direct messages and analyses aspects which were not discussed by critics or audiences but, nevertheless, had an impact on the overall messaging. The paper argues that in case of chosen commercials, the presence of certain cues diminished the intensity of the intended messages. In particular instances, the advertisements tended to create further stereotypes in the quest to address an existing one. The analysed advertisements were from well established brands (Anouk, Ariel and Titan Raga) and were praised by critics and audience alike for the messages they conveyed- thereby increasing the ethical responsibility they carried.*

Keywords: *Gender Stereotypes/ Television Advertisements/ Working Mothers/ Urban Families/ Portrayal of Women*

Media messages- be it films, television, print or online- are a reflection of the society but at the same time they play a significant role in shaping the society as well. The masses at large learn and unlearn about various issues from media (Kishwar, 2004). It therefore becomes an ethical responsibility of those conceptualising media content to be careful in what they are saying through their respective medium and how are they choosing to say it.

It is true that with increased education and exposure levels, especially in urban areas, the audience at large have become less impressionable (Chahal, 2015). But at the same time, media content depicting reality or those with social messages is gaining prominence with increased awareness of audience and their usage of social media platforms to discuss issues relevant to them. Audiences take such content very seriously and messages coming from

them are widely discussed over personal and social platforms (The Rise of Social TV, 2016), (Nielsen Report, 2014). This calls for a deeper analysis of the messages that are being projected through content which directly address social issues.

This paper analyses recent electronic advertisements which tried to break gender stereotypes by directly targeting chosen issues. Stereotyping of women has been a long discussed issue and there would be very few instances where it has not been condemned emphatically. Despite the almost universal condemnation, the portrayal has changed only slightly in advertisements (Moorthi *et. al.*, 2014) and is present even in news media (Adhikari, 2014). This paper, however, focuses on a completely different set of media messages. These were messages which attempted to reverse the trend of stereotyping women as the weaker sex.

For the purpose of this paper, the author has purposively selected content which was seen and discussed at large by audience on various platforms. The following advertisements were chosen to be analysed in this paper based on their rankings in various lists/polls of advertisements challenging gender stereotypes (Indiantelevision, 2017), (Mehta, 2015):

1. Anouk's Bold is Beautiful Campaign: The Calling
2. Ariel's Share the Load Campaign: Father's Apology
3. Titan Raga's Campaign: Break The Bias

The analysis has been done under the following broad heads:

- A. Lead characters and setting
- B. Plot
- C. Targeted issue
- D. How the issue was resolved and key message
- E. Critical Analysis

While the first four sections deal with direct messages projected through the advertisement, the last section contains a deeper analysis of the content, alternative messages, possible impact on audience, etc. The paper aims to give a fresh perspective on recent media content around gender issues which has been appreciated by audience as well as critics.

Anouk: The Calling

A. Lead characters and their traits:

1. **Young woman:** A promising architect working for a firm, apparently in the final trimester of her pregnancy.
2. **Middle aged woman:** Senior professional in the same firm as the young woman, most likely her boss.

Setting: A very urban setting. Advertisement opens in front of a posh office complex and has shots of the roads and flyovers of a metropolitan city. The entire content is in English.

B. Plot:

The young woman gets out of office and she is offered a lift by her boss. They get into a discussion regarding a promotion which was not given to the young woman, supposedly because of her pregnancy, despite the fact that she was the most deserving candidate. In between discussions, the young woman gives directions to the chauffer to reach her destination. Her boss discloses that they couldn't promote her as the clients needed an executive who would be around while she would obviously be away for a while. The boss also suggests that she should focus on her baby right now and when she joins back, they would consider her for a promotion. The young woman is very dissatisfied with this response and says that she could do justice to both responsibilities- a new baby as well as work. They reach the destination which appears to be a building under construction. The boss inquires if she is moving in a new place, but the young woman responds that this is her new office- which she herself designed- and that she would be starting her own venture right away.

C. Targeted Issue:

The advertisement targets the unsaid, yet common, practice of denying pregnant women the opportunities they rightfully deserve in the workplace. It is a problem faced by women at all levels of during their career where their personal life (marriage, pregnancy, young children) becomes a barrier to their professional opportunities, mostly because of the negative attitude of decision makers.

D. How the issue was resolved and key message:

When the young woman feels that her work has been overlooked due to her pregnancy, she makes the bold choice of quitting her seemingly coveted job and starting her own venture. The boss realises her mistake and tries to stop her, although in a slightly clichéd manner, saying "*Don't do this, you're the best we have...*" to which the young woman responds "*Had!*". The message is a brave wake up call for decision makers to look beyond personal lives and choices of women and realise the potential they hold before it's too late. It also encourages women to believe in their abilities to manage professional and personal responsibilities confidently.

E. Critical Analysis

Although the advertisement primarily has a strong positive message but there are elements which could have a negative impact on target audience, i.e. working women and recruiters/decision makers:

- First and foremost, it overtly emphasises the point that, given the chance, pregnant women or new mothers can work and perform at par with any other employee. This is certainly a flawed message as pregnant women and new mothers need to be given proper maternity leave and flexible working hours at their workplace to do justice to their own wellbeing and that of their baby (O'Callaghan, 2016). This becomes even more critical in the current times when most jobs involve high stress levels, long working hours and travelling. Creating a supportive and conducive work environment for expecting and new mothers is an aspect which has been advocated by the government, non-government organisations, doctors and working women themselves

(PTI, 2016). It is ironic that an advertisement claiming to spread a message in favour of working women who are pregnant missed this point.

- The advertisement also projects a superwoman sort of an image of the central character through the following cues:
 - The young woman arguing against the denial of her promotion telling how she single handedly managed a project for months
 - It is implied that while she was working with the firm, she was also setting up her own office
 - She was managing a demanding project and setting up her own office simultaneously during her pregnancy
 - The boss openly acknowledging that she is the best architect of the firm.

Although having an inspirational central character in any media content is appreciable, but the above points tend to border on making the character unrealistic.

Ariel- Father's Apology

A. Lead Characters:

1. **Young Woman-** An urban working woman. Shown to be completely occupied with office work and household chores throughout the advertisement.
2. **Woman's Father-** An observant man. Watching his daughter, he has a realisation that most parents raise their children with a bias in favour of boys and he writes a letter to his daughter apologising for this situation.
3. **Woman's Husband-** He is shown to be watching television while his wife is busy with endless chores.
4. **Woman's Son-** A little boy, apparently 4-6 years old, playing around the house creating a clutter.

Setting: The advertisement is set in an upscale, modern looking house/apartment. The language is primarily Hindi.

B. Plot:

The advertisement begins with the young woman entering the house late in the evening. Her father looks at her happily but she is too engrossed to notice anything. She goes straight to the kitchen with a bag of groceries. Her husband is comfortably watching television and her child is playing around the house with his toys scattered all over. The woman is still on an office call and turns on the laptop on the kitchen counter itself. While on call, she makes tea and hands it over to her husband and father. The husband gestures her food and she replies with a nod. She turns on the gas stove and makes preparations for dinner, collects scattered toys, arranges groceries and puts clothes in the washing machine. All this while, she is on her official call. The father is struck by this extremely hectic routine of his daughter burdened with both official and household responsibilities and her husband's complete indifference to her struggles. He realises that the husband is not ignoring his wife's hard work on purpose, it's just that the society has conditioned him like that. He writes a letter to his daughter

apologising for the way he never set an example (by helping his wife in housework) for her to see. He apologises on behalf of his husband's parents for the way they have conditioned him that housework never registers in his mind as a shared responsibility. He says that it is the whole society that has propagated separate roles for men and women, but now he would at least do his part by helping his wife with housework.

C. Targeted Issue:

The advertisement rightly targets the issue of housework being the sole responsibility of women in our society. The problem is so widespread that it has almost taken the form of a cultural aspect. The advertisement points out that the problem is the result of a flawed upbringing where parents condition their daughters and sons for different things, making their sons rather insensitive towards the hard work of their mothers/sisters/wives.

D. How the issue was resolved and key message:

The advertisement is less about the solution to the problem than its acknowledgement. Given the cultural conditioning of our society, an acknowledgement of this issue is the first step towards addressing it. The father observes his daughter struggle through office work and entire household chores while her husband nonchalantly watches television. Neither it occurs to the husband to help out nor it occurs to the woman that he should. Everyone appears to accept this biased distribution of responsibilities as a natural state of things. That is when the father realises the mistake all parents make while raising their sons and daughters differently. That is when he writes the letter of apology to his daughter.

E. Critical Analysis:

The advertisement is undoubtedly an honest attempt to address a prevalent mindset, but a deeper look reveals aspects which could be debated:

- Quite similar to the previous campaign, this advertisement also projects an extreme image of the central character through the following cues:
 - The woman enters home with bags of groceries which implies she was doing household shopping even after finishing off late at office.
 - She is on an official call and sends an e-mail on her laptop as she simultaneously turns on the gas stove and prepares tea for everyone.
 - She hands over tea to her husband, cleans up the cluttered toys, does the laundry without asking anyone to help out (all this while juggling with her phone and laptop).
- The advertisement, in the pursuit to create a hard hitting message, tends to stereotype the husband quite negatively. Apparently, he has come home from office much earlier than his wife and is watching television. He sees his wife struggle through but it doesn't occur to him to offer help. Instead, he asks her to wash a particular shirt while she is preparing to do the laundry. Though this might be true in many households, but the setting of the advertisement implies an upper middle class, metropolitan household with both partners working in well paying jobs. In such households, it is highly unlikely that a young husband would be so completely oblivious to his wife's

problems. Social research from other parts of the show that household chores are almost evenly split when both partners work. (Patten, 2015)

Although the advertisement strikes the right chord when it says that our society grooms girls and boys differently, it fails to incorporate the very fact it endorses that while girls are conditioned for responsibilities inside the house, boys are oriented for the roles outside home. This is reflected through alarmingly low participation of women in the workforce in India. Infact, with rising middle class incomes, the percentage of working women has gone down from 37% to 29% in the past ten years (Ray, 2016), with only 13% of urban women working (Goyal, 2008). But this advertisement, it shows the woman taking on both responsibilities with the husband taking almost none. In all likelihood, this might be an unfortunate truth in some cases, but the societal section to which this family is implied to belong- it would be more of an exception than a norm. Therefore, such an obvious stereotyping of the male character (husband) is completely uncalled for.

Titan's Break the Bias

A. Lead Characters:

1. **Executives in the meeting room:** All appear to be senior professionals- two relatively old and quite sophisticated men; one middle-aged man and one middle aged woman.
2. **Rajat:** A middle aged senior professional who is seen in an imagined sequence as the executives talk about him.
3. **Young Woman:** A fairly attractive young woman who is seen in the same imagined sequence working with Rajat.
4. **Kiran:** Young member from Rajat's team who is introduced to the senior executives in the end of the advertisement.

B. Plot:

The woman in the meeting room hands over a folder to the middle aged man saying that the recommendations for promotion are done. The man examines the folder and the first thing he says that it was very obvious that Rajat has recommended Kiran for promotion. Everyone is intrigued. He explains that Rajat relies heavily on Kiran despite the fact that it is uncommon to give so many opportunities to a fresher. As he tells about them, Rajat- a middle aged professional- is seen working with a young and beautiful lady. It is told that they always work together, they are the first ones to reach office and the last ones to leave and they even work together on weekends. Hearing this, the older men suggest playfully that they should also get to see Kiran. As Kiran enters the room, everyone is shocked to see that he is a man and not a woman as they imagined. The men are visibly ashamed to have imagined inappropriate scenarios just because they assumed Kiran to be a woman's name. The ad ends with the message "*Change the way you look at a woman's success. She is unstoppable now!*"

C. Targeted Issue:

The advertisement shows as to how a woman's professional rise is almost always attributed, not to her intellect or hard work, but to a supposed preferential treatment from a male

superior. Sadly, this perception is not limited to the general public (most of who draw their opinion based on films or television) but it exists in the most elite of corporate circles as well (represented by the two older men in the meeting room).

D. How the issue was resolved and key message:

The middle-aged man in the meeting room tells as to how Rajat involves his young executive Kiran (a girl's name in most cases) in all his projects and how they both work together after office and even on weekends. As he talks about Rajat and Kiran, the other members begin to picture Rajat in the close company of an attractive young girl who appears to be enjoying his attention. The older men suggest that they would like to see Rajat's *recommendation* in the promotion list. As Kiran enters the meeting room, they are shocked (along with the audience) to see that he is a man. They are visibly ashamed of themselves to have imagined such inappropriate scenarios just because they assumed that Kiran was a girl's name.

E. Critical Analysis:

The advertisement surely manages to astonish the audience in the end and make them rethink as to how they wrongly pictured Rajat sharing inappropriate closeness with a female subordinate. However, this advertisement seems to break our bias more against a male boss than it does for a female executive. The main reason is that the female executive turns out to be a fragment of imagination- she is not real. It is shown that the men in the meeting room have assumed that Rajat has nominated Kiran to be promoted because she is a young, good looking woman who allows him more than professional closeness. But when it is revealed that Kiran is actually a man, they are ashamed at their imagination. As Kiran is a male, it is obvious that Rajat has nothing but a professional relation with him and he has been chosen for promotion purely for his performance at work. The question remains unanswered that had Kiran actually been a woman, would the outlook of the other men change towards her. The core issue, which is also the tagline of the advertisement- *Break the Bias*, is somewhat lost. The last message "*Change the way you look at a woman's success...*" appears misplaced as there is no such woman in the advertisement.

Conclusion

All the three advertisements are well meaning attempts at addressing the issues they have targeted. However, viewing them critically points out certain aspects which should have been taken into consideration during the conceptualisation phase itself:

Central characters in all the advertisements are strong, attractive, professionally successful women. As mentioned earlier, inspirational characters are always welcome, but unnecessary glorification of the central character tends to shift the focus from the message to the character. In Anouk's "The Calling", the central character has done something so challenging- starting her own office in the final weeks of her pregnancy- that the plight of pregnant working women regarding biased treatment at workplaces got lost in the hallow of this feat of the central character.

Advertisements with characters which do not resonate with the audience will most likely not leave the desired impact. For example, in Ariel's "Share the Load" campaign, the message is meant for households where women are overburdened with household chores and other members, particularly husbands don't help. Most likely, these would be households where the income is not sufficient to hire a household help or very large families where the chores are too much for a single person to manage. However, the family shown in the advertisement was clearly an upper middle class, nuclear family. Therefore, while the campaign might have garnered praise on various platforms, it eluded the very group whose issue it took up.

While creative freedom is the right of every professional's right who is a part of the creative industry, but it is also their duty to be careful about what they are projecting through their content. But the ethical responsibility is higher when the content is supposedly created to address social issues. The reason for this is that the potential of such content to influence the audience, even the well aware ones, is very high. Therefore makers should be very cautious and scrutinise the content very thoroughly. Although most media content is produced with commercial interests, the makers must refrain from the typical trait of glorifying central characters, inadvertent stereotyping of supporting characters and focusing exclusively on the upper middle class or affluent segments, as the intended social messages may lose the desired impact among concerned groups.

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