



Portrayal of Women and Children in Advertising -Review and Analysis

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Abstract

The competitive environment of advertising allows various role portrayal of children and women in advertising. Women have been portrayed as an object of sexual desire, docile housewife, submissive roles, the epitome of beauty, etc. Children being vulnerable and susceptible to be duped are sold dreams in unrealistic ways. The objective of this paper is to investigate the situations that make the portrayal of women and children unethical. This paper attempts to identify the differences prevalent in the mindset of three categories of participants, students, teachers and working professionals. To accomplish this purpose multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) and analysis of variance (ANOVA) are applied to check whether the means of these groups are significantly different from each other. The findings suggest that there is no significant difference in three categories in the case of portrayal of children in advertising. However, for women, there exists a significant difference in the categories.

Keywords: Advertising, Women portrayal, Portrayal of children, MANOVA, ANOVA.

1. Introduction

Advertising is a highly persuasive method of media communication. Women and children play a significant role in almost all the advertisements as they are the key players in the family. All household activities revolve around women, be it taking care of the family members, cooking in the kitchen, shopping, and planning for social functions. Children too have a great role to play in advertising because they contribute to the sentimental values and hence the emotional appeal. To make advertisements appealing and relevant advertisers use a theme revolving around either of them.

The gender representations in advertising reflect “fundamental features of social structure”, such as values, beliefs or norms. (Goffman,1979, p.8). Initially women were depicted in the advertisements as homely, with relationship roles and were portrayed mainly in kitchen and bathroom settings. However, in most of the advertisements today women now have been portrayed as confident and outgoing. This transformation has come because of the several reforms and changes in the society. The advertisers think by involving women in advertising in any ways can increase the chances of making advertisement more appealing, but sometimes doing so, the representation of women gets distorted. She is projected as sexual object or stereotyped roles. Portrayal of women in Levi’s jeans where advertisers wanted to highlight the contours raised eyebrows of the general public.

Similarly, children are often shown indulging in activities that are not suitable at their age, for example bungee jumping in Thumbs up advertisement was more than an exaggeration. There are many such advertisements which raise the question of being unethical. This paper attempts to study the opinion of college students, teachers and working professionals towards the portrayal of women and children in the advertising.

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The following hypotheses are been proposed for the study:

H1: No significant differences will be observed in the three categories of students, working professionals and teachers/academicians for ethical issues related to women.

H2: No significant differences will be observed in the three categories of students, working professionals and teachers/academicians for ethical issues related to children.

2. Literature Review

Traditionally the advertisements had women portrayed as wife and mother because that is how she was accepted; her career choice was to be only housewife. Therefore, she was portrayed as an ideal housewife or object of desire, ideally, she will be endorsing the products which were related to household utility. For example, washing powders, bars, floor cleaner, brooms, incense sticks etc, but if it came to selling cars, watches, gadgets then it would be men endorsing the product. Slowly towards the late 20th century women's image was metamorphosed and she was depicted in multiple roles. Researches by Das (2011), Sukumar (2014) and Shyma and Shivani (2015) reveal that even though today's advertisements portray women as independent; they still are portrayed usually as glamorous, decorative and sexual objects.

Children lack analytical abilities and as compared to adults are easier to persuade, therefore advertisements targeting children or directed towards children raise concern regarding the ethics. They have significant role in influencing purchase of the family, typically in Indian context which is also demonstrated in study by Singh (1992) on purchase of television. Kaur and Singh (2006) found that children can even create the need to buy a product in family. Advertisements to create interest try to show children involved in risky physical activities.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Method

The study tries to identify issues or situations which can make the advertisement unethical. In order to identify and select these issues, code book for advertising content of three countries (US, India and UK) and past studies for the portrayal of women and children were reviewed. These ethical issues are listed in Table 1 and 2 in results section.

3.2 Procedure

For the study a questionnaire was developed and tested for its reliability and content validity. The reliability for the questionnaire was measured by Cronbach alpha which yielded a value of 0.89 which is greater than the recommended value of 0.7. To measure content validity, five experts were asked to rate the questionnaire item as relevant or non-relevant, each of whom rated the items to be relevant. Hence, the questionnaire is valid as well as reliable. For the data collection phase, participants were asked to understand the ethical issues in advertisements for women and children and then were asked to fill the questionnaire in a closed and contained environment. Then, the responses were analyzed using MANOVA and ANOVA statistical techniques to find whether the hypothesis proposed can be accepted or not.

3.3 Study participants

The participants consisted of students, professionals, teachers and academicians. Forming an age group of 18-50 years, these participants were selected randomly from various states in order to avoid any biases. The total number of participants were 100. These details were also observed in the sample: 37 females (37%), 63 males (63%); 46 (46%) students, 27 (27%) working professionals and 27 (27%) teachers/academicians.

3.4 Measures

The questionnaire comprised of one section for both women and children. In this section, the participants were asked to rate the role of a particular ethical issue or situation in making the advertisement unethical on a Likert scale of 1-5 (1 being the least to 5 being the most).

4. Results and Discussion

To compare the responses of the three categories of participants, MANOVA test, Pillai type was used to calculate the p-values for the ethical issues about women and children.

For the ethical issues of women, the p-value obtained is 0.1518, which is much more than the standard value of 0.05, hence the null hypothesis is invalid and there is a significant difference between the groups. Considering the individual ethical issues of women, a unanimous view is obtained for the situation women is dependent on men and need protection and face aggressive behavior from men as the p-values for these situations are 0.02309 and 0.001105 respectively. For the rest of the ethical issues the p-value are greater than 0.05, and thus the differences are significant.

There is a difference in opinions of these ethical situations as some members of Indian society are becoming open-minded and consider issues relating to sexual appearances, working roles for women as acceptable ethical issues. However, there is a variation in opinion with these views as in contrast with the traditional views as women's role as a housewife. Hence, a larger p-value for the overall data of unethical issues for women is obtained. There is a general agreement in the ethical situations of portraying women as dependent on men and submissive to men. These situations are considered as unethical by all the categories of participants as the role of women in decision making is now considered acceptable by all the participants.

For the children the p-value is 0.000566, which suggests that the null hypothesis is valid and there is no significant difference between these three categories. Taking account of the individual ethical issues, a unanimous view was obtained for sensitizing to buy branded goods, exposure to adult material, involvement in mental planning and enhancement in physical/mental level. Rest of the issues had the p-value greater than 0.05.

For children a unanimous view is obtained between the three categories of participants as there are no conflicting views on issues/situations as were in case of women of traditional vs modern view. In Indian society, children are considered to be the focal point in the family, they have the most important role as Indian parents always tend to take their opinion in buying any product. This focal point is commonly perceived as the same without any exceptions, leading to a common viewpoint for the issues concerning children.

The following tables show the mean and standard deviation for the ethical issues.

Table 1. Ethical Issues for women

Issues/ Situations	Mean			
	Overall	Working professional	Students	Teacher/ academician
Dependence of women on men	3.59	3.20	3.75	3.11
Variance in intelligent than men	3.85	3.60	3.93	3.63
Remain tight lipped	4.08	3.45	4.28	3.58
No role in decision making	2.71	2.75	2.73	2.58
Less in age than males	2.39	2.55	2.28	2.84
Low physical positioning	3.34	3.55	3.26	3.53
Shown petite	2.63	3.15	2.49	2.89
Diaphanous clothes	3.79	3.95	3.73	4.00
Seductive looks	4.05	3.90	4.08	4.00
Highlight on certain parts of body	4.24	4.10	4.28	4.16
Object of Desire/Sexual object	4.36	4.20	4.42	4.16
Never ageing	3.30	3.30	3.20	3.84
Submissive Posture	3.15	3.40	3.12	3.05
Licensed withdrawal	2.91	3.20	2.84	3.00
Feminine Touch	2.98	3.15	3.04	2.47

Dormant Behavior	2.95	3.10	2.98	2.63
Gregarious	2.68	2.85	2.65	2.74
Restricted at home	2.87	3.40	2.81	2.68
Traditional role of Happy housewife	2.99	3.45	2.95	2.74
Roles with other members	2.72	2.80	2.67	2.95
Endorsing limited products such as cosmetics, detergents, baby care.	3.01	3.40	2.91	3.21

Table 2. Ethical Issues for children

Issues/ Situations	Mean			
	Overall	Working professional	Students	Teacher/ academician
Allured by showing dreams	3.35	3.20	3.32	3.68
Attracted to imaginative objects	2.87	3.15	2.78	3.15
Unrealistic desires	3.61	3.50	3.62	3.63
Behave like adults	3.12	3.50	3.00	3.42
Indulging in dangerous physical activities	4.11	3.80	4.20	3.94
Made conscious for branded goods	3.18	3.75	3.02	3.47
Access to adult material	4.32	3.8	4.47	4.05
Offer enhancement in physical/mental level	3.22	3.85	3.10	3.21
Involved in mental planning	3.41	3.65	3.47	2.84
Engaged in unethical practices	4.40	3.90	4.50	4.42
Using adult product	3.91	3.65	4.00	3.68
Involved with promotion for other product	2.73	3.55	2.50	3.26
Unsafe usage of products	3.93	3.85	3.95	3.94

From the above tables it is clear that for the issues concerning women, the advertisement becomes the most unethical by using women as a sexual object considering the mean (overall). Most unethical issue for individual categories of working professional, students and teachers is using women as sexual object. The least impact is by petite and vivacious and depicted as less in age than males.

The advertisement for the children become the most unethical by engaging them in unethical practices. This is also the case in the individual categories of working professional, teachers and students. The least impact is by the attracting to imaginative objects and involved with the promotion of other product. As the minimum value in both of the tables is 2.38, it can be safely assumed that all of these issues can lead to advertisement being unethical. Also, the issues which are rated more than 4 on the Likert scale have the standard deviation less than 1.

5. Conclusion

Marketers may even have to pull back a campaign if it is not perceived as ethical by the audience. This leads to the wastage of huge resources that have been utilized for making the advertising campaign, additionally it creates negative image for the company. Further, the company can even receive certain financial penalty for the advertisement to be unethical. To avoid this, it is essential to have a campaign which are ethical. As there are differences in views of women, it is necessary for the marketers to be careful while depicting women in the advertisements as different sections of the society views unethical aspects in different light. The advertisements should be focused with respect to the target market. However, for children as the views are same for different sections, marketers can take liberty and just avoid the aspects which have the maximum unethical concerns as mentioned in the above section. Hence, this paper provides a comprehensive guide about the perception of ethics about the portrayal of the major categories in the target market and will help them in designing advertisement for a particular target segment.

6. References

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