
Gender Representation in Selected Indian Advertisements: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

This paper examines rhetorical strategies and symbolic representations in contemporary Indian advertisements featuring celebrities such as Katrina Kaif. The researcher selects five advertisements (primary texts) — Colgate’s Mother’s Choice, The Slice, Lux, Liril, and Fair Life Milk — to interpret and analyze the visual and linguistic elements. The aim is to reveal how these ads are cleverly created and emphasize the importance of critical scrutiny of promotional texts. The paper explores underlying messages about gender roles, consumerism, and cultural narratives using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), focusing on how these ads construct and perpetuate societal norms, particularly the depiction of women and feminine figures. CDA examines how language reflects, reinforces, and challenges power dynamics and societal structures. The research also incorporates Naomi Wolf’s concepts of “cultural conspiracy” and beauty “backlash,” which undermine women’s advancements by reinforcing restrictive norms that limit their freedom and power. In these ads, linguistic and visual expressions subtly objectify female models using their celebrity image, impacting public mentality and influencing consumer behavior.

Keywords: Rhetoric, gender representation, objectification, consumerism, CDA

Introduction

The issue of gender representation in media is a critical area of study as it influences societal perceptions and behaviors. Advertisements, in particular, play a significant role in shaping and reinforcing gender norms. This paper investigates how the selected advertisements represent gender and the implications of these portrayals on societal attitudes toward gender roles by executing Critical Discourse Analysis. Colgate’s “Mother’s Choice” advertisement is a prominent example that reflects gender dynamics within Indian society. Colgate is a well-known brand in India’s oral care market. The ad highlights the trust mothers have in Colgate products to maintain the family’s dental health. It typically shows a mother choosing Colgate toothpaste for her family, promoting the idea that women, especially mothers, are the primary caretakers of family health. This projection supports traditional gender roles, suggesting that women should focus on their family’s well-being with the spirit of their domesticity.

Similarly, the “Slice” advertisement, a popular beverage commercial in India, features the prominent celebrity of contemporary Indian cinema, Katrina Kaif, and employs visually appealing and sensuous themes to market its product. Slice is a mango-flavored drink by PepsiCo, and its advertisements have historically emphasized the sensual enjoyment of the beverage. By the same token, The Lux soap advertisement foregrounds four different popular heroines of Bollywood in an effort to authenticate the superiority of the advertised soap to others in the market.

The “Liril Soap” ad uses vibrant colors, an attractive model, and a catchy slogan, “Come Alive,” to suggest that using the soap enhances a woman's appeal and energy. This brings in the idea that women's value is tied to their physical appearance and attractiveness rather than other dimensions such as character, caliber, and intelligence. The milk product ad, targeted at children, uses the slogan “Drink What She Is Wearing,” with an image of a female model whose attire appears to be turning into milk. This ad sexualizes the female model, linking the product to sensuality and attractiveness, even in the context of the children’s world.

Both ads feature well-known beautiful women known for their beauty and charm, creating a strong association between the products and glamour. This portrayal emphasizes beauty, sensuality, and romantic availability, suggesting that women's worth is based on their appearance and their ability to attract others. Advertisements come in various formats, but language is crucial in most of them. Visual images, graphic designs, color schemes, and other techniques are important elements of print advertising. It is the language in advertisements that helps consumers recognize and remember a product. In fact, language significantly impacts readers and their behavior. Advertisers use both images and language as persuasive techniques.

By using famous female figures, the selected ads effectively utilize ethos (credibility), pathos (emotion), and logos (logic), as suggested by Aristotle, to persuade consumers. However, they also promote patriarchal gender roles by presenting women primarily as objects of beauty and desire.

Lila Pelita Hati et al. discuss the exploitation of the female body in advertisements in their article, “The Exploitation of Women's Body and Sensuality: The Attraction of Newspaper Movie Advertisements in Local Daily Newspapers.” In this essay, they claim:

In its promotion, advertising is not only promoting its products but also trying to build the value or image of the products it offers. The problem that often arises is how to build the value or image of the product; every so often, the advertisements use politics to invite and attract the public by using signs, images, or words that are gender biased. Gender bias is the most serious and frequent problem and is still happening in various

aspects of social life, especially with the depiction of women in newspaper advertisements. (31)

Advertising promotes products while also building their value or image. A common issue is how to create this value, and ads often use gender-biased signs, images, or words to attract the public. Gender bias remains a significant problem, especially in how women are depicted in newspaper ads. These ads not only sell products but also propagate gender stereotypes, bringing harmful societal norms about women to the fore.

Critic Uttam Poudel, in his article "Female Subjugation and Body Politics in Song's Girl Powdering Her Neck and Marvell's To His Coy Mistress," draws on Fredrickson and Roberts' objectification theory to argue that women are "oppressed by societal beauty standards and trapped in a cycle of self-scrutiny, prioritizing external appearance over inner value" (247). Poudel asserts that advertisements often focus on the physical beauty of women, ignoring their inner qualities and reducing their worth to mere appearance. This emphasis on body politics overshadows female intellect and agency, promoting the idea that a woman's value lies in her looks rather than her mind. This reduction of women to their physical attributes perpetuates a harmful narrative that undermines their capabilities and contributions beyond their appearance.

The idea of body politics is evident in "Liril" and "Slice" ads featuring renowned, beautiful women, where the focus on their physical beauty controls any other qualities they might have. These ads often use the actresses' beauty to captivate the audience, thereby reinforcing the notion that a woman's primary value lies in her beauty rather than her brain. By showing these actresses in revealing and appealing attire, the advertisements perpetuate a narrative that prioritizes physical appearance over intellect and agency, reflecting the societal beauty standards that objectify and control women. This approach focuses on the growing trend in media and advertising where women's value is reduced to their external appearance, underestimating their inner qualities and contributions.

This way, presenting female celebrities in advertisements with a sensual appearance reduces them to mere objects of male pleasure, ignoring their intelligence, personality, moral strength, abilities, and unique identities. This portrayal limits their happiness and satisfaction to male admiration and gaze. This is mere rhetoric of advertisers to appeal to the consumers emotionally, visually, and linguistically.

Referring to Aristotle, Richard T. Torto elaborates on the profound power of language as a persuasive tool, emphasizing its ability to influence and sway audiences in significant ways. He notes that the strategic use of rhetoric can effectively shape perceptions, evoke emotions, and ultimately guide the decisions and beliefs of listeners. As he notes:

In Rhetoric, Aristotle identifies three artistic proofs, namely, logos, pathos, and ethos, which, according to him, constitute the art of rhetoric. According to Aristotle, the available means of persuasion in discourse are based on the three kinds of proof: Logos (logical reasoning), pathos (human emotions), and ethos (human character). Aristotle's

logical proof is based on logical reasoning in an argument; his pathetic proof is linked to the feeling or emotion the writing draws out of the audience, and his ethical proof refers to the manner in which the writer's character or attitude is manifested in the message. (271)

Torto, referencing Aristotle, discusses the power of language to persuade audiences through three main elements—logos, pathos, and ethos. Logos refers to logical reasoning used in arguments while pathos refers to emotions that the writing evokes in the audience. In the same way, ethos refers to the writer's character or attitude shown in the message. These three elements form the basis of effective persuasion according to Aristotle.

Ethos

Ethos is the truthfulness of the speaker or presenter, appealing to his sincerity and trustworthiness. It has a significant role in advertisement for persuasive tasks. With the help of the speaker's credibility, the reliability of the product or services increases and promotes business. Ethos is similar to ethics in the sense that it seeks moral principles on the part of the speaker. Yog Raj Lamichhane notes that "to achieve the persuasion, ethics establishes the good, trustworthy characters, and it is always affected by the reputation of the speaker as well as moral principle followed by the characters. So it is a moral philosophy too" (70). Lamichhane explains that to persuade effectively, ethical appeal (ethos) involves establishing trustworthy characters influenced by the speaker's reputation and moral principles.

Pathos

Pathos is an appeal to emotion. It is a call to audiences' sentiments as well. Advertisements often get driven by emotions. In advertisements, pathos is used with an expectation to touch a nerve full of feelings and move consumers to do intended actions. Since the major aim of advertisements is to extend the market, the language is designed to touch the emotions of customers. To arouse the sense of pathos in a subtle but effective way, some advertisements use color meaningfully and tactfully in order to manipulate customers.

Logos

Logos is logic, encouraging people to think with their critical faculty about what is presented to them. It appeals to our intellect with its scientific approach. Logos are used to compare the products and differentiate them from one another's products of similar categories. In advertisements, logical appeals are used through facts, data, and information presented in a consistent manner. The logical appeals in advertisements are usually straightforward, so dragging the consumers to make their purchase decisions easier. Logos for Richard T. Torto is both an inductive and deductive study of arguments used in reasoning. In his article "Aristotelian Rhetorical Theory as a Framework for Analyzing Advertising Texts in the Print Media in Ghana" he writes:

The application of logos to an advertising message is an appeal to logical reasoning. In fact, the messages of most advertisements that are communicated in the English language appeal to the rational side of the audience. If, for instance, a particular cream could transform a lady's skin and make her beautiful as a result, it follows logically that the reader could also

benefit equally from the cream being advertised. The use of negatives in English advertising could also be employed to set precedence or a premise of an argument in advertising in order to advance the qualities of a product or service that distinguish it from others. In English, which is used in advertising, experiences and examples are sometimes employed to draw conclusions, and this is the application of inductive reasoning. In English, logos are used in advertising to appeal to the reasoning and intellect of the audience (4).

Torto notes that ads appeal to the audience's rational side. For instance, if an ad claims a cream can transform a woman's skin, it logically suggests the reader will also benefit from it. Negatives can be used to highlight a product's unique qualities, setting it apart from others. Therefore, just like in argumentative essays, ads use logical reasoning to persuade.

Analysis/ Discussion

The first figure below foregrounds the mother as an authoritative voice for the children. By nature, children are innocent, and they tend to depend on motherly voices rather than the voices of other figures. The figure also establishes ethos with the word "dentist" on the slogan. Here, both "dentist" and "mother" are ethos. It establishes pathos with the reference cavities if the children remain un-brushed. As far as logos are concerned, the ad references millions of consumers who use Colgate to maintain healthy teeth. According to Aristotle, as mentioned in his book *Rhetoric*, "how a reader perceives a writer's character determines how credible or persuasive he or she becomes in the transmission of information. Ethos in rhetoric is the demonstration of a communicator's character or credentials. For persuasion to be achieved, the audience has to find the writer or speaker's character credible" (Aristotle, 1991). Since the character of both a doctor and a mother is normally unquestioned, the writer, i.e., the creator of this ad, has used ethos successfully.



Figure 1

Similarly, in the ad *Slice* in Figure 2 below, ethos is established through the presence of a reputable celebrity Bollywood, Katrina Kaif, lending credibility and trust to the product being advertised. Pathos is effectively utilized by appealing to the audience's emotions, such as happiness and nostalgia, through heartwarming imagery and evocative music, creating a connection that resonates on a personal level. Logos is employed by presenting logical arguments and statistics about the product's benefits, demonstrating its effectiveness and

value. Together, these rhetorical strategies—ethos, pathos, and logos—work in harmony to persuade the audience, enhancing the ad's overall impact and persuasiveness.



Figure 2

Likewise, in the Lux ad shown in the figure below, ethos is established through the endorsement of different glamorous and respected celebrities with a view to enhancing the brand's credibility and trustworthiness. Pathos is evoked by appealing to the audience's desires for beauty and elegance, using luxurious visuals and emotive language of color contrast in bright and shining enough to catch anyone's eyes, which has created an aspirational allure. Logos are incorporated by highlighting the product's superior quality and benefits, providing logical reasons and evidence for choosing Lux over other brands. The combined use of ethos, pathos, and logos creates a compelling narrative that persuades the audience to associate Lux with sophistication and excellence.

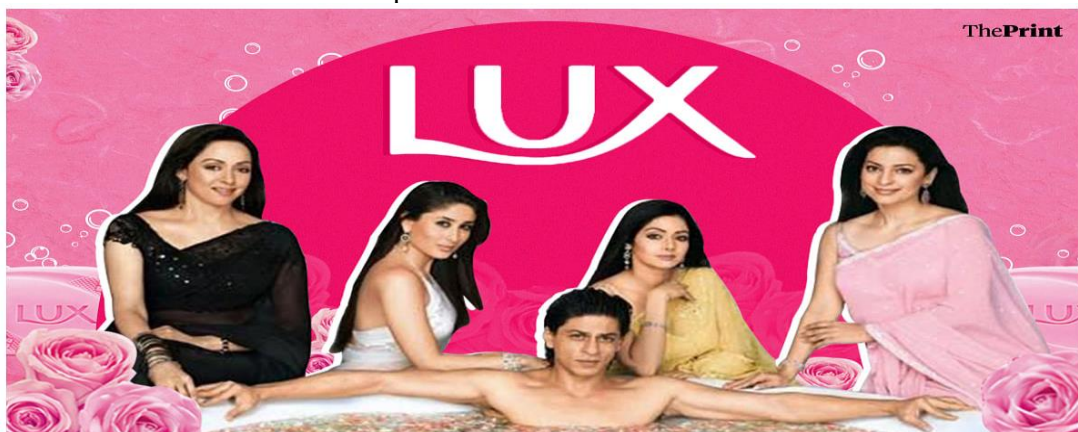


Figure 3

In the Liril ad with the catchy slogan, "Come Alive With Liril," a celebrity in a sexy appearance is foregrounded with a glamorous costume. While she seems to be excitingly playing with the water as if forgetting the whole world, the intention of the ad seems to focus more on her than on the product itself. Her beauty matches the beauty of nature in the background with greenery and freshness. Such a combination of beauty arouses emotional appeal in the consumers. At the same time, the objectification and commodification of this woman are also quite obvious and pervasive here.



Figure 4

In the Fair Life Milk ad (figure 5), shown in figure 5 below, ethos is conveyed through the company's reputation for high-quality dairy products, reinforced by testimonials from trusted nutrition experts, which bolsters the brand's credibility. Pathos is effectively invoked by emphasizing the health benefits for families, featuring heartwarming scenes of parents caring for their children and enjoying the milk together, tapping into the audience's emotions and values around family and well-being. Logos is demonstrated by presenting scientific data and comparisons that highlight Fair Life Milk's superior nutritional content, such as higher protein and calcium levels, providing logical reasons for consumers to choose their product. The integration of ethos, pathos, and logos creates a persuasive and well-rounded message, encouraging consumers to see Fair Life Milk as a smart and wholesome choice for their families.



Figure 5

Advertisements often use female figures to influence consumer behavior, focusing on beauty and sex appeal. This objectifies women's bodies and promotes the idea that

appearance is more important than intellect, reinforcing harmful gender stereotypes. This strategy, known as body politics, manipulates societal perceptions of beauty and worth. Anna Kniazian, in her article "Gender Stereotypes in Advertising," reflects on the bad impact of objectification of women's bodies in their agency. As she explains:

more often sexually objectify women's bodies than men's to sell merchandise, and women are more often depicted in a way emphasizing their sexuality. This cultural milieu of sexual objectification functions to socialize girls and women to evaluate their own value based on appearance and become preoccupied with their own physical appearance. (85)

The critic points out that women are frequently sexually objectified in advertising to sell products, emphasizing their sexuality. This cultural environment reinforces societal norms where girls and women assess their worth based on appearance, leading to a preoccupation with physical beauty.

The sexualization of women's bodies is a common strategy in advertising. In her book, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women*, Naomi Wolf insightfully notes that "consumer culture is best supported by markets made up of sexual clones, men who want objects and women who want to be objects" (144). Wolf's observation is that consumer culture thrives when men are encouraged to desire objects and women are conditioned to become those objects. This dynamic creates a market where products are sold by exploiting these roles, ensuring a continuous cycle of desire and consumption.

Conclusion

The selected advertisements, thus, apply Aristotle's rhetorical strategies to manipulate consumers' sentiments and influence purchasing decisions. Through visual and textual slogans, these ads exploit stereotypes and objectify the female body, encouraging women to prioritize beauty over intellect and promoting notions of docility and domesticity. These representations reinforce narrow gender roles, marginalizing diverse and empowered portrayals of women. These ads, thus, urge consumers to recognize the manipulative tactics used by advertisers and advocate for ads that value diversity, empowerment, ethical standards, and equitable gender representation to bring about positive changes in society.

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