

Ideology of Post-Feminism: Portrayal through Visual Advertisements in India

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Abstract

Post feminism has started during the 80s, and it is a highly debated topic since the word “post” can be referred as “dead” or “after” feminism. Its goals are different from second wave and third wave feminism. Post feminism celebrates sexuality and says that women can be more empowered, free to choose and liberated. In the beginning, the post feminist generation has mostly focused on media. In the present scenario, there are many types of media available; for the purpose of study, the researcher has chosen visual advertisements in India and attempts to analyse how they portray the ideology of post feminism and its concepts through commercials. The method used for the study is textual analysis method. The present study attempts to find whether the post feminism ideology is present in the selected visual advertisements.

Keywords: Post feminism; Feminism; Advertisement; Textual analysis

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Introduction

The term ‘feminism’ has been coined in the year 1960. Before that, the centre concept behind it has been known as women’s rights. Feminism has three waves. The first-wave has happened between the mid 19th century and the early 20th century. It has been 1999 called the suffragettes movement [1]. The major writers of the wave are Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin. The second-wave has surfaced between 1960s and 1970s. During this time, the liberation movements spread all over the world [2]. The extremism the second-wave feminist has exhibited to bring out their plan to achieve equality and freedom for women has made it infamous among its progeny [3]. Feminist theorists like Betty Friedan, Kate Millet (The Feminine Mystique) and Elaine Showalter (Feminist literary criticism) have promulgated “activism” as a female ethic.

Post-Feminism

The term ‘post-feminism’ has been first used in 1919 in the journal “Female Literary radicals” in which radicals of the day declared that, “We’re interested in people now – not in men and women, that moral, social, economic, and political standards should not have anything to do with sex, that it would be pro-woman without being anti-man and that their stance is called ‘Post-feminist’ [4]. Officially, in 1982, the New York Times magazine published

“Voices from the Post-Feminist Generation” written by Susan Bolotin in which she reintroduced the term “Post-feminism” after which the term has gained much popularity.

During this period, post-feminism has started spreading to the Western countries. The critic Amelia Jones has written that the post-feminists texts, which emerged in the 1980s and 1990s have portrayed the second-wave feminism as a monolithic entity and overtly generalized in their content. Some contemporary feminists, such as Katha Pollitt and Nadine Strossen, put in the simple terms “women are people”. The views that take apart the sexes rather than bringing them together are considered by these writers to be sexist rather than feminist [4].

Post-feministic ideology is a new form of empowerment, individual choice, independence, consumer culture, fashion, hybridism, humour and (sexual) pleasure, and the renewed focus on the female body can be considered important for this contemporary feminism. Post-feminism lies within the world of academic paradigms and can be located on the connection between post-modernism, post-structuralism and post-colonialism. In the present scenario, post-feministic views are applicable for every field a person could possibly think of. Brooks in his book Post-feminisms: Feminism, Cultural Theory and Cultural Form [5] states that “Post-feminism is not against feminism, it’s about feminism today.”

Characteristics of Post-Feminism

In early 1980s, the media has begun to classify women in their teens and women in their twenties as “post-feminist generation”. After twenty years, the term post-feminist is still used to refer to young women. Post-feminism is a highly debated topic since it implies that “post” refers “dead” or “after” feminism. Post-feminism celebrates sexuality and says that women can also be empowered through working in the sex industry as strippers and adult film stars. Post-feminism is fuelled by advances in abortion, employment and fertility laws and concentrates on furthering the idea of empowerment, celebration of feminists, freedom of choice and liberation.

Women in visual media

Advertisements in both print and audio-visual media reach all types of people. For advertisements, very attractive women and teenage girls are mostly used to promote the product through their acting skills. Advertisements in the 1980s have portrayed a woman as a homemaker serving her husband and children at home. Later in the 1990s, even though they have portrayed perfect and complete man, women are showed as a sex pictogram. The women have been shown sexy, abused, insensitive and hormone-driven female chauvinist. There have been many new advertisements being launched every month but the concept and idea have been often new when compared with the old ones.

The present concepts in advertisements avoid the stereotyping approach. While they portray an independent woman who is successful in her career, which inspires and motivates the young girls and registers a positive note in their minds to no longer spend time on useless activities. Advertisements are made in a very attractive manner that they appeal to both men and women regardless of their age. Advertisements are often made to celebrate what is happening in the society. Events like International Women’s Day reach a wider audience by commercials which promote consumer items through the concepts based on liberated career-driven women. Most of the advertisements are based on the present scenario. To create the catchy advertisements, there are many private media companies running day and night all over the globe. They come up with apt concepts which are suitable for the target audience based on the products that they are going to sell. In this way, media helps a lot in keeping people aware of the feministic views.

Post-feminist views in media

The term ‘Post-feminist’ with regards to poetry has been, for the first time, used by Carol Rumens in her anthology titled Making for the Open: The Chatto Books of Post-feminist Poetry [6]. Rumens have clarified the use of the term ‘Post-feminist’ in her introduction to the anthology. As a post-feminist supporter, she has applied the concept in the fields of media sector like print and visual media. It has reached earliest in England, Germany, the United States and other countries. The post-feminist ‘equality portrayals’ of women are visible in cinema, electronic and mass media advertisements and also in literature in the form of avoidance from depicting a young woman as passive, inferior, weaker and subordinate to a man. The impact of ‘the girl poser’

has been recognized, and women are represented as more assertive. Self-assured and confident women are shown as having equal footing with men. Even if some portrayals appear sexist, women are not shown as ‘victims’. The new women proclaim their womanhood in a bold manner.

Post-feminism has started in the media field in the year 1982. The feminist critics have explored the concept through media. It has showed those traditional felinities which are not allowable through feminism. These include an unabashed return to men, a spotlight on consumerism, reconsideration of motherhood and attempts at home life. The individualism, domesticity and consumerism are presented through powerful TV shows and films like Bridget Jones Diary. One of the modern novels (which also has its film version) concerned with feminist criticism is Bridget Jones’s Diary by Helen Fielding which portrays society’s views of single women in contemporary societies. The protagonist of the novel is a strong and independent person and her worries are that she does not want to arrive finely living alone without the support of man when she grows older.

Textual Analysis

Textual analysis comes out of the work of theorists known as the French structuralists in the 1960s, particularly the work of Roland Barthes (1915-80), who have believed that any kind of popular cultural product could be ‘decoded’ by reading the ‘signs’ within the text. It is one of the most important tools media researchers can use to understand how meaning is made from media text.

Media theorist McKee [7] says textual analysis is a way for researcher to gather information about how other human beings put together intelligence of the globe. It is a methodology-a data-gathering process-for those researchers who want to understand the ways in which members of various cultures and subcultures make sense of which they are and of how they fit into the world in which they live.

Textual analysis is a toolkit for examining the media forms such as advertisements and to more complex forms such as news narratives, television series and films. It is also a toolkit for media reaction that wants to convey a certain message or that tries to convince audiences to think in a certain way. For the purpose of this research paper, the researcher has conducted textual analysis of advertisements. In this textual analysis, the researcher has looked for difference in the relationships between post-feminist view of female characters and post-feminist ideology in the advertisements.

Sample

The research question is how the ideology of post-feminism is portrayed by visual media in India? The researcher has watched the latest advertisements which are always shown on TV and other forms of visual media. Seven advertisements which are permeated with the ideology of post-feminism are selected for the study. They are:

- Forest Essentials Ayurvedic Cream
- Wedding Jewellery by TBZ Garlands
- DaburVadika Hair Oil

- Titan Ranga: "Woman of Today"
- Havells' Coffee Maker
- Havells' Fans
- Femina

Avoiding Stereotypes

Avoiding stereotypes is an important feature of advertisements which carry the hallmark of post-feminism. For instance, in the advertisement 'Wedding Jewellery' by TBZ Garlands, the model Katrina Kaif talks about the concept of the right time for marriage denying the old school thoughts which condition women to stay at home after marriage. The commercial gives awareness to women and makes them catch hold of the post-feminist concept through its strong female character.

Another advertisement by Home Appliances has ideas as endless as their gadgets. The commercial depicts the Indian customary scene of seeing a bride where the mother of the boy laments that her darling son seeking a wife suffers so much in his bachelor life abroad and has to step out even for a cup of coffee. The defiant girl firmly places her coffee-maker before the startled boy, saying "Take this one and settle down, no travel authorization problem either", as she wants only to be a wife, not a kitchen appliance. This advertisement stands against the stereotyping concept which has been there for ages that emphasizes women's space in the kitchen. For breaking the stereotype mindset, this advertisement has earned the glorious Cannes award [8].

Femina, the advertisement of the brand, opens the scene when a traditionally dressed girl with all her jewels and an expensive silk saree approaches directly facing the audience. Then the camera starts to pan around the house which she has just entered and it lets us know that there is a marriage function happening there. On her way to a room she casually looks at a middle-aged man's photograph and closes her eyes suggesting that she is looking for his blessings. Finally she enters a room and there is a middle-aged woman in her bride costume looking at the window sadly. The table turns out when the girl calls the middle-aged woman 'Ma', it makes the audience to understand that it's the second marriage of the middle-aged woman, and the person in the picture is her ex-husband. The concept totally breaks all the stereotypes rooted in tradition which makes a woman's life empty after her husband's death.

Dabur Vatika hair oil advertisement tells us the tale of a woman who has survived cancer and lost her hair due to medication. Even though she looks tonsured, her family and colleagues are very happy with her real beauty. She gets comfortable with the society, and the advertisement demolishes the stereotypical idea of beauty.

Support for Female Characters

Most of the advertisements are made with female actors. It gives the clue that the post-feministic ideologies play a vital role in the marketing industry. An Ayurveda cream advertisement titled "Warrior Princess" is directed by Carole Dennis. It tells us the story of the transformation of a warrior maiden sent to battle. Cream is rubbed on her forehead before she mounts a horse, sheathes a small sword and ride off with a small group. It shows female courage and enthusiasm to the audience.

Individualist

The main goal of post-feminism is a woman's individualism. Mc Robbie introduces a new 'female individualism' which dismisses the 'old' feminism. Feminism itself is seen to belong to the past which characterizes the post-feminist woman of popular culture in individualism, sophistication and choice. The advertisement 'Woman of Today' featuring the Bollywood actresses Nimrat Kaur, which has made by the company Titan to sell their wrist watches, tells the audience that a woman has every right to make the choices of her own. It also has the tagline 'Her Life Her Choices'.

Women Identity

Mostly, the female actors from the film industry are used in the advertisements to showcase the women's identity in the society, since the target audience of these commercials is women. It portrays every individual woman from different fields of the workplace, for example, IT professionals, students, home makers and so on. An advertisement for ceiling fans from Havells has been launched in the year 2013. The concept of the ad is to avoid patriarchy, and it also shares a socially relevant view on changing one's name after marriage. In the commercial, a couple goes to an office for registration. At that time the husband decides to take his wife's last name after their marriage, and it makes the female registrar to get surprised and satisfied. The couple from the ad has given a simple and yet never noticed lesson to the society. The Indian advertisements of the recent times give a lot of importance to women identity when compared with the old ones.

Impact of Advertisement on Society

Advertisement is a medium of communication to send product-related messages to customers along with various features of the products advertised. Each advertisement sells a product with a concept and a trending topic. At present advertisement companies have become a critical component for the overall advertising market. Social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter are also becoming a powerful platform for advertisements to reach a wider audience. Through media, the message about the product can be heard within minutes. While the viewer's watch the advertisement, the message gets into their minds and its impact reflects on the society.

Discussion

In the 21st century, media has reached a cutting edge development in terms of technology and reaches all over the world. The researcher has focused on visual media for his study because it is very effective and memorable owing to the use of characters and concepts which can occupy the minds of the audience for a very long time. In India, many new products are getting launched every month. During the festival times, innumerable advertisements appear. India has 29 states and 22 official languages. A huge number of people watch television as a means of entertainment. The programmes in such genres as serials, films, sports and games, talk shows and news are the major ones being watched by the audience. No matter which programme a person watches during his/her leisure time, each programme has a commercial

break for 7 to 8 minutes in every 30 minutes of its run time. While the viewers watch the advertisements, the particular products will get fixed in their minds. This is the method how the products and the concept are getting into the viewers' belief and trust. This paper has concluded that post-feminism ideology is available in the selected advertisements.

Conclusion

The concept of post-feminism has its both positive and negative aspects since it is a debatable topic. One of the wide spread

negative aspects of it is that it is suitable only for the Western countries, which is a wrong assumption. For, in the present era, many post-feminist supporters in India support the media for its work just like how a good idea is appreciated all around the world. The present study is a pointer to the fact that post-feminism ideology is available in Indian advertisements, and they tend to change people's mindset with every new advertisement launch in the popular visual media.

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