



## PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN DEODORANT ADVERTISEMENTS

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### **Abstract**

*Advertising is the method used by businesses, companies and other organizations to promote their goods and services to the public. The ultimate aim of advertising is to increase sales and profits by showing their products and services in a positive light. Advertising markets are projected to grow across all major world regions between 2011 and 2017. Creating advertisements is indeed an art and sometimes it can cross the thin line between creativity and vulgarity. Companies frequently use women as spokespersons to deliver their advertising messages and convince consumers of their brands. The use of women is one of the most successful ways of gaining the consumer's attention and getting her to infer the right message in a limited amount of space and time.*

*Portrayal of women in advertisements has been clouded with biased and chauvinistic male perception. They are either objectified as loyal housewives or as sex symbols, both these being convenient and well sought roles for women. FMCG (Fast Moving Consumer Goods), as a segment has used women as a strategic marketing tool. Under the Home and Personal care product line, Deodorants and Body Sprays is one such product which makes the most of the fairer sex. Media is a reflection of society and we as a society is in turn influenced by what we see and hear, hence media casts an influence on our thinking and actions. The depiction of women in advertisements is one such aspect which reflects our thinking as well as impacts our thinking. Articles, journals, and blogs written on the issue of portrayal of women in advertisements have been researched to understand the idea behind this portrayal. The role played by the Government in streamlining the depiction of women in poor light has also been looked at in this paper.*

**Keywords:** *FMCG (Fast Moving Consumer Goods), Women, Television advertisements, Media, Deodorant Brands.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In today's competitive business world, it takes a lot of effort to survive and have a part of the market share. Corporate and Business units take any and every route to make their presence felt in the minds of the customer. The paradigms of marketing have changed; quality has been replaced by style, latest technology and features has replaced durability, brand hopping has replaced the concept of brand loyalty and personal selling has been replaced by online selling. These changes have made tremendous impact on the concept of marketing. Today's customer is well read and well aware about all the aspects of the product and the benefit it offers hence advertising is no longer a medium of informing the customer. It is primarily a channel to induce, convince and attract the prospective customer towards the product and the brand. Advertisements reflect the thought process and creative ability of marketing a product or service. It is indeed an art and sometimes it can cross the thin line between creativity and vulgarity.

Certain advertisements do reflect pre-biased notions about the characters that are part of them. Portrayal of women in advertisements is either limited to being objectified as loyal housewives or as sex symbols, both these being convenient and well sought roles for women. Home and Personal care products use women as a strategic marketing tool, Deodorants and Body Spray advertisements depict women in a derogatory manner. The core concept behind deodorant advertisements is to portray the product as a tool for attracting women and this has led to an objectionable portrayal of women in these advertisements.

### **METHODOLOGY**

In order to understand the portrayal of women in advertisements pertaining to deodorant brands, a thorough research has been undertaken using secondary sources. Articles in journals, websites, blogs, newspaper reviews, comments by advertising experts, and research on the chosen theme were studied in detail to understand the various aspects related to the topic of research. This paper has been written with an objective of understanding the



portrayal of women in advertisements with special reference to male deodorant brands in India. The topic of study can be understood through the following sub-headings: Concept of Advertising, Indian deodorant market and major players, Critical review of deodorant advertisements, Portrayal of women and Government intervention. Certain findings and discussion points are highlighted for future course of action.

## **ADVERTISING**

A simple way to define Advertising would be that it is a medium to communicate with a lot of people in minimum possible time. Advertising started off as a medium for transmitting information during Greek and Roman times, but today it isn't only a medium of communication, it is a reflection of our society and social values. Advertising is getting the audience's attention for a few seconds and in those seconds creating a positive impact on the minds of the audience. This surely is not an easy task as the attention span of humans is reducing by the day due to numerous distractions.

Advertising is the method used by businesses, companies and other organizations to promote their goods and services to the public. The ultimate aim of advertising is to increase sales and profits by showing their goods and services in a positive light. Advertising is designed to make a long lasting impression on its audience. Sometimes an ad only has a few moments to grab the audience's attention before they turn the page, change the channel, drive past or click onto a new screen. Some of the most successful advertising campaigns involve catchphrases or slogans that have become so ingrained in the community's consciousness that they are almost as well known as the products themselves. Advertising messages are usually paid for by sponsors and viewed via traditional media; such as newspaper, magazines, television commercial, radio advertisement, outdoor advertising or direct mail; or new media such as websites and text messages.

Television amongst all other mediums is the most influential tool of advertising. Television Advertising adds credibility to the products and services increasing the clients' relation with business firms. Television is preferred above radio and print mediums by the businesses to advertise their produce because of its great impact created on viewers through audio-visual means. Television Advertisements provide a broader sense of understanding in viewers and have long lasting impact on the mind of audience.

FMCG is a major segment which uses television advertising as an important medium to reach the target customer. The main area of interest for advertisers is to increase their sales, gain more and more customers, and increase the demand for the product by presenting a well decorated, puffed and colourful advertisement. Of all the major perspectives by which people construe the world, advertising is at once among the most influential and the least examined.

## **INDIAN DEODRANT MARKET & MAJOR PLAYERS**

Deodorant as a product is something which has turned into a basic necessity owing to hot weather conditions, and awareness among people to smell good and maintain body hygienic. With increased advertisements focusing on deodorants as a tool to attract the opposite sex, more and more young men are drawn towards the various deodorant brands in the market.

A good fragrance not only gives smell but it enhances the self confidence of the user while interacting with others. Deodorant marketers have cashed on the sexist appeal and have managed to attract the young generation through their bold and explicit advertisements. Deodorant is a low investment category product where customers are loyal but willing to experiment. The deodorant market is an extremely competitive one as the top FMCG companies strive hard to make a mark and grab a bigger piece of the market share. The deodorant market in India is considered to be in its nascent form. It falls under the personal care category which is worth Rs 90,336 crore. Men's deodorants occupy 60% of market share in the deodorant market. HUL (Hindustan Unilever) is the market leader and holds 31.5 % of the market share.

AXE is its flagship deodorant brand aimed AXE at males with a very unique advertising technique. Other HUL brands include Rexona and Dove. The controversial advertisements have surely helped in drawing curiosity which in turn



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has led to market expansion and growth. The other popular male deodorant brands are Wild Stone, Fogg, Park Avenue, Zatak, Denver, Engage, and 18+ deo-sprays.

### CRITICAL REVIEW OF DEODRANT ADVERTISEMENTS

Adman Prahlad Kakkar says, "I believe as a country, we find obscenity in everything, from men wearing their underwear on top of their pants, to women showing their bras. But in this case, I agree that some of the deodorant commercials are really in bad taste. They are just pushing the ticket a bit too much. It's not the Axe ads which are indecent; it's the Indian ads which copy the Axe commercials' style. For instance, the one in which a lady meets her brother-in-law and drops her mangalsutra. Now, that was stretching it too far. If you watch the Indian commercials, you'll know that this time, the Information & Broadcasting Ministry is erring on the right side of conservativeness."

This statement is an indicator that somewhere the deodorant makers have crossed the line, sex does sell in the Indian market but obscenity and vulgarity needs to be kept under check. In order to understand the portrayal of women in these advertisements, we need to critically review them.

The most famous and the dominant brand in the Indian deodorant market is 'Axe', a Unilever product, which is a British- Dutch company and has a history of advertising the product line with commercials that depict women in a questionable manner. They have cashed on the sexist appeal. **Axe** is also known as **Lynx** in the United Kingdom. The official Axe Face book page was launched in 2010 and has more than 3.5 million fans. Axe advertisement (Fig 1) sends out a message that one who uses the brand will be able to attract not one but multiple women. Axe launched an irresistible chocolate-inspired Dark Temptation fragrance, the advertisement (Fig 2) of which shows a boy who has used the chocolate based deodorant being attacked by desirable women in a bid to grab a bite of the chocolate scented man.

Since 2003, Axe advertisements have successfully conveyed the message that their products help men attract women. Whether they are print advertisements or TV commercials, they always have the same message, "sex sells, we sell sex, buy Axe, you get women."

**Figure 1 Axe Deodorant Advertisement**



**Figure 2 Axe Dark Temptation Advertisement**



The next deodorant brand in question is Wild Stone one of the India's leading male grooming brand producing perfumes, deodorants, soap, and shaving products. The brand has used a very erotic appeal to attract the market. One of its advertisements has pushed Indian sensibilities to their limits. It shows a young, pretty woman in a sari, carrying food at a family gathering, where she bumps into a young man after being distracted by his body spray. In the next shot they are seen naked in bed, where they appear to have sex before the women leaves with her sari disheveled and hair tousled. Another advertisement (Fig 3) features famous actress Diya Mirza getting drawn to a



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man wearing Wild Stone deodorant and what follows then is again an erotic and bold scene. In yet another Wild Stone advertisement (Fig 4), drum beats echo within the walls of a colorful neighborhood as revelers carry on the Durga Pooja. The Wild Stone man is walking along a corridor and that's when a sensual, sari clad woman who is on an errand for the Pooja bumps into him. And at that very moment, the fragrance of Wild Stone takes her by storm and spurs a fantasy in her mind's eye. Flashes of a dangerous liaison cloud her thoughts. She is snatched back from her fantasy only to realize that the Wild Stone man is peering at her, like he knows of the thoughts that just ran through her mind. He leaves with a look that says they're going to meet again.



**Figure 3 Wild Stone Deodorant Advertisements**



**Figure 4 Wild Stone Deodorant Advertisements**

There was uproar when the Wild Stone ad was aired, as it had crossed over to the side of vulgarity and immorality. The media and the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting both retorted and remarked on this new age advertising fiasco. Ad filmmaker Bharat Bala says, "This is just not about advertising, one has to see what television is showing overall. When other media can show obscenity, why only single out the commercials suddenly? Anyway, we as an audience want such sensationalism, which is why we are consuming these commercials passively. Ad filmmakers are showing it because sensationalism sells. When we don't object to such things; the ministry steps in to draw the line between commercialism and decency."



**Figure 5 Denver Deodorant Advertisements**

Deodorant brand 'Denver' has used film actor Saif Ali Khan as its brand ambassador and has used his sex appeal to promote the brand. The advertisement (Fig. 5) is aimed at tickling the libidinous male instincts and portrayal of women as lustily hankering after men under the influence of the deodorant brand. The message conveyed is that 'Denver' helps you to attract sexy women.

'Engage' deo-sprays by ITC is yet another brand with a loud sexist appeal. The advertisement (Fig. 6) shows a young boy and girl eager to get physically close and is trying to resist each other in a public place. 'The attraction and yearn for sex is a result of using Engage deo-spray', this is the message conveyed through this

advertisement. The target audience for this brand is the youth both male and female and it depicts the person using this brand as irresistible to others. The brand has come up with multiple ads (Fig. 7), all with the same erotic appeal, where young couples are unable to resist the temptation of being close to their partner. It also depicts a "care a damn about society" attitude of the young generation. It portrays a concept of PDA (Public display of affection) which does not go very well with the traditional Indian community.





**Figure 6 Engage Deodorant Advertisement**



**Figure 7 Engage Deodorant Advertisement**

The deodorant brand 18+ has tried to break the clutter of the deodorant market in India. In the advertisement, a man is shown applying deodorant on his naked torso. This topless man on the beach is seen looking at an approaching woman with confidence. He is sure the woman is coming towards him. But the woman had actually come to pick a beach ball. The man is left embarrassed as others poke fun at him. This brand also uses the same formula 'titillate the viewers with a delectable skin show'. The woman is beautiful and skimpily clad as in the other deodorant ads. And it is this that gives credence to the laughter of the woman. It is as if the sexy woman is



**Figure 8 Zatak Deodorant Advertisement**



**Figure 9 Zatak Deodorant Advertisement**

mocking other brands telling them that she is not stupid enough to fall for a stupid deodorant. The ad is edgy, seemingly simple and yet is effective in communicating that women are not as dumb as they are portrayed in advertisements.

A new entrant to the Indian deodorant market is 'Zatak', which has adopted a Frontal attack strategy towards the market leader 'Axe'. Zatak has successfully given an international feel to the brand by using foreign models in all its ads to be seen alongside axe. As Philip Kotler says "In case of a strong market leader you have two choices, one, identify a small segment and target that; two, go for a frontal attack which of course is risky". Following the sexist appeal legacy, Zatak advertisement (Fig. 8) depicts a married woman visiting a tailor and is lustily attracted to the fragrance he is wearing. She is shown as experiencing a pleasurable moment which does not look aesthetically acceptable. In yet another Zatak ad (Fig. 9) a young man, shirt unbuttoned, sprays himself with 'Zatak' before a visit to the dentist, which must smell amazing because it drives the dentist to unbutton her blouse. (The kicker -"Just Zatak her" may offend more than the images.)



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Majority of the deodorant depict that young men are all about skirt chasing. And the role of deodorants in their life is limited to an aphrodisiac spray-on, which transforms a man into an instant chic magnet. There is no proof whether a man really believes all the fantasies peddled by deodorant advertisements – being 'attacked' by a horde of sexy women, turning into a man of 'chocolate' that the ladies can take bites from, or being grabbed and seduced by women of the house. But is that all young men are about?

### **PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN**

The social role of advertising includes the culture that is projected by the advertiser and the perceptions of the communications by the receiver. Culture has been defined in the Oxford Dictionary to include, “the ideas, customs and social behaviour of particular people or society”. Indian culture is deeply embedded in its past traditions and customs which views women as an epitome of morality and sacrifice.

According to McCann Erikson study, the Indian women have yearnings for personal achievement, romance, recognition, personal leisure and emotional support. Most importantly she wants to reconcile personal ambition with traditional role. Women are featured in advertisement of all sorts from home care products to automobiles, from health care to technology driven products. An advertiser has to keep three R's in mind while communicating with women – Respect her by not talking down to her, Romance her and Reward her self-esteem and sense of self-worth.

Similar to global advertising, women in Indian advertising are also portrayed sexually with a western look. Advertisers' hesitate to have sexual portrayals of women as too overt, since they can find abjections from the media or social activist groups. Though the advertisers have become sensitive to the stereotyping of women as physical objects, one cannot deny the fact that there are some deodorant ads which depict women as lustily craving for men and the portrayal of women in these ads is blatantly vulgar. The women who accept to be a part of such advertisements are also to be blamed. They should not accept such assignments which is defamation to womanhood.

In many advertising agencies, the Executive Creative Director or the Associate Creative Director is a woman and she approves of such derogatory advertising messages. The controversial 'Zatak' ad which created uproar and was later banned had one Ms. Pallavi Chakravarti as Associate Creative Director of the advertising agency which created this advertisement. The sex appeal used by deodorant brands will have you believe that men use deodorant with the hope of turning women into heat seeking missiles. Well, it may be partially true. It is however the only truth that concerns most deodorant brands in the country.

The rules of engagement always have been very well defined in the male grooming category, particularly the deodorant aisle. For some time now, a clutch of deodorant makers has been resorting to voluptuous women and libidinous men to convey to potential users that a single spray of their deodorant can transform a regular Joe into a lady killer.

Recently, the Vatican issued an article which says ads should follow three moral principles - Truthfulness, Social Responsibility and Upholding Human Dignity. But when we look at the deodorant ads, these three principles seem to be completely missing. The ads depicting women as objects who will come running towards you if you smell good are surely far from the truth. By degrading women and showing them as mere sex objects who don't see anything beyond physical charm in their man is nowhere close to being socially responsible. It is a blot on our narrow minded thinking and is an insult to the women community.

### **GOVERNMENT INTERVENTION**

The Information and Broadcasting Ministry in a letter to the Advertising Standards Council of India has commented about deodorant ads as, "these ads appear indecent, vulgar and suggestive they appear to denigrate women and thus violate the cable laws." The ministry issued a warning to the brand owners that the ads must be modified or pulled off air and issued a statement that sexually suggestive ads violate India's advertising code, adding that the nation's "cable operators should ensure that the portrayal of the female form is tasteful and



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aesthetic and within the well established norms of good taste and decency,” and that showing women "lustily hankering after men under the influence of such deodorants," offended "good taste and decency."

Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) is a self regulatory voluntary organization of the advertising industry. ASCI was set up in October 1985 by the advertising industry itself consisting of advertisers, advertising agencies, media owners and allied professionals like consumer researchers, processors, film makers, etc to regulate the content of advertising with the primary purpose of protecting consumer interest, but also to ensure fairness in competition.

The ASCI receives and processes 120-140 complaints against advertisements, from a cross section of consumers and the general public, and this covers individuals, practitioners in advertising, advertiser firms, media, and advertising agencies and ancillary services connected with advertising.

ASCI ensure that each complaint receives a prompt and objective consideration by an impartial committee Consumer Complaints Council (CCC) which takes into account the view point of the advertiser. The CCC consists of 21 members, only 9 from within the industry and 12 from outside, consisting of educationists, lawyers, doctors, technologists, consumer activists and the like. The CCC meets once a month to deliberate on complaints that are ready for deliberations, i.e. both the complainant and the defendant's response is available. The decision of the CCC is final although here is a provision for a review. The CCC decision has no legal sanction although compliance is good.

In the year 2011 ASCI ordered certain objectionable deodorant advertisements of Hindustan Unilever and Paras Pharma to be pulled off air. The complaints upheld against three deodorant advertisements include:

**1. HUL's The Axe Effect** - The advertisement depicts a female security staff checking a man at an airport with a metal detector on his chest and arms. She is shown in a spell of lust and clinging to his body in a display of sexual passion overpowering her with the voice-over, "The Axe Effect".

**2. Paras Pharma's Zatak Deodorant** - The advertisement shows a boy going to a lady dentist after using the Deodorant. The lady dentist is shown closing her eyes and moaning suggestively.

When the boy says that he has toothache, the lady dentist is shown unbuttoning his shirt. She asks him to breathe and demonstrates it by sensuously thrusting her bust forward. In doing so, her white coat is off and her inner garment is clearly showing off her cleavage.

**3. Paras Pharma's Set Wet Deodorant** - The advertisement shows a man using the Deodorant and a female clinging to him in a passionate display of desire. An onlooker also tries the deodorant and soon a female is shown coming behind him taking off her garment and clinging to him lustfully.

The Consumer Complaints Council (CCC) of ASCI in a meeting concluded that these advertisements display overtly sexual desire and are also demeaning to women. Keeping in view the generally prevailing standards of decency and propriety is likely to cause grave and widespread offence. Since these advertisements contravened Chapter II of the ASCI Code, the complaints against these three advertisements were upheld. Once a complaint is upheld, the advertiser has to pull off the commercial within 48 hrs and then he/she has the option of either modifying it or completely withdrawing it. All the three advertisements were pulled off air but they still feature on the internet and can be viewed by anyone.

### **FINDINGS & RECOMNDATIONS**

In a country where women are accorded the status of a goddess and is worshipped, this objectified portrayal of women is indeed dichotomous. 'Kamasutra', an ancient Indian text by Vatsayana which has served as the basis for eroticism seems to be the source of inspiration for the advertisers of deodorant brands. All the brands of repute have capitalized on the sexist appeal and have depicted women as a mere object driven by lust.



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The main objective of using a deodorant or a deo-spray has lost its significance. It is only shown as a tool for attracting women for sex. The ads don't convey the message that deodorant keeps you fresh, casts a favourable impression at workplace or in public, or it gives you physical hygiene. These are the main uses of a deodorant, but the creative minds in advertising have presented the product in a totally different way. Yes they have been successful in grabbing attention and making headlines, but where is their corporate social responsibility towards society and women.

The Government intervention in redefining morality in advertising is appreciated, but why does the ASCI or I & B ministry react after the storm, why can't they be proactive and vigilant in screening advertisements before hand and keeping a check on the ads which toe the line. Banning or taking the advertisement off air is only a reactive strategy, the government needs to have a system in place which screens and clears the advertisement for broadcasting only when it fulfils the basic criteria of decency and morality.

Good fragrance does cast an impression and women can be attracted but why take it to the level of obscenity and vulgarity. The appeal could be kept subtle and still could have managed to attract attention from the audience. Women should be portrayed in a respectful manner in advertisements. The ads should be realistic and adhering to social values. An advertisement where a newlywed bride is shown getting attracted to a man (not her husband!) because of the fragrance of the deodorant he is using portrays women in an extremely derogatory manner and should be avoided.

### CONCLUSION

The projection of women in television advertisements has always been controversial and a matter of debate. As believed advertisements have a greater impact on audience so the way women are portrayed in ads should be positive. And no doubt as said earlier advertisers have understood this and are fencing a proper line especially for ads employing women. Advertisements affect the consumption pattern of the consumers. The presence of female model in the advertisement also influences the liking of a particular product.

Advertisements should be more educative, informative and product oriented, it should be family oriented and should contain a bit of humour in it. Women should be presented in different roles; she should not be projected only as product user but also as product maker. In advertisements, portrayal of women should not be vulgar and the product should be given more emphasis than the female model. In conclusion women in advertisements should be shown as intelligent, confident, independent and empowered individuals, and that would be a true reflection of society.

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