

IN FOCUS: DECODING THE CONNOTATION

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Abstract : Media theories examine the reciprocal relationship between media and its audience. Media theory emphasizes the fact that media cannot exist outside the ideological constraints and became constitutive of the very ideology it re-presents. Going in accordance with the theory one cannot dismiss the influence of the encoded messages projected through the media in reinforcing the current ideology or creating a new one. Television advertisements provide a great platform in analysing gender stereotyping in a society. The objective of this research is to examine how gender stereotyping is represented in advertisements. Stuart Hall's theory will act as a methodology to analyse it. According to Stuart Hall, the television sign is a complex (connotative) sign and it is made up of two types of discourse: visual and aural. The visual sign takes on active ideological dimension at the level of connotation. On scrutinizing advertisements on close quarters one can decode a connotative level of gender stereotyping from a different angle. For instance, women are often showcased as someone obsessed with domestic work or an object of sex-appeal. The finding is that gender stereotyping exists in various advertisements; however a wave of change is visible in certain others.

Key words: Advertisement, Stereotyping, Connotation, Encoding and Decoding

I. INTRODUCTION

Advertisements are one of the most effective vehicles in persuading people. They have the potential to create need or change attitudes among the consumers. Television advertisements are repeated numerous times and they have a long lasting influence on the consumers. Advertisements can be equated iconic signs because "it possesses some of the properties of the thing represented". However, one can find an unequal portrayal of gender in advertisements especially in relation to Indian context.

Femininity is a set of attributes and behaviours that are often attached to female identity. Unlike gender, it is socially constructed. However, the concept of female identity is strengthened through the portrayal of feminine characters in media. On analysing advertisements on close quarters one can find how the ideal female image is reinforced. Stuart Hall's concept of encoding and decoding can be applied to advertisement messages to overlook the impact of the representation of stereotypical female identity on consumers.

Advertisement and Gender Stereotyping

The primary aim of advertisements is to entice the consumers to buy their products. They portray their products as perfect and often employ women to create the image of perfection. It is to be noted that the way a male body is projected through advertisements is totally different from their counterpart. Women are often portrayed as sex objects or as preoccupied with mundane domestic chorus. In this respect gender stereotyping is re-established. Moreover, one may also notice advertisements reinforcing gender roles such as a man's inability to do household chorus or a woman's inability to park a car properly.

Globalization and educational opportunities has taken women to the next level. In the contemporary society the ideas of femininity and masculinity have changed at least in the urbanised areas. However, the representation of gender identity still sticks to the stereotypical gender roles. Women are always the passive, domestic housewives who are always subordinate to men or the object of sex appeal.

Few research studies have been conducted on this issue in Indian context. Munshi (1998) examines the way Indian housewives are portrayed in television advertisements in the 1990s and finds that they are still portrayed primarily as housewives. Das (2000) examines the role portrayals of men and women in Indian magazine advertisements and explores that though over the period the portrayals of men and women have changed, they still are portrayed in stereotypical ways.

Communication is not a one way process and the communication through mass media follows one to many formats. Stuart Hall's concept of encoding and decoding will stand as a model to analyse the "communication" through television advertisements.

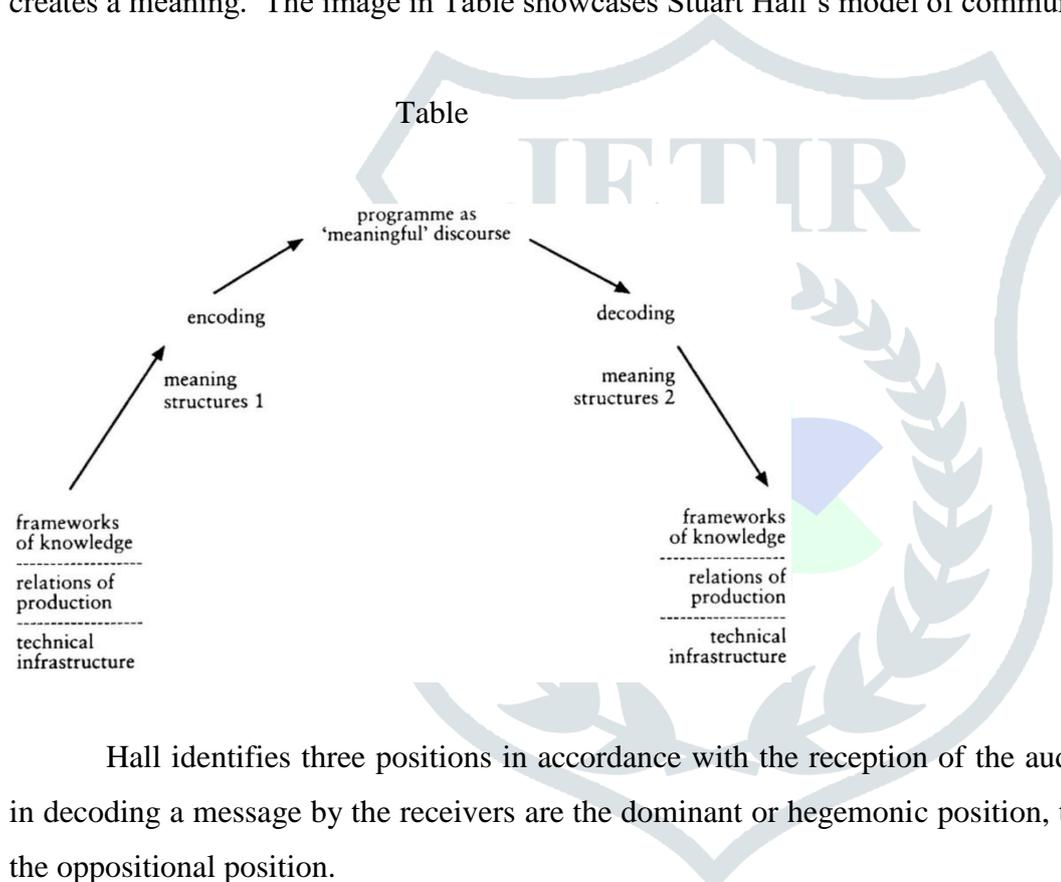
Stuart Hall's Model of Communication

The concept of encoding and decoding model of communication was introduced by Stuart Hall. He takes a deviation from the linear sender – message – receiver format. Linear format focuses only on one facet of communication and the responses of the audience via mass communication is often not taken into account. Hall identifies a complex structure which, unlike the traditional method, does not take the audience for granted. In his essay "Encoding and Decoding in The Television Discourse", Hall proposes a four-stage communication model. They are production, circulation, use (consumption) and reproduction.

Production is the creation of the encoded messages where the creator of the message uses the dominant ideology of the society to convey his/her designs. Circulation stresses on how the message is transmitted. Use or consumption is the decoding/interpreting of a message which requires active recipients. This is a complex process of understanding for the audience. Reproduction is the stage after the audience have accepted the message according to each person's beliefs and values. The reaction of the audience after the reception of message comes under reproduction.

Hall confirms that each stage is relatively autonomous but at the same time is interdependent on each other. Each stage has its own limits and possibilities. There is a complex structure of dominant message in each stage and the dominance differs in each stage. Production of the message is arrogated to the level of technical needs while the circulation depends on the message form. Consumption depends on the audience and it is the decoded message that persuade or entertain the audience which is intern related to the cognitive, emotive or behavioural consequences.

A gap of difference may exist between the encoded and the decoded message. The audience will interpret the message according to their socio – economic background or even their political stance. Thus the encoded message is not decoded in the desired way. The encoder creates a message and the decoder creates a meaning. The image in Table showcases Stuart Hall’s model of communication.



Hall identifies three positions in accordance with the reception of the audience. The three positions in decoding a message by the receivers are the dominant or hegemonic position, the negotiated position and the oppositional position.

(1) The Dominant Position

The dominant position is the ideal scenario where the encoded message is decoded without any ambiguity. The consumer operates within the dominant position where the encoded message perfectly resonates with the dominant ideology of a society. Here the chance of misinterpreting the message is negligible since both the sender and the receiver are from the same cultural background.

(2) The Negotiated Position

Hall states that the “decoding within the negotiated version contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements.” In this scenario the intended meaning of the encoded message is accepted partially while the other half is understood according to a person’s age, socio – economic background, interests and even political bias. Negotiated code operates on situated logic. For instance, an advertisement portraying the latest trends in wrist watch collection will be accepted by people according to their gender, ideology or even age. An old person may view it in a different way compared to a teenager. However, the encoded message will be clearly understood but the audience accept it according to their personal preference.

(3) The Oppositional Position

In this position the audience understands the literal meaning but they may decode it according to their cultural background. In this case the consumers interpret the decoded message in exactly opposite of the intended meaning. For instance, the advertisement issued by the central government that specifies the need of toilets in each house may not be received by the audience in Kerala (where every household has a toilet) with the same intensity of the encoded message.

CONCLUSION

On having a glance at the response of the consumers one can find that the hegemonic position ranks the top. In most of the advertisements the consumers subconsciously accept the stereotypical women portrayal without thinking further. For instance, there is a dominant – hegemonic position held by the society that the ideal woman is lean and fair skinned. Likewise, a viewer who shares a similar view operates within the dominant – hegemonic code. However, negotiated position and oppositional positions are also observed according to their specific culture. A person who has a feministic point of view may understand the marginalisation of gender; however his/her view will be oppositional to that of the dominant position.

Even though one can find traces of gender stereotyping in majority of the advertisements a wave of change is visible in many others. There are advertisements that celebrate the strength of women while others break the stereotypical images by placing men in the domestic sphere.