

# Body, Masculinity, Identity and Advertisement

**Krishnendu Ghosh**

## **Abstract**

*Television commercials have more to convey than any other media of communication in the present day scenario. As a marketing tool it informs and attracts its viewers. It also functions to build and rebuild our conception about different things and as such discursively contributes to the making and consolidation of ideology. The concept of the male body as used in diverse advertisements is crucial to our understanding of the discourse of masculinity. The question of 'being' and 'becoming' a man is intricately connected with the performance of the body and the pursuit of the muscle. This paper reviews the function of some television advertisements, particularly for men's skin products in defining the masculinist ideal.*

**Keywords:** ADVERTISEMENT, BODY, MASCULINITY, GENDER, IDENTITY

Advertisement, as a form of communication, is now a universal phenomenon and an inseparable part of our daily lives. Newspapers, television channels are now loaded with advertisements or commercials. It has embedded our routine life and thoughts. Since its inception during the flourishing of Industrialism in the 17th and 18th centuries, advertising has been a powerful tool for the proliferation of capitalist goods. Different companies use many different methods to affect our choice and decisions in purchasing specific products. Therefore, as a discursive tool for the capitalist market advertising effectively contributes to the making and consolidation of ideology by transmitting messages to the public. Like anything else, how maleness or masculinity is shown in media texts of advertisements can have the power to build popular conception of masculinity.

By projecting and portraying certain groups of individuals in certain roles, advertisements, like any other literary and non-literary texts, promotes stereotypes. Traditional advertising has, for decades, sexually objectified women and their bodies. While the health drink advertises of Horlicks,

Bournvita and the likes still continue to stereotype women in traditional roles of home-making and child-rearing, there is now an abundance of advertisements that are objectifying men in a similar fashion. The male body is now subjected to various patterns of consumption. It is now in the centre of focus in diverse advertisements ranging from denims to deodorants. In fact, the body has been of great importance in establishing the masculinist ideal right from the days of Greek statuary. In analysing gender in advertising, Susan Bordo argues that men are usually portrayed as virile, muscular and powerful. Their powerful bodies dominate the space in the adverts. In a particular Clinic All Clear Shampoo advert run a few years back, the camera has its focus as much on the body as on the dandruff free hair. In the recent motor bike ad of Mahindra Centuro the masculine body lines of the bike get objectified in the biker's bare bodied image. There are many such ads where the male body dominates the space. This trend of exposing the body is termed as 'Adonis Complex' in current theoretical terminology. The renewed focus on well-built muscled bodies is the result of the same anxiety that women have felt for decades. It relates to a crisis of the masculinist ideal. As women have entered every domain of the so called masculinist orientation from work-force to politics and policy-making, men can no longer enjoy the authoritative (read: patriarchal) roles of the past. Threatened of emasculation in this new environment men strive to prove their manhood by using whatever symbolic props are available like deodorants and fairness creams. Douglas Holt and Craig Thomson refer to this symbolic reaffirmation of manhood as the compensatory consumption thesis in their article "Man-of-Action Heroes: The Pursuit of Heroic Masculinity in Everyday Consumption".

Such socio-economic changes have also given way to 'multiple masculinities' as variants of the culturally superior 'hegemonic masculinity'. This is apparent in the equally flamboyant representation of the metrosexual and the jock. The metrosexual is characterized by smooth features, concern for appearance, show of emotion while the jock is the 'old type' masculine who avoids being soft and is aggressive. By demonstrating his power and strength the jock wins approval of other men and adoration of women. These are connected with different behavioural patterns of the body which in turn relate to the performative aspect of gender. The very constructed nature of gender becomes apparent in the ad for Wild Stone Talc whose tagline goes like a plea: "Wild Stone Talc: Use It in the Interest of Mankind". The ad begins with images of effeminate men and a masculine voice over which derides such gestures as 'wrong'. There is a

man with long hair, a metrosexual man in a parlour and one who cries and expresses joy in an effeminate way. The male body is nevertheless offered as an object of desire. The man, so far using women's talcum powder, makes seductive feminine gestures. However, his muscular body does not quite match with these 'imposed' effeminate movements, thereby underlining the gap between masculinity associated with a well-built body and effeminacy which is 'other' to the masculine body. It aims to essentialize the connection between male body and masculinity.

In another advert for the soap of the same brand a man is tricked by some ladies into getting dirty during a football match with kids. To the expectation of the ladies he goes shirtless. The man in this advertisement is rugged, seductive but not hegemonically masculine. The game is an important trope used here. There is the fascinating strip-tease sort of format: the man gradually gets to expose his body and comes closer to the ladies, playing with water. The background score of "Aise Na mujhe Tum Dekho" adds to the thematic effect of the scene.

Through their participation in the meaning of these adverts men seem to acquire a sense of social control. Through the use of such products people behave in ways that meet expectations of others. Indeed, the stereotypes created by these adverts tend to segregate the non-buyers as 'the other' and put them on the verge of emasculation. Then they are willing to do whatever it takes to be masculine and be accepted by the society. Erikson defines this process as assuming a 'social identity'. He sees identity as a process involving the interaction between the "interior development of the individual personality, understood in terms derived from the Freudian id-ego-superego model, and the growth of a sense of selfhood that comes from participating in society, internalizing its cultural norms, acquiring different statuses and playing different roles".

Advertisements, with so much focus on the gendered function of the body, thus also play on the ideas of 'being' and 'becoming' man. In fact, popular culture is lived through participation. What we buy says more about who we are than any other fact. In the latest television commercials for men's beauty products, a man using a women's beauty cream and other such stuff is prone to emasculation. Only by choosing a proper, men's product he is saved from being feminized. In the advert for the Emami Fair and Handsome Fairness Cream for Men, the man concerned has the muscular body stuff but is not fair enough to be hegemonically masculine and so attract girls. Use of women's fairness cream only makes him feminine in his bodily gestures. Confusion

arises with masculine body in feminine acts. By using the right product for men he consolidates the sex-gender-desire teleology and comes to attract beautiful ladies around him. In using the cream he learns masculinity and in the process becomes a man. Needless to say, this segregation of daily products in two categories of 'for men' and 'for women' is one of the most common ways that male-female binary is upheld and reinforced in society.

So, the representation of the body in advertisements lends itself easily to discursive analysis. Theorists have spoken at large on the norms and expectations of gender performance. Pierre Bourdieu talks of 'Habitus' or the regulation of the body in various cultural fields. Butler speaks of 'gendered bodies' that cannot exist outside the cultural conditions of their own materialization. Butler, in fact, draws on Foucault's theory that as a signifier of maleness, the body speaks to the gender category of Heterosexual men and is located within a political power structure; the body is the surface upon which power operates. So, the various images of masculinity shown on the screen exist to promote not the male body as such but corporate profits. In objectifying the body we also identify with it and rush to the market to impersonate the ideal. This Ideological State Apparatus continues to work on us as it is supposed to do.

### References:

1. Bordo, Susan. *Reading the Slender Body. Body/Politics: Women and the Discourses of Science*. Routledge (1990) Print
2. Accessed from JSTOR: *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (September 2004) Web
3. Erickson, Richard V. and Kevin D. Haggerty, *Policing The Risk Society*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press (1997) Print
4. In preparation of this article close readings of the following has been of great help:  
Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990. Indian Reprint 2007. Print