

Humanizing Alexa: Some Reflections on Recent TV Advertisements of Amazon Echo Smart Speakers

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Abstract

This paper presents a critical discussion on the TV commercials of Amazon Echo smart speakers, currently being aired on Indian TV channels and also uploaded in YouTube. It is a textual analysis of the select contents of the advertisements, especially incorporating the subtleties of emergent Indian domestic space which are represented in them to ensure acceptance of the product in Indian familial consumptions. It is argued in the conclusion that a process of dehumanizing automation is creatively altered in these video commercials to make the product feel like a human.

Key words: Advertisements, Gender Role Portrayal, Anthropomorphism, Consumer Culture.

Introduction

As another wonder from the much-cherished digital technology of the current age, the e-commerce giant Amazon Inc launched its versatile smart speaker systems, branded as Echo, also referred through its conversational agent named which is named as *Alexa*, in the later part of 2017 in India (Malik). In post-liberalization India, after the domestication of smartphones and low-cost internet services, one of the next sensations lined up on the doorstep seems to be the smart speakers, or voice-controlled intelligent personal assistants (IPA). In addition to Alexa from the *Amazon*, other virtual assistants which have already become familiar names to Indian consumers are Google's *Assistant*, Microsoft's *Cortana* and Apple's *Siri*.

Amazon Echo Advertisements

To begin with, there are twelve video commercials which have been uploaded in YouTube by Amazon Echo India in the month of June, 2019. These video commercials, which are the subject matter of this paper, are being aired on TV during high-consumption times, including the live telecast of the ICC World Cup 2019. Whereas the earlier such commercials of the same product, which were uploaded within a year or less, were more about making the gadget familiar to the new consumers in India, this later sequel of the commercials is evidently about internalizing this IPA within the domestic fabric of the affluent urban Indian families. A brief summary of these later sequel is described below to begin the discussion of this paper.

In the clip titled *Party anytime with Amazon Echo*, a couple is seen to be preparing to receive their guests for dinner. While preparing the dinning table, the wife commands Alexa to check messages and it is found the guests are not going to turn up for the dinner. To manage this frustrating situation, the husband asks Alexa to play party music which the smart speaker plays instantly. The wife, though initially reluctant, joins the husband for a dance in tune of a bhangra music played by Alexa. Alexa also dims the light in respond to a voice command from the wife. In the clip *Bedtime Stories on Echo*, a little girl during bedtime asks her father, who is seen to be tired, to tell a story. The tired father asks Alexa to tell a story which the speaker responds instantly by narrating a story of lion. When the father begins to doze, the little girl whispers Alexa to play the sound of lion. The roaring sound of lion played by Alexa shocks the dozing father, to the amusement of the little girl. Similarly, in the other clips of the commercials of this sequel demonstrate a kid getting assistance from Alexa for homework when her father is unable to do it; a young woman making hands-free video calling to her father to find that the old man is eating sweets; a man asking Alexa to change timers during his morning exercise; a woman at home asks Alexa to show the front door as the calling bell rings when her hands are busy in nail

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polish; a wife asking Alexa for the correct recipe when her husband is not happy with the meal she cooked; a husband, while watching TV, asks Alexa to set the AC temperature towards the comfort of his ailing wife at his side; an old man commands Alexa to play a content of his choice in Fire TV Stick, resolving a confronting couple on what to watch on TV; and a man asking Alexa to add cereals in his shopping list when he discovers on breakfast table that his cereals-box is empty. As the recurrent tagline “Just Ask” goes in these videos, all these tasks of playing party music to hands-free shopping lists are accomplished through the ease of voice commands only.

Analysis

These video commercials can be read as prescribed templates for the consumers in India to use the Echo smart speaker and to interact with its conversational agent Alexa. Embedded with this prescription, which can be taken as the main text of these advertisements, there are several interesting subtexts. One is the idea of “smart home” wherein the Echo smart speakers would be integrated to an array of domestic appliances, such as, TV and multimedia entertainments, electrification system, CCTV, and off course, the smartphone and internet services. This integration seems to be essential to realize the true versatility of Alexa. More importantly, what is evident in these catching video commercials is the intent to promote anthropomorphism, which is ‘the assignment of human traits and characteristics to computers’ (Nass and Moon), among the consumers. Though the product being advertised is a cylindrical shaped object with multifunctional potentials in responding to voice-based signals, there are several traits in constructing this commodity to make it a human-like feel. Referring to Fong et al’s conceptualization of ‘*socially interactive robots*: robots for which social human–robot interaction is important’ (Fong, Nourbakhsha and Dautenhahn), Purington et al observed that,

The Amazon Echo has several affordances that predispose users to personifying it and integrating it into social life. First, to operate the device, users must interact with Alexa, the conversational agent. Thus, the Echo is inherently a *socially interactive device*, since it requires social interaction to function. Alexa is also personified, in that the agent is endowed with a name, gender, and a personality. Such design choices encourage users to anthropomorphize the device; ... (Purington, Taft and Sannon).

These ‘name, gender and personality’ resonate in specific ways in the context of Indian consumers. While for the majority, in the typical traditional context, Alexa could have been an “outsider”, this Anglophonic name is no longer so for the rising segment of affluent consumers in globalized India. To reduce this culture gap, the manufacturer is reportedly ‘working on accommodating regional language speaking capabilities in its AI voice assistant, to cater to the Indian market’ (Soni). In any case, the pleasure and pride of having someone named Alexa at home is overtly articulated in each of these stated commercials. As far as the portrayal of gender roles in Indian advertisements is concerned, Das has found that, ...there are more male than female central characters and voiceovers in Indian ads; stereotypical differences were also found in the type of credibility used by men and women, and the nature of the products they advertised and settings that males and females appeared in. Female central characters tended to be younger than their male counterparts and were more likely to be portrayed in relationship roles (Das).

The sequel of Amazon Echo ads conforms partially to these observations. It is true that all the women characters in these ads are shown in relationship roles of wife, daughter or mother – three ubiquitous roles for women in Indian families. In fact, barring one single ad where a man is shown not in any relationship role (#JustAsk Alexa to Set Timers), all other ads in the sequel have shown even the male characters too in relationship roles of father, son and husband. This is because the projected site of this celebration of the bonhomie with virtual assistant Alexa is the interior domestic space of Indian families, for which not only interpersonal relationship but deep emotional bonding is foundational. In fact, on this front of Indian domesticity, the feminine identity of Alexa has clear edge. Alexa is not only female by name, but *she* is also an obliged companion to women and children at home. In terms of ‘central characters and voiceovers’, and also on the issue of ‘credibility used by men and women’, the stereotypical discrimination of women is not found in these ads of Amazon Echo. That kind of discrimination is obviously not affordable in these ads because a

substantial part of the private sphere of Indian families is reserved for authority of women. This is in addition to the fact that women in India are significant for the advertisers, as opined by Roy, '....women in India have emerged as a prime target for advertisers. Factors such as the purchasing power of Indian women, coupled with their changing status in society and their high viewership of television have contributed to the construction and targeting of women as a distinct segment by Indian advertisers' (Roy).

Coming back to the issue of encouraged anthropomorphism with Alexa, as quoted above from Purington et al, it can be seen in the larger contexts of consumer culture and its effects upon society in India in the last two decades. It has been a cliché that such consumer culture is based on individualism at the cost of communitarian life and the sense of collective belonging. The virtual becomes more real than the actual. It is also driven by what is called the *logic of instrumental rationality*, i.e. how a job is done is more important than what actually is done. Children doing homework, for example, is ordinary, but children doing homework with Alexa is fascinating. With the advent of electrified communications and entertainments in their various forms, the urban societies are increasingly becoming individualistic and self-centric. It is no longer an anomaly that people remain constantly online in virtual communication platforms, but without knowing the name of the next-door neighbor of real life.

If such lack of real-life communication in the outer neighborhood was a marker of our times till the age of smartphones, then the Amazon Echo smart speaker has extended this lack-of-communication-in-real-life to the interiors of our family and domesticity. In the scenarios depicted in these specific advertisements discussed in this paper, direct conversation hardly takes place between the family members, be it husband and wife or parents and children. The family members communicate among themselves through the virtual Alexa only. Even the most humane acts and moments, like the moment of intimacy between husband wife, or the act of telling of bedtime stories to children, is encouraged to be facilitated by the virtual assistant Alexa.

Conclusion

Most importantly, what is very cleverly kept hidden in these ads is the fact that all devices, which are based on technological automation and which are intended to replace human involved labor, are always dehumanizing by default. This fact was perhaps most telling portrayed in video by Charles Chaplin in his cult movie *Modern Times*, particularly in the famous scene of the automatic feeding machine for factory workers. The use of digital gadgets like smart speakers to accomplish the things associated with interpersonal bonding between the members of a family is, in actuality, a sign of severe mechanization of the society. It is unmistakably the triumph of the non-human over the humane, of the virtual over the real. Yet, this mechanization or dehumanization is very effectively reversed in the portrayal of these commercial video clips, by striking the carefully chosen emotional chords of the emergent familial ecology of the affluent class in India.

Video Commercials:

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2. *#JustAsk Alexa to Set Timers*. 3 June 2019. Amazon Echo India. 1 July 2019. <<https://youtu.be/1Or5D8OAeIU>>.
3. *Alexa on Fire TV Stick #JustAsk*. 3 June 2019. Amazon Echo India. 1 July 2019. <<https://youtu.be/dcOkjT9o7-8>>.
4. *#JustAsk for Sports Updates*. 3 June 2019. Amazon Echo India. 1 July 2019. <<https://youtu.be/liSqHtqaWRc>>.
5. *Bedtime Stories on Echo*. 12 June 2019. Amazon Echo India. 1 July 2019. <<https://youtu.be/MvbVoPgHeAE>>.
6. *Hands-free Cab Booking #JustAsk*. 3 June 2019. Amazon Echo India. 1 July 2019. <<https://youtu.be/WaJff5DU7n8>>.
7. *Hands-free Home Security #JustAsk*. 3 June 2019. Amazon Echo India. 1 July 2019.

<<https://youtu.be/BHJNYKDnMbk>>.

8. *Hands-free shopping lists #JustAsk*. 27 May 2019. Amazon Echo India. 1 July 2019. <<https://youtu.be/ENVZzFIFYLY>>.
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11. *Party anytime with Amazon Echo*. 24 June 2019. Amazon Echo India. 1 July 2019. <<https://youtu.be/25CNwCeol7Q>>.
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