

Portrayal of Women in Advertisements

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Abstract: Our society is diverse in multiple ways which many times have also led to stratification and marginalisation of people. Gender is one such category. Society has its own images and portrayals of/for women and they contribute in determining the status of the women against other genders. In a democratic country, the media becomes a strong influencer and shaper of the public/society's opinion. Status of women is also something that is not left untouched by the media's influence. The objective of this research was to look at the portrayal of women in one small part of the media i.e. the advertisements aired on the mainstream channels of India. Through a thematic analysis of the advertisements aired on the mainstream channels, it was observed that the roles that women play in them can be categorised broadly into decorative, responsive and independent roles. Through a careful analysis it was concluded that the advertisements play a huge role in reproduction of the gender stereotypes around women and act as an influence in their status in the society today.

Keywords: Advertisements, Gender, Portrayal, Stereotypes, Women

I. INTRODUCTION

Women in Advertisements:

Society is influenced by different aspects such as cultural values, lifestyle and behavior of individuals. Mass media also plays a significant role in perpetuating values in society. It is considered as an important tool to influence and transmit social values. Advertisements are one of the mediums which communicate the masses to propagate the ideology beneath the messages between seller (advertiser) and buyer (consumer). They are known as powerful marketing tools which influence the purchasing behavior of consumers and parallelly penetrate into their cultural lives with language and social messages which are used.

Paff, Lakner (1997) mentioned that "Advertising is a highly visible and seemingly controversial agent of socialization". It is also observed that viewers not only watch advertisements on television to decide whether to buy the product for consumption, they also associate and analyze the roles which are shown on television.

Researchers like Lundstorm and Sciglimpaglia(1977), Goffman(1979), Lindner(2004), Schaffter(2006), Shabbir et.al.(2019), and many more have looked into the relationship between advertisements and portrayals of women in them. The findings of researchers conclude that women are being portrayed stereotypically in advertisements (Negi, 2014, Gulati, 2014). Negi (2014) further mentions that the general roles that women play in advertising are 'Decorative Role,

Recreational Role, Independent Career Role, Self-involved Role, Carefree Role, and Family Role'. The dynamism of society affects the change in role of women in advertisements too which could be observed through women also playing an independent career role in the TVC's. But looking into these roles and TVC's they are being telecasted in, gives us further details unlayering many aspects of the TVC world. To get into details, one need to reflect and find answers to various questions like: What type of body of women is been shown in the TVC?, What products use women to sell themselves and how are they connected to women depicted in the TVC?, What are the women identified as in the roles they play?, What are the emotions (of and for) women depicted in the TVC?, What are the power dynamics represented in the TVC's?, What roles do women play in real lives & what are they depicted? and many more. The literature also reflects the questions and tried to answer these questions.

It is noted that females are shown in ideal images in the advertisements. Goffman (1979) also mentioned that the carefully posed lean fair-skinned models created "a pseudo-reality that is better than real". The models posed set an ideal image of figure and skin tone which appears to be very distant from the existing diversity in the body and color women have. The superficial imagery projected in the advertisements which portray women in stereotypical roles doing all the household chores with full make-up on, has now undergone some changes wherein women along with these roles also go to the office (Kang, 1997). Monika Gulati (2014) 'Advertisements remind women every time that perfume or lipstick can completely change her life. It can save her marriage and can fetch her job with a handsome salary.' These TVC reduce women to mere objects portraying them as weaker sex, mindless, submissive, confused, childish, generally in need of help and so on. Schaffer (2006) analyzed over 200 advertisements over a 12 years period concluding that the millions of women in India who are professionally engaged in productive activities are selectively kept out of the ads.

Jean Kilbourne (1999) mentioned that women are shown as sex objects. Women are viewed as "things", objects of male sexual desire, or the part of the merchandise rather than people (Hall, Crum, 1994). Body exposure and frequency of these ads have increased at an alarming rate over time. Hall and Crum(1994) mentioned that the chests, legs, buttock, and crotch shots increase the stereotypes and images that women are "bodies", rather than "somebodies" (with personalities which ultimately reflect the provocative, exploited images and Gulati (2014) also mentioned it. Sex, an emotion which uses women to promote and sell jeans, perfumes, alcohol, watches,

personal products, and cars are highly damaging and objectified. In some places, they are found to be ineffective but are still used as they are those few appeals that equals the attention value it gets. Lundstorm and Sciglimpaglia (1977) in their attempt to address this question reveal that women more than men find these advertisements to be offensive and suggesting that they don't do important things are mere bodies (commodities) to please the men out there. These advertisements also, "somewhere believe that since men have the purchasing power, they can be compelled by a woman model in an ad to buy that product" (Gulati, 2014).

It is noted that media contributes to people's understanding of imagery of the role of a woman in the society and they are still portraying women as objects in the advertisements as the studies suggest. The pseudo reality of portraying women in selective advertisements resonates with power dynamics of the society in the way it is portrayed. There is an underrepresentation and misrepresentation of the roles regarding the women in the advertisements which needs to be altered. "Until the media and the advertising industry develop a new found respect for women, the struggle to be taken seriously and viewed as equals will continue" (Gulati, 2014). In particular, no advertisement shall be permitted which projects the derogatory image of women. Advertisers shall ensure that the portrayal of the female form is tasteful and aesthetic, and within the well-established norms of good taste and decency". This research study analyzed the advertisements in the light of gender roles which women play in the society. It used thematic analysis for analysing the advertisements shown in mainstream channels for the research study.

II. OBJECTIVE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Research Questions:

1. What are the different roles of the women portrayed in the advertisements aired on the mainstream channels?
2. How are these portrayals related to the existing notions and stereotypes around women?

The objective of this study is to understand the portrayal of women in the advertisement aired on mainstream channels like Star Plus, Zee TV, Sony Entertainment Television, Colors TV in the last decade (2009-2019). Also, how do these relate to the existing notions and stereotypes for women in the society.

III. METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative research done on some selective mainstream Hindi entertainment channels. The channels are selected on the basis of their viewership ratings¹. The top 10 selected channels include channels like Colors TV, Star Plus, Zee TV, etc. Further, the selected advertisements are the ones

which were aired during 2009-2019 on these channels. The list of the advertisements are mentioned in table 1.

Table 1: List of selected advertisements

COSMETICS & PERSONAL CARE	HOUSEHOLD PRODUCTS	JEWELRY
Maybelline New York Fit Me Foundation	Daawat Basmati Rice	Niloufer By Tanishq
Lakme Perfect Radiance Serum	Everest Hingraj Masala	Malabar Gold
Maybelline Creamy Matte Lipstick	MTR Breakfast Mix	DE BEERS GJEPC
New Lakme Peach Milk Moisturiser and Soft Creme	Everest Masala	Tanishq Jewellery
Lakme Sun Expert Ultra Matte	Good Day Biscuits	OTHERS
Lakme Absolute	Kissan Ketchup	Cric Buzz
Lakme 9 to 5 Lipstick	Coca Cola	Hero Moto corp
Lakme Blush and Glow Face Wash	Lipton Green Tea	Astral Pipes
Lakme Foundation	Lux Soap	
Wotta Girl	Surf Excel Matic	
Secret Temptations Perfume	Colgate active salt	
Wildstone		
Venus soft Razor		

The selected advertisements were thematically analysed with a focus on the role that women played in them and how they responded to the existing notions and stereotypes around women and their roles.

IV. ANALYSIS

Through a thematic analysis of the selected advertisements the women were observed to portrayed under three major roles. Namely,

- [1] Responsive role,
- [2] Decorative role and,
- [3] Independent role

¹ According to viewership ratings on 'trendrr.net'

Responsive Role

The spheres in the world have been divided under two broad categories - private sphere and public sphere. Private sphere is related to home and work related to maintaining and keeping the house functioning. Since, long time back the private space has been the boundary defining the area of women. The maintenance of this private space has been the prime responsibility of the women. They are expected to be experts at the work, instead we should refer them to activities (because the household work does not fall under the paid economy) like cooking delicious and healthy food, cleaning the home, cleaning clothes, etc. The expectation of being experts at household work has remained one of the major stereotypes which act as a burden and requirement for the girls in India to go under training. The market contributes in making the task of women easier by producing many such products that help them stand successful on those expectations - as per their claims in the advertisements they make to market their products.

Advertisements like *MTR*, *Kissan Ketchup*, *Everest Hingraj Masala* have shown how just being a good cook (having magic in hands - "Aapke hatho ka jadu") is not enough, but there is a need to add extra spices and ketchups to make the food taste tasty and look appealing. Further, a woman can make everyone happy at her husband's house because *MTR* has given her possibilities to successfully cook a variety of dishes according to different choices of different family members.

Stereotype - A woman is required to be an expert at cooking so that everyone at home is happy. And many products like spices and ketchups will help her.

This is also argued by Bhasin(2000) in her book, that females are responsible for certain tasks in patriarchal society and household is one of the spheres which is managed by a female.

Extending the food further, *Daawat Basmati Rice* tries to highlight that 'Dil ka raasta pet se hokar gujarta hai (Way to heart is through one's stomach)'. It shows how food (rice here) is used by women to show her love, anger, concern etc. It has reduced the womanly emotional expressions just around food and it's serving to her husband and children. Although, it tried to highlight the 'reverse pyaar ki basha (the opposite definition of love)' but in that short glimpse too, the woman was in the kitchen cooking along the husband, unlike the other instances where men were shown returning from work.

Stereotype - 1. A woman expresses her emotions through food she cooks and serves to her husband and children. 2. Even if a woman is angry at her husband she will (must) express it by cooking and serving for him. 3. When women cook, the men are not required in the kitchen rather they are at work but when men cook, the women are around them in the kitchen only.

These instances are similar to household chores for which a

female is responsible as Bhasin(2000) and Menon(2012) also mentioned in their books.

Similar instances like spices making women's work easier at kitchen can be seen at her work for washing clothes when *Surf Excel Matic* power to take away hard stains makes the mother and his child tension free towards the stains and efforts to get rid of them.

Stereotype - Clothes must be washed properly to get rid of all hard and soft stains, and the responsibility for it is of the mother. She must know how to get rid of stains on clothes.

Advertisements of *Good Day* shows how a father does not see her daughter as an option to take care of his shop on first hand and waits for the help of the shop. Also, how women are full of compassion by giving all children good day biscuits in return of origami unlike father (male) who asks for money.

Stereotype - 1. Women cannot be considered as a first option to look after a grocery store. 2. Women unlike males have these motherly instincts like being polite, caring and compassionate towards children.

Advertisements have also promoted rewards that women deserve for taking care of the husband's house and family. These rewards are shown and promoted majorly in form of 'expensive diamond, gold or platinum jewelry'. These can be gifted on occasions like birthdays, anniversary, diwali or even as surprise without any occasion. The women on receiving these gifts are generally shown with an expression of surprise and spell bound, something which one will feel when they receive something that they did not expect and deserve. Advertisements of all the jewelry brands like *Tanishq*, *Kalyan*, *Malabar Gold* fall as examples to it. These advertisements try to highlight and reproduce two major *stereotypes* - 1. The purchasing power at the house is dominantly in the hands of men and women are waiting to get gifts from them. 2. The women are responsible to look after the family and household chores with or without any sense of their own choice and demands, instead ideally they should not have any demands and be thankful for the praise and gifts they get.

Similar mentions are found in 'Being a Feminist' by Niivedita Menon.

Another message given by these jewelry advertisements in a very subtle manner is the *treatment of women as decorative pieces* and *their enjoyment and acceptance* towards this. The jewelry gifted to a woman here is/will act as an ornament which when she wears will make her look beautiful (according to the people around her who will compliment her and will make her feel beautiful).

Stereotype - 1. Women need additional materials/objects like jewelry to make her look beautiful. 2. A lot of external validation and recognition is sought by women which makes her feel that she is beautiful.

Decorative Role

Women beside being portrayed in responsive roles are also portrayed largely in two types of roles, which can be clubbed together and can be called as decorative roles. The message the woman is used to give via a decorative role is - 'A woman is a sexual object'. Her treatment of a sexual body (sexual beings) is used in two ways in advertisements.

1. A body that gets suitable for 'attention' of men after application of certain products or gets 'attracted' to men who apply certain products
2. A body who has been used to sell products which are least related to her. A female body is just used as a marketing tool which will get the attention of the viewers.

Objectification of women and her body is a marketing strategy for many companies. The ways women are portrayed here, have special focus either on her bodies or sexual attraction/pleasures/fantasies. These advertisements show both a traditional woman in a suit or saree and a modern body woman in skirt and jeans. But the focus will not be on their clothes, but the way they present their bodies.

Advertisements like *Lakme Perfect Radiance*, *Maybelline FitMeAsIAm*, *Maybelline 12 hours summer fresh- Polishing Serum* shows women applying foundations and cream to look beautiful, 'Get salon like look', 'Ramp ready radiance' when they need to go out of the house. They tell how applications of these products make women look attractive and beautiful, that men come around them with cameras, or raise their head to just check them out. Further, they need products like *New Lakme Peach Milk Moisturiser & Soft Creme*, *Nivea, Lux Soap* etc. which will moisturize their skin ('apki nazuk twacha', 'For Satin soft Skin'), keep it safe and soft (and white ofcourse without any exception) so that they can flaunt their flawless and smooth back and legs to attract their lovers, husbands or other men around them. Shabbir et.al.(2014) also mentioned that this racist imagery has been a part of advertisements.

The portrayal of women as mindless sexual beings becomes evident in the advertisement of *Wildstone* where the daughter and her mother get attracted to the boy who has applied the wildstone perfume. Such advertisements not only portray women as mere bodies but also show them as mindless sexual beings who just seek attention of the 'men' around them. It can be related with Lundstorm and Scilimpaglia (1977) as they mentioned that women are being mere bodies (commodities) to please men out there.

Stereotype - 1. Women need to apply various products on her body to keep it safe from sun and dust (apparently not required by men because they are not shown applying it). *2.* Women need to apply these products because only, then men around them will give them attention (underlying assumption - women seek attention from men). *3.* Women are mindless

sexual beings, and a man just needs to put good fragrance to get many women on his body desiring him together.

Similar observations of similar stereotypes were observed in many advertisements related to jewelry as well, mentioned and described above under the heading - Responsive Role.

Series of advertisements of *Coca-Cola* have shown how women use her body and its parts to deviate men sexually and get the bottle of the drink in her control. Like here the woman makes a pout in one of the advertisements and the man gets diverted towards her lips and loosen his grip on the coca-cola bottle and the woman successfully wins that bottle from him to drink.

Stereotype - The only potential woman holds is her body and nothing else. Women use their bodies to win over men or divert them.

Many advertisements around *Lipton Green Tea* promote being healthy, fit and have no belly fat through a female body. The use of females to market the health benefits of green tea without any fail can make anyone wonder that either all men in the society are fit or the requirement to be fit is only the requirement of women. Goffman(1979) also found the same posing of lean fair skinned models in research of advertising to set an ideal image of a figure in public.

Stereotype - A lean body without any belly fat is a desirable body for women and all women should work towards it.

Media, further, is full of advertisements where the one will find women portrayal does not make complete sense, or is not something that holds direct connection with women or their lives. Advertisements like *Criz Buzz* are related to live updates about cricket matches, where in all advertisements women are portrayed. One of them is where an old rich business man introduces her young, lean wife wearing a body hugging dress (giving a sexually appealing appearance - according to the expression of the men) when one of the men standing there exclaims, "What a Catch!". The line here stood for two different meanings. One highlighting towards either the boss or his wife who has married each other either for sexy and attractive body or money and fame respectively and another meaning was related to a catch in a cricket match. Another similar example is advertisements of *Astral Pipes* where women are bothered by the leaking roof and a man of good built (here Salman Khan) comes and tells them about piping they should choose and all the women agree him not because he is right but because they were sexually desiring and fantasizing (according to the expressions of the women) the man telling them about the pipes. Such advertisements did not have any direct connection with women and instead used them and their bodies as sexual objects to create sexual humor around them and get the attention of the audience watching it. Also, the sexual humor they use is based on many gender stereotypes like the women look for the financial status of the man over all the other qualities of his; women desire and fantasize about a man with broad shoulders and fit body (abs

preferred). Hall, Crum(1994) also mentioned that women are viewed as things and as a part of merchandise.

Independent Role

The status of women has gone under many changes. The women who were seen and defined only in the boundaries of their household have now started to move out and work according to their choices. They can be seen in corporate offices, on roads driving cars, on construction sites, etc. They have proved that they hold the potential to not only compete with men but even beat them in many tasks which were considered to be inappropriate for a woman in the past. When one looks into the advertisements to reflect on this change in the role that women are playing in society, it will be very difficult for one to identify a woman who is solely playing an independent role. The portrayal of women is majorly and closely intertwined with responsive and decorative roles.

Advertisements which are related to the big cosmetics brands like *Lakme 9 to 5 look*, *Lakme Smudge Proof Kajal*, etc. have marketed their products saying ‘...that stay for long hours’, ‘...that go according to your office hours’ highlighting that you don’t need a touch up before work. Particular advertisements have also shown the need for cosmetics for women for different tasks at work like presentation with CEO, meeting at site etc. They subtly pass the *stereotype that women in an office will be heard only if she looks beautiful or she needs (or does) regular touch ups at work wasting the work hours*. One can wonder after watching these advertisements that a woman working in an office is there and can stay there because of her potential or because of the make-up she applies? If it is the make-up what makes men different, as no advertisements can be seen showing men in requirement of applying make-up and going to the office for a presentation with the CEO. Such advertisements in spite of being progressive by showing a woman in an independent role (a working woman) till the end reduce them down to mere bodies which have to be decorated. As Jain (2011) also mentioned that the stereotypical role of women advertisements are presenting themselves as mere bodies.

Advertisements have also highlighted and many a times even promoted the double burden of office work and household work that women in real world face and in order to appreciate their efforts they have marketed their brands of jewelry (*DE BEERS*) with taglines like ‘ek heera apke heere ke naam’ because the women has been perfectly and ideally balancing her family and work and is keeping everyone happy. A very progressive portrayal of women as an entrepreneur can be seen in advertisement of *Tanishq - Niloufer Collection* but the content of the advertisement portray how a women who is receiving a youngest entrepreneur award only talks about her history of saying sorry (where the professional bargaining is with ‘sir’s’ and domestic bargaining with friends, mother and children) and desire to say thankyou. The two advertisements mentioned here have represented women in independent roles but the same time reduced them to responsive roles they did

perfectly or lost upon and how their efforts should be appreciated and awarded with jewelry that they can use to decorate their bodies and look beautiful.

Other advertisements like *Everest (range of masalas)* have glorified this struggle in the lives of women by showing a mother who even while working imagine her son and husband asking, ‘mummy aaj kya banega?’ (mother, what will you cook today)’. She is always worried about cooking something new and delicious that is liked by her family members even while she is working - showing that she is not able to concentrate at her work. The solution to this problem is not a dialogue over expectations and distribution of responsibilities but it is to get everest masalas so that when she uses them, her cooked food can taste good. Reducing an independent working woman again into a home-maker (responsive role). It can be related to what Kamla Bhasin (2000) also mentioned that when women are working outside, it is just an extension of their own work which they are meant to do for their family.

Stereotype - 1. Women have to balance between work and family, and they should be experts at it. *2.* When a woman is not able to balance between work and family she has to be sorry and has to thank everyone who stood beside her, in spite of her being imperfect at the balance. *3.* A woman has responsibilities of her home too, which can act as a potential barrier for her to concentrate and do her best at work_ The advertisements here play a normalising role for the double burden that the women face and tend to not only represent but also propagate this burden by letting a message out that gifting them diamonds, or other products (marketed in advertisements) will make them feel happy.

V. DISCUSSIONS

The advertisements selected and analysed responded to the findings of Negi in 2014 showing women majorly in responsive, decorative and independent roles. Clear demarcation between the roles has been very tough and challenging. This challenge has been borrowed from society as it is, the women living in real life are identified under various roles. They get responsible for each role that society determines for them using various disciplines like mythology, biology, history etc. They being represented as bodies (sexual) which have a role to look attractive and beautiful to men is something which can be also traced back in many stories of Hindu mythology where many nymphs (apsaras) were responsible to divert sages using the beauty of their bodies. The stereotypes which have come into existence through these stories are that women are sexual bodies who are needed to look beautiful and attractive and their bodies are to attract and get the attention of men around them. Reproducing these stereotypes, advertisements not only market their cosmetics products but also hire models with lean bodies and fair color (ones which approve to the standards of beauty defined by mainstream society today). They extend this stereotype further by showing women (no matter she is at home, sleeping, going to work etc.) always with make-up on, the

models will be always wearing kohl and liner, their lips will be always shown painted with colors giving out a message that not only highlights the necessity of these products in lives of women but also, that the concepts like natural beauty, skin at it's true appearance, inner beauty, etc. are not important. Similar mentions are made by Gulati (2014) in her research.

Further, women and their identity are shown in relation to others (without any fail) like they are mothers to someone, wife of a husband, daughter-in-law to other, employee of an office etc. and her role in all the advertisements is seen as one who perform various functions to stand by the expectations of these roles like make delicious food using kisan ketchup and everest masalas (species) or look ready and bold by wearing 9 to 5 look lakme products. And her performance in these roles then decides that she should be rewarded by her husband (or family) for success at these roles or her tireless efforts of being perfect at these via diamonds, gold or platinum that will make her happy and look beautiful. The woman in spite of being earning and showing thinking capacity for all others in society tend to surprisingly lack the same for herself and therefore, is never shown with any demands and desires (except for the sexual ones) for herself. She is being defined in terms of others, what others feel and expect her to do?, how do they expect her to look?, how do they expect her to work and balance? etc. and further, her acceptance to this definition is shown by the small subtle instances where she seek recognition and validation in from these others in form of men looking at her when she walks out with ramp ready radiance or in form gifts and support ('thankyou everyone for putting up with me - tanishq niloufer advertisements). Her dependency (irrespective of the economic independence) on others for recognitions, validations and praise has been prevalent in the advertisements.

The advertisements (media) have not only shown the expectations of society and struggles of women to live up to them (on the cost of her own 'self (identity)') but have also glorified them through the power it holds in its hands. We have read above that the role of the media is not just to reproduce the realities, but it also holds the power to influence reality, shape reality and even change it. The advertisements, thus, appear to choose to reproduce and glorify the current status of women, their struggles and the stereotypes around them and even further refine them by giving a message that products like MTR, Everest etc. makes the work of women easy and gifts like diamonds make them feel happy. The advertisements seem divorced with the attempts to push society to reflect over the expectations and lives of women, which it can easily do using its power and creative thinking.

VI. CONCLUSION

The study concluded that the advertisements aired on the mainstream channels of Indian televisions portrayed their women in responsive, decorative and independent roles similar to the finding of Negi (2014). Although, the decorative role dominated over the other roles of women and the rare

portrayal of an independent woman was always reduced down to either responsive role or decorative role and sometimes even both. These portrayals reproduced the stereotypes around women (Das, 2010) and their status and sometimes even played a role in deepening and strengthening them by the representation of pseudo reality of beauty, body types of women (Goffman, 1979) which stood better than real by eliminating the diversity of body types and skin color amongst women. The dominance of women objectification as weaker sex, mindless, submissive, confused, childish, generally in need of help (usually considered as damsel in distress) and so on is continued, something which Gulati (2014) also highlighted in her study. The pseudo stereotypical reality of advertisements used its power to glorify struggles of women and women who successfully achieved the notion of 'perfect' by fulfilling the expectation of society and gave solutions to other unsuccessful women to purchase the marketed products (shown in TVC) to achieve this status of perfection. The advertisements as correctly said by Paff and Lakner (1997) is the most visible and controversial agent of socialisation which has chosen to reproduce and glorify the stereotypes and struggles of women instead of questioning them and making attempts to change them and thus, change the reality.

VII. LIMITATIONS

The limitations of the research included that the advertisements which show female roles in them were chosen to study the portrayal. Mostly researches tend to have similar findings regarding the stereotypical role and objectification of females. It was noted that there was a transition between the roles of females portrayed on different advertisements. This study focussed on mainstream products advertisements aired on mainstream channels during 2009-2019, a contemporary urban scenario has been discussed in it.

VIII. SCOPE OF THE RESEARCH

This research can be further done with the perception of women, as what they think about the portrayals of women in advertisements. It can also discuss the different portrayals of genders in advertisements shown on digital platforms such as YouTube and others and contrasting views of mainstream and alternative advertisements. The timeline of changing in portrayal of women in advertisements can also be studied with reference to this study as it focuses on contemporary scenarios. The old research studies can be compared to show the timeline of portrayal of gender in advertisements.

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