

# Unveiling Stereotypes, Disparity, and Framing: A Critical Analysis of Women's Representation on Vanitha Magazine Cover Pages

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**Abstract:-** This study presents a comprehensive analysis of the representation of women on the cover pages of Vanitha, one of India's most circulated women's magazines, spanning from January 2019 to August 2021. Employing a content analysis methodology, we collected and analysed sixty-six cover pages from the magazine, utilising descriptive statistics and visual analysis to gain insights into the portrayal of women. Our findings reveal a pervasive and stereotypical representation of women on the magazine's cover pages. While females are prominently featured, there remains a significant disparity in age, colour, class, and social status among the featured models. Older women are conspicuously absent from the cover pages, while middle-aged and young women conform to the societal norms dictated by patriarchal structures. Moreover, the cover pages predominantly display single portraits, perpetuating the normalisation of patriarchal ideals surrounding the "ideal" woman. The multidimensionality of the female psyche is primarily overlooked, failing to represent women's diverse experiences and complexities accurately.

Furthermore, our research highlights the dominance of male and female actors as the primary stars featured on the magazine covers, followed by a limited presence of models, politicians, singers, and authors. Additionally, we observe a tendency for cover photographs to emphasise a seductive effect rather than effectively communicating the magazine's content. Examining the cover lines, we identify several dominant frames: health, celebrities, beauty, food, relationships, career, festivals, astrology, entrepreneurship, travel, and politics. These frames reflect the magazine's prioritisation of topics and align with the interests and concerns of its target audience. In conclusion, our study underscores the need for more inclusive and diverse representations of women on Vanitha's cover pages. By challenging stereotypical portrayals, addressing the disparity in age and social status, and adopting a more nuanced approach to the female experience, the magazine can foster a more empowering and authentic representation of women in its content.

**Keywords:** Gender Representation, Content Analysis, Women's Magazines, Kerala

## I. Introduction

Media have the power to reinforce, legitimate and naturalise societal norms. Media, especially mass media, play a significant role in projecting, propagating and normalising a constructed view of reality. The construction of reality in media is directly related to social power, cultural dominance and money. Media continually reinforce or establish the norms created by the above-mentioned influential groups' interests. Also, the media is a vital agent in the cultural transformation of society. Through media representations, the audience perceives themselves and the world (Fong, 2019). All media forms can control consumers' emotions, thoughts, and social actions. But the degree of media influence will vary according to the media's form. The same content transferred to a particular audience through different media platforms may impact them differently. An internet-based streaming application can create instantaneous reactions. Still, the in-depth approach and vivid detailing of the same content in a magazine have a different impact on its consumers. A well-researched and organised magazine's content has more credibility, and thus it has more influential power on its consumers.

Magazines play a significant role in socialising the cultural representation of society. In particular, Women's magazines can be seen as an essential avenue for gender identity and gender roles in developing nations like India (Das & Das, 2009). Indian periodicals have always raised women's issues throughout history. For example, Rajaram Mohanray's Sambath kaumadhi was the voice of the Anti-Sathi movement (Pawar, 2008). In Kerala, women's magazines have also played a crucial role in educating women and questioning gender distinctions. The first women's magazine in Kerala was Keraleeya Sugunabodhini, published in 1887 from Thiruvananthapuram. And the first women's magazine edited by a woman was Sarada. Mahila Ratnam, Lakshmiibhai, Mahila, Mangalodhayam, and Mahilamanthiram are some early Malayalam women's magazines published in Kerala. Women magazines in those days focus on spreading progressive ideas like education, employment, the necessity of ascertaining girls' desires concerning marriage etc.

Even though magazines were accessible to only a minority of the elite class and educated women during that period, more constructive discussions emerged about women's empowerment through those magazines (Swarna Kumari, 2001). But today, regardless of class, women's magazines have access and acceptance among readers in Kerala. The increasing number of women's magazines and their circulation confirm the recognition. Some prominent Malayalam women's magazines include Vanitha, Grihalakshmi, Mahilaratnam, Kanyaka, Snehitha, Sthree Dhanam, Mahila Chandrika and much more.

Vanitha is a fortnightly Malayalam women's magazine launched in 1975 as a monthly magazine and later became a fortnightly in 1987. The magazine was founded by Annamma Mathew, wife of K.M. Mathew, and is owned and published by MM Publications Ltd. from Kottayam, part of the Malayala Manorama Group. The magazine had a readership of over 2 million, making it one of the highest-read magazines in India. Vanitha is a famous women's magazine in Malayalam that covers various topics, including fashion, beauty, health, parenting, recipes, and celebrity interviews. The magazine has a large readership and distribution among Malayalis and is known for producing stories that uplift and empower women.

Women's magazines are vital in informing, educating, socialising, and creating awareness among women. With its rich matrilineal heritage, Kerala is one of India's most female-literate states (Das & Das, 2009). Feminist academicians recognise women's magazines' significant role in uplifting and empowering Malayali women. Therefore, understanding the framing of gender and the representation of women in these magazines is crucial for recognising the cultural transformation of society. Hence, studying the need for gender framing and representation of women in Malayalam women's magazines becomes indispensable in comprehending the impact and influence these magazines have on their readers.

## II. Review of literature

Gender studies researchers have had a keen interest in magazines and the representation of women. Studies have been conducted on the content, advertisements and cover pages. The cover pages of the magazine are vital because it is the first point of contact for the audience. It plays a critical role in attracting attention and generating interest among the audience. Besides, it will give insights into various visual communication strategies like images, headlines, colour schemes and layout designs.

Sammye & William G (1988) examines the cover pages of Time magazine from 1923-1987 to understand the representation of women in it. They perceive that women are underrepresented in the Time magazine covers during their study period. They have classified the women cover page personalities using age, nationality and occupation. Joyce Woolridge (2010) analyses English footballers' representation on magazine covers from 1950 - 1975. The research examines portrait photographs, poses, expressions, clothing, backgrounds, and accompanying text through qualitative content and visual analysis. The study explores the changing trends and cultural context reflected in these cover portraits, offering insights into the visual representation of footballers and their identities. This research contributes to understanding the intersection of sports, media, and visual culture in mid-twentieth-century English football magazines.

Han & Rudd (2015) focuses on the components of sex, race, age, and occupation as it explores how beauty is portrayed on the covers of fashion magazines, namely Vogue and GQ. The study examines the demographics and traits of the models featured by analysing the magazine covers. To shed light on the aesthetic standards of the cover pages, the research examines the prevalence and trends associated with these criteria. The study advances our knowledge of the complexity and biases in how beauty is portrayed in fashion.

Akinro & Mbunyuza-memani (2019) examined the representation of African women in four African magazines. Their findings implied that African magazines portray beauty identical to Western and white-centric beauty standards. Another similar study was done by Arakaki & Cassidy (2014), which observed the production of fame and celebrity the People magazine during the first decade of the 21st century. The findings suggested that the People magazine covers were primarily accomplished entertainers or those with dramatic personal lives. Fong (2019) did another study that betides in the Asian context; he studies masculinity and femininity in Malaysian women's magazines. Their findings signify that Malaysian women's magazines encourage female readers to pursue their passion for promoting masculine and feminine characters essential for success. In the Indian context, Banerjee & Kakade (2018) examines the manufacturing of the concept of 'beauty' in Femina magazine. Their findings affirm the so-called patriarchal notion of women obsessed with fashion and beauty. In the Kerala context, Vinayan & Raj (2019) analyse the politics of 'ideal Malayalee women' in the early twentieth-century women's magazines. The study identifies the influence of patriarchy, caste and caste in the content of these publications. The study also reveals the underlying politics in their apolitical stance. Overall, these studies shed light on various aspects of magazine cover pages, including the representation of women, beauty standards, celebrity culture, gender roles, and societal influences. They contribute to understanding the media's role in shaping perceptions, reflecting cultural values, and potentially perpetuating stereotypes.

Despite the existing studies on the framing of women in magazines, several research gaps need further exploration. Firstly, most studies have predominantly focused on Western magazines, while the Indian context, particularly Kerala, remains relatively

unexplored. Investigating the representation of women in Kerala women's magazines can provide unique insights into the intersection of gender, culture, and regional dynamics.

Additionally, there is a need to delve deeper into the specific framing and portrayal of women in Indian magazines, considering the diverse cultural, social, and historical contexts. This includes examining how beauty standards, femininity, and gender roles are constructed and portrayed in these magazines, considering the complex and evolving nature of Indian society.

To bridge this gap, we propose a study with the following objectives.

### **Research objectives**

To classify the cover pages of Vanitha women's magazines based on gender.

To find out the type of cover photographs in women's magazines.

To identify the people on Cover pages in terms of their profession.

To determine the frames of cover stories in women's magazines.

### **Research Questions**

RQ1 Who got featured on the Vanitha magazine cover pages regarding gender?

RQ2 What type of celebrity got featured on the Vanitha magazine cover pages?

RQ3 What are the trends in cover photographs regarding the type of cover?

RQ4 What frames were employed by the cover stories in women's magazines?

### **III. Research Method**

Content analysis is chosen as the method of the research. The magazine selected was Vanitha. The researchers analysed all covers of Vanitha magazine published from January 2019 to August 2021. Sixty-six cover pages from the Vanitha magazine were collected and analysed using descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages. The researchers also use visual analysis to interpret the cover pages. The researchers use the Magazine Covers as the unit of analysis to answer the first three research questions. Walter (2019) identifies the importance of magazine covers and cover lines. He acknowledges magazine covers as an 'independent, self-contained unit'. The cover can both be editorial and social indicators of importance.

The researchers categorise the gender of cover page models, type of cover page photographs and type of people on the cover page in terms of the profession to determine the research objectives. Coding for the gender of cover page models, cover photographs by type, and type of celebrity in cover photographs on cover pages was done through a visual inspection of the covers. Coding categories for gender were 1, Male only, 2, Female only and Both. Coding categories for the cover photographs by type were 1, Single, 2, Couple and 3, Group. Celebrity type was also coded in the same fashion with Five Categories 1, Actors; Individuals best known for their performance acting in films and serials. 2, Musicians; Individuals best known for their talents in singing and music. 3, Models; Individuals best known for their work posing for photographers and artists. 4, Politicians; Individuals best known for their government and political parties' activities. 5, Authors; Individuals known for their writing skills. The researchers critically evaluate the cover pages and the coding to identify their underlying trends.

The researcher uses the cover lines as the unit of analysis to answer the final research question. "What frames are employed by the cover page stories in women's magazines?" This study uses an inductive approach for analysing frames. The coding categories are designed after a preliminary examination of the samples. As a result of the initial examination, 12 frames were identified.

- 1, Health; Focussing on physical and mental health
- 2, Celebrity; Discussing famous personalities
- 3, Beauty; Emphasising makeup and beauty tips
- 4, Politics; Discussing government, political party leaders
- 5, Education/Career; Emphasising Jobs, Courses, and learning-related
- 6, Travel; Discussing travel experiences and unique travel spots
- 7, Food; Focussing on food /cooking and kitchen
- 8, Festival; Focussing on the festivals like Onam, Christmas and Ramzan etc

- 9, Astrology; Horoscope and stars signs related
- 10, Relationship; Focussing on Marriage, Love and family
- 11, Entrepreneurship; Businesses and Market-related
- 12, Success stories; Achievement stories of women

Two of the authors worked as coders for this project. If there are questions and discrepancies in coding, the authors discuss them. The authors use additional materials like books, magazines, newspapers and the Internet to resolve the issues. An intercoder reliability test was conducted even if all the issues were resolved through discussions. The authors coded all 66 covers, and the results were not disclosed before being compared. Using Holsti’s formula for intercoder reliability, the level of agreement for gender was 1.0, the level of agreement for the type of cover photo was 1.0, the level of agreement for the celebrity type was 0.98, and the level of agreement for the frames was 0.96.

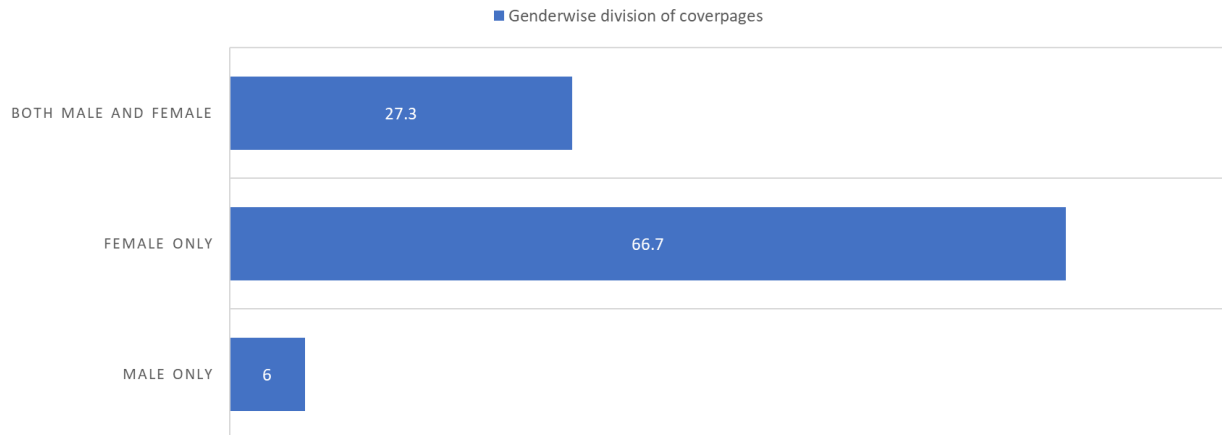
**IV. Analysis and Findings**

**Gender and Gender representation on cover pages**

Sex	Frequency	Percentage(%)
Male only	4	6
Female only	44	66.7
Both	18	27.3
Total	66	100

**Table 1: Classification of Cover Page based on the gender of the people in it**

**GENDERWISE DIVISION OF COVERPAGES**



**Chart 1**

Among the 66 cover pages of Vanitha magazine published between January 2019 to August 2021, 66% are women, 6% are men, and 27% include both men and women (refer to Table 1 and Chart 1). The results are not surprising as the magazine Vanitha is meant for women. So it is quite natural that more women appear on the cover pages. There are no transpersons’ among the 66 cover pages analysed. As we strive for a gender-neutral society, and the media have a massive role in altering our culture, we should change to give a fair representation of transpersons in their content.

Another important observation is that although most cover pages feature women, the samples’ stereotypical representation is evident. All the women featured on the cover pages have similarities in age, colour, class, and social status. We found that all the women featured on the cover pages of Vanitha magazine are very young. A majority of them are in their twenties and look healthy and energetic. Women of age in their thirties and forties also got a commendable representation. The women in this category are

often represented as homemakers - a social position the patriarchal society forcefully imposed on the women's community. The women in their old age are not featured on any of the cover pages of Vanitha. Thus, we can interpret that the so-called women-oriented magazines are only interested in creating a pleasant and energetic feel. Not all age groups are placed on the cover pages, which means an accurate representation is absent in the content also. An apparent disparity is evident in the models' skin tones portrayed on the cover pages. All the models, especially the women featured on the cover pages, are white-skinned, which shows that the women's magazines are trying to reinforce or normalise the idea of the patriarchal world. Vanitha is a magazine circulated in Kerala, where most of the population is brown or dark-skinned. Even then, they try to establish white skin as a symbol of beauty and pride. These stigmatic representations expose the superficiality and dishonesty of the so-called women's magazines in Kerala.

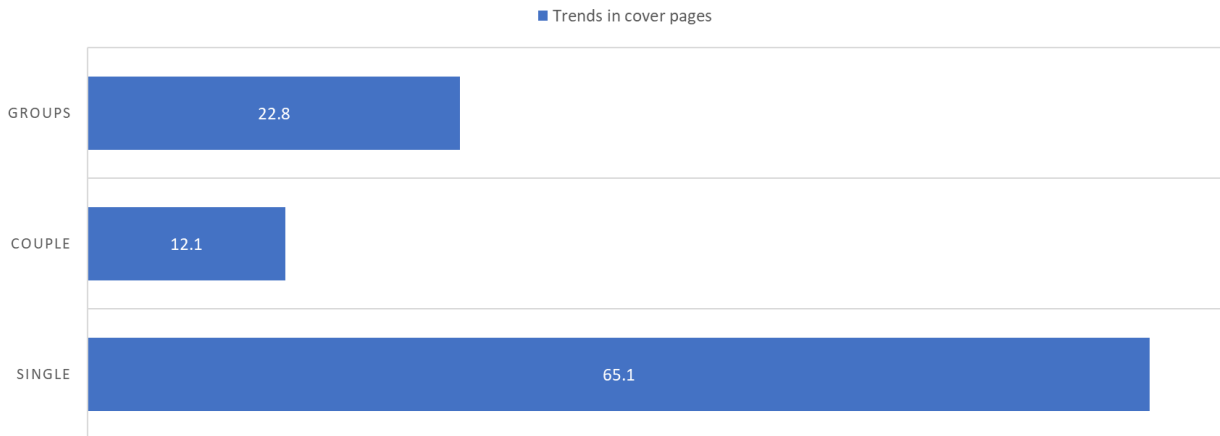
The researchers identified a severe paradox in the class and social status of the women featured on the cover pages. All the models featured represent an affluent class. The picture's costumes, ornaments, and total setting approve the above argument. The researchers concluded from these assumptions that although most cover pages feature women, there is still an apparent disparity in the featured models' age, colour, class, and social status. This kind of representation will help the dominant male society reinforce their viewpoints on the women's community.

**The trend in cover page photographs**

Type	Frequency	Percentage
Single	43	65.2
Couple	8	12.1
Group	15	22.8
Total	66	100

**Table 2: Classification of the cover photograph by type**

**TRENDS IN COVER PAGES**



**Chart 2**

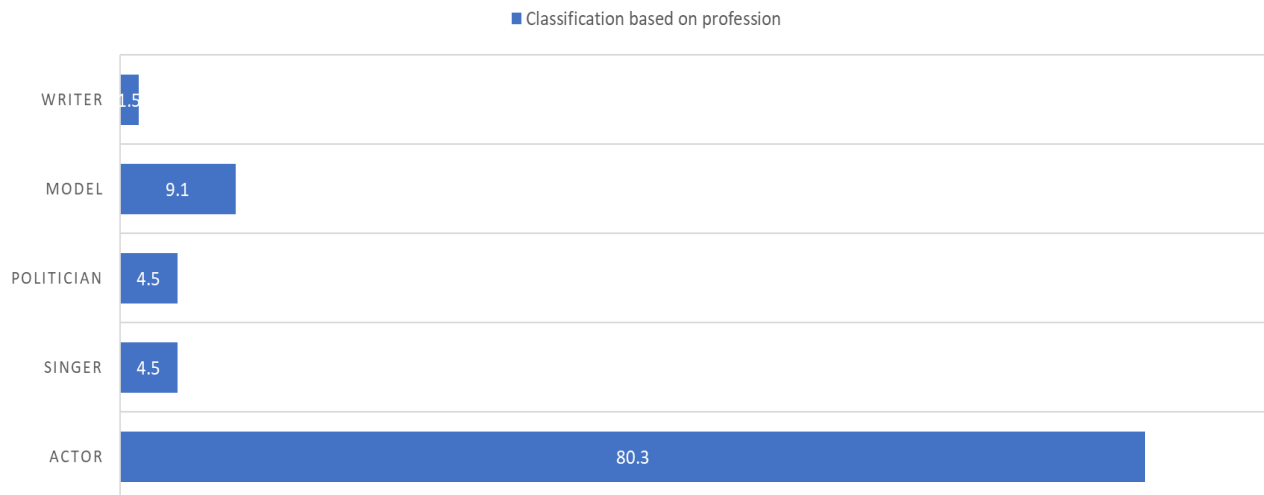
Table 2 shows that among the 66 cover pages, about 65 per cent of the magazine cover photographs are single, followed by Group 22.8 per cent and couple 12 per cent. This finding shows a clear trend in magazine cover pages. Single portraits are predominant in women's magazine covers, followed by comparatively fewer Group photos and Couple photos. In a cover photograph featuring a group, the focus will be on conveying the idea of their relationships. But on a cover page featuring a single model, the focus will be on the model's emotions, apparel and ornaments. Usually, all these focus elements are well established in the cover pages featuring a single woman. A conscious effort to create some pseudo-social norms and the paid promotion of the textile and jewellery can be evident in these representations.

**Professional profile of people who got featured on cover pages**

Profession	Frequency	Percentage
Actor	53	80.3
Singer	3	4.5
Politician	3	4.5
Model	6	9.1
Writer	1	1.5
Total	66	100

**Table 3: Classification of people in Cover Photographs by Profession**

**CLASSIFICATION BASED ON PROFESSION**



**Chart 3**

Another aim of the study is to determine the types of celebrities on magazine covers. About 80 per cent of the cover page models are actors, followed by 9 per cent models, 4.5 each and singers and 1.5 per cent writers. It is evident from the findings that women’s magazines use actors, men and women, followed by models, singers and politicians. The grim reality is that people like entrepreneurs, sportspersons, politicians and women representation from any other walks of life don’t even have a place on women’s magazine covers. Only a single writer has been placed on the magazine cover. These findings reinstate the so-called patriarchal belief about women.

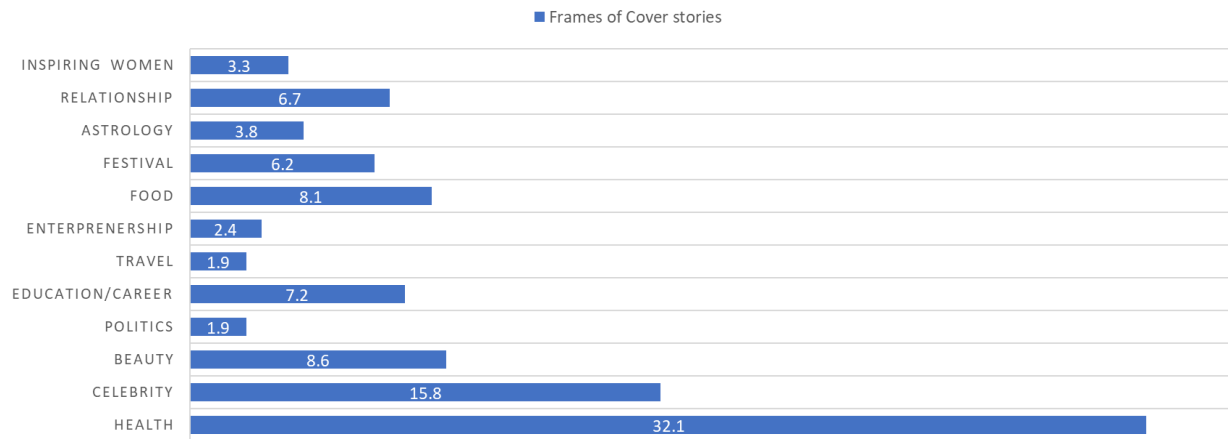
Featuring only actors and models themselves proves that the concerned publication focuses more on creating a seductive appeal than communicating the content they intend to handle. Today women are actively involved in all social affairs and are entrusted with professional responsibilities irrespective of the gender barrier. Hesitance to showcase these diverse dimensions of the woman community means the publishers are trying to complement the patriarchal norms of only celebrating the women’s body as a showpiece.

**Frames employed by Vanitha magazines in cover stories**

Frame	Frequency	Percentage
Health	67	32.1
Celebrity	33	15.8
Beauty	18	8.6
Politics	4	1.9
Education/Career	15	7.2
Travel	4	1.9
Entrepreneurship	5	2.4
Food	17	8.1
Festival	13	6.2
Astrology	8	3.8
Relationship	14	6.7
Inspiring Women	7	3.3
Total	208	100

**Table 4: Frames of Cover Stories**

**FRAMES OF COVER STORIES**



**Chart 4**

Amongst the various frames, the health frame dominates, accounting for approximately 32 per cent of the cover lines. This observation aligns with the ongoing pandemic, where health-related topics understandably take precedence. The magazine also allocates significant attention to celebrities, comprising 15.8 per cent of the cover stories. Beauty and food also hold notable positions, constituting 8.6 per cent and 8.1 per cent of the frames, respectively. Education and career, relationship dynamics, festivals, astrology, success stories, entrepreneurship, politics, and travel frames collectively comprise the remaining portions, indicating the magazine's diverse interests.

## V. Discussion and Conclusion

This study tries to answer four intriguing research questions about women's magazines. Which gender got featured in women's magazine covers? What types of photos are included in cover photos of women's magazines? What kinds of personalities are featured on the cover pages of women's magazines based on the profession? What are the frames used in cover lines of women's magazines? The study's findings implied that females were more featured in women's magazines. Yet there are instances of Male only covers and covers featuring both Males and Females. It is also found that even though most of the cover pages feature women, there is still an apparent disparity in age, colour, class, and social status of the featured models. The result is similar to those obtained by (Freitas et al., 2017); they have identified low levels of diversity in age, colour and ethnicity of the models on the magazine cover. Women in their old age who don't have any space on the cover pages. This study's findings align closely with the results obtained (Edström, M. 2018).

In contrast, the middle and young-aged women featured on the cover pages have been portrayed following the norms imposed by the patriarchal society. An accurate representation of the multidimensionality of the female psyche is absent in the cover pages observed. The study also finds out the current trend of women's magazines using single portraits as cover photographs. It is followed by group and couple photos which are comparatively less. There is a recurring tendency to normalise the social norms established by the patriarchal groups regarding the ideal woman is evident in portraits of single women on cover pages. Yan & Bissell (2014) also produced matching findings in this specific aspect. The paid promotion of the textile and jewellery can also be viewed in the single portrait representations. We have an exciting result regarding the type of celebrities featured in women's magazines. Most of the stars featured on magazine covers are Male and Female actors. It is followed by a significantly less number of models, politicians, singers and authors. It is also found that a seductive effect is visible in the pictures featured on the cover pages rather than communicating the content that exhibits congruence with the outcomes of the study conducted by (Frisby & Cynthia 2017).

Our study finds out the frames of the cover lines of women's magazines. The most dominant frame is the health frame, followed by celebrities, beauty, food, relationship, career, festival, astrology, entrepreneurship, travel, and politics. In conclusion, our study underscores the need for more inclusive and diverse representations of women on Vanitha's cover pages. By challenging stereotypical portrayals, addressing the disparity in age and social status, and adopting a more nuanced approach to the female experience, the magazine can foster a more empowering and authentic representation of women in its content. Apart from some of these compelling findings, our study has some limitations too. We do not measure the effect of this framing among the readers. We hope future researchers will try to determine the impact of magazine framing on the audience. Despite these drawbacks, we hope our research will contribute significantly to the study of representation in women's magazines. Also, it will help to bridge some gaps in gender studies on magazine research.

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