

Deconstructing Gender Stereotypes in Indian Advertising: Insights from Media and "Bulbbul"

Shivam Gaur¹, Ananta Sarkar²

¹4th Year BA.LLB(Hons) Student, Amity Law School, Noida, Amity University Uttar Pradesh

²2nd Year BA.ENGLISH (Hons) Student, SOL Delhi University

Abstract

Gender stereotypes are pervasive in Indian advertising, with many ads perpetuating harmful and limiting stereotypes about women's roles and potential. Stereotypes, which are cognitive structures that influence perceptions of individuals based on social group membership, often depict women in traditional roles such as homemakers, caregivers, and objects of beauty. These representations reinforce outdated notions of gender and limit the perception of women's capabilities and aspirations. Although there has been some progress in challenging these stereotypes, significant obstacles remain due to deeply ingrained cultural norms and commercial interests that favor conventional portrayals.

This paper explores the impact of media representations on gender stereotypes, particularly through content analysis of various media items, and examines the portrayal of gender in the Netflix film "Bulbbul" as a case study. The film's subversion of traditional gender roles and its depiction of gender-based violence highlight the potential for media to challenge and change societal attitudes. Achieving gender equality in Indian advertising requires a multifaceted approach involving industry-wide efforts, grassroots movements, and consumer advocacy. By promoting inclusive and diverse representations of women, advertisers can contribute to a more equitable and just society.

Introduction

Stereotypes are "cognitive structures that provide knowledge, beliefs, and expectations about individuals based on their membership in a social group." Because stereotypes are cognitive in nature, they can influence specific social perceptions of everybody else, such as personality traits, behavior, attitudes, and appearance. Stereotypes, for example, can lead us to believe that women are communal by nature, which they demonstrate by being warm and sensitive to others, and that men are agentic by nature, which they demonstrate by being assertive and autonomous in the presence of others.¹

It has been demonstrated that people's stereotypical categorisation into different groups is fluid and dependent on the context of comparisons. Gender classification, on the other hand, appears to elude such fluid categorisation, as it is a primary and salient feature of how people perceive others. Such readily apparent and persistent categorisations contribute to the persistence of gender stereotypes. While stereotypes are cognitive in nature, they include people's beliefs and descriptions about members of various groups (e.g., gender), evaluations that follow these implicit or explicit attitudes may involve

¹ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9833609/>

negative or positive reactions to members of a specific group. In the case of gender stereotypes, they are organised around the importance of men's agency and women's communality.

As a result, task performance is prioritised for men, while social relationships are prioritised for women. Women who violate the prescriptive gender stereotype of being warm and kind in social relationships may face repercussions for deviating from these prescribed gender norms. Negative assessments of gender stereotype violations may lead to discriminatory behaviour.

The media is a powerful socialising agent, and studying its influence can provide a wealth of information. This section will introduce to the research on media representations and various degrees of gendered depictions. The way the media portrays aspects of social life can help us understand society and our place in it. The articles in this section are primarily concerned with the study of media and how it portrays gender in our social world. All of them make use of some form of content analysis to investigate issues concerning the construction and representation of females and/or males in the media. Music videos, children's books, and magazines are among the media items examined.

Because the media is such a vast entity, research on its impact can cover a wide range of topics. This section provides an overview of media and gender studies, implying that the field of media research is vast. Each of the articles listed aims to understand how the media represents and constructs a specific topic, as well as the implications of these representations. Readers will gain a comprehensive understanding of media studies and how this socialising agent has influenced the gender ideologies that shape our social world.²

Gaye Tuchman's (1978) concept of symbolic annihilation refers to women's underrepresentation in a narrow range of social roles. Men are represented in a wide range of social and occupational roles at the same time. Tuchman contends that women's accomplishments are overlooked, often trivialized, or simply not reported, and are given less weight than other factors such as their appearance.³

Women are primarily represented by stereotypical gender roles such as doing housework and work, being wives and mothers, and so on.

The Feminist Cult in Media Representation:

Ferguson (1980) investigated women's magazines and came to the conclusion that media representations were built around the cult of femininity. The representations were based on traditional, stereotypical gender roles and values, such as caring, family oriented, marriage-related, and outward appearance-focused.

She emphasises that teen magazines with a young female audience provide diverse female representation. Their focus, however, remains on men, household activities, and dressing up to meet male beauty standards.

According to Newbold's (2002) study on television sports presentation, not only do women's sporting accomplishments receive little coverage, but they also tend to trivialise, sexualize, and undervalue female athletes and their skills and achievements.

Many films in recent decades have featured female protagonists who are independent, strong, and resourceful, potentially undermining hegemonic concepts of masculinity.

² <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10420340/>

³ <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-020-00654-0>

In connection with the Netflix movie BULBBUL

In the movie as it takes place in the 19th century Kolkata, India the movie portrays the behaviours, habits and culture of that time hence, it starts with over powerful male characters and subtle female characters, yet it has disputes between same gender. Majorly the men were overpowering over women in every situation and also there were injustice against the most young girl as she was married to the thakur of the village while she was just 5 years old and was clueless of her situation and the marriage therefore she misconducted her marriage and thought she was married to the youngest brother (Satya) of the thakur who was few years older than her but when she is told that her marriage is infact with the man 15-20 years older than her she was utterly confused but kept quite because before the marriage she was taught by her mother and elder woman of her family to keep her limits to herself and behave as the thakur wants.

The second brother (Mahendra) of the thakur when sees her gets attracted to her despite the fact that she was now the wife of thakur (his elder brother) and now pronounced as badi bahu and that he was married himself from a long time and was also a mentally challenged person.

Over the years as bulbbul grew up with satya become her bestfriend and shared the same age group as her's they were likely to catch eachothers attention which converted into subsequent love which brothered highly to the thakur and so He flew satya to London in the name of his higher studies but was actually done to keep him away from bulbbul.

As he was far away bulbbul became upset and was desperately waiting for him to come back or write back letter to her but days gone by without any word from him. They both used to share a diary and write stories in sequence of one another which used to pull them closer together and was found later by thakur in bulbbul's absence which ignited his anger of satya's and bulbbul's relationship which resulted in grievous hurt to bulbbul by thakur when she was taking a bath and was entirely naked he came in drunk with a heated metal rod and led out his anger and frustration on her which disabled her feet and entire body in grave pain and so she was being treated by the village doctor (Sudip) and when He asked about the incident and how this happened he was told by the thakur that she fell from the stairs. Taking the mis-advantage of her position mahendra sexually assaulted her while she was in this un-imaginable suffering and trauma. When she was looking forward to inform about the incident to someone the wife of mahendra came in and strictly ordered her to keep her quiet and that this suffering and trauma is bearable infront of the luxury of being the badi bahu of the Thakur of the village and that this will only give her more jewellery and more of the materialistic things that one dreams of therefore her pain should be secret of the haveli.

After sometime thakur left of outstation for some work which led to bulbbul being the thakurain of the village and take control of the command in the midst of which she gained her power and ability back with the help of the village doctor with whom she was attracted to and he also had feeling for her which added up and gave her even more power both physically and emotionally to her.

After a while she became emotion less towards other people and was solving all the village problems which were occurring more frequently and more dangerously as there were multiple murders taking place one after the other of all men in which one was mahendra himself. After few years satya came back from London and saw her the most powerful a person can be and decided to call the widow of mahendra to the haveli to look after the bulbbul because when he saw bulbbul and village doctor sharing a very close moment together he became jealous and insecure. As he was in the town he told bulbbul to rest as he has came back so he can look after the village and the murders so she can get some rest. A few days passed by and there were more murders being reported which strike a conversation between satya and bulbbul in which his belief was that the murders were committed by a man were as she believed it can also be a

woman and listening to this satya said “no woman has the courage to murder so brutally or to murder at all”.

Then came the celebration of durga puja which was also the day of mahendra’s death anniversary during the puja a boy came in looking for bulbbul and told her about her mother committed a suicide because his father married another woman and had started mis-treating her which ignited bulbbul’s anger and when satya heard of this and other murders which were happening all over the village and he suspected the village doctor were the accuse which upsetted bulbbul and she became even more emotion-less towards satya.

When satya went off and arrested the village doctor in the suspicions of the murders his horsecart driver was murdered riding the cart as they were going through the forest which was set to be the land where “chudail” resides and was believed to be the murderer by the village people hence when the cart stopped suddenly satya came out with the gun and saw the driver dead when the doctor said this might be the chudail but since satya didn’t believed in this cover story of his or of the chudail that the village people believe about he scoffed and went forward in search of the murderer with the gun and told him to stay right there when he was in search far away from the doctor a strong sound surrounded the doctor and when he looked up he saw the chudail standing with her turned feet on the tree in front of him and the chudail was infact bulbbul herself as she was hunting after each and every men who were violent towards woman and girls in various aspects of physical and emotional so she would hunt for each of them and kill them off right then and there.

Her turned feet was the result of the assault she suffered earlier by the thakur which forever became the consequence to her body and physical ability. Satya came back and saw her as well and was scared to his life so he shot on her in fear when doctor stopped satya from going after her he didn’t listen even when he straight forwardly told him that she is none other than his sister-in-law still he didn’t listen and accidentally started a wild fire in the forest during a fight with the village doctor which ultimately caught up to her (bulbbul/chudail) and she died in the middle of the forest by the wild fire which infact liberated her soul and her the immense freedom she deserved so she can kill off her final prey the thakur on his return back to the haveli and to continue her hunt for men like these who do not deserve to be born in the first place. Bulbbul is a significant film in terms of its impact on gender stereotypes. The film portrays the patriarchal society of that era, where women were expected to be submissive and obedient to men. However, the movie subverts this expectation by presenting strong female characters who resist patriarchal oppression and assert their agency.

The main protagonist, Bulbbul, is a woman who defies the traditional gender roles assigned to her. She is portrayed as a strong and independent woman who refuses to be cowed down by societal norms. She is educated and is shown to be interested in literature, a pursuit that is considered unusual for women during that time. Bulbbul also challenges the norm of arranged marriages and is shown to be in love with her husband's younger brother. This portrayal of a woman who is not bound by traditional gender roles is a refreshing change from the usual portrayal of women in Indian cinema.

Another significant aspect of the movie is its exploration of gender-based violence. Bulbbul is a victim of physical and emotional abuse at the hands of her husband. The movie does not shy away from depicting the violence she faces, and this portrayal is crucial in raising awareness about the issue of domestic violence. The movie also shows how societal norms perpetuate violence against women and how women are often blamed for the violence they face.

Bulbbul also presents the idea of sisterhood and the power of women coming together to fight patriarchal oppression. The movie has strong female characters who support each other and work together to overcome their struggles. This message of solidarity is essential in a society where women are often pitted against each other and taught to compete for male attention.

Overall, Bulbbul is a significant film in terms of its impact on gender stereotypes. It challenges traditional gender roles and presents strong female characters who resist patriarchal oppression. The movie also raises awareness about gender-based violence and promotes the idea of sisterhood and solidarity among women. In a society that is still grappling with issues of gender inequality and violence against women, Bulbbul is a much-needed voice of change.

In conclusion, Bulbbul is a powerful and thought-provoking film that holds significant impact on its audience in terms of challenging gender stereotypes. By depicting strong female characters who assert their agency and resist patriarchal oppression, the movie breaks away from traditional gender roles assigned to women. The exploration of gender-based violence in the movie also raises awareness about this issue, which is crucial in a society that still grapples with gender inequality and violence against women. Furthermore, the movie promotes the idea of sisterhood and solidarity among women, which is essential in a society that often pits women against each other. Overall, Bulbbul is an important voice of change that challenges societal norms and inspires the audience to question their own beliefs and biases.

Indian Advertising

Advertising plays a pivotal role in shaping societal norms and perceptions. In India, a diverse and culturally rich country, the portrayal of gender roles in advertisements significantly influences public consciousness. Despite strides towards gender equality, Indian advertisements frequently fall back on stereotypical representations that undermine women's diverse identities and capabilities. This paper seeks to explore the extent and implications of gender stereotyping in Indian advertising, providing a detailed critique of various ad categories and campaigns.

One of the most common gender stereotypes perpetuated by Indian ads is the portrayal of women as homemakers, whose primary role is to take care of the family and children. Advertisements often depict women cooking, cleaning, and doing household chores, while men are shown as the breadwinners or decision-makers. This reinforces the stereotype that women belong in the domestic sphere and are not suited for professional or leadership roles.

Another common stereotype perpetuated by Indian ads is the objectification of women's bodies. Advertisements often use women's bodies to sell products, portraying them as sexual objects or using sexual innuendos to grab the audience's attention. This perpetuates the stereotype that women's bodies are objects to be consumed or enjoyed by men, rather than being treated with respect and dignity.

Additionally, Indian ads often perpetuate the stereotype of women as the weaker sex, in need of protection and rescue by men. This is evident in advertisements for products such as detergents, where women are shown as vulnerable and in need of protection from dirt and stains. This reinforces the stereotype that women are weak and need men's protection, perpetuating a patriarchal view of society.

However, there have been some positive changes in recent years, with some ads challenging gender stereotypes and portraying women in non-traditional roles. Advertisements have shown women in leadership roles, pursuing their dreams, and breaking free from societal expectations. These ads have had a positive impact on the audience and have challenged traditional gender roles and stereotypes.

Gender stereotypes are a pervasive issue in Indian advertising, with many ads reinforcing traditional gender roles and limiting the roles of women. Here are a few examples of how Indian ads portray gender stereotypes:

- 1. Beauty and Grooming Ads** Beauty and grooming advertisements predominantly target women, reinforcing the stereotype that women are primarily concerned with their appearance. These ads often feature fair-skinned women with long, straight hair, perpetuating the belief that fair skin and straight hair are the ideal beauty standards. This not only marginalizes women who do not fit this narrow standard but also promotes unrealistic and homogeneous beauty ideals. The implications of such portrayals are far-reaching, affecting women's self-esteem and societal acceptance.
- 2. Household Products Ads** Household products advertisements typically depict women as the primary users and caretakers of the home. Women are shown performing household chores such as cooking and cleaning, while men are rarely portrayed engaging in these tasks. This reinforces the stereotype that women's primary responsibilities lie within the domestic sphere, sidelining the idea of shared household responsibilities. Such depictions limit perceptions of women's roles outside the home and reinforce the notion that domestic duties are inherently feminine.
- 3. Luxury Items and Car Ads** Advertisements for luxury items and cars often use sexualized images of women to sell their products. Women are portrayed as objects of desire and sex appeal, reinforcing the notion that they exist primarily for the pleasure of men. This objectification demeans women and perpetuates a culture where women's value is tied to their physical appearance and their ability to attract men. The reduction of women to mere visual attractions in these ads detracts from their agency and individuality.
- 4. Food Products Ads** Food product advertisements frequently depict women as the primary cooks and nurturers of the family. Cooking is portrayed as a way for women to express their love for their families, perpetuating the stereotype that a woman's primary role is to care for others. This can limit the perception of women's identities to that of caregivers and overlook their professional and personal aspirations. Such portrayals contribute to the expectation that women should prioritize familial duties over personal ambitions.
- 5. Financial Products Ads** Financial products advertisements often depict men as the primary earners and decision-makers in the family. Women are rarely shown in positions of financial power or making important financial decisions. This reinforces the stereotype that men are more capable of handling financial matters, which can contribute to the undervaluation of women's financial acumen and discourage their active participation in financial decision-making. The marginalization of women in financial contexts perpetuates economic disparities and limits their influence in financial spheres.

Critique of Specific Indian Advertisements

- 1. Fair and Lovely** the Fair and Lovely brand has long been criticized for promoting the idea that fair skin is more desirable than dark skin. Advertisements often feature women who are unhappy with their skin color until they use the Fair and Lovely cream, which magically lightens their skin and transforms their lives. This reinforces the harmful notion that women must be fair-skinned to be considered beautiful and desirable. The brand's messaging perpetuates colorism and places undue emphasis on external appearance as a determinant of worth.
- 2. Pepsodent** In a series of advertisements, Pepsodent featured a young girl who was always eager to please her mother by keeping her teeth clean. This reinforces the stereotype that women are expected

to be clean and well-groomed at all times and that they are responsible for maintaining their family's hygiene. The ad reflects and perpetuates traditional gender roles, implying that women's value is tied to their ability to uphold domestic standards of cleanliness and grooming.

3. **Ariel** Ariel's famous "Share the Load" campaign aimed to challenge the stereotype that women are solely responsible for household chores. While the ad's message is positive, it still operates within the framework of reinforcing that household chores are primarily a woman's responsibility, albeit shared. The campaign underscores the need for shared domestic duties but stops short of challenging the underlying assumption that domestic work is inherently feminine.
4. **Fogg** Fogg's advertisements often feature women who are relentlessly pursued by men wearing the brand's deodorant. These ads reinforce the stereotype that women are objects of desire and that men are the active pursuers, further perpetuating a culture of objectification and male dominance. Such portrayals reduce women to passive recipients of male attention, undermining their autonomy and agency.
5. **Hero Honda** In a series of advertisements, Hero Honda depicted women as passengers on the backs of men's motorcycles. This reinforces the stereotype that women are dependent on men for transportation and cannot be trusted to ride their own motorcycles. These ads limit perceptions of women's independence and capability, portraying them as reliant on men for mobility and safety.

Indian advertisements have a significant impact on societal norms and gender roles. Despite some progress in challenging traditional stereotypes, many ads continue to perpetuate outdated and limiting portrayals of women. Advertisers must strive to reflect the diversity and complexity of women's experiences and promote more inclusive and empowering representations. This shift is essential for fostering a more equitable society that values and respects women's contributions in all areas of life. By challenging gender stereotypes and embracing diverse narratives, Indian advertising can play a pivotal role in advancing gender equality and social progress.

Conclusion

In conclusion, gender stereotypes are a pervasive issue in Indian advertising, with many ads perpetuating harmful and limiting stereotypes about women's roles and potential. These stereotypes often portray women in traditional roles, such as homemakers, caregivers, and objects of beauty, which reinforces outdated notions of gender and limits the perception of women's capabilities and aspirations. Despite these challenges, there has been some progress in recent years, with a growing number of advertisements beginning to challenge these stereotypes and depict women in more diverse and empowering roles. Campaigns that feature women as professionals, leaders, and individuals with agency and ambition are slowly gaining traction, reflecting a gradual shift in societal attitudes.

However, there is still a long way to go before gender equality is fully realized in Indian advertising. The persistence of deeply ingrained cultural norms and the commercial interests that favor conventional portrayals pose significant obstacles. Advertisers and marketers must recognize the critical role they play in shaping societal perceptions and attitudes. By consciously creating and promoting more inclusive and diverse representations of women, they can contribute to the dismantling of harmful stereotypes and the promotion of gender equality.

Furthermore, it is essential for industry stakeholders, including regulatory bodies, advertising agencies, and media organizations, to collaborate and support initiatives that advocate for gender-sensitive content. Educational programs and workshops can raise awareness about the impact of gender stereotypes and

provide tools for creating more balanced and equitable advertisements. Consumer advocacy also plays a crucial role, as public demand for more representative and respectful portrayals of women can drive industry change.

In summary, achieving gender equality in Indian advertising requires a multifaceted approach that includes both industry-wide efforts and grassroots movements. By working together, advertisers, marketers, and consumers can help create a media landscape that celebrates the diversity and potential of women, ultimately contributing to a more equitable and just society for all.