

Changing Role of Women in Indian Advertising

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the changing role of women from Post Independent to recent trend. The role of women has undergone significant transformation across various fields globally including advertising, academics, political etc. as they establish themselves as professionals in diverse areas. However this paper seeks to explore how the representation of women in advertising has evolved over time, or if it continues to perpetuate traditional gender stereotypes and societal expectations surrounding women's roles. Indian brands are portraying a new world in the canvas of reality, targeting urban, educated working women. Just as new female characters and their aspirations are resonating with the audience in Bollywood movies, in the advertising world, they are reflecting the social and personal issues of today's thoughtful and progressive society.

Keywords: Women, advertising, representation, gender roles, stereotypes, objectification

Indian Advertising: An Overview

The Visual image in India has become extremely influential and convincing, invading people's social spaces and shaping people's perception attitudes and behaviours. It informs and moulds public opinion by evoking imagination and emotions. It presents a perspective of reality which is understood by the target audience through prevalent social cultural codes (Jha 2019). In reference to cinema, the forms created on screen can be linked to the world both on and off screen. This concept also implies to other screen media form including TV advertising, computer games etc. Advertising industry plays an important role in our culture, reflecting the social norms of our society.

In India, the mass media such TV, newspapers and social media often presents a biased or inaccurate representation of facts sensationalizing and manipulating information to grab attention and attract viewers. In India, the mass media such TV newspaper and social media often presents a biased or inaccurate representation of facts sensationalizing and manipulating information and to grab attention and attract viewers. Courtney (1971) analyzed 112 magazine ads and found that the ads reflected stereotypical gender roles like marginalizing women as domestic caregivers excluding them from important decision-making and portraying them as dependent on men. Additionally, women are reduced to sex objects undermining their individuality. Das (2000) in her study reveals that although the depiction of women in Indian magazine ads has improved overtime, they are still portrayed in stereotypical ways.

Representation of Women in Indian Advertising

Traditional stereotypes often depicts women as dependent passive and intellectually inferior while men are depicted as career focused, independent and assertive.(Das 2000) in her study found that Indian men can be broadly categorized into three groups : the career driven , the self-seekers and the home lovers.

Interestingly each group preferred advertisements that feature men similar to themselves and disliked men that portrayed men vastly different from their own self-image.

Conventional Advertising for categories like detergent, cookware and edible oils have relied on stereotypical portrayals of women. Nevertheless, in recent years significant transformation in this narrative has occurred overtime. Representation of women in advertising has changed over the decades, with the pre - 90s showing women in the kitchen or managing a family and the post 90s portraying women as sex symbols or unattainable versions of perfection. Like Courtney and Lockeretz(1971), many other studies still believe that sex role stereotyping occurs in television commercials and the same is been a trend for many years.

In the pioneering days of advertising and entertainment, women worldwide were portrayed as mere side characters such as helping male leads with mundane tasks. As society evolved, women's opinions gained more value, they became a significant and influential characteristics that businesses, marketers, and advertisers wanted to target and cater to. The late 70s, early 80s saw women selling everything from kitchen utensils, food products, and detergent to baby products. Although these ads featured women as the main characters, these ads relied on outdated gender norms. The women depicted in these ads were often shown prioritizing their roles as perfect homemakers, reinforcing the ideas that domestic duties are their principal concern.

This Usha Ad from the 1980s has the tag line "train her to be an ideal housewife". The idea behind this ad - that all girls should aspire to be ideal housewives is highly problematic. Since advertisements have the power to influence society, this ad sends a wrong message, both directly and indirectly suggesting that a girl's sole duty is to become an ideal housewife when she grows up.



Source – Google

From Stereotyping to Objectification

Advertising has a major influence on our lives and plays a significant role in creating and disseminating a number of stereotypes including gender stereotypes (Flowes 1996; Jhally 1987; Leiss at el 1986). It

plays a crucial role in forming our opinions of gender roles and expectations. Historically, Indian advertisements reinforced harmful stereotypes about women making them seem acceptable or normal and often portrayed woman as delicate and submissive and limited to domestic roles. These ads reinforced societal expectations, objectified women and promoted unfair beauty standards. During the later half of 20th century, advertisements often illustrated women in a stereotypically passive role often dressed traditionally and engaged in domestic chores. These ads portrayed women as conforming to societal norms whose primary goal was to please their husbands and taking care of their family. During this period another prevalent imagery was the objectification of women as desirable objects. Women were featured as sexually attractive and were shown wearing minimal and revealing clothing, emphasizing their physical appearance and using the same for selling products. Pollay (1986) emphasized that since its inception, advertising has consistently sold sex in one form or the other, often promising enhanced allure or grabbing attention through sexual stimuli. While more subtle than pornography, sex has been employed in various forms to promote diverse products, regularly and widely through mediums that are hard to ignore.

“Addiction” deodorant ad featuring Neil Nitin Mukesh is a textbook example of women objectification. The commercial suggests that women are turned on by men’s fragrance and helplessly drawn to them when men wear the deodorant. The ad’s suggestive tone and final scene with multiple partners imply that women are mere playthings for men’s desires. These portrayals reinforced a troubling narrative reducing women to mere sexual beings driven by desire. Advertising with sexualized female models is a commonly used technique in the advertisement industry (Keller et al 2020)



Source – agencyreporter.com

The Slice advertisement Aamsutra: Pure Mango Pleasure uses the sexual connotation by featuring Bollywood actress Katrina Kaif associating with sensual Pleasure to promote the mango drink.



Source – google

Impact of Advertising in women's self-esteem and societal perception

To attract the consumers, advertising agencies or the ad makers depict women as the central focus on the screen and continue to promote unrealistic and unattainable beauty standards. These advertisements encouraged the notion that women must prioritize their physical appearance to be considered attractive (Jeyarania ; Vasanthan 2023). On screen women are portrayed as multifaceted ideals: perfect wives, nurturing mothers, stunning girlfriends and glamorous bosses. However this gap between these portrayals and reality is substantial. For instance (Dai ; Zhu and Yuan Guo 2025) highlights the negative psychological impact of how the traditional advertising has portrayed women in idealised and stereotypical ways, leading to increase body dissatisfaction and self objectification. Social Comparison Theory (Festinger 1954) claims that individuals have an inherent tendency to evaluate themselves by comparing their abilities skills and qualities to those of others which results in inferiority , rivalry or supremacy depending on the outcome of competition. According to social comparison theory, women who view advertisements featuring thin attractive models may experience upward social comparisons resulting in self criticism and feeling of inadequacy. (Richins 1991, Trigermann and Polivy 2010)

From Homemakers to Working professionals: Evolving roles and responsibilities

Traditionally, Indian advertisements often represented women in limited roles such as domestic caregivers, homemakers, wives or reducing women to mere objects of male attractions thereby reinforcing societal expectations and gender norms. For decades many advertisements have reinforced gender stereotypes about gender race and other characteristics (Reghunath S and Sreena K 2023). But modern Indian Advertising witnessing a new perspective with brands that focusing on exhibiting women

as strong, independent individuals who embody empowerment. The first decade of 21st century saw a significant shift towards feminist advertising emerging as a powerful force for social change by taking many forms from challenging beauty standards to promoting women rights and empowerment. For instance, Ariel's Share the load campaign ignited a discussion about unequal distribution of household chores between men and women and thus urging men to share domestic responsibilities equally. The campaign received international recognition, including the prestigious Glass lion Grand Prix at Cannes Lion in 2015.

Havell Fans have revolutionized fan advertising by coming up with campaigns that tackle social issues. The Hawa Badlegi concept has been a corner stone showcasing the alignment of Havels with the progressive way of thinking.

Discussion and Conclusion

Advertising has a major influence on our lives and plays a significant role in creating and disseminating a number of stereotypes including gender stereotypes (Flowes 1996; Jhally 1987; Leiss et al 1986). It plays a crucial role in forming our opinions of gender roles and expectations. Advertisers need to understand the evolving Indian market - notably the significant transformation occurring in the attitudes of Indian women (Kotwal and Sahni 2008). Das (2010) note that marketers should adapt their approach to showcase women in diverse roles professions, and settings, reflecting the changing demographics to effectively appeal to young Indian women.

As discussed by Kotwal and Sahni (2008) that repetition of TV commercials though often annoying to adults, have a lasting influence on the impressionable minds of the young viewers. For instance, airing condom advertisements during prime time may have an adverse effect on adolescents pulling cultural ethos on stake.

The review study highlights the evolving role of women in Indian Advertising from Post Independent period to current trends. Owing to the influences from the west, the traditional patriarchal norms are shifting towards equality, where both spouses are partners in decision making (Fatma 2016). Historically, women are portrayed in stereotypical gender roles but a notable shift has occurred in the narrative and the types of advertisements featuring women. The growth of the middle class in India, combined with their increasing education level as in other countries result in a more egalitarian marital ethic in India(Sullivan and O' Connor, 1988)

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