

# Shifting Representations of Gender in Indian Television Commercials

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**ABSTRACT:** Contemporary developments in gender representational design aim to reconsider the role of gender in advertising. Gender stereotyping in advertising occurs when gender roles are represented incorrectly. Advertising used to fall behind in the advancement of gender equality but in recent years it has constantly changed the trend of showing women in traditional roles and men being patriarchal. Gender stereotyping in advertising occurs when gender roles are represented incorrectly. In television ads, there has been a move towards narrative and emotional appeal, enabling corporations to engage viewers more deeply. It's vital to remember that shifting viewing habits have an impact on how popular television advertising are becoming in India. Therefore, ads must be more careful when they convey their messages and should strive to disrupt rather than reinforce existing gender stereotypes and representations.

**KEYWORDS:** Gender advertisement, Stereotypes, Women depiction, Men Depiction, Television Ads

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Gender plays a significant role in advertising as it often influences the way products and services are marketed to different target audiences. Advertisements frequently rely on gender stereotypes and portrayals to appeal to specific consumer groups. For example, products targeting women may emphasise beauty, fashion, or domestic roles, while those targeting men might focus on strength, success, or adventure.

Recent gender representational tendencies seek to rethink gender roles in advertising. Advertisements have evolved over the years to embrace more diverse and inclusive portrayals of gender and sexuality. Instead of sticking to conventional gender norms, some advertisements now depict a broader range of gender identities and expressions, including androgynous and non-binary representations that are more inclusive of the LGBT community.

These portrayals seek to challenge traditional gender stereotypes and promote a more accepting and affirming environment for individuals of all gender identities and sexual orientations. By featuring strong, lively, and sexually assertive women alongside other diverse representations of gender, advertising can contribute to a more open and respectful portrayal of human experiences and identities. This shift towards more progressive and inclusive advertising can have a positive impact on promoting diversity and fostering a sense of acceptance and belonging for all consumers. (Kohrs, Kirsten and Rosalind Gill 2021)

Advertising's portrayal of women is frequently criticised for being exploitative, degrading, and not accurately reflecting contemporary women (Khandeparkar & Motiani, 2015).

Advertising is continuously falling behind when it comes to improving gender equality. On the contrary, it reinforces gender stereotypes and fails to depict women as empowered. Gender stereotyping in advertising occurs when gender norms are portrayed in an incorrect manner.

This happens, for example, when women are depicted as performing housework, being extremely nude, needing males for protection, and going to great lengths to achieve the 'perfect beauty' in order to make their partner pleased; however, men are portrayed as being in places of authority and acting influential. An advertisement shows men and women in ways that are contrary to how we truly observe them in society.

## II. ADVERTISEMENTS IN INDIA

In the past, a Advertisements, whether on television, radio, or roadside hoardings, have always proactively contributed to the enhancement and proliferation of gender stereotypes in India. To name a few, baby goods commercials typically show the mother taking care of the baby, implying that the responsibility of raising the child comes in the hands of mother where as car and automobile commercials rarely feature any women, reflecting that men are more capable and competent of making better suitable decisions than women; a big share of household appliance commercials show women as their primary consumers, advertisers can argue that it is reflection of society that these advertising showcase.

For a fact that support for patriarchy is extensive in India, the commercials on various level are problematic in nature that are often disregarded.

Over the years, television advertising have steadily increased in popularity in India. Due to reasons like greater brand recognition, higher consumer spending, and an abundance of television channels, the Indian advertising business has experienced substantial growth. The expansion of streaming services and digital media has also changed the landscape of advertising.

Advertisers in India are increasingly focusing on creating impactful and relatable television commercials to capture the attention of a diverse and discerning audience. With a population of over 1.3 billion people, India offers a vast and diverse market for advertisers to reach their target consumers.

Furthermore, there has been a shift towards storytelling and emotional appeal in television commercials, allowing brands to connect with viewers on a deeper level. Many Indian commercials now feature narratives that resonate with cultural values, traditions, and societal issues, making them more relatable and memorable.

Additionally, the advent of e-commerce has led to an increase in direct-to-consumer advertising, with numerous brands utilizing television commercials to promote their products and services. This trend has been particularly prominent in sectors such as FMCG (Fast-Moving Consumer Goods), electronics, and e-commerce platforms.

It's important to note that the growth of television commercials in India is also influenced by changing viewership patterns. With the rise of digital platforms, advertisers are exploring innovative ways to engage audiences, such as incorporating interactive elements and leveraging social media integration.

Overall, television commercials continue to be a significant advertising medium in India, offering brands a powerful platform to reach and connect with a diverse consumer base.

### **III. LITERATURE REVIEW**

In fact, a recent UNICEF study in the year 2021 has shown that women are still heavily stereotyped by portraying the traditional gender roles of primary carers of the family, mostly seen in private rather than public spaces, even though they have equal screen presence and more speaking time than men in the most watched Indian advertisements during 2019. Women typically appear in advertising for home and beauty items. Women are typically limited to carrying out domestic responsibilities while men are depicted as making crucial decisions and calling out the big shots.

While there have been some positive changes, conventional advertising still focuses on the harmful and insulting traditional cliché, according to new research study "GenderNext" conducted by the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) in collaboration with contacting and management firm Futurebrands.

It can go without saying that commercials, if they lasted only for seconds, they can have a long lasting imprint on consumers' thoughts which subtly shape their social perspectives. Therefore, it is essential that the marketing industry keeps up with the changes and creates more commercials that precisely show women in a very progressive light, breaking the chains of long held gender biases.

As time progresses, there has been a growing recognition among corporations of their social responsibility to promote gender equality in their advertising and marketing practices. They are becoming more mindful of the impact their campaigns can have on shaping societal attitudes towards gender roles and identities. As a result, some companies have made efforts to challenge and break stereotypes and preconceived notions about gender through their advertisements. Examples include Havell's "Hawa Badlegi" commercial depicting the husband adopting his wife's last name after marriage; Ariel's "Share The Load" commercial depicting a father reflecting on his role at home and deciding to assist his wife with the laundry after observing his married daughter juggling work and household duties alone; and Biba's "Change The Convention" commercial depicting the father doubting the cooking abilities of his future son-in-law with the latter inv

As a result, however slowly, there has been a change in the quality of advertisements throughout time. It is heartening to see some companies bravely combating gender norms and working to promote greater diversity. With such uplifting and continuous efforts, it is believed that Indian commercials would be able to overcome the glaring gender bias and play a significant part in establishing the society and culture of the future.

Studies have found that this type of stereotyping is widespread in advertisements from various countries, indicating a global phenomenon. However, there is limited research specifically focusing on gender roles in Indian television advertisements, suggesting a gap in the understanding of how gender is portrayed in this specific cultural context.

The reference to the previous study by Munshi (1998) suggests that the issue of gender stereotyping in television ads is not unique to India but extends to other countries as well. The study indicates that men and women are quite often presented in a stereotypical manners in television commercials, perpetuating traditional gender roles and reinforcing societal expectations.

The findings from the studies conducted by Munshi (1998) and Gupta and Jain (1998) shed light on the depiction of women in the Indian television commercials during the 1990s. According to Munshi's research, women were predominantly depicted as housewives in these advertisements. This portrayal reinforced traditional gender roles, where women were often confined to domestic settings and perceived primarily as caregivers and homemakers.

Gupta and Jain's study further adds to the understanding of the issue, revealing that Indian television commercials contributed to perpetuating traditional and preconceived notions that women are inferior to men. This perpetuation of gender inequality in advertising can have significant implications for societal attitudes towards gender roles and the empowerment of women. The aforementioned conclusions are supported by most of study on gender role depictions in Indian television advertisements, performed by Jha Dang and Vohra in 2005. Women frequented more on personal or beauty items and were less seemingly to be shown as being working better than men, according to Jha Dang and Vohra's research from 2005.

Das (2000) discovered that while women appeared more frequently in commercials for home and cosmetic products than men did, men were more frequently in advertisements for technology, financial, and automotive parts.

There are more male central characters than female in voiceovers in the Indian advertisements, according to a study by Das (2010) that also looked at the rate of visual appeal and incidence of gender prejudices. Stereotypical distinctions were also discovered in the types of trust used by men and women, the forms of goods they promoted, and the contexts that both men and women showed up in. Challenging age-old tropes and breaking away from rigid gender roles will contribute to a more progressive and empowering media landscape that resonates with audiences from all walks of life.

#### **IV. GENDER STEREOTYPES**

According to Ashmore and Del Boca (1981), stereotypes are commonly explained as beliefs about the characteristics, behaviors, and attributes of individuals belonging to specific groups. Gender stereotypes, based on the research by Eisend (2010), stem from the idea that certain traits, qualities, and behaviors distinguish different genders. However, this perspective falls short in capturing the full spectrum of gender identities and fails to address the prevalence of stereotypical representations of men and women in advertising (Eisend, 2019).

Historically, most of the researches on gender roles in advertising are centered on a binary and sex-based understanding of gender, dividing individuals into strictly male or female categories. This approach overlooks the diverse and evolving nature of gender identities, limiting the representation and recognition of non-binary and other gender identities in advertising. The gender preconceptions observed in advertising refer to the common portrayals of women and men that align with traditional stereotypes associated with their respective genders. These stereotypes often present women as nurturing, emotional, and focused on beauty and domestic roles, while men are depicted as strong, dominant, and success-driven.

These portrayals adhere to a binary conception of gender, which means they are based on the traditional and simplistic classification of gender into two distinct categories: male and female. This binary understanding of gender overlooks the complexity and diversity of gender identities that exist way past the typical male and female roles. (Grau and Zotos, 2016).

Gender stereotypes can be categorized into physical qualities, role behaviors, vocational status, and personality characteristics. Non-stereotypical portrayals in advertising lack these traits, such as masculine bodies or non-conformist women. These composite portrayals reinforce societal expectations and norms surrounding gender roles and appearances. To challenge and break free from these stereotypes, advertisers should promote diverse and inclusive representations of gender in advertising, featuring a broader range of physical appearances, roles, and personalities that defy traditional gender norms. (Kestam, 2018; Deaux and Lewis, 1984). In contrast to bring down gender stereotypes, non-stereotypical representations of gender in advertising should abstain from showcasing some features of them (kestam et al., 2017a). Non-stereotypical portrayals of gender in advertising, on the other hand, should avoid from presenting particular elements of them in order to subvert gender stereotypes (kestam et al., 2017a).

#### **Depiction of Women in Advertisements**

Post-globalisation, companies have used women's identities and bodies to compete, but these depictions are often negative and vulgar, violating women's self-respect and fundamental rights. While some positive changes have been made, the prevailing market focus on men as primary consumers can perpetuate the perception of women as undervalued commodities. To transform the depiction of women in television advertisement, it is important to educate children about gender equality and sensitivity at a young age. Collaboration among educated individuals, government bodies, and non-governmental organizations is vital to challenge and resist these harmful depictions. Ensuring equal education and opportunities for all children can

also contribute to dismantling gender stereotypes. Establishing a censor board for television, led by knowledgeable individuals, particularly women, can thoroughly assess the content of advertisements, scrutinizing images and claims to promote more respectful and empowering representations of women. Additionally, increasing women's involvement in advertising is necessary to maintain women's freedom in advertising. (Lal,2023)

In recent years, efforts have been made to present images of women in positions of authority and influence. They work to dispel and combat unfavourable stereotypes. However, closer inspection revealed that the majority of these allegedly rebellious and feminist pictures really contributed to legitimise the norm and form they were contesting. For instance, males who work in kitchens are portrayed as being ignorant and oddballs. Similar to this, women who have positions of authority and influence frequently face the danger of coming seen as 'unfeminine' or even absurd in the media. Sharda (2014), These representations support gender norms. An assertive, strong woman is typically viewed as an outlier who neglects her responsibilities to her family. (Parvin, 2014)

The depiction of women in Indian television commercials has evolved over time, reflecting changing societal norms and a growing emphasis on gender equality. While gender stereotypes have been prevalent in the past, there has been a shift towards more progressive and inclusive portrayals of women in recent years. Few key aspects of the depictions of women in Indian television commercials: Empowerment and independence, Breaking traditional roles, Professional success, Financial independence, Body positivity and diversity, Social issues and empowerment. While progress has been made, it's important to note that not all commercials in India reflect these positive portrayals. Some advertisements may still rely on outdated stereotypes or reinforce regressive notions. However, the overall trend indicates a move towards more progressive, inclusive, and empowering representations of women in Indian television commercials.

### **Depiction of Men in Advertisements**

According to Banerjee&Kakade, 2016, in the advertising, the stereotype of masculinity—that a woman would be ruled by men—is clearly shown. The majority of men's goods advertising portray winning or having a lady by your side as a triumph symbol. The ladies in the advertising are shown as being easily receptive to males, subservient, ornamental, attractive, and revealing.

Our patriarchal civilization is deeply based in masculinity. Without taking into consideration both the gender roles of men and women, no step towards fulfilling the developmental duties of society would be accomplished. Women's emancipation won't be a far-off dream if media, in particular. The content of films, commercials, and television shows that have a significant impact on society's members has been changed to reflect gender equality and sensitise the general public.

The manner of advertising has changed from television sets in the 2000s to internet portals in the present, as can be seen if we examine new era commercials.

In the worlds of today's television and films, men and women are often on an equal footing, albeit male characters are still frequently in the spotlight. Images of toned and conventionally attractive women and men are promoted by advertising and the wider world of stars as well as celebrities, that appears to show everybody that being in under pressure looks good. Although, women are also forced to wear makeup and are greatly exposed to greater anxiety about wanting to look thin. Overall, contemporary media portrays sexuality and gender identities in a more nuanced way than ever before. (Verma, n.d.)

The depiction of men has also undergone changes, reflecting evolving societal norms and a broader understanding of gender roles. Few key aspects of the depictions of men in Indian TV commercials are Emotional expression, Active parenting, Evolving masculinity, Equal partnerships, Career and aspirations, Body image and grooming. While these positive shifts are noticeable, it's important to acknowledge that some commercials may still reinforce traditional gender stereotypes or depict men in narrow roles. However, the overall trend suggests a move towards more diverse and nuanced depiction of men in Indian television commercials, reflecting a changing understanding of masculinity and the breaking of stereotypes.

I have selected five Commercials to represent the various gender representations. Each was chosen to serve as an illustration of how men and women are perceived by one another and by the other sex. All of the top Hindi networks have broadcast the selected ads in the past. I have decided to analyse these advertisements since they are pretty common and they allow for a deeper examination of the practises. The analysis portion of the advertisements is all my interpretation of how I perceived the context.

"Vim's Nazariya Badlo, Dekho Bartano Se Aage" is a tagline for an advertising campaign created by the advertising agency Lowe Lintas for Vim. The campaign's tagline translates to "Change your perspective, look beyond the dishes." The main message of this campaign is likely to encourage people to see household chores, specifically dishwashing, in a different light. It aims to break traditional gender stereotypes associated

with household responsibilities and promote the idea that everyone, regardless of gender, should be involved in household chores. By using the phrase "Dekho Bartano Se Aage" (look beyond the dishes), the ad campaign suggests that there's more to life and relationships than just performing household tasks.



This TVC co: **Image I: Vim's Nazariya Badlo, Dekho Bartano Se Aage** independent guy' attempts to flatter the lady by offering to 'help' her with kitchen chores like cooking, in spite of the presumed assumption that it is the supposed rool of wife's to cook and clean. The female promptly offers to 'help' him with those dishes, and she quietly urges the guy to be independent in some other household responsibilities because she might be late for work. The premise of this campaign, "Nazariya Badlo, Dekho Bartano Se Aage," is steered by the boy's first surprise visit to home and resulting paradigm shift in the perspective. Adding to just being "more than her chores," the child in that advertisement is an agent to drive change who can advocate for more equitable cooperation.

"Saffola's Rakhna Heart ka Khayal" is a tagline for an advertising campaign created by the advertising agency Mullen Lintas for Saffola, a popular brand that offers a range of health and cooking oils in India. The campaign's tagline translates to "Take care of your heart."

The Saffola's film reversed gender roles and portrayed new generation relationship where husband takes care for his wife, Distant from the usual depiction of the stereotypical role of a woman caring of her husband and the family's health. In the advertisement, the husband is shown to be worried about her wife's heart from stress she goes through work. He fails to relief her from the anxiety, despite his recurring efforts to keep her heart healthy. The Saffola and Mullen Lintas shatter the stereotypical supposed gender role in FMCG advertising that we're done with watching.



**Image II: Saffola's Rakhna Heart ka Khaval**

"**Kuch Khaas Hai**" is a famous tagline for an advertising campaign created by the advertising agency Ogilvy India for Cadbury, the well-known chocolate brand. The tagline translates to "There is something special."

Is anyone unaware of Cadbury's reimagining of the Kuch Khaas Hai commercial? A discussion about gender equality and nostalgia was sparked by this Ogilvy India campaign. The commercial flipped gender roles and normalised men's expression of emotion and support for their female relationships.



*Image III: Cadbury's Kuch Khaas Hai*

"**Dove India's #StopTheBeautyTest**" is a social awareness campaign created by the advertising agency Ogilvy for Dove, a well-known personal care brand. The campaign aims to challenge societal beauty standards and promote self-acceptance and body positivity.

The #StopTheBeautyTest campaign is part of Dove's broader global campaign to address body image issues and the unrealistic beauty standards imposed on women. The campaign encourages individuals to reject beauty tests or judgments based on appearance and instead focus on accepting and celebrating their natural beauty.

The StopTheBeautyTest film by Dove takes us through the disturbing experiences women go through during the whole process of dating and the effects it can have on their self-esteem



*Image IV: Dove India's StopTheBeautyTest*

**The Mirror** is a powerful advertising campaign created by the advertising agency FCB India for UNAIDS, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS. The campaign aims to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS and combat the stigma associated with the disease.

In the film "The Mirror," a little boy refuses to play with other children at an Indian kite festival. His mother rebukes him, and then he goes downstairs alone. He takes a look in the bathroom mirror and smiles at himself after wrapping himself around in a woman's scarf. Later, his mother and grandmother notices him dancing while dressed with it. The women stop the music to look at the young man. The women abruptly follow him after an instant of anxiety.

This commercial from FCB India and UNAIDS demonstrated on gender diversity being a fundamental human right rather than a lifestyle choice. Gender stereotypes cause prejudice and stigma, particularly for LGBTIQ+ people. This is particularly obvious in children and teenagers because society places enormous pressure on them to conform to gender standards that are ascribed to them at birth and because variation among them is not widely appreciated.



*Image V: UNAIDS The Mirror*

A fascinating area of research is gender representation in television advertisements. The advertisements are well-created collections of visuals that frequently aim to connect the product with pleasurable emotions that arise from deep-seated dreams and worries. In order to sell items, advertisers are perfectly happy to twist these imaginations and prey on our fears, particularly those relating to our gender identities. Critics claim that because gender stereotyping is still prevalent in advertising, it does not accurately represent many civilizations. Pessimistic and optimistic general inferences might be drawn, respectively. Pessimistic research emphasises that women are still stereotyped negatively and that these stereotypes are getting worse.

Studies that are more upbeat believe that women are surpassing males in many areas and overcoming harmful stereotypes. They contend that commercial role models are more often modern women and are edging closer to parity with men.

Every level of analysis, including family, peer groups, schools, and other social institutions, sends information to an individual. Transformation must take place at all levels if gender roles are to be abolished and norms outside of the restrictive boxes of masculinity and femininity are to be accepted. Therefore, advertisements need to be more mindful when they transmit their ideas and offer to challenge established gender stereotypes and images rather than perpetuating them.

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