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Redefining Indian Women in Indian Television Ads: a critical analysis

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Abstract

Television advertisements or commercials (TVCs) have gained immense popularity & business significance over the years and played a crucial role in shaping societal perceptions on multiple aspects of human life and human in particular. Advertisements are tools of strategic communication and appeal to a specific group or target audience. Portrayal of specific gender in specific product domains in advertising is often decided keeping in consideration the product type and the target audience, eventually leading to societal biases and gender stereotypes.

However recent gender representational perspectives in some specific areas tend to rethink gender depiction in advertising. Depiction of women in Indian Television advertisements has evolved over time exhibiting a slow but steady change in societal norms on sexuality and growing awareness on gender equity. Indian Television advertisements or commercials are transmitting a new and broader range of gender identities, expressions & thoughts and perspectives instead of sticking to conventional gender norms and notions.

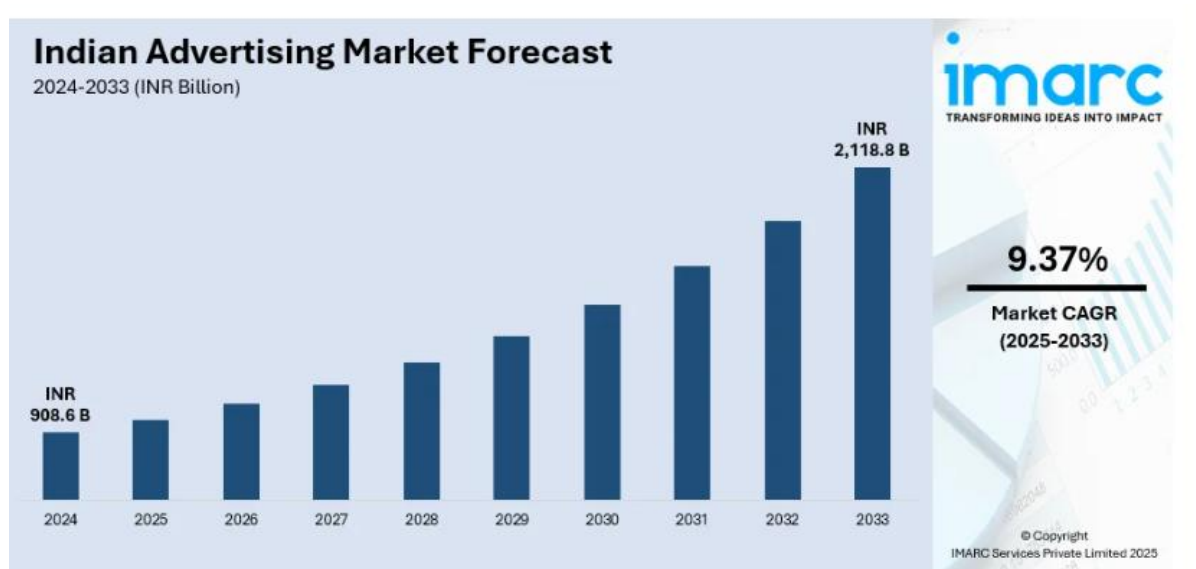
This study analyses gender representation in Indian TVCs and examines the change (if any) in the nature of portrayal of sexuality, gender ratio in lead characters and gender depiction in specific product domains in the last two decades. Product domains have been selected and closely studied, analysed and inferred to arrive at a perspective. The work employs a systematic evaluation of a category of chosen advertisements and the literature as well to present descriptive qualitative research results.

Keywords: #Genderdepiction #stereotyping #IndianTVCommercials #biasesandnorms.

Introduction

With the rise of digital media and increasing population, the Indian advertising industry has experienced tremendous growth in the last decade acquiring heightened economic importance and an emerging tool to encash a wide network of lucrative business domains and consumers. In the last two decades, the Indian advertising industry reported sustained growth. As per the FICCI-KPMG (2012, 2014) reports, there has been an increase in advertisement spends by marketers. As per the IMARC reports, “the Indian advertising market size reached INR 908.6 Billion in 2024. The market is expected to reach INR 2,118.8 Billion by 2033, exhibiting a growth rate (CAGR) of 9.37% during 2025-2033. The market growth is attributed to the growing adoption of advertising to enhance brand awareness, increasing number of media and

entertainment models, and rising demand for digital advertising solutions”.(IMARC, Report ID: SR112025A546)



Source: IMARC, **Report ID: SR112025A546**

The increasing investment predictions in the advertisement sector clearly indicates a wide acceptance and prevalence of advertisements as an important mechanism of marketing tactic, strategic and social communication tool to suffuse not only a desire for a promoted lifestyle but a societal norm to a target audience in particular. In the process of promotion and persuasion, advertisements become an invisible instrument to convey societal norms, culture, expressions and thoughts, stratification of gender behaviour and gender roles transmitting perceptions of masculinity and femininity leading to the idea of development of femvertising (Varghese and Kumar, 2022). Gender stereotyping is the most common tactic employed by advertisers to achieve the purpose of persuasion and promotion successfully and establishing a brand recognition and connect as “a lack of identification with the roles portrayed may reduce the attention, credibility, retention and subsequent recall of any advertisement” (Pollay & Lysonski, 1993).

Methodology

The study aims to identify the gender representations techniques and strategies employed in TVCs or Ads in India between 2010 and 2025 and its impact and intention of gender stereotyping in particular. The study applies the narrative interpretative analysis method as a research approach with an exhaustive literature review and this work employs a systematic evaluation of the literature to present descriptive qualitative research results.

A qualitative analysis on a few chosen parameters, namely portrayal of sexuality, gender ratio in lead characters and gender depiction in specific product domain of selected television advertisements during 2010-2025, exhibits a clear difference and distinction between gender representation with males and females playing ideals as per societal perception on gender roles in the Indian society. This study was conducted in 2024-2025, a time when many of the popular Ads of the last two decades were not available

on Television channels anymore. Consequently, YouTube has been chosen as the medium to collect the required Ads as a sample for the study. A combined and systematic analysis and evaluation of these Ads in respect to portrayal of sexuality, gender ratio in lead characters and gender depiction in specific product domain. The time frame of the Study is kept 15 years in order to do a qualitative study on the nature of transformation taking place in building perceptions and thoughts in consumer choice amid massive technological improvements and colossal shifts in digital communication processes in the recent period.

Gender portrayal in Indian Ads

Indian Television commercials or advertisements are carefully wrapped packages with an intriguing intent and motivation which facilitates the use of gender stereotyping, a sure shot tactic to achieve the purpose. Advertisements or commercials “verbalize...the possible meanings of things and to facilitate the exchange of meanings occurring in social interactions” (Leiss, Kline, and Jhalley, 1986). Previous Studies on Gender Stereotyping in Indian commercials indicate the prevalence of gender differences in various forms and aspects. Munshi (1998) in his studies observes that the Indian women of the 1990s were mostly depicted as modern housewives or “new avatars of homemakers” representing empowered women continues to be very stereotypical as the representation of women has just been tinkered with but not the structural or substantial concept. Das (2000) examines the portrayal of women in Indian commercials dominated in the beauty industry, home décor with a little change in traditional roles, men continued to be portrayed in automotive, financial sectors and electronic gadgets. Gupta & Jain (1998) finds Indian Television commercials playing significant roles in thrusting the conventional and stereotypical representation of women, promoting the subordination to men. One of the most detailed studies on gender portrayals in Indian television advertisements-Dang & Vohra (2005) conforms to the above ideas and studies, observes product based gender portrayal dominance with women endorsing mainly household, kitchenware and beauty products and showcasing educated smart homemakers. Das (2010) further examines the rate of appearance and prevalence of gender dominance in specific product categories and domains, concluding that male characters dominate the lead characters and voice overs in Indian television commercials with female characters stereotyping youth and beauty. Product categories in the domains of banking and technology, development and transportation have been heavily dominated by men and shows remarkable differences in the representation of women in these domains with unanimous acceptance of women as “home and child care taste sweeter to women while business and profession taste sweeter to men”(Sivakumar & Manimekalai,2021). Men in India are psychologically conditioned in imbibing the qualities of management and leadership skills characterized by competitiveness, aggression, and risk-taking behaviours (Sivakumar & Manimekalai, 2021). According to the UNICEF study (2021), women in Indian television commercials are portrayed in specific product domains and even though enjoying equal screen presence and more speaking time are still highly stereotyped representing the conventional gender roles of caregivers of family occupying more of private than public space.

Banerjee & Kakade, (2016) observes in their study that stereotyping is widely prevalent in Indian advertising with definite emphasis on Masculinity - a woman is clearly depicted as ruled and governed by men. A good majority of product category advertising belonging to male domain portrays protecting a lady from eve teasers, or having a lady by one’s side as a chivalrous act of heroism and symbol of triumph instead of addressing the issues of women harassment. While the female counterpart in these advertisements are portrayed as physically attractive but ornamental and easily receptive to male supremacy.

The UNICEF study (2021), on “Gender bias and inclusion in Indian advertising” observes the portrayal of men and women in the following aspects:

Gender Prominence, Sexuality and Activities

Gender Prominence

As per the report “female characters are just as likely to appear in ads as male characters (49.6% compared with 50.4%) and that the female characters dominate screen time (59.7%) and speaking time (56.3%) in Indian ads. There are more young boys (ages 1 – 12) than girls in ads (20.5% compared with 13.1%). Female characters are more likely to be depicted in their 20s than male characters (38.2% compared with 26.7%), and older characters are male”.

Sexuality

The UNICEF report, 2021 also studies the element of sexuality in Indian advertising. “Six-in-ten characters have light skin tones (59.6%), and few characters have dark skin tones (4.0%). A majority of characters with dark skin are presented as lower-class (56.5%) while two-thirds of characters with light skin are shown as upper-class (65.7%). Colourism is evident in Indian ads. Two-thirds of female characters (66.9%) have light or medium-light skin tones—a far higher percentage than male characters (52.1%). Male characters are five times more likely to have a dark skin tone than female characters (6.5% compared with 1.3%). Female characters are four times more likely to have a small body type than male characters (41.8% compared with 9.4%)”.

Moreover, “female characters are nine times more likely to be shown as ‘stunning’/‘very attractive’ than male characters (5.9% compared with 0.6%). Female characters are twice as likely to be shown as ‘better than average’ looking than male characters (33.6% compared with 16.8%)”.

Activities

Female characters are more likely to be shown doing the following activities than male characters:

- Shopping (4.1% compared with 2.3%).
- Cleaning (4.8% compared with 2.2%).
- Being involved in the purchase or preparation of meals (5.4% compared with 3.9%)

Representation of Women in recent Indian Ads

The world of advertising post-globalisation, have included women characters as much as male characters for persuading the target audience with a heightened use of women's identities and bodies to compete but these depictions have often been done at the cost of violating women's self-respect and dignity. Though changes are noticeable in the portrayal of women amidst gradual transformation in societal perceptions and gender awareness, the conventional advertising strategy still focuses on men as the primary target audience in specific product domains such as banking, finance, technology and development. However, very recent studies, and analysis of Indian Ads of the last decade in particular show a slow but steady shift

in the portrayal of women in Indian television commercials breaking stereotypes and emerging as powerful leads. Some Indian commercials have come up with more gender balanced advertisements, setting new norms and challenging deep rooted gender stereotyping tendencies. Havel's "hawa badlegi" depicting women's identity with her maiden surname at marriage registrar's office and Ariel's "share the load" advertisements depicting men's involvement in active household activities.

Some brands have addressed the issues of colourism particularly in the use of skin whitening products and creams. The *#Stop the Beauty Test* film by Dove India, a reputed personal care brand is an awareness advertisement created for addressing issues pertaining to body shaming, body image and absurd beauty standards and promote self-acceptance and body positivity. The advertisement is a deep introspection of the psychological disturbances women go through because of the societal perception of beauty standards thrust upon, and challenges the existing norms and notions of beauty.

Another notable advertisement is Vim's tagline "*Nazariya Badlo, Dekho Bartano se Aage*", and "*Equal vows*" are awareness advertisements focused on changing perception on household activities and breaking stereotypes associated with misogyny related to household activities in Indian societies especially. Ariel's *#Share the Load*, award winning campaigns since 2015 addressed unequal expectations thrust upon from men and women and urges the audience to introspect and break unequal norms and gender biased perceptions.

Saffola's "*Rakhna Heart ka Khayal*" is a tagline from the Saffola's advertisement that broke age old gender stereotype by reversing gender roles where the husband is shown showing concern and taking care of his office going wife who works in a high pressure post and needs to ease herself from stress for better health.

These advertisements have broken stereotypes, set new narratives and pioneered women as an empowered gender, have taken the cause of gender role reversals as per the changes in societal perception, massive technological advancements and growing awareness on gender equality. Another category of progressive advertisements have raised concerns over body image, skin colour and superficial aspects of beauty, personality and self-esteem.

Representation of Brands by Women in recent Indian Ads

Advertisement contents have witnessed huge transformation and colossal shifts in the recent time especially with the rise of digital platforms and growing gender equality awareness, the focus of advertisement content is witnessing a transition from women objectification to gender equality societal perceptions and the beginning of the notions of gender de-stereotyping. Money (1977), Rao (2013) connotes the concept of gender de-stereotyping as deconstructing the gender stereotypes; the stereotyped portrayal of men and women associated with men's and women's description. This change in outlook is fuelled by the rise of digital platforms, the existing patterns and notions on gender roles are being swayed away by the emerging undismayed, individualistic and empowered feminine gender. The *Axis Bank (2017-2018)*; "*# Experience Axis*" advertisement by *Deepika Padukone* without any male lead ruled the top charts, an eye opener towards the fact that the feminine gender is not just emerging out as representation of empowered gender in recent television commercials but are actually empowered to boost big brands and product sectors tagged for masculine gender hitherto. *Kiara Advani* endorsing *AU Small Finance Bank* not only showcases the shift in societal perception and consumer acceptability in the role of feminine gender in financial decision making but emphasises the fact that women endorsers are breaking into the

boundaries of product domains tagged generally for masculine gender. Featuring Priety Zinta as a lead in the *Drive Fit* Commercial echoes the notion of gender de-stereotyping in the recent Indian commercials.

The *Hilton Hotels* advertisement by Deepika Padukone, the reel which broke the internet with 1.9 billion views is not just a testimony to the fact of breaking gender stereotypes but the beginning of the acceptability of the notions of gender de-stereotyping in Indian advertisements and television commercials. The stereotypical television commercials perpetuating limiting perceptions are being broken slowly but steadily exhibiting an ideology or a growing mind-set towards a more gender neutral society in the aspects of tradition, culture, ethnicity and occupation.

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