

**EMPOWERMENT VS. OBJECTIFICATION: AN IN-DEPTH
ANALYSIS OF THE PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN INDIAN
ADVERTISEMENTS**

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Abstract:

This paper delves into the depiction of gender roles in Indian advertisements, with a focus on the transition from traditional stereotypes to more inclusive and empowering representations. Drawing on multidisciplinary research in visual culture, gender studies, and advertising, this analysis explores the intricate interplay of societal norms, cultural influences, and global trends that shape gender portrayals in advertising. Through a critical analysis of visual imagery, color palettes, and thematic tropes, the study identifies recurring patterns and shifts in gender portrayals over time. While early advertisements often reinforced traditional gender roles, recent years have seen a gradual shift towards more progressive and diverse representations, challenging stereotypes and promoting gender equality. This paper aims to explore how specific visual elements contribute to the construction of gendered meanings in Indian advertisements and the implications of these representations for women's empowerment and societal attitudes towards gender roles.

Key Words: Visual culture, gender representation, Indian advertisements, empowerment, objectification, gender stereotypes, intersectionality.

Research question: How has the portrayal of gender roles in Indian advertisements evolved over time, and what factors have influenced this evolution, from traditional stereotypes to more inclusive and empowering representations?

INTRODUCTION

In modern society, visual culture plays a significant role in shaping our perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors. Visual images, from advertising to social media, influence how we understand ourselves, others, and the world around us. W.J.T. Mitchell's

concept of the "pictorial turn" (Mitchell, 1994, p. 16) emphasizes the importance of images and visual representation in contemporary culture. Visual culture includes not only the images themselves but also how they are produced, distributed, and interpreted within diverse social and cultural contexts, as explained by John Berger in his book *Ways Of Seeing*. It is a powerful tool for communicating ideas, values, and ideologies.

Within visual culture, advertising is a crucial site for gender representation and negotiation. Indian advertisements have played a significant role in constructing and perpetuating gender norms through their use of visual imagery. India has one of the largest advertising industries globally, with annual expenditures reaching billions of dollars. According to Statista, the advertising expenditure in India was estimated to be over 600 billion Indian rupees (approximately 8.2 billion USD) in 2021. Additionally, Bollywood, India's prolific film industry, significantly influences the visual language and aesthetics of Indian advertisements. The portrayal of gender roles in Bollywood films often mirrors or reinforces societal norms, which are then reflected in advertising campaigns.

With the rise of digital media and social networking platforms, advertising in India has undergone a significant transformation. Digital advertisements now reach a vast and diverse audience, presenting both opportunities and challenges for gender representation. These advertisements

often reinforce stereotypical notions of femininity and masculinity, influencing societal perceptions of gender roles, relationships, and identities. The advancement of modern technology has led to the proliferation of false images created through tools like Photoshop and filters, particularly in portraying women at unrealistic standards such as in the ad for MTR masala. In the later part of the twentieth century, television became a dominant force in households, capturing the attention of homemakers who were drawn to advertisements promoting beauty products promising idealized appearances for the sake of male approval (Pond's ad).

India, despite its reverence for female deities, grapples with high rates of sexual abuse and violence against women. In Indian advertisements, women have often been depicted devoid of self-identity, portrayed in a stereotypical and sexually objectified manner such as in this billboard. Katrina Kaif's advertisement for Slice drink is a typical example for how ridiculous these ways have become. These portrayals perpetuate the notion of women as objects of desire, reinforcing moral oppression and ethical dilemmas. Rather than emphasizing women's achievements, their self-confidence is often tied to physical attributes (Thrill drink ad). Women are portrayed as sexually submissive to their husbands, fulfilling duties as mothers, and exhibiting tolerance toward their in-laws, prioritizing marital and household stability over social advancement and economic empowerment

(Rin bar ad).

These issues are relevant to feminists, who have been grappling with the objectification of women since the time of Mary Wollstonecraft. As noted by John Berger, women in culture are often meant "to be looked at": "Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed is female. Thus she turns herself into an object of vision: a sight." (Berger, 1972, p. 47)

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars from various disciplines have extensively analyzed the ways visual representations in advertisements either reinforce or challenge gender norms and power dynamics. For instance, studies by Belkaoui & Belkaoui (1976) and Sullivan & O'Connor (1988) in the UK found that women are often depicted in stereotypical roles, such as homemakers or sex objects. Similar trends have been observed in other countries, including Japan, Korea, and Hong Kong (Ford et al., 1998; Cutler et al., 1995; Sengupta, 1992).

These studies underscore the influence of cultural context on gender portrayals in advertising. For example, Cutler et al. (1995) noted that advertisers in Asia display less sensitivity to gender-role stereotyping compared to their Western

counterparts. Consequently, women are frequently featured in advertisements for products associated with traditional female roles, such as household and cosmetic items. Mitchell and Taylor (1989) further elaborate on how the portrayal of women varies depending on the product category, with more stereotypical depictions in entertainment and clothing advertisements, but less so in tobacco, travel, and financial services ads.

Leigh et al. (1987) explored how these portrayals impact advertising effectiveness, discovering that women's cognitive responses are shaped by their attitudes toward the advertisements, role models, brands, and purchasing behavior. Munshi (1998) similarly analyzed Indian advertising, noting that while representations of women have varied, they have not fundamentally changed in structure or substance.

Das (2000) suggests that the persistence of gender-role stereotypes in advertisements for female-oriented products is closely linked to traditional portrayals of women. However, the increasing participation of women in the workforce has led to a gradual shift in their representation, particularly in advertisements for products traditionally marketed to men, such as automobiles and financial services.

Acevedo et al. (2006) conducted a content analysis of Brazilian commercials, identifying three main portrayals of women: stereotyped, idealized, and plural. Amir (2007) offered a cross-cultural comparison of sexual content in

advertisements, revealing that American and Israeli ads often depict explicit or non-normative sexual behavior.

More recent studies have observed a shift in the portrayal of women in Indian advertisements. Moorthi, Roy, and Pansari (2014) noted that while women were traditionally depicted in stereotypical roles, there has been a noticeable change over time, particularly in advertisements for traditionally male-dominated products. These findings align with Munshi's (2000) earlier observations of subtle changes in women's portrayals.

Kumari and Shivani (2015) found that women in Indian magazine and television advertisements are still often depicted as housewives, especially in advertisements for household products. Nath (2016) examined the effectiveness of sex appeal in brand recall, noting that while it can attract attention, it may also have negative effects if not used carefully.

Fatma (2016) observed that despite some changes, women's roles in advertisements remain confined within a male-dominated ideology. Pavani et al. (2017) highlighted the impact of stereotypical representations on adolescent girls' purchasing behavior, while Kumar (2017) and Das and Sharma (2017) both explored the negative effects of overt sexuality and objectification in advertising.

Soni (2020) examined the societal impact of advertisements, noting that women often feel pressured to conform to physical stereotypes, which can harm their

confidence and self-esteem. Sharma and Bumb (2021) further explored how gender portrayal in advertisements influences consumer behavior, particularly noting differences between Indian men and women.

Finally, Eisend (2022) reviewed the representation of older people in advertising, emphasizing the importance of factors like similarity, credibility, and authenticity to optimize advertising effects and minimize negative social consequences.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Visual culture possesses a significant agency in shaping and challenging dominant narratives of femininity in Indian society. Through strategic visual interventions, advertisers can challenge stereotypes, disrupt power dynamics, and promote more inclusive representations of women. However, visual culture also reflects and perpetuates existing social hierarchies and inequalities. Visual elements such as imagery, color, and composition are crucial in constructing gendered meanings in advertisements. Imagery, including representations of bodies, facial expressions, and gestures, communicates specific messages about femininity and masculinity (Cinthol ad). Color palettes and visual aesthetics can evoke gendered associations and reinforce stereotypes. Composition, including framing and camera angles, can emphasize power dynamics and hierarchical relationships

between genders. The semiotic analysis examines how signs and symbols within advertisements convey meaning, while gender studies provide insights into the social construction of gender and how it intersects with other axes of identity as shown in this advertisement for deodorant. Through this interdisciplinary lens, scholars have uncovered the complexities of how visual imagery contributes to the reproduction and contestation of gender ideologies in advertising. By examining these visual elements, one can identify recurring themes and patterns that shape gendered meanings.

This analysis revealed a spectrum of visual cues and tropes associated with both empowerment and objectification of women in Indian advertisements. Empowering representations often feature women in confident poses, engaged in active roles, and exuding agency and autonomy. Conversely, objectifying portrayals tend to depict women in passive poses, objectified through sexualized imagery, and reduced to mere objects of desire (Gold Spot ad). Previously, women were primarily used in advertisements to attract attention through their beauty and charm. Household-related tasks such as laundry and sewing were exclusively associated with the female population. Advertisers capitalized on emotional aspects such as marriage (Palai Central Bank ad) and encouraged daughters to become ideal housewives, thereby reinforcing the gender norms. The Usha ad from the 1980s promotes the idea of

training girls to be the "ideal housewife," indirectly urging parents or guardians to use the product for this purpose. This approach reinforces traditional gender roles and imposes unrealistic standards on women. Despite airing in a patriarchal era, such ads contributed to harmful gender norms that persist today.

Color schemes also have a subtle impact on the impression of any product or service. For instance, using soft pastel colors and delicate framing may reinforce traditional notions of femininity as shown in advertisements for Lux body soaps featuring famous actresses with fair complexions. Meanwhile, bold colors and dynamic compositions may challenge gender norms and assert women's agency like in the advertisements for Stayfree sanitary napkins. Furthermore, we often observe the perpetuation of the male gaze, where common sexist tropes prevail. Women are frequently depicted in revealing attire, positioned around a dominant male figure, reinforcing his alpha status. These portrayals suggest an inherent gender dynamic where women are portrayed as submissive, seemingly drawn to macho male characters, and depicted as throwing themselves at them. Open sexism is often evident in advertisements, where there is a tolerance towards stereotypical male behavior. This is frequently accompanied by taglines such as "men will be men", which reinforce and excuse behaviors that perpetuate gender stereotypes.

Furthermore, advertisements frequently feature cars, motorbikes, male

undergarments, and perfumes alongside a female figure positioned nearby, insinuating that these products will garner increased female attention, thereby implying associations with physical relationships. In this advertisement, the tagline "Don't hold back, Take your work home" conveys a sense of authority over women in the workplace. Ranveer Singh is criticized for being "sexist," as his portrayal seems to glorify sexual harassment in the workplace. The clothing advertisement with the tagline "Take your work home" perpetuates the idea of power over women. It creates a misleading impression that women would readily succumb to men who wear branded clothes. Similarly, the portrayal of women holding a baby in diaper advertisements often employs emotional persuasion, depicting women as the primary caregivers responsible for raising children due to their motherly duties. This portrayal can inadvertently create a negative impression of working mothers, suggesting they may not prioritize their children's needs as much as stay-at-home mothers.

This analysis also considers the intersectionality of visual representations, recognizing that gender intersects with other axes of identity such as race, class, and age. Advertisements like this (Lux soap) targeting different demographic groups may perpetuate racism by employing distinct visual strategies such as complexion, age factors (Pears ad), etc, to appeal to specific audiences, thereby reinforcing or challenging intersecting

power dynamics and setting trends for others to follow such as being a "Santoor-Mom".

However, there has been a contemporary shift from sexual objectification towards empowerment, with beauty being replaced by notions of bravery and independence in the recent decade. This change is driven by modern women's focus on empowerment rather than their physical appearance. The fight for gender equality is gaining momentum across various fields, including the media, with many feminists, women, and social activists speaking out against the sexual objectification of women in media and advertising. Women have begun to critically analyze and condemn the indecency and vulgarity directed toward their gender (Dove campaign).

Patriarchal media and the advertising industry have begun to rethink their approach, realizing that beauty and marital stability are no longer effective marketing strategies. There has been a shift from a male chauvinistic attitude towards viewing women as equals if not superior, and consumer-centric marketing tactics are gradually moving away from the objectification of women. The image of women has evolved from that of glamorous dolls to that of self-assured individuals on equal footing with men. An instance from the recent past is the Fair & Lovely beauty cream, which underwent a name change to Glow & Lovely following criticism and accusations of perpetuating racism in India.

Various advertisements illustrate this shift

towards empowerment. For instance, in a Ford Motor Company ad featuring the Ford EcoSport, actress Kalki asserts her independence without relying on a brother for protection. Similarly, an Airtel-Boss advertisement showcases a woman excelling as a multi-talented boss in the office and a loving wife at home, challenging traditional gender stereotypes. Moreover, recent advertisements have challenged gender stereotypes by depicting husbands participating in household chores, such as in the Ariel detergent ad advocating for sharing the load of laundry.

The role of men in advertisements has also evolved to emphasize shared responsibilities within the family. Ads such as Prestige Kitchen Appliances and Titan-Raga depict men actively participating in household duties and supporting their wives' independence and career aspirations. These advertisements reflect a societal shift towards gender equality and shared responsibilities within relationships. Nevertheless, certain advertisements in the present day persist in perpetuating the objectification of women, as exemplified by the Slice drink advertisement featuring Kiara Advani.

DISCUSSION

In early advertising, there was often a reinforcement of traditional gender roles, with women depicted in domestic settings and men portrayed as breadwinners or authority figures. These ads tended to reflect societal norms and expectations

of gender behavior prevalent at the time. Women in Indian advertising have often been depicted as caregivers, homemakers, or objects of desire, reflecting entrenched gender stereotypes: she prepared Maggi for her children when they were hungry and offered them Rasna when they were thirsty. She was also the one who entered the room with a tray of cold drinks when guests visited and prepared excellent food using the flour of a certain brand. This image depicted an Indian woman wearing a saree and a bindi.

However, there have been shifts, with more diverse representations emerging, showcasing women in professional roles and challenging traditional gender norms. The opening of the Indian economy in the 1980s led to changes in advertising practices. With increased globalization and exposure to Western advertising norms, there was a gradual shift towards more progressive portrayals of gender roles in advertisements. The growth of alliances with multinational advertising agencies brought in new perspectives and approaches to advertising. This influence may have contributed to the diversification of gender representations in Indian ads, aligning them more closely with global trends.

Finally, it is essential to consider the ethical implications of visual analysis and the responsibility of advertisers in creating inclusive representations. Visual analysis should be conducted with sensitivity and respect for the subjects depicted, avoiding reductive or essentialist interpretations.

Advertisers have a moral obligation to uphold ethical standards and prioritize the well-being and dignity of their audience, especially marginalized communities. By adhering to ethical principles, advertisers can contribute to a more equitable and inclusive media landscape.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study has offered a comprehensive analysis of gender role portrayal in Indian advertisements, charting the transition from traditional stereotypes to more inclusive and empowering representations. Through interdisciplinary scrutiny, the complex interplay of societal norms, cultural

influences, and global trends shaping gender depictions in advertising has been elucidated. The findings underscore significant transformations, with recent advertisements challenging stereotypes and advocating for gender equality through diverse and progressive portrayals. As advertisers continue to embrace diversity and inclusivity, there exists considerable potential to leverage visual storytelling to create a more equitable and empowering environment for individuals of all genders. By critically examining visual culture and advocating for ethical standards in advertising, a more inclusive media landscape can be fostered, one that celebrates the diversity and complexity of human experiences.

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