

QUALITATIVE PROJECT

GENDER REPRESENTATION IN INDIAN ADVERTISING MEDIA

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study looks into the media portrayal of gender roles to understand how the concept of how gender is socially constructed through the representation shown in the advertisements. I will look at changes in role representation portrayed throughout the years. Indian stereotypical advertisements of past decades will be analysed and compared to the present-day advertisements to review if and how the gender role representation has changed.

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## INTRODUCTION :

'Gender' is one of the most studied social areas as it is the main focus of what people use in determining how to act and interact with people. For this reason, it is important to look at the ways in which individuals receive messages about gender norms. Apparently advertisements are designed with the purpose of selling specific products but it does not limit to the product as they also sell a specific idea of what should be 'appropriate', it is undeniable that the characters portrayed in advertisements behave in ways that appear to be normal and make sense to viewers. The advertisements of major beauty brands dominant in India such as Dove, Veet, Fair and lovely, Garnier will be analysed. The forum will be on television and social media. Gupta. S , (2017)

It has been said that advertisements can affect the way people think about their own gender, and thus contribute to the ongoing social norms of gender in our society. Therefore, from sociological view, the research about commercials (in any forms or approach) affecting the gender perception of people is extremely relevant. The focus is on the way women, and more recently men, are represented in advertisements designed to encourage consumers to purchase the product and the idea being promoted. In the past there has been a concern of restricting the image of women in advertisements of that of sex-objects , house wife limiting the aspirations of women or the 'supporting' role by presenting them with a limited role with which to identify. More recently concern over the representation of women has been joined by concern over the representation of men as well. As concluded by S. Kumari and S. Shivani (2015) , With the changing norms , the brands are taking new approaches with advertising their products, some in an inclusive light but often many of them fail to grasp the concept resulting in a more biased representation. The study will analyse the brands in beauty industry which are dominantly female focused, although are increasingly targeting the male centric products as well. For ages a certain idea was being propagated on what is considered as acceptable in the given society and culture. The advertisements play a major role , which is now not only limited to television but a huge part is being played over social media as well. With changing times of the social media presence , the advertisement industry has a larger platform and a more engaged audience.

The beauty industry plays a major role in influencing the society, earlier being female focused now has included men as their target audience as well. The industry feeds off people's insecurities by creating them in the first place and then 'coming to their rescue' . this pattern can be observed all along the advertisements such as for example, Olay's total effect skin cream endorses anti-aging effects as ageing in the first place is termed as a bad sign for women, to have smooth wrinkle free skin is a 'must have' for women .

According to de Mooij (1998) considering that advertisements in society reflect “the way people think, what moves them, how they relate to each other, how they live eat, relax, and enjoy themselves” , it is likely that a society’s stage of gender development and equality relate to its advertising content. Although it should not be considered that gender-role portrayals in advertisements are directly influenced by gender equality in each country. As different cultures and societies have different norms and expected behaviours . As per Richa Verma (2017) quoted “*Charvez in this context contends that this inquiry is important because if media predominantly favour one gender over other, that gender inequality could be detrimental to both genders because it limits the socially accepted roles of both men and women depicted*”. “Further, she elaborates on Pingree ; explains that without a full palette of roles and role models, children may learn only limited gendered identities from the media.” Furthermore, the concept of limited gender roles may only serve to reinforce stereotypes in a society and impact how people view themselves and others “*a round-up by the **Economic Times**, the top ads of 2016 show that not much has changed. What is marketed to men and women (and how) still shows up the gender binary for what it is – rigid.*” However, the ads still focus on cis gendered people and identities inside the gendered binary. This is problematic as there is very less recognition of trans and non-binary people . although it is soon on a rise with subtle hints of inclusivity , the cis-binary representation still dominates the advertisements of the big beauty brands.

Advertisements are have become an inevitable part of our lives, online and offline . There is no way around the them as they are a part of our everyday life. This makes it a vital approach of influencing and reinforcing the ideas. The portrayal of traditional gender role associated is slowly taking a progressive turn as compared to the same brand’s advertisement a decade ago. Even though people are being more conscious of the gender bias , the stereotypes are deep rooted and reinforced strong enough in the Indian audience that an extreme deviation from the expected norms will not be received well ,rather a more subtle and indirect approach should be executed.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Indian society has undergone a variety of changes as far as gender representation in the society is concerned. Changes in the value system of a society, its norms and most importantly the opportunity to acquire education have brought up a remarkable change in how gender roles are viewed in Indian society. Although, despite of the progress in the positioning of gender roles in Indian society, advertisers in India still encash on the traditional homemaker role of women and toxic masculinity with almost little to no representation of the LGBTQ+ people.

### TRADITIONAL ROLE REPRESENTATION IN ADVERTISEMENTS

Grau and Zotos (2016) in their study examine the historical context of gender stereotypes, to get an understanding of how they emerged traditionally and set the current scenario of the changing re structure and labour force in the last five years. feminism in the 1960's challenged men and women's concept of equal opportunities in the work and domestic realm

Kumari.S and Shivani. S study how the contemporary Indian women are perceived, they conclude , the portrayal of women has significantly progressed from sexist representations to 'less sexist' ones . This eventually starts reflecting in the advertisements and give rise to a subtle and slow progression of gender roles in media. Even though there was a good amount of sexism towards both the genders( more towards women) , there was a dramatic uprising towards the representation through media. The advertisements of the times reflected the current state of the society and it was constructed according to the acceptable norms of the given culture. The advertisements would not profit portraying a drastic gender portrayal and it would not be well accepted by the audience. Hence their interest lies in catering and being 'liked' by their viewers more than representation of any social issue. Zotos and Grau (2016) examined the recent research since 2010 and *"He found that some stereotyping still persists particularly for women. Occupational status still showed the highest degree of stereotyping, despite the education, occupation and status changes earned by women over the past several years."*

According to them, even though it still pertains, it is less serious than it seems to be. With people becoming increasingly aware and educated, there is lesser blind acceptance of gender stereotypes. Not to say it has completely vanished, but there is a promising subtle progress with the brands becoming (or just showing) to be more aware. This says that not only the perception of advertisements influences the people and society, but the society and people too are able to influence the portrayal of gender representation in advertisements.

Although whatever change is shown in their portrayal is limited to more to their modernized looks and not very less of their role in society. At the same time men still dominate in almost all the traditionally stereotypical categories. Advertisers and companies use traditional ways of portraying men and women because people are familiar with these portrayals and these are easily accepted by the society. But advertisements on television are not just portraying men and women in some traditional and accepted ways; in recent times with various campaigns are slowly challenging stereotypes and being vocal about the social issues. Miller, E (2018). Verma (2018) explores the role of advertisement and its influences in the Indian society as she says we have come far from the traditional stereotypical roles portrayed 2 decades ago in comparison to the current scenario of the slowly shifting representations of men and women in the advertisements. Even though women are shown as the 'central character' in a high number of advertisements, now men, too share a good proportion on camera. With this the usual women-targeted advertisements have started to represent men as well for a more inclusive target audience.

## **LGBTQ+ IN ADVERTISEMENTS**

Representation of Gender roles in advertisements have come a long way in compared to the past decades. They have been continuously altered in an attempt to showcase more inclusivity. 'gay window advertising' is a term coined by Bronski which states a more subtle way of advertising LGBTQ+ people using indirect means and metaphors that would not seem representation the LGBTQ+ people. This seems to be in the advertiser's fear of isolating their heteronormative and usually homophobic consumers. A recent Ad by Knorr, India starring Karan Johar can be an example of a 'gay window advertising' being used. The advertisement depicts Karan Johar having a male neighbour over at 3am who has lost his key. At this point, anybody following Bollywood would know or at least have the hint of Karan Johar being gay. Even though this is the theme that the ad revolves around, it does not mention any of the obvious, letting the audience take the hint. Advertisements

including the LGBTQ+ community are very rare and have been seen coming into the mainstream media recently. Advertisements portraying a spectrum of identities, even though being at a very initial stage will help normalising non heteronormative and non-binary people. The media has immense power to mediate with the perception of their viewers, which shows a slow but promising future towards inclusivity.

## **GENDER AND BODILY REPRESENTATION**

Representation of bodies are important facets of gender. People tend to judge others based on their physical appearances as Femininity and masculinity are closely associated with bodily expressions. Verma (2018) quotes Erving Goffman, “*gender display is the expression of masculinity/ femininity through bodily postures and behaviour. Different societies may perform gender differently, but gender has a close connection with bodily characteristics; what we do with our bodies and how we do are also gendered.*” As said by Gerber, in Grau and Zotos (2016), the cultivation theory suggests that how people see their social reality is guided by the media by incorporating the generic stereotypes about how one should live their life according to the media’s belief system. People create their reality as in accordance to what they see (in advertisements) to match the given norms and set in the cultural trends. The advertisements play a major role in how one perceives the physical beauty, especially the attributes of an ideal woman in India. Verma further states how the accepted norm for Indian women is having a fair complexion with spotless skin and this is exactly what the beauty brands endorse, an “*ideal beauty myth*” and adjoining being feminine to beauty. Verma further states, “*Social construction of gender through body representation becomes crucial to enquire about since in this postmodern era of consumer culture, body has become a significant aspect of consuming gender identities.*” This makes the advertisement industry not only central to female audience but also encompasses male as well.

## **FEMVERTISING OF ADVERTISEMENT CAMPAIGNS**

“*This phenomenon of employing feminism as an advertising tool has been labelled as ‘femvertising’.*” Gupta, S (2017). Femvertising uses the concept of feminist ideology to market their product into inclusivity and market their awareness for a social issue all the while the primary objective is the sale of the product. It can be empowering and actually helpful when the brands follow up on the social issue to make a change in the



society. But quite a lot of brands have been taking the name tag of feminism, often creating an even more problematic advertisement. For example, advertisements like “Biba- change the conversations” , “dove- body positivity bottles” and even bigger brands like vogue fail to execute the real idea behind feminism. Gupta . S further relates femvertising to “it is a lot like using social work as a PR tool to re-build the brand image after a fiasco” According to Banet-Wieser (2018) , femvertising plays no role in the fight for women’s equality if the company doesn’t live up to feminist ideals. Instead, they’re redefining the meaning of feminism in a dangerous way — diminishing it to a tagline and dumbing it down to a hashtag. Using feminist arguments to sell products may be better than perpetuating gender stereotypes – as long as they get feminism right; which, honestly very few advertisements get it right on. Miller. E (2018) in her study says , the consumerism is to be blamed for presenting a skewed image of feminism throughout these years, depoliticising it and using it solely for marketing purposes . Although the fact that they use these mediums as a marketing strategy them to enhance their sales and profits which is and has always been their primary motive should not be overlooked. They will always alter and cater to the ‘most selling’, ‘most trending’ idea. Even though the road to progress is paving its way, a majority of the brands and advertisements are still portraying sexist values that are being reinforced again and again in the already internalized and institutionalized structures of the society, rather than being a medium to challenge them and their existence in the changing society.

## METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative piece of research that focuses on the gender representation in Indian advertising media through the lens of media students from Whistling Woods college. I used feminist and Ethnomethodology as an approach. The tool data collection was Focused Group Discussion. There were 12 respondents in the study that was divided in two groups for the Focused Group Discussion. Out of the 12 respondents, 5 were female and 7 were male. 1 of the respondents identified himself as queer and rest of identified themselves as straight. As I knew just a few people for my study I asked them for further contacts of their friends and people who would be willing to sit for the discussion. for this , I used the method of snowball.

### Respondents for the study

My study, focused on the Media Students of Whistling Woods as my respondents. Both the group discussions took place in Goregaon. Before every group discussion, I explained the topic and verbally asked for their consent to record the focused group discussion. The group discussions were recorded through an audio recorder. The data collection took place over 10 days. I travelled to Goregaon twice for the discussion. Although I had to wait till their college fest got over as everyone was busy with it, it was tough getting respondents agreeing to the same time and place. I coordinated the meeting and availability with two of the friends that I knew from the college. They helped me find more respondents for the group discussion after their college event got over. This created a time crunch as I was left with just few days for my data analysis.

### Data collection

The group 1 took place at one of the respondent's house where everyone felt it would be much more comfortable and convenient. As I waited for everyone to gather, by the time we started, the group had already warmed up and everyone seemed comfortable. Another factor being, all of the respondents from group 1 were either roommates or friends from the same circle which made it easier for them to settle down and open up faster. One of the respondent from the group fell sick which meant he could contribute very little to conversation and was mostly silent through the discussion. The group 2 was a little less relaxed compared to the group 1. The discussion with group 2 took place in the college campus at whistling

woods. As I met them post lectures, some seemed to be in a rush to get home. The respondents in group 2 was a mix crowd, some being friends, acquaintances and a few did not know each other at all. There were minor obstacles as a few had to attend to calls mid conversation and hence lost track when they returned. As we were sitting on the campus bench, there was welding work going on around us that made it a little difficult to continue the conversation without being interrupted by the noise and asking the respondents to repeat themselves. In both the group discussions there were 1-2 respondents who slightly tend to dominate the discussion, in this process a few respondents seemed to lose interest as they were getting overshadowed by other respondents, so I had to pitch in between and ask the others for their view on the topic being discussed. Initially the group 2 respondents were a little shy to speak more than just agreeing or disagreeing but as the discussion went by, they became more comfortable. The discussions recorded were around 60-80 minutes per group.

After each of the focused group discussions, I went home and transcribed the data collected through audio recorder. The audio recorded in the group 2 was unclear in some parts as there was welding work going on nearby. After going through the recordings, I segregated the data collected into subheadings that I found were repeated the most in both the groups and re-read by literature review to link the data collected to the written literature review. I also made note of the things I found interesting, that was said by the respondents while narrating their own experience around the topic. There were a few opinion clashes in both the groups that were quite intriguing to me which I also noted down.

### Obstacles

There were a few obstacles during the data collection, as I was collecting data from the same college, the respondents knew each other. Some were from the same friend circle, while some of the respondents were not on talking terms with each other. There seemed to be a lot of group dynamics playing part and I had to set their group slot accordingly. Conversations went outside the topic, had to be redirected. Sometimes it would be pertaining only gender or only advertisements.

### Personal limitations

As this was the first focused group discussion that I held, I did realise in hindsight, that I pitched in the conversation a little more than one is expected to as I may have gotten swayed away with the topics being discussed. Although I realised it soon and withheld myself limiting to just redirecting questions in case, they went off topic and providing examples, I tried to be unbiased in the further on-going conversation.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

The data was collected about the gender representation in Indian advertising media. The respondents covered their views over various advertising forms like social media, television ads and campaigns. The main categories of products covered were cosmetics, automotive and alcohol brands

### **Gendered advertisements**

Discussing about the men targeted advertisements, one of the general disagreement among the respondents were how the products are becoming gendered in places that gender has nothing to do with the product in the first place. one of the respondent shared her incident from her uncle's house, where only the men use lifebuoy soap and women use lux soap, because that is how it has been in their house. Another respondent spoke about how she likes a particular perfume brand but since it is targeted for men, she is always been told not to use it , but uses regardless. Verma (2018) states .” Verma further states , “*Social construction of gender through body representation becomes crucial to enquire about since in this postmodern era of consumer culture, body has become a significant aspect of consuming gender identities.*”

### **Prevailing sexism**

In the hindsight of the discussions about brand advertising, the consistent point that was being brought out was the prevailing sexism that finds its way through the nooks and corners of the ‘progressive’ advertisements. Many of the respondents felt that the was so much sexism and ingrained patriarchy to begin with, that the people making the seemingly progressive advertisements too end up catering to the sexism. although a lot of them agreed that we have come a long way from the overtly and upright sexist advertisements, we now have ‘subtle sexism’ that is not as common to point out without giving it a second thought. Miller E (2018) says *They (advertisements) will always alter*

*and cater to the 'most selling', 'most trending' idea. Even though the road to progress is paving its way, a majority of the brands and advertisements are still portraying sexist values that are being reinforced again and again in the already internalized and institutionalized structures of the society, rather than being a medium to challenge them and their existence in the changing society.*

### **Extreme ended target population**

When asked if they think the advertisements influence the audience or if the audience influence the advertisers, the discussion dived into the roots of the target population that the advertisements focus on. Everyone agreed that the advertisements being either stereotypical or highly progressive are meant to cater the particular strata of the society. Advertisers know there is a population that likes a particular kind of content that will ensure their sales going up. Several examples were given by the respondents, like, the Garnier for men specially comes in a black packaging with John Abraham driving roughly in the desert, or how the Olay anti-ageing cream is targeted towards women solely to become younger and not men. The discussion concluded by everyone agreeing the advertisements are extremely problematic but there prevails an amount of population that agrees to these advertisements without finding them problematic.

### **PR Stunts**

Usually, the use of a token person is made to show how 'inclusive' the brands are to hop in on the bandwagon towards feminism. These brand advertisements are termed as 'femvertising'. According to Banet-Wieser (2018), *femvertising plays no role in the fight for women's equality if the company doesn't live up to feminist ideals. Instead, they're redefining the meaning of feminism in a dangerous way — diminishing it to a tagline and dumbing it down to a hashtag.* Brands portray false inclusivity in ad campaigns that usually run on a hashtag. They hardly do anything solid pertaining that issue. The discussion pointed towards the deeper-rooted theory with the trending feminism as sometimes things are done deliberately to come in eye of the audience. PR Stunts play a huge role in the advertising industry. Any type of publicity is good publicity. All of the respondents agreed on the high role of PR Stunts played by the brands to market their product. A brand can say something very sexist just to gather the attention of the people, either negatively or positively to get them talking. Marketing the products can use cheap tactics that create a controversy.

### **Lgbtq+ ads**

Very few people said that they saw LGBTQ+ ads. These were mostly over social media and not on tv. When questioned why they think this would be so, they said even though there is a need to reach the issues to the masses. The television is still more of

traditional advertising medium than social media and not everyone would agree with it. there was a clash of opinions on this as a few respondents felt that even if it is not the 'job' of the advertising company to obligatorily show lgbtq+ inclusive advertisements, but it should be their responsibility to spread awareness granted that they have huge influence and reach over masses. The respondents felt that they should not just advertise to the audience they are sure that will accept the ad but also strive towards taking advantage of the position they are in to educate others. Finally, they came to a conclusion as this would mean taking risks and not everyone would risk their product and brand for a high-level risky execution.

Another respondent pointed out when section 377 was scrapped down and everyone was celebrating, a lot of brands on social media celebrated by changing their profile picture to the pride flag, but never actually took any action for supporting the people.

### **Over sensitization**

While discussing the ease and availability of internet, most of the respondents felt that people are taking every single small issue to the social media and making a huge deal about it. They felt the Over sensitisation of trivial issues is mainly by the 'gen z' which idolises the 'fake woke culture'. One of the respondents commented on the need to feel inclusive in this kind of culture as it is current 'in trend'. A few respondents unanimously agreed that over sensitisation of social issues take the focus away from how the product actually is and people tend to make direct blind judgements based on the product advertisement solely. On the other hand a few respondents made contrasting point that if we take trivial matters seriously and call them out for it, they will eventually start getting content conscious and advertise in an appropriate manner as they believe the audience have the same amount of influence over advertising media, how the advertising media has influence over the audience.

## CONCLUSION

The respondents I interviewed considered themselves fairly privileged to have a certain amount of knowledge about the influence of advertisement over people and said they were not the type who would get sucked into believing a bad advertisement. Privilege does play an important role in how one perceives advertisement. As they came to a conclusion in the interview, they had multiple opinions about the current advertising scenario. Some saying we have progressed drastically while some saying we have a long way to go. But one thing everyone believed in together was the picture they saw for the advertising industry in future as an inclusive space that is used also to spread awareness about social issues and does more than what its 'job' calls for. Although a surprising number of respondents thought that people are being over sensitive and lashing out unnecessarily on social media. In this case , one would only hope for more knowledge and awareness. The PR Industry plays a huge role in shaping the product branding with the people endorsing it that can impact a large audience. But I still believe that advertising and audience are a two-way street where both influence and cater to each other at some point. And it is our responsibility as audience to speak out to make it can inclusive space.

## APPENDIX 1

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## **APPENDIX 2**

### **GUIDE FOR FOCUSED GROUP DISCUSSION**

1. How do you perceive the recent advertisements ?
2. Do you think the gender-based stereotyping still pertains in today's advertisements?
3. What changes do you see in terms of gender roles compared to old advertisements?
4. Have you noticed any advertisements Inclusive of the lgbtq+ community?
5. Do you see a difference between the television and social media advertisements?
6. Have the advertisements affected how you perceive gender roles? please elaborate
7. Can you recall any recent advertisements that changed gender representation in a positive light?
8. Can you recall any recent advertisements that portray toxic gender representation?
9. Do you feel the advertisements will be more gender sensitive in the future advertisements?