

# A Study on Portrayal of Women through Commercial Advertisements in India

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## Abstract

Commercial advertisements play a significant role to introduce or define a product, its quality and its uniqueness to a purchaser. The roles of advertisers are thus very crucial in the modern day cut throat competition. The present study has examined how advertisements have depicted women in popular commercials from different points of view. It is found from the study that women have been projected as mothers, sisters and friends as per the situational demand. In case of older women, nurture and care are depicted and it is shown how they play a pivotal role in their families and thereby maintain social balance. In case of middle-aged women, their love and care for their children remain the central point of focus; whereas in the case of young women, their charm and relationships are the point of focus. However, some advertisements focus on erotic side and depict women in such a manner which hurts the culture and balance of the society.

**Keywords:** Advertisements, brand image, customer, society, women.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The Preamble of the Indian Constitution enshrines equality and empowers the State to take necessary actions regarding the cumulative socio-economic and political disadvantages faced by any section of the society. Indian women, coming from a Patriarchal society, have faced gender inequality since centuries. Today, they have the fundamental rights of equality on grounds of gender and are offered equal opportunity and protection under the law but the modern day notions of equality are far from being satisfactory in actual practices. It thus becomes an obligatory duty of every citizen to maintain the dignity of women.

In modern days, the commercial advertisements are portrayed through different mediums chiefly the Television, the Web (Internet) and the print media. In an open economy facing cut-throat competition, advertisements are important weapons of an organization to maintain, enhance and stabilize sales/revenue. The advertisers use their creativity to show the product, its features, quality and uniqueness to a purchaser in ways which induces the purchaser to take a favorable decision for the product. The models, their

characters and their roles are designed in such a manner so as to create urgency for the product in the minds of the purchaser. The advertisers represent all characters, including women, through their advertisement to enhance their brand image, product acceptability and product loyalty. Sometimes women are portrayed as perfect role models in the form of a mother, a sister, a perfect leader or as a dominant child as per the demands of the commercial; but sometimes they are portrayed negatively or erotically to create demand for the product. These negative projections have lasting impact on the minds of the viewers and even hurt feelings of various groups of people. Some negative female projections through advertisements are against the prevailing culture or social norms resulting in destabilization of social equilibrium. Under this backdrop, the present study tries to analyze the different roles of women as represented through the Indian commercial advertisements.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Last few decades have witnessed representation of women's and their various roles through advertisements in TV, magazines and other print media. Such advertisement and the role depicted

therein have been analyzed by different researchers. A few significant literatures are reviewed in this section of the study.

Pavani *et al.*, (2017) investigated the role portrayal of women through Indian television commercials to assess how the adolescent girls perceive their role and which role influences the adolescents to make the purchase. They have concluded that a stereotyped role portrayal of women in advertisement i.e., representation of women as a beauty symbol influences the Adolescent girls the most to make their purchase decision.

Fatma (2016) in her study examined the changes witnessed in the depiction of women in advertisement with special focus on television commercials. She found that the roles of women are portrayal largely within the male dominant ideology and it was reflected in the advertisement as stereotypes with confinement of women to household chores.

Nath (2016) in his study investigated the fruitfulness and futility of sex appeal in brand recall. He has found that high sex appeal in advertisement sometimes gives an adverse effect. Sexual advertisement designing is a real challenge to the marketer and advertisers should use sexual appeal in the right way as per the product demand.

Sasirekha *et al.*, (2020) in their study examined portrayal of women through advertisements with reference to body image. Content analysis was done using magazine advertisements and they found that majority of the models in advertisements are young, attractive, partially or barely clothed. They are thin and skinny and are very fit showing them highly attractive through the advertisement. The advertisements in magazine do contribute to the respondents of all ages and the desire to look like the models are often depicted in them.

Kumari and Shivani (2015) in their study examined the portrayal of women in contemporary Indian magazine and television advertisements for various products and service categories. Using content analysis they have found that advertisers represent females mostly as housewives and they are predominantly endorsing household products. The young female models were mostly preferred for brand promotion of any brand in Indian advertising.

Eisend (2022) in his study reviewed about the representation, portrayal and effects of older people in advertising and have found mixed responses. Different important mechanisms (mediators) such as similarity, credibility, and authenticity and conditions (moderators) can help to explain the variations. Because of the potential negative social effects of ageism, it is

important to think different ways to optimize commercial advertising effects while avoiding negative social effects. Advertisers are now encouraged to consider social effects not only for ethical reasons but also because social and commercial effects of advertising are interrelated.

Chatley (2018) in her study investigated the projections of roles of women through various print and audio-video advertisements in India and how far it defines the social acceptance of women. She found that although the representation of women through advertisements has changed over a period of time but still, even after balancing multiple roles, she is shown fulfilling her domestic responsibilities.

Kumar (2017) in her study examined people's perception about overt sexuality and objectification of women in advertisements through the ages. She has found that the use of sexual appeals attracts consumers but also believed that the blatant use of such themes build a negative image about the brand in the consumers' mind.

Sharma and Bumb (2021) in their study examined how women's role portrayal impacts consumers' willingness to buy and identify the difference in views of Indian men and women. They concluded that considerable differences exist between males and females when considering the role portrayal of women and willingness to buy the product being advertised. The differences are attributed to the different orientation of the mindset of both the genders.

Das and Sharma (2017) in their study investigated the perception of the young adults regarding the portrayal of women through Indian TV advertisements. They have found that women are mostly depicted as decorative objects holding firm cultural beliefs and rarely shown in professional roles. Their portrayal as mothers and wives cannot be avoided as they are considered vital part of Indian tradition. Majority of the young adults are not uncomfortable seeing women in scantily clad dress playing a decorative role in the advertisements. They concluded that women generating sexual interests through advertisements only attract immediate attention and never help to establish long term brand loyalty among the perspective customers.

Soni (2020) investigated how far today advertisements affect the way women are accepted in the society is. She has found that women feel pressurized into conforming to various physical stereotypes displayed through commercials such as thin bodies, fair colour, etc. which is giving rise to eating disorders. Confidence level and self-esteem of women are also affected and it creates adverse effect on teenagers and children, mostly young females.

Acevedo *et al.*, (2006) in their study examined the female roles portrayed in advertisements through a systematic content analysis of Brazilian commercials from 1973 to 2000. They have found that female images in advertisements are depicted in three different ways: stereotyped, idealized and plural portrayals.

Munshi (1998) investigated how the advertising discourses in India are accountable for the emergence of 'new Indian women in multiple avatars as homemakers'. He also examined whether such representations in advertising further defies or build western theorizing through media texts which were used in print and television advertisements during 1990's. He has found that the representation of women have been played around with, but have not changed in structure or in a substantial way.

Leigh *et al.*, (1987) examined the portrayal of women's role and its effects on the effectiveness of advertising by exploring traditional and modern women's responses to such advertisements. Applying cognitive response framework through laboratory experiment they have found that the women's thought reactions were related to their attitude towards the advertisement or the product, the role model (or source), the brand and the act of buying the brand.

Harker *et al.*, (2005) examined the peoples' attitude towards gender as portrayed through advertisements in Australia. They found that people are not offended by advertisements that portray women in a stereotypical way. Traditional 'pessimist' feminist group exhibited offense, whereas the 'optimist' feminist group expressed less concerns regarding the portrayal of women in a stereotype way. They have also concluded that modern women are more critical towards role portrayal through advertisement and advertisers are still falling short of realistic role portrayals and women remain dissatisfied with their current role depiction.

Amir (2007) investigated in his study the sexual contents on mainstream TV advertisements with a cross-cultural comparison. Applying content analysis of American and Israeli advertisements in their representation of sexual content, he found that both countries show explicit behavior for acts displayed like intercourse, or non-normative conduct like homosexuality, or illegal activity like prostitution.

### III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Women of different age segments are depicted differently through modern commercials. The primary purpose of this study is to examine the depiction of women of different age groups through modern advertisements.

## IV. METHODOLOGY

Popular TV commercials are analyzed by the researchers to assess the depiction of women and their primary role displayed therein. The role portrayals of women through advertisements are then analyzed through qualitative techniques to arrive at major conclusions.

## V. DISCUSSION

### 5.1 Representation of middle-age women

Middle aged women are depicted as perfect mothers for their children. They sometimes play the role of a guide, a friend or a philosopher to their wards as per the needs of the child. 7 commercials are taken up for study and it is seen that in all advertisements the middle-aged women are depicted as caring mothers looking for the wellbeing of her child in her own unique manner. In the advertisement of mosquito repellent 'All out' the mother is depicted as strict and tough to protect her young son from misappropriation of cash and thereby giving him a lesson. In 'Rajnigandha' advertisement the mother gives a lesson to her children about the importance of her presence in their lives. In the Peek Freans 'Cake Up' advertisement, the working mother, though physically not present with her child at every moment, is shown to give extreme love and care to her child. In the Sunfeast 'Mom's Magic' biscuit advertisement, the mother gives lessons of equality between siblings to her elder son and demonstrates that both he and his little brother are equally precious to her. The perfect mom, in the 'Flipkart' advertisement, plays a significant role in selecting the perfect gift from a range of choices for her children. In the 'Bag Talk' advertisement, the mother gives a surprise on the 'Mother's Day' to her working daughter who is employed in another city (and unable to visit her due to her work schedule) with her physical presence at the latter's place. In the 'Fabelle' advertisement, the mother presents herself as a friend to her teenage boy.

### 5.2 Representation of old women

Older women are depicted as matured ladies who direct their younger generations to take informed decisions. 6 commercials are considering for the study and it is seen that the older women are shown as experienced guardians instructing their younger ones in their own unique styles. They are portrayed as caring mothers or grandmothers in the advertisements where their inherent qualities like enjoyment, soreness, naughtiness, etc. are reflected.

In the 'Tanishq' advertisement, the grandmother tries to convince selection of wedding jewellery of her granddaughter to as per her choice (though the granddaughter is about to marry a Punjabi boy of her own choice) but when she fails to do so, she simply calls for another granddaughter who was in queue to select jewellery as per her choice. In the 'Help age India' advertisement, it is depicted how an old

mother convinces her adult son with her unique style to eat a samosa which her son had bought for other members of the family and the taste rekindles the memories of her childhood. In the 'Domino's' advertisement, it is depicted that a mother separated from her son due to confinement in an old age home and having no news of her son, still cannot forget the choice of his son (his craving for pizza). Subsequently, on the mothers' day when the mother sends a home delivery order from Domino's for her son, her son feels how much his mother cares for his happiness and choices, and immediately comes to meet his mother along with his family. In the 'Abott' advertisement it is shown that an old grandmother had planned her cycling program with her grandson. After a small lap, when the grandmother called her grandson, the grandson was worried about her grandmother as he anticipated that she had fallen down from cycle but on reaching the spot running, he was delighted to see that his grandmother was enjoying her time on the cycle. In the advertisement of 'Simaaya', the grandmother shows her granddaughter the jewellery which was gifted by her grandfather. The granddaughter appreciated the jewellery and expected her grandmother to tie it around her neck but she was astonished to find her grandmother displaying the jewellery around her own neck in her unique childish manner. In the 'Fortune' edible oils and foods advertisement, it is shown how a grandmother convinced the nurse of the hospital to give homemade food prepared by her to her injured grandson for his fast recovery.

### 5.3 Representation of younger women

Younger women are depicted as charming ladies who are a significant part of any society. 8 commercials are considered for this study and it is seen that the focus is on their close relationships with siblings or their concern for the society. The innocent naughty girls are projected as fighters amongst people who are deliberately causing guilt and pain among them through derogatory remarks.

In the 'Amazon' advertisement, it is shown that on the day of 'Raksha Bandhan' festival, a young woman prepares sweet dish for her brother and after eating, her brother refuses to share it with her. She later comes to know from her maid that that by mistake, she had put salt in place of sugar and realizes how much her brother loved her. In the 'Fernsnpetals' advertisement, it is shown how the organization delivers personal gifts in time to upkeep the emotions of brothers and sisters staying miles apart on the auspicious day of 'Raksha Bandhan' festival. The 'Bajaj Allianz' advertisement depicted how a young divorced sister mentally boosts up by her brother although she was personally facing many hazards from her family and the society. In the 'Gits' advertisement, a woman after preparing sweets in her home shared it in boxes with a security man, a liftman, a peon and a laundryman (Dhobi) and wishes

Happy Raksha Bandhan to all of them as she realises that her secured lifestyle was ensured due to their presence. In the 'Pega News' advertisement, we have seen a mother is projected as supermom or perfect mom as per decisions of a board meeting for an advertisement campaign. A young lady from the board opposes the proposal stating that every mother need not always be perfect as she is also a human being subject to errors. She argued that depiction of perfection would generate guilt in mothers and this inspired the team leader to label mothers as 'imperfectly perfect'. In the 'Subhyata' advertisement, a young woman creates a drama with her mother in law and forced her husband to prepare the morning tea for them. In the advertisement of 'Subhyata', the friendship between a young lady and her parents is depicted. In the advertisement of 'National Family Health Survey', a dressmaker protests against early marriage of a young child and gives a clear message that every child must be saved from these nuisance as more than 25% of Indian girls are married before the age of 18. The 'Dove' advertisement depicted how young women are criticized due to their body's complexion, height, hair texture, spot on the faces etc. by different women of the society (who always care about beauty not quality).

### 5.4 Representation of women in a negative sense

Women are sometimes depicted in negatively through advertisements which tarnish their images and give a wrong message to the society. 14 commercials are considered for this portion of the study and it is found that the acts and appeals of women are portrayed rather cheaply. Few advertisers have showed young girls performing rather nasty deeds besides displaying adult women performing derogatory activities.

The 'Manforce' condom advertisement depicted how a little girl's behaviour changed when she saw adult sexual activity in front of her through internet/TV and also saw the physical intimacy of her parents. Her innocent childhood is subsequently tarnished and she too engages in acts which are uncalled for. In case of advertisements of other brands of condom like 'Kohinoor', 'Masti', 'NACO', 'Durex' and 'Playgard', the female sex appeal is presented in such a manner which is unacceptable to the traditional Indian society and they adversely affects the teenagers. The 'Shilajit Gold' advertisement shows how the feelings and ego of a woman is hurt when she is denied physical intimacy by her spouse. The 'Wild Stone' deodorant and perfume commercial depicted how women chases and surrenders themselves to a man using the product. The 'Zatak' cool talc and perfume advertisement shows how a woman loses control over herself when she inhales the smell of the product. The 'Parachute' body lotion advertisement depicted that a man is tempted to touch different parts of a woman's body only when she has used the product. In the 'Rexona' shop advertisement, it is shown that the

husband is physically attracted towards his wife only after using the product. In the 'Amul Macho' underwear advertisement, a woman fantasises while washing the underwear of a man and her erotic physical expression at the pond side is observed by women of different ages (younger as well as older). In the 'Eurovision' DVD advertisement, a man tries to erase the tattooed name of a former boyfriend from his wife's hand but fails to do so. The woman is depicted similar to a rewritable product where the owner can choose to inscribe his choice. In the 'Virgin' mobile advertisement, a man comes out from a lift and explains the sexuality of a lady present there to his boss but the lady eventually turns out to be the latter's daughter.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Women play a significant role in maintaining the balance of the society through their daily acts. The advertisers reflect these different roles through various commercials. They try to associate these roles with their product and thereby, create a subtle urge in favor of the product. The present study dealt with how women are portrayed through commercial advertisement in modern India. It is found that middle aged women are depicted as responsible mothers who care for their children and are always there for them as their friend, philosopher and guide. The love and care for their children remain the central point of focus in the commercial. In case of older women, their enjoyment, soreness, naughtiness, etc. are portrayed through the commercials. It is shown that they play a pivotal role in their families and thereby maintain social balance. In the case of young women, their charm and relationships are the point of focus. It is shown that they play a significant role in the society as sisters, daughters, friends etc. and are vital for social balance. However, some advertisements focus on the erotic side and depict women in such a manner which hurts the culture and balance of the society. These commercials are uncalled for in Indian homes where the family usually watches TV together. The negative representation of women gives a bad message to the younger generations and such cheap portrayal of women must be avoided by the content creators. The advertisers must be more responsible and must highlight women in such a manner that addresses the real issues of the society like abolition of gender discrimination, social status enhancement of women, political equality, health, sanitation and so on. Only focus on real issues through advertisements can lead to a balanced and fair society.

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