Breaking the Gendered Stereotype: A Case Study on Effeminate Appeal in Selected Contemporary Indian Advertisements

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ABSTRACT

Advertisements are meant to promote the products/brands, but they have often been irresponsible in portraying women by representing them in stereotypical ways. In most advertisements, women are either highly sexualized/glamorized or shown in traditional roles such as mother, housewife, daughter, etc. and thus fail to show them in empowered roles. Advertisers use several notions to depict an ideal woman- beautiful, confident, glamorous, loving, caring, obedient, homely, and meek. Not surprisingly, those who do not fit this criterion are ridiculed and bullied upon in the advertisements. Ads on Beauty products, Weight loss, and household items have furthered the stereotype of an ideal woman. In such a scenario, they miss out on the wide range of emotions/ expressions/roles that women can have. These ads fail to depict or explore- body acceptance by females, women taking up new roles or breaking stereotypes. Such portrayal is not in line with women who have already stepped out of their homes, and have created a name for themselves in every possible field where they are taking the lead and changing the world. But all is not doom and gloom; things have changed for better even though only slightly. In the past decade, the notion of femineity started getting challenged with Social Media activism and the Fourth Feminism Wave. These campaigns in turn forced the traditional media content to change accordingly. The same

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began to be reflected in many of the companies/brands' advertisements who started changing themselves along with these developments and started showing confident, empowered, free, and vocal females. They were shown breaking gendered stereotypes, challenging societal norms, and taking up roles that were earlier reserved for just men. To study and appreciate this improved and renewed notion of femineity is the need of the hour. To achieve this, this renewed concept of 'femineity' was studied in gendered stereotype shattering advertisements shown on Indian television channels in the recent years with the help of critical analysis and review of secondary data.

Keywords— *Stereotypes, Feminine Appeal, Advertisements, Myntra, BIBA, Titan*

INTRODUCTION

The prime objective of advertising is to create a lasting impact on the target audience until it compels the person to procure the product or service. While an advertisement has the responsibility to cater to the needs of the consumers, there are several competitors who are racing for the same spot. Using an appeal can prove to be extremely useful for making a commercial identifiable and passionate. Sometimes, the need arises to use more than one appeal from the One-twenty-eight long lists of appeals to highlight the claims further. Exploratory research conducted on the Indian perspective of advertising appeal included fifty judges, and two hundred participants found that the perfectness, sensational, aesthetic, persuasiveness, fascinating, energetic, distinctness, captivating and elegant are the factors that appears more prominently from the list of appeals while perfectness, energetic, sensational, persuasiveness and sensational factors are considered to be gender-neutral (Mishra, 2009). According to some scholars, advertising appeals are described as the arrangement and management of advertisements in favour of potential purchases. While advertisement appeals are applied to create an emotional atmosphere around the target group, attitudes try to establish an innate connection between the seller and consumer. In simple words, it is believed to be a declaration of goodwill while, for some, rejecting the very idea, product, or even the person. When attitude differs on the fluctuation of motivation, studies have suggested that persuasive advertisements have attempted to create lasting impressions on the audiences. On a simple note, advertising appeals cause specific changes in the behaviour of the audience that impact their purchase decision. A study conducted by Syed Hassan Raza, Hassan Abu Bakar and Bahtiar Mohamad on the relationship between advertising appeal and behavioural intention proposed a model

which displays the connection between the 'advertising appeal' and 'behavioural intention' based on the three connecting factors 'positive relationship between advertising appeal and attitude'; 'positive relationship between attitude and behavioural intention' and 'positive relationship between the advertising appeal and behavioural intention' (Syed Hassan Raza, 2017).

Another research in 1991 by Kenneth G. DeBono and Michelle Packer on the effect of advertising appeal on product quality perception shows the differences in perception of the audience combining three studies to illustrate the objective. A group of eighty-four female and male paid undergraduates was selected and divided equally into low self-monitors and high self-monitors to be evaluated for all three studies. After being exposed to the advertisements study, one displayed a higher rating of advertisements by high self-monitors after being exposed to the image-oriented advertisements while low self-monitors provided higher ratings to the quality-oriented advertisements. The second study also indicated the image-oriented ads were highly perceived by the high self-monitors when the quality-oriented advertisements were perceived well by the low self-monitors. The third study took place after a week from the first two, where the participants were shown some new and original advertisements of the same brands, and the results indicated a similar outcome where high self-monitors succeeded in identifying the image-based advertisements and low self-monitors identified the quality-based advertisements better than the other group of participants (Kenneth G DeBono, 1991).

FEMININE APPEAL IN ADVERTISING

Sex appeal in product marketing has been used numerous times to arouse the desire among the audience to procure the product. At the same time, much of the debate goes into forcing the inferior products on the consumers using their desires. A study in 2001 illustrates the usage of sex appeal on sports products by Christine M. Brooks took the case of the International Beach Volleyball Federation (FIVB), which was objectified to design up the female players in a way to promote sports products by means of sex appeal and erotism. While using sex has been a more effortless and lucrative way of product promotion, Schultz described it as a trick used by the advertisers to park or resorts to retreat the male imagination and stroke their ego to sell their product. The FIVB was also accused of encouraging their elite players into breast enlargements while others trained hard to get impressionable abdomen to put on an exquisite beach look to support the sale of their sports brands. According to Kilbourne, automobile companies also follow the same league and often attach an attractive female model at the side of a male model to add a seductive touch to the campaign. There are tons of other prominent examples of objectifying a woman to enhance the impact of the

advertising like the Miller Draft beer exhibited an attractive woman coming out dry well to serve a thirty man or dressing up the women in a more seductive way than the counterpart in the advertisement to draw much more attention towards the offering. The consumer does not always appreciate the impact of such advisory as they might consider the product quality as poor and get irritated with the brand itself. The positive or negative perception of the product leads to a specific behavioural change among the audiences reflected through their attitudinal changes towards the brand (Brooks, 2001).

Acceptance of femininity in advertising again depends on many factors, and cultural imperialism is one such factor. A study on "Cultural Masculinity/Femininity Influences on Advertising Appeals" by Chingching Chang, compares the influences of masculinity/ femininity on responses to the advertisements from both the United States and Taiwan concerning advertising appeals. While the United States is predominated by "masculine" culture, Taiwan thrives on "androgynous" culture. The ethnographic study allowed 112 participants for a University in the United States along with the same number of participants from the national university of Taiwan to explore the self-contractual differences between the inhabitants of both countries based on masculinity/ femininity. Keeping gender and appeal type as an independent variable, the study revealed that the Americans favoured utilitarian appeals while Taiwan prefers both the advertising types (Chang, 2006).

STEREOTYPICAL PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN ADVERTISING

The portrayal of women in the advertisement has been a general practice for ages in stereotypical ways. Research shows that the feminine appeal in online advertising is found to be a common phenomenon in both United Kingdom and the United States, while other countries are also lining their activities in a similar pattern. The stereotypical portrayal of women in the advertisement has contributed to gender inequality which has been promoted on television and print before it clutches the online mediums. Though limited researches have been conducted on the stereotypical portrayal of women in advertising, a study concerning the image of women used for global advertisements by Emmanuella Plakoyiannaki, Kalliopi Mathioudaki, Pavlos Dimitratos **&** Yorgos Zotos **in 2008** came out with objectives of bringing in the example of international advertisements portraying the role of women while looking out for shreds of evidence on webpages catering to various categories of audiences. Knupfer suggested that the female gender has been widely used in advertisements to stress on the idea of male being the protector while accentuating attractiveness, sexuality and dependence are latched to female gender. The author also accused the high-technology goods internet advertisements of showing women in supportive and helpless roles while the counterpart

beamed with technological advancement benefiting their carrier path (Emmanuella Plakoyiannaki, 2008).

Table 1: Categories of Female Fole stereotypes Depicted in the Advertisements

Female role stereotypes	
Category	**Description**
Women in traditional roles	
Dependency	Dependent on male's protection; In need of reassurance; Making unimportant decisions
Housewife	Women's place is at home; Primary role is to be a good wife; concerned with housekeeping tasks.
Women in decorative roles	
Women concerned with physical attractiveness	Women in pursuit of beauty and physical attractiveness (e.g., youthful)
Women as sex objects	Sex is related to the product; Sex is unrelated to the product

(Emmanuella Plakoyiannaki, 2008)

Emmanuella Plakoyiannaki, Kalliopi Mathioudaki, Pavlos Dimitratos **&** Yorgos Zotos have also identified the categories where advertisers portrayed women in stereotypical roles. The outcome of the same study suggested that online advertising primarily projected the idea of representing women in stereotypical ways, barring few exceptions, while webpages shamelessly hosted decorative female images encouraging women in the pursuit of physical attractiveness (Emmanuella Plakoyiannaki, 2008). Signorielli, in his study advocated to the fact that stereotypical behavior can be caused by advertisements in a similar category. Another study by Kilbourne in 1990 depicted that behaviour toward women changes once they are portrayed in stereotypical roles in advertisements which establishes the relationship between how advertisers portray women and what people perceive about them and their role in society. The extent of gender stereotyping often goes beyond the common perception and affects the physical appearance of the affected group. A study conducted on 'media image of women attractiveness' brings out the cases of women who are being exposed to the models of a fashion magazine, often manifest a negative body image leads to weight concern and several other psychical alterations (Lindner, 2004).

RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

With the arrival of the Fourth wave of feminism and the rise and rapid growth of Social Media platforms, awareness regarding gender sensitivity has spread worldwide. The various taboos and stereotypes that were not discussed in the public domain began to be discussed and debated openly. Not just this, gradually, these stereotypes and taboos were also broken. That is why several companies and brands that have been indulging in selling stereotypes (such as beauty products for dark skin, fat-shaming, etc.) for a very long time started mending their ways. Gender sensitization campaigns that were run on Social Media prompted them to become responsible and sensitive. Also, a few companies that wanted to connect with the informed women and the audience, in general, started showing ads that focused on women empowerment and breaking of taboos. Such advertisements need to be studied in order to understand their execution of ideas on an empowered woman.

OBJECTIVES AND METHODS

The research was conducted with the purpose of analysing the feminine appeal in gendered stereotypes embedded in the advertisements shown on Indian television channels in recent years. For this purpose, Secondary Data Analysis was done to find out the advertisements that were breaking gender-related stereotypes in a big way. Later, these advertisements were critically analysed in terms of- Portrayal of Female, Women occupying secondary or Lead role, Depiction of Femineity, Breaking of myths/stereotype, Role assigned and Symbolic Gestures.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION: INDIAN CONTEXT INDIAN ADS

India was not an exception when it came to the portrayal of women in stereotypical ways until the advertisers felt the need to change the market paradigm, creating ripples in the viewers' perception. With the women taking charge of more complex and male-dominated arenas, advertisers started using concepts and parameters that enhance women's appearance in society.

Bajaj Auto Ltd. came up with a utopian vision and launched their advertisement on the eve of independence, culminating the idea of women being a free spirit and not bounded by restrictions and societal stigmas. The ad displays a woman driving a 'Bajaj Avenger' and making friends as she embarks on her journey to her desired destination. Though a woman

driving a bike is not a very rare sight but showing such a bold gesture on screen and associating a woman with a product that is usually bought and used by men displays the courage and mettle of the brand. The advertisement materialized by 'Mullen Lintas', an advertising agency, was massively shared over social media with YouTube views reaching above 11 million. It showed the women biker with unconventional attire and accessories, living the life to her fullest. However, the advertisement highlighted a different side of women but failed to come out of stereotyping completely and featured the rider in the revealing outfit.

British Airways, the second-largest airline, based in the UK, launched a campaign in 2016 with an emotional appeal patched up with a feminine touch and titled the campaign **"Fuelled by love".** The commercial showed an exponential love for India, their culture and people, a graceful way of showing affection while convincing a large number of Indians living across the world to accept the hospitality of the airline. The striking difference of that ad from the rest of the category is the unusual bond portrayed between a girl from the United Kingdom with an old lady from Hyderabad, India, which claimed to be based on an actual event. The advertisement avoided the stereotypical portrayal of showing impressionable air hostesses, luxurious infrastructures and world-class facilities and instead highlighted the emotional bond between the customers and the service providers. British Airways created this thoughtful campaign with an unusual display of feminine spirit (that garnered over 10 million views on YouTube). It aimed to strengthen the bond between the two countries, as for the airline, India is considered as the second-largest consumer base with a handful of future opportunities and expansion.

Ariel came up with a unique campaign that challenged the stereotyped thought process of the society and called it **"ShareTheLoad".** Being a women-centric campaign, the commercial challenges our society's age-old beliefs and practices that clearly discriminate between the role of men and women and their respective responsibilities. Even though the women share the family's financial burden, yet they are expected to perform all their responsibilities as a housewife. "ShareTheLoad" campaign highlights the gender biased and stereotyping attitudes towards women while sending out the message to the parents to instil the seed of gender equality among their children right from the beginning. Ariel created a series of advertisements with #ShareTheLoad to bring changes to the attitude of the society and break the stereotypical portrayal of women (i.e. as a homemaker).

Titan has been creating beautiful campaigns for decades. However, in recent times it seems that the brand has also pledged to break the stereotypical portrayal of women. In 2014, with Ogilvy's help, the brand came out with an ad (that got 1.8 million likes on the YouTube)

that empowered the women in a whole new way. The commercial was brave enough to show that people often linger around the traditional and stereotypical beliefs even after being rejected because of them. The campaign challenges the very belief of society and their gender-specific role that suppresses the women's progress and limits their reach. Titan has been showing such courage to identify the root causes that hinder the growth of the women and link them beautifully with their campaigns. The commercial roots for **#HerLifeHerChoices** to indicate the support and encouragement they provide the women who are ready to bring changes and break the stereotypes.

Anouk, an ethnic wear brand from **Myntra,** had launched a series of advertisements to break the usual norms. In one of the ads, Shaheen (Radhika Apte), who is pregnant, is having a conversation with her boss Uma. Uma is bothered by Shaheen's pregnancy as she feels she is the best employee, but her pregnancy will make her compromise with her working capacity. During the conversation, Uma compliments her for her Blue jacket that works well in hiding her pregnancy. Shaheen is not pleased to hear this as she didn't wear the dress with this intention and is also frustrated with people judging her due to her pregnancy. A few moments later, she rakes up the issue of her pregnancy and how it has been the reason for her clients being assigned to someone else and her losing out promotion to another colleague despite working very hard on the project. In her defense, Uma says this decision was taken by the management as clients wanted someone who is available all time. She then says that she should take six months break and then next year the company will consider her promotion. To this, Shaheen retorts that she can handle both i.e. pregnancy and the job. While they are conversing in the car, Shaheen asks the driver to stop at a place. Then Shaheen tells Uma that the building that she sees outside is her new office and announces that she is going to start her own business. This ad titled **"Bold is Beautiful: Pregnancy doesn't mean the end of the career"** of 2 minutes 26 seconds with a **#BoldIsBeautiful** shows how society, including women, think that after pregnancy, the women's career is over and they would be busy in taking care of the child only and won't be able to manage both. This belief is beautifully portrayed and also shattered by the ad.

Another ad by Myntra titled **"Myntra salutes the women who break stereotypes!"** of 1 minute 17 seconds with **#TrendsettersNotFollowers** shows montage of 5 successful women- Sumukhi Suresh (Stand-up comedian), Kartiki Selena (Wildlife Photographer), Vanitha VR (Cricketer), Kaveri Sinhji (Entrepreneur) and Ganga RV (Cab Driver) and their story of breaking the stereotypes. The ad was made to salute the spirit of women who broke the stereotypes and established a career for themselves in the fields which are considered as the profession for men. First, Vanitha is shown in the ad, which says how there is the perception

that women are delicate and fragile and how she is breaking this perception by playing a sport that was played earlier by only males. In the next scene, Kaveri confesses how females are expected to compromise and not pursue what they desire. She breaks this restriction as in real life, she is a successful entrepreneur. Women like Ganga face discrimination from the society that assumes the women should remain confined to household chores and responsibilities. Ganga breaks this barrier by driving a cab for livelihood. Sumukhi breaks the perception that women cry a lot by pursuing comedy as a career. Also, she is proving that females can also be great comedians. Kartiki, a professional photographer, shatters the stereotype that women don't talk too much and are reserved by expressing her ideas through photography. Overall this advertisement is a fine example that celebrates women who have broken barriers and overcome every obstacle that came in their way.

Table 2: Categories of the non-stereotypical depiction of women in advertisement

Female role non-stereotypes			
Brand	**Campaign**	**# tag**	**Category**
Bajaj Auto Ltd	Bajaj Avenger Independence Day Film	#RideYourIndependence	Women in non-traditional roles
British Airways	British Airways: Fueled by Love	#fuelledbylove	Women in non-traditional roles
Ariel India	"Are we teaching our sons what we have been teaching our daughters?" - Ariel	#ShareTheLoad	Women portrayed as equal to men
Titan Company Limited	The Raga Woman of Today	#HerLifeHerChoices	Women portrayed as equal to men
Myntra Designs Pvt Ltd	Anouk Bold is Beautiful: Pregnancy doesn't mean the end of the career	#BoldIsBeautiful	Women portrayed as equal to men
Myntra Designs Pvt Ltd	Myntra salutes the women who break stereotypes!	#TrendsettersNotFollowers	Women in non-traditional roles

According to the factors identified by Emmanuella Plakoyiannaki, Kalliopi

Mathioudaki, Pavlos Dimitratos **&** Yorgos Zotos, the above advertisements were divided into two separate categories "Women in non-traditional roles" and "Women portrayed as equal to men" which represents the non-stereotypical portrayal of women in advertisements.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The stereotypical portrayal of women in media content is not new. One of the most prominently noticed media content, i.e., advertisements, is also not an exception. Several stereotypes related to the depiction of women were found in the literature relevant to the topic. There has been a depiction of women in extremes and their broad spectrum of emotions/expressions/roles were ignored. The ads either focused on traditional values or on the glamorous side, which are both contradictory and archaic portrayals and revealed the advertisers' binary thinking. On one side, it was common for the advertisements to use them as eye candy by displaying their sensuality and attractiveness. They focused on outer beauty and ignored their inner traits. And on the other hand, women were also shown in advertisements in traditional roles (such as homemaker) washing utensils/clothes, cleaning the home, doing other household chores, helping the elderly and taking care of husband and the children. Another stereotype is showing woman with lack of confidence or having several insecurities/complexions. They are shown being worried about their dark skin, short height, pimples, skin odor, etc. No wonder the beauty product manufacturers have created billion-dollar worth of industry by selling such stereotypes and insecurities. The viewpoint that was missing from the advertisements was of a woman who is empowered, free, unpredictable, expressive, carefree, doesn't tolerate injustice, risk-taker, independent, and a role model.

For ages, women have been confined to the home and have been subjected to several restrictions but as times changed, women started stepping out of the home to prove their equality and worth. They took up every role that was limited to males while creating individual identities for themselves in every role they took and even started leading in such fields. These changes began to be reflected in the media content and soon were adopted by Social Media user who pushed the brands to become socially responsible (in short, to become "woke"), be it in terms of- showing stereotypes, racially offensive content, getting environment-friendly, or sensitive towards society and minorities etc. In this study, few selected advertisements of Bajaj Auto Ltd, British Airways, Ariel India, Titan Company Limited, Myntra and BIBA were considered for analysis as they were fulfilling the criteria of breaking gendered stereotypes. These ads conveyed this message by showing stories from multiple instances of life where women face discrimination and bias from society. And instead of stopping here, they also led the way by showing female as lead in the ads who take up roles/actions/decisions that are

against society's norms at large. Apart from these, several other ads depicted various issues related to women such as culture of silence, discrimination/harassment at workplace, gender-based judgment, etc. In a newly sensitized world, such content is the need of the hour as it can create a strong impression on the viewers' consciousness and subconsciousness while changing their perception. The study was done with the purpose of understanding the recent surge in advertisements that displayed women in a more appropriate manner by providing them the required screen presence while empowering their stature.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE SCOPE

Due to paucity of time, advertisements that were known to the researcher and gathered through discussion with colleagues and experts were only considered. And so, chances of missing out a few of the prominent ones can't be ruled out. Few advertisements were also showing women in lead roles but were not fully empowering and hence were not selected as they were not breaking the stereotype in a big/prominent way. As far as the scope of the research is concerned, study on such a topic helps in reinforcing how the depiction of certain characters can have implications on society at large. If stereotypical portrayal is conveyed through ads, then society would remain the same. On the other hand, if stereotypes are broken through media content such as advertisements, they act as catalyst/agent of change and trendsetters (not just in terms of fashion but also behaviour/attitude). Future research can further stretch to include quantitative data to understand the impact of such advertisements on the consciousness and subconsciousness of the viewers.

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