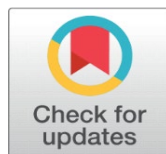
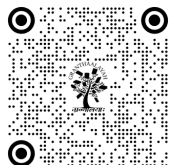


TRANSCENDING BOUNDARIES – REPRESENTATION OF CHANGING GENDER DYNAMICS IN SELECT INDIAN TELEVISION ADVERTISEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

Advertisements are primarily intended to persuade the consumers to buy a particular brand of product. In modern times Television advertisements or TV commercials as they are known, have emerged as one of the most visible and popular form of advertisements. Traditionally, selling a product entailed roping in a celebrity to either pose with the product or to highlight its advantages over other products. But the advent of various domestic and foreign channels offered the viewers the option to skip the advertisements and switch over to more interesting content in other channels. Besides, the stiff competition between the brands necessitated the advertisements to be more creative, resulting in the incorporation of engaging storylines. Thus, advertisements have transitioned from a means for merely selling products to cultural artefacts mirroring the socio-cultural practices and values of the society. They portray social norms, cultural reality, and gender patterns in keeping with the patriarchal ideology. Culture profoundly impacts gender-related behavior, roles, values, identity, and their perception in various social contexts. It governs the expectations placed on men and women and influences their attitudes and behavior. Since advertisements are predominantly created by men with the intention of appeasing the male consumers, women are often objectified. The recent decades have seen women progress in leaps and bounds but the advertisements have been slow in acknowledging their achievements. The winds of change have been very subtle but steady progress is being made in making progressive and socially relevant ads which has captured man - woman equation from a different angle. This paper proposes to analyze select TV advertisements that appeared after 2000 which show both men and women breaking away from the narrow confines of patriarchy to don new and unconventional roles.

Keywords: Advertisements, Boundaries, Cultural, Gender, Patriarchy, Social, Stereotypes and Transcending

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1. INTRODUCTION

Advertisements are paid promotion of brands intended to persuade the consumers to buy their products. Some of the common forms of advertisements today are print ads in magazines, Newspapers, and Notices, TV ads, Billboards, Flexes, and the social media. TVs became common place in Indian households in the early 1980s. It brought entertainment and information to the door steps of ordinary people. It also provided an easy avenue for advertising various products. The popularity of TVs resulted in the increased reach and visibility of many products.

Since most of the brands recognized the untapped potential of the emerging middle class, majority of the advertisements were woven around the familiar premise of middle-class domesticity, aspirations, and ethos. Initially ads were concerned only with highlighting their products and its competitive edge over others. Over a period, advertisements developed into cultural documents taking on the guise of aesthetic texts in a particular socio-cultural context. The advertisements were laced with patriarchal ideology especially in the depiction of gender stereotypes. According to Raymond Williams, in advertising, the product is not enough there should be an accompanying narrative which resonates with the audience with its social and personal meanings and lures them with its magic. (During, 1993) [1]

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Advertisements were in circulation even before the recorded History. The first form of advertisements must have been the word of mouth. The hawkers coining interesting slogans seem to have been among the earliest form of advertisements. The advent of the printing press introduced printed advertisements. The Industrial Revolution provided great impetus to print advertising especially in the UK and other European countries. In India, print advertising found its foothold in the 18th century. The first advertisement appeared in the year 1776, in Bengal Gazette. The advertisements were initially meant to merely 'inform.' Well scripted ads with attractive images created with the purpose of selling products became popular by the beginning of 20th century. Early decades of the 20th century also witnessed the entry of Radio Advertising. With the foray of Television into many Indian households by the 1980s, commenced the era of Television ads. Now social media ads are the in thing. But TV ads have not lost its relevance as majority of the older generation watch TV serials and thereby end up seeing the ads that are often aired in between. [2]

The Television advertisements with its audio-visual component proved a novel experience for the audience. The catchy jingles and tag lines began to rule the hearts of the audience and soon the ads overshadowed the programs in popularity. The 80s and 90s are regarded as the heydays of Television commercials as life for the common man was all about making prudent choices and practicing thrift, without compromising on quality, as espoused by Lalitaji of the famous Surf ad. Other famous ads of the period like that of Nirma washing powder, Bajaj scooter, Magi Noodles and others still have a special place in the hearts of many.

3. GENDER STEREOTYPES IN ADVERTISEMENTS

Many ads continue to enjoy cult status across the country and are perhaps more popular than the sponsored programs. The ads of the 80s and 90s still strike an emotional chord with those who grew up watching them. Made with the simple intention of marketing products, the wide reach and entertainment quotient of TV advertisements have transformed them into one of the most potent media for transmitting cultural values as well as for subtly disseminating and reinforcing patriarchal values. Many Ads have been in the eye of the storm for objectification of the female body which was used as a catch to lure the male customers. Despite the growing population of working women who excelled in their field and managed to successfully juggle between their personal and professional lives the ads stuck to the age-old images of the devoted home maker, sultry seductress and damsel in distress. Narratives that challenged the status- quo slowly made its way into ads only post 2010.

According to the celebrated feminist and philosopher, Simon de Beauvoir, gender is a social construct. The society expects both men and women to possess certain qualities and take on specific roles. The ads conveyed patriarchal ideology by presenting men as powerful, confident, goodlooking, successful and efficient. Until a few years ago, men were portrayed as fearless often performing great stunts with aplomb or displaying heroism in rescuing women in distress. He was often depicted in office, amidst his subordinates, wielding authority, and commanding respect, or outdoors engaged in adventurous sports as in Thumps Up ad or participating in some form of entertainment. Men usually appeared in the ads for vehicles like bikes, cars, or electronic gadgets that spell power and affluence.

On the other hand, women were confined to the hearth and home. They were depicted as beautiful, docile, submissive, and passive. They mostly appeared in the ads for domestic items like cooking oil, detergents, dishwasher products, kid's products, or cosmetics.[3] Women in ads fell under two categories, those who featured in household products, portrayed as upholders of tradition, clad in traditional attire, displaying great prudence and discretion in making choices and catering to the needs and wellbeing of the family. E.g. The sari-clad, comely Lalithaji with the big bindi as the advocate of Indian customs. Since these ads targeted women, it was easy to sell the idea of the perfect woman whom Virginia Woolf refers to as "the angel in the house." But ads for cosmetics like creams and soaps as well men's products were based on women's attractiveness for men hence more glamorous scantily clad women appeared in these ads. Since the creative minds behind the ads and the intended customers comprised of men this was but natural.

4. ADVERTISEMENTS REFLECTING CHANGING GENDER ROLES

Women today are a far cry from their counterparts a couple of decades ago. They are not only educated and earning but also possess independent opinion and decision-making power. They have greater say in family matters including the purchase of various items at home. Besides the work force in the advertising industry also boasts of many women. Thus, women are a formidable power to reckon with both within the family and outside within the advertising world.

Many of the young men today acknowledge the professional demands of their wives. Hence, they are willing to shoulder the responsibilities in the family from doing daily chores to baby sitting or raising kids. Some of the Ads which toed the line of patriarchal values, have embarked on a path of depicting unconventional gender roles in keeping with the times. The transition in the role of males and females have been happening in real life for some decades. But it started reflecting in the ads only recently. The patriarchal conception of gender stereotypes has evolved over thousands of years. It is so deep rooted in the social consciousness that it is difficult to dismantle the notion overnight. The main reasons for the change in the approach towards gender roles in advertisements are: Increase in women's education and employment, migration to other places both within and outside the nation for studies and better career prospects and the 'New Normal' in the aftermath of the Pandemic.

5. INCREASE IN WOMEN'S EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

The beginning of 21st century witnessed a huge leap in women professionals. Initially, though the extra income in the form of a working wife was welcome, men were not ready to share the domestic chores and responsibilities of raising children.

They regarded home as the primary responsibility of a woman. All her other commitments were secondary. No matter what her responsibilities were she was not expected to compromise on the domestic front. In most of the middle-class families which could not afford a servant, often it was the children, irrespective of their gender who came forward to relieve their mothers of their domestic burden. In the nuclear families which evaded the scrutiny of a grandmother, it was not difficult to bring the sons into the kitchen. In many boys - only families the sons were forthcoming to help their mothers. Many even developed an interest in cooking. Judith Butler reminds us of the fluid nature of gender identity by proclaiming gender to be performative. (Nayar, 2019) [4] Such ideas regarding gender fluidity have discarded the hard and fast notions of masculinity and femininity making the new generation more receptive towards changing perceptions of gender. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie says that the gender roles were established during the primitive phase in our evolution when strength was of prime necessity for survival, since men were stronger than women, they became leaders. But now, thousands of years later, in an era in which intellect, creativity and innovation matters more and most women have proved their mettle in this respect, men have no reason to claim superiority.[5]

Many young men who had reaped the benefits of having working mothers and grew up lending them a helping hand, were open to supporting their wives.

6. THE MIGRATION WITHIN THE COUNTRY AND OUTSIDE

The recent years have witnessed massive migration within the country, as well as outside in large number for jobs and higher studies. This has forced youngsters both boys and girls to try their hand at cooking and other household work. Moreover, eating out is not only expensive but also deemed unhealthy. Hence, those aspiring to move out of the comfort of their homes irrespective of their gender are often forced to shed their inhibition about domestic chores and adopt it as a survival skill.

7. THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC

The Lockdown in the wake of the corona pandemic, brought the world to a standstill. People were confined within the four walls of their homes as going out was forbidden. The sudden imposition of lockdown left many stranded in different parts of the world without their regular helps. With the restaurants, hotels and other eateries closed, those staying alone including male professionals and students had no option but to try their hands at cooking. Since families were cooped up in homes with hardly much to do, even men took to the kitchen to help the female folks as well as to engage in something creative and rewarding. Many who had lost their means of livelihood turned to the making of You Tube videos for a living. Since those focusing on cooking and food were very popular, many men were encouraged to launch their cooking channels. As good health and immunity had become a priority, food took the centre stage, forcing many men to cross the forbidden threshold of kitchen to try their hands at cooking and discover their unexplored potential. This served to do away with much of the stigma associated with men entering the kitchen.

The above factors changed the society's attitude towards gender roles. It became evident that to have a good, meaningful, and fulfilling relationship the man and woman must step outside the circle drawn by the society and subvert the hitherto established norms of society regarding gender roles. This realization,

gradually being reflected in the contemporary narratives has recently found its way into advertizing as well.

8. ANALYSIS OF SELECT ADVERTISEMENTS FROM 2000 TO 2024

8.1. HAVELLS

Havells boasts of an array of electrical items including wires, switches, and fans. The brand has always attempted to stand out from the crowd incorporating a tinge of humour in ads like “shock laga kya?” and “wires that don’t catch fire” to name a few. In 2011 they introduced the “Respect for Women” series of Television Commercials to advertise a range of home appliances which convey the message that Havell’s home appliances could be used by men as well. Through several advertisements, they chose to address the gender disparity, one of the pressing issues in our society. [6]

Figure 1



Figure 1 [7] Havell’s Fan Ad

Their iconic 2013 advertisement made every one sit up and notice. The advertisement depicts a newly wedded bridegroom at the Registrar’s office, in a historic move, offering to adopt the wife’s surname, in a reversal of the traditional practice of bride taking up the husband’s surname. Patriarchy ensures that a woman’s identity is always tied up with a man as she is given her father’s surname in infancy which is replaced by that of her husband’s, on marriage. Thus, it was a bold attempt from Havell’s to introduce a level playing field for both the sexes. Havell’s restrains from coaxing its audience to follow suit while often associating itself with progressive thinking and optimism conveyed through the tagline, “hawa badle gayi,” which connotes the winds of change for a better tomorrow

8.2. ARIEL SHARETHELOAD CAMPAIGN

Airtel's ShareTheLoad campaign launched in 2015 was a breakthrough initiative that challenged the age-old belief that laundry is exclusively a woman's domain. Titled "IsLaundryOnlyAWoman'sJob?" it served as a reminder to the gender inequality prevailing at homes, relegating women to the position of second-class citizens despite their professional success. The many Awards that have come its way, including 10 at Cannes Lions and Grand Prix is a testimony of its popularity. The 2016 Ariel ad, "Dads, ShareTheLoad" highlights how gender biases are transferred from parents to children. The ad shows a father watching his young daughter who despite being a busy professional tirelessly performing all household chores while her husband relaxes watching TV. The father is deeply hurt by the toil undertaken by his daughter and in retrospect thinks about his own role as well as that of his generation who have set a bad example for the children by never helping their wives with their chores. Back home, he offers to help his wife with the laundry, embarking on a true partnership. The 2019 edition exhorts mothers to train their sons in household work so that they become self-sufficient in looking after their basic needs and learn the importance of sharing the load of domestic chores. The mother in the ad takes the first step by teaching her son to load the laundry in the machine. The ad reminds us of the onus on the mothers to educate and train their sons in paving the way for a world where gender equality is practiced. #ShareTheLoad- For Equal Sleep 2020, launched on the World Sleep Day, threw light on the fact that most women who were saddled with all the chores at home were deprived of adequate sleep. The advertisement advocates sharing of household responsibilities to ensure a woman's right to a good night's sleep. [8]

Figure 2



Figure 2 [9]

The latest edition of the Ariel campaign 2024, is about strengthening "HomeTeams." The advertisement depicts how women shy away from taking up official responsibilities which entail absence from home. Aisha in the ad is an efficient multi-tasker who manages both her work and home effortlessly. But she declines the great opportunity to train a team in Singapore as she is doubtful whether her HomeTeam would manage without her for a week. Her boss who is a woman, comments that just as Aisha has learnt all the household work from scratch, her HomeTeam would also learn to survive in her absence. Aisha's husband who overhears the conversation expresses the willingness of the team in undergoing a

training programme under her so that they become self-sufficient in managing the household tasks in Aisha's absence. It urges men to be supportive so that the wives can focus on their work sans the pressure of household responsibilities.

8.3. SURF EXCEL MATIC

Surf Excel has always strived to connect emotionally with the consumers and make their lives easier. Its tryst with the Indian market date back to 1950s, the decade it was launched in the domestic market. The 60s and 70s were the "Lalithaji era" in the history of Surf advertisement which was instrumental in winning over the loyalty of the Indian customers. The 90s witnessed the Daag Dhoondthe Rah Jaoge" and "Surf Excel Hai Na" campaign. The "Daag Acche Hain" commercials which hit the screen in 2005, revealed the beautiful stories hidden behind every stain. These ads featuring kids, projected stains as an outcome of doing good to others. Whatever be the message conveyed it was the mothers who washed the clothes. But in a breakthrough Surf Excel Matic involved the father in it's pour-rub -pour ads where the father is seen doing laundry in the absence of the mother. [10]

Figure 3



Figure 3 [11]

The latest advertisement from Surf Excel Matic liquid features a father daughter duo. The mother is absent in the picture. The daughter is back home after an exciting football match and her soiled dress testify to her exceptional performance. The father enquires of her whether she played well and she retorts "any doubt?" pointing to the stain on the dress which is ample proof of her performance. The father washes the Jersey in the washing machine with Surf Excel Matic and triumphantly produces a sparkling clean Jersey.

In this refreshing ad, laundry which in Indian households is exclusively a woman's duty, is done by a man. In a society where girls are initiated into the world of domestic chores in teenage, and are not only expected to take care of themselves but also to take care of elders like father, it is heartening to see the reversal in gender roles with the father doing laundry for his daughter. Similarly, the girls are shown playing football, a sport that has always been associated with machismo. It reminds us that given the opportunity girls can excel in any sport or in any field.

8.4. BOOST

Boost is one of the favourite health drinks in India. Energy and stamina are its USP. Boost captured the imagination of Indian audience when it roped in Kapil Dev,

who captained Indian cricket team in its 1983 world cup win, to endorse the brand. Since then, it has used many successful cricketers for marketing the brand, of whom Sachin Tendulkar has had the longest stint of two decades. The ad in its many versions carried the same storyline of a celebrity cricketer advising a young boy, an aspiring cricketer, to take “Boost” which is the secret of his energy. Many illustrious cricketers like Sehwag, Dhoni and Virat Kohli have featured in the ads from time to time. [12]

Figure 4



Figure 4 [13]

Living up to the changes in society, the brand has revolutionized its age-old ad by replacing the boy in the ad with a young girl as the aspiring cricketer, in its recent editions. She not only dares to take on boys but also overcomes their bullying stating that there are no special considerations for girls in a game, only stamina matters. The ad transcends the prescribed gender roles by introducing a girl who aspires to be a cricketer. Though cricket is a passion in India, it is synonymous with men's cricket. Despite their talent, the women's team languishes in obscurity whereas the men's team is always in the limelight as it enjoys the adulation of the nation. The advertisement is a reminder that women are capable of not only taking on men but also of outshining them at their own game.

8.5. BRU COFFEE

The pioneer of the instant coffee market in India since the 1960s continues its reign with its impeccable quality, taste, and variety. It has come up with many memorable commercials that highlight its significance in Indian households. Many wake up to its aroma, and many relationships are built, conversations made and happy news shared with a cup of Bru coffee. While the occasions differ, the maker of the coffee is always the woman of the house. This changed post 2000, with ads like the husband successfully following the wife's instruction to make coffee for both, the husband bringing a genuine smile on his wife's face with a cup of coffee after she declares herself tired of having a fake smile throughout an online meeting with the boss. [14]

Figure 5



Figure 5 [15]

The recent commercial for Bru starring actress Keerthy Suresh shows her partner leaving to meet a special friend. The aroma of coffee wafting from the kitchen, brings a puzzled Keerthy to the kitchen only to discover her partner preparing coffee for her whom he mentions as his special friend. The advertisement advocates for equality in partnership.

8.6. VIM

Vim which is available in both the popular bar and gel forms, is the leader among dishwash liquids. It boasts of the power of hundred lemons with the promise of sparkling, germ free utensils. Like any other liquid the ads targeted women, projecting them as solely responsible for cleaning the dishes. But they embarked on a new journey with their “Nazariya Badlo, Dekho Barthano se Aage” commercials. In one of the ads a prospective groom who offers to help with cooking, is given a rude shock as the bride to be offers to help him with dishes, awakening him to the reality of marriage as true partnership in every respect. The other ads in the series too drive home the fact that a woman is not just a homemaker but there is more to her and that man should play his role as a real partner to ensure successful life. [16]

Figure 6



Figure 6 [17]

The latest ad in the series advocates for freedom from the outmoded thought that washing dishes is a woman's chore. The ad shows a man asking his mother whether it's Mother's Day or his wife's birthday on seeing his son wash dishes, as he deems these as the only occasions that warrant freeing a woman momentarily from her house work. His mother replies that her grandson is celebrating freedom from the thought that washing dishes is his mother's job. She exhorts her son to get liberated from such narrow debilitating beliefs and become self-sufficient in washing one's own dishes. Her words declare that a woman should not be made to shoulder all the house chores single handedly, it is the joint responsibility of the family.

9. CONCLUSION

The audience are bombarded by numerous commercials all the time. It necessitates innovative storylines that engage the attention of the audience. Ads have shifted their focus from dwelling too much on the products to addressing the pressing problems in society. The emergence of the "New Women" who negotiate the precarious line between the domestic and professional commitments have a mind of their own and do not hesitate to express their preferences and challenge the norms that curtail their freedom and growth. Hence, it's high time the ads reflected the needs and dreams of women and spread the message of equality of all humans. Some commercials have already shown the way and the future holds great promise as more ads are poised to break the stereotypes and strive for the equality of the sexes.

Today, the world is becoming more sensitive towards the portrayal of gender roles and advertisements are one of the most potent media which can effect a change. Gender equality can become a reality only by doing away with gender stereotyping and ensuring equal rights for women. Advertisements can go a long way in making gender parity a reality and bring about a change in the prevailing perspectives regarding gender roles by reinforcing positive gender norms and roles. [18]

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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