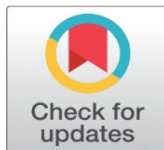
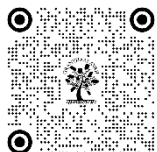


GENDER ROLE CONSTRUCTS OF BOYS AND GIRLS IN TELEVISION COMMERCIALS AIMED AT CHILDREN- A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

The current paper is a comparative analysis of two studies- one conducted by me two decades ago (2002) and the same study carried out again in 2022 that investigated the gender differences in television commercials aimed at children. Both the studies attempted to identify whether there are any patterns in terms of the production, presentation and editing techniques with reference to gender in television commercials specifically aimed at children; to probe the nature of relative patterns within and between sets of data and compare them. Hart (1991) suggested that the underlying meaning in a text, as intended by the producers, could be revealed by identifying and counting any significant textual features. The study attempted to compare the results of the previous study with the current one with the objectives: to (i) find out products associated with girls only, boys only and girls & boys commercials (ii) examine the depiction of boys and girls in these three categories of commercials and compare the results with that of the previous study (iii) dominant settings, activities and governing type of interactions associated with boys and girls in the commercials (iv) examine whether there are any differences in those representations in the current study and if they still continue to be gender stereotyped (v) identify the technical aspects used in these three types of commercials and if there are any changes in the contemporary advertisements when compared to 2002 commercials.

Keywords: Gender, Television Commercials, Culture, Stereotypes, Construct, Portrayal & Depiction

1. INTRODUCTION

The role of women in Indian society has undergone significant changes in the recent decades, with women increasingly participating in the workforce, taking on a wider range of occupations including sectors traditionally dominated by men. This shift has been driven by a range of factors, including changing attitudes towards gender roles, improvements in education and health, and greater economic opportunities for women. This has led to a greater scope for personal and

professional development of women and has helped to break down traditional gender stereotypes. However, Indian advertisements still refuse to adjust to the changing reality, reflecting conventional, stereotypical roles despite recent evidence to the contrary. It is not only with reference to women; even the way children are portrayed does not reflect the recent societal trends. Current Indian television commercials often reinforce traditional gender norms and perpetuate stereotypes about femininity and what is appropriate for girls.

For instance, commercials aim to sell toys, dolls, and other products to girls and boys by maintaining the notion that these products are designed specifically for them and that children should be interested in purchasing them. In other words, they give a picture that those advertisements suggest the children what is appropriate for their gender. The message conveyed by these commercials is that girls should be passive and submissive, interested in nurturing and care-giving activities while boys can be mischievous and act smart. In addition, they advocate that girls should be interested in certain activities and hobbies, while boys should be interested in others. Advertising aimed at children is a powerful tool for shaping their perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors [Acuff \(1997\)](#) Children's commercials are an integral part of the media landscape in India, with television being one of the most widely watched medium in this region. In this context, this paper aims to examine whether the gender construct in current Indian television commercials aimed at children have changed during a span of 20 years and to scrutinize to what extent they reflect reality using content analysis.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This review of related literature is intended to address how gender is embedded in the media texts and what kind of latent messages they disseminate to children. Bandura's [1969], social learning theory specifies that children learn their appropriate gender-roles through observing the actions of others and that they will acquire those behaviors more quickly where there is an attractive model such as celebrity, television personality or cartoon character whose behavior is rewarded. Peirce [1989] states that television teaches children a great deal about gender-typed behaviors simply because it brings an abundance of readily observable models into the child's own home. There has been a great deal of research to demonstrate that television has an impact on children's beliefs, and behaviors. In 56% of the dual-earner families', children are getting socialized more by television than by their mothers (Chandra V, 2000) especially in developing countries. Television commercials aimed at children, has been determined to be sexist in their depiction of female characters.

According to [Goffman \(1979\)](#) messages about authority and dominance could be inferred through features such as the arrangement of characters, visual and body orientation, and other cues that relate only indirectly to the product being advertised [Bandura \(1977\)](#). [Welch et al. \(1979\)](#) observed that different production techniques are used for both boys' and girls' ads and it was found that boys' commercials had higher level of action and more versatility in the form of changes to new scenes than the girls' or neutral commercials, in which both boys and girls were present. Their study found that advertisements showed girls playing with dolls and household gadgets while boys played with cars [Alexander et al. \(1998\)](#). The results of this study supported the fact that commercials aimed at boys contain higher levels of action. Boys' and neutral commercials had higher rates of cuts, while the girls' contained more fades and dissolves. One of the most widely quoted differences in the portrayal of men and women were the use of voiceovers in

advertisements. [Barcus \(1977\)](#) found the use of voiceovers in children's advertisements was similar to adult advertisements in that 90% of the commentary and narration was male. In this context, the current study attempts to find the answers for the following objectives.

3. OBJECTIVES

- To find out the products associated with boys only, girls only and girls & boys commercials.
- To examine the depiction of boys and girls in these three categories of commercials and compare the results with that of the previous study carried out in 2002.
- To analyze the dominant settings, activities and governing type of interactions associated with the boys and girls in the three categories of commercials.
- To identify if there are any differences in the gender representations in the current study in comparison to the previous study.
- To investigate the technical aspects used in these three types of commercials and if there are any changes in the contemporary advertisements when compared to 2002 commercials.

4. METHODOLOGY

The current study is a content analysis of 50 television advertisements aired during weekday prime time children's television programs. These results were compared with that of a similar study conducted in 2002. The ads were first categorized into typical (i) Girls only (ii) Boys only (iii) Girls & Boys commercials with the help of coders with .85 to .96 intercoder reliability for different variables. Commercials with the image of at least one child constituted the sample and repeated commercials were not included in it. If only a single gender appeared or one was dominant, that commercial was coded as girls only or boys only advertisement. When both genders were present in equal numbers, the orientation of the advertisement was classified as boys & girls / neutral / mixed gender. The results were compared with that of the study conducted in 2002.

4.1. HYPOTHESES

Hypothesis 1: More number of television commercials are aimed at boys than girls.

Hypothesis 2: Gender role construct in television advertisements are stereotyped.

a. Boys are depicted as active, caregivers taking responsibilities of the household as well as the environment and community they belong to.

b. Girls are portrayed as passive, concerned about their appearance with nurturing abilities.

Hypothesis 3: Boys only, Girls only television advertisements have different production and editing features.

a. Boys only advertisements contain more shots than girls only advertisements.

b. Shot duration in boys only advertisements is less when compared to girls only ads.

c. Girls only television advertisements have more fades and dissolves; boys only advertisements have more cuts.

Hypothesis 4: More number of television advertisements use male voiceovers than female voice overs in all categories.

Hypothesis 5: The changes in the gender construct of boys and girls in Indian television advertisements are very less when compared to ads twenty years back.

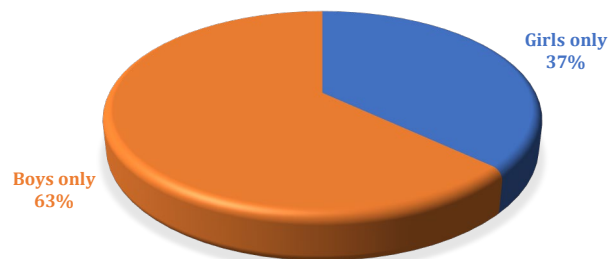
5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

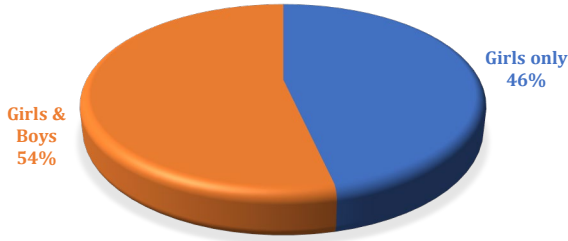
5.1. GENDER POSITIONING OF CHILDREN'S ADVERTISEMENTS

The first variable of investigation was the gender positioning of advertisements aired during children's programs; the purpose was to compare the proportion of commercials featuring only girls to those featuring only boys and both boys and girls. There were 35 single-gender advertisements in all, 22 of which featured boys and only 13 with girls. It was found that 63% percent of the advertisements were positioned with boys and 37% were positioned with both; similarly, when girls only and mixed gender commercials were compared, 46.4% of commercials were associated with girls while 53.6% of the commercials were neutral. Thus, Hypothesis 1 – **"More number of television commercials are aimed at boys than girls"** was accepted.

Table 1

Table 1 Gender Positioning of Children's Commercials		
Gender Positioning of Ads	Number	%
Girls only	13	63
Boys only	22	37
Total	35	100
Gender Positioning of Ads	Number	%
Girls only	13	46.4
Boys & Girls	15	53.5
Total	28	100



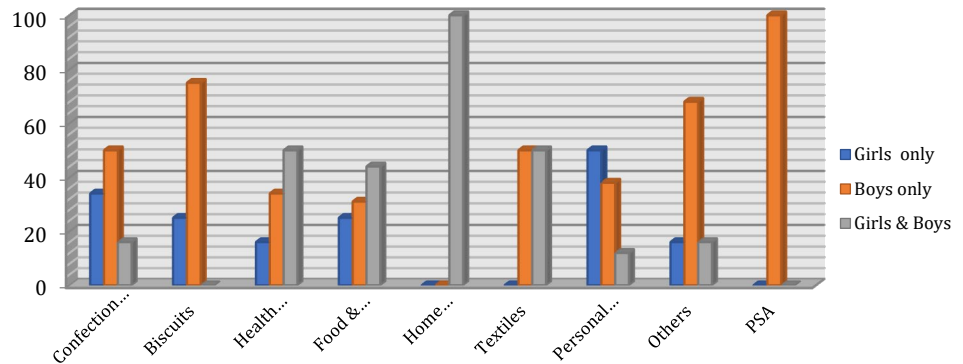


5.2. PRODUCT ASSOCIATION WITH GENDER

- The next variable for analysis in the study was the type of products advertised using children. [Winick et al. \(1973\)](#) identified four types of children's products that were commonly promoted using children such as toys, cereals, fast foods, candies & snacks. However, in this study, the proportion of commercials in those conventional categories constituted only 50% and the toys category was completely missing as in the case of previous study. According to a report published by the India Equity Foundation (IBEF), the Indian toys market size reached US\$ 1.5 Billion in 2022 and is projected to reach US\$ 3.3 Billion by 2025, growing at a Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) of 13.7 during the forecast period. The report also stated that the Indian toy industry is highly fragmented, with the unorganized sector accounting for around 90% of the market share. This could possibly be the reason for less number of advertisements for toys Indian television.
- The product categories evolved in the current study were Confectioneries (Chocolates, Candies & Toffees), Biscuits, Health Drinks, Food & Groceries, Home Appliances, Textiles, Personal Hygiene products and an "Others" category in addition to a Public Service Advertisement [Bandura & Walters \(1963\)](#). While the first four traditional categories constituted 64% of the total advertisements, 20% of the commercials that targeted children and used children as models were for personal hygiene products and textiles. The remaining 16% of the commercials belonged to the category of 'Others' along with a Public Service Advertisement.

Table 2

Table 2 Products Associated with Boys & Girls						
Product Category	Girls only Ads		Boys only Ads		Boys & Girls Ads	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Confectioneries	2	34	3	50	1	16
Biscuits	1	25	3	75	0	0
Health Drinks	1	16	2	34	3	50
Food & Groceries	4	25	5	31	7	44
Home Appliances	0	0	0	0	1	100
Textiles	0	0	1	50	1	50
Personal Hygiene	4	50	3	38	1	12
Others	1	16	4	68	1	16
PSA	0	0	1	100	0	0



- Among the Boys only advertisements, there were three ads each for chocolates, biscuits, and personal hygiene products, five ads for food & groceries, two ads for health drinks, one ad for textiles and four ads in the “others” category along with one PSA [Bussey & Bandura \(1999\)](#). Girls were associated with only half the number of commercials as that of boys except in the food& groceries category wherein four ads featured girls while three five ads featured boys. Those ads that featured girls were for Ghee, Dates, Paneer, and a traditional sweet making Flour. Boys were associated with Tea, Wheat flour, Salt and two brands of Fast Food. In the others category, only one advertisement was positioned with girls and one with mixed gender and the remaining four ads among six were associated with boys [Calvert & Wilson \(2011\)](#).

5.3. GENDER CONSTRUCT OF BOYS

- Among the advertisements for products positioned with boys, in two advertisements (one for health drink and the other for a fast food) sons help their mothers. In the first one, the son keeps a jar at the top shelf, which is not reachable to his mother. In the second one, the son who is preparing for his exams in the night, prepares a snack for his mother and asks her to take care of her health [Collins \(2011\)](#). Both the ads convey the message that boys take care of their mothers at home. Further, a small boy when questioned by his mother about breaking a piggy bank, questions how he can ask her money to buy a gift for her birthday. In addition, a boy in another ad helps a security person by giving him money to get a packet of tea when he notices the other person suffering from cold. Interestingly, in an advertisement for a chocolate, a boy hides a chocolate in his white shirt to protect his diabetic grandfather from getting scolding from the grandmother when he is about to be caught eating the chocolate. The boy is shown saying, “I had to hide it as grandpa is diabetic; I can’t allow him to see me eating a chocolate”. Boys shown in commercials are so compassionate and matured in their behaviour.
- Two popular brands of detergents have always used boys to promote their brands. One has continually emphasized that stain is good, and it has been associated with building/maintaining relationships. In the venture of helping others-in one case, a grandmother, a small boy makes

himself dirty [Calvert & Huston \(1987\)](#). An advertisement with the same concept, released earlier, showed a small boy helping his friend and making himself dirty. In the latter, the friend is a girl, and the boy takes care of her and even goes to the extent of hitting the ground which made her fall down. In one of the chocolate advertisements, an elder brother talks to his infant sibling about the chocolate and relates it to their relationship. In another chocolate ad, a boy gives a small girl (seems to be his sister) chocolate in the middle of the night without others knowing. Nevertheless, the excited sister raises her voice (because of the taste of the chocolate) making everyone in the house wake up. Here, the boy is portrayed as smart, giving chocolate to the girl cautioning her not to make noise. However, the girl is portrayed as naïve who doesn't have the sharpness of the boy to comprehend the situation. Thus, boys seem to be the protectors of girls whether it is a sister, mother, or grandmother.

- In the personal hygiene product category, relatively more number of advertisements are positioned with boys when compared to the scenario twenty years back [Calvert et al. \(1989\)](#). Two popular soap brands have always used boys as their models. However, these soaps are not positioned as beauty soaps; rather, their usage is shown after a tough sports battle or rough work out. It was observed that though the boy is shown taking bath using a particular brand of soap, it is pictured in a bathroom that is open with an aesthetic setting and a lot greenery. Unlike showing girls having bath in a closed, indoor setting, the boy is shown enjoying his bath in an open area. In other words, the scene represents the free will of boys indirectly conveying the message that given the same context, boys can have fun while girls should maintain their good skin/beauty and in turn their dignity.
- The depiction of boys has been the same for the past twenty years. Boys are always portrayed as smart; at the same time mischievous [Coyne et al. \(2004\)](#). They are not only concerned about their family; rather they care for the community as well. The same kind of depiction was observed twenty years ago, in an ad for a detergent, where a group of small boys cover the pitch in a stadium when rain starts pouring making themselves dirty. They are shown to be quick-witted than girls. In an ad for a biscuit, a boy tries to skip breakfast, saying that we have to care for animals and so he is giving his breakfast to his pet. However, when he comes to know that his mother is giving him a particular brand of biscuits, immediately he starts eating them and gives an excuse that his pet is fasting on that day.
- Further, even though they are children, boys are shown to have values. An ad for salt shows a boy playing a local cricket match and bowled by the opposite team. However, there arises a doubt whether the ball really hit the wicket or not. Even the umpire is not sure. In this context, the boy looks at his mother and he moves out of the field by himself. The mother's voice says in the background that honesty always pays; and the message conveyed is that boys are not only sportive, but also virtuous. In the Public Service ad, a small boy creates awareness regarding the importance of separation of biodegradable and non-biodegradable waste by sitting in the middle of the waste. He talks about the future world and makes his parents to be ashamed of their behaviour. Here

again, he is more of caregiver and protector of not just the family but also the environment.

Apart from being physically strong and energetic, boys are always represented as taking responsibilities outside their homes. They are shown to be taking care of not only their younger ones, but also as helping elders. Advertisement mothers always seem to appreciate their sons for their smartness, intelligence, knowledge, strength, affection and so on. They were featured giving instructions to their mothers, guiding others and involving in a variety of activities in which generally adults are engaged in. The commercials suggest that boys are the guardians of homes. Thus hypothesis 2 (a) **“Boys are depicted as active, caregivers taking responsibilities of the household as well as the environment and community they belong to”** was accepted.

5.4. GENDER CONSTRUCT OF GIRLS

- Association of girl children with personal hygiene products such as soaps and shampoos is found to continue even today. They often feature girls using them to enhance their appearance and to be more attractive. The message conveyed by these commercials is that girls should be interested in beauty and fashion, and that these activities are appropriate for them. This reinforces the stereotype that girls should be concerned with their appearance and that their worth is tied to their physical beauty. This was observed in an advertisement for a soap where a girl closes her eyes, runs to meet her mother without looking at anyone, and praises her mother that her face is so beautiful that nothing could be compared with it. Though gender associations with products remain the same, the concepts are gradually changing. For instance, the advertisement for a particular brand of soap earlier associated the skin texture of girl with the prospects of her marriage. Television commercial for the same product today, focuses on emphasizing her strength & self-confidence and symbolically represents the association between the product and those qualities.
- Similarly, amongst the gender stereotyped advertisements, one refreshing change observed was that when a girl asks her mother whether she will look like a King, the mother replies that her daughter will look like a Queen [Goffman \(1979\)](#). But the context of the conversation between the child and the mother remains the same. The daughter complains to her mother that others in the school tease her because she is very small. Her mother, lifting up her long plait, assures her that she is not small; but tall and strong. Nevertheless, the message conveyed here is that the caliber of a girl is measured in terms of her beauty – in this instance, her hair. In India, long hair is considered as a sign of beauty, and hair is always thought to be an important factor that signifies beauty of a woman worldwide. The advertisement also reinforces the same notion.
- For the first time in the advertising history of Boost, a girl has replaced the place of a boy, fighting for her position in the sports arena [Greenberg & Brand \(1993\)](#). The older ads for Boost used to show a boy with a popular cricketer like MS Dhoni playing and drinking Boost, revealing the secret of their stamina. But, in the current ad, the girl proves her talent to the sarcastic boys who comment on her abilities.

Here again, it goes without saying that a girl has to work twice and prove her worth to get her rightful position in a place where boys are the main stake holders. The celebrity in this advertisement tests her ability and only after that they drink the health drink together. The ad very subtly disseminates the notion that girls should fight hard to find their way in any field even if they are talented. They should be ready to prove themselves to those who pose questions to them.

- In an advertisement for a food item, a girl is shown putting her dirty legs on the wall upside down. This kind of portrayal was not observed even in a single advertisement twenty years back. Girls were always shown neatly dressed, well-groomed and with a so called lady like behaviour [Kimmel \(2017\)](#). They are expected to behave more like mothers. This was obvious in a mixed gender ad for a health drink where a girl advises a boy to take care of his health by drinking a particular health drink. Her mother strengthens her statement. Similarly, in a toothpaste ad, a small girl describes the process of germs getting inside our mouth and how it could be protected. In this ad, the small girl wears a cloth like a sari taking the role of a mother. In all the categories of advertisements, girls are shown to take up the nurturing role whenever possible. In general, advertisements positioned with girls reflect more of traditional gender roles prescribed for women. Hence, the Hypothesis 2(b) **“Girls are portrayed as passive, concerned about their appearance with nurturing abilities”** was accepted.

5.5. PRESENTATION AND TECHNICAL ASPECTS

- The study results proved that there are very subtle changes in the presentation and editing techniques between the results of the current study and the previous one with regard to all the three categories of advertisements.
- Girls only ads mostly featured girls inside their homes while boys only ads depicted boys in various places like cricket ground, market, swimming pool etc., Boys only advertisements mostly featured boys in outdoor settings (55%) while those with girls showed them in indoor settings (45%). Boys were associated with various activities like swimming, playing matches and so on whereas girls were re depicted eating chocolates, dancing etc.,
- Boys only ads have more shots & cuts and seem to be fast moving when compared girls only ads. Girls only advertisements have transitions and less number of shots compared to boys only advertisements [Lindgren & McDaniel \(2012\)](#). The duration of shots in boys only ads was less than the average shot length and it was less than 1.39 seconds. On the other hand, in the television advertisements with girls, the duration of each shot was above average, that was more than 1.74 seconds which meant that the shots were longer. Naturally, the number of shots in boys only commercials was more, and they move faster than girls only ads. Very negligible percentage of boys only advertisements used any type of transition effect while girls only advertisements used transitions like “dissolve” for more frames.

Hence, the Hypothesis 3 **“Boys only, Girls only television advertisements have different production and editing features”** was accepted.

- As the review of literature proved, majority of all types of ads had male voice over. Results of the study proved that male voice over was used customarily by all categories of advertisements. Boys only ads did not use female voice over even in a single occasion. Hence, the Hypothesis 4 “**More number of television advertisements use male voiceovers than female voice overs in all categories**” was accepted.
- Overall, the differences in the gender role construct of both boys and girls in television advertisements aimed at children during a period of 20 years is very little. The portrayal of both boys and girls still stereotyped with regard to dominant setting, activities and interactions of boys and girls. In addition, production and technical aspects continue to follow the same principles. Hence, it could be concluded that the Hypothesis 5 “**The changes in the gender construct of boys and girls in Indian television advertisements are very less when compared to ads twenty years back**” was accepted.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it was observed from the study that there are not enough changes in the gender construct in the current Indian television commercials when compared to the real life transformations. They still continue to reinforce traditional gender roles and perpetuate stereotypes about femininity and what is appropriate for girls. In addition to reinforcing traditional gender roles, commercials aimed at girls also propagate the stereotype that girls should be passive and dependent. Commercials for toys that require a nurturing or care-giving role, such as baby dolls or pet toys, often feature girls playing these roles. The message conveyed by these commercials is that girls should be interested in nurturing and care-giving activities, and that these activities are appropriate for them. They try to reinforce the idea that girls are nurturing and care-giving by nature and that they should continue doing it.

In addition, they continue to deliver the message that girls should be concerned with their appearance and should strive to be beautiful and fashionable. Being attractive is a primary goal for girls, and that they should focus on their appearance to the exclusion of other interests and pursuits. In many advertisements, where both girls and boys are featured, girls are shown dancing in medium or long shots, irrespective of the occasion or product while boys are captured in close-up shots showing various expressions. Also, when the boys in the commercials are involved in a lot of activities like swimming, playing, eating etc., girls are involved in taking care of their skin, hair and so on with very few exceptions.

These depictions reinforce gender roles and can influence children's self-esteem and beliefs about what is appropriate for their gender. It is important for commercials to feature a diverse range of activities and interests that appeal to children regardless of their gender, in order to promote gender equality and challenge gender stereotypes. It is important for commercials aimed at girls to challenge gender stereotypes and to promote gender equality, by featuring a diverse range of settings, activities and interactions associated with interests that appeal to children regardless of their gender. This will help to create a more inclusive and gender-sensitive media landscape for girl children in India. Another important observation from the study was that in four advertisements, adults were shown along with the children, and they were depicted more like children. Two biscuit advertisements portray fathers enjoying the biscuit, teaching their son/daughter how to eat the biscuit. In another ad, a school principal tries to eat the chocolates

he sees on television screen. Yet another ad shows a senior citizen fighting with a kid for the chocolate inside a biscuit. This inclination is entirely opposite to the trend followed two decades ago when more children models were used to promote products that were not used by them. Further, in all these commercials, the elders involved are men either adults or senior citizens; like voice over, there is a domination of male figures associated with children, spending time, having fun, and teaching the children the ways of life whether the child shown is a girl or a boy.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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