

Beyond the Gender Stereotype - New Age Advertising in India

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ABSTRACT

Advertising in India is seeing a slow but noticeable change in the way women are depicted. The stereotyping of women in roles of homemaker and caregiver are being overridden in favour of more dynamic personalities. Women are shown having agency both over their body and mind, as persons who are able to take decisions about life choices and career, without being subservient to social or familial expectations. This change is being reflected in new age advertisements for many brands, thereby strengthening the gender inclusivity emerging in present day society.

KEYWORDS: *Advertisements – stereotypes – women - representation - occupation – decision making area - inclusive*

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Advertisements quite naturally depict the dominant social mores and cultures of the society or country or audience these are targeted at. The depiction of women in advertisements in the country had been following this tradition of stereotypes since the early 20th century onwards,

“Women are more likely to be shown as married, less likely to be shown in paid occupation and more likely to be depicted as caretakers and parents than male characters”

These are some of the findings of a study released in April 2022 by UNICEF and the Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media (GDI) titled “Gender Bias and Inclusion In Advertising In India”. The research measures over 1,000 television and YouTube advertisements aired across India in 2019. The ads analysed were those that received the most reach.(The Hindu, New Delhi, April 22,2021)

The baby product ads always portray the mother taking care of the baby essentially showcasing that the responsibility of tending to the child rests primarily on the shoulders of the mother; the car/automobile commercials or advertisements for financial services rarely feature women, sending

out the message that men are intelligent and better decision makers than women; and, most of the home appliance ads show women as the principal consumers.

However in the last decade social attitudes have begun to undergo significant change, especially in the way women were perceived by society.

Instead of the demure, all sacrificing house wife managing the affairs inside home, attending to cooking, cleaning and other chores for husband, son and in-laws, there emerged in society the independent woman who also had her own employment and fulfilled role of a professional. Gender stereotypes in society thus came under scrutiny and began to undergo change.

Since Advertising is a commercial activity and focused on increasing awareness and interest about products thereby enhancing sales, has to follow existing majority social trends, so these social changes, being marginal, were by and large not reflected in the advertising campaigns designed by agencies.

Gender Next, a study undertaken by the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) and Future brands in 2021 looked at 600 ads across different categories and spoke to consumers across 10 cities. The study revealed that real women considered themselves more progressive than depictions in mainstream advertising.

The Gender Next study found that a majority of mainstream advertising continues to use harmful and non-aspirational portrayals of women. The study proposed the 'SEA' framework i.e. **Self-esteemed-Empowered-Allied framework** and the **3S screener (Subordination-Service-Standardization)** for marketing and advertising professionals to understand the nuances of gender portrayal and as an inventory checklist for the review of scripts or films. This helps not only to identify implicit and regressive stereotypes but offers a model to help brands create advertising that is more compelling and powerful and effective in gaining more acceptability for them.

The Advertising Standards Council of India, and Kantar, a leading data, insights, and consulting firm, have collaborated to release a white paper (2021) that puts together data and insights making the business case for mainstreaming positive gender depictions. Kantar found that progressive portrayals of women result in advertising that is more effective. Indian advertisements that depicted progressive gender roles had a positive impact of as much as 32% in short-term product sales and improved a brand's equity by a whopping 51%. These results and insights prove that progressive depictions of women can drive engagement with brands in a major way, in the target market segment.

"Brands that have experimented with progressive portrayals of women have earned good volumes, positive brand scores and profits. True," said Harish Bijoor, founder at Harish Bijoor Consults, a reknowned Bangaluru based consultancy firm. "But this is true only within their segmented buying audiences. within its carved out niche top of the pyramid audience. Downside is the fact that it may not work when the same message reaches a wider mass at the middle and bottom of the pyramid, which remains regressive in its intent towards women. Interestingly, it is not only women. Men, too, face similar stereotyping. In India, 74% female consumers and 70% male consumers believe that the way they are portrayed in advertising is completely out of touch with who they are."

In the last few years brands have slowly and steadily realised that advertisements have to take into cognizance changing attitudes of the consumer market towards gender equality (some of the

advertisements have indeed broken the stereotypes depicting alternate views of the traditional man-woman roles in society) as new portrayals of women in advertisements have a positive effect on business for the brands.

Some examples of advertisements that have shown women and men in a different light may be analysed here to understand the evolving trends -

- 1. Ariel's "Share The Load" campaign** (2016) showed a father introspecting his role at his house and deciding to help his wife with the laundry after watching his married daughter balancing work and household tasks alone. This campaign shows the desirability of the men in the household in sharing the work of laundry at home with the wife asking the question "Why is laundry only the mother's job?"
- 2. Havell's "Hawa Badlegi" advertisement** (2013) depicted the husband taking up his wife's surname after marriage couple walks into a lady marriage registrar's office. When the registrar asks the woman to confirm if after the marriage she will be taking up the husband's surname, the man interrupts to say that it is him who will take up her surname post marriage.
- 3. Biba's "Change The Convention" campaign** (2016) showcased the father questioning the cooking skills of his prospective son-in-law in the pre-marriage meeting with his family, with the latter inviting him for dinner after ten days allowing him some time to learn cooking.
- 4. Vim's Nazariya Badlo, Dekho Bartano Se Aage: Agency Mullen Lowe Lintas** (2021) This ad told the story of a prospective matrimonial arrangement, where the 'independent guy' under the implicit assumption that it is the wife's job to cook and clean, tries to impress the girl by offering to 'help' her with cooking. The girl immediately offers to 'help' him with dishes, gently nudging him to be independent in household chores as well, as she could get late from work. The boy's initial shock and eventual change of perspective drives home the campaign message of 'Nazariya Badlo, Dekho Bartano Se Aage'. The girl in the ad is not only 'more than her chores' but also a change-maker who calls for equal partnership.
- 5. Saffola's Rakhna Heart ka Khayal | Agency: Mullen Lowe Lintas** (2020) Moving away from the stereotypical gender role of a woman taking care of the husband and the family's health, Saffola's film reversed gender roles and visualised a modern couple where the

husband is looking after his wife. It portrays the husband as the one who is concerned about the stress his wife goes through at work and its impact on her heart. While he cannot take away her stress, no matter how much he would like to, he does what's in his control to take care of her heart. With this ad, Saffola and Mullen Lintas challenged the stereotypical FMCG ads we are tired of seeing about the eternally caregiver woman.

6. Elegant Steel's Nari Shakti - The Steel Within: Agency FCB India (2021) Launched during Navratri, this campaign pointed out how the irony of celebrating Nari Shakti and female power for the nine days is very stark. Because for the rest of the year, we get busy dis-empowering her. How this biased narrative is maintained is through words. Cruel words, words aimed to put you in boxes, words to shame, words to make sure you never ever discover your true power within. When even one woman, refuses to succumb to this narrative, the swords and the pitchforks come out. Because you see, one woman freeing herself from the narrative, can inspire millions to break free, refuse to be cowed down and write their own story.

This campaign celebrates women and the power they find within themselves to fight for a seat at the table and hopes for a better future for them.

7. Dove India's Stop The Beauty Test | Agency: Agency Ogilvy & Mather (2021,2022) Dove's Stop The Beauty Test film walked us through hard-hitting, real stories of beauty-based judgment and rejection faced by women during the matchmaking process, and the impact this has on their self-esteem. In this ad, a series of events is shown where the groom's family has come to prospective bride's home to check her out in person before giving approval as is done in arranged marriages in India. A fat girl is given a drape over her salwar kameez dress by her mother to hide her plumpness, a dark girl is jibed by the groom's mother for being darker than she appears in her photograph, a short girl is mocked by the groom's mother that she would have to use a ladder to talk to her son as he is a tall man, a girl with lush curvy hair is jokingly chided by the groom's sister to straighten her hair as the groom "doesn't like noodles at all", a girl with a reddish pigment mark on her cheek is questioned about it disparagingly. The voiceover at the end of the visual reminds us not to look at only the physical outward beauty in women but to value the inner beauty of the woman as a person.

8. Anouk (Myntra) - Bold is Beautiful, The Calling: Agency Ogilvy and Mather (2015) The ad shows two women walking out of a client's office. The senior woman manager congratulates the younger woman on her excellent presentation to the client. They get into the car and the senior woman suddenly makes a comment to the other woman praising her jacket colour adding that it almost hid her baby bump. The younger woman asks if her pregnancy was a problem otherwise why her male colleague was recently being re-assigned all her work and also getting promoted over her. The senior woman manager says that it was a management decision and that their client wanted a senior architect who would be around always and as she was pregnant this could not be expected of her. It was not a reflection of her performance. But she counters that her performance was being overlooked just because of her pregnancy. The senior manager advises her that she should take a break from her work now and rejoin after one year and the company would consider her promotion at that time. The younger woman, shown wearing a red Anouk brand dress, then replies that she could handle both motherhood and her work and it was her choice and reveals that she was starting on her own, resigning from the present job. (There is a lot of debate about this ad despite its projected views about the right of a woman to her choices in life and about work-place discrimination against women. Whether it was the right decision on the younger woman's part on taking up more responsibilities with her own start up at the time of having a baby, whether her plush start-up office shown betrayed her financial solvency and also a pre-meditated decision on her part to quit her job, not dependant on her employer Company's decisions regarding her promotion etc.)

9. Anouk (Myntra) - Bold is Beautiful, The Move: Agency Ogilvy and Mather (2016) This ad film presents a scenario of an intense discussion between a young married couple. The woman, an editor, who has found a job in Delhi, tries to convince her husband to move with her. But her husband exclaims that he is up for a promotion and requests her to stay back stating that all wives settle where their husbands dwell. The woman says that two years back she had moved with her husband to this city, leaving her earlier job without thinking about her career, so now it was the husband's turn to do the same for her. By the end of the film the woman decides to pursue her new career opportunity in Delhi, even

if her husband stays back.. She powerfully conveys the message that married women can look up to career opportunities and follow their dreams, even if it calls for relocating to another city.

The Anouk brand of Kurtas from Myntra is promoted through the dress worn by the woman as she leaves for her new job.

Conclusion

Advertising is a very powerful medium of influencing the attitudes of society towards gender stereotyping and roles of women i.e. gender socialization and changing them.

The process of gender socialization means expected gender roles are learned from birth and intensified throughout childhood and adolescence with messages received from society, including from the marketing and advertising they see around them.

Negative gender norms and stereotypes influence children's self-perception and contribute to shaping different pathways for their future. Addressing negative gender socialization is critical to achieving gender equality and the world of advertising is a powerful agent for change. Achieving gender equality is about breaking down negative gender stereotypes and realizing equal rights for women and girls – and gender positive advertising is a confirmation of these rights. A positive gender norm in marketing and advertising exposes children and adolescents to a concept of gender parity and encourage a way of thinking that includes the perspectives of all, leading to better outcomes for everyone.

Preeti Reddy, Chairwoman, South Asia, Insights Division, Kantar has said, "Mainstreaming positive gender portrayals is an exciting opportunity for creating engaging and impactful advertising. While taking a firm stand against inequality is

commendable, there is space to tell vibrant brand stories between the extreme ends of objectifying and deifying women. Without being preachy, subtle subversions on slice-of-life moments, gender roles and responses have the potential to make the viewing experience rewarding for consumers as well as to plant the seed of a fresh mental gender map. Positive gender portrayal is not just about occasional tributes but also about a more conscious integration of progressive portrayal of genders in advertising. Such advertising holds the potential to deliver higher marketing RoI and to help create a more inclusive world."

According to Manisha Kapoor, CEO & Secretary General, ASCI "Advertisers can no longer afford to ignore the issue of progressive depictions of women. Women, particularly the younger generation, reject the implicit and explicit stereotyping that creeps into advertising. Women see progressive advertising as their ally in their journeys to more fulfilling lives.

Over the period of time, there has been a slow but definite change in the content of advertisements,. It is encouraging to see some brands valiantly challenging gender stereotypes and attempting to bring in greater inclusivity. It is hoped that with such positive and persistent efforts Indian advertising will be able to alter the pervasive gender bias and play a pivotal role in shaping the society and culture for tomorrow.

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