

# WOMEN ON THE GO: VIEWING FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF INDIAN ADVERTISEMENTS AND COMMERCIALS

## Abstract

In tune with the changing socio-cultural norms and perspectives, women's role in Indian society has evolved over the time, encouraging their multifaceted projection in commercials and advertisements via broadcast and mass media. The narratives and discourses of advertisements and commercials have also reflected major shifts, influencing product promotions, marketing ethics and strategies. While some products have preferred to stick to celebrity brand endorsements some have problematized the idea of "real women" and those outside the boundaries of "real". With references to some popular ads and commercials, witnessed over a period of time on television and other social media platforms, the article intends to chart the development of women's role portrayal in the same.

**Keywords:** women, commercials, advertisements, society

## Author

**Jayita Ghosh**  
State Aided College Teacher  
Department of English  
Netaji Nagar College  
Kolkata, India  
gjayita14@gmail.com

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Ingrid Luden in a study in 2012 found that women watch television on an average for 32 hours per week which approximately is four hours more than a man. Number of female viewers also proved to be comparatively higher than that of men. Advertisers could therefore sense that women would make a potential consumer base for the market and therefore increased their portrayal in the TVCs and commercials. However, their projection across electronic and mass media has led to the creation of misleading images that have defined how women should be looked at, what they are or what they should be. It questions the implications of the "parasocial interactions between the Indian female viewer and the television characters she encounters on a daily basis" to quote Chandran, Ankila Sharavati (1998). Women have come a long way and in today's society they are meant both for the home and the world. Neither gender nor the duty of homemaking have been stumbling blocks on her way of being a professional. She is a woman of substance and being an integral part of the social and family constructs, her portrayal in advertisements and commercials has remained a staple. Advertising, since its introduction in AIR in 1967, partly as a reflection of a developing consumer base and a thriving middle class, has evolved in its character. And in due course of time, commercials, no matter in whichever form it may be, started operating on a trajectory that dwells on a firm synchronicity of the unique selling point and the unique emotional point that targets the consumer base. Women too have been projected in commercials towards this end. While modernity has demanded a regrooming of the socio economic cultural and individual identities, it has largely been regulated by the authorities that are involved in stipulating the measures and norms. Thus, women's portrayal in advertisements and commercials over the time, can be explored within the paradigm of this search for modernity.

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

In 1971 Dominick and Rauch conducted a study to assess women's role portrayal in television commercials and after going through a collection of contemporary advertisements, came to the conclusion that women's projection in the same was predominant in stereotypical domains, namely that of a mother or a homemaker while occupational roles were primarily reserved for men. [1]

In 1974 Silverstein and Silverstein provided valuable insights on the basis of their study and they inferred that men enjoyed more voice and authority in commercials as compared to women. Projection of women being more familiar in subservient roles, they hardly found expression as professionals. Rather, they were often being projected to be at a receiving end as they were more likely to receive knowledge and advice from men rather than themselves imparting the same. [2]

In 1975 a study conducted by Mc Arthur and Resko came to the conclusion that the percentage of women in television advertisements was comparatively much lesser than that of men even in such advertisements where the products or the services promoted were not male specific in particular. [3]

Courtney and Whipple too in their study in 1974 asserted how women's independent identities were ever overshadowed by their biological identity. [4]

Vaishali Shrikhande's study in 1998 came up with a different view, highlighting how women appear more as central figures in commercials than men. [5]

In 2007 Valls-Ferna' ndez and Martinez-Vicente observed how portrayal of gender roles in television commercials often fail to maintain balance. [6]

Moorthi in 2014 highlighted how women's portrayal in television commercials is largely regulated by the concerned product that is being promoted. [7]

Press Institute of India, in 2015 came up with a breakthrough observation focusing on how women in certain advertisements are being projected as independent, ambitious and empowered entities in their varied roles of being a responsible citizen, a professional and a multitasker who can assiduously carry on many responsibilities at a go. [8]

Tam ONEil in 2015 observed how women started regulating decision making across the world reflecting a major shift in social outlook.[9]

GADN report in 2016 threw light on how women being on a par with men in almost every sector of decision making, influenced marketers to increasingly portray them in television commercials.

### **III. OBJECTIVE OF STUDY**

The questions that the article proposes to deal with are, how far the projection of Indian womenfolk in the advertising world has achieved a dissociation from the past tradition through an unfaltering demolition of stereotypes, taboos and stigmas; how at times, the ad's narrative has problematized the idea of womanhood in general and how the medium's representation of women reflects and refracts the viewers' ideas and experiences, influencing marketing ethics.

### **IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The researcher has tried to address the topic in compliance with the research objectives. An exploratory and analytical approach has been undertaken. Relevant secondary sources of information have been taken into consideration for the purpose of building a conceptual framework and the content analysis is based on a thorough study of various books, journals, websites, e-papers, e-publications and online reports. To closely observe how the role portrayal of women in Indian advertisements and commercials has evolved over the time, some popular commercials aired on TV, since the 80s, and some others that are quite prominent across other social and mass media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and likewise, have been taken into account. The TVCs are mainly chosen from popular news, sports, entertainment and regional channels that the Indian households are known to have exposure to.

## V. DISCUSSION

The electronic media has made “womanhood” almost a tool to cater to the changing trends of the global market. The commercials, having access to almost every middle-class household, have been an effective instrument in rapidly spreading as well as in imbibing the changing ideologies and the cultural nuances. In doing so it has made women a staple undoubtedly. In the Indian societal context, traditionally, patriarchy has not faltered to consider “women” as “Other”. This attitude has developed early on at home by sex role socialisation. Thus Jane L. Thompson comments, patriarchy rewarded women for their “complicity” and “docility”. She further states, “Within each woman there is knowledge, energy and power which exists but which, because of the rule of men, has frequently been displaced, buried and confused.” [10]

**1. Gender role as noted in traditional commercials:** Speaking about the Indian tradition, it can be said that women have been usually seen as shallow and superfluous. Essentialism or biological femininity ever have prompted to subsume women under one category. Thus, they are traditionally represented in synchronic terms, reflecting the socio-cultural perspectives rooted in the very concept of “being a woman”. Television commercials in this context are seen to use women as powerful reinforcers of traditional ideas. Thus, they are often projected as being primarily concerned with familial issues, either as a caring mother or as a happy housewife. Being mostly pent up in her kitchen or dining room, she often has been shown to lack the quality of being a phenomenal woman. She got conditioned as being incapable of autonomous actions, thereby appearing in roles of an agent, object and subject. Her conventional and stereotypical roles in the commercials have mainly been that of the manager of the household affairs and the organiser of the family’s physical, economic, spiritual and aesthetic life. She thus got well grooved in her happy “housewife” image as *Lalitaji* of Surf detergent powder, who was not only a perfect housewife in her attire, but also an apt economic organiser of her family. She was intelligent enough to choose “Surf” over other detergent powders as it would not only work wonders on thread, but would also be economical. A troubling paradox is laden here. Women are “essentialised” and “eternalised”, for they belong to an unchanging world, namely the “domestic sphere.” Though situated in the homocentric premises of anthropology, she is ‘A Woman of Substance’. Thus, while exalting women in some respects, the commercials have not failed to belittle women in certain others. The commercials of yesteryears have invariably projected male characters as authoritative and autonomous when compared to their female characters. A close survey would reveal that while males were shown to be indulging in pleasurable rewards, the females were primarily concerned with commodities that could yield socially approved self enhancement. The females were more often bogged down with the cosmetic products, domestic articles, food items, practical concerns and rewards. Compared to the number of men, only a handful of women were depicted as being employed and established on their own terms.

Age has ever been an effective determinant of sex role stereotyping. The ad world has consistently shown women as younger than the males. Hardly would she be shown as widowed, divorced or separated. Whether she is the spouse or the caregiving mother, she

is not withered by the gaining scores, rather she is ever the flawless angel in her beauty and grace. To quote F.scott .Fitzgerald “..... she'll be a fool -- that's the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool. She needs to be classy and fabulous. This has been the usual motto of the fairness cream ads. The fairness cream ads often have made womenfolk believe that good skin pays literally. The motivation goes beyond the mere contentment of “looking good”. Strikingly, “looking good” has been made an integral part of “being good.” Through their myth making imagination, they attempt to instill the idea that looking presentable by combating the problems of darkening, tanning, shrinking and sagging skin is critical in achieving one’s goals in life. Thus, the woman’s face remains a “work of fiction” and an Indian woman can proclaim “The obstacle to obtaining my dream job was my skin” until she is seized by the miracle of a fairness cream. In this context, perhaps, we won’t have to boggle our mind much to remember the ad for “the Fair & Lovely fairness cream” for women, where a hapless father, in throes of dire financial crisis, is shown to lugubriously say, “if only I had a son,” and his dark-skinned daughter looks dejected and demoralised because she lamentably lacks the skill to support her family. The ad then cuts to a clip of the woman, who is now a “Fair & Lovely” user and a flight attendant who leads her father to a five-star restaurant. Skin lightening creams have also been shown to be promising for struggling parents who cannot betroth their dark-skinned daughters to wealthy and prosperous husbands. According to a report, Fair & Lovely, the branded product of Hindustan Liver Ltd held a 90% market share for the product in 1999, which gained a 15 %market share within a span of ten to fifteen years “since it began being sold in India, causing HLL to respond with increasing advertising efforts.” [11] Mark Twain’s saying “Wrinkles should merely indicate where smiles have been,” has been defied largely, by the commercials’ venture to launch numerous anti – aging and wrinkle defying creams. It almost seems to be a custom for Indian women to remain forever in their blushful teens. No matter how wise she is, with the autumns falling apart, her greying hairs, her puffy eyes and her sagging skin would be taken care of by the age miracle creams. A petite bottle can effectively fight “seven signs of aging” keeping her “diva” looks intact. She at times appears more to be an item of decoration that is defined in terms of her relationships with others.

2. **A theoretical approach to popular culture and gender role portrayal:** The factors that influence a successful advertisement campaign, depends on the ever-changing trends which are implicit in the “structures”, “signifiers” and the “signifieds”. The ramification of global marketing today has not only led to a change in the global economy but has also brought significant alterations in the social, cultural and ethical mores. Thus, popular culture is no more defined in terms of traditional disciplinary. Television commercials are more explicit in showcasing the changing ideologies and cultural ethos than any other regular programming. The feminists , to quote Laura Stempel Mumford are unanimous about one central fact “that the medium functions ideologically, working with other social and cultural institutions to reflect , reinforce and mediate existing power relations and ideas about how gender is and should be lived.”[12]The socialist , Marxist or materialist Feminisms also proclaim that women’s position in the society is directly linked to the capitalist relations of production, and in this context it is obvious that the commercials are directed towards investment and promotion as an upcoming profitable phase of domestic consumer economy. Thus, the changing trends in its attempt to replenish the age-old traditions and outdated ideas, have undertaken the challenge to annihilate the stereotypes

and stigmas associated with women folks. Thus, her jejune image of “a happy house wife” or a demure beloved has transcended to that of a sexually overwhelming figure. Now her range varies from that of fitness club faux pas, to the brassy and impish femme fatale. Busty girls, the lure of the heady brew of glamour, the naughty studio photographs, and often a fine blend of the sacred and the profane, attest the world’s inclination for the “dirty picture.” They are used tactfully, as marketing management knows the art of manipulating people. Chandran Ankila Sharavati in her dissertation observes “while the influx of western genres and popular cultural icons is viewed by Indian conservatives as the newest wave of cultural colonialism and moral depravity, it is seen by liberals and social engineers as a means of pulling the Indian mass audience from the rigidity of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Indian culture to the fluidity of the 20<sup>th</sup> century global culture.” [13]

- 3. Tracing changes in women's role portrayal in Indian commercials:** The Indian woman has thus morphed a lot, when compared to her previous images. A woman who is yet to get married can thus clearly state “I would like to work even after marriage”, and in turn get her husband’s support when he clarifies to his father “Sudha doesn’t work to fend her family; she works cause she likes it.”(The commercial for Bengali Matrimony). The Tata Tea “power of 49 %” (2014) , a wakeup call to the politicians , also zero in on women’s empowerment and voting rights .Thus the wife of “*mantriji*”, unabashedly reminds him that it is easy to ignore her , but not “them”, as 49 %of the voting rights are reserved for the females. Conceptualised by Lowe Lintas “the power of 49 campaign” an extension of the brand’s “jago re” campaigns looked forward to making people aware of the simple statistics, that women constitute 49% of the voting bank and they are capable of both making and breaking the governments. Havell’s fan’s “Hawa Badlegi” campaign also threw light on that new wave of change that the society witnessed almost ten years back. The commercial featured a couple walking into the marriage registrar’s office. Keeping with the traditional cultural practices while the registrar assumes to take on the husband’s name, the groom rectifies her and says that the bride would retain her maiden name and he would be jolly happy to take on her surname. So her maiden name is no more a mere “phrase applicable to no one,” nor could “marrying” leave her “maiden name disused” though she is “so thankfully confused /By law with someone else.” While recalling the ad, Rahul da Cunha, the managing director and creative head of Da Cunha Communications, said, “India is a chauvinistic country. Ad films and cinema only make it worse as they stick to stereotypes.” [14] Ad creator Lowe Lintas, the maker of the new Tnaisque ad in 2013, narrated a new tale. Though fair skinned brides are a staple in the mainstream Indian commercials, Tanishque jeweller’s commercial was found to unabashedly break the stereotype by flaunting a dusky bride, ebullient and graceful in her charms though. More tellingly the commercial celebrated a second marriage of the lady, though hapless widows and divorced women have ever been made a victim of their nemesis and thus have been historically shunned in India. Being “revolutionary” and “crazy bold”, the commercial postulated back in 2013 that second marriage is no more a taboo; rather it is often “a wedding to remember”. According to the AD Week’s report, India got “mesmerized” by the ad and Lowe Lintas himself asserted, “This is the thinking that most progressive people have. They may not be going through the same thing in their life, but the ad makes a bold progressive, statement and people like to be associated with brands that make such statements.” [15]

So, there's no denying the fact that with the time passing, the idea of gender stereotyping has largely been dissolved in television commercials, keeping pace with the changing socio-cultural scenario. While women are depicted not merely as peripheral characters in television ads, their portrayal too is not object specific. Needless to say, marketing strategies too have thrived by tapping into the creative possibilities of such major shifts in normative constructs. A large body of commercials have built up their narratives on this paradigm shift, drawing consumers' attention in an inspiring and positive way. Dove's " Stop the Beauty Test " campaign has voiced protest against the conventional practice of selecting women for marriage on parameters of height, weight, complexion, hair texture, birthmarks or similar other physical aspects. Detergent powder ads are no more solely revolving around the concept of an ideal homemaker making the best budget friendly choice of washing powder for her household but the narratives of such ads are largely focusing on the changed social outlook. So, washing clothes or doing household chores is no longer viewed as a duty or prerogative of only women but also of men. In this context, mention can be made of Ariel's ad campaigns that carry forth the message " when we see equal, we share the load." It is also interesting to note that on account of increased literacy rate in the society, women's attitude towards other women too have reflected transformation, which has been well showcased in many Indian commercials. To cite an example, The interaction between a daughter in law and a mother-in-law, in the ad of Sabhyata, an ethnic wear brand that weaves style and trend in traditional salwar kameez, is shown to promote the values of friendship and solidarity. The ad exhibits how the two women are playfully engaged in making plans to convince the son of the house to make the tea and prepare the meal for the day, while they themselves would celebrate a festive Diwali in happy leisure. The ad claims to celebrate change not only by swapping gender roles but also by encouraging the importance of sharing responsibilities that are otherwise taken for granted. The new Cadbury Dairy Milk ad (2021) wishes good luck to girls by portraying a lady cricketer, notching up a win by dealing with big match pressure. As her opponent drops a catch , she rules the pitch and presumably ,her boyfriend who was sitting by the side-line , nibbling off a Cadbury bar , in sheer ecstasy whizzes past the security to celebrate the victory with a dance on the cricket ground and the tune plays in the background "kuch baat hai.....hum sabhi mein.../baat hai.../khaas hai.../kuch swaad hai..."(There's something special in all of us/ something exceptional/ something flavourful) The ad, with a similar narrative in the 90s, just projected opposite gender roles with the cricketer being a male and the ecstatic other, his girlfriend. While the Cadbury ad has ever remained close to the viewers' heart, the changed narrative has sprinkled a little bit of an extra flavour to it, to be savoured by all.

- 4. Questioning the breaking of the stereotype in gender role portrayal:** Mass communication and media, though have taken the initiative to deconstruct the stereotypes, the hegemony imposed by the patriarchy upon the "fair sex" has not been absolutely obliterated. Rather, it has used the commercials as a weapon to inject new ideas, attitudes and behavioural practices into the atomized and vulnerable individuals. Hindustan Unilever Limited's product Fair and Lovely that ruled the Indian market for near about 45 years, holding approximately 60 to 70% share of 'fairness' cream industry, after facing a backlash for promoting racial discrimination through its use of terms like skin 'lightening' and 'whitening', opted for its rebranding by using the term 'glow' in lieu of 'fair' and by dropping the shade card from its packaging. However, the idea of colourism being

ingrained in the Indian cultural ethos, manipulated by age old social conditioning, and the brand's consumer base being spread predominantly across the township and the rural belts of the nation, it didn't take much chance to disturb its narrative that sets hyperreal beauty standards by primarily promoting the idea of 'fairness' playing with the sensitive psyche of 'dark' skinned women. Complying with the marketing gimmick the brand has now come up with the promise that the same cream would provide its trusted consumers "HD glow", rendering something "more than just brightness." It is to be noted that the radiance or the glow has not been referred to as natural and an intelligent consumer never fails to question the application of the term 'glow' that stands just as another crafty synonym for 'fair'. Commercials have been successfully used not only as agents for social change but also for social control. In this context we can cite the example of the very current Prega News ad (2022). While the women's day ad campaign of Prega News " She Can Carry Both" attempts at celebrating the unbridled spirit of womanhood by asserting the fact that pregnancy is not to be seen as an impediment on the path towards success for careerists, it has somehow failed to encourage the free will and choice of those women who prefer not to see themselves in the role of a biological mother. While the ad claims to promote women empowerment by glorifying her role as a professional and as a mother, it has somehow missed the mark by extolling a woman's image as an all-rounder, who is left with no other choices but to conform.

- 5. Problematizing the changing trends in gender role portrayal:** TVCs and Advertisements, be it in the form of hoardings, short films or videos that are aired across social media platforms, have continued to objectify women, normalising problematic scruples and mores in the name of promoting products or services. Rigid patriarchal norms are often celebrated in the camouflage of psychologically provoking narratives that feed on popular morality and render pleasure to a bulk of potential customers. In this context, brands like Imperial Blue Music CD having the catchline ' Men Will Be Men', Wild Stone soaps and deodorants for men, Tropicana Slice and some others can be referred to as many of their promotional ads have either reaffirmed in a very subtle way troublesome values that appeal to a prospective majority or they have projected women as visually bold and erotically impacting. Such commercials problematize the idea of sexism bringing forth the element of pleasure not only to men but even women as they get exposed to the idea of how they are to be desired by men or what would make them desirable.

The private sector has perfectly sought to capture the public imagination to invoke a desire for the very latest consumer goods and upwardly mobile lifestyles. Thus, the question that arises is whether advertisements merely act as instruments to promote commodities, or whether they are also the passwords for creating further demands. It creates a demand which is not necessarily manipulated by necessity. Jib Fowles in his book "Why viewers watch", has rightly observed that apart from the product information most of the average commercials "plays to the psychological needs of the consumer that the product may help to satisfy." [16] For the targeted middle class these commercials pave the path to assuage their "deep lying needs and drives." [17] The commercials not only concentrate on "an incredible amount of information and suggestions into capsule forms" [18], as said by the popular cultural expert William Khuns, but they also share a congenial and inviting association with the viewers psyche. It has been found that the



value of “happiness”, and “pleasure”, is present in nearly 60 % of commercials which is twice as often as any other value. Most of the commercials aim at the upper and the middle classes who have the disposable income that the manufacturers of the consumer goods are interested in. They often alienate the individuals while blatantly playing up on their aspirations and their purchasing power. With the increasing globalization the commercials are also becoming a part of the global elite, as they play on the desire of the disadvantaged classes to belong to a determinedly urban upper class. The commercials at times play with the emotions of its viewers through its projection of opulent images of wealth and success that tend to alienate its viewers. The viewers are lured indirectly, to identify them not just with the characters portrayed in the commercials but also with the brands. To say it in other words, the commercials are primarily selling lifestyles, within which the products fit perfectly and generate a feeling of contentment.

## VI. CONCLUSION

It can therefore be noted that the Indian woman has been presented in her myriad shades in advertisements and commercials. Yet her projection, while charting her development has not failed to problematize her very existence in the context of her social role, identity, scruples and culture. India being no longer the mystic ethnic east but a part of the modern Global world, its women have also undergone metamorphosis. But her identity in popular consumer culture is still conceptualised in biological terms and her reproductive role still shapes the products, services and the images offered to her by the global industry. At times, she is not only sexualized but her self-objectification is also normalised in the name of promoting her liberation and empowerment. So, the question that naturally arises is to what extent can she employ her freedom? Can she proudly affirm, “I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will”? (Charlotte Bronte) The resources here are limited and there are further untapped domains that are yet to be explored in the context of defining her role and importance in today’s electronic media, to find an apt answer to this question.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Dominick, J. R and G.E.Rauch (1971). “The image of women’s network TV commercials. *Journal of Broadcasting*,” 16(3), pp. 259-65
- [2] Silvrslain. A., R. Silverstein (1974). “The portrayal of women in TV advertising,”*Federal Communications Bar Journal*, 27 (1) 71-98
- [3] McArEhur, Z. Leslie., and Beth, G. Resko, (1975). “The portrayal of men and women in American television commercials,” *Journal of Social Psychology*, 97(2) 209-220
- [4] Whipple, W. Thomas., and Courtney. E. Alice (1985). “Female role portrayals in advertising and communication effectiveness: A review.” *Journal of Advertising*, 14 (3), 4-8,17
- [5] Vaishali Shrikhande. (1998) “Stereotyping of women in television commercials’, Thesis submitted to Louisiana State University.
- [6] Valls-Ferna´ndez, F and J.M. Martinez-Vicente (2007) “Gender stereotypes in Spanish television commercials’, sex roles”: *A Journal of Research*, 56: 691-699
- [7] YLR Moorthy, Subhadip Roy, and Anita Pansari. (2015). “The changing roles portrayed by women in Indian advertisements: A longitudinal content analysis,”*Indian Institute of Management Bangalore.*, Working Paper No: 446
- [8] Press Institute of India. (2015) “Changing role of women in television advertisements.”

- [9] Tam O' Neil and Pilar Domingo (2015). "The power to decide: Women, decision-making and gender equality," <https://odi.org/en/publications/the-power-to-decide-women-decision-making-and-gender-equality/>
- [10] Jane L. Thompson, Learning Liberation: Women's Response to Men's Education, Christina Manohar, Women's Issues and Reflections, New Delhi, 2012 Print, p.3.
- [11] <http://globalmarketingtoday.wordpress.com/the-real-world/fair-lovely-advertising-in-india/>
- [12] Laura Stempel Mumford, Article, Feminist Theory and Television Studies, Television: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies, Edited by Toby Miller, Routledge, London, 2003, p.87.
- [13] Chandran Ankila Sharavati, Dissertation- "You've come long way Bayhanji! Indian Women negotiate Feminism and Tradition in Watching Television," UMI Dissertation Services, UMI No 9902780, p.1.
- [14] <http://www.mid-day.com/lifestyle/2013/nov/031113-indian-television-commercials-ads-bending-stereotypes-mumbai.htm>
- [15] <http://www.livemint.com/Consumer/3KipzmBH06Qqv2NDsSqy2K/New-Tanishq-ad-receives-bouquets-and-brickbats.html>
- [16] Jib Fowles, Why Viewers Watch: A Reappraisal of Television's Effects, Sage Publications, London, 1992. p.201.
- [17] Jib Fowles, Why Viewers Watch: A Reappraisal of Television's Effects, Sage Publications, London, 1992, p.201
- [18] Jib Fowles, Why Viewers Watch: A Reappraisal of Television's Effects, Sage Publications, London, 1992, p.205.