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**The Changing Roles Portrayed by Women in Indian  
Advertisements: A Longitudinal Content Analysis**

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## **The Changing Roles Portrayed by Women in Indian Advertisements: A Longitudinal Content Analysis**

### **Abstract**

The role of women has been changing over the years in various fields around the world like advertising, academics, politics, etc. Today 30% of employees in the software industry are women. They are also distinguishing themselves as professionals in different walks of life. But has the representation of women advertising changed over a period of time in advertisements? Or does it confirm to some of the traditional notions about women and their role in society? That is the question we wish to deal with in this paper. The first section gives a review of literature on gender role portrayals in advertising. The second section discusses the various hypotheses of the study and the theoretical foundation for the same. The third section discusses the methodology of the study and a detailed analysis of the results. The last section contains general discussion, implications of the study, scope for further research and conclusion.

**Keywords:** Women, Television, Advertisements, Society

## INTRODUCTION

The role of women has been changing over the years in various fields around the world like advertising, academics, politics, etc. Today 30% of employees in the software industry are women. They are also distinguishing themselves as professionals in different walks of life. But has the representation of women advertising changed over a period of time in advertisements? Or does it confirm to some of the traditional notions about women and their role in society? That is the question we wish to deal with in this paper.

Portrayal of woman in advertising has been an area of interest for both academicians (Das, 2000, Siu and Au, 1997) and practitioners. There has been a socio-cultural change in society over the decades which are evident from the increasing number of women pursuing careers, changing family role structure, and unfavorable female attitudes toward traditional sex-role stereotypes.

The earliest study of women's role portrayals was done by Courtney and Lockeretz (1971). They studied 112 ads in magazines and concluded that the ads reflected stereotypical roles like "women's place is in the home, women don't make important decisions or do important things, and women are dependent and need men's protection, men regard women as sex objects and are not interested in women as people". (Pg 94)

Like Courtney and Lockeretz (1971), many other studies still believe that sex-role stereotyping occurs in television commercials and the same is been a trend for years. (Siu and Au, 1997). There is a strong similarity in sex role advertising around the world but there have been a few studies which have focused on the effect of culture on advertising (Siu and Au, 1997, Milner and Collins, 2000)

Role portrayals in advertising are different in Asia, as compared to the rest of the world (Cutler et al., 1995). Hofstede (1980) also identifies that the cultural values of Asian nations are significantly different from those of countries like the United States, Canada, and Britain. Therefore we can say that the role of woman will also be different in Asia when compared to the United States or United Kingdom.

There have been very limited studies on woman role portrayal in India. The studies are Matthew (1990), Munshi (2000) and Das (2000). All these studies have focused their study on the print advertising. Matthew (1990) studied the segmentation of men and the advertisements preferred by various segments. Munshi (2000) examined the role of housewives in advertisement. These two studies are limited in their scope. However, Das (2000) conducted a study on the role of both men and woman in Indian magazines over three years 1987, 1990 and 1994 and also compared these to the ads from other countries.

A review of extensive literature has helped to identify that there has been no study in the Indian context on the role of woman in Television advertising. This study aims to fulfill this gap by analyzing the role of woman in Indian Television over three decades from 1980.

**Overview of the paper** – This paper is divided into 5 sections. The first section gives a review of literature on gender role portrayals in advertising. The second section discusses the various hypotheses of the study and the theoretical foundation for the same. The third section discusses the methodology of the study and a detailed analysis of the results. The last section contains general discussion, implications of the study, scope for further research and conclusion.

## **1. Literature Review**

### **1.1 Role Portrayals in Advertisement**

The most frequently researched topics concerning the portrayal of women in advertising are the role portrayals relating to people and products. The issue discussed is whether advertising accurately reflects current women's roles or stresses stereotypic roles for women through explicit portrayals in particular role situations or through innuendo (Kerin et al., 1979 )

Wagner and Banos (1973) in their study concluded that the percentage of women in working roles had increased to 21%, Dominick and Rauch (1971) examined nearly 1,000 prime time television commercials and found that women were mostly portrayed in the role of housewife/mother and the occupational roles were substantially less as compared to men. Silverstein and Silverstein (1974) in their study on television commercials concluded that

1. Men are usually announcers, due to the attributed "voice of authority and trust."
2. Women were shown in the home with greater frequency than men.
3. Men were more likely to give advice to women
4. A woman's occupation was rarely evident.
5. Women were eight times more likely to be as portray subservient roles in their interactions with men.

McArthur and Resko (1975) also observed that the percentage of males used in television advertisements was higher even for situations where they would not be the primary users of a product or service. The authors of the sex portrayal articles of the 1970s concluded that women are not portrayed as independent, human beings, but are primarily sex-typed (Courtney and Whipple 1974 )

In the 1980s, Courtney and Whipple (1983) found that women were being portrayed in the home settings and men appeared in business settings, although the difference was less than those found in the studies of the 1970s commercials. Sullivan and Connor (1988) studied the role portrayals in magazine advertising from 1953- 1983. They reviewed 364 advertisements over 15 product categories. The results of their study were similar to the study of Courtney and Whipple. They also concluded that the difference in role portrayals of men and woman had reduced from 1970s. They further said that 52% women were portrayed as employed, 77% in non working roles and only 6.67% were depicted in family environment.

## **1.2 Cultural Differences in Role Portrayals in Advertisement**

The study of Siu and Au (1997) is a cross culture study between China and Singapore. There study found that both in China and Singapore male central characters appeared in products used by either sex, whereas more female central characters appeared in products used by females only. They also observed that male voices were used in voice-overs as compared to female voices. Women were portrayed more often to be younger than men and men were more likely to be seen in independent roles, whereas women were portrayed in roles relative to others.

Siu and Au (1997) also identified the difference between the two cultures and concluded that

in Singapore commercials, women were more portrayed at home and men were portrayed in outdoor settings. In Singapore advertisements women appeared more frequently as spokespersons but this was not true with the Chinese advertisements. In the Chinese commercials women were depicted more frequently as product users and men were depicted as product authority.

Das (2000) in their study on the role of men and women in Indian advertisement concluded that the portrayal of women in Indian magazine differs from those found in other nations. Two major differences in female role portrayals were;

1. The common stereo typical portrayals seem less prevalent in Indian; women were portrayed in neutral ways and less likely as sex objects in Indian advertisement. They were also portrayed as less dependent as compared to advertisements in Britain. The results of Indian advertisements were in sync with the Japanese and Korean advertisements.
2. In India, the trend of portrayal of woman has been nontraditional and this can be attributed to the changes in the Indian society.

The literature review above, highlights that the role of women has been changing over the decades around the world be it the print advertisements and television advertisements. Further, it is also noted that the portrayal of woman in India is different from the other countries. No study in India has yet studied the portrayal of woman in advertising over the decades. Therefore, the present study aims to

- (1) Examine female role portrayals in Indian Television advertisement
- (2) Examine the woman in television advertising and how there portrayals have changed over the years by comparing advertisements in three different time periods—1980-1990, 1990-2000, and 2000-2010.
- (3) Examine whether these gender-role portrayals varies across product categories

## **2 THEORITICAL FOUNDATIONS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMULATION**

Belkaoui & Belkaoui, (1976) and Sullivan & O'Connor (1988) in their study conducted in United Kingdom conclude that women in advertisements are portrayed as; being dependent, need the protection of men, home makers, sex objects, etc. Similar results have been found in other studies around the world like Japan (Ford et. al., 1998), Korea (Cutler et. al., 1995), Hong Kong (Sengupta, 1992).

Considering, the prevalence of stereo type portrayal of woman in other nations, and also considering the fact that advertisers in Asia have not been as sensitized to gender-role stereo typing as those in western nations (Cutler et. al., 1995). Hence, it is hypothesized that

*H1: In all three decades, women will be portrayed more often in traditional, stereo typical ways in Indian television advertisement (i.e.in traditional feminine roles) than in neutral or non traditional ways.*

Previous research shows that gender role portrayal is affected by the product categories. Women are generally found in advertisement for home products, baby items, cosmetics, and food items and they are also seen in non durable products than durable products (Cutler et al. 1995, Fowles, 1996). The gender role portrayal differs from the type of products also. For e.g. women are generally portrayed stereotypically in advertisements of entertainment, clothes, and cosmetics but are portrayed non – stereo typically in ads for tobacco, travel, food, and financial services (Mitchell and Taylor, 1989).

According to Das (2000) the gender-role stereotypes of women may be in line with the purchase of female-oriented products, therefore it can be expected that advertisements for such products portray women in traditional ways. Hence, the second hypothesis for the study

*H2 – In all the three decades, the nature of portrayals of women in television advertisement will not vary depending on the type of product being advertised.*

There has been a change in the way women are portrayed in advertisement. An increase in the participation of women in the workforce has led to women becoming major purchasers of several products like automobiles, insurance, and financial services. (Das, 2000)

A similar trend can be expected in India, as there has been an increase in the number of working women and their educational levels in India.( Das , 2000) Further, liberalization of the Indian economy has also increased the exposure of woman to the western world (Jacob,1992). Based on this literature it can be hypothesized that

*H3: Female role portrayals become less stereo typical over the decades. This would be reflected in the kind of advertisements and the product categories of advertisements in which women are used. Woman in television advertising in the 1980s would be more stereo typical than woman in 2010.*

### **3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The methodology used for the study was content analysis. It is the most extensively used technique to analyze gender roles in advertisements. (Das, 2000, Siu and Au, 1998) Courtney and Whipple (1983) state that, content analysis has been the primary means of assessing gender stereotyping in advertisements.

#### **3.1 Sample**

Television advertisements for the decade 1980-1990, 1990-2000 and 2000-2010 have been studied. 25 advertisements were used for the period 1980- 1990, 35 advertisements were used for the period 1990-2000 and 45 advertisements were used for the period 2000-2010. The reason for the unequal number of advertisements in each decade is because of lack of availability of advertisements in the earlier decades. In India, the first television commercial was seen only in 1978 and the color television was introduced only in 1982. Hence there were very few advertisements in the 1980-1990. In 1991, India got it s first satellite channel, Zee TV and the number of advertisements increased in the decade of 1990-2000., With the advent of technology the advertisement industry also developed and the number of television commercials increased manifold and hence the maximum number of advertisements were for the decade 2000-2010.



Only those Television commercials were used in which the female characters in the commercials had an on-camera appearance of at least three seconds and/or at least one line of dialogue.

### 3.2 Coding

Content analysis studies are challenging as they capture complex content of the data. Categorization based on meaning poses more challenges to coders than the traditional count. Coders have the same opinion on such classifications only if they share the knowledge required to interpret the encoded categories, extract meaning from ads, and relate that meaning to the categories. (Lerman and Callow, 2004). Interjudge reliability should be high, provided that the researcher devised coding categories with care and properly trained the judges (Kassarjian 1977).

Nine variables were examined to analysis the differences in women depictions. The variables and operational definitions have been provided in Table 1. Most of codes identified here are in sync with the codes of Ford et al. (1998), Siu and Au (1997) and a few codes have been developed by the coders in the process of analysis. The coders examined each advertisement and indicated with a 1 or 0 whether or not each trait was represented in the advertisement. Apart from the author, another coder also coded the advertisements. Both the author and the coder are research scholars at an Indian management institute. Any disagreement in the coding was resolved by a judge who is a senior research scholar in the same institute.

**Table 1: Variables used in content analysis**

<b>Variables which are coded for the advertisements and the characters</b>	<b>Operational definition of the variables</b>
Product Category	What is the product category being advertised? Food, snacks, beverages, Beauty products , Travel, Automobile,Householdappliances,Alcoholicbeverages,banks,pharmaceutical products , Household cleaning agents, Clothing, Others
Location of ad Setting	What is the setting in the advertisement? House/home; store; occupational setting; leisure time; fantasy; sport

	(participatory/active); using transportation; religious setting; outdoor; other; indeterminate
Age	What is the age of the female characters in the advertisement? Child, Young adult (18-35 years of age); mid adult (35-50 years of age); older adult 50, indeterminate
Credibility	If the women in the advertisement is either, Product user or presenter; product authority; decorative; other
Product user	Who is the product advertised used by primarily? Women, men, both, child or all.
Role	In what role is the woman portrayed-Mother, wife, girlfriend, homemaker, professional, daughter, both professional and homemaker, decorative, equal to men, superior to men, or role of men not applicable other?
Presence	If the presence of the female is implicit or explicit.
Attire	If the attire of the female model in the advertisement is traditional or modern
Protagonist	Is the female in the advertisement the main protagonist or not, is she an influential in the purchase decision of the product.

### 3.3 RESULTS

The results indicate a major differences in the portrayal of woman from 1980s to 2010. In the 1980s and the 1990s women were portrayed either as a home maker or as a professional. This was not the case in the 2000. In 2000, 13.34% of advertisements portrayed woman in the role of both a professional and home maker. There are many such changes in the television advertisement over the decades. However, some variables have not changed over the years like the portrayal of woman as a product user or presenter.

#### 3.3.1 Portrayal of Woman

To test Hypothesis 1, the female role categories were combined together in three categories i.e. traditional, neutral and nontraditional. The traditional category comprised of the following categories: Wife, daughter, mother, home maker and decorative. The neutral category comprised of the category of “others” and the nontraditional category comprised of professional,

professional and homemaker, girlfriend, women superior to men or equal to men. This is in sync with the study done by Das (2000).

**Table 2: Modified Female Role Categories by Decades**

<b>Role Portrayals</b>	<b>1980s</b>	<b>1990s</b>	<b>2000s</b>
Traditional	68.6	63.5	55.1
Neutral	-	16.01	12.34
Non Traditional	31.4	20.49	32.56

From the above table it can be said that although the percentage of woman portrayed in the non traditional role has increased from 1980s – 2000, the stereo typical way of portraying woman in the traditional role has been dominant in the television advertising, hence providing support to our first hypothesis

### **3.3.2 Product Users**

To test the second hypothesis, the advertisements were classified based on the users of the products advertised. There are four categorizations which are done, products which are used only by females, products which are used only by males, products which are used by both males and females, products only for children and products used by female, male and children.

**Table 3: Product User Categories by decades- correct**

<b>Product User</b>	<b>1980s</b>	<b>1990s</b>	<b>2000</b>
Female	8	22.85	15.4
Male	16	2.86	2.2
Both	20	25.71	40.2
Child	0	0	2.22
All	56	48.58	40

It is evident from Table 3 that, women were mostly used in advertisements of products which were of common use like snacks, chocolates, beverages, etc. Women were used minimal in

products which are for male and for children. The reason for the same could be attributed to the usage of men and children in the advertisements. It has been seen that on an average 2.2% of the advertisements portrayed child artists. Thus, we can say that children were being used for the advertisements of products used by them. The above table supports our second hypothesis which states that “In all the three decades, the nature of portrayals of women in television advertisement will vary depending on the type of product being advertised”.

### 3.3.3 Product Categories

To test our third hypothesis, the product categories were collapsed in three categories; household or woman dominant products, neutral products and male dominated products. This categorization has been borrowed from the work of Das (2000). The household/woman dominant products would comprise of cleaning products, food products, home appliances, beauty products, essentials. The neutral products comprise of snacks, beverages, clothing, pharmaceutical products and others. The male dominant products would comprise of travel, automobiles, banks, alcoholic beverages.

**Table 4 Modified Product Categorization over the decades**

<b>Product Category</b>	<b>1980s</b>	<b>1990s</b>	<b>2000</b>
Woman Dominant products	40	65.70	33.32
Neutral Products	54	34.3	57.76
Male Dominant products	6	0	8.92

The table above indicates that in 1980s there were only 6% of advertisements which portrayed woman in a male dominant product, but 8.92% advertisements in the decade 2000 portrayed woman in a male dominant product category. The number has risen over the decades. The percentage of advertisements portraying woman in a neutral product has been the highest (57.76%) in the current decade. In the current decade, only 33.32% of advertisements portray woman in the woman dominant products as compared to 40 % in 1980 and 65.70% in the 1990s.

This indicates that female role portrayals have become less stereo typical over the decades and the same is reflected in the above table. Hence there is evidence not to reject our hypothesis three.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

The results indicate that the role of woman in television advertising has changed over the decades. Although, woman in India, are portrayed as traditional and stereo typical over the decades, there is a difference in product categories advertised by them. Advertisers in the decade 2000 are willing to portray woman in male dominated advertisements as compared to advertisers of 1990s. The findings of the study are in sync with those found by Munshi (2000). He states that the portrayal of women has changed, but only slightly.

This study has attempted to cover as many advertisements as possible to study the changing portrayal of woman in television advertising in India. However, it has not covered all the advertisements and hence future researchers could cover more number of advertisements. Further, the changing portrayal of men could also be studied and a comparative analysis would add more insight to the study. A comparative analysis could be done with the advertisements of other nations as this would help the multinational organizations.

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