

## Non Verbal Cues and Gender Bias in Select Indian TV Advertisements

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history

Received: December 08, 2021

Accepted: February 10, 2022

Published: April 30, 2022

Volume: 13 Issue: 2

Advance access: April 2022

Conflicts of interest: None

Funding: None

#### Key words:

Gender Bias in Media,

Gender Inequality,

Non-verbal Communication in Indian

TV ads,

Gender in Indian TV Ads,

Gender Portrayal in Advertisements,

Gender Stereotypes in TV Ads

### ABSTRACT

Gender and Media, especially gender portrayal in advertisements, have been researched and discussed over the years leading to many changes in the way women are portrayed in the ads. Have we reached a stage where our ads depict equality? While explicit discriminatory references and objectification of women have reduced, there are non-verbal cues in the advertisements that reiterate the gender stereotypes, playing on the psyche of the consumers, thereby further strengthening the biases. This study analysed selected Indian TV ads based on three non-verbal parameters: Kinesics, Paralanguage, and Environment Setting to validate the hypothesis. The evidence in these ads reinforces the age-old stereotypes of men being career-focused, assertive and independent, whereas women are shown as loving wives and mothers, responsible for raising children and doing housework. It is time for our media industry to actively look at the subtle and non-verbal messaging that continues to propagate sales and revisit the content in the light of their moral responsibility towards society. As we work towards total integration of gender roles, it is important for advertisements to provide appropriate gender representation and powerful models of behaviour to emulate.

### INTRODUCTION

Media and gender and their intersection have long been discussed and researched, primarily because of the socio-cultural impact on and of both of these.

According to the World Health Organization, “Gender refers to the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys, that are socially constructed. This includes norms, behaviours and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl or boy, as well as relationships with each other. As a social construct, gender varies from society to society and can change over time.” “The newborn child has biological sex but no social gender. As it grows older, society provides a string of prescriptions, templates, or models of behaviour appropriate to the one sex or the other” (Connell, 1987), and these are grouped under the heading of gender stereotypes. We learn gender roles from our society and culture, which begins very early and is constantly reinforced throughout our lives through education, the media, family, religion, public policy and other social institutions.

Media, a powerful communication tool, has the power of directing and manipulating people’s views through tar-

geted content, primarily via advertisements. Advertisements are found in all kinds of mass media, from newspapers and magazines to radio and television. Producers use the media and its tools to persuade customers by conveying specific messages about the products.

Depending on the era and geography, each of these may have different kinds of meaning and power for people. For instance, as the inhabitants of the “electronic age” (McLuhan, 1964, p. 170), we are sometimes addicted to the incredible power of mass media tools that have embedded themselves deeply in our daily lives. Whether on purpose or reluctantly, people are exposed to a multitude of these devices. More importantly, they are exposed to the messages conveyed through them every day of their lives. Advertisers choose their words with a purpose. They want to get some message across to consumers. They also want their message to be clear about their feelings regarding the subject in question. So they use precise wording to achieve what they intend to as every purchase decision is rooted in emotion.

Media has such tremendous influence that individuals tend to imitate what they consume on TV and video. Media, which embodies a great power of diverting people’s under-

standing and living of the world in a particular direction, is very influential in shaping public opinion on several issues, including gender stereotypes and building gender identities. "Mass media produce and reproduce collective memories, desires, hopes and fears, and thus perform a similar function as myths in earlier centuries" (Van Zoonen, 1994, p. 37). "these days, ads sell images, ideas, even principles and ethics... In today's media-driven, fast-moving age, ads sell more than just products. They sell lifestyles and dreams" (Grover & Hundal, 2014, p. 56).

"Advertisers want viewers to enjoy their commercials and to associate the advertised products with a comfortable reinforcing picture of mainstream cultural values. As a result, commercials are designed to take optimal advantage of gender-specific fantasies, myths, and fears" (Grover & Hundal, 2014, p. 55)." Advertisements and commercials still use gender stereotypes based on the assumption that they are well known to everyone and help the receivers understand the message's content.

**Research Problem:** Despite growing awareness and call for equality among genders, due to various reasons, many advertisements use gender stereotypes to advance sales and indirectly reiterate existing biases. As known, communication involves both verbal and non-verbal and advertisements use this very effectively, especially non-verbal cues by their presence or absence in the videos.

**Goal of the Study:** The aim of this study is to analyse select TV advertisements on the existing non verbal communication cues in these ads for any gender bias or stereotypes. On the basis of the analysis, the intent is to validate or nullify the hypothesis that TV ads continue to foster gender bias through non-verbal communication.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The effects of TV commercials on gender stereotypes is a recurring theme of several studies in a wide range of countries. Studies have been conducted on objectifying women, the presence and gender of the primary character, and the gender of the voice-over artist since the Feminist movement began. McArthur and Resko's (1975) study is one of the first and most quoted works in the literature on media and gender stereotypes. They focused on the portrayal of the gendered images in TV commercials and made a list of the sex differences in TV ads. These are sex, role, credibility, location, arguments and product types.

It is now well known and widely accepted that "harmful gender stereotypes in ads can contribute to inequality in the society, with costs for all of us. Put simply, we found that some portrayals in ads can, over time, play a part in limiting people's potential," said ASA chief executive Guy Parker, UK. ("Harmful Gender Stereotypes", 2019)

Despite this awareness, the gendered point of view continues its existence significantly. Sometimes, to reach the target customers, ads intentionally or unintentionally use gender stereotypes and biases in nonverbal communication. Although interactivity is vital in today's world, most communication messages foster one-way communication where advertisers mainly present their message. (in Johnson et al., 2005; Peters

& Hessian, 2003). Nonverbal elements of advertisements can communicate complex meanings to consumers and go beyond the perceived obvious, straightforward meaning of the advertisement (DeRosia, 2008). Therefore, nonverbal elements are important in a communication message as consumers perceive some advertisements not only through words but also through their implicit nonverbal communication.

According to the code-based approach, "Nonverbal communication comprises everything other than language that we use as a means for communicating with others", and as per the functional approach, "nonverbal communication focuses more on revealing what nonverbal cues can do for us communicatively". (Valerie, 2006) As this definition suggests, nonverbal communication encompasses a wide range of behaviours, including but not limited to facial, vocal and postural expressions, touch, space and gaze, physical attractiveness, facial morphology, as well as such behavioural choices as hairstyle, clothing, and adornment or more generally appearance. Some researchers have even included material objects, which serve communicative functions within a society under this heading. Knapp (1972) suggested seven dimensions that describe the major categories of non-verbal behaviour research related to communication. Specific nonverbal cues like eye gaze, speech hesitations, and person attire affect the customer's impression of a person and the evaluations of a service (Leigh & Summers, 2002).

Nonverbal communication is regarded as a critical component in interpersonal communication carrying 93% of meaning in any message (Coulter, Zaltman, 1994). According to Albert Mehrabian's "7%-38%-55% Rule" (1981), 55% of the emotional information communicated in a given exchange is communicated via "body language", 38% via the way we say the words (intonation, affective tone of voice etc.) and only 7% from the words themselves. While the accuracy of these claims has been questioned, and indeed, Mehrabian himself has gone on record as saying his results are often misrepresented, it has been accepted that what is not actually said conveys more meaning than what is said.

## METHODOLOGY

Basis Knapp's seven dimensions that depict the breadth of nonverbal communication, in this paper, I have analysed the advertisements on three parameters - kinesics, paralanguage, and environment setting - to validate the strategic influence of the selected ads on gender stereotypes. The method chosen is content analysis, reviewing a set of thirteen Indian video/tv advertisements across different industries focusing on understanding gender depictions through non-verbal cues.

**Exclusion Criteria:** Since a lot of research has already been done on the objectification of women (in advertisements of products like men's deodorants and shaving cream), gender and primary character, and speech time, I have excluded ads that explicitly convey gender discrimination through these channels.

**Inclusion Criteria:** I have selected ads where hypothetically, the discrimination or bias is conveyed subtly - primarily through "absence".

## DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

Here are the findings from the analysis of the select 13 advertisements on the three parameters of Kinesics, paralanguage and environment setting:

**Kinesics:** This is commonly referred to as “body language” and includes movements of the hand, arm, head, foot, and leg, postural shifts, gestures, eye movements, and facial expressions.

The *Brooke Bond* tea ad conveys the non-acceptance of transgender even in something simple such as accepting a cup of tea; this is indicated through the frown and turning the face away from the window. In the second half, the ad uses gestures of a nod and smile when the individual realises the good cause of the transgender serving tea.

In the *Moov* ad, the frown from the family’s patriarch shows unacceptable behaviour, as the daughter-in-law of the house accidentally spills a dish on the father-in-law’s dhoti. The shocked expression of the mother-in-law (closes her mouth) and the “aah” of the kid further deepen this.

The stereotypical place of a woman in the household and the transgender people in society is demonstrated in these ads. The *Sunpure* oil ad sticks to the stereotype that caregiving is challenging for men and that daily chores like cooking are considered domestic and not life skills. All the expressions (the disappointment when the dosa is burnt and the hair braiding does not turn out correctly) show that the man in the ad finds it difficult to adjust to the household chores. The last scene where the young girl cooks/makes perfect puris conform to the belief that women are naturals in cooking and men are not as much.

**Paralanguage:** It is defined as content-free vocalisations and patterns associated with speech such as voice pitch, volume, frequency, stuttering, filled pauses (for example, ‘ah’), silent pauses, interruptions, and measures of speech rate and the number of words spoken in a given unit of time. Paralanguage involves tone and nonverbal aspects of speech that influence meaning.

In the *Big Basket* ad, the silent pause when asked, “Sir, do you order groceries” in a tone that shows surprise, together with fleeting eye movement, conveys that the hero would like to keep this a secret due to its unconventionality. The tone of the response indicates surprise that this star is relegated to chores at home and that household activities are not as important as stardom. In the *Brooke Bond* ad, the soft pitch, along with the “hmm” in a derogatory tone while attempting to give some money as charity, shows the inherent bias towards accepting transgender people and the assumptions on how they make their living. The silence/hesitation in accepting a cup of tea shows the usual expected behaviour.

In the *Continental Coffee* ad, the term “good news” refers to “pregnancy”, while the woman actually gives her three pieces of good news that she has achieved: setting up her own business, winning eight awards, and buying a new house. In the *SBI* insurance ad, there is a pregnant pause in a conversation between the son and the father as the mother enters the room (to serve them while they are having a meal at the table); the son is talking to the father about his options - to continue his studies or take up a job to support the family in

the event of the father’s untimely death (a hypothetical situation). This subtle underplay reiterates the stereotype that “financial matters” are not a woman’s domain.

Environmental factors make up the last category and deal with the influences of the physical setting in which the behaviour occurs. The environment (constructed or natural) involves the physical and psychological aspects of the communication context and is an important part of the dynamic communication process. It is important to note that the perception of one’s environment influences one’s reaction to it, and hence the environment directly affects your communicated decisions, attitude, and mood (Foley & Gentile, 2010).

In the *LIC life insurance* ad, the absence of a man in the ad setting conveys the importance of their presence and vice versa. The woman is portrayed as the dependant, and the men are considered financial providers. A question to think about would be what about women who are the primary breadwinners in the family. Similarly, in the *Big Basket* ad, all the characters are men in a household setting. Despite the tone, here, the woman’s absence shows her importance in the household. In the *Pampers* diaper ad where the father of the baby changes the diaper, the setting conveys the ease of changing diapers, despite it normally being the woman’s task and he usually asks the mother to attend to all the kids’ needs. The only reason he changes the baby’s diaper is that the product is incredibly easy to use and comes with instructions - implying that a man could manage to do it because of the amazing product features even if it is generally a woman’s task. Even when ads show good intent depicting women as strong and independent, domestic tasks like using the washing machine (even if it is indicated by merely switching it on) are performed by women, and the *Surf Excel* ad where the man switches on the washing machine is to prove the point that the product (*Surf*) is easy to use and does not require any rubbing or scrubbing implying that it might be challenging for a man to accomplish the task if it needed more effort; the scrubbing would be fine if it were a woman handling the task because her gender ensures that she could handle it with ease (not to mention, years of practice). The *Honda* ad reiterates the stereotype of men being aspirational, wanting to be dominant and rising above others and sporty, despite ~20% of women being car owners in India according to Economic Times. Even in the *Maruti Suzuki Dzire* ad, while the whole family is going out, it is the man who drives and who seems to know the features of the car. The same is the narrative with carbonated drinks where it is primarily consumed by men and branded as macho, adventurous and bold, both the *Thums Up* and the *Pepsi* ads.

The evidence in these ads reinforces the age-old stereotypes of men being career-focused, assertive and independent, whereas women are shown as loving wives and mothers, responsible for raising children and doing housework. Even when male images are not in the main frame, showing the women as submissive or nurturing can subtly convey the stereotype. All these ads depicted women as bearing domestic roles (even if they are working professionals), belonging to home or other domestic settings and being

Brand	Advertisement
1. Continental Coffee	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tUgq0Fi8Qfo">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tUgq0Fi8Qfo</a>
2. SBI	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4EVC9ILAW-M">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4EVC9ILAW-M</a>
3. LIC	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b2yrYYbEvgk">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b2yrYYbEvgk</a>
4. Sunpure	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IG5iEe0Zqn4">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IG5iEe0Zqn4</a>
5. Big Basket	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wzSR2ZsvCH8">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wzSR2ZsvCH8</a>
6. Brooke Bond	<a href="https://www.campaignindia.in/video/brooke-bond-red-label-calls-for-trans-gender-inclusiveness-again/458507">https://www.campaignindia.in/video/brooke-bond-red-label-calls-for-trans-gender-inclusiveness-again/458507</a>
7. Moov	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_P1bH77WySs">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_P1bH77WySs</a>
8. Honda	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VUXsX12o970">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VUXsX12o970</a>
9. Maruti Swift Dzire	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=krsbOB-ovow">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=krsbOB-ovow</a>
10. Thums Up	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vm8JBES66-g">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vm8JBES66-g</a>
11. Pepsi	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vm8JBES66-g">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vm8JBES66-g</a>
12. Pampers	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_VGOrKxsvk0">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_VGOrKxsvk0</a>
13. Surf Excel	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vjUiy9edjrY">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vjUiy9edjrY</a>

associated with domestic products while men were portrayed as having professional status, being authoritarian, belonging to outdoor settings and being associated with non-domestic products.

## CONCLUSION

On the basis of the above analyses, we can conclude that gender equality in advertisements still remains elusive. All of the 13 ads in different ways, through the use of non verbal cues have reiterated many gender stereotypes, mainly of women being caregivers and men as career oriented. Given the sheer volume of the ads we are exposed to every day, fair representation in advertising is especially influential in shaping societal values. Appropriate representations of gender in

advertisements can provide powerful models of behaviour to emulate. As we work towards total integration of gender roles, it is important for advertisements to relook at the non-verbal cues and the hidden biases that are continued to be propagated for enhancing sales.

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