
**READING WOMEN IN ADVERTISEMENTS: A STUDY ON THE
PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN ASSAMESE MAGAZINE
ADVERTISEMENTS**

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ABSTRACT

Since ages, women have been contributing towards development and progress of humankind and simultaneously, as an indigenous section of the society, have experienced change with reference to their overall status and standing in the societal structure. Women no longer confine themselves to bear only the traditional role of a wife, mother or homemaker but are working alongside men in every sphere of occupation. As a window to this changing world scenario, media has not only played a significant role by providing women an exposure to the nuances and challenges of modernization, but has also in the process contoured the popular discourse and image of new-age womanhood. It is pertinent to note that at various points of time concerns have been raised regarding the portrayal of women in media and more so in advertising. Women have always been a part of the advertising world and today women account for a large section of the target group for advertisers. Many affirm that the way women are portrayed in advertisements might perpetuate gender stereotypes. This paper presents the findings of a descriptive content analysis to study the portrayal of women in Assamese language magazine advertisements. The study reveals that although women are shown in central, authoritative and functional roles in Assamese language magazine advertisements, they continue to reinforce existing stereotypes.

Keywords: Women, advertising, media portrayal, Assamese magazines, gender stereotypes

1. INTRODUCTION

India is one of the fastest growing countries in the world. As far as women are concerned, in the globalized world they now have more access to education and know more about their rights and their identity as a woman. Western influences have resulted in the Indian women's movement towards challenging the traditional, religious, patriarchal interpretations of women's domestic roles, education levels, and economic participation. Male- dominated fields see the coming up of woman. Women are now more focused on removing the gender power imbalance by

emphasizing personal empowerment in making their own choices and decisions in life. (Haq, 2013).

Media which is believed to be the mirror of our society is strongly expected to present authentic particulars and reflect the reality in front of everyone. But studies by scholars at different points in time have contested this very role of the media disseminating reality to the common populace. For instance, large scale research conducted by scholars at the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania conclude that media does persuade our visions of reality and often gets in the way of understanding the truth. Media images cultivate the dominant tendencies of our culture's beliefs, ideologies and world views (Watson, 2003). When it comes to media images, it is important to remember that advertising always delivers the most potent and powerful categories of messages in front of the general public. Advertising has the power to change a set of values held by a collective majority (Cohan, 2001). In today's globalized world, every day we are bombarded with an innumerable number of advertisements in variety of forms through diverse media vehicles. Advertising is a very strong medium of communication. It is persuasive and at times decision directing. Many believe that advertising influences society's perception and so any improper depiction may lead to misconceptions (Gilly,1988).

There has particularly been a lot of concern regarding the portrayal of women by media and more so in advertising. The way woman are portrayed in advertisements, it may tend to create images of women that may not be the same as reality. Women are an important part of society. In today's globalized world, how advertisements portray women is very important because it helps in creating opinion regarding women. According to Sharma and Singh (2011), advertising plays an invisible role in opinion generating. If an advertisement can persuade people into buying a product using their money, it can also persuade people in many other ways. For instance, if an advertisement depicts that a girl who was not fair in complexion was initially rejected for a job, but when she used a certain product, she became fair and then she got the job immediately; people might start having the notion that women who are not fair are not good enough to even get a job. Again it may also make women, who are not fair feel rejected in society. It might also lead to the thinking that women who are not fair are not acceptable for jobs, etc. Thus even if the idea of the advertiser was to sell the beauty product, a certain image of beauty is cultivated in the minds of the people. Not only skin but the way media portrays the female body is also a matter of concern. According to Varghese (2011), some advertisements even use the products in such a way that the product itself is like the shape of a women's body and imply that if you use the product you are using a women thus objectifying the woman. There are advertisements that depict women as a sexual figure. Different parts of her body are focused on more to arouse sexual excitement in men. They may be clad in minimal clothing, or at times naked. The

depiction of women as sex objects affects the attitudes of men who from the earliest age are besieged with the images of the ideal women (Cohan, 2001). Men create the image of their 'ideal women' by seeing the media. For them the ideal woman is one who is beautiful and who manages her home and family efficiently. According to Macklin and Kolbe (1984), stereotypes influence the way in which individuals interact socially and perceive themselves. If skinny, anorexic body is shown as desirable in advertisements, this might have very wrong effect on the young girls, who aspire to become like the women they see in the advertisements and tend to starve themselves in the name of 'diet'. Men also tend to consider skinny women as desirable and wish for such attributes in their partners, thus propagating a very wrong notion. Hence, what most advertisers fail to portray is the large number of women who are self-reliant and working full shifts. Women who have dedicated their life to their careers and share equal status with men in society. They are intelligent, elegant and are respectable members of the society. Advertisers do not portray women accurately in terms of the variety of roles which they actually occupy in the society (Courtney and Lockertz, 1971).

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There are very few in-depth researches done on portrayal of women in magazines. Most of the articles reviewed provide the sex role portrayals or the portrayal of women in comparison with men. One of the earliest and the most cited research work is by Courtney and Lockertz in 1971. This article reports on an exploratory study that examined print advertisements to see if stereotypes could be identified. Particular attention was concentrated on comparing the occupational and nonworking roles of men and women as portrayed in advertisements. They found that the print advertisements examined very rarely showed women in working roles. In the magazines surveyed, there were few individual advertisements that could be considered depreciatory of women and fail to show the true range of women's roles within our society. The advertisements reflected a number of stereotypes like-

"A woman's place is in the home."

"Women do not make important decisions or do important things."

"Women are dependent and need men's protection."

"Men regard women primarily as sexual objects; they are not interested in women as people."

Another important research was done by Belkaoui and Belkaoui in 1976. They reported the results of an analysis of women's roles in a sample of advertisements drawn from eight magazines published in 1958. The results of this analysis were compared with those of similarly designed 1970 and 1972 studies to determine the extent to which stereotypes have been maintained and reinforced, and to determine the degree of social change with regard to women's

roles as reflected in advertising messages. The researchers found that few print advertisements showed women in working roles. A follow-up study was conducted in 1972. This content analysis showed a marked improvement in the number of working women portrayed but no significant changes in the frequency with which women were shown operating independently of men when purchasing big ticket items such as cars or major appliances, or participating in institutional transactions with banks, industries, or mass media.

Ferguson, Kreshel and Tinkham (1990) examined advertising content in what might be considered for research purposes an 'ideal' editorial/advertising environment. They selected a total of 628 advertisements from Ms. Magazine which is a feminist publication with a stated policy regarding sexist advertising and found sexist advertising that is consistent with the product type, and so concluded that it is reasonable to assume that sexist role portrayals are equally, or perhaps more pervasive in other media vehicles. In defense of Ms. Magazine, they suggested that it is possible that the very nature of what is considered to be 'sexist' has changed over time. Further, in light of increased interest in fitness and health, greater acceptance of intimacy and greater tolerance to nudity, they suggested that one can no longer assume that negative stereotyping characterize advertisements which simply 'focus on body'.

Cohan (2001) identified the ethical issues involved with women's advertising, and argued that advertisements can be successful in generating sales without portraying women as things or as mere sex objects, and without perpetuating various weakness stereo types. He believed that advertising has the power to change a set of values held by the collective majority. In their review of the literature, Sex Stereotyping in Advertising, Courtney and Whipple (1983) suggest that there is mounting evidence that sex stereotyping in advertising does play a role in reflecting societal ills and helping to sustain them. Duker and Tucker (1977) concluded that the stereotyped roles of women as housewives or sex objects alleged to be contained in most advertisements have become a major source of dissatisfaction among members of the current feminist movement. Zhou and Chen (1997) found that stereotypes are often used in advertising to convey images with which potential buyers may identify so as to increase advertising effectiveness, and so advertising still portrayed men more favourably than women. Their findings show that a larger number of males were shown in high/middle level occupations and in business settings in ads, and women were more likely associated with domestic products.

Ford, Voli, Honeycutt and Casey (1984) found that although some indigenous gender stereotyping was evident, several traits previously associated with Japanese women (devoted, obliging, rattle-brained, superstitious, and thorough) were associated with men. However, women still were portrayed as more concerned with appearance and as younger than men, were not depicted as product authorities, and were shown more often in sexist than in nonsexist depictions. Roger A. Kerin, William J. Lundstrom, Donald Sciglimpaglia provided a

comprehensive review of research and commentary on the use and reaction to women in advertisements in the last decade for the purpose of projecting future trends. The authors concluded that the 1980's would exhibit a larger proportion of advertisements featuring women in work related settings in parity occupations with men. Sex in advertising is expected to become more explicit. However, use of women as sex objects will decline. The modern women in advertising would be found in a diversity of roles reflecting her changing place in society in the 1980's. These would be exhibited by a greater number of advertisements showing women in work-related settings in addition to typical home oriented roles

3. METHODOLOGY

Content analysis was the method used for gathering data for this study. This method is well-suited in analysis of advertisements (Kassarjian, 1977). Some of the most popular magazines in Assamese language were taken into consideration for content analysis. Magazines were considered because most magazines have a long lifespan and are read several times, thus ensuring that advertisements in magazines get the full attention of readers compared to other print media (Dwivedy, 2009). Moreover, magazines were preferred because "analyzing a series of pictures (i.e. television ads) is more complex than analyzing a single picture (i.e. print ads)" (Courtney & Whipple, 1983). Two categories of magazines were selected - female audience and general audience magazines. Four female audience magazines and four general audience magazines were taken into consideration. These magazines were studied for a period of one month. These magazines were Nandini (monthly), Bichurito Barnali (monthly), Aaina Jibonor (monthly), Priyo Sakhi (monthly), GNRC Swasthya (bi-monthly), Pragor Geet (monthly), (monthly), Bismoy (monthly) and Rohosyo (weekly). All the advertisements in which women appeared were taken for evaluation. Advertisements which appeared across more than one magazine were not repeatedly taken into account and were considered as one single advertisement. The advertisements were then coded.

3.1. Codes and Operational Definitions

The researcher has gone for both fixed coding and also grounded coding for the advertisements. To check the applicability of the codes, the researchers coded 10% of the advertisements for a pilot test. After the pilot test, necessary changes in the codes were incorporated and 20% of the total advertisements were coded by the researcher and another coder to bring out inter-coder reliability. In total 31 advertisements were thus coded and the inter coder reliability calculated through Holsti method which was found to be 0.8669. It is within the range of allowed degree of inter-coder reliability. After this the researcher coded the remaining advertisements. For the purpose of analysis the researchers tabulated the data for each coding category and magazine type. The data was then converted to percentage for easy interpretation and analysis.

Stereotyping/ Non-stereotyping was considered to be the coding category for the study. Accordingly, codes were allotted and operational definitions determined. Stereotypes can be defined as beliefs about the characteristics, attributes, and behaviors of members of certain groups (Hilton & Hippel, 1996).

Stereotyping/ non stereotyping	Codes
Stereotypes	01
Non-Stereotypes	02
Others	03

The operational definitions of stereotypes/non-stereotypes determined were as follows:

Stereotypes	Advertisements that- Suggest that women are fundamentally dependent on men Treat women mainly as "sex objects" Accurately portray women in most of their daily activities Suggest that women don't make important decisions Suggest that women don't do important things Suggest that a woman's place is in the home Suggest that a woman is submissive Suggest that a woman is unintelligent Suggest that women are pre-occupied with beauty Suggest that for a women, looking good is central to success Use women as a mannequin simply to display
Non-stereotypes	Advertisements where- Women are shown as a professional/ in authoritative role Women shown superior to men People are not judged by their sex Women engaged in jobs that are traditionally masculine, not portrayed as unwomanly Women shown as important decision makers Women doing things for their own satisfaction
Others	Advertisements where- Men or women are not shown Women appear by default

4. FINDINGS

The study has been carried out by evaluating the advertisements in Assamese language magazines. A total of 150 advertisements were evaluated and analyzed. The two types of magazines - women audience and general audience magazines were analyzed separately. An attempt was then made to codify, tabulate, analyze and interpret the collected data. Table 1 represents the stereotyping present in Assamese magazine advertisements. These advertisements have shown women doing daily household chores. They have been shown to be beautiful, fair and having flawless skin, high cheekbones, long eye lashes etc. What has been most visible in the advertisements is the use of women as a mannequin for display. In these advertisements, women are not shown to be high on intellectual level but are shown as good-looking and portrayed as someone desirable. This stereotyping of women is more prevalent in women audience magazines (85.66%). Interestingly, stereotyping is more established in women audience magazines compared to general audience magazines (4.71%). In women audience magazines, jewelry advertisements where women were shown wearing heavy jewelry pertaining to various brands have appeared more as compared to other advertisements.

Table 1

CATEGORY	% of advertisements	
	Women audience magazine	General audience
Stereotypes	85.66	4.71
Non-stereotypes	3.33	1.39
Others	11.45	93.22

Though a large number of advertisements have stereotyped women, still there have been few advertisements that does not stereotype women. There have been advertisements that show women as decision makers, in professional, authoritative roles or doing things for their own satisfaction. These are the advertisements where a woman is shown at par with men, doing things that usually men do. These advertisements have reflected the changing scenario and broken the stereotypic notion that a woman is weak and she is best suited for household works or is only concerned about her beauty and looks.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of the study suggest that as far as role portrayal of women in Assamese language magazines is concerned, there are only few advertisements which have shown women in extremely positive light. Only few advertisements have shown women as professionals and decision makers who do not necessarily confine themselves to housework or mothering but instead involve in things that are traditionally done by men. (Men can also do housework alongside women).

Most of the advertisements have depicted women in roles such as a mother, homemaker, secretary or a nurse. It is true that portrayal of women as mother, wife or a nurse does not decrease the esteem of women and such a portrayal is even not unnatural. But the matter of concern here is that such portrayal fails to reflect the progressive picture of the globalized urban women and shows them in their traditionally accepted roles. These advertisements carry the notion that for women, career is not a priority spot but something second after their daily house work. But the truth is that in today's world, women are much more than just a wife or a mother. Women have now-a-days established themselves as individuals who can earn their own living and also support others. In Assamese magazines this advancement of women does not get reflected.

Again, it is essential here to mention that women have also been portrayed in negative shade in Assamese magazine advertisements. In those advertisements women have been shown as dumb or mere sex objects with little or no relevance to the context or product in the advertisements. Although the number is not a vast majority, still it is a matter of concern that there are some advertisers that do think that showing women as dumb or sex object would help influence readers to buy their product.

Following up on stereotyping, it is ironical that women's magazines have been stereotyping women more than general audience magazines. As women's magazines are more read by women, stereotyping can have strong negative impact on the women populace as a whole. Due to continuous stereotyping, a certain conditioning in terms of the image of womanhood may take place among young female readers who would be more susceptible to the same. For instance, in many of the advertisements, there was a continuous depiction of skinny and thin female models. Looking at these models, young girls may start to starve themselves to attain a lean and thin body like them. This can also have adverse effects on young men as they might start thinking that a woman who is not thin and fair is not desirable. They might also start giving more emphasis to the physical attributes than to the inner beauty or personality of a woman.

General audience magazines however, have showed women as decision makers, professionals and in authoritative roles in a few advertisements. In those advertisements, women have been

shown doing things for their own satisfaction. In such advertisements, women have been shown at par with men, doing things that usually men do. There have also been some advertisements where men have been shown doing things that are traditionally thought to be done by women only, such as cooking in households. These advertisements have truly broken the shackles of stereotyping. These advertisements have changed the stereotypic notion that a woman should only be confined to household works only and men bread earners.

Thus, the present study hints at two pertinent facts which becomes a matter of concern as far as portrayal of women in magazine advertisements are concerned. Firstly, there is a lot of stereotyping and regressive appealing happening in Assamese magazine advertisements. An advertisement which shows women only concerned about wearing heavy and costly jewelry to feel satisfied and gain acceptance in society is an example of such a primitive type of appealing. This sort of depiction is purely questionable in today's context when women in Assam and society at large have proved to be much more than just being only concerned about their skin colour, clothes or jewelry. Secondly, contrary to the popular notion that general audience magazines which have men as audience stereotype women more than women's magazines, the study came up with the contesting fact that, not the general audience magazines but the women audience magazines instead portray women in decorative roles (i.e. not doing anything specific). This revelation is a matter of concern because since women's magazines are mostly read by women, it can have huge negative impact on the mind-sets of women. They might get a wrong impression about life and start following something which is unreal and which goes against the true repute of today's globalized urban women.

6. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

In today's society, women are educated and empowered. They are confident and independent. These days women seem to make an important part in the decision making process of their family. They are no longer weak and dependent on men. Hence, more and more positive portrayal and less stereotyping of women is something which is ideal and required while portraying women in Indian magazine advertisements. Only then, the veracity of the fact that today's women are not tied on to family life and they have separate identity for themselves would be unveiled reflecting the sheer reality of today's globalized urban Indian women. Moreover, the readers will also feel good and get inspired by such advertisements where women are not shown as dumb, sex objects or mere stereotypes. The advertised products would definitely get more acceptability for depicting the real picture of the new generation empowered women thereby, accomplishing the main aim of the advertisers. Moreover, it is important to depict women portraying stronger roles in society. Advertisements should portray women as entrepreneurs or defense personnel, as women do play such roles in today's world.

There are a few suggestions that can be considered by the advertisers for effective advertising:

- Advertisers should avoid stereotyping of women as they help reinforce stereotypes in the society;
- Advertising is a very communicative and persuasive medium, so advertisers should foresee the long term effects of the way they portray women in their advertisement;
- Advertisements can be effective without showing the women in an alluring manner. So advertisers should stop using women for alluring the readers. It is not necessary to use women for decoration in men's product. A women can be shown to compliment men and not decorative i.e. not demeaning the dignity of the women. If the advertisement is made attractively, there is no need for advertisers to use women as decoration objects to attract the readers;
- Women in today's age are playing variety of roles in the society. Advertisers should try to portray women in those roles so that they can also be agents of inspiration.

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