Media portrayals of women: A thought to deliberate

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Abstract

Mass media can be considered as a forceful mechanism to promote social and economic value for women and cultivate social development in urban and also less developed regions of the nation. The roles which women portray in media have a serious impact in developing social status of women in society. The portrayal of women in media and its impact have been the centre of debate by academics, government, researchers and public. Taking this into consideration the present study aims to analyze impact of roles portrayed by women in media and reviews & describes some problem areas whose exploration will provide useful insights aimed at improving the ethical content in advertising, over-all marketing strategy and films. The paper also identifies the effects of projected roles of women by mass media on women psychology and health and also on the image of women in the society. The demand is to enhance the idea of transformation and progress in the society while developing significant and ethical content through mass media.

Keywords: mass media, portrayal of women, ethical, social development

Introduction

Communication is imperative for women’s development and mass media play noteworthy role. It is to be noted that growth of women’s education and their entry into employment have contributed to the growth of media. In all spheres of life whether for controlling population growth, spread of literacy or improving quality of life for vast masses, women have crucial role to play. However, women can be expected to play this role when they become conscious of their strength. In this context, media has an significant role to play – to create awakening in women to achieve their potential as the drivers of change in the social environment. In today’s world, print and electronic media play a vital role in effectively conveying message which contain enormous power in a democracy - a power which is only increasing and not decreasing, needs carrying out a focused thought about women-related issues and the portrayal of women. Both electronic and print media can play a constructive and an invigorating role to give to the women the rightful and the special space.

Debates on roles essayed by women in media

Since the late 60s there have been concerns regarding the portrayal of women in the media (Bardwick & Schumann, 1967). Bardwick and Schumann (1976) analyzed the portrayal of women in television commercials and concluded that to an amazing extent women are preoccupied with dirt, the television woman in commercials is shown as housebound. People watching televisions are bombarded with images and slogans through advertisements. People memorize slogans and absorb images without questioning them. More importantly people do it without thinking. This is what Gerbner, Gross, Morgan and Signorieli (1980) called the cultivation effect. According to Gerbner, one of the most common findings from media and cultivation studies is that increased television viewing is associated with more stereotypical views, especially of gender (Allan & Scott, 1996). Gerbner, Gross, Morgan and Signorieli (1980) argued that for heavy viewers, television virtually monopolizes and subsumes
other sources of information, ideas and consciousness. Furthermore, the heavy viewers perceive the world as what is shown on television (Gerbner, et al., 1980).

In 1980, researchers from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization suggested that repeated exposure to sexist roles is a contributing cause to havoc in society and many social problems, including such behavior as violence against women and sexual harassment to eating disorders. Jennings, Geis, & Brown in a 1980 study found that women who viewed reversed gender roles were more self-confident than women who viewed roles with typical gender roles. In addition, Atkin & Miller in 1975 showed that children who viewed programs and ads and films depicting reversed gender roles rated male oriented jobs as more appropriate for women, as opposed to those children who viewed them with women in a traditional homemaker role. Later studies have shown that roles portraying women as homemakers may activate the belief that women are domestic and nurturing, whereas programs that show half-naked women, may activate the belief that women are alluring, frivolous sexual objects.

There are some noteworthy ads and movies that came on air in recent times and what they say about working women in India. The first ad many could think of was the recent HDFC Women’s Plan ad that shows a young woman sending her parents on a holiday to Europe. Clearly, the ad is an acknowledgement of the growing purchasing power of working women in India. More importantly, it highlights many ways in which Indian women are taking care of their families, something new in a tradition where parents are not supposed to “take” anything from their daughters. With working women in India no longer a rarity in any sector some ads reflected that. This ad for MIOT hospitals is interesting for what it doesn’t focus upon – the pilot’s gender. She’s just a pilot who happens to be a woman, and needs support on a grueling job, like any pilot would. An ad for the Mia range of jewellery from Tanishq is explicitly targeted at working women in India. Attempting to be tongue-in-cheek, it suggests that jewellery can offer some solace for a hard day at work – but at least, brands are waking up to the fact that women’s problems go beyond choosing the day’s wardrobe. Problems like heart health, for instance. Ads shows a woman worrying about her man’s heart only, never her own? The Britannia commercial for Vita Marie Gold surely deserves some stature for having an Indian woman who wants to show her heart some love. Advertisement of Nirma which shows the unite power and confidence of doing something good and white while pulling out an ambulance from mud is a lesson to men who were there but not helped the ambulance. Advertisements of Taza Tea show the confidence of fulfilling dreams on her own.

We can even take a note of the movie “English Vinglish”, in which Sridevi (the famous bollywood actress) had shown the capability and determination of a house wife. We can consider the famous TV serial “Balika Vadhu”, “Meri Bhabhi”, “Yeh House Wife Hai Sab Janti Hai”, “Chhanchhan” and “Sanskar Dharohar Apno Ki”, “Jee Le Jara”, “Desh Ki Beti Nandani” etc. where we could have a look of a positive role of an Indian woman. We can even take an example of the reality show “Dance India Dance Supermoms” and “Kaun Banega Carorpati” which shows that women have much more talent than being a sex object.

The Campaigns like Femina’s campaign, “Raising The Bar, which created awareness about existing laws related to women and the loopholes in these laws, was awarded the Laadli Media and Advertising Award for Gender Sensitivity 2012-13 (Northern and Western Region). According to Dr A L Sharada, Director, Population First, “Femina’s campaign, Raising The Bar,” is a unique method of creating awareness about crime against women and the laws under which women can fight such crimes. Kavita Krishnan, a leading women’s rights activist, Secretary, All India Progressive Women’s Association (AIPWA) emerged as the voice of the December 16 mass protests. A year ago, a massive movement erupted on the streets of Delhi and the whole country was against the brutal gang rape of young woman on a bus, leading to her death. The Nirbhaya Case, where the whole country was the
participant to get the justice was highlighted by mass media. Same was the scene with Jessica Lal and Aarushi Murder cases. This contribution of media was appreciated by many organizations.

Whereas Vibha Padalkar, ED and CFO, HDFC Life in an interview (in an article Ladies Only? in Times of India dated March 5, 2014) emphasizes that playing down the stereotypical behavior is a starting point where the support from companies and male colleagues can make all the difference for working women. Chhavi Leekha, Group President (Brand and Corporate Communication), Spice Global wrote on the role of women in business leadership in Times of India dated March 5, 2014. She said that ‘ever since the opening up of the economy, Indian society has undergone a sea change with rising aspirations and breaking of stereotypes, especially with regards to the evolution women. Women, in these 22 years, in increasing numbers have been playing the ‘Super Ninja’ daily, juggling stiff demands at work and also at home. This rigorous drive to exceed their limits has taken them to leadership positions in business.’ However, these portraits of women shown/written in media have changed the way people think, but there is yet to do a lot to develop an environment where women could feel freedom in the society.

**Objectives of the study**

- This study aims to identify the impact of the content of feminist roles on the psychology and health of women in the society.
- The goal of the study is to know the effects of women portrayal in media on the psychology and behavior of men in the society.

The objective of the study is to understand the importance and role of ethical content in mass media which could build a good image and help maintaining dignity of women in contemporary society while discussing various campaigns and cases.

**Research Methodology**

This study deals with the impact of roles portrayed by women in media. The research analyzes different responses collected through the questionnaires filled by the selected sample from Delhi NCR region. The analysis of data is done on the responses collected from the selected sample of 500 who are between the age group of 18-50 years. This paper also studies existing data from a variety of sources, including governments, academics and media has been reviewed and arranged contextually to contribute in an innovative manner towards gender issues.

**Results and Discussions**

The responses from sample strongly illustrate that the roles play by women in different media strongly affect both men and women. The positive roles played by women act as a motivation for women. Negative roles develop a feeling of repulsion in women. The program which shows positive roles of women develops courage to do best for their home and of course for their country.

The following set of information is sieved through the answers of the target audience.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S No</th>
<th>Questions Asked</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>Can’t Say</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Potrayal of gender discrimination by way of physical and mental harassment of women everywhere.</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Potrayal of stereotype roles which builds an image of women for domestic purpose only.</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Potrayal of soaring crime rates and violence against women in the country reflects women as weaker sex who are being dominated and exploited.</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Potrayal of women as underrepresented group in decision making positions.</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Statement</td>
<td>Favorable</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Opposed</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Potrayal of the majority of women as sexy and fancy objects.</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Potrayal of glamourous, beautiful and zero-size female body results in increased cosmetics, designer clothes, medicine &amp; surgery business.</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Potrayal of the illiteracy among women continues to be in Media.</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Media does not address serious issues about exploitation and inequal treatment to women in different spheres but is keen in reporting sex related incidents by way of sensationalizing news of atrocities on women.</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Obscenity has risen so much in media. Unless there is any change in the content matter in media portrayals to change social perception of women, it will be difficult to change the image of women in the society.</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Women in media have a large responsibility in not only changing attitude towards women but also shaping public opinion.</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Overall picture of women is that they get limited coverage than men in media.</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Findings

The most noteworthy and longest social movement is movement for emancipation of women which appears unending. The media through its reach to people at large has been involved though not to the extent desired in supporting the movement for women emancipation by focusing neglect and marginalization of the position of the women in society. Women are under great social control and scrutiny which has restricted what they can say and where and to whom. Cultural moves in almost every social set-up determine women’s socialization in no vague terms. This has an important bearing on their ability to communicate and express their thoughts. To discuss content in women portrayal it is necessary to deal with the present situation of women in media.

There are certain key aspects related to the women which media should adequately cover and facilitate the process of liberation of women. To know the present situation we asked many questions to our target audience where we found that 75% of the target audience agreed upon the portrayal of gender discrimination by way of physical and mental harassment of women everywhere but for 15% of the audience. 50% of the audience said yes when asked that portrayal of stereotype roles which builds an image of women are for domestic purpose only but 40% of the audience did not give any answer and only 10% said no for this.

We found that 90% of the audience marked yes when asked portrayal of soaring crime rates and violence against women in the country reflects women as weaker sex who are being dominated and exploited where only 10% answered no to this question. 65% of the public from the target group said that women are portrayed as under represented group in decision making positions whereas 20% said no and 15% answered can’t say. We found that 90% of the target audience agreed upon that majority of women are portrayed as sexy and fancy object in media and 5% marked can’t say and 5% answered no for this question.

However, 90% of the target audience said that glamourous, beautiful and zero-size shaped female body results in increased cosmetics, designer clothes, medicine & surgery business whereas 60% of the target group disclosed that portrayal of illiteracy among women continues to be in media and 25% said no for this. We found that 80% of the public from the target group said media does not address serious issues about exploitation and inequal treatment to women in different spheres but is keen in reporting sex related incidents by way of sensationalizing news of atrocities on women whereas 15% of the audience said no to this question.
We found that 75% of the target audience stressed upon that there should be revolutionary change in the content matter in media portrayals to change social perception of women and/or change in image of women in the society. We found that 60% of target audience believes that women in media have a large responsibility in not only changing attitude towards women but also shaping public opinion whereas 30% marked no here. We found that 80% of the target group expressed that the overall picture of women in media is that they get domestic and very limited coverage than men in media and 20% of the audience marked no here.

Conclusion

The portrayal of women in the media is an issue of growing concern. The world of mass media and its role and influence in our lives is increasing at a rapid pace. Changes have occurred in the use of gender references in roles in recent years which are owed more to the producer's perception of their audience than to any considerations of morality, decency or good taste, or even to the influence of the feminist movement. Most advertisers now realize that women have at least as much buying power as men, and consequently take pains to avoid offending them. This does not mean that there is less sex exposure in contemporary advertising, just that it is used more subtly. We can say that ads for health and beauty products should appeal to a woman's sense of well being for her own sake -- not to enhance her status as a sex object. One can always try to look slim in a healthier way and that should not be under the influence of any actor or model or under the influence of any profit making beauty and slimming center. All these kinds of issues need to be addressed by the media because media is the medium of great exposure which has actually persuaded the public to go for such things. The present study shows that women are trying to look like a zero size model or heroine whom they saw on TV. Specially, young girls when gaze at models and heroines having slender and sexy body, with very fair and glowing skin in designer costumes and jewellery and also with a shine of sparkle in hairs, then they also want to look like these models. Unfortunately, because of all that they apply cosmetics and medicines beyond the limits and get suffered from many side effects by the overdoses of steroids and drugs. Whether a woman works or not, she should be shown as competent and creative in using products and performing any role which help her to perform the tasks, her roles and lifestyle status. Women should be free to take jobs outside the home if they want them. Show women as congenial and supportive of one another in a setting appropriate to the life style of the target market. Traditional women will attribute higher credibility to an authoritative male figure. This is especially true in product categories such as major appliances or those products which represent new technological developments. The contemporary women prefer a female role which has the necessary level of technical expertise. We got the portrait of a woman in the eyes of men is of no value from the study. It means some immature men who watch women oriented roles, crime and atrocities against women, alluring roles got impulsive and plan for such actions just for their enjoyment, without realizing the repercussions. The intended role portrayal will be most effective if all elements of the ad or program are in harmony with the ethical content.

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