

Gender Portrayal in Age of Social Networking Sites: An Analytical Discussion

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Abstract:

The relationship between gender and media is quite old. Media representations clearly highlight how different media portray gender roles in different forms. Gendered representation of media across the world revolves around the stereotypical portrayals of masculinity and femininity. Throughout history, the content of gender stereotype has changed in relation to historical changes in the relationship between men and women. Media for long is reinforcing the notion of gender stereotyping through its content. With the emergence of internet, change has been witnessed slowly but steadily in the stereotypical portrayal of gender in media content. Social media sites have been seen to allow information delivery, constant engagement and discussion of those ideas which are falling outside the existing of gendered discourse. This paper will try to delve into various aspects pertaining to gender portrayal in age of social media by surveying existing literatures.

Keywords: Gender Portrayal, Gender Stereotyping, Social Media, Blogs, Facebook

Introduction

According to Canadian Communication Theorist, Marshal McLuhan, mass media not only gives people information and entertainment, but also affects people's lives by shaping their opinion, attitudes and beliefs (McLuhan, 1964). It controls social life by transferring the dominant hegemonic ideology in an invisible way. In case of gender portrayal, society have established hegemony of males by institutionalizing dominance of men over women. Gendered representation of media across the world revolves around the stereotypical portrayals of masculinity and femininity.

Masculinity is associated with male and Femininity is associated with female. The male body is essentialized in our culture around certain traits that characterize maleness or masculinity. Similarly, femininity is also culturally constructed based on the body of the biological female. Thus, the concept of masculinity and femininity are culturally produced to signify the socially accepted differences between men and women. Although many scholars argue that this difference is based on biology, some of them argue that these differences are socially constructed.

Throughout history, the content of gender stereotype has changed in relation to historical changes in the relationship between men and women. Media for long is reinforcing the notion of gender stereotyping through its content, be it underrepresentation of women in media or portrayal of stereotypes in different forms of media. With the emergence of internet, the field of communication studies have undergone massive changes by making one-way sender dominated communication channel to two-way receiver oriented one. New Media is the consequence of this communication revolution. New Media has started changing the scenario in almost all aspects of life. With the passage of time and advancement of technology, change has been witnessed slowly but steadily in the stereotypical portrayal of gender in media content. New media being carrying the notion of participatory culture is expected to bring some changes in the way gender roles has been represented till now in media. Social media sites have been seen to allow information delivery, constant engagement and dialogue of those ideas which are falling outside the existing of gendered discourse. Social media provides platform to talk on issues which generally is silenced or overlooked in society. The pertinent area on how new media especially social media is dealing with portrayal of gender issues frames research question of this paper.

Literature Review

Different literatures highlight the fact that portrayal of gender stereotyping is very common across media. The depiction of women in media is an issue of controversy in the field of communication. The topic of media coverage and

portrayal of women has been a topic of interest to all, be it print or electronic. Ross and Carter (2011) showed that male coverage in news item is also much significant in comparison to female coverage. Ross and Carter's study was based on Britain and Ireland and their findings showed the bias in representation of women in media (Ross and Carter, 2011).

“Few women appeared as celebrities (9% newspapers; 5% radio and 0% across TV) and they were much more likely to be framed as victims (26% newspapers, 28% radio and 24% TV) of various crimes and events, including domestic violence (19%), war (16%) and discrimination (16%). Across broadcast news, three-quarters of male victims were described as victims of war, which corresponds with the number of war-related stories featured during the monitoring day...”

Other than print media, in sector of advertising gender stereotype is very prominent. Various research studies conducted over the years show the constant prevalence of gender stereotype in advertising sector. The results of these studies explored that over the years women are portrayed as either engrossed with the household jobs, like cooking or health, hygiene of the family and beauty or they are portrayed as the decorative or sex objects in advertisements (Lundstrom Scigliompaglia, 1970; Goffman, 1979; Bardwick Schumann, 1967).

Gender ideology is another important aspect for advertisers. Therefore, it is very important to examine the dominance of gender stereotype in advertisement as it reflects culture and how people act within given culture. Erving Goffman (1979) used frame analysis to examine gender role stereotypes in advertisements, where he defined a frame as the principles of organization which govern social events and our involvement in them. Goffman coded the portrayals of women in advertisements into six categories:

- *Relative Size - women are smaller or lower in comparison to men;*
- *Feminine Touch - women are shown caressing or touching objects or themselves;*
- *Function Ranking - women in occupational positions are shown subordinate to men;*
- *Family Scenes - women are portrayed as mothers and caretakers;*
- *Ritualization of Subordination - women are depicted in flirtatious or childish poses;*
- *Licensed Withdrawal - women are portrayed as distracted or not involved in their surroundings (Goffman, 1979).*

In sectors of films, also gender portrayal is very much stereotyped in nature. From its day of commencement, films were criticised and argued as dominated by male thoughts and gaze. Be production or viewership, the pleasure of a man was considered as focal point. Huhn and Westwell in Oxford Dictionary of Film Studies notes that “gender issues have been prominent in film studies since the 1970s, when roles, image and stereotypes of women, men in films began to be seriously addressed” (2012).

Judith Butler, in her work *The Psychic Life of Power* spoke of female experience and the oppressive patterns evolving out of the female identity as conceived and operated by the patriarchy (Butler, 1997). “Accepting identities is same as accepting dominant scripts and performing roles prescribed by them. Identities cannot be accurate representation of real self, when interpellation happens by hegemonic structures, people respond to it, especially oppressed ones perhaps because it recognizes them as a group” (Butler, 1997).

The persistent nature of Internet has started changing the scenario in today's world. The ever changing nature of internet and the ability to freely navigate among online cultures permits the fluidness of gender to be realized and experienced (Beiley and Telford, 2007). The Internet can be viewed as a space with liberating potential where gender

can be performed in new ways (Hans, et al., 2011). From this particular perspective internet is a space for gender emancipation where it can be performed and conceptualized in inventive ways.

Media and Gender Studies: A Theoretical Approach

The feminist work in communication has its origins in the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s. The seminal work of Betty Friedan - *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) catalysed women's movement in North America and Western Europe assumed a global momentum. United Nations declared the period of 1975 - 1985 as International Decade for Women. It was indeed a political movement well supported by feminist academics and practitioners from different lifestyles. According to Gallager (1992) over time feminist media studies revolves around two main areas:

- *An analysis of structures of power and oppression*
- *A focus on the politics of representation where women were objects rather than subjects (Gallager, 1992).*

At the heart of feminist cultural politics lies criticism of media content and its inference in the construction of gender. This debate was continuing since the content analyses of sex roles and media stereotypes, which symbolized feminist scholarship of the 1970s where quantitative social science methods were favored. In her seminal essay 'Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema' (1975), Laura Mulvey concluded that in built patterns of pleasure and identification in the mainstream narrative film impose masculinity as a point of view (Mulvey, 1975).

There are different perspectives in the field of feminist theory. Liberal feminist theorists claim that media reflects changes in society. When the role of women in society changed after women's movements, the media continued to misrepresent women. The liberal feminist theory argues that the status of women in media content is absent or marginalized. Radical feminist media theory mainly emphasizes on idea of patriarchy. This theory discusses the social organisation regarding gender.

Socialist Feminist theory is basically based on capitalist values and ideas, essentially opposing Marxist theories and communist standards. While Marxist media theory focuses on the relationship between the elite and the media and the economic determinants on media production and output (Political Economy) socialist feminist media theory focuses on things such as the nurturing role that women must play within the capitalist society.

Postmodern feminist media theory is grounded in a view of popular culture that reflects ideas of general postmodern theory, since it regards postmodernism as a cultural shift rather than a change in society itself. Postmodern feminist media theory focuses chiefly on the way that audiences read texts, whether they are affected by the media and the degree of control that the audience have over this.

In this paper the researcher has tried to see the role that social media has played in terms of different issues pertaining to portrayal of gender in media content. In the advent of 21st century technology was mainly male dominated. In 2000, survey reports show that male are twice engaged in online media in comparison to women. Because of this imparity in participation in online world between men and women, technological advancements have been tool of masculine power. Since 2001 male and female participation in online world has started reaching parity.

The Pew Research Report of 2000 showed that women started using social media much more than men to maintain relationship. This trend in parity of using internet by both men and women compels contemporary feminists to view internet as a space for women's empowerment and agency (Hans et al, 2011).

Representation of Women in Social Networking Sites

Several researches have shown that women outnumber men in social networking sites, which is very uncommon in traditional media. Generally, studies reveal that women use social networking sites more than men to foster their social connections. In a 2007 study, it is seen that women are generally using social media for social connection and posting photographs. Similarly, in a study on blog it is seen that women are writing blogs more than men and write on their family, romantic relationship etc. other than serious issues. A large-scale study conducted in Myspace has revealed the fact that both men and women tended to have majority of female friends in their list. One of the key findings of the study is that women are probably more popular in social networking sites as women can both give and receive positive emotions. The trend that women outstrip men in domain of social media is shaping the opinion that social media would serve as strong platform to empower women to build their own identity replacing the gender stereotyping of traditional media. Sneft (2008) are of the view that diverse narratives written by women in social media may begin to reverse the prevailing definition of ‘girl’ and challenge gender based limitations prevalent in society (Sneft, 2008).

Many social network sites like Facebook, Instagram etc. have skew towards female users. According to Pew Research, in US women are more likely to use Facebook than men by 11%. Pinterest is also a female centric social networking site with 33% female internet users using it compared to 8% of all men. It is also seen that more than half of women in comparison to men are using social network sites as they give positive response to brands and support and promote brands also. It is however very clear that in comparison to traditional media, representation of women in terms of using social media is much more.

Women and Different Social Networking Sites

One of the most important trend of social media is Facebook. Facebook provides variety of ways for the users to show their identity. Users portray their identity on Facebook through connectivity and narrative. Gender identity can be displayed through comments, status updates as well as pictures. Different research study showed that men upload pictures that make them seem independent and active while women focuses more on looking attractive. In terms of usage, women are more active in Facebook, busy in maintaining social relationships.

In terms of blogging, female can experience liberation. Blogs provide important platform for gendered self-expression, especially in countries with restricted freedom of expression. In different countries, female uses blogs as well as vlogs for uploading their personal content. Attwood (2009) studied blooks (blogs turned into books) as current trend. Through blooks a female can share their sexual openness, empowerment and pleasure.

Women Activism and Social Media

Other than high representation of women using social media in comparison to men as a positive facet, social media is also giving a platform for people to voice their opinion on social issues especially gender equality. Female activists are playing vital role in social media against atrocities on women and women centric problems. One can wonder how a click makes a difference in the world.

Social media offers an opportunity for female activists to make a difference in the causes they support in cost effective manner and with instant reach. There are pages on Facebook which address vehemently on women issues especially against the growing crime rates against women in India. Pages like Facebook Campaign and Abuse No More are such forums that are making people aware about women issues which can be addressed by generating consciousness and directed interventions. Abuse No More provides its members a forum to meet other members and talk safely without

conversations been seen by others. Thus social media sites help women to share their plight without disclosing their identities.

I Never Asked for It- an initiative of Blank Noise invites women to send garments they were wearing when they were sexually harassed or eve-teased in public along with an account of the story.

There was a severe uproar in the 2012 Delhi gang rape case among women. Several posts were there in Facebook, one of which said- ‘Don’t tell us how to dress. Tell them not to rape’.

Anurag Dwivedi, admin of Stop Acid Attacks, a popular facebook page, started his initiative in 2013 in light of the increasing acid attacks on women. Story of Laxmi, her fight for seven years and how her struggle forced the government to rethink on this issue in totality is worth appreciating.

SlutWalk fight backs against victim blaming and slut shaming around sexual violence. Such platforms are empowering women to participate in social movements. The Times of India report says, Nisha Susan, who initiated the widely popular Pink Chaddi campaign says, *“If I have a problem with something and post it on my blog, people who are interested can join. It is the same with social networking sites. It’s simple because you don’t have to reconcile with people who want to do it differently”*. Oxfam India shared the popular campaign named, *“We can Campaign towards reduction of violence against women and for political empowerment”* and launched, *“The Close the Gap Campaign in Social Networking”* like social networking sites having the tagline, *“Indians demand equality for women”*. These platforms are having influence on rural users too which helps women to deal with gender issues.

Social media, being the game changer has tried to be an influential platform for bringing women’s rights issues in attention of wider public. Social media tries to bridge the gap between women’s grassroots activism and policy makers. There are areas on which social media has fostered women activism.

Hashtag Activism

Hashtag activism in the recent era has helped to mobilise public attention on women’s rights and issues. It is increasing the credibility of those issues which are not properly highlighted in mainstream media. UN Women’s successful and high-profile #HeForShe campaign focuses on the potential of social media to attract large number of audiences. The campaign engaged more than 1.2 billion users, highlighting the fact to engage men and boys to achieve gender equality.

The recent #MeToo campaign has become one of the largest trending topics on Twitter with over half million tweets and a large number of share in Facebook. #Me too is an international movement against sexual harassment and assault. It spread virally in October 2017 as a hashtag to help demonstrate widespread prevalence of sexual assault. It provided space for people to be vulnerable about experiences without being specific.

Queer Identity and Social Media

During 1990s queer theory came into prominence as a different way of critically examining sexualities outside normative binaries. With the blogging movement of late 1990s users can put themselves into online spaces that allowed them to be honest and open about their identity. Facebook allows a user to designate their sex as either male or female while creating account. Once after the creation of account, the user is free to post whatever they wish to post in terms of their gender identity. Marginalised individuals after the emergence of internet are able to exceed geographical boundaries and provide anonymous communication. Indeed, early research revealed that queers often found safe and seen as

accepting online domain as more comfortable zone, and that these interactions are habitually helpful to users' psychological well-being.

Gender Stereotyping Still Continues

Despite of all these positive facts, social media also reinforces gender stereotyping. Commercials that appear in social networks are the main sources of gender stereotyping. Women are generally seen as object of sex in social media advertisements. Women are more often shown in commercials like cosmetic and domestic products while advertisements for men generally focus on cars, business products or investments. Another important aspect is that advertisements show frequently the complete figures of women and close-up shots for men. Showing entire figure of women objectify the female body, while the latter evoke positive associations. Thus culturally constructed gender roles and relationships continue to remain same element in both mainstream and social media.

Self-Representation in Social Media

The other significant way in which social media showcases gender difference is in the way young generation showcase themselves in social network domain. Youngster boys and girls differ in the way they post contents in social networks. Girls share their own pictures and while boys were more likely to share pictures and comments that they described as self-promotion. The pictures often contain sexual content or references to alcohol. Such behaviour echoes gender stereotypes and media portrays the picture of “commodified” woman on one hand and the strong stable depiction of man. Teenage girls are also more likely to share personal information than boys, which sometimes expose themselves to possible sexual harassment or cyber bullying.

According to some scholars, gender differences are rooted in our culture. They are of the view that girls and boys are raised with different sets of cultural values. In traditional media, gender differences and portrayal of gender stereotypes persists which continues in the online world as well. Despite of the shortcomings, each and every social media networking sites offers diversity of gendered performances. The detailed survey of existing literatures on gender representation in social media shows that users sometimes perform gender stereotyping in social media and in other cases it promotes equality of gender. There are still enormous scopes to deal with this particular area, it is on the users whether they will employ it to benefit or harm themselves.

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