

Social Construction of Gender through Mediated Communication in India

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ABSTRACT

This paper discovers the relationship between gender and media and how gender is represented within various media platforms. These platforms include, but are not limited to film, television, journalism and social media. We have a mediated, consumption-oriented society, where the stories produced and disseminated by media institutions play a vital role in marking anything as important and viral. In fact, much of what the masses know and care about is based on what they consume through these platforms. How individuals shape their social characters, how they come to differentiate between genders, colour, ethnicity, race, caste - even urban or rural - is shaped by objectified texts presented by media for audiences that are increasingly biased by the social construction of gender. In short, media has a strong position in controlling our social realities. While the difference in gender is rooted in biology, how we perceive and perform gender is rooted in culture. According to Byers & Dell (1992), we reckon culture "as a process through which people circulate and struggle over the meanings of our social experiences, social relations, and therefore, ourselves" (p.191). Gender is a social construct through which a society defines what it means to be a man or a woman. This paper looks deeper into the ways in which mediated communication in India represents the social construction of gender and ultimately shapes our understanding of the same. This study focuses on the specific contents and messages of newspapers, television, including the advertisements, and the Internet. The research uses the qualitative content analysis of gender roles in the contemporary media forms to find out if the quality of the coverage of the females in Indian media is afflicted by adherence to outdated gender role stereotypes.

Keywords: media and gender, India, language, culture, communication.

Media and Gender

Numerous studies have been conducted to map out the most relevant conceptual issues around gender in the field of culture studies and media. The most vital idea to the stereotypes of 'man' and 'woman' in the India media is that they are biologically and fundamentally different or are 'opposites'. To begin with, the children's media, like their toys, are among the first exposures which showcase how masculinity and femininity should be performed. The characters, like Spiderman, GI Joe, Kkrish or Gladiator define the 'normal' masculine behaviour, where a muscled and aggressive character may depict the image of a 'real man, ' who uses aggression to win over an opponent.

On the other hand, opposite aspects of identification were apparent in popular fairy tales from the seventeenth century. For

instance, female characters, like Rapunzel and Cinderella were beautiful, timid and emotional, and anticipated the arrival of a man to take them out of their pitiable situation. The content of media represents the pattern of values in a society and can well play a critical role in bringing about social change by disseminating the right and just information. Whether knowingly or unknowingly, the way women are depicted in media is a bit exaggerated form of their position in the real life. The flip-side of this is that the adolescents and young adults are deeply affected by what they see on the popular media and they tend to imitate or relate themselves with the characters shown in the content of the programs. A large number of research papers have been published in various journals highlighting the representation of women in the media in the last decade. In this paper, an effort is made to review the status of literature

on this concern. A total of 35 articles from 13 refereed academic journals are classified in order to understand the seriousness of the issue and its impact on the society. This paper attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What are the reasons behind sexual objectification of women?
2. What are the effects of objectification on women's self-esteem?
3. How could the image of women in the media be improvised?

Literature Review

In a country like India, where around 50% of the population consists of the females, women have invariably become the prime assets for the growth and development of the country. The time has passed when the role of the women in a family or society was limited. The women in India today are shouldering all the major responsibilities with the men and leaving their mark in all the spheres of performance. However, there are still many evidences which bring to the front the systematic discrimination and stereotypical practices to neglect the females. It could be in terms of domestic violence, denial of basic necessities, like education, health or sanitation facilities, poor nutrition or health and property rights (Purnima, 2010). Media can have major impact on the way one conceives the idea of gender, identity and sexuality. In fact, media has been regarded as an important pillar of social transformation. It has the power to mould or build public opinion and mobilize even the far-placed audiences. However, a few media programs, including advertisements, movies and posts on social media, showcase prejudiced and challenging themes. According to Arif and Ehtesham (2013), apart from the popular media, like television and radio, even the new media, like blogs, social networking sites and internet, is becoming increasingly powerful phenomenon, mobilizing mass support. Women have a crucial part to play in all the spheres of social lives, be it child rearing, running the household, improving the life quality or monetary contribution, and in order to play these parts well, they first need to be aware of their potential.

The advertisements being broadcasted on popular media, like radio and television, perhaps encourage sexism (Mishra, 2015). They reinforce the ages-old belief that women tirelessly serve others despite being unwell. It

has been widely accepted that media has the power to promote the social and economic development of women, as it reflects lifestyles, socialization patterns, cultural restrictions, participation levels, political scheming, religions agendas, education standard and image of any society. A few studies report that social issues related to women were far less (only 9%) than the sensationalized stories relating to women, which occupied 50-60% of the newspaper space. Even more disturbing is the growing inclination of media houses to report stories with women as victims. Some research reports found that sexualized objectification of women is the main motivation behind the reportage (Kumari & Joshi, 2015). A study of major English dailies in India reported that women issues comprised less than 3% of the total items reported in the newspaper. There has been much objection to the way women are portrayed in the advertisements of the products, like cigarettes, intimate wears, irrespective of the gender or apparels. A majority of them show scantily clothed women endorsing things which have absolutely nothing to do with feminism, for instance, cement (Waqar, et. al., 2015). As globalization spreads to the electronic media and market forces rule the advertising industry, the sexual objectification showcasing women in demeaning manner has become a norm.

Although it is a truth that modernization and awareness has hit the participation levels and decision making ability of women, the situation is still far from perfection. Objectification of women is still a reality and their depiction has rather turned vulgar and shoddy. The media, in fact, explicitly shows the overtones of sexual equation, overpowering the conventional inhibitions and orthodox presentation (Schwartz, et. al., 2013). The women are generally depicted as politically naïve, religious, submissive, scrupulous, socially predictable and culturally modern, with her primary interests restricting to her own family. Similarly, daily soaps depict women wearing heavy and costly ornaments and clothes and tied up in activities around plotting family feuds, attending parties, engaged in suicidal love affairs or caring little about anything which concerns a regular, mundane life. The journalism industry lacks female correspondents and columnists. The ones who are there are either

political activists or socialites. In vernacular media, too, the discussion around women is limited to the coloured pages, which are full of yellow journalism and hot pick-up and pin-ups or erotic photos from parties in some exotic location (Collins, 2011). The overall focus of portrayal of women in the media reinforces the stereotypes and prejudices instead of reducing them (see Figure 1).



Figure 1 Source: <https://bit.ly/2VzDBzq>

Causes behind Misrepresentation of Women

There is a need to look for a framework to understand, research and intervene so as to improve the women's position in socio-cultural context, which sexually objectifies a female's body and reduces her worth to her looks and sexuality. Objectification broadly refers to a behaviour of dehumanizing a person, reducing its worth to a commodity, without considering its personality or dignity. Psychologists associate objectification to a lot of mental and health related risks in women (Davis, 2018). It mainly involves the depiction of women as an object of male sexual desire in advertisements, art, media, occupations of stripping or prostitution, pornography or events where women are purely viewed and judged aesthetically or sexually in events, like beauty contests. Far from reality, media leaves very less influential or powerful roles to be played by women, indicating that women have less value or are less worthy. A majority of advertisements feature men and in movies, male characters get way more screen time than the female characters. In fact, many female characters shown by the media have unrealistic bodies, skin or behaviours. The misrepresentation of women leaves an adverse impact on the females, some of which are incorrigible and extremely serious.

Effects of Misrepresentation on Women in Media

Evans (2019) believes that objectification often leads to serious psychological disorders among women, like depression, bulimia nervosa and other eating problems and sexual dysfunction. At times, the effect of this could be direct and visible in the females, but at times, the effect is much more subtle and involves women's internalization of these experiences, leading her to self-objectification. Researchers believe that women internalize their outside view, thereby looking at themselves as an object, meant to be evaluated or judged in the basis of its appearance or attributes. According to Snigda and Venkatesh (2011), the bad and unrealistic image building of women often have negative psychological outcomes, like increased anxiety about one's appearance (fear about being judged or misjudged), lesser opportunities for high motivational levels, reduced awareness of one's basic physical sensations, like hunger, sexual arousal, etc., body shame, which happens when one's body is compared against the cultural standards, or increased anxiety about physical security, i.e., fear of getting molested. Figure 2 shows how gender representation is likely to be influenced by social class, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, and how its external and internalized effect may interact with women's other socio-cultural characters. Advertisements, music videos, internet sites, prime-time television series, sports or even music lyrics are no exception to portraying women as decorative objects or targets of men's sexist comments.

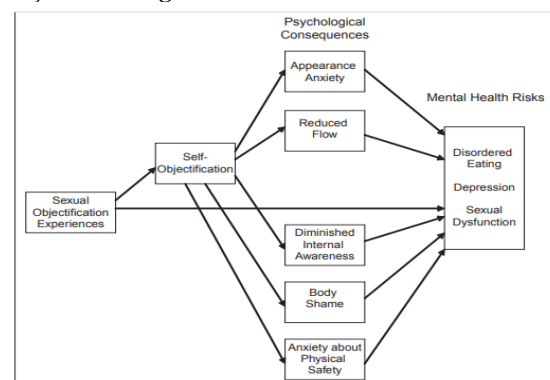


Figure 2 Model of key objectification theory tenets

Measure to Improve Women's Image in Media

Sarkar (2014) believes that the depiction of the ideal image of the beauty of women affects

their self-esteem and, also, affects how men perceive women. Men tend to judge women way more harshly when they compare them with the 'ideals' they see in the media. Objectification, misrepresentation and sexualisation of women often compel women to consider the society's perspective of the ideal body as their own view of their physical selves. It also leads to breeding of feelings like shame and appearance anxiety, further leading to depression.

In order to fight these problems, there is a need to not only bring about the changes which are profound and global, but also disrupt the stories which advertisers implants in the minds of people. Of course, there is also a need to change the attitudes which run deep in the conventional setups.

Conclusion

Representation of women in media, which is often objectified or sexualized, leads to grave and serious consequences in the women, including a low self-esteem. In order to address the public health problems like this, there is a need for a rise in the awareness, which could be done with citizen activism, discussions, education, media literacy and a general awareness to change the environment, norms and attitudes. These changes have to be insightful and universal and this would be made possible by an aware and educated public, who considers more of themselves as citizens than consumers.

Women may also combat being misjudged in various ways, like confronting the culprit or overlooking the situation. Movements like #MeToo or TimesUp spread a revolution, giving voice to women, who were just not mentally ready to come out of the closet with their stories of a disturbed past. Also, a campaign of #merireallife by a popular cellular brand urged people to post Photoshop-free or real photos in order to celebrate their flaws and celebrating their worth.

Additionally, various helpful resources made available by organizations which promote positive representation of women in media could be utilized to educate and influence media producers to stop stereotyping women and improve their image to create diverse

characters in various genres. The Dove Self-Esteem Project was one such project created with the sole aim to bring awareness and body confidence all over the world, inspiring women to form a positive relation with the way they looked.

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