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Gender Stereotypes and the Reimagining of Women in Indian Advertising: A Case Study

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Abstract: This article critically examines the changing representation of women in Indian advertisements between, with a focus on how gender roles, beauty perceptions and how the notions of agency are constructed and transformed within consumer culture. Drawing from feminist media theory and semiotic analysis, the article explores the shifts in the portrayal of women across parameters such as occupation, decision-making, financial dependence, and beauty ideals. Taking Tanishq advertisement as a case study, the article argues that there is a gradual departure from traditional depictions of women as dependent, emotional and ornamental toward more autonomous and selfassured portrayals reflecting changing socio-cultural values in contemporary India. The advertisements mirror broader discourses on gender equality, women's empowerment and consumer modernity, where jewellery transitions from a symbol of patriarchal possession to one of personal expression and independence.

Keywords: Women Representation, Feminist Media Theory, Consumer Culture, Gender Equality, Tanishq advertisement

1. Introduction

Advertising has long functioned as a persuasive medium that directs public attention towards commodities and ideas. Over time, its definition has been refined by scholars and practitioners alike. Many scholars defined advertising as a non-personal message presented to a specific audience in which the message is sponsor-identified about a product or institution. These definitions underscore its dual nature where advertising can be considered as an instrument of commercial gain and also as a carrier of cultural communication. In contemporary practice, the primary objective of corporate advertising is not simply to inform but to create favourable sentiments toward a product, brand or cause, to generate profit. While indispensable to both buyers and sellers, advertising remains particularly crucial for producers and corporations as it establishes consumer demand, fosters brand loyalty and situates products within wider cultural narratives.

Advertising does not exist in a cultural vacuum. Rather, it engages with and reflects prevailing social concerns and societal aspirations. Indian television advertising has frequently addressed social issues ranging from child labour and dowry to environmental degradation and political awareness. Such campaigns strategy are also used corporation where they integrate social issues into their promotional efforts to build positive corporate images while pursuing economic goals (Rathore, 2014). While it can enhance brand reputation and consumer trust, it also blurs the line between altruism and profit-driven motives. These issuebased campaigns operate as a strategic form of cause-related marketing which advances corporate interests and enhancing brand reputation also contribute to the broader social good by addressing societal concerns (Bajdor & Brzeziński, 2013).

Despite such potential, advertising has historically been criticised for promoting unrealistic ideals and for manufacturing desires detached from reality. As Tinic (1994) argues, advertising often fosters a culture of consumption premised on unattainable lifestyles, where happiness is portrayed as purchasable. Advertising campaigns such as Levi's are associated jeans with freedom, rebellion and joy, even though such qualities are not materially embedded in the product. Through such symbolic associations, advertising encourages individuals to internalise the belief that consumption is central to identity formation and personal fulfilment. Importantly, advertising also reproduces cultural stereotypes, particularly of gender, class and race. They also normalises certain body images, behaviours and ideals as desirable and natural.

Stereotypes are generalised beliefs about individuals or groups often grounded in cultural traditions rather than empirical evidence. They simplify social complexity by categorising people into fixed roles, but in doing so, they perpetuate distortions and reinforce inequality. Advertising has been propagating powerful messages of gender stereotypes where it continuously portrayed idealised gendered images. Historically, masculinity has been equated with strength, competitiveness and assertiveness, while femininity has been reduced to thinness, fairness, docility and maternal devotion. These portrayals not only reflect cultural expectations but also reinforce them, thereby naturalising socially constructed roles. Gender stereotypes in advertising illustrate how advertising has codified structured assumptions about men and women where women are seen as nurturers, caretakers and objects of beauty, and men as providers, leaders and embodiments of strength.

Gender stereotyping contributes to social categorisation, shaping perceptions of what constitutes appropriate behaviour for men and women. Media representations often propagate the notion that women's ultimate fulfilment lies in marriage and motherhood, while men must be financially responsible and emotionally restrained. Such images circulate across homes, schools and workplaces, embedding themselves into everyday practices and expectations. Television advertisements frequently depict newly married women as dutiful homemakers, devoted to serving husbands and in-laws, thereby reinforcing patriarchal norms. Boys are discouraged from expressing vulnerability, while girls are cautioned against assertiveness, all under the guise of 'natural' gender differences. As Rydell et al. (2010) demonstrate, these stereotypes can produce stereotype threat, where individuals internalise limiting beliefs about their abilities, adversely affecting personal and professional growth.

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At the same time, advertising does not merely reinforce stereotypes but it also serves as a site where stereotypes can be challenged or subverted. In recent decades, due to the rise of feminist movements, shifting consumer sensibilities and the rise of educated middle-class audiences, there has been a visible transformation in Indian advertising. Campaigns have increasingly experimented with narratives that disrupt traditional gender roles. Campaigns of Raymond's 2014 advertisement depicted a husband voluntarily staying home to care for his child while his wife pursued her career, thereby contesting the conventional portrayal of men as exclusive breadwinners. Similarly, detergent advertisements such as Tide's campaign, where a woman pushes an ambulance through the mud, break away from depictions of women as delicate or incapable of physical exertion. These interventions, while still embedded in commercial logic, symbolically contribute to reimagining gender possibilities.

In 2013, the jewellery brand, Tanishq in launched a campaign that features the remarriage of a dusky-skinned, non-slender woman with a child. Thus, challenging the cultural taboo in conservative Indian society and the campaign disrupted entrenched gender norms and challenged beauty ideals associated with fair skin and slimness. This shift reflects a broader trend within the advertising industry, where brands increasingly embrace progressive messaging as part of their corporate image-building strategies. Campaigns such as Havells' "Women are not kitchen appliances" or Airtel's "Boss" advertisement, in which a woman is portrayed as both professional superior and caring partner, exemplify attempts to destabilise rigid gender roles. Similarly, Fastrack's "Move On" campaign and Femina's remarriage concept illustrate how advertising has begun to experiment with socially sensitive issues, even if such efforts sometimes encounter resistance from conservative audiences. As Khariya, Meghe, and Bhise (2013) observe, these campaigns are not merely philanthropic gestures but deliberate corporate strategies that enhance brand equity by aligning products with progressive social values.

In this context, examining gender representation in Indian television advertising offers insights into the intersection of commerce, culture and social change. On the one hand, advertisements have historically reinforced patriarchal values, perpetuating ideals of femininity and masculinity that constrain individual agency. On the other, contemporary campaigns demonstrate the potential of advertising to disrupt these narratives and foster alternative visions of gender roles. This duality forms the basis of the present study, which seeks to critically analyse the ways in which Indian television advertisements construct, sustain and, increasingly, contest gender stereotypes.

2. Review of Literature

Understanding the distinction between sex and gender is fundamental before exploring gender stereotypes and their implications in advertising. Sex refers to biological attributes that distinguish males and females, while sexuality concerns an individual's sexual orientation or preference. Gender, on the other hand, denotes the social and cultural roles, behaviours, and expectations associated with being male or female, shaped through processes of socialization (Popova,

2010). Alvesson and Billing (1997) argue that gender embodies the social and cultural meanings attached to maleness and femaleness, which are both imposed and reinforced by society. Similarly, Chandler (2008) asserts that gender roles are socially constructed, emphasizing that behaviours linked to gender are learned rather than innate.

However, gender roles are not static; they evolve over time under the influence of diverse socio-cultural factors such as religion, ethnicity, class, and geography. The understanding and manifestation of masculinity and femininity in contemporary contexts differ significantly from earlier decades (Popova, 2010). Globalization and media expansion have introduced new ideologies and cross-cultural influences that reshape traditional gender norms. Advertising, as a powerful cultural text, reflects and reproduces these transformations. While global media flows have unified certain gender stereotypes, they have simultaneously marginalized others that are culture-specific. Movements advocating women's rights, gender equality, and human rights have also altered societal attitudes, leading to a gradual redefinition of gender expectations (Popova, 2010).

Advertising has both mirrored and contributed to these social transformations. The industry's recent trend toward portraying empowered women and breaking stereotypes marks a shift from its historically problematic representations. Advertisers increasingly align with social causes, promoting gender equality and inclusivity as part of brand identity. This form of issue-based or cause-related marketing not only addresses social concerns but also enhances corporate reputation by appealing to consumers' moral sensibilities (Khariya et al., 2013). Nevertheless, while advertisements may appear to champion empowerment, they continue to operate within commercial imperatives where social advocacy serves marketing objectives.

Advertising functions as a persuasive tool that conveys cultural values, social attitudes, and behavioral norms, extending its influence beyond consumer choices to shape perceptions of identity and society. While marketing often reflects existing social structures, it also perpetuates and legitimizes stereotypes, particularly regarding gender roles (Khariya et al., 2013). Women in advertising have historically been portrayed in limited, often dependent roles, such as homemakers, caregivers, victims, or sexualized objects, reinforcing patriarchal expectations and confining women within narrow identities.

Stereotypes, as defined by Kharifa et al. (2013), are simplified representations of social groups that become ingrained through repetition and transmission across generations. Although stereotypes serve a cognitive function by simplifying complex social realities and providing a sense of order, they also reinforce social hierarchies and justify unequal power relations. Gender stereotypes, therefore, not only categorize but also constrain, prescribing behaviors and expectations for men and women that sustain systemic inequalities.

Recent trends in advertising attempt to subvert these entrenched narratives by portraying women as independent, assertive, and self-sufficient. However, these seemingly

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progressive representations often function as a form of *social marketing*, corporate strategies that adopt social causes for brand enhancement (Lefebvre & Rochlin, 1997). As Novelli (1990) observes, social marketing is grounded in behavioral and social science theories, utilizing insights into consumer psychology to influence both social attitudes and market behavior. Thus, even campaigns promoting gender empowerment often retain a dual purpose: addressing social issues while simultaneously driving consumer engagement and profitability.

The diffusion of innovations theory, as outlined by Kotler and Roberto (1989), provides a useful framework for understanding how audiences adopt new social norms depicted in advertisements. Consumers can be categorized into five adopter types—innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards—each responding differently to new ideas. Advertisements that challenge gender stereotypes tend to appeal more strongly to female audiences, who identify with the message of empowerment. These women, historically the subjects of stereotypical representation, become active participants in promoting the new discourse by sharing, discussing, and endorsing such campaigns across social media platforms.

The cognitive model proposed by Prochaska and Velicer (1997) further explains how persuasive advertising operates through stages of behavioral change: attention, retention, production, and motivation. A successful advertisement first captures attention, then ensures retention of its message, stimulates the desired behaviour (such as purchase), and maintains motivation through emotional engagement. Advertisements that align with social relevance, particularly those addressing gender equality, tend to perform well because audiences connect emotionally with the message. The perceived empowerment of women thus becomes not only a social statement but also an effective marketing strategy.

The portrayal of gender stereotypes in mass media has long been a topic of academic scrutiny. Furnham and Mak (1999) note that since the global proliferation of commercial television, audiences have been continuously exposed to advertisements that reinforce traditional gender roles. Gilly (1988) found that such portrayals influence public attitudes and behaviors, underscoring media's power in shaping gender ideologies. Later studies have explored how women's increased participation in the workforce and editorial roles within media institutions has influenced representation. Chafetz, Lorence, and Larosa (1993) observed that as women gained visibility in professional spaces, media portrayals began depicting them as confident, independent, and professionally competent. Nonetheless, the persistence of biased portrayals in male-oriented media indicates that progress remains uneven.

Gender remains a central variable in advertising segmentation (Milner & Collins, 2000), highlighting the importance of examining gender stereotyping as both a social and marketing phenomenon (Ahlstrand, 2007). Scholars continue to debate whether advertising merely reflects societal gender norms or actively reinforces them (Courtney & Whipple, 1983). Empirical studies suggest that the degree of gender

stereotyping varies across cultural contexts; traditional societies and Asian nations exhibit more rigid gender portrayals compared to Western counterparts (Neto & Pinto, 1998). In this regard, India's traditional social structures make it a fertile ground for examining persistent gendered imagery in advertising.

Gender stereotypes have profound psychological effects on women's self-perception and mental well-being. Mule (2003) found that women often internalize societal expectations derived from stereotypes, leading to dissatisfaction and stress as they struggle to fulfil multiple social roles. Similarly, Hankin and Abramson (2001) demonstrated that girls as young as in elementary school exhibit body dissatisfaction influenced by gendered ideals of beauty. These findings suggest that the cumulative impact of gendered advertising extends beyond consumer behaviour to affect women's identity formation and self-worth.

In sum, the reviewed literature reveals that gender representation in advertising functions as both a mirror and a mold of societal values. Advertising simultaneously reflects existing gender hierarchies and shapes evolving notions of femininity and masculinity. The persistent influence of gender stereotypes underscores the medium's power not only to sell products but also to construct cultural meanings about gender, identity and social status.

3. Case Study

Tanishq, one of India's leading jewellery brands under the Tata Group, has long positioned itself as a brand that celebrates womanhood, emotion and cultural modernity. Its marketing campaigns, primarily targeting women, provide a valuable lens through which to examine evolving gender representations in Indian advertising. Between 2010 and 2014, Tanishq's advertisements reflect a gradual but notable transformation in the portrayal of women, from domesticated, dependent figures to self-assured, decision-making individuals. This shift parallels wider social, cultural, and economic changes in Indian society and aligns with global around gender equality and consumer empowerment. The following analysis, based on fifteen randomly selected advertisements from Tanishq's official YouTube channel, explores these transitions across five thematic parameters: occupation, decision-making, financial dependency, emotional responses toward gold, and beauty perceptions.

Across the sampled period, the most visible change pertains to occupational representation. Of the fifteen advertisements, six depict women in traditional domestic settings, often portrayed as saree-clad housewives whose primary role revolves around familial and emotional care. These portrayals reinforce a familiar cultural narrative that associates femininity with domesticity, grace, and devotion. Another six advertisements, however, portray young women as students, professionals, or creative individuals—embodying modern aspirations and independence. Such women are presented as confident, articulate, and self-reliant. For instance, in the *Mia Film* (2013), a young designer resists conforming to gendered expectations of appearance by choosing to wear statement jewellery that asserts her individuality. These depictions

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reflect the evolving gender dynamics within India's urban middle class, where education and employment have redefined femininity beyond household boundaries. The remaining three advertisements include two where men discuss purchasing jewellery for their wives and one where adult working women are depicted in more progressive roles. The gradual movement from passive domestic representation to assertive self-expression resonates with Popova's (2010) argument that gender roles evolve alongside broader social transformations influenced by education, class mobility, and exposure to global media imagery.

The question of agency becomes particularly salient when examining decision-making power in these advertisements. Out of the fifteen samples, only five portray women as active decision-makers in matters related to purchasing or wearing jewellery. Earlier campaigns such as the 2010 advertisement in which a young woman is persuaded to accept marriage after being dazzled by gold ornaments present decision-making as externally influenced, where material possessions guide critical life choices. This reinforces the gendered ideology that women's happiness and identity are anchored in material acquisition and matrimonial fulfilment. By contrast, later campaigns introduce a more autonomous female subject. In the Wedding Film (2014), generational negotiation unfolds playfully between a grandmother and granddaughter, where the latter confidently rejects familial suggestions in favour of personal choice. Similarly, in the Mia advertisement, the protagonist's decision to prioritize self-expression over professional conformity signifies a subtle but significant assertion of autonomy. These shifts mirror the broader social impact of feminist and human rights movements, which have challenged patriarchal norms and gradually influenced mainstream media narratives (Popova, 2010). Thus, Tanishq's advertising trajectory reflects a negotiation between traditional femininity and emergent determination.

Financial dependence remains a recurrent motif throughout these campaigns, serving as a barometer of women's perceived economic agency. In more than half of the advertisements, men are depicted as the purchasers or financial decision-makers. The narrative frequently revolves around the husband's or father's act of gifting jewellery, reinforcing the association between male provision and female gratification. For example, in one advertisement featuring Amitabh and Jaya Bachchan, the husband's anxious yet dutiful efforts to please his wife underscore an enduring stereotype of women as emotionally complex and materially oriented. Such portrayals perpetuate the idea of women as recipients of male generosity, reflecting what Khariya, Jain, and Kumar (2013) identify as the continued commodification of female desire in advertising. In other campaigns, men express discomfort or reluctance over expenses, subtly emphasizing financial power as masculine and consumption as feminine. Yet a gradual reconfiguration is evident in more recent advertisements, where women increasingly occupy the screen as vocal agents rather than passive recipients. In Lekin Pyaar Mein Koi Kami Nahi, for instance, a father's gesture of gifting jewellery is framed not as male indulgence but as emotional reciprocity, while the daughter's agency is foregrounded through her confident demeanor and expressive gratitude. The silent, backgrounded father figure contrasts sharply with earlier portrayals of dominant male buyers, suggesting a broader societal shift toward recognizing women's financial and emotional independence.

The emotional responses of women toward gold, central to the brand's symbolic appeal, also evolve noticeably during the examined period. Early advertisements often equate gold with heightened emotional ecstasy, portraying women overwhelmed to the point of tears upon receiving jewellery. Such dramatized affect reinforces the stereotype of women's irrational attachment to material beauty and emotional excess. One notable campaign depicts a woman's decision to marry being influenced by the allure of gold ornaments, reducing complex life choices to aesthetic gratification. This aligns with Khariya et al. (2013), who argue that women in Indian advertising are frequently depicted as dependent, sacrificial, or sentimental figures rather than rational agents. However, later advertisements consciously temper this emotional excess, replacing material obsession with more nuanced expressions of affection and familial connection. In Lekin Pyaar Mein Koi Kami Nahi, the daughter's response to her father's gift is affectionate yet composed, emphasizing emotional intimacy over material indulgence. This transition marks an important recalibration of femininity-from the consumerist stereotype of the gold-obsessed woman to an empowered individual capable of redefining value in emotional rather than material terms.

Beauty representation, perhaps the most culturally loaded dimension, reveals the most progressive transformation in Tanishq's narrative. The brand's earlier campaigns, particularly the Glamgold series, perpetuate a hierarchical beauty ideal grounded in physical allure and adornment. In one such advertisement, a woman wearing a gold necklace eclipses another woman's professional accomplishment at a cocktail party, implying that beauty, amplified through jewellery, commands greater social recognition than intellect or success. This representation reinforces patriarchal notions that equate feminine worth with external appearance and ornamental display. However, in later campaigns, particularly the acclaimed Remarriage advertisement, Tanishq disrupts conventional beauty norms by featuring a dusky, non-thin woman as the bride. This campaign subverts the Indian obsession with fair skin and youth, portraying remarriage—a socially stigmatized event—as a celebration of empowerment and emotional renewal. By doing so, the advertisement challenges both aesthetic and social stereotypes, signalling a decisive shift in the brand's ideological positioning. Such representation aligns with the growing recognition that advertising, while commercially motivated, can function as a vehicle for social change by normalizing inclusive and empowering images of womanhood (Khariya et al., 2013).

Taken together, the analysis of Tanishq's advertisements from 2010 to 2014 reveals a complex interplay between commerce, culture, and gender politics. Early portrayals largely conformed to patriarchal ideals of femininity—domestic, dependent, and emotionally driven. Over time, however, the brand has attempted to recalibrate its narrative, aligning with the changing aspirations of India's urban, educated women. This gradual transformation is reflective of a broader socio-economic transition wherein women's increased participation in the workforce, exposure to global

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feminist discourses, and growing purchasing power have compelled advertisers to adopt more progressive and resonant imagery. While vestiges of traditional stereotypes persist, Tanishq's campaigns during this period illustrate an evolving negotiation between market imperatives and social consciousness.

Ultimately, Tanishq's advertising evolution mirrors the dual role of contemporary media as both a reflector and a catalyst of social change. As Popova (2010) and Khariya et al. (2013) suggest, advertising not only reproduces but also shapes cultural meanings, mediating between the persistence of gender stereotypes and their potential reconfiguration. In the case of Tanishq, jewellery, traditionally a symbol of female dependence and adornment, becomes reimagined as a metaphor for agency, choice and emotional authenticity. Through this transformation, the brand contributes, perhaps inadvertently, to a redefinition of femininity in twenty-first-century India: one that embraces empowerment without entirely abandoning tradition and self-expression without rejecting cultural identity.

4. Conclusion

The analysis of Tanishq's advertisements from 2010 to 2014 reveals a gradual but discernible transformation in the representation of women, reflecting broader social and cultural shifts in India's gender discourse. Earlier advertisements predominantly reinforced traditional gender roles, portraying women as dependent, emotional, and materialistic, particularly in their relationship to jewellery and male authority. These narratives aligned with long-standing stereotypes in Indian advertising where women were often confined to domestic or ornamental roles. However, over time, Tanishq's campaigns began to embody a more nuanced and progressive portrayal of women, emphasizing individuality, autonomy and self-expression rather than dependency and conformity.

The changing imagery within these campaigns corresponds with India's growing urban middle-class consciousness, female workforce participation, and the broader global influence of feminist and equality movements. The later advertisements, such as *Mia Film* and *Remarriage*, move beyond superficial depictions of beauty and luxury to celebrate women's agency, choice, and emotional depth. This evolution also signals a strategic rebranding by Tanishq to align with socially aware consumers who expect brands to reflect contemporary values of inclusivity and empowerment. The use of diverse representations, showing women as professionals, students, and decision-makers, indicates a conscious corporate attempt to engage with changing gender norms while maintaining the cultural symbolism of gold and adornment.

Overall, Tanishq's advertising trajectory underscores the complex interplay between commerce and social change. While earlier campaigns commodified femininity through emotional manipulation and patriarchal undertones, later ones repositioned jewellery as a symbol of self-worth, identity, and empowerment. The shift is not entirely revolutionary but incremental—suggesting an ongoing negotiation between tradition and modernity, consumption and consciousness.

Thus, Tanishq's advertising corpus serves as a microcosm of India's evolving gender sensibilities, where consumer culture increasingly becomes a site of contestation and transformation of gender ideologies.

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