

## **“WOMEN IN COMMERCIALS ARE PREY TO BLATANT SENSATIONALISM”**

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Advertising is today an inextricable part of the social milieu. As such it is not surprising that the medium seeks to define women in relation to men, whereas men are defined in relation to their work, their creativity or their play. Media images have circumscribed woman's body, mind and soul to serve male goals. The commercialization of the media has been largely responsible for stereotypes both old & new that have done immense harm to the image of women in society. The older stereotype is that of submissive, house-bound woman interested in nothing beyond her daily toils and foibles. The updated stereotype is that of sex object. There is increasing use of sexist commercials which peddle the female anatomy to sell products that bear no relation either to their physique or needs.

Advertising has come under increasing attack regarding the negative “stereotyped” roles in which women are portrayed in the mass media. Television has been shown to influence sex-role values and perceived life options. Its programming has generally reinforced traditional sex-role stereotypes. According to Dominick & Ranch (1971), “In the world of the television commercial, women are housewives or low-level employees. When she does appear, the typical female is a young housewife, pictured in the home, helping to sell some product found in the kitchen or bathroom. Those women that are shown away from home relate to people in a service role..... If we view these results from the perspective of someone in the feminist movement, we find in general their criticisms are well taken”.

Courtney and Whipple reviewed four studies on sex-role messages in television commercials conducted in 1971-1973 which serve as the guideline for the present analysis. They reported that:

- Voice-over tended to be done exclusively by men (87 - 89%);
- Women were more frequently used as product representatives in commercials for domestic items (75%); and
- Women were more frequently used in commercials located in the home (65%).

At the backdrop of these findings this study was conducted to study the protection of women in the television commercials to determine the extent of sex-role stereotyping in them.

The sample consisted of 100 commercials aired over the national network between 1 st December 1993 and 31 st January 1994. All these commercials are grouped into eight categories:

- Foods & beverages
- Cleansers
- 5) Personal hygiene & cosmetics
- 6) Textile materials

- Electric, electronic & household aids      7) Vehicles, tyres and related products
- Medical items      8) Public service & insurance (vide Table – 3.5)

List of the Commercials Selected for the Analysis:

Foods & Beverages:

Complan, Boost, Nutramuel, Bournvita, Glucon C, Glucose Super Milk Biscuits, Brooke Bond Special Tea, Sweekar Vanaspati, Cadbury's Dairy Milk Chocolates, Maggi Noodles, Brooke Bond Red Label Tea, Brooke Bond Sona Masala, Nestle Everyday Dairy Whitner, Parle G Biscuits, Tata Tea, Nescafe, Sundrop, Postman Vanaspati, Thums up, Limca, Zandu Special Chavan Prash & Vital Feast Masala.

Medical items:

Strepsil, Coldarin, Iodex, Moov, Cold rub, Kailas Jeevan, Anacin, Vicks Inhaler, Amrut Malam and Handiplast.

Cleansers:

Vim cleaning powder, Godrej liquid cleaner,

Hyglo Flash cleaning powder, Wheel detergent powder, Odopic, Nirma washing powder, Surf, Rin, Bagon Spray, Trilo detergent cake, Cherry Blossom, 555 detergent cake & Sasa detergent powder.

Personal Hygiene & Cosmetics:

Nirma bath soap, Crowning glory, Hamam, Jai, Cinthol, Oil of olay, Keo Karpin hair Vitalizer, Old spice after shave lotion, Charmis, Palmolive shave cream, Evita, Wilman II blades, 7 O'clock Ejtek, Liril, Lakme Shampoo, Clearsil, Colgate tooth paste, Close Up, rexona, Marvel, Lifebouy, Halo Shampoo, Sunsilk shampoo, Tips & Toes, Cadil face mask, Fair & lovely, Ponds dream flower Talc, Dabour Special Hair oil, Clinic Plus shampoo and Lakme maximum moisturiser.

Electric, electronic & household aids:

Hawkins Pressure Cooker, Prestige Pressure Cooker, Titan Quartz Watches, Godrej Refrigerator, Allwyn Refrigerator, Videocon washing machine, luxury bulbs & luxury tubes, Prestige frying

pan, Ortem fan, Eureka Forbes – Vacuum Cleaner, LPG Gas, Nerolac Paints, Bush VCR & Oscar TV.

Textile materials:

Garden Vareli, T. T. Underware & Baniyan, Khatav Sarees, JCT Suiting & Shirtings.

Vehicles, tyres and related products:

Bajaj Scooter, Atlas Cycles and MRF tyres.

Public service & insurance:

Jeevan Akshaya, Janaraksha Policy & Rashtriya Saksharata Mission.

The content analysis of these commercials focused on:

- the number of principal or dominant characters present,
- Age of principal characters,
- the setting of the commercial,
- occupation of principal characters,
- the task & activities performed by the product representatives,
- the sex & quality of voice – over and
- The latent message of a commercial.

#### **Commercials by product category & showing number of principal characters**

Product Category	No. of commercials	Principal characters		
		Male	Female	Total
Foods & beverages	22	25	22	47

Personal hygiene & cosmetics	31	19	29	48
Cleansers	13	5	18	23
Electric, electronic & household aids	14	12	23	35
Medical items	10	11	8	19
Textile materials	4	4	4	8
Vehicles, tyres and related products	3	6	2	8
Public service & insurance	3	3	7	10
	100	85	113	198
Total				
	100	43	57	-

#### Percentage

As Table 3.5 indicates women featured in all the products categories & their visibility is comparatively higher than men. Out of 198 principal characters (113) or 57% are women as against (85) or 43% are men. The higher rate of visibility of women in advertising as against the severe under representation of men in other types of media content is reported by other scholars like Courney & Lockeretz, 1974; O' Donnell and O' Donnell 1978 in their findings.

Further, women are prominently visible in the category of personal hygiene, cleanser and household aids as compared to vehicles and medical items. But surprisingly foods & beverages

category which is considered as women's domain features less women characters than men, although the difference is not very significant. The reason being these commercials have featured male children rather than female in the family set up.

Youth appears to be very important component of the commercials, especially for women, as out of the 76% young characters 46% are female characters (vide table – 3.6). But as far as representation of children in the commercials is considered there are less female children compared to the male. However, in the categories of middle and old age, the male & female ratio is more or less even.

Analysis of the settings in which male & female characters appear, provides support for the stereotypical contention that women's domain is the house or private sphere whereas that for the man is public or outside the house. 41% of women are shown in the house (as against 23% of men). Further there is a significant difference in the number of women featuring in the house for particular commercials such as personal hygiene, cleansers & household items. More women are placed in the house in these advertisements further demarcating the world into male & female spheres (vide table – 3.7).

Although there are more men shown outdoors than women, the difference is not very significant. This is because certain commercials though have male as product representative also include female merely as “sex objects”. For example in an after shave advertisement (old spice) the setting is outdoors, a man is shown sea surfing while a sexy woman is shown casting seductive glance towards him. Here the use of female character has no relevance whatsoever to the product.

**Commercials by AGE Group Representation (Table 3.6)**

Product Category	Child		Youth		Middle age		Old age	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Foods & beverages	9	4	12	17	2	1	2	-
Personal hygiene & cosmetics	1	1	18	28	-	-	-	-
Cleansers	-	-	5	16	-	2	-	-
Electric, electronic & household aids	3	3	6	16	3	2	-	2

Medical items	1	2	6	5	1	-	3	1
Textile materials	-	-	4	4	-	-	-	-
Vehicles, tyres	-	-	6	2	-	-	-	-
Public service & insurance	-	1	2	4	-	1	1	1
Total	14	11	59	92	6	6	6	4
Percentage	12.62		76.25		6.06		5.05	

M = Male, F = Female

Some of the commercials have a combination of both settings within the house and outside. As in case of the Tea advertisement (Brooke Bond Special Tea), both husband & wife are shown engaged in recreational activities outside the house and then inside the house sipping hot tea. In yet other advertisements the setting is the office (RIN) or a restaurant (Wilman's Blade).

Occupational portrayal of women is rare and certainly not commensurate with the actual number of females in labour force (Ceulemans, 1977). Several studies (Dominick, 1971; Courtney; Whipple, 1973) found females over representing family/home occupations while males dominating occupations like the media/celebrity & business/sales management.

#### Commercials by AGE Group Representation (Table 3.7)

Product Category	Room in house		Outdoors		Combination of both		Any other	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Foods & beverages	18	18	3	2	4	2	-	-

Personal hygiene & cosmetics	3	18	10	5	5	6	1	-
Cleansers	4	12	1	2	-	-	-	4
Electric, electronic & household aids	8	20	2	2	2	1	-	-
Medical items	10	7	1	1	-	-	-	-
Textile materials	2	2	2	2	-	-	-	-
Vehicles, tyres	-	-	6	2	-	-	-	-
Public service & insurance	1	5	2	2	-	-	-	-
Total	46	82	27	18	11	9	1	4
Percentage	23.23	41.41	13.6	9.09	5.55	4.54	0.05	2.02

M = Male, F = Female

In the present study, the occupation of most of the principal characters could not be known. Food & beverage commercials portray female characters mostly as housewives, mothers in caring & nurturing roles, but in others the occupation of principal characters could not be identified. For, though most of the female characters were placed at indoors it would not be proper to call them as household persons having no occupations. This was true of male characters as well. Even when they were shown outdoors, they were shown most of the time sporting, singing, dancing & commuting and not in their occupational status.

The principal characters, both men & women are portrayed in a limited variety of stereotypical occupations. Women are shown as doctors, nurses, clerks while men as executives, business men, and sales men. There are few occupations in which one finds no visible gender difference, example: media celebrity.

The tasks & activities performed by principal characters in commercials strengthen the traditional & stereotypical images of women and are interested in maintaining the status quo. Advertisements indicate that most often women characters perform domestic tasks involving the advertised product. These activities include demonstrating the product features by using the product – for example: washing clothes with ‘Nirma detergent powder’ preparing mouth watering dishes with ‘Sundrop’ refined oil or cleaning the vessels with ‘Godrej’ liquid cleaner. However not a single male principal character is seen engaged in domestic tasks. The message one gets when one watches these advertisements is that the work woman performs is exclusively her work, and no self respecting man would dream of helping her with the washing, cleaning or cooking.

The male characters on the other hand are most often utilized to demonstrate (but not actually use) the product advertised. For example: in Vim cleaning powder, the male character holds a mopping contest between two women. So women for the most part continue to clean house, launder, cook and serve meals, while the men give instructions, advice, consume food & appreciate the cooking.

Even the scenes outside the home, women are shown performing stereotyped activities like shopping & marketing. These activities either indicate by showing them in the supermarket or sundry store or carrying a shopping basket. A typical example of the advertisement of “Surf detergent powder” where a housewife with her son is shown moving from shop to shop in a market with a basket full of vegetables, household goods and surf carrybag packet prominently displayed.

Activities of principal characteristics in commercials (Table 3.8)

Product Category	Domestic Tasks		Leisure Activities		Beautifying		Eating/ using demonstrated product		Singing / dancing / conversing	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Foods & beverages	-	16	2	-	-	-	5	2	15	2
Personal hygiene & cosmetics	-	-	13	4	5	21	0	1	-	5



Cleansers	-	10	-	-	-	-	1	3	4	5
Electric, electronic & household aids	-	12	2	1	-	-	8	5	2	5
Medical items	-	-	-	-	-	-	6	6	5	2
Textile materials	-	-	2	2	-	-	-	-	2	2
Vehicles, tyres	-	-	-	-	-	-	4	-	2	-
Public service & insurance	-	2	--	-	-	-	-	-	2	4
Total	-	40	19	7	5	21	24	17	32	20
Percentage	-	20	9.5	3.5	2.5	11	12	8.6	16	10

Men are projected engaged in leisure activities while women are beautifying. Ex: a woman is shown using a bath soap to enhance her beauty while man using it for his good health (nirma bath soap). Moreover woman is always portrayed as having a beauty bath while man is engaged in sports, construction work and hence he needs a healthy bath (Lifebuoy). These kind of stereotypical projections raise the expectation about a woman to be young and beautiful while man to be strong & healthy.

Commercials also promote another stereotypical image of woman being interested only in domestic affairs and having no interest in public affairs. A number of commercials show that women are advertly fond of small talk and where two or more women gather, their conversation usually revolves around shampoo, creams, detergents & sarees. Ex: in a shampoo Ad. (Clinic plus) two mothers are shown discussing hair care of their daughters and comparing various brands of shampoos. In another Advertisement for detergent (RIN) two attractive women meet at market place when one remarks about the other's clean white saree and reproaches her for using more detergent powder with a higher expenditure (saving is yet again a woman's concern while a man can swindle money on himself for cigarettes, drinks etc.). Then the other woman proudly says that she has used little RIN which produces fantastic results. In a second scene the first woman enters the office in a white saree and admits that RIN could certainly produce such superb results and it also works cheaper. So even when women are portrayed in an occupational

status they are projected as interested more in keeping their sarees clean and bothering about savings.

One prominent aspect of the man's position of dominance in relation to woman in T.V is the off-camera voice-overs. Voice-overs could be defined as messages delivered by an unseen speaker during the commercial. The voice-over typically imparts information to the viewers and by implication holds the role of the expert. Out of 100 commercials, 59% have male voice-overs while only 21% commercials have female voice-overs. Further in 20% commercials both male & female voice over are used. That means male voice over is present in nearly 79% commercials as against females in 41% commercials. Interestingly, the products which are mostly used by women such as food & cosmetics have male voice-overs. Further, the quality of the male voice-over is predominantly authoritative rather than informative or alluring (vide table 3.10). Nearly 52% of the male voice-overs are authoritative as against a mere 3% of the female voice-overs. Authority is considered a masculine trait. So by using male authoritative voice, commercials seem to reaffirm the dominance of men and subservience of women. Moreover, whenever female voice-over is used it is in the form of zingles or seductive tone so as to add the touch of glamour to it. Seductive female tone is used mostly in case of male cosmetics like the after shaves, lotions and blades to lure the male consumers. Women are allowed to certain extent to be informative but they are hardly presented as authoritative persons. Thus, by & large the commercials perpetuate the inferior position of women over male superiority. One sees the woman helplessly struggling in front of a pile of soiled laundry until the male voice of authority dictates to tell her how the wheel detergent cake with its fast acting enzymes will help her to wash clothes clean. So also a male authoritative voice tells a woman how she can keep her hair shining with the 'Lakme Shampoo', her face glowing with the "Oil of Olay" and her body beautiful with 'Evita' soap as if not for the man, the women would not have known about their use themselves. It appears that the male voice over is considered more convincing in the patriarchal set up. A man thus has automatic credibility on the TV. Even in those commercials when the voice-over is by both sexes, the male has last word. As evident in table 3.11, the male voice-over has the last word in 55% commercials as against the 30% commercials with female voice over having the last word.

**Sex of Voice – Over (Table 3.9)**

Product Category	SEX			
	Male	Female	Both	Total
Foods & beverages	14	2	6	22
Personal hygiene & cosmetics	16	7	8	31

Cleansers	7	4	2	13
Electric, electronic & household aids	7	5	2	14
Medical items	8	2	-	10
Textile materials	3	1	-	4
Vehicles, tyres and related products	1	-	2	3
Public service & insurance	3	-	-	3
Total	59	21	20	100

The latent messages of the commercials are invariably more demeaning and degrading to women than are the manifest messages. These messages urge women to enhance their appeal to men or gain the approval of men by using the concerned products.

**Quality of Voice – Over (Table 3.10) M = male; F = female**

Product Category	Authoritative		Informative		Seductive		Others		Total
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	
Foods & beverages	13	1	3	2	--	-	1	2	22

Personal hygiene & cosmetics	15	1	2	1	2	5	1	4	31
Cleansers	6	-	2	3	-	-	-	2	13
Electric, electronic, household aids	6	1	1	-	-	1	1	4	14
Medical items	6	-	2	1	-	-	-	1	10
Textile materials	3	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	4
Vehicles, tyres	-	-	2	-	-	1	-	-	3
Public service & insurance	1	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	3
Total	52	3	12	7	2	8	3	13	100

These commercials give the impression that women at home have no valid interest in their life except worrying about the perfection of their house, their clean shining floors, immaculate laundry and cooking. And to add insult to injury commercials depict as if women enjoy this household drudgery. These advertisements romanticize the housework and motherhood. The needs & desires of women are depicted in terms of her nurturing and caring role within the family. In the category of food & beverage commercials, she is shown more often than not in the focus of an ideal family wherein her family members appreciate her household drudgery.

A mother is complete if her children have gleaming white clothes and the dishes sparkle. No husband helps her in her washing & cleaning tasks. When the job becomes slightly more responsible or demands physical effort, men appear on the screen - they paint the walls climbing up on a ladder (Nerolac Paints), they replace the cylinders (LPG Gas) suggesting that women are physically weak & unable to perform these tasks.

Women are never shown to be knowledgeable about financial management. This is evident from the items a woman is shown to purchase. She goes shopping for detergents, soaps, and food & beauty products. But when the things are little expensive as in the advertisement of Prestige Pressure Cooker, she merely follows her husband and accepts his choice. Moreover, when handling the finances and making financial investments in LIC policies like the Jeevan Akshaya, Jana Rakshya, the husband deals with them.

**Commercials in which voice over is both sexes who gets the last words**

**(Table 3.11)**

Product Category	SEX			Total
	Male	Female	Both	
Foods & beverages	3	2	1	6
Personal hygiene & cosmetics	4	2	2	8
Cleansers	1	1	-	2
Electric, electronic & household aids	1	-	1	2
Medical items	-	1	-	1
Textile materials	-	-	-	-
Vehicles, tyres and related products	2	-	-	2

Public service & insurance	-	-	-	-
Total	11	6	3	20
Percentage	55	30	15	100

Women are primarily used by advertisers to sell products to both women & men. Depending on the sex of the target group, the strategies vary. In female oriented advertisements, women are to identify with the female product representative and easily enhance the appeal to men (ex: Lakme moisturizing cream – “get your man”).

In the male-oriented commercials, consumers are promised the attraction of females as it happens in the commercials after use of the particular product.

In the advertisement of Old spice after shave lotion, which is presented as the mark of a man, a woman is projected as one who recognizes the Old Spice man anywhere. Whether it is textile like “Garden Vareli”, or electronic

equipment like “Bush VCR”, or cosmetics like ‘Palmolive shave cream', the product is advertised as a guarantee to bring admiration of the opposite sex.

In the advertisements of briefs & vests, the T.T underwear and banyans, the wife is projected in seductive attire and the husband ordering for his undergarments as he enters the bath room. Here a woman is used not only as a sex object to endorse male product but she is also used to play a subordinate role. She is projected as the one who has to dance to the tunes of her husband and look after all his needs.

In yet another advertisement of fans, the Ortem scenes of a beautiful young woman twirling around on skates in mini skirt is alternated with shots of twirling fan in a tasteless display of sexism.

Commercials also seem to channelise the children in sex role stereotypes and thus primarily entail the status quo. Girls are shown imitating their mothers in domestic chores – cooking, serving & cleaning. In the advertisement of Cold Rub, a young girl is shown scolding her doll for playing in the water in much the same way as her mother scolds her. In yet another advertisement about Vaccum Cleaner, the Eureka Forbes, a small girl is shown asking the salesman whether she could clean her toy house with vaccum cleaner, so as to give the impression that girls even at the tender age are more concerned about cleanliness like their mothers.

Young boys, on the other hand are shown engaged in sports activities, consuming health drinks or imitating their fathers in bestowing approval on their mother's cooking. Quite a few

commercials project the male child as a 'Super hero' capable of doing extraordinary tasks. In a biscuit advertisement of 'Glucose super milk biscuit', the young boy rescues a princess from the devil. In the advertisement of 'Nutramuel' the brother is shown to rescue his sister. Yet another advertisement shows our 'super hero' hitting sixer after consuming vitamin preparation Glucon C. It seems impossible for commercials to imagine girls as 'super heroin'. Girls can only watch, clap and admire their brothers in much the same way as their mothers do. This kind of negative projection can mould the behaviour of children at early stage and can have devastating effect on the minds of the children. Thus, as we carefully scrutinize the commercials we find that, "women in advertisements are prey to blatant sensationalism where commercial interests are promoted by exploiting womanhood and sex".

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