

Images of Decision Making in Families: Reinforcement of Family Roles, Stereotypes and Gender Bias in Mutual Fund-related Advertisements in India

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Abstract

Due to the increasing awareness of gender sensitivity, the depiction of women in advertisements has been shifting away from objectification, male gaze, and stereotyping. However, prevalent notions of gender roles still persist in the financial product segment. This study analyses select mutual fund-related advertisements in India to understand whether it carries the images of archaic gender norms in conventional families. The study focuses on how the presence or absence of women gender in mutual fund ads invokes lack of representation, gender-bias and reinforcement of existing norms within families in matters of money and how the power is exercised in decision making. It has been observed that the niche of such advertisement segments is still male dominant and the texts are made to appeal to men to a great extent.

The study is built within the framework of Alice Eagly's Gender Role theory which states that defined roles of different genders reinforce their behaviour and create imbalance of power within any systems and structures. The theory predicts that 'gendered behaviour will change when gender roles change'. Hence it is important to rethink depiction of gender roles in decision making related to financial matters within families in advertisements in order to address the gender gap and power imbalance. The researchers analysed advertisements released in the past ten years by conducting a content analysis through classification of elements such as 'brand ambassador', 'niche audience', 'protagonist'. By using the content analysis, the researchers intend to reveal bias, reinforcement and stereotyping aspects of mutual fund advertisements in India.

Keywords: *Gender-bias, Stereotyping, Reinforcing Family Roles, Mutual Fund Ads*

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Introduction

Advertising encompasses the use of strategies and tactics to raise awareness of specific goods, services, viewpoints, or causes, aiming to influence people's behaviour. The majority of advertising revolves around promoting products for sale, often through brand marketing. However, similar techniques are also employed to support various causes, or garner support for political candidates, among other purposes. In many countries, advertising stands as the primary source of revenue for media outlets like newspapers, magazines, and television stations. In the non-communist world, advertising has grown to become a prominent and sizable service sector. Numerous studies have revealed the impact of advertising on individuals in our society. Throughout different eras, advertising has sought to depict society, either in fragments or in greater detail. The evolution of our society is prominently reflected in all forms of media advertising. Advertisers not only aim to promote their products or services but also convey ideas.

A corporation that pools money from several people and invests it in securities like stocks, bonds, and short-term debt is known as a mutual fund. Mutual funds are crucial to the growth of the financial sector. Mutual funds in India are actively promoted through various media channels, including digital platforms. The target audience of these advertisements typically includes newly employed young individuals as well as professionals who have retired from service.

Many studies on advertisements have revealed regressive aspects, including biases related to colour, gender, religion, and social status. This study focuses on analysing mutual fund advertisements in India, specifically examining their tone and how they may reinforce prevailing concepts of family, gender roles, and stereotypes.

Theoretical Framework

The premise of Alice Eagly's Gender Role Theory (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009) is that people who are socially classified as male and female often hold various responsibilities within social institutions and are assessed according to different standards of behaviour. As a result, the idea predicts that men and women would conduct differently and acquire distinct abilities and attitudes. The main argument of this theory is that the division of labour according to gender is the root cause of gender stereotypes. It also leads to differentiated skills for various genders.

Gender role theory has been used by communication scholars to explain and predict (a) the communication behaviours of males and females as well as (b) the evaluation of the same communication behaviour when performed by males and females. The

debate over whether the emphasis should be on gender differences or similarities has been greatly influenced by this research.

Literature Review

Gender and sexuality seem to be one of the important aspects of advertising. Advertisements still represent a space where gender expression is quite important (Haripriya, 2010). Stereotypical pictures of women are frequently used in advertising. She might be a wife, mother-in-law, sister, or wife. For decades, women have frequently been seen in advertising- cooking food, doing laundry, bandaging cuts, or taking care of their husbands and kids and giving food (ibid.) While it's reasonable to assert that women and men are generally depicted equally in today's advertising, it's important to acknowledge instances where this balance is not maintained (Das, 2009). Studies persistently raise concerns about the specific content of individual advertisements (ibid.), emphasising the need for changes in how women are portrayed in commercials (Soni, 2020).

Different genders have distinct ways of interpreting advertisements aimed at women, which suggests that advertising teams may exhibit bias towards the opinions of the majority gender within the team. When these teams are predominantly composed of men, the perspectives of the millions of women who view these advertisements can be negatively influenced by the team's preconceptions and perceptions of women in advertising (Soni, 2020). Despite women being assigned more prominent roles and positions in advertisements, stereotypical portrayals still persist. To mitigate the inequalities perpetuated by gender stereotypes, advertisers must elevate the representation of women's roles (Sharma and Bumb, 2021).

Methodology

This study investigates how mutual fund advertisements depict decision-making dynamics within families. It aims to analyse the reinforcement of specific family roles, the creation and perpetuation of gender bias and stereotypes in mutual fund-related advertisements, focusing on audio-visual advertisements as the primary research material. The researcher employs a qualitative content analysis method and supplements it with theoretical analysis to examine concepts related to gender roles and their portrayal.

This research focuses on audio-visual advertisements in the mutual fund industry and related areas. It examines advertisements from two prominent mutual fund companies and one mutual fund investor education initiative that have aired within the past 10 years. The selection criteria for these advertisements include a duration of less than 2

minutes. Specifically, the study analyses advertisements from *Mutual Funds Sahi Hai (A1)*, *Tata Mutual Funds(A2)*, and *HDFC Mutual Funds(A3)*.

Analysis and Findings

A1

The advertisements of 'Mutual Funds Sahi Hai', an initiative of Association of Mutual Funds in India (AMFI) primarily focus on general awareness about mutual fund investments. Majority of their advertisements predominantly feature male characters. Although female characters are present, only a few advertisements depict women as mutual fund investors directly. The Mother's Day advertisement, in particular, indirectly highlights women as investors. In others, female characters are part of the storyline.

Most of the advertisements involve male characters, who appear as colleagues, friends, or acquaintances, sharing mutual fund investment ideas and advice among themselves or with others in their circle. Even when cricketers Sachin Tendulkar and Mahendra Singh Dhoni feature in these advertisements, they retain their own identities as Sachin and Mahi. In such cases as well, male characters tend to play the predominant roles, with only one or two advertisements including female characters.

A2

This is one of the prominent mutual fund investment companies in India. Their advertisements feature various stories encompassing men, women, and children, set in diverse locations such as homes, public places, and restaurants. Upon analysis, it becomes evident that the majority of these advertisements predominantly showcase male characters from various age groups and professions. These male characters engage in discussions about mutual funds, offer advice, and raise awareness among one another and the public.

In contrast, advertisements featuring female characters are less frequent and vary in significance. Some women play supporting roles, while female children are characters in a few advertisements. A couple of ads portray men imparting insights about mutual fund investments to women. In others, women are depicted in common roles, managing household activities and caring for their partners and children. One advertisement stands out by showcasing an independent woman actively involved in mutual funds, alongside a man and a family.

A3

HDFC Mutual Funds advertisements show a more inclusive portrayal of women compared to previous mutual fund advertisements such as Tata Mutual Funds and Mutual Funds Sahi Hai. Women appear as characters in various advertisements, not limited to Mother's Day promotions, although they remain integral to the storyline rather than being the central focus.

However, these advertisements do not emphasise women as potential investors. Some simply provide details about mutual funds or advise people to invest in them. The majority of advertisements continue to focus on men as investors, portraying them as the central protagonists. There is one exception where a mother advises her son to invest in a mutual fund-related plan, but this stands out from the others in terms of focus.

To quantify the above results, nine advertisements (A1, A2 and A3- three each) were analysed.

Table. 1 Gender representation in mutual fund advertisements.

Advertisement Brand	No. of shots	Duration (In seconds)	Shots with women and %		Shots with Men and %	
MF Sahi Hai 1	30	60	0	0	30	100
MF Sahi Hai 2	39	60	4	10.26	36	92.31
MF Sahi Hai 3	31	60	19	61.29	30	96.77
Tata 1	30	40	13	43.33	14	46.67
Tata 2	16	78	9	56.25	10	62.5
Tata 3	13	38	0	0	11	84.62
HDFC 1	10	35	7	70	9	90
HDFC 2	40	86	12	30	39	97.5
HDFC 3	31	62	24	77.42	0	0
Mean =	26.67		9.78	38.73	19.89	74.49

The table shows that female representation in mutual fund advertisements is lower compared to males. On average, 26 to 27 shots are used in mutual fund ads. Men occupy central positions in about 20 shots, while women are seen in only 9 to 10

shots. In the mutual fund ads considered for the study, men enjoyed 74.49% of screen time, whereas women's chances of appearing were only 38.73%. Furthermore, women often appeared in supporting roles alongside men on a significant number of occasions. Some ads completely avoid featuring female characters to promote this financial product.

Discussion

A closer look at the mutual fund ads clearly shows the aspects as discussed below. The gender roles of males are reaffirmed as bread-winners of the family and females are homemakers who have no financial autonomy and decision-making capacities. As a corollary, female representation in this ad segment is limited and their social roles are not considered worth mentioning in texts. Reinforcement of stereotyping of female gender is clearly visible through limited screen space and dialogues. Although there are exceptions to this general trend, it's miniscule and tokenistic in nature.

Male breadwinners: The content and dialogue in most of the advertisements convey the male character as the primary breadwinner of the family. They are often depicted as the central protagonists, and most of the shots focus on male characters. The majority of advertisements are centred around male characters and predominantly address a male audience. This emphasis on men as breadwinners is reinforced through dialogue, scenes, and settings.

Limited female representation: While some advertisements feature female characters, they have limited screen time and few lines of dialogue. They are frequently shown engaged in traditional roles, such as preparing and serving food, household activities, and caring for family members. In a few cases, female characters are portrayed as employees, but their roles are often not explicitly defined or emphasised. Female characters typically have fewer lines of dialogue and less screen time compared to male characters. They are often depicted as homemakers or family members. The use of imagery like women in traditional sarees and performing kitchen tasks may reinforce stereotypes of women as powerless or unemployed within the family.

Exceptions and female empowerment: While there are exceptions, with some advertisements focusing on female characters, these instances are not the norm. Male celebrities are commonly featured and given more dialogue and screen space. Although some advertisements feature female characters or make them protagonists, they may not necessarily target a female audience. Female characters often seem to serve as narrative devices rather than addressing women directly.

Protagonists and brand ambassadors: Most advertisements feature men as the protagonists. However, in some instances, female characters also take on the role of the protagonist. The issue arises when even in these cases, female protagonists are portrayed in ways that adhere to traditional stereotypes related to their appearance, attire, behaviour, and engagement in household chores. Rarely are female protagonists depicted as employed (although without clear visuals of their jobs) and making financial decisions. In the majority of cases, women are included in the storyline as common characters. As mentioned earlier, brand ambassadors of some ads are cricketers and they address the male 'breadwinner' generally.

Niche audience: One crucial aspect to consider when analysing mutual fund advertisements is the primary target audience of these companies. In this context, mutual fund companies predominantly cater to and address a male audience rather than females or other gender groups. Men are typically depicted as employed individuals responsible for providing financial support to their families. Most advertisements, either directly or indirectly, encourage men to invest in mutual funds. By portraying male characters as the financial backbone of their families who make decisions about financial matters, including mutual fund investments, these advertisements may reinforce the perception that this reflects the reality of our society.

Conclusion

The advertisements of mutual funds clearly show a dominance of male characters. Most of the advertisements in the field are representing and addressing men. Even though the advertisements show women characters, they are portrayed as jobless, powerless people in a family barring a few exceptions. The age-old family roles like women doing household work, taking care of other family members and men engaged in earning etc. are portrayed in such ads. These advertisements evidently show the decisions taken in families are mainly by men. Financial matters are typically considered the domain of men. Women are stereotyped as home makers and jobless people as in some other advertisement segments.

Stereotyping, particularly the objectification of women and the portrayal of women as jobless individuals, persists in contemporary advertisements, which is disheartening. These stereotypes subtly influence the audience and reinforce antiquated perceptions of gender roles. The concept of bias is also relevant in the context of gender representation. It becomes evident in advertisements that promote progressive ideas. However, the majority of mutual fund advertisements continue to depict men as the key decision-makers within families, especially regarding financial

matters such as mutual fund investments and insurance. These portrayals further solidify gender-biased concepts in the minds of the audience.

Conflict of Interest Declaration

I declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the research presented in my article. I am not associated with any organization that has a financial interest in the subject matter or the data/materials used in the article.

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