

Gender Representation in Nepali Commercials

Pragya Paneru

Lecturer, Nepal Commerce Campus, T.U.

This paper explores gender representation in visual media, especially in commercials broadcasted through various Nepali visual media. A content analysis of twenty-one commercials was done underpinning gender and feminist perspectives to explore gender representation in them. The advertisement samples were selected among some popular brands and the products of everyday use. The findings suggested reinforcement of traditional gender roles and reproduction of gender hierarchies by depicting men and women in traditionally specified roles, appearances, and concepts. Cooking, washing, and childcare were regarded as female jobs. More men were depicted in occupational roles and females were projected in relational roles. This research is based on the claim that biased gender representations in media sustain gender bias attitudes on viewers thus a careful selection of gender-neutral or counter-stereotypical content should be promoted.

Keywords: *Commercials, gender stereotypes, Visual-media, feminism, body-image*

Introduction

Gender representation in media can have a huge impact on people's mindsets. People's social identities are shaped by commercialized texts fabricated by media for the viewers who are divided by the social construction of race and gender (Brooks & Hebert 2006). These days media have become one of the essential sources of entertainment and information. Although there are critical studies regarding these media contents, there are limited studies regarding how Nepalese women are represented in media. There have been some studies on women's representation in the print media. Studies on gender representations in Nepali press release confirms unequal gender treatment in the news concerning women as women's news were found printed in less important sections of the newspapers, embedded in a patriarchal culture, and represented in feminine roles (Koirala, 2018). Another research in mainstream print media argues that women's interests are less valued, and they are either presented glamorously or in traditional roles in the commercials related to domestic products (Gurung, 2016). Even though visual media have become an essential part of Nepalese life, there is very limited research exploring how females are displayed within them. This research wants to address this gap by exploring the female representations in commercials as a part of visual media circulated through Nepali visual media.

The objective of this research is to explore the underlying gender discourses circulated through the visual media, especially through advertisements in Nepal. Advertisements circulated through various Nepali visual media were analysed considering the qualities of advertisements as concise, complete, and widespread in visual media. This research claims that advertisement contents are important from the perspective of gender representations because males and females are constantly depicted in them (Shield, 2013; Nathanson, Wilson, & McGee, 2004).

Gender justice is possible only when the patriarchal mindset of people obstructing female aspirations and opportunities is transformed. In this task, media can play a critical role to impact and influence the

public attitude (Shield, 2013; Brooks & Herbert, 2006). This unearths the way males and females are projected in visual media.

Media and Gender Representations

Studies concerning media and gender representations are of three types: studies concerned with analysing media contents, studies that explore the impact of media contents, and studies regarding minimizing the impact of biased media contents.

The studies concerning gender in media content suggest that gender representation in commercials is discriminatory and stereotypical projecting females as erotic or sexual objects (Gurung, 2016; Shield, 2013). They argue that women are underrepresented in media (Martin, 2017; Rozario et al., 2018). Some of the studies have also found stereotypical emotions like fear and sadness associated with females against angry male characters (Martin, 2017). The monolithic notion of gender and race in media is criticized as they essentialise individual nature (Brooks & Hebert, 2006). Another important finding was females' dominant presence in the commercials related to domestic products against males' presence in non-domestic products (Bartsch et al., 2002; Nassif & Gunter, 2008). Researchers are also critical of the eroticised females in the commercials (Shield, 2013).

Visual media contents are also critiqued for nurturing fake attitudes associated with different body images in different studies. Researchers have found that specific body images presented in videos and books were associated with characteristics type and gender (Herbozo et al., 2004). For example, good characteristics were associated with attractive bodies, and bad characteristics were associated with obese bodies. Also, female attractiveness was emphasized more than male leading to potential negative impacts of unreal ideal body expectations and associations of different characteristics based on body type. Specific media contents are also found responsible for female gender-specific behaviours, body image, and prosocial behaviours in boys (Coyné et al., 2016).

The studies enquiring about the impacts of visual media contents claim that the viewers are negatively influenced by stereotypical representations. Children being less experienced in the world are found more vulnerable to media information (Strasburger et al., 2013; Singh & Kaur, 2011). Studies regarding the effect of gender stereotypes in media content argue that children often develop orthodox attitudes when exposed to such content (Nathanson, Wilson, and McGee, 2004; Steinke et al., 2007). Studies also claim that gender-stereotyped role models in the contents had immediate negative impacts on the viewers; in contrast to counter-stereotyped role models (Olsson and Martiny, 2018). Pryor and Knupfer's (1997) research asserts stereotypes through media commercials are quite influential and capable of turning the viewers into manipulated consumers when they lack critical viewing skills. Studies have also found different impacts of commercials on males and females (Shields, 2013). According to this research, commercials persuaded men to buy certain products, however, women found that commercials shaped their conscious and subconscious minds, impacted their daily lives, and gender behaviours (Shields, 2013). Likewise, research in the Indian context concerning girls' response to the media pressure found that the girls were pressurized to look beautiful, have a perfect body shape by changing their eating patterns, and often lacked confidence when they did not meet the criteria (Das & Sharma, 2016).

Lastly, the studies concerned with minimizing the negative impacts of media are suggestive of various strategies. For example, studies by Nathanson et al. (2002) argue that an active mediation is needed to minimise the impacts of stereotypical content by discussing such content with children and questioning them with evidence. Another study by Nathanson (1999; 2004) proposes evaluative mediation as a more effective interference to derive positive outcomes for younger children who are exposed to violent television content. Das and Sharma (2016) emphasised awareness and critical attitude toward media content to minimize their effects.

The studies discussed above suggest that media representation of gender is important, often influenced by patriarchal notions and with impacts on the viewers. The studies confirm that a critical

discussion against stereotypical media representation can minimize the influence. Nepal has minimum studies in the field of gender representation in visual media and its impacts. To initiate research in this field, this article will explore the gender representations in the commercials circulated through Nepalese visual media.

Research Objective

This research subtly investigates gender representation in visual content (advertisements) that are broadcasted through various national Nepali visual media. This research answers how males and females are represented in the Nepali commercials and what can be the potential impacts of those representations on the public.

Research Design

This is qualitative research. It explores the Nepali commercials broadcasted through Nepal visual media using the content analysis method. The main purpose of this research is to investigate the gender representations in Nepali commercials and study the potential impacts of such representations. The theoretical framework and methods are discussed briefly in the following sections.

Theoretical Framework

This research uses gender and feminist theories to look at the Nepali commercials broadcasted through various visual media. These theories claim that gender is not an essence, but a social and historical construct bound to change (Beauvoir, 1949; Butler, 1993; 2004; Connell, 2002; Wollstonecraft, 1972). According to Beauvoir, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (295). Wollstonecraft (1972) argues that men and women are made by the way they are cultured in the family and society. These scholars regard gender as a social-cultural construction rather than a natural stage.

Gender has become a problem because it projects males and females in terms of binary opposite characteristics like strong/weak, decisive/indecisive, emotional/rational, and active/ passive and justifies inequalities (Tyson,2009). More than merely a difference it takes a discriminatory route putting one over the other and naturalising the differences in appearances and roles. Although the direct negative impact of gender hierarchies is discussed more on the females, it is equally destructive to males by overburdening them with specific social expectations (Tyson, 2009; Connell, 2002).

Gender can come to an end or can be undone if we change our gender performance and the social relationships based on gender norms (Connell, 2002; Butler, 2004). As gender lacks essence and an objective ideal, it is a falsehood; the idea of gender is created by our actions; and in absence of these actions there would be no gender (Butler, *Undoing Gender* 2004). These scholars emphasise critical awareness of gender to deconstruct it. Underpinning these gender views, this research attempts to critically explore gender in Nepalese visual media by investigating the commercials and examining the male and female representation within them. Applying a critical feminist theory this research explores how gender is performed in visual media, especially in the Nepali commercials of various items used in daily lives. In doing so, this research investigates whether the gender roles, relations, and appearances perpetuate the traditional gender norms, or they counter challenge these norms to encourage viewers to go beyond gender.

Methods

Qualitative Research

This is qualitative research using explorative and descriptive methods to analyse gender representation in a total of twenty-one commercial contents. First, a purposive sample of Nepali commercials was chosen based on the varieties of products used in daily lives and the presence of human characters within them.

Critical Content Analysis

This research applies content analysis with the feminist lens to explore how gender is represented in Nepali commercials (Krippendorff, 2018). This method requires a close reflection of a small number of texts and their interpretation from a new perspective based on scholarly communities. Content analysis is used to explore the roles, appearances, activities, and overall impression of the male and female represented in the advertisements, and a feminist lens is used to see the gender bias.

A total of twenty-one commercials with male/female characters used for various products were analysed from gender and feminist point of view to explore the way they were represented. These commercials were selected based on product varieties and their utility in daily lives. The advertisements are grouped into three groups: construction materials, drinks, food grain, paints, and toiletries and three items are selected from each group.

Name of product	Type	Whose voice?	Theme
Shivam	Cement	male	Strength, durability
Siddhartha	Cement	male	inclusive/bias
Hongschic	Cement	male	Male voice
Muna	tea	male	Male voice/ counter role
Upahar	tea	Female/male	freshness
Tokala	tea	Male/female	Locality,taste
Wheel	Detergent soap	female	Fragrance, cleanliness
Puja	Detergent soap	Activities focused	In-depth washing
Ok	Detergent soap	Male voice	Free offer
Aarati	rice	Male/female	Happiness, energy
Krishna Bhog	rice	Male & female	taste
Gyan	Flour	Male & female	Taste, health, special
Burger Silk	paint	Male and female	Beauty, obsession
Pashupati	paint	male	Colour, happiness
Jasmine	paint	male	Durability, beauty
Horlicks	Energy drink	Male and female	Energy and diet
Viva	Energy drink		energy
Glucose D	Energy drink	Male only	energy
Fair and Lovely	Cosmetic cream	Male and female	Fair and bright
Dabar Vatika	Shampoo	female	Thick, strong, long, black and bright
Okhati	Herbal soap	Male	Beauty, nature

While analysing the commercial contents following things were considered:

- i. Theme emphasized by the product
- ii. Who represents the theme (male/female, adult/children)
- iii. Character Roles
- iv. Character appearances (traditional/modern)
- v. Who voices in the advertisement?
- vi. Overall gender impression on the viewers

Now, the upcoming sections deal with the individual commercial contents and gender representation within them.

Findings and Discussions

Male Voice and Stereotypical Gender Contents in Cement Commercials

The commercials for Cement were based on the themes of strength, durability, safety, and international quality maintenance. Among three commercials Shivam Cement's advertisement exclusively presents a

muscular male performing an act showing strength, durability, and safety gestures. This commercial use only a male voice. However, another commercial belonging to Siddharths is inclusive of various characters like male/female and adult/children. The character details show women gossiping, dancing, crying, putting on makeup, against males passing love letters, reading, stealing, and showing aggression. This advertisement is also voiced by a male character. Lastly, the Hongschic Cement advertisement presents an animated lion as a symbol of power backed up by a male voice. Even though there can be seen improvement in gender inclusiveness in some commercials there is still dominance of the male voice and stereotypical projection of human emotions and activities. Traditional gender-specific appearances such as gender-specific clothes and hairstyles are maintained throughout the commercials.



Figure 1. A still image from the advertisement of Shivam Cement, from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h-PAGxR-OdE>

Gendered roles and Occupations in Tea Ads

Most of the commercials for tea make use of female models making tea. These commercials present themes of taste, freshness, and warmth. Muna tea commercial starts with a counter gender stereotypic act of a male serving tea to his wife. However, there are some other stereotypical gender attitudes reflected in the activities like a mother serving tea to her child and a daughter-in-law serving tea to the family. In contrast to females, we can see a male in an occupational setting of that of a construction worker. Uphar tea focuses on the qualities like localness, fragrant, and freshness. This commercial also includes age and gender variations of characters. It portrays major three activities: photography, picnic, and friend reunion. The entire advertisement has both male and female voices. Though there is not any visible gender bias, the appearances of characters still maintain gender specific clothing and hair length. Lastly, Tokala tea commercials also make use of characters belonging to both gender and age groups. Even though both male and female adult voices are included in this commercial, the male voice dominates the female voice because it is the male who talks about the tea in detail. Also, the mother-in-law asks her daughter-in-law about the tea type suggesting it was she who made the tea for the family. This emphasizes the traditional norms of daughter-in-law as the family cook.



Figure 2. A still image from the advertisement for Muna tea retrieved from YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I_Gto1GnomQ

Washing as a Female role in Detergent Commercials

Commercials belonging to three detergent soaps present themes of fragrance, clean, and bright wash. These commercials feature women actively involved in washing clothes. The Wheel features a famous Nepali actress who is given a soap by her partner, but she uses wheel soap instead. In the commercial, she claims Wheel gives better wash and fragrance. Though her partner remains with her and plays with the soap bubbles it is her who does the washing. A female voice is dominant in the song of this product and female dialogue. Similarly, the advertisement for Puja soap also features women washing clothes and a man looking at women's cleavage lustfully. He is later punished by the group of women and washed like the clothes with Puja soap which gives an in-depth wash. A male voice is used in this commercial. Unlike these commercials, another detergent soap Ok features only male characters and male voices. This ad features males in the occupational setting of firemen.

These commercials dominantly present women doing washing jobs which is also commonly seen in Nepalese society. In most of the Nepalese community, laundry duty is that of females and mostly women are supposed to wash all the family members' clothes as seen in the commercials. However, men washing females' clothes are rare and often pecked negatively. Sticking to the social gender norms these commercials promote these norms and maintain gender bias.



Figure 3. A still image from the Wheel commercial, retrieved from YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YXgwIXR7Mjc>

Cooking as a Female Job in the Food Commercials

The commercials of cooking are expected to present females in the kitchen if they follow traditional gender norms. As expected, a woman is presented in a traditionally ideal getup covering her head, doing morning prayer, wearing traditional feminine clothes, and fulfilling her duty as a daughter-in-law. The daughter-in-law featured in this ad is active in household chores against other family members in the background. This advertisement suggests that the quality of rice is just like the ideal daughter-in-law.

Another similar advertisement for *Krishna Bhog* rice features a male as a shopkeeper and few women as customers in a daily grocery shop. The shopkeeper suggests taking this brand but the first lady refuses to take it as this brand is too tasty and guest keeps coming at her home. However, other women want to take this brand and the shopkeeper praises them for their good choice. Here, both male and female voices are used however, a man is in occupational role against women who are shopping for their household. Thus, this ad also reinforces household roles as a female job.

Gyan Chakki Aata commercial (whole grain wheat flour) also presents women in a relational role of daughter-in-law, mother, and wife where her daughter asks her to make a tasty meal, she serves tea to her mother-in-law, her sister-in-law asks for a healthy diet, and her husband informs her that his boss is coming for breakfast. She is confident that this brand is best to make chapatis. When her mother-in-law asks her if she can make a meal for all of them, she answers positively. This advertisement shows how a daughter-in-law in the Nepali family is solely overburdened with household work and how she is expected to take responsibility happily. These types of commercials sustain the image of traditional daughter-in-law and support the patriarchal division of gender-specific roles.



Figure 4. A still image from the Aarati Premium rice commercial, retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FdSCyEI_ovM

Carer women Versus Sporty Males in Energy Drinks Commercials

Child diet commercial contents were also dominated by women as women's responsibility as carers. We can also see the occupational stereotypes in the ad for Horlicks. In this advertisement, both males and females are seen but their association with the context reinforces gender stereotypes. A male sports teacher can be seen training boys for football against a mother who is in hospital with her daughter. Likewise, a lady journalist is struggling in the crowd against a mother helping her son wearing a sweater. A medical male student is projected against a female dance student, mothers are seen taking care of their children. Here, in different contexts, we can see the association of males with football, strength, and intellect against females who are projected as carers and in the activities requiring less strength like dance, a tv reporter.

Another advertisement for a similar product named *Viva* also presents mom giving *Viva* to her child. This reinforces females as a carer of the family.

Glucose D features a famous footballer practicing football. This ad is voiced by male and its main theme is energy. Sports is one of the fields where female visibility is felt. When commercials also present this attitude, it perpetuates the gender bias in sports.

Football is traditionally a male dominated game. The commercials for these energy diet drink also

reinforce football as male's business. On the other hand, women are always given a caring responsibility that naturalises women as a carer and unburdens males with this responsibility.



Figure 5. A still image from the Glucose D commercial, retrieved from YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aQq4tz1gLhQ>

Dominant Women's Presence in Toiletries

The beautifying products like shampoo, bathing soap, and face cream are loaded with women. The name *Fair and Lovely* itself is gender-specific as lovely is usually a term used to appreciate women. This advertisement reinforces that a dark complexion is a big no to females and suggests the ideal woman should be fair and lovely. This commercial shows a lady ignored by a boy due to her dark skin who later becomes attractive once she uses this product and lightens her complexion. Even though both male and female voices are used in this commercial male voice dominates this commercial. The fair females with spotless skin in the advertisements reinforce the idea that fairness and beauty are essential qualities of the girl. This concept has potential negative upon females who are of darker complexion and who do not fit into the idea of beauty.

Another advertisement for *Dabar Vatika* shampoo also features only females and female voices. This ad has the theme of black, silky, long, and thick hair. Although shampoos are equally popular among males, females are the popular choice for the commercials for shampoos.

Okhati soap also features fair, spotless, and slim female models indicating this effect of this product however soaps are used by males too. And the whole advertisement is voiced by a male voice.



Figure 6. A still image from the Fair and Lovely commercial, retrieved from YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yxt7XndHfqE>

Toiletries emphasizing beauty measures can have a negative impact on the audiences as everyone can not fit into those standards. This might be even more aversive to the teen-aged girls who are very sensitive and often influenced by the popular trends. There are studies that

prove that depicting certain images in the media pressurises the viewers (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Agliata & Tantleff-Dunn, 2005). Therefore, in a society that is already male dominated, these types of advertisements promote the traditional gender norms.

Erotic use of Females in the Paint Commercials

Neutral products like paints present themes of smooth texture, brightness, and durability. Though paints do not have any gender or sexual connection, the commercials for *Burger Silk* paint present a famous Nepali actress talking with the painted wall as if she is talking to her loved one. A man is shocked when he notices that she was talking with the wall. The theme of this ad is that the paint makes the walls so smooth and beautiful, so the lady does not want to go outdoors. Both male and female voices are used in this commercial.

Pashupati Paint's commercial presents various activities like painting the wall, participating in the festival, and caring child where males and females are together. Both are sometimes in casual modern clothing and sometimes in traditional clothing. However, it can be noticed that women's body is emphasized more than the male body. This commercial includes children, adults, and the old generation. Also, young girls and boys are playing football together breaking the stereotypical attitude. The voice is however a male voice singing song about this product.

Jasmine paint presents two popular artists of Nepali comedy who are smeared in paint while trying to rob a house. This commercial involves both genders, and avoids erotic use of females although it is voiced by only males.



Figure 7. A still image from the Burger Silk commercial, retrieved from YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vS7dGkU705M>

The commercials of paint have used the female body as an erotic object to promote their products. The male voice is dominant in the ads and females are silenced in most of the cases.

Based on the analysis of these advertisements it can be concluded that the advertisements are reproducing the traditional stereotypes regarding males and females with potential negative impacts on the viewers. They specify cleaning, caring, cultural transmission, and maintenance as women's responsibilities. Men are presented as stronger and decisive against weak, silent, but beautiful women. Similarly, the promotion of specific male and female body shapes, skin colours, and appearances for both males and females reinforces gender stereotypes and discriminations.

Conclusion

The advertisement contents of different products circulated through the Nepali visual media have gendered content reproducing and reinforcing traditional stereotypical gender attitudes. They are in a way naturalizing the gender distinction and discriminations prevalent in the Nepalese society validating them in national media. Studies claim that Nepalese women are overburdened by household chores and familial responsibilities than their educational aspirations and career goals (Mahat, 2003; Rothchild; Panthe & McCutcheon 73). The contents of the advertisements discussed above also project similar concepts showing women in caring, cleaning, and cooking rather than an occupational setting.

Women in Nepalese societies are also regarded as vulnerable, insecure, and dependent whereas, males are regarded as secure, violent, and independent. Single females are recognised as *abala nari* (one who is helpless) or insecure so they are discouraged to stay outside the home for a long period. The strong and muscular male in the advertisements for construction materials and emphasis on the male voice in the commercials connotes female exclusion and projects them as weaker.

Objectification and erotic representation of the female body in the ads (Shields, 2013) were other features in the advertisements. The neutral products like paints and cosmetics had women who were erotically presented. Beauty products on the other side projected Nepalese social preferences for fair, beautiful, and clear-skinned females over dark, and blemished-skinned women.

Besides, male-female binaries on the appearances including the dichotomy of short/long hair length and masculine/feminine dresses were also maintained in the advertisements. Individual men were shown as self-sufficient flawless individuals like that in the advertisement of Shivan cement however most of the females were displayed in relational settings as family people, waiting for approval, and always concerned about their looks. To be accepted, they had to be passed by the male gaze, be a good housewife, and mother.

The social development and opportunities for individual development in Nepal were almost negligible until the establishment of democracy in 1950. It was only after 1950, that education was open for the common people and with the educational development gradually there were opportunities for people and changes in their lifestyles. However, due to the dominance of patriarchal culture women lag in the social, political, and educational fields more than men, therefore, gender inequality is one of the social issues that need to be addressed in Nepal (Government of Nepal, 2011). Even if there have been efforts of women empowerment from the side of government and non-government agencies women's status is not satisfactory (Mahat, 2003). The commercial contents also reflected the discriminatory social attitude and expectations from both females and males.

The contents of advertisements reproduced and reinforced the traditional patriarchal social expectations from men and women with potential negative impacts on the viewers. These commercials naturalized and idealized domestic, caring, familial, and feminine image of the females and the strong, independent, and decisive image of the men. Besides, there were subtle cultural responsibilities imposed upon the women. Similarly, men were found exempted from caring, cleaning, and cooking responsibilities as most women were projected active in these activities. Specific body images of both men and women were reinforced indicating the ideal body shape of both females and males.

Media can always play an important role in generating awareness and promoting gender equality. One of the important steps in achieving gender equality can be cross-checking the media content such as advertisements from a gender-critical view and broadcasting filtered gender-neutral content. Moreover, if the advertisements challenge gender stereotypes, it might help change people's attitudes positively and promote gender justice.

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