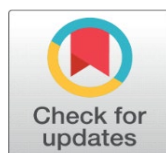


ROLE OF MEDIA IN PORTRAYAL OF GENDER STEREOTYPES: A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS PERCEPTIONS

Mimansa Singh Tanwar ¹, Dr. Adiba Ali ²

¹Research Scholar, School of Liberal Arts G. D. Goenka University Gurgaon Haryana, India

²Assistant Professor, School of Liberal Arts G. D. Goenka University Gurgaon Haryana, India



Corresponding Author

Mimansa Singh Tanwar,
mimansasingh24@gmail.com

DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i6.2024.5183](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i6.2024.5183)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2024 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



ABSTRACT

Through the lens of the high school students, this qualitative study explores perceived influence of media in shaping, reinforcing and challenging gender stereotypes. As shared by students described how media contributes to gender discourses in significant ways by portraying the normative gender ideas of masculinity and femininity. Using a thematic analysis approach, the paper examines the how students perceive, decode and respond to gendered messages that are portrayed across social media, print, film and television platform. The study shows that gender stereotypes are not just passively absorbed, rather students actively engage in meaning making process in context to their social, personal and peer experiences. With review of literature highlighting the potential impact of media on adolescents' perceptions of gender roles, the results highlight the importance of integrating media literacy and gender sensitive pedagogies in the educational spaces that enables students to critically challenge normative practices, assumptions and reconstruct inclusive understanding of gender.

Keywords: Gender Stereotypes, Media, Influence, Education, Students

1. INTRODUCTION

Media has been one of the most influential and multifaceted tools in the 21st century utilized for variety of purposes across social, political and cultural domains. Evolving beyond its traditional role as medium of communication and information, media has expanded its impact in shaping education, entertainment, public opinions and cultural norms. From broadcast news, print media to digital platforms and social media algorithms, media content has been increasingly shaping how an individual interprets the world around them. Given its pervasive presence in our lives which extends beyond passive consumption, it has been actively guiding our lifestyle choices, emotions, social behaviors and perceptions.

For decades, scholars have debated media influence on people's perception of reality as described by Walter Lippmann in 1922 that media creates an image in our heads and sets the way reality is conceived (Gayathri & Bhuyan, B,

2024). In today's age with the advent of social media, its impact on social attitudes and collective actions has only increased. In particular, media plays a critical role in constructing and disseminating gender norms through various narratives, representations and character archetypes. For example, gender stereotyping of women as more nurturing, submissive and appearance focused while portraying men as dominant and emotionally restrained are often perpetuated through media portrayals reinforcing the societal expectations of men and women gender roles. Such biases have a potential to influence on academic performance, opportunities, behaviours, leadership and mental health outcomes (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004; Heilman, 2012).

In the context of young people - specifically adolescents - media often presents range of role models and content that is highly appealing leading to conformity or imitation of existing gender stereotypes (Reinecke & Oliver, 2016). As adolescents navigate this critical phase of identity formation and cognitive development, gender portrayals are often internalized shaping their expectations of self and others in stereotypically gendered way. Through narratives of high school students reflecting on their perceptions and views of gender representations in media, this paper aims to explore the intersectionality of gender, media and education. It highlights the crucial role of educational spaces in encouraging critical understanding of how media contributes to construction and potential reconstruction of gender norms.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1. INFLUENCE OF DIFFERENT TYPES OF MEDIA ON GENDER PORTRAYAL

1) Gender Stereotypes through Print Media

Several studies over the years have shown that magazines and print advertisements often depict women through idealized body type and beauty standards significantly influencing adolescent perceptions of appearance and gender roles (Guo, 2022). The portrayal of women in print media shapes young peoples' understanding of physical perfection particularly girls who often tend to identify with these models to attain a slim body type leading to negative body image and contributing to increasing rate in malnutrition (Kumari & Joshi, 2015). In another research done by Adhikari & Guha (2018) exploring the gender representations and social discourses in English news magazines in India revealed sexualization and commoditization of women. The study used a critical discourse approach to analyze gendered texts and social schemas that were found depicting them in culturally conformed ways as young slim, beautiful, passive, male-dependent and often dull and dumb. Studies have also showed that boys who consumed more sexualized content about women, showed the tendency for more traditional beliefs to pursue them (Ward, 2015).

2) Gender Portrayal through Television and Movies

Even though new age media gained much popularity among young people, television continues to convey gender representations and stereotypes in our society. Daily soap operas have always been an integral part of the Indian household where gender representation of characters is stereotypical with women or girls are portrayed to be nurturing, caring, dependent and romantic while men or boys are expected to be dominant, athletic and independent (Glascok, 2001; Steinke et al, 2008). This narrative has played a significant role in maintaining and shaping the gendered schemas of viewers for decades. The depiction of female characters as polar opposites as vicious or conspirator or an idolized household versions have contributed in perpetuating gender stereotypes (Glascok, 2001). Despite change in the trends in recent years where women are represented through series or films as breaking the stereotypes, the social constructs and discourse in the form of language or plot still reflect gendered content.

In another study that examined gender representation in television commercials in India in three different languages (Tamil, Hindi and English) revealed that men outnumbered women as central character and voice overs (Das, 2011). Not only that, advertisements in Indian television are derived using emotional or argumentative content with women shown in more sexualized behavior or body display than men to promote products (Mubarki, 2012). However, some studies have reported positive change in portrayal of urban-middle class women in Youtube or Television advertisements due to financial independence (Lakshmi & Selvam, 2016)

3) Self-Representation on Social Media

Young people are one of the most prominent and versatile users of social media in today's age. Social media platforms are not only used for the purpose of connection and entertainment but are a powerful tool of self-representation and expression among young adults and adolescents. Recent researches on adolescent online self-representation have shown that they tend to adopt stereotypical gender roles which is depicted on their online profiles,

pictures, posts and language they use (Herring & Kapidzic, 2015; Manago et al, 2008). Adolescent emerging into adulthood is a time where their abstract sense of self often shaped by the social validation in response to their self-representations (Harter & Leahy, 2001). This is often reflected in their stereotyped gendered image with girls presenting the attractiveness in their image while boys portraying masculinity by reference to sexual language or alcohol thereby conforming to gendered norms (Siibak, 2009; Herring & Kapidzic, 2015).

Several other studies have focused specially on the online self-representation through use of language during online chat or blogposts textual information that has identified gender patterns with males or boys using more authoritative and negative style while interacting, whereas females or girls making more personal or emotional contributions to the interactions (Guiller & Durnell, 2007). It was also observed that while girls used more friendly response, boys used more competitive or flirtatious acts (Herring & Kapidzic, 2015). In another study by Subrahmanyam and colleagues (2006) revealed use of explicit sexualized language by boys while more implicit tone by girls.

2.2. IMPACT OF GENDER STEREOTYPICAL PORTRAYALS

Literature has shown internalization of appearance related messages and evaluating their self-worth from attractiveness scale can impede achievement and future potential for women or girls (Anjalin, 2015). Research evidence has also shown that sexualization and objectification negatively affect them across domains – self, emotional, physical and mental health (Fardouly, 2024). It has also been observed that increased female sexual objectification and social comparison can negative impact their identity development (Manago et al, 2008). In a review of by Ward and Grower's (2015) have also shown that sexualized media can influence perceptions of their relationships and related expectations with women. It also revealed psychological consequences on adolescents' well-being stemming from the pressure to conform to narrow gender views which can be presumptive and normative. Studies have also shown that non-traditional or positive portrayal of women can boost their self-esteem and ability to make judgements (Rosenwaser et al, 1989) with more recent use of pro-female advertising to decimate stereotyping and increase self-esteem in adolescent (Varghese, 2020).

While there is limited research to examine the influence of social network use perception of gender role in adolescent, studies have focused largely on self-representation that has been reflective stereotyped portrayal. Thus, social media has a potential impact and plays a significant role in shaping adolescents' self-concept, often reinforcing or challenging existing gender norms and stereotypes.

3. OBJECTIVE

The aim of the current paper is to explore role of media in reinforcing gender stereotypes and exploring its influence in shaping gender role beliefs as perceived by high school students from private schools in Gurugram using a qualitative interview. The research questions asked to the students was What differences do you see if any in the way media portrays gender stereotypes? Please elaborate your response based on how you think the portrayal varies on different media platforms for example social media, television and print. The data was collected from 20 students (10 boys and 10 girls, gender as expressed by the students) of grades 11th and 12th. The results were analysed using a thematic analysis approach.

4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Based on the thematic analysis of the interviews with students 5 major themes were identified: Gender representation Bias, Media Reinforcement of Gender Stereotypes, Body image and Beauty Norms, Algorithm and Media Influence and Polarization. Apart from these themes, an overarching theme that emerged was the exposure to and influence of social media on the lives of young people. Social media platforms were consistently referenced in students responses, highlighting the significant role it plays in shaping their perceptions of self and others. The duality of social media acting both as a pressure and possibility of change was evident in their interviews. The analysis was done by line by line coding. The themes generated are not mutually exclusive and have overlapping content.

Theme 1: Gender Representation Bias

The theme draws attention to the unequal or biased representation of gender. Particularly in ways in which women are victimized, marginalized or portrayed in a manner that undermines their potential or agency, students reported

observing this media content across news coverage, films, television or print depicting them as dependent or secondary in the given context. For example a student shared “Round tables they do for political things. Out of the six people on the roster, there would be one woman and the rest would be males. I have never seen an equal division among the people there.....And even though how many times, no matter what the position of the woman is, how popular she is, the reporter, she tries to stop them, they never listen until and unless a male intervenes” another expressed “even the pop culture media, with females and males, in some areas, they both get equal amounts of hate, but then with female, they would describe the whole thing, this is what she wore the whole day, and then they would just bombard them, the paparazzi” while several others agreed to perceive “If a woman is successful, the media usually criticizes them more, even for little mistakes than men”.

While some others felt lack of representation of problems concerning men “I feel like a lot of them or like problems related to women are more likely to be picked out..... but not enough about what men have and i'm not taking away from like women...but it definitely there is a problem when all of these like awful things happen to men and none of it gets like advocated against or talked in the media. They don't reflect on that, they don't speak about it”. Overall it reflects the skewed perception of gender capabilities, gendered scrutiny and disproportionate attention to problems faced by gender which has a persistent form of gender bias.

Theme 2: Media Reinforcement of Gender Roles

This theme highlights the portrayal of traditional masculine and feminine roles various forms of media reinforcing the stereotypical or presumed understanding of gender. As described by students largely who echoed the presentation of toxic masculinity for men and women to be nurturing, weak performing conventional roles for example “newspaper that there would be news about a woman getting harassed. And the next page would be about how much money a man has earned.....media portrays men, masculine and just, you know, very sophisticated. And they are not suffering. You're only showing women suffering”; “We've been seeing cases of toxic masculinity and all portrayed in such a way in media that men are told to be the alpha who works out, goes to the gym, makes a lot of body and the portrait of being a man”. “Girls wash dishes, girls are only housewives and boys go out or media portraying women to be weak, to be nurturing, who stays at home, who cooks for the family, who takes care of the family, while the man is someone who goes out... media still portrays gender stereotypes”. Such traditional portrayals can be powerful reminders of social norms which can contribute not only to pressure to conform but even social unacceptability for deviations from such cultural scripts. For young people, the scripts can influence their expectations of self and others in relationships.

Theme 3: Body Image and Beauty Norms

Media has continued to reinforce and maintained idealization of beauty standards in a gendered way. Perfect body type as described by students “beautiful, gorgeous women and the men they're like totally buffed up and like that's a masculine look” and “you should have a nice jawline. You should be slim. You should not do this and you should not wear this” and more prescriptive details on what will look good, attractive or desirable is often internalized often impact their body image. While some students acknowledged the shift in the narratives by movements like body positivity, however, they often get overshadowed by the dominant glorification of beauty standards.

Theme 4: Algorithm and Media Influence

Another aspect of media influence is the role of algorithms that is being acknowledged by students which is critical aspect of media literacy. Social media algorithms not only influence what they see but creates an echo chamber by consistently bombarding a certain kind of content that reinforces the way they think and behave by curating a personalised media environment. Expressed by a student “It's the algorithm which leads it to something that he or she might not. You might not want to believe it, but it's so tempting to be in it. Like changes your mind sets, means you pressurize and a lot of stereotypes like for girls or boys it's like they should have a perfect body they should have to do this” while another shared “It's the media who is controlling and it not only media which is controlling, it's the people who also are controlling the media itself. There is a long chain that they're involved, but if you want to stick to one, then you will have to be a lot more aware”. It reflects the paradox faced by young minds who recognize its influence yet often feel entrapped into the algorithmic ecosystem that shapes their thoughts, choices, emotions and self-perception.

Theme 5: Diverse Realities and Interpretations

This theme refers to the diverse experiences and perspectives that are provided by social media platforms. It certainly provides space that enables self-expression and alternative representations of gender by creating opportunities for progressive narratives and inclusive discourse. Students highlighted the positive shifts in media narratives by sharing

examples such as “Various TV shows have promoted gender equality” describing it as a “big change” or subtle linguistic change like, “we are pregnant” reflecting of evolving social norms.

While others drew attention to existence of contrasting realities shaped by socio-cultural or regional context. One student noted “it really depends on the kind of content you're seeing.... At one extreme end, you would see inclusivity and stuff like that. And then at one extreme end, you would see something that is so disrespectful to a certain community” while other observed resistance to the emerging inclusivity “some people support the community and like how females deserve equal rights and the LGBT community deserve equal rights. But from some newspapers and some articles, I have seen how people say stuff ... we do not support it because it would be wrong”. These extremes are also often determined by socio-economic backgrounds as reflected “it depends on which area you're talking about. If you see economically or socially weaker sections sometimes, this idea is still very prevalent.... But if you see metropolitan cities like..... people are usually just concerned with their lives”.

Such varied interpretations by students suggest that they actively engage in and negotiate with media messages through the lens of their lived realities. It also highlights the potential impact of social media on students in shaping their perceptions often contributing to the polarization of their digital experiences.

5. DISCUSSION

The study explored how students perceived the role of both traditional and digital media in shaping gender representations and stereotypes. Through the thematic analysis approach of the narratives, their voices reflected the deeply embedded gendered portrayals in media that has the potential to significantly influence their perceptions, norms and identity.

One of the most prominent findings was the reinforcement of traditional gender roles that continue to persist in mainstream media through films, stories, television or advertisements where the presumed roles dominate the content or media messages. Studies have shown that such media gender representations can shape the stereotypical career choices in students (Bond, 2016). Studies have also reported that by elementary school years, children increasing understand, interpret and assimilate feedback from others to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses (Wigfield et al, 2015) and given media messages can influence their value beliefs.

Further, the theme on ideals of a perfect body and beauty standards revealed the psychological impact of idealized portrayals. Students described conformity pressure experienced through such portrayals which are internalized by young people leading to dissatisfaction with self and unrealistic standards of body image (Sagrera, 2022). Studies have also consistently linked exposure to sexualized media to have a number of negative effects (Santoniccolo et al, 2023). On the other hand, findings also showed breaking of from such stereotyped conformity through movements like body positivity, highlighting the role of social media that can serve as a double-edged sword by both reinforcing and challenging stereotypes.

Findings also reflected the increasing awareness of the algorithmic patterns that are personally curated through repetitive content to reinforce a certain belief system as shared by few students. However, despite the awareness around media literacy, youth also expresses feeling powerless in the algorithm driven media landscape as noted by studies on digital subjectivity (Couldry & Hepp, 2017) where reality is constructed leading to far reaching influence on shaping the young minds.

Studies have also highlighted the positive role of social media in breaking and addressing the stereotypes as acknowledged by students in the study (Dass & Majhi 2022). Through films, storylines or advertisements, success stories of women or men breaking the gender stereotypes have been appearing on the platforms through challenging gender representations, though the number is still small.

6. IMPLICATIONS

Overall, given the diverse interpretations, realities and potentially polarizing digital landscape that the young people are exposed to in their formative years, it is crucial to understand the role of media in shaping their perceptions. The current study highlights the intersection of gender and media portrayals or representations that plays a role in both enforcing and breaking the existing norms. The study brings forth the urgent need to integrate critical media literacy

into the school curriculum to foster deeper reflections on how gendered messages are constructed, internalized and disseminated and educational settings can be one such powerful space.

7. LIMITATIONS

While the study provides valuable insights into the high school students perceptions of media driven gender stereotypes, the scope of the study is limited given the smaller sample size and geographical context. The findings may not be representative of a wider adolescent experience across educational setting, rural areas or socio-economic background. It is important to also take into account the participant and researcher bias in qualitative data reporting and analysis. Given media is an evolving process, a longitudinal approach can offer deeper insights.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

- Adhikari, S., & Guha, Satajit. (2018). Mediated communication and commoditization of the female gender: Discourse analysis Indian news magazines. *Media Watch*, 9, 501–519. <https://doi.org/10.15655/mw/2018/v9i3/49489>
- Anjalin, U. (2015). A content analysis of gender stereotypes in contemporary teenage magazines.
- Bhattacharyya, B. (2019). The Portrayal of Gender in Indian Television Content: A Study. VII, 88–92.
- Bond B. J. (2016). Fairy godmothers and gt; robots. *Bull. Sci. Technol. Soc.* 36, 91–97. 10.1177/0270467616655951 [DOI] [Google Scholar]
- Couldry, N., & Hepp, A. (2017). *The Mediated Construction of Reality*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Das, M. (2011). Gender Role Portrayals in Indian Television Ads. *Sex Roles*. 64. 208-222. 10.1007/s11199-010-9750-1.
- Das, Partha, & Majhi, Manoj. (2022). Gender Role Portrayal in Indian Advertisement: A Review. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-94277-9_40
- Eagly, A. H., Nater, C., Miller, D. I., Kaufmann, M., & Sczesny, S. (2020). Gender stereotypes have changed: A cross-temporal meta-analysis of U.S. public opinion polls from 1946 to 2018. *American Psychologist*, 75, 301–315. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000494>
- Fardouly, J., Levin, T., Vartanian, L. R., & Rapee, R. M. (2024). Isolating the effects of body size and sexualisation in social media images on body image-related constructs among young women. *Body Image*, 51, 101800. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2024.101800>
- G.Salimkhan, A.Manago and P.Greenfield. The construction of the virtual self on My Space. 2010.
- Gayathri, & Bhuyan, B. (2024). The Influence of Media on Gender Stereotype Among Young Adults. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 12(4), 2117–2127. <https://doi.org/10.25215/1204.202>
- Glascok, J. (2001). Gender Roles on Prime-Time Network Television: Demographics and Behaviors. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 45(4), 656–669. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15506878jobem4504_7
- Guiller J and Durndell A (2007). “Students’ linguistic behavior in online discussion groups: Does gender matter?”, *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 23, no. 5, pp. 2240-2255. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2006.03.004>.
- Guo, Yijing. (2022). The Impact of Media on Adolescents’ Perceptions of Gender Roles. https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-494069-31-2_338.
- Harter, Susan & Leahy, Robert. (2001). The Construction of the Self: A Developmental Perspective. *Journal of Cognitive Psychotherapy*. 15. 383-384. 10.1891/0889-8391.15.4.383.
- Heilman, M. E. (2012). Gender stereotypes and workplace bias. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 32, 113–135.
- Herring S and Kapidzic S. (2015) *Teens, gender, and self-presentation in social media*. Elsevier Oxford. pp. 1–16.
- Kumari, A., & Joshi, H. (2015). Gender stereotyped portrayal of women in the media: Perception and impact on adolescent, pp. 44–52.

- Lakshmi, C. & Selvam, Veena. (2016). Challenging Stereotypes: A Semiotic Analysis of Indian Advertisements. Asian Journal of Research in Social Sciences and Humanities. 6. 907. 10.5958/2249-7315.2016.01239.9.
- Lippmann, W. (1922). Public opinion. Harcourt, Brace, and Company. https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/126274.Understanding_Media
- Manago M, Graham M, Greenfield P, and Salimkhan G. "Self-presentation and gender on MySpace", Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, vol. 29, no. 6, pp. 446-458, 2008. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2008.07.001>.
- Mubarki, M A. (2012). Sexual Content in Indian TV Commercials. Media Asia. 39. 191-198. 10.1080/01296612.2012.11689937.
- Reinecke, L., & Oliver, M. (2016). The Routledge handbook of media use and well-being: International perspectives on theory and research on positive media effects, pp. 396–408. Routledge.
- Ridgeway, C. L., & Correll, S. J. (2004). Unpacking the gender system: A theoretical perspective on gender beliefs and social relations. Gender & Society, 18(4), 510–531. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243204265269>.
- Rosenwasser S, Lingenfelter M and Harrington A. Non-traditional gender role portrayals on television and children's gender role perceptions. Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 97-105, 1989. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1016/0193-3973\(89\)90016-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/0193-3973(89)90016-6).
- Sagrera CE, Magner J, Temple J, Lawrence R, Magner TJ, Avila-Quintero VJ, McPherson P, Alderman LL, Bhuiyan MAN, Patterson JC 2nd, Murnane KS. Social media use and body image issues among adolescents in a vulnerable Louisiana community. Front Psychiatry. 2022 Nov 3;13:1001336. doi: 10.3389/fpsyt.2022.1001336. PMID: 36405904; PMCID: PMC9669337.
- Santonico, F., Trombetta, T., Paradiso, M. N., & Rollè, L. (2023). Gender and Media Representations: A Review of the Literature on Gender Stereotypes, Objectification and Sexualization. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 20(10), 5770. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20105770>.
- Siibak, A. (2009). Constructing the Self through the Photo Selection: Visual Impression Management on Social Networking Websites. Cyberpsychology. 3. 1-9.
- Subrahmanyam K, Smahel D and Greenfield P. (2006). Connecting developmental constructions to the internet: Identity presentation and sexual exploration in online teen chat rooms. Developmental Psychology, vol. 42, no. 3, pp. 395-406. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.42.3.395>.
- Steinke, J., Long, M., Johnson, M., & Ghosh, S. (2008). Gender stereotypes of scientist characters in television programs popular among middle school-aged children. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Marriott Downtown, Chicago, IL.
- Varghese N, Kumar N. (2020). Femvertising as a media strategy to increase self-esteem of adolescents: An experiment in India, Children and Youth Services Review. Volume 113,2020.104965, ISSN 0190-7409. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.104965>.
- Ward, L., Vandenbosch, L., & Eggermont, S. (2015). The impact of men's magazines on adolescent boys' objectification and courtship beliefs. Journal of Adolescence, 39(1), 49–58. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2014.12.004>
- Wigfield A, Eccles J. S., Fredricks J. A., Simpkins S, Roeser R. W., Schiefele U. (2015). Development of achievement motivation and engagement, in Handbook of Child Psychology and Developmental Science, 7th Edm, eds Lerner R. M., Garcia Coll C., Lamb M. E. (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.), 1–44. [Google Scholar]