



Gender Stereotypes, Objectification And The Female Body In Media

RITUBARNA SINHA

RESEARCHER

JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY

INTRODUCTION

Society and culture acts as potential factors in the development of sex and gender determining the gender related roles, beliefs, norms and the identities. Media, being the indispensable part of the society shapes the cognitive processes and social behaviours of people while influencing their mindset. Over the years, the stereotypical representation, objectification and depiction of women body emphasizing their sexuality intensifies the hazardous socio-cultural norms and expectations, thus invoking more gender differentiation.

IMPACT OF MEDIA

The long term effect of media content over the years molds a person's cognitive framework leading to behave and act according to the generalized norms. The gender biased representations on media often asserts certain qualities, roles and characteristics perpetuating traditional gender norms. For instance, gender stereotyping presents household chores with women while aiming for professional growth with men. According to Heilman (*Gender stereotypes and workplace Bias*, 2012), this not only influences behaviour but also ignites gender disparities, restricting opportunities in the society.

Despite the social and legal progressions of women in civil rights, stereotypical representations of gender are widely prevalent in myriad forms of media. The constant objectification and sexualization of feminine gender reinforces the cultural ideas of appearance and affirmation of sexist attitudes resulting in detrimental effect on physical and psychological levels like heightened personal consciousness, anxiety, sense of rejection and body dissatisfaction.

GENDER STEREOTYPES IN MEDIA

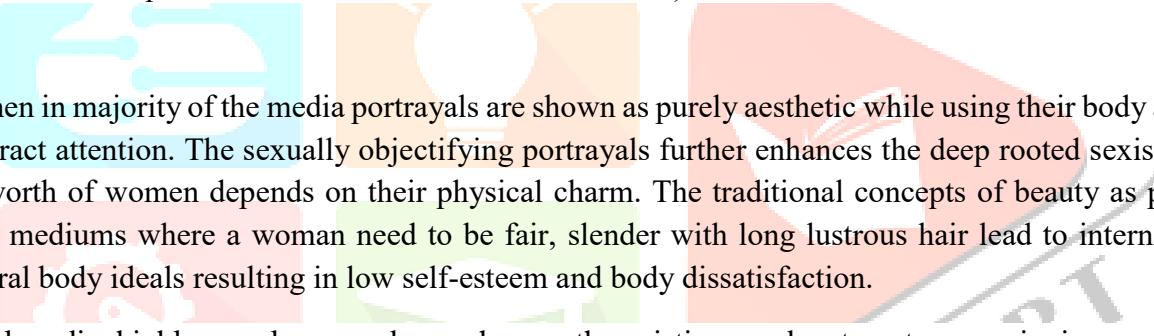
Several adverts, films or magazines consistently feature stereotyped images of gender – like the advertisements of daily bathing essentials or cosmetics, predominantly feature female models. Whereas, those products are equally needed and demanded by men to maintain a prim and proper look, the advertisements invoke the traditional belief that it is the women who need to take care of their appearance. Not only that, men who uses skincare products are often labelled as not masculine enough.

Representation in television programs and movies prominently features gender stereotypes for mass connection, where women are depicted mostly as passive and dependent. Women who are timid, takes order silently from men and never raise their voice against any oppression are projected as the “good woman”, whereas, women holding strong opinions about life, achieving a successful career and denying the age old customs are presented as the “bad women” of the society. Similarly, men who pursue interests in cooking or dancing are projected as comic characters since these activities are typically considered as feminine in socio cultural contexts.

An identical reinforcement of gender stereotyping can be seen in children’s media through cartoons, fairy tales and video games, where most of the times the girls are shown as delicate, image conscious and in need of a male figure to rescue her from the challenges of life in sharp contrast to boys who are depicted as strong and intrepid. This early exposure not only shapes children’s psyche about gender roles, but it also constructs their behaviours and choices in later periods. “The stereotypes we are offered create a false sense of ourselves, who we are and how we should live- false consciousness.” –Simmons (*Gender Representations and Digital Media*, 2013).

OBJECTIFICATION OF WOMEN

The objectification theory explains how women are socialized to view their bodies as objects to be evaluated by others (Barbara L. Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts, *Objectification theory: Toward understanding women's lived experiences and mental health risks*”, 1997).



Women in majority of the media portrayals are shown as purely aesthetic while using their body as an object to attract attention. The sexually objectifying portrayals further enhances the deep rooted sexist belief that the worth of women depends on their physical charm. The traditional concepts of beauty as projected in these mediums where a woman need to be fair, slender with long lustrous hair lead to internalization of cultural body ideals resulting in low self-esteem and body dissatisfaction.

Social media, highly popular nowadays enhances the existing gender stereotypes assigning gender roles to men and women. Since, it has an in built mechanism for recommending content based on their interactions (e.g. likes, shares, comments), it promotes gender biased and discriminatory content. In order to get attention, many female users share their sexualized images and these activities are encouraged by these platforms by paying for such content. This leads to the internalization in the female psyche to view themselves as an object and their bodies as the most prized asset they possess eternalizing the conventional idea that women exists primarily for male pleasure.

These platforms degrade and highly objectifies woman on the screen who is shown to bask in the glory of the male attention which is showered upon noticing solely their bodies. The achievement of women being judged by their physical beauty, denying all other parameters like education or professional skills, in many cases leads to the normalization of sexual harassments.

THE REPRESENTATION OF FEMALE BODY

Music videos, live performances, web series, reality shows promotes sexually explicit contents with the camera shifting focus from one organ of the female body to the other. From the usages of vulgar lyrics describing the women body parts to the sexually provocative dance moves, women are widely used as objects for sexual gratification.

Moreover, with the wide usages of filters, edits and digital modifications, an illusion of perfect beauty with ideal female body is created- pressurizing women to attain unrealistic beauty standards. These delusive representations have an adverse effects on physical and psychological levels of women resulting in stress, eating disorders and inferiority complexes. Additionally, the lack of real and diverse representations of

female body also marginalizes women who fail to meet the fabricated beauty standards, creating a sense of discrimination and exclusion amongst them.

CONCLUSION

Media acts as a significant socio-cultural influence in determining gender roles and norms and the stereotyping, objectifying and sexualised gender representations in the media have an adverse effect contributing to further gender inequity. Since media and social perceptions are intertwined, media should accordingly embrace a responsible approach by promoting realistic and gender progressive representations which can act as a step in diminishing the gender disparities in the society.

