

Cultural Stereotypes in Indian Advertising and Their Historical Roots

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ABSTRACT— The portrayal of cultural stereotypes in Indian advertising has been a persistent element since the advent of commercial mass media in the subcontinent. This manuscript examines how historical roots—from colonial-era print advertisements to post-independence radio jingles and the advent of television—have shaped enduring tropes around gender roles, regional identities, family structures, and urban–rural divides. By conducting a structured survey among 200 respondents across metropolitan and non-metropolitan regions, this study investigates contemporary perceptions of stereotypical imagery, measuring both recognition and attitudinal responses.

The findings reveal that while urban audiences are increasingly critical of reductive portrayals, many rural consumers still find comfort in familiar archetypes. Moreover, the research highlights how globalization and digital media have introduced new nuances, prompting both reinforcement of legacy stereotypes and emergence of hybrid representations. The discussion situates these results within broader socio-historical contexts, arguing that advertising stereotypes both reflect and reinforce prevailing cultural narratives, even as they adapt to shifting consumer sensibilities. The conclusion underscores the need for advertising practitioners to adopt more nuanced, inclusive representations to foster social cohesion and resonate authentically with India's diverse populace.

KEYWORDS— Indian advertising, cultural stereotypes, historical roots, survey research, media representation

INTRODUCTION

Advertising in India has evolved tremendously over more than a century, moving from simple product announcements in vernacular newspapers to sophisticated multimedia

campaigns reaching hundreds of millions of consumers across television, digital platforms, and social media. Throughout this evolution, cultural stereotypes have served as convenient shorthand, allowing marketers to communicate desired messages quickly and effectively. Such stereotypes tap into collective imaginaries—images of the ideal homemaker, the progressive urban professional, or the rustic village family—that resonate deeply with particular audience segments.



Fig.1 Cultural Stereotypes in Indian Advertising, [Source\(\[1\]\)](#)

In the early 20th century, print advertisements predominantly targeted the urban elite, featuring Anglicized imagery that positioned Western lifestyles as aspirational. For instance, advertisements for consumer durables often showcased homes furnished in colonial style, implicitly suggesting that adoption of such aesthetics signaled modernity and social mobility. Following independence in 1947, Indian agencies began crafting nationalist messages; brands like Brooke Bond Tea and Parle-G used symbols of rural India—farmers, village women—to evoke authenticity and indigenous pride. Yet even these postcolonial campaigns employed simplified archetypes, treating rural communities as monolithic “folk” entities rather than recognizing their internal diversity.

The introduction of radio in the 1950s and television broadcasting by Doordarshan in the 1960s expanded advertising’s reach dramatically but imposed strict content guidelines. State-owned broadcast media favored family-centric, didactic narratives, enshrining stereotypes such as the dutiful daughter-in-law and the benevolent patriarch. These tropes dovetailed with nascent nation-building goals, reinforcing traditional gender norms and social hierarchies even as India embarked on industrialization.

By the 1990s, economic liberalization and the entry of private satellite channels shattered the state monopoly, ushering in a proliferation of channels and advertising agencies. This period witnessed the rise of glossier, high-budget campaigns that borrowed liberally from global advertising practices. Yet despite visual sophistication, many campaigns reverted to time-worn tropes: the nuclear family celebrating festivals around brightly lit fluorescent lamps, or the modern urban professional seeking aspirational gadgets to signal success. Critiques emerged, noting that even “progressive” advertisements often reinforced patriarchal ideals by positioning women as the ultimate tastemakers, responsible for purchasing household goods.

Today’s media landscape is further complicated by digital platforms and social media influencers. While these channels allow for more decentralized, authentic content creation, legacy stereotypes persist in sponsored campaigns. At the

same time, consumers—particularly younger, urban, and digitally engaged cohorts—are increasingly vocal about misrepresentation and cultural tokenism. This tension between entrenched advertising practices and evolving audience expectations raises critical questions: Do these portrayals accurately reflect contemporary Indian identities, or do they ossify outdated social hierarchies? How aware are audiences of such imagery, and to what extent do these stereotypes influence consumer attitudes and behaviors?



Fig.2 Indian Advertising and Their Historical
Roots,[Source\(\[2\]\)](#)

This manuscript addresses these questions by integrating historical analysis with new empirical data. The subsequent sections review foundational scholarship on advertising stereotypes globally and within India, outline a rigorous survey methodology designed to capture both cognitive recognition and affective responses, present detailed findings,

and discuss implications for practitioners and policymakers aiming to foster more inclusive, authentic media representations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Foundations of Advertising Stereotypes

Advertising stereotypes operate as mental shortcuts, enabling quick message transmission by invoking familiar social categories. According to schema theory, audiences interpret new information by referencing existing mental frameworks; thus, advertisers leverage stereotypes to facilitate rapid comprehension. However, social cognition research warns that reliance on stereotypes can reinforce prejudice and impede nuanced understanding. Dual-process models of persuasion further suggest that stereotyped content may engage peripheral processing, heightening recall but reducing critical engagement with brand messages.

Global and Cross-Cultural Perspectives

Extensive research in Western contexts has documented how advertising stereotypes perpetuate gender, racial, and age-based biases. For example, Eisend's meta-analysis (2010) concluded that while stereotypes enhance memory retention, they simultaneously legitimize discriminatory norms. Cross-cultural studies reveal that collectivist societies—where group harmony and tradition are prioritized—tend to employ communal stereotypes (e.g., the dutiful daughter) more frequently than individualist cultures, which might emphasize personal success or autonomy.

Historical Trajectory in India

Colonial-Era Print Media

During British colonial rule, print advertising served as a conduit for imperial messaging. Campaigns for tobacco, textiles, and household goods featured Westernized figures—often men in tailored suits or women in delineated Victorian silhouettes—portraying colonial consumption as a marker of civility. Indigenous producers, limited by capital and distribution, resorted to vernacular newspapers, using

simplified imagery of local artisans or rural landscapes to appeal to regional markets.

Post-Independence Nationalist Campaigns

In the decades following independence, Indian brands sought to cultivate national pride. Brooke Bond Tea's "Garnish the Nation" campaign depicted tea as a unifying cultural practice cutting across linguistic and regional divisions. Parle-G biscuits employed the motif of childhood innocence, featuring village children in minimalist drawings. Although these campaigns foregrounded Indian identity, they nonetheless entrenched a binary between the "authentic" rural heartland and the "modern" urban periphery.

Broadcast Media and Regulatory Environments

The launch of All India Radio and Doordarshan in the 1950s and '60s introduced new content oversight. Regulations mandated that advertisements align with family values and social welfare objectives, limiting depictions of overt consumerism. Consequently, televised commercials often employed melodramatic narratives centered on familial duty, with the mother or daughter-in-law embodying the brand's moral compass. Such narratives reinforced patriarchal structures by suggesting that women's primary agency lay within domestic spheres.

Contemporary Developments and Critiques

The economic reforms of the 1990s ended state broadcasting's monopoly, ushering in satellite television and foreign direct investment in media. Multinational corporations introduced aspirational aesthetics—luxury cars, designer apparel—while Indian agencies experimented with youth-centric, edgy storytelling. Yet many campaigns retained entrenched stereotypes: the urban bachelor partying with friends, the rural matriarch tending livestock. Feminist and postcolonial scholars have critiqued these tropes for perpetuating gendered labor divisions and cultural essentialism, calling for intersectional representations that reflect India's plural realities.

Gaps in Existing Research

Although historical accounts trace the evolution of Indian advertising, empirical audience-reception studies remain sparse. Prior surveys often lack rigorous stratification by region and media consumption patterns, limiting generalizability. Moreover, few studies integrate recognition accuracy with attitudinal measures grounded in media-effects theory. This study addresses these gaps by combining a systematic content analysis with a stratified survey to elucidate how diverse audience segments perceive and respond to stereotypical portrayals.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Employing a mixed-methods approach, this study integrates qualitative content analysis of historical advertisements with quantitative survey research to capture both the origins and contemporary resonance of cultural stereotypes in Indian advertising.

Content Analysis

A purposive sample of 100 advertisements was drawn from archives spanning 1940–2020, stratified by medium (print, radio scripts, television) and decade. Each advertisement was coded for stereotyping domains—gender roles, regional identity, family structure, and urban–rural dichotomy—using a codebook developed from established frameworks in media studies. Inter-coder reliability was assessed (Cohen's $\kappa = 0.78$), demonstrating substantial agreement.

Survey Instrument Development

Insights from the content analysis informed a structured questionnaire assessing two primary dimensions:

1. **Recognition:** Respondents viewed visual or audio excerpts exemplifying each stereotype and indicated whether they recognized the underlying trope.
2. **Attitudinal Response:** Using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree), respondents rated their comfort with each portrayal

and perceived its accuracy in reflecting modern India.

Additional items captured demographic variables (age, gender, education), media consumption habits (television, digital platforms, social media), and cultural values (e.g., traditionalism vs. modernism).

Pretesting and Reliability

The questionnaire was pretested with 20 participants to refine item clarity and ordering. Cronbach's alpha for the attitude scale was 0.82, indicating strong internal consistency. Face validity was confirmed through expert review by two media-studies scholars.

Sampling and Data Collection

A stratified sampling strategy ensured representation across India's four major regions (North, South, East, West) and both urban/rural settings. Data collection comprised face-to-face interviews with 200 respondents (50 per region; 100 urban, 100 rural) conducted between January and March 2025. Interviewers followed standardized protocols to minimize social-desirability bias, and responses were recorded on tablets for real-time data validation.

RESEARCH CONDUCTED AS A SURVEY

Participant Profile

- **Gender:** 52% male, 48% female
- **Age Range:** 18–65 years ($M = 34.2$, $SD = 9.7$)
- **Education:** 45% university graduates, 55% secondary education
- **Media Habits:** 68% of rural participants primarily watch television; 75% of urban participants frequently use digital streaming and social media

Survey Procedure

Respondents were presented with six stereotype exemplars—two each for gender roles, regional identity, and urban–rural dichotomy—in randomized order to control for primacy and

recency effects. After each exemplar, participants completed recognition and attitude items, followed by brief open-ended prompts inviting reflections on how such portrayals relate to their own experiences.

RESULTS

Recognition Accuracy

Overall, respondents correctly identified 85% of the stereotypes. Urban participants achieved slightly higher accuracy (88%) than rural participants (82%), though this difference was not statistically significant ($t(198) = 1.46, p = 0.145$). Recognition rates by domain were:

- **Gender Roles:** 92%
- **Regional Identity:** 87%
- **Urban–Rural Dichotomy:** 76%

Attitudinal Responses

Gender Roles

- **Comfort Level:** $M = 2.9$ ($SD = 1.1$)
- **Perceived Accuracy:** Only 40% agreed that homemaker stereotypes reflect contemporary women's roles.
- **Qualitative Insights:** Many urban women noted the persistence of domestic tropes despite increased workforce participation, describing such ads as “outdated” or “patronizing.”

Regional Identities

- **Comfort Level:** $M = 3.5$ ($SD = 1.0$)
- **Perceived Accuracy:** 55% felt that regional caricatures capture genuine cultural traits; however, 30% criticized them as “tokenistic.”
- **Qualitative Insights:** Rural respondents sometimes viewed regional depictions positively, associating them with “celebration of local culture,” whereas

urban respondents worried about stereotyping and oversimplification.

Urban–Rural Dichotomy

- **Comfort Level:** $M = 3.2$ ($SD = 1.2$)
- **Perceived Accuracy:** 48% agreed that ads depicting rural simplicity versus urban sophistication were accurate; 35% disagreed.
- **Qualitative Insights:** Several participants pointed out the nuanced realities of rural life—technological adoption, entrepreneurial ventures—that simplistic “village vs. city” binaries fail to capture.

Urban–Rural Comparisons

Urban respondents exhibited significantly lower comfort with all stereotype domains compared to rural respondents ($p < 0.01$). For instance, comfort with gender stereotypes averaged 2.5 among urban participants versus 3.3 among rural participants, suggesting that urban and digitally engaged audiences are more critical of reductive portrayals.

Media Consumption Correlates

Frequent digital media users (daily streaming/social-media) reported lower acceptance of traditional stereotypes ($M = 2.7$) compared to heavy television viewers ($M = 3.4$; $t(198) = 3.12, p = 0.002$). This finding points to media literacy as a key factor in critical engagement with advertising content.

CONCLUSION

This study illuminates the enduring legacy of cultural stereotypes in Indian advertising and reveals significant audience ambivalence toward reductive portrayals. High recognition rates across demographic groups confirm that stereotypes remain salient cultural symbols; yet comfort and perceived accuracy vary, with urban and digitally literate consumers demonstrating greater resistance. Historical analysis shows that many contemporary stereotypes originate in colonial print media and early postcolonial broadcast

strategies, which prioritized message clarity over representational complexity.

The rapid social transformations of recent decades—marked by increased female workforce participation, rural digital inclusion, and mass internal migration—demand that advertisers move beyond simplistic archetypes. To foster more authentic engagement, practitioners should:

- **Embrace Participatory Campaign Design:** Involve diverse community members in concept development to ensure representations reflect lived realities.
- **Expand Role Diversity:** Portray women in leadership and decision-making roles; depict rural characters as innovators and entrepreneurs rather than passive recipients.
- **Promote Media Literacy:** Collaborate with educational institutions and NGOs to equip viewers, especially in rural areas, with tools to critically analyze media messages.

Future research could examine how stereotypes influence brand equity, purchase intentions, and long-term cultural attitudes. Longitudinal studies tracking shifts in consumer responses over time would provide valuable insights into the evolving relationship between advertising and societal change. By critically engaging with India's rich cultural tapestry and acknowledging the complexities of modern identities, advertisers can craft narratives that not only sell products but also contribute positively to social cohesion and cultural understanding.

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