

Portrayal of Women in Television and Women's Magazines: Perception of College Students

MADHURIMA
SUNITA KAUSHAL

Abstract

Present study was conducted on girl students of undergraduate arts stream in the age group of 17-21 years in district Ludhiana. Questionnaire as a tool of data collection was used to collect information from three hundred girl students of three colleges. The image of women in television and magazines as perceived by the young respondents has been analyzed. Respondents felt that both television and magazines portray realistic image of women. More respondents with rural background perceived positive portrayal of women on Television as it presents a real picture, while majority of the respondents from urban background admitted negative portrayal of women. Similarly, results show that respondents younger in the age were more under the influence of television characters because they treat them to be real. They start feeling that whatever is being shown on television is real. A good majority of the respondents with rural background showed interest in magazine reading as compared to the respondents with urban background. A considerable proportion of the respondents irrespective of their background, were satisfied with the text and language used in women magazines.

Keywords; Portrayal of women, Television, women's magazines, College students

Authors: **Dr. Madhurima**, Professor, USOL, Panjab University, Chandigarh, India, Email: madhurima764@gmail.com **Dr. Sunita Kaushal**, Associate Professor, SGGS College Jhar Sahib, Ludhiana, India, Email: sunitakk72@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

Historically, media have portrayed women as an object of desire and have established commodification of women for gain. The portrayal of gender in media is well documented. Media can act as both a perpetrator and as a protagonist. It has been established that all forms of media perpetuate unrealistic, stereotypical image of women. It can be argued that women's depiction by the media has some relationship with social reality. This is not to say that the images are real, they do involve distortions and misrepresentations. But there is a relationship between images and reality, either because images reflect social values about women's roles or because images

create social ideals on which people model their behavior and attitudes. The present paper attempts to broaden and specify the viewpoints of the young college girls regarding the image of women being portrayed in media. Despite transition from agriculture society to knowledge society, women continue to fight against gender stereotypes. The general premise is media portrayal of gender issues is still below the realistic graph. Study after study has endorsed the premise that the stereotypical portrayal of women in news has not changed in media. The image of women in two media of mass media i.e. television and magazines as perceived by the young respondents has been discussed.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

It is argued that television content repeatedly depicts women in highly traditional gender roles; women are under-represented, in character roles which are positively associated with perceived realism (Craig, 1992; Durkin, 1985; Slater & William, 1980). Even most of the Soap-Operas try to distinguish the masculine and feminine ideology. By portraying a sharp dichotomy between good and evil they socialize its audiences in more stereotypical roles (Downing, 1974; Jyotin, 2002; Katzman, 1972; Livingstone, 1990). Women are attracted to soap-operas because they can relate their lives and themselves to these soaps. They construct pleasures and meanings for themselves through their association with the soaps (Kiran, 2000). Wiergacz and Lucas (2003) report that women in soap operas are shown as young, single, upper class professionals. Very few characters are single mothers and these characters experience little work-life conflict. However the characterization of men does not vary from general population. According to Kaul and Sahni (2010) most of the serials are fake and fictitious in nature. They don't sketch the real and correct images of women either as a housewife or as a business and corporate women. Female oriented serials influence women to become self-conscious about their appearance as a measure of their worth. Kishwar (2007) has revealed that popular Indian soaps are dominated by women characters. She states that television serials portray an illusionary world. Shrivastva (1992) reveals that Indian media portrays negative stereotypes in daily soap operas. The serials show that the most important and valuable assets of a woman is physical beauty. Rama (2010) adds that "the consistent representation of women in passive, subordinate roles is complicit in supporting an oppressive gender order that is at odds with reality."

Ayoob et al.(2002) argue that magazines are a common and valued source of information for women. Women magazines serve all sources of information and entertainment. Feng and Karan (2011) show that women's magazines tend to reinforce traditional sex role stereotypes, and underline the pervasiveness of consumerism and the commercialization of gender. Shaw (1999) has found that while the established traditional women's magazines continue to provide more traditional messages to readers than nontraditional ones, the middle-class and working-class women's magazines contain some articles suggesting broader social horizons for women (such as the articles about work and political awareness). According to Sakamoto (1999) women's magazines reflect the changing lifestyle of Japanese women but the most popular articles are fashion and interior design.

Various research studies highlight that there is overemphasis on cooking, cleaning and child care in women's magazines. Even stories about women who are in the news because of achievements and professional activities typically dwell on marriage, family life and other aspects of women's traditional role (Foreit et al 1980; Guyon, 1982). According to Wolf (1991) "women magazine content either represents women as objects of lust and aggression or projects them in stereotyped traditional roles". Women's magazines are one of the very few media "for women, about women" and very often "by women" and assures the reproduction of patriarchal definition of the social world (Winship, 1978). Women magazines offer their readers particular definition and understanding of what it is to be a female (Ballaster et al 1991). According to Spartan (2007) Women magazine are coming out with different topics on beauty and health tips. Generally after reading these magazines females tend to make a lot of changes in their daily routine and lifestyle.

METHODOLOGY

The present paper was undertaken with two main objectives:

- To examine the perception of the college students on portrayal of women in Television.
- To examine the perception of the college students on portrayal of women in women's magazines.

Present study was conducted in district Ludhiana that is known as richest industrial

district of Punjab. Three colleges were selected for the study. The colleges are, Khalsa College, Government College, and Khalsa College Jhar Sahib, Ludhiana.

- All the three colleges are Girls Colleges and are located in Ludhiana district.
- In the present study, only girl students of Arts stream have been selected to get gender perspective on a gender related study.
- Students of BA Part-I & BA Part-III have been given equal representation.

BA Part-I students happen to be new entrants with fresh outlook and BA Part-III students are outgoing students with their matured perceptions. This distribution also proved to be helpful in understanding how respondents with different educational qualifications have perceived the image of women in media. An effort has been made to find out the impact of media on the lives of educated young girls. A simple random sample was drawn with a sample size of 300 girl student respondents. A sample of 100 students from each college was selected (50 from BA –Ist Semester and 50 from BA 5th Semester). In all 300 girl students from all the three colleges were selected for the study.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 : Profile of the Respondents

Age (Years)	Khalsa College Ludhiana	Government College Ludhiana	Khalsa College Jhar Sahib	Total	
				f	%
17-19	47	49	49	145	48.3
19-21	52	51	49	152	50.7
21+	01	00	02	03	1.0
Marital Status					
Married	08	12	01	21	7.0
Unmarried	86	85	93	264	88.0
Engaged	06	03	06	15	5.0
Caste					
Non-Reserved Castes	99	94	91	284	94.7
Reserved Castes	01	06	09	16	5.3
Religion					
Hindus	64	48	11	123	41
Muslims	-	01	02	03	1.0
Sikhs	36	50	87	173	57.7
Christians	-	01	-	01	0.3

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Background					
Rural	24	39	97	160	53.4
Urban	76	61	03	140	46.6
Family Income (per month)					
< Rs. 30,000/-	15	23	14	52	17.4
Rs. 30,000/- to Rs. 60,000/-	72	68	80	220	73.4
> Rs. 60,000/-	13	09	06	28	9.33

Results show that 50.7 percent of the respondents were in the age group of 19-21 years, while 48.3 percent of the respondents were of age group of 17-19 years. There were only 3 respondents who were in the age group of 21+ years. Such sample indicates that girl's students are sent to school at a later stage. There were 88 percent of the respondents who were unmarried. Only 7 percent respondents were married, while 5 percent respondents were engaged.

Further information regarding family background indicates that a good majority of the respondents 94.7 percent belong to unreserved category. Only 5.3 percent of the respondents belonged to reserved caste groups, which also highlight the fact that the higher education still evades the girls belonging to marginalized sections. As the present study is restricted to Ludhiana district of Punjab, which is mainly dominated by the Sikh community, obviously 57.7 percent of the respondents belonged to Sikh community followed by 41 percent Hindus, whereas very few respondents belonged to minority communities such as Muslims and Christians. Overall results indicate that a majority of the respondents were from two major religious groups. The distribution of respondents with regard to the family income shows that a large majority of the respondents, 73.4 percent belonged to the middle income group families i.e. families having monthly family income between Rs. 30,000/- to 60,000/-.

Realistic Image of Women

Television often portrays stereotypical images of women where she is projected as weak, 'submissive', who adheres to the norms of the society, but on the other hand she is presented as 'modern', 'good looking', 'fashionable' or 'career minded woman', and individualistic in outlook, thus selfish, cunning & rude. Elliot and Slater (1980) reports that television's programs

exposure is positively associated with perceived realism. Kreizenbeck (1983) has examined the portrayal of morality and sexuality in soap opera. According to him “Good” women are family-oriented, non-sexual and place their careers second, while the “Bad” women are openly seductive, use sex as a weapon in different soap operas. Keeping in mind, these views an effort was made to know whether television portrays a realistic image of women according to respondents.

Table 2: Distribution showing association between realistic image of women in television and the type of residence

Responses	Households				Total	
	Rural		Urban			
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Yes	98	61.3	85	60.7	183	61.0
No	62	38.7	55	39.3	117	39.0
Total	160	100	140	100	300	100

Respondents were asked whether television portrays a realistic image of women. Surprisingly, 61 percent of the respondents irrespective of their background reported that television portrays a realistic image of the women. Results further highlight the fact that 61.3 percent of the respondents with rural background, which was very close to the response given by the respondents with urban background i.e. 60.7 percent who stated that television programs portray realistic image of women. Overall figures also show that a majority of the respondents were of the view that television programs portray realistic image of women as they feel that they are from real life situation. The value of chi square is insignificant and did not show any relationship between two variables. Findings support Elliot and Slater (1980) and Kreizenbeck (1983).

Reasons to Portray Realistic Image of Women

It is argued that portrayal of women on Indian Television has not changed significantly. Prime time serials/shows cast them as docile homemakers and an object of male desire. These are generally portrayed as lively, yet submissive housewives, sacrificing their own life in order to conform to the pressures of the society. Today's liberated women are not dealt with gently in the

soaps, most frequently being depicted as villainous or emotionally unstable. Respondents were probed for the reasons that make them think that television portrays a realistic image.

Table 3 Distribution of the respondents showing association between reasons and the type of residence

Reasons	Households				Total	
	Rural		Urban		f	%
	f	%	f	%		
N/A	61	38.2	56	40	117	39
Shows what exist in Society	25	15.6	23	16.4	48	16
Present changing image of women	65	40.6	54	38.6	119	39.7
Exhibit modern women	9	5.6	7	5	16	5.3
Grand total	160	100	140	100	300	100

$$\chi^2 = .232, df - 3, P > 0.05, \text{ not significant}$$

Data reveals that a majority of the respondents were of the view that television presents the realistic image of women through its programs. When these respondents were asked to give reasons 40.6 percent of the respondents belonging to rural areas and 38.6 percent belonging to urban areas reported that television focuses on changing image of women. According to them position of women in Indian society is undergoing change, which is being reflected on television. There were 5.3 percent respondents who argued that television exhibits modern women through its programs which are real women. There were 15.6 percent of the respondents belonging to rural areas and 16.4 percent belonging to urban areas who reported that in every society there are both positive and negative persons. Women are also good and bad, same is reflected in television. Statistically no striking difference was observed in the perception between the respondents belonging to rural and urban areas.

Women's Magazines as Real Source of Information

Ferguson (1983) claims that women's magazines instruct women, they tell them what to do and how to think about themselves. Similarly, the novice is instructed in how to achieve her

chosen ends, what to wear, how to act and what to buy to be a femme fatale, supercook or office boss. There are a number of articles in the magazines which are meant for young girls which include some advice, real life information, celebrity interviews and some stories about girls facing challenges in life. Ayoob et.al (2002) have found that magazines are a common and valued source of information for women.

Table 4: Distribution of the respondents showing association between Women's magazines as real source of information and residence

Source of information	Household				Total	
	Rural		Urban			
	f	%	f	%	f	%
NA	11	6.8	20	14.3	31	10.3
Yes	130	81.3	92	65.7	222	74
No	19	11.9	28	20	47	15.7
Grand Total	160	100	140	100	300	100

$\chi^2 = 9.550$, df - 2, $P < 0.01$, highly significant

Results in the Table 4 show that a good majority of the respondents confirmed that magazines are the real source of information in the fast changing world. Data indicates that out of the total 300 respondents, 74 percent of them irrespective of their background reported that magazines are the real source of information. Only 15.7 percent of the respondents did not feel so. There were 81.3 percent of the respondents belonging to rural areas and 65.7 percent respondents from urban areas who felt that magazines are the real source of information. It was found that more respondents belonging to rural areas felt that women magazines are good source of information. Such results indicate that magazines are able to inculcate gender stereotypical image and gender socialization. These findings suggest a close association between type of residence and magazines as real source of information. The results also coincide with research findings of Ayoob et.al (2002).

Reasons for Accepting Women's Magazines as Real Source of Information

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It is a hard fact that women's magazines play a significant role in socialization of women to 'acceptable' social roles such as ideal housewife or mother. Women magazines offer their readers particular definition and understanding of what it is to be a female, (Ballaster et al. 1991). An attempt was made to find out the main reasons for accepting women magazines as real source of information:

Table 5 Distribution of the respondents showing association between reasons and type of residence

Reasons	Households				Total	
	Rural		Urban			
	f	%	f	%	f	%
NA	30	18.8	48	34.3	78	26.0
Innovative tips	40	25	23	16.4	63	21.0
Realistic	11	6.8	14	10.0	25	8.3
As Mentor	41	25.7	25	17.9	66	22.0
Good Friend	21	13.2	16	11.4	37	12.3
Career Guide	11	6.8	11	7.9	22	7.4
Multiple Reasons	06	3.7	03	2.1	9	3.0
Total	160	100	140	100	300	100

$\chi^2=13.38$, df – 6, $P < 0.05$, significant

*NA: It also includes those respondents who were not reading magazines.

Table 5 shows that 26 percent respondents did not feel that women magazines are the real source of information; amongst them a large majority felt that women magazines are a real source of information. 22 percent respondents felt that magazines proved to be mentor, 21 percent respondents felt these magazines provide information regarding innovative tips on various spheres, while 12.3 percent respondents felt that magazines act as a good friend as they help/support in many ways. On comparing the backgrounds, it was found that more respondents belonging to rural areas i.e. 25.7 percent respondents believed that women magazines play the role of mentor for them, 25 percent respondents reported it gives them innovative tips and 13.2 percent respondents took magazines as a good friend. On the other hand, 10 percent

respondents belonging to urban areas found magazines to be more realistic and 7.9 percent respondents took career guidance from women's magazines. Associating the residential background with reasons for feeling magazines as real source of information, a significant association was found between the two.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the study contribute in understanding as how television and women's magazines contribute in perpetuating gender stereotypes. Results highlight that perception of young girls is influenced by media and they start interpreting that media presents a realistic image of women. Surprisingly, 61 percent respondents irrespective of their background reported that television portrays a realistic image of the women. The main findings highlight the fact that television has great influence on the lives of young respondents. A majority of the respondents were affected by the television characters. Even they adjust their daily chores as per the television schedule. Most of the young respondents felt that television portrays realistic image of women, which implies that whatever is shown is acceptable to them. There was no big difference found in the viewpoints of rural and urban respondents, yet media has shortened the gap between rural and urban boundaries. Results indicate that the impact of television is intense on young girls. Television, continues to socialize women in gender stereotypical roles. They are imitating the characters and willingly apply their behaviour in their own real lives.

Women's magazines act as real source of information was admitted by overwhelming majority of the respondents. Such results show that magazines provide young respondents information easily. A strong impact of women's magazines contents as well as text could be clearly seen on the young minds. That's why women magazines proved to be real source of information. It was also found that that more respondents with rural background as compared to the urban respondents admitted this. Respondents admitted that magazines are the real source of information in the fast changing world and approved the image of women that appeared in the magazines. The reasons being magazines play the role of mentor, guide and provide innovative tips to its readers. For rural respondents, women magazines are a big support as they seek answers to their queries which they fail to procure from others. Results indicate that magazines are able to inculcate gender stereotypical image and gender socialization. These findings suggest

a close association between type of residence and magazines as real source of information. The results also coincide with research findings of Ayoob et.al (2002), Ballaster et al (1991), Winship (1978).

Findings reflect that respondents with young age group perceive the women's image both in television and magazines more positively. It shows that media has more influence on younger viewers, whereas as the age increases, respondents develop the mature outlook; hence perceive the media representation of women more negatively. Further, it was found that a majority of the respondents with rural background admitted that television portrays positive image of women. Images of women portrayed on television are accepted as real by them. The respondents with urban background perceived negative image of women both on television and magazines. It was observed that locale of the respondents play a major role regarding the impact of media. Findings in the study show that more respondents with rural background were influenced by the television characters as they found these characters to be more realistic and imitate them in their daily lives.

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