

# The Cultivation and Reception Effects of Gendered Images

## *Proposing Ways to Move Beyond Gender Based Stereotypes for Boys and Girls*

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This article presents an analytical discussion on how media images cultivate gendered beliefs and attitudes. The aim is to examine the possible patterns of media reception effects among young girls and boys which further influence their socialisation process. We do this by making complementing connections between the two theoretical approaches: George Gerbner's cultivation theory and Laura Mulvey's psychoanalytical approach. We observed that both the approaches are long-term effect theories and work simultaneously with reference to the social construction of realities experienced by children in their daily interaction with *screen oriented media*. Also, using textual analysis of video content available in the Indian context, we further argue that with a conscious projection of images that reflect gender justice and gender sensitisation, the cultivation of beliefs and attitudes about gender can be altered. In the conclusion, we highlight the challenges and risks involved in moving beyond gender stereotypes.

Children from a very early stage of their lives experience various socialisation processes. It has been established well that socialisation is a gendered process (Stockard, 2006). Also as Simone De Beauvoir argues "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (Beauvoir, 1949), she is referring to the binaries attached with socially constructed masculinity and femininity. The gendered process of socialisation rigidly categorises children into the binaries of femininity and masculinity, and teaches them gender roles and relations which are constructed through their own repetitive performance of gender (Butler, 1990). This gendered socialisation does not give children the flexibilities to move beyond the binaries of male and female or allow them to remain at the intersections of different genders.

In order to demonstrate gendered binaries, the society establishes socializing institutions for young girls and boys. Family and School being the most intimate institutions, play a major role in prescribing gender identities to children. Media as an overarching institution, however, produce and reproduce the social construction of gender via dif-

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ferent media texts outside as well as within the institutions of family and school. The social status of parents and their interpretation of media texts influence the socialisation process of their children and impact their success in school specifically in terms of how they read the text provided to them and also, how they develop tastes for media (Notten, Kraaykamp, & Konig 2012). Taylor (2005) proposed that college undergraduates who found television to be realistic, got their attitude influenced by the sexual content displayed on screen. Also there was a significant influence in the group about the beliefs related to women's sexual activity. There is also a growing literature focusing on a robust connection between television viewing and increasing tendency among male grade school children stereotyping fat females. This stereotyping is also significantly related to increasing pattern of eating disorder among boys and girls (Harrison, 2000). The portrayal of sexuality in media suggests interesting analytical reference points to propose further contextual studies in this area.

### The formation of gender through media

In this article, we are interested in discussing how gender based stereotypes are being formed and can be challenged through audio-visual media using Gerbner's cultivation theory from a functionalist perspective and Mulvey's psychoanalytical approach from a feminist media perspective. We believe, a considerable attention should be given to study all forms of traditional media (radio, television, and newspaper). We are, however focusing on television and online videos in this chapter because of their dominant audio-visual content. Also, both Gerbner and Mulvey have done their audience analysis using television and film respectively. We are opening our discussion to online videos as well, because today all forms of media converge into the digital space, and it is imperative to take into account children's overlapping viewership of television and online videos in the case of those with digital access. Going forward in the chapter, we wish to use *screen oriented media* as a common terminology for all forms of audio-visual media. For this article, we are focusing on Indian girls and boys in their pre-adolescence and adolescence (approximately the age group of 10 to 19) as our analytical category. Adolescence has been studied as a time period when young girls and boys build their individual identities and indulge in self conceptualization (Harrison, 2006). A study by Verma and Larson (2001) highlighted television as "a member of the family" and that adolescents in India spend about 12 hours per week in television viewing at home, majority of time with their family members. There is no strictly scheduled bed time and media time for children in most Indian households. Hence in India, television and film viewing become multi-generational practices. Also, it is common for teens and pre-teens to have access to the mobile phones and personal laptops of their parents to play games and watch videos. It is also not uncommon for Indian kids to have an access to parents' social media accounts; some even operate social media accounts for

their parents. Children's access to various multi-media devices expose them to different media content including that primarily created for adults.

There have always been screen oriented media in India- advertisements showcasing beauty products, jewelry, and deodorants, commercial cinema, and daily soaps- that prescribe specific conventional gender roles for both women and men. Ray and Jat (2010) highlighted the effects of media on "child health, including violence, obesity, tobacco and alcohol use, and risky sexual behaviors". Saraswati (1999) argues about the influence of mass media on the adolescence culture in India and highlight it as gendered and class based. There has, however, emerged a set of alternate thinking recently around production of screen oriented media in India that challenge gender based stereotypes. Although, this alternate thinking comes in myriad perspectives and face intense scrutiny through feminist critique, one positive contribution it has made is provoking a public debate around gender issues and we call this a paradigmatic shift. This shift has been strengthened by some critical questions raised by scholars within academic discourse around how the gendered images can be changed via media and "What kind of alternative portrayals of male and female role models for children can be offered, models that will offer children as well as the adults in their lives a vision of a possible more gender-equal world?" (Lemish, 2010). Also, we believe if synthesizing Gerbner's theory and Mulvey's approach help us understand how stereotypes have been established via media, it should also explain how appropriate screen oriented media content holds a reasonable potential to move beyond the existing stereotypes and influence the socialisation of Indian youth.

### Cultivation effect of the screen oriented gendered images

Gerbner (1986) at the University of Pennsylvania, under the *Cultural Indicator* project, developed Cultivation theory and suggested that television *cultivates* concepts of social reality. For the *heavy viewers* of television, it becomes the dominant source of information and they are strongly influenced by the way television frames their world-view. The *light viewers*, however, seek information from alternate sources besides television and hold divergent world-views. There exist *first order effects* which are the general *beliefs* about everyday world and the *second order effects* which are the specific *attitudes* towards those beliefs.

Cheung and Chan (1996) offer an explanation of cultivation theory in terms of televisions' focus on materialistic values like luxurious home, clothing, extravagant car and the adolescents endorsing such values through heavy television viewing. Cultivation research would argue that children who are heavy viewers of television may inculcate belief of boys being "dominant, assertive, and powerful" as male characters quite often demonstrate such qualities on screen (Martins & Harrison, 2012). The cultivation

effect is also based on the cultural ideologies of desirable and ideal bodies and perceptions related to such ideologies which further motivate sexual activities (Thompson & Hirschman, 1995). Anuradha (2012) based on cultivation analysis and social learning analysis of 118 television commercials aired during children's programmes in India suggested that children interpret the stereotypes shown in the television as 'natural' and perceive the visual images to be true and in sync with the assigned gender roles within society. Collins (2011) suggested that women in media are portrayed "in traditionally feminine (i.e., stereotyped) roles ... as nonprofessionals, homemakers, wives or parents, and sexual gatekeepers". Other studies have shown that women playing the role of 'attractive' models in advertisements can set high standards for physical attraction and people start comparing those with their actual real life partners (Richins, 1991). Eisend and Moller (2007) conducted a study which supported the cultivation of beliefs and attitudes towards gendered body images and results show that for women, "TV viewing increases the real-ideal self discrepancy, which, in turn, leads to consumption behavior in order to achieve ideal bodies" ( p. 101). The model they proposed in their study, suggests the cultivation effects of television viewing leading to body dissatisfaction for both men and women. Women, however, are more influenced towards body dissatisfaction and behaviour, leading to beauty-related consumption as their perception of self is more biased than men. We demonstrate this discussion with the help of an example in the following section.

In India, discrimination based on skin colour is one among the different forms of inequalities. Although, the country is a diverse nation and home to people of multiple skin colours, there exists a dominant preference for fair skin. Kakkar (1978) highlights the differences within Indian communities over complexions and their preferences for a fair complexion. This shapes into a double layered oppression when discrimination based on colour intersects with gender based discrimination (Collins, 2000). In India, the preference for fair skin has been specifically seen for women from their very early stages of lives and also when they approach job opportunities or marriage. In advertisements, for example in case of some fairness products for Indian women, such preferences have been observed to be shown for years to generate demand for the products from the non-fair coloured women who are assumed in 'need' to enhance their complexion or to 'empower' them (Karan, 2008). Adolescents, who are heavy viewers of television and get constantly exposed to such screen oriented media content over a longer period of time, are likely to inculcate certain beliefs in them towards such preferences. The beliefs may emerge from a sense of superiority for girls who have a fair skin while from a sense of subordination for those with a darker shade of skin tone. Such beliefs are often seen to be reciprocated by boys when they express and affirm their preference for girls with fair skin. This seems to be referring to a first order effect in cultivation analysis. As adolescents would grow with such beliefs, they would potentially develop specific stereotypical attitudes. Among girls with superiority beliefs, the possible attitudes might range from ethnocentrism to overshadowing and othering the girls with non-fair skin.

Also, among the girls with a sense of subordination, the attitudes might range from a loss of self-confidence while coming in contact with girls who have fair skin tone. This seems to be referring to a second order effect in the cultivation analysis. For boys, the attitude might range from showing 'approval' or 'disapproval' to girls of fair and non-fair skin respectively.

## Psychoanalytical approach

Laura Mulvey, a British feminist media theorist discusses psychoanalytical approach which highlights, how men and women consume and respond to gendered images in films. The consumption is explained in terms of pleasure, unpleasure, shame and disappointment. For both girls and boys, a long-term exposure to television viewing can bring *Scopophilia* (pleasure in looking) and *Shame* (opposite of scopophilia which brings shame, disgust and morality). Freud (1905) discusses scopophilia as finding pleasure while watching other objects and subjecting them to a controlled and curious gaze. The opposite of scopophilia is when one feels ashamed of being scopophilic which brings shame and disgust for being immoral.

Mulvey (1975) relates scopophilia to the act of watching cinema. The example of fairness product advertisement can be understood using Mulvey's approach. With a cumulative long-term exposure to such advertisements, girls can become scopophilic by seeking pleasure of looking at the female model who is projected as 'beautiful' on screen and the kind of validation she gets from society for the fair skin tone she owns. Mulvey suggests that this act of being scopophilic takes a narcissistic aspect when girls identify themselves with the model and the process of recognition (if a girl meet the beauty standards set on screen) and mis-recognition (if a girl fails to meet the beauty standards set on screen) decide their experiences of pleasure and unpleasure respectively. The trajectory of scopophilia getting converted into narcissism can prove to be the unique selling point for the product to be sold through the advertisement.

There are other sets of similar images which include bollywood movies, daily soap operas, music albums etc, where women are shown with a 'perfect body' on screen. Boys who are exposed to screen oriented media for a long time, may become scopophilic by admiring the woman on screen as a sexual object. They may receive erotic gratification by seeing the hero taking control over the woman on screen and wish to seek that control in real life on their partners also. Here the narrative structure of the screen content projects a heterosexual division of labour, where the man is projected as active while the woman is projected as passive.

For boys when they grow up and pursue the societal role of a 'man', scopophilia can develop into narcissism when they identify themselves with the male protagonist in the film, trying to seek control in the real life situation while considering the female counterpart as passive. And, in case they are not being able to seek that control, it can bring

unpleasure, shame, and disappointment. This discussion is not so strongly brought in Mulvey's analysis, as she has limited her discussions to the conversion of scopophilia into narcissism only in the case of women. However, as socialisation progresses, this process of recognition and mis-recognition has potential to be equally relevant for boys aspiring to become a 'man'.

## Synthesis

Understanding Gerbner and Mulvey together gives us a confident position to demonstrate how media highlight, reinforce, and reproduce gendered stereotypes generated in the larger process of socialisation. While the former discusses the cultivation analysis using a cause and effect explanation, the later helps us to understand the psychological responses of children while they are exposed to gendered media content over a longer time period. Hence, understanding the intersectional grounds offers an interaction between two different schools of thought. Some overlapping grounds from both the theories would be when children experience scopophilia and it gets converted into narcissism, there may exist the first order effect as young girls and boys develop gendered beliefs for how to function like a woman (passive, fair coloured or perfect body) and man (active, seeking control of the woman on screen). Later as they grow up as adolescents, they form attitudes towards such gendered beliefs. So now for example, in the process of recognition and mis-recognition, girls might possess specific social attitudes while passively responding to their male partners and boys might engage in specific attitudes while actively responding to their female partners and this signals a second order effect.

## Moving beyond stereotypes

To reflect upon possible ways of producing gender sensitive media content, we need to visualize nature of images which should be represented to challenge stereotypes. The Indian media industry has observed in recent years a considerable paradigmatic shift in terms of gender representations. Indian viewers, including adolescents because of the multi-generational socialisation and media exposure, have been exposed to several ads, online videos, and films that address women empowerment, challenge the existing gender roles, and redefine gender relations. These media products and their messages have been debated from multiple feminist standpoints where feminists and general public have also at times taken extreme positions to support or challenge the viewpoints within the messages. We do not claim that this recent shift has been sustained and in existence long enough for any noticeable cultivation effect to have taken place but it has certainly generated a lively public debate which is a necessary step in the process of democratic

social change. One such example is the *Vogue Empower* campaign on “Women Empowerment and Social Awareness” which include content in the form of still graphics, online videos, radio content, merchandise available on their website and messages shared vividly with other social media platforms. Within this initiative, one video featured Deepika Padukone, a highly popular movie star in India. The video, titled “My choice” shows her claiming a radical role in exercising her choices in every dimension of her life. She also rejects the point of view of her male counterparts in some of the choices she claims (For example, she defends her choice of remaining or not remaining loyal to one sexual partner or having a child or not). This provoked controversial debates around the agency of woman over her body and her decision making in a spousal relationship context, and pre-dominantly discussions around gradual social change vs. radical revolution. There is another video, “Boys don’t cry” which features Madhuri Dixit, another popular but older Indian movie star with boys age ranging from infants, pre-teens, adolescents, and adulthood. It shows how the society is rendering boys equally victims of patriarchy when they are discouraged to express emotions. Madhuri, who in real life is a mother of two boys, at the end of the video, makes a request to the parents for allowing their sons to cry and express emotions. It is important to note here that these two videos went viral on internet via various social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, user blogs etc. These two videos come with epistemic juxtapositions, where one reflects a perspective of anger, and fights to exercise women’s choices, while the other is advocating sensitive gender socialisation for both men and women. The third example is a video featuring Nandita Das, an actress well-known for unconventional and socially sensitive on-screen and off-screen presence. Here, the dusky Nandita is challenging the ‘fair is desirable’ stereotype with ‘Dark is beautiful’. Another noteworthy example is the ongoing campaign by the Star TV using celebrity cricketers to recognize mothers’ role in our patriarchal society. The campaign is being showcased during the live telecasts of cricket matches that reach a large number of Indian youth. Several other brands such as Tanishque, Nike, Asian Paints, and Havell home appliances among others have made “the empowered woman” the focus of their brand identity. All these examples potentially demonstrate the emerging alternative thinking within screen oriented media.

There have been emerging institutional and academic discussions around measures for sensitizing media towards gender equality. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2012 came out with a set of gender-sensitive indicators for media which aim to “...contribute to gender equality and women’s empowerment in and through all media forms, irrespective of the technology used” (UNESCO, 2012). While UNESCO has been proposing gender-sensitive media strategies at practice level, Lemish (2010) has proposed an academic discussion by suggesting eight principles for improving gender images for children. The principles involve *Equality* which is equal roles and opportunities offered to both boys and girls on television while also respecting their differences; *Diversity* which is representation of children through variety of characters within social categories of gender, race, and ethnicity etc., *Com-*

*plexity* which is “different but equal” positioning of characters of both boys and girls and further broadening gendered traits within society by producing more “complex, rounded, and non-stereotypical characters”; *Similarity* which is to emphasize on the “shared aspects of girls and boys” within media scripts rather than on differences leading to stereotyping and conflict; *Unity* which is to construct relationship between boys and girls on equal terms; *Family* which is offering a supportive and caring ground to the social context of family while providing a positive role models for “parent-child as well as adult-child relations”; *Authenticity* which is constructing television programmes while depicting “true-to-life characters, narratives, and social contexts”; and *Voicing* which is to construct television programmes to present children’s perspective. These principles bring a foundational discussion around giving a sustained exposure to an entire new generation of young girls and boys towards gender sensitive media content. It would be further interesting to connect how and what the theoretical underpinnings of Mulvey and Gerbner have to offer in this area. How media can render cultivation effect in producing gender sensitive beliefs and attitudes and also how psychologically, children would respond to such effect? This discussion however, is missing in Mulvey’s psychoanalytical approach.

We will explain this possibility using the “boys don’t cry” video featuring Madhuri Dixit. If young boys are given a long-term cumulative exposure to images that question the existing gender roles, boys would be introduced to an alternate media content which gives them flexibilities to express emotions as it would no longer be portrayed as a feminine characteristic. Sustained exposure to such media messages would at least expose them to alternatives and help them critically engage with their socialisation. Also, two critical situations might happen when scopophilia would turn into narcissism for boys. Either they will identify and recognise with the boys projected in the video and would seek pleasure in looking at a new flexible image on screen where they receive an unconventional message of allowing the boys to cry if they need to. Or else, they would mis-recognise with the boys on screen and seek discomfort and displeasure in identifying with the unconventional gendered images being portrayed on screen. We believe in both cases, the media content would at least question and disrupt the existing societal narrative around gendered images among the young minds and this we argue is a good entry point to approach a gender sensitive media discourse. Sustained exposure to such messages would also encourage an alternate thinking position for parents to raise their children in a gender sensitive manner and give them opportunities to choose from multiple socially constructed feminine and masculine characteristics.

### Moving beyond stereotypes: Challenges

We believe, as we celebrate the potential of gender sensitive content, that we should also be vigilant about multiple risks such alternative communication might possess.



Our analysis of the recent media content in India that claims to be contributing to gender sensitization points to three disturbing tendencies prevailing in media: One, oversimplification in media messages that ignores the complexities of gender issues; two, putting men down in an attempt to portray an empowered woman, and three, unconsciously reiterating the patriarchal norms within the messages. We explain these risks with examples. For instance, when Vogue Empower campaign came up with Deepika Padukone's "My Choice", the video discussed almost all individual choices of a woman in a binary hetero-sexual relational set up. One of the choices discussed was pertaining to the reproductive rights of a woman- "My choice, to have your baby or not" says the empowered woman in the video. The biological processes, however, allows only a woman to conceive and give birth and not to a man and in a monogamous marital relationship the man does not have any other way of fulfilling his desire to be a father. The debates around this video indicated that women shown in this video were perceived as holding the power to actually disempower their male counterpart by depriving them of having a child while exercising their choice over reproductive rights. We argue that oversimplification of gender issues in media messages do more harm than good and the aim of any gender sensitive media content should not be to disempower any gender, but to give an enabling environment where dialogue between genders can be initiated. The third risk is illustrated through a set of campaigns by the government of India for promoting the use of toilets in rural India to discourage open defecation. We evaluated some key messages in this multi-media campaign and observed that the cultivation of gender stereotypes has been so long and strong that it unconsciously enters into messages meant for gender justice. One of the messages, for instance, argued that one should have a toilet at home so that women of the family do not have to leave home. Leaving home and venturing out was portrayed as an unsafe practice for women. In another message, the elders of the family were asked, "we protect the women of the family by veiling them, how come they have to defecate in open?" Such messages reinforce the stereotypical practices of keeping women home-bound and imposing veiling as a desirable practice.

The above discussion suggests that moving beyond stereotypes is not just about bringing a radical shift, but to keep on revisiting the gendered socialisation process. We cannot move forward without learning from our past mistakes. We also need to recognize that patriarchal oppression is complex and is experienced by both, boys and girls and not just one gender. And finally, moving beyond the male-female binary and not just empowerment of women is an important step ahead in creating gender sensitive messages. The key is constant examination and critical reflection, not only on the part of media content producers but by everyone concerned about shaping a gender just society.

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