‘Analyzing the analyzed’: A Study of Women in New Media

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Abstract
The advent and usage of new media has created a whole new space for more interactive, more shared, more democratic and more personalized form of communication. Its feature of virtuality and unlimited tools of creating different kinds of online environment have attracted the eyes of scholars throughout the world, including the feminist ones as well. The present study tried to analyze the nature of this medium with regard to women. It was done by looking at and analyzing the kind of studies attempted on this medium by different researchers on its different tools. It was found that new media is contradictory in nature as it portrays traditional stereotyped image and roles of women in its content on one hand, while creating different social networks for causes, issues, campaigns and important deliberations on public policies. Further, the studies seemed to be attempted in a more varied manner as compared to those attempted on old mainstream media. A common concern regarding the issue of privacy and invasion of personal lives was raised. It was concluded that there is a need of initiative on the part of policy makers to utilize and tap the unique potential and features of this medium for the development of women in different societies.

Keywords: New media, Women, stereotype, images, online

Introduction
Feminist media studies has gradually emerged as a separate field, easily distinguished from other fields of enquiry into mass communication, mass media and journalism. The publication of book ‘Feminist media Studies’ by Liesbet Van Zoonen was the first of its kind of effort (not even touched by scholars like Denis McQuail) that brought forward the issues related to analyzing media and communication from feminist perspective. While the current society is going through the phase of ‘post-feminism’, an analysis of how communication media and technologies shape, reflect, show, generate, manipulate, use, define ‘female’ aspect becomes all the more important.

If one looks upon the three waves of feminist movement in the world, the one that is supposed to currently exist is the one that stresses on women’s individuality, her identity, her own space to exercise her own choice in every aspect. The book titled ‘Women, Feminism and Media’ published from Edinburg University Press in 2007, author Sue Thornham discusses the key areas of enquiry in this field as—a. fixing into images, i.e. relationship between women and images shown in media, b. Narrating femininity, i.e. narratives of femininity produced in media texts in the light of theories of narration and identity, c. Real Women, i.e. the absence of women’s voices from genres of news and documentary and their over-presence within popular ‘reality’ media forms, d. Technologies of difference, i.e. examining the relationship between feminism, women and new media technologies. Thus, this field analyzes gender as a mechanism that structures material and symbolic worlds and our experiences of them.
Gender and Mass Media

Feminists have always been worried about the way the mass media deals with women. The primary reason for this concern lies in the theory of mediation which, in reference to media studies, says that the central mediating factor of a given culture is the medium of communication itself. Thus, the role of media, as a medium of communication, becomes important to the status of women in any society and culture. Before going into the details, it is important to understand the term ‘gender’.

As Kamla Bhasin (2014) defines it, “Gender refers to the socio-cultural definition of man and woman, the way societies distinguish men and women and assign them social roles”. Feminists argue that there is a difference between sex and gender. The first one is biologically determined while the latter is socially constructed. A result of this overlapping of sex and gender can be seen in the form of typical social roles and behavior that men and women are expected to perform in the society. These roles are established and enforced by the institutions and practices, the people and their treatment of rewarding those who follow these and punishing those who do not comply to these expectations. From childhood, the parents can be seen bringing different colored dresses for boy and girl child, different books, toys and friends, encouragement of physical activities for boys and indoor activities for girls.

Similarly, the segregation of sections in schools on the basis of sex, not allowing them to talk to each other, references of different masculine and feminine behaviors in primary textbooks – all of these develop in a child its coherent sense of sexual identity and the expectations which are attached to it. Such practices make their interaction a matter of shame, modesty, fear for girls and that of aggression and awkwardness for boys. Feminists do not believe that men have one set of qualities and characteristics and women have the other. It is not at all related to their biological sex. Both men and men can have or develop the so called ‘masculine qualities’ like strength, brevity, fearlessness, dominance, competitiveness etc. and the so called ‘feminine qualities’ like caring, emotional, nurturing, loving, timidity, obedience etc. These are human qualities and not specific to either men or women. But media, parents, teachers, textbooks, behavior of people in homes, streets and workplace seem to suggest that it is natural and inevitable for men and women to develop different interests, desires, problems, capabilities and to pursue different paths and seek particular destinies.

Thus, the studies conducted in this field focus on the concept of being female, in terms of her presentation and treatment by media, her participation in media and her usage of media. Studies conducted so far on media and mass communication in this perspective have, as mentioned by Fiske (1997) and Morley (19894), focused on issues such as mediation of male violence, sexuality, pornography, verbal harassment, the body beauty, fashion and the study of ‘women genres.’

In a historical work that laid the foundation of many studies, Erving Goffman (1979) conducted a provocative analysis of visual images in print advertisements. A scholar who believed that gender relations are socially defined and constructed, he argued that the best way to understand the portrayal of male-female relations is to compare it to the parent-child relation in which men take on the roles of parents while women would normally be seen as behaving like children. This model of decoding behavior concentrates on hands, eyes, knees, facial expressions, head postures, relative sizes, position and placing, head-eye aversion and finger biting and sucking. Further, it was concluded that women are weakened by their portrayal in
advertisements through five categories- Relative Size, Feminine Touch, Functional Ranking, Ritualization of Subordination and Licensed Withdrawal.

As a result, the study found seven detailed phenomena- A. Woman is shown taller than man only when the latter is her social inferior. B. woman’s hands are shown for touching, holding or caressing and not manipulating, grasping or shaping. C. In an instruction-giving situation, the male as always shown the instructor whether it be a child or adult colleagues or in other relations. D. when an advertisement requires someone to sit or lie on a bed or floor, that someone is always a woman or child, hardly ever a man. E. The eye or head of a man is averted only in relation to a social, political or intellectual superior, but that of a woman is averted it is always in relation to whatever man is pictured with her. F. women were repeatedly shown drifting from the scene while in close physical touch with a male, their faces lost and dreamy ‘as though his aliveness and readiness to cope were enough for both of them. G. women, much more than men, are pictured as the kind of psychological loss or remove from a social situation that leaves one non-oriented for action. The researcher states regarding the portrayal of women that carefully posed models and carefully selected settings of advertisements created “a pseudo-reality that is better than real” (pp.23).

United Nations has published meta-analysis of 14 countries in this context. In its report titled ‘Content Discontent- Towards a Fair Portrayal of Women in Media’ (1993), it analyzed the language of a sample of TV advertisements as being either sexist or non-sexist. The study found various gender-neutral words, words incorporating the occupation of a person and the characteristics where the element of ‘masculinity’ or ‘femininity’ is highlighted in the content. For example, the difference of using the word ‘gossip’ in contrast to ‘discussion’, and using ‘faint’ instead of ‘pass out’. Along with analyzing the words used to describe the appearance, the study found that the word ‘man’ or ‘he’ was used universally.

The Case of New media

New Media is a 21st Century catchall term used to define all that is related to the internet and the interplay between technology, images and sound. In fact, the definition of new media changes daily, and will continue to do so. It most commonly refers to content available on-demand through the Internet, accessible on any digital device, usually containing interactive user feedback and creative participation. Common examples of new media include websites such as online newspapers, blogs, wikis, video games and social media. A defining characteristic of new media is dialogue. New Media transmit content through connection and conversation. It enables people around the world to share, comment on, and discuss a wide variety of topics. Unlike any of past technologies, New Media is grounded on an interactive community. Most technologies described as "new media" are digital, often having characteristics of being manipulated, networkable, dense, compressible, and interactive. Some examples may be the Internet, websites, computer multimedia, computer games, CD-ROMS, and DVDs. New media does not include television programs, feature films, magazines, books, or paper-based publications – unless they contain technologies that enable digital interactivity.

Features of New Media

Martin Lister, Jon Doney, Seth Giddings, Iain Grant and Kieran Kelly have highlighted basic features of new media in their book ‘New Media: A Critical Introduction’ that distinguishes them from the traditional and old media-
Digital - Since data is transformed into binary codes, it can be accessed in an easier and faster way by people as compared to that in old media.

Interactivity - It is the new way of user engagement with media text. New media offers people to play the dual role of producers of content as well as consumers. Through the facility of immediate access to all for upload, download feedback, comments, shares, it makes way for two-way communication.

Hypertextual - It provides unlimited access to resources of knowledge by linking different forms of data across the world by adding hyperlinks.

Personalized - New media enable users to choose a topic or website or application or language and presentation of their own choice to access content accordingly. This way, it becomes customized according to everyone’s choice.

Virtual - A virtual world is created by immersion or engagement in an environment constructed with computer graphics and digital video. It might be created as to look alike the real world or might be altogether different from it.

Tools of New media

The tools of new media are various methods of interactive communication that rely upon a computer or mobile device with internet access. These allow the creation, publication, modification and distribution of information using simple ways, like email, browsing, music, videos, chatting, shopping, researching etc. These may include-

Blogs - It is known as the earliest tool of new media. It is also referred to as ‘online diaries’. Initially, people used to write their experiences on this platform, like wordpress, blogspot etc. But later on, it began to be used as a platform for putting out news and events by the common people, and led to the practice of ‘citizen journalism’.

Social Media - These forms of new media are used to create, share and exchange information in the form of photos, text, videos. The essential element ‘social’ refers to the people getting connected online and sharing views on different topics etc. It includes Facebook, Twitter, social bookmarks, chat rooms etc.

Video sharing sites - These include websites like YouTube that are used to share videos made by people.

Informational and update tools - These include various widgets and applications like RSS, mobile applications related to news or information of a particular field.

Women in New Media

Since the emergence of new media, its nature and form has been a favorite topic of research for the scholars worldwide including feminist media scholars. As a result, it has been analyzed from different perspectives regarding women. Some of the studies are reviewed here in order to get an idea of the direction in which the research is going and the possibilities of further work. For an easier comprehension, a study of each kind has been discussed here.

Just like old media, various scholars have tried to study the content of new media tools and forms, be it Facebook or blogs or advertisements or news to see the way women are presented and represented in them.

Emmanuelle Plakoyiannaki, Kalliopi Mathioudaki, Pavlos Dimitratos and Yorgos Zotos conducted a research about female role portrayals in online advertisements of global products and also explored their role portrayals across web pages for different audience types. Titled as
‘Images of Women in Online Advertisements of Global Products: Does Sexism Exist?’, the study was published in Journal of Business Ethics in November 2008. The results revealed that women are generally portrayed in a stereotypical way, supporting the notion that sexism is prevalent in online advertisements worldwide. Portrayal of women across web pages varies considerably, with female-audience web pages embracing “decorative” female images; male-audience web pages promoting polarizing depictions of women in “dependent” or “non-traditional” roles; and general-audience web pages using portrayals of women as housewives or equal to men. Overall, the findings suggest that “traditional” or “decorative” stereotypes are largely evident in all three audience types, although some “non-traditional” roles may occur. Implications and future research directions are discussed.

In another study, Danica L. Smith came up with her Masters dissertation about gender stereotypes in online advertisements. Her work titled ‘Homemaker to Seductress: A Content Analysis of Gender Stereotypes in Online Embedded Advertisements’ was submitted at Minnesota state University in May 2011. The sample included three types of informational websites - fitness, health and parenting. The ads were coded using the representations set by Hyung Jung Yun et al in 2007. It was found that the majority of the online ads portrayed women in traditional and decorative roles. There were a few advertisements that portrayed women in non-traditional roles and one advertisement that presented a women in neutral way, with no apparent stereotypes.

Some of the research studies analyzed the content of video sharing sites as well. The authors S. Ronaldo, G. Taddeo and F. Beccaria hypothesized that new media, especially Web 2.0 environments, provide room for rewriting gender roles in relation to alcohol. Their study titled ‘New media and old stereotypes. Images and discourses about drunk women and men on YouTube’ was published in Journal of Gender Studies in 2016. To test this hypothesis, 2000 videos were retrieved on YouTube using a list of Italian keywords relating to drunkenness. The 142 most frequently viewed clips were then analyzed through a multilayer visual ethnography method. It was found that representations of drinking practices on YouTube seem to reflect the conventional double standard. Female drinking is mainly interpreted as a sign of sexual willingness, and is strongly stigmatized. In most cases, moreover, women themselves actively contributed to creating the sexual meaning, both as video protagonists and as commenters. Analyzed materials seem to show that even in a user-generated content medium such as YouTube, old gender stereotypes about drinking fail to be deconstructed. Conversely, the images and discourses that were analyzed reinforce these stereotypes, reproducing the messages conveyed by mainstream media in an even more explicit and risky manner.

A study regarding video games was conducted by Yi-Lin Yu. Titled as ‘The Research on the Female stereotype of the online Games advertisements in Taiwan’, it was published in The SIJ Transactions on Industrial, Financial & Business Management (IFBM) in May 2014. The author focused on how online game advertisement discriminates against and influences the female image through gender differences. The issue was analyzed from three perspectives: the advertisement-created image of women, online game consumers’ gender, and social aspects related to objectification of women. It was found that the games portrayed age old image of male characters as strong, aggressive, successful, rational, able to control their temper, while females are shown as attractive, obedient, non-aggressive, emotional, well-mannered, caring and considerate of relationships. It was also observed that though the number of female players
has increased, they consider themselves passive and adopt a caring role in games unlike men. The analysis of presentation of female characters revealed that they female players in games mostly wear bikinis to attract the audience, which probably, is considered as mainly males.

Thus, the research works that attempted to analyze content and discourse generally came out with a negative result. In this context, the new media seems to be copying the old mainstream media or competing with it buy showing women at status secondary and much lower to that of men.

But there are studies which revealed an altogether different form of this medium. These were attempted with reference to women as user, as a producer, as a potential beneficiary, as a participant in discussion and talks. The first of its kind of research in this category was attempted with regard to women’s participation in mainstream politics. While the topic suggests a positive need in the direction of women empowerment, the way it was conducted revealed a lot about the nature of political discourse and attitudes of women in UK regarding political activities and debates. The research was titled as ‘A study on Women in Decision-making : The Role of New Media for increased political participation’ and it was conducted by Directorate General for Internal Policies under European Parliament in 2013 to review how new media may be used to increase the involvement of women in politics. While defining the problem of study, barriers to women’s involvement in politics were discussed as – A. masculine model of political life and of elected govt. bodie4s, B. women’s lack of political sources to support their move into politics, C. additional work burden denies them the time necessary for this, D. media’s representation of women and men plays a role in socialization that excludes women from political, public discourse.

The research was conducted on end-users of new media – a Twitter survey, a focus group with women interested in new media, women and politics and members of a professional women’s network which uses online networking tools. It also involved case studies with eight new media projects. The study concluded Social media can help women to overcome these barriers. Most respondents felt that in order to be political, action, discussion or advocacy must take place in the public realm and online activity can facilitate this. By adopting innovative and courageous new media practices, female politicians can set themselves apart from the rest. In so doing, female politicians will be even better engaged with their voters and wider electorate. This could have two interlocking impacts – on the one hand to bypass mass media and social and cultural barriers that lock women politicians into ‘lower’ political roles.

On the other hand, it may attract the trust and support of individual voters by providing direct and honest contact between voters and female politicians. Whilst new media tools were not seen by any respondent as a replacement for physical meetings or one-to-one networking, they were essential in helping expand the reach and size of women’s networks. there was a strong feeling amongst participants that new media tools provide immediacy to action which is useful, often allowing women to act when angered or interested in an issue. It recommended Political groups should use social media networks to actively search for women who may be interested in running for selection. Also, that new media projects should be developed using a gender mainstreaming approach but this should avoid marginalizing women’s online communication. This study has the potential to point out towards the common mind set of society towards associating males with hard core politics and strategies while women are seen, mostly, as supporters.
Another study tried to measure the potential of new media in the direction of associating women with sports. Though the study focused on the revival of one sport, it highlights the way this platform can be harnessed in future for all other sports as well. It was authored in the form of a chapter titled ‘Women, Sport and New Media Technologies: Derby Grrrls Online’ by Adele Pavlidis and Simone Fullagar and focused on roller derby as one particular women’s sport that has undergone a global revival, mobilized through ‘new’ youth-oriented media forms. It was conducted with the perspective of sports being gendered masculine: competitive, public and ‘tough’, with women’s participation historically marginal to men’s.

The researchers examined four diverse websites that form part of the ‘social web’ of derby: two official league sites, a blog and a Facebook group. It was found that the reinvention of roller derby is intimately connected to the alternative mediated spaces made possible by the social web. Roller derby players and organizers have used online spaces for various ends: to promote the sport community, to make visible the relations of power between those involved, to create and maintain boundaries of inclusion and exclusion within the sport, and to express ‘creative’ aspects of identity. The chapter forms an essential part of the book titled ‘Mediated Youth Cultures’ edited by Andy Bennett and Brady Robards.

Researching on a different theme, scholar Rebekah L. Farrugia submitted in July 2004 her doctoral thesis titled ‘Spin-Sters: Women, New Media Technologies And Electronic/Dance Music’ at the University of Iowa. She tried to understand how it is that women become electronic/dance music (E/DM) DJs and intervene in the dominant discourses and practices of cultural production in E/DM and DJ culture. The three main areas she addressed are: the impact of the socialization of gender and technology relations, the various ways that women use the Internet to access knowledge and create supportive communities, and finally, the hegemonic representation of women in dominant E/DM culture and how this representation has led to women creating their own communities of practice. Cultural studies approach was used to understand the communicative strategies women adopt to become DJs.

Through an interdisciplinary examination of the relationships between people, places, practices, and texts from popular music, women’s studies, technology, and cyber culture studies, she formed a group of interconnected case studies linked by the ways that each of them addresses distinct aspects of the research problem. It is clear from my research that the increased integration of women in E/DM is the result of women building face-to-face social networks and creating their own communities—both on and offline. In the spirit of the Women’s Music movement that started in the 1970s and Riot Grrrl culture in the early 1990s, women in E/DM are increasingly taking on the roles of bookings agents, event planners and promoters, website developers, listserv managers, DJs, producers, and record label owners. Online forums are used to organize offline events like monthly potlucks and public performances, in addition to providing spaces where women can ask questions or share knowledge about all things DJ related. Overall, this project highlights the ways that cultural assumptions, discursive and material practices affect the roles that men and women adopt in E/DM culture.

In a unique effort to garner views of people on this issue, Women Watch (UN Initiative) and Women Action 2000 conducted an on-line discussion. The themes revolved around women and the information society: information and communication technologies (ICTs); how women are using new communication technologies; the portrayal of women in the media; the position of women in the media; women’s networks and media, and freedom of expression and social
responsibility of the media. The discussion spanned more than 6 weeks, i.e. November 8-December 17, 1999. In the report published on the website of Women Action, Most participants agreed that very little has changed in the portrayal of women in media since 1995, whether in advertising or news media. Negative, stereotyped, inaccurate and violent images of women are pervasive.

Some groups of women are simply invisible, such as those from minority populations. Women are described in terms of appearance rather than abilities. This has happened despite growing numbers of women in business, of women parliamentarians and journalists. However, women are still scarce in decision-making media positions. It was also reiterated that the most evident change on the communication scene in these five years has been the emergence of the Internet as a space where women can not only access information but also produce and disseminate their own information, and network. Further, it was pointed out that they also present dangers, such as deeper exclusion for those who do not have access, or greater interference in personal liberty ("high-tech snooping systems").

A concern was also expressed that the changes are taking place so fast that there is not enough time to grasp their implications and respond with adequate policy measures. A debate arose in the working group on the relevance of new technologies for this review process on media and particularly for women in the South, where access to ICTs is often minimal; but in general there was consensus that it is not an either or situation but that different media forms are complementary and that the Internet is not and should not be a technology just for the well-to-do and the North. As part of good practices, the respondents also highlighted many new and exciting initiatives taken in different parts of the world. This included creation of websites in Argentina, Canada, China to influence public policy, set up campaigns, making database about women in politics, work on gender sensitization, use audio-visual media as a tool for motivating media professionals.

Conclusion

Keeping in mind the interactive and instant nature and reach of new media, the scholars have tried to analyze it from various perspectives- women as a user, as a participant, as a producer of content, as a part of content, as a potential beneficiary of the content and many others. A depressing trend of portrayal of stereotyped images by advertisers, marketers and common people as well exists on its various platforms and tools which makes it stand in the line of mainstream media only. A positive effort on the part of researchers can be seen by bringing the issues of associating sports, politics and other fields with women that are traditionally considered as suitable for men. Thus, it can be concluded that though the information exchanged on new media runs the risk of being misused or manipulated, but the strong potential of this platform to reach, appeal and unite people along with a sense of social recognition across the boundaries can be tapped for the development of women. This needs an initiative on the part of policy makers and those designing the applications, widgets etc. for usage by the people.
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