

Male Representations and Transition in Masculinity: A Semiotic Analysis of Old and Modern Indian Print Advertisements

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ABSTRACT

Study of the history and nature of masculinity as a socially constructed concept may not affirm an idea or a definition, but a set of conflicting definitions and images that are consistently changing over time. Research on gender role suggests that the conception of masculinity has evolved over time in response to social and historical events (Brod, 1987; Kimmel, 1987). The visual representations of masculinity in print advertisements have also witnessed variations over time, suggesting shifts in social beliefs about males. This paper aims to understand the transition in the images of masculinity by studying the male representations in old and modern Indian print advertisements. Five advertisements, each from the pre-noughties and post noughties era, were selected, through a hand search of advertisements online, and analysed using semiotic analyses. The findings suggest that there is a visible transition in the idea of what constitutes masculinity. The older advertisements focused on hegemonic representations of masculinity with style, success, and power as being strong indicators of masculinity, whereas the modern advertisements emphasized male bodies, anti-femininity, playboy images and usage of gendered products as signs of masculinity and the achievement of the same.

Keywords: *Advertisements, Male Representations, Masculinity.*

Media plays a strong role in propagating gender images and prescribing gender identities through the stereotypical portrayal of masculinity and femininity. Within the media, advertising agencies often use knowledge of gender constructions and definitions present within the society to promote and sell their goods and services. By interacting with the audience's social position, advertisements engage in presenting an ideal image and standards of masculinity and femininity and how to achieve them.

Often, it is femininity and female representations that have been the focus of research on gender in advertising and consumer culture. It is important to consider however that just like the representation of the female, male representation and the definition of masculinity are also socially and historically determined constructions that are partly influenced by changes within femininity.

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Advertisers make use of 'semiotics' to create present and utilize images in such a way that the audience can infer the social meaning out of them to fit their realities. Semiotics is a way in which meaning is communicated through analyses of signs (words, pictures, symbols etc.). How these meanings are understood and interpreted by the consumer is important for the advertisers. Print media is an excellent example of how the combination of linguistic signs with visual signs allows advertisers to create representations of the ways in which masculinity (or femininity) is asserted in a given historical and cultural time period. These representations do not merely 'express' masculinity; rather, they play a central role in the formulation of the conceptions of masculine images and are useful sites of identity formation and contestation.

The present paper analyses the transition in the images of masculinity through a semiotic analysis of male representations in old and modern Indian print advertisements. The authors focus on the way old and contemporary images used in print advertising express and inscribe a number of contradictory images of masculinity.

Advertising and Gender Portrayals

Advertisements permeate our everyday lives and culture, capturing and often shaping and sustaining the social norms around gender. Television commercials are designed to take maximum advantage of gender specific myths, fantasies and fears (Craig, 1993).

Research on gender portrayals have shed light on the way gender roles are stereotypically depicted in television advertisements across a range of factors like the gender of the central character, the gender of the voiceover, and the setting or context associated with the central character (Dominick & Rauch, 1972; Eisend 2010; Furnham & Paltzer, 2010). The predominance of the male voiceovers has been a consistent finding across British and American televisions commercials and even more pronounced in Asian countries. Studies have shown that role portrayals in advertising are different in Asia, as compared to the rest of the world (Cutler et al., 1995; Furnham & Mak, 1999).

Another important variable in advertisements that portrays clear gender divisions is the setting. Women in advertisements appear mostly in a home setting (Das 2011; Uray and Burnaz 2003; Valls-Fernández and Martínez-Vicente 2007) whereas men are more likely than women to be shown in a workplace setting (Prieler and Centeno 2013; Valls-Fernández and Martínez-Vicente 2007).

Indian television advertisements were also found to represent the same traditional and stereotypical portrayal of male dominance over females by Gupta & Jain (1998), which is reflective of every patriarchal society. Indian commercials reinforce certain roles, norms, and ideas that are expected to be portrayed by a specific gender. For example, there are multiple advertisements where women are shown to have multiple arms suggesting their role in various duties of the household and family which they have to take care of. Their roles are thus restricted to the house. Men on the other hand are shown in various settings, be it work, play, sports, and more.

Masculinity in Advertising Media

There is a growing body of research that explores the representations of females in advertising as compared to males. The findings consistently have affirmed the continuing subordination of women to men, with men dominating the workplace whereas women are

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associated with the home setting. This trend, however, has seen some change owing to changes in the cultural climate and the changing role of women in the society (Sukumar & Venkatesh, 2011). It is crucial to understand that masculinity, like femininity, is also culturally and historically constructed concept which is responsive to changes within the society as well as the changes within femininity. Therefore, the images of ideal masculinities portrayed in advertisements are also in transition.

Many studies on recent advertising images have suggested that they reflect transformations in ideals of masculinity (Elliott, Eccles, and Hodgson, 1993; Mort 1996; Stern, 2003). According to Connell (1992), men are facing 'structurally-induced conflicts about masculinity' including conflicts related to their sexuality, their construction of relationship with women and heterosexual men, and their social presence as men. Therefore, the masculine ideals shown in advertising images become more relevant to gender identity as they provide crucial answers to the question 'What does it mean to be a man?' (Stern 2003).

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The present study analyses print advertisements from old and contemporary India. For this purpose, 5 print advertisements were selected each from pre noughties and post noughties era. The images were collected through a hand search of advertisements on Internet on the basis of visual and verbal symbols in the image and their interactions.

Materials and Method

In the present study, masculinity is defined as culturally established criteria of what it means to be a man. The analysis is based on Saussure's model of semiotic analysis, i.e. the model of Sign, Signifier and Signified. In this study, we have tried to understand the visual Sign and symbol of advertisement along with their interaction with textual information through semiotic analysis.

RESULTS

Old Advertisements



Figure 1. Brylcreem advertisement (old)

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Table 1: Brylcreem advertisement (old)

Sign	Signifier	Signified
Feature	Shiny, black mane	Style
Text	'for successful men'	Success
Human	Male	Smiling, in a suit, clean shaven, happy; style, class, status



Figure 2. Glucose-D biscuits advertisement (old)

Table 2: Glucose-D biscuits advertisement (old)

Sign	Signifier	Signified
Human	Male	One arm raised in victory pose, thick beard, masculinity, strength, win, power
Text	'Gabbar ki asli pasand' (Translation- Gabbar's favourite)	Masculinity, macho-ness, suitable for hard core masculine men (Gabbar)



Figure 3. Charminar cigarette advertisement (old)

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Table 3: Charminar cigarette advertisement (old)

Sign	Signifier	Signified
Human	Male	Acceptable and encouraged to smoke as a male, looking away to the side, not smiling, cool, stylish
Object	Cigarette	Substance use as style symbol
Text	<i>'It takes a Charminar to satisfy a man like you'</i>	Sense of uniqueness, valour, a 'man'
Clothes	Shit, rolled up sleeves, casual fit	Bad boy image, cool yet sophisticated

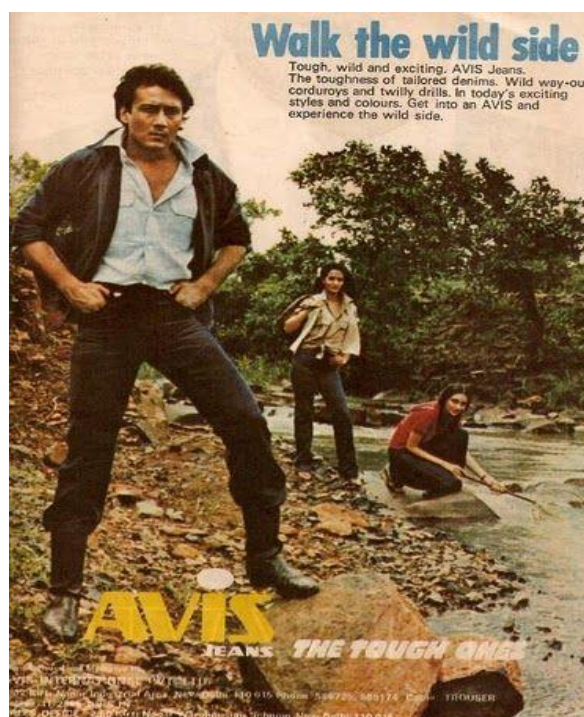


Figure 4. Avis jeans advertisement (old)

Table 4: Avis jeans advertisement (old)

Sign	Signifier	Signified
Human	Male	Power pose, confidence, demanding attention
Human	Females	Standing in the background, in less of a 'power' pose as the male, not as important, extras.
Text	<i>'tough, wild, and exciting'</i> <i>'experience the wild side'</i> <i>'the tough ones'</i>	Masculinity, strength, excitement, wildness
Environment/ Scene	Lake, forest, rocks	Adventurous, dangerous

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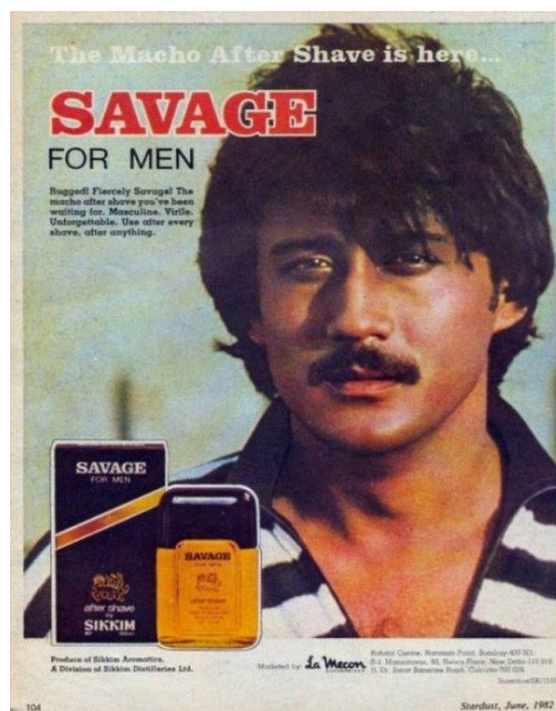


Figure 5. Savage aftershave advertisement (old)

Table 5: Savage aftershave advertisement (old)

Sign	Signifier	Signified
Human	Male	Not smiling, intense gaze, tousled hair, visible chest hair, 'bad boy image'
Text	'macho' 'rugged, fiercely savage'	Masculinity, bravado, strength
Object	Savage aftershave	The object name in itself has the term 'savage', indicating a fierceness and strong masculine vibe

Modern Advertisements



Figure 6. Adiction advertisement (new)

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Table 6: Adiction advertisement (new)

Sign	Signifier	Signified
Human	Male	Confident, cocky, Control and power over women, playboy
Human	Female	Clingy, Dependent, Less control
Text	'Spray it on. Turn them on'	Increasing Sexual appeal, Hegemonic masculinity



Figure 7. Hunk gym vest advertisement (new)

Table 7: Hunk gym vest advertisement (new)

Sign	Signifier	Signified
Human	Male	Fit muscular body, strong, confidence
Object	Gym vest	Highlighting muscular body
Text	'Ye aaram ka maamlahai' (Translation- this is a matter of comfort)	Comfort
	'Hunk'	Strong, Muscular attractive man



Figure 8. Brylcreem advertisement (new)

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Table 8: Brylcreem advertisement (new)

Sign	Signifier	Signified
Human	Male	Attractive, fierce, confident
Product	Hair gel	Style + care
Text	'Hair styling for men, not boys' #manuptobrylcreem	Desire to become a man masculinity



Figure 9. Wildstone advertisement (new)

Table 9: Wildstone advertisement (new)

Sign	Signifier	Signified
Person	Male	Feminine, womanly
Object(s)	Pink towel Pink flowers	Unmanly, femininity
Text	Don't smell like a woman. Smell like a man	Gender boundary crossovers. Gender distinctions on scents. Gender identity in question



Figure 10. Fair and Handsome advertisement (new)

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Table 10: Fair and Handsome advertisement (new)

Sign	Signifier	Signified
Human	Male	Light fair colour skin, attractive, confident
Object	Fairness cream	Importance for men to looking fair and handsome
Text	<i>'Mard ho keladkiyonwali cream kyun?'</i> (Translation- <i>being a man, why are you using creams meant for women?'</i>)	Gender boundary distinctions. Distinct gender identity

DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to analyze the transition in the images of masculinity via a look at the male representation in print advertising in old and contemporary India. The authors focus on the way old and contemporary images used in print advertising express and inscribe a number of contradictory images of masculinity.

Old Advertisements

From the older advertisements one can observe that the focus of all of them seems to be on the concepts of style, success, career, fierceness, and more. Masculinity seems to encompass these ideas. Upon close inspection, one notices how most of the emergent themes depict a sort of independent masculinity. Emphasizing the word independent, one notices how its more about developing oneself, working on one's own looks, appearance, power, and more. There seems to be less of a relational idea than it is of being self-determining and autonomous in nature.

Masculinity through style

A male figure is seen as being a 'manly man' if he is stylish in his apparel and appearance. A dapper suit and a crisp tie, often paired with a hat were seen as a symbol of status, class and utmost style (example, brylcream advertisement). Holding a cigarette was also seen as classy and stylish. It was revered as being chic and sophisticated. As one can observe in the ad starring Jacky Shroff (Charminar cigarette), the symbol of the cigarette is seen as a style statement. In those times it seems that there wasn't so much overwhelming information about the adverse effects of smoking. Nowadays we view advertisements regarding the harmful effects of the habit.

Starr (1984) stated that 'pipes, cigars and cigarettes add nuances of definition to the image of masculinity exhibited by male smokers'. He also states that 'though cigarettes might be in the vogue with the 'bright young things' in London and Paris, few 'real men' in America would consider their regular use'. Here it is important to note the phrase of 'real men', thus indicating that regular cigarette smoking did lead to a boosted image of being masculine. Though Starrs' isn't an Indian study, the basic rationale and logic surrounding the use of the substance seems to be the same across cultures. Moreover, according to Hausteine (2001) and Waldron (1988), smoking is seen as a masculine phenomenon because of the related smoking pattern, personality traits and endorsement of hegemonic ideals.

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Success as an Indicator of Masculinity

Interestingly, masculinity seems to have had at its core the idea of being successful and career oriented. For example, in the brylcreem ad, we observe the text which says 'for successful men'. There is also the symbol of the male having shiny, neat, slicked back hair. Here success is being linked to the product of hair care indicating that physical presentation and appearance, all adds up to the perceived success of a man. Men in the office should be well groomed and presentable.

Kimmel (1997) talked about a particular type of masculinity – the marketplace manhood – where identity is based on homosocial competition and success in the marketplace. Barber (2008) demonstrated that men embed their purchase of salon hair care in the need to appropriate expectations of white professional-class masculinity. Though a study based on white men, the basic idea seems to be applicable here too. Furthermore, in the ad it is also noticed that the actor is wearing a suit and appears classy and elegant. Davis (1987) found that persons wearing masculine clothing were perceived as more successful in their occupations than persons wearing feminine clothing for both the masculine and feminine (business) occupations. Additionally, one could also say that the focus on success could be because of the fact that in a country like India where arranged marriage is a common tradition, men at that time had this prospect looming over their head and hence having a stable job was a crucial point of acceptance of a marriage proposal.

Ramasubramanian & Jain (2009) studied gender stereotypes and normative heterosexuality in matrimonial advertisements from globalizing India. One of their findings was the support for social exchange of men's financial stability for women's physical attractiveness. Bergstrom & Bagnoli (1993) studied an equilibrium model in which the males who regard their prospects as unusually good choose to wait until their economic success is revealed before choosing a bride. In equilibrium, the most desirable young females choose successful older males. Thus, we can observe that success seems to play a vital role for men.

The Man of Power

Being strong, fierce, and tough, adventurous, and in essence 'wild' were also indicators of masculinity at the time. This is evident in the advertisement starring Jacky Shroff (Avis Jeans- 'walk the wild side') and the advertisement about Glucose biscuits ('Gabbar ki asli pasand'). In the former, the symbols are that of the surrounding environment (that of a dangerous, adventurous one) and the male standing in a dominant, power position. With the latter advertisement, we observe a victory pose and the use of the word 'gabbar'. Brannon (1976) summarized the definition of masculinity in four phrases, one of which was 'Give 'em hell' which indicates the exuding of an aura that is daring, aggressive, and one of risk taking. Furthermore, manhood is a homosocial enactment. Men act in heroic, risky, tough ways as they want other men to grant them their manhood (Kimmel, 1997). So, this advertisement may appeal to men in the sense that by seeming powerful, wild and rough, they will be respected by their fellow males. As stated by Leverenz (1986, p.451). The fear that men have 'is not fear of women but out of being ashamed or humiliated in front of other men, or being dominated by stronger men'.

The concept of hegemonic masculinity is of importance. It is a practice that legitimizes men's dominant position in society and justifies the subordination of women, and other marginalized ways of being a man (Connell, 2005). This concept has privilege as a central facet. Privilege is understood as a form of advantage contributing to a system of dominance;

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understanding and undoing privilege is required to bring about systematic change in gender relations (McIntosh, 1992). There are, of course, different ways to conceptualize and describe power. For example, we all possess the power to meet our needs, to fight injustice and oppression, the power of muscles and brain, and the power of love. All men, to a greater or lesser extent, experience these meanings of power.

However, the word 'power' also has a negative connotation. Men have come to see power as a capacity to impose control on others and on their own unruly emotions (Kaufman, 1999; as cited in Kuypers, 1999). India for a long time, and still to date has been enmeshed in a patriarchal structure. Simply put, men were viewed as being superior, dominant, and powerful whereas women were seen as weak, the inferior gender, not strong. Certainly, things have been changing in modern times and the struggle for equality is much stronger than before. However, in the olden times, this structure was very rigid and was maintained by both men and women. This could be as to why there is such unconcealed images of power, strength, 'macho-ness' which are linked to the idea of masculinity. These were clearly admired as desirable traits.

Modern Advertisements

The analysis of the modern print advertisements indicates a shift in masculine images from conventional notions of masculinity. Owing to feminist movements and modernization, male-female gender boundary and roles in India have gone through tremendous changes over the years. Success and power is no longer a privilege that is exclusive to men only. The realization of discrepancy in societal value of female and male roles has led women to raise their status by modeling behaviors traditionally identified as masculine (for e.g smoking, drinking). This shift has resulted in men seeking other distinctive images of masculinity to maintain their sense of gender identity. The reason, as noted by Bem (1993), is that it is 'males who are made to feel most insecure about the adequacy of their gender. Thus, in contemporary India, now the images of masculinity are distinctive in the sense that they encompass male bodies and appearances, and products exclusive to men. Also, the need for the distinctive image of manhood has given rise to the idea of masculinity which is straightforwardly opposite to femininity.

Male Bodies and Masculinity

There was a time when men were evaluated majorly on the basis of their success and career and physical beauty and appearances were considered as female prerogative. In contemporary India, success and career is no longer the only definitive evaluative criterion for an ideal man. Since the past decade, there has been very clear and excessive focus on male bodies where popular culture and media are using models and actors that are muscular and attractive in movies and advertising; portraying them in ways that accentuate their physical characteristics (chest, biceps, abs etc). For example, in Rupa frontline underwear and vest advertisements have always relied on highlighting the physical attributes of the model and communicating a masculine image through words like 'Hunk'.

Exposure to these types of visual images in advertising and popular media has shaped the new ideals of masculinity among individuals, not only making them more conscious about their bodies and driving them to seek out standards of physical beauty, but also creating a vulnerability among them towards the temptations of the consumer market (Parker, 1996). A study conducted by Hobza & Rochlen (2009) noted that men who viewed muscular images reported significantly lower body esteem than men in the neutral (control) group.

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Consequently, the men grooming industry has seen a 45 percent increase in last five year with 60 percent of youths reporting that using such products raise their confidence (Indian Cosmeceutical, Cosmetics and Personal Market 2022, 2017).

This shift towards the hypervigilance on body could be partly understood by the fact that the in modern India, women are getting a significant say in choices they make in their life including the choice to choose their life partner. This was not the case in the traditional India where marriages were arranged and decided by the elders in the family. As physical appearance plays a major role in attracting partners, therefore the image of masculine men has gravitated towards the muscular handsome models with abs.

The Playboy Image of Masculinity

Advertisers have been long played with the playboy ideals of masculinity in their commercials insinuating that their usage of certain products can help a man (more often an 'average' man) earns the attention and company of a woman. For example, in the addiction ad, one can see the cocky face of a man who is seen with multiple women drawn to him which the ad suggests is because of the potential of the addiction deo to turn on women. In these types of advertisements, there is usually a portrayal of an average man struggling with getting a women's attention and right after he sprays the deo on himself, women get swayed into mindless creatures that can't resisted getting attracted towards the man like a magnet.

Here, the point of using the product to attract the opposite gender is never indicated as the medium to win over your one true love. Instead, women in these advertisements are pretty much reflective of the ways in which they have become like a commodity to men; a conquest, men can brag about to other men. Moreover, if masculinity is a homosocial enactment, like Kimmel (1997) proposed, then, these sexual conquests can help men in achieving the recognition of a playboy image of manhood among their peers.

The importance of sexual conquests in achievement of a playboy image of masculinity is evident from Sabo's (1994) study on athletes' locker-room talk about women. The findings revealed that these athletes considered dating similar to a sport in which defeating the opponent was must and it was through these conversations of sexual conquests that the higher status in the locker room was established.

Anti-feminine Images of Masculinity

Masculinity is now increasingly being defined by making clear distinctions around what it is not. The advertisements like wild stone deliberately highlight and exaggerate the Signs and symbols that are stereotypically associated with females (for e.g. pink colour towels, flowers, elegant posture etc). Advertisers and media cash on the fact that male gender boundary crossovers are much more culturally stigmatized than female gender boundary crossovers (Bem, 1993).

Advertisements focus on reinforcing the masculine image by indicating to viewers that staying manly implies not using female products or appearing feminine in any way. According to psychologist Robert Brandon (1976), anti-femininity (no sissy stuff) is an important criterion in defining manhood. This point is also put forward by Kimmel (2004) who argues that being a man essentially means 'not being a woman', regardless of the man's age, class, ethnicity, race or sexual orientation. In this sense, anti-femininity is something that

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is the core foundation of contemporary and historical conceptions of manhood in essence that masculinity is defined more by what one is not rather than what one is (Kimmel 2004).

The Passage into Manhood: masculinity as something to be acquired

The idea of masculinity as something that needs to be acquired and proved is not new. Most traditional and tribal cultures over the world still follow certain rituals or rites of passage that aid and mark the transition of a boy into a man. Such ceremonies and rituals though important are absent or ambiguous in the modern world.

While the natural bodily process like first menstruation has been seen as one of the milestone for females in acquiring womanhood, the process of transition from boyhood to manhood is more of a social process (Keen, 1991). In order to become a man, boys have to go through existential changes which demand them to stop being what they were, in order to become someone entirely different (Groth, 2007).

Owing to these ambiguities around the specific process of imitation of manhood and the heavy emphasis placed on becoming a man by the society, popular media and advertisers are now forging their own rites of passage regarding what it takes to become a man. For example, the recent Brylcreem advertising campaign asked its audience to ‘man up to brylcreem’ stressing the point through visual image of a grown up man as well as through text explaining that the product is meant for men not boys.

The notion of gendered objects given by Kirkham (1996) is also of importance here. Kirkham discussed how the ideas of certain objects are defined by their gender and the same way gender is defined by objects. According to him, it is visible in everyday life as ‘it stretches from the type of clothes we wear to work or choose to go to bed or have sex...to the types of presents we give and are given, and from the design of cars to hair-dryers and hi-fi equipment.’ Thus, by associating the image of masculinity to a certain product, the media has given the product a gender which then is supposed to make the users into real men.

CONCLUSION

This study has presented various themes for old and modern print advertisements hence indicating a visible transition in the idea(s) of masculinity and male representations. From a traditional homogenic representation of man with style, success, and power into the contemporary notion of masculinity associated with focus on body, women, and the distinct anti-feminine symbols of masculinity. The different images of masculinities are not only reflective of the changes in the definition of manhood in response to the socio-historical changes in India; it also suggests how print media is propagating such images of masculinity for the Indian men. Future research can be carried out on how these different masculine images accounts to gender identity and confusion among young men in India.

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Conflict of Interest

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