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ALLAMA IQBAL OPEN UNIVERSITY, ISLAMABAD

Course: Women and Media (9165/874) • Level: BS/MSc

Semester: Autumn 2026

Assignment No. 1 (Units 1–5)

SOLVED ASSIGNMENT GUIDE

(For Study & Reference)

Note: This guide is prepared for study and reference purposes. Students are advised to read the relevant units of the course book, understand the concepts, and then write the assignment in their own words. Total marks of the assignment are 100; each question carries the marks shown with it.

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Question 1: Mass Media as a Cultural Force, Socialization and Gendered Identities (20 Marks)

Discuss the role of mass media as a cultural force in shaping social reality. How do media images contribute to the process of socialization and the construction of gendered identities as discussed in Unit 1?

Introduction

Mass media are often described simply as channels that carry information and entertainment from senders to audiences. This description is too narrow. Newspapers, television, radio,

cinema and, today, digital and social media do much more than transmit messages: they select what is worth noticing, they frame how events and people are to be understood, and they repeat particular images of life so regularly that those images begin to look like reality itself. In this sense the media work as a cultural force, comparable in influence to the family, religion, education and the law. Unit 1 of this course introduces this argument and then applies it to gender: the identities of 'masculine' and 'feminine', which most people assume to be natural, are in large part learned, and the media are among the most powerful teachers. This answer discusses, first, how media shape social reality; second, how media images enter the process of socialization; and third, how they help to construct gendered identities.

Mass Media as a Cultural Force

Culture is the shared stock of meanings, values, beliefs, stories and symbols through which members of a society understand their world. A cultural force is any institution that produces and circulates those meanings on a large scale. The mass media qualify on three grounds. First, they command unmatched reach and repetition: a television drama, a news bulletin or a viral video can present the same image of a 'successful man' or a 'good woman' to millions of people at the same time, night after night. No classroom or pulpit can match this regularity. Second, the media enjoy credibility: because news presents itself as fact and drama presents itself as a mirror of everyday life, audiences tend to accept media versions of the world as common sense rather than as constructions. Third, the media are industries owned and staffed by particular social groups, so the culture they circulate is never neutral; it tends to reflect the interests and assumptions of those who produce it, which in most societies means urban, commercial and male-dominated interests.

Scholars describe this through the idea of representation. Media do not reflect reality the way a mirror reflects a face; they re-present it, selecting some faces, angles and stories and leaving out others. A wedding shown as the happiest possible climax of a woman's life, a politician photographed only among male colleagues, or a village shown only as backward are representations: each one teaches the audience what to admire, what to expect and what to consider normal. When such representations are repeated across channels and genres over years, they settle into what sociologists call the symbolic environment of a society, the taken-for-granted background against which people judge themselves and others.

Media and the Shaping of Social Reality

The strongest statement of this influence is the social construction of reality, associated with Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann. Their argument is that much of what we treat as objective reality — roles, statuses, ambitions, even emotions — is built up through social interaction and shared symbols, and then maintained until it feels natural. Mass media are the largest machinery for building and maintaining these shared definitions in a modern society. Agenda-setting research shows that media may not tell people what to think, but they are very successful in telling them what to think about: issues that receive heavy coverage, such as a crime wave or a fashion trend, become 'real' public concerns, while uncovered issues effectively do not exist. Framing goes one step further: the same event, for example women entering a new profession, can be framed as progress, as a threat to family life, or as comedy, and each frame invites a different social judgement.

Media also supply the raw material of everyday conversation and imagination. People who have never met a film star, a cricketer or a woman judge still feel they 'know' what such persons are like, because media images fill the gaps left by direct experience. Where direct experience is thin — as it is, for many viewers, regarding working women, women in politics or men doing housework — the media version carries extra weight and can define social reality almost on its own. This is why the study of women and media begins with Unit 1's central claim: to understand gender inequality, we must examine not only laws and wages but also the images through which a society imagines men and women.

Media Images and the Process of Socialization

Socialization is the lifelong process by which individuals learn the norms, values, skills and roles of their society and develop a sense of self. Its classic agents are the family, school, peer group and religion. In contemporary societies the media must be added as a major agent, in some age groups the most time-consuming one: children and young people commonly spend more hours with screens than with any single human teacher. Media socialization works through several connected mechanisms.

- Observation and modelling: following Albert Bandura's social learning theory, viewers — especially children — observe characters, note which behaviour is rewarded or punished, and imitate rewarded models. A heroine who is praised for obedience and sacrifice, and a hero praised for dominance and risk-taking, deliver a practical lesson in approved gender behaviour.

- Repetition and reinforcement: a single image teaches little, but thousands of similar images — advertisements in which women serve food and men drive cars, dramas in which mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law are natural enemies — build durable expectations about what is normal and desirable.
- Reward and punishment within stories: narratives distribute happiness and suffering according to moral rules. Characters who break gender rules are frequently shown failing, repenting or being punished, while those who conform are rewarded with love, status and a happy ending. Audiences absorb the rule along with the entertainment.
- Identification and parasocial relationships: viewers form one-sided attachments to characters and celebrities, treating them as friends and reference points. Identification makes media lessons personal: a young viewer does not merely watch an ideal of beauty or success, she measures her own body, home and future against it.
- Providing scripts for new situations: media supply ready-made scripts for situations people have not yet faced — how a bride behaves, how a boss speaks, how romance begins — and these scripts are then performed in real life, completing the circle from image to reality.

Two features make media socialization distinctive. It begins very early, before children can read or judge critically, through cartoons, toys advertised on screen and family viewing; and it is largely unintentional — audiences seek entertainment, not lessons, so the lessons are absorbed without the resistance that greets open persuasion. Gender socialization is therefore one of the clearest cases of media power: by the time a viewer is old enough to question an image, the image has already helped to form the self that would do the questioning.

The Construction of Gendered Identities

A gendered identity is a person's internalised sense of being masculine or feminine, together with the behaviour, dress, ambitions and emotions considered appropriate to that identity. Feminist media studies argue that such identities are not simply expressed by media; they are constructed in media, through patterned contrasts. Content analyses across countries repeatedly find the same broad pattern. Men are shown more often, in a wider range of occupations, as active, rational, authoritative and located in public space; their value lies in achievement and status. Women are shown less often, in a narrower range of roles centred on home, beauty and relationships: they are younger, more emotional, more decorative and more likely to be defined through a man — as wife, mother, daughter or beloved. Laura Mulvey's idea of the 'male gaze' adds that even the camera itself is typically positioned for a male viewer, presenting women as objects to be looked at rather than as subjects who look and act.

Identities are constructed not only by what is shown but by contrast and absence together. If leadership is always pictured as male, a girl learns to experience ambition as unfeminine; if care work is always pictured as female, a boy learns to experience tenderness as unmanly. The media thus police both identities. Nor is the construction uniform: class, age and respectability divide the images. The 'modern' working woman of advertisements, the sacrificing mother of dramas and the bold heroine of films are different models offered to different audiences, and real women negotiate among them. This is an important qualification: construction does not mean audiences are passive copies. Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model shows that viewers can accept, negotiate or oppose the preferred meaning of a message. Even so, opposition must

work against a heavy flow of similar images, so the media's power lies in setting the terms on which negotiation takes place.

A Balanced Assessment

It would be one-sided to present media only as a conservative force. The same channels that repeat stereotypes have also carried images of women pilots, scientists, athletes and parliamentarians into homes where no such woman has ever entered, and such images demonstrably widen the ambitions of girls who see them. Media can denaturalise what tradition presents as fixed: a drama that sympathetically portrays a divorced woman or a caring father is also constructing identity, in a more egalitarian direction. The accurate conclusion of Unit 1 is therefore not that media dictate identity, but that media are now the central arena in which gendered identities are proposed, contested and revised — and that whoever controls representation holds real cultural power.

Conclusion

To conclude, mass media act as a cultural force because they produce and endlessly repeat the symbols through which society defines reality, normality and value. Through agenda-setting, framing, modelling, narrative reward and identification, media images enter socialization alongside the family and school, and they construct gendered identities by picturing masculinity and femininity as opposite, unequal and natural. Recognising this construction is the first step towards changing it: once students see that an image is made, they can ask who made it, whose interest it serves, and what alternative images are possible. That critical habit is the foundation on which the remaining units of this course are built.

Question 2: Gaye Tuckman's Concept of 'Symbolic Annihilation' of Women (20 Marks)

Critically evaluate Gaye Tuckman's concept of 'Symbolic Annihilation' of women. In your opinion, how does the media's tendency to ignore, marginalize, or trivialize women affect their status in a patriarchal society?

Introduction

Few concepts in feminist media studies have proved as durable as 'symbolic annihilation'. The term was given its classic form by the American sociologist Gaye Tuchman (printed as 'Tuckman' in the question paper) in her 1978 essay on the symbolic annihilation of women by the mass media, and it was developed in the same period by George Gerbner and others studying television. The claim is stark: women are not merely misrepresented in media; they are symbolically wiped out — condemned, as Tuchman put it, to invisibility, triviality or disapproval. This answer first explains the concept and its three processes, then examines how each process damages women's status in a patriarchal society, and finally evaluates the concept critically, noting both its lasting strengths and the limitations that later research has identified.

The Concept Explained

Tuchman's argument rests on a simple premise: representation is a form of social existence. To matter in a society, a group must appear in its public stories — its news, dramas, advertisements and histories. Groups that do not appear are treated, in practice, as though they do not exist or do not count. Studying American television and other media of the 1970s, Tuchman found that women, who formed about half the population and a large and growing

share of the workforce, appeared in media in far smaller proportions, in far narrower roles, and were often presented in ways that mocked or diminished them. She called this pattern symbolic annihilation: the combined effect of absence, trivialization and condemnation by which media under-represent women's interests, achievements and points of view, and thereby teach society that women are unimportant.

Table 1: The three processes of symbolic annihilation

Process	Meaning	Typical media example
Absence / omission	Women are missing or heavily outnumbered in media content relative to their real presence in society.	News bulletins and talk shows dominated by male experts and politicians; sports coverage devoted almost entirely to men's events.
Trivialization	When women do appear, they are presented in trivial, decorative or narrow roles that deny their competence.	Women shown mainly as housewives, beauty-conscious consumers, romantic partners or victims; women professionals introduced by appearance or family status.
Condemnation	Women who step outside approved roles are disapproved of, ridiculed or punished in media narratives.	Ambitious or independent women characters portrayed as selfish, neglectful of family, comic or destined for unhappy endings.

The three processes work together. Absence says women are not there; trivialization says that when they are there, they do not matter very much; condemnation says that if they try to matter in the wrong way, they will be corrected. Later monitoring, especially the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP), which has examined news media across more than one hundred countries every five years since 1995, has given the concept an empirical backbone: women have consistently formed only about a quarter — roughly 24 to 25 per cent in recent waves —

of the persons seen, heard or read about in the news, and they are far less likely than men to appear as experts, spokespersons or central subjects. The proportions have improved only very slowly, which suggests that Tuchman identified a structural pattern rather than a passing fashion of the 1970s.

Effects on Women's Status in a Patriarchal Society

In my opinion, the deepest harm of symbolic annihilation is that it supplies patriarchy with cultural legitimacy. Patriarchy survives not only through law, property and physical power but through the belief — held by many women as well as men — that male dominance is natural and female subordination is normal. Media invisibility feeds that belief directly, in at least five ways.

- It erases women's contribution: if farming, teaching, nursing, commerce and family survival visibly depend on women, yet screens show a world run by men, women's real labour is devalued and their claims to equal pay, credit and inheritance look unreasonable.
- It restricts aspiration: girls cannot easily become what they never see. The absence of women judges, engineers, editors and athletes in media narrows the imagined future of female viewers, while the abundance of male role models widens that of boys — an inequality produced without any formal ban.
- It weakens political voice: citizens and policymakers take seriously the groups they see speaking with authority. When women rarely appear as experts even on subjects such as health and education where they predominate, their policy preferences carry less weight and their under-representation in assemblies appears natural rather than unjust.

- It normalises triviality and self-doubt: constant presentation of women as decorative, emotional or preoccupied with appearance teaches women to monitor themselves from an imagined male viewpoint and teaches men to evaluate women accordingly, lowering women's standing even in private life.
- It punishes deviation: condemnation of independent women in stories warns real women that visibility has a price. In a patriarchal setting this operates as quiet discipline, keeping capable women out of public competition and so preserving male monopoly of status.

These effects are circular, which is what makes the concept powerful. Low status produces low visibility, and low visibility reproduces low status: editors commission fewer women because women seem less authoritative, and women seem less authoritative because editors commission fewer of them. Symbolic annihilation is therefore not a superficial matter of 'image' separate from real inequality; it is one of the mechanisms by which real inequality — in income, office and respect — is maintained from one generation to the next.

Strengths of the Concept

The concept's first strength is that it shifts attention from individual sexist items to a pattern. A single advertisement or drama can always be defended as harmless fun; symbolic annihilation asks about the total diet of images, which is where the effect lies. Second, it connects content to production: Tuchman and later scholars showed that annihilation is produced by news values, ownership and newsroom composition, not simply by the personal prejudice of individual journalists, which points reform towards institutions. Third, it is testable: counting who appears, in what roles and with what authority — as the GMMP does — allows the claim

to be checked, compared across countries and tracked over time. Few critical concepts in media studies have generated so much systematic evidence in their support.

Limitations and Criticisms

A critical evaluation must also record the weaknesses. First, the original studies were based mainly on 1970s American television; applying the concept unchanged to today's fragmented, interactive media is risky. Women are no longer only represented by gatekeepers: on social media they produce and circulate their own images in vast numbers, so absence, at least in quantity, has partly ended. Second, the concept can understate audience activity. Viewers interpret, mock and resist trivialising images, and fan cultures often celebrate precisely the strong women characters that producers intended as warnings. Third, counting heads is not enough: a rise in women's visibility can coexist with deeper trivialization, for example when women become more visible mainly as celebrities and influencers judged by appearance. Visibility without authority may be a new form of the old problem, which the original concept, framed around absence, captures imperfectly.

Fourth, later feminist scholarship has broadened the lens: symbolic annihilation operates differently for rural women, working-class women, older women and women of minority communities, who may be doubly invisible, and it also affects some groups of men, such as the elderly or the disabled. Finally, representation alone does not change material conditions — a screen full of women executives would not by itself equalise wages. The concept is best used, therefore, as one part of a wider analysis that also includes ownership, employment, law and economics, rather than as a complete theory of women's oppression.

Conclusion

To conclude, symbolic annihilation remains a valuable and largely accurate description of how media treat women: through absence, trivialization and condemnation, media symbolically erase half of society, and in a patriarchal society that erasure legitimises women's lower status, narrows their aspirations and disciplines those who step out of line. Its limitations — an older broadcast context, an underplayed audience, and a focus on quantity of representation — require the concept to be updated for the social-media age rather than discarded. The question for today's researcher is no longer only whether women appear, but on whose terms, with what authority, and with what power over their own image.

Question 3: Gerbner's Cultivation Theory and Gender (20 Marks)

Explain George Gerbner's 'Cultivation Theory' in the context of gender. How does heavy television viewing influence an individual's perception of real-world gender roles and the prevalence of violence against women?

Introduction

Most early research on media effects asked what a single programme or campaign did to its audience in the short term. George Gerbner, dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, asked a different and larger question: what does it do to people to live, year after year, inside the symbolic world of television? His answer, developed from the 1960s onwards through the Cultural Indicators project, became known as cultivation theory. It is one of the most influential — and most debated — theories in media studies, and it

has particular force for gender, because television's world is a strongly gendered one. This answer explains the theory and its key concepts, applies it to gender roles, examines its claims about violence against women, illustrates the argument with a comparison of heavy and light viewers, and ends with a brief critical assessment.

The Theory: Cultural Indicators and Cultivation

Gerbner's starting point was that television is not really a collection of separate programmes chosen item by item; it is a centralised system of story-telling into which most people are born and which they absorb as a whole, largely without selection. For the first time in history, he argued, the stories of a culture are told not by parents, schools or religious institutions but by a small group of commercial industries. The Cultural Indicators project therefore studied television in three linked ways: the institutions that produce it, the message system itself (through large-scale content analysis of prime-time programming), and the effect of long-term exposure on audiences' beliefs — the cultivation analysis.

Cultivation is the gradual, cumulative shaping of viewers' conceptions of social reality by the recurring patterns of the television world. Gerbner was careful to describe the effect as like an iceberg or a gravitational pull rather than a hypodermic injection: small in any single instance, but constant in direction. The central comparison is between heavy viewers — conventionally those watching four or more hours a day — and light viewers. Where heavy viewers' beliefs move systematically towards the 'television answer' and away from the real-world answer, a cultivation differential is said to exist. Three related concepts complete the theory. Mainstreaming means that heavy viewing washes out differences between social groups: heavy

viewers from different backgrounds converge on the television view of the world. Resonance means that cultivation is strongest when the television world matches the viewer's lived experience, so the message receives a 'double dose'. Finally, the Mean World Syndrome describes the finding that heavy viewers see the world as more dangerous and people as less trustworthy than light viewers do, because television drama contains several times more violence than real life.

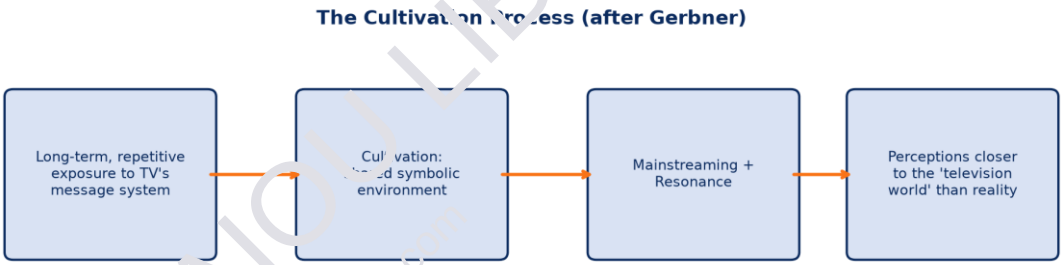

Figure 1: The cultivation process — long-term exposure to a consistent message system gradually pulls beliefs towards the television version of reality.

Cultivation in the Context of Gender

Content analyses conducted under Gerbner and many later researchers show that the television world differs from the real world in strongly gendered ways. Men outnumber women roughly three to one among characters; women characters are younger, more often defined by marital and family status, more often shown at home and in romantic or caring plots, and more often victims, while men dominate positions of occupational authority and are shown in a far wider range of jobs and settings. Women in the real world, by contrast, work in almost every occupation, head households, and form about half the population. Cultivation theory predicts

that the heavier the viewing, the more a person's picture of gender will resemble the television picture rather than the statistical reality.

Research in this tradition has generally supported the prediction. Heavy viewers have been found to hold more traditional attitudes towards the division of labour at home, to estimate that fewer women work outside the home in professional jobs than is actually the case, to endorse stronger distinctions between 'men's work' and 'women's work', and to express more sexist attitudes on standard attitude scales than comparable light viewers. The mechanism is not conscious persuasion: nobody changes their mind because of one drama. Rather, thousands of consistent portrayals quietly set the viewer's sense of base rates — what is common, normal and expected for each sex. A girl who has watched a decade of television in which authority wears a male face does not need to be told that leadership is masculine; the conclusion assembles itself from the evidence of her symbolic environment. Mainstreaming matters here too: heavy viewing tends to pull the gender attitudes of different classes and regions towards the same conventional television norm.

Table 1: Typical heavy-viewer and light-viewer perceptions in cultivation research on gender

Question about the real world	Light viewers (closer to reality)	Heavy viewers (closer to the television world)
How many women work in professional and managerial jobs?	Estimate nearer the real, substantial share.	Underestimate women's professional presence; assume most women are housewives.
Who is more likely to be a victim of violence?	Recognise risks for both sexes, in realistic proportions.	Greatly overestimate women's victimisation and fear; see women as natural victims.
What are typical male and female qualities?	More flexible, varied descriptions.	More stereotyped contrasts: men active and rational, women emotional and caring.
How dangerous is the world for	Judgement closer to local crime	Markedly higher fear — the Mean World Syndrome applied

a woman walking alone?	statistics.	to gender.

Heavy Viewing and Perceptions of Violence Against Women

Violence is where cultivation and gender meet most sharply. Television drama has historically shown violence at rates far above real life, and its victims are not randomly distributed: women, especially young women, are portrayed as victims more often in fiction than their real-world risk in many categories would suggest, while male characters both commit and survive violence as a normal instrument of power. Cultivation research predicts, and studies have repeatedly found, that heavy viewers overestimate the prevalence of crime and violence in society, express greater fear of being attacked, and take more precautions — locking doors, avoiding going out at night — than light viewers with similar real exposure to crime. Applied to women, this produces a specific cluster of beliefs: that violence against women is everywhere and largely unavoidable, that public space is naturally dangerous for women, and that women's safety depends on male protection and on restricting women's own movement.

These cultivated beliefs have real social consequences, in two directions. On one side, chronic fear can discipline women far more effectively than any formal rule: families cite the dangerous world shown on screen to justify limiting daughters' education, travel and employment, and women themselves internalise the restriction. On the other side, constant fictional violence can normalise aggression against women: if screens repeatedly show women being threatened, slapped or stalked as routine plot devices — often without lasting consequences for the aggressor — viewers may come to judge real violence against women as less serious, more provoked or more inevitable than it is. Heavy viewing can thus feed both exaggeration of

stranger danger and tolerance of everyday domestic aggression at the same time, a combination that serves patriarchal control well. Resonance strengthens the effect for women who have themselves experienced harassment: for them the television world confirms lived reality, and the cultivated fear is doubled.

Critical Assessment

Cultivation theory has been criticised on several grounds that a balanced answer should note. Effect sizes in cultivation studies are usually small, and critics argue that once factors such as education, neighbourhood and personal experience are controlled, some differentials shrink. Correlation is not causation: fearful people may stay home and watch more television, so viewing may follow fear rather than create it. The heavy/light division is also crude in an age of on-demand streaming, recorded viewing and mobile screens, where audiences select genres rather than absorbing a single message system. Defenders reply that the theory never claimed large short-term effects, that small but population-wide shifts in belief are socially important, and that genre-specific cultivation — for example among heavy viewers of crime drama or of romantic serials — continues to be found in newer studies. The theory's core insight, that long-term immersion in a patterned symbolic environment shapes what people take reality to be, remains widely accepted even by many of its critics.

Conclusion

To conclude, Gerbner's cultivation theory explains television's power as slow, cumulative and environmental: heavy viewers gradually adopt the gender order of the television world, in which men act and women are acted upon, traditional roles appear natural, and violence —

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particularly violence against women — appears far more prevalent than it is. The resulting mixture of stereotyped expectations, exaggerated fear and normalised aggression helps to sustain real gender inequality without anyone issuing an instruction. For students of women and media, the theory supplies both a warning and a research agenda: change the recurring patterns of the symbolic environment, and the cultivated reality will, over time, change with them.

Question 4: Portrayal of Women in Print Media — 'Hard News' versus 'Lifestyle and Fashion' (20 Marks)

Analyze the portrayal of women in print media. Compare the representation of women in 'hard news' versus 'lifestyle and fashion' sections. How do these representations reflect traditional gender stereotypes?

Introduction

Print media — newspapers and magazines — may be older than television and social media, but they remain a privileged site for studying how women are represented, because print makes its choices visibly: who is photographed, who is quoted, whose story leads the front page and whose is placed in the weekend supplement. A newspaper is internally divided into territories, and those territories are gendered. Politics, the economy, crime and sport — the so-called hard news — form the prestigious core of the paper; health, beauty, food, relationships and fashion form the lifestyle sections, historically labelled the 'women's pages'. This answer analyses how women are portrayed in each territory, compares the two patterns directly, and

argues that together they reproduce traditional gender stereotypes: men make the world of public consequence while women decorate, consume and care within a private one.

Women in 'Hard News'

Hard news is where symbolic annihilation is easiest to measure. Global Media Monitoring Project studies of newspapers consistently find that women make up only about a quarter of the people appearing in news stories, and a still smaller share of those quoted as experts, officials or spokespersons. When women do appear in hard news, patterned distortions recur. First, women enter politics and public life through a family frame: women politicians are routinely asked about husbands, children and clothing in ways men are not, and are introduced as wives, daughters or mothers of known men. Second, appearance competes with substance: photographs and descriptions comment on dress, age and looks, trivialising authority. Third, in crime news women appear overwhelmingly as victims — of violence, disaster and scandal — rather than as investigators, judges, officers or analysts; and reporting of violence against women frequently drifts towards victim-blaming detail, the hour, the place, the clothing, instead of examining the crime and its social causes.

Fourth, hard news values themselves filter women out. News is defined around conflict, power, money and official institutions, all arenas from which women have historically been excluded, so the very definition of newsworthiness guarantees male dominance; a nurses' strike or a women's cooperative breakthrough struggles to be 'news' beside a cabinet reshuffle. The cumulative portrait is of a public world owned by men, which women enter exceptionally, decoratively or as casualties. Even quality newspapers that consciously try to include women

sources report difficulty, because the expert class their routines draw upon is itself male-dominated — a reminder that representation in print reflects, and then reinforces, inequalities outside the newsroom.

Women in 'Lifestyle and Fashion' Sections

If women are marginal in hard news, they are central in lifestyle and fashion pages — but on narrow terms. Here the woman addressed and depicted is primarily a body to be improved and a consumer to be instructed: how to dress, apply make-up, lose weight, decorate a home, cook impressively, manage relationships and remain youthful. Fashion and magazine imagery presents an idealised standard of beauty — young, slim, fair and flawlessly groomed — against which ordinary readers are invited to find themselves wanting, and then to buy the products that promise to close the gap. Scholars call this the beauty system at the heart of women's magazines: the editorial content and the advertising share one message, that femininity is a project of appearance requiring constant work and spending.

The lifestyle portrait is not wholly negative, and a fair analysis should say so. These sections also carry serious material on health, children's education, household finance, legal rights and careers, and historically the women's pages were sometimes the only place where issues such as domestic violence, reproductive health or women's work were discussed at all. Talented women journalists built these sections when the rest of the paper was closed to them. Nevertheless, the dominant framing remains traditional: women's concerns are treated as private, domestic and aesthetic, segregated from the 'serious' news, and the woman reader is

constructed as responsible for the emotional and physical maintenance of the family while remaining attractive — the double burden presented as glamour.

Table 1: Representation of women in hard news and lifestyle sections compared

Dimension	'Hard news' sections	'Lifestyle and fashion' sections
Presence of women	Low — about a quarter of news subjects and sources; fewer as experts.	Very high — women are the main subjects and the target readers.
Typical roles	Victims, relatives of powerful men, occasional politicians or celebrities.	Models, actresses, brides, homemakers, beauty and health consumers.
Basis of value	Public achievement — but frequently undercut by family and appearance framing.	Appearance, youth, style, domestic skill and relationships.
Voice	Rarely quoted with authority; often spoken about by male officials.	Addressed constantly, but usually instructed by advertisers and experts rather than heard as citizens.
Message about women	The public world is not really women's place.	Women's proper work is beauty, home and care — performed consumingly.

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How the Two Portrayals Reflect Traditional Gender Stereotypes

Read together, the two territories divide the world exactly as the traditional stereotype divides it: public versus private, reason versus emotion, production versus consumption, subject versus object. Hard news stereotypes by exclusion — it preserves the equation of masculinity with power, rationality and history-making. Lifestyle pages stereotype by inclusion — they confine femininity to beauty, domesticity, romance and care, and they commercialise that confinement. The stereotypes are therefore complementary halves of one system: a girl reading the whole newspaper learns both lessons at once, that important events are made by men and that her own sphere of excellence is to look beautiful, keep a good home and be loved.

Several mechanisms keep the pattern in place. Newsroom composition matters: hard-news desks, editorships and proprietorships remain disproportionately male, while lifestyle desks are feminised and lower in status and pay, mirroring the content hierarchy. Commercial logic matters more: lifestyle sections exist to deliver women consumers to advertisers of cosmetics, fashion and household goods, so their portrait of women is shaped by what sells products; hard news sells authority to readers and advertisers who still picture authority as male. Deadline routines, reliance on official sources and photo libraries stocked with conventional images do the rest, without any editor needing to intend discrimination.

Signs of Change and Remaining Gaps

Change is visible and should be acknowledged. Women reporters now cover courts, finance, sport and conflict; some newspapers run gender desks, audit their own sourcing, and have revised style rules on reporting violence against women. Women's magazines increasingly carry careers, technology and money content, and print features sometimes celebrate women scientists, athletes and entrepreneurs in the main sections rather than the supplements. Yet monitoring studies show the underlying proportions moving slowly, and digital editions often reproduce the same division in new form — politics feeds led by men, 'women' verticals led by beauty and celebrity. The stereotype has modernised its surface faster than its structure.

Conclusion

To conclude, print media portray women through a divided pattern: nearly absent or trivialised in hard news, hyper-visible but confined in lifestyle and fashion sections. Neither half is accidental, and together they faithfully reflect — and daily re-teach — the traditional

stereotype that men belong to the consequential public world while women belong to the decorative, domestic and consuming private one. Reform therefore has to work on both territories at once: more women as sources, experts and decision-makers in hard news, and a broader, less commercialised definition of women's interests in lifestyle journalism, so that the whole newspaper, and not only its margins, recognises women as full citizens.

Question 5: Women as Consumers of Media — Advertising, Soap Operas and Psychological Effects (20 Marks)

Examine the role of women as consumers of media. How does the media target women through advertisements and soap operas, and what are the psychological effects of these targeted messages on female audiences?

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Introduction

Women are not only represented by media; they are courted by media as the audience that commerce most wants to reach. In most households women make or strongly influence the majority of everyday purchasing decisions — food, clothing, household goods, children's products, health and beauty — and they are heavy, loyal consumers of television serials, magazines and now social media. Media industries therefore design a large part of their content specifically to attract, hold and deliver female audiences to advertisers. This answer examines women's role as media consumers, analyses how advertisements and soap operas target them, and evaluates the psychological effects of this targeting, including body-image

disturbance, social comparison, anxiety and materialism, as well as the pleasures and limited forms of agency that women themselves report.

Women as Media Consumers: Why They Are Targeted

Three facts explain the targeting. First, purchasing power: advertisers regard women as the chief purchasing officers of the family, so daytime television, women's magazines and much of prime time are built to reach them. Second, time and loyalty: serialised domestic genres fit the rhythms of home-centred work and reward habitual viewing, giving broadcasters a predictable audience to sell. Third, emotional labour: because women are socially assigned responsibility for the family's health, appearance, food and relationships, messages about these matters are addressed to them as duties as much as desires. The result is a media environment in which a woman is addressed far more often as a consumer — of soap, fairness cream, cooking oil, jewellery and slimming products — than as a citizen, worker or thinker. This consumer identity is itself a gender role: it assigns women the management of consumption while frequently denying them equivalent control of production and property.

How Advertisements Target Women

Advertising aimed at women works through a small set of well-studied strategies. The beauty appeal promises that a product will move the buyer closer to the prevailing ideal — fairer, slimmer, younger, more fragrant — and it deliberately manufactures insecurity first, naming problems the viewer may not have known she had: dull skin, ageing, body odour, a less-than-perfect home. The domestic-expert appeal flatters women as queens of the kitchen and home while loading them with sole responsibility for family nutrition, cleanliness and children's

success; the smiling mother of advertisements carries the whole household's welfare as her personal grade sheet. The romance and status appeals link products to being loved, married well or envied by other women, and celebrity endorsement and influencer marketing lend these promises a familiar, trusted face.

Modern targeting has become finer and more continuous. Daytime slots, serial sponsorship, product placement inside dramas, and now algorithmic social-media advertising follow women across the day, using data about age, interests and anxieties to personalise the pitch. Filters and edited influencer images have raised the visual standard from professional models to apparently ordinary — but digitally altered — peers, which makes the comparison more intimate and harder to dismiss. Feminist critics describe the overall system as selling women two things at once: products, and a definition of femininity in which worth is measured by appearance, consumption and success in pleasing others.

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How Soap Operas Target Women

The soap opera — in South Asia, the prime-time television drama serial — is the genre built most completely around the female audience. Its targeting is formal as well as thematic. Open-ended, continuing stories centred on family, marriage, kinship conflict and romance match the concerns women are socialised to manage; scheduling in prime-time family hours and daily episodes build habit; and strong central women characters — the suffering daughter-in-law, the scheming relative, the resilient single mother — give viewers figures for intense identification. Production economies reinforce the fit: domestic sets and dialogue-driven plots are cheaper

than action genres, and advertisers of household goods pay premium rates for the attentive female audience the serial delivers.

The pleasures are real, and researchers such as Ien Ang, in her classic study of women watching the serial Dallas, showed that viewers are not passive victims: women enjoy emotional realism, discuss plots with friends, judge characters' choices against their own lives and take genuine companionship from the serial world. In many homes the drama hour is women's one protected leisure time, and the stories give them a language for grievances — unjust in-laws, unfaithful husbands, unrecognised labour — that everyday politeness forbids. Targeting, in other words, works because it offers something women value; the critical question is what price, in values and self-image, the offer carries with it.

Psychological Effects on Female Audiences

The psychological effects documented by research cluster around five themes. First, body image and self-esteem: repeated exposure to thin, fair, youthful ideals produces upward social comparison, in which viewers measure themselves against media figures and find themselves lacking. Experimental and survey studies link heavy exposure to beauty imagery with body dissatisfaction, disordered eating attitudes, low self-esteem and growing demand for cosmetic procedures and skin-lightening products — a particularly damaging trade in South Asia, where fairness is heavily marketed. Second, anxiety and insecurity: advertising that manufactures problems — ageing, weight, household failure — cultivates chronic low-level anxiety that only consumption can soothe, tying women's peace of mind to purchasing.

- Materialism and consumption pressure: targeted media raise the perceived necessity of branded goods, festivals of shopping and elaborate weddings, straining household budgets and linking a woman's respectability to spending she may not control.
- Cultivation of expectations: heavy serial viewing can normalise the melodramatic script — the ever-sacrificing heroine, the villainous mother-in-law, the redemption of erring husbands — shaping expectations of marriage and family life and sometimes tolerance of suffering within it.
- Parasocial attachment and time displacement: intense one-sided bonds with characters and celebrities fill emotional needs but can displace sleep, reading, work and family interaction, and make influencer marketing unusually persuasive.
- Emotional effects of serials: suspense and cliff-hangers produce real stress and rumination for strongly identified viewers, while shared viewing and discussion can equally provide relief, solidarity and mental-health conversation starters.
- Positive and empowering effects: health and rights messages carried in serials and campaigns, visible successful women in advertisements, and online communities of women consumers also raise awareness, self-confidence and collective voice — effects that grow as women become producers of content themselves.

Effects are strongest where other supports are weakest: among adolescent girls forming identity, among isolated home-based viewers with few alternative sources of information and esteem, and where media diets are heavy and unvaried. Media literacy, education, family discussion and women's own content production all moderate the harms, which is why

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researchers describe women audiences neither as cultural dupes nor as fully free consumers, but as negotiators working with unequal resources against professionally designed persuasion.

Conclusion

To conclude, women occupy a double position in the media system: under-represented as authoritative subjects, but over-targeted as consumers. Advertisements reach them through manufactured insecurity about beauty and domestic duty, and soap operas hold them through emotionally powerful family melodrama that mixes genuine pleasure with traditional scripts. The psychological price — body dissatisfaction, comparison, anxiety, materialism and cultivated expectations — is well documented, though never total, because women also extract companionship, information and occasional empowerment from the same content. A fair evaluation therefore ends with reform rather than contempt for the audience: honest advertising standards, diverse images of women, media-literacy education and more women creating content are the practical routes to a healthier relationship between women and the media that court them.

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