

# Media and Sexism: An Analysis of Changing Trends in Indian Commercial Advertisements and Malayalam Soap Operas

Reshma Krishnan and B. Sonia Chellirian

**Abstract---** *Visual media's role in forming ideologies in the mind of humans is quite inexplicable. In Indian context, for every class of Indian society, the most commonly found entertainment is television. As a media, television has a large number of audience and therefore it has a profound influence on the people. Soap operas and the commercial advertisements that come in between are things that the Indian audience are used to. On a close observation one can see that from time immemorial both these visual platforms are highly sexist in their content. Gender stereotyping has become an essential element employed in these operas and advertisements which in turn feeds the patriarchal values and middle-class morality of Indian society. This makes people glued to their seats especially during the prime time when majority seeks television as a way of relaxation. But recently it has been observed that drastic changes are coming in this media. Thought-provoking and realistic commercial advertisements are being made and publicized and makers of television operas have also started experimenting with fresh and novel subject matter even though they are less in number. The paper would be concentrating on some prominent advertisements and Malayalam television serials for their sexist content, mainly focusing on the changes that have come across in the theme and matter in both the fields. The paper will also be mentioning some old advertisements and serials with their themes critically explored along with the new ones so that it would be more like a comparative study rather than a vague description.*

**Keywords---** *Visual Media, Sexism, Gender Stereotyping, Soap Operas, Advertisements, New Themes and Subject Matter.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

As a visual media, a film can make its spectators glued to their seats for a duration of two and a half hours or to a maximum of three hours. It is also a known fact that film actors and actresses enjoy the celebrity status and has got a huge fan followers in real life as well as in social media. But the extent to which an impact can be made by such actors on the people is a matter of doubt. Actors will be admired for one mesmerizing character they played in a movie, for their brilliance in choosing appropriate scripts and roles or even for showcasing latest trends and fashions. At this context, one may mention and bring in another significant media which is nothing but the television. Television and in particular the soap operas that are broadcast in it on a daily basis have a much greater influence on the people than what a three-hour visual treat could give. It is on this terms, one can say that television serials and the characters shown are quite popular among the common mass. This is true especially in the context of Indian society. On a late evening, if one makes a visit to a middle class family in India, one would often witness the

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television set being kept on and some serial or commercial advertisement running on it. Irrespective of the age, in most Indian families, television has become the most common uniting factor in bringing all the members of the family together before the same screen. It is beyond doubt that television serials often use this gimmick of ending each and every single day's episode at a crucial point in the plot so as to make the viewers anxious and excited to come back and watch it the next day at the very same time. But apart from all the tricks employed in these television programs to attract its audience, one must examine if there exists any other factor that has its influence on the viewers. On a closer examination of the content and theme of the television serials, one may observe that most of these daily soap operas would be dealing with a story that is usually set in a family. Such a familial story and the situations that the characters undergo would be something that a normal audience can relate himself to or at least have heard of. With a mother in law of commanding personality, a daughter in law of submissive and timid nature, a husband of spiritless and inept character, Indian serials have a long history in engaging in gender stereotyping. When one comes to the audience of Kerala, Malayalam television serials are no exception to this. Let alone the character portrayal, one can even witness female characters heavily adorned with gold and perfect make up even while going to bed. This depictions make such portrayals far from being realistic. There have been serials in Malayalam that got broadcast for more than three years. Even a regular audience who initially started watching such serials with much enthusiasm would gradually feel reluctant to keep abreast with the developments in the plot for the storyline would just dawdle and each episode comes to an end with no significant progress. Therefore gradually the audience too would stop watching such programs. But as time pass by, nowadays there are changes being observed in this scenario. From an ambitious woman who would become a police officer with the moral strength and support of her in laws to the lady protagonist being the sole bread winner of the family, television serials are trying their hands in experimenting with novel subject matter. For the viewers who are done with the age-old theme of mother-in-law – daughter-in-law combat, this change is something welcoming. If one watches television programs, one may be very well knowing the trending commercial advertisements as well. A commercial advertisement would only be of a few seconds or say a few minutes. But they are shown repeatedly in such a manner that the idea of buying a particular product would be unknowingly instilled in the minds of the viewers or the viewer himself would flip the channel once he gets to the stage where he can't take it anymore. Like the television soap operas which pictures female characters in a low light, commercial advertisements too adopt the same logic, though obviously there are exceptions to both the cases. Gender stereotyping is in the most evident form in advertisements. A most common example of these gender biased advertisements is that of the ads of domestic products. In such commercials, the lady of the house is usually shown engaged in cleaning clothes or struggling with the daily chores at home. Through such representations, the ideology of woman being limited to the four walls of the home alone is implemented. In such depictions, male characters are seldom shown cleaning or cooking. Let it be professional or domestic, jobs are not gender roles and the makers behind such ads must put in an effort to bring in innovative ideas into this space especially in the present era where women are more or less equal to men. Media and sexism are highly intertwined as gender stereotyping has become something ordinary and therefore treated as natural. The paper would be pointing out the theme of Malayalam television serials and commercials of the past along with some of the latest ones that are quite creative and thought-provoking in terms of gender stereotyping.

## II. MALAYALAM SOAP OPREAS – NEW TRENDS

Majority of the audience for Malayalam television serials are women. Most of the shows are telecasted in the prime time owing to the fact that these shows have working women as well as homemakers as their audience. There was a time when the female audience preferred women protagonists of these soap operas to embody all the feminine qualities. Women being submissive and down to earth was considered as fine characteristics even if she is put to trials and tribulations by the rest of her family members. Even now this theme doesn't seem to change as in the serial *Kudumbavilakku* telecasted on the television channel Asianet. This serial got premiered lately in January 2020 but when one come across the content of this serial, it is found that it's the same old cliché of a compliant and dutious woman who inspite of being talented had her dreams and career shattered by her unappreciative husband. This is not the case with every other serials too. There are some soaps which with their theme and presentation is quite outstanding from the rest of others and have a very good number of audience. Some of them have already been aired and some are still successfully running in the prime time. For an analysis of the recent trends and advancements in Malayalam soap operas, some serials have been taken. These serials have been chosen according to the popularity they have among the Malayali audience. The list of serials along with the channels in which they are broadcast are as shown as below:

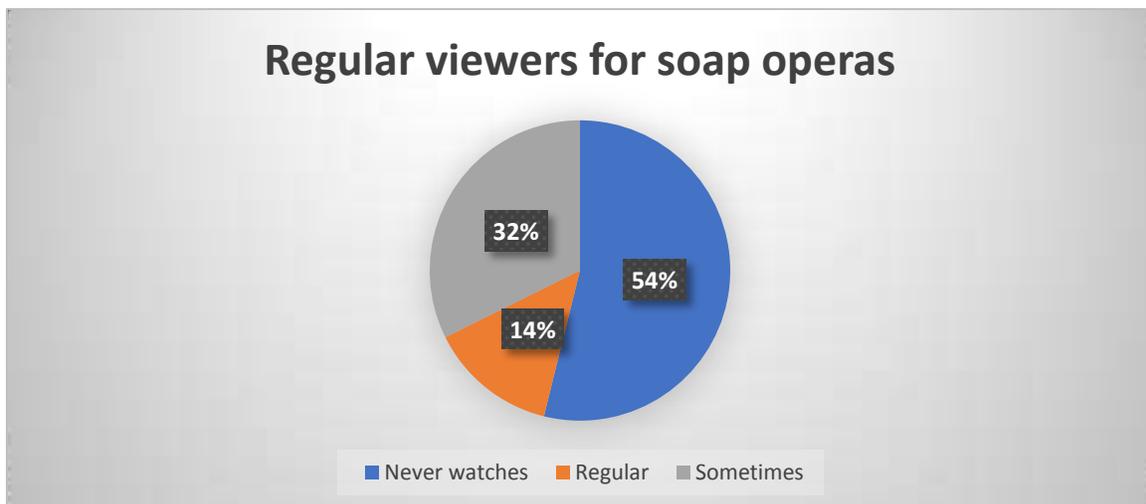
Name of the serial	Channel in which they were broadcast
Parasparam	Asianet
Thattem Mutteem	Mazhavil Manorama
Uppum Mulakkum	Flowers TV
Marimaayam	Mazhavil Manorama

The serial *Parasparam* was one of the successful soap operas that ran for a period of more than five years in Asianet. It was the remake of the Hindi serial *Diya Aur Baati Hum*. The story revolves mainly around the life of the female lead Deepthi played by actress Gayathri Arun. An aspiring civil servant, she is determined to become an IPS officer. The story narrates how she finally achieves her dream with the help of her in-laws who were initially prejudiced and conservative. The character Deepthi defied all the tenets of gender stereotyping for the profession she prefers is actually one that of a male domain. As the story progresses, Deepthi encounters several problems, both in her personal as well as professional life. Though her husband is shown as a supportive figure, a doubt may arise for the viewer if the serial is being sexist, as Deepthi who is otherwise strong-minded in her career, is made to depend on her husband for emotional support whenever she is distressed. But the serial had its own merits for it was a new experience for the Malayali audience to visualise something that was out of the box. The next serial *Thattem Mutteem* is more of a comic drama that tells of the relationship between a mother-in-law namely Mayavathiamma played by the veteran actress KPSC Lalitha and her daughter-in-law Mohanavally. The role of Mohanavally is played by the actress Manju pillai. This whole sitcom is about how Mohanavally's husband Arjunan maintains the balance between the two. This duo of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law stands out from the rest with their witty dialogues and less dramatic expressions. The serial often does not try to convey a message or end each episode with a moral. But each chapter will have a minimum amount of cathartic effect on its viewers for the situation comedies are light and entertaining. Another sitcom that employed the same method of the former was *Uppum Mulakkum*. Balachandran, an independent technician, his wife Neelima who works in a private company and their five kids are the main characters of this serial and the story focuses on them and their day to day affairs. The character of

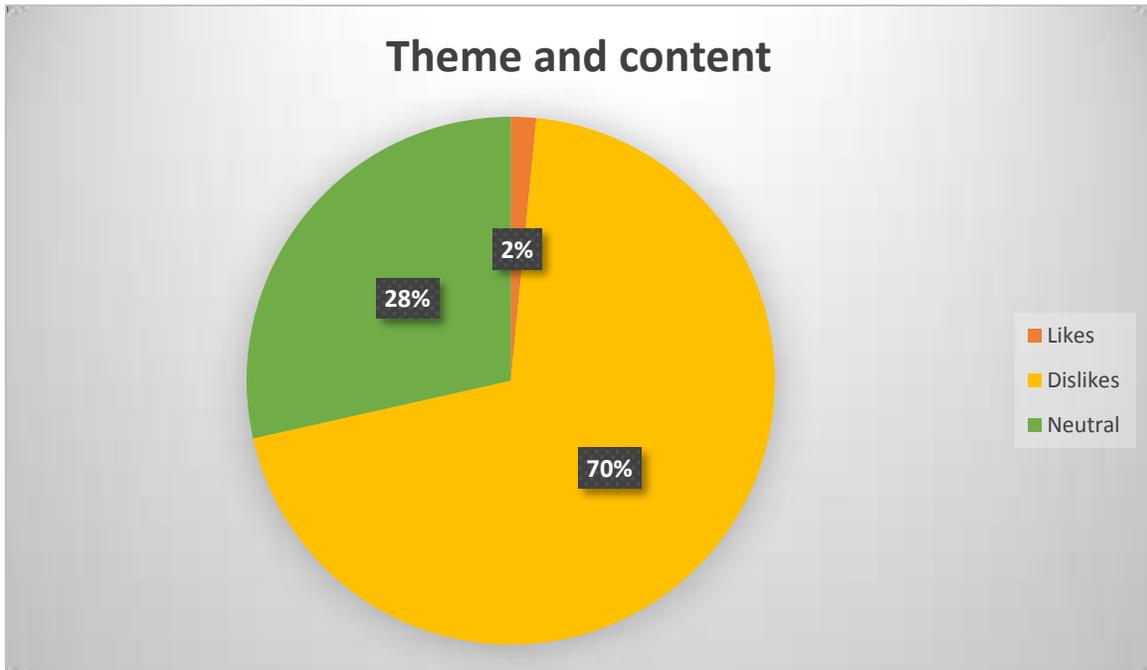
Balachandran, played by Biju sopianam is unlike the rest of the husband characters in Malayalam serials who became quite well known for the naturality with which he delivers his dialogues in “Trivandrum slang” – a dialect usually said to be used by a small majority of people in the district of Thiruvananthapuram. Dialogues and conversations that one usually hears and uses in one’s life are presented here by the characters without even the slightest vestiges of dramatization. On the sphere of gender and gender stereotypes, when we analyse this whole sitcom, we can see that though the character of Balachandran is said to be self-employed, it is Neelima who seems stable in her career and more efficient in home making. Balachandran can be usually found at home, while Neelima seems more responsible and duty bound in everything. But one thing noticeable is how the act of cooking considered as a sex role because in spite of being a working woman, Neelima is usually found at the kitchen whereas Balachandran keeps away from sharing such responsibilities equally. But in terms of the concept, core substance and method of presentation, the team *Uppum Mulakkum* has been doing a wonderful job. This nighttime soap has completed more than 1000 episodes and is still running profitably for its makers. *Marimayam*, aired in Mazhavil Manorama, comically satirizes social and political institutions and their way of functioning especially the way in which common man is hard pressed and put to troublesome situations by the former. This comic opera is far different from other serials that embody domestic squabble as its main theme. From the corruption that goes around in some government offices to the contemporary social issues, *Marimayam* hilariously depicts everything that a common man can connect himself with. The cast of *Marimayam* has men in majority and a few women characters. But while setting up a story, it can be observed that the crew has given equal opportunities to both the gender. If the plot of an episode is set in a government office, we can find lady officers duly engaged in work along with their male colleagues. There is no sort of distinction or awkward representation of women that one can find in this sitcom. This program, one can say is quite appreciable for its mode of presentation and honest delineation of men and women as individuals without any gender bias.

### ***A Case Study***

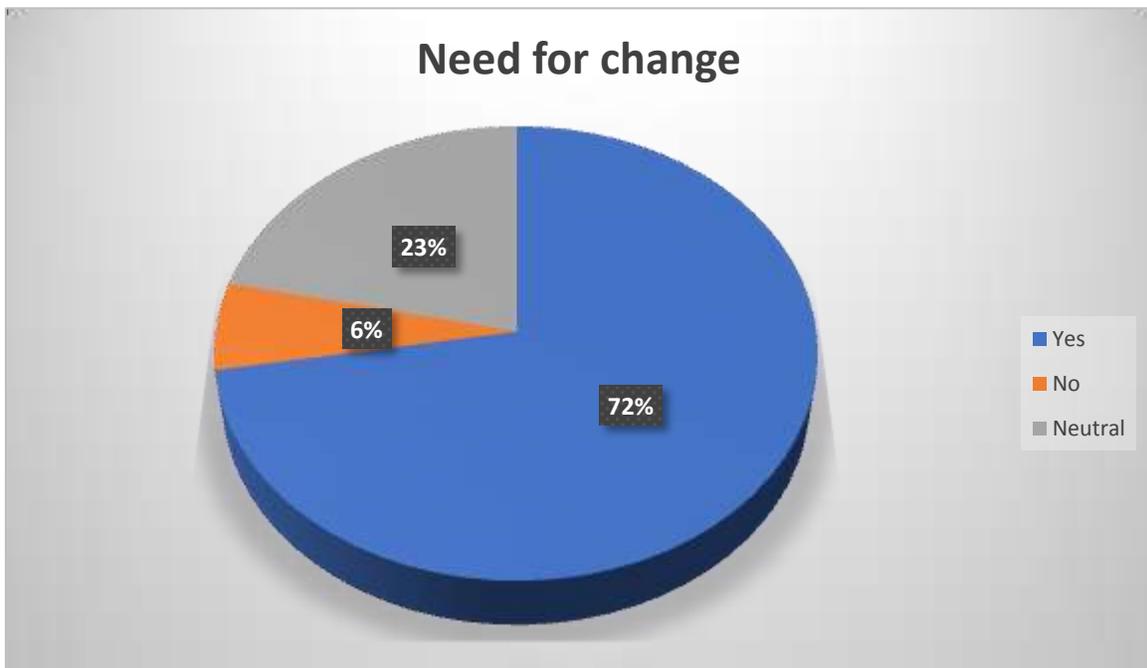
An online poll survey was created about the opinion of people regarding Malayalam serials. Around 65 people, both men and women marked their responses. Based on their response review we can see that,



When asked if they watch television serials, only a 14% of them seemed to be regularly watching and 32% of them watch at times. The majority 54%, as we can see from the data do not watch television serials at all. Regarding the subject of operas and the audience viewpoint about it, a majority of them could not agree with the theme and content, whereas there were only a few who could go with the theme and some, on the other hand is neutral in their stand.



Another pie chart that follows shows how much the audience really would like to see a change in the soap operas.



Having had a look up at the different aspects of Malayalam television serials and the audience's current perspective, we are moving on to the next section of commercial advertisements.

### **III. COMMERCIAL ADVERTISEMENTS - AN ASSESSMENT OF PRESENT - DAY ADS**

The influence commercials have on the general public is kind of unaccountable. When an individual perceives a commercial ad, his philosophies related to beauty, fashion, sex roles, gender etc are unwittingly getting imprinted onto his mind. These ideologies thus formed can be good or bad depending on the character and temperament of the individual too. For an Indian society, which holds patriarchal values on a high pedestal, it seems understandable for ads to embrace gender stereotyping as the viewers are unlikely to find fault with its content. If we take the advertisement of a car, a man in suits would be shown admiring the car first and then experience it behind the wheels. In this context, the number of adverts showing women driving are practically nil. These kind of significations inadvertently implies that driving is not something meant for women. It seems that ad companies here overlook the fact that driving like any other activity is something an individual can do irrespective of the gender. Ads of products like dishwash soap, disinfectants, utensils, detergents, electronic appliances used in kitchen and every other thing that is associated with the three Cs ( Cooking, cleaning, cleansing) presents woman in action. Another type of stereotyping is the way in which beauty products are commercialised. This category often picturizes a woman, who is diffident because of her dark skin, gets a cream or particular bar soap as suggested by her friend to enhance her beauty. It is completely illogical when these ads give out the idea that to have a bright future, you need to have a bright skin too. This in turn has racial traces in it. Next comes the ads of perfumes, deodorants and other such products used by men. Women in those ads are shown in a degrading way especially when they show how a man could attract innumerable women to him since he uses a particular product. Misconceptions related to the gender category is being formulated here that the women are fragile and easy to impress. Emotional relationship and the bond that a man and woman naturally develops is put into question here as these ads shows women as being readily available at a man's disposal to hang out with, the personal preferences of the women being disregarded. Adults who are sexist by nature might not find it necessary to criticise the misrepresentations of gender in media. But it is the kids and teenagers, who in their growing stage are being exposed to off beam ideas like women are supposed to do a set of jobs at home while men can go out and take over the outside world. These conceptions can have an effect on a person especially in his views related to his own gender as well as that of the others. As we have early mentioned in the case of tv serials, nowadays there are major transitions seen in the advertisement field as well. Some of the trending and thought provoking ads are considered here for their substance. Some of them are:

1. Flipkart's ad which came with the tag "#GenerationEqual".

The ad by flipkart is straight to its point in conveying the message to end gender stereotypes and gender bias. This two minute ad shows life of some kids, both girls and boys side by side. The background of the ad becomes their dialogues about the usual sentences that they hear in connection to their own life like that of – “girls do not like car”, “boys do not like dolls”, etc. later their dialogues changes into statements which makes it clear that in life many a things are common and can be applicable to both of them including their dreams. The ad ends with the note to a parents to treat both their kids as equal and give them equal opportunities rather than asserting specified gender

roles to each of them. Even the most stereotypical depiction of girls being made a helping hand at kitchen at a very early stage is also shattered here by showing a boy giving his part at the kitchen. This flipkart endeavour is commendable for it has the potential to inculcate worthy thoughts to people.

## 2. Ring the bell ad by Breakthrough foundation

Breakthrough was a foundation started by a lady named Malikka Dutt, that aimed to protect women from domestic violence. Ring the bell ad was made on a true story of a bus conductor. The ad shows a man peacefully sitting and playing carroms. All of a sudden a wife's conversation with her husband is heard in the backdrop. She questions him for drinking at home which in turn agitates the husband and he starts beating the lady. Loud thuds along with the woman's wails are heard. The man playing carroms is disturbed and he goes to the home where the incident is being taking place. He rings the bell and man of the house stops beating his lady for a while and then answers the door. The first man asks if there is electricity at the latter's home and starts ringing the bell continuously. The term ring the bell itself stands for the need for reacting against atrocities brought upon women, which includes domestic violence as well. A man, whether it is husband or father is traditionally considered as the authority who can mend the ways of the women at home by physical force. When at a stage where both the genders are considered as equal, no one single gender can assert its supremacy over the other. This viewpoint is well conveyed in this ad.

## 3. Havells fan's *Hawa badalegi*

The hindi term hawa badlegi means the air will change. Team havells has somehow well incorporated their ideology within the framework of gender stereotyping. This 33 seconds ad shows a man and wife sitting before a government official saying their full names for the latter to fill up on a document. Once the wife says her name, the official who is a woman, changes her surname to that of her husband's. And the husband in turn tells the official to have his wife's surname added to his own. This brings a smile on to the face of both the officer as well as on the wife. It's usually a custom to have a woman change her surname to her husband's once she is married. In addition to leaving one's own home and settling into a entirely different atmosphere, women at this point of time have to change her name, something which was till then a part of her identity. These unjustified ramifications of gender bias is brilliantly underlined in this ad.

## 4. Ariel detergent ad - #sharetheload

The storyline of this particular ad goes this way – a grandfather is seen playing with his grandson. To this, his daughter, the mother of the toddler comes after a busy day at work. Before even be able to strike up a conversation with her dad, she receives calls from office. She goes on doing her household chores including making tea and food for the rest of the family members when her own husband sits comfortably in a sofa with a laptop open before him and making gestures for food. The dad observes her actions and realises how he himself has set a bad example to his daughter by keeping away from sharing the jobs with her mother back home. Before going to his own home, he writes up a open letter to his daughter pouring his heart out and apologising. He promises to bring a change by helping her mother. The latter scenes shows the man sharing the laundry job with his wife. When running a home, even if a man is the sole bread winner, he cannot stay aloof from the rest of the things that take place within his own home, let alone be cooking and cleaning. The private life of a husband and wife is what their children are being

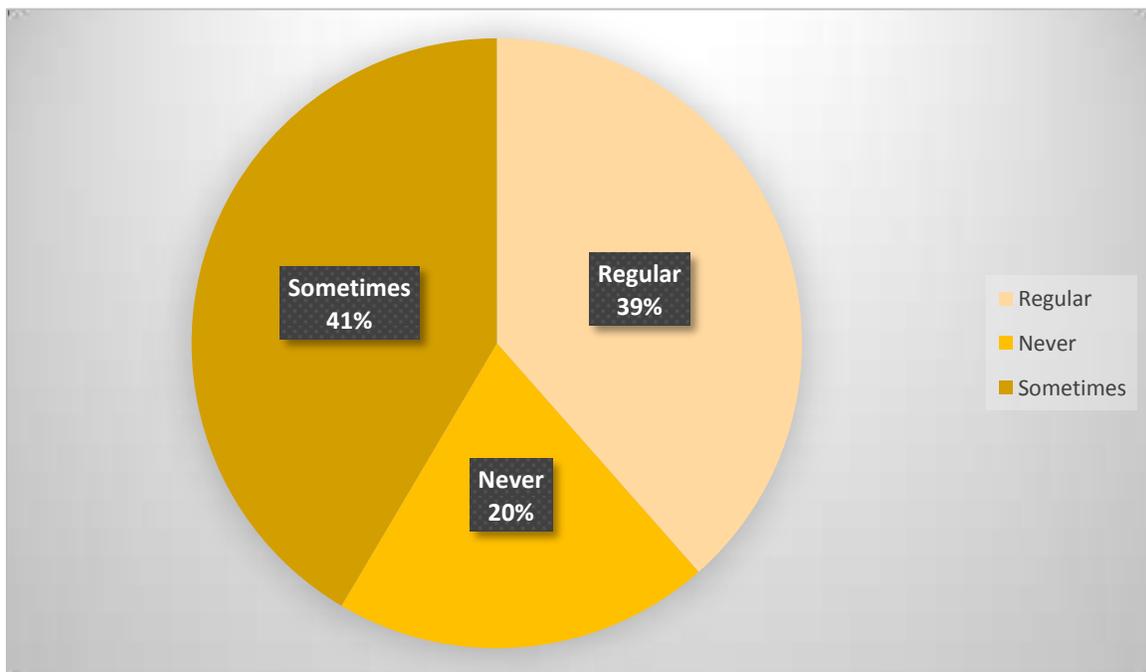
witnessed to. If they carry out actions as if they are normal, children too would be growing up with the same mentality. Their natural inquisitiveness to question things too would be hampered.

#### 5. Titan raga watches – Her life her choices

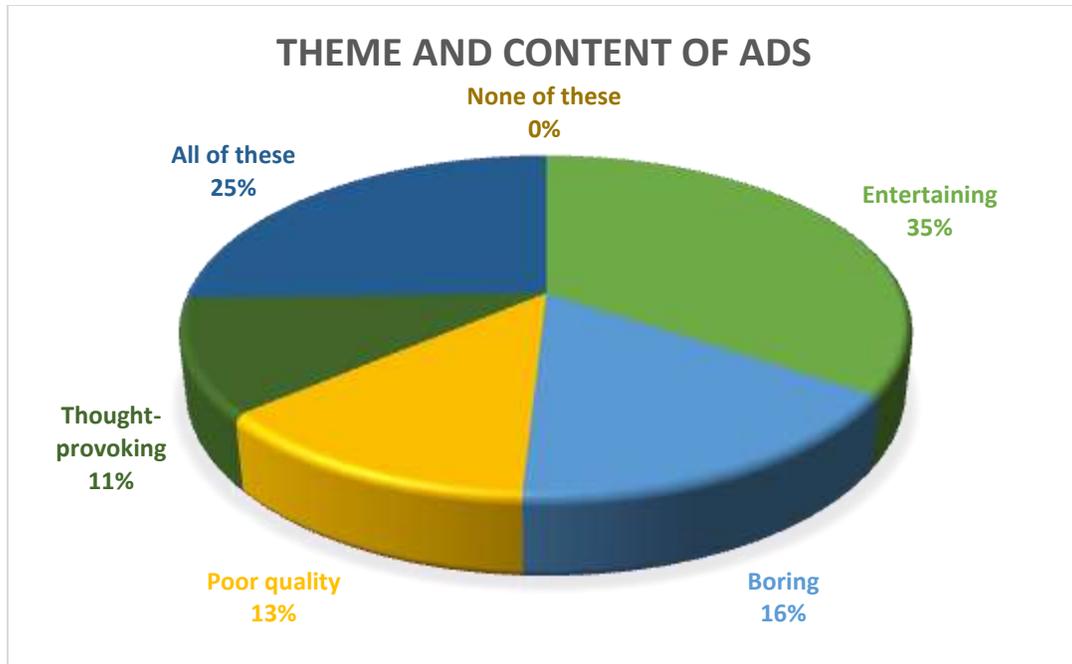
A lady happens to meet her ex (here we do not get a clear picture if the man is her ex-lover or ex-husband) at an airport lounge. They exchange pleasantries and the man once he finds that the woman is not yet married, suggests a possibility of giving a try to make their relation work only if she gives up her career. In response to this when the woman boldly remarks that he too can do the same, his reaction is “how can a man not work?”. The female character is the true representative of modern woman who with a smile replies that he is just the same as she has left. Though the man’s expression changes, the woman continues their conversation with a sweet smile and even offers him a coffee. This commercial of Titan saga watches with the tagline – ‘her life her choice’ explains everything well. Women cannot be designated as a weaker sex on any terms. They have their own choices related to even the tiniest aspects of their life. A woman as an individual cannot be expected to live up to the expectations of the society especially the modern educated women, who would strongly oppose the societal and familial conservatisms that others try to impose upon her.

#### *A Case study*

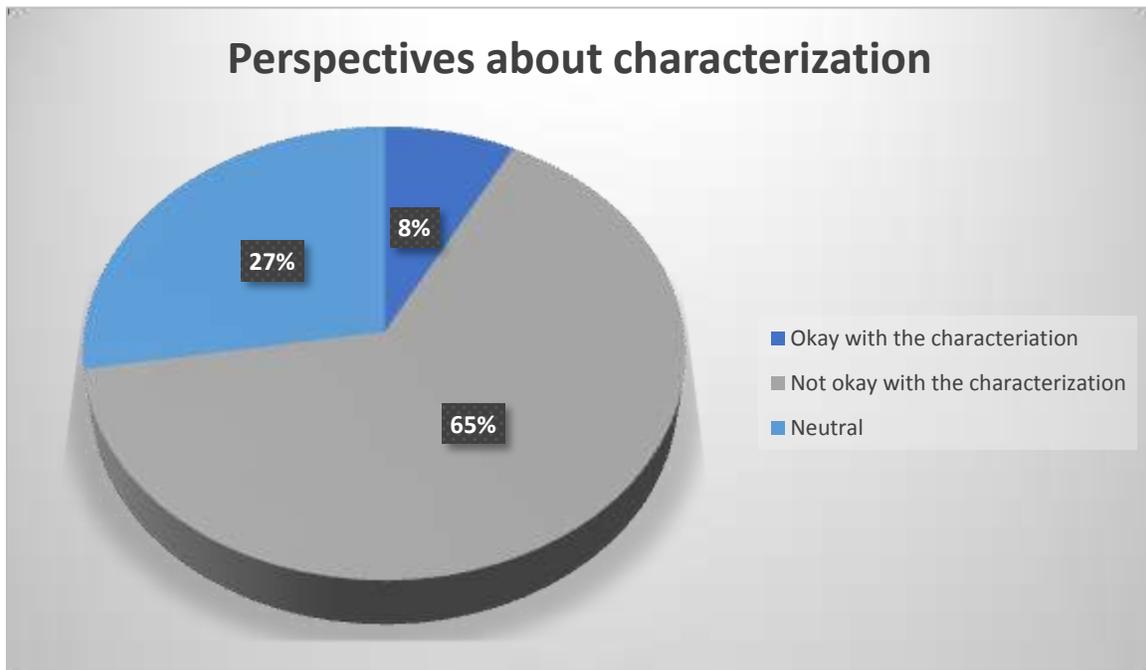
An online survey was conducted to know the opinion of people regarding advertisements. 65 people participated and has marked their response. When asked if they watch commercials, 38.5% opined that they do watch it while those who watch it at times and those who hardly watch it were 41.5% and 20% respectively. The pie chart that follows shows the pictorial representation:



Related to their opinion of theme and subject of commercials, five choices were given and people have marked their opinions according to their taste.



The next pie chart shows how the people answered when questioned if they were okay with the depiction of stereotyped men and women.



#### IV. CONCLUSION

The paper dealt with four popular Malayalam television serials and five sensible adverts for their variety in theme and new mode of approach. Based on the survey as well as from the general tendencies seen in the tastes of audience of today, we can come to the conclusion that whether it is a commercial or a soap opera, people would

always prefer to see something new. If the soaps want more viewers, they must take care of the elements they present. New generation viewers will not silently tolerate when undesirable picturization happens on screen. Women, as seen in the past are usually stereotyped but men too are expected to conform to a set of particular rules and behaviour which makes them typecast as well. In the present era, no one individual can be restricted from living one's own life. In social media platforms like YouTube, even the number of views can make the ads come in the trending list or can bring it down by hitting it with the dislike button. As such conditions exist, both the producer and makers of soaps and commercials must take special care in treating the message communicated by their product.

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