GENDER STEREOTYPING IN INDIAN ADVERTISING: A PROBE INTO THE GENDER EQUALITY

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Abstract

Advertisement plays the role of a multiplier in the developmental process. To achieve the prime objective of making money and earning profit, advertisers compromise with the ethical and moral standards. In the highly competitive business environment, every advertiser wants to make the most potent claims possible but the borderline between unethical and possible if often smudged. Gender inequality is at its peak when women are portrayed as mere sexual objects and their dignity is degraded. Their bodies are used as a means to draw the attention by raising the sexual content in the advertisement and this attention is used to sell the product or service. Although, the government has come up with strict and stringent laws yet the effectiveness of the same is debatable. Advertisers do not uphold the legislation and the basic human rights of the individuals in its spirit and letter. Awareness regarding the laws relating to gender equality is substantially low. The problem lies at the very basic composition of the laws regulating the advertising and gender equality in India. At present there are a plethora of laws which are intended to achieve the objective of responsible advertising. However, the failure to form any central authority results in exposure to indecent and immoral advertisement. Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) exists to ensure that the accepted standards of public decency are maintained, but it a self-regulatory council and a non-statutory body. In addition to this, advertising firms find a way around the rules and regulations made by the legislature of the country. They tend to defy the very objective of the Right to Equality mandated in the Constitution of India and the precedents set by the judiciary. The situation is worsened by a high rate of illiteracy and poverty in the country.

Key words: *Advertisements, Inequality, Constitution, Immoral, Indecent.*

INTRODUCTION

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is a milestone document in the history of human rights. Drafted by representatives with different legal and cultural backgrounds from all regions of the world, the Declaration was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in Paris on 10 December 1948 (General Assembly resolution 217 A) as a common standard of achievements for all peoples and all nations. It sets out the fundamental human rights to be universally protected and it has been translated into over 500 languages. It is evident that UDHR has become a touchstone for actions by governments, individuals, and nongovernmental groups. It has been ratified by every country in the world. Practically no other international instrument can claim this honour. In short, the UDHR has acquired a moral and political significance matched by few documents. It provides both a guide to present action and an evolving set of ideas for future implementation at the national level. Increasingly, the UDHR's principles have been embodied in what states do and it serves as the foundation for the International Bill of Rights and several other crucial human rights agreements. And, not least, the UDHR has proven a remarkably flexible foundation for a continued broadening and deepening of the very concept of human rights.

The UDHR sets forth a number of objectives — some to be achieved immediately, others as rapidly as feasible. The UDHR also provided the foundation for a series of other international agreements, both global and regional. Finally, the UDHR inspired people around the world to claim their rights, not simply accept the diktat of others. The UDHR provides "a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations." Every "individual and every organ of society" shall promote "respect for these rights and freedoms ... by progressive measures ..." The goal was "to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance."

Article 1 of the Declaration provides that, "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood."[2] Further, article 2 provides that "Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the

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[2] *Available at* https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/ (Visited on 25th October, 2019-10-2019).

political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it is independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty."[3] These articles provide a much needed security against discrimination for which the countries worldwide are endeavouring to achieve their set targets.[4]

Women and girls represent half of the world's population and, therefore, also half of its potential. Gender equality, besides being a fundamental human right, is essential to achieve peaceful societies, with full human potential and sustainable development. Moreover, it has been shown that empowering women spurs productivity and economic growth. Unfortunately, there is still a long way to go to achieve full equality of rights and opportunities between men and women, warns UN Women. Therefore, it is of paramount importance to end the multiple forms of gender violence and secure equal access to quality education and health, economic resources and participation in political life for both women and girls and men and boys. It is also essential to achieve equal opportunities in access to employment and to positions of leadership and decision-making at all levels.

The UN Secretary-General, Mr. António Guterres has stated that achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls is the unfinished business of our time, and the greatest human rights challenge in our world.

UNITED NATIONS AND WOMEN

UN support for the rights of women began with the Organization's founding Charter. Among the purposes of the UN declared in Article 1 of its Charter is "*To achieve international co-operation ... in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion.*" Within the UN's first year, the Economic and Social Council established its Commission on the Status of Women, as the principal global policy-making body dedicated exclusively to gender equality and advancement of women. Among its earliest accomplishments was ensuring gender neutral language in the draft Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The landmark Declaration, adopted by the General Assembly on 10 December 1948, reaffirms that "*All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights*" and that "*everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion,birth or other status.*"[5] As the international feminist movement began to gain momentum during the 1970s, the General Assembly declared 1975 as the International Women's Year and organized the first World Conference on Women, held in Mexico City. At the urging of the Conference, it subsequently declared the years 1976-1985 as the UN Decade for Women, and established a Voluntary Fund for Decade.

In 1979, the General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which is often described as an International Bill of Rights for Women. In its 30 articles, the Convention explicitly defines discrimination against women and sets up an agenda for national action to end such discrimination. The Convention targets culture and tradition as influential forces shaping gender roles and family relations, and it is the first human rights treaty to affirm the reproductive rights of women. Five years after the Mexico City conference, a Second World Conference on Women was held in Copenhagen in 1980. The resulting Programme of Action called for stronger national measures to ensure women's ownership and control of property, as well as improvements in women's rights with respect to inheritance, child custody and loss of nationality. In 1985, the World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace, was held in Nairobi. It was convened at a time when the movement for gender equality had finally gained true global recognition, and 15,000 representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) participated in a parallel NGO Forum. The event was described by many as "the birth of global feminism". Realizing that the goals of the Mexico City Conference had not been adequately met, the 157 participating governments adopted the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies to the Year 2000. The document broke new ground by declaring all issues to be women's issues.[6]

The Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) is the principal global intergovernmental body exclusively dedicated to the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women. The CSW is instrumental in promoting women's rights, documenting the reality of women's lives throughout the world, and shaping global

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[3] *Ibid.*
[4] "Gender Equality" *available at:* https://www.un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/gender-equality/ (Visited on October 25, 2019).
[5] Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, article 2.
[6] *Available at:* https://libraryresources.unog.ch/c.php?g=462664&p=3163053 (Visited on October 29, 2019).

standards on gender equality and the empowerment of women.[7] On 2 July 2010, the United Nations General Assembly unanimously voted to create a single UN body tasked with accelerating progress in achieving gender equality and women's empowerment. The new UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women – or UN Women – merged four of the world body's agencies and offices: the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW), the Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues, and the UN International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women.

The United Nations is now focusing its global development work on the recently-developed 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Women have a critical role to play in all of the SDGs, with many targets specifically recognizing women's equality and empowerment as both the objective, and as part of the solution. Goal 5, to "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" is known as the stand-alone gender goal, because it is dedicated to achieving these ends. Deep legal and legislative changes are needed to ensure women's rights around the world. While a record 143 countries guaranteed equality between men and women in their Constitutions by 2014, another 52 had not taken this step. Stark gender disparities remain in economic and political realms. While there has been some progress over the decades, on average women in the labour market still earn 24 per cent less than men globally. As of August 2015, only 22 per cent of all national parliamentarians were female, a slow rise from 11.3 per cent in 1995.[8]

WOMEN AND ADVERIESMENTS

Our everyday lives are saturated with advertisements, which consciously and unconsciously shape our beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviours. Alongside other forms of media, advertisements shape and reinforce gendered ideas about what it means to be a woman or man and how women and men are valued in our society. Inequalities based on gender result in significant differences for men and women in terms of their education, income, employment, caring responsibilities, social status and participation in public and private life across their lifespan. Gender inequality is also recognised as the key underlying cause of violence against women. A comprehensive body of research now exist which links family violence, sexual assault, sexual harassment and other forms of violence against women to expressions of gender inequality. This paper examines the links between advertising and gender inequality and women's health and wellbeing. It shows that advertising has historically under-represented girls and women and depicted them in stereotyped ways, and that, over time, portrayals of girls and women have become more sexualised and objectifying. This has helped to perpetuate inequalities based on gender in broader society. Advertising has also relied on stereotyped portrayals of men; however, the evidence shows that impacts of stereotyped and sexualised representations are not the same for men as they are for women.[9]

Gender bias is by no means unique to India, and unconscious gender bias research shows us that it's particularly prevalent when women shift into power or authority positions.

In India, the prevalence of femvertising is not yet sufficiently impacting entrenched inequities. A 2016 UN report on gender inequality ranks India at 131st out of 185 countries overall. Other studies and indicators of gender discrimination in India show there's a lot of room for new initiatives in areas, such as female entrepreneurship, where gender balance remains among the lowest in the world.

GENDER PORTRAYALS IN ADVERTISEMENTS

Girls and women are under-represented in advertisements. Boys and men provide more voiceovers and appear more often than girls and women. Advertising portrayals do not accurately reflect the diversity of our community. Advertising is dominated by representations of people who are white, young, able-bodied and heterosexual. Marketing to children has become increasingly gender-stereotyped, with colour used as a marker to indicate whether or not a product is considered appropriate for boys or girls to use. Toys and games marketed to girls are associated with a focus on appearance, nurturing and cooperative play, while those for boys are associated with competition, dominance, independence, and physical activity. Adult women continue

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[7] Hurst Hannum, *Rescuing Human Rights: A Radically Moderate Approach* 112-113 (Cambridge University Press, 2019)

[8] Michael Goodhart, *Human Rights: Politics and Practice* 27-43 (Oxford University Press; 3rd edn., 2016).

[9] Philips Aston & Ryan Goodsman, *International Human Rights* 299-310 (Oxford University Press; 2nd Revised ed., 2012).

to be portrayed in stereotypical roles such as housewives, mothers, wives and girlfriends, and the products they are associated with are appliances, furniture and products related to health, cleaning, beauty and fashion. Men are typically depicted as powerful and independent, are frequently shown in work settings and are used to advertise electronic, automotive, finance and insurance products, food and beverages.[10]

There is some evidence that gender role portrayals are becoming more egalitarian in some aspects. For example, women are increasingly portrayed in work roles, and men are increasingly depicted in more egalitarian roles or interacting with their children. However, the sexualisation and objectification of women is increasing. Women are more likely than men to be shown wearing revealing clothing or simulating sex acts, being dominated or portrayed as objects or animals. Digital technology enables images of women's bodies to be altered, producing even narrower conceptualisations of female attractiveness and helping to facilitate the objectification of women.[11] There is also evidence that men are increasingly portrayed in sexualised ways.[12] Problematic portrayals of masculine peer cultures are evident in marketing targeted to men. Gambling and alcohol advertisements are particularly likely to depict women in sexualised or subordinate roles, or as interfering with men's freedom, leisure time and their relationships with male friends.

Advertisements targeted at children frequently reinforce male dominance, independence and power. A study in the of television advertisements for children's games found that males tended to be shown as the main characters, were portrayed in dominant roles and were most often the verbal narrators of advertisements. Further, while males were shown playing alone, females were typically supervised by adults, suggesting that males are seen as independent and in control of themselves and their surroundings. Another study of advertisements television network Nickelodeon found that commercials reinforced traditional gender stereotypes through showing female characters in cooperative play situations, while male characters were portrayed in competitive interactions.[13]

In advertising targeted to adults, the types of products male and female characters advertise tend to be associated with gender stereotypes. A variety of studies have established that men are more often used to advertise electronic, automotive, finance or insurance products and food and beverages, while women frequently appear in advertisements for health, cleaning, appliances, furniture, beauty and fashion products. These stereotypical associations with products and roles are reinforced by other, more subtle, gender differences in advertising portrayals. Quite often, 'hypersexualised' representations of women (for example, those that depict women with their legs spread or pulling down their pants, lying on a bed or simulating sex acts) have become significantly prominent. The practice of digitally altering women's bodies in advertisements has also become widespread. Images are routinely altered to remove blemishes, elongate legs, reduce waist and hip sizes, and increase bust sizes. This practice has helped facilitate objectification and produce even narrower and more unrealistic conceptualisations of female attractiveness, portraying women as unrealistically thin, large-busted, long-limbed, unblemished, wrinkle-free and hairless. Technology has helped to extend the reach of the beauty industry 'across new areas of the body requiring product solutions', such as 'upper arm definition' and 'thigh gaps'.[14]

Alcohol and gambling advertisements are particularly relying on sexualised portrayals of women to boost their sales. This increase in sexualisation is not only linked to a desire on the part of advertisers to satisfy the male gaze, provoke, and stimulate hype, but also to shifting conceptualisations of female empowerment in Western cultures.[15] Influenced by 'post-feminist' notions of women's liberation and equality, traditional images of women as mothers or housewives have been replaced by portrayals of women as sexually assertive, independent and ambitious. Advertising agencies frequently defend their use of these portrayals by framing them as progressive and empowering. Violence against women is also exploited by advertisers seeking to create controversy and attract attention.

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[10] Jack Donnely, *Universal Human Rights in Theory and Practice* 33 (Cornell University Press; Third edition, 2013).

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] Supra note 3.

[13] Åkestam N, Rosengren S, Dahlen M (2017) Advertising "like a girl": Toward a better understanding of "femvertising" and its effects. Psychology & Marketing. 34 (8):795–806.

[14] Facebook (2017) How gender-positive ads pay off. Facebook IQ, *available at:* https://www.facebook.com/iq/articles/ how-gender-positive-ads-pay-off. (Visited on October 26, 2019).

[15] Eisend M (2009) A meta-analysis of gender roles in advertising. Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science. 38 (4):418–40.

IMPACTS OF ADVERTISING ON GENDER INEQUALITY AND WOMEN'S HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Peoples' understandings of gender, and their interests, behaviours and aspirations, are influenced by the advertising of toys and other products. Girls learn that they are expected to be attractive, cooperative and caring, while boys learn that they are expected to be strong, active and independent. Both boys and girls learn that activities and behaviours associated with masculinity have a higher social status. The sexualisation and objectification of women in advertising and other mass media has a negative impact on women's health and wellbeing. The ubiquity of sexualising and objectifying portrayals of women in advertising and other media causes girls and women to understand that they will be viewed and evaluated based on their appearance.[16] Girls and women who are regularly exposed to sexually objectifying media content are more likely to objectify themselves and internalise unrealistic appearance-related ideals. In turn, this increases body dissatisfaction, contributes to disordered eating, lower self-esteem and reduced mental health and results in reduced satisfaction in sexual relationships and reduced participation in physical activity and exercise. Evidence suggests that, regardless of whether women are depicted as sexually passive or sexually powerful in advertising imagery, women's body satisfaction is negatively affected by sexualised portrayals. There is also evidence that women feel less comfortable and less safe in situations in which sexualised imagery is used to advertise events and products.[17]

Sexualised portrayals of men are increasing and have been found to reduce men's satisfaction with their bodies and increase their self-objectification. While some of the impacts of sexualisation on men are similar to the impacts on women, sexualised portrayals of men tend to be associated with power and dominance.[18] These representations have different social meanings than sexualised representations of women. Sexualised and objectifying representations influence how women are perceived and treated. Sexualised representations in advertising and other media can cause women and men to have a diminished view of women's humanity, competence and morality. Women are perceived as less capable, less intelligent and more animal-like when they are portrayed in sexualised ways.[19]

Objectifying and sexualised media content is associated with attitudes that support violence against women. Specifically, exposure to advertisements and media content that objectifies or sexualises women is associated with a greater support for sexist beliefs, attitudes that blame victims for sexual violence, a greater tolerance of sexual aggression, and men's use of sexually coercive behaviour. Attitudes and beliefs that condone violence against women are recognised as an important underlying cause of violence against women. Culturally or racially specific representations may have different impacts on different women's body image, self-esteem and experiences of self-objectification.

Greater exposure to sexually objectifying media has been found to be related to greater self consciousness about body image during sexual activities. There are ought to exist some links between young women's media exposure, self-sexualisation (defined as valuing oneself for one's sexual appeal, to the exclusion of other characteristics) and their sexual agency. Consuming objectifying media may also have negative effects on relationship and sexual satisfaction for both women and men. Both men and women who have greater exposure to sexually objectifying television, films and magazines are more likely to objectify their romantic partners, though this effect was stronger for men. Self-objectification affects girls' and women's physical performance and reduces the likelihood that they will participate in physical activity.[20]

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[16] Hargreaves DA, Tiggemann M (2009) Muscular ideal media images and men's body image: Social comparison processing and individual vulnerability. Psychology of Men & Masculinity. 10 (2):109–19.

[17] Johnson S (2014) New research sheds light on daily ad exposures. SJ Insights, *available at:* https://sjinsights. net/2014/09/29/new-research-sheds-light-on-daily-ad-exposures. (Visited on October 26, 2019).

[18] Brown A, Knight T (2015) Shifts in media images of women appearance and social status from 1960 to 2010: A content analysis of beauty advertisements in two Australian magazines. Journal of Aging Studies. 35:74–83. a*vailable at:* http://ovidsp.ovid.com/ovidweb. cgi?T=JS&CSC=Y&NEWS=N&PAGE=fulltext&D=psyc13&AN=2015–52900–011. (Visited on October 27, 2019).

[19] Chandra-Mouli V, Plesons M, Adebayo E, Amin A, Avni M, Kraft JM, et al. (2017) Implications of the Global Early Adolescent Study's Formative Research Findings for Action and for Research. J Adolesc Health. 61 (4S):S5-S9. *Available at*: http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/28915994. (Visited on October 28, 2019).

[20] Loughnan S, Haslam N, Murnane T, Vaes J, Reynolds C, Suitner C (2010) Objectification leads to depersonalization: The denial of mind and moral concern to objectified others. European Journal of Social Psychology.

Exposure to sexualised and stereotyped media content not only affects how women view themselves, but also influences how women are perceived by others. It can also help shape beliefs and attitudes about violence against women, including perceptions of responsibility for violence. Images that focus on a girl or woman's physical appearance or portray her in a sexual manner have been found to reduce other people's perceptions of her competence, warmth and morality.[21]

GENDER INEQUALITY AND CONSUMER ATTITUDES

There is mounting evidence to demonstrate that gender stereotypical advertisements are out of step with public opinion. Even though there is a desire for change in gender portrayals in advertising, still an overwhelming majority of participants said women were not treated equally in the media. A lack of diversity in the advertising industry may contribute to the narrow range of portrayals in advertising. Like many other industries, women continue to be under-represented in Indian advertising agencies, both in decision-making and creative roles.[22] More than 70% artists in advertising industry are women who reveal that at some point of their career they are molested, harassed, prejudiced and discriminated. Advertising not only mirrors the values and stereotypes that already exist in our society, but also helps mould them in ways that have detrimental long-term effects on both women and men. A dependence on gender stereotypes is evident in advertising aimed at both children and adults. From a young age, children are targeted by colour-coded marketing, which is used to signify the gender-appropriateness of toys, games and clothing. The reliance on gendered cues in children's advertising appears to have increased over time. Marketing representations associate boys with dominance, independence, performance and competition, and girls with attractiveness, nurturing and relationships. Female characters and voices are underrepresented in marketing representations. Boys and men appear more often, receive more screen time, and provide more voiceovers than girls and women, while people from marginalised groups barely appear at all in advertising. When girls or women are portrayed, they are often shown in domestic settings, and are associated with stereotypically feminine merchandise, such as cleaning, fashion or beauty products.[23]

Increasingly, girls and women are portrayed in sexualised or objectifying ways. Further, it is not uncommon for advertisers to use 'transgressive' images of women being dominated or victimised by men in order to shock and gain attention. The growing influence of the pornography industry may have contributed to the increase in sexualised portrayals, in addition to changing cultural conceptions of women's sexual empowerment. It is important to acknowledge that advertising is only one of many factors in our society that contribute to gender inequality. However, it is an influential form of media that increasingly saturates our public, private, and online spaces. Advertising enters our homes via television, radio, magazines, newspapers, the internet, and through the products we purchase. It is ubiquitous in public spaces such as transport, shops, entertainment and sporting venues and it filters into our online and social media activities. Advertising has impacts on the entire community, regardless of our age, gender identity, race, cultural background, ability, sexuality, socioeconomic status or geographic location. The advertising industry's continued use of gender stereotypes and increasing reliance on images that sexualise, objectify, denigrate and subordinate women undermines efforts to promote gender equality in Australia. Gender stereotyped portrayals limit the aspirations, expectations, interests and participation of women and men in our society. Advertising's reliance on characters that are able-bodied, slim, white and heterosexual significantly under represents the diversity of our community.[24]

The use of gender stereotypes and sexualised advertising portrayals is increasingly the focus of consumer concern – particularly among women – and this can create negative brand perceptions and reduced purchase intentions. The studies cited in this paper demonstrate that there is a clear business case for change. Brands, businesses and creative agencies can benefit from portraying both women and men proportionately,

[21] Murnen,K, Smolak L, Mills A, Good L (2003) Thin, Sexy Women and Strong, Muscular Men: Grade-School Children's Responses to Objectified Images of Women and Men. Sex Roles, 49 (9): 427–37.

[22] Parsons AL, Reichl AJ, Pedersen CL (2016) Gendered Ableism: Media Representations and Gender Role Beliefs' Effect on Perceptions of Disability and Sexuality. Sexuality and Disability. 35 (2):207–25.

[23] Slater A, Tiggemann M (2014) Media Exposure, Extracurricular Activities, and Appearance-Related Comments as Predictors of Female Adolescents' Self-Objectification. Psychology of Women Quarterly. 39 (3):375–89.

[24] Heflick NA, Goldenberg JL, Cooper DP, Puvia E (2011) From women to objects: Appearance focus, target gender, and perceptions of warmth, morality and competence. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*. 47 (3):572–81.

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respectfully and realistically, in ways that reflect the diversity of ages, races, bodies, cultures, abilities, genders and sexualities in our community.[25]

CONCLUSION

There are ethical reasons why businesses and advertising agencies should reconsider the use of sexualised and gendered portrayals. The ubiquity of these representations is having serious and damaging impacts on the health, wellbeing and safety of women. Narrow gender roles and an emphasis on muscularity and performance are also detrimental to men's health. The good news is that marketing representations that challenge gender stereotypes appear to be positively received, particularly by women, but also by many men. Further, the ubiquity and influence of advertising across the community means that it is a setting that provides significant opportunities for encouraging positive representations of men and women and promoting gender equality. It is hoped that this paper will raise awareness of the damaging impacts that the use of gender stereotypes and sexualised portrayals has on the health and wellbeing of women and men, and girls and boys. The evidence discussed in this paper should help to create momentum for businesses, brands and the advertising industry to identify a business case for change and to take a leading role to ensure that advertising has a positive impact in promoting gender equality in our society.

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[25] Supra note 14.