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Representation of Gender in Modern Advertising

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Abstract:

This study critically examines the representation of women in advertisements through a feminist and gender perspective. It investigates how advertisements frequently prioritize women's physical appearance over attributes such as intelligence, creativity, and individuality, thereby reinforcing entrenched gender stereotypes. Through the analysis of diverse advertisements and discussions with women from different age groups, the research explores the influence of such portrayals on self-image, social behavior, and perceptions of gender roles. The findings reveal that advertisements not only shape consumer attitudes but also perpetuate patriarchal ideologies by objectifying women and confining them within traditional roles. The study highlights the urgent need for ethical advertising practices that uphold women's dignity, promote equality, and encourage more inclusive representations. In the 21st century, as advertising permeates television, print, digital, and public media, its role in shaping societal values.

Keywords: Advertisement, Women, Society, Feminism, Gender, advertisement, media, product and modern.

Introduction:

Advertisements have a profound influence on human psychology, primarily aiming to popularize products and shape consumer behavior. Advertisers often employ celebrities, persuasive slogans, and exaggerated claims to attract attention and build emotional connections with audiences. Iconic campaigns such as *The Taste of India* (Amul), *Think Different* (Apple), and *Just Do It* (Nike) highlight the power of branding and emotional appeal, while health and personal care advertisements like *ViccoVajradanti*, *Neutrogena*, and *Bournvita* dramatize benefits to enhance desirability and trust.

Functioning as a vital link between producers and consumers, advertisements inform audiences and stimulate demand, playing a central role in the growth of modern commerce. However, from a feminist perspective, advertisements often objectify women and reinforce

traditional gender stereotypes. Women are frequently depicted as homemakers, caregivers, or sexualized figures, even in ads unrelated to them—such as those for vehicles or men’s products. These portrayals undermine women’s dignity and confine their identity within patriarchal expectations.

This study analyzed selected television advertisements and conducted interviews with women in Wardha to examine the influence of 21st century advertising on family dynamics, social perception, and women’s self-image. The findings reveal that advertisements significantly shape women’s sense of identity, social value, and self-esteem, often portraying them in fragmented or diminished roles rather than as empowered individuals.

Contemporary advertisements frequently portray women as objects of desire, even in products targeted at men. For instance, the *Lux Cozi* advertisement featuring actor Varun Dhawan promotes men’s innerwear using sexualized imagery. The ad’s tagline, “Lux Cozi, Listen to Your Heart,” is accompanied by a scene in which a female model reacts seductively to the male actor’s exposed innerwear, implying that such products can evoke female attraction. Similarly, *Macho Company’s* commercial depicts a young woman admiring a man exercising in his innerwear, suggesting that masculinity and desirability are linked to the brand. The *Jet Wet Jatek* perfume advertisement portrays a female teacher becoming infatuated with a student because of his fragrance, reinforcing male-centered fantasies and reducing women to instruments of male pleasure.

In contrast, some advertisements attempt progressive representation but still retain patriarchal undertones. Airtel India’s “*The Smartphone Network*” campaign portrays a woman who is both a corporate boss and a homemaker, suggesting empowerment while simultaneously reaffirming traditional domestic expectations. Campaigns by *Bajaj Nature’s Sampoorna Chakki Atta* and *Fortune Rice Bran Health Oil* celebrate working women yet continue to emphasize family care over professional independence, subtly reinforcing the “ideal woman” narrative rooted in patriarchy.

Certain advertisements also reflect how beauty norms are internalized from childhood. A *Ba* advertisement, for example, shows a wife seeking validation for her appearance and later passing similar insecurities onto her daughter, demonstrating how societal beauty standards are reproduced across generations.

Advertisements for beauty products such as *Fair & Lovely*, *Roop Mantra*, *Olay*, *L’Oréal*, and *Garnier* further perpetuate color-based discrimination. By consistently featuring fair-skinned models, they imply that success, marriage, and social prestige depend on light skin rather than skill or character. This has cultivated an artificial definition of beauty in Indian society, fostering insecurity, self-doubt, and psychological distress among young women.

Most consumers of fairness creams are young women who attempt to alter their skin tone due to societal expectations, which often leads to self-doubt and mental health issues. Discussions with

women from various social classes reveal their perspectives on such advertisements. Shabnam (36) believes these ads present women's physical appearance in an extremely inappropriate manner, making it uncomfortable to watch them with male family members due to their sexualized content. She asserts that such portrayals negatively affect men's perceptions of women, causing them to view women suspiciously as attention-seeking or manipulative. Sony (21), a postgraduate student from Punjab, observes that modern advertisements frequently depict women as materialistic, showing them attracted only to expensive items, branded products, or wealthy men. For instance, a motorcycle advertisement implies that women are drawn to rich men or luxury goods. These portrayals reinforce the notion that women depend on men economically rather

Interviews with women across different age groups indicate that advertisements strongly influence social perceptions, as well as women's self-esteem and mindset. Kavita (32) from Punjab observes that beauty product advertisements—such as those for Fair & Lovely—deeply impact adolescent girls by suggesting that fair skin equates to beauty and success. This fosters feelings of inferiority, jealousy, and self-rejection, often leading to stress and low confidence. Deveshri (31) highlights that many contemporary advertisements increasingly display obscene or sexually suggestive content, which undermines women's dignity and spreads “mental pollution” in society. Similarly, Aastha (21) notes that women are consistently portrayed as decorative objects in ads, even for male-oriented products like tobacco or perfumes, where their appearance overshadows their talent or intelligence. Female professionals, such as reporters, are often judged by their looks rather than performance, unlike their male counterparts.

Reena (21) from Punjab adds that semi-nude depictions of women in male-targeted advertisements negatively influence young girls, who may imitate such portrayals, compromising their own values. Shreya emphasizes that advertisements reinforce patriarchal norms by limiting women to household-related products, while men dominate technological and financial advertisements. This sustains the idea that women belong to domestic spaces and men to decision-making roles.

Overall, women across age groups report that advertisements contribute to the objectification of women, reinforce traditional gender roles, and promote consumer-driven dependency on men. Moreover, sexualized, and violent portrayals of women in media harm their dignity and normalize gender inequality in workplaces through unequal pay and harassment.

Recent reports by UNICEF (2024), the Geena Davis Institute, and Kantar (2025) confirm these observations. According to Kantar's “Indian Masculinity Maze” report, 94% of Indian advertisements still reinforce traditional male dominance, and only 6% of male characters show respect or emotional care toward women. Women receive about 60% of screen time and 56% of speaking time, yet their roles remain stereotyped—mainly in domestic, caregiving, or beauty-related

contexts. Female characters are often young, light-skinned, and slim, while darker skin tones and older women are rarely represented. Only 17.5% of female characters are shown as independent caregivers, and men are portrayed as authority figures nearly three times more often than women. These portrayals, as UNICEF notes, not only sustain patriarchal attitudes but also shape young girls' body image and confidence, influencing how society perceives women's roles, abilities, and identities.

Recent studies by UNICEF (2024), the Geena Davis Institute, and Kantar (2025) reveal that Indian advertising continues to reinforce deep-rooted gender stereotypes. Men are rarely depicted performing household tasks, while women seldom appear as professionals or decision-makers. Women are more frequently shown shopping, cleaning, or cooking, whereas men dominate roles involving finances, leadership, and technology. According to the Indian Masculinity Maze report (Kantar, 2025), 94% of advertisements still reinforce traditional male dominance, and only 6% of male characters show emotional care or respect toward women. Although women receive nearly 60% of screen time and 56% of speaking time (UNICEF, 2024), their portrayal remains confined to domestic or beauty-related roles. The Geena Davis Institute further notes that two-thirds (66.9%) of women in Indian ads are shown with light or medium-light skin tones, perpetuating colourism and linking fairness with beauty. Sexualized depictions—particularly in deodorant, fitness, or cosmetic product ads—objectify women's bodies to attract male attention, normalizing misogyny and consumerism. Despite a gradual rise in “progressive” campaigns, dignified and independent representations of women remain scarce. The Global Gender Gap Report 2025 ranks India 131st out of 148 countries, with a parity score of 64.1%, reflecting persistent inequality in economic and political participation. Overall, Indian advertising continues to commodify women, reinforcing patriarchal norms and shaping social perceptions that hinder true gender equality.

Conclusion:

The analysis reveals that modern advertisements continue to reinforce traditional gender stereotypes by portraying women primarily as homemakers, caretakers, or objects of desire. Such portrayals not only undermine women's dignity but also normalize patriarchal attitudes within society. The repetitive depiction of women in limited roles shapes public perceptions, influencing how both men and women view female identity, capability, and worth. Advertisements focusing excessively on physical beauty and fairness standards have created deep psychological impacts, fostering insecurity and self-doubt among women. The market-driven nature of the advertising industry further intensifies this problem, prioritizing profit over ethical and social responsibility. Therefore, there is a pressing need for advertisers to adopt gender-sensitive and ethical practices that promote equality, empowerment, and respect. Active monitoring by media regulatory bodies and increased public awareness are essential to curb the dissemination—encouraging positive

representation and reflecting the evolving role of women as independent, capable, and dignified contributors to society.

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