



Women in Advertising: A Retrospective Study of Representation Trends and Their Sociocultural Consequences

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Abstract

Contemporary advertising continues to serve as a powerful arbiter of beauty standards, promoting problematic ideals through the prevalent use of models exhibiting specific physical attributes - including revealing attire, fair complexion, and slender body types. These Western-centric beauty paradigms present particular cultural challenges in diverse markets like India, where indigenous aesthetic traditions often conflict with imported media representations. Academic scholarship has increasingly examined gendered advertising portrayals, particularly following feminist movements that highlighted women's evolving societal roles. Historical analyses reveal persistent patterns of reductive female depictions, ranging from domesticated housewives to sexualized objects and dependents requiring male protection.

Despite four decades of sustained criticism regarding regressive gender stereotyping in advertising, recent studies indicate these representations persist in modified forms rather than disappearing. Current U.S. advertising discourse reflects growing concern about this institutionalized practice, even as societal expectations of gender roles become increasingly complex. The academic literature demonstrates that while the manifestations of female stereotyping have evolved, their fundamental presence in advertising remains resilient, adapting to contemporary norms while maintaining underlying problematic conventions. This perpetuation occurs despite logical expectations that progressive social changes would yield more equitable media representations.

Keywords: Marketing, television commercials, advertising, portrayal of women, Indian media

Introduction

Marketing is frequently described as a battle for consumer attention. The major goal in today's dynamic business environment is to attract customers, but the question remains as to how low one can go to acquire this fleeting appeal. Is it acceptable to denigrate women and portray them as sexual objects in order to elicit a second look at the advertisement? Though not universally embraced and derided by many, the use of overt sexual appeal in advertising has expanded significantly. According to literature, such explicit portrayals only cause a major outcry and a poor perception of the company in the long run.

“Advertiser’s main aim is to increase sales through positive impressions on audiences, about their products and services, by grabbing their attention, through persuasion in a very short span of time; before turning the page of a magazine/ newspaper, before changing the channel of the TV; before clicking the new screen on a computer; and while driving on the highways. Advertising is omnipresent; one cannot escape from



the influence of advertising. It has the ability to control the market by creating diverse personal needs, changing attitudes, self-images and preferences. While some consider advertising as a mere economic activity with the single purpose to sell" [1].

Female empowerment has been a more common theme in advertising, challenging stereotyped gender roles and encouraging body acceptance, as evidenced by campaigns like Dove's "Real Beauty," which has received widespread praise for infusing empowerment messaging into marketing efforts. While such advertisements have been widely debated and praised for sending good signals to women, little study has been done to determine whether and why these campaigns are beneficial, as well as the effects they have on female consumers. It's possible that these ads have succeeded in instilling positive brand attitudes and purchase intentions as a result of the emotions aroused by them. This study aims to determine the many ways that empowering advertisements influence consumers' perceptions of females in advertising, as well as their effects on important marketing performance indicators such as brand attitudes, buy intentions, and emotional responses.

Objectives

- To gain a conceptual understanding of the role of women in sexually appealing advertisements and how consumers perceive such advertising.
- To assess the depth of emotional brand engagement generated through femvertising.

Literature Review

"A sound literature on female portrayals in advertising has been developed, using content analysis as an instrument for the elucidation of stereotypical depictions. Print advertisement in particular has been excessively investigated, as magazine advertisements provide a frozen frame that facilitates thorough visual examination and the application of a code scheme" [2].

"Modern women who have grown accustomed to offensive or stereotypical advertisements do not think that the portrayal of their gender is realistic" [3]. In fact, while most college women accept how they are portrayed, they disagree that commercials adequately portray women in their daily activities. This indicates that even firms that do not offend women in any way are failing to connect with their target demographic. According to the conclusions of the literature analysis, marketers should utilize realistic imagery and messaging in female-targeted tactics to boost self-esteem, develop relationships with customers, and increase positive product and brand assessments.

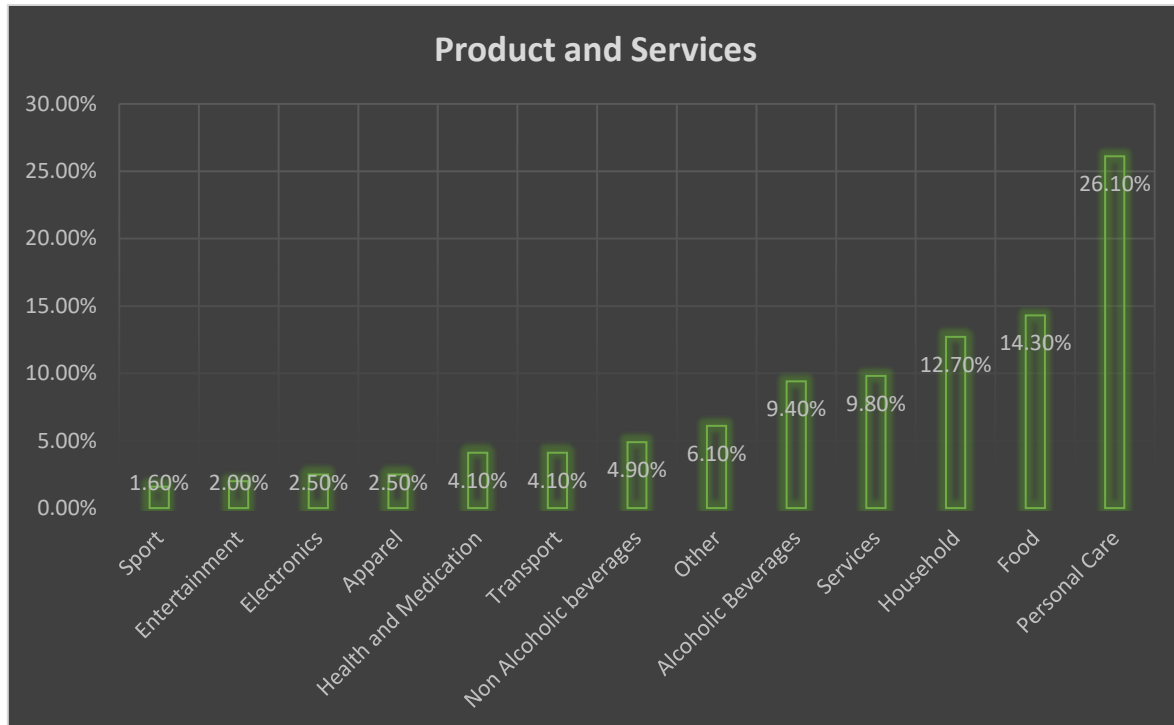
"Empowerment has been a fundamental element of feminist ideologies that aim to achieve gender equality, a definition that is recognized by both feminists and non-feminists" [4].

"Ads with female empowerment themes have been applauded for challenging gender stereotypes in the media and raising awareness about issues facing females of all ages while empowering women and young girls"[5].

Analyzing gender representations and sexuality in advertising, Sabat (2019) suggested "advertisements should work as a cultural pedagogy that teaches members of a given society how to be women or men, what is femininity and masculinity, hence, producing, in this way, identities and representations of reality". Sabat (2019) argues that "advertising doesn't create meanings but borrows them from social relations, while, at the same time, these advertisements reaffirm and consolidate these very same representations, as for instance, women always at home or exhibiting their bodies to men pleasure"

Analysis

Below graph indicates that 13 product and service categories were advertised in the Commercials featuring women.



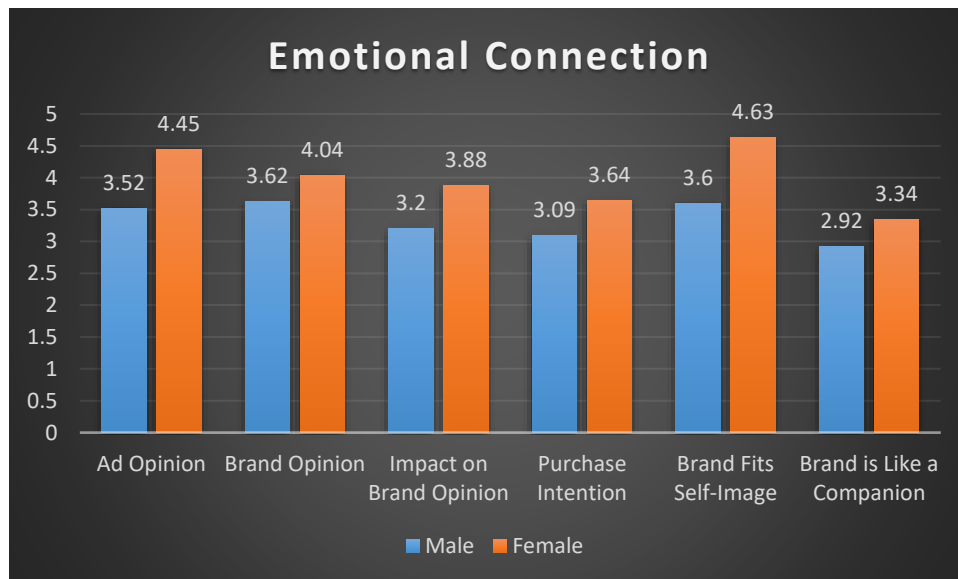
Graph 1: Product and Services

The analysis of commercial content revealed that personal care products were the most prominently advertised, appearing in more than a quarter of the commercials. Following closely, food products accounted for 14.3% of advertisements, while household products ranked third at 12.7%. Services and alcoholic beverages were nearly equally represented, each appearing in 9.4% of the commercials. The remaining eight product or service categories had a minimal presence, each featuring in less than 9% of the advertisements. Notably, women were significantly underrepresented in sports-related product commercials, appearing in only 1.6% of such ads.

The study found that rational appeals dominated television advertising, appearing in 39.6% of commercials, particularly for household and personal care products. Emotional appeals were used in 29% of ads, most commonly promoting alcoholic beverages and food. Meanwhile, a hybrid approach combining both intellectual and emotional appeals was employed in 31.4% of commercials, with personal care products being the most frequently advertised in this category. These findings highlight distinct advertising strategies based on product type, with rational appeals favoring practicality, emotional appeals targeting desires, and blended approaches catering to both logic and sentiment.

Numerous advertisements promote unrealistic beauty standards by encouraging upward social comparison, reinforcing harmful cumulative effects, and distorting perceptions of ideal body image. These ads often mislead women and girls by associating products even those unrelated to beauty—with unattainable physical ideals. For instance, Veet cream claims to deliver youthful, moisturized skin in just three minutes, while brands like Complian health drink, Sani Fresh toilet cleaner, Slice Amsutra, Sunfeast Dark Fantasy biscuits, Tide detergent, Philips iron, and TVS Wego feature unnaturally slim models, despite having no connection to beauty or body image. Such portrayals reinforce a narrow, standardized

ideal of attractiveness, shaping public perception and exacerbating body image insecurities among women.



Graph 2: Emotional Connection Metrics.

Female respondents who were exposed to female empowerment advertisements expressed significantly more positive attitudes toward the ads and brands, as well as higher purchase intentions, confirming previous research findings that most women have purchased a product because the ad featured a positive portrayal of women.

To be honest, women are no more or less susceptible to advertising's impacts than any other group. Indeed, 'studies have proven the many, often extremely subtle, and empowering pleasures that women, as individuals or as members of interpretive communities, obtain from commercial texts, even those that appear to operate against their interests.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore women's perceptions of female representations in advertisements, revealing three central themes tied to distinct perspectives. These themes highlighted portrayals that either devalued or idealized women, often framed within a modern context. Additionally, the research sought to examine whether women engage in self-comparison with advertising models and how they perceive these depictions to influence them. The findings demonstrated that participants not only compared themselves to the endorsers in ads but also reported adverse psychological effects, including increased feelings of depression and anxiety, due to exposure to idealized advertising imagery.

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