

Representation of Woman in Indian Advertisements: A Study

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ABSTRACT

This research article explores the complex and often controversial portrayal of women in Indian advertisements. Traditionally, advertisements have commodified the female body, using it as a marketing tool to appeal to the subconscious desires of consumers—especially in a society with deeply rooted cultural values and gender norms. From kitchen appliances to cosmetics, women's bodies have frequently been objectified, reinforcing stereotypical roles and beauty standards. This objectification not only undermines the identity and dignity of women but also contributes to broader societal issues such as gender inequality and the normalization of harmful attitudes. However, recent trends suggest a shift in the representation of women in advertising, where evolving depictions are beginning to reflect more equitable cultural values and a broader understanding of women's roles in society. The article critically examines whether advertisements are shaping culture or merely reflecting it, while also highlighting the responsibility of media creators in influencing public perception and social norms.

KEYWORDS: woman, Indian advertisements, consumers, objectification, culture

Woman has been an essential *thing* for most of the advertisement makers. It is but obvious that the sole purpose of any advertisement is to sell a product. So *anyhow* human brain is attacked; preferably subconscious mind. India being a country of close culture, advertise makers are exploiting suppressed desires and fantasies of a common man to run their business. But in that business of billions social values and culture promoted through advertisements are severely harming our cultural values. Advertisements are setting not only parameters for concept of beauty for a woman; they are reinforcing stereotype roles for a woman too. The representation of woman or culture displayed in advertisements put forth questions: whether advertisements are fashioning a culture or showing contemporary culture? Or whatever culture, tradition or values demonstrated during advertisements are genuinely real? It is said that making of advertisements requires outstanding creative ability and sharp sense of projection of idea, then why most of the time sensuality is used unreasonably? Whether the product is related to woman or not *She is presented in almost all kinds of ads in the form of an object or decoration!* It will be wrong to state that woman is ruling advertising world, in fact woman's body is used for selling product and

it is creating dangerous impact on society. We are still struggling with gender inequality, and the kind of objectification of woman practiced in the advertisements, poses grave concerns. They are instigating criminal activities against woman. Most of the commercials of deodorants, cosmetics and ornaments are objectifying woman's body. And unfortunately, it sells. Now let use look at few advertisements.

In India even pressure cookers are compared with woman's body 'Chandan sa badan' (Hawkins <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7rtNiPHGnq8>)¹, and people have never objected that thought. Even the bottle of Parachute body lotion is shaped in woman's figure! There is no exaggeration in saying that any how or any way body of woman is sold under the veil of a product. But in last couple of years there is remarkable shift observed in representation of woman in advertisement. Now, stereotype roles and responsibilities of a woman which have been considered to be *her* only and not of family or spouse is being taken to appropriate direction. Many aspects of woman's life which have been neglected since years in the name of traditional cultural values are being re-thought of and presented in such a way that the idea projected through advertisement is adding

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value to the product and providing appropriate place or space to woman too. Or it may be said that advertisements are showing change in cultural values of contemporary society. But the good point is; at least the change has started on television and other popular media.

Thus, present research examines a paradigm shift in representation of woman in addition to objectification of woman in Indian commercials. As a result, this article consists an interesting study in the established projection of woman in advertisements.

Advertisement plays an important role in promotion of a product and building a powerful brand. To serve this purpose, companies hire advertisers whose responsibility is to make advertisement in such an effective manner so that companies can achieve their desired target in revenue generation. For this, advertisers appeal to the emotions, desires, temptations and fantasy of consumers. As a result of that, we see adoption of various strategic approaches like sexual fantasy, emotions, humor etc. in making advertisement effective. Advertisers present any one out of these approaches in such a way so that they can successfully reach to their targeted consumer in the market. So they are profusely using and promoting set patriarchal norms by showing woman in her stereotype roles; wife, girlfriend, home maker, daughter, daughter-in-law. If at all a woman is representing a professional, she will be shown as a super woman balancing both, home and work (Oriflame).

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VJRALnKJhO0>)². So, this is how male domination is promoted. Moreover, if the product is not related to woman, still she will be projected as an object or as a decorative piece.

Objectification of Woman in Advertising:

A large chunk of commercials display woman unnecessarily half naked to sell the product. She is either projected as an object as she is shown in commercials for deodorant for man or she is projected as a decorative object as in male undergarments (Amul Macho) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bqDrWXxfBz8>)³. Women's sexualisation and objectification has remained a common practice. As it is rightly said that the advertisement sales more than just a product. But this strategic idea of generating revenue is clutching or suffocating human dignity in its giant claws and infusing filthy dirt in human minds.

Kellogg's Corn flakes: Here, in this ad a woman eats Kellogg's because she wants to lose weight so that she can dance in a wedding ceremony. In this ad it is

emphasized that only thin women can be considered to have a 'Perfect body'. Thus, it shows that such advertisement advocates physical standards for women which are almost unattainable for them. Moreover, many advertisements of edible oil, or snacks are made for woman only as if fitness is the criteria or parameters for woman only! And funnily, almost all the bathing soaps are advertised by woman only and for woman's skin only; that ridiculously suggestive of woman's bad odour and also beauty standards for woman. In addition, woman needs to be seen under age, maintain figure and beauty of skin as the idea promulgated in Santoor soap. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a1IWGPmInak>)⁴ (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m41KzR5eVBo>) (soap ads)⁵



Addiction Deodorant: This ad shows that women are getting attracted to men just by few puffs of deodorant. This ad is utterly ridiculous and derogatory for women. Here woman are just considered as a sex object. Besides, in most of the advertisements of ornaments woman has been objectified by focussing camera more on body parts than a complete person. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Fn0ecHHmOk>)⁶



Book my bai.com Ad: This ad is humiliating for all of them who are working as domestic help. This ad is a complete disregard for women's identity as it clearly depicts woman as an object. (https://www.google.com/search?q=bookmybai&rlz=1C1CHBF_en&source=lnms&tbn=isch&sa=X&ved=

2ahUKEwjLza7Yq6DvAhW683MBHTWTBs4Q_AUoAnoECBIQBA&biw=1366&bih=568#imgsrc=PNmLA0xJnP1mbM⁷

Nando's Ad: The ad Nando's is the worst form of objectification where various body part of a chicken is prescribed exploiting male's fantasy for woman's body.

<https://www.boomlive.in/chicken-and-babe-the-trials-of-being-a-woman-in-india/>⁸



Thus, most of the advertisements are made to convince consumers to buy products by provoking suppressed emotions, or by heightening the consumer's feelings and thereby, leading them into an unreal world of fantasy. In order to achieve the aim of revenue generation, women are utilized and objectified to sell almost all the products ranging from soaps to super luxurious cars. They have been stereotypically presented as an inferior to man whose major role is to act as a homemaker or sensuous object. In the name of marketing, advertisers present women in such an unethical way in advertisements so that it appears that sole purpose of women's existence is to be consumed visually by male in his subconscious mind..

These advertisements are seriously raising questions: are we consumers only or citizens too? And why are we not reacting or raising our strong protest against objectification of our counterparts? Are these the cultural values of the society we want to live with? Advertisement is a powerful tool for expanding business. But does it mean society should allow this kind of projection of woman's body?

This stigma - objectification of women in advertising world does exist across the world in almost all cultures. Even though, the feminist across the world have made efforts to prevent derogation of women's image in advertising world over the period of many years, women are still being projected as inferior and an object to arouse sensuality among viewers. Women are inevitable part of ad world but they are projected as if their worth is confined to sexual

pleasure only. Besides, this objectification of women completely neglects other intellectual capabilities of a woman. This practice of advertisers must be stopped. It is creating unhealthy society. Recently, there remarkable shift in advertisements is observed. In this vast jungle of unhealthy practices of advertise makers, there are few creative persons (advertise makers) who have started to sell their products presenting woman as a woman.

Woman: As a Woman in Advertising:



Now the commercialization has shown a different trend in the advertising. As now, woman has been treated equally by some advertisers. They are projected as a breathing human-being. The trend might not be considered to be supportive of feminism, but now in many advertisements women are shown as a woman with soul. The practice may be started because now women have a decisive role to play in purchase as she is earning too or may be due to change in culture, whatever may be the reason, a positive and noticeable change has started. Let's examine some of the advertisements: Ad of Nirma washing powder

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Cy7-5iKRf0>⁹



has shown for the first time woman coming out of the stereotypes and showing strength at least on screen. Otherwise women are shown as sexy and beautiful models which can be used for the marketing of soaps as if only women are expected to wash herself! And

cosmetics or fairness creams to make woman sick or to spread beauty sickness! But gradually, advertising industry is also making thoughtful advertisement to provide right place to woman in the society. The ad made by Havells fan (Hawa badlegi) is a thought provoking ad. Here, a man shows his willingness to adopt surname of her would be wife. In a way this concept goes with Hawa badlegi, where two ideas are presented: 1. since centuries, women are bound to change their name and surname after marriage but none has thought of changing name or surname of would be husband 2. male need to change their perception or male domination must be questioned on every point to make a better and healthy society. No one dare to challenge set tradition even if the tradition is baseless or useless. This ad can be considered very creative presentation of thought! This ad is breaking stereotypes, and thus a small step to present a woman as woman and respecting womanhood. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r4Ix2_-_-sg¹⁰



One of the realistic observation is: women are confined to parameters marketed through ads, only fair skin is considered to be beautiful. Advertisements are setting standards for most of the aspects of life affecting a woman. Though the models are made and their beauty is constructed and fake. They are so artificial that many times not only common consumers/customers but even the models themselves wished to be like the same as they are displayed. These women models are not naturally video-graphed they are photo-shopped models. As a result, woman themselves start to believe that they are supposed to look thin, lean with shiny skin and hair, if they cannot attain any of this goal, she will feel frustrated. So there was a need of promoting dark skin too so that all skin type woman can enjoy social acceptance. Even Dove soap has started adding practical value to advertisement instead of focussing only on fair and glowing skin with the tagline: *Stop the Beauty Test* where the idea of acceptance of a woman as woman is

promoted.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jEpTa2cMI_I¹¹

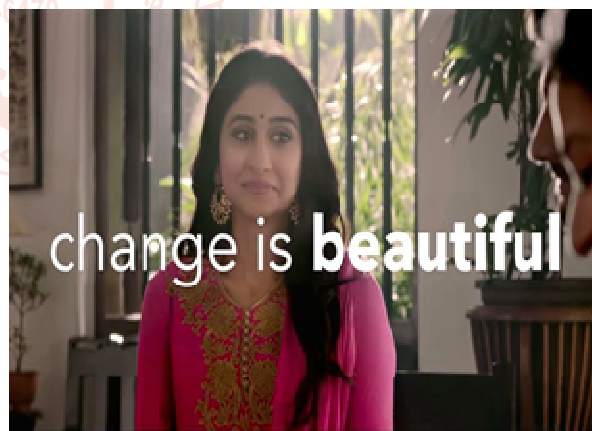
Even Fair and Lovely fairness cream has to change its brand name as Glow and Lovely.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ol_PAbSJTWc¹²

May be due to certain intellectual campaign like propagated by Nandita Das.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mo3ZJymnsRw>¹³

The projection of woman in advertisement put forth serious concern like: beauty is only related to skin type or skin colour, or shiny hair and thin figure only? Dr. Engeln, a professor of psychology and a body image researcher, has name this as an *Epidemic of beauty sickness* where she has rightly pointed out that girls grow up with the notion that most important attribute of a woman is beauty. Practically, this thought definitely distracts her from more important aspects of life. Dr. Engeln has put forward a workable solution to practical problems of the world when she said that, “what it might be like to live in a world where women feel free to spend less time in front of the mirror and more time changing the world.” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=63XsokRPV_Y)¹⁴ Just imagine a world where women are wasting less time in artificiality of beauty and investing more time in creative aspects of life. Thoughtfully, this world will become more lovable and liveable.



Biba (a clothing brand) has also started giving voice to feeling of a woman. Here, the advertise makers have challenged the idea of selecting husband after meeting him for few minutes. Secondly, father figure supports daughter's willingness. That is a giant leap from the old traditional reign of patriarchy to freedom of woman's mind and soul.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aS_wwC8P12I¹⁵

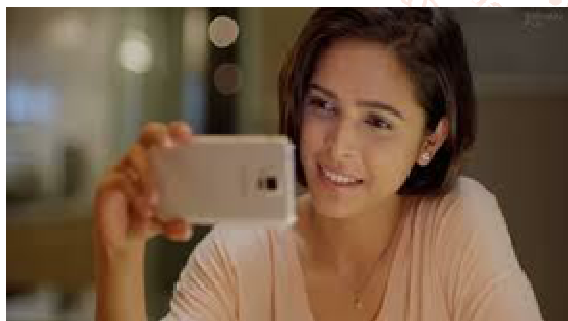
Similarly, Ariel washing powder has come up with a question- are we teaching our sons what we have been teaching our daughters? Or is laundry only

woman's job?
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8QDlv8kfwIM>¹⁶
 In addition, Ghadi detergent has played prolific role while working on 'is holi sare man ka mael dho dalo' ad where the girl is wisely reacting to teasing.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Dlqpuh9xAg>¹⁷
 (Gadi detergent)



Besides, many traditional advertisements show man giving advice to female but now there is a new trend where woman is giving advice man in decision making (Amazon Pay/LIC). Somehow advertise makers are contributing to breaking stereotypes and infusing gender equality and thus building healthy society.

Again Audi (a luxurious car brand) is introducing women driver in Saudi Arabia that also challenges set tradition of the country and the society with a tag line- *It's time to open new doors!*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=shLKAN2a6fw>(Audi)¹⁸



Airtel mobile network
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1MBkgLDZQVI>⁹
 has come up with the idea of wife boss and husband working under her. That also challenges set male domination where male ego of a husband do not permit him to work under his own wife. It is unanimously acceptable that a wife celebrates her husband's win but a husband can not tolerate if his wife is more talented than him. That is why, this advertisement is a constructive beginning towards equality and breaking stereotypes. The reason behind making this thoughtful advertisement may be evolution of gender role in the society however the

thought is good enough to challenge traditional structures of gender hierarchy.



Again, remarkable ad by Reebok
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Qf2CdoElcc>²⁰
 that has naturally revealed Indian social psyche when they saw bruises on the body of a woman. Interestingly, all persons notwithstanding their gender, were thinking on the same line. If a woman is bruised that means she has been beaten by her husband or by family. No one can think of woman wrestler who loves bruises. Here also the advertise makers have interestingly propagated the idea of a strong woman. Again breaking stereotypes! 1

Findings:

1. Advertising in popular media clearly contributes to gender inequality by promoting sexism. They are not only distorting image of woman but also validating this image as ideal and acceptable. The study of selected advertisements have posed certain questions like: Has the woman representation in advertisement changing over time? Or does it confirm to some of the traditional notions about woman and their role in society? Therefore investigation in sexualisation of woman and the portrayal of gender continues to generate thought-provoking findings.
2. Many advertisements are also reinforcing gender role in the society. Women were shown in the home with greater frequency than men. Woman is shown working in the kitchen or trying to balance work and home and is tagged as super woman, again reinforcement of larger than life ideal and ignoring male counterpart's or other family member's role in household chores or shouldering other responsibilities of a home.
3. Beauty is a construct. A value system focused on external beauty trivializes the rest of the attributes of an individual. Looks may lead to woman developing issues with body image and self esteem.
4. Teen aged girls who watched television ads using appeals that featured sex, beauty and youth as selling points were more likely to believe that

beauty is power so they start living in continuous pressure to remain thin, young and beautiful.

5. But fortunately this notion of beauty has been challenged as shown in the recent ad of Dove. In present scenario, the social concept of beauty is also changing. It is observed that female in advertising is expected to be young thin, and fair. But now the trend is changing with the idea of beauty too.
6. In last few decades a visible change has been observed in culture. There are more nuclear families. Woman is working and shouldering economic responsibilities of her home besides household chores. As she is contributing in economic gain, she has earned a right in taking her stand in economic cycle. Subsequently, she can take decision in purchase. So the trending of woman role in advertisement is also changing.
7. A Socio-cultural change is clearly visible in recent advertisements. Earlier advertisement shows traditional role of a woman. A woman who cannot take a small decision of buying a pressure cooker. She is shown to be completely dependent on her husband. (Prestige <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9USFqhWgkQE>).²¹ But as now, women participation in economy is increasing, woman's choice is affecting giant auto industry too.
8. Gender equality is propagated and promoted by some of the advertise maker like *Share the load* campaign of Areal washing powder or *Are we teaching our sons what we have been teaching to our daughters?*
9. In traditional advertisements men were more likely to give advice to women but recent advertisements show woman giving advice to man.

Suggestions:

- Advertisements create dangerous effect on society so it is our collective responsibility to be citizen rather than consumers only.
- European countries have provided guidelines on gender equality and portrayals in the media. India can also initiate in regulating projection of woman in media and promote gender equality through commercials. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/596839/IPOL_STU\(2018\)596839_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2018/596839/IPOL_STU(2018)596839_EN.pdf).²²
- If Advertisement can reinforce a cultural history to determine worth, particularly woman's worth, in the same way they can also create better and

healthy society by breaking stereotypes and focussing more on educating society on gender equality.

- Media literacy should be promoted.
- It is noteworthy here that Indian government has initiated a positive use of advertisement to educate and propagate anti-dowry act. The same can be implemented for respecting woman too. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TI9RmUFxZ4c>²³



Conclusion:

The discussion reveals hard facts related to human tendencies which need to be addressed with stern rules, regulations and education. Advertisements have played considerable role in deconstructing and distorting image of women. So this is the right time to collectively shouldering responsibility of making our society healthy and liveable by becoming human than mere consumers; becoming more responsive towards our surroundings and rethink on our attitude.

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