



# WOMEN IN ADVERTISING AND BRANDING: AN EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS OF REPRESENTATION AND CONSUMER PERCEPTION

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## Abstract

Women are important in advertising and branding not just as models featured in campaigns but also as symbolic conveyors of brand identity and cultural meaning. From passive domesticity to obvious objectification, their portrayal has historically depended on reductive stereotypes that support gender expectations. But growing social attitudes, feminist debate, and heightened consumer knowledge are transforming the advertising environment. Based on insights from both visual content and consumer perceptions, this study seeks to empirically examine the current depiction of women in Indian advertising and branding. Adopted a mixed methods methodology, categorizes portrayals of women into three main

archetypes: empowered, objectified, and neutral. Results show that brand reputation and customer participation are positively connected with empowered representations of women—especially in progressive stories or leadership positions. On the other hand, objectified images generate negative responses, particularly among female viewers, therefore influencing brand loyalty and emotional reaction.

Ultimately, this research highlights the need of gender sensitive marketing in influencing brand equity and public opinion. The results call for more sophisticated and ethical representations of women, so matching brand messaging with current societal values and moral standards. This work uses empirical methods to investigate how women are portrayed in advertising, their concordance with gender expectations, and how customer perceptions of products are affected.

Advertising and branding are potent instruments for influencing public opinion in the complex world of consumer marketing. Women have always held a major—yet sometimes problematic—role among the several identities represented in

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this sphere. The portrayal of women in advertising reflects and influences wider cultural standards, from vintage print advertisements that cast women in domestic roles to modern digital campaigns celebrating empowerment. As more and more businesses attempt to appeal to a variety of customers, the depiction of women has changed from a simple cosmetic option to a strategic choice with effects for brand equity, trust, and customer loyalty. While some strive to fit feminist ideals and progressive ideas, other advertisements persist in pushing stereotypes that restrict women's agency. This contradiction begs critical issues about why these representations exist and how they shape viewers' perception.

The present study seeks to examine the evolving function of women in Indian advertising by stressing empirical assessment using content analysis and consumer response. Rather than just how women are represented, the goal is to see how those portrayals affect brand perception in a socially dynamic and more feminist-aware market.

### Background of the Study

For decades, scholarly and activist arguments have been about how women are portrayed in media. Some academics, like Jean Kilbourne (1999), have argued that advertising is a mirror that both reflects and reinforces social norms—sometimes to the detriment of gender equality. Gender presentation in advertising varies depending on cultural, political, and financial setting throughout the world; India provides a particularly rich case study given its mix of tradition and creativity.

Long associated in Indian advertising with ideas of caregiving, beauty, and moral virtue, female imagery has been fueled by changing consumer expectations, female economic participation, and the emergence of social media as a counter platform for criticism and empowerment, this symbolic framing has evolved in recent years. Brands of today have difficulty balancing cultural sensitivity with a generation seeking genuineness and representation.

Concurrent feminist movements, lobbying initiatives, and scholarly critique have inspired more inclusive marketing strategies. Always demonstrate a movement toward complex storytelling



that challenges gender stereotypes through activities such Ariel's ShareTheLoad effort and LikeAGirl. Still, these instances remain anomalies rather than the norm, especially in sectors like personal care and fashion where utopian and hyper feminized representations are prevalent. This study is therefore motivated by a need to know if Indian advertising is actually changing or merely using outdated clichés with current cosmetics. By analysing a range of advertisements and polling consumer reactions, this study aims to provide data-driven insight of the complex relationship between gender depiction and brand engagement.

### Literature Review

A comprehensive review of prior studies highlights several recurring themes:

This research arises from a need to establish if Indian advertising is

Kilbourne, J. (1999), *Deadly persuasion: Why women and girls are vulnerable to advertising* argues that advertising perpetuates damaging and hypersexualized images of women, contributing to a cultural landscape that normalizes objectification and emotional harm. She underlines the mental toll of unattainable

beauty norms and stresses the need of ethical change in media communication.

Gill, R. 2007. *Polity Press* examines the paradox of postfeminist media, in which women are depicted as strong yet hypersexualized. Her examination of advertising and popular culture shows how consumer capitalism adopts feminist language to support patriarchal ideas under cover of empowerment.

Through meta analysis, Eisend shows that gender stereotyping in marketing has gotten more nuanced but still exists. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 38(4), 418–440.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s117470090181x>, Eisend, M. (2010). He gives empirical proof that although blatant sexism is fading, conventional roles remain strong particularly in product-specific situations.

Visual semiotics analyze how advertising uses pose, gaze, and size to depict gendered power dynamics, Goffman, E. (1979). *Harvard University Press*. He came to the conclusion that even modest signals reinforce unequal social systems by encoding societal rules of subordination and domination.

Using a postfeminist perspective, Sengupta, R., Desai, A., and Malhotra, N. (2021) criticize Indian advertising for



being selectively progressive. Asian Journal of Communication, 31(6), 572–590.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/01292986.2021.1947421>, Empowerment is occasionally tokenized for brand value instead of social transformation. While traditional media are typically risk averse, digital platforms are more experimental.

Though centered on male iconography, the framework elucidates contrasting portrayals of femininity and its employment in brand differentiation. Their investigation of branding and masculinity shows how profoundly symbolic gendered representation in media is.

McGrawHill Education's ninth edition, this book examines basic advertising and consumer psychology from an integrated marketing communications standpoint. It lends weight to the idea that consumer confidence and brand affinity result from authenticity and emotional resonance, especially in varied gender depictions.

Duffy, B. E.; Hund, E. 2015. Having it all on social media: Entrepreneurial femininity and self-branding among fashion bloggers. Social Media + Society say that under the banner of "authentic branding," influencer culture on social media enhances idealized femininity. Their

research reveals how self-representation on venues like Instagram sometimes strengthens commercial clichés instead of contesting them.

Sheehan, K. B. (2013). Controversies in contemporary advertising. SAGE Publications, covers the ethical issues included in modern advertising. From gender sensitivity to cultural appropriation, her work stresses the need of balancing commercial appeal with responsible representation.

Bhatia, T. (2018). Advertising in urban India: Language, identity and media. Routledge. This ethnographic study offers a glimpse into how middleclass Indians interpret gendered advertising; it reveals that ambitious images—such as the perfect mother or career woman—are contextual dependent and molded by consumer class expectations.

Kang, M. (1997). Reflecting or reinforcing stereotypes? The portrayal of women in advertising: Analysis of visual media confirms that women are regularly used as decorative elements, especially in commercial advertising, Women and Language, 20(1), 3–9. Her study wants structural change in creative direction and gender parity on media planning teams.



In their research of viewer attitudes toward sex role stereotyping in advertising, Ford, J. B., LaTour, M. S., and Lundstrom, W. J. (1991) Their studies showed that companies using such techniques saw a credibility erosion and consumer disconnect, especially among socially progressive consumers.

The use of women as core narrators in brand stories is shown in this research, Plakoyiannaki, E.; Mathioudaki, K.; and Pich, C., 2019. *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, 28(6), 753–769. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JPBM0220181766>; this study demonstrates how dramatically audience trust and emotional involvement are increased when women are seen as informed, credible communicators.

## Research Methodology

### Research Design

Using a mixed-methods approach, this study combines qualitative and quantitative techniques to give a thorough picture of how women are portrayed in advertising. The design incorporates:

- Content analysis of commercials to fairly classify depictions of women.

- Surveys help us to gauge consumer reaction to these portrayals.

By drawing insights from both media artifacts and audience interpretations, this strategy guarantees methodological triangulation and increases the validity of results.

### Sample and Population

**Population:** Indian consumers aged 18–45 across urban and semi-urban areas; all mainstream advertisements by top Indian consumer brands from January 2023 to May 2025; print advertisements, TV commercials, and social media campaigns (Instagram and YouTube).

**Sample:** 250 participants chosen employing stratified random sampling guarantees regional and gender representation. Demographics tracked: primary media consumption platform; income range; education level; age; gender.

### Approaches of Gathering Data

An organized coding sheet was created to classify portrayals into three categories: Empowered (e.g., women in leadership or skill-based jobs), objectified (e.g.,





emphasis on appearance or sexual appeal), Neutral/Passive (e.g., background roles or nonverbal cues). Two independent researchers hand-coded the results, achieving an intercoder reliability of 91%. Likert scale statements included in a structured questionnaire assessing: Brand perception (trust, credibility, appeal), Emotional response to ad portrayal and Perceived realism and authenticity. Contains open-ended and closed questions to elicit subtle responses.

### Hypotheses

H1: Empowering representations of women in ads are favourably connected with brand trust and consumer involvement.

H2: Objectified portrayals are adversely correlated with perceived brand authenticity and emotional resonance.

H3: Representation's effects vary among industries and population categories.

### Methods and Analytical Tools

Quantitative Analysis: Carried out using SPSS includes Descriptive statistics, Correlation tests, Independent t-tests, Regression modeling to find predictors of brand perception

Qualitative analysis: Thematic coding of open-ended responses to find repeating themes including empowerment, relatability, and backlash. Comparative research by gender, media platform, and business sector.

Cronbach's Alpha was determined for survey scales to indicate great internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.88$ ).

### Data Analysis and Interpretation

#### Content Analysis: Media

#### Representation of Women

A total of 100 advertisements from Indian brands (2023–2025) were analysed across various platforms—TV, print, and digital. Each ad was coded based on women's portrayal into three categories: Empowered, Objectified, *and* Neutral.

#### Distribution of Portrayal Types

| Portrayal Type  | Frequency | Percentage |
|-----------------|-----------|------------|
| Empowered       | 44        | 44%        |
| Objectified     | 28        | 28%        |
| Neutral/Passive | 28        | 28%        |

Source: Primary Data

- Empowered portrayals were dominant in sectors like finance (ICICI, HDFC), education, and



technology (Infosys, Tata Consultancy). Common themes included leadership, problem-solving, and autonomy.

- Objectified portrayals appeared most frequently in beauty and fashion ads, where women were depicted with an emphasis on physical appeal, passive postures, and minimal speech.
- Neutral roles, often in household product ads, featured women in domestic settings without overt empowerment or objectification.
- Inter-coder Reliability - Cohen's Kappa = 0.91, indicating high consistency in categorization.

### Survey Data: Consumer Perceptions and Emotional Impact

The survey comprised 250 respondents aged 18–45. Analysis focused on how ad portrayals influence brand trust, emotional response, and purchase intention.

### Descriptive Statistics Overview

| Variable                           | Mean (M) | Standard Deviation (SD) |
|------------------------------------|----------|-------------------------|
| Brand trust (Empowered ads)        | 4.32     | 0.71                    |
| Brand trust (Objectified ads)      | 2.91     | 0.88                    |
| Emotional engagement (Empowered)   | 4.15     | 0.65                    |
| Emotional engagement (Objectified) | 2.73     | 0.81                    |
| Purchase intention (Neutral ads)   | 3.21     | 0.74                    |

Source: Primary Data

Scale used: 1 (Very Low) to 5 (Very High)

### Inferential Statistics:

### Correlation Analysis

The researcher tested the linear relationships between portrayal type and brand trust:

| Variables                                | Correlation Coefficient ( <i>r</i> ) | Significance ( <i>p</i> ) |
|--|--------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Empowered portrayal & Brand trust        | 0.62                                 | < .01                     |
| Objectified portrayal & Negative emotion | −0.44                                | < .05                     |

Source: Primary Data

### Interpretation:

- A strong positive correlation exists between empowered portrayals and brand trust.
- A moderate negative correlation indicates objectification is linked to emotional backlash, particularly among female viewers.

### Independent Sample *t*-Test



Examining gender-based differences in response to objectified portrayals:

- Mean brand trust (male viewers): 3.28
- Mean brand trust (female viewers): 2.54
- $t(248) = 3.21, p < .05$

Female participants rated brands significantly lower when exposed to objectifying portrayals of women.

### Multiple Regression Analysis

A predictive model was developed to evaluate the influence of portrayal type and demographics on brand trust,  $R^2 = 0.47$  (47% variance explained) and  $F(3, 246) = 21.39, p < .001$

### Model Summary:

| Predictor           | Beta ( $\beta$ ) | Significance |
|---------------------|------------------|--------------|
| Empowered portrayal | 0.59             | < .001       |
| Gender (female)     | -0.28            | < .05        |
| Age group (18–25)   | 0.21             | < .05        |

Source: Primary Data

### Insights:

- Empowered portrayal is the strongest predictor of brand trust.

- Younger participants responded more positively to empowering themes.
- Women were more sensitive to gender portrayals, affecting overall trust ratings.

### Interpretation

The findings provide strong support for the study's hypotheses:

- **H1 Supported:** Ads featuring empowered women significantly increase brand trust, particularly among younger, urban consumers who value realism and leadership representation.
- **H2 Supported:** Objectified portrayals elicit negative emotional reactions, especially among female viewers. These portrayals reduce brand authenticity and result in lower purchase intention.
- **H3 Partially Supported:** Sectoral differences were evident. Tech and finance industries lean toward empowerment, while lifestyle and fashion often employ stereotypical depictions. However, some brands are beginning to challenge this





divide with more inclusive narratives.

### Thematic Trends

Respondents described empowered ads as: “Authentic,” “Refreshing,” “Progressive,” “Relatable”

Objectified portrayals were labeled: “Superficial,” “Outdated,” “Disrespectful,” “Irrelevant”

Emerging preferences include: Women as entrepreneurs, mentors, creators—reflecting aspirations beyond beauty.

### Findings of the study:

Empowered portrayals—women shown as leaders, professionals, decision makers—comprised 44% of analysed advertisements. Objectified portrayals (focusing on physical appeal or passive presence) were present in 28% of ads—mostly in fashion and lifestyle sectors. Neutral portrayals, usually domestic or background roles, accounted for another 28%.

Consumer Reaction to Several Representations: Empowering portrayals favourably impacted purchase intent, brand trust, and emotional engagement.

Objectified portrayals led to lower emotional resonance, especially among female consumers, and negatively impacted perceived brand authenticity. Urban customers and millennials (18–25) were more accepting of progressive gender representations.

Strong positive association between empowered portrayals and brand trust:  $r = 0.62$ ,  $p < .01$ . Significant gender difference in response to objectified ads:  $t = 3.21$ ,  $p < .05$  (women reported more negative brand perceptions). Regression study revealed empowered portrayal to be the most important predictor of brand trust ( $\beta = .59$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Leading in empowered representation were finance, technology, and education sectors; fashion and beauty businesses relied on conventional or objectified portrayals. Some companies demonstrated changing approaches, merging cultural sensitivity with contemporary values.

Qualitative feedback showed that respondents linked empowered depictions with traits including genuineness, relatability, and progressiveness. Objectified depictions were characterized as superficial, stereotyped, and old-fashioned. A definite change in customer preference was noted toward



companies that reflect real-life aspirations and reject gender prejudice.

### Suggestions:

Make empowered representation top priority by including women in leadership, innovation, and decision-making. Steer clear of depictions that center only on physical features or inactive expressions. Highlight talent, intelligence, and emotional fortitude over clichés.

To match representation with current norms, perform sector-specific audits to contextualize Gender Sensitivity.

Use inclusive narrative methods. Consider women of various ages, ethnicities, body shapes, and employment. Highlight actual stories to create sympathy and emotional link. Encourage collaboration with female creators, influencers, and authors.

Assess and Keep an Eye on Consumer Attitude To assess audience reaction, employ tools like sentiment analysis and focus groups. Monitor changes in brand loyalty and trust related to ad campaigns featuring different female representations.

Invest in Internal Gender Diversity Make sure creative teams and executive positions are balanced in gender. Create inclusive

settings where female voices impact brand messaging.

Use advertising as a forum for progressive social communication. Educate via responsible branding. Emphasize topics including education, entrepreneurship, and workplace equality via brand narratives.

Make sure that “empowerment” stories are genuine and backed by brand policies; avoid performative empowerment. Steer clear of tokenism; concentrate instead on depth and continuity in representation, not trend-driven portraits.

As a strategic asset, support Empowered Portrayals; statistically, advertisements showing women in empowered, skill-based roles correlated to greater brand trust and purchase intent. Brands should consciously show women as creators, leaders, professionals, and business owners. Such portrayal is especially appealing to ethically aware consumers and increases believability.

Reduce objectification to safeguard brand equity; objectified depictions caused negative emotional reactions particularly among women. These depictions corresponded with diminished brand authenticity and even brand hatred. Creative groups have to critically analyse narrative and visual components that



overstress appearance or passive behaviour.

**Customize Messaging by Demographic Segments** In campaigns, include multiculturalism, intersectionality, and aspirational realism.

Sectors including finance, tech, and education deftly used empowered images. Fashion and beauty companies are advised to broaden character roles beyond traditional beauty. Utilize customer feedback loops to find changing expectations inside each industry.

**Encourage Representation Beyond the Ad Surface.** Organizations should exhibit empowerment—not only storytelling. In campaign development, include additional women creatives and strategists. Make sure behind-the-scenes variety reflects onscreen values.

Cooperate with genuine women (users, influencers, topic matter experts) to present lived experiences via brand stories; avoid manufactured empowering clichés devoid of content or continuity. Leverage authentic narratives and co-creation; customers connected authenticity with emotional involvement and relatability.

**Institutionalize Gender Sensitive Metrics.** Monitor ad effectiveness using gender specific KPIs (e.g., emotional impact by

gender, trust index). Include representation audits in campaign planning to pre-empt backlash and enhance social alignment. Use A/B testing to assess consumer reaction across different portrayal styles.

### Conclusion

The most noteworthy discovery is that consumers react favorably to strong female representations. It was discovered that advertisements with women in independent, professional, and leadership positions strengthened brand credibility and greatly improved viewers' emotional connection. Younger, urban populations that demand authenticity, diversity, and value-driven narratives from brands respond especially favorably to these representations. However, empowerment went beyond visuals to include voice, narrative depth, and contextual relevance, confirming that consumers place a higher value on substance than on surface symbolism.

On the other hand, representations that objectify or stereotype women—which are frequently found in ads for fashion, beauty, and lifestyle—caused negative responses. Such representations were seen as out of date and unrelated to the advancement of



society, exposing a serious discrepancy between audience expectations and brand identity. Furthermore, sector-wise variation shows that although sectors like technology, finance, and education are moving in the direction of progressive representation techniques, while others—especially those with an aesthetic consumerist foundation—lag behind in implementing inclusive storytelling. This disparity emphasizes the need for sector-specific reflection and adjustment to gender-sensitive branding structures.

The results highlight the larger cultural change that is taking place: audiences are no longer merely passive consumers of advertising. They are socially conscious, emotionally sensitive, and critical of how brands represent women in internal values and strategic intent as well as external communication. Therefore, gender representation is not merely a creative choice; it is also a business necessity, a means of fostering trust, and an example of ethical branding. The study demonstrates that consumer perceptions and brand performance are greatly impacted by the representation of women in advertising. Modern audiences are more receptive to brands that incorporate

empowered portrayals, especially in India's urban and semi-urban segments.

### Limitations of the Study

Despite the study's methodological rigor and insightful findings, several limitations must be acknowledged:

**Limited Media Sample: Just 100 print, television, and social media ads were examined in this study. Particularly when it comes to regional, vernacular, or niche brand campaigns, this sample might not accurately reflect the whole range of Indian advertising.**

**Geographic and Cultural Focus: Indians living in urban and semi-urban areas were the target audience for the consumer survey. The results' applicability to wider cultural contexts was limited by the exclusion of rural consumers and foreign audiences.**

**Survey Limitations: Self-reported responses could be influenced by social desirability bias, particularly when it comes to questions concerning emotional response and gender sensitivity. Likert-scale measures, which may not fully capture the depth of participants' complex thoughts, were the main tool used in the questionnaire.**



**Limited Sector Representation:** The fashion, finance, technology, and lifestyle sectors were the main subjects of the study's sectoral analysis. It's possible that sector-specific representation trends were overlooked by leaving out other industries like entertainment, agriculture, and public sector campaigns.

**Absence of Longitudinal Consumer Behaviour Tracking:** Although the study recorded immediate emotional and perceptual reactions, it did not evaluate long-term behavioural outcomes associated with female representation, such as brand advocacy, loyalty, or repeat purchases.

### Scope for Further Research

While the current study offers valuable insights into female representation in Indian advertising, several avenues remain open for deeper investigation:

Cultural differences can be found by broadening the study to include regional ads (such as those in Tamil, Bengali, and Marathi media). This could draw attention to disparate gender norms across linguistic and geographic divides.

Examine the long-term effects of gender representation on repeat business, brand advocacy, and consumer loyalty. To gauge ongoing engagement, use digital analytics and behavioral data.

Future studies can examine how female figures represent intersecting identities, including caste, class, religion, and disability. This helps brands avoid tokenism and gives inclusivity analysis more depth.

To compare representation practices, carry out parallel studies in other nations or regions (such as South Asia, the Middle East, or Western Europe). This could reveal regional issues with gender representation or universal themes.

Examine the differences in representation between traditional media (TV, newspapers) and social media platforms (Instagram, YouTube).

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