

The Commodification of Femininity: Representation of Women in Indian Advertisements and Its Impact on Visual Arts

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyze and critique of the commodified representation of women in advertisements in India and its impact on visual arts. In contemporary Indian media, advertisements function as powerful cultural texts that commodified women's identities, portraying them as objects of desire and consumption. This paper examines how these constructed representations influence visual arts, shaping cultural narratives and aesthetic practices. The commodification of femininity not only reinforces gender stereotypes but also generates a counter-response from visual artists who critique and deconstruct these images. Women are usually reduced to the status of commodities or products rather than fully formed people in the world of commercials, motion pictures, television shows and applied art. This objectification of women reduces her identity. Woman becomes a designed product for sale. The study examines how women are portrayed as objects of fantasy and want, fostering unattainable beauty standards, using visual analysis and cultural studies. By employing a mixed-method approach including visual content analysis of advertisements from 1990 to 2024. The findings reveal that while advertisements construct idealized feminine identities based on beauty, youth, and domesticity, many artists challenge these portrayals, offering alternative perspectives on femininity and agency. The study ultimately underscores the intersection between media, gender politics, and artistic resistance in contemporary Indian visual culture.

Keywords: Commodification, femininity, advertisements, visual arts, stereotypes.

Introduction:

Women's representation in advertisements has been a longstanding focus of research and feminist critique and has been a dynamic site for studying the construction and enactment of gender identity. Because advertisements are one of the most prominent visual cultures, they have a powerful ability to influence social understandings of femininity and often portray, affirm, and advance already solidified gender expectations. In a country like India, which is rich in cultural diversity and fast-moving media, advertisements are potent cultural objects that demonstrate cultural values while also doing the work of representing, enacting, and commissioning idealized representations of womanhood. Advertisements depict femininities that often commodify women as objects of desire, as passive consumers, and as symbols of perfection in domesticity. Advertisements play an active role in shaping cultural expectations and collective ideas.

This paper discusses the intricate relationship between women's representations in Indian advertisements and the effects they have on contemporary visual culture. More specifically, it seeks to examine how these representations are harnessed in advertisements in terms of shaping aesthetic practices and cultural narratives in the domain of art. In a globalized context where advertising has become wider and more elaborate as an outcome of new digital media, visual tropes of femininity have become more normalized in advertising. These tropes are evident beyond the traditional categories of beauty and fashion, ultimately creeping into the advertising of household goods, technology, and even financial services. Each of these categories carries a somewhat specific, often idealized, representation of women aimed to both engage consumers' desire and aspirations, as well as to appeal to ideals of social behaviors and norms. These representations, although ultimately serving a commercial purpose, contribute to cultural work, calling into their own negotiations of how femininity is visualized and constructed.

The significance of these representations is most relevant in the field of contemporary visual arts. Artists create, react to, and sometimes challenge the images of femininity shown in advertisements and media. For some of these artists, the advertisements of femininity are sources of inspiration or a reflection of societal norms, while for some, they become a place of resistance and reworking. Through analysis of particular advertisements and the practice of selected contemporary women artists, this study will unravel the relationship between commodified femininity in advertising and the images produced in visual arts, and will also examine how these representations are continued, resisted, or re-imagined through artistic practices, and what this says about changing cultural discourses of femininity.

The aim of this paper is to achieve a deeper understanding of the media landscape in India while making connections to global patterns of gendered representation. It draws attention to

the dual role of advertising as both cultural products and a force of influence and examines the ways that contemporary artists position themselves in response to such representations. In doing so, the research aims to harness visual culture to reveal the intricate ways that visual culture mediates and shapes social constructions of femininity while establishing relevance to both local and global audiences.

Methodology:

The methodology used in this article, titled "The Commodification of Femininity: Representation of Women in Indian Advertisements and Its Impact on Visual Arts," are collected from the secondary sources of data and visual content analysis. The secondary data includes books, journals, articles, periodicals and different websites and the visual content analysis of advertisements on television, print media and on digital platforms and artwork created by Indian women artists.

An Analytical Discussion on the Findings of the work:

The Construction of the Ideal Feminine Identity in Indian Advertising -

Advertising has always played a significant part in forming societal perceptions of femininity in India, limiting women to prescribed roles that uphold and reflect traditional ideas of gender. Historically, Indian advertisements can be understood as framing women within three dominant stereotypes, each perpetuating its own specific set of ideals and expectations for women:

A. Beauty and Youth: One of the most prominent themes in Indian advertising is the glorification of physical appearance, particularly with regards to valuing fair skin, slender body shapes, and youthfulness. The promotion of fairness and other beauty standards is rooted in Eurocentric beauty ideology, which India takes and perpetuates, largely through the media. The

cosmetics and skincare industry sells fairness creams and aging creams, both communicating that how women look, and specifically how women look physically, matters. Commercials advertise fairness creams, usually using fair-skinned women, suggesting a connection between lighter skin and beauty, success, and desirability



Figure 1: The Olay advertisement

(Munshi, 2012). This gendered discourse infantilizes women with darker complexions and continues to perpetuate a homogenous and restrictive ideal of beauty.

B. Domesticity and Nurturing Roles: Women as caregivers and household makers emerge as yet another recurrent theme in Indian advertisements. Household products like detergents, cooking oil, and baby care are depicted, predominantly, by women as they engage with the home and family in cooking, cleaning, and caring for children. These representations reinforce the stereotype of women's primary role as not just caregivers of family members, but as caregivers of the home, while also serving as tacit support for patriarchal values that women belong only in the private sphere (Ghosh, 2017). These representations serve to narrow women's identities and also support the devaluation of domestic labor, which has traditionally been rendered invisible and thus disposable.



*Powerful Suction
WITH
Elegant Design
FOR A HEALTHY & CLEAN KITCHEN*

BUY Chimney AKH 900 DB Turbo (1U) + PHTS 03 L AI
(1U) Worth ₹45,996.00* **₹27,995.00***
• A unique kitchen hood with Angular suction technology for better health and storage space
• 1000m/hr Turbo Suction Power

BUY Chimney AKH 900 CS PLUS (1U) + GTS 03 L AI
(1U) Worth ₹32,996.00* **₹20,995.00***
• Auto Clean by Heat Technology
• 1000m/hr Turbo Suction Power

BUY Chimney GKH 900 CS (1U)
Worth ₹14,995.00* **₹9,595.00***
• Baffle Filters for Long Life
• 850m/hr Turbo Suction Power

LIFETIME WARRANTY*

Prestige
*Jo apnon se kare pyaar, woh
Prestige se kaise kare inkaar.*

*Conditions apply. Offers valid on MRP Only. No two offers can be clubbed together. Offers on selected models until stocks last. Offers valid across select stores.

Prestige Xclusive Available at all Prestige Xclusive and leading outlets.

Figure 2: Prestige advertisement

C. Objectification and Sexualisation: Ads for luxury brands, cars, and alcohol often render women as visual objects who lack agency or individual characteristics. Women are consistently depicted as props to enhance the allure of the product being sold; this trope implies that women live to be gazed at by men and consumed, giving rise to the desirability of women as sexually-signified objects that lack agency, aspiration, or identity (Jha, 2020). Such representations are part of a larger media landscape entrenched in damaging gender archetypes, but also the commodification of women; women's bodies are treated as commodities.



Figure 3: The Slice advertisement

These advertising tropes not only sell products, but they also confer and shape cultural standards for judging women and how women are valued within society. While advertising produces and disseminates these idealized images of women, advertising produces visual codes that artists either choose to reproduce or abstain from reproducing in their work. This intersection of advertising and visual arts is a significant space of cultural production and cultural resistance.

Visual Arts as a Site of Resistance:

The aggressive use of images alongside power, together with the ideas of uniformity and commercialization of femininity in Indian advertising, has led to women artists being critical and resistant voices. The artists create alternative representations of femininity that defy the norms of representation by engaging different media, including painting, photography, performance art, and even new media. The following trends appear in this work:

- A. Deconstruction of Beauty Norms:** Many artists have made evident the narrow and exclusive beauty norms prevalent in advertisements and other representations. Pushpamala N., a prominent Indian artist, effectively uses photography as a way of distorting beauty norms of the commercial art world. In her photographic series "Native Women of South India," Pushpamala is deliberately parodying beauty norms in colonial visual Perspective, by represent in through her own portraiture as a

colonial being and the humorous playfulness of the instability of indices of visual representations of Indian women. By reductively remaking such images into laughing, Pushpamala unpacks the validities of beauty norms. In Pushpamala's work, beauty appears as a socially accepted ideal that informs beauty standards is not the universal value of an obvious social system.



Figure 4: An installation art by Pushpamala N.

B. Critiquing Domesticity: Another major theme in contemporary Indian art is the critique of domesticity and the additional burden of a gendered division of labor. Artists like Mithu Sen and Nalini Malani are working on exploring these issues in their mixed media and installations, emphasizing the invisibility and, therefore, undervaluing of women's domestic labor. In many of Sen's works, she chooses to utilize everyday objects tied to domesticity like kitchen utensils, cleaning tools etc and personalizes them through her own digging to study this repetitive work that women do. Similarly, Malani has worked recently to study the limitations wrought by patriarchal structures through her installations in the form of fragmented and surreal imagery that considers some sort of psychological, emotional, etc., suffering (Gupta, 2015). Essentially, through their work, these artists are breaking down the assumption of the construction and possibility of someone being 'naturally' or 'inevitably' designated a woman and the different role assumed thus, and even before we enter 'domesticity'.



Figure 5: An installation Art by Nalini Malani

C. Reclaiming the Female Body: Performance art has emerged as an incredibly powerful medium for reclaiming the female body in advertising and in objectification. The performance artists Inder Salim and Varsha Nair utilize their bodies as sites of resistance and involve their bodies in live performance, which subverts and refracts the everyday notion of femininity. In addition, their work often asserts acts of subversion, for example, by challenging society's taboos surrounding female sexuality and by staging domestic labor to showcase reality as oppressive, mundane activity. Their focus on the work involving their bodies and bodies acknowledges their autonomy and freedom of agency and illustrates the female body as a spatial site of power and resistance rather than a passive object (Kapoor, 2018).

These artistic interventions not only contest passively consuming advertising images but also encourage viewers to think critically about how gender is depicted in visual culture. By offering alternative stories and representations, contemporary Indian women artists are important for disrupting discourses of femininity and opening new combinations of identity and expression.

The Role of Branding Women and the Narratives of Empowerment:

The rise of marketing mechanisms in the past few years has been matched by new gendered rhetoric in which brands utilize rhetoric associated with feminist values to appeal to consumers who care about issues of social equity. Campaigns such as Ariel's "Share the Load" campaign and Dove's "Real Beauty" campaign both aimed to challenge traditional notions of gendered roles or create able ways for women to represent their identity. Ariel's campaign emphasized the unequal burden of domestic labor for women, inviting men to take their share of domestic labor. Dove's campaign aimed to challenge traditional notions of beauty by employing images of a variety of body representations that are not considered socially sanctioned by those notions.



Figure 6: Dove Campaigns ads

Nonetheless, although these campaigns are a break from traditional advertising conventions, they too have received critiques over their performative aspects. Researchers have argued that this kind of branding for empowerment commodifies feminism as a marketing tool rather than demonstrating a dedication to social change (Banet-Weiser, 2018). For instance, even though Dove's "Real Beauty" campaign champions body positivity as a message, it is still reducing women's genuine insecurities into a commodified product, therefore still operating in a capitalist context. Similarly, although Ariel's "Share the Load" campaign conveys a progressive social message, it doesn't respond to the structural inequalities in the gendered division of labor.

This tension between feminist claims and capitalist imperatives raises an important question about the value and true impact of corporate feminism. In part, a number of contemporary artists have critiqued such campaigns for appropriating feminist rhetoric without recognizing the deeper structural concerns behind gender inequality. Some artists have used their practice

to uncover the problematic aspects of empowering branding, for example, realizing how often it serves to uphold the very norms it claims to counter.



Figure 7: Dove Advertisement

Conclusion:

The treatment of women as commodities in Indian advertisements is a significant means of reinforcing deep-rooted gender roles, which play a fundamental role in shaping cultural narratives and influencing visual arts. These adverts frequently create and circulate idealized versions of the femme experience based on constructs of beauty, domesticity, femininity, desirability, etc. This practice serves as an exercise of consolidation of patriarchy, which narrows women's representation to a possessive role. These manifestations depict cultural norms while promoting the idealization of women. In addition to this, these constructs simultaneously make a desperate effort to embed themselves into our societal psyche. To counter these dominant and reductive representations and tropes, contemporary Indian female artists are engaged in critique, reimagination, and subversion of the commodified representation of the femme experience. These female artists are subverting tropes and reclaiming representation through insights and representations of agency.

Contemporary women artists directly engage with the methods through which femininity is commodified and represented, exposing the myriad power structures and cultural biases that support such representations. By deconstructing these representations, artists are critiquing the status quo of our popular culture, but more importantly, they are inviting us to reconsider how we discuss issues of identity, representation, and gender equality. They use their art as a

form of resistance against dominant narratives espoused by advertising and media, emphasizing feminist aesthetics as well as the multiplicities of women's lived experiences.

This research emphasizes the complex interrelationship that exists between media, advertising, and visual arts and how they interact in supporting and resisting cultural narratives. It focuses on the role of artistic resistance in unsettling the existing gender norm and promoting a more diverse and egalitarian visual culture. Through an examination of the ways in which contemporary women artists respond to and subvert a commodified femininity, it has assessed the power of art as a site of social critique and change. It likewise explores the role of feminist interventions in visual culture, which challenge the existing power structures, as well as imagining alternatives to representation and identity.

Future research might consider the changing nature of social media activism as it relates to visual culture and advertising. As digital spaces continue to expand, women continue to find different opportunities to engage with feminist voice and action; through digital platforms, women are able to resist stereotypes, share their experiences, and demand accountability of print and advertising industries wider. When thinking about the intersections of these digital interactions with conventional visual formats such as advertising or fine art there can be significant insights about the changing nature of women's representation and room for diverse and inclusive stories in contemporary society. Ultimately, this research aims to contribute to the global context about the potential of media and art to influence culture's values, and specifically, the importance of imagining our world differently through and with a feminist lens, to build a more equitable and just society.

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