

From Stereotypes to Empowerment: A Qualitative Study on Gender Portrayals in Contemporary Advertisements

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ABSTRACT

Aim of the Study: This study investigates the representation of gender roles in television advertisements, aiming to explore whether modern advertising continues to reinforce traditional stereotypes or reflects a shift toward progressive gender portrayals.

Methodology: Utilizing a qualitative research approach, the study employed content analysis to examine 16 diverse television advertisements alongside relevant academic literature. The analysis focused on how male and female identities are portrayed in terms of roles, characteristics, and visual narratives.

Findings: Findings reveal a mixed trend: while there is noticeable progress in portraying women and men in more empowered and diverse roles—such as women in professional settings and men in nurturing roles—traces of traditional gender stereotypes still persist. In many cases, subtle biases and conventional norms continue to shape character representation, indicating that advertising is in a transitional phase.

Conclusion: The study concludes that although a shift in gender portrayal is underway, the complete eradication of stereotypes may take more time, largely influenced by societal attitudes and cultural expectations. The research highlights the need for advertisers to move beyond token representation and contribute more actively to reshaping public perceptions of gender. Further research is recommended to track long-term trends and their impact on audience perception.

Keywords: Gender Representation, Television Advertisements, Stereotypes, Content Analysis, Qualitative research, Media Portrayal, Gender Roles.

1. INTRODUCTION

Gender roles in advertising remain a complex and multifaceted subject of academic investigation, as they intersect cultural, psychological, and sociological domains. Advertising not only promotes products but also serves as a powerful medium for constructing and reproducing societal ideologies regarding gender (Eisend, Dens, & De Pelsmacker, 2019; Goffman, 1979). The portrayal of men and women in

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advertisements is frequently guided by entrenched social norms that dictate acceptable behavior, appearance, and roles based on gender.

Historically, advertising has reinforced stereotypical gender roles—for instance, portraying women as caregivers, homemakers, or objects of beauty and desire, while men are shown as dominant, rational, and career-focused (Kilbourne, 1999; Furnham & Paltzer, 2010). These representations do not occur in a vacuum; they both reflect and shape societal expectations. As a result, advertisements influence individual identity formation and interpersonal perceptions, often perpetuating limiting gender norms (Lazar, 2006; Shabir et al., 2017; Safdar et al., 2016; Shabir et al., 2015; Safdar et al., 2015).

Although recent trends suggest a gradual shift towards more progressive and egalitarian depictions, the change is neither uniform nor complete. Studies have found that subtle stereotyping still persists across many media forms, particularly in cultures where traditional gender values remain dominant (Kemp, 2017; Das, 2011). Furthermore, gendered marketing—especially in the fashion, beauty, and household goods industries—continues to rely heavily on gender-specific imagery, contributing to the ongoing reinforcement of these stereotypes (Grau & Zotos, 2016).

It is also debated whether advertising reflects prevailing social values or actively constructs them. While some scholars argue that media simply mirrors what already exists in society (Eisend, 2010), others suggest that repeated exposure to gendered messages can shape societal attitudes and consumer behavior (Ward & Harrison, 2005). In India, for example, the portrayal of women as submissive or objectified figures has drawn criticism from feminist scholars and raised questions about the role of media in gender socialization (Sharma & Bumb, 2021; Das, 2011).

In conclusion, while certain advertisements are beginning to challenge stereotypes and promote more nuanced representations, the pervasive use of gendered portrayals underscores the need for continued scholarly scrutiny. Understanding how these images influence public perception is essential for promoting gender equity in media and advertising.

1.1 Problem Statement

Despite the increasing global discourse on gender equality and the gradual shift toward more inclusive media practices, advertising continues to serve as a powerful medium that often perpetuates traditional gender roles and stereotypes. Numerous studies have shown that advertisements frequently depict men and women in limited, often stereotypical roles—such as women as caregivers or objects of beauty and men as authoritative or dominant figures (Eisend, 2010; Furnham & Paltzer, 2010; Kilbourne, 1999). These portrayals not only reflect societal norms but also reinforce them, shaping how individuals perceive themselves and others based on gender.

Although some advertisements have begun to challenge these norms by presenting more progressive and balanced gender representations, the transition remains inconsistent and slow, particularly in culturally conservative societies (Das, 2011; Sharma & Bumb, 2021). Moreover, the long-term impact of these portrayals on consumer behavior and societal values remains ambiguous, raising questions about whether advertising merely mirrors societal attitudes or actively contributes to the construction of gendered realities (Grau & Zotos, 2016; Ward & Harrison, 2005).

This study addresses the critical need to examine the extent to which contemporary advertisements continue to propagate gender stereotypes or promote role evolution, and how these portrayals influence audience perception and societal expectations.

1.2 Significance of the Study

This study holds considerable significance in the field of media and gender studies, as it critically explores the portrayal of gender roles in contemporary advertising—a medium that profoundly shapes cultural norms and public perceptions. Despite ongoing efforts toward gender equality, advertisements continue to display stereotypical representations that reinforce traditional roles, such as women as

passive, emotional, or beauty-oriented and men as dominant, rational, or career-driven (Eisend, 2010; Furnham & Paltzer, 2010). These portrayals can subtly influence societal attitudes, self-identity formation, and inter-gender relations over time.

By conducting a qualitative analysis of selected advertisements, this research contributes to the growing body of literature examining how media representations impact social consciousness. It sheds light on whether recent advertising trends genuinely reflect a shift toward gender inclusivity or continue to perpetuate outdated stereotypes. Moreover, this study is particularly relevant for advertisers, media professionals, educators, and policy-makers who are interested in fostering ethical and socially responsible communication strategies.

In culturally diverse societies—such as India or Pakistan—where traditional gender norms remain deeply embedded, the study provides a critical lens to evaluate the role of media in either challenging or sustaining gender biases. Ultimately, the findings may serve as a foundation for future reforms in advertising content and regulatory practices.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The portrayal of gender roles in advertising has been a persistent area of inquiry across media, marketing, and gender studies. Research consistently demonstrates that advertising not only reflects but also reinforces societal gender norms, often through stereotypical depictions (Eisend et al., 2019; Grau & Zotos, 2016).

Tsichla (2020) provides a historical analysis of gender representation in advertising, observing that while depictions of women have evolved from traditional homemakers to include more modern roles, stereotypical portrayals remain prevalent. Similarly, Hatzithomas et al. (2018) found that despite two decades of advertising evolution during high-profile events like the Super Bowl, gender stereotypes persist, though they are now more subtly coded.

Cross-cultural studies have also illuminated how cultural values shape gender portrayals. De Meulenaer et al. (2018) found that consumer responses to gendered advertising vary based on cultural traits such as masculinity, power distance, and assertiveness. Paek et al. (2011) and Matthes et al. (2016) similarly demonstrated that male characters continue to dominate both visual and auditory roles in global advertising, while female roles often remain confined to beauty or domestic contexts. However, cultural indices like Hofstede's Masculinity Index only partially explain these variations.

Feminist critiques highlight that women are frequently objectified and portrayed as passive or sexualized beings. Sharma and Bumb (2021) observed that such depictions significantly influence consumer perceptions, with Indian men and women showing divergent responses to female stereotyping in advertising. Studies by Grau and Zotos (2016) and Eisend (2010) confirm that while representations of women have broadened due to shifting societal roles, advertising still lags in fully embracing gender equality.

Recent literature has also addressed the intersection of humor and gender stereotyping. Eisend et al. (2014) discovered that humorous advertisements are more likely to reinforce traditional male stereotypes, while non-humorous ads more often stereotype women. This aligns with findings by Wolin (2003), who reviewed 30 years of research and noted that although some progress has been made, gender differences in ad responses remain significant.

Moreover, contemporary work by Åkestam et al. (2021) and Lindner (2020) explores how gender-neutral or inclusive advertising affects brand perception and consumer engagement. These studies suggest that progressive depictions can enhance brand equity and attract a broader consumer base.

Despite ongoing progress, stereotypical gender portrayals continue to influence media content globally. The persistence of these representations underscores the importance of further empirical work to challenge norms and understand their effects on consumer behavior and societal attitudes.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study employs Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) as its guiding theoretical framework to explore how gender roles are constructed, reinforced, or challenged through advertising. Developed by Bandura (1986), SCT posits that human behavior is shaped through a dynamic and reciprocal interaction between personal factors, environmental influences, and behavioral responses. Advertising, as a form of mass media, acts as a significant environmental factor that can influence individuals' attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors—especially regarding gender norms (Bandura, 2001).

Central to SCT is the concept of observational learning, or modeling, wherein individuals learn behaviors and social roles by observing others—often mediated through mass media (Bandura, 1977a). When advertisements repeatedly depict stereotypical gender roles, viewers may internalize these portrayals, which can influence their self-concept, role expectations, and perceptions of gender appropriateness (Eisend, 2010). For example, consistent representation of women as caregivers or men as decision-makers can reinforce traditional gender expectations and affect both male and female viewers' identity development.

Another key element of SCT is self-efficacy—the belief in one's ability to perform a certain role or behavior (Bandura, 1977b). Advertisements may either enhance or diminish individuals' self-efficacy depending on the roles being modeled and the perceived attainability of those roles. Moreover, vicarious reinforcement—observing that certain behaviors lead to rewards—plays a significant role in advertising. When a brand associates success, beauty, or acceptance with stereotypical gender behavior, it reinforces those portrayals as socially desirable (Bandura, 1986).

By applying SCT, this study critically examines how gendered advertising not only reflects cultural norms but also acts as a mechanism of socialization that may either sustain or challenge gender stereotypes, depending on the frequency, context, and nature of the portrayals.

3. METHODOLOGY

This chapter outlines the research methodology employed to explore gender role portrayals in television advertising. The methodological framework includes a discussion of the research approach, data collection techniques, and data analysis procedures used to address the study's objectives.

3.1 Research Approach

Given the exploratory nature of the research, a qualitative research approach was adopted. Qualitative methods are particularly suitable for examining complex social phenomena, such as gender representation, where context and interpretation play a crucial role (Creswell, 2013). The primary aim of the study was to analyze how gender roles are constructed, reinforced, or challenged in television advertisements. To achieve this, the researcher conducted a content analysis of 16 advertisements broadcast on electronic media platforms, primarily television, and retrieved from YouTube.

The content analysis focused on six thematic categories, informed by previous studies (Eisend, 2010; Grau & Zotos, 2016): 1) Traditional Gender Roles, 2) Modern/Progressive Gender Roles, 3) Gendered Products, 4) Objectification, 5) Empowerment and 6) Gendered Language

These categories served as analytical lenses for evaluating the portrayal of male and female characters in terms of roles, behaviors, visual cues, and spoken content.

3.2 Data Collection

Data was collected purposively from television advertisements available on YouTube, ensuring diversity in product categories and representation styles. A total of 16 advertisements were selected, encompassing various sectors such as beauty, household goods, food, fashion, and technology. The selected ads featured both male and female characters and were chosen to ensure variability in cultural representation and advertising tone (e.g., humorous vs. serious, aspirational vs. relatable).

Each advertisement was viewed multiple times and carefully documented for coding purposes. The researcher also maintained memos and observation notes during the coding process to capture patterns and initial insights.

3.3 Data Analysis

The collected data was analyzed using thematic content analysis, which involved identifying recurring patterns, symbolic representations, and discursive strategies related to gender portrayal (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Each advertisement was coded manually according to the predefined six categories. Patterns of portrayal, frequency of certain themes (e.g., women in domestic roles, men in leadership roles), and symbolic cues were interpreted in light of existing literature.

To enhance validity, the researcher cross-referenced coding patterns with established theoretical frameworks such as Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986), which emphasizes the media's role in shaping social norms through modeling and observational learning.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

4.1 Traditional Gender Roles

In many Pakistani television ads, women are consistently shown as devoted homemakers, burdened with cooking and caregiving duties, while men appear carefree and uninvolved. A prime example is **the** Kasan Cooking Oil advertisement, in which a woman diligently prepares an elaborate meal for a family gathering, and the male figures lounge without contributing (see top-left image). This portrayal reinforces entrenched gendered expectations: women as self-sacrificing nurturers and men as passive beneficiaries of domestic labor.

4.2 Modern Gender Roles

A growing trend in recent ads displays more equitable power dynamics. Two Shan Foods commercials exemplify this shift: in the first, a female doctor returns home from work, and her husband prepares dinner to uplift her spirits (represented in the second image). In the second ad, the husband organizes a celebratory family gathering in honor of his professional wife. These ads challenge traditional roles by showing men as supportive and women as career-focused, illustrating evolving societal attitudes towards gender equality.

4.3 Gendered Products

Product promotion remains heavily gendered: personal care and fairness products are aimed at women, while cars and tech are marketed toward men. A Fair & Lovely spot features young women equating fairness with empowerment (bottom-right image), perpetuating colorist and gendered beauty standards. Conversely, a Suzuki car ad (not shown) centers on masculine authority, with a male actor driving and a woman in the passenger seat—reinforcing male dominance and female passivity.

4.4 Objectification

Some advertisements exploit female physicality to promote products. A beauty soap ad uses sensual imagery and the tagline “*khubsurti jo rukay na rukay*” (unceasing beauty) to sexualize women for commercial gain. The chosen visual scenes (bottom-left image) reduce the individual to an object of desire—a marketing strategy that diminishes her agency and humanity.

4.5 Empowerment

In contrast, empowerment-focused ads depict women supported and encouraged by their families. A MoltyFoam advertisement highlights a father cheering on his daughter in pursuit of her dreams—symbolizing emotional and social backing for women's autonomy and ambition. The third image from the

carousel captures the warmth of this father–daughter encouragement, reinforcing themes of equality and support.

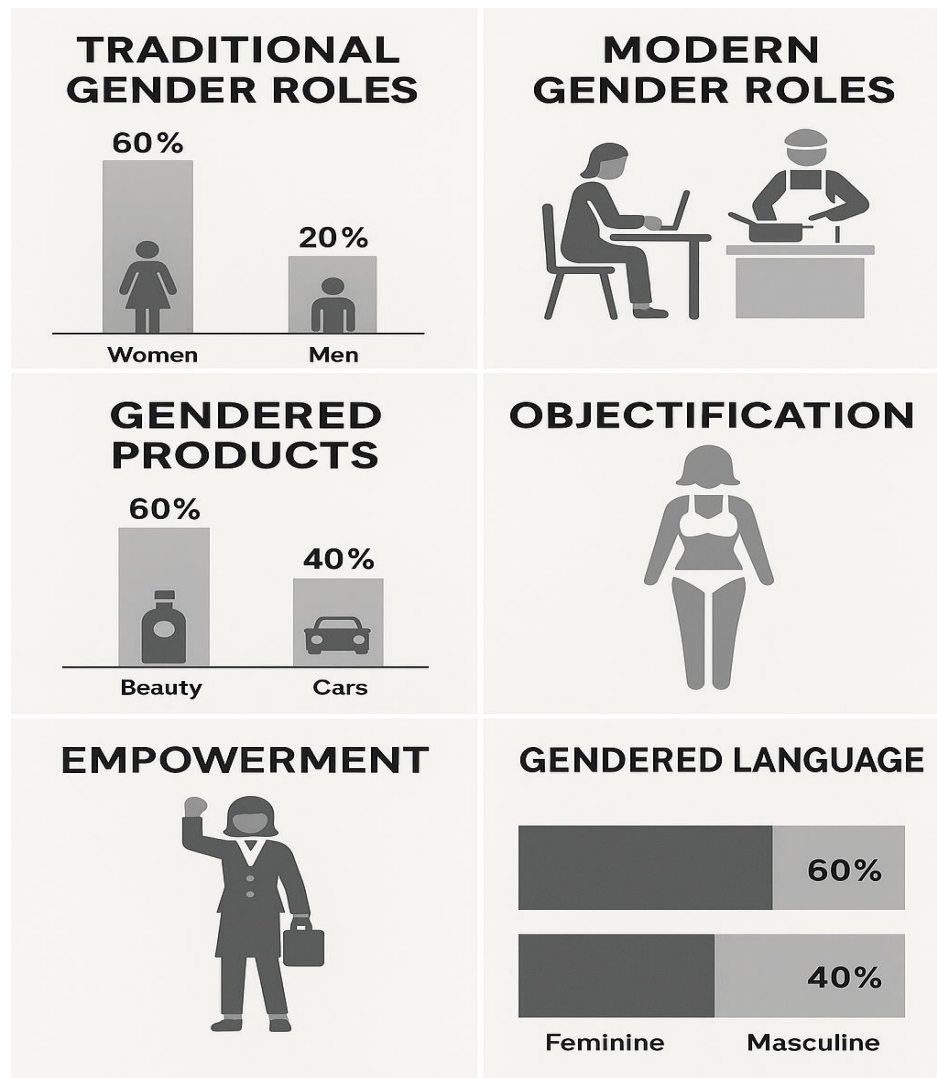
4.6 Gendered Language

Language in advertising further entrenches stereotypes. Ads targeting men—such as those for body sprays, energy drinks, or banking products—employ masculine terms like “power,” “strength,” and “tough.” In contrast, ads for cooking oil, fairness cream, or beauty soaps use words like “beautiful,” “gentle,” and “elegant,” embedding the notion that emotional or aesthetic traits are inherently feminine. This process of linguistic coding perpetuates rigid gender norms across product categories.

4.7 Family Roles

Family dynamics in ads often highlight either traditional nuclear structures or evolving family forms. Some ads feature single parents or blended households facing real-world challenges and joys. For example, one ad portrays a single mother’s day-to-day life, while another showcases a blended family celebrating together—suggesting a gradual recognition of diverse family units within Pakistani society.

Figure 1: Representation of gender in various perspectives



5. DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore how gender roles are portrayed in Pakistani television advertisements, with a focus on categories such as traditional and modern roles, gendered product marketing, objectification, empowerment, and gendered language. The findings revealed a complex mix of persistence and transformation in gender portrayals.

Traditional gender roles remain prominent in many advertisements, particularly in commercials for cooking oil and household products. As illustrated by the *Kashmir Cooking Oil* advertisement, women are often shown in caregiving roles—responsible for preparing meals and maintaining family unity—while men appear passive or disengaged. This is consistent with earlier findings from Eisend, Dens, and De Pelsmacker (2019), who noted that advertising still leans heavily on conventional gender stereotypes despite some progress.

Conversely, a shift is observable in advertisements such as *Shan Foods*, where the representation of men as supportive partners and women as professionals is emphasized. This reflects a societal trend toward redefining gender roles and promoting equality (Tsiehla, 2020). The portrayal of men helping in domestic tasks and encouraging their spouses' careers challenges long-standing patriarchal assumptions and suggests a slow but meaningful cultural transition.

Gendered product marketing remains a persistent issue. Advertisements for products like fairness creams (e.g., *Fair & Lovely*) and soaps largely feature women, linking beauty and personal value to physical appearance. This reinforces problematic standards of femininity and colorism, a concern echoed in Sharma and Bumb's (2021) empirical research on role portrayals in Indian advertising. Meanwhile, car and tech ads predominantly feature men, reinforcing masculine stereotypes tied to power and control (De Meulenaer et al., 2018).

Objectification was another troubling theme. Beauty product commercials often reduce women to visual commodities meant to attract attention and drive sales, as demonstrated in the *beauty soap* ad featuring the slogan "Khubsurti jo rukay na rukay." Such portrayals have been criticized for perpetuating harmful gender stereotypes and for dehumanizing individuals by focusing on their sexual appeal rather than their individuality or capabilities (Grau & Zotos, 2018; Hatzithomas, Boutsouki, & Ziamou, 2018).

Despite these issues, there are signs of progress in how empowerment is portrayed. Some recent commercials, such as *MoltyFoam*, celebrate women's strength, independence, and potential, emphasizing parental support and career growth. These advertisements align with newer global advertising trends that strive to promote gender equality and self-determination (Matthes, Prieler, & Adam, 2016).

Lastly, gendered language remains a subtle but influential aspect of how ads reinforce stereotypes. Descriptive terms like "strong," "tough," and "bold" are often used in male-centric ads, while "gentle," "beautiful," and "elegant" are reserved for female-targeted products. This linguistic coding shapes consumer perceptions and expectations (Paek, Nelson, & Vilela, 2011).

In conclusion, while Pakistani advertising shows emerging signs of progressive gender portrayal, traditional stereotypes continue to dominate, especially in product-specific narratives. The juxtaposition of old and new portrayals suggests that societal change is underway but remains uneven. Further research should explore how these portrayals impact viewer attitudes, particularly among younger demographics, and whether such advertisements influence or merely reflect cultural shifts.

6. CONCLUSION

This study critically examined the portrayal of gender roles in Pakistani television advertisements using a qualitative content analysis approach. The findings suggest that although there have been some progressive shifts in gender representation, traditional stereotypes continue to dominate much of the advertising landscape. Women are frequently depicted as homemakers, caregivers, and beauty icons, as

seen in cooking oil and fairness cream commercials. Men, in contrast, are often portrayed as strong, dominant, and independent, especially in ads for automobiles and financial services.

However, emerging advertisements—such as those by Shan Foods and MoltyFoam—challenge these norms by portraying women in professional roles and men in nurturing, supportive capacities. These progressive portrayals reflect a slow cultural transformation influenced by evolving gender norms and growing awareness of gender equality. Yet, gendered language, product targeting, and objectification still reinforce outdated ideals, suggesting that societal change is still in a transitional phase.

The study confirms the relevance of Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) by demonstrating how media continues to influence viewers' attitudes, behaviors, and expectations through modeled gender roles. While advertising has the power to normalize progressive gender portrayals, it also bears the risk of perpetuating limiting stereotypes if not approached responsibly.

In conclusion, there is a growing but uneven trend toward gender-sensitive advertising in Pakistan. Advertisers must become more intentional in how they construct gender narratives to reflect the diverse, evolving realities of contemporary society. Further research is needed to assess audience perceptions of such portrayals and their influence on behavior, particularly among youth and digital audiences.

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