

## Understanding the Advent of “Femvertising” in Contemporary Indian Advertisements

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### ABSTRACT

*There is an increasing presence of an advertising style that emphasizes the idea of women’s empowerment and revolves around pro-woman themes, messages, and imagery. This advertising style counters gender stereotyping and is popularly known as ‘Femvertising.’ This phenomenon results from growing activism for the representation of women in advertisements and rising awareness about feminism. This study aims to analyze the content of pro-women advertisements. For the study, eighty-seven commercial advertisements on diverse issues were viewed. Out of them, twenty-one advertisements portraying women in influential roles have been selected and analyzed. The results show a rising trend in pro-women advertisements, especially apparel, beauty, personal hygiene products, kitchen appliances, edible oil, etc.*

**Keywords:** *Femvertising; Advertising; Women empowerment; Gender; Stereotypes.*

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### 1.0 Introduction

Traditionally, advertisements have been celebrating women in stereotypical ways. Advertisements usually conform to the norms of society and reinforce prevalent stereotypes rather than challenging them (Eisend, 2010). Advertisements have been appreciating women only when they conform to societal parameters related to physical appearance or family responsibilities or workplace behaviour.

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The models featured in the advertisements also reinforced the same parameters (Richins, 1991; Buunk & Dijkstra, 2011, Halliwell & Dittmar, 2004; D’Alessandro & Chitty, 2011). Feminists have criticized such advertisements for the objectification of women and for setting unattainable standards. Such advertisements may cause dissatisfaction among women. The beauty industry has been setting impossible beauty standards, which may be viewed as being oppressive upon women. Some feminists, however, support beauty practices for the pleasure derived from the body’s self-adornment and view it as potentially revolutionary. Given the influence of advertisements on consumer perceptions, there is a rising concern for a more holistic portrayal of women in advertising. There has been a shift in the discernment toward women’s self-image and how they are perceived in society. The theme of women’s liberation and empowerment has been a part of discussions on advertisements (Ford *et al.*, 1991).

Women empowerment is becoming a rising trend in advertising. It challenges stereotypical gender roles and encourages positive self-image. Such advertising campaigns have been universally accepted for empowering marketing endeavors and have been applauded. The warmth and spirit of emotions evoked by these advertisements have successfully influenced positive brand attitudes and buying behavior. Such advertisements can build brand value and sensitize people (Kelly *et al.*, 2021).

Femvertising focuses on empowering and celebrating feminism through the message in advertisements. It refers to advertisements that revolve around challenging traditional gender roles, breaking stereotypes, and promoting positive representation of women. Femvertising breaks the stereotypical portrayal of women in advertising (Knoll *et al.*, 2011). Femvertising campaigns connect with female audiences by highlighting their strength, achievements, and diverse experiences. Femvertising empowers women and inspires them to embrace their individuality, challenge societal expectations, and pursue their goals. These campaigns often emphasize women’s accomplishments, promote body positivity, advocate for gender equality, and support women’s empowerment movements. Femvertising focuses on questioning and attempting to challenge gender stereotypes created by advertising proactively. It is a major change in the way brands advertise. It is increasingly used in advertising campaigns to enhance sales and spread the message of empowering women across all age groups. Femvertising has gained prominence due to the growing demand for more inclusive and authentic advertising. Many brands recognize the importance of appealing to female consumers by portraying them positively and addressing their aspirations and concerns. By adopting femvertising strategies, companies aim to build meaningful connections with women, gain their trust, and foster brand loyalty.

This study focuses on how feminist aspects are used as discourse in contemporary advertisements. This trend is more prominent in marketers selling products primarily

purchased and used by women. Thus, the advertisements analyzed in this study mainly relate to female apparel, cosmetics, jewelry, fragrance, skincare products, hair and body management products, and personal hygiene products like sanitary napkins, pregnancy control, and detection products. Some advertisements relate to home appliances and detergents. The advertisements that appeared from the year 2001 to 2024 in Indian television media and social media platforms have been included.

## **2.0 Literature Review**

With the changing roles of women in personal and professional spheres, their portrayal in advertising is also transforming. Research on gender in advertising is witnessing a shift in focus toward women being portrayed in empowered roles (Akestam *et al.* 2017). Accordingly, femvertising is a promising idea in the overall marketing strategy (Grau & Zotos, 2016). It is gaining popularity equally in both developed as well as developing societies like India, Bangladesh & Pakistan, which have a history of promoting egalitarianism and patriarchy (Varghese & Kumar, 2022). Femvertising could focus on the empowerment of women by changing the representation of women. Portraying females in power positions in advertisements may lead to positive attitudes toward brands (Akestam *et al.* 2017). Exposure to messaging with femvertising themes positively affects attitudes towards brands and leads to purchase intention among participants. Women exposed to empowerment-themed advertisements are likely to manifest significantly higher positive attitudes towards such brands, which may be reflected in higher purchase intentions. This indicates a strong marketing relevance for femvertising. This effect is likely to be more noticeable among millennial women. Femvertising is likely to boost company-customer relationships. It may be included as a part of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) association (Abitbol and Sternadori, 2019). There is a need to delve deeper into the increasing prevalence of femvertising, the themes, and issues highlighted by such advertisements to subjugate traditional thinking (Varghese & Kumar, 2022).

## **3.0 Benefits of Femvertising**

Marketers can benefit from femvertising in several ways. Some of the potential benefits of femvertising are discussed in this section.

- *Audience Engagement:* Femvertising campaigns resonate strongly with female consumers, who comprise a significant portion of the target market for many products and services. By embracing inclusive and empowering narratives, marketers can

connect with their audience on a deeper level, leading to increased engagement and brand loyalty (Vadakkappatt *et al.*, 2022).

- *Differentiation and Competitive Advantage:* Femvertising can help brands stand out by challenging traditional gender roles and offering a more progressive and inclusive image. By positioning themselves as advocates for gender equality and women’s empowerment, marketers can differentiate their brands and gain a competitive advantage over competitors.
- *Relevance and Authenticity:* Consumers today value authenticity and are increasingly drawn to brands that align with their values. Femvertising allows marketers to showcase their commitment to diversity, inclusivity, and social progress. By addressing relevant social issues and promoting positive representations of women, brands can build trust and credibility with their target audience (Vadakkappatt *et al.*, 2022).
- *Social Impact and Brand Reputation:* Femvertising campaigns have the potential to make a positive impact beyond just marketing goals. By actively participating in gender equality discussions and promoting social change, brands can contribute to societal progress. This, in turn, can enhance their brand reputation, attract socially conscious consumers, and create positive brand associations (Champlin *et al.*, 2019).
- *New Market Opportunities:* Femvertising can open up new market opportunities by appealing to underserved segments in the market. By challenging stereotypes and embracing diversity, brands can connect with a broader range of consumers and tap into emerging consumer trends and preferences (Lima & Casais, 2021).

Marketers must approach femvertising with authenticity, sensitivity, and a genuine commitment to gender equality. By doing so, they can benefit from the positive impacts on their brand and bottom line and contribute to broader social change (Akestam *et al.*, 2017).

#### 4.0 Analyzing Advertisements Portraying Women in Empowered Roles

Femvertising-based advertisements demonstrate how brands have used advertising to challenge stereotypes, promote empowerment, and address social issues affecting women. Some common themes have been identified and are discussed in this section.

- *Power of Self-determination; Promoting the “Be yourself” Attitude:* Femininity is voiced regarding women’s exercise of self-determination. Women’s ability to take charge and act upon life choices may be construed as a collective struggle or in

individualistic terms. Women may be referred to as a group or as individuals. Traditionally, advertisements have emphasized perfection in women's physical appearance in terms of body fat, shape, complexion, hair, wrinkles, fine lines, etc. Also, these advertisements define confidence and feminism based on their consumption of beauty products and services. Elle, a cosmetic brand, shows women being made conscious in case their clothes drift a little bit, and it ends up with the message, "Let her be."

The message is to avoid unnecessary snooping in matters relating to women's clothing. Tata Salt Lite, a brand selling table salt, shows women of different age groups and communities exercising and running on the streets in the morning to stay fit. The message in the advertisement is that women need to focus on staying fit and ignoring what people may say when they see women running on the streets. 'Unilever,' a popular consumer goods brand, initiated the 'Dove Campaign for Real Beauty' in 2004. In the campaign, women photographers showcased their creative efforts and took photographs of common women (rather than professional models). The essence was to make women feel comfortable with their appearance regarding body size, body shape, skin color, etc. The broader theme of the campaign was to create awareness that beauty is about self-confidence and not anxiety. These photographs were then showcased worldwide on billboards, print and television screen advertisements, magazines, news broadcasts, etc.

In 2014, a women-oriented media platform and lifestyle website 'SheKnows' organized 'Advertising Week' and hosted a panel discussion on rising trends toward messages, themes, and images about gender equality in advertisements. This resulted in the idea of "femvertising" gaining further acceptance. This panel labeled contemporary advertising campaigns that question traditional gender stereotypes and portray women in empowered roles as 'femvertising.' The Advertising Week panel questioned the stereotypes relating to personality traits, domestic responsibilities, and professional roles of women and their portrayal in advertisements. The panel questioned the stereotypical "Like a girl" attitude (Azanza *et al.* 2024).

- *Questioning Conventional Social Roles:* A women's apparel brand 'Sabhyata' launched an advertisement on Women's Day in 2021 with the punch line "Celebrate a change." It highlights how necessary it is for women to bring change in the way domestic responsibilities are performed. In the advertisement, the mother and daughter-in-law pretend to disagree, scheming to make the man prepare tea and fold clothes. The aim is to prove that responsibilities are not gender biased and must be shared among all the family members. Another apparel brand 'BIBA' came up with "Change the Convention" in 2016.

The advertisement starts with a girl asking her father to verify whether her male counterpart is worthy enough to support and care for her in the true sense of a life partner. The father visits the prospective son-in-law's house. During the conversation, the emphasis is on how many household chores the prospective son-in-law knows rather than the traditional thought of knowing the homemaking skills of the women. The prospective son-in-law seeks time from the prospective father-in-law to learn basic household chores and prove himself suitable enough to marry their daughter. The advertisement ends with the message, 'Change is beautiful.' Based on a similar theme, the same brand, 'BIBA,' showcased the social evil of dowry using the advertisement. In 2016, another advertisement showed a prospective father of the groom telling his mother in a satirical tone that they would have to give a dowry to the girl as their prospective daughter-in-law is a jewel in herself. The message is "Change the conversation." Titan Raga, a popular watch brand, launched a campaign, "Her Life, Her Choices," celebrating the choices and achievements of Indian women. The campaign highlighted the various roles women play in society and encouraged them to follow their dreams and aspirations.

Procter and Gamble have been promoting the idea of Femvertising since 2015. Initially, the brand proposition was, 'Ariel washes the most stubborn stains with just one wash' for their detergent powder advertisement. A phrase, 'Anyone can do it,' was added. This in a way questioned the gender stereotype that doing laundry is only the job of a woman. Additionally, the 'Share the Load' advertising campaign was launched in January 2015. In the first year, it emphasized that laundry is not the sole responsibility of the woman of the house. Each year, new punch lines were added so that the message of feminism could be communicated more decisively.

In 2016, their advertisement campaign condemned the root cause of social conditioning. Kids in the house learn what they see, and in most households, the men do not do laundry, so the kids grow up imitating what they've seen at home. In 2016, Ariel's advertisement's punch line was, "Dads Share the Load." The advertisement shows a man visiting his married daughter's house, where he realizes that none of the family members are helping her manage domestic responsibilities. Only then does he realize that he never helped his wife with domestic chores. When he returns to his home, he starts by doing the laundry. In a similar setup, a mother asks her married daughter about her job and realizes that she had to leave her profession as she was finding it difficult to manage her home and work. During the conversation, the mother realizes that just like her son-in-law, her son is also not in the habit of sharing domestic responsibilities.

The advertisement asks, "Are we teaching our sons what we've been teaching our daughters?" The tagline is "Sons Share the Load." These advertisements are a step towards

breaking the gender stereotypes prevalent in society. Ariel India's advertisement raised yet another pertinent question about the upbringing of children. In Ariel's 2019 advertisement, the punch line was 'Share the load.' The advertisement questions the discrimination in the family's upbringing of sons and daughters, eventually shifting the focus towards the need for the male members of the family to share household responsibilities. The advertisements urged mothers to be the flag bearers of change. In 2020, when the world was battling the COVID-19 pandemic, work-from-home culture impacted how domestic responsibilities were managed. The distribution of household chores became an everyday conversation. Another upsetting truth was highlighted that a vast majority of Indian women sleep less than their husbands due to household chores. Highlighting this fact, a campaign focusing on "Share the Load for equal sleep" was rolled out. Similarly, another brand, 'U Cook', manufactures pressure cookers and shows a famous male artist advertising a pressure cooker and cooking for the family. A ceiling fan brand, 'Havell's,' advertisement shows a young couple sitting at a marriage registrar's office. The male protagonist tries to break the convention of females taking up their husband's surname after marriage by offering to take up the wife's surname. The advertisement tries to break the gender stereotype. The tagline was 'hawa badledi.'

- *Portrayal of Fighter Spirit and Physical Strength:* In 2017, Reebok India's advertisement gave the punch line 'bruises can be good.' It started by showing women with injuries. This girl with bruises was not a victim of violence; instead, she was a trained boxer. The message was 'fit to fight'. The advertisement highlighted a woman who chose to become a professional boxer and ignored her marks and injuries during the fight. In 2020, the advertisement of H.S Kalekar Jewelers highlighted the importance of women learning and developing self-defense skills. The advertisement featured a skinny-looking girl who was being followed by a biker. On sensing the danger, she took a broomstick from a woman nearby and advanced toward the biker, showing martial arts with that stick, which resulted in the biker withdrawing. The advertisement's message was "Har bitiya ko khud ka Samman Khud karna padega, Har ladki ko Durga banna padega" meaning self-defense is essential for self-respect and real women empowerment.
- *Men Highlighting Physical Hygiene Issues:* 'Pee Safe' is a personal hygiene product for women. Its 'Raho Safe' campaign is about including men in conversations about menstruation. It encourages men to buy sanitary napkins for their wives and daughters. The message in the advertisement campaign is, "Men buy pads." Another brand, Whisper, which also sells sanitary napkins for women, launched a campaign called "Touch the Pickle," which challenged taboos around menstruation. The campaign

aimed to break stereotypes and empower women to confidently embrace their periods and overcome societal restrictions.

- *Questioning Gender Bias in Day-to-day Conversations:* A shampoo brand, Pantene, created an advertisement highlighting gender bias in ‘Labels against Women’ in 2017. It was a digital advertisement that exposed a gender bias in social standards. Despite exhibiting the same social behavior, men and women are labeled differently. The advertisement highlights situations when society aggressively defames women for pursuing their professional roles but appreciates men in similar roles. The advertisement shows men who work late at night are labeled as dedicated and committed to work, but women are labeled as ‘selfish.’ A man delivering a loud speech is labeled as ‘persuasive,’ but a woman is labeled as ‘pushy.’ It is okay for men to show their authority over subordinates, but a woman trying to lead would be termed ‘bossy.’ The advertisement inspires women not to let such labels act as roadblocks. Rather, women need to ignore such stereotypes and pursue their goals with strength and courage.
- *Emphasizing the Importance of Education of Girl Children:* Under its ‘Beti Bachao Beti Padhao’ campaign, the government of India promotes the education of girls and questions social evils like female feticide, dowry, etc. Corporate expenditure on such initiatives is covered under Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) under section 135 of The Companies Act. Advertisements of the corporations spending on such initiatives highlight their efforts to eradicate the prevalent social evils. Prega News, a brand manufacturing pregnancy detection kits, shares the message of “Boy or girl, good news is good news” in its advertisement. Brands like Samsung, Daikin India, and Mahindra sponsor girls’ education in underprivileged societies through CSR expenditure and promote the importance of providing equal education opportunities for girls in their advertisements. In another advertisement of ‘Bajaj Scooter,’ the daughter-in-law demands respect as she has paid the price for her husband as a dowry. The punch line is ‘khareed liya hai aapke bete ko.’ Dainik Bhaskar, a newspaper company advertisement, shows a father desirous of stopping his daughter’s education and dragging her out of the classroom. Her classmates successfully pull her toward the school in tug of war.
- *Emphasizing the Right to Make Personal Choices:* In 2014, Titan Raga celebrated ‘The Raga woman of Today’ with the tagline ‘Her life Her choices.’ The message in the advertisement was that women should give equal priority to their personal and professional life. The advertisement shows a working woman who meets her old male friend after many years. The male friend is surprised that the lady is still not married. He says they could have made their relationship work only if the woman had left her



job. When the woman asks a similar question, the man laughs and says, 'In our society, how can a man not work.' The woman explains and emphasizes the importance of her professional life.

Another issue that has been raised by advertisers is the right to choose the appropriate time of marriage and bearing kids. Modern women, being the change bearers of society, must embrace it to the fullest. In 2018, 'Blush' aired an advertisement featuring a conversation between a mother and daughter emphasizing the power of 'choice' and decision-making in a woman's life. The advertisement shows a mother and her daughter discussing the appropriate age for kids. Their conversation concludes that a married couple must have children when they are physically & mentally comfortable.

Advertisements have incorporated phrases like 'self-love,' 'me-time,' 'inner peace,' 'own mental health,' and 'prioritizing oneself' for women highlighting the idea that women need to give attention to themselves. In another advertisement, in 2021, Titan Raga celebrated International Women's Day with the tagline 'Making time for oneself to do fairly well at everything -because it's your time.' The advertisement showed a working woman prioritizing her guitar class instead of a late-night outing and rescheduling work commitments for a breakfast get-together with office colleagues. In 2016 'Dove,' a beauty soap brand, gave the tagline 'Beauty on your terms.' It emphasizes appreciating all women as a distinct source of feminine energy. Women need to appreciate themselves and not accept stereotypes relating to appearance that judge them based on their complexion, body shape, hair texture, and several other preconceived notions relating to appearance that may, at times, be derogatory.

## **5.0 Criticism of Femvertising**

Femvertising has been criticized for propelling materialism rather than feminist action (Hoad-Reddick, 2017). It reduces feminist campaigns to mere marketing exercises and, in the process, increases needless consumption (Rodrigues, 2016; Burn, *et al.*, 2000). Studies have expressed doubts about the effectiveness of femvertising in promoting feminist ideals (Kapoor & Munjal, 2017). Without authenticity and genuine commitment to feminist values, brands reinforce old stereotypes regarding women's appearance and social status (McCleary, 2014).

Propagating images of social dominance by females may have repercussions on the overall feminist movement because of the symbolic threat they represent to the men in society. It may have a damaging effect on the feminist agenda. Images showing women stepping on men and the dehumanization and disembodiment of men may raise suspicion against feminists as they are all out to take over and subjugate men. In some

advertisements, men are made the new oppressed group. Such representations of women’s power and the power reversal or gender parity depicted in femvertising are far from the social reality. Fundamental shifts hardly match the social relationships between women and men in the real world.

There has been a debate over the origins and consequences of femvertising. It is criticized as a marketing gimmick reinforcing stereotypes (McCleary, 2014). It may lead to negative feelings for brands in a patriarchal society (Abitbol and Sternadori, 2019). It is hard to generalize the impact of femvertising because audiences interpret advertisements differently based on their socioeconomic background and age (Kapoor & Munjal, 2017).

## 6.0 Challenges of Femvertising

While femvertising has gained traction and brought about positive changes in advertising, it also faces some challenges.

- *Authenticity*: Ensuring the authenticity of femvertising campaigns is essential. Some brands may jump on the femvertising bandwagon without substantially changing their business practices or values. This can lead to accusations of “fem-washing” or using feminism solely as a marketing tactic without a genuine commitment to gender equality (Lima & Casais, 2021).
- *Stereotyping and Tokenism*: Despite the intention to challenge stereotypes, femvertising can sometimes fall into the trap of reinforcing them. It is important to avoid tokenism by representing women from diverse backgrounds and experiences rather than presenting a narrow or homogeneous view of femininity.
- *Backlash and Criticism*: Femvertising campaigns may face backlash from individuals who perceive them as threatening traditional gender norms or view them as unnecessary. Critics might argue that such campaigns are driven solely by profit motives rather than a genuine commitment to gender equality.
- *Intersectionality*: Addressing the experiences of all women is essential in femvertising. Intersectionality recognizes that multiple identities, such as race, ethnicity, sexuality, and socioeconomic background, shape women’s experiences. Ensuring that femvertising campaigns are inclusive and representative of diverse women’s experiences can be challenging. Intersectionality recognizes that multiple identities, including race, ethnicity, sexuality, and socioeconomic background shape women’s experiences. Marketers must consider intersectionality in their femvertising efforts and ensure that campaigns are inclusive and representative of diverse women’s experiences.

- *Effecting Change Beyond Advertising:* While femvertising can change societal perceptions, it is crucial to recognize that advertising alone cannot bring about long-lasting social change. Brands must go beyond campaigns and ensure that their internal practices, policies, and products align with the values they promote in their advertisements (Vadakkepatt *et al.*, 2022).
- *Authenticity and Avoiding Tokenism:* Femvertising campaigns should genuinely reflect a brand's commitment to gender equality and not be perceived as mere marketing tactics. Tokenism, where a single campaign or ad features a woman or a specific group of women without considering the broader context of diversity and inclusion, should be avoided.
- *Avoiding Stereotypes:* Femvertising should aim to challenge stereotypes rather than perpetuate them. Care should be taken to avoid reinforcing harmful gender norms or presenting an idealized or limited version of femininity. Instead, the focus should be on promoting diversity, individuality, and women's empowerment.
- *Consistency across Brand Practices:* For femvertising to be credible and effective, a brand's internal practices, policies, and products must align with the values it promotes in its advertising. Consumers are increasingly aware of and expect brands to demonstrate consistency and authenticity in their actions beyond their marketing campaigns.
- *Addressing the Broader Context:* Femvertising campaigns should not be seen as a substitute for broader systemic changes needed to achieve gender equality. Marketers should be mindful of the limitations of advertising alone and consider how their brand can contribute to social progress beyond their advertising efforts.

Navigating these challenges requires a thoughtful and genuine commitment to promoting gender equality and empowering women. Brands that approach femvertising with authenticity, inclusivity, and a holistic perspective are better positioned to create meaningful impact and positive change (Champlin *et al.*, 2019).

## **7.0 Conclusion**

A few seconds of advertisements leave a long-lasting impact on the minds of consumers and significantly influence their social viewpoints. Marketers must keep up with the changing times and design advertisements that picture women in a progressive light instead of conventional advertising that relies heavily on the detrimental and derogatory stereotypical cliché. Femvertising is a win-win for consumers and brands as it delivers a positive social impact, using the message of female empowerment. Studies have

also shown their positive influence on the corporate bottom line. This paper provides a discussion based on content analysis of advertisements that primarily portray women in influential roles.

Femvertising is not just an ideological movement; it has an advertising appeal that has potential effects on brand building & consumer choices. Marketers are increasingly incorporating diverse portrayals of women in advertising to promote their brands. This approach is an attempt to empower women & brands simultaneously. This paper contributes to the understanding that advertising is crucial in building consumer perception while promoting positive societal change. Marketers must ensure that their femvertising efforts are authentic and inclusive and contribute positively to promoting gender equality. Femvertising can be a powerful tool for promoting gender equality and empowering women. Femvertising can influence substantial changes in gender dynamics or equal representation. Some audiences may find such advertisements acceptable and realistic, while others might consider them unrealistic and unacceptable. Nonetheless, femvertising has pushed for more inclusive advertising narratives and challenged traditional gender norms. Femvertising has contributed to diverse and progressive advertising.

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