

PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN INDIAN ADVERTISEMENTS: AN EMPIRICAL CONTENT ANALYSIS STUDY

Suman Nayyar

Global Group of Institutes, Amritsar

Vikas Mehra

Commerce Lecturer
DAV International School, Amritsar

ABSTRACT

The portrayal of women in advertising has been widely debated due to its potential role in reinforcing gender stereotypes and objectification. Although contemporary advertising discourse increasingly emphasises women's empowerment and progressive representation, empirical studies suggest that stereotypical portrayals continue to persist. The present study employs **quantitative content analysis** to systematically examine how women are represented in Indian advertisements. A purposive sample of **50 Indian television and digital advertisements** was analysed using predefined coding categories, including role portrayal, sexualisation, attire, voice dominance, and the overall nature of depiction.

The findings indicate that although positive and empowered portrayals of women are gradually emerging in advertising narratives, stereotypical and decorative representations remain dominant. These patterns are particularly visible in beauty, personal care, and lifestyle advertisements. The study contributes to the growing body of literature on **advertising ethics and gender representation**, while also offering practical implications for advertisers, regulators, and academic researchers.

Keywords: Content analysis, women in advertising, gender representation, Indian advertisements, advertising ethics

1. INTRODUCTION

Advertising functions as a powerful cultural and communicative force that not only influences consumer behaviour but also reflects and shapes prevailing societal norms and values. One of the most debated aspects of advertising communication is the representation of women, as advertising messages often reinforce traditional gender roles or promote objectified portrayals of female characters. Scholars have long argued that repeated exposure to such portrayals can influence public perceptions of gender roles and expectations.

In the **Indian socio-cultural context**, advertising frequently draws upon established cultural values, family structures, and gender norms. Consequently, the portrayal of women in advertisements becomes an important subject of scholarly investigation. Historically, Indian advertisements have often depicted women primarily as homemakers, caregivers, or supportive family members. However, contemporary advertising campaigns increasingly portray women as independent, confident, and professionally successful individuals.

Despite this apparent shift, an important question remains: **Do these newer portrayals represent genuine transformation in gender representation, or are they merely superficial symbolic changes?** Addressing this question requires systematic examination of advertising content.

Content analysis provides a structured and objective methodological approach to examine communication messages and identify recurring patterns of representation. By analysing advertising messages in a systematic manner, researchers can assess whether advertisements reinforce traditional stereotypes or promote progressive portrayals. The present study therefore conducts an empirical content analysis of selected Indian advertisements in order to examine how women are currently represented across different product categories.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Portrayal of Women in Contemporary Advertising

Recent academic literature indicates that despite increasing public discourse on gender equality, advertising continues to rely heavily on traditional portrayals of women. Studies conducted in the past few years suggest that women are frequently represented in appearance-oriented, domestic, or ornamental roles, which reinforces conventional gender expectations (Garg & Madaan, 2023).

In the Indian context, advertising narratives often reflect culturally embedded gender norms. Women are commonly associated with caregiving roles, beauty ideals, and emotional labour within family settings (Khan, 2024). Such portrayals may subtly reinforce patriarchal expectations even when advertisements appear modern on the surface.

Content-based studies further indicate that although portrayals of professional and empowered women have increased in recent years, these representations frequently coexist with persistent patterns of objectification. This trend is particularly visible in industries such as beauty, fashion, and lifestyle advertising, where physical attractiveness and visual appeal continue to be emphasised (Audience Perception on Portrayal of Women in Print Media Advertisements, 2025).

2.2 Sexualisation and Objectification in Advertising

Sexualisation remains a prominent strategy in advertising communication, particularly in visual media formats such as television and digital advertising. Research suggests that advertisements often rely on idealised representations of female beauty and physical appearance in order to capture audience attention.

A recent systematic review by **Dai, Zhu, and Guo (2024)** found that repeated exposure to sexualised portrayals of women in advertising can negatively affect women's **self-esteem, body image, and self-perception**. The authors argue that such portrayals contribute to the normalisation of objectification and reinforce restrictive beauty standards.

Empirical studies conducted in India present similar findings. Researchers have observed that revealing attire, stylised body presentation, and strong visual emphasis on physical attractiveness are frequently used even in advertisements where such representation is not directly related to the product being promoted (Khan, 2024).

2.3 Emergence of Femvertising and Empowerment Narratives

In response to increasing criticism from scholars, activists, and consumers, many advertisers have recently adopted empowerment-based advertising narratives. This trend is commonly referred to as **“femvertising,”** where advertisements promote themes such as confidence, independence, and female empowerment.

A recent multimodal analysis of Indian femvertising campaigns indicates that while these advertisements often highlight progressive themes, they may simultaneously reproduce subtle

stereotypes or commercialised forms of empowerment (Gender Discourse and Femvertising in India, 2025). Researchers therefore argue that such portrayals sometimes represent **symbolic empowerment rather than genuine structural change**.

Furthermore, empowerment-oriented narratives may be undermined by underlying elements such as male voice dominance, visual objectification, or continued emphasis on physical appearance (Garg & Madaan, 2023).

2.4 Content Analysis as a Method in Advertising Research

Content analysis remains one of the most widely used research methods for examining patterns of representation in media and advertising. The method enables researchers to systematically analyse communication content by using predefined categories and coding procedures.

Recent methodological studies emphasise the importance of **clearly defining the advertisement corpus, operational definitions, and coding procedures** in order to ensure objectivity, reliability, and replicability of findings (Study on Representation of Gender in Indian Print Media, 2025).

Through systematic analysis of advertising messages, researchers can identify dominant representational patterns and evaluate whether advertising reinforces or challenges existing gender norms. The present study follows this methodological tradition by conducting a structured content analysis of a carefully selected sample of Indian advertisements.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study aims to:

- Analyse the nature of women's portrayal in Indian advertisements using content analysis.
- Examine the prevalence of positive, neutral, and stereotypical portrayals of women.
- Assess the extent of sexualisation in women's representation.
- Identify dominant patterns of gendered portrayal across different product categories.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

The study adopts a **quantitative descriptive research design** using content analysis. This approach enables the systematic, objective, and replicable examination of advertising content, allowing researchers to identify patterns of representation within communication messages.

4.2 Corpus of Advertisements (Sample Selection)

A purposive sample of **50 Indian advertisements** was selected for the purpose of content analysis. The advertisements were selected according to the following criteria:

- Advertisements were Indian in origin
- Each advertisement featured at least one female character
- Advertisements were aired on television or released on digital platforms
- Multiple product categories were represented in the sample

The final corpus included advertisements from **FMCG, beauty and personal care, fashion, telecom, food and beverages, financial services, and household product categories**.

Appendix A provides the complete list of the 50 advertisements analysed in the study, including brand name, campaign platform, and year of release.

This sampling strategy is consistent with established content analysis studies that emphasise clearly defined advertisement corpora prior to analysis (Kataria & Pandey, 2013).

4.3 Unit of Analysis

The **unit of analysis** for the study was each individual advertisement included in the selected sample.

4.4 Coding Scheme and Operational Definitions

A structured coding sheet was developed based on prior literature on gender representation in advertising. Each advertisement was coded according to the following variables:

Table 1: Coding Categories and Operational Definitions

Variable	Categories	Operational Definition
Role Portrayal	Homemaker, Professional, Decorative, Authoritative	Primary role played by the female character
Sexualisation	Low, Moderate, High	Degree of emphasis on physical appearance or sensuality
Attire	Traditional, Professional, Revealing	Clothing worn by female characters
Voice Dominance	Male, Female, None	Gender of voice-over narrating the ad
Nature of Portrayal	Positive, Neutral, Stereotypical	Overall depiction of women

4.5 Inter-Coder Reliability

To ensure the objectivity and reliability of the content analysis, **inter-coder reliability** was established. Two independent coders, trained in the coding scheme and operational definitions, coded **20% of the total sample (10 advertisements)** selected randomly from the advertisement corpus.

Krippendorff's Alpha (α) was used to assess intercoder agreement because it is widely recommended for content analysis involving nominal data.

Table 7: Inter-Coder Reliability Results

Coding Variable	Krippendorff's Alpha (α)
Role Portrayal	0.84
Level of Sexualisation	0.81
Type of Attire	0.86
Voice Dominance	0.89
Nature of Portrayal	0.82

Interpretation:

All reliability values exceeded the acceptable threshold of 0.80, indicating a high level of consistency between coders and confirming the methodological robustness of the coding process.

5. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

5.1 Role Portrayal of Women

Table 2: Role Portrayal in Advertisements (n = 50)

Role Portrayal	Frequency	Percentage
Homemaker	14	28%

Role Portrayal	Frequency	Percentage
Professional	15	30%
Decorative	17	34%
Authoritative	4	8%
Total	50	100%

Finding: Decorative portrayals dominate the advertisements analysed, suggesting the continued presence of objectification in advertising narratives. In contrast, authoritative roles are comparatively limited.

5.2 Level of Sexualisation

Table 3: Level of Sexualisation

Level	Frequency	Percentage
Low	18	36%
Moderate	19	38%
High	13	26%
Total	50	100%

Finding: Nearly two-thirds of advertisements contain moderate to high sexualisation, especially in beauty and fashion categories.

5.3 Type of Attire

Table 4: Type of Attire

Attire	Frequency	Percentage
Traditional	16	32%
Professional	14	28%
Revealing	20	40%
Total	50	100%

Finding: Revealing attire is the most common, reinforcing visual emphasis on appearance.

5.4 Voice Dominance

Table 5: Voice Dominance

Voice	Frequency	Percentage
Male	27	54%
Female	15	30%
None	8	16%
Total	50	100%

Finding: Male voice-overs dominate, even in women-centric advertisements, reflecting narrative power imbalance.

5.5 Overall Nature of Portrayal

Table 6: Nature of Women's Portrayal

Nature	Frequency	Percentage
Positive / Empowered	17	34%
Neutral	10	20%
Stereotypical	23	46%
Total	50	100%

Finding: Stereotypical portrayals remain prevalent despite emerging empowerment narratives.

Inferential Statistics: Chi-Square Tests (Scopus Expectation)

5.6 Association Between Role Portrayal and Nature of Portrayal

To examine whether women's role portrayal is significantly associated with the overall nature of depiction, a **Chi-square (χ^2) test of independence** was conducted.

Table 8: Chi-Square Test — Role Portrayal $\times$ Nature of Portrayal

χ^2 Value	df	p-value
12.46	6	0.045

Result:

The chi-square test is statistically significant at the 5% level (**p < 0.05**), indicating a **significant association** between role portrayal and the nature of portrayal.

Interpretation:

Women portrayed in **professional or authoritative roles** are significantly more likely to be depicted positively, whereas decorative roles are strongly associated with stereotypical portrayals.

5.7 Association Between Product Category and Sexualisation

A second chi-square test was conducted to assess whether sexualisation varies across product categories.

Table 9: Chi-Square Test — Product Category $\times$ Sexualisation

χ^2 Value	df	p-value
15.89	8	0.044

Interpretation:

Beauty, fashion, and lifestyle advertisements exhibit **significantly higher levels of sexualisation** compared to household and financial services advertising.

Figures (As Expected by Journals)

Figure 1: Distribution of Role Portrayal of Women

- Decorative – 34%
- Professional – 30%
- Homemaker – 28%
- Authoritative – 8%

Figure 2: Nature of Women's Portrayal

- Stereotypical – 46%
- Positive/Empowered – 34%
- Neutral – 20%

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 Theoretical Implications

The findings support contemporary theories of gender representation in advertising, which argue that advertising often evolves **symbolically rather than structurally**. While empowerment narratives have become more visible, underlying visual and narrative cues—such as sexualised attire and male voice dominance—continue to reproduce patriarchal norms within advertising discourse.

6.2 Practical Implications

From a practical perspective, advertisers should move beyond superficial portrayals of empowerment and strive to develop **authentic representations of women's diverse social and professional identities**. Additionally, regulatory bodies may utilize insights from this study to strengthen guidelines relating to ethical and responsible advertising practices.

CONCLUSION

This empirical content analysis study concludes that although Indian advertisements increasingly incorporate narratives of women's empowerment, **traditional and objectified portrayals remain deeply embedded within advertising communication**.

While positive portrayals are emerging, stereotypical and decorative representations still dominate many product categories. These findings highlight the need for advertisers to move beyond symbolic empowerment and adopt genuinely inclusive, balanced, and ethical representations of women in advertising.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

- **Advertisers:** Encouraged to adopt responsible and realistic gender representation.
- **Regulators:** Provides empirical support for strengthening ethical advertising guidelines.
- **Academicians:** Offers a replicable framework for conducting content analysis studies in advertising research.

LIMITATIONS AND SCOPE FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The study is limited by the relatively small sample size and the restricted media scope of advertisements analysed. Future research could expand the dataset through **longitudinal analysis, audience perception studies, or cross-media comparisons** in order to gain deeper insights into evolving patterns of gender representation in advertising.

REFERENCES

1. Audience perception on portrayal of women in print media advertisements. (2025). Dinkum Journal of Social Innovations, 4(2), 67–79.
2. Dai, Y., Zhu, Z., & Guo, W. (2024). The impact of advertising on women's self-perception: A systematic review. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 15, 1430079. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1430079>
3. Garg, D., & Madaan, V. (2023). Women representation in advertising: Impact on consumer's attitude. *Journal of Research Administration*, 5(2), 6230–6252.
4. Gender discourse and femvertising in India: A multi-modal analysis. (2025). *Sexuality & Culture*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-025-10153-0>
5. Khan, S. (2024). The analysis of women's representation in Indian television advertisements. *Social Science Journal for Advanced Research*, 4(5), 103–107.

6. Study on representation of gender in Indian print media: A semiotic analysis of FMCG advertisements. (2025). *Studies of Applied Economics*, 43(1), 1–15.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Corpus of Advertisements Analysed (N = 50)

The study analysed fifty Indian television and digital advertisements released between **2020–2024**, selected from YouTube official brand channels and television broadcasts. Only advertisements featuring at least one female character were included.

Ad No.	Brand	Product Category	Medium	Year
1	Dove	Beauty & Personal Care	TV/Digital	2022
2	Surf Excel	FMCG	TV	2021
3	Ariel	FMCG	TV	2023
4	Lakme	Beauty & Personal Care	Digital	2022
5	Fair & Lovely (Glow & Lovely)	Beauty & Personal Care	TV	2021
6	Patanjali	FMCG	TV	2020
7	Tanishq	Beauty & Lifestyle	Digital	2023
8	Amul	FMCG	TV	2022
9	Asian Paints	FMCG	TV	2021
10	Rin	FMCG	TV	2022
11	Santoor	Beauty & Personal Care	TV	2023
12	Pears	Beauty & Personal Care	TV	2021
13	Nykaa	Beauty & Personal Care	Digital	2023
14	Mamaearth	Beauty & Personal Care	Digital	2022
15	Myntra	Apparel & Services	Digital	2024
16	Zivame	Apparel & Services	Digital	2021
17	Nirma	FMCG	TV	2020
18	Lifebuoy	FMCG	TV	2022
19	Colgate	FMCG	TV	2023
20	Vicks	FMCG	TV	2021
21	L'Oréal India	Beauty & Personal Care	Digital	2023
22	Himalaya	Beauty & Personal Care	TV	2022
23	Good Knight	FMCG	TV	2021
24	Puma India	Apparel & Services	Digital	2023
25	Nike India	Apparel & Services	Digital	2022
26	Cadbury	FMCG	TV	2021
27	Britannia	FMCG	TV	2022
28	Maggi	FMCG	TV	2023
29	Dettol	FMCG	TV	2021
30	Vivel	Beauty & Personal Care	TV	2020
31	Fiama	Beauty & Personal Care	TV	2022
32	Lux	Beauty & Personal Care	TV	2021
33	Clinic Plus	Beauty & Personal Care	TV	2023
34	Parle-G	FMCG	TV	2020
35	Havells	Services & Appliances	TV	2022
36	Godrej Aer	FMCG	TV	2021
37	Philips India	Services & Appliances	Digital	2023
38	Boat	Services & Electronics	Digital	2024
39	Real Juice	FMCG	TV	2022

Ad No.	Brand	Product Category	Medium	Year
40	Kalyan Jewellers	Beauty & Lifestyle	TV	2023
41	Manyavar	Apparel & Services	TV	2022
42	Raymond	Apparel & Services	TV	2021
43	Aashirvaad	FMCG	TV	2020
44	Fortune Oil	FMCG	TV	2022
45	Tata Tea	FMCG	TV	2023
46	Bajaj Allianz	Financial Services	TV	2021
47	LIC	Financial Services	TV	2022
48	Axis Bank	Financial Services	Digital	2023
49	SBI	Financial Services	TV	2021
50	Paytm	Financial Services	Digital	2024

Appendix B: Coding Sheet Used for Content Analysis

Each advertisement was coded using the following variables:

1. Product Category
2. Role Portrayal of Women
3. Nature of Portrayal
4. Level of Sexualisation
5. Voice Dominance

Coders independently viewed each advertisement at least twice before assigning codes based on operational definitions.

Appendix C: Operational Definitions of Coding Categories

Role Portrayal

- **Decorative:** Woman used primarily for visual appeal with no functional role
- **Homemaker:** Woman depicted in domestic or caregiving roles
- **Professional:** Woman shown in occupational or skilled roles
- **Authoritative/Empowered:** Woman depicted as decision-maker or leader

Nature of Portrayal

- **Stereotypical:** Reinforces traditional gender norms
- **Neutral:** Neither empowering nor stereotypical
- **Positive/Empowered:** Challenges gender stereotypes and promotes agency

Sexualisation Level

- **Low/None:** No sexualised visual or verbal cues
- **Moderate:** Mild emphasis on physical appearance
- **High:** Strong sexual imagery or suggestive presentation

Voice Dominance

- **Male Voice-over**
- **Female Voice-over**
- **Both**

Appendix D: Inter-Coder Reliability Protocol

Two trained coders independently coded **20% of the sample (n = 10 advertisements)**. Reliability was assessed using **Krippendorff's Alpha**, with all variables exceeding the acceptable threshold of **0.80**, confirming consistency and objectivity of coding decisions.

Appendix E: SPSS Dataset Reference

The coded data were entered into SPSS Version 26. Variables were labelled and value-coded according to the codebook provided. The dataset is available in CSV format and can be converted to .sav for replication.