

## Reframing Feminity in Indian Advertising: A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of Femvertising Campaigns

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### ABSTRACT

The media images of gender are not confined to the social expectations of society, but it has an influential role in drawing images of equity, self-concept, and daily experience. With the advertising industry in India being littered with old-fashioned misconceptions towards women, some of the more recent campaigns have set out to initiate the process of transforming the visual and narratives into a far more enlightened area. The new messages coincide with the emergence of a marketing tendency which is premised on the incorporation of feminist message with commercial discourse. This analysis reviews how three of the well-known Indian advertising campaigns, these are Vim's Nazariya Badlo Dekho Bartano Se Aaghe, Saffola's Rakhna Heart Ka Khayal and Dove's Stop the Beauty Test presented an insight into women empowerment. The study combines multimodal/discourse analysis in the analysis of the interaction of language, imagery, symbolism and narrative to be able to comprehend how these adverts re-position domestic roles, body norms and expectations of emotion.

The results indicate that the campaigns use a combination of proximate visual framing, emotional and contextually relevant linguistics to counter established stereotypes through stories as well. However, the findings also illustrate a certain paradox, as whereas the fact that both advertisements contribute to extending the definition of what it means to be a woman, the latter is filled with the commercial intentions of the brands that create these advertisements. The paper shedding more light on how the advertisement industry in modern-day India struggles with the intersection of social change and market demands, and defines femvertising as a form of empowerment and at the same time a well-designed demonstration of feminist principles. ..

**Keywords:** *Femvertising, Female portrayal, Gender Stereotypes, Women Empowerment, Visual rhetoric, Discourse Analysis..*

### 1. INTRODUCTION:

Women in advertising is a reflection of cultural trends where consumers receive information about brands and ideas (Pollay, 1986). Lindner (2004), argues that it is common to find advertisements portraying women as housewives or secretaries in their advertisements. In the recent works, it is noted that there has been a minimal change in the image of women in advertisements over the last decades. However, some scholars suggest that there is a reason to believe that the image of women in commercials is changing according to the current cultural tendencies. Varghese and Kumar (2022), highlights the significant increase in the number of advertisements targeting the capabilities of women as well as pro-feminine attitudes. This change has been credited to the activism and control efforts that support real depictions of women. Windels et al. (2020) analysed the area of femvertising, noting that there has been a transition to the process of depicting various femininity using supporting narratives of women. Tsai, Shata, and Tian (2021)

performed a consistent content analysis to investigate tendencies of print advertisement. It was noted that the advertisements that target female empowerment were mostly targeted at women. Female models demonstrated their agency in such campaigns and exemplified their power, and advertisements depicting women in a state of authority have increased. (Gill, 2008), (Halliwell et al., 2011).

Wood and Eagly (2010) states that the perceptions of the gender roles are strongly influenced by societal beliefs. The contemporary issue of identifying gender roles in the present societies brings forward the negative effects of stereotypes on the society. The traditional gender role linked to femininity is characterized by intimacy and solidarity and the traditional gender role linked to masculinity is characterized by authority and prominence (Thorne et al., 1983). The analysis of trends in television image offers the much need insight into the evolving perception of gender in popular culture. Given the agreement between scholars and advertisers on the ability of television advertisements to shape the views and

behaviours of the audience, it is important to analyse the characteristics of these images, and they are capable of affecting the learning process. The analysis of the gender representations in TV commercials reveals important knowledge about the greater gender representations in this media (Arslan,2015).

According to Vinacke (1957), stereotypes are the societal ideologies. According to Ashmore and Del Boca (1981), gender stereotypes are the characteristics making the difference between men and women. Stereotyping helps people to have a handy way of making their daily expectations. However, it might result in over-simplification of social groups (Eisend,2010). Gender stereotypes have evolved based on numerous social and cultural transformations. Women have made significant steps forward, improving their position against men. New evaluations indicate that advertisements now depict women depending on the current tendencies in the society. The gender representation in advertisement is increasingly becoming balanced demonstrating a trend of gender equality (Furnham & Mak, 1999).

The integration of varied representations in the media is an indication of the break of the traditional stereotypes of gender. This shift is characterized by the diversity of multifaceted manifestations, as emphasized by (Akestam et al., 2017). This shift helps people to relieve the pressure of conforming to certain stereotypes and, therefore, increases possibilities of interrelation. According to Puntoni et al., (2010) non-stereotypical representations allow the consumers to engage creatively with the meanings provided. In this respect, there are minimal chances of resistance to persuasion when women are depicted as strong, as opposed to men.

Ferraro (1995) and Van Dijk (1995) also discuss the pivotal role of media in philosophical discourse and its capacity to shape the norms in society. The field explores how media is influencing the perception of reality, which affects the societal attitudes and behaviour. According to McQuarrie and Mick (1999), the visual and linguistic elements of advertising produce symbols that have a deep cultural foundation, which convey a complex meaning. Advertising is a crucial element in the propagation and entrenching of social values, both at the individual and group level of behaviour. The relationship between advertising messages and social beliefs highlights the high influence advertisement has on the attitude of the consumer. The ubiquitousness of advertising underscores its capacity to reflect as well as shape social reality (Grau and Zotos, 2018).

Chu, Lee, and Kim (2018) also provide the evidence that suggests the increase of non-stereotypical representations, particularly the use of male models in the context of female-related jobs. Empirical studies have been conducted in large numbers and have yielded different results, which always indicate increased effectiveness of advertisements that contain unconventional representations (Jaffe & Berger,1994), (Zawisa et al., (2018). Socio-cultural aspects, especially the modern women movement are also considered in the analysis of the advertisements. This wave known as third-wave feminism emerged in the 1990s and emphasises the value of diversity and interrelation of gender with other social categories (Gillis et al., 2004), (Synder,2008).

The intersectional orientation of third-wave feminism has been important for advancing the image studies of the media as it challenges the singularity of gender and points to multiple representations and systems of power that intersect with one another (Crenshaw, 1989). According to Baumgardner and Richards (2010), there is a slow shift towards complex forms of representations of women despite the persistent stereotypes. Critical reviews demonstrate the need to further research the media studies field to show how the intersectional approach of the third-wave feminism can expand the discussion on the representations in the media and require a redefinition of the traditional discourses.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The systematic documentation of television visuals shows that there is much to discover about the evolution of the gender meanings in popular culture. Given the consensus between researchers and advertisers about the power of television commercials to influence viewer beliefs and behaviour, it is important to be aware of the features of these representations, since they can impact on learning outcomes. Analysing the representation of gender in television advertising can increase knowledge about the representation of gender in the wider context of the media world (Eisend,2010).

The systematic documentation of the television visuals shows that there is still a lot to be known about the development of gender meanings in popular culture (Furnham & Mak, 1999; Eisend, 2010). Given the agreement among the researchers and the advertisers on the persuasive capabilities of television commercials on developing the believing, and behaviours of viewers, therefore, there is an urgent need to analyse what the features of gender representations entail since these representations could affect the outcomes of social learning (Bandura, 2001; McQuarrie & Mick, 1999). Analysing gender portrayals in television advertising, therefore, can provide important insights into broader patterns of gender representation across the media landscape (Grau & Zotos, 2018; Arslan, 2015).

Television advertising is a form of visual persuasion advertising where advertisers use powerful visuals to inform and persuade consumers. Additionally, advertisement visuals are carefully designed in order to shift the attention of the viewers to key brand elements (Scott,1994). The arrangement of shots and scenes are designed to position the audience as the intended interpreter (Chandler,1994). The interpretation of the viewer is partly relevant in how he or she understands the advertisement depending on his or her familiarity with signs and symbols coming from the culturally shaped world (Chandler,1994). It is contingent upon the repetition of meanings (McCracken ,1986) and the interpretation of semiotic clues and symbols contained in the advertisement (McQuarrie & Mick, 1999), whether or not a television advertisement will be understood in the manner intended by its creators or not (Sherry,1987).

To break the traditional gender stereotypes, femvertising is a form of promoting women's empowerment. In Turkey, before 2020, very few companies adopted femvertising for their campaigns, such as Dove (2006), Orkid (2014), Nike (2017), Atasay (2017), Selpak (2018)

and Elidor (2019). A study by Akdurucak (2020) showed that the gender stereotypes on Turkish television commercials are gradually changing. Women are getting fed up with their traditional roles, they want to have full part in their social life, they do not want societal restrictions on beauty standards.

Najafian and Kitabi (2011) carried out a study based on social semiotic methods for analysing the ideologies in advertisements. They looked at both verbal and non-verbal elements. The visual and linguistic cues of advertisements had been analysed by the researchers from 'Time' magazine. The findings identified that social semiotic resources are useful to marketers in communicating the hidden ideologies through persuasive language. Colours, images, and words are a social behaviour reflection when analysed this way. Millard (2009) carried out a study based on the method of social semiotic analysis and interviews with the aim of investigating Dove's representation of female beauty and its impact on Canadian women's conceptions. The study showed that Dove made a major impact in allowing women to question the traditional standards of beauty.

Similarly, the study by Zhao (2019) also investigated Chinese domestic advertisement in the 1980s, but from a critical discourse perspective, which was viewed as progressive representations of female identities to encourage women to redefine their roles in society. Both studies employed the methodology of Critical Discourse Analysis in order to emphasize the significance of femvertising (this is supported by the findings by researchers who proposed this concept (Akestam et al., 2017)).

Talbot (2000) studied the links in British telecommunications advertisements, and she found psychological influences and an unequal representation of genders with females presented in an unfavourable manner understanding genders as stereotypes against the advancement of feminism. The results of her study were in line with those of (Machin and Thornborrow, 2003).

Artz and Venkatesh (1991), noted that modern women becoming critical analysers of gender-related language in marketing led to movement, and thus accuracy representation and empowerment in response to issues of gender bias. This movement is fuelled by motivation of consumers and ethical advertisement. Gill (2008) described current feminism has overtly impacted Advertising and so there are some divergence of women's portrayals and self-perceptions due to cultural extreme gender conflict, which gives birth to Femvertising. Commercials can have empowerment effects on women as they simulate a transformative and emancipatory female encounter (Pumphrey, 1987), (Rabinovitch, 2016). Femvertising empowers women through transformative advertising experiences, which changes social norms. This approach uses pro-female messages and imagery to inspire and motivate women to become better and change stereotypical advertisement to make use of good activism, (Media, Sheknows, 2016). The focus on female empowerment allows the challenging of gender positions and body positivity, which is seen in Dove's "Real Beauty" campaign. Some examples of recent advertisements include: Women's increasing economic and political power has meant that the

advertising industry's response has moved away from objectification and an emphasis on autonomy and confidence (Drake, 2017). Femvertising explores female empowerment and the ability to influence attitudes and perceptions, (Kordrostami & Lacznia, 2022).

According to Love and Helmbrecht (2007), Femvertising can be conceptualized as a conscious reaction to the prevalence of Commodity Feminism in related female-oriented advertisement during the early 2000s. The concept of femvertising can be considered innovative because of its focus on the critical examination of the female stereotypes which have been commonly recognized as being, to some degree, perpetuated by the advertising industry (Akestam et al., 2017).

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Kress and van Leeuwen (2020) emphasise the increased acceptance in the 20th century by researchers of semiotic modes as a carrier of meaning apart from language. This acknowledgment has resulted in the prominence in the contemporary era of multimodality, in which non-linguistic semiotic modes are accepted as vital for representation and communication. The mode of communication that is being called a visual mode given the emphasis placed upon it by Kress (2009) has specifically increased the importance of communication and multimodality in modern communications and impacts on social ideology and practices. Social Semiotics is concerned with the usage of certain visual elements in order to express wider concepts, principles, perspectives and individualities.

The study of advertisements is underpinned by a confluence of Halliday's socio-semiotics and Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar that each provide us with unique analytical tools and perspectives for a thorough study of advertisements. Combining these frameworks enables a deeper understanding of how advertisements communicate messages and build meanings in a cultural context. Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis goes in depth about the impact that discourse practices, subject to social and power structures, have on the production and consumption of texts. Within advertisements, language choices are used to manufacture social identities and advertise consumerist ideologies, demonstrating the complex relationship between discourse, power relations and societal norms.

Van Dijk (2013) states that Critical Discourse Analysis functions as a framework of linguistic semiotics and discourse analysis in line with Kress and Van Leeuwen's investigation of social semiotics and analysis of visual images. Their focus on the many semiotic aspects of contemporary texts highlights the roles of human agency and social context in the construction of meaning. Building on Halliday's systemic-functional linguistics, Kress and Van Leeuwen<sup>55</sup> extend the three communicative meta-functions of language to visual communication and argue that other visual modes such as music, image and colour have similar communicative functions to language. This perspective focuses on the communicative potential of the visual modes with regards to the communicative potential that is central to conveying meaning, which is again aligned with the functions of language in social semiotic analysis.



#### 4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This objective of the study, therefore, is to analyse the complex relationship between multimodal advertising discourses and women empowerment. This research also focuses on whether or not these advertisements come under the category of 'Femvertising'. In this study, the representation of women and gender issues by the advertising campaigns of femvertising is critically examined. This research examines these campaigns to uncover the manner of portrayal of women and the treatment of gender issues. Through a careful analysis of the campaigns in the industry of femvertising, this study contributes to the existing literature on women in advertising. Understanding the portrayal of women in advertising allows determining whether campaigns perpetuate diverse and empowering portrayals or stereotypes. By looking at visual aspects used in femvertising campaigns, can help us understand how the advertisers choose to communicate with their target audience.

#### 5. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How far are the visual elements in conveying the good picture of women in the selected commercials?

How do Multimodal elements in Femvertising challenge Gender Norms and Stereotypes

How does a combination of storytelling through different modalities make feminist campaigns more effective?

Femvertising How does verbal and visual advertising create interactive meaning?

How are the body language and facial expressions in femvertising visuals included in the empowerment narrative?

#### 6. METHODOLOGY

This research makes use of the theoretical framework proposed by Norman Fairclough for Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and adapts it to the model for the visual grammar developed by Kress and Van Leeuwen. It openly highlights the way in which Fairclough's CDA draws upon the principles of social semiotics in the process of referencing the dynamic relationship between the language, visuals and the power relationships behind them. By the combination of these theoretical approaches, the purpose of the current study is to offer a comprehensive analysis of the way in which advertisements communicate meanings and ideologies in the context of broader society. A qualitative methodology, namely discourse analysis, was used in order to have a profound understanding of the discourse in the context of video advertisements.

Fairclough (1995) introduced his framework of Critical Discourse Analysis, where he provides comprehensive methods of advertising content analysis. The framework encompasses textual analysis, discursive activities and social practices, which are vital to critical advertising examination. Textual analysis explains an advertisement's lexical choices, syntactic structures and rhetorical devices. This method helps researchers understand the way language has hidden meanings and intentions.

Creswell (2017) defines qualitative research as a way to explore the significance of phenomenon. The reason

behind the choice of this methodology is because it mainly focuses on the comprehension of significance. Usually, qualitative research uses smaller samples with characteristic-based rather than random samples. Dornyei (2010) notes that qualitative data of visual stimuli can be analysed and interpreted quite well. Recent trends in Indian advertising show a boom in feminist advertising. This paper examines cause-branding efforts relating to feminism. As a result, real data about various marketing campaigns were applied.

The subject of the research included analyse of a discourse in three selected television advertisements: "Vim's Nazariya Badlo, Dekho Bartano Se Aage", "Saffola's Rakhna Heart ka Khayal" and "Dove India's Stop the Beauty Test". The advertisements were taken from YouTube and official company websites and the importance of their connection to the objectives of the research. The selection of these advertisements was done meticulously with the aim of ensuring that they are pertinent to the aims of the study. This section aims to offer a comprehensive multimodal analysis of discourse of the three selected Indian femvertising campaigns. Every advertisement goes through a critical analysis using Fairclough's (1995) Critical Discourse Analysis, supplemented by visual grammar of Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) and interpreted through feminist media scholarship (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009). The goal of this discussion is to look at the ways that empowerment is constructed, contested, and commodified through various interconnected linguistic, visual and symbolic elements.

#### 7. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

##### Analysis of "Nazariya Badlo, Dekho Bartano Se Aage" by Vim

##### Introduction to the Discursive Narrative

The Vim campaign depicts the scenario of a young couple contemplating marriage, which is ripe with societal expectations, which are related to gender in India. The male protagonist assumes that the woman will naturally assume the responsibility of domestic work that falls on the shoulders of the woman, emphasizing the stubborn gender partition inside households which are deep-rooted in the Indian culture. The woman's response, which is expressed with a composed demeanour and a touch of assertiveness, challenges these beliefs by asking him to participate in everyday household tasks. This narrative change shows a critical examination of the ways in which domestic labour is still both left out and associated with femininity.

##### Empowerment's Linguistic Underpinnings

The central tagline, "Nazariya Badlo, Dekho Bartano Se Aage" is an obvious call to change the perspective. The use of the imperative mood ("change your perspective") puts agency on the viewer, where empowerment is conceived as a place of cognitive change, not one of confrontation.

Narrative turns include politeness strategies and strategy of persuasion - linguistic choices that are compatible with the media culture of modern time, in which the empowerment of women is achieved through relationship negotiation rather than overt resistance. This is in line with global trends in advertising around the belief that

audiences need to "rethink," rather than redefine, gender norms.

### **Semiotic Analysis: Visual**

The visual design is used to support the verbal communication: The close-up framing of the female protagonist is an effective way of communicating intimacy and establishing credibility. Soft lighting and pastel colour palettes serve to define her as calm, rational, and composed - which are commonly used in femvertising as multidimensional representations of emotionality. Her direct gaze is an invitation, and forces viewers to relate to her perspective. The advertisement very aptly contrasts the woman's authority within a domestic setting, seen as a nuanced critique of asymmetry in domestic roles while maintaining sensitivity to the culture for the Indian consumers.

### **Theoretical Considerations**

The campaign has been very good at emphasising the visibility of domestic work, which is important feminising work, but focuses on empowerment by teaching men to help rather than asking for a structural redistribution of labour. This allows one to see the concept of "tempered politics" in the context of branded feminism. However, the advertisement bucks the prevalent notion by trending private male participation in domestic activities by legitimising male participation, indicating a considerable shift in the traditional landscape of Indian advertisement of the years.

### **Analysis of "Rakhna Heart Ka Khayal" of Saffola Contextual Settings for the Story and Gender Reversal**

Saffola's campaign is centred around a married couple who are suffering at the hands of a stressful situation at work with a twist: Here the husband takes over the role of the career deliberate inversion of traditional Indian gender roles. The use of emotionally responsive carer men is rare in Indian advertising, which speaks to the importance of this narrative change, being rooted in Indian culture.

By situating health issues in the context of women's experiences as opposed to men's, the campaign emphasises the emotional burden dismantled by women in high performance settings, in accordance with research on the increasing professional stress faced by the Indian woman.

### **Language Techniques**

The tagline "Rakhna Heart Ka Khayal" incorporates the discussion of health with an understanding of emotional well-being. The instruction "Rakhna" ("take care") seems to situate care as a cooperative duty, and by doing so, the caring job is slowly turned from being gender-specific to its relational dimension. The dialogue is held in rather gentle, compassionate voices reflecting global changes where male vulnerability is increasingly accepted in advertising.

### **Visual Arrangement**

Saffola's advertisement uses various modes of communication that are used to augment the emotional intensity: The warm yellow and orange colours are in sync with Saffola's brand identity and are associated with warmth and empathy. Eye-level camera angles create a feeling of equality between the spouses, in effect, demolishing the power dynamics. The attentive posture

of the husband suggests a type of 'ethical masculinity', which is a new trend in the world of advertising. These visual strategies make men's care of women not an exception but the norm of expectation.

### **The Ideological Interpretation**

Although the advertisement critiques emotional disconnection that comes with associations of masculinity, ultimately, it links empowerment with domestic well-being instead of calling for substantive changes in workplace policies or the distribution of gendered labour. Nevertheless, it is a significant step towards painting male partner in emotional accountability, it is a truly remarkable move in the Indian advertising arena landscape.

### **Analysis of Dove India's "Stop the Beauty Test" Story-telling and Cultural Significance**

Dove's campaign addresses a deeply rooted societal problem that exists in India: the constant scrutiny of physical appearance of women in the context of marriage markets. Studies on the Indian standards of beauty have made consistent emphasis on the adverse implications of colourism, height bias, and culturally defined standards of femininity. Dove is not afraid to tackle a very serious social issue by emphasizing the humiliations that a woman suffers during the examination for arranged marriage. The worldwide setback to gender equality results from unsatisfied needs, inequalities, disparities, and imbalance. The hashtag #StopTheBeautyTest is a powerful call for action and also a commentary on societal norms and cultural practices. The transformation of individual experience related to beauty judgement to a larger societal issue of justice is significant. Dove uses narrative monologues and testimonies from the first person, which exposes the position of the brand as global based on realism and inclusion.

### **Analysing Visual and Symbolic elements**

A range of multimodal strategies is utilised in the advertisement: Sequential vignettes featuring a range of women in the face of beauty scrutiny-firming relationship of intersectionality through body type, skin colour, stature and hair texture. Close framing is a way of discovering emotional vulnerability: wobbly hands, averted eyes, and nervous movements played down. The use of neutral lighting and desaturated tones sets up a documentary look with a serious and realistic feel. Items such as dupattas, mirrors and hair straighteners are examples of artefacts that are symbolic of beauty ideals imposed at the cultural level. These visuals take a wholesale critique on the societal "gaze" that determines female acceptability.

### **Assessment of Ideologies**

Dove's campaign has been notable in challenging both personal prejudices and the social standards that are widely entrenched that determine marriageability. Nonetheless such campaigns should still be seen through the lens of branded empowerment where critique operates within the framework of market logic. Nonetheless, the advertisement plays an important role as it highlights the voices of those who were historically marginalised in the Indian society.

## **8. CONCLUSION**

Femvertising is a radical change in advertising in an attempt to enhance the representation of women in the

media. Although it advocates empowerment of feminine images, it has been criticized on selling the third-wave feminism by reducing the basic functions of the concepts to easily digestible tales. Irrespective of such criticisms, femvertising is gaining momentum contrary to the conventional advertisement that tends to promote the outdated concept of gender roles. In this paper, Discourse Analysis is used as the key to analyse three femvertising campaigns, paying our attention to the way these advertisements develop the meaning based on visual, verbal, and symbolic communication.

It can be seen in the analysis of these campaigns that both the conceptual and narrative structures are utilized, creating an interesting viewing event that has a clear interaction with participants. The feminist motifs are also evident, and it can be assumed that an effective femvertising can break the stereotypes and provide more empowering images of women. This study combines the linguistic, visual and the socio-cultural dimensions and enriches the existing academic discourse regarding feminist media culture and representation politics. The examination locates the Indian femvertising as a discursive space where empowerment is eroded and fostered at the same time - a space where critique can also arise but is inextricably tied up with corporate branding. Although solely these campaigns cannot address and eradicate structural inequalities, they are a vital part of changing gender role perceptions and making the audience question the accepted standards related to domestic tasks, emotional burdens, and beauty standards.

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## 9. IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This study shows that consumer response to femvertising in culturally diverse markets such as India is majorly shaped by the authenticity and cultural relevance as opposed to empowerment claims alone. Consumers, particularly in younger demographics, are more critically evaluating feminist narratives in context of their own lives when it comes to their daily experiences with domestic labour, beauty standards and work-life balance. This scrutiny adds to the scepticism towards performative or symbolic forms of empowerment. While there is potential for femvertising to make for emotional engagement and/or brand differentiation, there is also the risk of commodification of feminism where the rhetoric of empowerment loses association with true institutional commitment potentially weakening credibility. The meanings of empowerment are further affected by a situation of multimodal storytelling where values of visual symbolism, the sequencing of narrative and recognisable social cues direct interpretation. With the emergence of femvertising on algorithmically-curated digital platforms, it is important for future research to examine the possible visibility logics which are in place to determine the feminist meaning that is prevalent in the marketplace. In addition, the adoption of intersectional and longitudinal methodologies will be very important in the process of assessing the sustainability of attitudinal shifts..

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