



FEMVERTISING AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION IN INDIAN ADVERTISING

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Abstract:

This paper critically examines the phenomenon of *femvertising*—advertising that claims to promote feminist ideals—and its increasing adoption as a marketing strategy within the broader framework of *woke-washing*. Drawing from theories of popular culture, media influence, and gender representation, the study explores how femvertisements in the Indian advertising landscape have evolved over time, particularly post-liberalization. Through an analysis of select advertisements, including those by Oriflame, Airtel, Biba, Vogue, and others, the research exposes the contradictions between the empowering messages portrayed and the underlying commercial motives. While some campaigns succeed in challenging traditional gender roles and promoting inclusivity, others reinforce stereotypes or co-opt feminist discourse for profit, thereby diluting the political core of feminism. The paper concludes that despite its potential to influence cultural perceptions of gender, femvertising often serves elite, urban women and fails to include diverse representations, ultimately reducing feminism to a commodified brand narrative rather than a transformative social force.

Keywords: Femvertisement, Woke-Washing, Advertisement Strategies, Advertisement Stereotypes, Popular Culture Advertising has long played a central role in shaping societal norms, cultural ideals, and consumer behavior. From its early forms in ancient civilizations to its modern manifestations across digital platforms, advertising has evolved into a powerful medium that not only markets products but also constructs identities and reinforces ideologies. In particular, the representation of gender within advertisements has been a subject of ongoing critique and transformation. As gender roles in society continue to evolve, advertising has increasingly adopted the language of empowerment, especially through what is now commonly termed “femvertising”—a blend of feminist ideals and commercial messaging aimed at appealing to female consumers.

Femvertising claims to dismantle patriarchal norms and promote women’s liberation, often by portraying strong, independent, and self-assured female figures. However, a closer examination reveals that many of these campaigns are less about genuine advocacy and more about aligning brands with progressive values to expand market share. In this process, feminist discourse is frequently diluted, simplified, or even distorted, as companies commodify empowerment to enhance their public image. This paper explores *femvertising* as a form of *woke-washing*—a marketing strategy where brands superficially adopt feminist messages to appeal to socially conscious consumers without engaging in substantive structural change.

This paper critically analyzes a selection of Indian femvertisements to uncover the strategies employed in framing feminist narratives within commercial contexts. It explores how these advertisements often reproduce the very

stereotypes they claim to subvert and evaluates the extent to which they meaningfully engage with feminist concerns. The study also reflects on the broader implications of turning activism into a marketing tool, raising important questions about authenticity, inclusivity, and the co-option of social justice by corporate interests.

It is commonly believed that the very first signs of advertising are dated back to the ancient Egyptians' steel carvings in 2000 BC. The first print ad was published in 1472 when William Caxton printed ads for a book and tacked them to church doors in England. The first newspaper ad was published in the U.S in 1704. Modern advertising began to take shape with the advent of newspapers and magazines in the 16th and 17th centuries. The very first weekly gazettes appeared in Venice in the early 16th-century. From there, the concept of a weekly publication spread to Italy, Germany and Holland. In Britain, the first weeklies appeared in the 1620s, and its first daily newspaper was *The Daily Courant* published from 1702 to 1735

Early print advertisements were used mainly to promote books and newspapers, which became increasingly affordable with advances in the printing press; and medicines, which were increasingly sought after as modern people rejected traditional cures. In the early 1900s, advertising became a whole movement when it came to radio and television. Since it was speaking to people directly through their radios and TVs, it felt more personalized. In London Thomas J. Barratt was hailed as 'the father of modern advertising'. Working for the Pears Soap company, Barratt created an effective advertising campaign for the company products, which involved the use of targeted slogans, images and phrases. One of his slogans, "Good morning. Have you used Pears' soap?" was famous in its day and into the 20th century.

The popular culture theorist John Storey has offered six definitions of Popular Culture, the first definition refers to the culture that is wide spread and reaches mass populations, the second establishes a residual category in which all that is not high culture is located and the third definition points to a mass culture which inevitably has a commercial nature. The fourth defines it as originating in the people, while the fifth definition refers to a site of struggle between the resistances of subordinate groups and the forces of incorporation from the dominant groups. The sixth definition makes Popular Culture virtually indistinct from High Culture in the postmodern paradigm (2009: 5-12). Media culture has become in our days the predominant way in which Popular Culture is disseminated, media culture is one of the most significant agents of socialization through which we learn the norms and values of our society to the extent that our socially constructed ideas about gender often are created and reinforced by predominant narratives in the popular culture. Borrowing from these definitions, Popular Culture is to be understood henceforth as the verbal or printed works, sounds, pictures, objects and artifacts, generated by people, that are not excessively intellectual or elitist, and are instead widespread.

In this context, advertising presents a particularly relevant case of study regarding Popular Culture. Advertising, in very simple terms, is "the art of persuading people to buy a product" (Arend, 2014: 53). As Arend explains, it includes any method to achieve this goal, in any medium, such as film, television, radio, the Internet, billboards, magazines, and newspapers, among others (2014: 54). Advertising fits adequately the definitions of Popular Culture previously provided; it is disseminated through "spoken and printed word, sounds, pictures, objects, and artifacts" (Browne, 1972: 11). support the power of advertising as a socializing agent, is very powerful as it structures mass media content; plays a fundamental role in the construction of gender identity; acts as a mediator in families regarding the creation of needs; it conforms the strategy to be implemented in political campaigns; it controls cultural institutions such as popular music or sports, and, finally, it has become part of daily conversations. Gender roles have experienced a constant and progressive transformation in Western societies, and since the 1950s, such evolution has been reflected in the ways in which women and men have been represented in advertising.

Advertisements have undergone transformations in style, content and presentations over the years. A visual advertisement in any given period is a reflection of the cultural, economic, political and ethical status of any given society. The twentieth century has witnessed the rise of feminist advertisements or femvertisements that claim to empower women and do away with patriarchal norms. A few femvertisements will be analyzed in this study to identify the strategies behind their creation and perpetuation.

INDIAN ADVERTISING SCENARIO

A brief history of the Indian advertising scenario will help us to understand different epochs and milestones in the history of Indian advertising. In order to facilitate easy study, we can broadly classify the period as follows:

- Phase 1(Post Independence to late 70s)
- Phase 2(1981-1989)
- Phase 3(1991- Present)

When India got its independence in 1947, most of the advertising agencies operating in India were owned by Britishers. After the transfer of power, a lot of these companies were either shut down or were sold to Indians. The first advertising agency was established in Mumbai by Mr. B Dattaram as early as in 1905, Mr. J Walter Thomson is credited with establishing an agency that could really compete with International Ad agencies. Literacy rate was very low, and very small percentage of people could read the papers. So the idea of getting information from the TV seemed easy to them. During this period the radio was commercialized in the year 1967, and radio ads became a big hit. Unlike televisions, radios were quite popular even in villages; radio spots became widely popular. From cricket matches to general news, everything was broadcasted through the radio. The eighties witnessed a lot of people buying televisions. Earlier, the TV was considered a luxury good, but during this period, a lot of middle-class Indians were buying televisions even if the black and white version was all that they could afford.

Indian companies, by now had seen the power of advertising and were engaging agencies to increase sales and to bolster their brand value. A lot of advertising agencies were set up to cater to the needs of the businesses. The commercialization of Doordarshan channel enabled TV advertisements to grow very popular. The great Indian middle class became the target of these products from **Bajaj scooter** to Parle G biscuits. This trend continued till the late 1980s, but after 1991 the whole scenario changed. The portrayal of women in Indian Ads also began to change. The first feminist ad was probably the Surf ad that depicted the intelligent woman buyer.

Surf's Lalita ji

Surf's 'Lalita ji' was the first feminist of washing powders. The 1984 commercial presented the Indian homemaker as a confident and articulate shopper, dressed in a crisp white-and-blue sari, her hair rolled into a huge bun, she haggled with a vegetable vendor, when a man off-camera asks why a prudent shopper like her prefers an expensive detergent like Surf, she explains the difference between a cheap purchase and a smart one.

After Mr. Manmohan Singh opened up the Indian economy in 1991, there was a frenzy and many foreign companies strove to set up shop in the Indian subcontinent. This led to a very sophisticated change in the Indian advertising scenes. Advertising agencies were sensitive to the needs of their new customers and quickly adapted to the change. Even though *Print, Television, and Radio* were dominant forms of advertising during this period, the Internet had just started to spread its wings. The Internet ushered in a new era of advertising.

From the early 2000s onwards, digital marketing has had a great start. As internet penetration is increasing day by day, the power of **digital marketing** cannot be ignored. Digital advertising is going to be the dominant form of advertising in the coming years. The rising numbers of online businesses and other systems prove the fact that digital marketing is here to stay.

STEREOTYPES IN ADVERTISEMENTS

Television commercials have evolved significantly over the last many decades. They have been the catalyst and reflection of a society's aspirations. In their endeavor to sell, they have created images and metaphors which over time have assumed strong socio-cultural dimensions. Television commercials have not only created the perfect images but also woven pressing narratives which make the desire to attain that perfection imperative. These images have somewhere got domesticated and appropriated over time. In fact, these images have managed to build a

framework of ‘stereotypes’ with respect to different constructs including gender, class, religion, sexuality, ethnicity among others. Images of female bodies are everywhere. Women—and their body parts—sell everything from food, cars to toilet seats.

Stereotypes are ‘norms’ created by society in order to perpetuate behavioral patterns, customs, food or dressing habits through generations. Over the years’ advertisements have tried to sell women products by promising them the best skin, the best hair, the best figure or the best complexion. Models featuring the ‘ideal’ body were used to market these products. Advertising and portrayals of gender roles have received academic attention. Research proves that advertising tends to offer traditional and stereotyped images of men and women, relations and gender roles. Depictions of women related to Westernized beauty ideals, male desires and mothering stereotypes have long dominated advertising, perpetuating the subordinate status of women in society. As early as the 1950s, scholars began to assess the prevalence of gender bias in marketing communications content, specifically in relationship to women in stereotypical roles. Advertising is one of the major media that affects our daily life consciously and unconsciously and is responsible to play a significant role in shaping the society in a much broader perspective. Women today are no longer consolidated behind kitchen walls. Their aspiration for coming out of the door also taught society to think differently. Marketers wisely utilized this transformation process to launch their product and advertisement strategically.

Femvertisement is a portmanteau word combining feminism and advertisement. Those advertisements that take up women’s issues, try to dismantle gender roles, question patriarchal norms, draw attention to women and relationships are usually termed femVERTISEMENTS. Coined by SheKnows Media at Advertising Week 2014, the movement’s label is an abbreviation of “female empowerment advertising” and refers to ads that directly contradict stereotypical depictions of women in advertising. Femvertising is a term used to describe mainstream commercial advertising that attempts to promote female empowerment or challenge gender stereotypes. Femvertising, simply put, is the use of feminist ideals by brands to sell their products. Exploring of feminist issues, fabrication of women’s stories, presentation of female protagonists and promotion of pro-female messages— all of this when done by advertisers results in what we call ‘femvertising’.

STRATEGIES IN FEMVERTISEMENTS

The advertising industry once built itself by objectifying women. Be it women’s products, men’s products or gender-neutral products, women’s objectification was the way to go about advertising them. However, the advertisers recently realized that they have only been catering to one of their consumer groups — men, while another group, almost equally as large — women, remains unaddressed. Today, an increasing number of advertisers are creating pro-female ads to catch-up with the latest trend of feminism. The advertising Industry that once depended heavily on the objectification of women to market its content has now taken a 360-degree turn to attract the attention of female consumers and to make them feel ‘understood and valued’. This phenomenon of employing feminism as an advertising tool has been labelled as ‘femvertising’.

Unfortunately, some of the femVERTISEMENTS’ claim of advocating freedom from stereotypes and achieving gender equality remains far from the truth. An analysis of few such advertisements reveal that though on the periphery they appear to vouch for women’s liberation they are in fact marketing strategies to increase consumption. Some ads do more damage to the gender stereotyping by creating much more complex situations than the existing, whereas others in the process of erasing inherent meaningless traditions in patriarchal society only attempt in creating other such practices.

Some feminist advertisements have been remarkably successful in dismantling idealist conceptions of beauty, traditionally defined gender roles and in carrying across powerful messages of women’s liberation and women empowerment. The Dabur Vatika hair oil ad that features a cancer survivor woman strikes an emotional note with a bold and beautiful bald woman returning to work after her treatment. All her colleagues join in welcoming her back and convey through their gestures that she still looks beautiful. The ad ends with the statement that ‘Some women don’t need hair to look beautiful’. The advertisement will definitely embolden women with little or no hair as it conveys a very strong message. The ad dismantles the notion that only a thick and black mane will entitle a woman to be labelled young and beautiful.

The 'Vicks' ad that features a transgender woman adopting a girl child is another powerful femvertisement that questions the notions of motherhood. The single mother undergoes many difficulties to bring up her child and give her a good education. The child calling the transgender mother 'amma' and bestowing all love and dignity to her problematizes the concept of the heterogeneous couple and the married mother norm prevalent in society.

Although many instances of such powerful femVERTISEMENTS can be quoted here, there are also advertisements that claim to be feminist in substance but in reality, have complicated the women's issues further. Some leading brands have used feminism as a mere money-puller. Feminism 'sells' as it is the in-thing now. Women's issues and gender equality have become mere marketing techniques to sell a brand, and the real question remains unaddressed.

Woke washing is the act of using social justice themes in marketing campaigns to create a positive image for a company without taking any meaningful action. This practice has become increasingly popular as companies try to capitalize on the growing trends of purpose-driven consumerism. While some companies may genuinely support social justice causes, others use woke washing as a way to make their brand look good without doing anything concrete

A few feminist advertisements that have been released in the past few years have been take up for analysis here:

1. *Oriflame* – This Women's Day ad was released glorifying the woman's adherence to the prevailing gender roles that patriarchal norms have drawn up for her. She's shown to be multitasker who juggles her work, household chores and the child simultaneously without any help from her husband, unless you count the extra tasks he so conveniently passes on to her. The husband's scheduled meeting seems to be very important, whereas the woman's work is relegated as 'part time' or secondary. The husband cannot even manage to find his clothes or knot his tie. The woman on the other hand manages her business which she runs from home, takes care of the child, expertly manages her household chores and even goes to deliver the products that she makes, holding the baby in her arms. This ad reveres a woman's subjugation by putting it under the label of "Superwoman". The very idea of a 'Woman's Day' is subverted here. The ad promotes gender disparity and seems to be applauding women for adhering to it. The idea of a 'superwoman' is segregating and demeaning, as women who cannot juggle all these roles fall short of the 'super' mark and also all these kinds of work in the family get internalized as 'womanly'.
2. *Airtel*- The company released its 'Boss' TVC in 2014 with a "modern" twist where the woman is her husband's boss. The advertisement seems to be a path-breaking one in that it portrayed the woman as occupying a senior position in the office. The advertisement did try to break the stereotyped representation of a woman as only a homemaker, and even showed her holding a position of power in the workplace. However, even when she is the boss of her husband at work, she still comes home to do what pleases him. Asking him what he wants to eat, cooking a meal for him and fulfilling her "wife-duties". The ad seems to convey that even though the wife is powerful in the office, at home it is the rule of the man. She has to fit into her wifely duties and wait up for him to serve his food perhaps. Femverts like these take feminism one step forward and two steps backward.
3. *Biba*: A popular women's clothing brand came up with an ad on dowry Negotiation. A husband and wife return from a visit to a prospective bride's house. Seemingly they have fixed the match for their son. The elderly mother asks for details and finally asks for the amount that her grandson will be gifted as dowry. After giving a list of a hefty sum, a vehicle and money – he adds that they will have to pay it as they are bringing home a girl more precious than pearls. The grandmother accepts the proposal, albeit with a sense of disappointment, and the ad proclaims its time to change. While the ad seems to be heralding very bold changes in the society by protesting against the dowry system and stating that a girl's value is more than pearls, it's very regressive in the idea. One evil practice is being removed, to usher in another, which is again not acceptable. No woman wants equality at the expense of any other gender. Such ideas will only generate further inequalities and liabilities.
4. *Vogue*: This video basically proposes women's domination, not women empowerment. The video not only happily evades the central issues of feminism by proposing mostly frivolous choices but also proposes making a choice as the simple solution to gender disparity. Ground realities are not as simple as that. A number of lines said in this video by the woman protagonist are plain problematic. For instance, "to have sex outside of marriage." Is infidelity supposed to be a means of women empowerment now? Such wrong notions have skewed up the notion of feminists among the laymen and has also resulted in the very word 'feminist' carrying a negative aura around it, especially in 'Kerala'. Another remark goes "My pleasure might be your pain." Feminism does not propose inflicting the same hurt on the other gender to overcome one's own. This is not the solution. In addition, the video comes off as hypocritical in general. A line in the video is, "my choice; to be a size 0 or a size 15." However, all the

women featured in the video adhere to conventional body types. Magazines like *Vogue* parroting ideals of “feminism” is hollow as long as they themselves reinforce myths of conventional beauty through their cover pages that display only a certain kind of women and photoshoots that objectify women.

In recent times, it is a fad to sell to the empowered independent woman. Having clearly positioned itself as a magazine for women, *Vogue* also decided to use the feminist movement as a marketing tool. However, this just dilutes a movement that is trying hard to include everybody and focus on real world issues. These campaigns harm the purpose of feminism by saying things we don’t wish to say. The false sense of empowerment takes credit away from the real education feminists are trying to provide across the world. After Dove released its “Real Beauty” campaign, it was praised heavily for its empowering message for women. The popularity of the campaign drove 30 times more exposure than paid media space and sales at Dove grew from \$2.5 billion to \$4 billion in the decade after the campaign launched. However, Dove’s parent company, Unilever, owns Axe, a men’s health company. Many of Axe’s ads have been degrading and sexist towards women. Feminist advertising therefore doesn’t seem to reflect the core ideology of the company. It’s only used when it’s an effective marketing tool and with the rise of #MeToo, it’s becoming increasingly frequent.

Another case in point is the KPMG business group. The very popular ‘Glass Ceiling’ advertisement showcases a woman playing golf with a man. The woman, in the ad, in the process of hitting a ball shatters the glass-ceiling, in a nearby office. Despite the remarkably positive message of this ad, KPMG is the subject of a \$400M class-action lawsuit alleging a pattern of gender discrimination within the firm, including denying promotions to women and penalizing them for taking maternity leave.

The exploitation of women in mass media is mostly through the use or portrayal of women in mass media (such as television, film and advertising) to increase the appeal of media or a product to the detriment of, or without regard to, the interests of the women portrayed, or women in general. This process includes the presentation of women as sexual objects and the setting of standards of beauty that women are expected to reflect. Even the so called femvertisements all telecast white, thin models who are the epitome of beauty and grace. No representation can be found of a dark, illiterate or a tribal woman. All the advertisements are created for products that are to be consumed by the elite and educated and all other classes are pushed to the margins.

Advertisements are one of the major media forms that shape our daily life through conscious and unconscious means, and though their portrayal of gender and gender roles are powerful to transform and educate. Women today are no longer confined to the kitchen walls. Marketers have wisely utilized this transformation process to launch their products and advertisements strategically. The new Indian woman is here to stay and she will continue to evolve in her multidimensional role as a girl child, a prospective mother, a home-maker, a career woman and also as one who just enhances the appeal of the advertisement.

The new Indian woman and her evolving roles and resulting needs will always hold new business opportunities for marketers. Greater monetary independence, greater confidence, enhanced linguistic and other capabilities and other factors have greatly contributed to the way a woman is valued and appreciated. These changes have also led to the decrease of the ‘commodity’ status accorded to women hitherto and their portrayal as sex objects in advertisements particularly in the Indian advertisement context.

Femvertisements, or feminist advertisements have been successful in dismantling gender roles, exposing patriarchal evils, highlighting the nuances of the relationships that a woman nurtures, empowering women and boosting their self-esteem. However, most of these advertisements still cater to the needs of the upper class educated women and no efforts have been made to empower the lower or underprivileged classes. Femvertisements have also failed to incorporate women encompassing the cultural diversity of the nation in its true sense.

A few femvertisements were analyzed in the previous chapter of this study and it was found out that femvertizing has been reduced to a mere strategy of the multinational companies to draw more profit. While some only preach feminist ideals and do not practice it even with their employees, others who branded feminism were found to create more gender complexities through their portrayals. Femvertisements were also found to further the subordination of woman by offering her a glorified status.

The analysis of selected femvertisements, in this study, was conducted with a purpose to understand the incorporation and the adaptation of activist and feminist discourse in these commercial campaigns. What happens to feminism as a political project and struggle when its key ideas and discourses are co-opted by market forces, and how this kind of advertising is used in the process of building brands was identified. Under the mask of feminism and women empowerment, these brands attempt sell their products to a class of educated and elitist class who genuinely hope and strive for true empowerment.

This study examined a selection of Indian advertisements that position themselves as feminist or empowering, revealing a complex spectrum of representation. While some campaigns—such as those by Dabur Vatika and Vicks—succeed in challenging traditional gender roles and sparking important conversations, many others merely reinforce existing stereotypes under the guise of progressiveness. Ads like those from Oriflame or Airtel may appear to celebrate the modern woman, yet subtly re-inscribe patriarchal norms through idealized depictions of multitasking or self-sacrificial behavior. Even campaigns that seemingly critique regressive customs, such as dowry, often fail to propose truly equitable alternatives.

These contradictions point to a broader phenomenon wherein feminism is strategically co-opted by brands for profit—a practice that ultimately undermines the radical and transformative goals of feminist activism. As this paper has shown, the messages in femvertisements are often selectively empowering, catering largely to upper-class, urban, and conventionally attractive women, while marginalizing others. This limited representation flattens the diversity of women's experiences and silences those at the intersections of caste, class, and regional identity.

In this context, femvertising becomes less an instrument of empowerment and more a reflection of market logic—a carefully curated narrative meant to align brands with progressive values without enacting structural change. As feminist scholars and media critics, we must remain vigilant of such co-optations. Genuine empowerment cannot be achieved through representation alone, particularly when it is filtered through commercial interests. Instead, the challenge lies in ensuring that feminist discourse in advertising moves beyond tokenism toward inclusivity, authenticity, and accountability.

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