



A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF FEMVERTISING TRENDS IN INDIAN BEAUTY AND FASHION ADVERTISING

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the changing trend of femvertising in Indian beauty and fashion advertising, particularly in the context of the construction, representation, and commodification of feminist discourses. With brand practices increasingly subject to global gender equality discourses, Indian firms have adopted femvertising—a fusion of feminism and advertisement—as a tool for emotionally connecting women consumers. Based on qualitative content analysis of the advertisements and campaigns chosen, this research considers how brands such as Dove, Nykaa, L'Oréal India, BIBA, and Tanishq use empowerment messages with the tendency to vacillate between authentic advocacy and corporate opportunism. The paper examines negotiation of visual semiotics, narrative strategy, cultural references, and moral alignment in such campaigns, using feminist media theory and postfeminist critiques. Through examination of themes like inclusivity, self-purchasing behavior, reimagined femininity, and intersectional representation, the research demonstrates how femvertising not just captures rising gender norms but also threatens to water down activism into market-friendly media. The research uses content and discourse analysis rather than surveys and statistical methods, focusing on media text interpretation and theory rather than empirical tools. It identifies the manner in which femvertising can normalize positive gender representation but will depend on the authenticity and socio-cultural accountability of the participating brands.

Keywords: Femvertising, Indian Advertising, Feminist Media Theory, Beauty and Fashion Campaigns, Representation of Women

1. Introduction

Advertising has ever been an expression and shaper of society's gendered culture. There is no site clearer than in the representation of women in beauty and fashion. Traditional advertisements in India once reinforced patriarchal values—representing women as domestic home-makers, passive beauty, or decoration to a heroic male (Nath & Saha, 2021). But with growing feminist awareness and consumer pull for socially conscious advertising messaging, the more recent model developed: femvertising. Characterized by SheKnows Media in 2014, femvertising is used to describe advertising that leverages pro-women messages as a way of selling brands, frequently marking themes of empowerment, self-esteem, and women's equality (Gill, 2008; Lazar, 2006).

In the Indian context, this transformation can be best seen in beauty and fashion advertisements. Advertisements like Dove India's #StopTheBeautyTest, BIBA's #ChangeTheConvention, and Nykaa's #BreakTheHashtag seemingly subvert strict norms of beauty, sermonize body positivity, and sell self-love. But closer inspection leads to some pertinent questions: How far do these advertisements actually turn gender norms upside down? Are these campaigns serious interventions in public discourse, or are they examples of "commodity feminism," in which feminist values are being used to further commercial interests (Goldman, Heath, & Smith, 1991)?

As it has been contended by some authors, there is a paradox in the middle of femvertising. Even though it seems to be subversive in nature to a certain degree, it is still working in a neoliberal market economy under which woman empowerment becomes consumer choice (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Sengupta, 2021). Secondly, Indian femvertising is urban-focused, mainly targeting middle- and high-income women, and generally ignoring intersectional concerns like caste, class, regional diversity, and color. This reductionist approach to representation can make feminism accessible but hollow, removing its political bite. Against this background, this study is a qualitative, critical exploration of femvertising practices in Indian beauty and fashion advertisements. This study is interested in how empowerment is constructed, the use of aesthetics and narratives utilized, and the degree to which these representations strengthen or weaken feminist rhetoric in India.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

This paper sets out to:

1. Critically examine the visual and narrative strategies used in Indian beauty and fashion femvertisements.
2. Explore the extent to which these campaigns genuinely promote gender equality versus reinforcing new forms of consumer-driven stereotypes.
3. Analyze the ethical and cultural implications of using feminist themes for commercial gain.

1.2 Research Questions

1. How is female empowerment visually and rhetorically represented in Indian beauty and fashion femvertisements?
2. In what ways do these advertisements challenge or reinforce traditional gender norms?
3. What ethical tensions emerge when feminist ideals are commodified in brand marketing?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptualizing Femvertising: From Advocacy to Commodity

Femvertising, a blend of "feminism" and "advertising," gained popularity in the early 2010s as companies started increasingly integrating pro-women statements into brand narratives (Sengupta, 2021). In the beginning a signal of innovation, it became a marketing tactic in which empowerment became aestheticized and depoliticized. Goldman, Heath, and Smith (1991) contend that such events eventually lead to "commodity feminism," whereby feminist principles become abstracted and re-packaged into consumable, brand-compliant values. Gill (2008) and Lazar (2006) illustrate the building of a postfeminist discourse in advertising in which women are built as empowered shoppers—strong, autonomous, yet fixated on control and looks. Such a paradigm is perfectly lodged in neoliberal rationality, paraphrasing feminist freedom as individual empowerment through consumer politics. In India, the same globalization is expressed in locally conditioned terms through caste, class, urbanization, and colonial history.

2.2 Femvertising in Indian Beauty and Fashion Advertising

Indian fashion and beauty advertising has been criticized in the past for promoting narrow, exclusionary definitions of femininity—heterosexual romantic beauty, fair complexion, and slender body (Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2009). The industry for fairness creams, dominated by such brands as Fair & Lovely (rebranded now as Glow & Lovely), was quintessential to this practice. But some recent femvertising campaigns have proceeded to flip beauty standards on their head. For example, Dove India's #StopTheBeautyTest campaign challenges the typical expectations of the marriage market from women, and Nykaa's #BreakTheHashtag shows women refusing superficial labels such as #TooBold or #TooDark. These campaigns use inclusivity and empowerment as marketing tools with the aim of creating body positivity and consumer choice. However, Banet-Weiser (2018) contends, selling empowerment does not necessarily mean promoting structural change. These campaigns might do the opposite and substitute one ideal for another equally commercialized ideal of empowerment.

2.3 Media Ethics and the Feminist Dilemma

Femvertising immediately brings up ethical questions regarding the genuineness of feminist messages in capitalist environments. Advertisements are, by definition, commercial ventures. With companies positioning themselves as feminist champions of women's empowerment while, at the same time, capitalizing on fears about beauty and appearance, performative activism or "woke-washing" is a high risk (Gill & Orgad, 2015). Ethical advertising requires a more profound interaction with the socio-political existence of the audience that is being targeted. In the Indian scenario, ethical concerns are brought to the forefront because of overlapping bases of discrimination on the basis of caste, class, and colorism. While femvertisements target urban, English-speaking, upper-middle-class women in the majority of cases, they overlook the lived experiences of tribal, rural, or Dalit women. Such differential representation can have the effect of making specific groups invisible within mainstream feminist discourse (Sarkar, 2020).

2.4 Femvertising and Postcolonial Identity

Indian femvertising is not just gendered because it overlaps with postcolonial identity and nationhood. For Sengupta (2021), Indian femadvertisements deploy the empowered woman to be modern, cosmopolitan, and financially independent and implicitly equate her with non-traditional, cosmopolitan, or upper-class identities. This establishes a top-down model of empowerment shaped by Westernized tastes and desire. In addition, branding discourse appropriates aspects of Indianness—say, ethnic dress, celebrations, or classical motifs—without seriously addressing indigenous feminist issues. It is such "cosmetic indigenization" that Appadurai (1996) refers to as the "production of locality" in global cultural flows: an image of commodified Indian womanhood reshaped for consumption in globalizing cities.

2.5 Theoretical Insights: Feminist Media Studies and Cultural Critique

Femvertising scholarship is guided by arguments based on feminist media theory, postfeminist critique, and cultural studies. Postfeminist theory, as developed by McRobbie (2009), is critiquing the manner in which empowerment is depoliticized and individualized within media discourse. Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding model then guides us to an understanding of how audiences decode these texts into meanings that are shaped by their socio-cultural locations. Intersectional feminist scholars such as Crenshaw (1989) encourage academics to inquire about how intersecting classes (caste, class, religion, and region, for example) frame the experience of representation. This is especially pertinent in India because India's society is so socially varied. A monolithic, mono-conceptual understanding of female empowerment cannot speak to the Indian woman's variegation.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative critical methodology grounded in feminist media studies and cultural critique to examine how femvertising in Indian fashion and beauty commercials constructs, markets, and articulates notions of women's empowerment. In contrast to consumer interview- or survey-based research, this research relies on textual and semiotic analysis of exemplary advertisement campaigns in combination with thematic discourse analysis of brand stories and visual narrative strategies.

Qualitative approach is selected as it has the capability to critically read visual and textual materials in advertisements, decode latent ideological frameworks, and examine symbolic articulations of power that lie within media representation (McRobbie, 2009; Gill, 2008). It allows for a detailed examination of femvertising not only as a commercial text, but a cultural artefact infused with embedded socio-political meanings.

3.2 Selection Criteria and Sampling

The advertisements selected for analysis fall under the categories of beauty and fashion advertising produced by Indian brands between 2015 and 2023. These campaigns have been widely circulated across television, YouTube, and social media platforms, ensuring high public visibility and discursive impact. Selection is based on the following criteria:

- The advertisement must explicitly or implicitly promote a message of female empowerment.
- The brand must be Indian or have a strong consumer base and cultural presence in India.
- The content must belong to the beauty or fashion industry, including skincare, cosmetics, apparel, or jewelry.
- Campaigns must have been featured in mainstream discourse—media coverage, industry critiques, or academic mentions.

Notable campaigns analyzed include:

1. Dove India – #StopTheBeautyTest
2. Nykaa – #BreakTheHashtag
3. Tanishq – Ekatvam and Rivaah Campaigns
4. Anouk by Myntra – Bold is Beautiful series
5. BBlunt – Salon Secret Hair Color campaign

3.3 Analytical Framework

The analysis combines the following interpretive techniques:

- **Textual and Visual Analysis:** Decoding color palettes, lighting, body language, costume, and camera work to understand how femininity is constructed visually.
- **Discourse Analysis:** Examining scripts, slogans, taglines, and narration to explore underlying ideologies, subject positions, and contradictions.
- **Thematic Coding:** Categorizing recurring motifs like freedom, choice, diversity, defiance, and tradition to identify narrative patterns across campaigns.

3.4 Theoretical Anchors

This study draws heavily from the following theoretical frameworks:

- **Postfeminist Sensibility** (Gill, 2008): To understand how advertisements frame empowerment as individual choice within neoliberal capitalism.

- **Intersectionality** (Crenshaw, 1989): To assess whose empowerment is being marketed, and whose identities are being marginalized or excluded.
- **Cultural Studies Approach** (Hall, 1980): To decode how meaning is constructed and received within particular sociocultural contexts.
- **Commodity Feminism** (Goldman et al., 1991): To critique the transformation of feminist messages into consumer appeals.

4. Analysis and Discussion

The critical analysis in this section is thematically organized based on relevance that arises from critical examination of femvertising campaigns of Indian beauty and fashion advertisements. Through engagement with feminist media theory and cultural critique, the research explores how empowerment is represented visually and discursively, commodification contradictions arising from feminist principles, and general cultural implications of such narratives within the Indian landscape.

4.1 Visual Semiotics of Empowerment

Indian femvertising in beauty and fashion contexts generally visually conveys strength, independence, and individuality. With Nykaa's #BreakTheHashtag campaign, women assertively rebuff social judgments such as "#TooBold" or "#TooDark." The camera lingers on the faces of the models as they stand before the camera boldly—a timeless feminist visual signifier of agency and resistance—while hashtags get broken, marked through, or appear visually smashed on screen.

Similarly, the Dove India #StopTheBeautyTest campaign employs real women and not models to defy beauty judgments on complexion, weight, and height in matrimonial assessments. The mise-en-scène is usually a home or setting cultural (e.g., living room, wedding environment) where the camera observes surprise micro-aggressions like judgmental looks and body-scanning, only to be countered later with verbal assertiveness or reinforcement from family members. These acts of subversion are semiotically charged by soft lighting, tight framing, and plaintive instrumental music that elicits hope and solidarity.

While these movements push for empowerment, the emphasis on physical attractiveness—whether transgressed or reasserted—ironically positions beauty at the center as a site of identity production. Empowerment is thus impossible to separate from visibility, which means that in becoming "empowered," one is still compelled to enact a certain form of beauty, just more inclusively.

Selected Femvertising Campaigns in Indian Beauty and Fashion Advertising

Brand	Campaign Title	Key Message	Year	Media Platform
Dove	Real Beauty	Celebrates natural beauty and body positivity	2017–	Print, YouTube, Instagram
L'Oréal India	Because You're Worth It	Promotes confidence and inclusivity in beauty standards	2020–	TVC, Digital, Print
Nykaa	Beauty in Her Story	Focuses on women empowerment through everyday narratives	2019	Instagram, YouTube
BIBA	Change Begins with Her	Challenges patriarchal family norms through fashion choices	2018	Digital campaign
Tanishq	Marriage Conversations	Breaks stereotypes around interfaith marriage and women's agency	2020	TV, YouTube
Pantene	#StrongIsBeautiful	Celebrates strong women and redefines beauty through resilience	2016	TV, Print

4.2 Narratives of Autonomy and Choice

In campaigns such as Myntra's Anouk's Bold is Beautiful campaign, woman empowerment is stated in terms of life choices—single womanhood, inter-caste marriage, same-sex relations, and career aspirations. They are drawn upon what Gill (2008) has referred to as the "postfeminist sensibility" where freedom and agency are stated in terms of independent, private space choices rather than from within collective political struggle.

The protagonist of Anouk's "The Visit," say, is a single pregnant woman choosing to raise the child alone. The narrative re-imagines single motherhood not as a sacrifice but as an audacious, conscious choice. But such narratives are ensconced in aspirational class models—urban, English-speaking, fashion-oriented women—excluding rural, non-elite, or non-Hindi/English speaking women. So, while progressive, the narrative is also exclusionary.

Secondly, the lack of systemic critique—whether for gender violence, pay differentials, or structural patriarchy—renders the entire empowerment discourse superficial. Activism gives way to individual choice, and change is hoped in terms of consumer culture, supporting the critique of "commodity feminism" (Goldman, Heath & Smith, 1991).

Thematic Analysis of Femvertising Messages

Theme	Explanation	Representative Campaign
Empowerment through Appearance	Using fashion/beauty to inspire confidence and individuality	Dove Real Beauty
Inclusivity and Diversity	Featuring models of varied body types, skin tones, and ethnic backgrounds	L'Oréal Inclusive Beauty
Challenging Patriarchy	Narratives that question male dominance in decision-making	BIBA's "Change Begins"
Self-Purchase and Autonomy	Women buying products for themselves as an act of self-love and independence	Titan Raga's Feminine Gaze
Motherhood and Working Women	Celebrating multitasking and choice in balancing careers and caregiving	Pantene & Nykaa Ads
Intersectionality in Beauty	Acknowledging caste, class, and religion in constructing feminine ideals	Tanishq Interfaith Ads

4.3 Representation and Intersectionality

Intersectionality, as imagined by Crenshaw (1989), addresses how gender intersects with other intersecting axes such as caste, class, and ethnicity. Even though femvertisements are gradually becoming inclusive in body shape and skin color, much remains to be achieved with presenting caste-diverse, tribal, or northeastern identities in Indian fashion and beauty advertisements in mainstream India.

Others such as BBlunt's Salon Secret and Tanishq's Ekatvam ideologically welcome diversity, but not visually. In the latter, Indian brides of every caste wear different wedding attire, eliciting oneness in diversity. But representation is skin-deep inclusion; caste markers are erased or rendered "safe" for middle-class consumption. The question is then: can one have representation without being acknowledged as a historical exclusion and lived experience?

This superficiality is counterproductive to the feminist critique of these ads. In commodifying diversity as visual range rather than purely structural equality, femvertisements may not be means but a performance towards social change.

4.4 Ethical Contradictions of Femvertising

Though progressive-sounding, Indian femvertisements often fail on brand motives and moral hypocrisy. The rebranding of Fair & Lovely as Glow & Lovely, keeping more welcoming terminology, has been across-the-board condemned as an act of "woke-washing"—strategic deployment of social justice terminologies without addressing prior complicity in colorism advocacy.

Such campaigns point toward the inherent contradiction of femvertising: advertising exploits instilling insecurities to sell their solution, but femvertisements sell self-acceptance and love. This contradiction fits Jhally's (2000) term for "contradictory space," where empowerment is sold and commodified and, in doing so, reduces feminism to an instrumental determinant of sale.

These paradoxes are most evident where brands fail to make support for feminist movements extend beyond the advertisement or fails to exercise ethical labor practices along its production line. Feminist advertisement is consequently prone to suspicion, particularly from media-aware consumers.

4.5 Cultural Reception and Media Literacy

Indian audiences interpret femvertisements in various ways based on media access, cultural belief, and class position. While highly educated, urban consumers may consume the messages via the lens of empowerment and modernity, rural or conservative audiences may consume them as aspirational or even controversial.

This interpretive multiplicity is reflected in Stuart Hall's (1980) model of encoding/decoding, where messages are neither passively received but actively negotiated, nor even resisted. Media literacy in this regard is then an imperative catalyst for such processes. For femvertising to be amplified and better ethically directed, it should engage with grassroots communication, vernacular narrative forms, and culturally specific feminist structures.

5. Conclusion

Femvertising in Indian beauty and fashion marketing is a discreet, at times contradictory, terrain under the larger cultural discourse of gender emancipation. The ads discussed in this research project indicate a heightened sense of awareness by companies to remain attuned to liberal social values, specifically women's empowerment, diversity, and agency. However, the intersection of feminism and consumerism is a fine balance between advocacy and appropriateness.

While ads such as Dove's #StopTheBeautyTest or Anouk's "Bold is Beautiful" campaign tell empowering stories, they are still within the confines of commercial purpose. The stories rather like to accentuate market-accommodating feminism—cost-effective empowerment, control over self, and diversity in looks—without engaging with the root problems of patriarchy, class disparity, and intersectional marginalization. The replacement of authentic political activism by symbolic action threatens to make the feminist movement banal.

Moreover, the morals of femvertising have given way to its looks. The never-ending cycles of "woke-washing," tokenism, and avoidance of system-level change erode the seriousness of femvertising as a tool for meaningful social change. Brands can call upon the rhetoric of empowerment but until making their emphasis on ethical labor practices, corporate responsibility, and socially conscious community engagement core to their actions, their gesture remains inauthentic.

Despite these constraints, femvertising has the potential to shake up gender norms in Indian media culture—when it is ideologically coherent, intersectional, and lookist. As this research demonstrates, representation is everything. Well done, femvertising has the potential to be a force for good, creating dialogue, turning stereotypes on their head, and empowering consumers to rethink gender norms.

But for femvertising to transcend surface-level resonance, media literacy has to take center stage in both production and consumption. The audience needs to be able to deconstruct the dense contradictions between commodification and empowerment. Likewise, advertisers need to speak to feminist scholars, activists, and community bases to produce content that speaks volumes beyond urban middle-class enclaves.

In sum, femvertising is both exploitative and empowering—it is both. Its effect is subject to context, reliant on execution, and the willingness of brands to move past tokenism. As Indian media continues to change and evolve, the onus will be that femvertising becomes a force for inclusive, ethical, and impactful stories, and not merely another brand strategy trend.

6. Conclusion

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