

---

# THE HYPERREALITY OF FEMVERTISING: A CRITICAL UNDERSTANDING

**Megha Marik**

Research Scholar, Tata Institute Of Social Sciences (Guwahati campus),  
Tetelia Road, Guwahati, Assam-781013, India.

---

**Abstract:** The internet revolution has transformed the format of media and how it approaches the masses. Along with the old media, social media has also proved to be an impactful platform. Social media in particular has been able to connect people all over the world thereby leading to a general rise in awareness about people's lives. Additionally, in order to tap the consumer market, through innovative improvisation, producers are using these platforms to sustain the interest of the consumer in the product. Among such concepts is Femvertising or what is identified as feminist advertising, created to promote women's empowerment in addition to product advertising. This paper explores the conceptual understanding of femvertising and the role it plays in marketing strategies of different consumer products. Through examples of femvertisements the paper critically analyses the role of the media in developing gender roles. Finally, the paper discusses how alternative feminist media are critiquing and questioning the concept of femvertising and its mode of empowerment thereby opening up future discussions on the role of the media as a mediator between gender and consumption.

**Keywords:** Advertising, Consumerism, Feminism, Femvertising, Gender Roles, Media.

---

**What is Femvertising:** Acknowledging the presence of feminism in marketing and media started with the digital lifestyle and media company *SheKnows Media*. *SheKnows Media* was the first digital lifestyle and media company to detect and eventually award advertising campaigns which attempted to overthrow gender stereotypes thereby empowering women and girls. Accordingly, they conceptualized *Femvertising* as, 'advertising that employs pro- female talent, messages, and imagery to empower women and girls', (Hunt, 2017, p. 01) [1]. Even though the term femvertising has become quite mainstream in the international media across the last decade, in India, the trend and the terminology is a fairly recent phenomenon.

In India, few of the first brands which came up with such advertisements were *Tanishq*, *Dove* and *Bharti Airtel*. Subsequently, the uniqueness of these ads captured the attention of the media and the consumers at large, resulting in widespread discussion and critique of the same. Presently, in order to keep up with the social media revolution and to capture the attention of the consumer, more and more brands, especially brands, manufacturing products for women are coming up with such advertisements.

Feminist media scholars like Banerjee (2016) however have a different opinion of these advertisements. What might seem as empowering on face value, may actually 'in guise promote gender biasness and unfair themes related to women' (Banerjee, 2016, p. 32) [2]. Despite the given factors, femvertisements continue to be popular and more and more producers seem to opt for them. The following few sections of the paper discusses the underlying factors which influence these behaviors amongst both consumers and producers.

**The Marketing Of Gender:** As Payne (2012) describes, gender has always been an integral part of marketing strategies. Academicians have frequently pointed out the relationship between gender and advertisements or marketing. Two important observations made by feminist scholars of business studies or marketing are; firstly, the history of women's and feminist struggles have repeatedly demonstrated the pivotal role that media production has played in the diffusion of political ideas, mobilization and the constitution of political identities. Second, and most importantly, this connection remains largely under-theorized and minimally discussed (Payne, 2012) [3].

As Catterall, Maclaran & Stevens (2005) write, throughout the '70s and beyond, conventionally, women have been an integral part of marketing strategies and advertising mostly as the object which helps the producer sell the product. Consumer research in the '70s focused mainly on two gender stereotypes—how gender identity was used to understand and predict consumer behavior and gender portrayals in advertising (Catterall, Maclaran & Stevens, 2005, p. 491) [5]. These studies mostly reflected on how marketing theory and knowledge was gendered and remained unarticulated and unrecognized still. For example, an advertisement for *USHA* sewing machines read, 'Train her to be an ideal housewife—buy her an USHA!' (oldindianads.com, n.d.) [4]. The ad focuses on the woman's role as a wife and the work she needs to perform in order to be an 'ideal housewife'.

A radical study mentioned by Catterall, Maclaran & Stevens (2000) in their work states how during the late '80s and early '90s publications concentrated on presenting feminist thought to a marketing audience and exploring the possibilities for feminist perspectives in marketing and consumer research. These studies explicated how marketing strategies trivialized gender issues and objectified women (Catterall, Maclaran & Stevens, 2000, n.a.) [6]. Even though there were studies which were unique and attempted to understand how women viewed and understood their experiences and attitudes in the context of consumerism, these studies were extremely rare [5].

**The Social Media Success:** The success behind femvertising lies in a very simple role reversal, whereby the woman now becomes the subject of the advertisement and the advertisement is scripted to reach out to her, instead of a man. As Lauren Davidson of *The Telegraph* writes about how Rosalind Healy, Diageo's global marketing director of *Baileys*, had a recent epiphany and suddenly realized that she had been in the company for 11 long years and she had spent her entire career marketing to men. What she did not realize is that there is an entire consumer group called women, who have never been spoken to. Such a 'dawning realization of the existence of the female consumer resulted in the remarkable wave of female empowerment in advertising thereby claiming its own name—femvertising (Davidson, 2015) [7]. The question which one can raise here is why are producers suddenly putting the woman as the subject and attempting to grab her attention? The reason lies in the fact that a growing number of women are presently in charge of their own expenditures. Even though this is not a recent trend, yet the ability to communicate that women are increasingly holding economic power is a relatively recent trend. As Claire Cohen of *The Telegraph* also explains, social media is the platform which has allowed the communication of this power thereby also capturing the attention of producers and manufacturers. The consumer presently holds the ability to question and hold the producer accountable for not meeting their requirements or standards (Cohen, 2015) [8]. As Kumari (2017) writes, unlike previously, whereby producers had a strong marketing function because products were tailored locally according to consumer needs, social media universalizes the presence of the consumer. In order to retain the loyal clientele the producer has to constantly be aware of the consumers' needs (Kumari, 2017, p. 152) [9].

Not only direct communication with the consumer, but social media has also made it easier to understand the requirements of the consumer, by providing ease of access for research and statistics. Women feel more comfortable to express themselves and voice their concerns due to the platform provided by social media. Similarly, studies such as the survey conducted by *SheKnows* on more than 600 women reflected that an astonishing 91 per cent woman believed that women's portrayal in ads has a direct impact on girls' self-esteem. Further 94 percent believed that depicting women as sex symbols was harmful for them. Finally, what these studies also reflected was that almost half of the sample population purchased a product due to the nature of their portrayal of women—thereby proving the economic worth of femvertising [8]. Thus, femvertisements prove to be useful for both the consumer and the producer. What is often overlooked by female consumers however, is the subtle subtext that is displayed through advertisements.

**Postmodernism and Hyperreality:** The idea which is sold by femvertisements as feminism or empowerment is the fact that there are now opportunities for women to achieve positions of power without a perceived loss of their femininity. In fact, enhancing their femininities in such positions through consumer products is a positive change. Thus, brands like *Mia* by *Tanishq* while promoting

their line of jewellery for the modern woman or *Amway* with their slogan ‘Attitude’ for women; repackage popularized feminist ideas as product images; thereby presenting revamped feminist quests for freedom, choice and opportunities as images, desires, lifestyles and emotions that can be attained through consumption [5]. What these advertisements fail to portray is that these quests for freedom and rights have been attained through severe struggle involving, sacrifice and pain by thousands of women for centuries and are unattainable through mere consumption of consumer products. These results in producers and the mass media at large trivializing the struggles of feminisms and misappropriating their relevance and depth. For consumers, purchasing these products make them feel ‘empowered’. The question one might raise here—is why consumers identify to being empowered through consumer products. Postmodern theories of mass media provide explanations for such consumer behavior.

A postmodern world portrays consumers as producers of symbolic meanings attached to goods and services. French philosopher and Sociologist Jean Baudrillard’s work on hyperreality explains this phenomenon quite simplistically. Baudrillard’s early semiotic study found that the present consumer society exists as a large network of signs and symbols that require decoding. It is from this that he formed the basis for the work, *Simulacra and Simulation*, which added to the idea that our current society has replaced all reality and meaning with symbols and signs, and that human experience is a simulation of reality (“Hyperreality”, n.d.) [10].

Baudrillard further argues that reality television and films hold more relevance in our lives than our actual lives. According to Baudrillard, there are ‘maps’ which are formed by reality television and films and the mass media in general which guide our reality. These hyperreal copies or maps precede our lives, such that our television friends may seem more ‘alive’ or actual to us than the real person playing that character. Baudrillard’s studies on how the mass media affected our perception of reality and the world found that in a postmodern media laden society we encounter “the death of the real”. This meant that the postmodern individual lives in a hyperreal realm by connecting more and more deeply with things like television sitcoms, music videos, virtual reality games or Disneyland—things that have come to simulate reality [10].

Baudrillard argues that in a postmodern culture dominated by TV, films, the Internet and media all that exists are simulations of reality, which are as elusive as the reality that they stimulate. Thus, through the image and symbols that advertisements present to us, we believe that these signs and symbols are produced for our own ends and we can achieve that personal freedom through consumerist practices. Similarly, when extended to the concept of femvertising or femvertisements the so called ‘liberation’ or ‘empowerment’ is achievable through the marketplace by using products which simulate our minds to believe that the product is leading to our empowerment. Interestingly, one factor which is seldom highlighted is the composition of the target audience to whom femvertisements are marketed to. These comprise of mostly western, white, heterosexual, able-bodied middle class women. In case of India, it is the upper caste, upper class, heterosexual, able-bodied woman and not the marginalized groups of women. The presence of these women is mainly ignored and they are thus not a part of the production process [10] & [5].

**Conclusion:** With the expansion of the Internet and the gradual rise of social media, there have been new genres of mass media which mostly utilize the social media as a platform. Such media channels present critique or commentary on social events and issues in order to raise awareness amongst the masses. A lot of such social media organizations have called out or critiqued this rising trend of ‘femvertisements’ in order to raise awareness amongst the society with regard to the actual purpose of the same. One such article critiquing the *Biba* advertisement on arranged marriage and cooking raises issues such as:

I’m sorry to find that the ‘inspiring’ ad film doesn’t question what really needs to be questioned—a woman’s complete lack of autonomy over her life, her decisions, her body. Payal could have done so much more— maybe had a conversation with her father and her mother (!) about her doubts. Or maybe had an actual conversation with the man she was supposed to marry. Maybe she could have said no altogether (Oberoi, 2017).

Due to the flurry of advertisements which have labeled themselves as ‘femvertisements’, feminist scholarship is in danger of losing its own distinctive voice as its assimilated into the wider more generic categories of critical and interpretative gender work [6].

Contrary to the fundamental emancipatory aims of feminism, feminist analyses of marketing are in danger of becoming institutionalized as yet another brand of elitist and intellectually abstracted critique, indistinguishable from ‘other’ perspectives and confined to the pages of academic marketing journals [6]. The future task of feminist scholars hence, would be to portray how marketing can be viewed both as an exploitative and a liberating act, and to re-establish feminist voices within marketing and see to it that these voices are not diluted as increased attention is devoted to gender studies [5].

### References:

1. 1972: Usha sewing machine to train to be an ideal housewife.(1972). [Ad explaining why an USHA sewing machine should be bought, 1972]. Advertisement Access from Oldindianads.com Retrieved from <http://oldindianads.com/print/1972-usha-sewing-machine-train-ideal-housewife>
2. Banerjee, S. & Kakade, O. “The Emergence Of The “New Woman: A Study On Selected Tv Commercials”. *Social Sciences International Research Journal*. Volume 2. Issue 2016 (2016): 31-33.
3. Catterall, M., Maclaran, M. & Stevens, L. “Marketing and Feminism: Past, Present and Future” [PDF document]. Retrieved from <http://www.mngt.waikato.ac.nz/ejrot/cmsconference/1999/documents/Marketing/cmsconf.pdf>
4. Catterall, M., Maclaran, M. & Stevens, L. “Postmodern Paralysis: The Critical Impasse In Feminist Perspectives on Consumers”. *Journal of Marketing Management*. Volume 21 Issue 5-6 (2005): 489-504.
5. Cohen, C. (2015, July 9). How advertising hijacked feminism. Big time. *The Telegraph*. Retrieved from <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-life/11727478/How-advertisinghijacked-feminism.-Big-time.html>
6. Davidson, L. (2015, January 12). Femvertising: Advertisers cash in on #feminism. *The Telegraph*. Retrieved from <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-life/11312629/Femvertising-Advertisers-cash-in-on-feminism.html>
7. Hunt, A.R. (2017). Selling Empowerment: A Critical Analysis of Femvertising. Retrieved from <https://dlib.bc.edu/islandora/object/bc-ir:107483/datastream/PDF/view>
8. Jean Baudrillard (n.d.). HYPERREALITY: Jean Baudrillard [web log]. Retrieved from <http://enterhyperreality.weebly.com/jean-baudrillard.html>
9. Kumari, P. “Role Of Advertisement In Changing Perception Of Buyers”. *Social Sciences International Research Journal* : Volume 3 Issue 2 (2017): 152-155.
10. Oberoi, S. (2016, April 17). The New BIBA Ad Change is Beautiful: Same Old Samosas With a NewChutney. Retrieved from <https://feminisminindia.com/2016/04/17/new-biba-ad-change-is-beautiful/>
11. Payne, J.G. “Feminist Media as Alternative Media? Theorising Feminist Media from the Perspective of Alternative Media Studies”. *Feminist Media: Participatory Spaces, Networks and Cultural Citizenship*. Transcript Verlag. (2012): 55-72.

\*\*\*