The Construction of the Ideal Female Image in Advertising Photography

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Abstract:

This study employs content analysis to examine the construction of idealized female images in the field of advertising photography, with a particular focus on lingerie and menstrual care product advertisements primarily targeting female consumers. Historically, lingerie ads have emphasized the objectification, sexualization, and commodification of women, portraying them as passive objects of male desire, thereby exacerbating anxieties surrounding appearance and body image. Similarly, early menstrual product advertisements perpetuated the notion of period shame, with many women adopting attitudes of avoidance, taboo, and shyness toward this natural physiological phenomenon, reinforcing negative stereotypes about femininity. In contrast, recent lingerie advertisements showcase a wider diversity of models, prioritizing functionality and comfort over sexual appeal, while menstrual care ads increasingly emphasize authenticity and body positivity. This study seeks to determine the extent to which contemporary advertising photography continues to reinforce or challenge traditional gender roles within visual culture through the construction of the ideal female image.

Keywords: Advertising Photography; Female; Gender Stereotypes

1. Introduction

To begin with, a brief introduction to the history of advertising is necessary. Oral advertising, which involves advertisements delivered through public cries or announcements, is believed to have originated in ancient Egypt, where merchants would call out to capture the attention of potential customers. This early form of marketing was particularly effective in bustling marketplaces, ensuring that products and services reached a broad audience. In contrast, printed advertisements first appeared in the 15th century, marking a significant shift in how businesses communicated with consumers. Over time, visual techniques such as woodcuts and lithography became widely used in the advertising industry, enriching newspapers, magazines, and posters with detailed imagery. By the late 19th century, the streets and alleys, everywhere in the cities were filled with brightly colored posters promoting a wide variety of products and services, reflecting the growing visual appeal of modern advertising [1].

In the 1880s, the halftone process was introduced, revolutionizing the printing industry with its ability to serve industrial purposes. This technology utilized tiny dots of ink to create halftone images [2], allowing photographic images to be reproduced alongside text in books, newspapers, and magazines through letterpress and relief printing [1]. With the widespread adoption of this technique, incorporating photographic images into print media became both more efficient and cost-effective. This advancement allowed for the seamless integration of visuals into mass production systems, addressing the limitations of earlier methods like woodcuts and lithography, which had become increasingly expensive and inefficient as demand for printed images surged. According to the statistical data, by the early 1920s, approximately 15% of illustrated advertisements featured photographic images. By 1930, this figure had surged to nearly 80% [3]. This transformation reflects the process by which photography gradually supplanted drawing as the dominant medium for visual advertising, ushering in a new era dominated by photography in the advertising industry.

From a commercial standpoint, advertising photography functions as a powerful engine that drives consumerism. It serves as a crucial medium for disseminating information intended to attract potential consumers, influence purchasing decisions, stimulate sales, and ultimately fuel economic growth. It plays a central role in advancing capitalist values by promoting products and services within a framework designed to maximize consumer engagement and spending. From an artistic and cultural standpoint, advertising photography transcends its economic utility, evolving into one of the most influential mediums in contemporary visual culture. By embedding specific emotions, values, and cultural symbols into its imagery, it constructs idealized identities and lifestyles that resonate with societal aspirations. Through carefully crafted visual narratives, advertising photography creates a visual language that not only shapes consumer desires but also influences perceptions of societal ideals. This powerful form of visual storytelling amplifies the appeal of consumer goods, positioning them as representations of broader social and cultural values, ultimately reinforcing their symbolic significance within the marketplace.

Advertising photography occupies a unique space at the intersection of commerce and art, yet what is often overlooked is the deep connection between advertising and gender. Gloria Moss highlights a 2004 study that reveals women make up to 80% of consumer decisions [4]. This aligns with the broader social reality in which, within traditional heterosexual households, women tend to control most of their daily expenditures, particularly in categories like home goods, cosmetics, and fashion. Consequently, advertisers recognizing their pivotal role in household purchasing power, place significant emphasis on attracting female consumers. However, it is important to critically examine how advertisements often exploit and reinforce societal expectations around women's appearance and roles. By promoting an idealized version of femininity, advertisements do more than simply address perceived consumer needs—they actively shape and perpetuate standards of beauty and womanhood. These ideals frequently involve superficial traits, such as flawless skin, lustrous hair, and a slim, tall physique, which have long symbolized beauty and desirability. Yet the impact extends far beyond appearance: advertisements often diminish women's agency by positioning them in passive, supportive, or subordinate roles, both at home and in the workplace.

This phenomenon continues to reinforce rigid gender norms, confining women to narrow stereotypes. Advertisements often, either directly or indirectly, communicate that an ideal woman's value lies primarily in her appearance or traditional roles, such as being a caregiver, submissive figure, or self-sacrificing individual. By repeatedly emphasizing these messages, advertising profoundly influences women's self-perception, leading them to believe that their worth is derived more from their relationships with others than from their autonomy. This psychological reinforcement is evident in the aesthetic dimensions of advertisements, underscoring their role as powerful vehicles for disseminating societal gender norms.

2. Literature Review

While research on advertising photography has predominantly concentrated on its visual effects and aesthetic dimensions, as well as its impact on market trends and consumer behavior, the study of how advertising shapes gender norms, particularly the construction of the ideal female image, is of equal significance. Numerous scholars have already delved into this area. First of all, Erving Goffman's concepts of "Feminine Touch" and "Ritualization of Subordination" are crucial for understanding how advertisements frequently shape the ideal female image. Goffman highlights that the "Feminine Touch" refers to a recurrent pattern in advertising where women are shown gently caressing objects or their bodies. This touch is non-utilitarian, focusing more on symbolic meaning than practical function. It conveys delicacy, fragility, and passivity, with the woman or the object she touches depicted as precious and requiring care. This depiction reinforces an image of femininity as inherently soft and ornamental, rather than active or assertive. Similarly, "Ritualization of Subordination" describes how women are often portrayed in positions of inferiority, submission, or dependence relative to men or their surroundings. This is commonly visualized through women reclining, lying down, or positioned

lower than men in a given scene, with their gaze often directed downward or away [5]. These symbolizations of postures reinforce a social hierarchy where men dominate and women occupy subordinate roles. Mee-Eun Kang extended Goffman's work by analyzing gender roles in magazine advertisements from 1979 and 1991. The findings indicate that despite the progress in gender equality, the portrayal of women in advertisements remained largely unchanged, with women still depicted in submissive, dependent, and often sexualized roles [6]. Even today, advertisements continue to propagate these stereotypes, particularly in culturally conservative or slower-to-evolve regions. There is another piece of data to supplement the explanations. In the article published in the European Journal of Marketing, Steven Lysonski highlights that in the context of British advertising, women are frequently depicted in decorative roles, with a particular emphasis on physical attractiveness and being portrayed as sexual objects. The study shows that the depiction of women in such decorative roles increased significantly, rising from 67% in 1976 to 75.3% by the period of 1982-1983 [7]. Emmanuella Plakoyiannaki and Yorgos Zotos built upon this foundation, offering further analysis and providing more detailed insights into the portrayal of women in print advertisements [8].

Moreover, Patricia A. Johnston examines Edward Steichen's pivotal role in merging fine art with commercial photography during the 1920s and 1930s. Johnston illustrates how Steichen's work, particularly in fashion and beauty advertising which made he became famous, helped to shape the "ideal female" image by emphasizing attributes such as fragility, grace, and beauty—traits that aligned with early 20th-century gender expectations. When Edward Steichen created advertisements for brands like Ivory Soap and Pond's Cold Cream, he skillfully employed soft lighting and diffusion techniques, blurring facial details such as pores, wrinkles, and freckles. This resulted in a flawless portrayal of female models, reinforcing the ideal of perfection. From a compositional perspective, Steichen often posed his models in ways that placed them in a subordinate role within the frame, aligning with Goffman's concept of "Ritualization of Subordination." This concept, as discussed earlier, refers to the portrayal of women in passive, submissive, or dependent positions, visually reinforcing social hierarchies where women appear subservient or lesser to others, often males. Steichen's use of opulent sets, including flowing fabrics, mirrors, and luxurious jewelry, enhanced the glamour of his female subjects. These women were often portrayed as calm, passive, and decorative figures, reinforcing traditional gender stereotypes by positioning them as objects of beauty rather than as individuals with agency, confined women to a narrow, stylized form of femininity rooted in

aesthetic appeal rather than substantive identity [3]. Another advertising photographer from the same period as Edward Steichen was Lejaren à Hiller, whose work leaned more toward dramatic visual storytelling. According to Elspeth H. Brown's book on Hiller's works, Hiller's approach to advertising photography often emphasized theatrical, dramatic tension, and staged compositions, presenting vivid narratives [9]. The differences between them offer a fascinating contrast for study, particularly in how both photographers shaped public perceptions of women through advertising imagery.

Finally, Diane Barthel offers a critical perspective on beauty product advertising. Barthel argues that these advertisements primarily function by convincing women that such products are essential to attaining and maintaining the "ideal female" image. These ads exploit women's fear of aging and promote the notion that products can delay aging and preserve youth, leading women to believe that these products are "must-haves." Beyond beauty, the association between fashion, luxury goods, and social status is also highly seductive. Jewelry advertisements, for instance, often symbolize male validation through expensive items like watches or diamonds, portraying women as objects to be envied, while simultaneously conveying a sense of "worth." This creates a consumerist trap in which women feel compelled to constantly purchase products to meet unrealistic beauty standards. As a result, women are trapped in endless cycles of appearance-related anxieties and are valued for how they look rather than their inner qualities or professional capabilities. These gender stereotypes restrict women to roles centered on beauty and pleasing others, rather than viewing them as independent, equal individuals [10].

3. Methodology

This study employs a content analysis approach to investigate the construction of idealized female images in advertising photography, specifically focusing on lingerie and menstrual care product advertisements, which predominantly target female consumers. The research examines how visual elements such as composition, angle of view, lighting, body language, and gaze are utilized in these advertisements to either reinforce or challenge traditional gender stereotypes. By closely analyzing the depiction of women in these advertisements, the study explores the symbolic meanings embedded within the imagery and their broader cultural implications. Furthermore, by exploring the interaction between gender representation in advertising photography and consumer marketing, this study seeks to reveal the extent to which these advertisements perpetuate or subvert established gender roles within contemporary visual culture.

4. Results

4.1 Reinforcing Gender Stereotypes

First, lingerie advertisements have long played a role in reinforcing traditional gender norms in the eyes of many female consumers. Under the male gaze, these ads heavily rely on idealized, heavily edited representations of women, whether through the use of photographic techniques, symbolic meanings embedded in the scenes and props, or the values that the brands convey. These images often emphasize objectification, commodification, sexualization, and the treatment of women's bodies as passive objects to be admired or consumed.

Second, menstrual product advertisements present similar issues. While they focus on hygiene, a primary concern for female consumers, many of these ads often embed misogynistic or degrading undertones. Brands profit from female consumers but simultaneously devalue women, either directly or indirectly, by perpetuating negative stereotypes or promoting shame around natural bodily functions.

4.2 Subverting Gender Stereotypes

In recent years, several lingerie brands founded by women have shifted their advertising approach from promoting a narrow, idealized aesthetic to embracing a more diverse and inclusive representation of beauty. These brands prioritize showcasing women of all skin tones, heights, and body shapes, with confidence and self-assurance. This includes plus-size models, models with disabilities, and those from different racial and cultural backgrounds, reflecting a commitment to diversity and body positivity. The advertisements no longer center on the idea of lingerie being used to enhance physical appearance or sculpt the body to meet traditional beauty standards. Instead, they focus on functionality and comfort.

Today, menstrual product advertisements are actively working to dismantle the stigma traditionally associated with menstruation. Historically, these ads used symbolic and indirect visual language, such as the use of blue liquid to represent menstrual blood. However, some brands have now shifted towards using red liquid in their advertisements, embracing a more honest depiction of menstruation and encouraging women to accept their natural cycles without shame or embarrassment. Menstrual product ads now emphasize authenticity and often feature women in relatable, everyday settings—such as working out, resting at home, or going about their daily routines. Additionally, these advertisements frequently employ bold, vibrant colors and upbeat music, conveying the message that women can remain active, energetic, and vibrant during their menstrual periods. This stands in stark contrast to the traditional, passive imagery often seen in older ads.

5. Discussion

With the rapid development of the global economy and the advent of the digital era, various new consumer cultures are emerging, and market competition is becoming increasingly intense. In response, major brands have significantly increased their advertising budgets, utilizing multiple channels to expand their brand influence. On social media platforms, brands enhance their visual impact and narrative through various types of promotional videos, thereby deepening brand recognition. Additionally, the use of celebrities or KOLs (Key Opinion Leaders) as brand ambassadors has become a common and effective strategy, especially in driving strong brand identification and consumer desire among younger audiences. Meanwhile, brands are placing more emphasis on experiential marketing, using pop-up stores, product experience events, and immersive exhibitions to build deeper emotional connections with consumers. Guerrilla marketing, known for its low cost and high creativity, is also gaining popularity as a way to generate unexpected engagement, sparking widespread discussions and organic sharing on social media. These diversified, cross-media advertising approaches have become essential tools for brands to maintain a competitive edge in a highly contested market, requiring them to continuously innovate and quickly adapt to market changes. Even so, certain brands of women's products continue to retain remnants of traditional societal views when creating advertisements.

Historically, lingerie advertisements have often portrayed an idealized image of women to appeal to consumers. The models selected by brands typically embody the so-called "ideal female" standard, featuring an hourglass figure—slim, with a small waist, long legs, and well-defined curves at the bust and hips. This ideal conforms to male desires and aesthetics. The models' poses are intentionally eye-catching, as the brand aims not only to attract female consumers but also to entice male consumers to purchase for the women in their lives. In many of these advertisements, the models are often shown reclining or leaning suggestively against furniture, with their poses conveying a sense of allure and seduction. They are depicted as beautiful, sexy, and desirable, but these representations are passive, positioning the women as objects of visual pleasure for an assumed male gaze. In some cases, brands even employ voyeuristic camera angles, simulating the perspective of a hidden observer. These advertisements reinforce aesthetic ideals that exacerbate women's anxieties about their appearance and body image. They tightly link a woman's worth to her perceived sex appeal. Lingerie is often marketed as a tool to "save" or "enhance" a

woman's body, making her more attractive to others, particularly men. Words like "slimming" or "body sculpting" frequently appear, subtly implying that a woman's natural figure needs to be "fixed" or "enhanced" to meet ideal standards. As a result, women may focus more on how lingerie accentuates or reshapes their curves, rather than considering the garment's function or comfort.

In lingerie advertisements, props and settings are often used to symbolize themes of romance and sensuality, reinforcing the notion of women as decorative objects meant to please men. Items such as candles, roses, and jewelry are strategically placed to create an intimate and romantic atmosphere, emphasizing traditional gender roles. Soft lighting and luxurious settings further enhance this effect, conveying a sense of seduction by depicting women as inherently sensual beings, seemingly in a constant state of readiness to fulfill others' desires.

The depiction of women in menstrual product advertisements has historically centered around shame. Early ads often portrayed women as fragile, anxious, helpless, and needing to immediately address the "unclean" and "embarrassing" nature of menstruation. Some sanitary pads even featured decorative designs like bows and hearts, reinforcing the idea that women should uphold traditional notions of femininity, even during their menstrual cycles. Many menstrual product advertisements depict scenes where a woman, with a worried expression, looks down anxiously to check whether her clothes have been "stained" by her period. This undoubtedly exacerbates the psychological pressure associated with menstruation. In addition, menstrual product advertisements almost exclusively feature young female models, and in some cases, close-up shots of women's intimate body areas are even used during filming. As a medium that perpetuates period shame, the root of this issue lies in long-standing societal and cultural conditioning. In some regions, when women purchase menstrual products from convenience stores, the cashier will make a "thoughtful" gesture by replacing the transparent plastic bag with a black one. Menstruation is often viewed as "unclean" or "messy," a notion historically used to brainwash and control women's bodies.

However, overall, in recent years, some menstrual ads no longer portray women as being constrained by their cycles. Instead, they celebrate women's freedom and health. Additionally, some lingerie ads have embraced inclusivity and diversity, removing explicit sexual cues and embracing a more body-positive approach. The ideal woman in lingerie ads can be confident and powerful, while the ideal woman in menstrual product ads can be free and unrestrained.

6. Conclusion

This study highlights the significant shifts in advertising photography within the lingerie and menstrual product sectors. Historically, both types of ads have reinforced gender stereotypes—lingerie ads frequently portrayed women as objects of male desire, while menstrual product ads were centered around shame, neglecting women's physical and mental health needs. However, the study also reveals a transition in female product advertising photography towards a more inclusive and authentic approach. Contemporary lingerie ads not only embrace diverse body types but also prioritize comfort and functionality. Meanwhile, menstrual product ads are increasingly breaking taboos, depicting the menstrual cycle more realistically and celebrating women's freedom and health. Despite these advancements, the advertising photography industry must continue to challenge deeply ingrained gender biases and strive to create richer, more diverse representations of women.

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