



REPRESENTATION OR EXPLOITATION? EXAMINING WOMEN'S PORTRAYAL IN DIGITAL ADVERTISING

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Abstract

Digital advertising plays a crucial role in shaping societal perceptions of gender, particularly in the representation of women. This study examines the dual nature of women's portrayal in digital advertising—balancing between representation and exploitation. While digital media has fostered more diverse and empowered identities, it has also perpetuated problematic portrayals, including hyper sexualization, unrealistic beauty standards, and the commodification of female bodies. By analysing historical trends, case studies, and ethical concerns, this research highlights the evolution of gender representation in digital media. Additionally, the paper explores the role of social media, influencer marketing, and algorithm-driven advertising in reinforcing or challenging gender stereotypes. The findings suggest that while some brands have adopted progressive strategies such as woman empowerment, others continue to exploit women's images for commercial appeal. To promote ethical and responsible advertising practices, recommendations include diversifying female representation, eliminating hypersexualized portrayals, and regulating AI-driven biases in targeted ads. Ultimately, this study advocates for an industry-wide shift toward equitable and inclusive digital advertising.

Keywords: Digital Advertising, Gender Representation, Hyper sexualization, Advertising, Algorithmic Bias

1. Introduction

In the digital age, advertising has become one of the most influential forces in shaping societal perceptions and gender narratives (Gill, 2007). Women's representation in digital advertising has evolved over the years, transitioning from traditional portrayals of domesticity and beauty to more diverse and empowered identities (Kilbourne,



2010). However, this shift has not been entirely free from controversy. While digital advertising has created opportunities for more inclusive representation, it has also perpetuated exploitation through hyper sexualization, unrealistic beauty standards, and commodification of female bodies (Baker, 2015).

This research paper explores the dual nature of women's portrayal in digital advertising—where representation and exploitation often coexist. It seeks to analyse how digital platforms, social media, and algorithm-driven advertising strategies shape the way women are depicted. By evaluating historical trends, case studies, and ethical considerations, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the intersection between gender and digital marketing.

Objectives of the Study:

1. To examine the evolution of female representation in digital advertising.
2. To analyse how digital advertising influences societal perceptions of women.
3. To explore the ethical concerns and exploitative elements in digital advertisements.
4. To identify best practices for ethical and responsible representation of women in digital media.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform advertisers, media professionals, and consumers about the impact of gender representation in digital advertising. By addressing both progressive and problematic portrayals, this research aims to contribute to the broader discourse on gender equality in media and advertising (Lazar, 2016).

The following sections will delve deeper into the historical context of women in advertising, the evolution of digital media portrayals, the challenges of exploitation, case studies of notable campaigns, and recommendations for fostering ethical and equitable representation of women in digital advertising.

2. Historical Context: Women in Advertising

The portrayal of women in advertising has undergone significant transformation over the decades, reflecting broader social and



cultural shifts. Traditional advertising in the 20th century largely depicted women in roles associated with domesticity, caregiving, and beauty (Goffman, 1979). Advertisements reinforced rigid gender norms, portraying women as homemakers or objects of male desire. With the advent of digital advertising, there has been a notable departure from these restrictive stereotypes. The feminist movement and changing consumer expectations have influenced brands to showcase more empowered female figures in advertisements (Gill, 2008). However, this shift has not eliminated problematic portrayals, as digital media has introduced new challenges such as algorithm-driven objectification and the commodification of feminist ideals for marketing purposes (Banet-Weiser, 2014).

Table 1: Illustrates the key phases of women’s representation in advertising:

Era	Representation of Women	Key Characteristics
1950s-1970s	Domestic and submissive roles	Women as housewives, caretakers
1980s-1990s	Beauty and desirability focus	Emphasis on appearance, objectification
2000s-Present	Empowerment and diversity	More diverse representation, yet persistent sexualization in digital media

Despite progress, the tension between representation and exploitation remains prevalent in digital advertising. While brands increasingly promote feminist messaging, many also leverage women’s bodies for clickbait marketing, undermining genuine progress toward gender equality (Lazar, 2014).

3. The Evolution of Women’s Representation in Digital Advertising

The advent of digital advertising has significantly transformed the portrayal of women in media. Unlike traditional print and television advertising, digital media allows for more dynamic representation and targeted marketing. Social media platforms, influencer marketing, and programmatic advertising have reshaped how brands present women in their campaigns (Eisend, 2015).



While there has been a push toward inclusivity and diversity, problematic themes persist. Women are often featured in advertisements promoting beauty, fashion, and lifestyle products, reinforcing certain gendered consumer behaviours (Mager & Helgeson, 2011). Additionally, the use of AI-driven personalization in digital ads has amplified existing stereotypes, as algorithms tend to reinforce historical biases rather than challenge them (Noble, 2014).

3.1 Persistent Challenges in Representation

Despite progress, digital advertising continues to struggle with issues such as:

- **Hyper sexualization:** Many digital ads still portray women in sexually suggestive ways to attract consumer attention (Hatton & Trautner, 2011).
- **Unrealistic Beauty Standards:** The widespread use of photo-editing tools and filters has perpetuated unattainable beauty ideals, negatively affecting self-esteem and body image (Perloff, 2014).
- **Algorithmic Bias:** AI-driven ad targeting often reinforces gender stereotypes by displaying certain types of ads to specific demographics, further entrenching biased representations (Noble, 2014).

As digital advertising continues to evolve, it is crucial to examine both its progressive and problematic aspects to ensure a balanced and ethical representation of women.

4. Exploitation in Digital Advertising

4.1 Hyper sexualization and Commodification

Many digital advertisements still employ hypersexualized imagery to attract consumer attention, perpetuating the objectification of women (Gill, 2009). The commodification of female bodies in digital ads is evident in industries such as fashion, beauty, and fitness, where women's physical appearance is emphasized over their capabilities and intellect (Hatton & Trautner, 2011).

4.2 The Psychological Impact of Unrealistic Beauty Standards

The emphasis on unattainable beauty standards in digital advertisements has profound psychological effects, particularly on young women. Research indicates a correlation between exposure to idealized female images in digital ads and increased levels of body



dissatisfaction, anxiety, and low self-esteem (Perloff, 2014). Social media platforms exacerbate this issue, as targeted ads reinforce perfectionist beauty ideals (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2014).

4.3 The Role of AI, Algorithms, and Targeted Ads in Reinforcing Stereotypes

Algorithmic advertising plays a crucial role in shaping consumer perceptions. AI-driven ad placements often reinforce existing biases by targeting gendered content to specific demographics (Noble, 2014). This phenomenon results in the cyclical reinforcement of stereotypical portrayals, limiting progress toward gender equity in digital marketing.

5. Case Studies of Notable Advertising Campaigns

To understand the dual nature of women's representation in digital advertising, it is essential to analyse real-world campaigns that have either empowered or exploited women in media. This section examines notable advertising campaigns that have made an impact, exploring their intent, execution, reception, and long-term influence on gender representation in digital advertising.

5.1 Empowering Campaigns: Redefining Women's Representation

Several advertising campaigns have successfully challenged traditional stereotypes and embraced a more empowering portrayal of women. These campaigns resonate with audiences by advocating for gender equality, body positivity, and female empowerment while promoting their products.

1. Dove's "Real Beauty" Campaign

Launched in 2004, Dove's *Real Beauty* campaign aimed to challenge traditional beauty standards by featuring real women of diverse ethnicities, body types, and ages (Etcoff et al., 2004). The campaign received widespread praise for fostering self-acceptance and redefining beauty norms. However, some critics argue that despite its positive message, the campaign ultimately serves corporate interests rather than a genuine feminist cause (Murray, 2013).

2. Always' "Like a Girl" Campaign

The *Like a Girl* campaign by Always redefined the phrase "like a girl" to emphasize female strength and resilience. The campaign's viral video challenged negative gender stereotypes, showcasing how



societal expectations impact young girls' confidence (Kearney, 2015). This campaign effectively used digital media to promote gender empowerment while aligning with Always' brand identity.

5.2 Controversial and Exploitative Campaigns

Despite progress, many campaigns continue to objectify and exploit women, using their bodies as marketing tools to attract consumer attention. Some campaigns that faced backlash include:

1. Carl's Jr. and the Hyper sexualization of Women

Fast-food chain Carl's Jr. is infamous for its hypersexualized ads featuring scantily clad women eating burgers (Stankiewicz & Rosselli, 2008). These advertisements received criticism for reinforcing objectification and failing to acknowledge women beyond their physical appearance. Following consumer backlash and declining sales, the brand shifted its advertising strategy in 2017 to focus on product quality rather than sexual appeal.

2. Victoria's Secret "Perfect Body" Campaign

The *Perfect Body* campaign by Victoria's Secret featured extremely thin models, reinforcing unrealistic beauty ideals (Freedman, 2015). The campaign sparked outrage, leading to petitions and widespread criticism for promoting body shaming. In response, Victoria's Secret altered its campaign messaging, but the brand continues to struggle with inclusivity and consumer perception.

6. The Role of Social Media and Influencer Marketing

The rise of social media and influencer culture has significantly influenced women's representation in digital advertising. Unlike traditional media, social media provides a platform for user-generated content, allowing individuals to challenge mainstream beauty and gender norms. However, it also presents new challenges, such as the commodification of self-image and perpetuation of unattainable beauty standards.

6.1 The Influence of Female Social Media Influencers

- Social media influencers, particularly female influencers, play a significant role in shaping advertising trends.
- Many influencers use their platforms to promote body positivity and gender inclusivity, collaborating with brands that align with their values (Abidin, 2016).



- However, some influencers engage in **self-objectification**, endorsing products that reinforce narrow beauty ideals in exchange for sponsorships (Duffy & Hund, 2015).

6.2 The Responsibility of Social Media Platforms

- Social media platforms, including Instagram and TikTok, facilitate targeted advertising, often reinforcing gendered marketing practices.
- AI-driven algorithms prioritize content that conforms to existing beauty standards, limiting the visibility of diverse body types and unconventional beauty norms (Cotter, 2016).
- Platforms have attempted to address these concerns by implementing policies against deceptive advertising, though enforcement remains inconsistent.

7. Recommendations and Conclusion

7.1 Recommendations for Ethical and Inclusive Digital Advertising

To ensure that digital advertising fosters gender equality rather than reinforcing harmful stereotypes, industry stakeholders must adopt ethical practices and promote responsible representation. The following recommendations provide actionable steps for brands, advertisers, and policymakers:

1. **Diverse and Authentic Representation:**

- Brands should feature women from diverse ethnicities, body types, and backgrounds to reflect real-world demographics.
- Advertisements should avoid tokenism and instead focus on genuine inclusion.

2. **Avoiding Hyper sexualization and Objectification:**

- Advertisers must be mindful of how they portray women, ensuring that campaigns do not exploit or commodify female bodies.
- Regulatory bodies should implement stricter guidelines on content that perpetuates harmful stereotypes.



3. Promoting Body Positivity and Mental Well-being:

- Digital advertisements should emphasize self-confidence, natural beauty, and diverse body representations rather than unattainable beauty ideals.
- Brands should collaborate with mental health organizations to assess the impact of their campaigns.

4. Regulation of AI-Driven and Algorithmic Biases:

- Tech companies should work to eliminate gender biases embedded in AI-driven targeted advertising systems.
- Ethical AI guidelines should be developed to ensure that machine learning models do not reinforce existing stereotypes.

5. Empowering Women in the Advertising Industry:

- Increasing the representation of women in leadership roles within the advertising industry can lead to more balanced and inclusive campaigns.
- Companies should invest in mentorship and career development programs for women in media and advertising.

6. Strengthening Advertising Standards and Policies:

- Governments and industry regulatory bodies should enforce stricter policies against misleading and exploitative advertising practices.
- Brands must be held accountable for campaigns that perpetuate gender discrimination.

7.2 Conclusion

The portrayal of women in digital advertising is a complex issue that straddles the line between empowerment and exploitation. While progress has been made in diversifying representations and challenging traditional gender norms, issues such as hypersexualization, algorithmic bias, and unrealistic beauty standards persist. The shift toward inclusive and ethical advertising requires a



collaborative effort from brands, advertisers, social media platforms, and policymakers.

By adopting ethical advertising practices, promoting diverse and authentic portrayals of women, and regulating harmful content, the digital advertising industry can contribute to a more equitable and socially responsible media landscape. The ultimate goal is to create an environment where women are represented as individuals with agency rather than as objects for commercial appeal. Moving forward, continuous evaluation and industry-wide accountability will be necessary to ensure sustained progress in the ethical representation of women in digital advertising.

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