"Gender On Advertising: How Advertisements Shape Body Image And Identity Among Young Adults – An Overview Of "Lucknow University Students"."

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Abstract

This research explores how advertisements influence body image and gender identity among young adults at Lucknow University. Drawing on Cultivation Theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976), which proposes that prolonged media exposure shapes individuals' views of reality, and Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954), which asserts that people assess themselves in relation to others. The study examines how media depictions reinforce gender stereotypes and foster body dissatisfaction. Moreover, it applies Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) to understand how advertisements may lead to the objectification of individuals, promoting heightened self-surveillance and negative self-image, particularly in women.

Keywords: Body image, Gender identity, Media influence, Gender stereotypes, Body dissatisfaction, Self-perception, Self-surveillance.

1. Introduction

Advertising wields considerable influence over cultural norms, impacting how individuals perceive themselves and others within society. For young adults, who are deeply engaged with platforms like social media, television, and digital content, advertisements play a crucial role in shaping their views on gender roles and body image. These advertisements often depict idealized, unrealistic body standards for both men

and women, establishing unattainable beauty ideals. Such portrayals are linked to severe mental and emotional health challenges, particularly among young adults.

The National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) states that exposure to advertisements focusing on physical appearance can lead to body dissatisfaction, decreased self-esteem, and an increased risk of disordered eating behaviors among adolescents and young adults (NEDA, 2019). For instance, commercials for fashion, beauty products, and fitness services frequently feature images of perfectly sculpted bodies, reinforcing the idea that beauty and success depend on one's physical appearance. The relentless exposure to these "ideal" beauty standards distorts reality and fosters harmful comparisons, making individuals feel inadequate when they fall short of these unrealistic ideals.

In India, gender advertising remains a significant issue. Advertisements often adhere to traditional gender roles, depicting women as symbols of beauty and domesticity, while men are shown in authoritative, active positions. These portrayals perpetuate the cultural notion that a woman's worth lies primarily in her appearance and passivity, while a man's value is determined by his strength and leadership (Singh & Malhotra, 2020). These stereotypes limit personal growth and shape how young people perceive gender roles in a rapidly modernizing society.

At Lucknow University, students are exposed to various forms of media, including television, social media, and digital marketing, all of which contribute to their ideas about body image and gender identity. A 2021 survey by the Indian Institute of Social Research (IISR) revealed that almost 70% of university students in India felt pressure to conform to the body types portrayed in advertisements (IISR, 2021). Additionally, many students indicated that media representations reinforced traditional gender roles, influencing their self-perception and their ideas about how men and women should look and behave.

This study aims to investigate the complex ways in which advertisements shape body image and identity among young adults at Lucknow University. Through qualitative interviews and thematic analysis, the research will offer insights into how young people internalize these media messages and how they affect their self-esteem, mental health, and understanding of societal roles. By exploring how advertisements contribute to the reinforcement of gender stereotypes and body image issues, this paper seeks to add to the ongoing conversation about the societal impact of media in modern India.

2. Literature Review

Gender Stereotypes and Body Image in Advertising:A Historical and Contemporary Overview

Advertising has long faced criticism for reinforcing gender stereotypes and societal expectations. Scholars have recognized since the 1970s that media representations, especially in advertising, play a significant role in perpetuating gender roles. Advertisements often positioned women within domestic environments or as passive figures, while men were portrayed as authoritative and powerful. This gender divide reinforces societal norms that influence how adolescents view themselves, affecting their sense of identity and self-worth (Gill, 2007).

Beyond professional and domestic roles, gender portrayal in advertising extends to physical appearance. Women, in particular, face intense pressure from idealized beauty standards that emphasize youth, thinness, and beauty above all else. These standards are often unattainable for most, leading to widespread issues such as body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, and unhealthy behaviors like disordered eating (Grabe et al., 2008). Although men are less frequently targeted by beauty standards, they too are affected by portrayals that highlight physical strength, muscularity, and dominance. This narrow depiction of masculinity can be equally harmful (Agliata & Tantleff-Dunn, 2004)

2.1 Body Image and Advertising's Influence on Young Adults

The intersection of advertising and body image has been a subject of extensive research. Multiple studies emphasize the influential role advertising plays in shaping body image perceptions, particularly among young adults (Fardouly et al., 2015). With the prevalence of heavily edited and idealized images, these portrayals contribute to a distorted sense of reality, often leading to negative self-evaluations, especially in adolescents. Research suggests that young individuals, particularly those in late adolescence and early adulthood, are especially vulnerable to media messages that promote unrealistic body ideals (Levine & Murnen, 2009).In 2017 study by the American Psychological Association highlighted the significant impact of media exposure on body dissatisfaction, particularly for female adolescents who tend to internalize the idealized images they encounter. This internalization often leads to comparison behaviors, where individuals measure their worth against the beauty standards presented by advertisers. While men are also affected by such portrayals, the pressure they experience typically relates to body size and physical strength (Leit et al., 2001). Furthermore, the long-term effects of these media representations extend into adulthood, continuing to influence self-perception and social behavior.

2.2 Cross-Cultural and Societal Implications

Though much of the research on body image and advertising has concentrated on Western societies, there has been a growing interest in exploring its impact in non-Western contexts. The rise of globalization has contributed to the spread of Western beauty standards in regions where traditional perceptions of gender and beauty once prevailed. In countries like India, exposure to Western advertising has significantly altered societal expectations for both men and women (Singh, 2020). According to a 2012 survey conducted by the Centre for Media Studies, almost 50% of Indian women reported feeling pressure to adhere to Western ideals of beauty, particularly related to body weight and skin tone. Similarly, men have increasingly felt the pressure to conform to muscular, "heroic" standards of masculinity.

This transformation has had notable consequences. The clash between traditional cultural norms and the modern, Westernized portrayals of gender roles has created confusion and dissatisfaction, particularly among adolescents undergoing crucial stages of identity development (Mishra, 2018). In India, young adults, especially those attending universities, are constantly exposed to advertisements promoting unrealistic body ideals, which fosters feelings of inadequacy and frustration (Chugh & Purohit, 2018).

2.3 Adolescence and Media Exposure

Adolescents, particularly those between the ages of 18 and 25, are highly susceptible to the influence of advertising due to their critical stage of identity development. Research, including findings by Jones et al. (2004), shows that this age group is especially vulnerable to media messages that shape their perceptions of gender roles and body image. In my own survey, conducted with second-year students from the education department and evenly split between males and females, the results highlighted how often these young adults encounter advertisements reinforcing physical appearance ideals and gender norms.

The impact of such media exposure during this formative period can have long-lasting effects on self-esteem, behavior, and future self-perception. Studies, such as those by Tiggemann and Slater (2014), have linked frequent media consumption to higher levels of body dissatisfaction, alongside unhealthy behaviors like dieting and excessive exercise. While these effects are particularly pronounced among women, men are also affected—especially by portrayals of strength and dominance that define traditional masculinity (Aubrey, 2006).

2.4 Gender and Advertising: A Broader View

The impact of advertising on body image is well-recognized, but its influence on shaping broader gender stereotypes is equally important. Advertisements frequently reinforce traditional gender roles, often depicting women as caregivers and men as breadwinners, even in modern and progressive societies (Lazar, 2011). This reinforces the harmful notion that a woman's value is defined by her physical appearance, while a man's worth is judged by his financial success and physical strength. Such portrayals uphold outdated societal norms that restrict both men and women in their personal and professional growth.

In recent years, there has been a growing push for more diverse and inclusive representations in advertising. However, despite some efforts, progress has been slow, and traditional stereotypes still dominate the media landscape (Zotos & Tsichla, 2014). My research specifically aims to delve deeper into these dynamics, particularly within the context of young adults. While this demographic has become more critical of the media they consume, they remain significantly influenced by it.

The literature exploring advertising's impact on gender stereotypes and body image reveals a complex relationship between media exposure and self-perception. Advertising wields the power to shape societal norms and individual identities but often does so by reinforcing harmful stereotypes and unrealistic expectations. For young adults, particularly those between the ages of 18 and 25, the effects of media exposure can be profound. It influences their sense of self and shapes their.

3. Research Objective's:

This study is structured around three main objectives:

1. Investigating how gender advertising influences body image,
2. To investigate the role of advertising in identity development,
3. To examine various viewpoints on gender.

4. Research Question's:

This study examined three research questions:

1. In what ways do gender advertisements impact the body image of young adults,
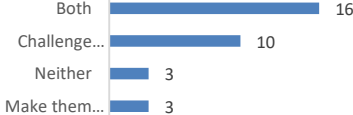2. How does exposure to gender advertising influence the identity development of young adults,
3. How do advertisements present varying perspectives on gender.

5. Methodology/Design/Approach:

This research aims to explore the impact of advertisements on the body image and identity formation of young adults through qualitative interviews. A purposive, non-probability sampling method was applied to select 32 participants aged 18-25, ensuring an equal gender distribution. These participants were second-year students from the Education Department at Lucknow University, providing a focused cohort of individuals at a pivotal stage in their identity development. The chosen sampling technique emphasizes diversity,

capturing a range of media consumption patterns and backgrounds. This is crucial for obtaining rich, in-depth perspectives on gender portrayals in advertising. Semi-structured interviews were employed as the primary data collection method, offering flexibility to examine participants' views on body image, gender expectations, and media influences. Thematic analysis will be applied to the transcribed interview data, enabling the identification of emerging themes and patterns surrounding gender, body image, and identity construction. This qualitative approach aims to uncover the ways in which advertisements contribute to shaping the self-image and identities of young adults.

6. Findings and Data Analysis:
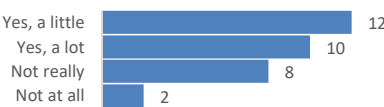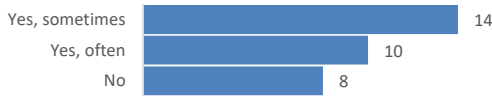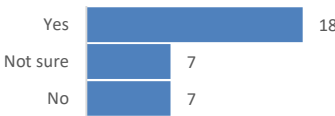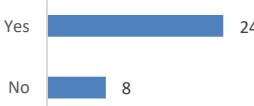
This section outlines the survey results from participants aged 18-25, with an equal gender representation. The survey explored the impact of gender advertising on body image, identity development, and perceptions of gender. The findings are structured around the research questions that guided the study.
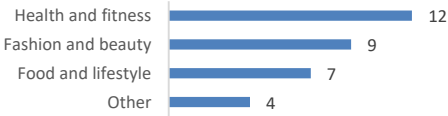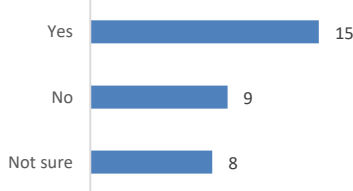
Participant Demographics (Lucknow University students): -

- Total number of participants: 32
- Age range (Years): 18 to 25
- Gender: Male-16 Nos. & Female-16 Nos.

6.1. In what ways do gender advertisements impact the body image of young adults?
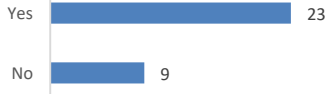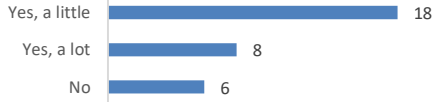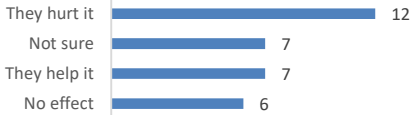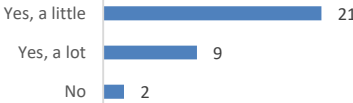
The data reveals that gender advertisements significantly impact the body image of both young men and women, though the degree and nature of this influence vary between genders.

Questionnaire	Response
Do you think ads showing traditional gender roles change how you see your body ?	Yes, a little — 12 Yes, a lot — 10 Not really — 8 Not at all — 2
Have you ever felt you need to look a certain way because of ads?	Yes, sometimes — 14 Yes, often — 10 No — 8
Do you think ads for products make young adults unhappy with their bodies ?	Yes — 18 Not sure — 7 No — 7
Have you ever compared your body to people in ads?	Yes — 24 No — 8
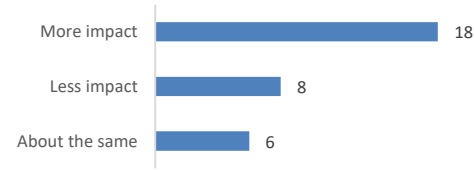
What kind of ads do you think have the biggest effect on how you feel about your body?	Health and fitness — 12 Fashion and beauty — 9 Food and lifestyle — 7 Other — 4
Do you think ads showing different body types help people feel better about themselves?	Yes — 15 No — 9 Not sure — 8

6.2. In What Ways Do Advertisements Offer Different Perspectives on Gender?

Advertising not only affects body image but also plays a role in shaping identity among young adults. The survey responses reflect the multifaceted nature of this influence.
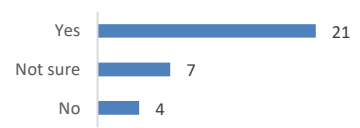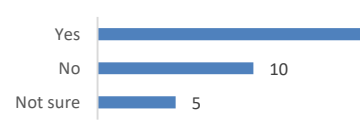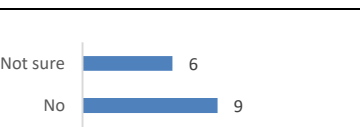
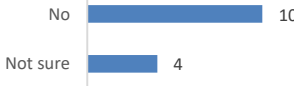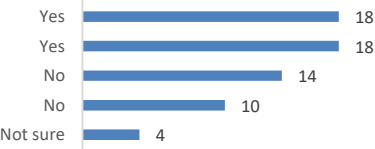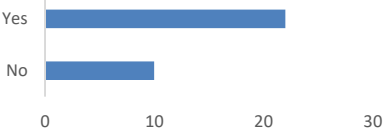| Questionnaire	Response
Do you think ads have changed how you see what it means to be male or female?	Yes — 23 No — 9
Have you ever changed how you look or act because of what you saw in an ad?	Yes, a little — 18 Yes, a lot — 8 No — 6
How do you think ads affect the self-esteem of young adults?	They hurt it — 12 Not sure — 7 They help it — 7 No effect — 6
Do you think ads make gender stereotypes stronger or challenge them?	Both — 16 Challenge… — 10 Neither — 3 Make them… — 3
Do you think your friends are influenced by ads when it comes to their identities?	Yes, a little — 21 Yes, a lot — 9 No — 2

How do you think social media ads affect identity compared to regular ads?	More impact — 18; Less impact — 8; About the same — 6

6.3. How do advertisements present varying perspectives on gender?

The findings indicate that while some progress has been made in promoting diversity in gender portrayals, traditional gender norms remain prevalent in advertising.

Questionnaire	Response
Do you think boys and girls react differently to gender ads?	Yes — 21; Not sure — 7; No — 4
Do you think girls are more affected by body image ads than boys?	Yes — 17; No — 10; Not sure — 5
Do you think boys feel less pressure to look a certain way because of ads?	No — 14; Yes — 11; Not sure — 7
What do you think is the biggest reason young adults feel a certain way about their bodies because of ads?	What they see in media — 10; Personal experiences — 9; Friends' opinions — 7; Family expectations — 6
Do you think ads for beauty or fitness products make people feel insecure?	Yes — 17; No — 9; Not sure — 6
Have you seen any ads that positively show different genders and body types?	Not sure — 6; No — 9; Yes — 17

Do you notice how gender is shown in ads?	No — 10; Not sure — 4
Should ads show more diverse body types and gender expressions?	Yes — 18; Yes — 18; No — 14; No — 10; Not sure — 4
Have you talked with friends about advertising and body image?	Yes — 22; No — 10 (axis 0, 10, 20, 30)
Would you like to join future studies about this topic?	No — 18; Yes — 14

7. Summary of Findings

The present survey results indicate that gender-specific advertisements have a profound effect on the body image and identity development of young adults. Although women seem to encounter more intense pressures regarding body image, men also feel substantial pressure to conform to societal standards. Media continues to be a key influence in shaping these perceptions, although personal relationships and experiences are also important factors. Additionally, there is an increasing awareness among participants about gender representation in advertising. Many expressed a strong desire for greater diversity and inclusivity, particularly in terms of gender and body types. Conversations among peers about these issues are frequent, highlighting the social nature of how young adults interact with gender messages in advertisements.

- **Body Image Impact**: A significant number of participants felt pressured to conform to the body types portrayed in advertisements.

- **Gender Perspectives**: Many participants indicated that advertisements reinforced traditional gender roles, influencing their self-perception and ideas about gender.

8. Discussion

The study highlights the profound impact of gender advertising on young adults' body image and identity development, with advertisements for women reinforcing unrealistic beauty standards, leading to significant pressure to conform to idealized beauty norms. However, the study also reveals a growing trend where men are

increasingly affected by body image concerns, particularly in the fitness and grooming sectors, challenging the traditional view that women are more impacted. The role of media in shaping body image and broader aspects of identity is central, with personal relationships also influencing how individuals perceive themselves. Many participants indicated that their body image perceptions were influenced not only by ads but also by feedback from peers and family, making identity formation a complex process shaped by both media and social contexts. A clear demand for more diversity and inclusivity in advertising emerged, with participants advocating for a broader range of body types and gender expressions, reflecting a shift away from narrow beauty ideals. This growing awareness of gender representation in advertising is coupled with a critical engagement, as young adults move from passive consumption to actively questioning and critiquing gender messaging. Peer discussions around gender and body image play a key role in either reinforcing or challenging media portrayals, further emphasizing the social dimension of how advertising influences body image. Interestingly, while global media is widely engaged with, there appears to be limited discussion on how gender is portrayed in Indian advertising, suggesting a need for further research on how gender roles are represented in this context. In summary, the study reveals that while traditional gender portrayals still hold significant influence, there is a rising demand for more inclusive and authentic representations, offering advertisers an opportunity to create media that resonates with a diverse and critically engaged audience.

9. Conclusions

This study highlights the significant influence of media on the body image and gender identity of students at Lucknow University, emphasizing the pressures and stereotypes perpetuated by advertisements. The research underscores the need for greater awareness and critical engagement with media content, aiming to contribute to broader discussions on the societal impacts of media. It advocates for more inclusive and diverse representations to foster healthier self-perceptions and challenge traditional gender norms in modern India. Additionally, the study reveals the profound impact of gender advertising on the body image and identity development of young adults. While traditional portrayals continue to exert pressure, there is a growing recognition of the need for more diverse and inclusive representations. This shift reflects a broader societal demand for authenticity in media, encouraging advertisers to embrace a wider range of body types and gender expressions. The findings highlight the importance of both media and social contexts in shaping self-perception, advocating for a critical engagement with media messages to foster healthier and more inclusive ideals.

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