

# The Portrayal of Women in Advertising

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## ABSTRACT

The portrayal of women in media advertisements, over the decades, has been about unrealistic body images, sexual objectification, physical beauty, and family roles. These advertisements affect the self-esteem and confidence of the female viewers and results in dissatisfaction and pressure to conform to certain body norms. It also affects the way women are perceived and sets men's expectations of a woman's appearance. A study was conducted on 313 respondents to understand the effects of such advertisements. It was observed that advertisements showing unrealistic body images of women pressurized them to conform to body norms. It was also observed that these advertisements affect the way women are accepted in the society. Men's perception of women and their expectations of women's appearance are also affected in the process. Majority of the respondents agreed that they would like to see more reality-based images in today's advertisements.

**Keywords--** Body Image, Gender Studies, Sexual Objectification, Women in Advertising

## I. INTRODUCTION

An advertisement is an announcement to the public of a product, service or idea through a medium to which the public has access. The medium may be print, electronic, or any other. This is a form of persuasive communication with the public. Advertising has a huge role to play now days both in marketing and in society, from marketing the products to setting stereotypes in the minds of people. Women, from the beginning, have made appearances to advertise different products and services, yet the portrayal remains the same with each and every product. Advertising does not merely sell products; it sells images, ideals, dreams, ways to live your life and stereotypes.

Back in 1980's the portrayal of women has been that of a stereotypical women who takes care of her family and looks after household. In today's era, the advertisements are more of girls being equal to boys and portray women as independent and powerful, yet there are advertisements that showcase and reinforce various stereotypes such as women being tall, slim and fair. Such advertisements not only affect the self-esteem of women but also influence how men perceive them.

Representation of women in advertisements has remained a topic of discussion, debate and research. The paper aims to study what is the role of women, how they are portrayed in different advertisements and what are the effects of these portrayals.

## II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Back in 1980's the portrayal of women has been that of a stereotypical women who takes care of her family and looks after household. In today's era, the reality is more of girls being equal to boys and women being independent and powerful, yet there are advertisements that showcase and reinforce various stereotypes from the past such as showing women as homemakers and taking the entire responsibility of the household chores. These advertisements have also created a brand new image of a woman in the minds of our society which relates to women being tall, slim and fair, and pleasing men around her. Such advertisements not only have an effect on the self-esteem of women but also influence how men perceive them. Research concludes that the advertisements which depict the ideal thin bodies of women leads to increased dissatisfaction with their bodies, spending more on their appearance, and eating disorders among the female viewers of the advertisement. (Grau & Zotos, 2016) These advertisements that portray women have a direct impact on a girl's self-esteem as well. Even 30 minutes of watching TV advertisements can change the perception of a woman towards her body which results in women making overestimations about their bodies. It also suggests that portraying ideal body images in the advertisements can lower down these overestimations (Myers, Biocca, & A., 1992)

There should be media literacy through which girls will be taught not to pay attention to such variables in the advertisement and how to prevent body dissatisfaction and eating disorders. Although it has been contradicted that the positive effect of media literacy is far less than the negative effect from these advertisements, a greater emphasis on reducing the usage of fanciful thin ideals will help in decreasing the anxiety levels and dissatisfaction among women. (Grabe, Ward, Hyde, & Shibley, 2008). In several advertisements women have been portrayed as sexual objects even when it is not in relation to the advertisement. Advertisers sometimes used the sexual imagery of women just to attract and sell their products to consumers. It was also found that in the same advertisement where men is wearing full clothing, women is portrayed in less clothes which means that women is shown as sex object more than men. When these kinds of advertisements continue to be in media, people start associating it with real life, considering women as mere sex objects. (DiSalvatore, 2010). The advertisements use a woman's body to induce demand for a product and to attract the viewer's attention

towards a product. It was observed that a set of respondents feel that in some advertisements, females are being presented unnecessarily and this is distorting their image. There is also a change in the in the behaviour of people around them and respect given to a women. They believe that the advertisements are portraying a distorted image of women. While the other set of respondents believe that presenting a woman in the advertisement can increase a product's demand and sale and that without a woman in the advertisement, the product will not get the attention of the viewers. (Shahwar, 2013). The British Women's Magazine advertisements consisting of lean, radiant and thin white women have known to produce death-like behaviour amongst white women and they let themselves die a little each day by refusing to let anything go into their bodies. (REDMOND, 2016)

The role of women in Indian advertisements is mostly decorative (associated with physical beauty) or related to family (roles such as daughter, mother) and less of independent working women. It was observed that even if women were depicted as independent and working, they often appear in the advertisements related to cosmetics, jewellery and hygiene rather than the advertisements of high value such as real estate and automobiles. Also, in some advertisements women are unnecessarily shown explicitly which is not required and it makes people uncomfortable while watching them with their family. It was observed that people did not appreciate thin models and prefer more normal looking women in advertisements. (Das & Sharma, 2016). Age can be a deciding factor in the presence of women in the commercial advertisements. Women in their late 60's have less chance of appearing in the advertisements than the men of the same age. Women are portrayed as young, beautiful and good looking in the advertisements and not aged middle class everyday women. This gives rise to stereotypical gender roles. Also, (Peirce & McBride, 1999) male spokes-person in advertisements is more common than female spokes-person. Male spokes-person is more likely to remain in the memory of the advertisement receivers. The way women are portrayed in the advertisements creates the way of thinking of how women should be accepted and what are their roles. (Susannah R. Stern, 2009). Even after the globalization has improved the lives of women they still have various challenges. On one hand it provides exceptional opportunities and on the other hand women remain disadvantaged in various areas of life. Due to globalization, the competition for producers has increased and the role of women in the advertisement media is for the benefit of producers and not consumers. Women is a very important yet vulnerable part of the society and the way media portrays the image of women invokes other peoples actions in the same direction. She concludes by saying that the major responsibility of the advertisement media should be to portray a real and more positive image of women and focus on improvement of the status of women in the society. (Pallavi, 2017). Portraying women positive and powerful in the advertisements can

encourage and inspire women in real life as advertisements have great impact on the minds of people. If women are portrayed as strong and independent, they will believe in themselves and can take charge of their future and career. On the other hand, if they are portrayed in sexual power, it gives rise to objectification, eating disorders and dissatisfaction among women receivers. (Kordrostami, 2017). Media can play a great role in advancement of women. By creation of self-regulatory mechanisms, it should strive to eradicate gender based stereotypes which is misleading. It should also contribute a good percentage of their programming to spread awareness in the society about women's rights and redressal mechanisms. The author emphasizes the need of advertisements, reality shows and chat rooms to portray more realistic and self-confident images of women who are career oriented. As said by Swami Vivekananda "A nation which doesn't respect women will never become great..." the author says that media and other agents should work towards the empowerment of women if we ever want to become a global player. (Goel & Kumar, 2015). When media was redefining the roles of women, car advertisements gave them more alternatives in which they built their modern feminine identities and pictured themselves as more independent and powerful. For instance, in 1923 when Cadillac launched its type 61 model, the advertisement was positioned around the picture of modern women portraying them as young and fashionable. The advertisement recognized her as a representation of "ideal American womanhood". (Rabinovitch-Fox, 2016)

In an organization, the advertising department which is referred to as 'creative department' consists mainly of men and this is the reason why advertisements aimed for women receivers are sometimes so bad because men create advertisements from a male's perspective. (Broyles & Grow, 2008). (Shani, Sandler, & Long, 1992) There were no efforts on the part of advertisers to reach to the female sports market as a separate segment.

(Andersson, Hedelin, Nilsson, & Welander, 2004). Men and women can have different interpretations of the same advertisement. (Prakash & Flores, 1985) Men and women process information differently portrayed in an advertisement. Women being more subjective than men and different advertising formats must be used for different sexes. The advertisements should be made by keeping the traditional and cultural differences of different areas in mind. A comparison is made between advertisements of two countries - Singapore and China. In China, the roles of women are more of a housewife and being dependent on men; while in Singapore, women go out for work and hold various managerial positions. As a result, the advertisements focus on household appliances in China whereas the advertisements in Singapore are more of unisex products. (Siu, 1997)

Portraying false and unrealistic images of women in advertisements might also affect the organization and the products adversely. (DeYoung & Crane, 1992) A study conducted on females from Canada

reveals that close to 50% of the respondents would not buy a product if its advertisement is offensive to women, no matter how good the product is. (Bower, 2013). Negative and derogatory portrayal of models in advertisement may affect the product adversely. (Agerup, 2011). For brands, ethical self-image is more

important than aesthetic self-image. When a fashion brand uses overweight models instead of thin models, it may be very unattractive but the corporate-good that will result from this will cover the damage it does to the brand.

Sr. No.	Title of the Paper/Book	Names of Authors	Name of the Journal	Major Conclusion
1	Gender Portrayals Across the Life Span: A Content Analytic Look at Broadcast Commercials	Susannah R. Stern & Dana E. Mastro	Mass Communication and Society	Age is a deciding factor in women's appearance in commercial advertisements
2	Portrayal of Women in Advertising	Ellen DiSalvatore	-	Women Portrayed as sexual objects to attract consumer's attention
3	Portrayal of Women in Indian TV Advertisements: A Study of Audience Perception	Madhusmita Das, Sangeeta Sharma	The IUP Journal of Marketing Management	Role of Women in advertisements is either related to physical beauty or family
4	Female power portrayals in ads: Dimensions and consequences	MelikaKordrosta mi	Iowa State University Capstones, Theses and Dissertations	Portraying powerful image of women in advertisements can encourage and inspire women
5	MEDIA AS A PROPELLANT OF FEMINISM IN INDIAN DEMOCRACY	Shivam Goel, Ankit Kumar	Human Rights International Research Journal	Media should work towards women empowerment instead of giving rise to gender stereotypes
6	The Potrayal of women in Indian media in the era of globalization: A review of concepts, operationalization and key findings	Kumari Pallavi	International Journal of Applied Research	Women in advertisement are for the benefits of producer and not consumer. Media should portray positive image of women.
7	Baby, You Can Drive My Car: Advertising Women's Freedom in 1920s America	Einav Rabinovitch-Fox	American Journalism	Car advertisements pictured women as independent and powerful and recognized them as the "ideal American Women"
8	A Study of Audience Perception about the Portrayal of Women in Advertisement of Pakistani Electronic Media	DeebaShahwar	J. Glob. & Sci. Issues	In some advertisements women are presented unnecessarily which distorts their image and changes the behaviour of people around them and respect given to the women in society
9	The role of the media in body image concerns among women: A meta-analysis of experimental and correlational studies.	Grabe, Shelly Ward, L. Monique Hyde, Janet Shibley	Psychological Bulletin	Advertisements that depict unrealistic body images leads to dissatisfaction and women tend to spend more on their appearance. Eating disorders also increase
10	The elastic body image: The effect of television advertising and programming on body image distortions in young women.	Myers, Philip N. Biocca, Frank A.	Journal of Communication	Even 30 minutes of watching TV can change the perception of a woman towards her body.
11	Creative Women in Advertising Agencies: Why So	Sheri L. Broyles, Jean M. Grow	Journal of Consumer Marketing	Advertising departments consist mainly of men because of which advertisements focusing on women

	Few “Babes in Boyland”?			are so bad.
12	Women in advertising: a comparison of television advertisements in China and Singapore	Wai-sam Siu	-	Advertisements should be made by keeping the traditional and cultural differences of different areas in mind.
13	Females' attitudes toward the portrayal of women in advertising: a Canadian study	Susan DeYoung and F.G. Crane	-	Women will not buy products if the advertisements are offensive to women no matter how good the product is
14	Thin White Women in Advertising: Deathly corporeality	Sean Redmond	Journal of Consumer Culture	Advertisements consisting of lean, radiant and thin white women have known to produce death-like behaviour amongst white women and they let themselves die a little each day by refusing to let anything go into their bodies.
15	Gender stereotypes in advertising: A review of current research	Yorgos Zotos, Stacy Landreth Grau	International Journal of Advertising	Advertisements that portray women have a direct impact on a girl's self-esteem.
16	Highly Attractive Models in Advertising and the Women Who Loathe Them: The Implications of Negative Affect for Spokesperson Effectiveness	Amanda B. Bower	Journal of Advertising	Negative and derogatory portrayal of models in advertisement can affect the product adversely.
17	Violent advertising in fashion marketing	Svante Andersson, Anna Hedelin, Anna Nilsson, Charlotte Welanders	Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management	Men and women can have different interpretations of the same advertisement.
18	The influence of real women in advertising on mass market fashion brand perception	Ulf Aagerup	Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management	For brands, ethical self-image is more important than aesthetic self-image.
19	Courting Women Using Sports Marketing: A Content Analysis of the US Open	David Shani, Dennis M. Sandler, Mary Mallinson Long	-	There were no efforts on the part of advertisers to reach to the female sports market as a separate segment
20	Share A Study of Psychological Gender Differences: Applications For Advertising Format	Ved Prakash, R. Caeli Flores	-	Men and women process information differently, portrayed in an advertisement. Women being more subjective than men and different advertising formats must be used for different sexes
21	Aunt Jemima Isn't Keeping Up with the Energizer Bunny: Stereotyping of Animated Spokescharacters in Advertising	Kate Peirce, Michael McBride	-	Male spokes-person in advertisements are more common than female spokes-person. Male spokes-person are more likely to remain in the memory of the advertisement receivers.
22	Body Image and Self-Esteem Among	Daniel Clay, Vivian L.	Journal of Research on	Ultra-thin and unrealistic body images of female models shown in

Adolescent Girls: Testing the Influence of Sociocultural Factors	Vignoles, and Helga Dittmar	Adolescence	media can lower down the self-esteem of young girls.
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### III. RESEARCH GAP

There have been ample studies on the portrayal of women in advertising and other media and how it affects their self-esteem and confidence. It forms societal norms on how a woman should be accepted in the society and how men perceive and accept them. The advertisements showing nudity and women as mere sexual objects also makes it uncomfortable for the viewers to watch it in their homes along with their families. But do they want to see more realistic images of women in the advertisements? The study has been made in the past years on the portrayal of women in advertisement but today the times have changed and more and more people are becoming aware of these issues. Many brands are using daily average women for their advertisements such as Dove and sports brand are using overweight models for their campaigns. There has been a lot of awareness for women to not conform to the unrealistic images shown in the advertisements. The objective of the further study will be to find out whether today, when more and more women are becoming independent and are not just confined to their households, do certain advertisements still affect the self-esteem and confidence of women in this fast changing world?

### IV. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

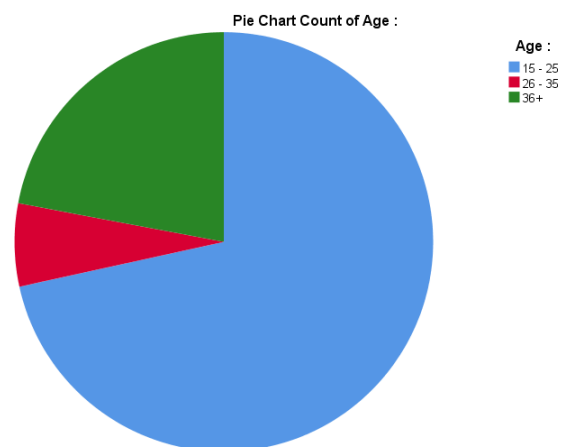
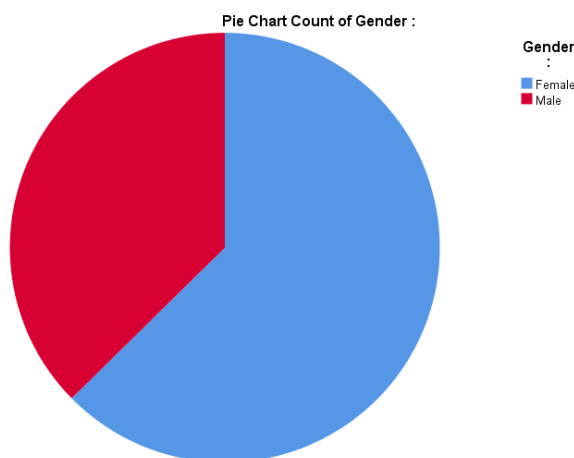
1. To find out whether today’s advertisements affect the way women are accepted in the society.
2. To find out whether today’s advertisements affect women’s self-esteem and confidence.
3. To find out whether today’s advertisements are forcing women to conform to certain body norms such as thin bodies, fair colour etc.
4. To find whether there is a need for certain changes in the way advertisements are made today and would people like to see more realistic images of everyday women in these advertisements.
5. To find out whether men and women perceive advertisements portraying women differently.

### V. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research is quantitative and descriptive in nature. A structured questionnaire was prepared and circulated to gather data from males and females across different age groups. Ordinal scale was used to collect the opinions of the respondents on various variables. The sampling technique used to gather the data is convenience sampling.

Various statistical tools and graphs were used to analyse the collected data which includes frequencies, cross tabulation, ANOVA, bar graphs and pie charts.

### VI. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS



A total of 313 responses were collected for this study which includes 196 females and 117 males. 224 respondents were from the age group 15-25, 20

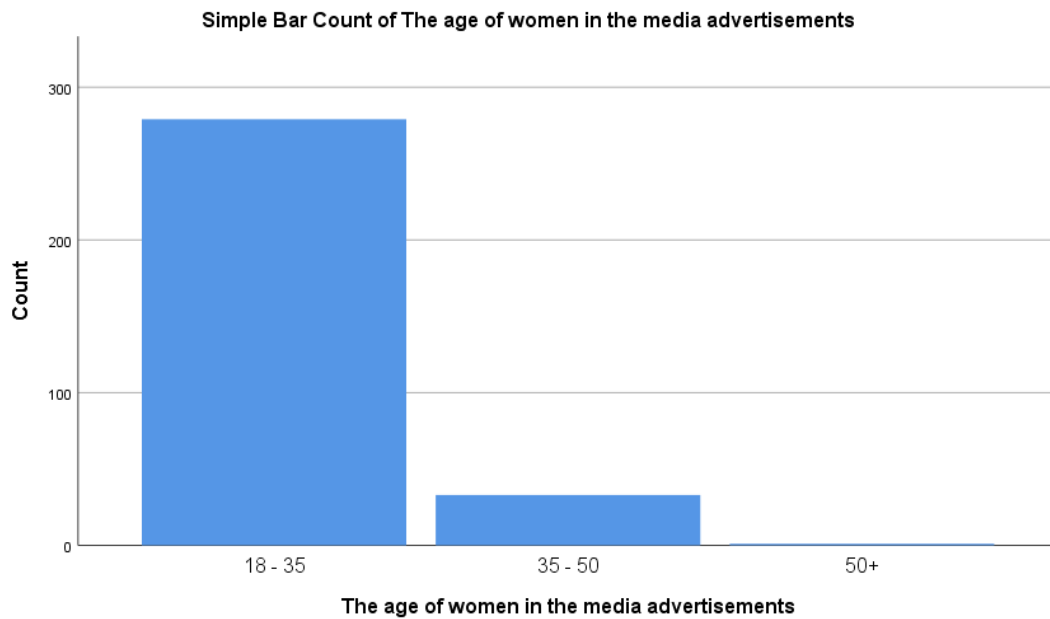
respondents were from the age group 26-35 and 69 respondents were from the age group 36+.

1) Following is the table comprising responses collected through the questionnaire.

S.N.	Variables	Males					Females				
		SD	D	N	A	SA	SD	D	N	A	SA
1	Women feel pressurized into conforming to a perfect body because of seeing advertisements using young and beautiful female models.	7	3	33	28	46	18	10	34	63	71
2	Displaying beautiful and young female models in the advertisements is giving rise to eating disorders and increased dissatisfaction among women.	17	12	35	22	31	12	13	41	59	71
3	Advertising creates a mythical world in which no one is ever ugly, overweight, poor, struggling or disabled.	3	9	27	29	49	7	8	41	71	69
4	Role of women in most advertisements is related to family and physical beauty and less of independent working women.	9	21	34	35	18	8	29	66	52	41
5	Women are portrayed as sexual objects more than men in various advertisements.	3	16	26	35	37	5	26	42	65	58
6	Advertisements negatively objectify women by using semi-pornographic models in most advertisements.	8	24	23	38	24	12	29	55	65	35
7	Advertisements which portray a derogatory image of women influence the way women are accepted in society.	3	9	32	43	30	5	14	64	58	55
8	Rarely see any middle-aged normal day women in advertisements.	5	14	25	45	28	4	24	44	68	56
9	Media might have an impact on influencing men's expectations of a woman's appearance.	4	13	15	45	40	7	6	40	69	74
10	Middle-aged men are more likely to appear in an advertisement than women of the same age group.	7	13	33	37	27	6	32	48	56	54
11	Would like to see more advertisements that reflect reality based images.	5	9	14	26	63	5	5	20	17	149
SD – Strongly Disagree		D - Disagree		N - Neutral		A - Agree		SA – Strongly Agree			

It can be seen in the above table that the percentage of men agreeing on any variable is always less than the percentage of women agreeing on the same variable. This shows the difference in how men and

women perceive advertisements portraying women differently. The impact of such advertisements on men and women is also different.



89 per cent of the respondents agree that the age of women in the media advertisements is between 18 – 35 years which indicates that advertisers prefer young women for their audience and not middle aged everyday women.

2) The advertisements portraying women affect the way women are accepted in the society and it also impacts men’s perception of a woman’s appearance.

	Males			Females		
	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
Advertisements which portray a derogatory image of women influence the way women are accepted in society.	17	15	85	13	40	143
Advertisements which portray a derogatory image of women influence the way women are accepted in society.	12	32	73	19	64	113

The advertisements which portray women as attractive, or as someone who looks after the household and her children instead of being an independent working woman, or as a mere sexual object affects the perception of people around them. Findings indicate that 65 per cent of women and 67 per cent of men believe that these advertisements affect the way women are accepted in the

society. Men’s perception of women and their expectations of women’s appearance are also affected in the process.

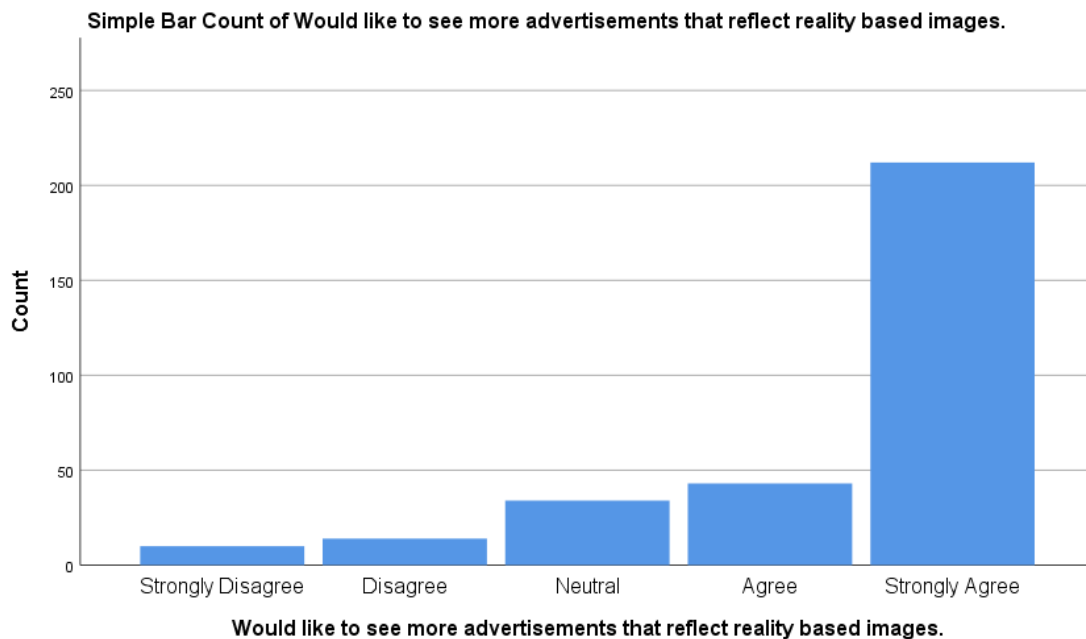
3) Today’s advertisements affect woman’s self-esteem and confidence, and pressurize them to conform to certain body norms such as fair colour, thin bodies, etc.

Variables	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
Women feel pressurized into conforming to a perfect body because of seeing advertisements using young and beautiful female models	28	34	134
Displaying beautiful and young female models in the advertisements is giving rise to eating disorders and increased dissatisfaction among women	25	41	130

It was found that 67 per cent of women feel pressurized into conforming to certain body norms by seeing beautiful, young, fair, and thin female models displayed in advertisements and it also gave rise to

increased dissatisfaction of their bodies and eating disorders among the female population.

4) People would like to see more reality based advertisements.



81 per cent of the respondents agreed that they would like to see advertisements which reflect reality based images instead of those building stereotypes. It also sets basis for the expectations of men and the society on how a woman should appear or be accepted in the society. Additionally, it represents the general dislike towards such advertisements.

**5) Hypothesis Testing**

**Null Hypothesis** – The perception of age of women in media advertisements has no relation with the age of the respondent.

**Alternate Hypothesis** – The perceived age of a woman in media advertisements increases with the increase in the age of the respondent.

<b>ANOVA</b>					
<b>The age of women in the media advertisements</b>					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
<b>Between Groups</b>	1.009	2	.504	4.874	.008
<b>Within Groups</b>	32.078	310	.103		
<b>Total</b>	33.086	312			

Since the level of significance was found to be less than 0.05, null hypothesis is rejected at 95 per cent level of confidence. Therefore, there is a significant

relationship between the perceived age of a woman in media advertisements and the age of the respondent. On further analysis the following was observed –

Age of respondents	Perceived age of women in media advertisements			
	25-35	Percentage	35-50	Percentage
15-25	224	92 %	17	8%
35 and above	54	78%	15	22%

It can be observed that as there is an increase in the age of respondents, the perceived age of women in media advertisements also increase. In the above table, 92 per cent of the respondents between the age group of 15-25 feel that the age of women in the media advertisements is between the age group of 25-35. The percentage is reduced to 78 per cent as we increase the age of respondents to 35 and above.

Similarly, 8 per cent of the respondents between the age group of 15-25 feel that the age of women in the media advertisements is between the age group of 35-50.

The percentage is increased to 22 per cent as we increase the age of respondents to 35 and above.

From this table, one can infer that with an increase in the age of the respondent their perception of the age of women in the media advertisements also increases.

**VII. LIMITATION**

Due to the limited number of responses in the age category 25-35 a significant conclusion could not be drawn in the same.



## VIII. CONCLUSION

The findings above indicate that there is a need to change the way advertisements portray women. It was observed that women feel pressurized into conforming to various body stereotypes such as thin bodies, fair colour, etc. which is giving rise to eating disorders and dissatisfaction. Advertisements also affect the confidence and self-esteem of women.

Most of the respondents agreed that they would like to see advertisements which reflect reality based images instead of unrealistic body images of women, depiction of semi-pornography, and portraying women as mere sexual objects.

These advertisements affect the younger female population more adversely. Teenagers and children grow up seeing these advertisements and they are under tremendous pressure of conforming themselves to the societal definition of attractive. They are afraid of their fat bodies and dark colours and many young girls have already tried dieting before the age of 15. Children know and can recognize brands even before can read and it is important that advertisements of these brands don't affect their confidence and self-esteem at such a young age. Many of the big brands today even use teenage models in their advertisements, which is even worse.

From the above findings we can also conclude that there is a difference between how men and women interpret advertisements related to women differently. From this, one can infer that as long as the teams creating advertisements do not have a balance of both genders, it will be biased toward the thought process of the majority in the team. If such teams are primarily composed of men, and their ideas and perceptions of women in advertisements, it could adversely affect the thought process of the millions of women watching those advertisements.

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