

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background of the Study

The rise of "femvertising" — advertising that promotes pro-female messages, imagery, and talent to empower women and girls — has become an increasingly prominent trend in marketing (Ciambriello, 2014). This shift is largely a result of changing gender dynamics, where women, now enjoying greater economic and political influence, have altered the way they engage with advertisements. As women's roles in society have evolved through expanded educational opportunities and financial independence, advertisers have adapted their messaging to resonate with this more empowered demographic. In contrast to older depictions that often portrayed women as passive, subservient, or objectified, modern advertisements focus on themes of confidence, independence, and empowerment.

Despite the surge in ads aimed at empowering women, such as Dove's "Real Beauty" campaign and Under Armour's "Rule Yourself," questions remain about their genuine effectiveness. While these campaigns are celebrated for challenging traditional gender stereotypes, there is limited research assessing their actual impact on female consumers. Some studies suggest that women are increasingly receptive to marketing that reflects their evolving values and aspirations (Sivulka, 2009). However, many critiques argue that these campaigns fail to fully challenge the

beauty ideals they claim to question. For example, Patton and Vasquez (2008) analyzed Dove's "Real Beauty" and found that, despite its intention to challenge conventional beauty standards, the campaign still reinforced a narrow, idealized form of diversity. McCleary (2014) similarly critiqued the Dove campaign, noting that it offered only a limited critique of traditional beauty norms, without addressing the broader societal implications of such ideals.

With the growing demand for emotionally compelling advertisements, particularly among women, many brands have embraced empowerment-themed messaging as a way to establish a deeper emotional connection with their audience. Research indicates that women are more likely to respond to emotional appeals in advertisements, making empowerment-based messaging an effective strategy for engaging female consumers (McMahan, 2005). Emotional advertising has long been recognized as a powerful tool for strengthening consumer-brand relationships (Rossiter & Bellman, 2012). However, while some campaigns have been praised for their empowering messages, others have been criticized for using empowerment as a mere marketing ploy rather than a genuine challenge to societal norms. As a result, the true impact of femvertising remains unclear, with some campaigns perpetuating stereotypes under the guise of inclusivity, rather than fostering meaningful change. This raises ongoing questions about the authenticity and long-term effectiveness of these campaigns in truly empowering women.

This research investigates the evolving landscape of advertising with a focus on the emergence of femvertising, a movement aimed at countering the historically

negative and stereotypical portrayals of women in media. Stereotypes, defined as generalized beliefs about social groups, often result in biased perceptions and limiting assumptions that can constrain individuals' potential (Perkins, 1979). Despite arguments suggesting that stereotypes might not be inherently detrimental (Zotos & Eirini, 2013), they frequently lead to portrayals that diminish and undervalue women (Barker, 1999; Eisend, 2009; Pollay, 1986).

Traditionally, women in advertisements have been depicted in submissive or passive roles, frequently objectified and reduced to voiceless homemakers (Eisend, 2009; Matthes et al., 2016). These portrayals have been shaped by cultural factors, with more entrenched stereotypes evident in countries scoring higher on Hofstede's masculinity index (Das, 2000).

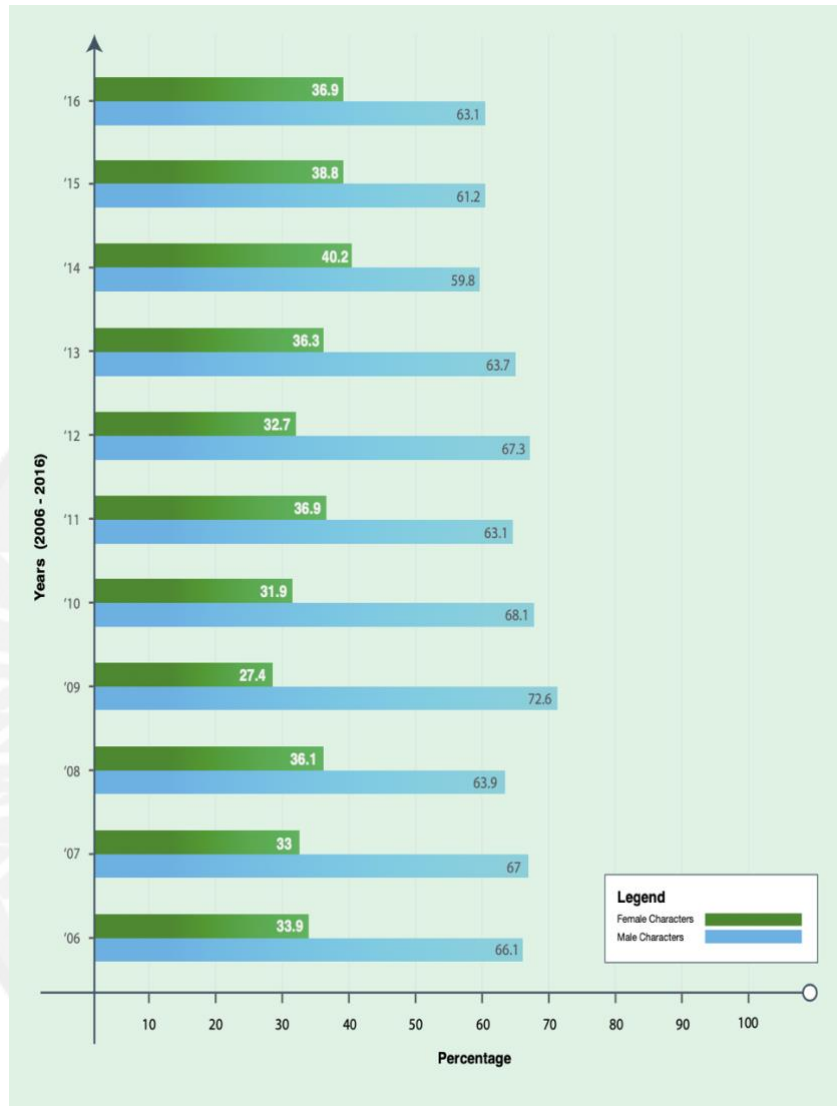
A pertinent example can be observed in Indian advertisements, where women's sensuality is often commodified, and their roles are closely linked to financial dependence on men (Das, 2000; Iijima Hall & Crum, 1994; Lin, 1998; Verhellen et al., 2016). However, these depictions are not isolated to India and are part of a broader global pattern of stereotypical media representations.

The Geena Davis Institute (2017), in collaboration with USC's Signal Analysis and Interpretation Laboratory (SAIL), developed the Geena Davis Inclusion Quotient (GD-IQ) tool. This tool measures gender representation in media with high accuracy, tracking screen and speaking time down to the millisecond. An

analysis using this tool, covering over 2,000 Cannes Lions films from 2006 to 2016 across five English-speaking countries, uncovered persistent gender gaps in representation and dialogue. This highlights the ongoing issue of gender bias in advertising and underscores the necessity for continued scrutiny and improvement in media representation.

Key findings of the study reveal several insights into gender representation in advertising. Women made up roughly one-third of the characters in commercials, showing only a slight increase over the decade, from 33.9% in 2006 to 36.9% in 2016, highlighting a persistent gender disparity in advertising. Regarding screen and speaking time, the percentage of commercials featuring women for 20% or less of the screen time remained nearly unchanged, with 43.6% in 2006 and 44.2% in 2016. Advertisements featuring only male characters were five times more common than those with only female characters, with men receiving approximately four times more screen time and speaking around seven times more than women. In terms of dialogue content, the study found that dialogue delivered by men was 29% more likely to contain words associated with power and 28% more likely to include terms related to achievement compared to dialogue spoken by women.

Figure 1.1 Distribution of Screen Time and Speaking Roles by Gender in Commercials (2006-2016)



Source: Geena Davis Institute, 2017

Recently, there has been a noticeable shift in the advertising landscape, particularly regarding the portrayal of women. Traditionally, advertisements often depicted women in stereotypical, objectified roles. However, recent trends indicate a move towards showcasing women in more authoritative and powerful positions

(Econsultancy, 2018). This shift mirrors broader cultural changes that have influenced both the portrayal of women in advertisements and the reception of these portrayals (Johnson et al., 2006; Koerning & Granitz, 2006).

For instance, Kordrostami (2017) investigated advertisements where women are depicted in powerful stances, exploring how these portrayals affect viewer perceptions. The rise of "femvertising," which emphasizes female empowerment, has gained significant attention (Abitbol & Sternadori, 2018; Åkestam et al., 2017; Becker-Herby, 2016; Sternadori & Abitbol, 2019). Femvertising highlights women exercising agency in various dimensions, such as intellectual authority or physical strength, rather than conforming to traditional, reductive stereotypes.

Despite the growing interest in femvertising, further investigation is needed to understand its diverse forms and theoretical implications. Femvertising emphasizes various empowerment aspects—ranging from intellectual prowess (e.g., Microsoft's "Girls do science") to physical strength (e.g., Under Armour's "I will what I want") (Abitbol & Sternadori, 2018; Kordrostami, 2017; Windels et al., 2019) Conversely, female sexual empowerment in advertising focuses on women embracing and controlling their sensuality, as exemplified by Calvin Klein's "I seduce in #mycalvins" campaign, which portrays women as fully in control of their sensual expression (Gill, 2008).

It is crucial to differentiate between femvertising and female sexual empowerment. Femvertising generally addresses broader empowerment dynamics,

whereas sexual empowerment specifically pertains to women's control over their sexual identity and decisions. This distinction is evident in the portrayal of provocative appeals in advertising, where women have historically been depicted as "powerless objects" (Nokes, 1994). Emerging trends now depict women as confident and in control of their sensuality, marking a shift from traditional passive portrayals (Dominick & Rauch, 1972; Soley & Kurzbard, 1986).

Research indicates that objectified portrayals of women often lead to negative viewer responses, such as decreased brand recall and reduced appeal (Peterson & Kerin, 1977; Sengupta & Dahl, 2008; Steadman, 1969). In contrast, advertisements featuring women as empowered agents of their own sexuality tend to elicit more positive viewer reactions. This aligns with the theory of planned behavior, which suggests that positive attitudes towards empowered portrayals enhance viewers' purchase intentions (Ajzen, 1991; Han et al., 2010).

In the fashion industry, the use of provocative appeals is widespread (Kuipers et al., 2016). However, the reception of these appeals varies significantly. Andersson et al. (2004) found that viewers often perceive violence in fashion ads more negatively than intended, with women reacting particularly strongly. This underscores the complexity of using provocative appeals in advertising, where the depiction of female empowerment—or the lack thereof—can profoundly affect viewer perception.

Another report by the Geena Davis Institute, in collaboration with UNICEF India and UNICEF South Asia ((2021), provides an in-depth analysis of gender and racial representation in Indian media using cutting-edge automated tools. The study employs the Geena Davis Inclusion Quotient (GD-IQ) to measure gender-based screen and speaking time, alongside the Spellcheck for Bias tool to gather data on character prominence and attributes from scripts. Both tools are the result of advancements developed at USC's Viterbi School of Engineering.

In terms of Gender & Prominence, female characters in Indian advertisements command a notable share of screen time (59.7%) and speaking time (56.3%). However, despite this increased visibility, they are often depicted in roles that reinforce traditional gender norms, particularly within advertisements for domestic and beauty products.

Regarding Sexualization & Stereotypes, female characters are subject to a higher degree of objectification and stereotypical portrayal. They are nine times more likely than male characters to be depicted as "stunning" or "very attractive" (33.6% vs. 16.8%). Additionally, women appear in sexually revealing clothing six times more often (11.2% vs. 1.7%) and face five times more sexual objectification (4.7% vs. 0.9%). Female characters are also four times more likely to be portrayed with a slim body type (41.8% vs. 9.4%) and in partial nudity (7.6% vs. 1.6%).



In the realm of Work and Leadership, male characters are portrayed in paid employment roles twice as frequently as females (25.2% vs. 11.6%) and are more commonly depicted as leaders (26.3% vs. 19.3%). Men are shown in work and leadership contexts more often than women, reinforcing gendered assumptions about occupational roles.

Gender Roles are further emphasized in portrayals of parenting and household duties, with female characters three times more likely to appear as parents (18.7% vs. 5.9%) and caretakers (18.3% vs. 5.2%). They are also shown making household decisions twice as often as male characters (4.9% vs. 2.0%).

In terms of Settings and Activities, female characters are frequently depicted engaging in traditional activities like shopping and cleaning. They are often shown in domestic spaces, such as living rooms and bedrooms, while male characters are more likely to be presented in professional or outdoor environments, underscoring stereotypical gendered associations with space and activity.

## **1.2 Problem Statement**

This study aims to critically examine the influence of femvertising on consumer behavior and purchase intention. In an era where femvertising seeks to challenge entrenched gender stereotypes and promote female empowerment, it plays a crucial role in reshaping societal perceptions of women. By portraying women as empowered individuals making choices about their sexuality,

femvertising positions itself as a force for positive change in advertising, contrasting with traditional ads that often rely on objectification or reductive portrayals of women.

The research explores how femvertising affects consumer behavior, especially in terms of purchase intention. It delves into whether these portrayals resonate more with female consumers, fostering a stronger emotional connection to the brand, and whether they positively influence attitudes toward both the advertisement and the product. Moreover, this study investigates whether men respond differently to femvertising, examining the potential for gender-based disparities in consumer reactions.

Additionally, the research seeks to determine if femvertising can shift societal perceptions of women toward a more equitable and empowered view, contributing to the broader cultural conversation on gender equality. By promoting images of strong, autonomous women, femvertising may inspire consumers to engage more deeply with brands that align with progressive gender values.

Through this investigation, the study aims to provide deeper insights into the complex relationship between femvertising and consumer behavior, offering a nuanced understanding of how these marketing strategies affect purchase intention and brand perception in a rapidly changing cultural landscape.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

Building on the research discussed, this study aims to explore the following key questions. These questions focus on understanding how the element of female empowerment in femvertising influences consumer attitudes and buying decisions, and how gender affects these perceptions. The goal is to determine whether empowered portrayals lead to more positive responses from consumers, particularly women.

1. Does Female Empowerment positively influence consumer attitude?
2. Does Female Empowerment positively affect purchase decisions?
3. Does gender positively influence the perception of Female Empowerment?
4. Does Female Empowerment positively impact consumer behavior, particularly among women?

#### **1.4 Research Objectives**

The objectives of this study are rooted in the desire to understand the nuanced effects of female empowerment in advertising. By focusing on these key areas, the study aims to provide insights into how different portrayals of women in advertisements influence consumer behavior and purchase intention.

1. To examine whether Female Empowerment ads positively influence consumer attitudes.
2. To examine whether Female Empowerment ads positively influence purchase decisions.

3. To examine whether gender positively influences the perception of Female Empowerment
4. To examine whether Female Empowerment positively influences consumer responses, particularly from women.

### **1.5 Scope of the Study**

By investigating these variables, this study aims to provide a robust and comprehensive analysis of how advertisements featuring female empowerment influence consumer attitudes, behaviors, and purchase intentions. In particular, the research highlights the moderating role of gender in shaping consumer perceptions.

Situated within the context of Western markets—specifically the U.S., UK, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and Europe—the study will gather empirical data through a meticulously designed online survey. This survey will target a diverse cross-section of adult consumers, enabling the research to deliver nuanced insights into the differential impacts of femvertising on consumer behavior across varied demographic segments. By focusing on this geographic scope, the research aspires to contribute to the broader discourse on gender dynamics in advertising and the extent to which femvertising can reshape societal and consumer perceptions in line with evolving ideals of gender equality and empowerment.

Through this analysis, the study aspires to contribute to the broader discourse on how contemporary advertising strategies can either challenge or reinforce traditional gender norms, thereby influencing consumer behavior in significant ways. The insights gleaned from this study are expected to be of particular relevance

to marketers, advertisers, and scholars interested in the intersection of gender, empowerment, and consumer psychology.

## **1.6 Significance of the Study**

### **1.6.1 For the Researcher**

This study holds substantial significance for the researcher as it offers a deep dive into the evolving landscape of advertising and consumer behavior, particularly in the context of gender portrayals. The research provides an opportunity to contribute original insights to the academic community, particularly in understanding how contemporary advertising strategies affect consumer perceptions and behaviors. This exploration enhances the researcher's expertise in marketing, consumer psychology, and gender studies, laying the groundwork for future academic and professional endeavors.

### **1.6.2 For Business Schools**

For business schools, this study is invaluable as it contributes to the curriculum on advertising, consumer behavior, and gender studies. The findings offer fresh perspectives on how different advertising strategies can influence consumer behavior, which is crucial for educating future marketers, advertisers, and business leaders. The study's insights can be integrated into courses on marketing strategy, brand management, and social media marketing, providing students with a nuanced understanding of the complexities involved in advertising in the modern era.

### **1.6.3 For Women and Men, Especially the Social Media Generation**

This study is particularly relevant for the social media generation, who are constantly exposed to various forms of advertising across digital platforms. For women, the research sheds light on how portrayals of female empowerment in ads can impact their self-perception and consumer choices. For men, it highlights how different gender portrayals can influence their attitudes toward brands and products. The study encourages both genders to critically assess the media they consume and to be more aware of the underlying messages in advertising, fostering a more informed and conscious consumer culture.

### **1.6.4 For Future Researchers**

The study lays a solid foundation for future research by identifying key variables and relationships that are ripe for further exploration. It opens avenues for scholars interested in examining the evolving roles of gender in advertising, the psychological impacts of media portrayals, and the intersection of consumer behavior with social trends. Future researchers can build on this study to explore similar dynamics in different industries, cultural contexts, or through different media channels, thus contributing to a broader understanding of gender and advertising.

### **1.6.5 For Brands**

For brands, the study provides critical insights into the effectiveness of advertising strategies that leverage female empowerment. It underscores the

importance of aligning marketing strategies with evolving consumer expectations, particularly in an era where social values around gender are rapidly changing. Brands can use the findings to refine their advertising approaches, ensuring that their campaigns resonate positively with diverse audiences, enhance brand perception, and ultimately drive consumer loyalty and purchase intentions. The study also emphasizes the need for brands to be mindful of the potential social impact of their advertising, encouraging them to adopt strategies that are not only effective but also socially responsible.

## **1.7 Organisation of the Study**

### **1.7.1 Chapter I: Introduction**

The introduction serves as a vital component of the research, offering readers a comprehensive overview of the study. It encompasses the background of the research, articulates the problem statement, outlines the research questions and objectives, and delineates the study's scope and significance.

### **1.7.2 Chapter II: Literature Review**

The second chapter introduces and defines the variables examined in this study. It also presents the conceptual model employed, elucidating the relationships among the variables. Additionally, this chapter explores the theoretical frameworks utilized by previous researchers, providing a foundation for understanding the study's approach.

### **1.7.3 Chapter III: Research Methodology**

This chapter delves into the methodologies adopted by the researchers, encompassing the research design, paradigm, objectives, and the nature and extent of researcher involvement. It further outlines the study's context, unit of analysis, time frame, data collection methods, sampling strategies, measurement techniques, and analytical procedures, providing a comprehensive overview of the research approach.

### **1.7.4 Chapter IV: Results and Discussions**

This chapter provides a detailed account of the study participants' profiles, the preliminary study, the results of the main study, the hypothesis testing, and concludes with a discussion of the findings.

### **1.7.5 Chapter V: Conclusions and Suggestions**

This chapter brings the investigation to a close by synthesizing the overall findings and insights gained throughout the research. In addition to summarizing the key outcomes, it offers thoughtful advice and strategic recommendations for future scholars who wish to delve deeper into this case study, highlighting potential areas for further exploration and study.