

Consumers' Perception of Visual Communication in Lingerie Advertisements: A Qualitative Approach

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ABSTRACT

The portrayal of women in advertisements has been an important topic of research across the world in light of the objectification of sex. In the Indian context, advertising of women's lingerie has come a long way from being non-existent up to the late eighties to being all over the media in the present day and time. Like elsewhere, the post-liberalisation era saw a gradual rise in this sector too, as symbolised by the now iconic Liril soap advertisement of the bikini-clad girl in the waterfall on the theme of refreshing take on life. This change truly reflects the paradigm shift in Indian society's acceptance of the basic needs and rights of a woman to exercise her choice with dignity. This transformation has also reshaped the interaction between consumers and brands and enabled the depiction of different themes in lingerie advertising. The phenomenon of the depiction of a woman as a symbol of strength in print and online single-frame advertisements of inner sportswear for women, which is the main focus of this study, is one of the most remarkable examples of high-level awareness of the consumers about adopting a healthy lifestyle. Earlier studies have focused on analysing the image of women as a commodity, or an object of desire as projected in all types of advertisements (Tanuja Singh & Denise Schoenbachler, 2008). However, sportswear lingerie advertisements in India are not much explored in terms of research and this analysis shows that a distinct image of a stronger and confident woman is being projected (Femvertising as popularised by She Knows Magazine, 2014) while marketing inner sportswear as against a delicate and sensual image in traditional lingerie ads. Besides, another significant finding of this study shows that society has accepted and acknowledged the portrayal of a woman in her innerwear in popular media.

Keywords: Lingerie Ads, Sensuality, Urban Woman, Visual Communication, Women Sports Innerwear Ads, Consumer Perception, Objectification

1. Introduction

Well-endowed and often photoshopped images of female bodies help sell almost everything under the sun (Field et al., 2005). The media is accused of propagating the objectification of women for its gains (Fredricks on & Roberts, 1997). Young women are depicted as being accepted by society only if they meet certain beauty standards set by the consumerist culture (Susan Runkle, 2003). However, there is another side of the story. Some brands are actively promoting a self-assuring and confident image of women that seeks to break away from the stereotype.

Such a discourse highlights media's perception of woman as an object of desire-based only on the skin colour on one hand and contrasts it with a vehicle of changing attitudes challenging the stereotypes expressed through different

constructs of class, beauty, sexuality, vulnerability among others, on the other. The latter boldly announces the preference of Indian women to belong to a globally uniform culture of visual recall (Parnal Chirmuley, 2015).

Because of first the liberalization and second, the digital revolution, explosion of sexual images in the media have begun to serve as symbols of all that was opposed to in India and the focus now seems to be on the individual and individual pleasure as inherently liberating.

Advertisement is a marketing weapon that helps a brand to stay in the minds of people through the techniques of association and attract more customers (Ghaffor et al., 2013). This study hence looks at different associations through elements of visual communication such as gestures, motifs, symbols, images and placement that convey meaning. This is the semiotic analysis approach

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wherein the object of investigation is the language of the message itself (Barthes, 1964; Durand, 1964) or the graphic image of the message (Eco, 1979; Mick, 1986; Scott, 1994).

For instance, there exists a spectrum of skin colour in this country and yet almost all Indian actresses and models are (portrayed) overwhelmingly fair-skinned (Parameswaran & Cardoza, 2009). This element has also been observed in the responses recorded in this study.

The Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986, seeks to prohibit indecent portrayal of women through advertisements, in publications, writings, paintings, figures, or in any other manner. The Act defines "indecent representation of women" as "the depiction in any manner of the figure of a woman; her form or body, or any part thereof in such way as to have the effect of being indecent, or derogatory to, or denigrating women, or is likely to deprave, corrupt or injure the public morality or morals." However, such a publication shall not be prohibited if it is proved to be justified as being for the public good on the ground that it is in the interest of science, literature, art, learning or other objects of general concern.

With the rise of tabloid journalism, unabashed exposure of women in Indian media today is not considered as being taboo in Indian society, and in this sense, most of the surveyed lingerie advertisements linger on the thin line between aesthetics and titillation.

2. Review of Literature

Gender portrayals in media continue to be the subject of ever-increasing scholarly research across the world. More than anything else, a portrayal of women in advertising is being constantly debated and discussed in academic circles.

Artz et al. (1999) in his A study on 'Gender Issues in Advertising Language', highlight the following broad patterns of portrayal:

1. Youthfulness and physical attractiveness are matters of immediate concern to women than their male counter parts.
2. Women are often depicted as product users and not portrayed as authority figures.
3. More frequently women are shown as subordinate to men, as decorative objects, or as alluring sex objects. Higgs and Milner (2004), in a content analysis on the portrayal of women in Australian advertising, suggested stereotypical portrayals of women.

Carpenter & Edison (2005) in their comprehensive work on the portrayal of women in magazine advertising over the last forty years expressed that the incidence of sexuality in advertising has been increasing over the years and women continue to be more sexually portrayed in a magazine advertisement.

Bermosk (2013), in her article 'Representation of Women in Advertisements' observes - common traits in most advertisements having a woman in them are that the woman is often the center of attention, who is viewed as a sex object, childlike and needy, wears something very revealing and speaks in a low and seductive tone. The camera lens appropriates the view of the male eye, looking the woman up and down. Taking care of the kids and enjoying household chores are projected as a woman's favourite pastime. Other cues point to her being unintelligent, irrational, or demanding. In exchange for an insignificant materialistic gratification, she is more than happy to offer sex in the ad as a reward if she gets what she wants.

2.1. Stereotypes in influencing consumer perception

Kim Sheehan (2004) demonstrated how stereotypes in advertising aid in changing consumer behaviour which can be observed in her book titled 'Controversies in Contemporary Advertising' by Sage Publications. The three possibilities suggested here in terms of the quantitative and qualitative aspects of stereotypes in the advertising context and the roles of stereotypes in society can thus be evaluated as follows:

1. The range of stereotypes presented in advertising messages: implying that advertising presents a variety of images of a single group of consumers, which is perceived as all the individuals in that group are alike but certainly not one-dimensional.
2. The valence of stereotypes presented for a specific group refers to the emotional significance of a particular portrayal. In this case, the consumers can relate to the positive stereotyped attribute and can see themselves emulating it (Lerner, 2001).
3. The frequency of the portrayals of each stereotype indicates the consistent single-faceted representation of a group throughout mass media which can affect how we perceive all members of the group.

Thus, the real power of stereotypes is their ability to alter the behavior of the person holding the stereotype.

2.2. Gendered Stereotypes, Appearances and Roles

Jennifer L. Paff & Hilda Buckley Lakner, (2009) have used content analysis to determine the role of female gender in magazine advertisements during 1950-1994 which indicates that women were most often depicted both in feminine roles and dress. Over time, though the attire became somewhat more masculine, yet roles remained consistently feminine. Findings further suggested that advertisers in *Good Housekeeping* and *Vogue* did not depict a realistic image of the woman. No direct relationship between the gender orientation of the women's roles and the dress was evident. Also, gendered roles of activity were consistent with traditional gender stereotypes of appearance within magazine advertisements across time. This finding is read as a

possible reflection of social changes typical of the postmodern era. The research paper makes a case for the need to reconsider the relationship between appearance and gender roles in a postmodern context.

2.3. How women perceive objectification

Fredrickson & Roberts (1997) in their 'A study based on Objectification Theory' used the sociocultural model of women's sexual satisfaction. The paper measured and correlated media internalization, body surveillance, body shame, sexual self-esteem, and sexual satisfaction of around a hundred and one college women attending university in the UK.

As expected, the results of a path analysis indicated the following chain reaction:

When appearance ideals originating from media sources were internalised, it led to more body surveillance, causing higher body shame and lower sexual self-esteem, resulting in less sexual satisfaction (indicating marginal significance for sexual self-esteem).

Rachel M. Calogeroa & J Kevin Thompson (2009) have shown sexual satisfaction was directly determined by body surveillance and body shame. These results further point to the sociocultural practices that objectify women while disrupting women's experiences of sexual satisfaction.

All these studies point to the fact that objectification of women is now a part of the capitalist culture that will only manifest in the coming times. It is now a documented conclusion that women are portrayed in 'decorative' and 'stereotypical' roles. However, this study looks at how the consumers of lingerie ads perceive visual cues embedded in lingerie and inner sportswear advertisements.

3. Research Questions

1. What are the visual cues that make respondents perceive the ads as objectifying a woman?
2. What visually appeals to the respondents about the selected lingerie and inner sportswear ads?
3. What different parameters can the respondents relate to while differentiating between lingerie and sports innerwear ads?
4. What are the different themes pointed out by the respondents pertaining to the selected lingerie and inner sportswear ads?

4. Objectives of the Study

This study aims to understand consumers' perception of the visual cues in lingerie and sports innerwear print and digital advertisements.

The objectives of this research study are:

- To understand consumers' perception of objectification of women in lingerie ads
- To analyse the visual appeal of the lingerie ads for their consumers

- To study different parameters that consumers can relate to for differentiating lingerie and sports innerwear ads
- To understand consumers' preference for different themes in lingerie and sports innerwear advertisements

5. Theoretical Framework

The social construction of reality was co-authored by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in 1966. In this book, they explain how cultures use signs and symbols to construct and maintain a uniform reality. According to James Carey, communication is a symbolic process in which reality is produced, maintained, repaired and transformed. The theory states that people who share a culture, also share an ongoing correspondence of meaning. Over time, people come to accept signs (objective meanings) and symbols (subjective meanings). Thus, they form what we call Typification Schemes. These schemes are a collection of meanings that have been assigned to some situations and phenomena.

These schemes form a natural backdrop of people's interpretations and behaviours in the major routines of everyday life. The portrayal of women in lingerie ads is reflective of typification schemes-where certain gestures, expressions and motifs have come to form a natural backdrop for interpreting the messages.

'Media stereotyping' also helps build a convincing theoretical explanation in this context. The theory of stereotyping has its roots in Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, where dominant ideologies tend to become dominant social discourses and find space and acceptance across various domains including the media. Representation of women is one such dominant ideology that is used and re-constructed by the media. Advertising images reinforce the stereotypical feminine attitudes- a dimension of hegemonic ideological discourse.

6. Research Methodology

The research design employed by the researcher is exploratory and uses both qualitative and quantitative research techniques of content analysis to study different aspects of visual communication in Lingerie Advertisements. Based on the objectives of the study, it proceeds by analysing patterns of perceptions about the objectification of women, visual appeals and themes of the advertisements and the difference between lingerie and sports innerwear among the target audience. Primary data was collected using the instrument of the survey as a tool to analyse different perceptions of the selected respondents. The responses were coded to determine different themes for further analysis. Secondary data in the form of selected lingerie and sports innerwear advertisements of five popular brands were sourced from print and online. Single-frame advertisements were used for interpretation by the researcher.

7. Data Collection and interpretation

The semi-structured questionnaire was self-administered. It comprised close-ended and open-ended questions. The close-ended questions concerned the demographic data. The open-ended questions asked for the respondents' opinions about different aspects of visual communication.

Data collection was exclusively carried out by female colleagues and female students keeping in mind the sensitivity of the subject and confidentiality of the respondents.

The final sample size of 90 undergraduate and postgraduate female students was chosen using purposive sampling. This helped to understand the research problem from the viewpoint of the research participants. The respondents are from colleges and private universities in Pune and Mumbai cities having English as their medium of instruction. It is important to note that the respondents are the target consumers of the brand whose advertisements feature in this study.

This research study analyses the visual content of print and digital advertisements by popular lingerie and sports innerwear brands in India published onwards December 2018. The study analyses select advertisements representative of their campaigns by the sports female innerwear brand such as Jockey and Loveable Sport and popular lingerie brands such as Wacoal, Amante and Prithvi. As a part of the self-administered questionnaire, all of the participants were shown the images of the selected advertisements from sports female innerwear brands such as Jockey and Loveable Sport and by popular lingerie brands such as Wacoal, Amante and Prithvi.

8. Limitations and Scope

The findings of the study need to be examined in light of the fact that the study had a small sample size consisting of only English-speaking, university-educated projected as representative of the urban middle-class population of Pune and Mumbai region. Future researches should focus on investigating the long-term effect of media images on different population samples such as adolescent and adult women from both urban and rural settings and in vernacular languages also. The researcher believes the findings of this basic study could be a precursor for an in-depth approach to marketing strategies.

8.1 Visual Communication Analysis

The social semiotic analysis approach based on these elements (codes, themes, categories) focuses on symbols that were used to recognise forms. These are identified as anything that conveys meaning, e.g., words, gestures, images, and dance. Semiotic studies address the issues of encoding, and more generally of the code used. The object of investigation is the message itself containing different signs and symbols that can be interpreted according to pre-established intention, without reference

to the consumer and the influence on the consumer behaviour. This approach is useful especially in the context of advertising creation. In this study, the researcher looks at the selected advertisements where information is represented graphically and as images.

8.2. Questionnaire

After validation from the subject expert, a semi-structured questionnaire was designed using the following:

1. Are these ads embarrassing to look at?
2. Which of these ads do you find derogatory, offensive, insulting or demeaning to a woman and why?
3. Should lingerie ads be banned in India and why?
4. Which of these ads objectifies a woman and how?
5. Elaborately explain what appeals to you most about each of these ads and why?
6. Comment in detail what all differences do you observe in each of these ads?
7. Could you comment at length upon the different moods presented in each of these ads?
8. What role do the backgrounds play in all of these ads?
9. How is the model projected differently in each of these ads?
10. Do you think the advertisements featured here project a more positive confident image of a woman?

8.3 Content Analysis

The respondent's commentary was analysed using manifest and latent content analysis (Green and Thorogood 2004) using simple frequency counts for the codes that emerged from the data. 'Summative content analysis' was used for counting and comparing keywords or content, followed by interpreting the underlying context (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). This was not limited to frequency counts of words but included latent content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005).

The qualitative responses received from the questionnaires were transcribed into Microsoft word tables; the researchers analysed the data and checked it for emerging themes. Text analysis was carried out at three stages: Forming condensed meaning units, coding text, then formulating sub-categories and categories, which eventually were organised into themes (Tables 1 and 2). This was achieved by cutting and pasting the text in the Word document. Categories were formulated partly from frequency counts of codes derived from subjective opinions.

Image Manifest & Latent Analysis (Table 1 & 2)

The advertising analysis - The following table lists insights after analysing responses to questions from the sample chosen for print and digital advertisements of five well-known lingerie and sportswear brands marketed in India.

Brand	Advertising Image	Respondents' Comments
Wacoal		The fair-skinned model is positioned to reveal the body curves with a tilt of head and wearing a seductive expression using the product placed against an affluent backdrop. It gives a sensual connotation to the whole concept of decorative lingerie aimed at niche Target Group.
Prithvi		The fair-skinned model with a sharp jaw line is flaunting her trim body curves and is positioned against a bright staged backdrop. As a result the ad doesn't evoke fascination and looks tacky for its colour scheme.
Amante		The fair-skinned model uses a fear appeal as a way of a testimonial. It reveals the attitude of today's fiercely independent working woman. Sensuality, in the literal sense, is replaced by focus and confidence. A certain aura is seen around the model suggesting wisdom.
Jockey		Women models wear sports innerwear sans any titillation during a recreational activity. Ease of body movement and comfort are the focus of the ad and convey strength and agility.
Jockey		A young woman model flaunts her toned body in a casual non-seductive way; she is not coy and looks unapologetic while radiating confidence and a certain attitude in a recreational mood.
Lovable		Women models sport sports innerwear sans any titillation. Ease of body movement and comfort are the focus of the ad and convey flexibility and agility in a recreational activity.

Fine-tuning the manifest responses, further analysis was carried out as follows using the inductive approach to coding. The objective was to identify homogenous groups using the data obtained from Table 1:

Latent Analysis Table 2

Typification Schemes	Meaning Units	Codes	Sub-Categories	Categories	Emergent Themes
Profiles of the models	Only fair -skinned models featured	Fair-Skinned	Fair Models with sharp features	Socially Accepted Standards of Beauty	Perceived Beauty
Seductive Facial expressions	Expressions are inviting and naughty	Bold expression	Eye contact looks assuring	Power to attract people	Feminine Strength
Body Contours (Curves)	Well-toned figures look attractive	Sensual Posture	Attractive Body Type	Physically in good shape	Aspirational Image
Colour Combination	Rich colours vs Tacky colours	i) Novel Setting ii) Artificial Setting	i) Classy background ii) Realistic backgrounds	Elite backgrounds vs Sub-standard	Class Representative
Recreation	Work-out and focus	Confidence	Physically strong	Go-getter	Quick & Agile
Mind Speak as a Testimonial	Urban Educated	Strong Personality	Determined Face	Independent	Attitude Forming
Decorative	Girl Next-door	Playful	Flaunting Youthfulness	Careless	Fun Loving

Compilation:

Using the themes that emerged during content analysis, consumers' perception of the advertised brands was tabulated as a simple percentage of the total responses for that theme.

Coding Schema for Summative Content Analysis (Table 3) (Figures in simple percentages)

Brand	Perceived Beauty	Feminine Strength	Aspirational Image	Class Representative	Function R/ D/ W	Attitude
Wacoal	70	70	65	64	70 D	60
Prithvi	50	60	45	68	80 D	55
Amante	70	70	70	60	85 W	75
Jockey(SI)	50	65	60	50	70 R	75
Jockey	50	67	50	68	70 R	65
Lovable	50	67	55	60	75 R	60

Legends: SI-Sports Innerwear, R-Recreation, D-Decoration, W-Working

9. Results and Discussion

From the content analysis, a lot of interesting findings were revealed. Some of them were unexpected in terms of percentages, but also in terms of intensity. Specifically:

Of the total responses, 78% of the respondents commented that the featured advertisements did not objectify women. Overall, 15% said that objectification of women was subtle and 7% said that they were not sure.

The different visual cues that appealed to the respondents are: i) the features of the models, ii) colour combination, iii) feminine strength, iv) aspirational image, v) representation of economic class, vi) function and mood of the ad, and vii) the attitude depicted by the models.

Bold colours such as black, purple and blue were related to strong sensuality by 60% of the respondents while pink and light green were perceived as playful and sombre respectively by 60% of the respondents.

Overall, a total of 80% of the respondents have outlined the mood as either recreational or decorative or working. The background was perceived as an indication of an economic class. Respondents are skeptical on the effectiveness of using dark-skinned models. They are concerned about the distortion of the message in the audio-visual format. Reservations are also expressed about the lack of text (copy) in some of the ads. The language of brands like Prithvi appears as one more issue that demands attention.

Overall, a total of 70% of the respondents opined that sports innerwear ads projected the agility and flexibility of the woman and the lingerie ads evoked the beauty aspect and inner strength of the woman.

10. Findings of the Study

- Lingerie Advertisements rely on creating a social reality using typification schemes of beauty. However, these do not contribute towards the objectification of women.
- Visual appeals include facial expressions, body contours and colour combinations used in the communication. These factors aid in forming brand associations. Regular lingerie ads rely on using only fair skin models highlighting body contours.
- Sports lingerie ads project a strong and confident image of women as compared with non-sports innerwear that lay stress on the beauty appeal aspect. In this sense, the parameters of recreation, decorative and work-related attributes have been identified.
- Almost all the lingerie ads evoke a strong and positive image of women. Some ads (Amante) also show women in the position of authority. The analysis has brought to the fore themes such as beauty, strength, aspiration and belongingness to a class as indicators for further study.

11. Conclusion

The six key factors that affect lingerie and sports innerwear branding identified in this paper attempt to comprehensively cover all the elements of consumer perception that could contribute to the brand identity and personality of the product.

This study has used a thematic content analysis approach relevant to various previous studies and attempted to fit the observations into a conceptual framework that can be used as a benchmark when conducting a study of branding for lingerie and sports innerwear.

More than 70% percent of respondents have indicated that none of the advertisements objectify women in the conventional sense. An important point to be noted is that all the featured advertisements have relied upon using only fair-skinned models, who are projected as representative of their target audience and the backgrounds evoke an economically well-off segment of society leading a successful and contented life. Other demographic segments remain untapped as a result.

This study also reaffirms the overarching differences in advertising between lingerie and sports innerwear for women. Lingerie ads tend to focus on the mottoes of 'sensuality' whereas sports innerwear ads talk more about 'power and strength'.

Advertising is a powerful promotional tool to reach the masses as well as disseminate different values to them (Zinkhan, 1994). Values are accepted beliefs that should be ideally upheld in a society or community and they eventually shape attitudes. Thus, ads depicting a confident woman help in propagating and shaping strong attitudes about personal well-being in women regarding sports innerwear in particular and lingerie in general.

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