



## FEMVERTISING AND THE SELF-PERCEPTION OF URBAN INDIAN WOMEN: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF AUTHENTICITY

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### Abstract

The rise of femvertising—advertising that embeds messages of women's empowerment and gender equality—marks a significant shift in how brands address female audiences. This study investigates the psychological and socio-cultural impact of femvertising on urban Indian women's self-perception. It explores whether empowerment-oriented advertising genuinely alters women's self-concept or commodifies feminist ideals for profit. Drawing from Feminist Theory, Social Comparison Theory, and Self-Perception Theory, the study employs a mixed-method approach combining quantitative surveys (N = 400) and qualitative focus group discussions (FGDs) across major Indian metros. Results reveal that perceived authenticity plays a crucial mediating role between exposure to femvertising and self-perception outcomes. Quantitative findings demonstrate that authenticity explains 52% of the variance in empowerment scores, while qualitative data highlight both identification and skepticism. The study concludes that femvertising holds transformative potential when aligned with sincerity, inclusivity, and cultural resonance.

**Keywords:** Femvertising, empowerment, authenticity, feminist theory, self-perception, urban women, India

## Introduction

Advertising has historically been a powerful cultural force shaping perceptions of gender and identity. From the submissive homemaker of the 1950s to the independent professional woman of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, advertisements mirror and mediate social ideologies. Over the past two decades, advertising has increasingly adopted feminist rhetoric—a phenomenon termed *femvertising*—which depicts women as assertive, capable, and self-reliant. In India, this transformation is visible through campaigns such as Ariel's #ShareTheLoad, Tanishq's Remarriage, and Whisper's Touch the Pickle, which challenge gender norms while promoting products. However, scholars warn of *—woke-washing* (Vredenburg, et al. 2018), where empowerment messaging is used superficially for brand advantage. The question, therefore, remains: Does *femvertising* authentically empower women or commodify feminism for profit? This study investigates the impact of *femvertising* on urban Indian women's self-perception, with a special focus on the mediating role of authenticity.

## Literature Review

### From Objectification to Empowerment

Historically, advertising reinforced gender stereotypes by objectifying women as passive, decorative, or domestic figures (Kilbourne, 1999). With the rise of postfeminist advertising, women began to be portrayed as independent and assertive, but often within a consumerist framework—where empowerment is expressed through consumption (Goldman, 1992; Gill, 2008). *Femvertising*, therefore, represents both progress and paradox: it visually empowers women, yet often conceptually commodifies feminism.

### Feminist Theory and Brand Discourse

Feminist theorists such as Butler (1990) and Lazar (2006) argue that gender is performatively constructed through cultural narratives—including advertising. Modern brands employ feminist discourse to appeal to socially conscious consumers (Banet-Weiser, 2012). However, this form of *—branded feminism* risks diluting political feminism into marketable aesthetics, prompting the need to study perceived authenticity as a critical variable.

### Representation, Body Image, and Self-Perception

Media representations profoundly influence self-concept and self-esteem. According to Bem's (1972) Self-Perception Theory, individuals infer their self-concept through observing external stimuli and personal behavior. Research by Dittmar, et al. (2009) and Tiggemann & Slater (2013) confirmed that exposure to idealized images impacts body satisfaction and confidence. In India, Sengupta (2014) and Das (2011) noted persistent tensions between modernity and tradition in advertising portrayals—where women oscillate between roles of empowered professionals and culturally compliant homemakers.

### The Role of Authenticity

Authenticity in advertising—defined as the perceived sincerity, integrity, and alignment between message and brand values—directly affects audience trust and emotional engagement (Napoli et al., 2014). Åkestam, et al. (2017) found that authentic *femvertising* enhances both brand trust and personal empowerment, while Becker-Herby (2016) highlighted that tokenism generates cynicism and backlash. Thus, authenticity becomes the key mediator determining whether *femvertising* empowers or exploits.

### Indian Context

Indian femvertising operates within a hybrid socio-cultural framework (Kaur & Arora, 2017; Mukherjee, 2018). Urban Indian women navigate dual expectations—pursuing professional autonomy while sustaining traditional family roles. Therefore, empowerment messages resonate only when culturally contextualized, inclusive, and credible.

### Research Gap

Existing global research focuses on Western markets, with limited empirical data from India. Prior Indian studies are largely descriptive and lack integrated theoretical testing. This study bridges that gap by empirically validating authenticity as a mediator between exposure to femvertising and women's self-perception, using both quantitative and qualitative approaches.

### Objectives and Hypotheses

#### Research Objectives

1. To examine the influence of exposure to femvertising on the self-perception and empowerment levels of urban Indian women.
2. To determine the mediating role of perceived authenticity between exposure to femvertising and self-perception outcomes.
3. To analyze differences in perception based on age, occupation, and cultural orientation.
4. To interpret qualitative insights into how women perceive empowerment and authenticity in Indian advertising.

#### Research Hypotheses

- **H<sub>1</sub>**: Exposure to femvertising has a positive effect on women's self-perception and empowerment.

- **H<sub>2</sub>**: Perceived authenticity positively mediates the relationship between exposure to femvertising and self-perception.
- **H<sub>3</sub>**: Age and occupation moderate the relationship between femvertising exposure and self-perception.
- **H<sub>4</sub>**: Women's qualitative experiences of femvertising reflect both empowerment and skepticism depending on the perceived sincerity of the message.

### Theoretical Framework

**Feminist Theory (Butler, 1990; Lazar, 2006)**: Feminist Theory views advertising as a performative space that constructs gender identities. Butler (1990) argues that gender is performed through repeated cultural expressions, and advertising becomes one such performance shaping what it means to be —empowered. Lazar (2006) cautions that femvertising may convert feminism into a marketing tool, where empowerment is sold rather than practiced. In this study, Feminist Theory helps evaluate whether Indian femvertising truly challenges patriarchal norms or merely commercializes feminist ideals under the guise of empowerment.

**Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954)**: Festinger's (1954) Social Comparison Theory explains that individuals assess themselves by comparing with others, often influenced by media images. Traditional ads promote unrealistic upward comparisons that harm self-esteem, while femvertising can encourage positive identification by portraying real, diverse, and relatable women. In the Indian context, this theory clarifies how authentic empowerment messages reduce comparison-based insecurity and enhance women's confidence and self-worth.

**Self-Perception Theory (Bem, 1972):** According to Bem (1972), people infer their self-concept from observing their reactions and behaviors. When women repeatedly encounter empowering advertisements, they may internalize these cues, fostering stronger self-belief and identity. However, inauthentic or tokenistic messaging weakens this effect. In this study, Self-Perception Theory explains how genuine femvertising can reshape urban Indian women’s self-concept by reinforcing positive self-perception through consistent empowerment cues.

**Conceptual Model**

Exposure to Femvertising → Perceived Authenticity → Self-Perception/Empowerment (*Moderated by Age, Occupation, Cultural Orientation*).

**Research Methodology (Elaborated)**

**Research Design**

The study uses a convergent mixed-method design (Denzin, 1978). Quantitative data measures relationships among constructs, while qualitative data provides depth and context.

**Table 1: Summary of Mixed-Method Research Components**

Component	Method	Purpose
Quantitative	Structured survey (N = 400)	Statistical testing of hypotheses
Qualitative	Focus Group Discussions (3 groups)	Thematic exploration of empowerment and authenticity

**Sampling and Population**

**Population:** Urban Indian women aged 18–45 from Mumbai, Delhi, Pune, and Bengaluru.

**Sampling Technique:** Stratified random sampling based on age and occupation.

**Sample Size:** 400 respondents (Cochran’s formula, 95% confidence level).

**Strata:** 18–25 years (students/early professionals); 26–35 years (mid-career professionals); and 36–45 years (working mothers/homemakers)

**5.3 Data Collection Tools**

**(A) Quantitative Instrument:**

Structured questionnaire with four parts:

- Demographics:** Age, occupation, education, and city.

- Exposure Scale:** Frequency and recall of femvertising campaigns.

- Perceived Authenticity Scale** (Åkestam, 2018): e.g., “*This ad feels sincere about women’s empowerment.*” ( $\alpha = 0.84$ ).

- Self-Perception Scale:** Adapted from Rosenberg (1965) and Dittmar et al. (2009).

**(B) Qualitative Instrument:**

Three FGDs with 8–10 participants each. Stimulus advertisements:

- Dove’s *Real Beauty Sketches*
- Ariel’s *#ShareTheLoad*
- Tanishq’s *Remarriage*
- Whisper’s *Touch the Pickle*

Questions explored perceptions of empowerment, sincerity, and identification. Transcripts were analyzed

using Braun & Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis.

**Data Analysis Techniques**

**Table 2: Analytical Techniques Used in the Study**

Technique	Purpose
Descriptive Statistics	Measure central tendencies (Mean, SD)
Correlation Analysis (Pearson’s r)	Examine bivariate relationships
Regression Analysis	Test predictive influence of authenticity on self-perception
ANOVA	Assess differences by age and occupation
Thematic Analysis	Identify qualitative themes
Triangulation	Integrate quantitative and qualitative insights

**Data Analysis and Interpretation**

**Demographics**

**Table 3: Demographic Profile of Respondents**

Category	% of Respondents
18–25 years	35%
26–35 years	40%
36–45 years	25%
Working Professionals	55%
Students	30%
Homemakers	15%

**Descriptive Findings**

- **Exposure to Femvertising:** Mean = 4.25 (High)
- **Perceived Authenticity:** Mean = 4.02 (Moderate-High)
- **Self-Perception:** Mean = 3.88 (High) → Indicates strong engagement and positive empowerment perception.

**Correlation Analysis**

**Table 4: Correlation Matrix of Key Study Variables**

Variables	r	Significance
Exposure ↔ Authenticity	0.59	p < 0.01
Authenticity ↔ Self-Perception	0.72	p < 0.01
Exposure ↔ Self-Perception	0.63	p < 0.01

→ **Authenticity** strongly correlates with empowerment outcomes.

**Regression Analysis**

**Model:**

Self-Perception =  $\beta_0 + \beta_1(\text{Authenticity})$

**Equation:**  $Y = 1.32 + 0.72X$

**R<sup>2</sup> = 0.52, F = 19.74, p < 0.01**

→ Authenticity explains **52% variance** in self-perception—confirming mediation (H2 supported).

**ANOVA Results**

- **By Age:**  $F(2,397) = 4.86, p < 0.05$  → Younger women (18–25) report higher empowerment.
- **By Occupation:**  $F(2,397) = 5.34, p < 0.05$  → Working professionals perceive higher authenticity and relevance.

**Qualitative Findings (FGD Themes)**

**Table 5: Key Themes and Insights from Qualitative Analysis**

Theme	Key Insights
<b>Empowerment through Relatability</b>	Ads showing real women (Ariel, Dove) evoke recognition and pride.
<b>Skepticism about Authenticity</b>	Some ads still show fair, slim, urban women, excluding diversity.
<b>Emotional Resonance</b>	Messages evoke strong feelings even if perceived as marketing.
<b>Intersectional Gaps</b>	Rural, dark-skinned, or differently-abled women remain invisible.

**Triangulation**

Quantitative and qualitative data converge to affirm that authenticity mediates empowerment. While women appreciate empowering imagery, perceived insincerity undermines trust.

**Discussion**

The findings confirm that authenticity is the pivotal determinant linking exposure to femvertising with positive self-perception among Indian women. Consistent with Åkestam (2017) and Becker-Herby (2016), authentic empowerment messages evoke trust, identification, and internalization of positive self-concepts. Quantitative results indicated that authenticity significantly

predicted self-perception outcomes, while qualitative findings highlighted emotional resonance and credibility as the main drivers of acceptance.

In the Indian socio-cultural milieu, empowerment is not merely about independence but also about redefining traditional roles within relational frameworks. Campaigns like Ariel’s #ShareTheLoad and Tanishq’s Remarriage were particularly appreciated because they depicted empowerment through partnership, dignity, and familial equality rather than rebellion. This aligns with Kaur and Arora (2017) and Mukherjee (2018), who assert that Indian femvertising succeeds when it harmonizes global

feminist ideals with indigenous values of togetherness and respect.

However, participants also expressed ambivalence—admiring the narratives while questioning corporate sincerity. This reflects the tension identified by Banet-Weiser (2012) between authentic empowerment and brand commodification. Respondents noted that empowerment loses meaning when brands exploit feminist ideals without corresponding action, such as inclusive representation or ethical labor practices.

Overall, femvertising in India emerges as a hybrid communicative form, balancing cultural sensitivity with aspirational modernity. It can elevate women's self-perception by promoting self-worth and agency, but only when grounded in truthfulness and inclusivity. The study thus reinforces that authenticity is both a moral and strategic imperative for femvertising in culturally diverse societies like India.

### Conclusion

Femvertising represents both a marketing innovation and a social movement. It can reshape gender narratives and foster self-confidence among women—provided it is authentic, inclusive, and culturally grounded. When empowerment is treated as a branding tactic rather than a value, it loses credibility and reinforces skepticism.

### Managerial and Societal Implications

From a managerial perspective, this study underscores that authenticity is not merely a creative choice but a strategic imperative in femvertising. Marketers must align feminist messaging with the brand's internal values and practices—such as gender-inclusive hiring, pay equity, and socially responsible initiatives—to build credibility and trust. Inclusive representation across body types,

skin tones, professions, and regions further enhances relatability while challenging stereotypical beauty norms, allowing empowerment to transcend urban and elite boundaries. Long-term commitment to women's causes through sustained initiatives and authentic storytelling transforms femvertising from a short-term tactic into a purpose-driven strategy. From a societal perspective, authentic femvertising carries the potential to reshape gender perceptions, normalize equality, and influence cultural narratives by presenting empowered, self-assured women as everyday realities. When rooted in sincerity and ethical alignment, femvertising becomes both an instrument of brand differentiation and a catalyst for social transformation, bridging the gap between symbolic representation and genuine empowerment.

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