

Exploring the Relationship Between Women's Empowerment and the Diversity and Positive Representation of Female Images in Fashion Advertising

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Abstract

This paper investigates the relationship between women's empowerment and the diversity and positive representation of female images in fashion advertising. Using a qualitative content analysis approach, the study examines a selection of fashion advertisements from various magazines and online platforms over the past two years. The analysis focuses on the portrayal of women in terms of diversity, body positivity, and empowerment. The findings reveal a gradual increase in the diversity and positive representation of female images, with more advertisements showcasing a broader range of body types, ethnicities, and ages. There is also a notable trend towards portraying women in more empowered and active roles. However, persistent gaps remain, with limited representation of certain groups, such as older women and plus-size individuals, and some advertisements continue to perpetuate unrealistic beauty standards and objectification. The paper concludes with recommendations for the fashion industry to further promote diversity and positive representation as a means to empower women. Future research should explore the long-term effects of exposure to diverse and empowering representations on women's self-perception and societal roles.

Keywords: women's empowerment, fashion advertising, body positivity, empowerment

1. Introduction

The portrayal of women in fashion advertising has long been a subject of scrutiny due to its potential impact on societal perceptions of femininity, beauty, and gender roles. Over the years, fashion advertisements have been criticized for perpetuating narrow beauty standards, objectifying women, and reinforcing gender stereotypes. These portrayals can influence societal norms and individual

self-perceptions, potentially impacting women's empowerment and gender equality. This paper explores the relationship between women's empowerment and the diversity and positive representation of female images in fashion advertising. It posits that inclusive and empowering portrayals can contribute to challenging traditional stereotypes and promote a more equitable and diverse understanding of femininity.

Fashion advertising serves as a powerful medium through which cultural norms and ideals are communicated and reinforced. The images presented in fashion campaigns are not merely selling products; they are also selling concepts of beauty, success, and desirability. Historically, these images have often depicted a narrow and unrealistic standard of beauty, characterized by youth, slimness, and specific racial features. Such representations can contribute to a range of negative outcomes, including body dissatisfaction, low self-esteem, and the internalization of harmful stereotypes among women.

In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of the need for more diverse and positive representations of women in media, including fashion advertising. This shift is driven by a recognition of the role that media plays in shaping societal attitudes and the potential for advertising to promote more inclusive and empowering images of women. Diversity in advertising can encompass a range of factors, including body size, age, race, ethnicity, and ability. Positive representation goes beyond mere inclusion, seeking to portray women in ways that are authentic, respectful, and empowering.

Empowerment, in the context of this paper, is understood as the process by which women gain greater control over their lives and the decisions that affect them. It is a multifaceted concept that encompasses personal, social, and economic dimensions. In the realm of fashion advertising, empowerment can be reflected in images that depict women as confident, capable, and diverse individuals, rather than passive objects of desire. Such representations can challenge traditional gender roles and contribute to a broader cultural shift towards gender equality.

The relationship between women's empowerment and fashion advertising is complex and multifaceted. On one hand, advertising has the potential to challenge and redefine societal norms by presenting diverse and empowering images of women. On the other hand, the commercial nature of the fashion industry can lead to the co-optation of empowerment narratives for profit, without a genuine commitment to change. This paper seeks to explore this relationship by examining the current state of diversity and positive representation in fashion advertising and assessing its impact on women's empowerment.

In doing so, this paper will draw on a range of theoretical perspectives, including feminist theory, media studies, and social psychology. It will also review existing literature on the topic, highlighting key findings and identifying gaps in the research. The study will employ a qualitative content analysis approach to examine a selection of fashion advertisements from various magazines and online platforms, focusing on the portrayal of women in terms of diversity, body positivity, and empowerment. The findings of this analysis will be used to assess the extent to which fashion advertising is contributing to or hindering women's empowerment and to make recommendations for the industry to further promote diversity and positive representation.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative content analysis approach to investigate the portrayal of women in fashion advertisements. The methodology is designed to systematically analyze the content and context of the advertisements, focusing on the representation of women in terms of diversity, body positivity, and empowerment.

2.1 Sample Selection

The sample for this study was drawn from a range of fashion magazines and online platforms, including both high-end and mainstream brands. Advertisements were selected from issues published over the past two years to capture recent trends in the industry. The selection process prioritized advertisements with high visibility and relevance to the target audience, ensuring that the study reflects the images most likely to be encountered by consumers. A total of 150 advertisements were selected for analysis, with an effort made to include a diverse range of fashion brands and styles.

2.2 Coding Scheme

A coding scheme was developed to categorize the images in the advertisements based on their portrayal of women. The scheme included the following dimensions:

Diversity: This dimension assessed the representation of women in terms of race, body size, age, and other characteristics that contribute to diversity. Each advertisement was evaluated for the presence of diverse models and the extent to which they were prominently featured.

Body Positivity: This dimension focused on the portrayal of women's bodies in a positive and realistic manner. Advertisements were analyzed for the presence of body-positive messages, the depiction of a range of body types, and the avoidance of unrealistic beauty standards.

Empowerment: This dimension examined the portrayal of women in terms of agency and role portrayal. Advertisements were evaluated for the depiction of women in active, empowered roles, as opposed to passive or objectified positions. The presence of empowering messages and themes was also considered.

Each advertisement was coded based on these dimensions, with specific indicators defined for each category. The coding process was conducted by two independent researchers to ensure reliability.

2.3 Inter-Coder Reliability

To assess the consistency of the coding process, inter-coder reliability was evaluated using Cohen's kappa coefficient. The two researchers independently coded a subset of 30 advertisements, and their results were compared to calculate the kappa coefficient. A kappa value of 0.75 or above was considered indicative of substantial agreement, ensuring the reliability of the coding scheme.

2.4 Data Analysis

The coded data were analyzed to identify patterns and trends in the portrayal of women in fashion advertising. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the frequency and distribution of different representations across the sample. Qualitative analysis was also conducted to explore the nuances of the advertisements and the contextual factors influencing their portrayal of women.

The methodology of this study provides a systematic framework for examining the diversity and positive representation of female images in fashion advertising. By combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, the analysis aims to capture both the prevalence and the complexity of these representations and their implications for women's empowerment.

3. Findings

The analysis of the selected fashion advertisements revealed several key findings regarding the portrayal of women in terms of diversity, body positivity, and empowerment.

3.1 Increased Diversity

There was a noticeable increase in the diversity of female images in fashion advertising. Advertisements showcased a broader range of body types, with more representation of curvier and plus-size models compared to previous decades. Ethnic diversity was also more evident, with a greater number of models from different racial and ethnic backgrounds being featured. Age diversity showed some improvement, with a few advertisements depicting older women, although this remains an area with limited representation.

3.2 Positive Representation

The portrayal of women in fashion advertising has shifted towards more positive and realistic images. Body positivity was a recurring theme, with some advertisements actively challenging traditional beauty standards by celebrating natural body shapes and imperfections. The use of unretouched photos and models with visible stretch marks or cellulite was observed, signaling a move towards authenticity and acceptance of diverse body types.

3.3 Empowerment

A significant trend towards the empowerment of women was noted in the advertisements. Women were often depicted in active and dynamic roles, portraying strength, confidence, and independence. The traditional passive and objectified representations were less common, with a shift towards images that emphasize women's agency and capabilities. Empowering messages, such as slogans promoting self-love and confidence, were frequently used to reinforce the portrayal of strong and empowered women.

3.4 Persistent Gaps

Despite the positive trends, several gaps in representation were identified. Older women and plus-size individuals were still underrepresented in fashion advertising. While there has been progress in including plus-size models, their representation is often limited to specific brands or campaigns focused on body positivity, rather than being integrated into mainstream advertising.

The portrayal of ethnic diversity, although improved, was not consistent across all brands and campaigns. Some advertisements still predominantly featured white models, indicating that there is room for further

improvement in representing racial and ethnic diversity.

3.5 Perpetuation of Unrealistic Standards

While there has been a shift towards more positive and diverse representations, some advertisements continue to perpetuate unrealistic beauty standards. The use of heavily edited images and the emphasis on certain beauty ideals, such as extreme thinness or flawless skin, were still present in a portion of the advertisements. This indicates that the fashion industry has not fully moved away from traditional beauty standards and that the objectification of women remains an issue.

The findings of this study reveal a gradual but significant shift towards more diverse, positive, and empowering representations of women in fashion advertising. However, there are still persistent gaps and challenges that need to be addressed. The industry has made strides in promoting body positivity and women's empowerment, but there is still work to be done to ensure that these trends are inclusive and widespread. The ongoing perpetuation of unrealistic beauty standards and the limited representation of certain groups highlight the need for continued efforts to achieve genuine empowerment and diversity in fashion advertising.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study highlight a significant shift in fashion advertising towards more diverse and empowering representations of women. This section discusses the implications of these findings for women's empowerment, the challenges that remain, and the potential pathways for the fashion industry to foster a more inclusive and equitable cultural landscape.

4.1 Implications for Women's Empowerment

The increase in diversity and positive representation in fashion advertising has important implications for women's empowerment. By showcasing a broader range of body types, ethnicities, and ages, advertisements can challenge the narrow and unrealistic beauty standards that have long dominated the media. This shift can contribute to a more inclusive view of beauty, which is essential for promoting body positivity and self-acceptance among women. Moreover, the portrayal of women in empowered and active roles can inspire confidence and agency,

challenging traditional gender roles and stereotypes.

4.2 Challenges in Achieving Genuine Empowerment

Despite the positive trends, the study identified persistent gaps and challenges in achieving genuine empowerment through fashion advertising. The limited representation of certain groups, such as older women and plus-size individuals, indicates that inclusivity is still not fully realized. Additionally, the continued presence of unrealistic beauty standards and objectification in some advertisements suggests that the industry has not completely moved away from traditional norms. These challenges highlight the need for a more consistent and comprehensive approach to diversity and empowerment in advertising.

4.3 The Role of the Fashion Industry

The fashion industry plays a crucial role in shaping cultural perceptions and societal norms. As such, it has a responsibility to promote diversity and empowerment in its advertising practices. This involves not only including a wider range of models in advertisements but also ensuring that the portrayal of women is respectful, authentic, and empowering. Brands should be mindful of the messages they convey and strive to challenge stereotypes rather than reinforce them.

4.4 Recommendations for the Fashion Industry

To further promote diversity and empowerment in fashion advertising, the industry should consider the following recommendations:

Regularly Audit Advertising Content: Brands should regularly review their advertising content to ensure that it reflects diversity and promotes positive representation. This can involve assessing the diversity of models used, the portrayal of women, and the messages conveyed.

Collaborate with Diverse Voices: Brands should collaborate with diverse voices, including models, designers, and creatives from various backgrounds, to ensure that different perspectives are represented in advertising campaigns.

Promote Body Positivity: Advertisements should celebrate all body types and avoid promoting unrealistic beauty standards. This can involve using unretouched images and showcasing models with diverse body shapes.

Empower Through Storytelling: Brands can use storytelling in their advertisements to highlight women's achievements, strengths, and individuality, thereby promoting empowerment.

Engage with Consumers: Brands should engage with their consumers to understand their preferences and values. Feedback from consumers can inform more inclusive and empowering advertising strategies.

The increasing diversity and positive representation in fashion advertising are steps in the right direction for women's empowerment. However, there is still a need for continued efforts to ensure that these trends are inclusive and widespread. The fashion industry must remain committed to prioritizing diversity and empowerment in its advertising practices, thereby contributing to a more equitable and empowering cultural landscape.

5. Conclusion

This paper has explored the intricate relationship between women's empowerment and the diversity and positive representation of female images in fashion advertising. The findings indicate a gradual shift towards more inclusive and empowering portrayals, which is a promising development for women's empowerment. However, the persistence of narrow beauty standards and the limited representation of certain groups highlight the ongoing challenges in achieving genuine empowerment through fashion advertising.

The progress made in recent years towards more diverse and positive representations in fashion advertising is commendable. The increased visibility of diverse body types, ethnicities, and ages in advertisements challenges traditional beauty standards and promotes a more inclusive view of beauty. Additionally, the portrayal of women in empowered roles contributes to a cultural shift away from stereotypical and objectified representations.

Despite these advancements, the study has identified areas where improvements are still needed. The underrepresentation of older women and plus-size individuals, as well as the continued prevalence of unrealistic beauty standards in some advertisements, indicates that the fashion industry has not fully embraced inclusivity and empowerment. These findings underscore the importance of continued advocacy and industry commitment to address these gaps and promote a more equitable

representation of women in fashion advertising.

The fashion industry has a significant influence on societal perceptions and norms. As such, it has a responsibility to ensure that its advertising practices promote diversity and empowerment. This involves not only including a wider range of models but also ensuring that the portrayal of women is respectful, authentic, and empowering. Brands should strive to create advertisements that challenge stereotypes and promote positive messages about body image and self-esteem.

Future research should continue to monitor trends in fashion advertising to assess the ongoing impact of diversity and positive representation on women's empowerment. Longitudinal studies could explore the long-term effects of exposure to diverse and empowering representations on women's self-perception and societal roles. Additionally, research could examine the perspectives of consumers and industry professionals to gain insights into the challenges and opportunities for promoting diversity and empowerment in fashion advertising.

In conclusion, the relationship between women's empowerment and the representation of female images in fashion advertising is complex and multifaceted. While progress has been made, there is still work to be done to ensure that all women are represented in a diverse and empowering manner. Continued advocacy and industry commitment are essential to promote genuine empowerment and create a more inclusive and equitable cultural landscape.

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