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# Femvertising in Bangladeshi TV advertisements: A semiotic analysis

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**Abstract:** This study undertakes a thorough examination of advertising material in Bangladesh, specifically concentrating on femvertising and gender stereotypes. This study diverges from previous research that mostly focuses on the objectification of women in TV commercials (TVCs). Instead, it aims to investigate resistance within three femvertising contexts: Taza tea, Freedom sanitary napkin and Sunsilk shampoo. This qualitative study reveals an intricate and diverse landscape of advertising by utilizing content analysis (CA) and critical discourse analysis (CDA). By combining CA and CDA, the study provides a comprehensive semiotic analysis of femvertising in Bangladeshi TV advertisements. This approach allows to explore both the visual and textual elements while critically examining the discourses and ideologies surrounding gender and feminism in these ads. Although there is some opposition in how female figures are spoken and depicted, the study shows that stereotypes persist in these advertisements' overall context and persuasive facets.

**Keywords:** Femvertising, stereotyping, TVCs, women empowerment

## Introduction

Advertising functions as a powerful medium that not only imparts information and knowledge but also shapes society attitudes and views (Iftikhar & Islam, 2017). Within the context of Bangladesh, the impact of this influence is clearly evident, as television commercials (TVCs) play a substantial role in spreading messages and molding public discussions. Although the influence of advertising is unquestionable, the representation of women in this form of communication has consistently sparked discussion and examination. This study diverges from the traditional investigation of the portrayal of women as objects in TVCs. Instead, it explores unfamiliar territory by emphasizing femvertising, a concept that advocates for women's empowerment in advertising (Kilbourne, 1999). Femvertising refers to an advertising strategy where brands create advertisements and promotional campaigns that empower, celebrate, or promote women and gender equality. The rise of femvertising signifies a change in the advertising industry. Gillespie (2016) defines it as the advertising that employs pro-female talent, messages and imagery to empower women and girls.

However, this study focuses on three Bangladeshi TVCs: Taza tea, Freedom sanitary napkin, and Sunsilk shampoo. We aim to analyze the signs and symbols of these advertising, examining the complex relationship between femvertising and gender stereotypes. The objective is to understand the concept of femvertising in Bangladesh and illuminate the intricate gender depictions deeply rooted in advertising. This study offers a deeper understanding of the complex aspects of femvertising, ultimately enhancing our understanding of how gender is portrayed in advertising. The current study provides a unique sociocultural perspective on Bangladesh. Because traditional gender portrayals in advertising very often disseminate gender inequality and sexist attitudes, this research

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attempts to promote awareness among practitioners and encourage them to portray women more positively in Bangladeshi ads. It also aids future studies on female roles in TV ads. However, the study aimed to analyze the manifestation of femvertising in Bangladeshi TV ads, taking into account its capacity to empower individuals and the continued existence of gender stereotypes. With a semiotic study, the authors aim to reveal these commercials' hidden connotations.

## Literature Review

The portrayal of women in advertising has long concerned researchers worldwide. Zeb et al. (2021) challenged TV ad stereotypes in Pakistan using semiotic and critical discourse analysis. Recent research shows that gender stereotypes are very prevalent in South Asia. Das (2010) noted that Indian television ads generally depict women in household duties and without authority. Similar findings are found in Pakistan. Ali and Shahwar (2011) noted that women are often represented doing housework, beautifying, and being attractive to buyers, raising issues about objectification.

Pioneering sociologist Goffman (1959) found that advertising consistently portrayed women as submissive and lower in social standing than males. This depiction persists over 40 years, showing a persistent issue that devalues women in advertising.

Kumar (2017) examined women in sexually appealing Indian commercials from the 1990s to 2017. The study examined changing customer perceptions and the intentional move from product attributes to models in commercials using qualitative methods like literature review and content analysis. It claimed that sex appeals in such ads victimized women and damaged brand impressions.

Courtney and Lockeretz (1971) examined some magazine ads featuring women. They found that women are underrepresented in professional places and relegated to ornamental roles. Women were rarely seen outside without men, highlighting their dependence on men and objectification by men.

In another study, Asemah et al. (2013) used constructivism and standpoint theories to study audience reactions to women in TV ads. Their survey found female respondents dissatisfied with TV advertising' image of women and wanted more favorable depictions. Despite substantial studies on gender depiction in advertising, Bangladeshi ads have garnered little attention. Khan (2019) found male domination and women shown as moms and homemakers in Bangladeshi print ads. Nahar (2019) observed a changing landscape, especially after 2013.

Previous research has focused on qualitative content analysis to study gender depiction in ads but no particular studies were found focusing on femvertising. This study addressed femvertising by using qualitative approach to examine the assigned roles, voiceovers, central characters, and women's images in Bangladeshi prime-time television advertising.

## Methodology

The researchers search for recent TVCs that present woman in both leadership and stereotypical positions. Three ads were randomly selected that have several contents, concepts and rhetoric that creates complexities regarding the representation of woman. The study used a qualitative approach for the development of the core idea. The researchers used content analysis (CA), semiotic analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA) tools to summarize the findings.

The study used CA and CDA to examine the portrayal of gender in Bangladeshi television advertising, with a specific focus on femvertising and gender stereotypes. The field of semiotics serves as the basis for comprehending how signs, symbols, and words communicate (Solik, 2014). In the realm of advertising, semiotics denotes contextualized meaning and significance. It also facilitates the interpretation of messages communicated through pictures, symbols, and language, hence exposing the techniques advertisers employ in constructing their narratives (Murtaza & Kubra, 2017). Simultaneously, CDA aims to reveal power dynamics and inequities present in the discourse of commercials. CDA examines the textual, discursive, and socio-cultural dimensions of advertisements, as outlined by Fairclough's three-dimensional framework (Fairclough, 2001). It focuses on how language and imagery in commercials reinforce or question gender stereotypes. This

study aims to elucidate the intricate terrain of femvertising and gender representation in Bangladeshi TVCs by integrating semiotic analysis with CDA. It strives to reveal the manipulation of cultural norms and beliefs.

This framework, utilizing semiotics and CDA as analytical tools (Chand & Chaudhary, 2012), provides the theoretical basis for the research. It applies these methodologies to analyze and interpret the messages communicated in the chosen TV commercials, specifically emphasizing femvertising and gender stereotypes.

## Findings: Representation of Women in the Selected TVCs

### TVC 1. Taza Tea




**Fig 1.** Empowered character

Here, the male figure is seen powerful as he threats the female by saying "আমার এক কথায় সব বন্ধ হয়ে যায়।" (*Trans.* Everything comes to a halt with my one word.). Hearing it the female figure takes a sip from her cup of tea and gives a ridiculous reply "আপনার এক কথায় যখন সব বন্ধ হয়ে যায়, পানির লাইন টা কে একটু বলে দিন না বন্ধ হতে।" (*Trans.* "When everything stops with your one word, then tell the water line to stop."). That inspires others to protest also. A man added "আমার চুল পড়াটাও যদি... " (if his hair fall can be stopped by the male authoritative character's order). Another woman added, "ভাইয়া, আমার বয়স টাও..." (if her age can be stopped growing older).

### TVC 2. Freedom Sanitary Napkin




**Fig 2.** Confident character

The ad opens with a discussion between an aged stereotyped woman and an appearance of a young girl in modern dress creates an interaction. Seeing her, the aged women asks her "আরে... এত

শুকায়া গেছো কেন!" (*Trans.* Why have you become so slim?). The young girl confidently encountered with a smiley-face reply that "আন্টি, শুকাইনি, ফিট হয়েছি। আপনারও হওয়া উচিত।" (*Trans.* Aunty, I have not become slim, rather I have become fit. You too try for it.).

**TVC 3. Sunsilk Black Shine Shampoo**

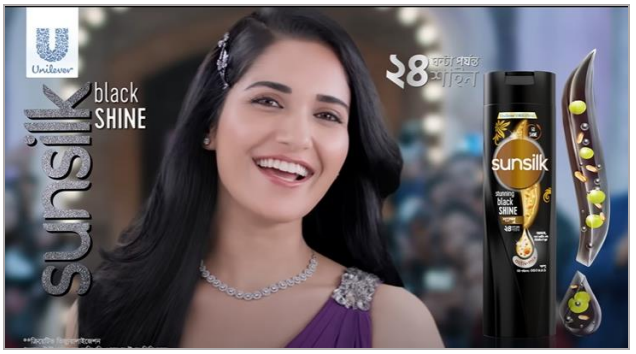



**Fig 3.** Successful character

The advertisement begins with a picture of film admission queue in the campus of an educational institution where a female enters to register her name as a heroine. Suddenly with a mocking tone, a male character advises her that "ম্যাডাম, সিনেমা হিরোর নামেই চলে। আপনি চুলে নজর দিন। গরম আর ঘাম চুলের শাইন না নষ্ট করে ফেলে!" (*Trans.* Madam, a cinema can only run with the hero's name. You should watch out for your hair. Hot temperatures and sweat can damage your hair shine.) Unnecessarily, the male character suggests her to be mindful about her hair because the weather is very hot and she should be concerned about her hair, instead of role of heroine. The woman immediately refutes him by mentioning her beauty concept not about her role in film by saying "শাইনতো মন খুলেই করবো। আমিও, আমার চুলও।" (*Trans.* I will shine beyond doubt. Even my hair will shine too.)

## Discussion

The findings from the semiotic analysis of this paper suggests both 'stereotypes' and 'femvertization'. From an in-depth analysis of the attitude and resistance level of those two contents, it is evident that the confidence level of female figures is high which suggests a strong message of empowerment. While the language of resistance is not direct, rather it is polite and indirect, which is observed in those advertisements.

In Taza tea advertisement, a woman figure is depicted confident, resistant and professional role in an accurate professional setting which symbolizes the shift of a woman's role from a professional to a domestic setting. Moreover, the polite language of resistance suggests two positive things; one woman is very much concerned about her professional manner and they are perfect in this professional role because of their skilled rhetoric in any critical situation in a professional area. Here stereotypical gender role has been challenged which similar to the study of Zeb et al. (2021). Analyzing the appearance, cloth and confidence of the female officer in the advertisement it can be said the content suggests both traditional male domination and female resistance. However, the male person is given an authoritative voice.

In the ad of Freedom sanitary napkin, appearance shows a massive breakthrough in portrayal as the female figure is depicted with 'shirt & pant' which suggests a strong message of challenging of common dress code for women. Secondly, it is also probably a critical reaction against body shaming as she immediately responds with a confident smile with a polite defense by arguing that the aged foil-character woman should also take care of her health. So, perceiving the content of this

advertisement it can be argued this content can be an exemplary role model for femvertising in the Bangladeshi advertisement industry. It presents a strong reaction from women which challenges the deeply rooted gender stereotyping in Bangladeshi society. Here the immediate response from the girl indicates smart and appropriate resistance which is suitable for the context. Moreover, the choice of rhetoric, dress and appearance suggests a high level of self-confidence and self-respect which makes this advertisement an ideal example of femvertization. Here the question asked by the aged woman, is about the girl's body shaming which again reflects a so-called gender norm associated with woman.

In the Sunsilk ad, the female protagonist is concerned equally about her career (heroine, connected to beauty) and hair's beauty. The speech of the male friend may portray the strength of masculine society as Alam (2021) says that the way of socialization process may make a boy to feel as 'real man', whereas, the speech of the female figure strongly suggests an underneath stereotype. This finding echoes another recent semiotic study conducted by Safi (2021) who points out that most women in Bangladeshi advertisements are being objectified even though they are not aware of the mind of psychological crimes. By semiotic analysis of her speech, it can be argued that woman defends her position but at the same time she is also concerned about her hair which is associated with controversial beauty concept. The word 'hair' uttered by her own mouth when she says both her hair and she herself will shine together which probably indicates her inner worries that belief that beauty concept is strongly connected with woman. However, the role of male figure is observed as a so called guardian of the woman who interrupts her decision and is more concerned about the beauty of woman than her. In depth analysis of the speech of that male suggests the inner patriarchal desire to control a woman and it is contradicting to the idea of femvertising.

Thus, the overall finding is completely contrasted with the context of US advertisement where Prieler (2016) found that most woman were portrayed half naked. Our result also dissimilar with Australian context where Cobbaert (2019) finds that a huge number images in alcohol advertisements are shown almost naked and sexually attractive. However, in our context, despite of a little stereotypical role, they are still represented with self-esteem and proper dignity. However, sexually appealing ads are hardly absent in Bangladeshi context. This research suggests that in Bangladeshi context, women are constantly showing empowering themselves amidst strong patriarchal rules, however at the same time it strongly reflects the barriers of Bangladeshi context.

## Conclusion

Though the content of the selected advertisements reflects the positive shift of a woman's professional role from the traditional role which is full of responsibility, maturity and capability of managing the critical situation. It is evident from their appearance that they are challenging stereotypical gender roles, such as slim body concept which suggests ideal woman empowerment. Based on the findings of this study, the authors suggest that companies consider utilizing women images in a wider range of products beyond just beauty-related items. Instead of confining to domestic products, female characters could also be featured in broader categories of products or brands, such as air conditioning, motorcycles, or automobiles. Further research on a larger scale can be undertaken to investigate whether female figures, featured in both print and electronic advertisements, consistently convey an appropriate level of confidence and resilience when addressing topics related to women's empowerment in their speeches.

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