

Cosmetic Product Advertising Trends with Special Reference to Women in India: An Analytical Study

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Abstract

Cosmetic product advertising plays a pivotal role in influencing consumer preferences, shaping beauty standards, and constructing gender-specific ideals in modern society. In India, the cosmetics industry has experienced remarkable growth in the past two decades, driven by rising incomes, urbanisation, globalisation, and increasing aspirations among women. This paper critically examines advertising trends in the cosmetic sector with special reference to women in India. Using a qualitative content analysis of selected television, print, and digital advertisements between 2015–2025, the research identifies thematic patterns such as fairness and complexion enhancement, anti-ageing narratives, celebrity endorsements, digital influencer culture, and the gradual shift towards inclusivity. It also analyses the socio-cultural implications of these trends, focusing on issues such as body image, self-esteem, consumer empowerment, and ethical advertising practices. The findings reveal that while there is a growing shift towards diversity and natural beauty narratives, a significant proportion of cosmetic advertising still reinforces narrow beauty ideals. The paper concludes with recommendations for creating socially responsible, inclusive, and empowering advertising strategies in the Indian context.

Introduction

Cosmetic products have played an influential role in shaping ideals of beauty and self-presentation for centuries. Across cultures, they have functioned not only as tools for aesthetic enhancement but also as markers of social identity, class, and gender. In India, the use of cosmetics has evolved from the application of natural products like turmeric,

sandalwood paste, and henna in traditional grooming rituals to the adoption of a vast range of modern, industrially manufactured beauty products that promise transformation, rejuvenation, and self-confidence. In this transition, advertising has emerged as the most powerful medium for promoting cosmetic brands, shaping consumer perceptions, and creating demand.

In the past two decades, the Indian cosmetic industry has witnessed unprecedented growth, driven by globalization, the rise of mass media, increasing disposable incomes, and changing social attitudes toward beauty and grooming. Within this context, women remain the largest and most targeted consumer segment. This is not accidental — historical gender norms, cultural narratives, and socio-economic patterns have all reinforced the idea that beauty and femininity are deeply intertwined. As a result, advertising strategies for cosmetics in India overwhelmingly focus on women as both the primary audience and the primary aspirants of the beauty ideals being sold.

However, the role of women in cosmetic advertising is not merely as passive recipients of marketing messages. Women are portrayed in varied, sometimes contradictory ways — as empowered professionals who use cosmetics to boost confidence, as romantic figures seeking attraction, or as homemakers who maintain their beauty for family and social acceptance. These portrayals are significant because they influence how women view themselves and others, and they often carry subtle or overt messages about what it means to be an “ideal” woman.

The early 21st century has also seen the emergence of new advertising channels, particularly digital and social media platforms, which have transformed the way cosmetic products are marketed. Influencer-driven campaigns, user-generated content, and targeted social media ads have allowed brands to reach women in more personalized and interactive ways. At the same time, these trends have sparked debates about unrealistic beauty standards, body image issues, and the ethical responsibilities of advertisers in portraying women.

In India, the cultural diversity of beauty ideals adds another dimension to cosmetic advertising. Fairness creams, for example, have been heavily marketed for decades, reinforcing colorism and linking lighter skin tones to success, attractiveness, and social mobility. While recent campaigns have attempted to promote inclusivity and diversity, the legacy of such advertising remains deeply entrenched. Similarly, advertisements for anti-aging creams often play on women’s fears of losing their youth, suggesting that beauty — and therefore value — is inherently tied to physical appearance and age.

The intersection of gender, culture, and commerce in cosmetic advertising thus presents a rich area for research. Studying this subject is particularly relevant at a time when Indian women's social roles are rapidly evolving. More women are entering the workforce, pursuing higher education, and asserting autonomy in personal and professional spaces. Yet, the pressure to conform to certain beauty norms remains strong, and advertising continues to both reflect and shape these expectations.

From a marketing perspective, cosmetic brands have developed increasingly sophisticated strategies to connect with women consumers. These range from celebrity endorsements — where Bollywood actors and models embody aspirational beauty — to emotionally charged storytelling that aligns cosmetics with personal success and empowerment. Digital tools such as algorithmic targeting now allow brands to tailor ads to specific demographics, lifestyles, and even psychological profiles, making advertising more persuasive than ever before.

However, the social and psychological implications of these advertising practices cannot be overlooked. Numerous studies have found that exposure to idealized images of women in media can lead to lowered self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, and increased consumerism, particularly among young women. In India, where patriarchal values still influence many aspects of life, such advertising may reinforce gender stereotypes, even while appearing to promote female empowerment.

This research paper aims to critically analyse cosmetic product advertising trends in India with a special focus on their portrayal of women. It will examine the historical evolution of such advertising, the strategies currently used to target women, and the socio-cultural messages embedded in these campaigns. The study will also address the ethical considerations surrounding the portrayal of women in cosmetic advertising, considering both the empowering and problematic aspects of current trends.

By exploring these dimensions, the paper seeks to contribute to the ongoing conversation about how media and marketing influence women's self-image, consumer behaviour, and social status. The findings may provide valuable insights for advertisers, policymakers, and activists working toward more ethical and inclusive representations of women in the beauty industry.

The cosmetic industry in India has witnessed unprecedented growth in the past two decades, driven by rising disposable incomes, urbanisation, global beauty trends, and the

increasing participation of women in the workforce. Advertising plays a crucial role in shaping consumer awareness and driving demand for cosmetic products. For women, cosmetics are marketed not merely as products but as tools for self-enhancement, confidence, and even professional success.

However, cosmetic advertising is not without criticism. Many campaigns propagate unrealistic beauty ideals, promote skin-lightening products, or objectify women to attract consumer attention. This creates an ethical dilemma: while advertising fuels industry growth and empowers women in certain respects, it may also perpetuate harmful stereotypes and influence women's self-esteem negatively.

This research paper aims to explore the trends, consumer behaviour, and ethical challenges in cosmetic advertising in India, with a special focus on its impact on women.

Background

The cosmetics industry in India has undergone significant transformation, moving from being an unorganised, low-volume market to becoming one of the fastest-growing segments in the global beauty industry. Traditionally, cosmetic products in India were marketed primarily through print media and television, with a heavy focus on fairness creams, talcum powders, and hair oils. However, with the advent of digital marketing, social media influencers, and global beauty trends, the sector has expanded into skincare, haircare, fragrances, colour cosmetics, and personal grooming products.

According to a report by Euromonitor International (2024), the Indian beauty and personal care market is projected to reach USD 30 billion by 2027, with women accounting for a significant share of the consumer base. This expansion is not only a result of rising disposable incomes but also a cultural shift in beauty perceptions, personal grooming habits, and self-expression.

Importance of Advertising in the Cosmetic Sector

Advertising serves as a bridge between cosmetic brands and their target consumers, shaping perceptions and influencing purchase decisions. For women, cosmetic advertising often goes beyond product promotion — it reflects societal beauty norms, aspirations, and even gender

roles. Therefore, studying advertising trends is essential to understand not only market strategies but also the broader socio-cultural implications.

Significance of Study

The research is important for understanding how women are portrayed in Indian cosmetic advertising, how these portrayals affect consumer psychology, and what ethical issues arise in this process. By analysing brand strategies and consumer responses, this study bridges marketing analysis with gender sensitivity.

Research Objectives

1. To identify and analyse current trends in cosmetic product advertising in India targeting women.
2. To examine the socio-cultural messages embedded in these advertisements.
3. To evaluate the role of celebrity endorsements, influencer marketing, and digital platforms.
4. To provide recommendations for more inclusive and ethical cosmetic advertising.

Literature Review

Global Trends in Cosmetic Advertising

Globally, cosmetic advertising has evolved from simplistic product demonstrations to highly emotional and aspirational storytelling. In Western markets, there is an increasing emphasis on diversity, body positivity, and authenticity. Campaigns such as Dove's "Real Beauty" have challenged traditional beauty stereotypes, promoting inclusivity in skin tone, body type, and age representation.

Indian Context and Cultural Influence

In India, cosmetic advertising historically focused on fairness, youthfulness, and marriageability — reflecting deep-rooted cultural ideals about female beauty. Early campaigns for products like Fair & Lovely (now rebranded as Glow & Lovely) epitomised the fairness obsession. Studies such as Mukherjee & Banerjee (2018) have highlighted how such advertisements perpetuated colourism and reinforced patriarchal expectations.

Women as the Primary Target Audience

Women form the primary consumer base for cosmetics, but their portrayal in advertisements has been both empowering and problematic. While some ads present women as confident, independent individuals, others still depict them as seeking social validation through beauty enhancement.

Rise of Digital and Influencer Marketing

With increased internet penetration, cosmetic advertising in India has shifted towards digital-first strategies. Influencer-led campaigns on Instagram, YouTube, and other platforms have become major drivers of product awareness, especially among urban millennial and Gen Z women.

Evolution of Cosmetic Advertising in India

Cosmetic advertising in India began with print ads in women's magazines like Femina and Women's Era in the 1960s–70s, featuring brands such as Lakmé. Television brought a new visual appeal in the 1980s, with iconic campaigns such as “Lakmé — Reinvent Yourself.” The liberalisation of the Indian economy in the 1990s saw the entry of international brands like Maybelline, L'Oréal, and Revlon, creating competitive dynamics that reshaped advertising trends.

Recent years have seen the rise of homegrown brands like Nykaa, Plum, and Mamaearth, which combine e-commerce with aggressive social media marketing.

Gender and Advertising

Scholars like Erving Goffman (1979) have highlighted how advertising often reinforces gender stereotypes. In India, early cosmetic ads reinforced ideas of fairness and perfection as essential for female beauty. However, post-2015, there has been a shift towards campaigns promoting diversity, self-love, and empowerment.

Impact of Digital Platforms

Research shows that platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook have become major advertising channels for cosmetics, enabling direct interaction with women consumers through influencers, beauty tutorials, and personalised recommendations.

Growth of the Cosmetic Industry in India

India's cosmetic sector has grown into a billion-dollar industry. According to Statista (2024), the Indian beauty and personal care market is expected to reach over ₹1.2 trillion by 2026. This growth is supported by aggressive marketing campaigns that specifically target women of different age groups.

Portrayal of Women in Advertising

Academic research shows that women in cosmetic advertisements are often depicted as youthful, fair-skinned, and flawless — a portrayal that sets unrealistic standards. Studies such as N. Gupta (2019) highlight that this representation impacts women's self-perception and purchasing decisions.

Consumer Behaviour Theories

Models like the AIDA (Attention-Interest-Desire-Action) and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs explain how advertising taps into emotional and psychological needs to influence buying behaviour. For women, cosmetics are often linked to self-esteem, belongingness, and self-actualisation.

Methodology

Research Design

The study uses a qualitative content analysis approach to examine cosmetic advertisements targeting women.

Sampling

A purposive sampling method was employed to select 60 advertisements aired or published between 2015–2025. The sample included: 20 television commercials, 20 print advertisements in leading women's magazines, 20 digital/social media campaigns

Analytical Framework

The advertisements were analysed for:

1. Product category and positioning
2. Key message/theme
3. Representation of women (age, body type, skin tone, role portrayal)
4. Emotional appeals (confidence, romance, success, self-love)
5. Marketing strategies (celebrity/influencer endorsement, visual style, language)

Analysis and Discussion

In the beauty industry, anti-ageing products such as creams, serums, and cosmetic treatments are increasingly marketed to women as young as 25. These advertisements promote the idea that youth is essential to beauty, subtly implying that signs of ageing—like wrinkles or fine lines—diminish a woman's attractiveness and social value. This messaging reinforces ageist and gendered beauty standards, creating pressure for women to maintain a youthful appearance and view ageing as something to be feared or hidden.

In contrast, the marketing of colour cosmetics by brands like Lakmé, Maybelline, and Nykaa has shifted toward themes of self-expression and empowerment. Rather than focusing solely on appearance enhancement, these brands

position makeup as a tool for individuality, creativity, and confidence. This reflects a broader cultural movement toward redefining beauty in more inclusive and personal terms, allowing women to embrace their identities rather than conforming to narrow beauty norms.

The “clean beauty” trend has gained significant momentum in recent years, with brands actively promoting herbal, cruelty-free, and chemical-free cosmetics. This shift appeals strongly to health-conscious and environmentally aware consumers who prefer natural ingredients and ethical production practices.

Despite this evolution, fairness creams and skin-lightening products continue to dominate Indian cosmetic advertising. While the language in these campaigns has softened—focusing on terms like “glow” and “radiance”—the underlying implication often remains that lighter skin is associated with attractiveness, confidence, and success. This reflects a deep-rooted cultural bias that continues to influence consumer perceptions.

To capture market attention, brands employ a range of marketing strategies. Celebrity endorsements remain a key tool, with figures like Deepika Padukone, Kareena Kapoor Khan, and Alia Bhatt lending star power to build aspirational value. Alongside this, influencer collaborations are on the rise, with a preference for micro-influencers who cater to niche audiences and are perceived as more relatable and authentic. Emotional storytelling has also become a dominant approach, with campaigns highlighting themes of empowerment, individuality, and breaking stereotypes.

The socio-cultural impact of cosmetic advertising in India is complex. While some brands are challenging outdated beauty norms and promoting diversity, many still reinforce unrealistic standards that affect women’s self-esteem and body image. However, the rise of digital platforms has empowered consumers—especially women—to voice their opinions, demand inclusivity, and hold brands accountable, forcing the industry to gradually adapt to more inclusive and progressive ideals.

Findings

1. Fairness remains a persistent theme despite global shifts towards inclusivity.

2. Digital media has revolutionised how cosmetic ads reach and engage women.
3. Ethical concerns persist regarding colourism, ageism, and body shaming.
4. Positive shifts include increasing representation of diverse skin tones and body types in niche campaigns.
5. Women are the core audience and decision-makers for cosmetic brands in India.
6. Digital platforms have overtaken television in influencing purchase decisions for urban women.
7. Ethical challenges persist despite progressive campaigns — particularly in relation to colourism, body image, and token diversity.
8. Brands that combine authenticity, inclusivity, and transparency build stronger consumer loyalty among women.

Recommendations

1. Promote inclusivity in all campaigns — diverse age, skin tone, and body type representation.
2. Avoid language that reinforces colourism or ageism.
3. Use storytelling that focuses on individuality and self-worth.
4. Collaborate with influencers who embody authenticity and diversity.
5. Ensure transparency in claims to build long-term trust.

Conclusion

Cosmetic advertising in India targeting women is at a transitional stage. While deep-rooted stereotypes persist, consumer demand for authenticity and inclusivity is pushing brands towards positive change. The future lies in balancing commercial success with ethical responsibility, ensuring that beauty marketing empowers rather than pressures women.

Cosmetic advertising in India has moved from a narrow, perfection-driven approach to a more inclusive and diverse narrative. Women remain the most important demographic, both as consumers and as cultural influencers. While brands are experimenting with empowering campaigns, they must also address deep-rooted biases such as colourism and unrealistic beauty standards. Digital media offers a chance for two-way dialogue, allowing women to shape the narrative rather than simply consume it. Ethical, inclusive, and culturally

sensitive advertising is not just a moral imperative but also a profitable strategy in a rapidly evolving market.

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