



Asian Journal of Marketing Management (AJMM)

2022, Vol (01), Issue (11), 113-132

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ISSN: 2820-2031 (Printed)

ISSN: 2820-2082 (Online)

DOI: 10.31357/ajmm.v1i02.5961.g4425

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Objectification of women in advertising in Sri Lanka**V.V. Gamlath**

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: *The purpose of this study is to explore the perception of Sri Lankan female consumers towards the objectification of women in advertising and what are their ideas about brands that practice objectification.*

Design/methodology/approach: *The study follows an inductive approach and applies a qualitative research design. Semi-structured interviews were used for data collection.*

Findings: *Findings have shown that Sri Lankan female consumers perceive the objectification of women in advertising as “a practice of portraying women in advertisements in a way that their social and personal value as women is undermined”. Even though there is a negative brand image, people still tend to purchase the product if it provides substantial value for their money.*

Originality: *Previous findings on the use of female sexual objectification in advertising have been mixed and inconsistent. A social shift in society, with the presence of sexually objectifying advertisements, has created a need to understand consumer attitudes towards brands that make use of these advertisements in the current landscape in Sri Lanka.*

Implications: *The study informs policymakers on how to implement appropriate policies and strategies to deal with panic buying situations. Retailers can use this expertise to effectively address the various demand conditions without disrupting their internal business practices.*

Keywords: *Advertising, Objectification of women, Sri Lanka*

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INTRODUCTION

Advertising has become a significant role in the revenue generation of an organization. It is considered a key functionality in any organization (Reichert, 2002). Considering the importance of advertising and competition among organizations, gaining the target audience has become Complex. Decision makers related to marketing continuously search for new advertising tools and methods to take their brands to the target audience. As a solution, using women in advertisements to acquire the visual attention of their customers has been the most used method among marketers throughout the years (Bello et al., 1983).

There are a number of studies that have been done to discuss how women have been treated when it comes to advertising such as by authors Castillo and Mensa (2009); Dahl et al., (2009); Reichert et al. (2001); Severn et al., (1990), etc. (Bianchi & Mensa; 2019). One of the main reasons for this immense use of women in advertising is the belief that can simply state as “sex sells”. Marketers believe that using women in advertisements combined with sex appeal get them a higher chance of getting the customers’ attention (Parker, E., and A. Furnham. 2007). But still, this is debatable because according to past studies done by researchers, there can be both pros and cons when using sex appeal in advertising. There are some studies that show advertisements with sex appeal can increase brand recall (Ferguson et al., 2010; Furnham & Hiranandani 2009) while there are other studies that mentioned it can negatively affect the recall of the brand or the advertisement (Wirtz et al., 2018; Parker and Furnham 2007). Based on these findings it clearly shows that there can be mixed results when using women in advertising combined with sex appeal. When considering women and advertising ethics, treating women as objects is a key topic discussed throughout the past few decades. Researchers specifically refer to this substance as “Objectification of Women in Advertising” (Krawczyk & Thompson, 2015; Zimmerman, 2008; Bianchi, 2020; et al).

Objectification results in women getting into a mental myth where the assumption of the requirement to maintain that perfect body image that was portrayed in the advertisement to get social recognition which ultimately affects their mental health and self-esteem. (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) But the people’s perception of objectification is subjective (Szymanski, Moffitt, and Carr, 2011). This means the same advertisement will interpret the idea in different ways to different people. One might see that as an advertisement that includes female objectification while another person might not see anything wrong with that. Given that, it is crucial to explore how consumers perceive objectification when it comes to the Sri Lankan context.

As discussed earlier as well, the effect of female objectification on the brand recall can be both negative and positive. In another study done by Huhmann & Limbu (2016) they have shown that objectifying women in advertising may cause a negative brand association towards the brand image. Hence the brand image is “the perceptions and beliefs held by consumers, as reflected in associations held in the consumer’s memory” (Kotler, Keller, Brady, Goodman & Hansen, 2009, p.861), It is one of the

main criteria which determines the quality and the value of a company (Lin & Lin, 2007). It is very crucial to maintain a positive brand image for any organization. In their study, Huber & Lindgren (2018) mentioned that brand image influences female objectification in advertising. But as mentioned earlier, since the way people perceive female objectification is subjective (Szymanski, Moffitt, and Carr, 2011), there is a possibility for the level of change it can make towards the brand image also can differ from one to another. Therefore, it is beneficial to discover consumer opinions about the brands /products that practice objectification in advertising according to their point of view. It will help in a guide for future marketing strategies.

Even though several studies have already addressed this topic, only a few have focused on the Asian context. Based on the analysis, there are no studies that have covered the Sri Lankan market and customers. Although female objectification in advertising, harms female mental health (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), the way people perceive objectification differs from one to another (Szymanski, Moffitt, and Carr, 2011). Therefore, it is critical to identify the perception of Sri Lankan consumers towards objectification. According to Huber & Lindgren (2018, p.75) “brand image can be negatively influenced by seeing a sexually objectifying advertisement within a short period... sexual objectification in advertisements should be avoided”.

Therefore, the importance and requirement of maintaining an appropriate brand image among the consumers is pivotal in familiarizing and prudently identifying this issue in the Sri Lankan context. Even though both males and females have faced objectification in advertising (Eisend, Plagemann, and Sollwedel, 2014) the consequences that females face are way higher than what males have to face because of objectification (Gentry and Harrison, 2010). Hence, this study focuses on Sri Lankan female consumers’ perception of objectification.

Accordingly, the study aims (1) to explore the Sri Lankan female consumers’ perception towards female objectification in advertising and (2) to explore their ideas/judgments about brands that practice female objectification in advertising.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Advertising is defined as “any paid form of non-personal presentation and promotion of ideas, goods and services through mass media such as newspapers, magazines, television or radio by an identified sponsor” (Kotler, 1984, p58) It is the most commonly used marketing tool to increase the awareness and engage consumers with the brand (Fill, 2009). In our day-to-day life, we see various kinds of advertising such as magazines, billboards, buildings, and bus stations which makes it hard to ignore them (Rutledge Shields and Heineken, 2002). When considering this immense volume of advertisements available in the market, it is exhausting to grab the visual attention of the consumer. (Wedel and Pieters, 2000; Winer, 2009).

A product is defined as “something that is made in a factory; a brand is something that is bought by a customer. A product can be copied by a competitor; a brand is unique. A product can be quickly outdated; a successful brand is timeless” (King as cited in Aaker, 2009, p.1). Without a doubt, a brand is one of the most valuable assets in an organization (Kapferer, 2012). Brand image is the perceived value that consumer gets through a brand. While brand identity is created by the organization itself, brand image is the identity that consumers give to the brand. An organization must have a positive brand image to generate more value for its product/brand (Roper & Fill, 2012; Kapferer, 2012; Tajzadeh-Namin & Norouzi, 2014). Aaker (1991) mentioned in his study that brand image and purchase intention have a strong correlation. He stated that a positive brand image will create a positive effect on the brand and ultimately will result in increased purchasing behavior. Effective and successful advertising strategy plays a pivotal role in achieving a successful brand image (Keller 2009). Aaker and Biel (1993) stated that advertising is the main element that builds the brand image. Therefore, patrons’ attitudes towards advertisements can directly or indirectly affect the brand image (Keller, 1993).

Objectification is a widely discussed topic by scholars for an extended period. Cambridge dictionary defines objectification as “treating people like tools or toys as if they had no feelings, opinions, or rights of their own” or “To deny the significance of their voices, or to silence them, would be a form of objectification and oppression.” It is a state where the person or a human being is treated as an object regardless of his/her human nature. Even though this concept applies to both genders (Eisend, Plagemann, and Sollwedel, 2014), females are the most common victims of this practice (Gentry and Harrison, 2010).

The study done by Fredrickson, B.L. and Roberts in 1997 named “Objectification Theory” gives a clear idea about the concept. They have stated “girls and women are typically acculturated to internalize an observer’s perspective as a primary view of their physical selves. This perspective on self can lead to habitual body monitoring, which, in turn, can increase opportunities for shame and anxiety, reduce opportunities for peak motivational states, and diminish awareness of internal bodily states.” The objectification theory provides a “framework for understanding the experiential consequences of being female in a culture that sexually objectifies the female body” (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997, p175).

According to the Martha Nussbaum (1995) there are seven features of objectification: (1) Instrumentality which is the treatment of a person as a tool for the objectifier’s purposes; (2) Denial of Autonomy which is the treatment of a person as lacking in autonomy and self-determination; (3) Inertness which is the treatment of a person as lacking in agency, and perhaps also in activity; (4) Fungibility, the treatment of a person as interchangeable with other objects; (5) Violability, the treatment of a person as lacking in boundary-integrity; (6) Ownership which is the treatment of a person as something that is owned by another (can be bought or sold); and (7) Denial of Subjectivity, the treatment of a person as something whose experiences and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account

And in 2009, Rae Langton have added another three features to the list. (As cited by The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,2010): (8) Reduction to Body which is the treatment of a person as identified with their body, or body parts; (9) Reduction to Appearance, the treatment of a person primarily in terms of how they look, or how they appear to the senses; and (10) Silencing which is the treatment of a person as if they are silent, lacking the capacity to speak.

Boddewyn (1991) refers to this as “using women (mostly) as decorative or attention-getting objects, with little or no relevance to the product advertised”. Sexual objectification in advertising is not a novel technique. It has been implemented by marketers since the mid-nineteenth century (Black & Morton, 2017; Reichert, Lambiase, et al; 1999). And using objectification in advertising is not limited to one area of the world. It has been popular not only in the United States and Europe but also in the Asian context (Nelson and Paek, 2008; Reichert and Carpenter, 2004; Huang and Lowry 2012). Which means objectification of women in advertising exists worldwide (Nelson & Paek, 2005).

By objectifying women in advertising, it conveys the idea that treating women like objects is acceptable in society (Goffman, 1979). Sexually objectified advertisements tend to show women emphasizing one or two body parts by excluding her face completely from the advertisement (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). Another way that sexual objectification appears in advertising is through the male sexual gaze often sexualizes women (Kaschak; 1992). Patterson & O’Malley (2009) has identified five ways that female objectification appears in advertising, which are like objects to be used, to be viewed, as parts. As symbols for objects, and gender stereotypes (mothers or good wives). Rather than showing them in a more powerful and unrestricted way, marketers tend to portray women as vulnerable, obedient, unintelligent, and reliant on men (Wirtz, Sparks & Zimbres, 2018; Infanger, Bosak & Sczesny, 2012).

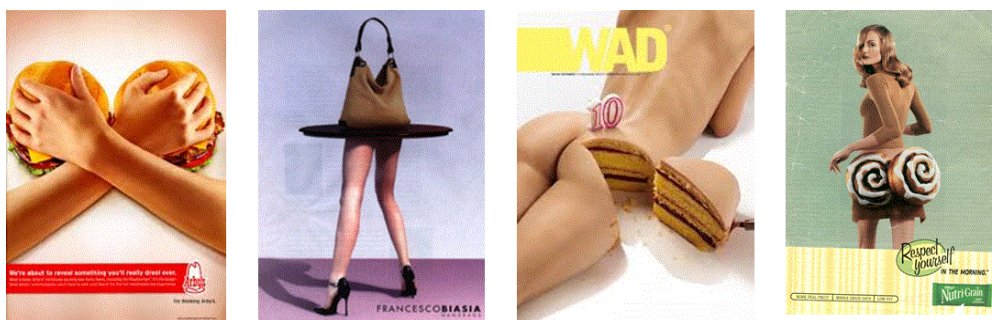


Figure 1: Different Forms of Objectifications

Objectification of women has a clear connection with women’s mental health and self-esteem. Analogically speaking, they have stated that female objectification may cause anxiety, depression, eating disorders, low self-motivation, and sexual dysfunction among women. (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997)

Using sexual content in advertisements can affect the brand in both negative Keller (1993) and positive (Alexander and Judd, 1978; Parker and Furnham, 2007) manner. Especially when it comes to overly sexual content, there is a more possibility for consumers to have a negative impression of the advertisement and the brand image (LaTour & Henthorne, 1993). Consumer attitudes have also been shown to be negative when advertisements portray a lack of congruity, meaning relatedness, between the appropriateness of incorporating sexual content and its connection with the product and brand (Chang & Tseng, 2013; Peterson & Kerin, 1977). When there is a connection between the product and female nudity as an example, there is a more possibility that consumers can recall the advertisement easily rather than an advertisement that has no connection with female portrayal (Rouner, Slater & Domenech-Rodriguez, 2003).

However, interpretation of objectification and its effect on the brand image vastly depends on the values of the individuals and is therefore subjective (Khandeparkar & Motiani, 2017). Frankly, different nationalities have different perceptions of female objectification based on their culture and beliefs (Lipman, 1991). Considering all these factors, it is crucial to identify what type of advertisements initiate positive relations toward the brand image and what type of advertisements initiate negative relations toward the brand image.

METHODOLOGY

With the paper aiming for an exploratory purpose to explore the perception of Sri Lankan female consumers towards objectification of women in advertising and what are their ideas about brands that practice objectification, a qualitative study is of appropriation as in a qualitative study researcher focuses on ideas rather than numbers and scores. And the approach to the study is the inductive research approach, as it is more open-ended and exploratory by its nature, it is the best approach to conduct the current research. Since the study is piloted in a natural environment, it is shown as a non-contrived setting rather than a contrived setting where things happen in an artificial environment. A Semi-structured in-depth interview has been used to get a deep idea of the interviewees' ideas and thought processes. When considering sample strategy, since the current study aims toward female objectification in advertising, the informants were selected among Sri Lankan female consumers who have sufficient idea about females' role in advertising by using the purposeful sampling method. The selected sample size was 15 participants.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews had to be done over the phone and sample advertisements had to be sent via social media platforms. Given that it has become a necessity that participants have sound knowledge of technology and social media platforms. Since young adults are more familiar with social media and more tech-savvy when compared to older adults (Olson, O'Brien, Rogers et al; 2010), young female adults representing the age range of 18 and 34 (Vespa, 2017) was chosen for the study. Because the current study aims to investigate the informants' behaviors and opinions about female objectification, the individual unit of analysis method is ideal.

Two types of data collection instruments were used in this study. The purpose of using semi-structured interviews was to direct the interviewee toward the required area while being open to new ideas and possibilities (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). Photo or video elicitation method, which included female objectification were used to investigate their behavioral changes towards advertisements. This is a common theoretical framework that is used to assess consumer attitudes towards advertisements (Batra & Ray, 1986; Cacioppo, Petty & Morris, 1983; MacKenzie, Lutz, & Belch, 1986; Moore & Hutchinson, 1983). Initially, all sessions were open-ended, in-depth interviews and later visual representation analysis was conducted by using photos/videos of advertisements that include objectification.

The first step of the interview procedure was to contact relevant informants, who were selected through a purposeful sampling method, and get their consent for an in-depth interview. After placing an appropriate appointment with the informants, the next step was conducting the interview. Due to the plight of the country, all the interviews took place over the phone which was considered an acceptable and valuable method of data collection (Sobin et al, 1993). In their study, Sturges and Kathleen (2004) stated that when it comes to the safety of the interviewer or interviewee, telephone interviewing is the most suitable method.

The videos/photos which were selected as visual aids were shared via WhatsApp and Messenger platforms and insights were taken over the telephone interview. The interview was started by asking for some general information about their name, occupation, age etc. They have been notified about ethical and legal aspects (Bryman & Bell, 2015); each interviewee was asked for their consent to audio-record the interview. They were free to express their ideas and opinions throughout the interview.

Field notes were used to get a better understanding of the responses that have been given by the informants including the interviewer's observations, key points that have been stated by the interviewee, any other special remarks that were seen, felt, or noted. Voice recordings were used to reduce the risk of forgetting valuable insights from the interviewee, combining both field notes and media, leading to a credible analysis. When considering the time horizon, the method used for this study was the cross-sectional method. It is a One-time way without repetition.

All the conclusions are formed based on the initial interview done by the researcher and the majority of the interviews in this study were done in English. Some used both for clear understanding which was crucial in building a mutual relationship with the interviewee. The interviews were transcribed directly after they were conducted in order not to risk missing anything of importance related to non-verbal communication (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). All interviews were audio-recorded to ensure the accuracy of data, and both audio and written facts were transcribed to avoid missing any data the first time.

When analyzing the data in the current study, thematic analysis was used to identify the themes of the informants' insights. And the photo-elicitation method was used to investigate participants' behavioral changes towards the advertisements, which included female objectification. The method was inspired by the Attitude-Towards-the-Ad model which is a common theoretical framework that has been used to assess consumer attitudes towards advertisements (Batra & Ray, 1986; Cacioppo, Petty & Morris, 1983; MacKenzie, Lutz, & Belch, 1986; Moore & Hutchinson, 1983).

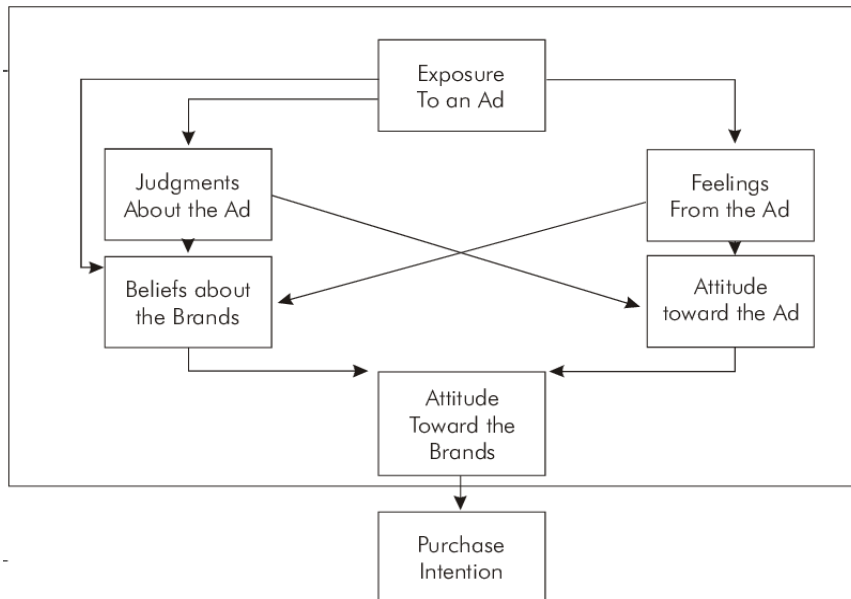


Figure 2: Attitude-Towards-the-Ad Model

The quality of the study was evaluated according to the framework of trustworthiness as presented by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Where transferability was limited in the qualitative study. Bryman and Bell (2015) argue that it is of significance for researchers to illustrate credibility while conducting research, where all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, which increased the credibility further (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Regards to the dependability of the study, the current research is dependent on situational factors which might differ between interview sessions, limiting the ability to reach identical outcomes.

FINDINGS

Over the past few years, women have achieved a more independent and prominent position in society. But this transformation has not been visible when it comes to advertising and marketing. Many of the respondents felt frustrated about the fact that marketers tend to portray women as helpless, dependent, and submissive manner.

Hirushi (26) – “Is this a real advertisement? This is one of the worst advertisements I have ever seen. To be honest I’m getting angry by just looking at it. What did they expect from this advertisement? It shows that women should always be obedient to men and should be controlled by them. Which exactly I can’t agree at all.” (Angry)

Another point that is emphasized by the respondents is, portraying women as a gender stereotype. They argued that in the current society women have been given their contribution in many aspects apart from being at home cleaning, cooking and babysitting.

Chamali (24) – “I have seen this ad before. It’s like the only thing that a young girl needs to learn is how to wash a dish properly. These types of ads can change the way that men think about women as well as women think about themselves as well. They should have put this as ‘your child,’ not ‘your daughter.’ Why they can’t show our achievements in their advertisements?” (Frustrated)

And some of them argue that current advertising always tries to portray women as a ‘trophy’ that men can win by simply owning some physical possessions.

Devindi (24) – “It shows like women are very shallow and can easily persuade by some physical possession like a body spray or brand-new vehicle. I have seen these kinds of ads and sometimes it’s very funny to think about like how they could imagine a girl falling in love with them just because of deodorant or a body spray.”

As a whole all of them agreed that female objectification in advertising can change people’s mindset about women and some stated that it is making it harder for a woman to stand in society as an independent and proud individual.

Tharushi (24) – In a world that there is no gender equality, women are already in a lower position when compared to men. Meanwhile, these companies make the situation worse by making these types of advertisements. (Disappointed)

None of them agreed with the way that marketers portray women in advertising. not only they did not agree to female objectification, but also, they strongly believe that it is undermining the value of the female in the society. According to them female should be treated with respect and care not as an object.

Lack of Purpose

The unclear purpose of women in these advertisements was often mentioned by respondents. This can be defined as the women missing a purpose and being portrayed as an object only for attention.

Respondents questioned why some of the women were placed in the advertisements in the first place since they did not seem to serve any purpose, apart from appearing as an attention-grabbing sex object.

Ayeshma (24) – Firstly, I can't understand the connection between a burger and a half-naked woman. It ruins my appetite. There is literally no connection between the product and the advertisement. (Confused)

Respondents were confused about the objective of the advertisement, and they all believe that it could have been more effectively presented without using the woman in it. In some scenarios, they were not only confused but also frustrated about the way that advertisement objectifies the woman.

Sanduni (26) – It is 100% clear that they use this woman as an object to grab attention. Other than that, there is no other purpose for using a woman in this manner. They are indirectly comparing her breasts to the beer cans which makes me kind of annoyed. If it is a women's lingerie or at least a woman's make-up product, then I can understand the purpose of using a woman. But not like this. There are more respected ways to present a female in an ad. (Frustrated)

Respondents paid attention to the products that were being advertised to the portrayal of women. They were frustrated when they can't understand the benefit or purpose of placing a partially nude woman on an advertisement next to the product since they could not identify any relation. Sometimes they felt like the woman in the advertisement is overpowering the actual product.

Amali (23) – It took me a minute to identify the purpose of the advertisement. I didn't pay extra attention to the advertisement; I might not understand that this is aiming to save animals. I would just ignore it considering it as a woman's underwear ad or something like that. It is ironic when we think about the way that they have chosen to present this idea. I can't even see the cow in the ad. I'm not at all encouraged to go vegetarian after seeing this. This makes me laugh. (Ironically)

After analyzing their comments what we can identify is that using women in advertisements without a clear purpose is not effective. One might argue that it will help to increase brand recall, but this study has clearly shown that lack of purpose can affect the brand negatively.

Heshani (24) – I prefer the advertisement that has a message to share. Rather than using some model to sit there and do nothing, if they can do something meaningful, then I think it will help to make a good impression on the brand.

Respondents prefer to see advertisements where characters have a role and a purpose to play. This agrees with the respondents' desire to see advertisements that are purposeful excluding typical outdated stereotypes.

Brand Image vs Purchase Intention

Keller (1993) referred to brand image as “the perceptions and beliefs held by consumers, as reflected in associations held in the consumer’s memory” (p.3). It is proven that a negative brand image can cause a decrease in purchase intention (Um, 2013). In this current study, there can be seen a small difference to that theory. Female objectification in advertising certainly leads to a negative impression towards the brand. But when it comes to purchase intention, they tend to rely on quality and past experience of the product. Thilini (24) expressed her ideas as below.

“I think it is not necessary to use objectification in any kind of advertisements. There are so many creative ways to give the message to clients. Personally, I don’t have a good impression of the brands that practice objectification. (However) I don’t rely on advertising that much when I’m buying products. What I search is good quality and satisfaction. If I feel that I’m receiving a substantial value for my money I might tend to buy it regardless of the advertisements.”

According to her, even though she does not like female objectification in advertising, it does not affect her purchase intention. Another respondent states her ideas regarding this matter as below. Dileka (25);

“Actually, it depends on the situation. If I have multiple substitutes for that particular product, then I might switch the brand to one of those substitutes. But if there’s no substitutes or if it is the best quality product available, then in that case I might not change the brand even though I didn’t like the advertisements.”

According to her, it depends on the number of choices she has at that moment. If there are similar products which have the same quality, then there’s a possibility for her to change her purchasing decision. In another case respondent’s purchase decision depend on the fact that whether it is a newly introduced brand or not.

Niruni (23) – “If it is a brand that I have already purchased and familiar with, and if it has a good quality, then to be honest I will not change the brand. I might not like the advertisement or the message that they are giving from that, but if that product provides a great value to my money, then I might continue to buy that.”

“But if it is a new brand and I don’t have that much idea of the brand, or I have never used it, then the situation is different. Because in that case that particular advertisement which includes objectification is the only source that I can get an idea about the brand. So, in a situation like that, there is a huge possibility that I might reject that brand completely.”

These findings show that if they are loyal to the brand and if they believe that the brand provides substantial value for money, then they will continue to buy that regardless of the advertisement. But if it is a new brand or it that brand has lots of similar substitutes, then there is a possibility for them to change the brand.

Based on these findings we can conclude that even though female objectification has a clear negative effect on the brand image, it might not have the same effect on purchase intention. Most of them do not tend to buy products based on advertisements. When they purchase a product what they mainly rely on is the quality of the product and the level of satisfaction that they can get through that product.

Key Findings

All the respondents have a negative feeling toward the objectification of women in advertising. Since this is a subjective topic, they expressed their ideas in different forms. But they all agreed on the fact that women should be treated more respectfully and ethically in advertising. They all believed that by using women as objects in advertisements, the level of respect and value that a woman has in society can be reduced. And, they all acted frustrated and annoyed when it comes to the lack of purpose. Not only they have a negative feeling toward those advertisements, but also, they believe that it shows the lack of creativity of the marketer. Finally, when it comes to the brand image and the purchase intention, the brand image tends to have a direct negative impact from the objectified advertisements while purchase intention does not have that much of an impact. When it comes to purchasing, they all believe the quality of the product rather than advertising.

DISCUSSIONS

Undermining the Female Value

Nussbaum (1995) explained the term sexual objectification as “treating as an object something that is not an object, what is, in fact, a human being” (p.257). But the way individuals define objectification is subjective (Szymanski, Moffitt, and Carr, 2011). Different nationalities might have different perceptions towards female objectification based on their culture and beliefs (Lipman, 1991). That is why it is

important to identify how Sri Lankan female consumers perceive female objectification. Based on the findings that have gathered from the in-depth interview, all the participants are agreed on one criterion about objectification. They all define female objectification as something that undermines the value of the female in society. This is somewhat not in line with the previous literature. In the study done by Infanger, Bosak and Sczesnys' (2012) analyzed whether consumers preferred women who were portrayed as powerful and leader figures or in a more subtle, helpless, and dependent way. Their findings illustrated that powerful women were not fully accepted, and that the more stereotypical portrayal of women was preferred. But in the current study respondents want to see females as more independent and empowered manner. Which case agrees with the study done by Sassatelli (2007). She argues that advertising can reproduce the prevailing societal differences and, although more seldom, encourage new social orientations and tendencies. Ans also it agrees with some of the other researchers who argue that 'femvertising,' a term to describe the more powerful and realistic woman in advertising, is becoming more predominant in the industry as it reflects the shift in the roles of women in Western societies (Åkestam, Rosengren & Dahlen, 2017; Grau & Zotos, 2016).

Lack of Purpose

According to the previously found literature consumers dislike advertisements when there is a lack of compatibility between the appropriateness of the sexual content and its connection with the product and brand (Chang and Tseng, 2013; Peterson and Kerin, 1977; Orth and Holancova, 2003). This is 100% agreed with the current research findings. Respondents were annoyed and confused about brands who make use of women as objects rather than giving them a purpose and role in the advertisements.

Furthermore, they have pointed out that using women in advertisements is more acceptable when they have a relation with the product that has been advertised. This means they have placed much importance on functionality. This is similar to the study done by Sherman and Quester (2005) who argues that sexism in advertising largely depends on its functionality and suggestiveness.

Brand Image vs Purchase Intention

Arora and Stoner (2009) defined brand image as the emotional aspects that identify the brand, which have a strong influence on consumer purchasing behavior. Similarly, Chien-Hsiung (2011) stated that purchasing behavior and brand image are closely related. On the other hand, brand image has a strong relationship with advertising as well. Advertising plays a key role when building a brand image (Kapferer, 2012). Aaker (1991) argued that if consumers develop a negative feeling toward the brand through brand image that will effectively result in reducing the purchasing behavior.

Even though numerous studies have shown that there is a negative relationship between brand image and purchase intention, it is not compatible with the findings of the current study. According to the findings, respondents accepted that they got a negative feeling about the brand image through female objectification in advertising. But as per them, it does not affect their purchase intention. Their purchase intention depends on the quality and the satisfaction of the products rather than advertising and brand image.

The main contribution of the current study was in expanding the knowledge stream with exploring the perception of Sri Lankan female consumers towards objectification of women in advertising and identifying their opinions towards the brands/products that practice objectification. Through the analysis, three main themes were identified namely: undermining the Female Value, Lack of Purpose and Brand Image vs Purchase Intention. In other words, findings have shown that Sri Lankan female consumers tend to define the objectification of women in advertising as “a practice of portraying women in advertisements in a way that their social and personal value as women is undermined”. And, it can be seen that lack of purpose when using women in advertising is caused frustration and negative brand image. Finally, it is shown that even though there is a negative brand image, people still tend to purchase the product if it provides good value for their money.

The findings can contribute to the development and evaluation of marketers' future advertising and brand strategies. Where the current research shows that marketers can and should avoid advertisements that portray sexual objectification that negatively trigger the identified themes. And this study will do a contribution to the existing literature regarding the objectification of women in advertising. Effectively, the advertisements should illustrate the modern woman, whereby they have a purpose, and look independent and happy. Through this, brands could maintain and foster their brand image.

While the main limitation of this study is that it only incorporated one consumer segment: females. These findings may not be generalizable among the whole consumer group, which is why future research should also focus on male consumers as well. Furthermore, given that this study only analyzed Sri Lankan consumers, culture was another significant limitation, in which other nationalities may have contributed to other results. Also, the current prevailing situation due to the COVID-19 pandemic limits the access to conduct the face to face in-depth interviews. Hence, with several questions remaining to be resolved; in particular, it is of interest to determine how culture and age influenced the results. As such, further research could follow a similar approach by incorporating diverse cultures as well as age groups. Moreover, this study only analyzed the female perspective of objectification which is why further studies could base their research on both genders and solely on male sexual objectification.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study is to explore the perception of Sri Lankan female consumers towards the objectification of women in advertising and what are their opinions towards the brands/products that practice objectification. To conduct the research qualitative research method was followed. Many related kinds of literature with good conceptual base were also presented as the groundwork of the study. To collect the data, semi-structured in-depth interviews were held with the participation of fifteen respondents.

After analyzing the collected data, three main themes have been identified: undermining the Female Value, Lack of Purpose and Brand Image vs Purchase Intention. In other words, findings have shown that Sri Lankan female consumers tend to define the objectification of women in advertising as “a practice of portraying women in advertisements in a way that their social and personal value as a woman is undermined”. And, it can be seen that lack of purpose when using women in advertising is caused frustration and a negative brand image. Finally, it is shown that even though there is a negative brand image, people still tend to purchase the product if it provides good value for their money.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

The findings can contribute to the development and evaluation of marketers' future advertising and brand strategies. Our research shows that marketers can and should avoid advertisements that portray sexual objectification that negatively trigger the identified themes. And, this study will do a contribution to the existing literature regarding the objectification of women in advertising. Effectively, the advertisements should illustrate the modern woman, whereby they have a purpose, look independent and happy. Through this, brands could maintain and foster their brand image.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The main limitation of this study is that it only incorporated one consumer segment; females. Thus, neglecting males. Evidently, these findings may not be generalizable among the whole consumer group, which is why future research should also focus on male consumers as well. Furthermore, given that this study only analyzed Sri Lankan consumers, culture was another significant limitation, in which other nationalities may have contributed to other results.

Another major limitation of this study is the current prevailing situation due to the COVID-19 pandemic which limits access to conduct face-to-face in-depth interviews. Moreover, an additional limitation of the study could be the choice of brands and advertisements. Effectively, the findings might have had different outcomes if other brands and advertisements were shown to the respondents.

Several questions remain to be resolved; in particular, it is of interest to determine how culture and age influenced the results. As such, further research could follow a similar approach by incorporating diverse cultures as well as age groups. Moreover,

this study only analyzed the female perspective of objectification which is why further studies could base their research on both genders and solely on male sexual objectification.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The authors would also like to express their gratitude to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions in completing this study.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declared no competing interests.

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