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Male objectification in TV advertisements: A study of media design education through the lens of objectification theory

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Abstract

While objectification theory has been extensively applied to the representation of women in advertising, limited scholarly attention has been given to the objectification of men, particularly within the context of Pakistani television (TV) advertisements. This study addresses this gap by examining patterns of male objectification and exploring how media and art education can function as a critical pedagogical intervention to challenge and reform objectifying advertising practices. The purpose of this research is to explore the trends and patterns of male objectification portrayed in male representation in Pakistani TV advertisements. This research was conducted through the lens of objectification theory. The study also aims to investigate the impact of such objectification on culture, art, and social value systems, as well as how media art education can help abate the objectification phenomenon in advertisements. To achieve this purpose, the present research analyzed selected Pakistani advertisements for their objectified portrayal of men. The study concludes that men are objectified in advertisements in various ways, primarily through an emphasis on their physical attributes. The findings reveal that art and media education can contribute to reforming contemporary advertising norms and values by informing them intellectually and ethically for the well-being of human—beings endowed with sensitive and refined intellect. Art and media education must therefore be considered a critical pedagogy of visual culture.

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doi: 10.36922/AC025240056**Received:** June 10, 2025**1st revised:** October 25, 2025**2nd revised:** November 6, 2025**3rd revised:** November 29, 2025**Accepted:** December 11, 2025**Published online:** January 8, 2026**Copyright:** © 2026 Author(s). This is an Open-Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons AttributionNoncommercial License, permitting all non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.**Publisher's Note:** AccScience Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

1. Introduction

While there is extensive research on female objectification in the media, the portrayal of men, particularly in relation to objectification, remains comparatively neglected. "Objectification," a core concept in feminist and gender studies, refers to treating a human being not as a person but as an object. Another similar term, "sexual objectification," refers to any portrayal that emphasizes sexually suggestive body parts with the intent to entice. Both concepts recognize that the primary motive for objectified portrayals is to satisfy the "gaze" of the targeted audience.

As the present study examines male objectification within the domain of advertising, it is essential to consider the stakeholders in the advertising process, including advertising agencies, the corporate sector, media production companies, and audiences. Although, in principle, all stakeholders at both the producing and receiving ends should influence media processes, the revenue of mass media largely depends on advertisers and sponsors. Consequently, advertising trends and cultures are shaped more by these sponsors than by other stakeholders. The corporate sector uses media to engage audiences with their business interests and exercises strong influence in designing and shaping advertising norms. Media channels exert minimal, if any, influence in this regard. Pakistan's economic survey (2018–2019) revealed an investment of 840 million United States dollars in the country's electronic media industry, which underscores the media's significance as an industry.¹ This economic landscape leads advertisers to adopt every strategy they believe will attract public attention. Objectification is one of the most commonly employed strategies to draw viewers to advertisements.² However, with the rise of gender studies in the past century, ethical, intellectual, and moral debates have emerged regarding gender objectification in advertising and other areas of life. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)'s media education program, which includes a course on gender, media, and information and communications technology, emphasizes the sensitivity of media representation and its effects on audiences. The course also offered approaches to addressing gender issues in media, especially in the digital age.³

Sexual objectification refers to the media's misuse of men through sexually suggestive poses, revealing clothing, muscular physique, complexion-based preferences, or by highlighting specific body parts.⁴ Characters in advertisements are often portrayed in provocative clothing or engaging in alluring behavior. It is therefore essential to examine the patterns through which gender is presented to audiences. Universities can adopt UNESCO's gender-sensitive indicators for media or develop their own media art education frameworks to integrate gender-sensitivity issues into their curricula.

In contemporary commercial and media industries, male objectification appears to have become normalized. The primary motive behind gender objectification is to produce enticement for audiences. Key stakeholders in this cycle include sponsors, advertising agencies, media production companies, and electronic media audiences.⁵ All these parties are involved in the process consciously or unconsciously, either at the production or reception

end. For the present research, the key concern is not determining who initiates or sustains objectification, but rather understanding the ways in which human beings are objectified and exploring how such practices can be discouraged. This raises important questions about how media art education, through its pedagogy and curriculum, can help produce media content that is more sensitive to issues of gender representation, sexualization, and socio-cultural values.

The objectives of this study are to analyze how male objectification is portrayed in Pakistani television (TV) advertisements, identify the patterns through which such objectification occurs, and examine the effects of male objectification on culture, art, and social value systems. The study also aims to understand how media art education can contribute to reducing objectification in advertising.

In line with these objectives, the research questions guiding this study inquire into the ways men are represented in Pakistani TV advertisements, the trends and patterns of male objectification used within the Pakistani advertising industry, and the potential strategies for reforming advertising norms and values to minimize male objectification for the well-being of audiences. In addition, the study seeks to explore how media art education can support content producers in curtailing objectification practices in advertisements.

2. Review of literature

Advertising is a communication medium that consistently endeavors to influence potential consumers to purchase a specific brand, product, or service. Men are increasingly being portrayed as users of beauty and grooming products, with growing emphasis on body image, fashion, and sexuality. Scholars assert that the new male image emerging in advertising depicts men as being highly concerned with their sexuality as a primary and distinctive trait. The daily repetition of such depictions can create complexities in the minds of audiences. Media, with its increasing influence on society, plays a significant role in shaping how individuals understand their identity. Media images form part of the experiences through which men learn how to construct their sense of masculinity. This "metrosexual" image is frequently conveyed through the attire worn by male models in advertisements.⁶ In another study, Kolbe and Albanese⁷ stated that sexual objectification occurs when a marketer presents explicitly suggestive body parts or excludes an individual's head in photographs. Advertisers evaluate models primarily based on their physical characteristics in commercials. Expanded patterns of objectification reveal that both male and female characters are portrayed in alluring ways in advertisements. The study demonstrated a

clear acceptance of sexuality as a significant component of present advertising culture.⁷

Art education must consider critical pedagogy to help learners understand visual culture. People are exposed to hundreds of advertisements daily, especially in visual form on TV screens, movies, billboards, and magazines. These advertisements shape our worldview, and various cultural commodities are consumed as a result of their influence. Art education can help train students critically and support media literacy by enhancing their ability to analyze and utilize media content.⁸

Several studies have examined the physical characteristics of male models, noting that developing physiques similar to those portrayed in advertisements is an unrealistic goal for many men. Such unattainable standards may lead to physical and psychological issues, including muscle dysmorphia or diminished body esteem. Body composition has been classified according to type, including delicate and rounded (endomorph), solid and muscular (mesomorph), or thin and lightly built (ectomorph).⁹ The objectification of men in advertisements has evolved over time, presenting male images in various ways that contribute to self-objectification.¹⁰ The portrayal of men displaying their bodies, highlighting skin complexion, associating psychological traits with appearance, promoting macho or handsome looks, focusing on styling, celebrity appeal, expressions, body language, posture toward women, and clothing choices are among the various elements contributing to the objectification of men in media.¹¹

3. Theoretical framework

The study draws its theoretical framework from objectification theory. Originally presented by Barbara Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts, objectification theory explains objectification as a prevailing cultural trend. The theorists argue that objectification leads men and women to internalize a third-person perspective of perfection and beauty.¹² The theory is further supported by the concept of “body image,” which posits that people tend to compare their own beauty standards with those of others, often resulting in beliefs that they are imperfect or inferior to the idealized images portrayed in the media. Individuals experiencing body dissatisfaction may suffer from negative emotions, such as low body esteem, feelings of inadequacy, low self-esteem, body shame, anxiety, and related psychological issues.

4. Methods

The study employed a qualitative approach, using critical discourse analysis to analyze the data. A purposive sampling

technique was used to collect data from mainstream TV advertisements. Six TV commercials were selected from January 2018 to December 2018 from digital archives, particularly Ad Pedia and YouTube. These advertisements were aired on Pakistani private TV channels during the specified period. The selected advertisements promoted various beauty and daily-use products related to body and facial care, such as body sprays, shampoos, face creams, and bath soaps. To conduct the analysis, every frame of each advertisement was examined through critical discourse analysis. The unit of analysis was each frame that contained representations of men. Based on these representations, the study critically assessed the role of media art education in shaping media production design.

5. Data presentation and analysis

The following subsections examine selected advertisements through a critical analysis of how male objectification is constructed and represented.

5.1. Advertisement #1: Golden Pearl body spray

This advertisement promotes a body spray named Golden Pearl. The male model in the advertisement displays his shined anterior and medial body parts at the beginning of the commercial (Figure 1). The man is shown singing while a woman is depicted as being lured toward him. The tagline of the ad is “*Kheech ley pas*” (gets/pulls you closer). The body language of the male model suggests enticement and temptation. Audiences have different social and ethical values, as well as varying opinions regarding art and media. While subjectivity undeniably prevails in the two-way process of art production and reception, clearly defined genres and their boundaries are still recognized and are generally not expected to be crossed without a clear justification. An advertisement is intended to promote a product or service, while erotica is meant to stimulate sexual esthetics and excite the audience. This advertisement appears to combine both functions by exploiting body



Figure 1. A frame of the Golden Pearl body spray advertisement

display and gestures of intimacy—elements that are not essential for brand promotion. The norms of erotica and advertising are distinct, and their audiences are not always the same. Considering the sensational presentation of the male body shown in the advertisement, it is evident that the male body is presented as an object of pleasure for the opposite gender, and that fragrance is positioned as an aid to the enticement. The production team seems to focus primarily on commercial gain, employing marketing tactics to increase product sales by exploiting human persona and sensual appeal.

Advertisements form part of the broader visual culture of the media industry. One dimension of advertising is purely creative, while the other reflects the marketing strategies of the corporate world. Semiotics is one of the key components of visual communication; the symbols embedded in advertisements influence not only consumer purchasing behavior but also much broader social and cultural perceptions. Because even a short visual sequence can affect the human mind, the production of such content requires careful consideration. Responsible media design and art education can train the content creators to address such sensitive matters. These visuals represent the underlying psychology of media marketing, and their production demands a responsible media art education to help develop content that can counter negative media effects.

5.2. Advertisement #2: Set Wet TV commercial

While the advertisement in [Figure 1](#) uses body display to objectify, this TV commercial exploits sexually suggestive body language ([Figure 2](#)). The advertisement promotes a body spray called Set Wet, a name itself open to sexual interpretation. The advertisement objectifies the man through sexually suggestive and supposedly seductive interactions between the male and female models. It is notable that a single male model is placed against multiple female models. As the male consumer of the brand walks



Figure 2. A frame of the Set Wet television commercial

through different locations, women are portrayed as becoming attracted to him due to the product's fragrance. According to Fredrickson and Roberts,¹² media often use human physical traits to engage audiences and manipulate consumer behavior. This strategy affects not only purchasing decisions but can also lead to psychological complexities, such as eating disorders, body shaming, body-complex issues, and identity crises. This advertisement reverses the traditional trope, where a woman in public becomes the object of multiple men's gaze, by depicting a man as the object of multiple women's gaze. While some feminists might interpret this as a symbolic reversal of gender roles or as women exercising agency, the fundamental issue remains: Objectification of any individual—man, woman, or even animal—is ethically unjustified. Media art literature emphasizes human values over commercial gain, yet advertisements often blur these boundaries. With their large and diverse viewerships, advertisements directly or indirectly shape consumer behavior and influence cultural norms. This illustrates how media lead audiences toward selected consumerism. Media literacy is one of the key approaches through which media art academia can educate media graduates, who are the future content creators, to produce content that conveys information about products or services without imposing or propagating a particular stance to the audience. Media literacy also enables audiences to critically evaluate media images and understand the subliminal messages embedded within them. It helps individuals recognize negative effects, such as self-esteem, eating disorders, and other psychological complexities. Scholars have further suggested online media literacy programs as a means to combat these negative effects.¹³

5.3. Advertisement #3: Garnier Fairman TV commercial

This advertisement features a famous actor as the brand ambassador and promotes a skin-fairness product. Notably, whereas fairness products were traditionally advertised using female models, this commercial features a male model. The choice of a muscular man as the brand ambassador is noteworthy ([Figure 3](#)). In addition, the emphasis on skin display is strong enough that the audience is unlikely to interpret it as anything other than sexual. Even the lighting seems deliberately designed to highlight the minor details of the model's "masculine" anterior and medial features. The use of voice and word choice further enhances the sensual tone. The selection of a film actor known for his "topless scenes" and "masculine beauty" raises questions about the intended message: The targeted audience is encouraged to associate brand usage with achieving a similar appearance—essentially, a "masculine

beauty” akin to that of popular topless male celebrities. Advertisers seem confident that this portrayal will attract a large viewership. This leads to a deeper question about the role of audiences in shaping contemporary advertising norms. If advertisers invest heavily in well-known male celebrity figures, it signals their confidence that such representations are widely accepted. If so, then male objectification has penetrated deep not only into media platforms but also broader social value systems. In this advertisement, the media seem to reinforce rather than challenge this trend.

5.4. Advertisement #4: Clear Shampoo TV commercial

Aggression, fierceness, and seriousness have been associated with traditional masculinity in popular art and media discourses of the past century, especially within South Asian culture. It appears as though there exists an implicit checklist of physical or intellectual qualities for a person to be considered a “perfect package.”

Media, such as other artistic discourses, have contributed to shaping this conception of the “perfect masculine package.” Not only drama and film heroes but also models in short advertisements are often portrayed as embodying this ideal. Such images present an illusory dream that advertisers sell to the masses in exchange for commercial profit.

In this commercial, the consumer of the shampoo “Clear” is presented as a “perfect masculine package,” free from minor issues, such as dandruff, which is portrayed as embarrassing. The model’s fierce expression, posture, and direct address to the audience echo the stereotypical “Punjabi hero,” though updated with a suit rather than traditional attire (Figure 4). This portrayal is deeply connected to male objectification. The model is depicted not as an everyday “dandruff-free man” but as an idealized and unrealistically perfect version of masculinity. This may lead male viewers to compare themselves unfavorably with the model—essentially comparing a real person to a pre-defined idealized image. Such comparisons amount to self-objectification and ultimately serve commercial interests by promoting product sales. Grizzle¹⁴ concluded that adults show greater attraction and purchase intention toward advertisements presented in a sexualized manner. Such a phenomenon is also discussed in UNESCO’s Gender-Sensitive Indicators for Media, particularly regarding sexualized and erotic content.¹⁵

5.5. Advertisement #5: Bold Spray TV commercial

The advertisement begins with a shot of a neck being sprayed with a perfume body spray (Figure 5). The



Figure 3. A frame of the Garnier Fairman television commercial



Figure 4. A frame of the Clear Shampoo television commercial

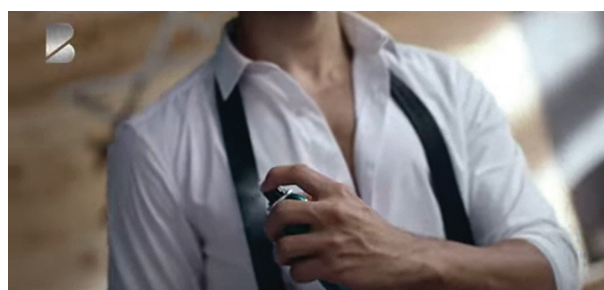


Figure 5. A frame of the Bold Spray television commercial

commercial proceeds as follows: A young boy sets out for his workday after using a perfume body spray named Bold. On his way from home to the office, he comes across three girls and a man who react to the fragrance of his spray.

The objectification in this advertisement is manifold and deeper than it first appears. First, it creates deliberate age-based distinctions. The lead male model and the first grocery woman are the youngest in the commercial, and both are shown as lively but not desiring, while the two older women—the one in the lift and the other in the office—display facial expressions more clearly suggestive of desire. The middle-aged man who is being searched by the security guard is presented in contrast to the young

man. When examined closely, the intent seems to be to introduce the brand as a product associated with youth, depicting the young as bold and as the center of attraction for the mature.¹⁶ This is not coincidental; models in the ad belong to slightly different age groups to construct two categories: Those who are young and bold (the consumers of the brand and the desirable), and those who are attracted to them (the desirous). Consequently, the viewers may be encouraged to aspire to desirability and youthfulness.

This advertisement uses a young male model as an object of desire for women of different age groups. It does not rely on explicit body display to achieve this; rather, it employs a sequence of scenes as its primary tool. Background music and the thematic line sung along with it also enhance the effect. The line “*Tera hey hold, ker dey bold*” (you have got a hold, and you have clean bowled) reinforces the theme. Overall, the commercial exemplifies male objectification through the portrayal of men as objects of female pleasure. The glamorization constructed around this theme dominated the 60-s advertisement, while the product itself became secondary. The word “bold” gained more attention in its double meaning related to erotic attraction. Media art education emphasizes not only the visual elements of such content but also the neutrality of language and semiotics to manage media effects and, in particular, psychological impact.¹⁷ Theories concerning media influence suggest regulating double meanings in media communication. By adhering to media ethics and enhancing media literacy, such effects can be mitigated.

5.6. Advertisement #6: Fair and Lovely Men’s Facewash

The commercial starts with a shot of the model, Fawad Khan, riding a bike and passing by a truck, where he encounters pollution and dirt that make his face appear darkened. The next shot shows him going to the washroom, where two other men are also present. The lead model starts talking about the dirt, and a shot of his shirt is shown, in which his white shirt has turned grey due to the dirt and smoke. Meanwhile, another man passes a bar of soap to him, which he rejects, saying, “*hum bikers ko chahye Fair and Lovely Men’s Facewash*” (we bikers need Fair and Lovely Men’s Facewash). At this point, instructions regarding how to use the product are shown, alongside visuals of the model’s complexion becoming brighter after use (Figure 6). The final shot shows the two men—the consumer and the non-consumer of the product—walking out. This shot highlights the difference between them. Some girls standing nearby appear attracted to the lead model, who has used the facewash, and they comment on him with pleasant expressions. In contrast, they ignore the other man who did not use the product.

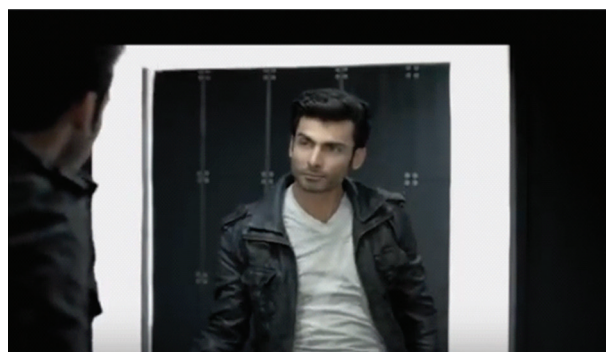


Figure 6. A frame of the Fair and Lovely Men’s facewash advertisement

Besides exploiting the idea of fair complexion, this commercial also capitalizes on the glamour associated with biking, which is evident in the tagline. Through this line, the advertisers target the general male youth, as both the biker imagery and the presence of a well-known national celebrity encourage young boys to relate to the advertisement. Such content not only violates the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority laws but also undermines basic advertising ethics, which discourage manipulating human agency as a marketing strategy. These standardized beauty myths are also developed as capitalist constructs.

6. Conclusion

Digital media art education is a combination of technology, skill, and esthetics. It involves the use of various technological tools throughout the entire process of media production.¹⁸ Alongside technological advancements, socio-cultural value systems have changed in recent decades, reshaping the visual culture of Pakistani society. In the postmodern, globalized world, where cultural capitals blur cultural boundaries, media art design still needs to remain connected to local and regional value systems and cultural norms. Media production now relies heavily on artificial intelligence and advanced technologies.¹⁹ These technologies are not only used by media producers but also by designers, animators, and a range of media artists. If they understand the effects of their productions and design content carefully, negative psychological effects can be reduced. Similarly, when media users learn how media constructs gendered bodies, they develop stronger psychological resilience.^{20,21} In addition to learning critique, young viewers reclaim agency in shaping representational culture when they create alternative, diverse, and body-affirming narratives while deconstructing sexualizing messages.²² Digital and media art literacy must therefore be viewed as part of a broader rethinking of literacy and technology in media production.²³

The analysis reveals that contemporary TV advertisements tend to portray men as objects of consumer value, marketing strategy, and the female gaze. This objectification is conveyed through skin display, sexually suggestive language, and various forms of polarization related to skin complexion, physique, age, and weight.²⁴

Advertising executives should take into account both gender effects and media literacy effects when addressing sexualized images of men and women.²⁵ Awareness of constructed content is the first step toward recognizing its influence. Understanding stereotypes related to idealized, hyper-muscular portrayals of men can help reduce male objectification.²⁶ Visual literacy is essential for both creators and consumers; it is crucial to understand how the male body is staged and manipulated in media, especially in advertising.²⁷

This objectification of men is as condemnable as that of women. Frequent and unchecked circulation of such TV commercials can normalize polarization based on the traits mentioned above. It can also shape and distort esthetic and intellectual standards regarding men and masculinity. Men can better understand how objectification affects them by participating in critical masculinity debates within media design education. These discussions can lessen body dissatisfaction, compulsive gym culture, steroid use, and emotional suppression.²⁸

In short, such portrayals can influence how men see, identify, and define themselves, and how women see, identify, and define men. In the long run, these flawed conceptions of men and masculinity can penetrate our education, art, culture, and social value systems, as media have become a foundational pillar of these structures. Media literacy campaigns, particularly within educational institutions, remain an effective way to mitigate the negative effects of such content. Responsible media art education, proper legislation, and oversight from regulatory bodies like the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority can help minimize these impacts.

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Ethics approval and consent to participate

Not applicable.

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Availability of data

The data analyzed/generated in this study are available within the manuscript.

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