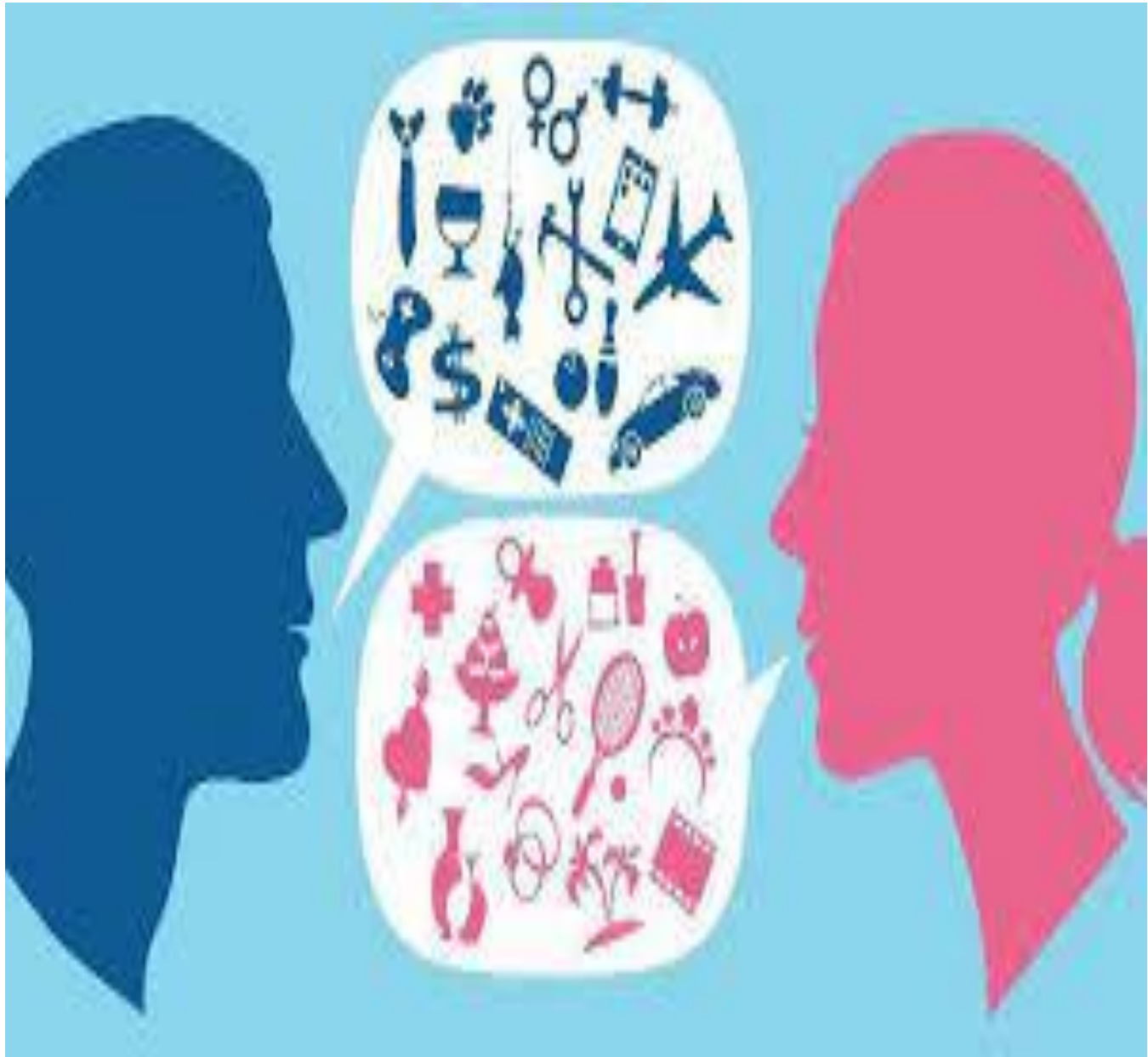


Volume: 5 Issue: 3
July-September, 2026
ISSN: 2957-4137



OPEN

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.64907/xkmf.v5.i3.jges.9>

Semiotic Representations of Gender in Fashion Advertising

Prantik Roy Anoy¹; Kazi Abdul Mannan²

This study examines the semiotic representations of gender in contemporary fashion advertising, focusing on how visual and symbolic elements construct, reinforce, and challenge gender identities. Drawing on semiotic theory, gender performativity, and critical perspectives on ideology, the research adopts a qualitative methodology based on secondary data, including global fashion campaigns, academic literature, and digital media content. Through a systematic semiotic analysis, the study identifies recurring patterns in the depiction of masculinity and femininity, including the persistence of traditional gender binaries, the influence of the male gaze, and the symbolic coding of gender through clothing, posture, and visual composition. At the same time, the findings highlight the growing presence of gender-fluid and androgynous representations, reflecting broader socio-cultural shifts toward inclusivity. However, these progressive portrayals are often commodified and strategically employed for brand positioning, raising questions about their authenticity and transformative potential. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of fashion advertising as a site of cultural and ideological production, where gender norms are continuously negotiated, reproduced, and contested within the dynamics of global consumer culture.

Keywords: semiotics, gender representation, fashion advertising, gender performativity, visual culture, masculinity, femininity

¹Department of Fashion Design & Technology, ²Department of Business Administration, Shanto-Mariam University of Creative Technology, Dhaka, Bangladesh Email: anoyr2004@gmail.com

Copyright: © 2026 by the authors. Licensee KMF Publishers (www.kmf-publishers.com). This open-access article is distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

Fashion advertising constitutes one of the most influential visual and cultural systems in contemporary society, functioning not only as a commercial tool but also as a powerful mechanism for the construction and dissemination of social meanings. Among its most significant cultural roles is the representation and shaping of gender identities. Through carefully curated imagery, narrative structures, and symbolic codes, fashion advertisements participate actively in defining what it means to be masculine, feminine, or situated outside traditional gender binaries. These representations are not neutral; rather, they are deeply embedded within broader socio-cultural and ideological frameworks that influence how individuals perceive themselves and others (Gill, 2007).

Gender, as conceptualised in contemporary scholarship, is not a fixed biological attribute but a socially constructed and performative identity shaped through repeated cultural practices (Butler, 1990). Media, including advertising, play a central role in this process by providing visual and discursive templates through which gender is enacted and understood. Fashion advertising, in particular, operates at the intersection of identity, aesthetics, and consumerism, making it a critical site for examining the semiotic construction of gender. By encoding meanings through visual signs such as clothing, posture, gaze, and setting, advertisements communicate complex messages about gender roles, norms, and expectations.

Historically, fashion advertising has reinforced rigid gender binaries and traditional stereotypes. Men have typically been portrayed as dominant, active, and authoritative, while women have been depicted as passive, decorative, and subordinate (Goffman, 1979). These portrayals reflect and perpetuate broader patriarchal structures, contributing to the normalisation of gender inequality. The repetition of such images over time has led to the naturalisation of specific gender roles, making them appear inherent rather than socially constructed (Barthes, 1977).

However, the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have witnessed significant transformations in societal attitudes toward gender. The rise of feminist movements, LGBTQ+ activism, and critical gender theories has challenged traditional norms and called for more inclusive and diverse representations. In response, the fashion industry has increasingly incorporated alternative portrayals of gender, including androgyny, gender fluidity, and non-binary identities. These developments suggest a shift toward a more pluralistic understanding of gender, reflecting broader cultural changes (Entwistle, 2015).

Despite these advancements, the relationship between fashion advertising and gender representation remains complex and often contradictory. On one hand, contemporary advertisements appear to embrace diversity and inclusivity, presenting a wider range of gender expressions. On the other hand, critics argue that these representations are frequently commodified and strategically employed to align with market trends rather

than to promote genuine social change (Banet-Weiser, 2018). In this sense, fashion advertising may simultaneously challenge and reinforce dominant gender ideologies.

Semiotics, the study of signs and meaning-making processes, provides a valuable analytical framework for examining how gender is constructed in fashion advertising. According to Barthes (1977), images function as systems of signs that convey both denotative and connotative meanings. These meanings are shaped by cultural codes and are often embedded within broader ideological structures. By analysing the semiotic elements of fashion advertisements, it is possible to uncover the underlying assumptions and values that inform gender representation.

This study aims to explore the semiotic representations of gender in fashion advertising through a qualitative analysis of secondary data. It seeks to address the following research questions: How are gender identities constructed and represented in fashion advertising? What semiotic elements are used to convey gendered meanings? And to what extent do contemporary advertisements challenge or reinforce traditional gender norms?

The significance of this research lies in its contribution to the understanding of fashion advertising as a site of cultural and ideological production. By examining the visual and symbolic dimensions of gender representation, the study provides insights into the ways in which the media shapes social perceptions and identities. Furthermore, it highlights the tension

between commercial imperatives and social responsibility in the fashion industry.

In an increasingly globalised and media-saturated world, the images disseminated through fashion advertising have far-reaching implications. They influence not only consumer behaviour but also broader cultural attitudes toward gender and identity. As such, a critical examination of these representations is essential for understanding the dynamics of power, ideology, and meaning in contemporary visual culture.

2. Literature Review

The representation of gender in media has been a central concern in communication and cultural studies for several decades. Early research in this field focused on identifying and critiquing stereotypical portrayals of men and women in advertising. Courtney and Lockeretz (1971) conducted one of the earliest systematic analyses, demonstrating that women were predominantly depicted in domestic roles, while men were associated with professional and authoritative positions. These findings highlighted the role of advertising in reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies.

Subsequent studies expanded this line of inquiry by examining the symbolic and ideological dimensions of gender representation. Goffman's (1979) seminal work on gender advertisements identified recurring patterns such as the "feminine touch," "ritualisation of subordination," and "licensed withdrawal," which collectively depict women as fragile, submissive, and dependent. These visual conventions

function as cultural codes that communicate gendered meanings and normalise unequal power relations.

In more recent scholarship, the focus has shifted toward the complexity and diversity of gender representation. Gill (2007) argues that contemporary media portrayals of women are characterised by a postfeminist sensibility, which combines elements of empowerment and objectification. Women are often depicted as confident and autonomous, yet their value remains closely tied to physical appearance and sexual desirability. This duality reflects the ongoing tension between feminist ideals and commercial imperatives.

2.1 Semiotics and the Analysis of Advertising

Semiotics provides a theoretical foundation for understanding how meaning is constructed in advertising. Rooted in the work of Saussure (1916) and Peirce (1931), semiotics conceptualises communication as a system of signs composed of signifiers (forms) and signifieds (concepts). In advertising, these signs are strategically arranged to convey specific messages and evoke particular responses.

Barthes (1977) extended semiotic analysis to visual media, emphasising the distinction between denotation and connotation. While denotation refers to the literal meaning of an image, connotation involves the cultural and symbolic meanings associated with it. For example, an image of a woman in a flowing dress may denote a fashion item but connote femininity, elegance, and passivity.

Barthes also introduced the concept of myth, which refers to the process by which cultural meanings become naturalised and taken for granted. In the context of fashion advertising, myths about gender are constructed through repeated visual patterns that reinforce specific norms and expectations. These myths contribute to the perception of gender roles as natural rather than socially constructed.

2.2 Gender and Fashion: Theoretical Perspectives

Fashion is a key site for the expression and negotiation of gender identity. Entwistle (2015) conceptualises fashion as a situated bodily practice, emphasising the role of clothing in shaping and communicating identity. Through choices of dress, individuals perform and negotiate their gender identities within specific social contexts.

Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity provides a critical framework for understanding this process. According to Butler, gender is not an inherent quality but a set of repeated acts that produce the illusion of a stable identity. Fashion advertising contributes to this process by providing visual scripts that guide the performance of gender.

The intersection of fashion and gender is also influenced by broader socio-cultural factors, including class, race, and sexuality. Crane (2012) argues that fashion serves as a form of symbolic capital, enabling individuals to express social status and identity. However, access to certain forms of fashion is often

limited by structural inequalities, resulting in uneven representation in advertising.

2.3 The Male Gaze and Objectification

The concept of the male gaze, introduced by Mulvey (1975), has been widely applied to the analysis of advertising. According to this theory, visual media are structured around a masculine perspective that positions women as objects of visual pleasure. This perspective is evident in fashion advertising, where women are often depicted in ways that emphasise their physical appearance and sexual desirability.

Objectification theory further explains the psychological and social consequences of such representations (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). By reducing individuals to their physical attributes, objectification undermines agency and reinforces gender inequality. In fashion advertising, this is manifested through the use of suggestive poses, revealing clothing, and camera techniques that fragment the body.

2.4 Contemporary Shifts: Diversity and Inclusivity

In recent years, there has been a growing emphasis on diversity and inclusivity in fashion advertising. Brands increasingly feature models of different genders, body types, ethnicities, and identities, reflecting broader societal changes. This shift is partly driven by consumer demand for more authentic and representative imagery (Duffy & Hund, 2015).

The rise of gender-neutral and androgynous fashion represents a significant departure

from traditional norms. These styles challenge binary conceptions of gender and create space for more fluid identities. However, scholars caution that such representations are often limited to specific market segments and may not translate into broader social change (Rocamora, 2017).

2.5 Commodification of Feminism and Gender Politics

One of the most critical debates in contemporary literature concerns the commodification of feminism and gender politics. Banet-Weiser (2018) argues that brands increasingly adopt feminist and inclusive messages as part of their marketing strategies, a phenomenon she describes as “commodity feminism.” While these campaigns may raise awareness, they often prioritise profit over genuine social transformation.

This commodification is evident in fashion advertising, where progressive representations of gender are used to enhance brand image and appeal to socially conscious consumers. As a result, the line between activism and marketing becomes blurred, raising questions about authenticity and impact.

2.6 Intersectionality and Representation

Intersectionality, a concept introduced by Crenshaw (1989), emphasises the interconnected nature of social identities and the ways in which they shape experiences of oppression and privilege. In the context of fashion advertising, intersectionality highlights the need to consider how gender

intersects with race, class, sexuality, and other factors.

Despite increasing attention to diversity, many advertisements continue to privilege certain identities, particularly those that align with dominant cultural norms. This results in limited and often stereotypical representations that fail to capture the complexity of real-world identities.

3. Theoretical Framework

The present study is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates semiotic theory, gender performativity, and critical perspectives on ideology and representation. These theoretical approaches provide a comprehensive lens for analysing how gender meanings are constructed, communicated, and contested in fashion advertising. By combining these perspectives, the study seeks to uncover both the visible and underlying structures that shape gender representation in visual culture.

3.1 Semiotic Theory and Meaning Construction

Semiotic theory forms the core analytical foundation of this research. Originating in the work of Ferdinand de Saussure (1916) and Charles Sanders Peirce (1931), semiotics conceptualises meaning as a relational system of signs. Saussure's model defines a sign as consisting of two components: the signifier (the form of the sign, such as an image or word) and the signified (the concept or meaning associated with it). The relationship between these components is arbitrary and shaped by cultural conventions,

making meaning inherently social and contextual.

In the context of fashion advertising, semiotic analysis enables the examination of how visual elements-such as clothing, colour, posture, facial expression, and spatial arrangement-function as signifiers that convey gendered meanings. These elements do not operate in isolation but are embedded within broader systems of cultural codes that guide interpretation. For instance, the use of soft lighting, pastel colours, and delicate fabrics may signify femininity, while darker tones, structured garments, and assertive postures may connote masculinity.

Roland Barthes (1977) extends Saussurean semiotics by introducing the distinction between denotation and connotation. Denotation refers to the literal, descriptive level of meaning, while connotation involves the cultural and symbolic associations that an image evokes. In fashion advertising, a photograph of a model wearing a suit may denote a clothing item but connote authority, professionalism, or masculinity, depending on the context.

Barthes also introduces the concept of myth, which is central to understanding the ideological dimension of advertising. Myths are culturally constructed narratives that naturalise specific meanings and values, making them appear universal and self-evident. In fashion advertising, myths about gender are perpetuated through repeated visual patterns that reinforce normative ideals of masculinity and femininity. These myths contribute to the normalisation of gender roles and obscure their socially constructed nature.

3.2 Gender Performativity and Identity Construction

The second key theoretical pillar of this study is Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity. Butler challenges the notion of gender as a stable and inherent identity, arguing instead that it is constituted through repeated performances shaped by social norms and expectations. According to this perspective, gender is not something one is, but something one does.

Fashion plays a crucial role in this performative process, as clothing and bodily presentation are primary means through which individuals express and negotiate their gender identities. Fashion advertising, in turn, provides a set of visual scripts that guide these performances by depicting idealised forms of gender expression. Through repeated exposure to these images, individuals internalise and reproduce specific gender norms.

Butler's framework is particularly useful for analysing the dynamic and evolving nature of gender representation in contemporary fashion advertising. As societal attitudes toward gender become more fluid and inclusive, advertisements increasingly depict non-traditional and non-binary identities. However, these representations are still shaped by commercial and cultural constraints, raising questions about their authenticity and transformative potential.

3.3 Ideology, Power, and Representation

The third component of the theoretical framework draws on critical theories of ideology and representation. Advertising is

not merely a reflection of reality but an active participant in the construction of social meanings and power relations. As such, it plays a significant role in shaping cultural norms and values, including those related to gender.

From a critical perspective, representation is understood as a site of ideological struggle, where dominant and alternative meanings are negotiated. Hall (1997) emphasises that representation is constitutive of reality, meaning that the way something is represented influences how it is perceived and understood. In fashion advertising, the representation of gender is shaped by dominant ideologies that privilege certain identities while marginalising others.

The concept of the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975) further highlights the power dynamics embedded in visual representation. According to this theory, media images are often structured from a masculine perspective that positions women as objects of visual pleasure. This perspective reinforces gender inequality by prioritising male subjectivity and female objectification.

Additionally, Foucault's (1977) notion of discourse provides insight into how power operates through systems of knowledge and representation. In the context of fashion advertising, discourses of beauty, desirability, and identity shape the ways in which gender is constructed and understood. These discourses are not fixed but are subject to change and contestation.

3.4 Integrative Framework

By integrating semiotics, gender performativity, and critical theories of

ideology, this study adopts a multidimensional approach to analysing gender representation in fashion advertising. Semiotics provides the tools for decoding visual signs and meanings, gender performativity offers a framework for understanding identity construction, and critical theory situates these processes within broader structures of power and ideology.

This integrative framework enables a nuanced analysis that goes beyond surface-level interpretation to uncover the deeper cultural and ideological forces at play. It allows the study to examine not only how gender is represented but also why certain representations persist and how they influence social perceptions and practices.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in interpretive and critical paradigms. Qualitative research is particularly suitable for exploring complex social phenomena such as gender representation, as it allows for an in-depth analysis of meanings, symbols, and cultural practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interpretive approach emphasises understanding how meanings are constructed and communicated, while the critical perspective seeks to uncover underlying power relations and ideological structures.

The research is based on secondary data, including published academic literature, fashion advertising campaigns, and digital media content. This approach enables a comprehensive analysis of existing representations without the need for primary

data collection, making it both efficient and appropriate for the study's objectives.

4.1 Data Sources and Sampling

The data for this study consists of three main sources:

- **Academic Literature:** Peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and theoretical texts on semiotics, gender studies, and fashion advertising.
- **Fashion Advertisements:** Print and digital campaigns from global fashion brands, selected to represent a range of styles, target audiences, and time periods.
- **Online Archives and Media Platforms:** Fashion magazines, brand websites, and social media platforms that host advertising content.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select relevant advertisements for analysis. This method involves selecting cases that are particularly informative or representative of the research topic (Patton, 2015). The sample includes advertisements that explicitly depict gendered imagery, as well as those that challenge or complicate traditional gender norms.

The selection criteria included:

- Visual prominence of human models
- Clear representation of gender identity or expression
- Availability of contextual information (e.g., brand, campaign theme)
- Diversity in style, geography, and brand positioning

4.2 Data Collection Procedures

Data collection involved systematic retrieval and organisation of relevant materials from academic databases, online archives, and brand platforms. Academic sources were accessed through databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Scopus, ensuring the inclusion of credible and peer-reviewed literature.

Fashion advertisements were collected from publicly available sources, including brand websites, digital magazines, and social media platforms. Screenshots and images were archived and categorised based on themes such as gender representation, visual style, and narrative structure.

All data were organised using thematic coding to facilitate analysis. This process involved grouping similar items based on shared characteristics, enabling the identification of patterns and trends.

4.3 Analytical Framework

The study employs a semiotic analysis to examine the selected advertisements. This method involves the systematic interpretation of signs and symbols to uncover their meanings and cultural significance (Chandler, 2017). The analysis is conducted at both denotative and connotative levels, following Barthes' (1977) framework.

The analytical process includes the following steps:

- **Identification of Signifiers:** Visual elements such as clothing, colour, posture, gaze, and setting.
- **Interpretation of Signifieds:** Meanings associated with these

elements, including gendered connotations.

- **Analysis of Myths:** Examination of broader cultural narratives and ideologies embedded in the representations.
- **Contextual Interpretation:** Consideration of the socio-cultural and commercial context in which the advertisements are produced and consumed.

In addition to semiotic analysis, the study incorporates elements of discourse analysis to examine how language and imagery work together to construct meaning (Fairclough, 2013). This approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay between visual and textual elements.

4.4 Reliability and Validity

Ensuring the credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative research is essential. This study employs several strategies to enhance reliability and validity:

- **Triangulation:** The use of multiple data sources (academic literature, advertisements, and media content) to corroborate findings.
- **Theoretical Consistency:** Alignment of analysis with established theoretical frameworks, including semiotics and gender theory.
- **Transparency:** Clear documentation of data selection, coding, and analytical procedures.

While qualitative research does not aim for generalizability in the same way as

quantitative studies, it seeks to provide rich, contextualised insights that are transferable to similar contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

4.5 Ethical Considerations

This study relies exclusively on publicly available secondary data, minimising ethical concerns related to privacy and consent. However, ethical considerations still apply in terms of accurate representation and interpretation of data. Care has been taken to avoid misrepresentation of advertisements and to acknowledge all sources appropriately.

Additionally, the study adopts a critical and reflexive approach, recognising the researcher's role in shaping interpretations. Efforts have been made to ensure that the analysis is balanced, respectful, and grounded in evidence.

4.6 Limitations

Despite its strengths, the study has several limitations. The reliance on secondary data may restrict the depth of analysis, as it does not include audience perspectives or primary empirical data. Furthermore, the interpretive nature of semiotic analysis introduces a degree of subjectivity, which may influence findings.

The sample of advertisements, while diverse, may not fully capture the global scope of fashion advertising. Future research could address these limitations by incorporating primary data collection methods, such as interviews or surveys, and expanding the geographical scope of analysis.

5. Findings and Analysis

The semiotic analysis of fashion advertising reveals a complex and multilayered system of gender representation that simultaneously reinforces traditional norms while incorporating emerging forms of identity expression. Through the examination of visual signs, symbolic codes, and narrative structures, this section identifies six major thematic patterns: persistence of traditional gender binaries, visual coding of masculinity and femininity, the operation of the male gaze and objectification, emergence of gender fluidity and androgyny, commodification of inclusivity, and limitations of intersectional representation.

5.1 Persistence of Traditional Gender Binaries

Despite increasing discourse around gender diversity, the analysis indicates that many fashion advertisements continue to rely on binary constructions of gender. Masculinity and femininity are frequently represented as distinct and oppositional categories, with clearly defined visual and behavioural characteristics. This binary framework reflects deeply entrenched cultural norms that shape both the production and consumption of advertising content.

In line with Goffman's (1979) observations, women are often depicted in subordinate or passive roles, characterised by reclining poses, tilted heads, and indirect gazes. These visual cues signify vulnerability, dependence, and emotionality. In contrast, male models are typically portrayed in upright, expansive postures with direct eye contact, conveying authority, control, and confidence. Such

representations reinforce the association of masculinity with power and femininity with subordination.

From a semiotic perspective, these recurring patterns function as sign systems that naturalise gender differences. The repetition of these visual codes contributes to what Barthes (1977) describes as myth-making, whereby culturally constructed meanings are perceived as natural and inevitable. As a result, traditional gender roles are reproduced and legitimised through advertising imagery.

5.2 Visual Coding of Masculinity and Femininity

The analysis further reveals that gender representation in fashion advertising is constructed through a range of visual elements, including clothing, colour, body language, and spatial arrangement. These elements operate as signifiers that convey culturally specific meanings about gender identity.

Femininity is commonly associated with soft textures, flowing fabrics, and pastel or light colour palettes. These visual cues evoke notions of delicacy, elegance, and emotional sensitivity. Additionally, female models are often positioned in domestic or intimate settings, reinforcing traditional associations with private spaces and relational roles (Gill, 2007).

Masculinity, on the other hand, is signified through structured clothing, darker colour schemes, and minimalist aesthetics. Male models are frequently placed in public or professional environments, emphasising independence and social dominance. Their body language tends to be assertive, with

squared shoulders and controlled gestures, reflecting ideals of strength and rationality.

These visual codes are not arbitrary but are rooted in historical and cultural conventions. As Entwistle (2015) notes, clothing and bodily presentation are key sites for the expression of gender identity, and fashion advertising plays a crucial role in shaping these expressions. By consistently associating certain visual elements with specific gender traits, advertisements reinforce normative expectations and limit the range of acceptable identities.

5.3 The Male Gaze and Objectification

A significant finding of this study is the influence of the male gaze in fashion advertising. Mulvey's (1975) concept of the male gaze provides a critical framework for understanding how visual media position women as objects of male desire. This perspective is evident in the composition, framing, and styling of many advertisements.

Female bodies are often fragmented through close-up shots that focus on specific body parts, such as legs, lips, or torsos. This fragmentation reduces the subject to a collection of visual elements, emphasising physical appearance over individuality or agency. Furthermore, camera angles frequently position the viewer in a dominant perspective, reinforcing a hierarchical relationship between observer and observed.

Objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) suggests that such representations have broader social and psychological implications, including the internalisation of objectifying perspectives

and the reinforcement of gender inequality. In fashion advertising, the emphasis on physical perfection and sexual appeal contributes to unrealistic beauty standards and pressures on women to conform to these ideals.

While male models are also subject to aesthetic scrutiny, their representation tends to emphasise strength, control, and action rather than passivity or availability. This asymmetry highlights the gendered nature of objectification and its role in maintaining power imbalances.

5.4 Emergence of Gender Fluidity and Androgyny

In contrast to traditional representations, the analysis identifies a growing presence of gender-fluid and androgynous imagery in contemporary fashion advertising. These representations challenge binary conceptions of gender by blurring the boundaries between masculinity and femininity.

Androgynous models often wear clothing that combines elements traditionally associated with both genders, such as tailored suits paired with soft fabrics or makeup. Their poses and expressions tend to be neutral or ambiguous, resisting clear categorisation. This ambiguity allows for multiple interpretations and reflects a more fluid understanding of identity.

The emergence of such representations aligns with broader cultural shifts toward inclusivity and diversity. Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity is particularly relevant here, as it emphasises the constructed and dynamic nature of gender. By presenting alternative forms of gender expression, fashion advertising has the potential to

expand the range of visible identities and challenge normative assumptions.

However, it is important to note that these representations are often concentrated in high-fashion contexts and may not be widely accessible. As Rocamora (2017) argues, the adoption of gender-fluid aesthetics is frequently limited to niche markets and does not necessarily translate into widespread social change.

5.5 Commodification of Inclusivity

Another key finding is the commodification of inclusive and progressive gender representations. Many fashion brands incorporate themes of diversity and empowerment into their advertising campaigns as part of their branding strategies. While these efforts may appear to promote social change, they are often driven by commercial considerations.

Banet-Weiser (2018) describes this phenomenon as “commodity feminism,” where feminist and inclusive messages are used to enhance brand value and appeal to socially conscious consumers. In fashion advertising, this is evident in campaigns that feature diverse models or challenge traditional norms while simultaneously promoting products.

The semiotic analysis reveals that these representations often rely on surface-level diversity without addressing deeper structural inequalities. For example, a campaign may include models of different genders or body types but still adhere to conventional standards of beauty and desirability. This suggests that inclusivity is being used as a marketing tool rather than a

genuine commitment to social transformation.

5.6 Limitations of Intersectional Representation

Despite the increasing emphasis on diversity, the analysis highlights significant limitations in the intersectional representation of gender. Intersectionality, as conceptualised by Crenshaw (1989), emphasises the interconnected nature of social identities and the need to consider multiple axes of difference.

In fashion advertising, gender is often portrayed in isolation, with limited attention to how it intersects with race, class, age, or sexuality. This results in representations that are narrow and exclusionary, privileging certain identities while marginalising others.

For instance, many advertisements continue to feature models who conform to dominant beauty standards, including specific body types and facial features. Even when diversity is present, it is often tokenistic and does not fully reflect the complexity of real-world identities.

This limitation underscores the need for a more holistic approach to representation that acknowledges the diversity of human experience. Without such an approach, fashion advertising risks perpetuating existing inequalities and failing to resonate with a broader audience.

6. Discussion

The findings of this study reveal a dynamic and often contradictory landscape of gender representation in fashion advertising. While

there are clear indications of progress toward inclusivity and diversity, traditional norms and power structures remain deeply embedded. This section interprets these findings within the broader theoretical and socio-cultural context, highlighting key implications and tensions.

6.1 Reproduction of Gender Ideologies

One of the central insights of this study is the role of fashion advertising in reproducing dominant gender ideologies. Through the repeated use of specific visual codes and narratives, advertisements contribute to the normalisation of gender roles and expectations.

From a semiotic perspective, these representations function as myths that naturalise socially constructed differences (Barthes, 1977). The persistence of traditional gender binaries suggests that advertising continues to operate within a framework that prioritises stability and recognizability over innovation. This is consistent with the commercial imperative to appeal to broad audiences and minimise risk.

The reproduction of gender ideologies is also linked to broader structures of power and inequality. As Hall (1997) argues, representation is not merely reflective but constitutive of social reality. By depicting certain identities as normative and others as marginal, fashion advertising plays a role in shaping cultural perceptions and reinforcing hierarchies.

6.2 Tension Between Progress and Commercialisation

The emergence of gender-fluid and inclusive representations reflects a shift in cultural attitudes and increased awareness of diversity. However, this progress is often accompanied by a process of commodification that limits its transformative potential.

The incorporation of inclusive imagery into advertising campaigns can be seen as a response to changing consumer expectations. In a competitive market, brands seek to align themselves with progressive values to enhance their appeal. However, as Banet-Weiser (2018) notes, this alignment is frequently superficial and driven by profit motives rather than genuine commitment.

This tension raises important questions about the role of advertising in social change. While fashion advertising has the potential to challenge norms and promote inclusivity, its primary function as a commercial tool may constrain its ability to do so effectively. As a result, progressive representations may coexist with, rather than replace, traditional norms.

6.3 Gender Performativity and the Role of Media

The findings also highlight the role of fashion advertising in shaping gender performativity. By providing visual scripts for how gender should be expressed, advertisements influence the ways in which individuals understand and enact their identities.

Butler's (1990) concept of performativity emphasises that gender is constituted through

repeated acts. Fashion advertising contributes to this process by presenting idealised forms of gender expression that are internalised and reproduced by audiences. This underscores the importance of media representation in shaping social norms and behaviours.

At the same time, the increasing visibility of alternative identities suggests that these scripts are evolving. The inclusion of androgynous and non-binary representations expands the range of possible performances, offering new ways of understanding and expressing gender.

6.4 The Role of Visual Culture in Identity Formation

Fashion advertising is a central component of contemporary visual culture, influencing not only consumer behaviour but also broader processes of identity formation. The images disseminated through advertising are widely circulated and consumed, making them powerful tools for shaping perceptions and attitudes.

The semiotic analysis demonstrates that these images are rich with meaning, conveying complex messages about gender, identity, and social norms. By decoding these messages, it becomes possible to understand how visual culture contributes to the construction of reality.

However, the influence of advertising is not uniform or deterministic. Audiences interpret and respond to images in diverse ways, influenced by their own experiences and social contexts. This highlights the need for further research on audience reception and the ways in which individuals engage with advertising content.

6.5 Implications for the Fashion Industry

The findings of this study have important implications for the fashion industry. As societal expectations evolve, there is increasing pressure on brands to adopt more inclusive and responsible practices. This includes not only the representation of diverse identities but also the promotion of ethical values and social awareness.

To achieve meaningful change, fashion brands must move beyond superficial representations and engage with the structural dimensions of inequality. This may involve rethinking design processes, marketing strategies, and organisational practices to ensure that inclusivity is integrated at all levels.

6.6 Future Directions and Research Implications

This study highlights several areas for future research. First, there is a need for empirical studies that examine audience responses to gender representation in fashion advertising. Such research could provide valuable insights into the impact of these representations on attitudes and behaviours.

Second, further exploration of intersectionality is to capture the complexity of identity and representation. This includes examining how gender intersects with other social categories and how these intersections are represented in advertising.

Finally, the rapid evolution of digital media presents new opportunities and challenges for gender representation. Social media platforms, in particular, have transformed the

production and dissemination of fashion imagery, creating new spaces for identity expression and contestation.

7. Conclusion

This study has explored the semiotic representations of gender in fashion advertising, demonstrating how visual imagery functions as a powerful medium for constructing and communicating gendered meanings. By integrating semiotic theory, gender performativity, and critical perspectives on ideology, the research has provided a comprehensive analysis of how gender identities are encoded, reproduced, and occasionally challenged within contemporary advertising practices.

The findings reveal that traditional gender binaries remain deeply embedded in fashion advertising, with masculinity and femininity often depicted through established visual codes and symbolic conventions. These representations contribute to the dominant gender ideologies by naturalising socially constructed roles and expectations. At the same time, the study identifies a growing presence of alternative representations, including androgynous and gender-fluid identities, which reflect broader cultural shifts toward inclusivity and diversity.

However, the analysis also highlights a significant tension between progressive representation and commercial imperatives. While many brands adopt inclusive imagery, these efforts are frequently driven by market considerations rather than a genuine commitment to social transformation. As a result, inclusivity is often commodified,

limiting its potential to challenge underlying power structures and inequalities.

Furthermore, the study underscores the nature of intersectional representation in fashion advertising. Gender is frequently portrayed in isolation, without adequate consideration of its intersections with race, class, sexuality, and other dimensions of identity. This limitation results in representations that fail to capture the complexity and diversity of lived experiences.

In conclusion, fashion advertising operates as a critical site of cultural production where gender norms are both reinforced and contested. While there is evidence of change, the persistence of traditional representations suggests that progress remains uneven and incomplete. For meaningful transformation to occur, the fashion industry must move beyond symbolic inclusivity and engage with the structural dimensions of inequality. Future research should further investigate audience reception, digital media dynamics, and intersectional approaches to better understand the evolving landscape of gender representation in fashion advertising.

References

- Banet-Weiser, S. (2018). *Empowered: Popular feminism and popular misogyny*. Duke University Press.
- Barthes, R. (1977). *Image, music, text*. Fontana Press.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Chandler, D. (2017). *Semiotics: The basics* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- Courtney, A. E., & Lockeretz, S. W. (1971). A woman's place: An analysis of the roles portrayed by women in magazine advertisements. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 8(1), 92–95.
- Crane, D. (2012). *Fashion and its social agendas: Class, gender, and identity in clothing*. University of Chicago Press.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), 139–167.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Duffy, B. E., & Hund, E. (2015). “Having it all” on social media: Entrepreneurial femininity and self-branding among fashion bloggers. *Social Media + Society*, 1(2), 1–11.
- Entwistle, J. (2015). *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, dress and modern social theory* (2nd ed.). Polity Press.
- Fairclough, N. (2013). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. Pantheon Books.
- Fredrickson, B. L., & Roberts, T. (1997). Objectification theory. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 21(2), 173–206.
- Gill, R. (2007). *Gender and the media*. Polity Press.
- Goffman, E. (1979). *Gender advertisements*. Harvard University Press.
- Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices*. Sage Publications.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage Publications.
- Mannan, K.A., & Farhana, K.M. (2026). *The Principles of Qur'anic Research Methodology: Deriving the Process of Knowledge from Revelation*. KMF Publishers. Open Access (CC BY 4.0). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.64907/xkmf.book.pqrm.26.02.12>
- Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen*, 16(3), 6–18.
- Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Peirce, C. S. (1931). *Collected papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Harvard University Press.
- Rocamora, A. (2017). Mediatization and digital media in the field of fashion. *Fashion Theory*, 21(5), 505–522.
- Saussure, F. de. (1916). *Course in general linguistics*. McGraw-Hill.