

# Representation Of Women In Modern Advertising Visuals: A Semiotic Analysis Of The Transformation Of Feminine Imagery In Popular Media

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## Abstract

This study analyzes the representation of women in modern advertising and examines the transformation of feminine imagery across media periods using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework. This study employed a qualitative approach through purposive sampling of advertisements from two distinct eras, sourced from digital platforms, particularly YouTube, due to its high visual consumption and relevance in contemporary media culture. Visual elements, including gestures, expressions, composition, color, and symbolic attributes, were systematically interpreted at three levels of meaning: denotation, connotation, and myth. The findings reveal a significant shift from ornamental and passive portrayals in earlier advertisements to active, independent, and empowered figures in contemporary digital and professional contexts. Earlier advertisements constructed femininity through soft visual aesthetics, static postures, and pastel color schemes that reinforced traditional gender roles, while contemporary advertisements positioned women as active agents of change within professional and technological environments. Nevertheless, these progressive portrayals remain embedded within commercial aesthetics and industry-driven visual standards, indicating that empowerment narratives in contemporary advertising are not entirely free from commodification and market-driven visual logic. These findings highlight advertising's role as a cultural agent in reconstructing gender narratives and underscore the need for critical awareness in visual communication design practices to foster more inclusive, equitable, and context-sensitive portrayals of women in contemporary media.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The representation of women in modern advertising visuals continues to evolve alongside cultural, technological, and social transformations in contemporary society. Advertising media plays a strategic role not only as a marketing tool but also as a cultural medium that constructs and reproduces social values, including gender identities (Hall, 1997; McQuail, 2010). In the context of visual communication design, advertisements function as systems of signs that shape public perceptions of femininity through visual elements such as composition, color, gesture, and symbolism. Previous studies have shown that women in advertising are often represented through idealized standards of beauty and femininity, reinforcing cultural norms and stereotypes

(Eisend, 2010; Winarni, 2010). Studies on advertising content also reveal persistent patterns of gender stereotyping across different media contexts (Furnham & Mak, 1999). Global studies have consistently shown that gender-role portrayals in advertising follow recurring patterns across different cultural contexts, reflecting broader social norms and media conventions (Matthes et al., 2016). These findings suggest that representations of women in advertising are not isolated phenomena, but part of a wider global discourse shaped by cultural and institutional influences. However, recent developments indicate a shift toward more progressive portrayals, where women are depicted as independent, active, and empowered individuals. Despite this shift, several studies argue that such representations remain influenced by commercial interests and industry-driven aesthetics (Gill & Orgad, 2018; Iyer & Dani, 2024), resulting in a tension between empowerment and commodification. This study identifies a gap in the need for deeper visual interpretation of how feminine imagery is constructed across different advertising eras. While many studies discuss representation descriptively, fewer examine the layered meanings embedded in visual elements using a semiotic approach (Widiastuti, 2020). Therefore, this study aims to analyze how women are represented in modern advertising visuals and to examine the transformation of feminine imagery using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework.

This study contributes to the field of visual communication design by providing a critical understanding of how advertising constructs gender narratives and how these representations influence social perceptions of women in contemporary society. Furthermore, it also provides a critical perspective on the intersection between visual aesthetics and gender ideology in contemporary advertising practices.

## **2. METHODS AND THEORY**

### ***2.1 Methods***

This study employs a qualitative research approach using Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis. The study focuses on interpreting visual signs in advertising through three levels of meaning: denotation, connotation, and myth. The objects of the study consist of selected advertisements featuring female figures from two different periods, representing earlier and contemporary advertising contexts. Data were collected through visual observation using purposive sampling techniques. The selected advertisements were obtained from digital platforms, particularly YouTube, due to its high visual consumption and relevance in contemporary media culture. Visual elements such as gestures, facial expressions, color, composition, and setting were systematically documented and analyzed. The data analysis process follows Barthes' semiotic framework. The denotation stage focuses on identifying literal visual elements, the connotation stage interprets symbolic meanings, and the myth stage examines broader ideological narratives embedded in the advertisements. To ensure validity and credibility, the analysis is supported by literature review, repeated visual examination, and comparative interpretation across different advertising contexts.

### ***2.2 Theory***

This study is grounded in Roland Barthes' semiotic theory (Barthes, 1972), which conceptualizes meaning as a layered system consisting of denotation, connotation, and myth. Denotation refers to the literal or surface meaning of visual elements, representing what is directly observable in an image. Connotation involves the cultural and symbolic meanings associated with these elements, shaped by social, historical, and cultural contexts. At a deeper level, myth represents the ideological dimension of meaning, where cultural values and beliefs are naturalized and presented as common sense. In advertising, myth plays a crucial role in constructing and reinforcing narratives about gender, identity, and social roles, particularly in shaping perceptions of femininity.

Within the framework of visual communication design, visual elements such as color, composition, gesture, and expression function as signs that convey meaning beyond their literal

appearance (Hall, 1997). This theoretical approach enables a critical interpretation of how feminine imagery is constructed, communicated, and normalized in advertising media across different eras.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1 Results

##### 3.1.1 Representation of Women in Earlier Advertising (*Sariayu-Serangkai Bintang Reuni 2013*)

###### 3.1.1.1 Denotation



**Figure 1.** Sariayu Advertisement Scenes (2013)  
(Source: YouTube; processed by author, 2026)

At the denotative level, the Sariayu – Serangkai Bintang Reuni (2013) advertisement presents women dressed in neat and elegant attire, characterized by soft facial expressions and calm body movements within a warm and nostalgic visual atmosphere. The clean background, soft lighting, and the use of pastel colors create a classic and feminine impression that aligns with the visual characteristics of beauty advertisements in that period (Aristyaningsih, 2013; Winarni, 2010).



**Figure 2.** Sariayu Advertisement Scenes (2013)  
(Source: YouTube; processed by author, 2026)

As shown in Figure 2, the use of close-up shots and gentle body gestures represents women as graceful and composed figures, commonly found in earlier beauty advertising (Goffman, 1979). The visual composition places women as the central focus in passive and static positions, emphasizing smooth skin and subtle smiles. From a visual communication design perspective,

this strategy directs the audience's attention toward physical aesthetics as the primary value constructed by the product.

### **3.1.1.2 Connotation**

At the connotative level, the advertisement constructs femininity as ornamental and symbolic. Women are not merely presented as individuals but as representations of beauty, softness, and social harmony. This representation also reflects how advertising traditionally positions women as objects of visual consumption and aesthetic appeal (Kilbourne, 1999). Gentle body gestures, calm facial expressions, and minimal visual conflict signify women as maintainers of emotional balance and harmony in social relationships (Rajab, 2009). This interpretation aligns with previous studies in the Indonesian context, which show that advertising continues to construct dominant beauty standards, particularly the association of fair skin with ideal femininity (Kumara et al., 2025). Such representations reinforce culturally embedded perceptions of beauty, demonstrating how visual media actively shapes and normalizes specific ideals of women's appearance.

This study interprets the selection of these visual elements not merely as aesthetic choices, but as a visual communication strategy that reproduces traditional cultural values regarding women's roles (Hall, 1997). In this context, visual design plays an important role in constructing the image of women as ideal figures—graceful, calm, and non-dominant. This aligns with the view that advertising often utilizes feminine visuals as symbols of stability and beauty that are easily accepted by a broad audience.

From a visual communication design perspective, the use of soft colors and balanced composition reinforces a safe and conventional feminine image. Women are not positioned as active subjects but as representative figures supporting the aesthetic narrative of the product.

### **3.1.1.3 Myth**



**Figure 3.** Sariayu Advertisement Scenes (2013)  
(Source: YouTube; processed by author, 2026)

At the myth level, the Sariayu advertisement reproduces the idea of the ideal woman as graceful, gentle, and responsible for maintaining cultural values and traditional beauty. This myth associates femininity with natural beauty, emotional calmness, and symbolic roles in social harmony.

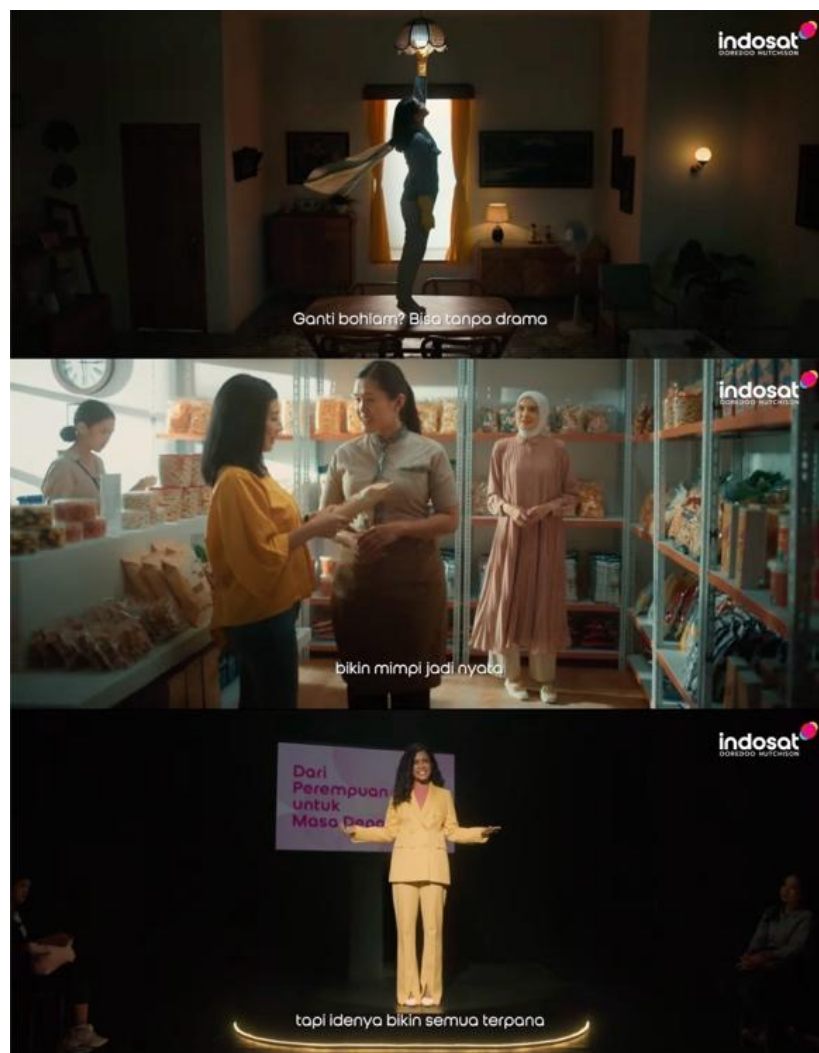
Women are positioned as aesthetic objects that represent inherited cultural values. This study argues that this myth reflects the pattern of female representation in early 2010s advertising, where beauty advertisements strongly constructed women's identity through traditional visual standards rooted in Indonesian cultural ideals, specifically the valorisation of fair skin, gentle facial expressions, and composed body language as markers of feminine virtue and social

acceptability, thereby naturalising the notion that a woman's worth is inseparable from her physical appearance and cultural conformity (Barthes, 1972; Kumara et al., 2025; Winarni, 2010). Beauty products are positioned as a medium to preserve this feminine identity, meaning that beauty is not only a personal attribute but also a cultural obligation.

Thus, the Sariayu advertisement functions not only as a promotional medium but also as an ideological tool that maintains traditional constructions of femininity in Indonesian society. This representation demonstrates how visual design and advertising narratives work together to construct myths about the ideal woman within specific cultural and social contexts.

### 3.1.2 Representation of Women in Contemporary Advertising (*SheHacks 2025: Dari Perempuan untuk Masa Depan*)

#### 3.1.2.1 Denotation



**Figure 4.** SheHacks Advertisement Scenes (2025)  
(Source: YouTube; processed by author, 2026)

At the denotative level, the SheHacks 2025 advertisement presents women engaged in various professional activities, such as discussing ideas, working with digital devices, presenting projects, and interacting in modern workspaces. The visuals are delivered through dynamic scenes with a fast pace, collaborative work environments, presentation stages, and the use of technology, emphasizing a professional and innovative context (Pratiwi, 2020; Widiastuti et al., 2024).

Women are consistently positioned as the main subjects within the visual composition, using medium shots to wide shots that show them as part of a professional ecosystem and community. This indicates a shift in representation from aesthetic emphasis toward roles and activities.

### 3.1.2.2 Connotation



**Figure 5.** SheHacks Advertisement Scenes (2025)  
(Source: YouTube; processed by author, 2026)

At the connotative level, the SheHacks advertisement constructs the image of women as independent, competent, and innovative through active body movements, confident expressions, and equal interactions among characters. The presence of digital devices and modern workspaces signifies women's connection with technology and productivity, which were previously associated with masculine domains.

From a visual communication design perspective, the use of contrasting colors, strong lighting, and fast visual rhythm creates a new feminine narrative that emphasizes competence and social contribution (Gomez-Borquez, 2024). These elements direct the audience to perceive women as key actors in shaping the digital future.

However, the analysis also reveals that this representation remains within a specific professional visual framework. Women are depicted with neat appearances, controlled gestures, and consistently positive expressions. This indicates that, although the advertisement promotes empowerment, its visual construction still follows industry aesthetic standards to remain acceptable and credible to a broad audience.

### 3.1.2.3 Myth



**Figure 6.** SheHacks Advertisement Scenes (2025)  
(Source: YouTube; processed by author, 2026)

At the myth level, the SheHacks advertisement represents women as agents of change and drivers of the future, constructed as symbols of innovation, creativity, and technological progress. This aligns with global narratives of women's empowerment in the digital era (Banet-Weiser, 2015).

This study argues that this myth reflects an ideological shift in gender representation, from the myth of women as “guardians of beauty” to women as “productive subjects and creators of solutions.” Following Barthes’ perspective, this myth works by naturalising the image of modern women as something normal and ideal in contemporary society; the SheHacks advertisement constructs this naturalisation through specific visual strategies, including the repeated depiction of women operating digital devices, leading collaborative discussions, and occupying dominant compositional positions within professional and technological environments, which collectively embed a cultural ideology that equates modern femininity with productivity, agency, and public visibility. Rather than presenting these qualities as progressive achievements, the advertisement normalises them as inherent attributes of contemporary womanhood, effectively transforming an ideological construction into an apparent social reality (Audina et al., 2022; Banet-Weiser, 2015; Barthes, 1972).

However, this empowerment myth is not entirely free from commodification. The representation of active and empowered women is still packaged within visual frameworks aligned with brand interests and persuasive communication goals. In other words, the SheHacks advertisement presents a form of transformational empowerment, but it remains within the boundaries of creative industry aesthetics and ideology (Gill & Orgad, 2018; Iyer & Dani, 2024).

Taken together, these findings confirm that advertising visuals are never ideologically neutral; rather, they function as active sites of meaning production where cultural myths about femininity are constructed, normalised, and strategically packaged to serve both social and commercial ends, a dynamic that Barthes’ semiotic framework reveals with particular clarity.

### **3.2 Discussion**

Previous studies have demonstrated that gender representation in advertising is not arbitrary, but systematically shaped by media conventions and product-related contexts. Female portrayals are often constructed through recurring stereotypical roles, which vary depending on the type of product being advertised and the target audience (Plakoyiannaki & Zotos, 2009). These patterns indicate that visual representations of women are strategically designed to align with broader marketing objectives, reinforcing specific gender norms while maintaining audience familiarity and acceptance. In this context, advertising does not merely reflect social reality, but actively participates in structuring and reproducing gendered meanings through visual communication strategies.

#### **3.2.1 Transformation of Feminine Imagery from Traditional to Modern Contexts**

Based on the visual analysis of advertisements from 2013 and 2025, there is a clear shift in patterns of feminine representation. This transformation is not only visible at the surface level of visual elements but also at the symbolic and ideological levels constructed through visual communication design strategies.



**Figure 7.** Sariayu Advertisement Scenes (2013)  
(Source: YouTube; processed by author, 2026)

In earlier advertisements, women are represented within a framework of femininity that emphasizes harmony, softness, and attachment to traditional cultural values (Rajab, 2009; Winarni, 2010). This is reflected in static body poses, calm facial expressions, pastel colors, and soft lighting that reinforce elegance, obedience, and emotional stability. This study interprets this representation as reinforcing women's roles as guardians of cultural values and social aesthetics.



**Figure 8.** SheHacks Advertisement Scenes (2025)  
(Source: YouTube; processed by author, 2026)

In contrast, contemporary advertisements portray women as more active, independent, and future-oriented. Women are no longer positioned merely as aesthetic objects but as subjects with roles, ideas, and contributions in public and professional spaces. This is reflected in stronger expressions, dynamic body gestures, and visual compositions that position women at the center of the narrative.

This shift can be interpreted as a visual response to increasing social awareness of women's roles in work, technology, and leadership (Audina et al., 2022). These findings highlight a clear transformation in the representation of women across different advertising eras and form the basis for a broader discussion on how feminine imagery is constructed and redefined within various media contexts.

### ***3.2.2 Tension Between Empowerment and Commercial Interests***

Despite the progressive shift, the transformation of feminine imagery is not entirely detached from commercial interests. Representations of women that appear progressive are still packaged

within certain visual aesthetics to align with audience preferences and marketing objectives (Iyer, 2024).

This shift can also be understood within the broader emergence of femvertising, a marketing approach that promotes empowering representations of women while remaining embedded in commercial objectives. Such strategies attempt to challenge traditional stereotypes by presenting women as confident and capable, yet they simultaneously operate within persuasive communication frameworks designed to attract consumers (Akestam et al., 2017). This duality highlights the inherent tension between empowerment and commodification in contemporary advertising practices. In this context, advertising occupies an ambivalent position: on one hand, it promotes narratives of women's empowerment, but on the other hand, it continues to frame women within visual structures controlled by the creative industry and market logic.

This reflects how advertising operates as both a cultural and commercial system, where visual representations are shaped by ideological and economic considerations simultaneously. This condition is often associated with postfeminist media culture, where narratives of empowerment are intertwined with consumerism and market-driven visual strategies (Gill & Orgad, 2018).

### ***3.2.3 Advertising as a Cultural Agent and Implications for Visual Communication Design***

Advertising functions not only as a promotional medium but also as a cultural agent that shapes and normalizes social values, including gender constructions (Hall, 1997; McQuail, 2010). Advertising visuals also carry ethical implications, as they shape how identities and social roles are constructed and communicated globally (Schroeder & Borgerson, 2005). The representation of women in advertising becomes part of the meaning-production process that influences audience perceptions of ideal femininity.

In the context of visual communication design, meaning is constructed through visual elements such as color, composition, typography, and the representation of human figures. These elements act as signs that guide how audiences interpret advertising messages (Dewi, 2023). Meaning in advertising emerges from the interaction between visual structures and the audience's cultural background and cognitive framework (Dewi, 2023). Therefore, audiences are not passive recipients but active interpreters of visual representations.

The comparison between earlier and contemporary advertisements shows a shift in visual strategies aligned with evolving social values. Pastel colors in earlier advertisements construct a soft and harmonious feminine image, while vibrant and contrasting colors in contemporary advertisements emphasize dynamism, progressiveness, and future orientation. This shift indicates that visual communication strategies are not purely aesthetic but also ideological, as visual elements are used to reinforce specific values regarding women's roles in society.

The implication for visual communication design practice is the importance of critical awareness in designing advertisements. Designers play a strategic role in shaping social representation through visual choices. By understanding audience perception, visual design can produce more reflective, inclusive, and contextual representations of women, rather than merely reproducing gender stereotypes in new visual forms. From a critical perspective, gender representation in media should be understood as a discourse shaped by power relations and ideological structures (Lazar, 2006).

## **4. CONCLUSION**

This study demonstrates that the representation of women in modern advertising visuals has undergone a significant transformation in line with evolving social and cultural contexts of media. In earlier advertisements, women were predominantly represented as graceful, aesthetic figures oriented toward emotional values and social harmony. This representation positioned women as symbols of beauty and guardians of cultural values, reinforced through visual elements such as soft facial expressions, passive gestures, and compositions that emphasized feminine aesthetics.

In contrast, contemporary advertisements portray women as more active, independent, and empowered. Women are represented as subjects engaged in professional activities, technological environments, and digital public spaces. This shift indicates a transformation in the myth of femininity (Barthes, 1972), from women as aesthetic objects toward women as agents of change. However, the analysis also reveals that these progressive representations are not entirely free from industry-driven aesthetic frameworks, as certain visual standards remain embedded in the portrayal of modern women.

Through the semiotic approach of Roland Barthes, this study confirms that advertising visuals are not neutral, but actively construct meaning through signs, symbols, and myths that reflect specific ideologies (Hall, 1997). Therefore, advertising plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions of women's image and identity, both in reproducing and challenging prevailing social norms. Future studies are recommended to explore audience reception and broader media contexts to further understand how these representations are interpreted across different social groups. This study also highlights the importance of critical visual literacy in interpreting gender representations in contemporary media.

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This study received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. The authors declare that Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools were used solely for language refinement, structural improvement, and stylistic consistency of the manuscript. AI was not used in the generation of research data, data analysis, interpretation of findings, or the development of the core academic arguments. All data, results, and analyses presented in this article are entirely original and represent the authors' own scholarly work.

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