

Commodification of Female Body: A Critical Study of Male Deodorants

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Abstract

This paper analyses the sexual overtones in the advertisements of male deodorants. By applying Gunther Kress's theory of multimodality (2010) this paper contends that the female body in the advertisement of male deodorants is objectified to increase the sale of the male specified products. Perfumes and deodorants are considered as a tool to entice women. For this purpose advertisers manipulate the sexual orientation of men consumers and sell their perfumes as sex items.

Keywords: Female objectification; multimodal; commodification; male deodorants.

Introduction:

This paper analyses the sexual overtones in the advertisements of male deodorants. By applying the theory of Gunther Kress's theory of multimodality (2010) this paper contends that the female body in the advertisement of male deodorants is objectified to increase the sale of the male specified products. Perfumes and deodorants are considered as a tool to entice women. For this purpose advertisers manipulate the sexual orientation of men consumers and sell their perfumes as sex items.

Since centuries women are considered a commodity. Not only their historical subordination is celebrated but also they are "culturally prepared for powerlessness" (Lips 90). They are victim of marginalization. Their only purpose is to satiate male needs. Women are defined in terms of their sexuality as Jamaica Kincaid said "Woman? Very simple, say the fanciers of simple formulas: she is a womb, an ovary; she is a female—this word is sufficient to define her" (Kincaid 132).

In the powerlessness of women their body plays an important role. "The identification of women with their physical bodies is the root cause of their oppression in a patriarchal culture and society" (Mathur 54). Mathur argues "Women are denied rights over their own body and sexuality. They do not have control and autonomy over their sexuality and cannot decide freely on matters related to their sexuality" (59). Media becomes one of the yardstick to reinforce this idea. Women bodies in the advertisements of male deodorants, are objectified to increase the sale of the male specified product. They are used as a commodity to satiate male gaze.

Literature Review

Robert Goldman says “a commodity sign designates the joining together of a named material entity (a good, product or service) as signifier with a meaningful image as signified” (Goldman 691). He further argues that it is not the product but its sign that the user consume. “Contemporary advertising teaches us to consume, not the product, but its sign. What it stands for is more important than what it is” (Goldman 694). Zia Argues in her paper that “Gender and its relation with power is a social and cultural discourse which is shaped on the binary of man and woman” (Zia 218). This debate of binary gives birth to signifier and signified. This paper argues that for the signifier product (Deodorant) the signified image is sex drive. For this purpose female body is used as a commodity. According to Jean Kilbourne “Most of us know by now that advertising often turns people into objects. Women’s bodies, and men’s bodies too these days, are dismembered, packaged, and used to sell everything from chain saws to chewing gum. But many people do not fully realize that there are terrible consequences when people become things. Self-image is deeply affected. The self-esteem of girls plummets as they reach adolescence partly because they cannot possibly escape the message that their bodies are objects, and imperfect objects at that” (26-27). Such advertisements also reinforce the image of ideal women as Jean Kilbourne says in her article entitled “The More You Subtract the More You Add: Cutting Girls Down to Size”. She says “Girls of all ages get the message that they must be flawlessly beautiful and, above all these days, they must be thin” (Kilbourne, 105).

These advertisements laid the foundation of the myth of beauty and chalk out the rules and categories by fulfilling which women can be beautiful. “The glossy images of flawlessly beautiful and extremely thin women that surround us would not have the impact that they do if we did not live in a culture that encourages women to believe that they can and should remake their bodies into perfect commodities” (Kilbourne, 105). But interestingly these myths are created by men to satiate male gaze as Naomi Wolf says “The beauty myth is not about women at all. It is about men’s institutions and institutional power” (Wolf 13). Simon De Beauvoir has also taken up this issue of “beauty myth” in her book *The Second Sex*:

It (Myths) projects into the realm of Platonic ideas a reality that is directly experienced or is conceptualized on a basis of experience; in place of fact, value, significance, knowledge, empirical law, it substitutes a transcendental Idea, timeless, unchangeable, necessary. This idea is indisputable because it is beyond the given: it is endowed with absolute truth. Thus, as against the dispersed, contingent, and multiple existences of actual women, mythical though opposes the Eternal Feminine, unique and changeless. (Beauvoir 1407).

The “eternal feminine” is a psychological archetype or philosophical principle that idealizes an immutable concept of “woman”.

This argument is further developed by Pyke who relates these cultural stereotypes with power discourse. He argues that “male dominance and female submission are constructed as natural in body language [...] in this manner power dynamics often are obscure and legitimated as essential and natural” (530). Female sexuality is considered a property of male as Das says “gender equality is still a far cry for the women in our patriarchal society which is characterized by exclusive male dominance by way of male control of female sexuality” (203). Other than

cultural stereotypes, cultural habitat is one of the corner stone to explore the relation of a person with his surroundings. Zia says in her article, “The cultural relationship among humans and their surroundings varies in keeping with human’s perception of the landscape” (Zia 9). So where a person lives also forms an attitude towards that person. Moreover media plays its role in forming these sexual behaviors as Lanis says “media portrayals of women can influence sexual attitudes and beliefs” (Lanis 646). Muren also comments on this approach “In the media women’s bodies are more likely to be shown to advertise products and there is often a focus on parts of the body rather than the whole body which emphasizes the view of woman as an object” (Muren 427).

In 1979 a survey was conducted to see the trajectory of portraying women as sex objects. “Content analyses of advertisements portraying women as sex objects indicate that the popularity of this device has grown in the last decade. Prior to 1969, it was estimated that upwards of 30% of all advertising used sex appeal and sexual expressions while in the period 1969-71, Venkatesan and Losco report that slightly over 65% of advertisement portrayed women as sexual objects while 13% showed her as being sexy” (Kerin 39).

Research Methodology

The present research investigate the sexual overtones in the advertisements of male deodorants. For this purpose five advertisements were taken as a primary text. Correlational design was used. Purposive strategy was used for sampling because the choice of sample was dependent upon the availability and consent of the participants. The sample was consistent of (N= 100) males. The participants were chosen from different universities. The age group of 18-25 was selected. In the inclusion criteria married males were excluded from the sample. Five advertisements of male deodorants were employed. The name of the products and prices were intentionally removed and a fake tag was edited in the video under the heading of deodorant A, deodorant B, deodorant C, deodorant D and deodorant E respectively. For this survey self-developed open ended scale was used in which one statement of ranking was employed and the sample was asked to rank the ads ranging from 1 to 5 according to their preference. The results were further developed in percentages and were shown through linear graphical representation and pie-charts.

Five designs were used in these advertisements. Ad one was without any model. Ad two was consisted of only men models. Third ad was of a dark, night club party. In the fourth ad a female bride was introduced and in the fifth ad a mehndi function was in the back drop and the bride to be was asked to go to the jeweler to try her jewelry.

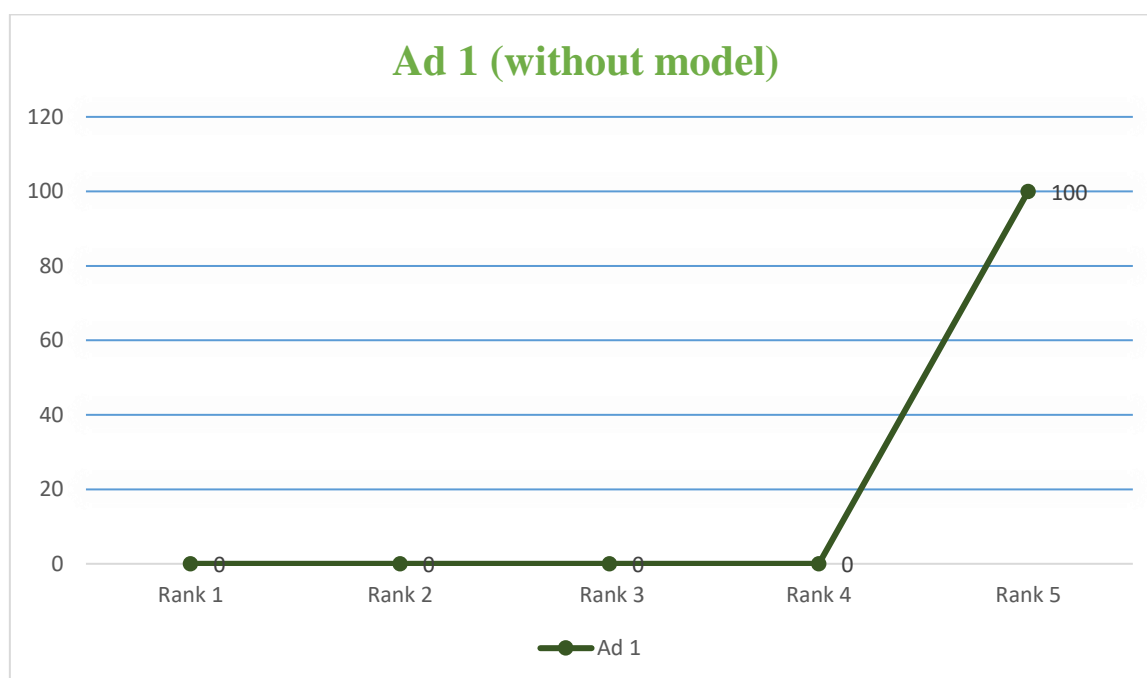
Data was collected by indoor and outdoor interviews. All ads were shown to the sample individually. The participants were asked to grade the ads according to their choice. The condition which was applied to consider all the deodorants of same brand and of same price. The consent was taken from the participants and they were allowed to withdraw themselves at any point in time. The participants were make sure that their information will be kept confidential and will be used only for this research purpose. After data collection statistical analysis was carried out to analyze the result and demographic information was also accessed to made final result. To analyze the advertisements Kress’ multi modal was used. Within that

modal the concept of “mode” was employed. “Within social semiotics, a mode is understood as an outcome of the cultural shaping of a material through its use in the daily social interaction of people. The semiotic resources of a mode come to display regularities through the ways in which people use them and can be thought of as the connection between representational resources and what people do with them” (Kress 2010). Within this framework the aspects that were analyzed were gaze and posture as Kress says “This has included contributions to mapping the semiotic resources of visual communication and colour, gesture and movement, gaze, voice and music, to name a few” (Kress 2010).

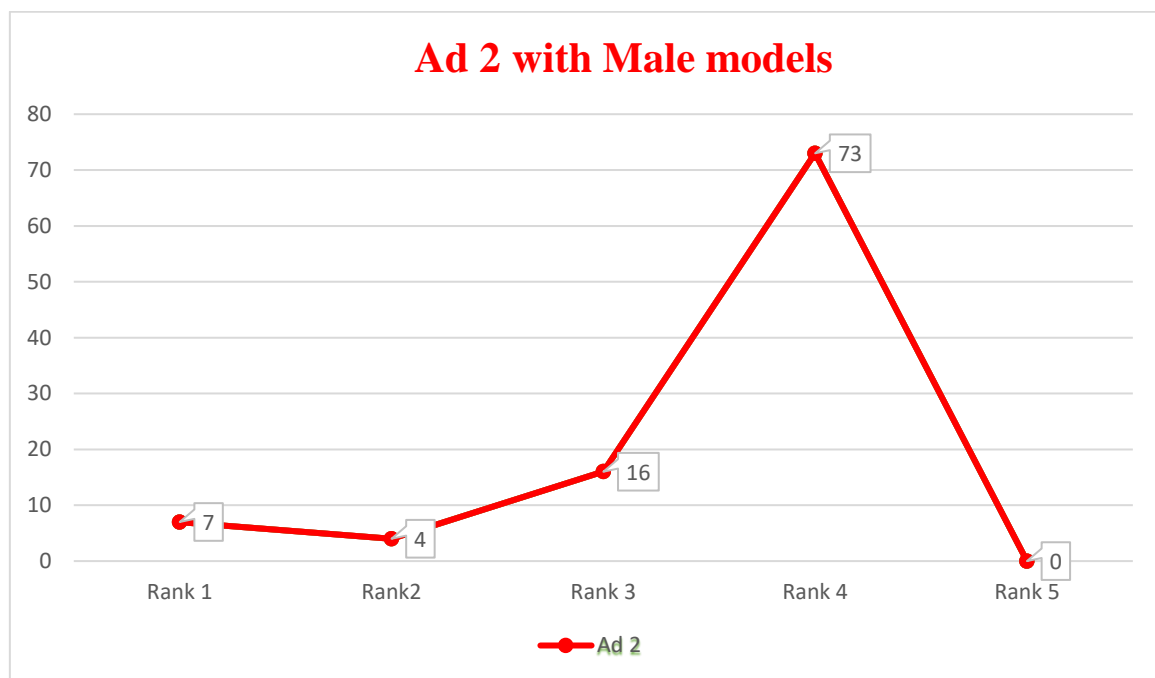
The result shows that there is an inclination in the young males towards the product in which female figure is more objectified. All the ads were analyzed individually and then collectively for the comparative study. For all the ads, ranks 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 were placed on x axis while variables/ sample’s response was placed on y axis ranging from 1-100.

Result and Discussion

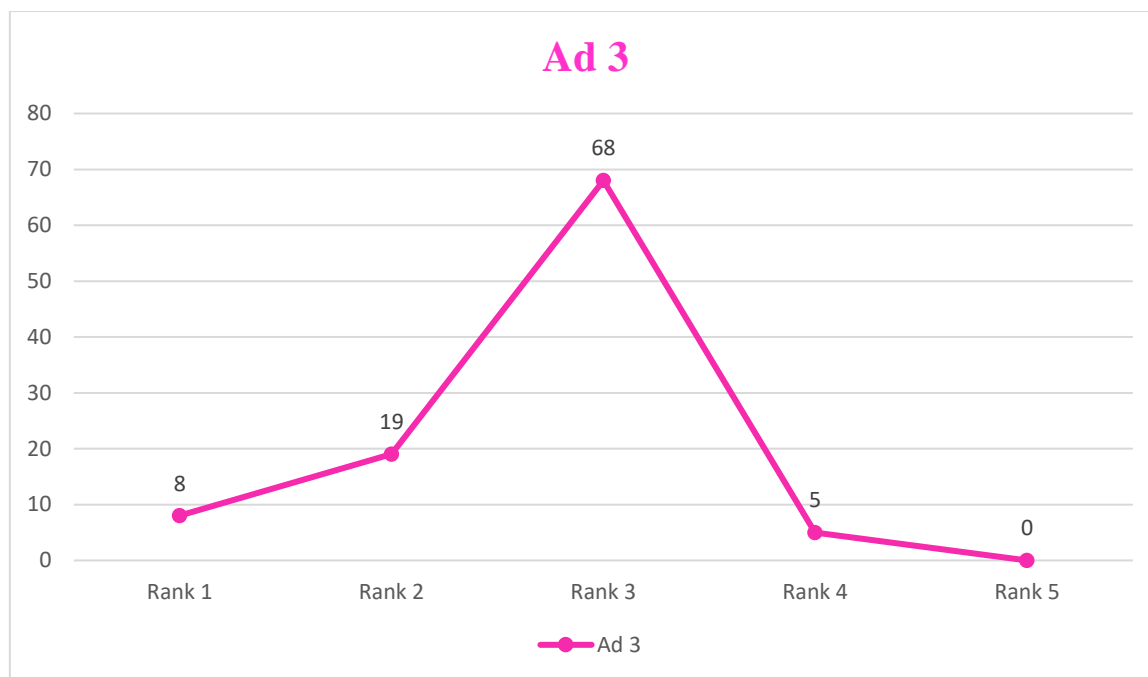
The first ad was without a male or female model. By placing the deodorant on the table the product was presented by itself. In the other four advertisements models were introduced. For the first ad, the result was astonishing. Not even a single subject gave it first, second, third or even fourth position. Hence the sample ranked it on number 5 which shows that the absentia of models from the ad does not prove fruitful for the sale. A few of the subject sample were asked for the reason of their ranking. They replied that only models can attract the buyers in the consumer society and there is no model in the ad so the ranked it on the lowest position. The ranking percentage for this ad was rank 1, 0%, rank 2, 0%, rank 3 0%, rank 4, 0% and rank 5, 100%. Graphical representation is given below.



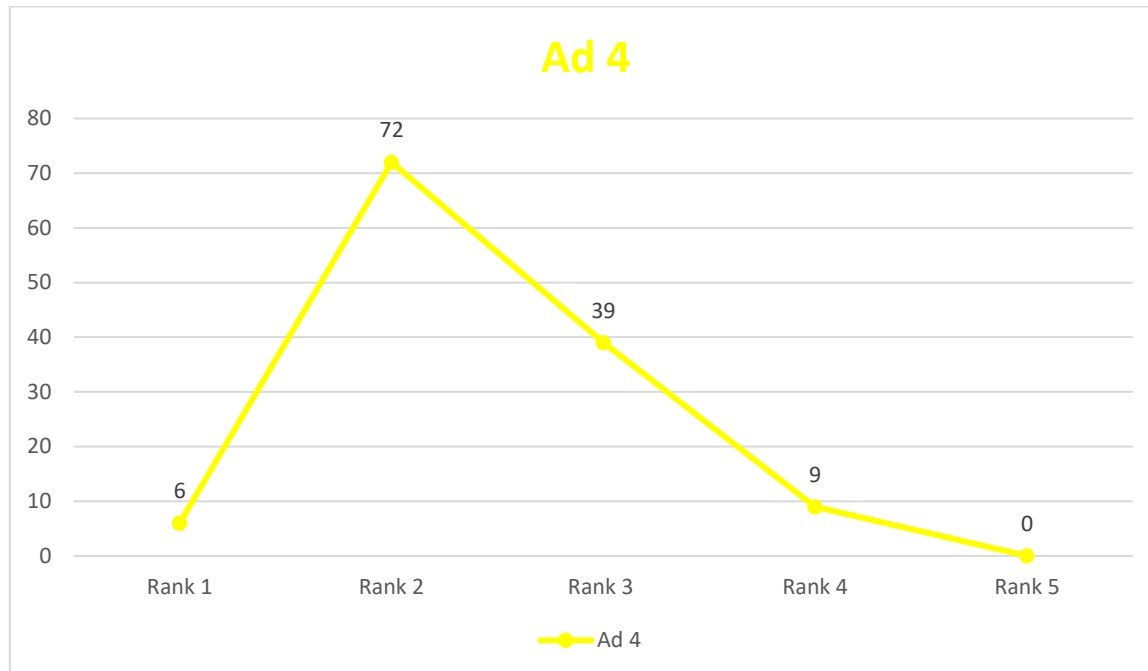
In the second ad four shirt less male models were represented on a cruise. This ad was particular chosen to confirm the absentia of female body and to analyze its result on the sale of the product. Second ad contained no female models, only male models were introduced in this ad. The ranking percentage for this ad was: rank 1, 7%, rank 2, 4%, rank 3, 16% rank 4, 73% and rank 5, 0%. Those of the subject sample who gave this ad first position in ranking were asked for the reason. They replied that they really like the atmosphere of the ad, four male friends on a cruise is like a dream for them. Moreover the representation of men in this ad was very close to their “ideal” image of man; clean shave, no hair on chest and displayable biceps and triceps. 73% percent of the sample gave it 4th position. Those who gave it the lowest rank were also asked for the reason and they replied since there is no women in the ad hence they will not buy this product. Graphical representation of the result is given below.



Ad 3 was a bit different from the rest. The scene was of night club party in which many women dance in some frenzy caused probably by the effect of the male deodorant. Although females were objectified in this ad but since it was a night club party in the ad so, due to darkness, female bodies were not much exposed. The ranking percentage for this ad was: rank 1, 8%, rank 2, 19%, rank 3, 68%, rank 4, 5% and rank 5, 0%. One interpretation of the result is, that since female body is less objectified in this ad and also there is no complete absentia of women in this ad so it got an average response from the sample. Graphical representation of the result is given below.

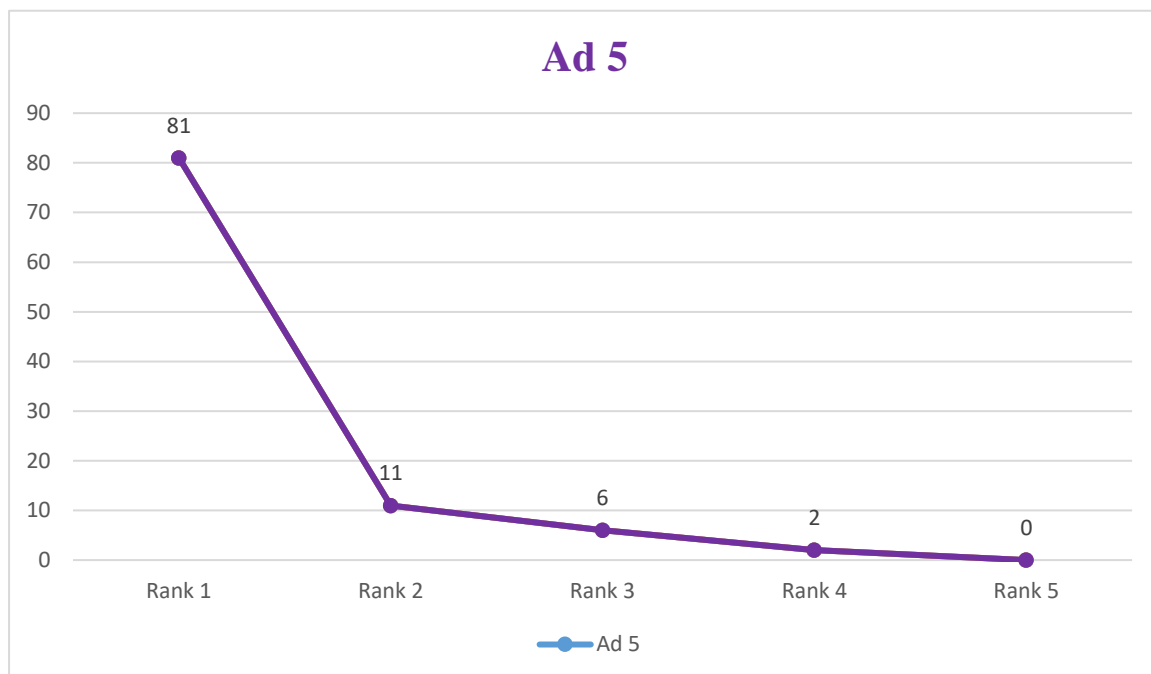


In the fourth ad a female bride was used as a model who throws her jewelry, her wedding ring and her head cover off under the influence of the smell of her neighbor's deodorant. She is exposed in the ad with her deep cleavage and is shown stripping her down for the male next door. The ranking percentage for this ad was: rank 1, 6%, rank 2, 72%, rank 3, 13%, rank 4, 9%, rank 5, 0%. Graphical representation of the result is given below.

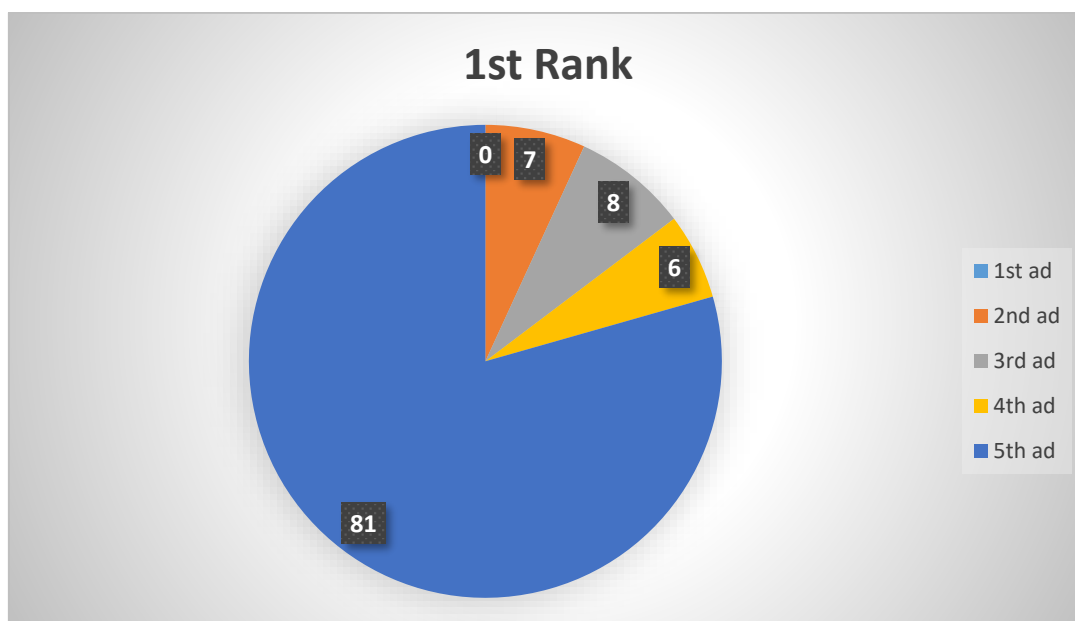


In the fifth ad the function of Mehndi is going on and the bride is called by her jewelry designer. The bride is dressed in a short blouse, exposing her deep neck, her back less shirt, her cleavage, her midriff and her belly to the fullest. She is enticed by the fragrance of the jeweler and her expression turns the whole scene into a sex appeal. The ranking percentage for this ad was rank 1, 81%, rank 2, 11%, rank 3, 6%, rank 4, 2% and rank 5, 0%. When the subject sample was

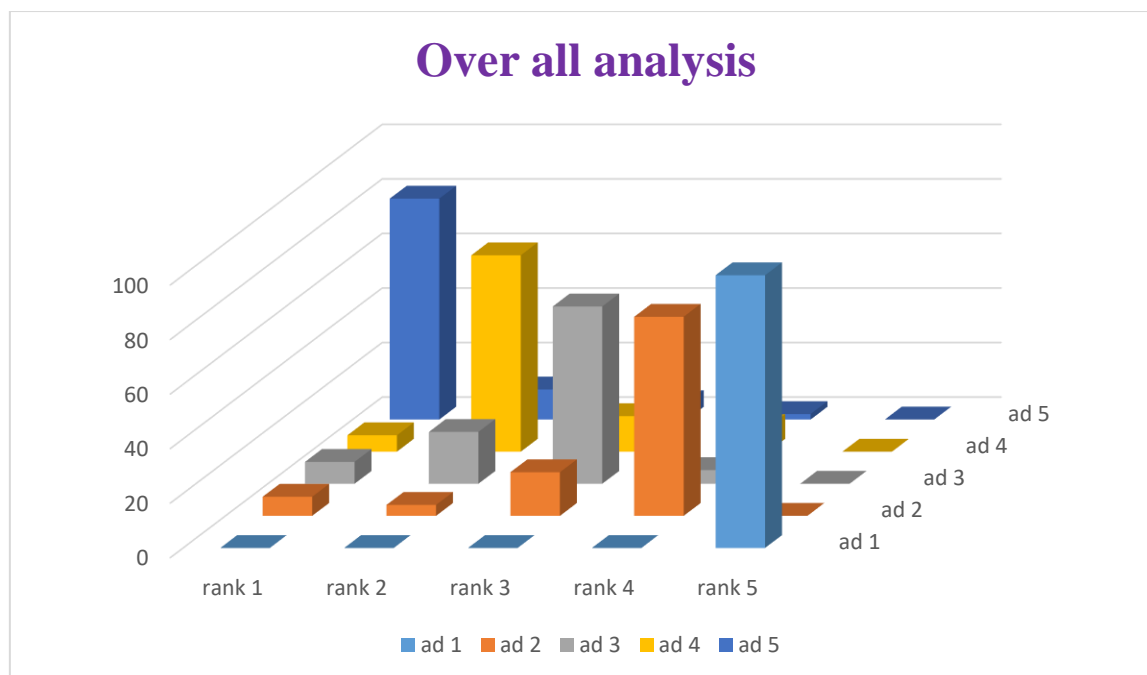
asked for this preference sample said the girl in the ad is beautiful. By applying Kress' concept of "Mode" it can be interpreted that since the female model is not only exposed but also her body parts are captured in a close up in this ad when the jeweler puts the jewelry on her so, 81% of the subject sample gave it first rank in the preference list. Thus made it the most wanted product. The graphical representation is given below.



From all the ads 81% of the sample gave first rank to the ad five. 8% of the sample gave first rank to the ad three. 7% of the sample gave first rank to the ad two. 6% of the sample gave first ad to the ad four and 0% of the sample gave first rank to the ad one. Pie-chart demonstration is given below.



Below is the graphical representation of the overall comparative analysis.



Conclusion

The overall result shows that the female body in the advertisement of male deodorants is objectified to increase the sale of the male specified products. Perfumes and deodorants are considered as a tool to entice women. For this purpose advertisers manipulate the sexual orientation of men consumers and sell their perfumes as sex items. As the criteria of the sample was single young man, whose ages are ranging from 18 to 25, so one interpretation of the result is, that other than patriarchy, repressed sexuality is the reason behind such attitude of male buyers. Their emotions are repressed. In such a situation media tries to satiate their male gaze and tries to provide a solace to balance their emotions. But in this process female body becomes the victim of objectification.

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