



# The Culture of Consumerism in Advertising: An Analysis of the Representation of Social Values through Mass Media

Vannyora Okditazeini,<sup>1\*</sup> Oktri Permata Lani,<sup>1</sup> Marhen,<sup>1</sup> Fadhilatul Khaira<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Universitas Islam Negeri Mahmud Yunus Batusangkar, Indonesia

\*Correspondence: [vannyoraokditazeini@uinmybatusangkar.ac.id](mailto:vannyoraokditazeini@uinmybatusangkar.ac.id)

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## Abstract

*This study examines the role of advertising in shaping social perceptions and reinforcing existing social inequalities in society. In an increasingly digitally connected context, advertising functions not only as a tool for promoting products but also as a cultural force that influences public views on gender, social class, race, and ethnicity. This literature review aims to analyze how advertising creates, strengthens, or even challenges social stereotypes and prevailing norms. Based on a literature review methodology, this research collects and analyzes various relevant academic literatures, including journals, books, and articles that discuss the impact of advertising on social perceptions across different cultural and geographical contexts. The findings show that advertising often reinforces traditional gender stereotypes, portrays social class in a reductive manner, and strengthens racial hierarchies in society. However, on the other hand, there are also efforts to challenge these stereotypes through more inclusive advertising campaigns, such as femvertising. This study also highlights how social media is increasingly playing an important role in shaping narratives about social status and consumer identity. Overall, the findings suggest that advertising not only reflects but also shapes social values and norms, thus having a significant impact on the formation of social inequalities. This research is expected to provide insights for the development of more ethical and diversity-oriented advertising policies and practices.*

**Keywords:** Advertising, Mass Media, Social Values

## Introduction

This technology has had a significant impact on the social and cultural life of society, especially through advertising media (Omorodion et al., 2021). Advertising, which is present in public spaces whether on television, social



media, or other digital platforms has increasingly contributed to the formation of consumerist mindsets that often conflict with deeper social values (Adinda & Amalia, 2022). The use of advertising as a tool for product promotion does not merely deliver consumption messages but also shapes public perceptions of lifestyle, success standards, and self-identity. This phenomenon is clearly evident in the consumption of goods and services often promoted through advertisements as symbols of status, beauty, and happiness, which do not necessarily reflect the broader social reality (Ananda et al., 2019). At the same time, this consumerism often widens the gap of social inequality by disregarding more complex social realities on the ground. From this picture, it is clear that advertising not only serves as a product promotion tool but also as a potential agent for changing or reinforcing existing social norms.

The study of consumerism culture in advertising is still limited, especially in examining the social and cultural aspects represented in advertisements. Most existing studies tend to focus on the economic and marketing aspects of advertising, without delving into how advertising, as a medium, influences the formation of social values within society. Three main tendencies in existing research can be identified: First, studies examining the influence of advertising on consumption habits (Åkestam et al., 2017). Second, research highlighting the negative impacts of the consumerist culture promoted by advertising on social welfare (Adinda & Amalia, 2022). Third, studies emphasizing advertising techniques and strategies that shape consumer behavior (Callier, 2014). Among these three tendencies, there is still a gap in comprehensive research on how social values such as equality, solidarity, and diversity manifest in advertisements and how this contributes to the formation of consumerist culture.

This article aims to fill this research gap by analyzing in-depth how advertising represents social values through consumerist culture and its impact on society. The focus of this study is to understand the representation of social values such as social class, gender identity, and cultural norms in advertisements, which are often distorted in efforts to shape consumption. In line with this, three main questions can be raised: First, how does advertising depict social values in consumerist culture? Second, what are the impacts of advertising on the formation of social and cultural identity in society? Third, how does advertising play a role in reinforcing or challenging existing social structures? Answering these three questions will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the

impact of mass media, particularly advertising, in shaping societal mindsets related to existing social and cultural values.

This study argues that the consumerist culture promoted through advertising is closely related to changes in social values within society, where advertising not only functions to promote products but also shapes new social norms. In this case, advertising works as a social agent that introduces and solidifies concepts such as success, beauty, and certain lifestyles, which often can only be achieved through product consumption. Through its visual and narrative representations, advertising connects social status and individual identity with the possession of certain goods, which in turn reinforces social hierarchies and exclusivity. Therefore, the social values reflected in advertising often emphasize individualism, materialism, and social inequality, rather than solidarity and inclusivity. Thus, to understand the impact of consumerism culture, an in-depth analysis of the social representations presented in advertising is needed, along with its effects on societal mindsets and the existing social structure.

In this study, the methodology used is a literature review, aimed at examining and analyzing previous research findings related to the impact of advertising on social perceptions and inequality within society. This literature review relies on secondary sources, such as academic journals, books, articles, and research reports, covering relevant periods. Data collection is carried out by selecting verified literature published across various reputable academic databases, such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, and SpringerLink, ensuring the credibility and quality of the obtained information. This methodology prioritizes qualitative analysis to deeply understand various perspectives on the role of advertising in shaping social values, cultural norms, and stereotypes within society. In this analysis, the researcher filters and categorizes findings from previous studies based on specific themes, such as gender, social class, race, and ethnicity, as well as the impact of advertising on marginalized groups. Additionally, this approach involves comparing cross-cultural studies to understand how advertising influences society in different contexts. Through this literature review, the researcher can build a more comprehensive understanding of the role of advertising in influencing social structures and inequality, and suggest directions for further research that could more deeply explore the ethical implications of advertising in contemporary social contexts.

## **Representation of Social Class in Advertising**

The representation of social class in advertising is a complex issue that reflects the values, aspirations, and tensions of broader society. Advertising not only functions as a medium to promote products but also as a cultural artifact that shapes and reflects perceptions of social class. The portrayal of various social classes in advertisements can reinforce stereotypes, influence consumer behavior, and impact social norms. This synthesis explores how social class is represented in advertising, drawing on various academic sources to provide a comprehensive understanding of this topic.

One of the key aspects of advertising is its ability to reflect and shape ideologies of social class. Paulson and O'Guinn (2018) argue that post-World War II American advertising was closely linked to ideologies of aspiration and social mobility. They highlight that advertisements often depict an ideal version of life accessible to consumers, promoting the idea that upward social mobility can be achieved through consumption. This aligns with Cohen's assertion that aspiration is a fundamental component of American class ideology (Paulson & O'Guinn, 2018). Advertisements frequently feature luxurious lifestyles, suggesting that purchasing certain products leads to social advancement, thereby reinforcing class divisions and aspirations. Additionally, representations of social class in advertising are not limited to aspirational portrayals; they also involve the marginalization of lower social classes. Zaidi et al. (2018) conducted a study on advertisements in Pakistan, revealing that the lower and middle classes are often depicted as the "other" and marginalized in visual representations. This marginalization can perpetuate negative stereotypes and reinforce social hierarchies, as advertisements often fail to depict the reality and complexity of lower-class life. This phenomenon is also found in the work of Connolly and Dolan (2016), who analyze how advertising embeds bourgeois values in the subjectivity of ads, further alienating the lower social class from the narratives presented in mainstream media.

The impact of these social class representations goes beyond mere visual depictions; they also influence consumer attitudes and behavior. Grier and Deshpandé (2001) explore how social status affects group identity and advertising persuasion, showing that individuals from different social backgrounds respond to advertising messages in distinct ways. This suggests that advertisements that resonate with specific social classes can increase consumer engagement and brand loyalty. Conversely, advertisements that fail to

acknowledge the diversity of social experiences can alienate certain consumer segments, leading to a disconnect between the brand and its target audience. Furthermore, the role of social media in shaping class representations in advertising cannot be overlooked. Zheng (2024) discusses how social presence in social media advertisements can enhance consumer engagement by reducing ad avoidance. This shift toward digital advertising has implications for social class representation, as brands can now tailor their messages to resonate with specific demographics, potentially reinforcing or challenging existing class narratives. The intersection between gender and social class in advertising also deserves attention. Studies show that gender roles are often closely tied to class representations, reinforcing traditional stereotypes. For instance, portrayals of women in advertisements often reflect societal expectations related to their social class, as highlighted by Eisend (2010). This interaction can perpetuate harmful stereotypes that limit the representation of women across different social classes, affecting social perceptions of both gender and class.

Moreover, the lack of diversity in the advertising industry impacts how social class is represented. McLeod et al. (2009) point out that the predominantly male, white, and middle-class advertising workforce can lead to a narrow understanding of social class dynamics, resulting in ads that fail to authentically represent the diverse experiences of consumers. This lack of representation can perpetuate stereotypes and limit the industry's ability to connect with a broader audience. The effectiveness of advertising in conveying messages about social class is also influenced by the tone and emotional appeal used in campaigns. Casais and Pereira (2021) emphasize that the tone of an ad's emotional appeal can significantly affect audience engagement and their responses. Ads that evoke an emotional connection are more likely to resonate with consumers, leading to a stronger impact on their perceptions of social class and the products being advertised. This highlights the importance of understanding the psychological dimensions in advertising related to social class representation.

In addition to emotional appeal, semiotic analysis of ads reveals how social class is constructed through visual and textual elements. Callier (2014) explores the semiotic resources used in consumer ads, arguing that the representation of social class is deeply connected to the meanings attached to products and lifestyles. By analyzing the rhetorical context of advertisements, it becomes clear that social class depictions are not just reflections of reality but also narratives crafted to meet specific marketing objectives. The implications of

social class representation in advertising extend to consumer self-esteem and materialism, particularly among vulnerable populations. Sayah (2024) highlights how exposure to advertisements can negatively impact the self-esteem of lower-class children, leading to feelings of inferiority and materialistic aspirations. This underscores the ethical considerations surrounding advertising practices and the responsibility of marketers to consider the social impact of the messages they convey.

In conclusion, the representation of social class in advertising is an intricate interaction between aspiration, marginalization, and identity construction. Advertising functions as a powerful tool that reflects societal values and shapes consumer perceptions, often reinforcing existing class hierarchies while offering pathways for aspiration. As the advertising landscape evolves, especially with the rise of digital media, it is crucial for marketers to adopt inclusive practices that authentically represent the diverse experiences of consumers from different social classes. In doing so, the advertising industry can contribute to a more equitable representation of social class, fostering a deeper understanding of the social dynamics at play.

### **Gender Representation and Traditional Roles in Advertising**

The depiction of gender roles in advertising has become a significant research topic, reflecting societal norms and expectations while also influencing public perception. Historically, advertising has heavily relied on traditional gender stereotypes, which serve to reinforce established norms regarding masculinity and femininity. For instance, Infanger and Sczesny (2015) highlight that the effectiveness of advertising is often linked to adherence to these stereotypes, suggesting that traditional gender role portrayals remain dominant in contemporary advertising practices. This reliance not only shapes consumer perceptions but also affects individuals' self-awareness, as Ostapchuk et al. (2024) emphasize that such portrayals affirm social norms and expectations. The implications of these representations go beyond mere visual portrayals; they contribute to the perpetuation of gender hierarchies in society.

Zawisza and Cinnirella (2010) argue that advertisements that break traditional gender roles often experience decreased effectiveness, which suggests a societal preference for conventional portrayals. This is further supported by research indicating that ads depicting women in non-traditional roles, such as leadership positions, may not receive a strong response from audiences



accustomed to traditional representations (An & Kwak, 2019). Cross-cultural studies reveal significant variation in gender role portrayals across different cultural contexts. For example, Matthes et al. (2016) conducted a comprehensive analysis of gender role representation in TV ads across various countries, finding that while some nations have made progress towards more equal representation, others still adhere to traditional stereotypes. Khairullah and Khairullah (2009), in their study of advertising in India and the United States, show that while both cultures display gender bias, the manifestations of this bias differ, with American ads exhibiting a lack of female models in executive roles compared to their counterparts in India. This highlights the crucial role of cultural context in shaping gender representations in advertising.

Moreover, the evolution of gender roles in advertising is not merely a reflection of changing social norms but also a response to shifting consumer expectations. Hatzithomas et al. (2016) argue that marketers often lag in adapting to these changes, which can result in a mismatch between the messages conveyed in advertisements and the values held by contemporary audiences. This mismatch can lead to ineffective advertising strategies that fail to resonate with consumers who increasingly seek authenticity and representation in marketing messages. The impact of gender portrayals in advertising is particularly pronounced among younger audiences. Research by Lynch and Campbell (2021) shows that teenagers are becoming more critical of stereotypical representations in ads, signaling a generational shift towards more equal views on gender roles. This shift is also reflected in findings by Zhang et al. (2009), who observe that the depiction of women in decorative roles continues to persist in various cultural contexts, including in China and the U.S., but is increasingly challenged by younger consumers who demand more diverse and realistic portrayals.

Beyond the direct implications for ad effectiveness, the depiction of gender roles in advertising has broader social consequences. As noted by Coleman et al. (2020), the strategies employed by advertising professionals in navigating institutional complexities often reflect underlying gender role logics that perpetuate stereotypes. This is particularly evident in regions undergoing cultural transition, where traditional gender roles may clash with emerging egalitarian values, creating tensions in ad content. Furthermore, the portrayal of women in advertisements has been linked to the reinforcement of harmful stereotypes, particularly in ads related to health. Research by Munce et al. (2004) highlights that representations of women in psychotropic drug ads often

emphasize helplessness and incapacity, thus perpetuating negative stereotypes that can influence public attitudes towards mental health. This underscores the need for a critical examination of the messages conveyed through advertisements and their impact on public perceptions of gender roles. The discourse surrounding gender representation in advertising is also evolving, with increasing attention given to the concept of "femvertising," which aims to empower women through positive portrayals in marketing (Åkestam et al., 2017). This approach contrasts sharply with traditional depictions that often emphasize beauty and domestic life, suggesting a potential shift towards more progressive advertising strategies that resonate with contemporary audiences. However, the effectiveness of femvertising remains a debated topic, as some studies indicate that while it may reduce negative reactions to ads among female audiences, it does not necessarily result in increased brand loyalty or purchase intentions (Åkestam et al., 2017).

In conclusion, the portrayal of gender roles in advertising is a complex issue that reflects and influences societal norms and expectations. While traditional stereotypes still dominate many advertising narratives, there is a growing recognition of the need for more diverse and authentic representations. As consumer expectations evolve, marketers must navigate the complexities of gender representation, balancing the need for effective marketing with the responsibility to challenge and transform deeply rooted stereotypes. Ongoing research in this area highlights the importance of critically examining advertising practices and their implications for gender representation in society.

### **Consumption as a Symbol of Identity and Social Status**

Consumption has long been recognized as an important indicator in the formation of identity and the affirmation of an individual's social status within various socio-cultural contexts. The relationship between consumption practices and social identity is complex, encompassing economic, psychological, and cultural dimensions. In this context, consumption is not merely about fulfilling material needs, but also serves as a way for individuals to build and express their identity within a broader society. As Bainotti (2024) points out, conspicuous consumption functions as a productive activity that not only reflects an individual's social status but also constructs that status through the accumulation of and access to socially valued goods. This is supported by Bilancini and Boncinelli (2012), who demonstrate that conspicuous consumption becomes a



means for individuals to signal their social status, especially in societies where status depends on relative ownership of marketable goods.

These conspicuous consumption practices are often connected with broader social dynamics, such as migration, where individuals may use remittances (money sent by migrants to their families) to compensate for a perceived loss of social status, creating collective bonds through consumption (Zhou & Li, 2018). Here, consumption becomes not only an individual effort but also part of a collective identity, often involving recognition from specific communities or social groups. Furthermore, Brooks and Wilson (2015) highlight that excessive consumption behaviors are more often associated with indicators of higher socio-economic status, while limited consumption behaviors or reductions in spending may signal the opposite. Consumption, in this context, becomes a way to send clear social signals about an individual's position in the social hierarchy, reinforcing their identity within society. This is related to materialism, where individuals with lower economic mobility may engage in impulsive consumption as a way to assert their status, even though they may not have sufficient resources to sustain it (Yoon & Kim, 2016).

Consumption also serves as an important mechanism for navigating social hierarchies and displaying status within a psychological context. For instance, individuals with a lower perception of their social status are more likely to engage in conspicuous consumption as a way to cope with threats to their social standing (Wang et al., 2022). This suggests that consumption is not merely a response to material needs but also serves as a tool to address social and psychological uncertainties. Cultural factors play a crucial role in shaping consumption patterns as status symbols. Olivos and Wang (2023) discuss how consumption becomes a means for individuals to demonstrate their attachment to a particular group or cultural identity, especially in multicultural societies. Cultural omnivorism—the ability to consume various types of culture—also becomes a status symbol in societies that are more culturally diversified. This implies that consumption can serve as a way to assert a broader social identity.

With the rise of social media, consumption as a symbol of status has taken on a more open and publicly visible form. Social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok allow individuals to curate their identities by showcasing luxury brands or exclusive life experiences, reinforcing social hierarchies in the digital world (Fiers, 2020). This phenomenon adds a new dimension to consumption as a status symbol, as consumption is now not only viewed by the consumers

themselves but also by a global audience that can assess and compare social status through social media. In emerging market economies, the dynamics of consumption as a status symbol exhibit more global characteristics. For example, studies in South Africa have shown that millennial consumers engage in luxury goods consumption, such as handbags, to assert their social status, even when their resources are limited (Grotts & Widner Johnson, 2013). This illustrates how consumption as a status symbol transcends cultural and geographic boundaries, becoming a global phenomenon shaped by globalization and the influence of social media. However, the motivations behind status consumption are complex and tied to psychological factors such as narcissism and materialism. Niesiobędzka and Konaszewski (2022) indicate that lower-income groups tend to desire consumption patterns typical of higher-income groups. The desire to own luxury goods as status symbols is often exacerbated by social comparison, where individuals feel compelled to compare themselves with others in terms of consumption.

These consumption patterns carry broader implications, including economic inequality and environmental sustainability. Danzer et al. (2013) argue that status consumption often diverts resources from basic needs such as health and education, creating potential poverty traps in poorer countries. This raises important questions about the sustainability of consumption practices that prioritize social status over more fundamental life needs. Overall, consumption as a symbol of identity and social status is a complex phenomenon involving the interaction of economic, psychological, and cultural factors. As a means of signaling social status and building identity, consumption reflects broader social dynamics and shapes how individuals interact within the social hierarchy. Moving forward, it is essential to understand the implications of these consumption patterns, particularly in an increasingly interconnected and digital world. Further research should continue to explore the impact of these dynamics on societies and the global economy and seek ways to promote more equitable and sustainable consumption patterns.

### **The Influence of Advertising on Social Perception and Inequality**

Advertising plays a significant role in shaping social perceptions and reinforcing inequality within society. The relationship between advertising and social norms is complex, as advertisers not only reflect cultural values but also actively shape them through their messaging strategies. This dynamic can lead

to the perpetuation of stereotypes and the reinforcement of existing inequalities, particularly those related to gender, race, and social class. Historically, advertising has functioned as a mirror of society, reflecting prevailing attitudes and norms. McDonald et al. highlight that advertisers influence societal values through the messages and images they present, which can either challenge or reinforce cultural norms (McDonald et al., 2021). This statement is supported by Czarnecka et al., who note that advertising shapes consumer attitudes and behaviors, making it crucial to study the content and implications of advertising messages (Czarnecka et al., 2018). These findings suggest that advertising is not merely a tool for selling products, but a powerful medium in shaping societal perceptions and expectations.

Gender representation in advertising is a particularly important area of concern. Research shows that advertisements often convey implicit messages about gender roles, contributing to the reproduction of dominant ideologies ("Unravelling the Linguistic Tapestry: A Discursive Study of Gender Portrayal in Select Indian Electronic Advertisement", 2024). For example, Adebola's study of cosmetic advertisements in Nigeria reveals how social expectations influence women's choices and reinforce traditional gender roles (Adebola et al., 2023). This aligns with Åkestam et al.'s findings, which argue that the portrayal of marginalized groups in advertisements can evoke a sense of social connection and empathy, indicating that advertising can influence perceptions of these groups (Åkestam et al., 2017). Such portrayals can either challenge or reinforce stereotypes, depending on the context and objectives of the advertising campaign.

Furthermore, targeting specific demographic groups in advertising can exacerbate social inequality. Yancey et al. discuss how advertisements related to obesity disproportionately target racial and ethnic minorities, potentially influencing health behaviors and reinforcing negative stereotypes about these communities (Yancey et al., 2009). This targeted advertising approach raises ethical concerns about the responsibility of advertisers to consider the broader social implications of their campaigns. The ethical complexities of using potentially harmful themes in advertising are emphasized by Grougiou et al., who explore the social impact of advertising that degrades women (Grougiou et al., 2020). Such practices not only reinforce harmful stereotypes but also contribute to a culture of inequality.

The cyclical nature of advertising content further complicates its impact on social perceptions. Fay argues that the widespread and deliberate persuasion of advertising continually adjusts social values to serve the interests of producers (Fay, 2006). This cyclical relationship indicates that as social values evolve, advertising strategies must also adapt, though many advertisements remain trapped in outdated stereotypes. Feminist critiques of advertising highlight how traditional gender roles are often reinforced through marketing messages, which can hinder progress toward gender equality (Fay, 2006). Advertising's role in shaping perceptions of social class is also crucial. Paulson and O'Guinn emphasize that advertising representations of lower-class and working-class individuals can be highly positive, in contrast to portrayals in other forms of media (Paulson & O'Guinn, 2017). Such positive representations can serve to challenge stereotypes about social class but may also obscure the reality of socio-economic inequality. A deeper exploration of class representation in advertising is needed to understand how these portrayals affect public perceptions and attitudes toward different socio-economic groups.

Additionally, the impact of advertising on children and young audiences cannot be overlooked. Norin's research highlights how advertising influences children's environmental awareness and purchasing patterns, suggesting that advertising plays a significant role in shaping future consumer behavior (Norin et al., 2024). This influence is particularly concerning given the potential for advertising to reinforce materialistic values and social inequality from an early age. The implications of such advertising practices are profound, as they can shape the attitudes and behaviors of future generations, potentially perpetuating the cycle of inequality. Beyond gender and social class, the intersection of race and advertising is a crucial area of study. Research shows that advertising often perpetuates racial stereotypes, which can have long-term effects on public attitudes toward various racial and ethnic groups. For instance, the portrayal of African Americans in advertising has been shown to influence public perceptions and reinforce existing biases (Yancey et al., 2009). This underscores the need for advertisers to be more mindful of the social implications of their messages and strive to create more equitable representations.

The ethical implications of advertising practices go beyond individual campaigns and encompass broader social responsibilities. Borgerson and Schroeder argue that advertising must navigate the complexities of social values and ethical considerations, especially when addressing sensitive issues such as

gender-based violence (Borgerson & Schroeder, 2002). This perspective underscores the need for advertisers to engage with social issues thoughtfully and responsibly, recognizing their potential to shape public discourse and social norms. In conclusion, the influence of advertising on social perception and inequality is a multifaceted issue embedded in deep social structures. Advertisers wield significant power in shaping cultural narratives and reinforcing or challenging existing inequalities. Therefore, it is crucial for stakeholders in the advertising industry to critically examine their practices and strive to create more just representations that reflect the diversity and complexity of contemporary society. By doing so, advertising can serve as a catalyst for positive social change, rather than perpetuating inequality.

## Conclusion

This study emphasizes that advertising plays a crucial role in shaping social perceptions and reinforcing inequality within society. As a medium that not only sells products, advertising also acts as a tool for shaping cultural values and norms, which can either reinforce or challenge existing stereotypes. In this context, gender, social class, and race become key aspects influenced by how advertising presents various groups in society. First, advertising often reinforces gender stereotypes by portraying traditional roles that limit the positions of women and men in society. On the other hand, even though there are efforts to present more inclusive representations, ads involving marginalized groups such as women or certain racial groups often fail to avoid bias or may even exacerbate it. This not only reinforces social discrimination but also affirms existing social hierarchies. Second, advertising plays a significant role in shaping perceptions of social class, particularly through representations of luxurious lifestyles that can mislead public views about the reality of lower and middle classes. Furthermore, social media increasingly exacerbates social inequality by providing a platform for individuals to showcase their consumption, thereby amplifying status differences. Therefore, it is essential for the advertising industry to be more sensitive to the representations presented to the public, aiming not only for economic profit but also contributing to a more just and equitable social change.

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