AG EDITOR

REVIEW

A game between semiotics and beauty advertising on social networks

Un juego entre la semiótica y la publicidad de belleza en redes sociales

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ABSTRACT

Over time, the way in which communication is perceived has changed. What used to be television, magazines or print advertising, today is social media. Along with this, there has also been a change in the way beauty advertising is communicated, as it used to not show women of color, robust , with freckles, with short hair, etc. Now it is a little more normalized, as it has influenced women with these stereotypes and they compare themselves to themselves. However , this type of beauty advertising, such as makeup, lingerie or even influencers, still has limits that have made women have a perfect standard of beauty, i.e. the fact of being skinny, having good attributes, a perfect smile, long nails, long hair, etc., to be accepted in society or with themselves, which is a situation that is normalized in social networks. This review article will analyze the impact that this type of advertising on social networks has had on Colombian women and how this has created stereotypes in society itself. It will identify the important role played by aesthetic semiotic codes in this situation and will compare different cases of some brands such as Victoria's Secret and Avon.

Keywords: Advertising; Social Media; Beauty; Women; Stereotypes.

RESUMEN

A lo largo del tiempo, ha cambiado la manera en que se percibe la comunicación. Lo que antes era la televisión, las revistas o la publicidad impresa, hoy en día lo son las redes sociales. Junto con esto, también se ha hecho un cambio en la manera en que se comunica la publicidad de belleza, ya que antes no se mostraban mujeres de color, robustas, con pecas, con el cabello corto, etc. Ahora se normaliza un poco más, ya que ha influenciado a las mujeres con estos estereotipos, lo cual hace que se comparen con ellas mismas. Sin embargo, este tipo de publicidad de belleza, como la de maquillaje, de lencería o hasta de influencers, sigue teniendo límites que han hecho que las mujeres tengan un estándar de belleza perfecto, es decir el hecho de ser flacas, tener buenos atributos, una sonrisa perfecta, las uñas largas, el cabello largo, etc, para que sean aceptadas en la sociedad o con ellas mismas, lo cual, es una situación que se normalizo en redes sociales. Con este artículo de revisión, se logrará analizar el impacto que este tipo de publicidad en redes sociales ha tenido en las mujeres colombianas y cómo esto ha creado estereotipos en la sociedad misma. Se identificará el papel importante que juegan los códigos semióticos estéticos en esta situación y se compararán distintos casos de algunas marcas como lo son Victoria 's Secret y Avon.

Palabras clave: Publicidad; Redes Sociales; Belleza; Mujeres; Estereotipos.

INTRODUCTION

It is currently recognized that, in recent decades, advertising has created stereotypes of women based on skin type, body type, hair type, build, etc. With these specific dominant codes, television advertising persists in idealizing beauty standards and creating prototypes to be followed.[1]

 Now, with social media, it would be more common to see these stereotypes, but do female beauty brands today, in the middle of 2025, continue to use these stereotypes to promote their products?

Social science experts, especially those working with communication and advertising, have studied how women's appearance is portrayed in the media. Western beauty standards often portray thin figures, fair skin, stylish hair, balanced faces, and a youthful appearance as the perfect examples, which are widely disseminated by different media types.[1] Highlight that advertisements have played an essential role in constructing stereotypes by showing women who conform to a limited standard of beauty, which leads to social and cultural press in this situation. Advertisements not only show what cultural values exist but also play a role in keeping those already accepted values alive.

In recent years, as we have moved into the digital age, old-school media such as newspapers and television have slowly been replaced by interactive sites such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook.

These social platforms, which are visually driven and widely viewed, have significantly changed the signs and symbols associated with women's attractiveness. Herrera Giraldo[1] suggests that television advertisements have maintained specific dominant codes of representation, which continue in today's digital media but with some changes. Sánchez[3] points out that beauty stereotypes prevail on these platforms, which amplify their impact due to rapid spread and continuous exposure to idealized images.

This means that the signs and symbols used in online advertisements play a crucial role in how women's bodies are displayed. Barthes warned that images can create cultural meanings using visual symbols, and this method remains helpful in examining how social media shapes beauty standards. The regular presentation of edited or filtered images of attractive bodies sets a standard that shapes how people view beauty and desirability, individually and as a group. Akhavi argues that new generations, who have grown up in a digital environment, are very consumerist and obsessed with buying products, as the 21st century is characterized by excessive consumption where people seek to satisfy needs, but above all, desires.

This problem is significant for adolescents and young adults, who see these things every day and, according to various studies, may begin to feel bad about their bodies, become anxious, or develop eating disorders due to these displays. In recent years, advertising on social media has given rise to new trends where some stereotypes persist. Still, efforts are also being made to show various body types, such as vitiligo. These efforts to show symptoms or physiques that are not currently common are being intentionally repeated.

This article aims to explore how stereotypes of female beauty persist in online advertisements, identifying the main signs and symbols used and how they have remained the same or changed over the last five years on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, which is the platform that has increased its visibility in recent years and has become the third most present network in the minds of internet users.[4]

Although attempts are made to show variety, many online campaigns still use heavily retouched photos that fit typical beauty standards.

This creates a strange situation where inclusion seems more like a publicity stunt than a genuine interest in reflecting reality as it is. Based on Menendez[5], this half-hearted diversity (so to speak) can be confusing, as it implies that only certain types of different bodies are valid as long as they continue to meet other beauty standards, such as having a symmetrical face or an idealized lifestyle.

In addition, filters, digital retouching, and AI tools have meant that even photos that attempt to show "real" or "natural" bodies are so heavily edited that they distort reality. This can particularly affect women who view digital content non-stop, creating a conflict between self-acceptance, which is now considered the norm, and the perfect images that continue to fill the online world. As Menendez[5] says, many influencers who encourage self-love on social media do so from bodies that, although they appear different, still conform to the aesthetics in vogue.

In recent years, we have seen that stereotypes do not go away but change and adapt to new platforms. Although progress has been made toward greater inclusion, there is still a long way to go before female beauty standards are truly broad, representative, and fair. Therefore, this article seeks not only to see what visual cues create these stereotypes but also to think about the intentions behind these changes and how they affect how we see female beauty in today's digital world.

METHOD

To write this article, two main phases were addressed and then complemented. First, a literature review of various articles was conducted, followed by a visual analysis of the social media accounts of several beauty brands. Along with this, the type of population was considered when selecting the studies, as importance was given to Colombian women who had been impacted by this situation, such as in the municipality of

Bucaramanga. With this information, we delved deeper to complete this article. Literature review: A search was conducted on Google and Google Scholar, focusing on review articles related to stereotypes of women on social media, investigating documents by various national and international authors from the last 20 years to gain a broader perspective on the topic to be written about. References were taken from these articles to include these studies.

RESULTS

Various articles were examined, including some from other countries, and this was the result of the comparison of some authors:

Table 1. Summaries of the articles analyzed					
Author, year	Country	Type of study	Subject of analysis	Key findings	Key conclusions
Isabel Menendez, 2018	España	Qualitative case study	Campofrío's "Delicious Calm" campaign.	Mixes female empowerment with stereotypes; commercial use of feminism.	Femvertising raises awareness of gender issues, but it can trivialize feminism.
Herrera Giraldo, 2022	Colombia	Television content analysis	Gender stereotypes in TV commercials	Idealized aesthetic representations continue to dominate, albeit with variations	There are changes in form, but not in substance, in stereotypes.
Anzualdo Trejo, Begui Alejandra 2022	Perú	Qualitative study with content analysis and interviews.	Advertising campaigns by Dove and Avon; Peruvian women's perceptions of femvertising.	they meet the characteristics of femvertising; greater acceptance of ads featuring women with everyday appearances..	Femvertising has its limitations, but women want brands to back up their messages with concrete actions.

Analysis

A visual analysis of AVON and Victoria's Secret social media accounts was conducted, selecting photographs that focused on stereotypes that have already been broken and looking for the meanings behind their logos and posts about female beauty codes.
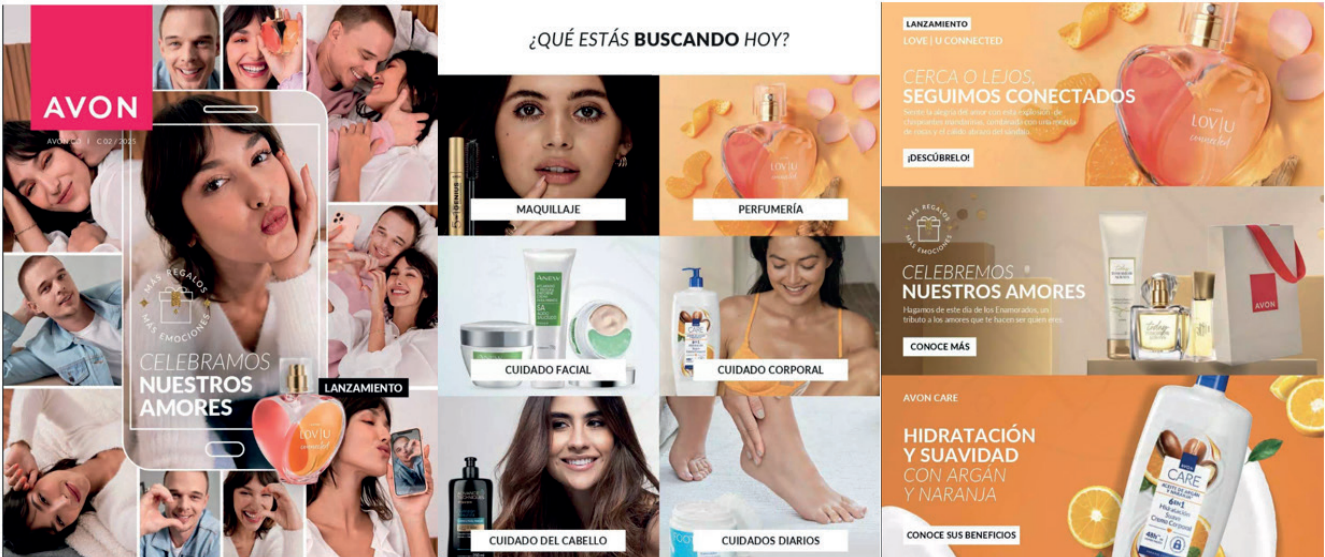
Taken from: https://diosamujer.com/co/catalogos-avon-colombia/catalogo-avon-campana-2-colombia/
Figure 1. AVON_Colombia advertising campaign cycle 2- 2025

The beauty product brand Avon has a logo created by Standard Black that signifies fun and confidence. But it is also inspired by its heritage, which looks forward and cares about friendship, love, life, and laughter.

When analyzing Avon's Instagram, you can see how they include women of different skin colors, older women, and women with varying body and physical appearances. This shows us how this brand broke with the stereotypes of the past, which is a significant step forward in advertising promoting greater representation of women, showing real beauty and greater physical diversity that breaks with traditional beauty stereotypes and shows women as they are and not as society dictates they should be.[6]

Avon represents real women, and this has a positive impact on society and especially on young people who

see its content, as they will feel represented and no longer confused about how they should look since social media users are the ones who make opinions leaders.[7] This means that users who see this post are influenced by what they want to communicate, whether good or bad. In this case, it is good because stereotypes that affect women's feelings are no longer perceived.

One thing to note is that not everything is good, as Avon, like many other brands, still wants women to be young. Age and not having smooth, flawless skin were discriminatory elements in advertising[6], and they are still discriminatory elements, only now they are made to look like something good. Covering or removing the natural wrinkles and expression lines of old age is a stereotype that has not yet been broken. The fact that we want to delay our aging makes us feel beautiful, comfortable, and young. Still, it is because of the advertising that has been done to promote this that it is now so normal that we do not see it this way, and that is why it is something that is not considered to be broken.

Taken from: @victoriassecretcolombia (2025)
Figure 2. Victoria's secret campaign

The Instagram profile of the company Victoria's Secret seeks to convey, through an elaborate image that is appealing to women, a visual context that is consolidated in an atmosphere of charm through inclusivity. However, the effects provided by the sparkling accessories, corsets, and the notion of genuine success represent the standards of sensuality and eroticism characteristic of femininity.[8]

Victoria's Secret's advertising images attempt to sell the idea of inclusive bodies for a fresher, renewed, and even "revolutionary" concept of beauty in the 21st century. However, the truth is that hegemonic symbolic characters still prevail: prioritization of aesthetics, proportionality, stereotypes of diversity, and voluminous bodies offer a breath of fresh air. However, these bodies are matched with the lingerie on sale, adapted to large sizes with a market within the existing variability.[6]

As with the AVON brand, something very similar happens with the Victoria's Secret brand, as today they show women with different skin tones and short hair, closer to what the viewers are. However, they continue to use photos of women with specific protocols, such as being thin, which makes women with certain imperfections in their bodies, such as stretch marks or abdominal fat, when they compare themselves to the girls in the photos in these publications, they feel dissatisfied with themselves, since society or men find a thin girl with a good

figure more attractive, due to the stereotypes created by society itself, which are somehow repeated on social media, as some girls post "sexy" photos showing their bodies without any imperfections, and others do not post any pictures because of these insecurities about having a perfect body or face. Both cases are done to fit in and be accepted by society.

DISCUSSION

Based on the above findings, social media significantly influences its users. In this case, advertising featuring women for the selected brands is no longer as stereotypical. We now see women of color with different body types and diverse faces, which is a significant step forward in the female beauty industry, demonstrating progress, especially when young women see it. Although some traditional beauty standards are still being used, i.e., those of the past, there is progress, and it is not stuck in old stereotypes. Now, it is more realistic, allowing women to see themselves reflected in this and understand the message that natural beauty is found in each of them. [9,10]

Among the commonalities we find is the idea that beauty stereotypes function as semiotic codes defined by what is socially accepted or desirable. This can be seen in the approach to image semiotics and recent feminist studies that address an objective female point of view. [11,12]

However, there are clashes between sources regarding the effectiveness of campaigns that promote diversity. While authors such as Menéndez[5] claim that these campaigns have opened up a space for representation, other studies assert that many of these strategies respond to market feminism, as if to say that the feminine trend has exploded and is beneficial for companies and that in reality there are only ideals without substance. For example, older models are featured in the case of Avon, but there is still a strong emphasis on smooth, flawless skin and harmonious bodies.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST
The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION
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