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Influence of Televised Beauty Products Advertisements on Self-Image Among Undergraduate female students at Egerton University, Kenya

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Abstract

This study examined how television advertisements for female beauty products influence self-image and perceptions among undergraduate female students at Egerton University, Kenya. It is grounded in Cultivation Theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976), which argues that long-term and repeated exposure to television shapes viewers' perceptions of reality by transmitting dominant cultural values, including ideals of attractiveness, success, and social acceptance. Through repeated exposure, television advertising may normalize idealised beauty standards, encouraging audiences to internalise these representations and compare themselves against them. Over time, this can contribute to the belief that beauty is closely linked to happiness, success, and social belonging. A qualitative research design was employed to explore participants' lived experiences in depth. The study used purposive sampling to select 60 female undergraduate students from all four academic years who frequently viewed televised beauty product advertisements. Data were collected through eight focus group discussions using a semi-structured interview guide. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data, involving systematic coding and refinement of emerging themes. Findings indicated that repeated exposure to idealised beauty images encouraged social comparison and body dissatisfaction among participants, which in some cases led to increased consumption of beauty products. However, some participants reported positive outcomes, including improved self-care practices and heightened awareness of personal grooming, suggesting a dual and nuanced effect of beauty advertising. The study concludes that televised beauty advertisements significantly influence female students' self-image and perceptions. It recommends that universities strengthen media literacy programs to enhance critical engagement with beauty narratives in media. It also suggests that media regulators promote more realistic and diverse representations of beauty to support healthier self-perceptions among young women.

Key words: Advertising, cultivation theory, media influence, self-image.



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INTRODUCTION

The study focused on televised beauty product advertisements aired on four major Kenyan stations, namely Citizen TV, NTV, and KTN, which have played a significant role in shaping ideals of female appearance. These advertisements consistently depicted women as having smooth, silky skin, attractive features, slim bodies, and polished looks. These portrayals serve as symbols of beauty, confidence, and success in society, thereby reinforcing narrow and aspirational standards. Due to their broad audience, these messages are frequently consumed by diverse groups, including female students at Egerton University, who are actively engaged in identity formation and self-evaluation. The idea of this repeated exposure to idealised televised images, influenced students on self-perception, body dissatisfaction, and consumption behaviour change, this encouraged them to align with media driven norms.

According to Gerbner and Gross (1976), frequent exposure to media content gradually cultivates viewers' perceptions of social reality. They argue that heavy viewers are more likely to internalise recurring media portrayals and messages, perceiving them as normal and representative of real life. Through this process, audiences may adopt the societal expectations, beliefs, values, and attitudes reflected in media narratives, particularly when such portrayals are repetitive and consistent over time. Furthermore, media messages interact with peer influence and cultural norms, creating the social environment where by physical appearance becomes a primary measure for social acceptance and a foundational acceptance of self-worth in society. This study examined these dynamics among female students at Egerton University, selected from its diverse population, through group discussions on media exposure and personal narratives addressing cultural expectations. The research underscores how media, social interaction, and cultural norms converge to shape identity, self-esteem, and beauty-related practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review examined the influence of televised beauty products advertisements on self-image among undergraduate female students at Egerton University, Kenya. It analysed how media representations either upheld or contested idealised beauty standards. Therefore, central to this discussion Gerbner and Gross Cultivation theory of (1976) was employed. This study critically examined scholarly arguments regarding the influence of sustained television exposure on perceptions

of social reality and the internalisation of mediated beauty ideals. By synthesising the available literature, it became evident that there was a significant theoretical void which remained. This underscored the gap and necessity of this study to address the necessity of the current investigation.

Television Influence of Beauty Products on Female Self-Image and Perception

According to the views of Gerbner and Gross (1976), television serve as powerful sources of repetitive and ritualised messages that shape audience perceptions and social consciousness over time. In relation to beauty product advertisements, continuous exposure to idealised images of beauty cultivates common standards of attractiveness among viewers. Their theory suggests that audiences who are frequently exposed to such advertisements may gradually internalise these portrayed beauty ideals as realistic and socially desirable, influencing their self-perception, attitudes, self-esteem and expectations regarding physical appearance.

Media has a powerful influence on a person's attitudes and behaviour through television and other platforms, shaping how audiences perceive reality and linking prolonged exposure to lower self-esteem and increased consumption, though emerging diverse representations suggest media influence may be evolving (Grabe, 2008). This influence is especially strong among adolescents and young adults, whose identities are still forming. Advertisers strategically construct messages that highlight perceived inadequacies by encouraging product consumption as a solution to problem-solving (Haney, 2024).

According to Dittmar (2009), beauty advertisements promote narrow ideals such as thinness and flawless skin, which women internalise, leading to appearance-related consumption. In contrast, Gill (2007) suggests that such consumption may also be framed as an empowerment and self-expression. However, Sirgy (2012) links repeated exposure to increased materialism and compulsive buying, reinforcing dissatisfaction. Televised beauty advertisements are highly influential due to their visual appeal, shaping ideals of the "perfect" woman (Stanković et al., 2018). Nevertheless, Levine and Murnen (2009) noted that while appearance and anxiety may decline with age, dissatisfaction often remain. While Hou (2025) associates' exposure with negative psychological outcomes such as body dissatisfaction and depression, constant self-evaluation and appearance

modification. However, Tiggemann (2014) emphasises that cultural context shapes interpretation, meaning media messages are not uniformly internalised. which linked prolonged exposure to lower self-esteem and increased consumption, though emerging diverse representations suggest media influence may be evolving.

Consequently, televised beauty advertising exhibits a complex influence on self-image and behaviour, encompassing both psychological impacts and perceptions of empowerment. Its effects are mediated by individual interpretation, cultural context, and media literacy, underscoring the necessity for critical engagement and more inclusive beauty representations (Mann, 2011).

Comparison of Oneself to Models in Adverts in Kenya

Beauty advertisements significantly influence how women perceive themselves, with differing views focusing either on psychological internalisation or on their persuasive impact on consumer behaviour. Jobsky (2014) argues that contemporary advertisements construct visual narratives embedding normative ideals of attractiveness, which are internalised as standards of beauty. Extending this argument, Jobsky situates beauty advertising within broader sociocultural mechanisms, asserting that televised platforms reinforce gendered norms that shape not only aesthetic preferences but also identity formation. Similarly, Kim (2020) highlights the repetitive nature of such imagery, noting that constant exposure cultivates feelings of inadequacy, particularly among young women, who often compare themselves to the models portrayed on television. Supporting this position, Lewine and Murnen (2009) demonstrated that women engaged in self-evaluation by comparing themselves to idealised media images, often resulting in dissatisfaction and reduced self-esteem. According to Tiggemann (2014), these effects are intensified by societal expectations of femininity, which lead to long-term psychological consequences such as chronic body dissatisfaction or overconsumption of beauty products.

According to Diaz (2011, as cited in Midigo, 2024), the Downy Lavender oil advertisement featuring Lulu Hassan on Citizen TV exemplifies an aesthetic of beauty and elegance. The advertisement utilises vivid visual symbolism, including a lavender field, coordinated violet attire, and suggestive gestures, to associate the product with attractiveness, freshness, and satisfaction. The conversion of lavender oil into a commercial product,

particularly its presentation in an affordable sachet, further underscores notions of accessibility, thereby subtly encouraging consumer engagement. In this context, the advertisement not only constructs beauty ideals but also highlights the practice of exposing body parts, particularly among women, in the marketing of beauty products. Wafula (2015) observes that many Kenyan women wear dresses that generously reveal their bodies, a phenomenon attributed to the increasing prevalence of nudity in television advertising. For instance, a 2010 Vaseline oil advertisement featuring television personality Sheila Mwanyigha in Kenya was perceived by many viewers as inappropriate. Similarly, advertisements for products such as Nice and Lovely oil, featuring images of Catherine Kamau, have prompted concerns that it is unsuitable for African women to appear unclothed in advertisements. Some concerned Kenyans have pledged to pursue legal action in response (Wafula, 2015). This contrast demonstrates that beauty advertising serves simultaneously as a sociocultural force shaping self-perception and as a marketing strategy aimed at influencing consumer behaviour.

Theoretical Framework Cultivation Theory

The study focused on the theory of Cultivation, which was developed by Gerbner and his colleagues in the late 1970s, and was used in this research. The long-term and repeated exposure to television shapes audiences' perceptions of social reality (Shanahan, 1999). Garbner argues that TV viewers gradually adopt beliefs and attitudes that reflect consistent media portrayals rather than objective reality, and it is viewed as a dominant cultural storyteller that presents stable and repetitive images, leading audiences to internalise these patterns over time (Brent, 2019). This theory is applicable to televised beauty advertisements, which frequently present idealised standards of femininity. In this study, exposure to beauty advertisements is the independent variable, while self-image, media literacy, and awareness are dependent variables. Continuous exposure on TV may cultivate shared beliefs about desirable beauty standards, leading female students to compare themselves with idealised images, potentially resulting in reduced self-esteem and body dissatisfaction. Cultivation operates through mainstreaming and resonance among viewers by promoting a uniform beauty ideal, while resonance strengthens effects when media images align with real-life social pressures. In the Kenyan context, Westernised beauty ideals in advertisements may intensify these effects among female students. However,

media literacy can moderate cultivation effects. Students with higher media literacy are more likely to critically evaluate the advertised messages and resisted on internalising the unrealistic beauty standards, thus reducing negative impacts on self-image perception.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design to examine the influence of televised beauty advertisements on undergraduate female students’ self-image and perceptions. The study adopted a qualitative approach as it enabled an in-depth understanding of participants’ experiences, perceptions, and meanings attached to media content, which are inherently subjective and context-specific. The study was conducted among undergraduate female students at Egerton University; this population of female students was deemed suitable due to their regular exposure to beauty-related media. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) were used as the primary methods of data collection. The in-depth interviews enabled participants to express personal views and experiences in a confidential setting, while FGDs promoted interactive engagement, which allowed for the exploration of shared perspectives and social influences. A total of 60 participants were involved, with each focus group comprising 8 members to ensure effective participation and manageable group dynamics.

A purposive stratified sampling technique was employed, based on year of study, to ensure representation across different academic levels. This approach captured variations in media exposure, maturity, and critical engagement with advertisements, thereby enhancing the depth and relevance of the findings. There was a small

incentive given to participants as an appreciation for their time.

Ethical standards were strictly observed, with informed consent obtained from all participants, participation being voluntary, and assurances given regarding confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any adverse consequences.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study examined how the influence of televised beauty advertisements on female students can affect their self-image, emotions, and behaviour by leading to low self-esteem, social comparison, and the desire to change their appearance, as well as their purchase behaviour. This was done across the four years of their academic study, which helped to understand how media exposure and peer influence shape one's perception and responses.

Influence of Beauty Advertisements on Self-Image and Perception

The researcher examined how televised beauty product advertisements influence female students’ self-image, emotional responses, and behavioural intentions across different year groups at Egerton University. The study also assessed low self-esteem as an emotional outcome (feelings of inadequacy and dissatisfaction) and the desire to change appearance as a behavioural response. The researcher used this data to examine the relationship between emotional impact and behavioural action, as shown by having 15 students for each year. The study compared responses across all years of study in order to understand how exposure affects students differently over time, highlighting patterns of vulnerability, internalisation, and behavioural influence.

Table 1: Responses towards Televised Beauty Advertisements and Self-image Perception

Response Category	Y1	Y2	Y3	Y4	TOTAL
Desire to Change Appearance	13	14	15	15	60
No Mention (Desire to Change Appearance)	2	1	-	-	
Low Self-Esteem	12	12	15	15	60
No mention (Low Self-Esteem)	3	3	-	-	
Desire to Change Appearance	15	15	15	15	60

The findings from the study revealed that Y1 (13) and Y2 (14) students were more emotionally affected by beauty advertisements. The senior students had these figures: Y3 (15) and Y4 (15). Those with a desire to change appearance had a total of (57 mentions) (3students had no mention), and it followed (13) Y1, (14) f Y2, (15 Y3 and Y4. Early-year students showed higher sensitivity, reflecting transitional life stages and this heightened self-consciousness. Those with low self-esteem had a total of (54 mentions), with Y1 (12) and Y2, and Y3 and Y4 (15), suggesting that senior students experience or were recognised to have self-esteem concerns more consistently. There was a notable overlap between those students with low self-esteem and those who had a desire to change their appearances, which was consistent across all years of study. This indicated a strong correlation between emotional responses and behavioural intentions in the context of televised beauty advertising. The results

also indicate that early-year students (Y1 and Y2) were more vulnerable to televised beauty advertisements and to height self-consciousness during the transition to university life. The students in (Y3 & Y4) reported slightly higher behavioural responses, reflecting accumulated exposure to televised beauty ideals and a stronger awareness of societal expectations.

Comparison of Oneself to Models in Adverts

The researcher examined how female students compared themselves to models featured in televised beauty advertisements, and how this comparison influenced their emotional well-being and consumer behaviour. The analysis examined both the differences and similarities between early-year students (Y1 and Y2) and senior students (Y3 and Y4). The researcher equally focused on these female students' emotional impact. The findings were as shown below:

Table 2: Distribution of Responses on Comparison, Emotional Impact, and Behavioural Influence of Beauty Advertisements Among Female Students

Category	Y1 and Y2 Students	Y3 and Y4 Students	Total Respondents
<u>Student comparing self to model</u>			
Comparisons to TV models	35	25	60
emotional impact -Felling insecure -self-doubt, dissatisfaction, inadequacy	40	20	60
Influenced to purchase	33	27	60

The models' responses indicated that students compared their physical appearance, lifestyle, and standard of beauty to models in the advertisements. The responses indicated that they had an emotional impact, which indicated they felt insecure; they also expressed self-doubt, inadequacy, or dissatisfaction with their personal appearance after viewing beauty product advertisements. These categories allowed the researcher to assess both emotional and behavioural outcomes resulting from social comparison with media portrayals.

The findings revealed that TV cultivated these students to start comparing themselves with models in beauty advertisements. It was widespread throughout their academic years. The majority of respondents reported having compared themselves to the women portrayed in oil products, hair cream, bodies lotions, and many others. This specifically showed indications of respondents of Y1 and Y2(35), while Y3 and Y4 (25) engaged in

comparisons to models, suggesting that social comparison is a common practice among female students, regardless of their level of study. The researcher examined their feelings of insecurity, which were highly prevalent, as there were a total of 40 respondents in Y1 and Y2 and 20 in Y3 and Y4. Therefore, this indicated that emotional responses remained a strong element among senior students, despite increased academic maturity and awareness of advertising strategies. Beauty advertisements also influenced consumer behaviour, where there were respondents (33) from Y1 and Y2, and (27) Y3 and Y4 who reported being influenced to purchase advertised products on television. These findings demonstrated that emotional reactions to idealised beauty products translate into consumer-oriented behaviours, reinforcing the commercial objectives of beauty advertising.

The data presented in Table 2 shows a comparison of students cultivated by television advertisements of beauty products. The results showed that there was a high prevalence among all early years. The Y1 and Y2 students demonstrated higher emotional vulnerability, particularly in feelings of insecurity. The Y3 and Y4 students continued to experience emotional and behavioural influence despite increased awareness of advertising tactics. Those students in Y1 and Y2 showed early recognition of persuasive marketing strategies; this awareness did not prevent emotional impact. All respondents reported comparing themselves to the models found in television advertisements. Similarly, it was noted that the Y3 and Y4 students, despite greater academic exposure and media literacy, remained affected emotionally and behaviorally.

The findings demonstrated that beauty advertisements exert a persistent influence on these female students' self-image throughout their university life. The tendency to compare oneself with idealised models is consistent across all year groups, highlighting the pervasiveness of social comparison in media consumption when cultivated. The feelings of insecurity were reported across both early and senior years, suggesting that prolonged exposure to idealised beauty standards does not necessarily reduce emotional vulnerability. Instead, repeated exposure may normalise unrealistic ideals, reinforcing dissatisfaction with one's appearance. Furthermore, the continued influence to purchase advertised products indicates that emotional responses often translate into consumer behaviour, sustaining the commercial success of beauty advertising. The cultivated perception encouraged social comparison, leading to feelings of insecurity and motivating purchasing behaviour as a means of achieving the advertised ideal. Despite increased awareness of advertising strategies among senior students, the cultivated standards remained influential, demonstrating the long-term psychological and behavioural effects of televised beauty advertisements.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: The study concludes that modern consumers are exposed to a great number of television

advertising messages on a daily basis, as a result of which they quickly react by buying this product. The findings demonstrated that repeated exposure to these idealised representations of beauty products contributed to the internalisation of narrow appearance standards, which significantly influenced how female students evaluated themselves. A large number of participants reported feelings of having low self-esteem and the desire to alter their physical appearance, which indicated a strong link between media exposure and self-perception. In the early years, students are more emotionally vulnerable due to their ongoing identity formation, while senior students, despite greater awareness of advertising strategies, continue to exhibit behavioural responses such as the intention to purchase beauty products. This suggests that prolonged exposure to television cultivates and reinforces the normalisation of unrealistic beauty ideals over time, which highlights its pervasiveness.

However, the study establishes that televised beauty advertising operates both as a sociocultural influence and a marketing tool, which has lasting psychological and behavioural effects on female university students.

Recommendations: The study recommends that media literacy be integrated into university curriculum programmes to equip students to understand and critically evaluate the persuasive strategies used in televised beauty advertisements. This would enable learners to engage more thoughtfully with media content rather than passively consuming it. Additionally, students should be encouraged and supported to access counselling services, which can help them cope with body dissatisfaction, self-esteem concerns, and emotional challenges that may arise from exposure to such media messages. Furthermore, there is a pressing need to promote broader awareness of the psychological impact of televised beauty messaging in order to foster healthier interactions between consumers and key stakeholders, including beauty companies, educators, and student organisations, who play a central role in shaping students' experiences and perceptions.

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