Media Coverage of Women across Countries (The Special Case of Azerbaijan)

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Abstract

The relevance of this study results from the need to examine the way in which images of women and femininity are presented in the Azerbaijani media. The purpose of the study is to analyse the characteristics of the portrayal of women in Azerbaijani television advertising. The theoretical and methodological foundations of the study are based on gender and socio-cultural approaches. The method of audiovisual content analysis was used for the study. The sample includes 103 commercials collected between 2020 and 2023, with the prerequisite of the presence of female characters. The results showed two main trends in the portrayal of women. Firstly, a patriarchal perception dominates: women are usually presented as housewives or mothers, and most advertising takes place in a domestic environment. Women are often depicted in advertisements for men's products, which reinforces patriarchal stereotypes. Secondly, there is an emancipatory trend, which is reflected in the reduced objectification of women's sexuality in advertising. The plots and dialogues of commercials practically do not contain stereotypical ideas about women and present them in a positive light. Further research should aim to develop practical recommendations for improving the broadcasting of women's images in an emancipatory context.

1. Introduction

The research relevance is determined by the current position of women in Azerbaijani society. Mass culture reproduces and marks the current gender order in a particular socio-cultural space. The images of

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women and femininity captured in cultural products can reveal underlying patterns in Azerbaijani society. Consequently, the research has broader implications: addressing the problem of gender equality in a Muslim country; identifying the presence of stereotypical constructs that create a distorted view of Azerbaijani women; and examining the influence of mass culture images on the younger generation, which is the main audience for modern cultural products. Still, the main line of the relevance of the research is the need to understand how common trends and challenges affect women in different cultural contexts because mass culture primarily serves as a form of global education at the present stage. But we should not forget about the influence of traditional culture on mass culture (Balalaieva & Boico 2022).

The scientific discussion in Azerbaijan on this issue has not received adequate coverage; nevertheless, several studies have touched upon certain aspects of the representation of Azerbaijani women in the cultural space. Kerimli (2021) addressed the issue of the dissemination of female images in Azerbaijani art. She concludes that the female image in the evolution of Azerbaijan's artistic culture is the basis for the education and spiritual development of the individual. Turkish culture actively produced female images, besides showing that women's art is not second-rate art. Thus, the images of women were already relevant in the traditional culture.

Jalilova (2020) examined Azerbaijani cinema as a case study of the representation of women through cultural products. She conducted a comparative analysis of popular classic films and contemporary films to document the negative tendencies of the traditional view of gender and gender roles. The researcher recorded the presence of patriarchy in the plot structure of the films. Women performed decorative roles. At best it was the role of the mother, which is also stereotyped. A stereotypical image is created, assuming that this role is the best achievement of a woman in Azerbaijan. But in contrast to this trend, Garayeva (2023) points out that the social mobility of Azerbaijani women has undergone many changes, which is

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reflected in cultural attitudes and stereotypes. Azerbaijani society today is more open to women's self-assertion, but patriarchy still exists.

Aliyeva (2017), in her monograph on women's representation in Azerbaijani culture, confirms the problem described above by previous researchers – the presence of a high level of patriarchy. Based on the analysis, the researcher derives her recommendations that call for change. Firstly, all kinds of discrimination against women in the space of mass culture should be destroyed only by legal and democratic methods. Secondly, cultural products that demean women, such as advertisements and TV series, should be exposed through the active participation of women. One of the main ways is to boycott products both material and intellectual. Third, strict media monitoring committees should be put in place with a clear programme of action and response to discrimination against women (Spytska 2023b). Fourth, there must be an effort to eliminate discriminatory aspects in all kinds of official documents. Fifth, an important element in the fight against gender discrimination is to work actively with language policy.

Political life also relates to mass culture. Mehrabov (2016) studied the ways in which Azerbaijani women participate in various social and political movements in online and offline formats, having a great deal of systemic pressure from state authoritarianism in Azerbaijan. By comprehensively examining data from online resources, focus groups and interviews, the researcher concluded that flash mobs are the main tactic primarily used by liberal activists. It is a very promising mode of group influence in Azerbaijani patriarchal society to increase the political role of women in the country.

Thus, there is a small research density on this topic in the scientific discourse of Azerbaijan. Nevertheless, the existing works cover some facets of the problem in a concrete form. The main difference proposed by the current study derives from its attempt to comprehensively determine the specifics of the representation of images of femininity in Azerbaijani mass culture. Based on this, the

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research aims to capture the attributes of women/femininity in Azerbaijani society through textual, auditory, and visual media as products of mass and popular culture. The following tasks were implemented to realise the set goal:

1. To identify common cross-cultural features of the representation of women in mass culture.

2. To highlight the socio-cultural background and context of Azerbaijan in gender issues.

3. To analyse images of femininity in Azerbaijan state corpus (The State Agency for Advertisement of The Republic of Azerbaijan, 2024).

2. Materials and Methods

Regarding the empirical part of the research, a specific carrier of gender-cultural codes was selected – TV advertising. The method of audio-visual content analysis was used to study it. The method of audio-visual content analysis is a powerful tool for researching the codes that translate the image of women in TV advertising. It allows the analysis of a variety of aspects of advertising, including visual and audio elements, language features and scripts, and the attention given to different gender roles and stereotypes. The choice of TV advertising to analyse the image of women in Azerbaijan is logical and justified for several reasons. Firstly, TV advertising is one of the most widespread and accessible means of mass communication. It reaches a large audience and has a significant impact on public consciousness. Therefore, analysing TV commercials can reveal what gender and cultural messages are widely disseminated in society through media. Secondly, TV commercials are often used to promote various goods and services, and their creators actively try to attract the attention of consumers. In the process of creating advertisements, gender stereotypes and cultural images can be used to create an effective advertising message. In summary, analysing television advertising allows us to explore how gender and culture interact in modern

society, and which images and messages dominate the media environment. It is an important tool for understanding the influence of media on the formation of gender roles and cultural stereotypes. A corpus of 103 advertising videos on television in Azerbaijan featuring women for the period 2020-2023 were analysed. Three Azerbaijani TV channels were chosen as the source for content analysis: two state-owned and one private. Their choice was due to their large audience of viewers. A coding matrix was created for the analysis, considering women's roles, patterns of behaviour and stereotypes.

It's worth pointing out two serious limitations of the research. Analysing 103 promotional videos over the period 2020-2023 provides optimal temporal coverage, but some seasonal or temporal factors may have influenced the content of the adverts. A broader analysis of data from different periods may provide a more complete picture of the dynamics of change. The coding matrix, while an important tool for analysis, can be subject to subjective judgement. Different researchers may arrive at different interpretations, and it is important to ensure that coding is reliable and consistent.

3. Results

The representation of women in popular and mass culture varies significantly across different countries, reflecting diverse socio-cultural, economic, and political landscapes. In Europe, there has been a progressive shift towards more equitable and diverse representations of women, although traditional stereotypes persist. For instance, in Scandinavian countries like Sweden and Norway, advertising and media are known for promoting gender equality and frequently showcase women in professional roles, emphasizing empowerment and independence. However, in southern European countries like Italy and Spain, there remains a stronger tendency to depict women in traditional roles related to beauty, family, and caregiving, although this is gradually changing as societal attitudes evolve.

In Eastern Europe, the representation of women is often a mix of traditional and modern influences (Zavyalova & Stakhevych 2022). In

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countries like Poland and Hungary, advertisements and media sometimes reinforce traditional gender roles, but there is also a growing presence of women portrayed in diverse and professional capacities, reflecting the ongoing societal changes and the influence of European Union norms on gender equality. In contrast, many Asian countries exhibit a wide range of portrayals influenced by cultural norms, economic development, and political frameworks. For instance, in Japan and South Korea, while there is an increasing number of women depicted in professional and diverse roles, traditional images of women as homemakers and caregivers remain prevalent. Japanese advertising often emphasizes beauty and youthfulness, while South Korean media has made significant strides in showing women in more varied and empowered roles, partly due to the global influence of K-pop and Korean dramas that promote more progressive gender norms.

In India, the portrayal of women in mass culture is undergoing a significant transformation. Traditional images of women as devoted wives and mothers still dominate, especially in rural and less urbanized areas. However, urban advertising increasingly depicts women as independent and career-oriented, reflecting the changing dynamics of Indian society. This shift is supported by various initiatives promoting gender equality and the representation of women in leadership roles. In Middle Eastern countries, the representation of women in media and advertising is deeply influenced by cultural and religious norms. Countries like the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia have strict guidelines governing women's portrayal, often emphasizing modesty and traditional family roles. However, recent years have seen gradual changes, with more women being depicted in professional and leadership roles, aligning with broader socio-economic reforms.

These varied representations across the globe highlight the complex interplay between tradition and modernity, cultural norms, and the push for gender equality. While progress is evident in many regions, traditional stereotypes still persist, underscoring the ongoing

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challenge of achieving truly equitable representation of women in popular and mass culture. This global perspective provides a context for understanding the unique dynamics at play in Azerbaijan, where traditional and modern images of women coexist, reflecting the country's own socio-cultural evolution.

In the framework of the author's present analysis, commercials that are presented on Azerbaijani television for the last 5 years were used (Figure 1).
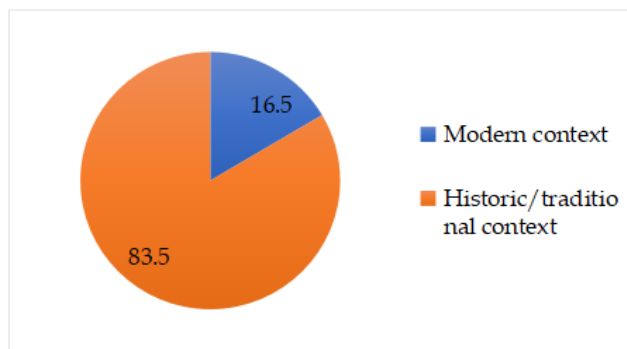

Figure 1. *Sociocultural context*

First of all, the correlation of traditional and contemporary socio-cultural contexts in advertising materials was recorded. A significant preponderance was found in favour of the modern context, which can be labelled as globalisation, correlating with mass culture. The traditional and/or historical context had no significant statistical representation. Thus, TV advertising in Azerbaijan primarily broadcasts a topical rather than retrospective background. In other words, the use of traditional motifs in adverts featuring women has low popularity in Azerbaijan.

The second aspect of the analysis was the study of the role of women in the structure of advertising materials (Figure 2). Thus, in about one-third of advertising materials, the woman is a housewife, which shows one of the main stereotypical constructions of a

patriarchal society. Almost a quarter of adverts show the woman in the role of a mother, which also indicates patriarchy. There was a low representation of women in professional roles or as active and independent individuals. In general terms, such trends indicate the transmission of stereotypical thinking towards women through TV commercials from the perspective of activity and functionality.
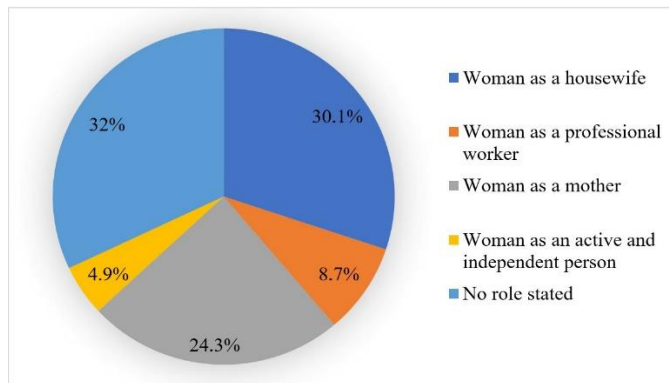

Figure 2. *Women's role*

The appearance and style of a woman in advertising videos had predominantly neutral representation – 88.4%. The share of the sexualisation of the image of a woman was 11.6% (this term refers to the presence of objectifying attributes of sexuality in the image of a woman). The analysis of dialogues and retorts showed that in 42.7% of cases, the commercials broadcast positive and supportive dialogues with women. Only 1.9% of the advertising content had negative or derogatory dialogues, considering that 55.4% of the promotional videos did not have a dialogue-based structure. The analysis of the plot of the promotional videos shows the presence of a positive plot and message about women – 40.8%. At the same time, approximately one-fifth of the promotional videos displayed a stereotypical message – 19.4%. It should also be emphasised that 39.8% of the promotional

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videos had a neutral storyline with no meaningful connection to women. The products that are advertised were also analysed. Thus, out of the total content of the promotional videos where women were present, only 36.9% promoted products or services related to women and their needs. There were even slightly more male product adverts – 38.8%. At the same time, about a quarter of products or services were gender neutral – 24.3%. The location of the adverts was predominantly domestic – 38.6%. The second place was public places – 23.3%. The working environment was only found in 17.5% of the advertising videos. Fantasy or abstract locations occurred in only 3.9% of the promotional videos.

As for the age categories of the image of women in Azerbaijani TV advertising, approximately half of the content was broadcast featuring young women (Figure 3). The second place was occupied by middle-aged women. Elderly women were practically not used for TV commercials.
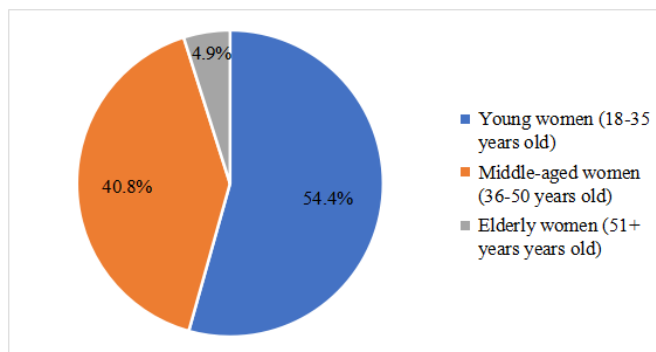

Figure 3. *Women`s age*

In terms of ethnicity, approximately one-third of advertising videos broadcast Azerbaijani women – 27.2%. In 72.8% of cases, ethnicity was not specified. Also, 10.7% of advertising videos broadcast married women, in other cases marital status was not specified – 89.3%. Thus, it is possible to draw seven main inductive

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conclusions, which structurally display the core attributes of female images in television advertising in Azerbaijan. They, in turn, can be divided into two themes – patriarchy and emancipation.

Patriarchy and tradition:

− advertising in Azerbaijan continues to support patriarchal stereotypes about women, portraying them in the roles of housewives and mothers. This indicates that traditional gender roles remain relevant in advertising practice;

− limited representation of women in professional roles or as active and independent individuals in advertising can maintain patriarchal norms and expectations, limiting women's opportunities;

− Dialogues in advertising materials, although increasingly positive, rarely overcome stereotypes associated with a patriarchal society.

Emancipation:

− despite patriarchal stereotypes, some advertising materials in Azerbaijan include positive stories and messages about women, which can contribute to their emancipation and support equality;

− the presence of dialogues and lines that are increasingly positive and supportive can also reinforce positive images of women and their role in society;

− the existence of diverse products and locations in advertising can contribute to women's emancipation by giving them more choices and self-expression;

− considering that young women are more likely to be represented in advertising, this may reflect a shift towards more emancipated and educated women who are willing to take an active role in society.

These two vectors (patriarchy and emancipation) reflect the mixed nature of advertising practice in Azerbaijan, which combines both outdated gender stereotypes and attempts to promote more modern and equal representations of women. It is important to note that these mixed practices may reflect the diversity of opinions and

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values in society. It may also evolve over time due to socio-cultural and political changes. Ultimately, advertising practices can be an effective tool for shaping public views on gender equality and the role of women in Azerbaijan, and for influencing societal changes in this area.

4. Discussion

The media, especially movies and television, are powerful tools for shaping and reinforcing the roles of men and women in society. How gender is represented in the media is critical because it affects how people perceive and internalise gender roles during their socialisation (Gürkan & Serttaş 2022). To specifically understand the essence of Azerbaijani women's representation in mass culture, Sultanova (2019) retrospectively analysed how female characters were portrayed from the birth of Azerbaijani cinema to the present day. The director's view of the place, role and identity of women was analysed. At the beginning of the Soviet era, until the "revolutionary romance" with its characteristic peculiar attempt to emancipate women was dispelled, strong and powerful female characters dominated cinema. Soon, female characters were confined within the framework of tradition and given an instrumental role, often under male domination. Azerbaijani women were essentially turned into bearers of family honour, and their infidelity was questioned more than men's. The stories of women in the films did not occupy the central plot lines. Even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, with the apparent transition to democratic values, the portrayal of women in cinema did not change radically (Spytska 2023a).

Another audio-visual medium that represents women in mass culture is television advertising. For its specificity, it is a marketing material that has the property of displaying or constructing certain stereotypes and images of women in mass culture (Kalashnyk et al. 2020a). Australian researcher Gurrieri (2021) presents the concept of "patriarchal marketing", exploring the persistence of gender inequality in marketing and consumer culture. He defines patriarchal marketing

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as an approach to marketing that operates according to an established hierarchy of power in which men dominate and use their dominance to suppress and exploit women. This approach entails serious problems such as the symbolic destruction of women. There are three main consequences of patriarchal marketing: simplification and distortion of the complexities of women's lives, overlooking and marginalizing those who do not conform to the established hegemonic feminine ideals, and infringement of women's physical nature and corporeality (Trofimov et al. 2019). The researcher concludes that the application of a feminist perspective can be a challenge to maintaining the repressive power structures of patriarchal marketing that symbolically disadvantage and destroy women. The binary concept of gender is central to the gender stereotypes found in advertising, which are characterised by images of women and men (and only these two genders) that conform to stereotypes of the respective sex (Åkestam et al. 2021).

Brazilian researchers Shinoda et al. (2021) analysed the representation of women in print advertising. The research identified three main female roles: empowered women, women in a decorative role, and women subordinate to men. The findings suggest that women presented as successful professionals, engaged in non-traditional activities, or as equal to men, have long gone unnoticed and undervalued. It is also important to understand women's perceptions of sexist advertising. The research of Gamlath and Malkanthie (2022) in Sri Lanka found that women label sexist brand advertising messages negatively. However, despite the negative brand image, women still tend to buy the product, provided the product has good value for its price.

Ghanem and Dekhil (2023) compared and contrasted how men and women were portrayed in television advertisements before and after the Tunisian revolution. The authors conduct a content analysis of television advertisements aired during the month of Ramadan in 2007 (representing the Tunisian revolution) and 2017 (representing the

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post-Tunisian revolution). The research revealed significant changes in the representation of men and women in Tunisian television advertising from 2007 to 2017, reflecting the social evolution of Tunisian society. During this period, images of both genders remained, but there was a shift from traditional scenarios to more contemporary contexts. The research results also indicate differences in the representation of gender roles. In 2007, during the month of Ramadan, television advertising was characterised by more limited representations of men and women and more traditional gender roles. Whereas in 2017, there was greater diversity in the representation of gender roles and greater participation of women and men in adverts. In 2007, women were more likely to appear as housewives in most adverts, presenting products and services targeted at female audiences (Romaniuk 2021). Men, on the other hand, were more likely to feature male outdoor products. In 2017, scenarios became more diverse: women and men were more likely to present products and services together, as well as in different social contexts (Saifnazarov 2024). Women were no longer limited to domestic imagery and actively participated in promotional stories. The main difference of this research is the opportunity to see how images of women in TV advertising have changed over time. The results of this research partially confirm the results of the author's research, in which the predominance of the modern socio-cultural context over the traditional one was observed.

Das and Sharma (2023) studied how women are portrayed in Indian television advertisements and how their portrayal varies across product categories. To analyse the role of women in Indian advertising, research was conducted by analysing the content of 268 promotional videos aired in five popular TV shows in India. The results of this research revealed interesting trends. Most of the adverts studied feature women in roles related to their decorative function and family responsibilities. This indicates that traditional stereotypes about the role of women in Indian society remain relevant in advertising

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practice. Moreover, advertising material that portrays women as independent individuals and professionals is rare, especially in the context of products related to body adornment and homemaking (Ryskaliyev et al. 2019). However, it is worth noting that the research has noticed a significant increase in situations in which women are portrayed as independent individuals capable of making decisions. This may indicate a gradual shift in the perception of women's role in advertising and their greater involvement in important decisions. Thus, the research highlights a dynamic in the representation of women in Indian advertising where, despite traditional images, there has been a gradual development of more modern and independent images of women. These results are consistent with the author's research in terms of the frequent portrayal of women in traditional and functional roles. The main methodological distinguishing feature of the research is the much larger sample in a short time frame.

The comparison with the Turkish context is highly relevant due to the closeness (mental and cultural) of Azerbaijan and Turkey. Bayazit (2020) conducted a study based on qualitative analysis to identify and advance theory, research and practice related to the image of women in advertising. In reviewing the literature, it was observed that different images in advertisements have a stronger impact than others. Particular attention was paid to the role of depiction of women in advertising, which was considered to be one of the most influential elements used to increase the effectiveness of advertising, raise awareness, enhance viewer response, and increase sales of products and services (Kalashnyk et al. 2020b). The empirical research concluded that most advertisements systematically use objectification of women, which may hinder their individual development and advancement in society. The results of the research have meaningfully similar findings to the author's study, but the main difference is that qualitative rather than quantitative methodology was used. This suggests that the problem is examined in two different methodological

ways. Consequently, this problem of portraying women does not have a hidden or underlying aspect.

The research is also of interest in terms of comparison with similar studies conducted in European countries. Kitsa and Mudra (2020) analysed theoretical sources concerning the impact of advertising on the modern world and also assessed the psychological features of advertising based on the experience of world researchers. As part of their research, they conducted a content analysis of 200 commercials broadcast on 6 leading Ukrainian TV channels in prime time. The findings suggest that Ukrainian commercials characterize women mostly as housewives, nurses, carers, maids or objects of adornment for powerful men. This study is consistent with the author's research, but is also more specific, showing a list of stereotypical professional roles of women. This suggests that women are subject to stereotyping even in professional roles in advertising (Balalaieva & Maidaniuk 2023).

The research aforementioned highlights important questions about the way in which television advertising shapes and influences perceptions of gender roles and images of women and men. In a world where advertising plays a huge role in shaping public opinions and values, this has profound socio-cultural implications. TV adverts often use stereotypical images of women and men, which can reinforce gender expectations and norms in society (Ronzhes 2023). For example, the constant portrayal of women as housewives or men as strong and successful often confirms and reinforces these stereotypes in the minds of viewers. Advertising images can influence people's self-esteem and behaviour. For example, women and girls seeing idealised images of feminine beauty and success in advertisements may feel pressured to be like these images, which can lead to negative consequences for their mental health (Romaniuk & Yavorska 2022). In the light of these socio-cultural implications, it is important to encourage advertising practices that reflect contemporary and diverse gender roles and promote more inclusive and equal societies. This also

implies actively including women in the advertising industry and respecting their contribution to shaping the images and messages that people see every day on television screens and the internet.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the representation of Azerbaijani women in mass and popular culture has several distinct characteristics. Firstly, there is a certain degree of patriarchal perception of women. This is seen when the roles of women in advertising are analysed – predominantly housewives or mothers. The dominant location is also the domestic setting. There is a large number of adverts that use women to sell male products where she is displayed in a utilitarian context. Secondly, there are also emancipatory tendencies. Thus, the level of objectifying sexualisation of women in TV advertising, although present, is low. It is also important to confirm the fact that there are predominantly positive dialogues and stories with women in TV commercials, which were not of a derogatory or stereotypical nature. However, it is important to note that even with the positive trends, there may still be aspects of the representation of women in TV adverts that need to be improved. This may include increasing the diversity of female images and roles, challenging negative stereotypes, and continuing efforts to achieve full gender equality in advertising and society at large.

This research provides practical insights into how Azerbaijani television advertising both perpetuates traditional gender stereotypes and introduces modern, emancipated representations of women, highlighting opportunities for influencing societal views on gender equality. The research on gender images in TV advertising thus provides valuable insights and recommendations for improving advertising practices that not only can benefit customers and TV channels but also contribute to a more equal and inclusive society as a whole. Research on gender images in Azerbaijani advertising provides valuable data for reflection and further action. Further research should aim to develop practical recommendations for improving the

broadcasting of women's images in an emancipatory context. Improving the representation of women in mass media and advertising can contribute to a more just and inclusive society where everyone, regardless of gender, has equal opportunities and rights.

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