

## **CREATING CULTURE: THE IMPACT OF MEDIA IMAGES ON THE MYTH OF FEMALE BEAUTY**

**T.N.K. Meegaswatta**

*Department of English, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka  
thilini.meegaswatta@gmail.com*

In any given society, ‘culture’ can be taken to mean a set of socially transmitted beliefs, values and practices which provides a common understanding which often transcends immediate individual experience. If culture is the force that constructs the social reality which often guides our actions, the concept of female beauty is unarguably an oppressively influential discursive construct at present. The dynamic theory of social impact suggests that people tend to be more influenced by nearby rather than far away people, and construct local patterns of consensus that can be interpreted as subcultures. However, in the modern world various media outlets have taken the lead in disseminating uniform sets of beliefs and attitudes which have dovetailed in to these subcultures.

This observation is apt in relation to Sri Lanka where Television is one of the most popular sources of entertainment with 80% of households having televisions. Among various types of media images disseminated through television, advertisements are the most consistent. Starting with the understanding that the image of women perpetuated through advertising could influence the collective consciousness of society, and thereby influence and construct elements of culture, this study aims to draw a statistical profile of primetime advertising in Sri Lanka and analyze the construction of female beauty in advertisements from a quantitative and qualitative perspective. A sample of fifty-five advertisements was chosen from the prime time broadcast of three television channels (Rupavahini, ITN, Sirasa) during August, 2012 to produce quantitative data on categories of female representation and qualitative data on the ways in which the myth of female beauty is constructed. Deductive method was adopted to conduct qualitative analysis on a number of advertisements focusing on how representations operate to produce meaning which reproduce and normalize socially constructed dominant ideologies on female beauty. Inputs from respondents through informal interviews and response sheets have been used when necessary to assess the impact of the beauty myth on society.

According to Lanka Market Research Bureau (LMRB) statistics, advertisements occupy 17% - 25% of primetime telecast. A feminist analysis of the content and ideology of advertisements reveals that most advertisements build on extremely sexist ideologies of female beauty that could profoundly affect the way women are treated in real life. Most advertisements objectify women, applaud a rigid and limited definition of female beauty and exhort women to achieve and maintain impossible beauty standards. Not only are men encouraged to primarily judge women by their physical attributes and sexual appeal, but the women themselves are forced to internalize the self-degrading and harmful belief that flawless white skin is the only acceptable appearance. The fact that billions of dollars are spent annually on cosmetics and other beauty products while more important areas of spending are ignored shows the power advertisements wield in the way of creating culture. Emanating from a pool of collective knowledge that is highly sexist, media images of female beauty contribute to the formation of crippling definitions which have become an integral part of modern popular culture.