



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

## PORTRAYALS AND PERCEPTIONS: EXAMINING THE INFLUENCE OF ADVERTISEMENTS ON MODERN INDIAN SOCIETY

Kriti Songriwal

Ph.D. Research Scholar

Department of Modern Indian Languages & Literary Studies  
University of Delhi

**Abstract:** Roland Barthes in his book *Mythologies* (1957) mentioned that myths are all about countermanding culture into common sense, norms and general opinion. This concept can be taken up to understand how dominant ideology functions. 'Hegemony', like myths, translates the perspective and opinions of the ruling class into common sense. This process is so gradual, natural and apolitical that it seems as if it never happened. The apparatuses that are responsible for this, are termed as 'ideological apparatuses' by Gramsci and one such major apparatus is 'advertisement'. Commercials can be collated into myths where they often resolve social contradictions, provide stringent framework of identity and very strategically celebrate the existing social order.

In the technology driven world, advertisements and commercials are present everywhere. It is impossible to imagine contemporary Indian modern society without advertisements. They influence the social behavior of people, shape their opinion about everything from products to politics and impact the public sphere with powerful intensity. At present, they are playing a key role in the ideological transformation of public discourse and acting as a genuine mediator of hegemony. They are changing the contemporary public space, creating a framework of identity and celebrating the dominant. In this process, gender representation is a critical aspect to focus on.

The Indian advertising industry has evolved into a humongous zone, modern day adverts have taken a complete makeover and an unceasing narrative of virtual reality led to genesis of characters that seem to belong to a parallel world. The predefined image of males and females represented through advertisements initiates the process of hegemony where these perspectives get transformed into common accepted behavior. Women are always represented in a particular shape, size and color. They, in most of the advertisements are treated as sexual objects whose job is to only woo a man. They are provided space either in a brand promoting domestic chores (dishwash, washing machines, cooking items) or as eye candy. These misrepresentations gradually change the public discourse and make people think along these predetermined lines.

Through this paper, I intend to focus on the impact of modern-day advertisements on the public discourse. By taking print, digital and social media advertisement into consideration, the paper will highlight & critically analyze representation of Indian contemporary women in adverts and how these misrepresentations transform contemporary Indian public discourse.

**Index Terms** - Commercials, Adverts, Advertisements, Stereotypes, Public Discourse, Media, Women, Sexual Objectification, Hegemony

## Introduction

The ancient city of the Indus Valley Civilization, Mohenjo-Daro had people walking down the streets with huge drums and sticks, shouting their own and messages from others. These people were aided by signs on shops or drinking houses to indicate and advertise the name of shop owners or information that was supposed to be passed on from one person to another. In Indian subcontinent during Ashoka's reign similar purpose was served by stone pillars that were used for making public announcements. Ancient Greece and Rome had town criers, drummers and signs to carry information for advertising goods and services. They painted the advertisements of theaters performances, games, goods, services, public events, etc. on the walls of busy centers of the towns.

Through these examples one can see that advertisements have been playing a very important role in all types of society since memorial times. The purpose which it selected, and the way changed from time to time, but the presence has always been there, and Indian society is no exception.

The history of advertising in India goes hand in hand with the history of the Indian press. The first issue of the first newspaper of Indian subcontinent, "The Bengal Gazette" or "The Calcutta General Advertiser" started by James Augustus Hickey on January 29, 1780, carried many advertisements. These early newspapers, via advertisements, announced births, deaths, appointments, arrival and departure of ships and sale of commodities.

At the beginning of the 19th century, a change in the pattern of these advertisements was observed. They became more concrete and substantial in nature and the power of advertisement has been increasing since then, because of which, contemporary Indian modern society is all about adverts. It's almost impossible to not mention or see an advertisement every 30 minutes. They are not just a simple tool of information which is trying to persuade people to buy or invest in some commodity. Rather, it has become a social apparatus which is playing a key role in ideological transformation of public discourse and acting as a genuine mediator of hegemony.

## GENDER & INDIAN ADVERTISEMENT

The predefined image of males and females represented through advertisement, initiates the process of hegemony where these perspectives get transformed into commonly accepted behavior. The representation of women in past and in contemporary advertisements is problematic. The role provided to women in Indian adverts can be viewed from and categorized in three main categories:

- Domestic Superhero- Where all domestic chores are her responsibility.
- Beauty Stereotypes- Where women models of a set size, age, height and complexion are used to set a narrative. A public discourse is initiated through her about accepted characteristics of beauty.
- Decorative and Sexual Stereotypes- Where women are presented as a decorative sexual object whose only responsibility is to woo a man.

These misrepresentations gradually change the public discourse and make people think along these predetermined lines. The societal set up created by these advertisements slowly takes over the general voice and understanding of people, creating a discourse which ultimately favors the dominant. This pattern can be observed by taking into consideration a few renowned brands, their advertisements and the changed ways of advertising over a period.

## WOMEN AS A DOMESTIC SUPERHERO

New research released by UNICEF on representation of women in advertisements shows that while girls and women are well-represented as characters (49.6%) and dominate screen time (59.7%) and speaking time (56.3%) but when girls and women appear in ads, it is mostly to sell domestic and beauty products to female consumers.

The domestic world has always been considered as the territory of woman. Everything associated with house comes under woman's supervision & irrespective of her professional achievements, excelling in this zone apparently makes her acceptable in society. This perception has been passed on from one generation to another via various ideological apparatuses, advertisements being the most important one in today's time.



A young newlywed wife is seen cooking in Lotus cooking oil advertisement for her in-laws to prove her "worth" as a wife and to be accepted into the new family. She appears nervous, and her mother-in-law treats her with contempt and husband doesn't provide any support. Finally, the family bursts out laughing and tells her that she should cook more often because she did such a good job.

At first glance, this could be misinterpreted as a lighthearted advertisement. However, it emphasizes the fact that a woman's worth is limited to the kitchen. The ad goes on to say that as a wife or mother, her primary responsibility is to serve the family. Wasn't there another way to appreciate cooking oil besides regressing?



MTR advertisement, though, depicts a housewife as a goddess who is blessed with multiple hands, reiterate the domestic roles of women. The family members are here only passing on orders to cook things, and she receives no help from anyone. Although she is presented as a self-sufficient powerful woman, the setting makes her another 'stereotype' where instead of using her superpowers to fight for her rights and bigger things, she serves her family.



"Jhatse banao, kuch tasty khao" is the theme of McCain, which is one of the most popular frozen food brands among kids. The advertisement of this brand takes Karishma Kapoor, a celebrity homemaker, to pass on a message that it is always a mother's responsibility to fill in their kids' bellies.



With the world going crazy for disinfectants in covid time, Dettol the most trusted Indian disinfectant brand made sure to again locate a woman to pass on a message about the domestic world. As per the dominant stereotypical ideology, keeping house clean, safe and hygienic is the responsibility of woman of the house &

Dettol successfully contributes to promoting this sexist ideology. Since this new range of surface cleaning deals with ‘cleaning of house’, it by default and to no surprise landed up in women’s lap for advertising.

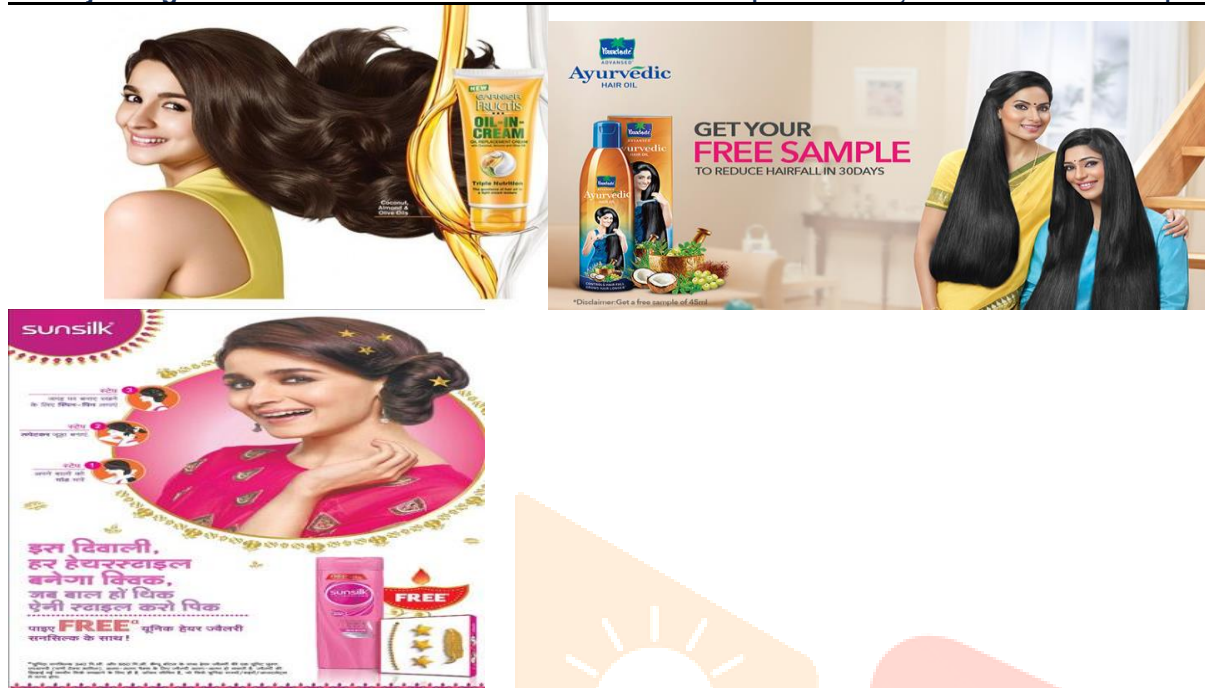
### BEAUTY STEROTYPES

Mention of a typical Indian woman invokes set images. It is culturally loaded, filled with illusions. The dominant social discourse, do's and don'ts, if and but, the good things and the bad ones, the accepted and the unaccepted, cultural and societal rules sought to create a model of woman, who is slim, fair, polite, naive, helpless, submissive and sexually undemanding. This model is constantly pushed into the center of society via public discourse and societal apparatus through the process, which is exclusive and hegemonic, wherein a specific upper caste, sexist gendered norms are imposed as the ‘Indian norms. This ‘Indian norm’ is promoted extensively by advertisements on daily basis.



A country which was once colonized, where most people have different shades of brown, white and fair skin complexion is not just considered superior but is an obsession. Innumerable beauty products promote and advertise themselves only based on making people fair and bright and this concept of having fair and bright skin tone is deliberately made more important for women. This ideology and perception are promoted by renowned celebrities to such an extent that all that a woman needs are fair complexion. Recently a very famous fairness cream “fair and lovely” changed its name to “glow & lovely” just to make people understand that fair is not synonymous with lovely. But what one fails to notice is that advertisements for this face cream still follow the same line of promotion where glow is again associated with fairness.

Women in such adverts are presented in a set body type, we always see slim, tall, fair women with long hair flowing here and there. Such adverts promote ready-made stereotypes structure of women where there is no place for diversity. These voices and perceptions are so regular and uniform in nature that they soon get transformed into common sense and ‘obvious public discourse’ where people consider these angles as ‘normal’ and any other delineation from this as ‘abnormal’.



These famous hair product companies and many other such hair brands promote knowingly or unknowingly the stereotypes of beauty, where a woman if she wants to fit in the category of ‘pretty’ needs to have long flowing hair. And the most important thing to note here is that, irrespective of presence of hair in both the genders, almost 90% of unisex hair products (shampoo, conditioner, oil, straightener, curler etc.) are promoted by female brand ambassadors. This should not be mistaken with better work or employment opportunities for women, because it is about creating a hegemonic anti-diversified stereotypes for women via social apparatus of advertisements.

### **SEXUAL OBJECTIFICATION OF WOMEN**

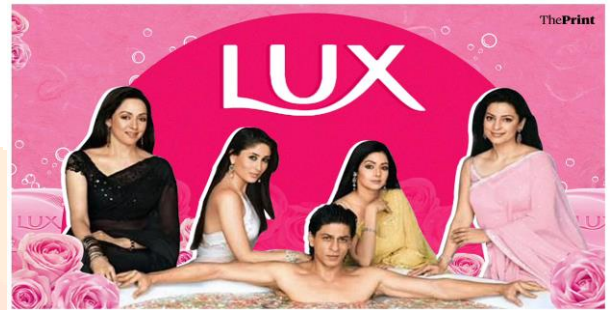
The concept of decorative portrayals is closely related to the concept of beautiful face and body. When people are usually portrayed in advertisements, they are either actively involved with the product or service being advertised, or they are passively decorating the advertisement. For instance, a model could be seen drinking milk (active portrayal), or the model could be carrying the commodity without direct interaction with it (a decorative portrayal).

Decorative depictions of people in advertisements show them as passive and disengaged, whereas active portals show them interacting directly with the product. Many advertisements with attractive men and women use them as decoration. According to a global study of advertising, women are four times more likely than men to be presented visually without speaking. The fact that women are depicted in decorative roles far more than men indicates that adverts do not provide a realistic version of the female gender role. Many decorative depictions of women show women in sexual or alluring positions; a sexual depiction is frequently an overtly forceful image of a woman that focuses on her lips, breasts, or pelvic area. And enticing portrayal is less explicit, with a woman reclining meekly on furniture or the floor or looking at the camera with her lips suggestively parted.

The broader issue with ornamental and sexual portrayals is that the individuals involved may become objects, like the objects that people are attempting to sell with passive portrayals, where there is a disconnect between person and object and potentially even between people. Such feelings may be extended from the advertisement to the entire world, starting to cause a general sense of disassociation among those who see the ad.

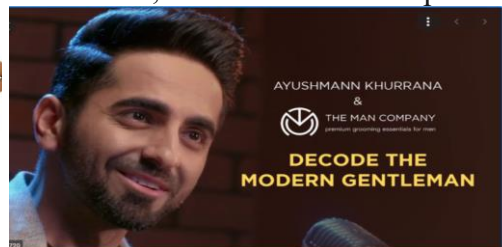


While advertising for food products, women are reduced to highlight sexually provocative body parts in commercials to drive sales. The one shown above is from slice and the range of mango drink is called 'Aam sutra' which is closely associated to (sound wise) 'Kamasutra'. Here to sell a mango drink, Katrina Kaif is reduced to sexual symbol where sexually impregnated words are intentionally used.



In such adverts, women are reduced to tools to woo and satisfy a man. They are used as mere ornaments that are good for decoration and do not serve or aid any primary purpose. As a result of which they become synonymous with the commodity being sold out. There is a disconnect between the concrete material and tools used for decoration. Audience or prospective buyers treat them in exactly the similar way as they are presented in these adverts.

This sexual objectification is not an issue which has to be taken up lightly because it does have some grave consequences. TOI in one of its articles on titled UNICEF: Female characters in Indian ads prominent but highly stereotyped mentions how "...sexual objectification has serious consequences in the real world. The more girls and women internalize the idea that their primary value comes from being a sex object, the higher their rates of depression, body hatred and shame, eating disorders, and a host of other personal impacts. Advertisers promoting the message that women are sex objects need to be mindful of the negative impact that may contribute to their dehumanization and personal harm," it is stated in the report.



## CONCLUSION

Meghan Markle in one of her many speeches on feminism mentioned how, when she was 11 years old, a commercial for a dishwashing liquid, had the tagline, which goes like this, "women all over the America are fighting greasy pots and pan". She mentioned how two boys from her class said "...yeah, that's where women belong in the kitchen".

This episode is to bring in the center 'effects of advertisement'. They are most of the time considered as innocent and harmless tools, with the only motive of promoting commodities and persuading people to buy or invest in them. What most people fail to realize is that these adverts and commercials are very powerful social apparatus which are not just capable of molding the public sphere but creating it too.

To back this up one can notice (via above mentioned commercials) how Indian adverts have very successfully promoted an ideal image of 'Indian Woman'. This woman is beautiful in a way they want her to be. She is professional to an extent they allow her; she is sexually submissive when they want her to be, and

sexually dominant when it serves their purpose. The culture and norms promoted by these adverts consciously, subconsciously and unconsciously affect our perception and ideologies. They are making us believe in dominant ideologies presented by not just their products, but their representations too.

Official reports and surveys present how little girls are investing their valuable time to look like women presented in popular adverts. They unfortunately cannot look beyond this superficial world, because this digitalized market will never provide them with the space to do so. Hence, these little girls are stuck in either or all the 3 categories: superhero of domestic-world, stereotypically beautiful and sexual objects. They are looking up to becoming one of these as they are made to believe in these categories on an everyday basis.

Fortunately, contemporary India is witnessing some changes where a scope for diversification is incorporated by companies like Aerial, Dove and Man Company. Companies are moving forward in a humanitarian way to support a greater cause of equality, but there still are ads like Blue Label with taglines 'men will be men', successfully humiliating man- woman at the same time and trying to be a part of public discourse in a not so funny way to change and affect it.

## **REFERENCES**

- Barthes, Roland. (1977). Image, music, text. London: Fontana.
- Carey, J. (1989). Communication as culture: Essays on media and society. Boston, MA: Unwin Hyman.
- Chaney, David. (1994). The cultural turn. London: Routledge.
- Chaudhuri, Maitrayee. (1993). Indian women's movement: Reform and revival. New Delhi: Radiant.
- Chaudhuri, Maitrayee. (1996). Citizens, workers and cultural emblems: An analysis of the first plan document. In Patricia Uberoi (Ed.), State, social reform and sexuality. New Delhi: Sage.
- Chaudhuri, Maitrayee. (1998). Print media, advertisements and the new Indian woman. Social Action, July.
- Chaudhuri, Maitrayee (2001). Print Media, Gender and Advertisements: The Rhetoric of Globalization. Pergamon, July.

## **ONLINE REFERENCES**

- <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/unicef-female-characters-in-indian-ads-prominent-but-highlystereotyped/articleshow/82185166.cms>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FgxywFbiyGo>
- [https://cdn.i.haymarketmedia.asia/?n=campaign-india%2fcontent%2f20160517205116859855\\_MTR\\_breakfast\\_460x325-size.jpg&h=570&w=855&q=100&v=20170226&c=1](https://cdn.i.haymarketmedia.asia/?n=campaign-india%2fcontent%2f20160517205116859855_MTR_breakfast_460x325-size.jpg&h=570&w=855&q=100&v=20170226&c=1)
- <https://media2.bollywoodhungama.in/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/57770335.jpg>
- <https://media.fashionnetwork.com/m/b82b/1962/6ac2/79c7/07f9/9778/55e0/dc2d/2bb6/8870/8870.png>
- <https://www.ubuy.co.in/product/13NVAJ7S8-50g-1-8oz-fair-and-lovely-fairness-cream-for-women-skin-lightning-vitamins#gallery-1>
- [https://m.media-amazon.com/images/I/81+fIAJQzWL.\\_SX679\\_.jpg](https://m.media-amazon.com/images/I/81+fIAJQzWL._SX679_.jpg)
- <https://adn-static1.nykaa.com/media/wysiwyg/2185-1.jpg>
- <https://www.letsexpresso.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Illuminate-Layout-KV-01.jpg>
- <https://data1.ibtimes.co.in/en/full/573635/alia-bhatt.jpg?h=450&l=20&t=37>
- [https://1.bp.blogspot.com/-aEmTEpIvP20/VtBhR2sqM\\_I/AAAAAAAAAbCc/TXSivRWlfjY/s1600/parachute%2Badvansed%2Bayurve dic%2Bhair%2](https://1.bp.blogspot.com/-aEmTEpIvP20/VtBhR2sqM_I/AAAAAAAAAbCc/TXSivRWlfjY/s1600/parachute%2Badvansed%2Bayurve dic%2Bhair%2)
- <https://i.pinimg.com/564x/85/55/4a/85554a816301eeb07f6b9fb239eb76b9.jpg>
- <https://www.exchange4media.com/marketing-news/slice-comes-up-with-digital-campaign-slicekipeti-104988.html>
- <https://www.livemint.com/Leisure/P6mUaX5OW9pa37J5GHhevO/Spot-Light--Wild-Stone-Red.html>
- <https://static.theprint.in/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Brandma-Shah-Rukh-Lux-ad.jpg?compress=true&quality=80&w=800&dpr=2.0>
- <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/unicef-female-characters-in-indian-ads-prominent-but-highly-stereotyped/articleshow/82185166.cms>
- [https://media.bizj.us/view/img/1795341/dove-real-beauty-campaign\\*800xx750-422-0-17.jpg](https://media.bizj.us/view/img/1795341/dove-real-beauty-campaign*800xx750-422-0-17.jpg)
- <https://www.afaqs.com/news/advertising/the-man-companys-new-ad-is-a-poetic-tribute-to-the-21st-century-vulnerable-gentleman>
- <https://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/life-and-relationships/the-girl-power-speech-that-put-meghan-markle-on-the-map-20181009-p5081b.html>