

MIS(S)REPRESENTATION

Women and advertising

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Written on her body

We live in a visual culture. Posters, flyers, billboards, signs, and banners dot our cityscapes. And if you look closely — or even from a distance — you'll find that the majority of these images are advertisements. Advertising is everywhere we look, every time we turn on the television, every website we open on the Internet. It is not simply part of the environment in which we live: it *is* our environment.

As the Indian economy opened up to global capital in the 1990s (through what is known as economic liberalisation), the job market underwent significant changes. As a result, there was a rapid accumulation of wealth available to an expanding middle class, and within the context of the globalised world, an increased availability of new ways in which this money could be spent. In order for capital to keep passing through these new markets (ie, in order for people to spend their money), there needed to be a new mass distribution system

to keep people wanting more; to keep spending. Advertising acts as the handmaiden to a global capitalist system by speaking the language of more: essentially, it is premised on the idea of dissatisfaction. And with global media and global markets, there is a new brand of dissatisfaction available to us. The Indian advertising industry began the mass marketing of not only products, but of lifestyles. Attached to each product came the promise of a new, cosmopolitan lifestyle for its consumer. A lifestyle of luxury homes, glossy hair, fast cars, and steamy sex.

But what does this mean, in practice, when 32.7% of a country's population lives below the poverty line? When the majority of potential 'consumers' are buying dal and rice, not Mercedes-Benzes and computers? There is something to be said, here, for the exploitation of dreams. 'Most people can look at and hear adverts. Few can read adverts. Fewer still can read English adverts. The

numbers that can actually possess the goods advertised are smaller still. But theoretically everyone has access to adverts, to the pleasure of looking, to desiring... Mass marketing offers the illusion of equal participation' (Chaudhuri, 2001, p 4). And in this way, advertising's most effective tool lies in its illusory nature. It manufactures hope.

A major factor in contributing to the manufacturing and sale of these illusions is the role of Bollywood. From bank owner to *chaiwala* to autorickshaw driver, there are very few Indians today who have not come into contact with this multibillion-dollar movie industry — as ubiquitous as advertising in its reach and influence. With a worship/cult culture surrounding many of Bollywood's biggest icons, its dreamy songs echoing through every radio and its grand narratives of bravery and love, the Indian advertising industry has capitalised on an illusion that all of us share: to be like the stars. With Bollywood stars endorsing everything from shampoo to cars to fairness cream, they promise viewers a life like theirs — an illusion that is hard to resist.

In her seminal work *Deadly Persuasion*, Jean Kilbourne talks about the effects of living and breathing in a world comprised of advertising: 'The problem with advertising isn't that it creates artificial longings and needs, but that it exploits our very real and human desires... Above all, advertising promotes a corrupt and bankrupt concept of relationship... we are surrounded by advertising that yokes our needs with products and promises us that things will deliver what in fact they never can... It is difficult, perhaps impossible, not to be affected by this' (Kilbourne, 1999, p 77). Advertising preys on our desires for happiness or love or success, telling us that buying the new Prestige pressure cooker is the key to a happy domestic life, and that a new bike means a beautiful girlfriend. But more than the cooker or the car, what these adverts sell us are images of domesticity and love which are more about us than the product for sale.

If advertising sells image rather than products, at the heart of this statement is the resounding question: whose image? Women have been seen throughout history as markers of cultural value, and their bodies have served as sites

upon which various ideas, morals or beliefs have been inscribed. Subsequently, the value of women in advertising has been equated with the value of the product, or rather, the image or lifestyle being sold. Her body, in turn, has become the location where the exchange of capital takes place. Through this process, women are effectively used to sell various ideas of satisfaction to both male and female consumers. The two principal features of this process are women's sexualised bodies and the (generally) stereotypical roles they play in society (homemaker, mother, etc). Happy sex and happy marriages/families are the most frequent images thrust upon Indian consumers in both print and television advertising. Straddling the desire for the modern, sensual item-girl, as well as simultaneously paying credence to the *Bhartiya Naari* — so dogmatically constructed in the name of Indian Culture following freedom from colonial rule — advertising constructs its women as either or both of these extremes. From the Maggi Mother who grows 7 extra arms to produce food for her family to the sensual models rushing to catch up with

the Axe effect, this polarisation of women is arguably one of the most common features of advertising today.

Novelist Jonathan Dee writes, 'the harm lies not in the ad itself; the harm is in the exchange, in the collision of ad language, ad imagery with other sorts of language that contend with it in the public realm' (Dee in Kilbourne, 1997, p 74).

As the language of these ads collides into a public realm that is rife with the social, economic and sexual devaluation of women, we can see the dual way in which advertising works. Chaudhuri says, 'Adverts both depict new trends and accelerate them. (But) they also obliterate other trends' (Chaudhuri, 2001, p 3). With these polarised representations of women and female bodies, we do not only find the reinvention of womanhood as existing on either — or both — of these contradictory poles, but an effacing and invisibilising of the multiple roles, classes, achievements, struggles and successes of women's lived experiences. Many feminists therefore believe that advertising serves at the behest of a

patriarchal, capitalist culture, and uses these images and ideas of 'womanhood' as a political weapon to prevent women from advancing in society. Advertising also, of course, perpetuates certain images of manhood and masculinity. However, the difference lies in that 'collision' of the ads with the public realm; their collision with reality. Kilbourne writes, 'When power is unequal, when one group is oppressed and discriminated against as a group, when there is a context of systematic and historical oppression, stereotypes and prejudice have a different weight and meaning... When (advertisements) objectify women, they do so in a cultural context in which women are constantly objectified and in which there are consequences — from economic discrimination to violence — to that objectification' (Kilbourne, 1997, p 279).

The issue over the representation of women in advertising is not a new one, and has been an integral battle for women's movements across the world. However, for a nation existing within the complicated arena where postcoloniality meets globalisation, the ways

in which Indian advertising campaigns have constructed its women are based on often contradictory ideas with far-reaching implications for culture, internationalism, and women throughout the country.

Advertising in India is not a homogenous category: spanning television, radio, Internet websites, and print ads found everywhere from local train compartments to billboards to daily newspapers, ads exist in multiple forms and in multiple languages. To talk about 'women in advertising' in an Indian context is to invariably make certain generalisations. An ad for the same product will differ slightly when it appears in a men's magazine as compared to a women's magazine as compared to a Marathi daily. The women it features will be constructed as per the assumed tastes, sensibilities and desires of the intended audience. However, many studies exploring different forms of advertising across different decades in different languages have highlighted similar trends in the representation and treatment of women. And while the contexts in which ads are produced

result in different types of content, one can observe an increased direct translation of ads from one language to another (using the same visuals) as well as wider trends that reflect similar attitudes across different forms of media.

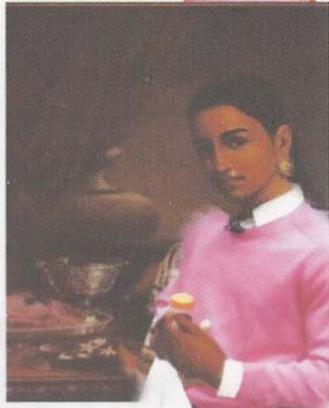
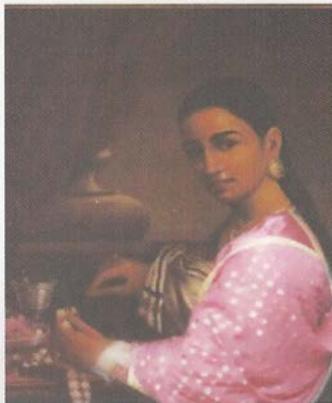
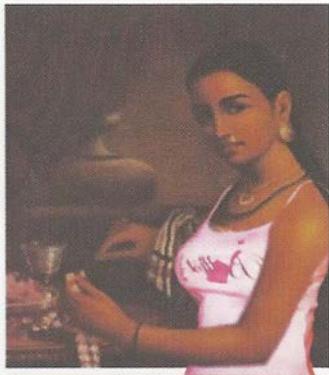
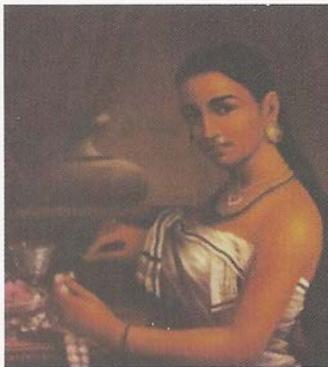
For example, in a study entitled 'Gender Role Portrayals in Indian Television Ads', author Malika Das looks at various facets of the representation of women in English, Hindi and Tamil television advertisements. Despite great cultural, linguistic and class disparities between the consumers and producers of these ads, their similarities are greater than their differences.

- **Voiceovers:** Male voiceovers are used more often than female voiceovers (10% women to 80% men to 10% both women and men). The voiceover in an advertisement is used to indicate authority and knowledge – a realm that is dominated by men. The subject of the advert may be a woman, but the one who dictates, judges, and sanctions is almost always a man.

- **The young and the beautiful:** Women are portrayed as younger than their male counterparts (86% of women shown were under the age of 35, as compared to 62% of men). Youth is often equated with beauty, and these statistics indicate the gendered role beauty plays in the advertising world.

- **Employment:** Men are portrayed as being employed more often than women (7% women to 24% men). Reinforcing the stereotypes of women in the kitchen (or, as in more recent adverts, as being signifiers for men and their masculinity), the ones bringing in the bucks are still twice as likely to be men.

- **Relationships:** Women are more likely to be portrayed in dependent or relationship roles than men (52% women to 32% men), contributing to the dual notions that women must depend on men for their survival, and that they will necessarily (want to) have children.



**indian
cultures**

Aamchi bhartiya naari: The Indian woman and postcoloniality

Indian Culture. With a capital 'I' and a capital 'C'. How are 'we' different from 'them'? This question was at the heart of both personal and wider social colonial contestations during the rule of the British in India. With the need to carve out a unique identity in direct opposition to the nation's colonisers, new meaning was invested in the idea of Indian culture during — and after — British imperialism. Framed by monocultural readings of our nation's identity, we often romanticise a singular past and homogenise the history of the present to retain the notion of a fixed, unchanging Indian Culture — one that existed prior to colonisation. Always ours, always will be. In her paper 'Why Culture Matters: The Changing Language of Feminist

Politics in India', Tejaswini Niranjana writes, 'As we become modern Indians, and then go on to become citizens of an independent nation, we hold on to the idea of "our culture" as setting us apart from others' (Niranjana, 2010, p 232). In this sense, 'modernity' — a striking feature of newly globalised markets and media — always already represents the outside, the Other, who we court in the name of progress and development, but reject in the name of 'culture'.

But culture does not sit still: it fluctuates, it pulsates, it interacts — its lived individual and shared realities are defiantly heterogeneous within its identifying labels: 'Indian Culture';

'Hindu Nation'; '*Bhartiya Naari*'; '*Desi Girl*'. The play for a monolithic culture is further complicated by the near-impossible task of homogenising incredibly diverse histories and equally diverse presents. The expedition of cultural exchanges through the tools of a globalised economy and technological advances gives the gatekeepers guarding the myth of a singular Indian Culture cause to step up their game. Throughout history, women across the world have been used as indicators of societal or cultural worth. Their chastity, morality and demeanours have come to represent the value of a particular culture. The Indian Woman — as many would like her to be singularly defined — has her roots in mythic Indian Culture, which is just that: a myth. The domesticated, tradition-bound, victimised, sari-clad, preferably mute *Bhartiya Naari* exists in reality as much as a singular, 'traditional' Indian culture does in a land of 415 living languages, over 1.2 billion people, histories as diverse as land terrains, and globalised markets serving as the cherry on top of the diversity cake.

However, the multiple lived realities of Indian

women do not prevent culture's gatekeepers from wanting to enforce upon women and upon wider society, traditional and singular notions of Indian womanhood. Enter advertising.

In the world of international television programmes, which depict women as agents provocateurs, suave lawyers and beauty queens, the construction of the *Bhartiya Naari* can no longer be entirely sari-clad, demure and seen flitting around through the *purdah*. With many women working in diverse careers and engaging in pastimes outside of the confines of the kitchen, the method by which women are returned to the kitchen must bear in mind the jet-setting, cosmopolitan world liberalised markets promise us. Enter the revamped, trendy, Indian domestic goddess. She's beautiful, she's well-dressed, and she has the house/children/food to prove it. Domesticity is modern, and before you can say 'women's movement', she's back in the kitchen.

Food, glorious food

Women have always been closely linked to the gathering, preparing and serving of food, and advertising today works to reinforce and revamp the 'duties' in the kitchen that the majority of women still bear responsibility for. One of the most striking contemporary examples of this is the Maggi Mother television commercial. Her sons and husband arrive hungry at the dinner table, and are disgruntled and sulky when the quantity and variety of food is not to their liking. But it's Maggi Mum to the rescue, as the cheerful mother very literally grows four extra octopus-like arms, so she can get to work preparing a delicious, many-dished, Maggi-based meal for her family. And it succeeds! They are happy once again, and motherhood and womankind have been saved.

Maggi Mum is only the start. Commercials and images of mothers feeding hungry children or husbands are rife in both print and television advertising. What we see in very few ads, however, is men giving food to

women (unless it's through the swiping of their Mastercards), and even more rarely, women cooking for other women. In family settings, in fact, we hardly even see the woman of the house eating; rather, she surveys with pleasure the fulfilled appetites of her family members.

However, it's not 'all work no play' when it comes to the relationship between women and food. Women — when seemingly unattached from the restrictions of their ever-hungry families — are encouraged by advertisements to have a sensual experience with their food. Yes, sensual as in sexual as in sex. Food is intertwined with love everywhere, from chocolates on Valentine's Day to fasting in the name of love for Karva Chauth, thus socially and culturally linking food and women to love and sex. The linkage is not always erotic or pleasant. How many countless women have walked down busy city streets and faced the sexual harassment of roadside Romeos calling out to them —



'aam ras', 'cham cham', 'doodh factory', 'cotton candy', 'laddoo', 'lollipop' (words courtesy Blank Noise 'Eve Teasing Food Chart'). But when it comes to advertising, one of the first and last rules is 'sex sells'. Advertising offers food as a way to relate romantically and sexually. Food in this case, is interchangeable with the erotic. In fact, it *is* the erotic. Take a look at the campaign by Slice featuring Bollywood actress Katrina Kaif.

Katrina's lips on the finely cut mango and her expression of pure pleasure do not make the ad's viewers — male or female — think about Slice. We think about sex, and the pleasures of sex with (for heterosexual men) or while being (for women) a beautiful woman like Katrina. And the drink on sale? It's the object of her desire, the source of her pleasure. As consumers, of course we don't actually believe that drinking Slice — or rubbing a mango over our lips — will make us more desirable or improve our sex lives. However, what these sorts of adverts do contribute to is 'a cultural climate in which relationships are constantly trivialised and we are encouraged to connect via consumption... We are not only offered connection via the product, we

are offered connection with the product. Food becomes the lover' (Kilbourne, 1999, p 112).

This is, however, a double-edged sword, because it begs the question: how much are women actually expected to love food? Alongside having a sensual, erotic and deeply pleasurable relationship with food, women are simultaneously told that they must always embody beauty. And 'beauty' as it is conceived by and understood within popular culture today, means that you better not have enjoyed that food too much; you better not be fat!



The beauty myth

We are in the midst of a violent backlash against feminism that uses images of female beauty as a political weapon against women's advancement — The Beauty Myth (Wolf, 1990, p 10)

Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at... The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object... of vision: a sight. Her whole sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated in another (Berger, 1972, p 47)

The notion of the male gaze is central to any exploration of the visual construction of women and gender roles, including those in advertising. First defined by Laura Mulvey in 1975 in her essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', the male gaze positions the audience of a film, a photograph, or any visual as sharing the same viewing space as a heterosexual man. And this gaze most frequently falls upon the desires of heterosexual men: women. The male gaze

can be extended beyond the relationship of image to viewer, and translated into a way of understanding the world in which we live. The ways in which men look construct gender as we understand it today. How we define a 'woman' has a great deal to do with the manner in which women are watched, and always expected to perform their gender. Berger goes on to talk about how the male gaze is then internalised by women, who watch themselves through the eyes of both the real and imagined male spectator. We see ourselves how we imagine men see us.

In the case of advertising, female models perform for male viewers as per what (according to advertisers) men want to see. She looks out of a magazine ad, television screen, or billboard, boldly calling on us to see her, and judge her, through the gaze of heterosexual male desire. And what all advertisements show us is that whether the woman in question is a mother, a dancer, a fashion star or a cook, she is always, *always*, beautiful. And the ones who aren't are shown

in supporting roles as generally unhappier and unloved. This leads to one of the most insidious effects of advertising today: the unrelenting, unashamed promotion of beauty as a singular, universal, and unchanging ideal. In her widely read book *The Beauty Myth*, American author Naomi Wolf writes, 'The beauty myth tells a story: the quality called 'beauty' objectively and universally exists. Women must want to embody it and men must want to possess women who embody it' (Wolf, 1990, p 12). Wolf ties the intensity with which the beauty myth is forced upon us to the desire for those in power to prevent true female liberation. She says, 'The more legal and material hindrances women have broken through, the more strictly and heavily and cruelly images of female beauty have come to weigh upon us' (Wolf, 1990, p10). And as greater numbers of Indian urban women work in professional environments, competing with their male counterparts for high-figured salaries, or no longer feel compelled to 'marry off' at an early age at their parents' demands, they also simultaneously and exponentially increase the number of beauty products and fashionable clothes in their lives. Out of the



kitchen and into the make-up salon. Feminists like Wolf believe that for economically independent, upwardly mobile women, the beauty myth is the new glass ceiling that no one talks about. Because no one, after all, wants to be called ugly.

The principal victims of this pernicious industry are urban, middle class, adolescent

girls. Adolescence is a time of self-consciousness and the terror of humiliation or shame, and the advertising industry plays to this. It doesn't cause these emotions or insecurities, but it cleverly exploits them in the name of profit. Girls of all ages get the message that they must be flawlessly beautiful, and even more destructively, they get the message that this is possible, and that with enough effort, self-sacrifice (and spending of money), they can achieve this ideal.

Ellen Goodman says, 'The big success story of our entertainment industry is our ability to export insecurity. We can make any woman anywhere feel perfectly rotten about her shape' (Goodman in Kilbourne, 1999, p 135). The technologies of Photoshop and airbrushing that can lighten skin tone and knock many kilograms off a model, means that we are surrounded by a visual culture populated by thinner, taller, fairer, bigger-breasted, smaller-waisted, beautiful women. And its effects are terrifying. The beauty industry, for which many believe advertising serves as a handmaiden, is a global system of violence perpetuated against women: despite all the educational, professional and societal advancements decades of women's struggles have brought, the myth of beauty tells us that without a perfect body, none of it really counts for very much. And though most women may know better, it's hard — maybe even impossible — not to watch ourselves through an appropriated male gaze, and wish we were more beautiful.



Cutting us down to size

There are many disconcerting things about this advertisement, along with the hundreds like it finding their way into our lives through magazines, daily newspapers, billboards and infomercials. The most chilling element, perhaps, is that it speaks to a country which suffers from startlingly high levels of malnutrition (25% of the entire world's hungry population lives in India), which, according to the United Nations, most cruelly impacts the country's women and children. But as with almost all other *avatars* of lifestyle advertising, the intention is never to speak to the realities of the *aam janata*. Insofar as the success of advertising agencies is concerned, the masses are wilfully erased in the face of profit. And it is profitable, in all senses of the phrase, to *cut women down to size*.

In Indian culture — where culture here is defined as an ever-evolving way of life of a particular people — the preparing and sharing of food has always been a social affair of family, relationship, and community. With

Dr. Bhavana Shah's Fitness Highway

From 15kg to... 7kg Weight Loss to... Perfect Figure

Look Good

A NIGHT OF IT!
40067744
BORNWALLI (M)
28991474
5892114414
FOR LADIES ONLY

Independence Day offer

FLAT 50% OFF on Weight Loss, Skin Care, Lip Care, Eye Reduction

15kg Weight Loss in 12 Weeks

Intensive Strategy for Weight Loss, Lip Care, Eye Reduction, Skin Care & Weight Loss

Dr. Bhavana Shah's Fitness Highway TRUST

ANCHERI (M) 40067744
BORNWALLI (M) 28991474
5892114414
FOR LADIES ONLY

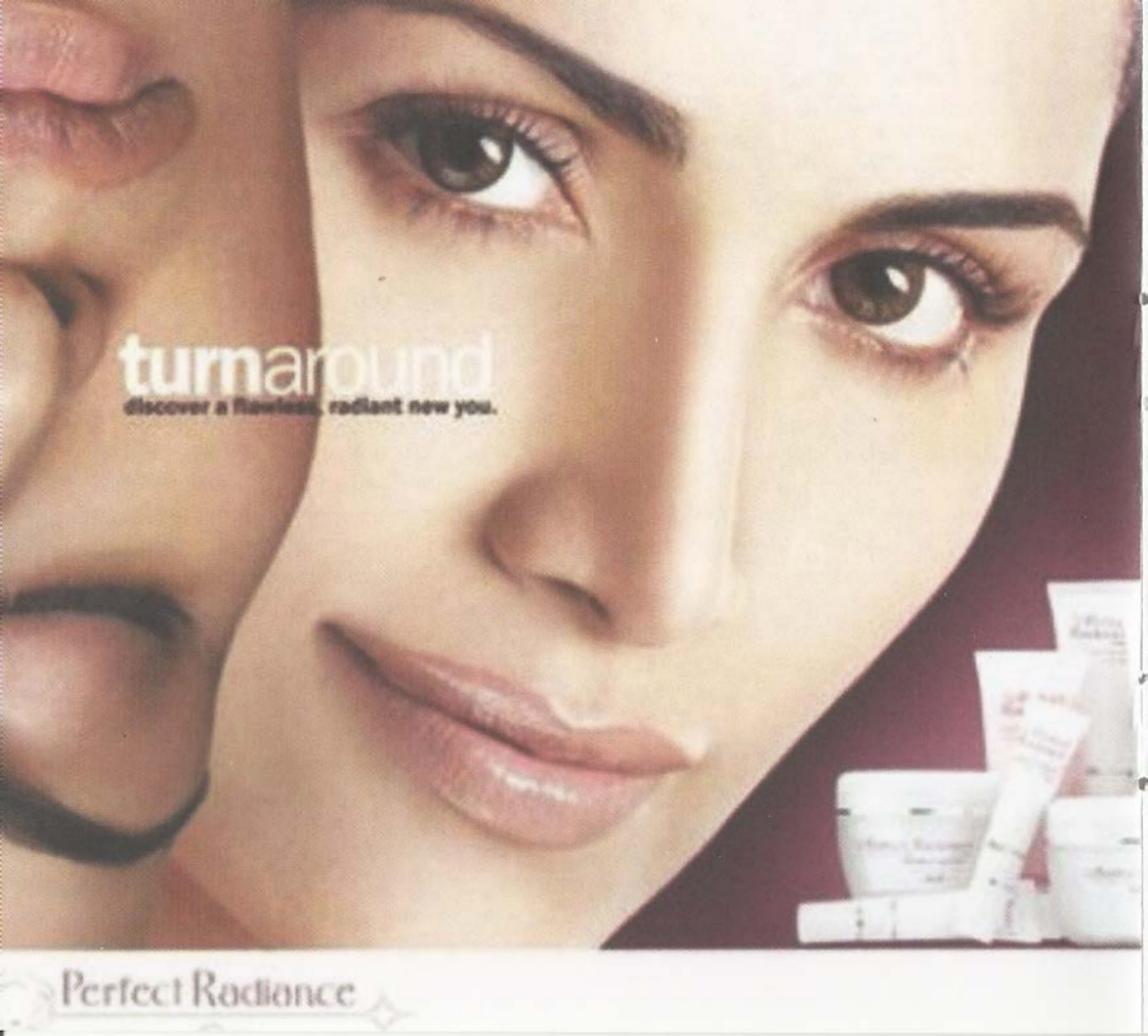
Day at Fitness Highway Weight Loss Happens.

the increasing visibility of the weight-loss industry, we can truly see the effectiveness of advertising in rupturing this cultural phenomenon. Successfully injecting what was previously a purely Western guilt-culture into the relationship women share with food, the sheer increase in the number of low-fat 'eat without guilt' foods, slimming teas, health foods and so on is telling of the new ways in which women are being asked to engage with their bodies: as the sum of all its parts. The advert very literally illustrates this

breakdown of a woman's body, while simultaneously effacing its existence as a totality (forget individuality, personality, or identity). Stomach. Thighs. Chin. Arms. Each body part is individually covered in extra fat, and each must be separately worked upon. This trend also runs deep in advertisements that do not so clearly break it — or the woman — down for us. From effective lighting to suggestive clothing, we are always asked to consider a woman as comprised of different parts of her body. Big breasts. Small waist. Nice butt. She exists for our viewing pleasure not as a complete entity, but as parts of the human body, airbrushed, liposuctioned, or starved to perfection.

The weight-loss programmes that these advertisements offer do not only project the message that women must be thinner, but have an even more insidious message beneath the surface: you must be less than what you are. Ads tell women — and especially girls and young women — that they should diminish themselves in every aspect of their lives. That women need to cut down not just on fatty foods, but on their sexual freedom, their need for authentic relationships, and their desire for power.

Serving the mantra 'better seen and not heard', the weight-loss industry and its accompanying advertisements tell women that the best way to navigate the world is using their bodies, not their voices. Let your look speak volumes. And it's best if you don't actually speak at all. This is not necessarily something advertisers wilfully or knowingly create. However, existing within a culture based on dissatisfaction — and specifically, women's dissatisfaction with themselves — advertising reinforces existing power structures that disproportionately affect women's sense of self and their relationships to their own bodies. Running counter to ideas of women's liberation about equal participation and freedom, beauty advertising tells us that the road to successfully being a woman in this world is paved with flat stomachs and straightened hair. And with the omnipresence of advertising in our daily environments, much of the emphasis placed on the way women look remains largely unquestioned.



turnaround

discover a flawless, radiant new you.

Perfect Radiance

Mirror, mirror on the wall

Launched in 1978 by Unilever and publicly declared 'hope in a tube' for Indian women by its manufacturers, Fair and Lovely has become a household name over the past 30 years. Their adverts — now joined by fairness products from many companies — are as ubiquitous (if not more) than they were three decades ago. In fact, it is one of the biggest success stories boasted by the Indian advertising industry. One Fair and Lovely advert depicts a man lamenting that he did not have a son, and believing his daughter would never get a job. But after using Fair and Lovely, lo and behold, she is hired! Son-preference has successfully been endorsed and yet undermined in the same two-minute video! Another shows a commonly depicted scenario where a woman's skin-lightening cream leads to her having many suitors. These ads are *everywhere*. Furthermore, the endorsing of such products (and by extension, stereotypes) by Bollywood's best and fairest reinforces the idea that fairness is part of the dream lifestyle of stardom, and therefore a legitimate aspiration for the common Indian person. These adverts have

successfully injected fairness into every aspect of the Indian woman's — and to an extent, the Indian man's — life, exploiting the varied social stigmas related to darkness that have manifested themselves in diverse historical, social, cultural and gendered ways.

Many historians link colour-preference in India to the defeat of the darker-skinned Dravidian peoples by the fairer-skinned Aryans: one of the elements contributing to the foundations of the caste system. Subsequently, caste has meant a social privileging of (largely) fairer-skinned brahmins — a factor heightened by Hindu mythology depicting battles between fair-skinned *devas* (gods) and dark *asuras* (demons). Despite the constitutional clauses within the Right to Equality that take a firm stance against caste-based discrimination, the desire to be fairer may continue to reflect these deep caste-based prejudices. In the 1800s, British imperialism further enforced the idea of power and privilege as being linked to fair or white skin. Art, culture and music during the time reified the superior

beauty of the fair-skinned British *memsahib* as compared to her less attractive, brown-skinned counterpart. Reconfigured today by neo-colonial policies and a globalised media, this definition of beauty along racial lines still continues to thrive both globally and locally. Given the multi-faceted and many-layered ways in which the privileging of fairness has developed in the Indian subcontinent, the advertising strategies seeking to exploit it have been equally diverse.

Outside of the urban glossy posters, the TV ads reinforcing notions of dowry by promoting fairness cream as a way to be a more 'valuable' bride, and the linking of fairness to employability, Unilever's advertising strategies have managed to reach rural areas with astonishing success. In locations that have little television or radio connectivity, much less the space or resources for billboards, the campaign to make Indian women buy fairness creams has created a new type of advertisement: the woman herself. The Fair and Lovely Vani Scheme's declared aims are to increase employment and livelihood for rural women in hundreds of villages. Their undeclared desire is, of course, to create a market for beauty products in areas where the majority of people live below the poverty line. Through

this scheme, the Fair and Lovely advertising team — along with people in the community — appoint a Fair and Lovely *didi* (or sister), who has a well-known face in the village and good social standing amongst its inhabitants. Her role is to direct her fellow sisters towards the Fair and Lovely promotion team, along with whom she can very literally show other women in the village the benefits of fairness products — they too can be *like her*. In this way, Fair and Lovely's use of a living breathing woman as a type of advertising has influenced hundreds of women without access to conventional urban advertising, and has expanded an already growing market.

The successes of fairness cream advertising lie in the ways in which it has audaciously bombarded the subcontinent by embodying a woman's dreams, hopes and aspirations. Beauty is not simply a means to being loved or getting married, but it has been transformed into the very basis of being anything at all. From villagers to the growing middle classes to Bollywood's best, fair is lovely, and lovely will get you anywhere you want.

Reference: Shevde, Natasha, 'All's Fair in Love and Cream: A Cultural Case Study of Fair & Lovely in India'. Advertising & Society Review, Vol 9 (2), 2008

Just like a virgin

Female genitalia has been a source of uneasiness and discomfort for men and/in power throughout the ages, and across the globe. Depicted as oozing, wet, and unseemly, the representation of the vagina as something to be controlled (along with its owner — the woman) is not a new phenomenon. The uncontrollable vagina has been equated with the uncontrollable feminine (or as many women would say, the uncontrollable potential for female power), and efforts to 'contain' it have always existed. In India too the days of the vagina or its Sanskrit counterpart *yoni* being envisioned as the creative force running through life are long gone. Embroiled in a cultural discourse of power that seeks to control and negate women's sexualities, the vagina is highly contested territory, and it is within this context that products and advertisements aimed at vaginal 'improvement' are introduced.

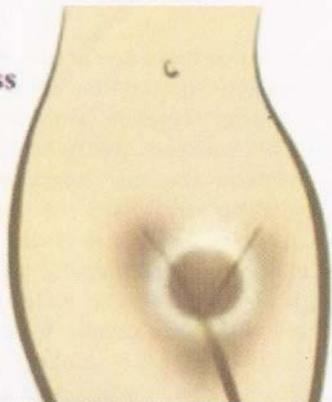
The most commonly shared characteristic of

vaginal products is that they attempt to turn the vagina into everything apart from what it actually is: a vagina. Therefore, with the introduction of scented panty-liners celebrating hygiene (because there is apparently something very wrong with the way a vagina naturally smells, compared to the odours of its male counterpart), the vaginal branch of the advertising industry kick-started, and has subsequently found many ways in which to make the vagina more appealing to its viewers. Constructed as much through the male gaze as any standard of beauty, these advertisements tread the awkward line of selling beautiful vaginas to a country where the taboo of women's sexuality continues to pervade both public and private spaces. And what does a beautiful vagina look like? Here are some common features of vaginal beauty.

Hairless. Just like the rest of a woman's body. With a booming Indian hair-removal industry even more prolific than its Western

Before

CLEAN
DRY
Freshness
+



After

CLEAN
DRY
Freshness
+
Fairness



counterpart, a hairless vagina is only the next 'natural' step for a woman to take. Much of the emphasis on a hairless vulva can be located in the artificially manufactured conjunction between the appearance of the vulva and sexual desire. One of the biggest contributors towards this sexual fallacy is, of course, pornography. Shaven and shorn (with labia reconstruction surgery often thrown into the mix), the women and the sex represented in porn feature no hair and female private parts that resemble those of a 10-year-old girl. However, a dearth of serious sex education programmes means that many teenagers first learn about sex through pornography, and subsequently, women are encouraged to feel ashamed by vaginal hair — a sense of shame that the markets are only too eager to prey upon.

White. Yes, because don't forget, fairness is godliness: *everywhere*. Clean and Dry Intimate Wash promises fairness even in the areas where the sun don't shine. Its globally criticised ad campaign features a very fair-skinned (presumably married, because otherwise how in our Indian Culture could we talk about vaginas) couple in their house

drinking their morning tea. The man appears ashamed to look at his wife, and the source of that shame is soon revealed: her dark vagina. After using the miraculous wash — illustrated through a cartoon of changing skin colour, because, of course, *real* vaginas could never make it past the censor board — their marriage (and more importantly, though unstated, their sex life) is joyfully renewed. Despite the vigorous criticism the campaign has received — including the bodily truth that the vaginal area is naturally darker than the rest of a woman's body — this is simply another move in the marketing game for an already powerful fairness industry. And without supplementary education surrounding sex and female sexual organs, there is no reason for people not to buy into the myth of vaginal whiteness vis-a-vis sexual pleasure.

Tight. A vaginal tightening gel called 18 Again was released accompanied by a TV advertisement depicting a Tamilian joint family that is celebrating with the young woman of the family (presumably the son's wife), who is dancing around the house and singing to the high heavens that she feels 'just

like a virgin'. After using this unscientifically-proven tightening gel her brand new virginal vagina can now provide sufficient pleasure for her husband. It's as if she has never had sex before. The way in which the dynamic between being a virgin and having sex is constructed is telling of the double-bind of traditional versus modern that advertising consistently constrains Indian women within: sex before marriage is bad and anti-Indian; however, there is a way you can preserve the façade of our culture — fake virginity. There is no dearth of mythology around the untold sexual pleasures with a virgin (presumably not for the woman who will probably be in pain and mildly traumatised), and the selling of vaginal tightening gel reinforces the value society places on women's chastity. And if as a culture we can't actually possess that 'value', we can at least try and fake it.

Advertisements selling vaginal improvement products serve to enhance female sexual shame. Girls are taught from a young age that there is something inherently shameful and dirty about their sexual organs, and as they grow up, they encounter a culture that reinforces those teachings. This is further

compounded by the way in which popular culture links the appearance of the vagina (inherently grotesque and always needing improvement) to sexual happiness. However, the focus is nearly always on sexual happiness for the heterosexual man, who is shown as unable to experience sexual pleasure if he encounters a natural, dark or ageing vagina (or woman). As a result, these advertisements entirely negate any notion of *female* sexual pleasure, while simultaneously reducing male pleasure to the dictates of the beauty industry. The real pleasures of sex and eroticism are invisibilised through the premium placed on reconfiguring women's sexual organs, and the only winner in this scenario is the logic of the market.

Taking us for a ride

The automotive industry in India is one of the largest and fastest growing in the world. Subsequently, the country has also witnessed an increase in car and motorcycle magazines, newspaper columns, television programmes, and, of course, advertisements. Throughout the Global North cars have come to be equated with notions of masculinity, virility, and prowess. This has, to an extent, been appropriated by Indian advertising. The buying of a car in India is still very much a family-based decision, and car ads tend to depict families (or married couples) in a car together — most likely with a man at the wheel, directing his family or partner where he pleases. However, in the case of motorcycles or scooters, the projected consumer is most often a younger, less wealthy, unattached man. In this context, the promotional material for bikes and scooters is far closer to the types of advertising we see for cars in Western countries, which uses the fantasy of a beautiful woman's love to endear male buyers.

The message we get from the advertisements is, if you have the ride, beautiful women will want to be with you. Referring us back to Kilbourne's idea of advertising facilitating the 'bankruptcy of relationship', this type of advertising is undermining to both men and women in its depiction of desire in the form of a commodity. Here, the desire for love is doubly filtered — first through the lens of beauty and then through the lens of the automobile.

The print ad expands upon the message: not only will women want to be with you, but they *will* be with you, and this will contribute to your masculinity. The TVS Wego is advertised with the slogan 'built to play', where the 'sport' is actually an enjoyment between the two men depicted and a celebration of their shared masculine success. They have the bikes and they have the girls. The ad, therefore, serves as a *homosocial* space — one in which relationships and bonding between men become intelligible



jeego

**BUILT
TO PLAY**

when routed through a woman — allowing the men viewing the ad to speak to each other in an all-male conversation. The women depicted here aren't playing any sport, they are simply 'fair' game: the spoils of male conquest and adornments to masculinity, just like the bikes.

However, more common than the 'look at my beautiful girlfriend' bike advertisements are those that actually discuss the qualities of the bike. The adverts talk about the technologies and benefits of the bikes they advertise. Their speed, their power, their mileage. For men driving in the fast lane, the ads talk the talk of automobiles — something we hardly see in *any* advertising, which tends to forget all about the product while focusing on the images of desire it seeks to project. While this may have much to do with the fact that knowledge of cars and machines is often how masculinity today is constructed, the ads at least visibly shift back from consumer to product. However, this approach to selling automobiles based on their merits as *automobiles* stops and starts with an all-male audience.

The bikes advertised to women are all pretty-

in-pink pastel colours and look as though they were designed for or by Barbie. The TVS Scooty Pep campaign shows an actress in a helmet matching her bike. The television version of the advertisement follows her driving through the street against a constantly changing backdrop featuring different environments and people. Wherever she goes, people are looking at her, and admiring her. At every stage, she acknowledges their looks, soaks in their approval, and drives on. What's the message? See girls, we can ride too. And what's more, we make it *look* good. Unlike the cars or bikes driven by men, when women drive (or walk, or dance, or breathe), they do so under a male gaze that *watches* them, constantly legitimising who they are (or rather, what they look like). This bike is not for riding, it's a 'dress-code dictator', where we're left to question whether the real fashion dictators are the bikes or the advertisements themselves.

Mother versus pole dancer: Embodying the extremes

Gorbatschow vodka's advertising poster 'Mother by Day, Pole Dancer by Night' was widely featured on billboards and hoardings across Mumbai city, typifying the paradigm

of extremes into which the Indian advertising industry constructs its women: the domestic, 'chaste' mother versus the sexualised, sultry item-girl. Maggi Mother versus a diva on her

POLE DANCER BY NIGHT

MOTHER BY DAY

GORBATSCHOW

WHOMEVER YOU ARE, **BE PURE**

MUSIC CDS

The advertisement is a horizontal banner with a dark blue background. On the left, a woman in a red and black outfit is performing a pole dance. In the center, a woman in a red dress is sitting on a pole, looking directly at the camera. On the right, a large, clear, diamond-shaped vodka bottle is shown with ice cubes and coins scattered around its base. The text 'POLE DANCER BY NIGHT' is on the left, 'MOTHER BY DAY' is on the right, and 'GORBATSCHOW' is on the bottle. At the bottom, the slogan 'WHOMEVER YOU ARE, BE PURE' is written in white and blue. In the bottom left corner, 'MUSIC CDS' is written in small white letters.

TVS Scooty. Domestic goddess extraordinaire versus Katrina Kaif. What the Gorbatschow campaign very literally illustrates, however, is that these two extremes are not pitted against one another as a choice for women to make. Framed through a national discourse struggling with 'culture' as a consequence of colonialism, but also courting the 'other' in the name of development, markets and foreign media, the Indian woman does not choose between these two opposites; rather, she is expected to embody *both*. The drive for 'cultural values' and 'consumer glory' is fought on her body, and nowhere are these double standards clearer than the ways in which the advertising industry has constructed who she should be. This perversion of 'purity' does not lie in one or the other — it is always both at the same time.

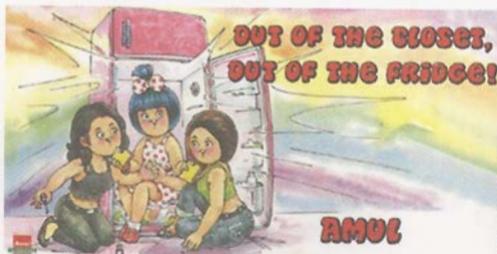
The enforcement of extremes on the same body and within the same individual speaks volumes about the pressures placed on women today, which ensnare them simultaneously within a local, and patriarchal societal structure as well as commodify their bodies to service global market forces. Expected to be modern and traditional,

demure and sexy, independent and dependent, all at the same time, creates a public discourse that effaces the lived realities of women in this country. The domestic goddess who presides over her expensive, flawless house as well as the women of Bollywood with ever-growing eyelashes and straightened hair are both in stark contrast to the daily lived experiences of ordinary women. The advertising industry serves to homogenise the multiplicity of lives women lead in this country — and the world — into the marketable fantasies of a 'better' life, of a 'better' woman. In doing so, they also reinforce limited and limiting constructions of gender, where the category 'woman' is enforced by those who seek to control her.

Who's that girl?

The Amul Girl was created in 1967 in response to Amul butter's rival brand's campaign The Polson Girl, and has been an integral part of the Indian advertising landscape ever since. Bold, sassy and unafraid to lend her voice to current debate, her vivacious personality and unrelenting comments on the society she lives in makes her, perhaps, the only woman in the history of advertising to have so consistently and cleverly captured our imaginations *on her own terms*. Subverting trends of 'seen but not heard' constructions of

women in advertising, the Amul Girl's unique voice is very much heard, shouting from billboards, posters and print media across the country. When we look at her, we also hear what she has to say — she is first and foremost an individual in her own right, breaking more stereotypes than she conforms to. She also represents the active participation of women in public discourse through the ways in which she comments on — and often chooses sides in — current events, no matter how unpopular. From



In celebration of the decriminalisation of homosexuality



A comment on moral policing and the crackdown on the 'rave' culture in major cities, which shamed women for 'indecenty'

lending her support to the decriminalisation of homosexuality with the repeal of Section 377, to demanding justice for victims of the Bhopal gas tragedy, her voice as a commentator, observer and sometimes-activist is unmissable. Her satirical, witty perspective makes her a proud feminist icon in an advertising world of gruelling stereotypes and profit-driven commodification. She sells Amul butter to the masses in *their language*. She sells no dreams, she sells butter. And she makes us

laugh while doing it.

It is often argued that advertisers are simply responding to public demand and giving people what they want. This is, to an extent, true. But 'what we want' tends to have more to do with us and less to do with the products being sold. What ads *do* give us are images of our very real and human desires for joy, love, sex, and so on, both reflecting and amplifying them. As we have seen in the case of fairness products or many-armed cooking mothers,



A clear, political demand for justice for victims of the Bhopal gas tragedy

the advertisements are indeed responding to women's desires for employment, social standing and suitors (fairness creams) or to a family's desire for togetherness and sharing of meals (Maggi). The ways in which these desires are achieved, of course, is through the purchase of a commodity. The *desire*, however, always preceded the *thing*. Advertising also has the power, influence and reach to manufacture *new* desires. One example of this is the value placed on thinness as a prerequisite for beauty, which was paralleled by the opening up of Indian markets and television channels to international (read: Western) products and ideas. The desire for thin beauty is the result of aggressive advertising campaigns that mirrored similar ideals to those depicted in Western media, in order to supplant earlier notions of beauty with new ones.

Lash and Friedman write, 'The shift from producer to consumer capitalism has meant its disruption, which... has brought the transience of new styles, the introduction of a new flattening temporality and the *reduction of the self to the mere politics of presentation*' (my italics) (Lash and Friedman

in Chaudhuri, 1996, p 18). What we can, and should, crucially hold advertisers to account for is just that: the ways in which they have 'reduced the self' — reduced the human being — to his or her surface value. The dream lifestyles, relationships and people that advertising sells us are simply *image*. However, the people who are exploited or effaced in the name of this image — in particular women and the poor — are very real. The advertising industry is not the neutral player we have been made to believe, but a deeply embedded cog within an exploitative market structure running on a profit-driven philosophy. It is controlled by very wealthy and influential people who have vested interests in maintaining the hierarchies that society is structured into, most of which relegate women to the bottom of the food chain. And the working classes right off it. It also serves to negate the experiences and struggles of women who are breaking the stereotypes advertising promotes in their daily lives. The women at the grassroots who refuse lives of domestic chains, or who discard the ideals of plastic beauty for their natural bodies. It effaces the realities of the poor, for whom these new

lifestyles and neoliberal markets are actively detrimental: the systems they are premised upon make the rich richer at the expense of those who have the least.

With the most acutely negative effects of advertising falling upon girls and women, it is important that we work to contest these representations in our everyday lives. The first step is acquiring media literacy, which teaches ordinary people to analyse the messages conveyed by the media, consider the commercial, political, social or cultural purpose of an image or advertisement, and then learn who is responsible for its creation. It also comprises a critical thinking about the stereotypes or exploitative situations involved in media representations, and how they interact with and influence the world in which we live. Media literacy is especially important for women, who find themselves in front of the camera more often than behind it, and are subject to a range of portrayals that either reflect and/or contribute to the systemic patriarchal oppression they face in their day-to-day lives. As girls and women become more aware of the ways in which the media influences public

discourse on gender, they can begin to both recognise and resist the effects of media stereotypes in their own lives. Most importantly, we can begin to question. Question why the depictions of 'us' in advertising bear so little resemblance to who we really are and the lives we really lead. Question in whose interests these images are being produced, and who the losers and winners of this cultural exchange are. Question when exactly profit-over-people became so acceptable that not only do we forget to question it, we buy into it. These questions are difficult to ask. And they don't have singular, uncomplicated answers. But as more girls and women begin to ask them — both publicly and privately — the victories will, like the power of advertisements, reach deeper and further than we can imagine.

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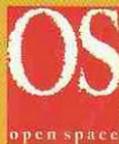
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Open Space is the youth and civil society outreach programme of CCDS. Open Space uses innovative communication strategies to encourage young adults to engage with issues related to pluralism, social justice and sustainable development

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