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The Good Life – Buy 1 Get 1 Free Messages of Outdoor Advertising for Social Change in Urban India

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Introduction

Mass media and mediated communications have become an intrinsic part of most urban life. Consequently, the links between media and daily living are of great interest. Aspects of linkage include choices of representation, utilisation and messages as well as communication strategies and trans-medialisation made by the advertising bureaus and/or the companies selling the product. As a mediator between a created reality and day to day life, media mirrors and influences society simultaneously. The portrayal of life in media can be said to strengthen as well as challenge “the dominant discourse in society” (Sommansson 2009:72). Ultimately, media exists as an ongoing blur of interaction, “in an uneasy and unstable alliance” between realities (Mazzarella 2003:56).

Different forms of media are continuously being used to influence attitudes and activities as well as to sway peoples’ purchasing behaviour. A common example of this includes attempts to improve public health besides the multitude of product and service sales. In addition, media is said to be important in democratic governance as it functions as a watchdog of governmental operations (Sen 1999:180-187) and seen everywhere in the form of entertainment.

Due to the pervasiveness of media in all aspects of life, media scholars, development planners and conscientious citizens alike are concerned with the possible harmful impact of media upon society e.g. sexism. At the same time media messages are considered to be a social sub-structure that represents an intrinsic variable in the process of social change (Reddi 1989:396). I therefore suggest that media holds the potential to encourage change towards equality, tolerance and social responsibility and hence see possibilities of positive effects of commercial messages.

Consumerist advertising strategies are of special interest. Advertising is believed to have the ability to influence purchasing behaviour and encourage people to buy or use one specific brand or service (Das 2007:1). Some regard advertising communications as entirely profit driven (Vilanilam 2005:161) and not intended as educational messages. However, the messages contained are biased communication that indicate a point of view, a proposed ideology or reflect a public discourse and can in this way be viewed as messages that might challenge existing social structures and prove to propagate social change.

Urban India as a relatively new neo-liberal market is especially interesting due to its blend and vastness of socio-economic classes, castes, religion and trans- and multicultural existences. The increasing consumerist trends among financially-able groups in urban India are accompanied by a milieu with increased advertising and mediated forms of communications (Fernandes 2000:612-614; Mazzarella 2003:13).

Combining the possible effect of advertising and media with the potential of reaching the most diverse group of people I consider the public space a setting of extraordinary potential. I therefore will discuss existing examples of media communications between consumerism and social change in the realm of the multifaceted nature of outdoor advertising in urban India. Included are billboards and posters mainly collected by myself during the fall 2008 that will be presented and analysed in their message conveyed and images depicted.

Looking at the vast landscape of billboards and posters in front of us, my interest is to discuss gendered representations. These visual and text displays, as I have outlined above, harness the potential to alter, challenge or preserve gendered stereotypes and therefore give us an intriguing site to further investigate social change in the field of gender. Gender relations continuously seem to be the foundation of control and politics (Caplan 1993:1-9) and as a result the construction of feminine identities is a way to enforce control over women's lives (Munshi 2001a:7). As such, characteristics of women and the expected attitude and behaviour have evolved into a "socio-symbolic site" (Fernandes 2000:623), exemplified in the discourse of women representation in media and advertising.

Theoretical Framework & Point of Departure

In order to understand the scope of this essay it is necessary to touch upon the foundation carrying its rationale. Based in the theory of *social constructionism* gender is thought of as a social construct, not possessing inherent natural traits. What constitutes a woman or man is created through time, space and context, and characteristics are considered learned behaviour and re-enforced through the socialisation process. Ultimately, these are illustrated through stereotypical or idealised images. The perceptions of what constitutes femininity and masculinity are deeply rooted in cultural and social convictions and hence differ in various contextual settings. It is therefore essential to consider perspectives according to the contextual setting of cultural, historical and demographic influence (Caplan 1993: 1-9; Burr 2003). The belief in the social creation of peoples' characteristics means that these constructions are changeable and can be altered by intended or unintended influence.

Similarly to the various possibilities of gender constructs one must take the differing possibilities within localities into regards. As feminist Chandra T. Mohanty pointed out, so-called third-world women are not a homogeneous group, not only differing from country to country (Chandra 2009:2; Munshi 2001a:6-7) but also within countries, societies and localities. Especially in urban areas and with the growing mass media coverage one can speculate on an increased blend of multiple existences that differ immensely despite geographical closeness.

In this context I utilise the concept of *trans-cultural* existence as discussed by media scholars Martin Löffelholz and Andreas Hepp (2002) to illuminate the complexity of the public space and each individual who exists in it and travels through it. Within the understanding of trans-culturality, cultural features as well as conflicts are considered to penetrate and transgress national borders and society boundaries. But this can also be seen on individual terms in addition to explaining the complexities of nations and cultures on a larger scale. Each person is considered to be made up from multiple influences - national, traditional, familiar and foreign – and hence creates an eclectic personality, which can also be referred to as hybridisation of all input (Sen 2006; Welsch 1999). According to the German philosopher and post-modern scholar Wolfgang Welsch (1999) trans-culturality exists as an inner differentiation on both a micro-level as well as on a macro-level (4). This does however not mean that all become the same but that each person, nation or culture contains influences from several, thus creating hybrid worlds as well as hybrid people. Simultaneously to the eclecticism within, each individual might engage in certain parts of the

characteristics depending on the reality around. Even though it might sound schizophrenic, behaviour and attitude might differ greatly according to the people we interact with and which situation we are entering (Welsch 1999). It is therefore not possible to suggest and limit cultural characteristic to a certain geographical locality. The way globalised media-culture has perpetrated in particular most spheres of urban existence has created a connectivity that transcends the perception of regional cultures. Trans-cultural communication as such has in the end created a *deterritorialisation* of culture (Löffelholz & Hepp 2002:12-14; Hepp 2004:14-17). This viewpoint will in this paper be highlighted when discussing oppositions to globalisation and the belief of a common Indian culture. Ultimately, urban public spaces can be viewed as a miniature universe of a trans-cultural world due to the presence of manifold and highly diverse audiences within.

Even though trans-culturality is considered to be a phenomenon of the globalisation age, it can be argued to have existed throughout time. Travellers, trade and adventurers have always carried different parts of one world to another and back again, and in this way contributed to the blending of cultures and impact on each others societies. The difference to today's trans-cultural world is, according to Hepp, the physical presence and speed through which mediated communications and thus cultures can be shared, keeping in mind that still not the entire population is connected and that aspect of power relations among media messages exist (2009).

The meddled realities of trans-culturality do however pose some issues that need to be discussed. To what extend does deterritorialisation of culture and individual hybridity eliminate groupings and generalisation? And if the multifaceted combinations of various inputs eliminate the possibility of groupings with generalised characteristics is it in the end possible to bring any generalised statements? It is important to consider that any individual, community or society is linked to processes within a certain nation-state as well as the traditional implications (Fernandes 2000: 620-622). As such one can create knowledge that entail realities of many and find structures that are reproduced. Ultimately, the general statements are valid only as long as one considers the possible complexities.

Contextual Setting

The following chapter will touch upon parts of the emergence, development and current state of advertising in India. Additionally, I will outline the differing uses and possibilities of media. As base for the actual analysis an overview of gender issues in general and in media is presented.

Advertising in India

During the last century the advertisement business in India grew immensely after the first Indian agencies established themselves as early as 1905. Since then the Indian subcontinent saw the launch of several companies both Indian and foreign, but it was not until the 1990s that the transformation of the industry became increasingly visible (Brosius & Butcher 1999:11; Das 2002:319; Fernandes 2000:613; Schneider 2007; Munshi 2001b:79). The economical liberalisation and media reform initiated already in the 1980s by the Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi opened the market for foreign advertising companies as well as brands and products (Schneider 2007; Mazarella 2003:12-14; Ciochetto 2004:1-4) and has affected the street picture throughout India ever since.

The amount of billboards and other outdoor media has caused official institutions to instigate different activities of restrictions in order to limit the numbers and size of hoardings, especially because many are suspected to be illegal (Blecken 2008). In the years 1993-1997 outdoor advertising was said to bear only 5.5% of total advertising, illustrating that other media - television media, print media in magazines and internet - generally hold the greatest part of advertising (Ciochetto 2004:6). Still, urban India is a colourful palette of images. Despite the intent to lessen the amount of what some call visual pollution in the public space, the urban city canvass is still cluttered with a vast amount of pictures, slogans and stories. These communicative tools do not demand previous actions by the spectator. The audience is not required to buy a television set. They do not have to buy a ticket for a movie or a magazine. Outdoor advertisements are available for everyone and anyone passing by and functions as a constant background noise to the daily workings of people in public spaces. As long as the by-passers have not lost their eye-sight, advertising placed outside has the potential to reach everyone in the surrounding area.

Discourse of Utilisation

American based anthropologist William Mazzarella (2003), in his studies on advertising and globalisation in contemporary India, describes messages of marketing and advertising as a constant deliberation between the local and the global, culture and consumerism, as well as the abstract and the concrete (3, 17-18). As such, the possibilities of advertisement communications are highly complex and diverse. Despite the complexities of media messages the belief of affecting attitudes and behaviour persists, especially in the realm of advertising. Corporate executives utilise advertising based on the assumption that it has an effect on consumers purchasing behaviour (Mazzarella 2003:25-27) and through market research expect to be able to determine which strategies will be useful.

Some say that the modern world has become increasingly visual (Ramaswamy 2003:xiii) and as such images and media messages have gained an assumed power to impact life. In this regard advertising is noted to “affect social attitudes, define social roles and influence cultural values” (Ciochetto 2004:1), exceeding the objective to sell products and services. In this light, advertising and media in general is often deemed to have negative effects on audiences. One concern is the creation of a super-structure or mainstream that results in a perceived majority that “dominates public taste and cultural norms” (Reddi 1989:410). Thereby, alternate desires and behaviour are deemed abnormal. In this sense, the creation of desires and wants leads to the creation of new class divisions, destructive for a multicultural and diverse society. A common critique of advertising is its role in reinforcing existing stereotypical images of men and women and traditional values that conflict with changes taking place in society (Reddi 1989:410-411). Consequently, the possibilities of challenging such stereotypes seem to be an impossible task when the media constantly affirms the gender separation and traditional roles, as for example in many ads that contain women as mothers and wives in charge of household chores, child care and cooking or as possible brides being dressed in beautiful traditional saris to attract possible suitors for marriage as was the case in much of the advertising in the 1960s and 1970s (Srivatsan 2000:85 + 89-91; Munshi 2001b:82).

Despite the apparent dangers of media, mediated communications are continuously used in projects in the name of development. Parallel to the growing occupation of space by advertisements, which illustrates the expansion in consumerism, governmental sponsored advertisements too increased during the 1990s. Tourism ads, army recruitment and HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns were launched by state departments, international organisations and/or non-governmental organisations alike to influence public perception and behaviour. This development continued into the new millennium where polio prevention, malaria information and family planning ads spring up alongside a multitude of political ads (Ciochetto 2004:5-10) as well as encouragement for voting, helmet use and the appropriate cell phone use (not while driving). Social marketing as such plays a great part in the public sphere. The extensive use of outdoor public announcements and the public space illustrates how this media strategy is considered to be a valuable tool in encouraging social change and communicating information.

An example of influencing the populations' attitudes and behaviour through media was introduced in Indian television in the 1980s by the state owned channel *Doordarshan*. As a state project the ideal Indian family unit was created and portrayed in TV-serials. Through the lives lived on TV, the stories told illustrated desirable values. According to Purnima Mankekar the intention was to create a modern Indian family with modern values. The intended modernisation was concerned with issues around family planning and status of women and designed to push a modern national identity with the family unit as the foundation (Mankekar 1999; Schneider 2007:820-822). In addition, what was of great concern in this initiative was to “facilitate a critical shift from a capital goods to a consumer economy by creating and encouraging consumerist desires” (Mankekar 1999:6) and was supported by private corporations and advertising companies (Fernandes 2000:612-615, 620-621). This shows the involvement of advertising already then and judging by the immense popularity and reactions of the shows discussed by Mankekar the impact can be deemed a success and according to plan. In addition, the linkage between consumerism and modernity is made visible. The modern values sought are accompanied by a growing culture of consumerism that is associated with “a better life” and something to strive for.

The above described use of media shows not only the strength of media messages but also an intentionally placed strategy to influence the audience and their values. The question arises to what extend advertising bureaus and corporate companies are concerned with this aspect of advertisement. The executives' involvement can prove to be an important factor when it comes to challenge oppressive social norms in that their goal to sell products and influence purchasing behaviour is complimented with a willingness to address social faults (Mazzarella 2003:35) and make “decisions that stimulate equality, liberty and fairness of opportunity” (Leo Burnett quote in Maignan & Ferrell 2004:4). But is this an objective in advertising? Ultimately, in their work lies a responsibility to be acknowledged and considered in making choices of advertising strategies.

Gender and Sexuality in Advertisement

Gender has throughout history proven to be a site of political discourse. In the media landscape in India this is exemplified through the discussions of representation of women's bodies, nudity and

*sexuality*¹. Constructions of femininity reflect norms and values that are apparent in Indian society. Despite a multitude of existences that live out their gendered persona in different ways the overarching social structures label women as good or bad according to certain markers that define femininity. Consequently, a good woman is described as a caring, emotional, passive, quiet and shy being. She is expected to incorporate these into her daily life and behaviour. As a consequence girls and women - in the extreme case - are expected to be obedient, never talk back, dress according to respectable guidelines, not socialise in bars or night clubs, be coy and stay in the family house. These behavioural patterns stem from a notion of regarding chastity as the ideal (Chauhan 2009:7). As a result, women's mobility and choice of life is often seen to be highly constrained, as expectations of this constructed femininity condemn any behaviour outside the norm (Chandra 2009:3). Nevertheless, young women find opportunity to negotiate these social norms and young women continuously see themselves in a discussion between conformity and personal choice (Sommanon 2009:76).

Advertising that reinforces gender stereotypes complicates any possible change towards equality and continuously restricts women in their behaviour of what they themselves believe they should do or how they should behave as women. But similarly to changes in the status of women the representation of women in the media is a place of change. Some have gained a new found independence and entry into the workforce in many urban settings and form an important target group as consumers and buyers (Ciochetto 2004:3, 9). According to the studies of Srivatsavan, representation of women in advertising “functions as an instrument of modernisation” (2000:97) i.e. a strategy that pushes women's independence struggle onwards. In this case, the importance of gender and in particular women images increases. Ultimately, the discourse of women's representation in media is linked to the discussions of globalisation and the Indian-Western dichotomy. The polarised oppositions are entangled in the problematic of globalisation which creates anti-western arguments (Fernandes 2000:622-625). The importance of tradition and nationhood is emphasised and pan-Indian characteristics are made essential according to locality. This is illustrated in attempts to censor images that are considered to be obscene in film, TV and advertising. In the 1990s this was used as a political strategy and regarded as necessary steps to protect Indian culture from foreign harmful influence (Fernandes 2000:624). The politicisation of gender and in particular in regards to women, represents a field where the nationalist argumentation against so-called westernisation takes place. The Indecent Representation of Women Act enacted in 1986 made it possible to censor advertisements due to distasteful and degrading representation of women (Ciochetto 2004:6) and illustrates an ongoing concern with the protection of women. This venture does at the same time create a *de-sexualisation of women*² and ultimately complicates living beyond the norm. Additionally, this argumentation distances itself from more complex realities and trans-cultural identities that acknowledges that gender as well as sexuality do not exist as homogeneous categories (Chauhan 2009:12-13). Some however note the changes towards increased women's independence since the flourishing of the consumerist culture and growing of visual input

¹ According to the WHO sexuality includes “sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction” (2006).

² Eliminating the possibility of women as sexual beings. Their role is restricted to that of a daughter, a wife or a mother according to idealised images of women and in this way made dependant on the father, the husband or the son.

in the public space in the 1990s. The representation in media now sees women that have “detached themselves from mere approval of men to self-fulfilment (Munshi 2001b:82).

With expanding market and changes in society structures new women images emerged. In the process of changing purchasing behaviour and encourage specific buys, the tradition of what products are purchased shifted. With women gaining more influence and more consumer-power their role in product choices increased. As a result of changing certain areas of daily life other areas are in the process of being challenged as well, such as traditional values. That means that by creating desires for new products, consumers are introduced into a circle of change that influences the other aspects of life. Simultaneously, the corporate companies gain from women’s increased decision making and purchasing power and thus initiate and stimulate social change through their advertising. An “equation of liberation with product purchasing” can be said to take place and the products and services sold are given extra meaning through the power of catalysing change and shifting structures (Ciochetto 2004: 9; Mazarella 2003:21).

Before getting to the analysis and discussion of narratives found in outdoor advertising that exemplify the above described potential of the media I will outline the way the images were collected and touch upon possible drawbacks.

Methodology

This paper will as mentioned discuss the messages of in particular outdoor advertising in urban India. For this, the main data are photographs of billboards and posters. These were collected during the fall and winter 2008-2009, primarily in New Delhi. This selection must be said to have been gathered randomly and whenever found as it was not possible to predict where in the city one could expect useful media communication. The obvious shortcomings are thus the danger of missing out on messages posted but not seen. Simultaneously, I cannot pose myself as being fluent in Hindi and hence not necessarily have been attentive to messages I do not fully understand. This system-less data gathering poses the danger of an uncontrolled sample. However, as the point is not to give a picture of the messages representation mapped throughout the city but consider examples of media messages that combine consumerist intentions with the possibility to be read to propagate social change I do not consider this a flaw in this discussion. In order to form a multifaceted discussion on the significance of outdoor advertising I have included numerous articles and books concerned with the implications of media, depiction of women in mass media and advertising as well as pose assumptions about advertising and media influences on society structures, attitudes and behaviour. The information obtained will be included in the analysis.

Drawing upon the theories proposed by Welsch, Hepp and Löffelholz the analysis will discuss the public space in which the media communication takes place as a universe of trans-culturality i.e. a place of immense diversity and uncontrollable presences. Consequently, the effect, impact and ultimate change is included in a space that is signified by its nature of encompassing all sections of society, all gender, ages, educational backgrounds, traditional convictions as well as views of modernity, everything in between and different blends of it all.

Media Messages, the World and Shopping

The following chapter will present the gathered pictures and for each touch upon the implication in the narrative (text and image). Subsequently, the next section will discuss the potential for social change through discussing the target group, the public space and factors influencing possible impact. The theoretical foundation will be incorporated and the discussion will be linked to topics of concern that are crucial to the discussion. These include globalisation, nationalism and modernity.

Women Representation in Outdoor Advertising

According to South-asian scholars and social scientists Christiane Brosius and Melissa Butcher (1999) “images and their narratives reflect [...] changes” that are apparent in Indian societies (11). A multitude of billboards and poster exemplify this, in particular in connection with female representation. For instance, advertisements often utilise the perception of beauty in their campaigns, e.g. whitening cream ads play on the issues of dark skin complicating employment (Ciochetto 2004:9). Body image thus becomes a vehicle for sales and reinforces a simplified beauty ideal. As the image of fair skin has a very strong connotation in Indian society (matrimonial for example mention it as a category and an asset when looking for partners) the ad for Mail Today (Indian daily newspaper) ads is an interesting exception to the general situation. Here, the image and text recognises the existing beauty ideal, but at the same time challenges this idea by stating it as outdated and “yesterday” (see picture 1). Thereby, this ad opens a possibility to be lovely despite not fulfilling the usual beauty ideal of fair skin. The woman on the picture is however not as dark as can be in India and would probably not fall into the category of un-fair and hence undesirable women. In this way, the ad might send out a message of an outdated beauty ideal, but does not walk the talk.



Picture 1: October 2008, Ad for *Mail Today*, Street corner Jor Bagh, New Delhi.
 (“I’m not fair but I’m lovely. I’m not yesterday. Mail Today. News for the new Indian”)

Additionally, the women clad in clothes that show her naked back, holds a glass of sparkling white wine indicating that she is engaging in a social happening, probably outside the home. All in all, she belongs to a so-called modern generation of women, that drink alcohol, dress “western” and are not

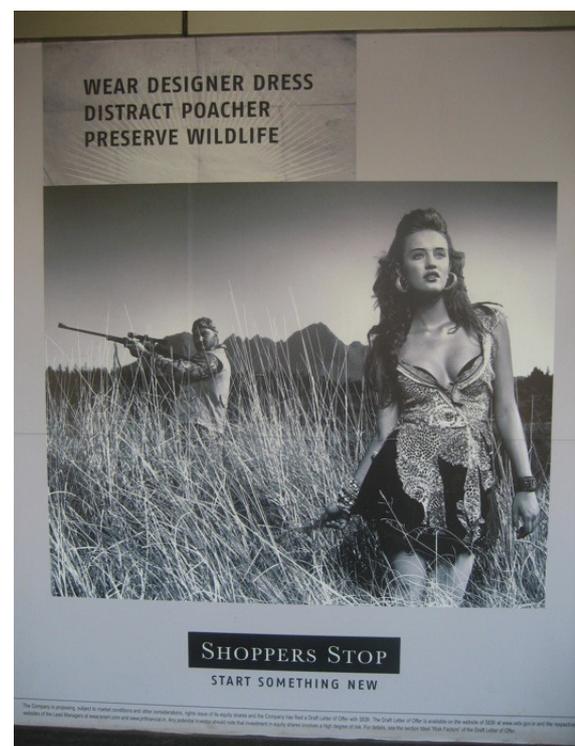
restricted by patriarchal structures to move about in the city. The feminine traits of the pure chaste young woman are according to this mediated message not part of her modern lifestyle and simply not desired to be. She is part of a group of “new Indians” that have moved beyond traditional beauty ideals.

The consumerist ads that on one hand sell products and on the other are concerned with social issues are seen also in ads for Shoppers Stop, a clothing store in the metropolitan Mall in South Delhi. Here women are depicted in sexy poses in extraordinary settings, combining environmental issues while selling lingerie, or wildlife preservation while advertising for garments. Women are here able to influence electricity use or poaching through their female lure (see pictures 2 and 3).



Picture 2: October 2008, ad for *Shopper Stop*, Metropolitan Mall, New Delhi.
 (“Wear sheer lingerie. Watch him turn off the lights. Conserve electricity. Shopper Stop. Start Something New”).

Picture 3: October 2008, ad for *Shopper Stop*, Metropolitan Mall, New Delhi.
 (“Wear designer dress. Distract poacher. Preserve wildlife. Shopper Stop. Start Something New”).



Even though a stereotypical picture of a sexy young woman is given, in the context of India's passive feminine ideal characteristics her outgoing and extravert presence is opposed to shyness. She is in charge of what can be done and through wearing specific clothing, that need to be bought is able to affect ecological concerns. Often one saw the use of foreign women whenever pictures needed to show women in sexual poses. On these ads, one can not say for sure that they are not Indian. They might be modern, confident *Desi-girls*, that not only have an interest in expressing their sexuality but also show concern for environmental issues. Similarly to the Mail Today ads, the slogan encourages to step away from former ways of life - what ever this might be - and "start something new". In this way a change is sought form the traditional stereotypical chaste women, that is characterised by being a passive, dependant caretaker to a modern form.

An example in which the woman's role is also not merely to be dependant on the household head but in charge of family welfare, can be seen in the ads for *active*, a carrot juice. Even though one can interpret the message in more stereotypical terms, i.e. the women's role as the caretaker of family health (as the juice apparently provides nutrition that helps boost the immune system), the text here also indicates that the woman is in charge of both the purchase and influencing her husband towards a healthier life, which defies the notion of the husband making all decisions in the household (see picture 4). This illustrates the creation of "the new Indian woman" who emerged in the realm of media images and who combined traditional values with modern ways of life (Schneider 2007:822; Fernandes 2000:616+623; Munshi 2001b).



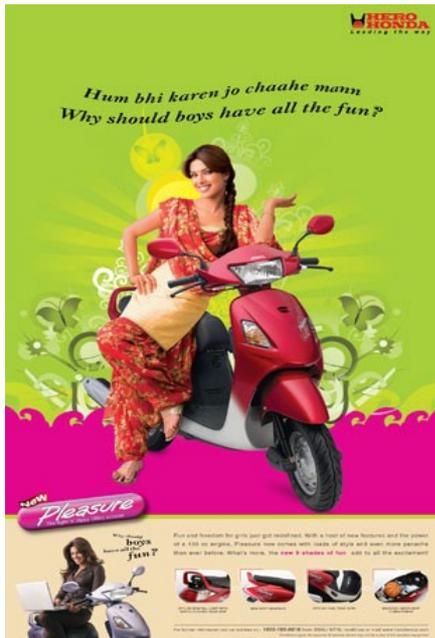
Picture 4: October 2008, ad for *active* carrot juice, Defence Colony market, New Delhi. ("I have changed my husband. Active, much more than juice.")

The message indicates that the husband was not according to the woman's choice of desire before the wife's and juice's influence. What the change consists of is not explained but the images shows a husband who is friendly, happy and carrying his wife on his back. One could argue that he now has to cater to all her wishes and needs, the opposite of the usual patriarchal family pattern where good obedient women more commonly service the men.

Throughout urban India several examples of challenging perceptions of the good girl and femininity exist. The ad for Hero Honda depicts a girl, dressed in modern or so-called western clothes on a scooter and accentuates the narrative with the text: “Why should boys have all the fun?” (see picture 5). Here her mobility is in question and is directly counter-posed to boy's, who apparently automatically are allowed fun, whereas girls usually do not engage in activities that are, firstly outside the house and secondly, only designed for *pleasure*, which is also the name of this particular model.



Picture 5: December 2008, ad for *Hero Honda Pleasure*, Varanasi. (“Why should boys have all the fun?”)



Picture 6: *Hero Honda Pleasure* ads. (“We will also do as we like. Why should boys have all the fun?”)

Picture 7: *Hero Honda Pleasure* ads. (“Just 4 her. The scooter showroom only for girls. Where every girl is a celebrity.”)



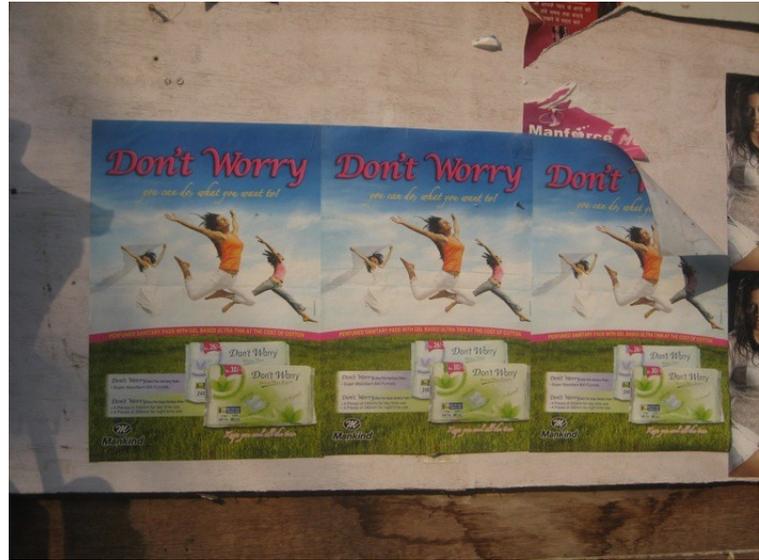
The freedom of the scooter is for different kind of girls. The modern girl who wears western clothing as seen in picture 5, where the young woman is dressed in a small top and knee long shorts, an outfit which is not seen in the street picture a lot, and the more traditional young woman wearing a salwar kameez³ as in picture 6. The advertised mobility is thus made available for all girls. On the last image the campaign continues its theme of addressing the young trendy woman (see picture 7). Here however, the main message seems to be the possibility of entering a showroom reserved for girls only, separating them from boys. One wonders if this separation can not exacerbate gender

³ A salwar kameez is a common clothing combination of pyjama pants and a long shirt ofne considered to be decent clothing for women.

roles that are fastening power relations among the two and particular in opposition to each other, as women according to this ad are in need of separation and possibly protection from boys.

The ad for sanitary pads on the other hand addresses women menstruating and exclaims: “Don’t Worry. You can do what you want to!” and thereby declares that women are able to make their own choices (see picture 8).

Picture 8: October 2008, ad for *Don't Worry* sanitary pads, Green Park market, New Delhi. (“Don’t worry. You can do, what you want to!”)



The three women on the picture seem carefree and enjoying themselves while leaping across green grass. What springs to my attention is the brand-name. One wonders why the product designed only for women is created by a company called *Mankind*. Also, the sanitary pads are perfumed, indicating that the actual smell of a woman menstruating is faulty and something to conceal. In the end, the overall message of the independent woman is the main attraction, but one cannot ignore the rather subliminal implications of male dominance.

The same company produces the condom *Manforce* (see pictures 9 and 10).



Picture 9: October 2008, ad *Manforce* condoms, Green Park market, New Delhi. (“The colour of love. The colour of *Manforce*.”)

Picture 10: October 2008, ad *Manforce* condoms, Green Park market, New Delhi. (“Its a great time for love.”)



Opposed to the usual de-sexualisation of women this image creates an over-sexualised version. Apart from the acknowledgement of a sexuality for women this ad illustrates a depiction of

dangerous women who following the constructions of femininity should not exist in actual life. Through this, the possibility of sexually active women, who also might enjoy pleasure instead of just catering to men's sexual desires arises. However, the image seems to be stereotypically designed to attract male customers - pulling all strings for making women sex-objects more than agents of their sexuality - to actually being concerned with challenging oppressive gender structures.

Opposed to this the Sunsilk campaign of 2007 can be seen to create women solidarity and challenging *hetero-normativity*⁴ (see pictures 11 and 12). One billboard shows a wide range of female characters drawn as animated figures and already here widens the possibility of how to express yourself. The image is encouraging young women to join a gang of girls on www.gangofgirls.com with whom they can share common interests, share makeover tips and find possible friends, but at the same time get exposed to more ads for hair-products. The clothing of the young women depicted indicate different kind of women; from the more traditional in salwar kameez to the ultra modern in short skirt and sleeveless top, the sporty type as well as one dressed in what can be regarded as more boyish clothing. Still, other characters seem missing, in particular body shapes are exactly the same, creating an ideal for young women to be sleek, fair and grooming their long hair. Especially the choice of animation makes them all look the same and complicates diverse appearances and in the end could cause marginalisation that do not fit the mould.



Picture 11: 2007, billboards for *Sunsilk*, India. (“11174 gangs started.”)

The other goes a step further with a provocative statement by what seems to be a naked young woman, inspiring thoughts on defying monogamy with the slogan: “I share my boyfriend with 32,529 girls”. Again, what is sought is to get connected to the website that launches further commercials on a multitude of products to buy. The statement is surely thought of as a shock effect as it is highly controversial. Talks on women sexuality are often treated as a taboo. Virginity as the

⁴ Hetero-normativity is a concept introduced through queer theory and argues that reality exist through an assumed normal situation of heterosexuality and distinct characteristics for men and women and in this way makes all life situations and choices that differ from this norm abnormal and as a result stigmatises and marginalises these.

prime ambition of a young woman stands contested. On the other hand, why is the boy who ends up with having many women as in a harem and not the young women who indulges in multiple partners?



Picture 12 : 2007, billboards for *Sunsilk*, India. (“I share my boyfriend with 32,529 girls.”)

The anonymity given by the internet is a useful way of voicing concerns, sharing stories and asking questions without fearing consequences. Even though the point was to sell hair products this campaign initiated a forum that in the end was utilised as a tool for women to find a voice and express themselves (O`Barr 2008). The opportunity for women to discuss their lives with other women can be seen as an empowering tool. Family settings can become closed environments, with restricted contact to the outside world, such a forum can allow women to share possible worries by realising that they are not alone and in turn express themselves more freely. Examples of inter-mediality i.e. connecting different types of media, are increasing and can be seen as a strategy to extend media communication (Vilanilam 2005:28-29). Ads for mail today is in this sense not only selling prescriptions to a magazine but also making yet another media platform available to the consumer. Consequently, the audience will be exposed to even more ads, information and mediated messages, snowballing media messages and in this case ads and consumerism.

Other ads have gone as far as explicitly challenging notions of hetero-normativity and contribute to the discussion of expression of sexuality (see pictures 13 and 14).

Picture 13: May 2007, ad for *Lee Jeans*, Bangalore. (“Lee. Straight Jeans”)



Picture 14: May 2007, ad for *Lee Jeans*, Bangalore. (“Lee. Straight Jeans”)

The campaign launched by Lee jeans created a furore as the jeans are straight, but the people wearing them might actually not be. As homosexuality still provokes some part of the population and the process of recent legalisation of the same is only at its beginning, this campaign is an extraordinary example of challenging the existing views on relationships and sexualities. According to Lee Business Head Chakor Jain, the campaign was not designed to promote homosexuality and says: “We believe that people can make their own choices and do whatever they want to do. I don't

think we are promoting anything here - we don't condemn it, we don't condone” (Sharma 2009). Through this statement however, it is clear that homosexuality is considered a valid choice and as such the message of the advertising pushes the boundaries of social structures. The possibility that the campaign was designed particularly due to its chock effect might still be a factor, but nevertheless the images give an opening to further discussion.

Despite a possible new take on a hetero-normative world, the ad fails to make it India specific by using characters that are likely to be of other than Indian origin (hair and skin colour indicates this). Also, as seen before animated characters can not convey complexities of people but create a stylistic unification of people. Consequently, the discussion might - as in many other instances - turn to the harmful impact of westernisation, globalisation and modernity to Indian culture. It is however not certain that characters that could be identified as Indian might not spurn the same argumentations.

Discussions and Considerations

Investigation of representation of women in media is vast and often concluding that media illustrates a hetero-normative world where gender stereotypes and roles comply with the images of an ideal family and family values. The images that are dominant in print media as well as television represent ideologies of family order and “increasingly contribute to the reproduction of hegemonic political culture” (Fernandes 2000:612+622-623). On the other hand as seen, there is the opportunity for media to operate as a powerful tool to catalyse social change (Reddi 1989:404-411).

The following part will touch upon vital aspect in the consideration of the potential of advertising more thoroughly. Hereto belong, considerations of media impact in general and in linkage to public space and the intended target group and other audiences. Additionally, I will discuss the possibility of unintended communication and link the issue to discussions of globalisation, nationalism and trans-culturality.

The Public Space, a Trans-cultural Setting

The urban public sphere is located through public transportation (Metro, bus and train station), markets (street markets, shopping malls), streets and highways and residential areas. All these places are potential commercial spaces. Even though the market place is by some considered to be the ideal place to negotiate existing values and behaviour due to its communicative practises (Mazzarella 2003:13), one has to remember the implications of the complex realities of the public space, the audience within as well as the current discourse.

When discussing the effects on the audience, one common opinion states that advertising reflects the desires and attitudes of individual consumers and, that successful ads are always based on already existing social norms and values. This means that agencies choose strategies and messages that already persist in mainstream opinions in order to be appealing to the future buyer and as such does not initiate changes that are not already persisting (Mazzarella 2001:13-26). This is however a simplified view of the reality of the audience. Especially in outdoor advertising the public is a mass of people that consists of various possibilities and combinations of all socio-economic classes, castes, religious and educational backgrounds, and also varies in all levels of gender, age and ethnic

affiliation. In this way the audience represents all sections of Indian society and as such complicates generalisation (Chauhan 2009:2). This reflects the essence of trans-cultural existences in a specific location. To a higher degree this multi-geneous group is diverse, multifaceted and contradictory and can be expected to react to messages in various ways. Dependant on the area chosen for a billboard certain population groupings might be of higher densities than others. But in urban settings the possibility for catalysing social change is high as the mass of people passing and being potentially affected by the message is immensely large. Public space hence functions as a space of eclectic communication, a space where cultures meet, and outdoor advertising as a medium that transgresses cultures within urban Indian cultures. As a result, the reception, effect and impact of outdoor messages is hard to predict. The immense diversity of the mass can be referred to as part of a trans-cultural mass, ever changing. Similar to societies in general - existing in a constant state of flux and change – the public spaces are a complex blend of multilayered individuals and communities (Löffelholz & Hepp 2002) and the possibility of determining what the ultimate impact and long term effect of media is i.e. how it affects the audience and thus society is highly problematic (Reddi 1989:409).

The Target Group; Who, What, Where?

Each advertisement functions through the use of specific target groups. Only a certain group is intentionally addressed to buy a specific product. Market research supposedly holds information that identifies characteristics particular to this group. Advertising messages are directed at this group specifically and in the end expected to act upon the given message. In 1995 India was seen as “the fastest growing and largest consumer market” and the communication of consumerist advances intrinsically linked to the so-called growing middle classes (Ciochetto 2004:3). Through a lens of trans-culturality however, one has to consider that the seemingly closed group of the Indian middle class is however not definable with specific characteristics fitting all. The range of people who are said to belong to this group are counted to somewhere between 80 – 250 million people, illustrating the disparities of measurement indicators (Favero 2005:18-19). In popular discussions the average middle class person is often referred to as one who “received schooling, speaks English, has a house made of bricks and possesses some kind of transportation vehicle” (Favero 2005:18) or “rich, modern, western-exposed and English-speaking urban dwellers” (O’Barr 2008). These definitions can however not capture the immense diversities that exist also within the group. Differences according to locality, religion, income etc. have evolved over time, which results in an extremely heterogeneous grouping. Consequently, there are no characteristics that describe every individual at all times who is included. The most useful definition in my opinion is a group that have the financial means to purchase luxury items or are financially able without having the economic stability of e.g. big company families and upper classes. The heterogeneity of the middle class must be kept in mind as the range varies greatly (Mankekar 1999:9). In this light, the messages given might address only one specific part of the middle class, the other might react in entirely different ways than expected.

Additionally, the audience for outdoor advertising is much greater than the appointed target group. The public space contains as mentioned a fleeting mass, uncontrollable and immensely multi-geneous. When one considers media to be complex enough to speak to a wide range of audiences with differing agendas (Freitag 2002:367; Pinney 2001:5) the messages communicated into the

public sphere and the image and/or text displayed might still speak to various people in different ways, even though these sections of the audience might not be considered by ad-makers.

When it comes to reaching the target group, one can speculate on the densest occurrence of the particular group according to characteristics of areas. However, urban population can in theory move freely between many areas. Some neighbourhoods and areas automatically attract certain kind of people e.g. shopping malls will not have many people with low income in their vicinities, but many upscale markets that attract middle and upper class people will simultaneously also see low class groupings for the reason that there are opportunities to make money in such places. I propose that most areas and public spaces will, despite separation among class and caste, still see individuals from all sections of the strata e.g. an up-scale neighbourhood is still dependant on waste-pickers presence. These can be seen to live nearby with their families. In addition, the emergence of the metro in New Delhi, which is affordable for all, demonstrates that the availability of messages for an urban audience that is a mixture of class and caste is higher than anywhere else.

Confounding Factors, Influences on Perception

Even though it might not be possible to predict to what extent or in what ways to determine the ultimate impact there are a multitude of variables that might influence perception of the narratives. Factors that influence the possible impact of media include literacy, income and language (Ciochetto 2004:5). What connects all these three issues is education in that a family's income dictates the possibility for education and thus literacy and language skills.

Even though the English language was still considered an anomaly in Indian advertising in 1997 (Mazzarella 2003:13), by now many campaigns make use of English or a blend of English and Hindi in northern India but are still accompanied by large numbers of advertisements in other local languages. To what extent the messages seen in this paper are also apparent in other Indian languages would demand a bigger study than possible at this time, but the use of English in outdoor advertisements might still exclude groups of people who lack these skills from the communication process. The question apparent is in what ways the image is combined with the text or slogan. Is the message only understandable with the text? Does the image contain another message on its own? And in what ways does the audience receive the two on their own and in combination? Ultimately, images and texts can be examined as communicative tools with several possibilities of meaning, manipulation, influence and persuasion. Even though images and photographs are strong communicative tools to focus desire and create identification (Mazzarella 2003:49-50) the possibility that messages and language choice are excluding illiterate or non-English speakers is still apparent. Moreover, advertising messages might only make sense to people of a certain background and as such only speak to that particular group which already lives out certain values not held by the rest of society. On the other side, the narratives do not disappear and thus might just differ in meaning. Consequently, even though images and text have one certain intent this does not mean that others are excluded from reacting to images in other ways. The narratives told are “related to ways of seeing, embedded in a culturally specific scenario” (Brosius & Butcher 1999:11) and in the trans-cultural setting of the public space can be of any indefinite kind.

Globalisation vs. Nationalism

Globalisation plays an important role as boundaries between local and global cultural realities are broken down (Fernandes 2000:611) and shared information is extended. At the same time, the increased trans-culturality also creates a fear of loss of tradition, original and authentic culture. Consequently, certain groupings of the Indian population intensify their regional belonging and in many cases regard themselves to be the protectors of Indian culture.

As mentioned in the chapter on gender and sexuality in Indian advertisement and media, some might argue that depiction of women in so-called western clothes or in sexual suggestive poses is a symbol of harmful increased westernisation of Indian culture and should be excluded from media. The politicisation of the discourse becomes a differentiation between the Indian population and tradition as inherently moral, and the opposed immoral western population. Any so-called liberal attitudes might be deemed “foreign inspired... that will surely corrupt Indian womanhood” (Uberoi 2001:169) and the corresponding media is described as “highly commercial and entertainment driven; and which is damaging, in its promotion of consumerism” and as such deeming the modern consumerist world as an attack of the Indian culture and family (Brosius & Butcher 1999:12-14). What becomes apparent is the linkage of consumerism, globalisation and entertainment to a foreign invasion and the attempt to distance oneself from these in order to fixate Indian culture as an unchanging entity. This argument does not acknowledge the diversity of Indian culture, but only accepts a singularity, unity and territorialisation of the same. By adopting the views of social constructionism and the notions of global media communication that has eliminated cultural traits according to locality, the 'we-them' dichotomy is faulty. “Globalization should not invoke a binary opposition between unity and diversity, [...] but [...] rather, the complex operations through which nomad technologies and ideologies become renegotiated” (Pinney 2001:8).

According to Wolfgang Welsch, a trans-cultural perception increases tolerance among people. When accepting that one's personality is influenced by several cultures and that we do not exist in a vacuum one cannot launch out on the foreign as their will always be foreign part within (Welsch 1999:6-9). In this scenario, the messages of media further have the potential to speak to different part of each person's identity, but as long as some persist on cultural traits as being regionally connected, the views of western evils complicate change. Globalisation and consumerism will continuously be affiliated with foreign powers and thus be rejected.

Concluding Remarks

By analysing images and text of a selected few outdoor advertisements that initially showed potential to challenge in particular gender stereotypes and oppressing structures, the above discussion has not surprisingly shown that the possibility of determining what the ultimate effect of advertising and media is and just how it affects the audience and thus society is a difficult task. In the end, how does one measure change of constructions of gender, social norms and societal structures as the one sought? Not least in the trans-cultural setting of public space.

Even though the content of outdoor advertising - as seen in the examples above - have great potential in regards to encourage social change and also can be seen to do so in parts, most commercial stories contain contradictory messages. For example, the attempts to create new beauty ideals in the advertising message non of the characters in the pictures are actually dark. Hence, these ads continuous to strengthen fair skin as the ideal. When it comes to discussing the opening of opportunities to women and encourage change towards freedoms for girls and women the situation is equally problematic. In regards to sexuality displayed there seem to be possibilities of de-sexualisation or over-sexualisation. Women are in some cases entitled to a sexuality, but in most case only in regards to what men can, want or can not do, as in the ads for *Shoppers Stop* or *Manforce* products or when considering freedom of girls in comparisons to boys'.

Despite the intended or unintended attempts to catalyse gender equality, tolerance and social responsibility, the communication shows issues that might create new problematic characteristics of femininity and structures. New categories of feminine traits, new ideal and stereotypes that do not acknowledge divers existences might produce new categories that in the end can be used to marginalise others that do not fit.

In the end, we are left with more questions: What is the motivation and objective of using messages that seemingly contradict mainstream attitudes of femininity? Are corporate companies encouraging campaigns that potentially can stir conflict and possibly change? Or are advertising agencies active bodies seeking provocation? What campaigns have shown to be successful and why? And in that sense, in what way does the audience react to these messages? Can the actual impact be measured and if so, what would it be?

The importance of the ongoing negotiation of gender and its implications is contributing to constant change and I still wonder, if consumerism in itself merely sells one kind of the good life or if it is possible to get one free.

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