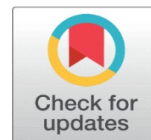


POSITIONING OF WOMEN IN ADVERTISEMENTS: ECONOMICS OF TRANSFORMATION



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ABSTRACT

In Indian society, across the regions women are changing, becoming confident, decisive, taking a lead and consequently Indian advertisements have also changed the way of positioning women and their issues. Where in 1984, the female protagonist of Surf advertisement, famously remembered as *Lalita Ji*, was projected as dedicated housewife, in 90's the advertisement of Nirma Washing Powder also projected the female characters as housewives washing clothes or Sangeeta Bijlani as displaying her beautiful and clean dresses as a beauty icon, in 2011, same Nirma Washing Powder showed an ambulance advertisement in which the female characters push the ambulance out of mud in front of the uncomfortable people standing around the ambulance. The tagline used was same as used in 90's '*Hema, Rekha, Jaya aur Sushma, sabki pasand nirma*' but where the previous one just depicted women in the stereotyped roles of housewives and beauty symbols, latter one depicted them as confident, self-reliant, and decisive women with leadership quality. This is in contrary to much research on gender in the media which blames advertisements for showing women stereotypes. This compels to examine the factors behind new positioning of women and their issues in today's advertisement which could be social, financial, and ideological and so on. However most significant and reasonable of all these factors seems to be financial factors keeping in mind the increasing number of employed women who are free to spend their money and thus proving to be strong prospective consumers. This paper tries to explore and examine all such financial factors behind positioning women and their issues in modern day advertisements.

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1. INTRODUCTION

While inspecting about the evolution and growth of advertising, it becomes quite evident that it evolved, organized, and grew everywhere in the world with capitalism. Advertising is said to be the most visible manifestation of capitalism [Kirkpatrick \(1986\)](#). As the capitalism culminated after globalization, advertising industry also reached to the highest level following the market. In India too, it became a huge industry and prospered after liberalization. However, the advertising industry has been smart enough to reflect the popular trends and practices in society and also to reap the profit out of it. They have been investing a huge amount of money in marketing research as well as in audience research to know what the demands in the market are and who are willing to pay for what, also who makes the purchase decision.



They are the target audience for advertising world, people with money, willing to spend and have decision making power.

Thus, when we talk about women's positioning in advertising, it also depends upon the same philosophy – have the money, are they willing to spend, are they decision makers? We need to examine their role and status from all these perspectives in order to understand their positioning in advertising and the economics behind it. Especially it is all the more important to study when in recent past in Indian advertising the positioning of women and their issues have taken a stronghold. Where earlier women were being portrayed either as a sober and committed housewife or an attractive and glamorous model who could be used to sell everything from car to shaving creams, now there are some companies and advertisements which are recognising them in their more realistic self and portraying them in some un- stereotype forms. This is all the more important at the recent time when women are becoming more economically independent and decisive. This paper tries to identify the economics behind this transformation of positioning of women in advertising.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the inception of the feminist discourse, the relation between women and advertisements have been studied mostly from the perspective of their role, their portrayal, their objectification, always as an object in the advertising, not as a decision-making consumer, not as a subject, not as a potential market. Since this study is about the women as consumer and how this perspective changes the whole equation and the perception of advertisers to see them in new light, the literature review has been classified into following segments.

2.1. WOMEN AND ECONOMY: ROLE AND STATUS

Swami Vivekananda said that 'without improving the condition of women, the world cannot thrive. The bird cannot fly with single wing.' This truth has been accepted by all countries of the world and India is one of them [Kumari and Sinha \(2014\)](#). This is true even in terms of world economy.

Women, today, are driving the world economy by controlling about \$20 trillion in annual consumer spending which is expected to rise to \$28 trillion in the next five years and by earning \$13 trillion yearly which is expected to rise to \$18 trillion in the same period [Silverstein et al. \(2018\)](#). This denotes that woman are much bigger market than India and China together, so advertising industry can't be foolish to ignore or underestimate the female consumer [Silverstein et al. \(2018\)](#). They clearly indicated in 2009 that women were going to lead the consumers' share of economy and would emerge as the most potential consumer in the world economy. It was much before them that it was realised by few scholars that women were very important force as consumers and as consumers, they were not a homogeneous group rather, they were as diversified as their counterparts. There were urban and rural women, there were lower class, middle class and high-class women, there were single as well as engaged women of various age groups, among single women also there were single women with families and without families and some were head of the families and most importantly there were workingwomen and non-working women as well as working women with traditional values and modern values both [Roberts \(1981\)](#). There were many studies focussed separately on these various segments of women and their role in economic development such as

Women's Role in Economic Development by Ester Boserup; Employment of Women. Regional Trade Union Seminar, Paris, 26-28 November 1968. Final Report by F. Guelaud Leridon; Family Issues of Employed Women in Europe and America by Andree Michel; Dual-Career Families by Rhona Rapoport and Robert Rapoport; Women and TopJobs: The Next Move by Michael Fogarty, Rhona Rapoport and Robert Rapoport; Re-Entry of Women to the Labor Market after an Interruption in Employment by B. N. Seear; Professional 'naia Rabota Zhenshchin i Sem'ia (Professional Work of Women and the Family) by A. G. Kharchev and S. I. Golod. However, most of them were concentrated upon the female labour division in villages and towns and in case of India, it was found that female activity rate was higher in villages than that of their counterparts in towns; the reason may be their involvement in agricultural work too in villages [Dodge \(n.d.\)](#).

According to a report published in a research paper, 'Declining Female Labour Force Participation in India: Concerns, Causes and Policy Options', published by Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), it has been stated that during the peak working age, which is between 25-60 years, more than 96% males, in rural and urban areas, are in the labour force as compared to 37.48% (rural) females and 25-28% (urban) females which is not much different from the report in 2010 that the percentage of women in employment in rural areas of India are 33 percent which is much higher to the percentage of women in employment in urban areas of the country i.e. 25 percent [Singh \(2010\)](#). However, one significant difference between the rural female workforce and urban female workforce is that most of the rural women are employed in unorganised sectors like agriculture or labourers while majority of urban women are employed in organised sectors [Singh \(2010\)](#). This implies that urban women are more economically empowered than the rural women.

In her speech (2018), Annette Dixon, World Bank South Asia Vice President highlighted the potential of female workforce in India and lamented not utilising it properly. In the participation of female labour force, the rank of India is 120 among 131 countries, and it is not difficult to understand that when the almost 50% of the total population is not actively participating in economic growth; the development of the country would not be inclusive and sustainable. At present Indian women are contributing to the GDP much less than the global average and if this 50% of the Indian population starts contributing to economic growth, the country's growth would reach to 9 percent per year from 1.5 percent per year. This shows how much potential is underlying among Indian women as female work force and given the right opportunities and required facilities, they can do miracle to the Indian economy. When the World Bank is considering it so important, then the global market must be having its eye on the working women of India.

2.2. WOMEN AS DECISION MAKER?

In the previous segment, it has been tried to relate the economic empowerment of women with their employment conditions, since one of the most significant determinants of female autonomy is greater access to labour market (Anderson & Eswaran, 2009 as quoted in [Banerjee \(2015\)](#)). It is well assumed that if a woman is earning, she has the economic power, but the question is whether this employment ability of women empowers them to take decisions as a consumer?

In recent years, the issue of women's active participation in the development process has been raised as a serious issue in all international and national forums, but unless their potential as a decision maker in spending money will be realised,

their empowerment and participation in development will only be a mirage whether in India or anywhere else. Just like the whole Indian population, the women in India are also divided into fragmented groups of caste, creed, religion, class etc. What unites them is underlying aspiration for creating their identity apart from being a woman who inspires them to achieve economic independence. This latent aspiration among Indian women provides creative opportunities to the advertisers to exploit their dreams, ambitions, and emotions. This is why in the advertisements of Fair and Lovely (2010), it is shown that the woman protagonist gets a job of air hostess after using the cream to become fair or in another advertisement it is shown that the woman protagonist gets a job before marriage to be equal to her life partner. These are reflections of the aspiring Indian women work force.

This is why India Today writes, “Despite the fact that gender inequality and many prejudices persist, there has been a marked transformation in the role of women. We can see this in their participation in the institutions of higher learning, employment opportunities, technology and start-up firms and travel. Middle-class housewives in Class II towns are using WhatsApp groups to sell the products that they source or make at home, thus dramatically enhancing their earning capacity. With this financial independence comes an increasing influence of women on key family decisions.” [India Today Web Desk \(2017\)](#) .

Although in Indian culture, women had always been key decision maker in case of buying small grocery items and day-to-day household material, but they had not been considered an influential person when it comes to buying decision of a luxury or technical item.

In the Indian patriarchal society, men have the final say in everything and women are considered less powerful than men in the family. However, women have been great influencer in buying decision of their family members and relatives in case of smaller things. It was also found in research conducted by Dr. Sriparna Guha (2013) that since women carries multiple roles in the family such as mother, sister, wife, and daughter; so, they influence the buying behaviour of their family members and relatives.

A research paper published in 2015, studied the condition of female autonomy or in other words women decision making capacity; across the Indian states by using the data gathered in National Family Health Survey 3 in the year 2005-06. Some of its findings are:

- *Employment rate of married women:* It was found that among the currently married women in an age group of 15 to 49 years around 43% women are employees. However, their employment rate significantly varies across states.
- *Control over cash earnings:* Since the economic independence is the most important aspect of female autonomy, it was found that almost 81 percent of the currently married working women have good control over their earnings. They alone or jointly decide in spending their earnings
- *Women's participation in decision making:* On investigating that whether women in India are part of the decision making in the family, it was found that 37 percent working women in India are consulted in the major four decisions in family such as health care, daily purchase decisions, major household purchase decisions and socialisation. However, women of north-eastern states participate in these decisions making much more than other states.

- *Women's access to money and credit:* Women will be able to spend only if they have their own money and they can do transactions, so it was found that around 45 percent women in India have their own money and 15 percent women have bank account which is a reflection of their access to financial resources.

The study also reveals that social condition of women in India strongly determines the women autonomy and eventually the growth of the country. It is due to the backward and conservative thoughts of the society

that women are weaker decision maker than men in India. However, it also suggests that if the family

income increases, the autonomy of women in the family also increases [Banerjee \(2015\)](#).

In a most recent article (2019) published in Wall Street Journal by Corinne Abrams titled *Indian Women Seize Spending Power: 'I Just Tell My Husband I Am Buying This Stuff'*, She says, "Indian women are beginning to get more control over personal and household financial decision-making, a cultural shift that is prompting some of the country's big retailers to revamp their offerings."

Keeping in mind all these above-mentioned factors, it can be argued that women have emerged as a significant economic force in the world and so in India too and they are also assuming the position of decision maker in financial decision mainly because they are earning.

3. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

In the light of the above-mentioned facts in previous sections, this study tries to examine the following questions with the help of the case studies:

- 1) How women and their issues are being positioned in today's advertisements?
- 2) What are the economic factors for positioning women as subject not object?

4. METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in this study is qualitative; analytical and interpretative. Two case studies have been used to analyse the positioning of women and factors behind it. The case studies have been chosen on the basis of their relevance to the topic and their unique treatment. Before analysing these case studies, the present status of advertising towards female consumers and the expectations of women from them have also been analysed on the basis of the secondary sources. This analysis sets the stage for the two case studies – one the bournvita ad campaign '*Tayyari jeet ki'* and second one is from Tanishq.

5. WORKING WOMEN AND ADVERTISEMENTS: MUNDANE CHOICES

Women are not only earning, they are making their choices too. The number of women working force is continuously increasing all over the world, so their expectations from market are also increasing. However, they are not very satisfied with the offerings of the market.

A study in 2008 by the Boston Consulting Group is disappointing for women consumers. It complains that even though women are the decision makers in most of the consumer goods and they also control the spending, the businesses ignore them and their power of purchasing decisions. Even the market does not offer well-conceived quality products and services to them and promote the old, outdated narratives and stereotypes. As part of the same study, it was tried to find out the feelings of 12,000 women's lives and work and the services they were getting from market. This study concluded that women felt severely underserved despite their remarkable presence in market power and there was lots of room for improvement. [Silverstein et al. \(2018\)](#)

The needs and requirements of working women are also different, and more utility based. There are many such products and brands which are specific for working women and the consumption of many products are more among the working-class women thus making them the most significant consumers. Also, they might like or unlike many advertisements based on its appeal specifically to them not to the women in general (Johnson and Satow 1978 as quoted in [Roberts \(1981\)](#)). According to one Indian study too, it is claimed that working women are very much conscious towards the price, quality and brand of the products and they also get influenced by other people while shopping [Guha \(2013\)](#).

The consumer behaviour of working women should be highly tracked by the companies to tap the potential of new emerging customers. As per the study conducted in 2008, there are six industries with the greatest potential to serve the female customers. Out of these six industries, women are more interested to spend in these four: food, fitness, beauty, and apparel, but they are very much dissatisfied with the other two: financial services and health care [Silverstein et al. \(2018\)](#).

The working women are not only underserved in terms of market but as a side effect to the market, they are also underserved in advertising. For example, cars are considered men only item and are usually highlighted as speedy, stylish, adventurous, and strong and rarely portrayed as a utility vehicle for women in spite of the fact that majority of upper class and upper middle-class women own cars. According to a report published by Campaign India in 2018, in the past five years, the percentage of women among car buyers has nearly doubled, to 10-12 per cent from about six per cent. The advertising industry behaves as per the behaviour pattern of its target audiences. If they have to sell groceries, their target audiences are housewives, and they portray women as typical housewives in their advertisements that take pride in all kinds of household work and master the art. However, the trend in advertising is changing because women themselves are changing, becoming confident, decisive, and taking a lead. The market and advertisers are taking advantage of this and target them as potential consumers. This change is highlighted by one article published in Business Line by Hamsini [Shivakumar \(2018\)](#) titled 'The advertising that women want'. This article says, "Indian advertising, while selling products, has sought to either mirror traditional societal norms so as to connect with the brand's target group or to put forward progressive views on gender equality." The Indian advertising is changing its course from home bound to forward looking.

Here comes the role of positioning. Creating a unique place in customers' mind is called positioning; claiming a piece of consumer's mind is called positioning, placing a product among the plethora of similar products with some unique identity is called positioning. Thus, positioning can be explained as creating an appeal for a product in such a way that it deemed fit for the prospective consumer as if it has been manufactured exclusively for him or her. It is a generalised offering with

personalised attributes. At the time of the crisis when the majority of working women are feeling underserved and underrepresented by the advertising industry, there is dire need of positioning the product or a brand in such a way that women feel it is for them, it is as per their needs, and it is reflection of their thought and beliefs. Just making everything pink and using mere symbols will not work on today's women. As Kate Slay maker, Media Analytics Commercial Lead said in 2018 that "Marketers need to think more strategically beyond cheap tricks, making things pink, or adding female icons to labels to reach women." They need to understand, who is she? Today's economically independent woman thinks about her, does not mean that she has stopped caring for other people in her life. As a consumer also she is different, and if the marketers want to target them as consumer, they will have to understand her thought process and her buying behaviour. There are many differences between the men and women brains at various levels such as biological, neurological, and behavioural which ultimately influences differently the buying behaviour of men and women. Thus, men would rely more on the information about the products from various sources such as internet, television, newspapers while women would rely more on their trusted people and their experiences with the product, they depend more on their feelings and connect easily with brands just like their family and friends, they decide to buy something not only on the basis of her needs but also on the basis of the choices of her family and friends. So, the products or brands are required to position in a mall or store in such a way that it highlights its importance for the women consumers and their loved ones. [Kumaravel \(2017\)](#)

There are some advertisers, who have understood this requirement of change and they have started moving towards positioning the female protagonists in a more realistic and unorthodox manner. Though the attempt is not so robust, but it shows that the beginning has been made. According to a white paper issued by Engendered in 2018 and published by Campaign India, 21 per cent of the ads released over Diwali broke stereotypes and portrayed women in a positive

light. Although the report was critical in tone that in spite of 37 percent rural women are taking their purchase decisions themselves and 20 percent of the leadership positions in India are occupied by women, only 21 percent ads could reflect this new avatar of women, yet I would like to consider the positive side of it because for long women have been portrayed in the stereotypical ways and the change would come gradually. Not all of the sudden all brands would rush to en-cash the changing status of women in socio-economic sphere. However, they have recognised the underlying potential. According to a report published by The Economics Times in 2017 on their website, "But as women learn to assert themselves and increase their spending power, brands are realising that they can no longer pander to the lowest common denominator in their communication. Thankfully, some brands dare to break stereotypes beautifully and showcase the contemporary woman in her all-new avatar." In the recent past we have seen many such advertisements which presented the real contemporary women, such as Bournvita's advertising campaign of 'Taiyyari Jeet ki' (Getting prepared to win) or Havell's 'Hawa Badlegi' advertisement or Ariel's 'Share the load' advertisement or Tanishq's 'Remarriage' advertisement; media is full of these new age advertisements too and these are liked by the huge segments of society; especially today's women. Let us discuss two case studies in which the positioning of women has been done quite innovatively and un-stereotypical manner.

5.1. CASE STUDY I: BOURNVITA'S ADVERTISING CAMPAIGN OF 'TAIYYARI JEET KI' (PREPARING TO WIN)

Bournvita, a health drink product of Cadbury India, launched an advertising campaign in 2011 with the theme of 'Taiyyari Jeet ki' (preparing to win). This series of advertisements with same theme but different plots created a unique position of a progressive modern-day mother, which most of the women liked as they wanted to see themselves like the female protagonist in the advertisements. The message was loud and clear; the role and status of women are changing both economically and socially, so they should get fair treatment in all platforms including advertising.

One advertisement talks about how falling is not defeat, rather with each fall of the child, mother would also fall, and they rise again together. Each fall gives some lesson which mother wants to teach her child. Two images of this advertisement are shown below:



Image 1



Image 2

There is another TVC in which the mother is shown competing with her son in racing with her full strength. She says that her son would develop the habit to win only when he would defeat her mother, not when she would let her win. When her son would defeat her then it will be her true win. Two images of this advertisement are shown below:



Image 1



Image 2

In the most striking one TVC of this series, a child is shown to practicing boxing whose face is covered with hood. The child is shown to practising with mother who receives the punches just to prepare the child to face even bigger opponent because she thinks that they should prepare with better and stronger opponents so that they can always remain one step ahead and better prepared, because the competitions in life will not always be between equals. This training pays well when the child defeats

an opponent bigger than her. And this is the climax of the ad when the child is shown without hood, and it is revealed that she is a girl. Two images of this advertisement are shown below:



Image 1



Image 2

These advertisements were created by Ogilvy & Mather, and they positioned modern mothers as actively involved in their children's preparation for life rather than being just a passive facilitator. Here it is not shown that women are not caring for their children, but the form of caring has changed which is so true in terms of today's society. Parents are becoming active participants in their children's lives, especially mothers. They are more dedicated, stronger, more confident, and evolved mothers. All these three advertisements have shown the role of mothers in training their kids in sports which could not be considered suitable in earlier times because all outdoor activities used to be men's forte. But these advertisements not only position women as strong mothers but also break the stereotype that they are not suitable for outdoor sports activities. Even in these ads, the advertisers do not feel any need to show any male protagonist by her side as father of the child, rather they focus on the strength of the mother even more than child.

5.2. CASE STUDY II: TANISHQ'S PATH BREAKING ADVERTISEMENTS

Tanishq, a jewellery brand of Tata's always surprised the audiences with its path breaking advertisements which positioned women in most un-stereotypical manners, whether it's 'remarriage' advertisement or 'Raksha Bandhan' advertisement or 'mid-aged women' advertising, all are unique and innovative. These advertisements touch our chords and most of the women connect with them easily, some get inspired, some get reflections of their own lives, but they have set a trend. These advertisements position modern women just like they are, natural, realistic, confident, and decisive. Unlike many advertisements which claim to be women centric, by only showing some symbolism like using pink colours and setting the old stereotypes in new context, these advertisements look more credible, promising and heart winning.

The best of them all and I am sure it is favourite of most people is the 'remarriage' ad which broke a number of stereotypes. One, the female protagonist is a dark complexed bride unheard in the world of advertisement till then, two, it is her second marriage, a subject never been touched in the Indian history of advertising, three, and she has a daughter, and second marriage of a young mother is not a subject the society would like. Still, they did it. The advertisement was created by Lintas, and they won 4th place in 'the seven most inspiring ad campaigns for women in 2013'

by Adweek. The ad clearly shows that the woman is happy for her remarriage and the man she is marrying to not only loves and respects her but also her daughter. Also, they have shown that the woman has a daughter not a son, which is again something against the perceived notions of the society. This is one of the legendary advertisements which positions woman as a normal human being, who has every right to be happy and set her life again all odds. Two images of this advertisement are shown below:



Image 1

Image 2

Another advertisement of Tanishq is 'Raksha Bandhan' ad which portrays the relations between two sisters instead of brother and sister. In this ad the female protagonists share the bond of sisterhood, and they love each other so much that they celebrate Raksha Bandhan with each other. This advertisement also shows that it is not necessary that one should feel protected only with brother, even sister can take care of her younger sister equally effectively; so why not share the small bond of 'Raksha Bandhan' among sisters too. The message has not been created very loudly but very softly it leaves impact on the audiences and many women who have only sister can connect with the advertisement. They can even start giving value to their sisterhood. Thus, this advertisement also positions women in the strong care taking role and shows them enjoying their bond, not feeling void of having brother. Two images of this advertisement are shown below:



Image 1

Image 2

Tanishq has also celebrated aging and friendship with its ads. There is one advertisement in which old friends (all female) are meeting after a long time and they are enjoying each other company just like good old days, although they are family persons now. In another advertisement, it is shown that age is not a factor to stop enjoying life and female friends of more than 40 years of age enjoy their time in colourful ways. Both the ads position women as individuals, who want to spend their time in their own way, who want some space too and who are not laid back due to their growing age. One picture of each of these ads is shown below as image 1 and image 2 respectively:



Image 1

Image 2

In all these advertisements of Tanishq, women are positioned as independent, decision making and confident individuals, who have taken charge of their lives and who know what they are doing. This is the image of working women today in India which is reflected from these advertisements.

One more very important thing here to notice is that none of the protagonists in these ads are from any middle class or lower middle-class background or rural background, because they are not target audiences for these ads. The target audiences are decision making working women, so their images have been portrayed in these advertisements in both the case study I and case study II.

6. CONCLUSION

Although not so fast but the advertising world has started catering to its female audiences in India too keeping an eye on their potential participation in the market in near future. In the other parts of world, the women economic power is much significant than India, so the advertising industry is also exploiting them by responding to their demands in much faster way. Here in India, the trend has been initiated by multi-national companies, because they are catering to the global market and they know what is happening outside India is bound to come in India soon, so they have pitched in early to the Indian floor. Also, Indian working women have very promising potential to be converted into a loyal consumer, if their ideological and emotional appeals are answered by the advertising world. Not a single company would like to lose such a promising and untapped throng of potential consumers, so eventually advertising will cater them in the manner they want.

The case studies taken here in the study also reflect the changing positions of elite working women in society. If we minutely see these ads, they are just like the slice of lives of many of the working women of elite class, who are decisive, confident and leaders of their lives. These are bound to connect with those women who are leading their lives on their terms.

Although these ads are created to touch the chord of the women of similar group, class, and potential, they are inspiring for the whole society. The inspiration generated from these ads is the positive side effect of the breaking of stereotypes. It is not a hidden fact that any form of media message evokes certain emotions among people, and they tend to imitate them. Such kinds of path breaking ads also show better ways to the society and even if they are targeting the elite class audiences, they inspire all sections of the society.

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