

"A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF TRANSGENDER VISIBILITY AND RESPECTABILITY IN BHIMA JEWELLERY'S 'PURE AS LOVE' CAMPAIGN"

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ABSTRACT

The present study explores the representation of transgender identity in Indian advertising, with particular reference to the Bhima Jewellery advertisement "Pure as Love" (2021). While representations of transgender individuals are gradually increasing in Indian media, there remains a significant gap in scholarly analysis, particularly within commercial advertising contexts. Drawing on Stuart Hall's Media Representation Theory, this study explores how gender identity, cultural acceptance, and emotional narratives are constructed through visual imagery, sound design, and symbolic elements. A qualitative, frame-by-frame content analysis is employed to uncover the advertisement's narrative strategies and ideological underpinnings, offering a deeper understanding of how mainstream media negotiates inclusivity within prevailing cultural norms. The findings show that although the advertisement presents a positive story about a trans woman being accepted by her family, it also supports traditional gender roles. The main character is shown through familiar signs of femininity like wearing bridal jewellery, showing emotional sensitivity, and seeking approval from her parents. This suggests that acceptance depends on fitting into cultural norms, reflecting Stuart Hall's idea of dominant-hegemonic meaning. The advertisement also ignores important issues such as caste, class, and religion, creating a clean and idealized version of what it means to be transgender in India. This study adds to gender and media research by offering a critical view of how Indian advertisements handle the idea of inclusion within a consumer-driven system. It also gives useful suggestions for advertisers and media creators who want to represent marginalized communities in a more honest and respectful way.

Keywords: Transgender Representation, Indian Advertising, Media Representation Theory, Encoding/Decoding, Trans Visibility, Intersectionality

1. INTRODUCTION

The growing visibility of transgender people in global media has sparked renewed academic interest in how marginalized communities are represented in mainstream commercial platforms. In India, where gender identity is closely linked with religious traditions and caste systems, the media often shows transgender individuals in ways that either superficially include them or ignore their real issues. Even though legal changes like the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019, have recognized transgender rights at an institutional level, cultural portrayals still tend to present them through narrow and stereotypical lenses such

as figures of pity, spectacle, or as symbolic inclusions without real agency [Chatterjee \(2021\)](#), [Misra \(2020\)](#).

Within this complex social setting, advertising holds great influence. It is not just a tool to sell products but also a medium that shapes public opinion and social norms. One significant example is the Pure as Love advertisement by [Bhima Jewellery \(2021\)](#). This ad tells the emotional story of a young transgender woman's journey through her transition, including her struggles and eventual acceptance by her family. On the surface, the campaign promotes gender inclusivity and acceptance. However, a deeper look reveals that it may also reinforce certain social expectations—such as traditional gender roles, family approval, and idealized feminine beauty.

The ad uses familiar Indian cultural symbols like bridal jewellery and parental blessings to gain emotional appeal. While this helps in normalizing transgender identities, it also raises important questions. Whose stories are being told? What kind of transgender identity is being made acceptable to society? And how do commercial interests influence these portrayals? Despite a growing presence of transgender individuals in Indian advertisements, very few academic studies have analysed these portrayals in detail using established media theories. This study aims to bridge that gap by applying Stuart Hall's Media Representation Theory to examine the Bhima Jewellery ad closely. By doing a detailed content analysis, this research contributes to wider discussions in gender studies, media representation, and consumer culture. It focuses on how visibility, identity, and ideology intersect in Indian advertising and what this means for the broader fight for transgender rights and representation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. GENDER AND MEDIA REPRESENTATION IN INDIAN ADVERTISING

Indian advertising has long reflected traditional gender roles, often promoting ideas tied to patriarchy and heteronormativity. [Butalia \(2002\)](#) argues that instead of challenging these norms, Indian media tends to reinforce them in the name of cultural tradition. Advertisements frequently show women in domestic roles or as symbols of beauty, promoting femininity through visuals and consumer behaviour [Kaur and Joshi \(2012\)](#).

Transgender individuals have mostly been left out of Indian advertising, or when shown, they are often presented in negative or superficial ways. [Ghosh \(2020\)](#) notes that these characters are often shown as exotic or unusual, without real personality or story. [Rajadhyaksha \(2009\)](#) explains that this limited portrayal is due to both market conservatism and social resistance to accepting diverse gender identities.

2.2. TRANSGENDER VISIBILITY AND CULTURAL LEGITIMACY IN MEDIA

The 2014 Supreme Court verdict in *NALSA v. Union of India* legally recognized transgender people as a "third gender." This was a milestone for visibility in Indian media. However, legal change does not always lead to cultural inclusion. [Narain \(2014\)](#) points out that transgender individuals are often only accepted when they fit into familiar and socially acceptable roles. [Dutt and Roy \(2019\)](#) also stress that

transgender people in advertisements are usually shown in a way that fits the idea of “respectable” identity avoiding complexity or controversy.

Ads like Pure as Love by [Bhima Jewellery \(2021\)](#) and similar campaigns by brands like Vicks and Brooke Bond have brought transgender protagonists to the forefront. However, these stories often rely on safe and familiar themes like family support, emotional journeys, and traditional ceremonies such as weddings [Sundar \(2021\)](#). [Patel \(2022\)](#) argues that this visibility is often shaped to please mainstream audiences, rather than present the full spectrum of transgender experiences.

2.3. ADVERTISING AS IDEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE

Advertising is more than just a way to sell products it also shapes public thinking. As [Williamson \(1978\)](#) explains, ads work as “systems of meaning,” embedding cultural ideas within consumer messages. [Goldman \(1992\)](#) adds that advertisements help define social values, shaping how people think about roles, identity, and success. In the Indian context, especially under a market-driven economy, advertising continues to reflect divisions based on caste, class, and gender [Mazzarella \(2003\)](#).

Campaigns like Bhima’s can be seen as playing both sides: they promote inclusion while also catering to market interests. [Mukherjee \(2020\)](#) warns that such ads may simplify complex social issues and turn them into emotional stories just to boost brand image essentially selling marginalization for profit.

2.4. STUART HALL’S MEDIA REPRESENTATION THEORY

Stuart Hall’s theory of media representation [Hall \(1980\)](#), [Hall \(1997\)](#) offers a strong foundation for analysing how media creates meaning. His encoding/decoding model suggests that media messages are shaped by dominant social values, which audiences then interpret in different ways accepting, negotiating, or rejecting them depending on their background. Hall argues that media doesn’t just show reality it helps shape how we understand reality.

In terms of transgender portrayals, Hall’s theory allows us to explore how ads like Bhima’s use symbols such as bridal wear, family approval, or traditional femininity—to send emotional messages. [Procter \(2004\)](#) and [Orgad \(2012\)](#) support this view, stating that media plays a key role in how identities are imagined and understood in society. Using Hall’s framework helps critically examine whether such portrayals truly break barriers or simply adjust marginalized identities to fit mainstream comfort.

2.5. EXISTING RESEARCH GAPS

While there is increasing academic interest in LGBTQ+ representation in Indian films and online media, focused research on transgender portrayals in commercial advertising is still lacking. Much of what exists is journalistic in nature and lacks detailed theoretical analysis. [Sharma \(2021\)](#) points out that advertising research in India often ignores how corporate branding interacts with identity politics, especially concerning the transgender community. Although Bhima Jewellery’s Pure as Love ad is widely praised for its progressive message, it has not yet been analyzed thoroughly through academic lenses like Hall’s representation theory. This study aims to fill that gap by examining how the ad constructs transgender identity, emotional appeal, and cultural acceptance. In doing so, it contributes original insights to both media studies and gender discourse in the Indian advertising space.

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

3.1. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study offers a critical analysis of how transgender identity is portrayed in [Bhima Jewellery \(2021\)](#) advertisement, with specific attention to the construction of gender roles, cultural expectations, and emotional storytelling within commercial visual media. Drawing on Stuart Hall's Media Representation Theory, the research aims to explore the following key objectives:

- To examine how transgender identity is visually and narratively constructed in the Bhima Jewellery advertisement.
- To investigate the ideological codes embedded within the ad, particularly in relation to gender norms, respectability politics, and familial acceptance.
- To decode the symbolic representations and narrative structures through which transgender subjectivity is legitimized or constrained.
- To assess the potential for inclusive advertising to both challenge and reinforce dominant socio-cultural ideologies in Indian media.

3.2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design rooted in critical media analysis and interpretive inquiry. Based on a constructivist approach, it seeks to uncover hidden ideological meanings and symbolic structures embedded within the selected media text. A frame-by-frame content analysis was conducted, focusing on key elements such as visual representation (including costume, lighting, framing, facial expressions, and body language), sound design (background music, dialogues, silences, and emotional tone), narrative structure (particularly the protagonist's gender journey and family interactions), symbolic elements (such as bridal jewellery, cultural rituals, and the interplay between domestic and public spaces), and gender role portrayals (including themes of femininity, transformation, and heteronormative coding). The analysis was guided by Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model [Hall \(1980\)](#), allowing for the interpretation of dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings of the advertisement.

The theoretical framework draws primarily on Stuart Hall's Media Representation Theory, which views representation as an active process of meaning-making. It emphasizes the relationship between producer intention (encoding), audience reception (decoding), and the polysemic nature of media texts anchored in dominant ideologies [Hall \(1997\)](#). Additionally, the study integrates intersectional perspectives to examine how gender representation intersects with class, caste, and cultural privilege. The unit of analysis is a single audiovisual text: the [Bhima Jewellery \(2021\)](#), with a runtime of approximately 100 seconds. This advertisement was selected through purposive sampling due to its significance as one of the earliest mainstream Indian commercials to feature a transgender woman in a central, respectful, and emotionally resonant role.

4. DATA ANALYSIS: FRAME-BY-FRAME CODING TABLE

Table 1

Frame No.	Scene Description	Visual Elements	Sound/Music	Symbolism	Gender Role Portrayal	Encoded Message	Possible Decodings (Hall)	Notes/Comments
1	Teen walks with head down	School uniform, long hair, downcast eyes	Soft piano	Hair = gender cue	Emerging gender dysphoria	Vulnerability, identity struggle	Dominant: empathy; Oppositional: isolation	Sets emotional tone
2	Dancing in class	Classical dress, graceful gestures	Carnatic music	Dance = cultural femininity	Performing ideal womanhood	Respectable transformation	Dominant: inclusion via culture; Negotiated: conditional	Traditional approval encoded
3	Applying lipstick	Close-up of face & mirror	Emotional swell	Mirror = self-acceptance	Female aesthetics affirmed	Self-affirmation	Dominant: empowerment; Oppositional: cosmetic femininity	Gender performativity shown
4	Bridal transformation	Saree, ornaments, confident smile	Climax music, voiceover	Bridal dress = symbolic womanhood	Conforming femininity	Cultural legitimacy	Dominant: celebration; Oppositional: transnormativity	Highlight of ideal woman trope
5	Wedding photo with family	Frame, warm colors, father smiling	Silence / calm fade-out	Photo = public acceptance	Social integration complete	Love = validation	Dominant: family unity; Negotiated: love with conditions	Patriarchy silently affirmed

4.1. ANALYTICAL PROCEDURE

- The advertisement was viewed and transcribed multiple times.
- Visual frames were segmented based on shot changes and narrative progression.
- Key frames were coded thematically (e.g., “transformation moment,” “bridal imagery,” “parental acceptance”).
- Interpretations were mapped to theoretical constructs such as ideological encoding, hegemonic femininity, and media polysemy.

5. FINDINGS AND THEMATIC INTERPRETATION

This section presents a critical frame-by-frame analysis of the [Bhima Jewellery \(2021\)](#), focusing on how transgender identity, femininity, cultural norms, and emotional resonance are constructed through visual, auditory, and symbolic means. The analysis is grounded in Stuart Hall’s Media Representation Theory, specifically his ideas on encoding/decoding, ideological meaning, and power circulation in media texts.

Table 2

Scene/Frame	Visual Elements	Sound/Music	Symbolism and Semiotics	Interpretation (Hall's Theory)
Opening Frame: Teen trans girl walks with head down	School uniform, long hair, slightly anxious expression	Melancholic piano; ambient sound	Hair as gender identity marker, downcast gaze = internal conflict	Encodes vulnerability and early gender dysphoria. Dominant reading: "difference" is quietly introduced.
Parent observing child in mirror	Warm lighting, reflective surface	Soft string music	Mirror = self-realization, parental gaze = social judgment or concern	Encodes dual reality (self vs. societal perception). Hall's model suggests negotiation between viewer empathy and parental disapproval.
Scene of trans girl learning dance	Classical attire, close-ups on face and hands	Traditional Carnatic music	Dance = reclaiming feminine cultural space	Dominant-hegemonic decoding: cultural legitimacy via tradition. Oppositional: only classical femininity is validated.
Applying lipstick before mirror	Focus on hand, slow motion	Crescendo of emotional music	Lipstick = agency + femininity; Mirror = identity affirmation	Encodes gender performance (Butlerian). Audience may read empowerment (dominant) or artificiality (negotiated).
Jewelry shopping with mother	Intimate body language, golden lighting	Emotional dialogue between mother and daughter	Jewelry = symbolic of belonging, acceptance, and womanhood	Encodes cultural integration. Dominant reading: family affirms identity. Polysemic for different viewers.
Bridal transformation scene	Bridal saree, heavy ornaments, confident smile	Uplifting music; "Pure as Love" tagline	Marriage as cultural legitimacy; bridal image as ultimate femininity	Encodes societal approval via traditional rituals. Oppositional decoding may see it as transnormative conformity.
End Frame: Family smiling in wedding photo	Framed photo, warm tones	Fades into silence	Photo = permanence, closure, public recognition	Dominant message: love transcends gender. But ideological limits remain acceptance comes after "transition success."

6. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The Bhima Jewellery Advertisement Pure as Love constructs gender identity through a range of culturally coded elements. Femininity is communicated through rituals, bridal ornaments, traditional attire, and a soft emotional tone, all of which affirm the protagonist's identity using familiar cultural narratives. Drawing from [Hall \(1997\)](#) concept of representation through codes, it is evident that the advertisement relies heavily on traditional and heteronormative signifiers. This suggests that acceptance of the transgender subject is conditional granted only when they perform "ideal" or socially acceptable femininity.

[Hall \(1980\)](#) further enables a nuanced understanding of how the advertisement can be interpreted by different audiences. A dominant-hegemonic reading may view the ad as a touching and progressive portrayal of a trans woman's journey toward

familial acceptance. A negotiated reading may appreciate the visibility but question the reliance on normative femininity for validation. An oppositional reading, however, critiques the ad for reinforcing "transnormativity," where only those transgender individuals who conform to traditional notions of beauty and gender presentation are deemed worthy of inclusion.

In addition, the advertisement draws on aesthetics associated with visual pleasure such as classical bridal imagery and soft lighting—to frame the narrative in an emotionally appealing manner. While this enhances the ad's accessibility, it also functions ideologically. The use of beauty and sentiment works to soften the perceived complexity or discomfort around transgender identity, rendering it more acceptable to mainstream audiences.

Ultimately, while Pure as Love is a significant step forward in terms of transgender visibility in Indian advertising, it operates within carefully controlled boundaries. Acceptance is framed through culturally "safe" visual and emotional codes, suggesting that mainstream inclusion remains conditional. Trans identity, though acknowledged, is legitimized only when it aligns with traditional gender expectations highlighting both the progress and the limitations inherent in commercial representations of marginalized identities.

7. CONCLUSION

The [Bhima Jewellery. \(2021\)](#) marks a notable shift in the Indian media landscape by foregrounding a transgender woman as its central figure, offering a rare instance of visibility within mainstream advertising. Through a frame-by-frame analysis grounded in Stuart Hall's Media Representation Theory, this study has demonstrated how the advertisement skilfully weaves emotional storytelling and traditional aesthetics to present a narrative of love, acceptance, and belonging.

However, this narrative operates within ideologically safe boundaries that privilege cultural conformity and normative ideals of femininity. While the ad challenges cisnormativity erasure and offers symbolic progress, its portrayal is rooted in respectability politics, thereby limiting the scope of authentic transgender representation. The absence of intersectional dimensions such as caste, class, and systemic marginalization reveals the selective inclusivity often employed in commercial media.

Thus, while Pure as Love can be seen as a progressive milestone, it also underscores the complexities of representation in a socio-culturally stratified context. True inclusivity in media representation demands not only visibility but also a deeper engagement with the lived realities of marginalized identities beyond the frame of mainstream comfort and aesthetic acceptance.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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