

“LIVE YOUNG, LIVE FREE”: EXPLORING THE FACE OF MODERN INDIAN YOUTH IN TELEVISION ADVERTISEMENTS

Debanjali Roy

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Adamas University

Tanmoy Putatunda

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Adamas University

Abstract: Post economic liberalization in India in 1992 and a subsequent growth in the conception of the ‘youth’ as an autonomous and amorphous subject, there was a marked change in print and television advertisements which on one hand tried to cross examine the ideologies that shapes individual identity and on the other, attempted to build up a national identity. It was difficult because of the mosaic nature of Indian youth and the vast diversity in their socioeconomic, cultural and ideological positions.

Today the changing cultural fabric of Indian market has led to a paradigmatic shift in the content, conceptualization and presentation of advertisements as commodities. Although it still does not or rather, cannot reflect the wide cultural diversity of our nation, advertisers today are taking the risk of challenging the “set formulas” that typify Indian markets and Indian youth in particular. Besides branding the national heritage, the traditional and core values of the Indian youth, there is a constant attempt to present the emerging India who is globally placed - the “Youngistaan” who believes in “make[ing] it large.” Models are therefore, being provided for them to identify themselves as individuals and fulfill their aspirations and desires. Our article tries to explore how television advertisements are constantly evolving and attempting to conjure up a new understanding of the Indian youth and in the process, constructing a new national identity.

Keywords: Advertisement, Identity, Indian, Values, Youth.

Introduction: India as a nation has always defied easy categorization and explanation. The incredible amount of variety and heterogeneity that characterize Indian society is not easy to fathom. Not surprisingly, the idea of Indian youth is as amorphous and as elusive as the country itself, not least because of the problematic nature of the ‘youth’ itself. The Government of India classifies any person aged between 15 to 29 years of age as ‘youth’ (National Youth Policy 2014). However, this categorization does not take into account the broad spectrum of cultural and socioeconomic diversity which renders any such nomenclature problematic. Even if we consider a small slice of such population by considering India’s new urbane, ‘transnational class’ as our target zone, it still poses considerable range of contradictions within it. This class, as Smitha Radhakrishnan observes in her *Appropriately Indian: Gender and Culture in a New Transnational Class*, “embraces individuality, development and change but holds fast to specific ideas about tradition and family.” [Radhakrishnan 3] This urge of being a global player while remain rooted within one’s own cultural heritage has been extremely tempting and desirable for the Indian society ever since the economic liberalization of the 1990s. This paradox or duality of essence produces a number of contradictions and ambivalence which characterize today’s mass media and popular culture in India.

Television was both the by-product and harbinger of the process of globalization in India. Indian youth, who were striving for a new identity, who were attempting to gain a foothold on the world stage after ages of economic and social starvation, found in television a medium which could bridge the gap between their home and the world outside. Television promoted characters which supposedly embodied the perfect balance and advertised the ways of being and becoming ‘Indian’. This was difficult, primarily because of the vast geography of the nation and the sociocultural and economic diversity. The term ‘Indian youth’ is complex and multi-layered owing to its rootedness and global approach – a blend of tradition and modernity. To find what the aspirations of Indian youth are, the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) in Delhi, along with the German foundation Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, conducted an exhaustive Youth Survey — a sample survey of 6,122 respondents aged between 15 and 34 years across 19 states in April-May 2016. They put to them about 80 questions, including the ones posed to Goswami and Janardhanan. The report, “Attitudes, Anxieties and Aspirations of India’s Youth: Changing Patterns”, notes how Indian youth is “both different from youth in the

advanced societies of the industrial world and, at the same time, different from the older generation of Indians.” [Harikrishnan] Suhas Palshikar, political scientist and director of Lokniti, who was an adviser to the survey, says: “The crucial takeaway is the internal differentiations within the category called ‘youth’ — there is only a sketchy existence of the mythical youth as a homogenous category.” [Harikrishnan] Thus, there is no particular unifying trait, but rather a broad spectrum of features that define the Indian youth whose heterogeneity in expectations, actions and desires is symbolic of a multilingual and multicultural nation to which it belongs. The recognition of the idea that Indian youth is not a homogenous concept but rather a curious concoction of diverse set of attitudes and values began since the late 1990s. Youth in India started possessing importance in the context of liberalization and globalization. They constituted the main content of television commercials, popularly known as TV advertisements, as media directed itself to not only cater to the widest cross section of its audience but also to create a visual image with which they could identify themselves. Advertisements promote ideas, goods or services by an identified image - these images permeate society and they consist of texts and images organized in a manner that strengthens the interplay between verbal and non-verbal elements. Ads reflect the value system of a society and offer freedom of choice - it “has an acknowledged dialogical and inter-textual structure which draws upon a multitude of cultural codes, ideologies and discourses to construct meaning.” [Srinivas 18] Way back in the early 90s, a print ad of Mr Coffee Instant Coffee caused quite a stir in the Indian society because of its overtly sexual tagline “real pleasure can’t come in an instant”. This ad generated quite a controversy because it transgressed the moral codes and standards of Indian society at that point of time when Indian viewers had just started having a global approach in advertisements. The 1991 Kamasutra Condoms TV Commercial was banned on Doordarshan and other media channels because it challenged conservative Indian sensibilities. Much later, with the turn of the new millennium, in 2007, a TV commercial for Axe Dark Temptation was withdrawn from public viewing due to its overtly sexual content (the ad showed a young man using the deodorant transforming into an irresistible chocolate man who is nibbled, licked and gnawed by women in public). Although parts of the clip were censored for the regional audience, the Advertising Standard Council of India (ASCI) deemed it fit to make it off air. The year 2007 saw many such moves by Indian advertising authorities who banned any such TV or print commercials that disrupted the image of Indian value system – a value system that is permeable to internationally evolving outlook, retains a fixed set of cultural and social codes that attempt to project a homogenous face of Indian youth and Indian society in general.

Post liberalization and globalization, the cultural fabric of Indian market has changed and continues to change rapidly. This has led to a paradigmatic shift in the content, conceptualisation and presentation of advertisements as commodities. The ease with which the Indian youth could be presented and projected in TV commercials a decade earlier has now given way to a more complicated, contradictory and paradoxical stance. New perspectives have constructed new ideologies which need to be catered to without disrupting the existing ideological structures- this is probably the new challenge of television advertising in contemporary India. With the changing face of Indian youth, new models are being created by television advertisements- models to help them identify themselves as ‘glocal’ individuals and fulfil their aspirations and desires.

Introducing its new campaign for ‘Youngistaan’ Pepsi, the official Press Release of PepsiCo, a brand that had always equated itself with expressions and aspirations of youth, dated 15th February 2008, admitted- “Today, the Indian youth are in control of their lives. They want to create the lives they want to live.” With the tagline ‘Yeh hai Youngistaan Meri Jaan’, Pepsi aimed to brand the Indian youth as energetic, daring, free-spirited and uninhibited. Punita Lal, Executive Director (Marketing), PepsiCo India, said, “The Youngistaan idea captures the energy, excitement and irreverence of the young confident India. This is a big idea that Brand Pepsi will leverage to connect with a whole new generation. We are confident that the expression ‘Yeh hai Youngistaan meri jaan’ will resonate very well with the Indian youth. It speaks their emotion, in their language.” [“Pepsi Introduces Its New Campaign for 2008”] The idea was to create an image to which the target consumer could relate to but more significantly, it was a move to provide the consumers a model which will symbolise a set of traits with which they would like to identify themselves with. When Ranbir Kapoor, the newly appointed brand ambassador of Pepsi said (about ‘Youngistaan’); “it is a way of being, it’s an attitude”, he was in a way, creating an image of Indian youth which they would like to adopt- an image which desperately tried to forego its past look and perspective. By attempting to create a common, unified space/model which could accommodate the varied tastes, desires and aspirations of the heterogeneous Indian youth, it crafted an image which would foster the desire for Indian youth to embody the projection- a desire, according to French theorist René Girard, to become the other (when the other is powerful, famous or beautiful). [Andrade] This attempt at generalisation of an entity so mosaic and multidimensional is itself flawed and fails to truthfully represent

sections of this entity, their desires and aspirations. From Vince Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957) to Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), the common idea is that "ads reflect, but also distort certain aspects of our lives". [Pope] Thus, the brand of Youngistaan, the glossy image of a care-free, independent and confident individual failed to take into account other youth values like individual and social responsibilities, career choices etc. which radically differ from each other along the lines of socio-economic diversity. With technological development and globalisation, there has been an evolution in the 'face' of Indian youth and media has travelled a long way from attempting to present a homogenous picture of the diversity in youth of India. Although there are still hackneyed presentations of certain traits and features that characterise Indian youth, attempts are being made by film and advertisement makers to address issues like the position of Indian youth in global scenario, their independent career choices, balancing of traditional values and tailoring them to suit their modern outlook. Raymond Williams suggests that ads are an effective form of propaganda because they play on our patterns of social bonding and our loyalty to symbols. [Pope] Winning this loyalty involves the shaping of opinions and beliefs. The 2015 short ad-film of Urban Ladder, the online furniture and home-decor company, titled *The Homecoming* has beautifully portrayed how the globalised modern Indian youth negotiates its identity vis-à-vis different contexts. The film is centred around the idea of generation gap but unlike previous presentations of conflicting attitudes, morals and values of the 'old' and the 'new' in television commercials, this one presents a different face of Indian youth- a generation that balances its modern perspectives besides being rooted in traditional values. Directed by Vinay Jaiswal, the ad-film opens with a young entrepreneur (played by Amit Sadh) who stays with his family in the city, inviting his parents from village to stay over for Diwali in his well-furnished modern-styled home. The father (played by Piyush Mishra) is not used to living in such comfort and luxury and misses his 'khatiya' and vernacular newspaper. Sensing his discomfort, the entrepreneur and his wife (played by Tapsee Pannu) send his parents to some relative's place for a few days and when they are re-invited on Diwali, the young couple surprise them with a re-furnished room that matches their taste and comfort. The film has been well-received by viewers in social media where the presentation of the contact-zone of modern Indian youth and its traditional roots have been commended. This particular ad-film projects the image of a globally placed, modern Indian youth who is urban and economically affluent, taking responsibilities of his parents and accommodating their tastes and desires into his own. Such an image is definitely representative of a section of the new Indian youth who, in the words of Suhas Palshikar (an advisor in the survey conducted by Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) in Delhi, along with the German foundation Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2016) is "different from that in the industrial world and, at the same time, different from the older generation of Indians... in the sense that it has not yet fully gone through the process of individuation — it retains family and community ties — but it is different from the previous generation/s in the hope, expectations and aspirations that mark India's youth of today". [Harikrishnan] Such a projection is also a 'propaganda' (as Kathleen M. Vandenberg notes how advertising "exhibits many of the characteristics of propaganda") - a product (the image) to be consumed (traits to be emulated and identified with) by the target audience. [Pope] Contemporary advertising is mostly about "creating an image, refining a look, presenting a style" and this preoccupation with an image-formation is "closely linked with consumerism as people are encouraged to buy an image". [Srinivas 26] As Baudrillard puts it, "the modern consumer...sets in place a whole array of sham objects, of characteristic signs of happiness, and then waits...for happiness to alight." [Lane 72] He also argues that "media does not present us with reality...but the dizzying whirl of reality". This 'dizzying whirl of reality' or simulation is propagated by modern TV commercials to cater to the dreams of the target customers and in turn sell that dream to them- the commercials create dreams and desires which in turn are consumed by the audience. These projections provide them a framework of identity- "In the consumer society, individuals define themselves as consumers and gain fundamental modes of gratification from consumption. Hence marketers and advertisers generate systems of meaning, prestige and identity by associating their products with certain lifestyles, symbolic values and pleasures". [Srinivas 30]

Thus, with significant change in the perspective and outlook of Indian youth, a re-appropriation of advertisements and their content was the need for the hour. Issues which were previously trivial and presented in a non-serious way, are now taken up by the advertisers and reshaped for public consumption, an attempt to accommodate the many issues that are redefined by the Indian youth by virtue of their proximity to the changing socio-cultural fabric of Indian society. "The growth of internet and rapid technological changes have made the market volatile and changed the ways in which consumers communicate about products. Today's increasingly global business environment requires incorporation of a global perspective into all aspects of the company"[Srinivas 36] Hence, with society's changing perspectives and a globalised Indian youth, advertisements are evolving in the contents that they are endorsing and the 'packaging' of the idea which is

finally propagated and presented. Unlike the advertisements of the past that aimed at creating a homogeneous 'national' youth identity, advertisements now are taking up the diverse issues that concern youth, presenting snippets of their diverse lifestyle choices, attitudes and aspirations as well as attempting to provide them a model which their multifaceted persona will be able to connect with.

“Khud Se Naya Rishta”: One such representation was attempted by a 2014 television commercial of Titan Raga which promoted a significant aspect of women empowerment where women are no longer second fiddle to men but have an independent career choice and identity of their own. The ad showed a lady (played by Nimrat Kaur) reading a book in an airport lounge when she encounters a man who was presumably her suitor in the past. The man says that their relationship could have worked had she stopped working to which she replies that even the man could have done the same. The man argues that his case is different and that being a man he could not have done that. Then comes the punch line of the ad when the woman says, *“tum aaj bhi waise ho jaise maine chora tha”* (you are still the same, the way you were when I left you). The ad ends with the man fumbling and visibly uncomfortable and the woman confidently offering him coffee as the signature tune of the company jingled on. The watch thus becomes more than just an instrument which indicates time- it becomes a signifier of confident decision making, of forming and asserting self-identity and a ticking reminder that “times they are a changin’”. The same company came up with another ad film next year, reiterating the voice of a smart, confident, modern Indian woman subverting conventional belief systems that denies her the voice of her own. It is set against the backdrop of an Indian marriage where a beautifully dressed woman (played by Katrina Kaif) challenging the conventional notions and reasons of getting married. She confidently asserts that a girl should not marry because of fulfilling society’s expectations, or redressing personal past but must marry only when she finds the person who deserves her time. This ad not only serves the purpose of debunking the idea that marriage is a necessity, but also carves the face of the new Indian youth who are free-thinking, rational individuals, having a definite identity of their own.

“Hawa Badlegi”: While the commercial by Titan Raga explores the popular youth question- “When is the right time to get married?” and provides a model that couple the concept of marriage with individual identity-formation, Tanishq in their 2013 ad had addressed the opinions and attitudes of Indian youth about the taboos and prejudices that bind the institution of marriage. What apparently begins as any other commercial endorsing jewellery, showing the bride getting ready for her wedding takes a different turn when a girl comes and playfully interacts with her and accompanies her to the *mandap*. When the bride and the groom start to walk round the sacred fire, the girl signals that she too wishes to join them. Getting no response, she calls the bride as ‘mama’ (mother), thereby making their relationship apparent. The groom then lifts her in his arms and continues their round. In the end the girl asks the groom if she can call him her father to which the latter assents. Although not stated clearly, the issue of remarriage is approached in a progressive way that is symptomatic of the progressiveness of modern Indian youth. In the same year, Femina also broke similar grounds when in an ad featuring Minissha Lamba, a young woman is shown amidst all the business of a marriage ceremony - only to reveal at the end that the actual bride is her mother, who is going to remarry. Whereas the taboos and prejudices associated with the issue are far from getting completely erased, ads like these can certainly be considered as significant symptoms of a rapidly evolving society pushing the boundaries of its comfort zone.

Havells India turned tradition on its head in a 2013 ad which opened with a couple in a marriage registrar's office and the groom-to-be pleasantly surprising the middle-aged female officer as he says that he would take up the bride’s surname. The commercial ends with an approving smile on the officer’s face with the male voice over signing off affirming “Hawa badlegi”. Such attempts to break gender stereotypes and fixed gender roles have continued and in 2016, Ariel’s “Share the Load” campaign which encouraged men to share the traditionally female chore of washing; became an instant hit and widely influenced people in India and abroad. It led to a phenomenal participation where 2.1 million people pledged their support for the cause and even made it into the Guinness Book of World Record with 2600 men washing clothes together showing their support for the cause. Before Ariel’s campaign, Lloyd’s ad for ‘unisex washing machine’ also addressed the same issue.

“Get This Straight, Don’t Discriminate”: While addressing stereotyped gender roles and gender discriminations, television commercials have also taken up the issue of same-sex relationship in its ambit. The 2015 commercial by Anouk (Myntra’s in-house brand) portrayed a lesbian couple in a live-in relationship and their conversations and interactions before meeting their parents. Two years before, Fastrack aired an ad that

literally showed two young women coming “out of the closet”. These ads were hailed by many as bold moves towards resisting set notions about sexuality as it portrayed the changing face of youth as a class of individuals who are confident and unapologetic about their sexual orientation. Myntra and Fastrack are both youth-oriented brands that attempt to reflect and represent the perspectives, aspirations, desires and needs concerning youth. Therefore, the commercials that promote them also target such ideas that concern contemporary youth. These radical representations stand in stark contrast to the way homosexuality was portrayed by advertisements of youth-oriented brands in the past. What is now a realistic portrayal of a social issue was a trope used by advertisers to evoke humour, almost bordering on insensitivity.

A 2008 ad of Virgin Mobile showed a girl using homosexuality as a ploy to achieve her desire for a trip to Goa with her male friend. The ad opened with the girl informing her parents that she is not interested in boys. Her parents, confused, start accusing each other for her ‘unnaturality’, then the girl slyly brings up the news of a trip to Goa with her male friend hearing which the parents not only allow but actively encourage her to go. It is far more relieving for them to allow their daughter to go to the trip than accept their daughter as a lesbian. PepsiCo’s 2010 commercial of ‘youngistan’ series followed suit and showed a girl using homosexuality as a ploy to escape an arranged marriage. Today, when the issue of homosexuality has become a matter of national concern, with the Indian youth voicing for LGBT rights and widespread resistance against Section 377, there has been a paradigmatic shift in the way visual media handles this subject. Unlike the commercials of yesteryears, the advertisements today are more inclusive in their approach. Denouncing stereotypical representations, present-day TV commercials are aimed at interrogating and deconstructing deep-rooted ideological biases about gender and sexuality and providing a non-discriminatory model, albeit suggestive, that does not consider homosexuality as an aberration. The eBay’s ad “Things Don’t Judge” asserts “that a gay couple can exist as matter-of-factly as an elderly lady who likes skipping and a Muslim who celebrates Diwali, suggests a further step towards acceptance”. [“Why eBay's New Commercial Featuring a Gay Couple”] In a country which still considers homosexuality as a criminal offence, these recent attempts at reshaping perspectives are certainly laudable.

Notable and significant social changes in the world have been brought about by youth-led movements, because of the energy, desire and idealism that this particular class of individuals exhibits. In India, youth is synonymous with action, radicalism, leadership and the power to transform. Undoubtedly the most powerful section of the society, Indian youth is the marker of the nation’s progress. The biggest consumer entity today-youth is the focal point of the national economy as more and more companies are orienting their approach to reflect and represent them, advertisements are presenting a kaleidoscopic view of this ever-evolving class. When Tata Tea started the Jaago Re (Wake Up) campaign, it counted on the active agency of the youth- their power to destabilize existing ideologies by questioning and reforming them, their modern outlook and global identity. From hackneyed representations that attempted to portray a uniform, homogenized Indian youth who desire to “live young, live free”, television commercials have radically evolved - with the changing face of their target consumers, they have changed in their choice of content and approach. However, there are several advertisements which are clichéd and conformist as well. On one hand when we have the image of a liberated, progressive individual voicing out his/her own rights, there is the entire series of men’s deodorant commercials which not only present a cringe-worthy picture of female sexuality but also commodifies male as sex-objects. While these days, companies are always ready to jump on the bandwagon of women emancipation and gender equality with the help of the commercials, there are representations of women as objects of male-possession. While the ‘mangalsutra’ of the woman in the Dabur Honey ad of 2014 becomes symbolic of male authority and claim over the woman’s body and identity, the 2015 ad of Quaker Oats drive the message deeper. The commercial begins with a female voiceover stating that instead of sales figures, the husband has started noticing his wife’s figure. Moreover, some sections of Indian youth like the rural, uneducated, educated yet unemployed classes have almost no representation in modern commercials. In a 2015 ad, Fair & Lovely packaged male machismo with fairness which, as the ad shows, makes men desirable - thereby completing the full circle of double objectification. These representations are interesting subjects of analysis because they embody the dichotomy that exists in the very term ‘Indian youth’ - these advertisements are in complete contrast with those that attempt to present the liberated, globalized individual capable of redefining the values and codes of society. This brings us to our closing remark that modern advertising, like its biggest consumer is amorphous in nature. At its heart is mutation, which makes it analogous to the complex and constantly changing class of people that it caters to.

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