

# **Alternative Transgender Discourses: A Critical Analysis of an Indian Ad Campaign**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Advertising has been an integral part of society as it not only represents society, but is also a powerful tool that affects people's thoughts, judgements and actions. The use of language in advertising, however, is very different from the habitual use of everyday language as a mode of communication. Its main objective is to persuade the audience and create an impact. This persuasive communication is achieved through the conscious choices of the advertisers in their selection of words, syntactic structures and rhetorical devices. As a result, advertising as a form of persuasive language has become an important topic of study in linguistics as well as psychology. This paper analyses the *Vicks 2017* Ad campaign called "Touch of Care", interpreting what is communicated through the advertisement. The campaign highlights transgender rights in India. The promotional strategies adopted by the brand attract the consumers' interest and attention through a social cause. The video advertisement is analysed using the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) proposed by Norman Fairclough (1992) and Positive Discourse Analysis (2003), to understand the interplay of power relations and ideologies in the visual and audio elements of the ad and its impact on consumers.

## **KEYWORDS**

Ideology; advertising; persuasion; Critical Discourse Analysis; stylistics.

## **1. Introduction**

Over the years, advertising has strengthened its ground as a social language, as well as a persuasive technique aiming not only to make the addressees buy a product, but also to 'amuse, inform, misinform, worry or warn' (Cook, 1992, p. 4). Although advertisements are brief, they have an impact on society. They include information about the culture in which they are produced and are indexical of the social mindset that are influenced by ideologies. Ads also try to influence perception and create an effect through their message system. Because of the abundance, relatability and modes of persuasion, the words and details used in ads are etched on people's minds. Jingles

used in ads, for instance, are widely recognized and create a long-lasting impression on the audience.

Therefore, Davidson (1992) defines advertising as

a genre of spectator/reader experience, a technique of persuasion... almost a world in its own right, with its own languages, customs and history, and one that sets the tone and pace for large parts of our lives. Advertising is a topic which both causes and reveals existing social divisions.' (Davidson, 1992, p. 3).

Advertisers try to impose their ideologies on the audience through the

process of encoding their ideologies in their advertisement. Successful 'transmission of meaning' takes place if people are able to extract the meaning that the advertiser wants to convey. In order to persuade and create an impact, encoders are very particular while choosing their language, emphasizing the emotive and conative functions of the language used. Since gender is an important part of our social structure and conditioning, it becomes an influencing factor while communicating an idea. Barkay (2013) noticed that the marketing strategies adopted by brands frequently highlight progressive ideologies prevalent in contemporary society, and this restructuring has made them relevant in a society that in itself is undergoing fundamental social changes.

## **2. Methodology**

This paper draws on Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which focuses mainly on the ideologies and innate power relations that are naturalized, accepted and implemented in discourse (Machin & Mayr, 2012).

### **2.1. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Positive Discourse Analysis (PDA)**

Critical Discourse Analysis takes into consideration both spoken and written text as a form of discourse. Since it analyses language used in everyday communication instead of artificially constructed texts, it is regarded as a type of social practice. Fairclough's theory of CDA is concerned with the complexity of power relations and its disempowering effect on society. Influenced by Foucault's idea of discourse, Fairclough broadens the scope of CDA, keeping the concept of power and ideology as fundamental and interconnected to analysis practices.

Positive Discourse Analysis (Martin & Rose, 2003) is a critical approach that analyses discourse that has a positive,

empowering impact on society. It deals with positive language and persuasive techniques used to frame a favourable image of the theme. Integrating the observations of both the critical approaches, viz., Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Positive Discourse Analysis (PDA) gives a comprehensive analysis of the discourse of the advertisement selected for study. On the one hand, PDA focuses on the language expressing solidarity and understanding, promoting a positive impression of the transgender community. On the other hand, CDA helps to understand the underlying critical issues like power dynamics and ideologies that the ad attempts to highlight. The interplay between both these methodologies helps to understand the context in which the ad is produced and the social factors that affect both the positive and critical discourse.

In this paper, CDA has been used as a model to analyse the context in which the advertisement is made. The corrective role of CDA suggests how a text can be modified in order to resist the dominant ideology. The analysed advertisement is an attempt to move towards CDA, with the aim to undo the harm done by the existing dominant ideology. Thus, the ad discusses existing beliefs of people and their intentional use of language as a conscious effort to change the prevailing situation in which the text is produced. Therefore, finding linguistic features and elements of positive discourse that is used in the text not only legitimizes the underlying power structures in the social world, but also attempts to counter the harm through their discourse. The Vicks Ad understands the societal impact that advertisements have, and therefore, it highlights a social issue which resonates with the target audience and creates empathy for a marginalized group.

Since ideologies are reconstructed and expressed in advertising discourse through both verbal and non-verbal

communication, CDA suggests that a multidisciplinary approach needs to be adopted while analysing advertising discourse.

## 2.2 Social Semiotic Approach

Non-verbal communication includes semiotic messages like pictures, photographs and videos. Social Semiotic Analysis (SSA), proposed by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (1996) introduced a visual code or 'the grammar of visual design' (Kress & van Leeuwen,1) which involves the contextual analysis of images through features like colour, visual modality, images, framing, image placement, angles, focus and close ups. Kress and van Leeuwen state that 'language and visual communication can both be used to realize the 'same' fundamental systems of meaning that constitute our cultures, but that each does so by means of its own specific forms, and independently' (Kress & van Leeuwen,19). This 'multimodal analysis' helps in constructing social meanings through visual communication. It establishes a coherence between the verbal and non-verbal modes to signify certain ideologies and power interests. It also imparts an identity and value to the advertised products through the specific choice of words by the advertisers.

Social semiotic theory adopts three sub-modes of analysis. Composition is the methodological aspect that finds coherence between the visual features and the language. Representational function highlights the interaction between these verbal and visual elements to create meaning, and interaction refers to the relation established between the viewers, the participants portrayed and the multimodal realizations.

The video advertisement in question is a part of the advertising campaign in 2017 called "#Touch of Care" released by the brand Vicks. This advertisement produced by the agency,

Publicis Singapore, is about the consequences faced by a family because of deformed transgender rights in India.

## 3. Transgender Laws in India and the Impact of NEP 2020

Earlier, the discriminatory laws of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code with the normative practice of officially not recognising transgenders as the 'third gender', marginalized their existence in Indian society. Later, these laws were dissolved and transgenders got legal recognition in 2014. However, there is still a great deal of incongruity in the operationalization of these laws. Despite legal recognition, marriage and transgender adoption are topics that are still ambiguous and debatable. Moreover, society's role is still questionable when it comes to effective implementation of transgender rights and privileges. The Ad campaign was released in 2017, before the 'Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill' of 2019 was passed. The bill has played a positive role in shaping perceptions towards this marginalized community and is an attempt towards increasing transgender visibility in India.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes the importance of gender equality in the Indian education system. It aims to promote gender-sensitive approaches in the educational environment through provisions like Gender Inclusion Fund (GIF) and by identifying transgender children in Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) so that existing gender disparities can be resolved in the long run. As an advertisement, therefore, this contemporary media's stance towards socio-political issues supports the government's educational policy, promoting inclusion and acceptance of the third gender.

### 3.1 Analysing the Touch of Care

“The Touch of Care” (2017) depicts the consequences faced by a family because of the skewed transgender rights in India. The ad is based on the (true) story of Gauri Sawant, a transgender woman who adopts an orphan girl named Gayatri, to highlight trans-adoption rights in India. Gayatri’s biological mother was a sex-worker who lost her life to HIV AIDS when she was only 6 years old. She was then adopted by activist Gauri Sawant, who wanted to provide her a better future. The LGBTQ+ community is denied basic human rights by the government, and even by our society. In the advertisement, Gauri Sawant represents her community. Directed by Neeraj Ghaywan, the ad received an extraordinary amount of attention from the media and the masses.

The three-and-a-half-minute long video is a monologue by Gayatri where she recounts the journey of her life while travelling to her boarding school on a bus with her mother. The bus journey is figuratively used to represent the metaphorical journey of her life with her foster mother by her side. Like any typical teenager, she talks about the consequences of disregarding her mother’s wishes. Use of the phrase ‘Naraaz to hone hi wali’ (Vicks, 00:00:07) meaning ‘She is going to be disappointed’ expresses modality, her epistemic awareness, as in stating the truth. She knows her mother too well to know what her mother wants, and what makes her upset. She is sure about the consequences of her decision. We come to know from the following lines that Gayatri’s mother wants her to be a doctor. She is so determined on making her daughter a doctor, that she wouldn’t let Gayatri stay back with her, even for an additional day. Using the expression ‘Mummy bhi na’ (Vicks, 00:00:18), which may be translated to ‘Mom, I tell you.’ resonates with the universal nature of motherhood, a human emotion that the audience can relate to. Like any other

mother, she worries about her daughter’s future and prioritizes her daughter over herself.

Gayatri then continues to narrate both hers and her adoptive mother’s biological families and their individual stories of parting from them. Gauri, her adoptive mother was eighteen years old when she was evicted from her house by her father. Since then, she has lived her life on her own terms and established herself as a self-made woman. Contrary to the experiences of Gauri, Gayatri has never seen her father, while her biological mother used to be unwell. She recounts one incident etched in her memory, where some people took her mother away in an ambulance and she never returned. Both Gauri and Gayatri lose their families at a young age but their circumstances are contrastingly different. Gauri’s separation from her father was deliberate, whereas Gayatri lost her mother to the inevitable forces of death. However, while Gauri was alone, she adopted Gayatri and took care of her. Gayatri acknowledged the adversities that her mother faced while putting herself in her mother’s condition, saying ‘Akele rahne ka to sochne se bhi dar lagta hai’ (Vicks, 00:00:33-00:00:36) - ‘Even the thought of living alone scares me’ (translated by this researcher). She would have been in a similar predicament had Gauri not raised her.

Gayatri reminisces about her meeting with her foster mother for the first time. Her introduction, ‘Phir ek din mummy ai’ (Vicks, 00:01:10) alludes to the classic opening lines of a fairy tale, ‘One fine day, mom came to my rescue’. She caressed her and took Gayatri to her house. The Ad then documents the beautiful mother-daughter relationship the motherly care and compassion shown by Gauri when her daughter was ill and their daily rituals. The memories of staying awake through the night and looking after her daughter, buying gifts like a beautiful red frock for her, and cooking her favourite






food to cheer her up are recollections we all can relate to. It elicits the audience's childhood memories of how their mothers always pampered them as children. Gayatri spent ten years with her foster mother and she grew to be her best friend. They share common interests like watching horror films and having their favourite lunch, 'kadhi chawal' on their favourite day of the week, Sunday. Their favourite Sunday routine, of Gayatri getting a hair-oil massage from her mother, having her favourite home-cooked meal, and watching a film together with her foster mother, emphasizes these small cherished moments in life shared by the mother-daughter duo, highlighting the conventional nature of their relationship.

Corresponding to the description of the mother mentioned in the Ad, Gauri is perceived as a strong, self-made woman, raising a child as a single mother, who is headstrong and wants the best for her children and like every other mother, takes care of her child. Initially, a major part of the ad shows only the hands of Gauri, which metaphorically refers to the 'motherly touch' or the 'Touch of Care'. This stereotypical image of a cisgendered, heterosexual woman is shattered by the revelation of Gauri Sawant's identity as a transgender woman. But the ideological constraints about the transgender community prevailing in society does not affect Gayatri's perception of her mother, whom she adores, saying, 'Hai na pyari' or 'Isn't she lovely?' (Vicks, 00:02:21). Being raised by a transgender woman, she is sensible enough to understand the

hardships faced by the transgender community in India, but her mother has always tried to protect her from these social adversities. She raises an important question for the audience to contemplate, 'Civics book me to likha hai ki sabke liye basic rights same hote hai, phir mummy ko kyu nahi hai?' (Vicks, 00:02:46-00:02:55) which may be translated as 'Civics book says that everyone is entitled to basic rights, then why is my mom denied them?' (translated by this researcher). That is why, she says, she wants to be a lawyer instead of a doctor, so that she can fight for her mother's rights. The Ad urges the audience to empathize with Gauri and her daughter. Through their extraordinary story of care and compassion, they become representative of the community and other similar hidden stories.

The Ad can be subdivided into five sections- the introduction; the second part that is about the mother's wishes about her daughter's future; the third part where Gayatri talks of their previous families and how they parted from them; the fourth part that describes how she met her foster mother, Gauri Sawant and their life together as a happy family; and the last part that reveals the identity of her mother and talks about transgender inequality. For the analysis, a total of six frames from the advertisement video have been captured and sequentially numbered. Details of the numbered shots, along with their time frames in the video, as well as the verbal text in each respective shot have been arranged in a table (see Table 1).

Table 1: The verbal text in each respective shot of the video

Serial no.	Shot no.	Image Shots	On-screen text	Time Frame
(1)	9		Athara saal ki thi jab unke father ne unhe ghar se nikal diya <b>Translation:</b> She was only 18 when her father threw her out of the house	00:00:28- 00:00:33
(2)	12		Maine apne papa ko kabhi dekha nahi <b>Translation:</b> I have never seen my father.	00:00:40- 00:00:42
(3)	16		Ek din kuch log ae aur unhe ambulance me le gaye <b>Translation:</b> Some people came and took her away in an ambulance	00:00:53- 00:00:59
(4)	18		Phir wo kabhi wapas hi nahi ayi <b>Translation:</b> and she never came back	00:01:01- 00:01:09
(5)	24		Mere liye dher sare chips banaye <b>Translation:</b> and made lots of chips for me.	00:01:43- 00:01:48

(6)	32		<p>Ye hai meri mummy. Hai na pyari?  <b>Translation:</b>  This is my mom. Isn't she lovely?</p>	00:02:17-00:02:23
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This advertisement creates a perception of the social world through the use of both visual and verbal communication. In India, a lot of parents want their children to become doctors. Gauri too conforms to this conventional belief system of positioning the medical profession at the highest position of status and respect. However, Gayatri shows resistance to this widespread ideology. Her mother's urgency to send her back to the boarding school can be because of a number of reasons. It might be because of her concern about her daughter's future, or because Gauri wants to keep her daughter away from the way of life that the society has imposed on her, so that Gayatri doesn't have to face the atrocities that Gauri faces. It reinforces the societal difficulties that a trans-mother like Gauri has to face to keep her adopted child with her. In the advertisement, the parting stories of both Gauri and Gayatri are stated consecutively as both of them lost their families pertaining to social practices which are considered taboos - Gauri's family disowned her because she came out as a transgender woman and Gayatri being the biological child of a sex worker, was left orphaned because her mother died of HIV. The second part of the Ad reveals the widespread hegemonic attitude of society towards these issues, wherein the marginalized conditions of the transgender community is accepted as 'natural' in society. This hegemony of power and popular culture leads to people normalising and naturalising this inequality. Gauri's father also conforms to this dominance, choosing the safety of ideological constraints prevalent in the

society over the safety and security for his child. It showcases the pervasive attitude of society towards transgenders as 'outcasts'.

Bignell (2002) states that the images that are used in print advertisements function as a 'system of signs...which give form and meaning to consciousness and reality' (p. 7). In this Ad, the image of a barbed wire fence shown in Shot 9 (see Table 1 in Appendix) is used to reflect on the condition of this deprived group. It alludes to their separation from conventional societal structures. It also refers to the barbed wires used in prisons, which is here used to portray the condition of transgenders who are forced to hide their identity so that their whole life resembles that of prisoners. Gayatri's relationship with her parents is also implied through the use of imagery. In Shot 12 (see Table 1 in Appendix), when Gayatri talks about her father, the camera focuses on a father and his daughter, buying a bunch of balloons. It mirrors a regular moment in a father-daughter relationship, which Gayatri has never experienced. The image of the balloon is again seen in Shot 18 (see Table 1 in Appendix), where Gayatri recollects her last memories with her biological mother and a single balloon flies up into the sky. While Gayatri has never been with her father, her biological mother who was the only valued relation in her life, and her loss through death is represented in the shot of a single balloon floating away into the sky. The Ad shows an alternation of past memories and the present, with the transitions captured using the sound of the ambulance siren in Shot 16 (see Table 1 in Appendix), and with

Gayatri eating chips in Shot 24 (see Table 1 in Appendix).

The advertisement, as a whole, connects to sociocultural practices by focusing on a sensitive topic – inaccessibility of civil rights to the transgender community and their fight for survival against the law, as well as against societal stigmas and discrimination. Through the video Ad, the advertisers redefine traditional perceptions of ‘family bond’ unfolding through performance and convention, to emphasize relationships that are based primarily on love and compassion. This reworking is achieved by narrating an exceptional story of motherhood that goes beyond gender as performance. The ad uses interdiscursivity by relating advertising discourse with gender discourse. Even the gender identity of Gauri is revealed much later in the ad, which leads to breaking gender stereotypes of the mental image of a mother as a biological female. Thus, the ad resists social power by debunking institutionalized gender roles. Repetition of the word ‘mummy’ and ‘mom’ throughout the text shows the attitude of the advertiser who attempts to normalize motherhood beyond gender through the use of repetitive language highlighting lexical cohesion. The emotional parting of the mother and daughter as Gayatri leaves for her boarding school, of Gauri trying to hide her tears from her daughter, evokes the universality of parental love, empathy and relatability. Gayatri’s expression of the emotion ‘dar’ or ‘fear’ twice – ‘Akele rahne ka to sochne se bhi dar lagta hai’ (Vicks,00:00:34) or ‘Even the thought of living alone scares me’; and ‘Dar lagta hai, par mummy hoti hai na, to nahi lagta’ (Vicks, 00:02:07) - ‘I do get scared, but when mom’s around, not so much’ (translated by this researcher) also evokes the feeling of fear and loneliness experienced predominantly by the transgender community. For Gayatri, however, her mother is her saviour. In the

end, Gayatri vows to become a lawyer to fight for her mother’s rights and be the voice of the minorities and the oppressed groups in India. It ignites hope for a better future, where Gayatri is representative of the future generation who decides to fight for equal human rights - their step towards building a better, more accepting society.

In the above discussed advertisement, further, the issues of the real world are conveyed through the reel-world, thus engaging the audience by narrating a real-life story and using the real-life personality, Gauri Sawant to play her own part, instead of an actor. It deepens the sensitivity towards the issue and makes it more credible. It also blurs the distinctions between the real and the imaginary, with the hope that the imaginary will create a transformative impact on the real.

The use of the hashtag- ‘Touch of Care’ in the ad refers to the connotative meaning of ‘motherly care’ and becomes a metaphor for ‘motherhood’. The relation between Gauri and Gayatri in the Ad shows that motherhood can be redefined as a ‘behaviour’ beyond biological ‘ties’. The warmth of a mother’s love is expressed through phrases like ‘Bahut pyar se mujhe apni god me biṭhaya’ (Vicks, 00:01:25)- ‘she lovingly took me in her arms’, and ‘Unhone hamesha mera kheyal rakha hai’(Vicks, 00:02:38)- ‘She always took care of me’. Gauri’s motherly love and care as she caresses her daughter when she is ill, provided her relief. Vicks compares this warmth of love with the warmth and relief that the advertised product - Vicks balm - provides its users. In the process, the brand Vicks addresses an important social issue in order to raise awareness about the transgender community and their struggles.

The tagline of the campaign- ‘Caring for families for generation’ states that although the definition of family has changed, reflecting the changes in society, the touch of care provided by the product



is everlasting. 'Everyone deserves the touch of care' (Vicks, 00:03:26) refers to the breaking of social stigmas and promoting equality, where society needs to be more inclusive and kinder towards its people. With the prevalence of Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which at the time of production of the ad was not abolished, the advertisement featuring the story of Gauri and her daughter Gayatri highlights that everyone deserves to be treated with love and respect, irrespective of their gender and sexuality. The tagline also refers to the Vicks balm which provides care and relief irrespective of gender or sexuality - thus promoting a message of inclusivity.

#### 4. Conclusion

Ina Goel in one of her articles states that although trans-adoption has always been a tradition in hijra families, 'it was only through cases of normative child

adoption that *hijra* motherhood came into being was accepted in a patriarchal and predominantly trans-exclusionary society and media' (Goel, 7). The virality of the video that features a transgender mother celebrates this change in society and shows a more inclusive approach towards trans-inclusive motherhood.

Vicks as a brand takes this bold step of not conforming to the norms and dares to break stereotypes. Their initiative becomes a means to influence ideologies in society to become more inclusive. By chronicling the life of Gauri, a transgender woman, to create awareness about the life struggles of these people, their struggle for existence and even civil rights which cisgender people take for granted, the advertisement provides a contemporary meaning to family as it keeps evolving beyond gendered norms, thus promoting inclusivity and equity.

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