

Brand Storytelling and the New Indian Woman: Flip Side of the Social Change

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ABSTRACT

With the constantly changing scenario, the brands are changing their marketing strategies. In other words, we can also say that the market strategies are helping change the scenario. Today, the brands are selling their products and services using stories that touch the hearts and influence the minds. Irrespective of their intentions they have been successful, to a great extent, in stimulating the society, especially for the cause of women empowerment. Taking into account selected advertisements of renowned brands that have been popular in India in the post millennial era, the present paper makes an effort to examine a cultural shift in the Indian society through storytelling in advertisements and how they are making women agential of bringing about this change who themselves knowingly or unknowingly are playing an important role in it. A significant change in the portrayal of women in Indian advertisement industry has been observed and most of the brands are now portraying Indian woman as empowered, independent and with agency i.e. the freedom to decide and act. Accordingly, movements like 'fourth wave feminism' and the current advertisement trends are complementing each other. The paper also observes the politics behind this shift that has been made possible through the stories/narratives in the ads and how they are constantly changing the socio-cultural setting of Indian society.

Keywords

Narrative advertising, Indian Commercials, New Woman, women consumers, brand activism, social change

"Those who tell the stories rule the world."

- A Native American Proverb

The twenty first century would be known as the era of stories and storytelling in the history of the age. Although the art of storytelling never died but today's digital era comes with a revival of the same and is marked with an accentuated buzzword 'stories'. The internet and the social media are becoming the greatest platforms for sharing stories. The age of Whatsapp, Facebook, Twitter and other social networking sites has made people share their 'stories' at a large scale and at the same time, this opportunity is being utilized by the market too, to connect with people using the mode of storytelling on social media. The market is making an extensive use of this technique to attract their consumers through stories in advertisements.

There are several books and articles pertinent to marketing and leadership that advocate storytelling as the most promising approach to win over the masses. Stories are said to be 'the sense making device' that "identifies a necessary ambition, defines challenges that are battling to keep us from achieving the ambition and provides a plan to help us conquer those challenges" (Miller, 2017, p. 9). The stories are undoubtedly the powerful tool of persuasion as they can inspire and stimulate people to act, and therefore, all the brands are using stories today. The consumers get 'transported' into a 'hypothetical' world while watching an ad narrative (the process called 'narrative transportation') and are 'hooked' by it (Chang, 2009, p. 22). People tend to relate themselves to what they see and hear in those stories and get transported into them. Reinforcing the idea, Rajagopal (1998) states, "by constructing scenes of desiring and desirability, advertisers create a sense of autonomy and independence, and a perception of the achievability of individual wishes, that is critical in constructing the subject of consumption (p. 16). Thus, in order to create a psychological and emotional thrust upon people, brands are using this mode of narratives which is now being intensified with their social activism or what is known as brand activism. The powerful narratives used in their advertisements give the brands a meaning and a distinctive identity and this brand storytelling tells the consumers what they stand for.

Brand activism or 'cause marketing which aligns a brand with a cause' (Baxter, 2015, p. 49), is a marketing strategy that makes the brand reliable and authentic and also brings them into positive light that affects consumers' choices. Although, the two: brands that are capitalist in approach and activism that refers to the social welfare, are contrary in nature, they are working well in today's complex world which is full of binaries and it has been certainly helping the brands gain increasingly more consumers.

In Indian context, the ad narratives with brand activism are working equally well and they are constantly gaining popularity. The paper aims at highlighting the power of the advertising narratives and how the corporates are using these narratives to inculcate their ideologies among masses. It also makes an effort to critically examine how the Indian advertisements are bringing about the change in society in terms of the roles and portrayal of women and its impact on the social-familial structure of Indian society and how they are making women agential in stimulating this change who knowingly or unknowingly are contributing in it. For this purpose, the paper takes into account selected TV and online commercials of renowned brands that have been popular in India in the post millennia and are viewed frequently on YouTube and Facebook. These commercials are parts of the brands' notable ad campaigns and have a narrative in them that taps the sentiments of the masses, especially of women, and the powerful stories are successfully brining about the change in society.

Today's ad campaigns clearly reveal that gone are the days when brands and advertisements were merely objectifying women. A shift has been observed in the advertisements in terms of women's portrayal as 'empowered' and 'liberated'. Such women oriented ad narratives are also being called as "ad-her-tising" (Baxter, p. 48) possibly with a negative connotation and 'femvertising' with a positive note. The brands are now apparently standing for the cause of women and trying to create sensitization in this direction. However, the paper makes the proposition that the brands are deploying feminism in India to gain benefit mainly and not to serve the true purpose. The following table shows the selected ad campaigns and the advertisements along with their taglines and the key ideas:

Table 1
Advertisements selected for the study

Sr.	ADVERTISEMENT	TAGLINE	PROJECTED IDEA
1	Biba (Clothing): Change the Perspective Marriageable girl creating portfolio of designs by her mother instead of thinking of marriage	Change the Perspective	Encouraging mother's and her own ambitions
2	Biba (Clothing): Change is Beautiful Girl's father asking the prospective groom if he knows cooking	Change is Beautiful	Challenging conventional gender roles in arranged marriage structure
3	Anouk (Clothing): The visit (ad by Myntra)	Bold is Beautiful	Lesbian relationship
4	Anouk (Clothing): The Move (ad by Myntra)	Bold is Beautiful	Career above Marriage
5	Anouk (Clothing): The whispers (ad by Myntra)	Bold is Beautiful	Single motherhood
6	Titan Raga (Watches): The Raga woman of today	Her life her choices	Career over Marriage
7	Titan Raga (Watches): When is the right time to get married?	Her Life Her Choices	Marry when and if you feel right.
8	Titan Raga (Watches): Mom by Choice	Khud se Naya Rishta	Becoming a mother is not a sacrifice, it's a choice
9	Ariel (Detergent): Multiple ads	Share the Load	Gender equality
10	Bajaj Avenger (automobile): Girl riding a motorbike	Ride your independence	Freedom to move whenever, wherever she wants
11	Horlicks (supplement): Things to Do	Because Your Body Needs You too	Highlighting the women's efforts and self-neglect
12	Swiggy (online food ordering site): Maa ke hath ki Bhindi (Okra cooked by mom)	Why lose out on quality family time when you have Swiggy?	Leave cooking to Swiggy and spend time with family
13	Swiggy Not all Santas are men. We also hire women delivery partners	Real Life Santas	Generating jobs for women. . Acknowledging women's efforts
14	Swiggy What's in the lunch today?: Girl asking her exercising mother 'khane me kya hai?'	Leave today's meal to us. Just Swiggy it	Make out time for yourself and swiggy the food
15	ICICI Bank Fund your own worth	Fund Your Own Worth	Highlights discrimination between the investment plans of men and women

The brands and the advertisements selected in the table above are not the only ones that tap women's sensibility, there are several brands that align themselves with this cause, but these are the prototypes of such ad narratives that manifest the trend of this commercial feminism and portray the 'new woman' of twenty first century. The outward projection of these ad stories that support women empowerment makes the following features over pronounced:

- Catering to women's abilities, desire for career, ambition and identity
- Catchwords: Change, breaking stereotypes, boldness, independence, choice (decision making)
- Aversion from conventional gender roles, especially the kitchen space and household
- Challenging established social institutions including marriage and motherhood
- Women's 'Self', that has remained disregarded so far, needs to be taken care of

Apparently the brands are working towards a progressive society that is suitable for the women and such stories are liberating Indian women from social conventions, gender roles and their inhibitions. However, the questions: whether this activism is genuine or just a façade; and why only this cause has been chosen by most of the brands; need to be addressed here.

In their discussions about the politics of media and market, Herman and Chomsky in their phenomenal work *Manufacturing Consent* (1988), comment that "the mass media are interested in attracting audiences with buying power, not audiences per se; it is affluent audiences that spark advertiser interest today" (p. 51). His 'Propaganda Model' evidently focuses on the functioning of market and media and tells what regulates the interest and choices of mass media. He claims that advertising is the major source of income for the mass media and it is the elite class or the major conglomerates who have the power and control to govern the market. The propaganda model, according to him, weakens the 'public sphere', wherein the "matters important to a democratic community are debated and information relevant to intelligent citizen participation is provided", since such settings are not ideal for selling goods (p. xviii). He maintains that "media serves the ends of dominant elite" (p. 1) and the propaganda is used to simulate the minds of the masses and to make them act. The representation of the middle class Indian women in the ad narratives reflects that feminism acts as the propaganda model for the conglomerates and they are trying to create new consumers through this.

Not discarding the brand activism as a means of social welfare completely, Wesier and Mukherjee (2002) state,

We may, on the one hand, characterize these forms of commodity activism as corporate appropriations, elaborate exercises in hypocrisy and artifice intended to fool the consumer, sophisticated strategies aimed at securing ever-larger profits. On the other hand, commodity activism may illuminate the nettled promise of innovative creative forms, cultural interventions that bear critically, if in surprising ways, on modes of dominance and resistance within changing social and political landscapes. (p. 2)

Hence, it cannot be denied that such activism is successfully inculcating particular ideologies, though they may not be essentially in the interest of both the women and the society. They further call "consumer" 'a political category' and 'consumption' a part of the 'complex framework that constitutes identity' (p. 19). In the present context, the political category of the consumer is identified as 'women' who seek liberation and empowerment and what they consume under the influence of such narratives strengthens their chosen identity. In both the cases stated above by Wesier and Mukherjee, it is the consumer who is at the receiving end; either directly by being fooled by the hypocrisy of such activism or indirectly by allowing their profit-oriented interventions in the socio-political and cultural framework in which the consumer situates herself.

In the last two decades, there has been a dramatic shift in the portrayal of Indian woman. They portray a 'new woman' who is progressive, single, middle class, career oriented, decision maker and seeking autonomy (Lau 2010). A close analysis of the selected ad narratives demonstrates that the new Indian woman lives her life at her own terms and is not anymore dependent, submissive or afraid of the society. Interestingly, most of the women depicted in these narratives are the young middle class women mostly aging between 18 and 40. The women who were stereotyped and were demeaned for their being a woman are now being celebrated and are breaking all the gender biases in these ad narratives. In other words their fight for getting equal rights and respect, for coming out the stereotypical images, and for breaking the sexism is being given voice by the commercials today.

On one hand the women are thrashing the rules imposed onto them by patriarchy; they are now ambitious and single minded when it comes to their careers (as in the ad narrative by Biba's 'Change the Perspective' and Raga's ad narrative of 'when is the right time to get married?'); they very blatantly reject even the social institutions of marriage and family rooted in the Indian culture if they cost them their career (as in Anouk's narrative 'The Move', the wife moves to the other city without her husband for the sake of her career since it is the time to have equal rights and equal opportunities; and as in Raga's 'Her Life Her Choice', the woman decides not to marry her boyfriend in order to follow her career and remains single and unregretful); They are ready and are able to take bold decisions regarding their own lives and to face the consequences (as in Anouk's narrative 'The Visit', the women are ready to talk about their lesbian relationship and in 'The Whisper', the woman adopts for single motherhood and rejects any need of father for her daughter; and as in Titan Raga's 'Mom by Choice', the expectant woman expresses gratitude to her mother who chased her ambitions even after marriage and children, and wonders what kind of mother she herself is going to become now); they also are now more expressive of their desires and dissatisfactions about their gender role that confines them to the kitchen only (the ad narratives by Swiggy allow women to liberate themselves from their kitchen space). On the other hand, in some advertisements they are striving to strike the balance between their awakened individualistic self and the gendered role expected of them but this balance too women want to achieve at their own terms. They are ready to embrace marriage and motherhood but not necessarily in conventional ways that keep them away from their ambitions (as in Raga's Mom by Choice); They are ready to make the kitchen as their space but either when it is being shared by their male counterparts (as in Biba's 'Change is Beautiful' and Ariel's 'Share the Load' narratives) or when it gives them financial independence. They do not want to be seen as soft, subtle, submissive and stupid anymore, they are rather happy to be seen with the qualities marked by masculinity as aggressive, retaliating, domineering, assertive, sensible and not necessarily wanting male protection (as in Bajaj Avenger's, Titan Raga's, Anouk's ad narratives they have been shown).

In a country like India where social institutions and the gender roles are pre-defined and are rigidly practiced, such progressive ad narratives are making women question, and discard the very fabric of the Indian society. Undoubtedly, these ad campaigns are liberating women and constantly reminding women to take care of their 'self' (as in Horlicks's 'Things to do' narrative and ICICI's narrative 'Fund Your Own Worth'). Their role as a mother, as a wife, as a daughter, as a friend is being acknowledged as a caring, sacrificing and loving individual but at the same time another narrative is also being created and cultivated that emboldens them to become more individualistic. The portrayal of women's never ending efforts of shouldering the responsibilities in their domestic space strengthens their sense of victimization by creating self-pity and further enhances an urge of liberation. Such depictions also make them think that their 'self' has never been cared for by the institution called 'family'.

In a way, the ad narratives mostly justify and reinforce the perspectives of the young women, who have the control over the finances or who decide the purchase for the family, even when they act in non-conformity with the social norms. The Indian women who for centuries have been characterized as tolerant, sacrificing, motherly, family-oriented, docile and dutiful are expected to hold a responsibility of creating and sustaining a family and they are considered its backbone in the Indian social structure. The 'new woman' who is liberating herself and is progressive, probably does not identify herself with these ideas anymore. The women are breaking the roles and the rules, denying the kitchen and other household chores, ready to quit relationships when necessary and discarding the familial and societal institutions in order to keep the 'self' intact. The ad narratives with their gendered approach are liberating women from a "stifling domesticity, encouraging new independent gendered subjectivities and, in some situations, subverting traditional gendered relations" (Weiser, 2002, p. 6). Swiggy's ad narratives exemplify the case clearly. The first ad narrative shows how the essence and taste of food cooked by mother can be replaced by Swiggy and the women can enjoy quality time with family. In another Swiggy narrative, the exercising woman asks her hungry daughter to order whatever she wants for both of them from Swiggy.

It becomes imperative here to mention that the changed ad narratives are a result of 'fourth wave feminism' which is "an emerging movement closely associated with the online activity and involves the use of social media to promote gender equality and social justice... has been credited for positively affecting media representation, especially concerning how companies market their products to women" (Lambiase, 2017, p. 33). But, with their over emphasized role of women, they either negate or minimize the role of 'family', 'father', 'husband', 'marriage' and also of 'society'. They are all becoming the metaphors of subjugating forces in these stories hence, it necessitates that the ideas of 'femvertising' and their right application in the society, with a sense of where it is leading us to, has to be taken care of prudently.

This shift has affected the institution of family in Indian society to a great extent. Indian social structure is undergoing a paradigmatic shift with the changing role of women in society. The traditional joint family has been abandoned by the modern India. With both, the husband and wife working, 'the family income has increased, leading to increased consumption and demand'. "The husband and the wife have both become career oriented, making marriages more fragile. As a result, the urban nuclear family is splitting" (Kotler, et al, p. 64). The shift has left the elderly and the children uncared for. Also the changing role of women is changing the economy (65). This can be considered as a "consumer-oriented politics of individualism" that is pushing women to become highly career orientated and an 'individual' in order to create more and more consumers and buying hands and "leaving feminism's emphasis on collective politics and social transformation in its wake" (Comella, 2002, p. 241). Baxter (2015) finds this "overwhelming burst of female-empowering ads" "faux activism rather than truly empowering the women they target" (p. 48). Thus, brand activism of the capitalist market proves to be more a political stance to earn profit under the guise of performing social responsibility since they fail to address the needs of young, uneducated, poor working women, and also of the elderly women of middle class or any other classes, who do not have control over their finances and are not the promising consumers. In Lambiase's (2017) words, "prowoman advertising reflects corporations' desire to connect with women as consumers and access their considerable spending power, probably more than a desire to deliver authentic feminist messages." (p. 30).

However, in the Indian cultural space, the much needed feminist messages are also being inculcated through these ad narratives whose profit-making attempts too in a way are creating the society a place where women can use their agency and a place more tolerant towards women's empowerment so that women can entertain a respectable position. However, in this attempt, women's agency has found unrestricted exposure in these stories and the advertisements are creating an alternative value system where women constantly negotiate to find their own space. But their negotiations that take place within the framework of feminism, make it much difficult for them to act as a responsible member of society as feminism itself has become a subjective notion and has no set definition of its own which leaves it infinitely open to individualistic interpretation. It also has no set boundaries as to what is the right parameter of a liberated woman within the context of the Indian societal format. The ideas projected by the advertisements are mostly lopsided and do not show the underside of this projection as today's feminism is largely a market supported political movement now and the negotiating space that is being provided to women is yet an unknown territory to women themselves.

Storytelling through ad narratives is definitely a very powerful tool to make people believe and act but at the same time it becomes a responsibility of the masses to look at the stories critically and objectively and to postpone what Coleridge says 'the willing suspension of disbelief' so that better stories can help create a better world for everyone.

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