Selling Surveillance by Fixing Femininity

Exploring the Representation and Discursive Construction of the Gaze Between Women in Indian Advertisements

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ABSTRACT

The advent of neoliberalism incited critique on Indian advertisements that highlight consumer sovereignty as a seductive path towards achieving femininity concomitant with the male gaze. This study speculates that recently, a 'gaze' shared between women is used as a form of postfeminist representation instead, and it aims to regulate normative femininities in a particularly sinister way. Through an audiovisual discourse analysis of Indian skincare advertisements, it reveals the discursive construction and ideological prowess of the gaze and provides a detailed account of the semiotic elements that contribute to its creation, regulation, and strengthening. Drawing on the sociocultural milieu of India, and literature on surveillance, peer surveillant gazes, and their representation, it uses the concepts of representation, discourse, ideology, and intersectionality to reveal three main findings. First, the advertisements use narratives of friendship and sisterhood to create the gaze. Second, they uphold the 'glow leitmotif' to regulate femininity through the gaze, consequently reinforcing class- and caste-based ideologies. Third, they use practices of magnified surveillance and scientific visualizations to further strengthen the gaze. To that end, it aims to provides nuanced opinions of resistance in the readings, and contributes an original analysis of the hitherto understudied representations of 'acts of looking between women' in neoliberal and postfeminist India.

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INTRODUCTION

Gazing confidently into the distance, laden in flowers and bathed in love, a woman on our television screens is transformed into the most 'beautiful' and 'empowered' version of herself with the gentle touch of a lotion. As she walks through the cobbled streets, everyone turns to look at her; women, with jealousy, and men, with admiration.

Such has been the modus operandi of Indian advertisements thus far. Due to the complexity of the Indian neoliberal milieu, it isn't considered novel to witness the exigency for women to embody femininity through consumer citizenship, as precarious media narratives have often represented beauty work as the empowering path for acquiring love and success (Grewal, 2005; Parameswaran and Cardoza, 2009). Given the omnipresence of advertising in our daily lives, the interpellations for aesthetic labour under the guise of feminist empowerment has been critiqued by several scholars for two reasons: first, its transformation of feminism into mere commodified signifiers (Goldman *et al.*, 1991), and second, its use of ideological narratives that reproduce classed visions of femininities (Grewal, 2005; Oza, 2006). While some caution against the use of such 'postfeminist' discourses and representations, where 'stark and continuing inequalities' sit beside intense body work (Gill, 2017; McRobbie, 2009), others applaud the change from traditional, submissive stereotypes, where women are represented as confident rather than submissive. To this day, debates persist, however, they hold one tenet to their core: the 'empowered' woman's sexuality is represented as a way of gaining status in the eyes of men (Pandian, 2021).

Recent years bear witness to a change in representations; so natural its ideological prowess, that questioning it seems counter-intuitive. Instead of femininity being enacted for the male gaze, advertisers found a new discourse that was relatable, but also powerful. Television screens are now dominated by narratives of two women: one, whose body serves as a site of crisis and commodification, and the other, who appears perfect. Beauty and femininity are seamlessly constructed through the exchange of

advice, feedback and motivation (Winch, 2013), as opposed to jealousy. Indeed, the male gaze has been rendered benign, and instead, a mutual policing gaze between women has taken hold. While studies have evaluated its effects on subjectivities, academia has barely scratched the surface with its representation.

Using Indian skincare advertisements as a site of exploration, this dissertation conducts an audiovisual discourse analysis to illustrate the discursive construction of the gaze between women, and by doing so, it discusses the way the gaze is honed to represent normative femininities. It begins with a critical literature review, divided into three parts: the *contextual*, the *conceptual*, and the *representational*. The first establishes postfeminism within the Indian neoliberal context and discusses how advertisements reflect dominant views of femininity. On questioning the regulation of feminine identities, the second illustrates the prevalence of gendered surveillant gazes in a postfeminist context. The third bridges the gap between the first two and considers how surveillance of, and between, women is represented in media texts. After a consideration of the literature, a feminist-Foucauldian inspired conceptual framework is laid out for answering the research questions appropriately, which is followed by a discussion of the study's method, design, and most importantly, consideration of ethics and reflexivity. By drawing on the literature, the final section provides a detailed account of the three main patterns observed: *creation* of the gaze, *regulation* of femininity through the gaze, and *strengthening* of the gaze. It concludes by discussing the hurdles faced, implications of the study, and avenues for future research. Ultimately, this dissertation aims to make original contributions to the corpus of work on postfeminist critique and feminist surveillance studies by offering a unique perspective that considers the nuances of the Indian sociocultural tapestry.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Contextual

India: Mapping the neoliberal, postfeminist terrain

Neoliberalism has been widely understood as a macroeconomic doctrine that calls for the 'deregulation, privatization and withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision' (Harvey, 2005: 3). For some scholars like Harvey (ibid), it's a philosophy that edicts a consideration of the political economy and its market forces. However, this notion has been critiqued, by Foucauldian scholars in particular, due to neoliberalism's influence on aspects of societal life that aren't overtly economic (Brown, 2015). As Foucault (2008: 226) himself states, 'the stake in all neoliberal analyses is the replacement every time of *homo oeconomicus* as partner of exchange with a *homo oeconomicus* as entrepreneur of himself…'. In simpler terms, he argues that neoliberalism governs at a distance and creates subjects that are independent, and thereby 'increasingly self-reliant and self-governing' (Butler, 2013: 40). For the purposes of this study, it is imperative to clarify how neoliberal ideas saturated 'the nooks and crannies of everyday life' (Littler, 2017: 9) in India, and became dominant, quotidian sensibilities that created novel subjects.

India's tryst with neoliberalism can be traced back to the 1980s, when the economy was opened to an unrestricted flow of capital in response to a looming fiscal crisis. Joining the ranks of global consumers was now considered possible, and consequently, middle-class aspirations were seemingly brought forth (Oza, 2006: 11-12). To borrow from Salim Lakha (1999: 251),

> by most accounts the middle class is expressing an insatiable propensity to consume as a consequence of rising incomes and a greater variety of goods offered through an increased exposure to global forces.

Inderpal Grewal (2005) concurs, and notes how this was mainly due to transnational corporations that settled in a newly liberalised India. However, the 'ideal' purchasable

life they posited heralded a certain vision of gender, femininity, and sexuality, and it wasn't long before neoliberalism extended its grasp on feminism (Grewal, 2005: 81-82). On this, Grewal (ibid: 31) notes,

> the current phase of capitalism in India is producing a new kind of popular, cosmopolitan feminism…This feminism constructs women as working professionals at the same time as it commodifies feminism through beauty and fashion culture.

A host of Indian feminist scholars, such as Maitreyee Chaudhuri (2014), Leela Fernandes (2018), and Srila Roy (2022) have traced the emergence and propagation of neoliberal feminist ideas in India. From their vantage point, much like Grewal's (2005), neoliberalism presented itself as a project that fashioned new kinds of femininities that could only be achieved through consumer citizenship. This 'double entanglement' of feminism where, in Angela McRobbie's (2009) trenchant words, it is simultaneously 'taken into account' yet 'repudiated', is precisely what 'postfeminism' as an ideology constitutes. Gill (2017: 606) conceptualizes it as a set of hegemonic 'sensibilities' that manifest as the 'gendered version of neoliberalism'. Similar to the claims laid bare by Grewal (2005), postfeminism too valourizes consumer sovereignty while disavowing structural inequalities. Indeed, the work of Indian scholars resonates strongly with the empirical claims made by McRobbie (2009) and Gill (2017), however, they refrain from using the term 'postfeminism'.

Critiquing the same, Simidele Dosekun's (2015) framework for reimagining postfeminism as a transnational concept provides an interesting intervention. Inspired by Grewal's (2005) and Radha Hegde's (2011) understanding of *transnationalism*, that considers the multiplicity and unevenness of cultures and subjectivities, Dosekun (2015) places postfeminism outside the often self-referential Global North, and posits that it circulates seamlessly through mediated cultures (see: Hegde, 2011: 1), and interpellates distant subjects with 'tools and resources for the imagination and construction of new selves' (Dosekun, 2015: 965). She further states in defence that it offers a particular analytical value that helps investigate gendered cultural phenomena.

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Evidently, the transnational cultures through which neoliberalism surfaced as a philosophy in India simultaneously opened avenues for the proliferation of postfeminist sensibilities. However, the neoliberal consumer identity was also structured by dominant views on religion and caste due to the rise of Hindu nationalists in the 1980s; indeed, the middle class were disproportionately upper caste and Hindu (Oza, 2006: 13). Both factors were integral and interdependent in solidifying middle class identities, and consequently, the consumer culture and what (or rather, who) it catered to. Undoubtedly, it is within this complex sociocultural context that postfeminism must be analyzed in this paper.

Advertising and (Post)femininity

Confirming Dosekun's (2015) suggestions on the proliferation of postfeminism through media channels, the persistence of consumer culture in the shadow of neoliberal India inevitably raised suspicions on the ideological functions of advertising. Central to several enquiries were observations on gender and femininity as advertisements were notorious for, to borrow momentarily from Myra Macdonald (1995: 73), 'constructing multiple possible identities for women in an effort to enhance their spending power'.

One such identity was that of the 'new Indian woman', as postulated by Shoma Munshi (1998). According to her, the role of the 'homemaker', that was popularly represented in Indian advertising, was now reconfigured into a multidimensional persona to better reflect the changing dynamics of neoliberal India. Femininity needed to reflect both 'modern' sentiments, while upholding 'Indian' values. Thus, 'astutely incorporating both the ideologies of feminism and femininity with consumerist discourses, [advertising has] synthesized them into a *post-feminist* image of the 'New Indian Woman'' (ibid: 586), who resists 'westernized' imagery, yet echoes liberalised characteristics. While Munshi's (ibid) analysis regarded the collectivist predisposition of Indian culture, Ajit and Gowrisankar (2016) contend that advertising now embodies the postfeminist sensibility of individualism. However, both of them take into consideration 'resistance', and argue that postfeminist narratives in India aren't necessarily bad since

they reflect positive interpretations of historically erased bodies. I address the value of this point at the end of this section.

Evidently, cultural shifts were well represented in advertising upon the bodies of women. Commenting on the ideological implications of the same with regards to skincare advertising, Parameswaran & Cardoza (2009) observe that narratives of Indian middle-class aspirations often coincided with light-skin emerging as an attainable marker of social status (Rajagopal, 2001: 91). Consequently, their observations are particularly scathing, as they note systematically the underlying class and caste-based ideological effects of interpellating women, using registers of confidence, self-care and liberation, to alter the colour of their skin as a way of achieving success in their private and public lives. They write:

> circulating within shifting fields of gender relations, advertising's pedagogical doctrines of femininity - fairness, slimness, youthfulness…- in India's vibrant media landscape initiate new global-national subjects into the mobile selfhood of consumerism's therapeutic narratives (ibid: 217).

For the purposes of this study, I find their analysis particularly useful since it locates femininity both on the body, with regards to beauty, and beyond, with respect to personality. Considering the context of postfeminism and neoliberalism, skincare advertising, as evidenced in their work, as well as that of several other scholars (see: Nadeem, 2013; Lazar, 2011), reflects aptly the affective, psychic and physical manifestations of postfeminist sensibilities (Gill, 2017).

A compelling point made by Parameswaran & Cardoza (2009) helps return to the question of 'resistance' as raised by Munshi (1998). They highlight how skin colour is coded within both global and local formations; the precise 'shade' could, for example, be associated with Northern Indians. It proves as a powerful contention to the critical view scholars undertake with regards to the influence of Western ideals on skincare narratives in India. For example, Mobeen Hussain (2021) traces the historically contingent effects of colonialism on advertising where 'cleanliness' was promulgated,

concluding that 'current global marketing strategies continue to envelop consumers in these affect-dependent stories' (ibid: 947). While her observations are exemplary, her conclusion on nascent representations is rather reductive. As posited by Munshi (1998: 588), any historically informed analysis must account for 'spaces of resistance [that] have to be read as part and parcel of the whole dominant structure'.

With regards to the study of femininity in neoliberal and postfeminist societies, scholars have increasingly worked towards both decolonizing the field, as well as transnationalising it by recognising it within 'scattered hegemonies' (Grewal & Kaplan, 1994) of national contexts, or 'unevenness of cultures' as previously stated by Dosekun (2015). Considering the same, the turn towards transnationalism in beauty studies isn't surprising. However, these circulating discourses lead one to consider the ways in which they have dominated social imaginaries. I ask, how does neoliberalism gain its hegemonic power? How does it naturalize its ideals of beauty? Here, contemporary feminist studies make an important observation on the emergent theme of *surveillance*-its power, enactment, and instantiations- in upholding practices of neoliberal, normative femininity.

The conceptual

Femininity and surveillance: Gazing as a tool of regulation

Several scholars have studied the regulation of femininity in concomitance with modes of surveillance by drawing on Foucault's reconfiguration of the *panopticon* (Gill, 2007a: 62), thereby theorizing it as a form of discipline. Foucault (1979: 7) invoked the architectural design of the panopticon to metaphorically illustrate the way power functions in a disciplinary society. Perpetually 'subjected to a field of visibility', he states, the prisoners perform their daily lives whilst knowing they are under constant surveillance. Interestingly, the way power is enacted in this system is not through force, but through self-inscription; the prisoner submits himself to this 'inspecting gaze' and consequently 'becomes the principle of his own subjection' (ibid). While this thesis has been amended by him in his later work, his conceptualization hasn't avoided due

critique. Specifically, there are two limitations of this postulation considering the nature of contemporary surveillance.

First, it is highly reductionist and doesn't consider the nuances of gender and agency. Drawing on Foucault, on women who regulate every aspect of their bodies, Sandra Lee Bartky (1990: 80) writes, '[she has become] just as surely as the inmate of the *panopticon*, a self-policing subject, a self-committed to relentless self-surveillance. This self-surveillance is a form of obedience to patriarchy…'. While Bartky (ibid) applauds his work, she also questions the lack of engendered views on disciplinary practices. Undoubtedly, surveillance studies didn't place subtleties of gender at the forefront of their queries in the past (Walby and Anais, 2015). The corpus of work on surveillant, inspecting 'gazes' remains largely male-centric; the person doing the looking is regarded as being male, and the person subjected to the look, female. The limited enquiries that exist on the female gaze either center on an over-identification with women characters or corroborate with the male gaze by viewing the female as being 'gazed upon' (Berger, 1972; Mulvey, 1975).

The second critical deviation presents itself in our media proliferated world. In contention with Foucault, Thomas Mathieson (1997) devised the *synopticon* where 'many watch the few' instead of 'the few watching the many'. However, here as well, power is theorized as totalizing and as disseminated from the top-to-bottom, as opposed to in horizontal, dialectical manners as permitted by the media. How can we, in the present cultural moment, engender surveillance studies to understand how women are represented and encouraged to regulate each other's femininities?

Bringing forth a persuasive assertion by drawing on Foucault (1979) and Mathieson (1997), Alison Winch (2013) theorizes the *gynaeopticon*, where much like the prisoner in Foucault's postulation, the neoliberal, postfeminist subject submits herself to 'regimes of looking' (ibid: 5). She contends that women's bodies are constantly under surveillance, not just through the scopophilic male gaze (Mulvey, 1975), but also through the *girlfriend gaze*. Disseminated through the gynaeopticon, Winch (2013) posits that while the

girlfriend gaze objectifies women, it works differently from the oft-cited male gaze. In this postfeminist context, the gaze deployed by men is considered benign (Gill, 2019: 156), or as Winch (ibid: 21) would state, rendered obsolete, and instead:

> …women can relate and express intimacy as they all turn their eyes on each other in tightly bound networks where *they gaze* and are *gazed upon*. It means subjecting oneself to the *gynaeopticon* of the girlfriend gaze where the many girlfriends watch the many girlfriends.

Further drawing on psychosociological research, Winch (ibid: 5) illustrates how the girlfriend gaze regulates femininity by evoking the affective desires of 'intimacy, normativity and belonging'. According to her, the gaze is insidious as it is 'located in a female sphere, and is marketed as intimate and enabling' (ibid), and often converges with 'discourses of class, race, sexuality and disability' (ibid: 26). She illustrates its functionality through sites of 'girlfriend media', which I address in the next section for its representative work, however the two imperative components noted by her for its enactment are as follows: first, the subject must contribute to the process of self-transformation, and second, they must participate in the policing network, where women are constantly in the process of *becoming* as opposed to *being*, engaged in 'perpetual training of the entrepreneurial self' (Deleuze, 1992: 5-7). Hence, Winch (2013) aptly provides nuance to Foucault's conjectures whilst using the same to explicate her analyses.

One might assume that the male gaze ceases to exist in this paradigm; on the contrary, it is internalized. To some extent, it is reflective of Bartky's (1990: 34) concept of a 'panoptical male connoisseur' that 'resides within the consciousness of most women: they stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgment', however as Riley et al. (2016: 98) argue in their work on the 'postfeminist gaze':

> postfeminist beauty work is not an objectification evaluated by the 'male in the head'; instead it is a process of subjectification because the transformation is understood as a practice of consuming oneself into being through the rhetoric of agentic individualism, choice, and empowerment.

Their concept of the 'postfeminist gaze' works in perfect tandem with Winch's (2013: 22) assertion: 'a collaborative enterprise between women, the girlfriend gaze enables the *mutual* development of *hypervisibility*'. According to them, the gaze is embodied by a heteronormative exchange of surveillance between women, where femininity is located on, and transformed, through the body, and recognition and validation is achieved through appearance (Riley *et al.*, 2016). After all, as Winch (ibid) remarks:

> the body is recognized as the object of a woman's labour: it is her asset, her product, her brand and her gateway to freedom and empowerment in a neoliberal market economy.

Consequently, under the gaze, women are burdened to enact femininity as dictated by normative ideals. Hence, postfeminism and the 'doing of femininity' it demands, is deeply implicated in the gazes, and acts of looking, between women (Elias et al., 2016; Riley et al., 2016).

The representational

Mediating the surveillance of women: Scrutiny and shared gazes

The cultural and conceptual sections of the review have highlighted two critical ways in which femininity is regulated. First, as a mediated neoliberal discourse of commodified beauty, and second, through gazes shared between women. Providing a well-developed bridge to fill the gap between the theoretical aspects of various surveillant gazes and their representation, Dietmar Kammerer (2012: 104) configures the 'surveillant imaginary', and suggests, 'popular culture can help us shape our imagination by providing metaphors, images, and references for discussing and theorizing surveillance'.

While Kammerer (ibid) primarily refers to represented technologies and practices, Wise (2016: 7-9) builds on his claims to include any 'dynamics of visuality', including self-surveillance and 'lateral surveillance'. Their conceptualizations serve as rather fruitful metaphors for what several feminist academics have been reporting on for the past

decade. While politics of looking and female friendships aren't necessarily recognized as surveillance studies, Gill (2019) positions them within the field considering her previous contentions: 'surveillance of women's bodies …constitutes perhaps the largest type of media content across all genres and media forms' (Gill, 2007b: 149).

Wielding a feminist-Foucauldian framework of discipline, Elias et al.'s (2016: 15) work momentarily evokes the 'surveillant imaginary' in reference to the regulation of women's beauty and bodies in visual culture, for example, as motifs and tape measures in contemporary advertising. These critical practices of magnified surveillance are also noticed by Wearing (2007) and Tincknell (2011), albeit in the context of cosmetic surgery in television shows. They demonstrate how women are inevitably subjected to visual regimes of assessment that render 'abject' their bodies, through zoomed in pictures of wrinkles or cellulite, since micro-scrutiny is one of the seemingly patterned ways in which surveillance of women's bodies is mediated in popular culture. Further providing a classed analysis of the same, Ringrose and Walkerdine (2008: 236) elucidate that excruciating detail is provided on the abject body so that these women are shamed into becoming successful neoliberal subjects:

> the massive proliferation of media aimed at exploiting this age old question
> of transformation and the mass fascination it holds…does seem to represent
> a discursive proliferation that indicates a discursive shift, to use Foucauldian
> terms.

Winch (2013) too notes visual abjection as a critical mode of surveilling, and notices the enactment of these practices primarily in sites of 'girlfriend media'- a term that encapsulates examples of media texts that use female social relations as representational tropes or marketing strategies. Explaining how they use a false rhetoric of intimacy, she further draws on Ringrose and Renold's (2009) concept of 'normative cruelties'- ways of invoking hurtful practices whilst regulating gendered bodies- to illustrate how the female body is relentlessly subjected to work under the 'girlfriend gaze'. Winch (ibid: 9) states:

> girlfriend media both reproduce social pleasures of belonging to an intimate group, while also holding up the body for analysis and scrutiny. They are sites that induce pleasure and belonging, while also enacting surveillance and cruelty.

To further exemplify Winch's (2013) points, I'd like mention Hu and Wang's (2021) recent study of the visual construction of 'girlfriendship' in *Ode to Joy*. Perhaps serving as one of the few pieces of evidence for the representation of the feminine surveillant imaginary in the Global South, they use Winch's (2013) concept of the 'girlfriend gaze' and argue that it's used as a way of regulating heteronormative femininity by evoking feelings of shame and envy, under the relatable affective rhetoric of friendships. By positioning it within neoliberal China, they further illustrate how the gaze represented intersects with discourses of class and religion.

Notably, most of the work on representations of surveillance, as well as the 'gaze' as a form of represented surveillance, happens to be situated in the Global North with the exception being their study. Evidently, enquiries into the representations of 'gazing' in relation to gendered bodies are urgently required. As Gill (2019: 159) concludes in her work on surveillance as a feminist issue:

> One thing is sure: while we are all implicated in the surveillant imaginary, the 'work of being watched' remains disproportionately women's work in a way that requires our urgent attention.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study is strategically situated within neoliberal and postfeminist India, with its interests lying in the influence of those ideologies upon the construction of femininity through the represented gaze between women. After carefully analysing the literature, a coherent framework has been devised for developing and answering the research

question, that addresses the following concepts: representation, discourse, ideology, and intersectionality.

I'd like to begin by addressing that in congruence with Gill's (2017: 606) postulations on postfeminism, the study understands it as an analytical sensibility that is virtually hegemonic in contemporary India as a gendered version of neoliberalism. To that end, it recognises the manifestation of certain neoliberal ideologies vis-a-vis postfeminist sensibilities, and vice-versa. By understanding 'femininity' and 'beauty' as socially constructed, it is epistemologically grounded in *constructivism*, thereby viewing representation as a practice that deliberately includes certain elements of reality to construct specific meanings (Hall, 1997; see: Orgad, 2015: 53). As such, it understands *representation* as being centered around analyzing what is 'described' by the media text, through semiotic and discursive components, and what is 'symbolized' by the text, that is, the meaning (Hall, 1997). As observed by Shani Orgad (2015: 62), power relations are intrinsically encoded in representations, and representations themselves wield power through their construction of knowledge. This knowledge, according to Foucault (1971) is produced by *discourse*, which is a way of organizing information or representative elements to structure our understanding of the social milieu.

In any study that analyzes discourse, there's a considerable focus on what *ideology* it reflects, or 'the ways in which meaning is mobilized for the maintenance of relations of domination' (Thompson, 1984: 5). However, for Foucault, 'the question is not whether discourse is truthful but 'how effects of truths are produced within discourses' (Macdonald, 2003: 18 as cited in Orgad, 2015: 67). Notably, this study is a feminist analysis that aims to disclose cultural constructions of femininity through the gaze between women, and how they reflect 'ideologies' of the Indian sociocultural milieu. As such, it looks for the *effects of truth,* or the 'grounds on which truth is claimed', that reinforce ideologies and naturalize them (Rose, 2001: 138; Orgad, 2015: 67).

Lastly, feminist research conducted on the valorization of certain femininities over others, particularly through the beauty industry, has addressed that the politics of

appearance is not simply related to gender, but is also constitutive of the ideologies of race, class, and nation (Elias *et al.*, 2016: 10). The complex sociocultural fabric of India demands an addressal of its rich diversity and complicated history, hence, *intersectionality* (Crenshaw, 1991) becomes an imperative concept to predicate the research upon. The dynamic nature of Indian identities begs for consideration of the ways in which various categories of an identity can exacerbate oppression. This paper, in agreement with Cho *et al.*'s (2013: 795) conceptualization of intersectionality recognizes it as an 'analytical sensibility'; the study focuses less on the use of the term, but more on adopting 'an intersectional way of thinking about the problems of sameness and difference and its relation to power'.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

After a critical review of the literature, and an exploration of the conceptual framework, three speculations can be ascertained. First, beauty advertisements, especially that of skincare in India, have proven to be crucial archives for analyzing the construction of normative femininities as symptomatic of neoliberal and postfeminist sensibilities. Second, 'gazing' between women is a powerful way of regulating femininity, however a considerable portion of the literature that exists on the same relies on the sociocultural milieu of the Global North. Third, surveillance between women has been relatively underexplored as a form of representation.

Thus, this research aims to answer the following two questions:

RQ1: How is the gaze between women represented and discursively constructed in Indian skincare advertisements?

RQ2: How is normative femininity visually regulated through this gaze?

METHODOLOGY

Rationale: Considering advantages and limitations

Analyzing advertisements requires an interdisciplinary approach that takes into consideration an amalgamation of facets within the moving image, along with its social context (Rose, 2001; Tonkiss, 1998). As such, the most effective method for answering the research question is *audiovisual discourse analysis* (AVDA), that addresses both the textual and contextual.

First, conducting an AVDA enables a rigorous study of the texts' auditory and visual elements in relation to the discourses they constitute. Foucault (1972: 38) states, 'whenever one can define a regularity…we will say, for the sake of convenience that we are dealing with a *discursive formation*'. In simpler terms, there are elements in a discourse, 'systems of dispersion' (ibid: 37), that seem disunited at first glance. Once someone organizes them to identify a coherent pattern, the underlying discourse is revealed. By drawing on this paradigm, Rose (2001: 156-173) explicates how AVDA pays careful attention to the relationship between semiotic components by establishing their semantic relations with the help of one's 'interpretive repertoire'. Taking into consideration the conceptual framework of this study, that is indeed heavily influenced by a Foucauldian perspective that seeks 'effects of truth', AVDA presents another advantage. It helps unpack the organization of various elements within the text that claim to be truthful, or patterns that aim to look natural (Gill, 2000; Rose, 2001), by analyzing the discursive formations. Considering the same, the method lends particularly well in understanding how the gaze is discursively constructed to make itself persuasive (Gill, 2000: 176), through the rhetorical organization of narrative blocks, transitions and edits, and dialogues and copies.

Second, as the study further examines how normative femininity is constructed using this gaze, it warrants an investigation of representations against India's complex sociocultural tapestry. Seeking to understand how power is encoded within these representations would reveal nuanced intricacies that otherwise remain unnoticed.

AVDA enables the study of hidden ideologies that are masked with visual and acoustic cues, revealing 'what ideas and values are being expressed through what is represented, and through the way it is represented' (Van Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2001: 94). It assumes that 'the efficacy of discourse often resides in…what is not said' (Rose, 2001: 158). Consequently, the method enables looking for *invisible* representations and *silences* within the text (Gill, 2000: 180). Studying how the characters are represented, or rather how they aren't, would not just reveal the way the gaze is regulated, but how it is strengthened through powerful imagery and potent ideological influences that construct femininity. Since the Indian population varies largely in terms of how they look, studying the way characters are visually coded will help analyze which social group they are meant to represent, and hence, what identities are preferred over others.

Lastly, a striking feature of Indian advertisements that AVDA can address is their reliance on jingles (See: Chou and Singhal, 2017; Rodrigues and Singhal, 2017). Drawing on Cooke's (1959) theory, various aspects of the music- rhythm, tenacity, calmness- can appeal to different structures of thoughts and feelings, and AVDA precisely reveals those through its unique combination of studying the text, and the world beyond the text. Through this, jingles can be studied to evaluate how they lend to the construction or normalization of the gaze by considering the feelings they evoke in relation with the rest of the semiotic components.

However, while the chosen method resonates strongly with the epistemological underpinnings of this study (Gill, 2000), there are observable limitations as well. First, with regards to collecting media texts for analysis, Rose (2001: 143) comments that it can be difficult deciding where to stop collecting data. Indeed, there are several Indian skincare brands that release advertisements regularly. However, Tonkiss (1998: 253) argues that the quality of visual data matters more than the quantity collected. Since AVDA examines the material in depth, focusing on collecting representative data is imperative, but a confirmation bias remains where the representative data is sampled in a way that confirms the hypothesis.

Moreover, AVDA presents the hurdle of viewing the visual texts as having a fixed meaning, even though they are 'open and polysemic' (Lacey, 2009: 83). Analysts indeed have their own ways of interpreting the world, and their 'talk is no less constructed, occasioned and action oriented' (Gill, 2000: 181). Kumar (1994: 21) beckons rumination over the fact that the slightest displacement of an element in a discursive formation can reveal a 'multiplicity of meanings'. Considering the cultural context of this research, and the fact that Indian women's identities are shaped in intersectional ways, heralding the representations as reflective of a certain reality runs the risk of discounting valuable insights that claim otherwise. I address both these limitations in the following sections on sampling and reflexivity respectively.

Note on other methods

Studies conducted on the 'gaze' generally warrant a psychoanalytical approach supported with an ideological analysis to ascertain sociocultural influences. It does bring into question the ways femininity is shaped and enacted, but it wouldn't help recognize emergent dominant discursive patterns. AVDA on the other hand helps think about connections between and among the texts to address the production of the discourse (Rose, 2001: 151). Methodologies like thematic analysis or narrative analysis, on the contrary, would help decipher broader themes within the advertisements. However, they don't place as much importance on the representational elements as AVDA does. Hence, it is considered as the appropriate method for the scope of this study.

Sampling strategy

First, five leading Indian beauty brands were shortlisted according to the popularity of their parent companies. The following were chosen: *Himalaya* (Himalaya Wellness Company), *Glow & Lovely* (Unilever), *Pond's* (Unilever), *Lacto Calamine* (Proctor & Gamble), and *Garnier* (L'Oreal). They're considered to be relatively affordable products that cater to both the working and upper-middle class, thereby representative of the context in question.

Second, four adverts released between 2017-2022 were shortlisted from their YouTube channels through 'strategic sampling' (Mason, 2002: 124), according to two main criteria: interaction between two or more women, and conversations about the product and empowerment. Since this study uses Gill's (2017) understanding of postfeminism as a set of sensibilities, as explicated in her study published in 2017, the timeframe (2017-2022) is deemed appropriate for a contemporary analysis of the phenomenon.

Lastly, to minimize the limitation of confirmation bias as discussed above, out of the twenty adverts collected, the five most *popular* advertisements from each brand were picked for analysis (see Table 1), however, other videos were watched thoroughly for possibilities of deviant cases (Potter, 1996; see: Gill, 2000: 187). Since the study aims to analyze semiotic elements in depth to trace discursive patterns, as opposed to provide a superficial account of the phenomenon, five videos were considered well within its scope.

Table 1 Sampled advertisements

Brand	Video title	Year uploaded	Views (as of 18/08/2022)
Garnier	*Garnier Light Complete Serum*	2018	117 million
Himalaya	*Himalaya Purifying Neem Face Wash*	2021	67 million
Glow & Lovely	*Glow Ko Na Roko*	2021	16 million
Pond's	*Pond's Age Miracle*	2019	14 million
Lacto Calamine	*#ClearMatteFace Daily*	2022	300 thousand

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Research design

As there isn't a prescribed framework for conducting an AVDA, the tools for this research were inspired by the literature on discourse analysis of (audio)visual material. In particular, I found Ledin & Machin's (2018) analysis of moving images insightful for the study of textual elements since they address a wide array of features and the interconnected ways in which they represent ideologies. However, I believe that for a robust analysis, the design needs to be complicated further to accommodate for nuances that their work, however appropriate and recent, doesn't accommodate. Accordingly, I incorporated salient features as laid out by Gill (2000, 2007a) and Rose (2001), which helped situate the study within a feminist-Foucauldian understanding of discourse and its powerful effects. The analytical framework, thus, consisted of three intertextual stages: semiotic, ideological and contextual (see: Yan and Santos, 2009: 300-301).

On a semiotic level, the interplay between the visual and audio components were considered by first analyzing the narrative stages: orientation, complication, resolution, and coda (Ledin and Machin: 133-134). After noting its structure, tonality, and coherence, attention was given to the following: composition, shots, settings, characters, audio, dialogues, and captions. I took into consideration a range of questions while recording these representative elements: what do the women look like? How are they positioned against each other? Who is made visible? What are the various elements placed around them? How are the shots composed?

Next, the ideological level of analysis aimed to disclose the underlying conventions that informed the structure of the advertisements (Gill, 2000). Since the discursive formation relies on an assemblage of various elements, the questions asked at this stage were: How does this text create effects of truth? Is it organized to be persuasive? (ibid) How does it naturalize the gaze? Variable and consistent patterns were then noted (ibid).

Lastly, the analysis consisted of the contextual stage which considered features of postfeminist and neoliberal India, while taking into account the various intersectional ways in which they could manifest.

However, since 'the ideological is made possible by the semiotic, and both are always positioned within the contextual' (Baym, 2000 as cited in Yan and Santos, 2009), intertextuality- the interconnected nature of signifying systems (Kristeva, 1980)- was a crucial analytical tool informing this study. Rose (2001: 136) asserts that semiotic materials rely on 'intertextuality for its interpretive power' (ibid: 149), since the meaning of a certain discursive text depends on the meanings carried by other texts within a culture. It proved as an imperative tool since elements of the advertisements could be analyzed together, or against each other, to understand how they are in dialogue with the sociocultural context beyond the text.

Ethics, reflexivity, and positionality

First, I'd like to reflect on a probable ethical impediment caused due to my positionality. As an Indian feminist, I'm exposed to interpretational biases, as noted in the 'rationale' section of this chapter. The ethical value of the topic could be compromised due to my institutional location, where I indulge in 'speaking for others' (Alcoff, 1991: 6) by using an imperialist tone in my analysis (Vanner, 2015: 1). As noted in a pilot study I conducted with a similar sociocultural context, an efficient solution is to position myself as a *bricoleur* (ibid), where I layer postfeminist critique with an intersectional analytical lens. In doing so, the research could reveal polyvocal readings on the topic, since academic knowledge is indeed 'partial and situated' (Rose, 2001: 130).

The second aspect I'd like to clarify is the inspiration behind the research. Winch (2013: 195) states in the concluding chapter of her book, 'my most cherished friendships are precisely those knotty ones in which we have found ourselves exposed, vulnerable, hurt, but also loving'. My closest confidantes and I have engaged in pointing out things wrong with each other's bodies, subsequently providing ways to 'fix' them. I wasn't reminded of these 'emotional tangles' (ibid) till I worked on promoting an advertisement for a skincare brand that claimed to 'fix' women's problems. I realised that the language used by my friends and me, for example, to point out acne, was similar to the dialogues in the advertisement. Drawing inspiration from my experiences, I decided to conduct an

analysis of representations and discourses in similar media texts. I have included the brand I worked with. While these could skew 'objective' observations, emotions and experiences are considered vital to feminist research since it can enhance a deeper understanding of the issue being studied (Blakely, 2007: 59). Consequently, I have aimed to embrace reflexivity while discussing my interpretations and conclusions.

Lastly, according to the ethics review form submitted to the London School of Economics (LSE) prior to this research, no further impediments were recognized since the data was sourced from a public platform. None of the sampled videos are user generated, and don't implicate any observable people or institutions.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Creating the gaze: The power of friendship and sisterhood

In a postfeminist context, female sociality has been studied as a particularly sinister form of representation that respeaks existing patriarchal discourses (Anwer and Arora, 2021; Gordon, 2007). As discussed in the literature, Winch (2013) locates these conventions in sites of 'girlfriend media' that 'mediate intimacy' (Gill, 2009) to uphold existing standards of ideological beauty. In these visual texts, the collaborative process of maintaining the spectacle of feminine bodies, however cruel, is sold as enabling and empowering (Winch, 2013: 26). She warns that it generates a gendered gaze that inflicts 'normative cruelties' (Ringrose and Renold, 2009: 575) whilst regulating femininity under the guise of care. Her observations on the 'girlfriend gaze', as manifest in 'girlfriend media', provide valuable insights for analysing how the 'regime of looking' between women is constructed in the advertisements sampled in this paper.

First, the creation of the gaze can be observed through the advertisements' narrative structure, since it unveils the core discourse they are attempting to repurpose or represent (Ledin and Machin, 2018: 133). Winch (2013: 5) states that the gaze is 'located

in a female sphere, and marketed as intimate and enabling'. Incidentally enough, a coherent pattern is revealed across the sampled data that exemplifies her claims:

They begin by *orienting* the viewers with skincare concerns faced by a woman, that is often pointed out to her by her friend or sister; these problems transcend the skin and seep into their daily lives as incapacitating hindrances.

Next, they present the *complication*: how can they achieve perfect skin like their friends and sisters?

Third, the one whose body serves as an example of perfection provides the *resolution*: the product; it won't just 'fix' their skin 'problems' but will also enhance their daily lives.

Finally, at the *coda* stage, the women whose bodies serve as sites of crisis co-opt into the product to become just like their friend or sister (See Appendix A for detailed analysis).

A lucid discourse emerges: there's a strong emphasis on personal, often familial, relationships between women, that is grounded in 'intimate networks of comparison, feedback and motivation' (Winch, 2013: 2) as the path to validation. Winch (ibid: 5) clarifies that these 'policing networks' between women are undeniably symptomatic of the girlfriend gaze. We don't witness male characters as plot vehicles; their presence is rendered obsolete, and their gaze is considered benign (Gill, 2019; Winch, 2013). Instead, the product is discursively positioned as a trustworthy and effective solution offered by a woman who knows how to achieve perfection. On an ideological level, they implicitly draw upon the powerful rhetoric of coalescence, or more explicitly that of sisterhood, by indicating that women must come together to solve each others' problems.

Undoubtedly, the 'familial and affective labour historically performed by women in the home' (Oulelette and Wilson, 2011 as cited in Winch, 2013: 20) is exploited, with 'consumerist pleasure-seeking' signalled as the path to redemption for their problems (Anwer and Arora, 2021). By virtue of being women, the characters on screen teach each other how to achieve beauty and femininity that align with society's standards (Lazar, 2011: 37). Therefore, relying on the sanctity of friendships to ensure that viewers accept

the femininity constructed on screen as natural, these adverts create powerful *effects of truth*.

Further taking into consideration the Indian context, representing relationships between young siblings, as seen in *Himalaya* (2021) and *Pond's* (2019), is indicative of a shift to modernity hitherto unused in advertisements. Their approach thus far has been to depict more traditional relationships between grandmothers or mothers, and their daughters (Johri, 2011). However, in *Himalaya* (2021), we witness a young sister asking her older sibling for advice. Her first pimple has surfaced, and no solution proves effective enough to help her. Her sister recommends using the face wash, which is considered an expert in its own right. It works effortlessly, and the younger sister applauds her sibling, exclaiming, '*didi ka kamaal!*' [my sister's magic!]. The gaze created isn't explicitly cruel in this scenario. Instead, sisters become effective tools of wielding the rules of maternalism and patriarchy, however their youth veils the same and we see them as friends, rather than siblings. As Winch (2013: 13) asserts, 'feminine identities, shaped in…private spaces of adolescene, are still susceptible to, and shaped by, girlfriends in older life'. Priming younger bodies with the message that pimples are indeed ugly, thereby indicates that these flaws must be prohibited as the body ages in order to be beautiful according to the conduct of societal norms.

Returning to the representation of the gaze through friendship, Winch (2013: 16) states, 'the 'girlfriend gaze' in constructing contemporary mainstream femininity generates its affect from the visual and rhetoric signifiers of friendship and girlhood'. Similarly, the second way the gaze is created to gain its discursive power is through the rhetorical assemblage of fragmented semiotic elements (Gill, 2000: 180), specifically setting, shots, character action, and dialogues. In the case of *Lacto Calamine* (2022), the opening scene of the advertisement is set inside a kitchen, which isn't clearly articulated. It is slightly out of focus, making the characters, two friends, more salient (Ledin and Machin, 2018: 154). This generates the feeling that as viewers, we are privy to a personal conversation, an intimate space within a larger setting. This notion is strengthened with the way it is further composed: front angled shot, with the two women positioned close to each other.

On setting this elaborate scene, *Lacto Calamine* (2022: 0:00-0:04) then uses dialogues and actions to further mediate intimacy. As seen in Figure 1, the narrator touches her friend's face and confesses that it is oily with 'problems' that she can't 'erase'. When she rubs her fingers to feel the oil, the narrator looks critical of the sensation, while her friend looks ashamed, even sad. This provocation of shame and guilt commences the creation of the gaze; we are now witnessing it unfold as the female body becomes the site of crisis. Following this, she puts her hand around her friend, and smiles while speaking about the problems she sees, thereby providing feedback and motivation.

This touch, seemingly coded as reassuring, is also witnessed in the *Garnier* (2018: 0:29-0:30) advert when we see the protagonist apply the product on her friend's face in a ritualistic action of care. It must be noted that friendliness is extended only after the protagonist divulges a list of problems she sees on the face of her acquaintance. In both the advertisements, we witness normative cruelties being inflicted upon these women, but the rhetoric of intimacy, as denoted by the language and behaviour, makes this symbolic violence appear loving, and even natural and necessary. Therefore, a 'loving meanness' (Winch, 2013: 16) is seamlessly generated through actions that come across as empathetic, but are accompanied with dialogues that are scrutinizing and cruel.

Figure 1. The 'oily' touch in Lacto Calamine (See Figure B1)

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The last way the advertisements create the gaze is rather interesting. A striking feature that Indian advertising relies strongly upon is jingles, that can accomplish considerable discursive work. While this convention has been studied by Chou and Singhal (2017), their analysis only provides insights on the effect they have on creating positive associations with products, as opposed to their representational power as symbolic elements. Every advertisement oscillates between moments where the rhythm is slower while the friends' problems are being presented, and it becomes more tenacious as the liberating nature of the product is discussed. The dynamic music creates an illusion that 'lightness', and thereby relief, can only be achieved on using the product (Ledin and Machin, 2018: 158-159). For *Lacto Calamine* (2022) and *Garnier* (2018), their jingles' upbeat nature masks the cruel actions and dialogues discussed above. It aids in upholding the affective guise of the gaze, and makes feedback more palpable; therefore, 'doing femininity' is recontextualized as fun through semiotic creativity (Lazar, 2016: 61). Embodying the conventions of intimate, playful 'girl talk', we witness lines sung such as:

> '*Chip chip sa* oil on your face, with problems *jo na ho* erase… All you need is a magic potion, Lacto Calamine Lotion' [There's sticky oil on your face, with problems that can't be erased. All you need is a magic potion, Lacto Calamine Lotion]

> 'Spots! Spots! Spots! Night *ho ya* morning, they come without a warning. No, no, no, no warning! Dull skin *hai inka* plan, *koi lago inpe* ban!... Say hello, say hello to Garnier light [Spots! Spots! Spots! Morning or night, they come without a warning. No, no, no, no warning! Their plan is to make your skin look dull, someone ban them!...Say hello, say hello to Garnier light]

As explained by Lazar (2016: 62), the rhetoric of knowingness, humour, and irony blended creates the illusion that these skincare practices are a necessary part of 'doing' femininity. When the friend sings phrases like 'magic potion', and 'say hello to Garnier light', it makes abiding by beauty norms sound magical, facetious, and approachable. It creates the illusion that femininity can be achieved by simply making the *choice* to 'say hello' to a product recommended to them. Since they are first person, casual accounts-

note how the narrator is always the friend singing this advice- normative cruelties being inflicted are effectively obscured (McRobbie, 1997; Lazar, 2016). Phrases, like 'chip, chip' for example, evokes a textural sensation that denotes how sticky and unpleasant the friend's face feels. As opposed to explicitly calling it sticky, the use of informal language makes it seem less critical than it is. In addition, repetition combined with expressive punctuation and passionate advice-giving ('Spots! Spots! Spots!'/'Say hello, say hello') further upholds cruelties and the gaze between women as these phrases are seamlessly embedded in the discourse of an inviting, intimate friendship (Lazar, 2016; Winch, 2013). When advice is deployed through 'warmly couched hostility' (Elias and Gill, 2016), it becomes difficult to unearth its harmful implications.

As Winch (2013: 5) states, 'the desire for intimacy, normativity and belonging often means submitting oneself to regimes of looking by the girlfriend gaze'. So powerful is this discursive construction and its *effects of truth*, it doesn't appear to need any clarification. Consequently, the woman subjected to the discipling gaze of her friend 'appears to be bathed, not in rules, but the power of love' (ibid: 14). Certainly, one can imagine how women contextually relate to the potency of friendship, and find relief in the advice they receive from their confidantes. Ultimately, capitalizing off this valuable cultural resource, these Indian advertisements use friendships as a way of masking the policing gaze that regulates beauty and femininity on the bodies of women in order to position their products as relatable and friendly. Indeed, they can be interpreted as forms of 'girlfriend media' that represent the 'girlfriend gaze' (ibid).

It is imperative to note briefly that the gaze is certainly built as a policing one, but the semiotic components used to represent this gaze can be read as positive. Culture is contradictory (Gill, 2016), and 'scattered hegemonies' must be accounted for. In fact, this is precisely what an intersectional analysis demands: polyvocal readings, as opposed to reductive ones. To provide more context, the use of friendships or sisterhood as a form of representation can be read as resistance since it doesn't involve aesthetic labour being undertaken for men. As argued by Martinussen and Wetherell (2021), we certainly cannot decide if the confidence gained by women in being competent friends is negative

(even if it is for the sake of femininity). The gaze in question, therefore, begs further analysis that will help reveal its ideological implications.

Regulating femininity through the gaze: The glow *leitmotif*

While the evocation of shame and feedback in creating the girlfriend gaze was discussed at length, Winch (2013: 26) further asserts that it often intersects with ideologies of race, class, and sexuality. Indeed, moving from the sphere of inadequacy to the land of aspirational beauty, and creating a 'feminine body out of a female one' (Genz, 2004: 26), reinstates categories of inclusion and exclusion that are charged with hierarchies of cultural power. In these advertisements, the characters are transformed by their friends to fit the visualities of ideal femininity that is envisioned as achievable with 'glowing' skin. Unsurprisingly, the spate of skin-lightening narratives in India hasn't gone unnoticed. As referenced in the literature review, Parameswaran & Cardoza (2009) provide a compelling analysis of the cultural politics of advertising that molds 'fairness' as aspirational. However, there seems to be a significant difference in the advertisements discussed by them and the ones sampled in this study: fairness isn't the explicit imperative. Instead, it is disguised using a seemingly harmless lexicon. The calls to action of each advertisement proclaim efficacy in revealing skin that is 'brighter', 'glowing', and 'clearer':

> *Garnier* (2018): One week, one week spotless and *bright*

> *Pond's* (2019): For youthful *brighter* skin

> *Glow & Lovely* (2021): *Glow ko na roko* [Don't stop the glow]

> *Lacto Calamine* (2022): *Clear*, matte face daily

The didactic tone and terse pace of the copy makes them sound like facts as opposed to possibilities. Moreover, these ideological imperatives are made in conjecture with two kinds of discursive tactics that strengthen them further. First, the call is evoked by the friend who is visibly fairer than her dull-skinned counterpart. Her claims are often

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supported by visual cues of 'darkness' that further imprint categories of exclusion. Second, the transformative impact is discursively built by evoking a public/private binary, where hypervisibility in both is achieved only by acquiring glowing skin.

For example, in the advertisement by *Garnier* (2018: 0:19-0:29), the fair-skinned friend presents the risks of dark 'sun spots' to her dull-skinned friend, because of which she can't step out and 'shop, eat, chill'. She then solves her 'problems' by presenting a solution for *brighter* skin that will help her be presentable to the world. The scene is supported with a representative element that is unique to this advertisement, as seen in Figure 2: a dull mask with dark spots, which is then removed to reveal bright skin. It concludes with both friends standing side-by-side, smiling; their complexion is now similar and notably fairer.

Figure 2. The mask in Garnier

A Foucauldian analysis encourages one to consider how practices of exclusion are symbolized (Orgad, 2015: 68). On looking for the *invisible* and *silences* (Gill, 2000; Rose, 2001), it is readily apparent that power is encoded within the body of the friend who helps, as she is the only one who speaks (or rather, sings). By giving this character a voice, a precedence for bright skin is set through her representation. The 'brightness' discourse indeed gains its persistence from the invisibility of 'dull' voices. Moreover, the

removal of the mask strongly symbolizes the elimination of something unwanted, or rather unacceptable. As stated earlier, in neoliberal India, skin colour emerged as a signifier for class mobility, with fairness becoming a critical symbol of success (Rajagopal, 2001: 91). If the friend needs to 'shop, eat, chill', she needs to look like someone who can 'afford' to do those things; succinctly put, she needs to look like her 'bright' friend. Parameswaran and Cardoza (2009) too note how some advertisements show the transformation of the dark-skinned women as embedded in plots of social surveillance. However, they argue that their fairness is regulated by the need to look attractive enough to achieve male validation. On the contrary, the adverts analyzed in this paper demonstrate that the 'glow' is regulated between two women as a means of achieving status in both public and private lives. Since the decision to expel dullness is encouraged by the 'brighter' friend, it can be ascertained that the gaze created between them, as argued in the preceding section, is what regulates femininity by asserting the glow/brightness *leitmotif*.

The public/private dichotomy enforced by the gaze is also witnessed in the *Glow & Lovely* (2021) advertisement (formerly known as Fair & Lovely). A young girl, who is running for school elections, rejects impositions placed upon her by the male characters- ones who are competing against her, and her father who is worried about the blazing sun tainting her beauty. She refuses to compromise between public (the elections) and private (her body) achievements (Genz, 2004: 3). It is indeed a friend with brighter skin who reminds the young girl to use the product by asserting '*glow ko na roko*' [don't stop the glow]. After using the cream, she wins the elections and promises to fight for the nation. The product hasn't just fixed her corporeal exterior, but has penetrated deep within to aid her psychic interior; she now glows from within.

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Figure 3**.** The successful young girl from Glow & Lovely (See Figure B2)

First, subjected to the gaze of her friend that asserts the *glow leitmotif*, a distinct postfeminist shift is marked where attractiveness becomes the 'ultimate measure of success for a woman' (Elias *et al*., 2016: 25-26). Seemingly, her accomplishments are evidenced by her appearance that corroborate with the discourse of fairness. 'Public' achievements aside, her 'private' body must be beautiful, and normatively perfect (McRobbie, 2015).

Second, a particular dialogue that stands out in this advertisement is '*ab desh ke liye ladna hai*' [now, I will fight for the country]. Now that she has acquired her glow, she is eligible to fight for the country. It beckons one to consider the ideological implications of the same. With 'fairness' as the apparent imperative, a logical train of thought would lead one to consider these values as highlighting Western ideals of femininity, and rightly so due to India's transnational, neoliberal culture. But an intersectional and reflexive reading demands otherwise. Reducing it to terms of internalized racism would oversimplify and reinstate an imperialist imaginary (Elias et al.: 10-11); or how Chandra Mohanty (1988) would perhaps express, it would indeed be looking at it through 'western eyes'. As discussed in the literature review, the neoliberal subject's identity was also structured by hegemonic views of caste and religion (Oza, 2006: 13). The term for caste in Sanskrit, *varna*, translates to 'colour'; different castes in the Indian epic

Mahabharata were separated according to their colours, with the upper-caste Hindus being the 'whitest' of them all (Parameswaran and Cardoza, 2009: 225). The current sociopolitical environment in India undoubtedly raises suspicions on the reasons behind a light-skinned young girl, wearing a necklace of lotus flowers, being showcased as the future of the youth (the lotus is indeed a prominent motif in Hindu mythology). Her body which, as evident in Figure 3, visibly aligns with hegemonic Hindu ideals, is then intrinsically coded with power through her achievements as a neoliberal subject.

Ultimately, one thing remains true: the glow *leitmotif*, as asserted by the gaze, rejects the existence of structural inequalities. If women could use creams or serums to break the glass ceiling without having to consider the impositions placed upon them by various institutions, India would indeed be a different country altogether. Moreover, this gaze further depoliticizes the struggles, and decontextualizes the lived realities, of people who suffer due to the politics of colour in India. Therefore, when the gaze regulates a femininity that repudiates feminism, it takes on an increasingly postfeminist dimension. If exclusions are encoded within it, how friendly or empowering is this gaze? More importantly, how does its sinister nature retain its strength?

Strengthening the gaze: From abjection to confidence

With respect to the mediation of femininity, the 'representational' section of the literature traced two pertinent forms of the surveillant imaginary: first, practices of magnified surveillance that result in abjection, and second, peer surveillance between women that dictates norms. However, the advertisements sampled in this paper reflect how these imaginaries aren't independent; instead, they converge to strengthen each other, making subjection to the gaze natural, persuasive, and irrefutable.

The discursive formation begins with compelling imageries of abjection. Ringrose and Walkerdine (2008) observe that in a neoliberal culture, proclamations to resign oneself to practices of transformation, that could prevent or reverse 'abjection', are indisputably omnipresent. Abjection creates a repulsion towards an undesirable 'other', imagined as a threat 'to one's own clean and proper self' (McAfee, 2004: 46). The first way these

advertisements achieve abjection is through dramatic editing. In *Lacto Calamine* (2022: 0:13-0:14), every scene has been filmed from a consistent distance except the ones showing 'problems' (pimples, patchy skin, blackheads, dark spots) that the woman suffers from. Figure 4 shows an example of how these are the only shots that are zoomed into. The distinction is prevalent especially in the scene where the camera pans in at a considerable speed before the product transformation is witnessed. While the threat of invisibility already existed due to classist coding of representations as discussed in the previous section (notably, the one providing aid is once again fair skinned), exclusion is further imprinted through these visual cues of abjection on the face of the concerned, helpless woman. This is precisely the second way in which abjection is symbolized: through expressions of concern and unhappiness.
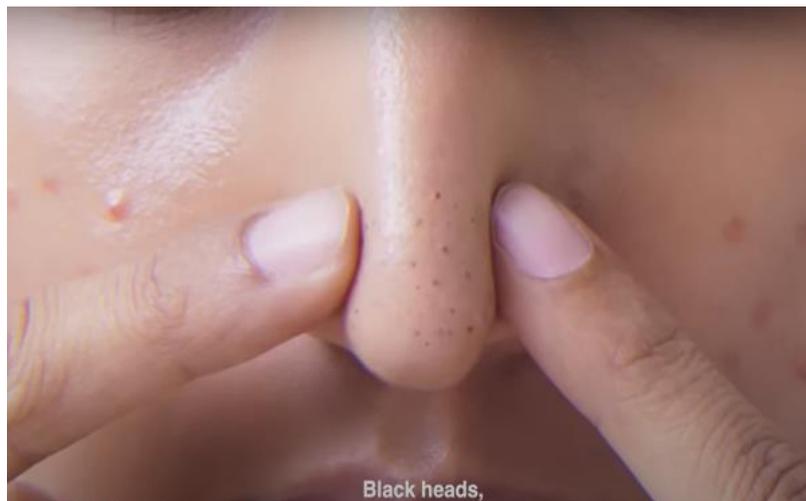
Figure 4. Zoomed in visuals of 'problems'

The editing technique and expression is prevalent in other cases as well, especially *Garnier* (2018: 0:06-0:07). A woman clicks a selfie and sees dark spots on her face (See Figure C1). She zooms into them and gasps, shocked at her imperfections (See Figure C2); meanwhile, you hear the protagonist assert that the dark spots make her skin look dull. The use of the mobile phone as a tool of self-reflection provides an insight into our increasingly surveillant digital age, where a woman's body is always subjected to scrutiny and assessment. Elias *et al*. (2016) caution against the use of magnifying

techniques in postfeminist media, arguing that it doesn't conclude at a superficial level, and instead insinuates that a woman's appearance is permanently under (magnified) surveillance. The advertisements studied in this paper too magnify 'problems' on the skin, as suggested by them; each time it happens, the woman looks visibly upset. However, in both cases we don't hear the one suffering from these 'problems' speak; while we see their 'imperfections' on the screen, their friends are the ones speaking. Evidently, the surveillant imaginary is enacted by the friend, configuring 'the spectacle of the female body as subject to calculation by other women' (Winch, 2013: 18); the body is undoubtedly 'subjected to a field of visibility' (Foucault, 1979: 7) in this gynaeopticon. This is precisely where the advertisements under analysis differ from the ones studied by other scholars. The need for self-regulation is incited through the constant proliferation of the woman-to-woman gaze that entails the complicity of both. As both Winch (2013) and Riley *et al*. (2016) suggest, there is indeed a collaborative process of transforming femininity in these advertisements.

However, at first glance, a deviance presents itself in the *Pond's* (2019) advert. The protagonist Tara suffers from sun damage that has caused her skin to age faster. She is positioned against her twin sister, Meera, who looks visibly younger. As she narrates this anecdote herself, one would assume that the gaze between women is missing in this example. However, it functions internally as she subjects herself to transformation to be as beautiful, if not younger-looking than her twin sister. This representation closely echoes Riley *et al.*'s (2016) 'postfeminist gaze', since the advertisement attempts to portray that women 'work and transform themselves (seemingly for themselves)', whereas in reality, their appearance which is 'the vehicle to female recognition and validation' is judged in comparison to other women; ultimately, she seeks feedback, which implicates her within the surveillant gaze. The abjection, further presented through imagery where Tara looks gravely concerned as she touches her 'old' face, strengthens the public/private binary as explicated earlier. The advertisement thus relies on the contextual presupposition that a working woman cannot let the signs of ageing

come in the way of her successful career and relations as, in Deborah Covino's (2004: 87) words, 'better relationships and higher incomes come to those with youthful looks'.

Now that abjection is achieved, a solution is presented by the 'perfect' friend or sister, and her 'advice' is supported visually with pseudoscientific claims of certainty which credence to the discourse of transformation under the gaze.

First, we see visuals of transformation supported with scientific claims. Every advertisement is supported by a visual where we witness the product taking its effect on the skin, making the woman both more beautiful and happier. *Pond's* (2019: 0:18-0:20) does this through an 'intensified, forensic surveillance', as stated by Elias and Gill (2016). As we see it act on the protagonist's face on the right, we see a creative visualization occur simultaneously on the left, as evidenced in Figure 5. It shows the epidermis and the skin cells below it; as the product works its magic, the skin gets tighter, becomes bouncier, and retains its glow. Not regarding the epidermis as the boundary, the product permeates 'within', making the model look 'younger', and visibly fairer (ibid).
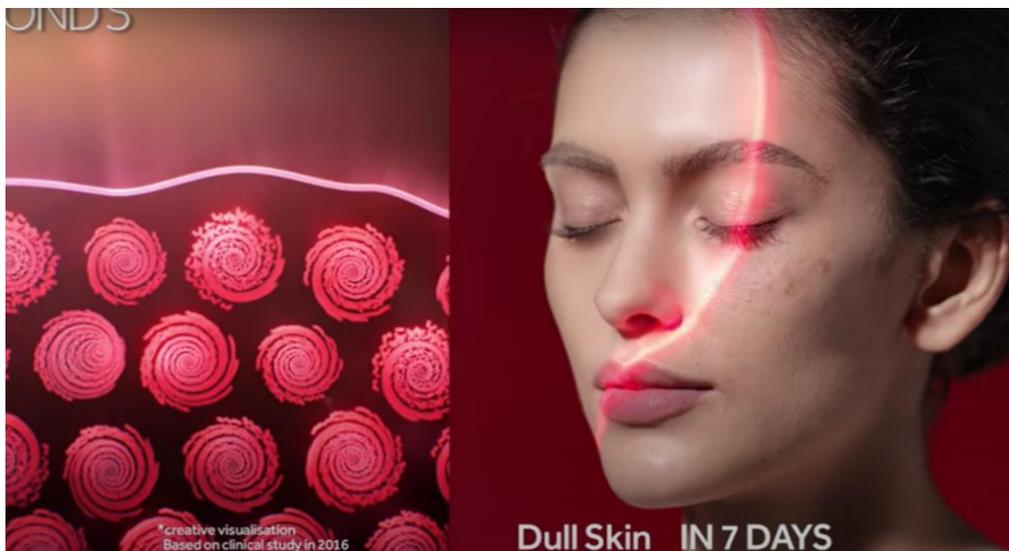
Figure 5. Scientific visuals (See Figure B3)

Second, there is a noticeable emphasis on the temporality of the product, that is, the time it takes to achieve the desired outcome- seven days. In two of the advertisements that mention this trait, *Pond's* (2019) and *Garnier* (2018), the subtext reads 'based on clinical

study'. The product is presented as a way of achieving femininity scientifically, with ease and quickness. The idea of saving time, especially when women are represented as busy, social, or professional, is characteristic of a distinctive postfeminist trait (Lazar, 2016: 54). Furthermore, providing proof in the form of a scientific claim (even if it is in a subtext) creates an *effect of truth* (Rose, 2001) that sustains the undisputed reliance on skincare products in the doing of femininity, or in the becoming of a feminine subject. While emotions, generated through friendship and sisterhood, are imperative to the narrative, the use of 'some sort for scientific proof or experiment, very specific numbers, or an impressive sounding mystery ingredient' (Schrank, 1998: 48) further appeals to the 'rational' neoliberal consumer.

However, there's a fine line between scientific elements, and natural ones in these adverts, which is quite symptomatic of the dichotomy of tradition/modernity in India. As observed by Munshi (1998) while conceptualizing the 'new Indian woman', with neoliberalism, whole-hearted acceptance of cosmopolitanism, or 'western values', didn't come about as easily, which often led advertisers to 'search for new sources of value within advertising, with local culture increasingly being used to endow goods with symbolic distinction' (Rajagopal, 1998: 17). Hence, the emphasis on ingredients like neem leaves and turmeric in the *Himalaya* advertisement, for example, along with the claim of scientific certainty, aims to walk that tightrope to cater to all audiences, modern or otherwise.

Ultimately, the discursive construction that started with coding the abject, followed by the use of scientific products, is tied together with visual motifs of women looking happier next to their friends and appearing more confident. Gill and Orgad (2022: 20) state that as a visual regime, confidence in postfeminist media is represented through cues of women gazing straight into the camera with their heads held high, or strutting through an urban landscape. In the sampled advertisements, the confident woman's identity is certainly represented using these motifs, albeit further strengthened through validation from friends or sisters when positioned together. In *Lacto Calamine* (2022), *Garnier* (2018), *Himalaya* (2021) and *Glow & Lovely* (2021), the transformed women

experience (or at least, emote) joy as their abjections are reversed, and they look into the camera confidently next to their friends. *Pond's* (2019) on the other hand doesn't just portray the confident gaze, but also uses clothing as a semiotic device. When Tara was positioned against her sister in an earlier 'before Pond's' shot, her 'younger' looking twin wore bright red clothes, and she wore dull, white ones. Once her signs of ageing are reversed, Tara too, opts for the same confident attire (See Appendix D). Hence, the gaze between women in each advertisement, although discursively produced in various ways, is ideologically strengthened to regulate femininities using three steps:

First, the person laying claims to the efficacy of the product is the 'perfect' friend herself, who fixes the abjections faced by her counterpart, and counteracts the magnified surveillance she witnesses.

Second, as the advisor, she takes on the guise of the expert; she isn't providing solutions that *might* work, but a *scientific or natural formula* that is *guaranteed* to work (note that in the Himalaya advert she literally calls her sister the expert, and not the product). By naming the ingredients in the product- be it vitamin C, yuzu lemon, kaolin clay, advanced multivitamins- she is affirming her knowledge as the skincare guru.

Lastly, when the transformed subject is placed alongside her friend or sister, the gaze is strengthened as she gains approval from them and aligns herself with the ideals of normative beauty.

As Riley et al. (2016) assert, validation achieved through body work is an imperative indicator of the postfeminist gaze shared between women. It is through these complex discursive constructions that encode effects of truth, that neoliberal and postfeminist ideologies of consumer sovereignty providing liberation and empowerment (Grewal, 2005) are seamlessly reified and reinstated.

CONCLUSION

By casting one body as a corporeal signifier of femininity undone, and the other as the epitome of middle-class desires, the gaze is represented in Indian advertisements as a bridge towards attaining the ultimate symbolic capital: appearance. Whilst conducting the analysis, I made a few observations that couldn't be accommodated within this study, but contain the potential to be further explored by feminist media scholars.

First, most advertisements use popular, young celebrities that they believe women can (or rather, they aspire to) relate with. As Winch (2013: 27) speculates:

> the combination of the democratization of celebrity with the intimate rhetoric of friendship, as well as the commercialization of these relations, means that women and girls are encouraged to both admire and envy celebrities in order to buy into the brands that they are selling.

The celebrity figure then further hones the gaze created in the advertisements, and extends it to the viewer. We become one with the girlfriend gaze, consequentially implicated in the process of enabling mutual hypervisibility. Considering the pedestal Bollywood celebrities are held on in India, a textual analysis paired with star studies can help further reveal the ideological dispositions of advertisements.

Second, the metaphor of relentless transformation permeated this study, both in the postfeminist representations analyzed, and in the scope of this dissertation. It started as a project that aimed to clarify the type of gaze between women as represented in Indian advertisements. However, I realized that reducing the gaze to a fit a certain conceptualization would reject the conflicting nature of Indian femininities. Surely, as identified at several junctures of the analysis, the surveillant imaginary critiqued could be classified as the 'girlfriend gaze' (Winch, 2013) or the 'postfeminist gaze' (Riley et al., 2016). They do account for conflicting discourses of identity, but they do not take into consideration the dimension of caste, which is unique to countries like India. When there are complex axes of identity involved, where power resides in intersectional dimensions, it codes the gaze studied with a notion of empowerment where the woman is being

saved, for example from a disempowered, dark-skinned present to a bright, glowing-skinned future. For the likes of Abu-Lughod (2002) and Khader (2019), this narrative is missionary in nature, which can certainly cultivate within the borders of a nation, since urban, middle-class, fair-skinned women, often speak for their rural sisters in India (Phadke, 2015: 4572). Here, I propose that feminist academics need to move past the definitions and limitations of panoptic or gynaeoptic gazes, and consider how these two can converge to configure something more complex, vexed, and sinister: a missionary gaze that creates the illusion of girlfriendship.

Ultimately, this study aimed to provide an analysis of the salient issue of representations of feminine bodies as regulated by the gaze between women. While several dominant features, as pointed out by Munshi (1998) and Parameswaran and Cardoza (2009) remain true, the advertisements in this paper reflect how ideologies are being increasingly disguised under the shroud of affect and the positive lexicons of 'glow' and 'brightness'. Their strength is further upheld through the surveillant imaginary that feminine bodies internalize. Certainly, analyzing these practices of representation becomes crucial. It is indeed in 'the digital realm that the possibility of egalitarian change lies' (Gururmurthy, 2011: 144), and perhaps critical enquiry is the first step towards that change.

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APPENDIX A

Narrative stages of each advertisement

Garnier	Dark spots appear at any time of the day without any warning (spoken by protagonist, the friend with problems doesn't speak)	It'll cause the skin to look extremely 'dull', someone needs to ban dark spots so that their skin can be as clear as the main character's	The product gives spotless and bright skin in one-week	The friends dance together after using the product
Himalaya	The younger sibling has her first pimple, and she wants healthy skin just like her sister's	She has tried every home remedy, DIY routine but nothing seems to work	The sister suggests Himalaya facewash which is the 'expert'	After seeing her younger sibling's healthy skin, she pulls her cheeks and exclaims. Meanwhile, younger sister says that her sister is the real
Glow & Lovely	There are only boys fighting for the univeristy elections, who will change this (asked by the friend). The young girl says that she will	The dad refuses, saying that the hard work and blazing sun isn't good for her skin	The friend provides a solution that will help retain her 'glow' as she fights for the elections	Now that she has bright glowing skin, she has won and is on her way to fight for the nation
Pond's	Tara and her twin sister are positioned next to each other	Tara works 'under the harsh sun' which causes her skin to age faster, and makes her look older	Pond's repairs signs of ageing and gives youthful glowing skin in just 7 days	Tara says, "now tell me, who looks younger amongst us?"
Lacto Calamine	The protagonist says that there's oil on her friend's face which causes problems she can't erase	There are pimples, patchy skin, blackheads, dark spots	There's a way of fighting them all in one shot, all she needs is a 'magic potion', the product	The product absorbs excess oil and 'stops' skin problems and gives the friend a 'clear, matte face daily'

APPENDIX B

Annotated images

Figure B1
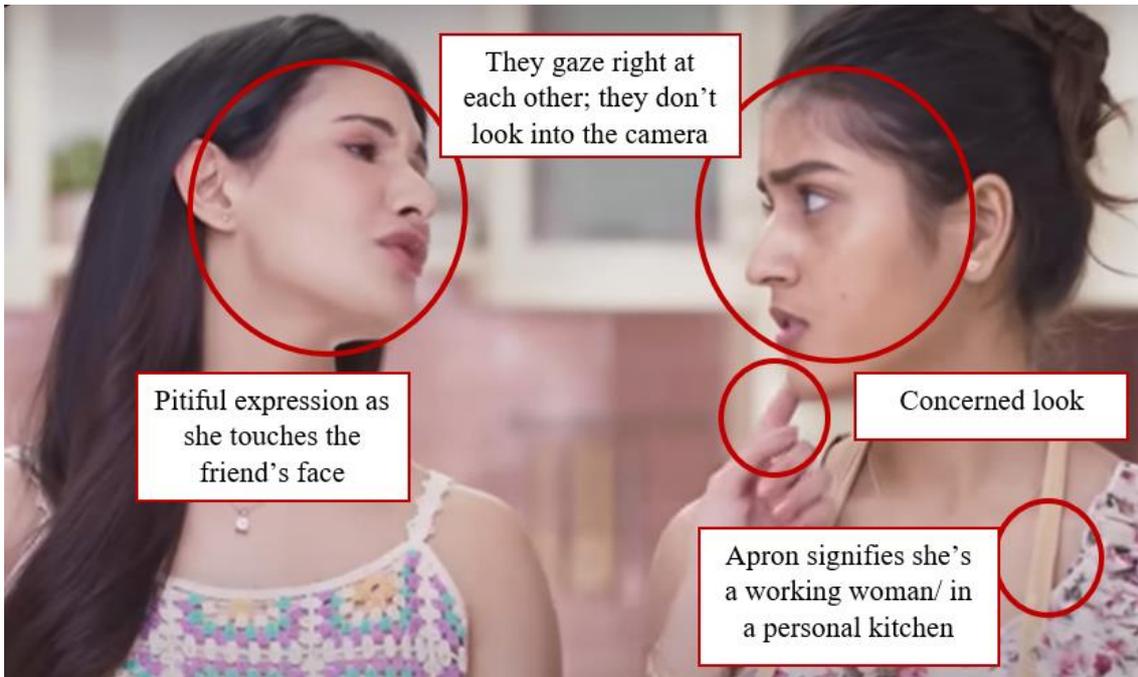
Figure B2

Figure B3

**APPENDIX C**

Zoomed in representations- Garnier

Figure C1

Figure C2

APPENDIX D

"Confident appearing"- Pond's
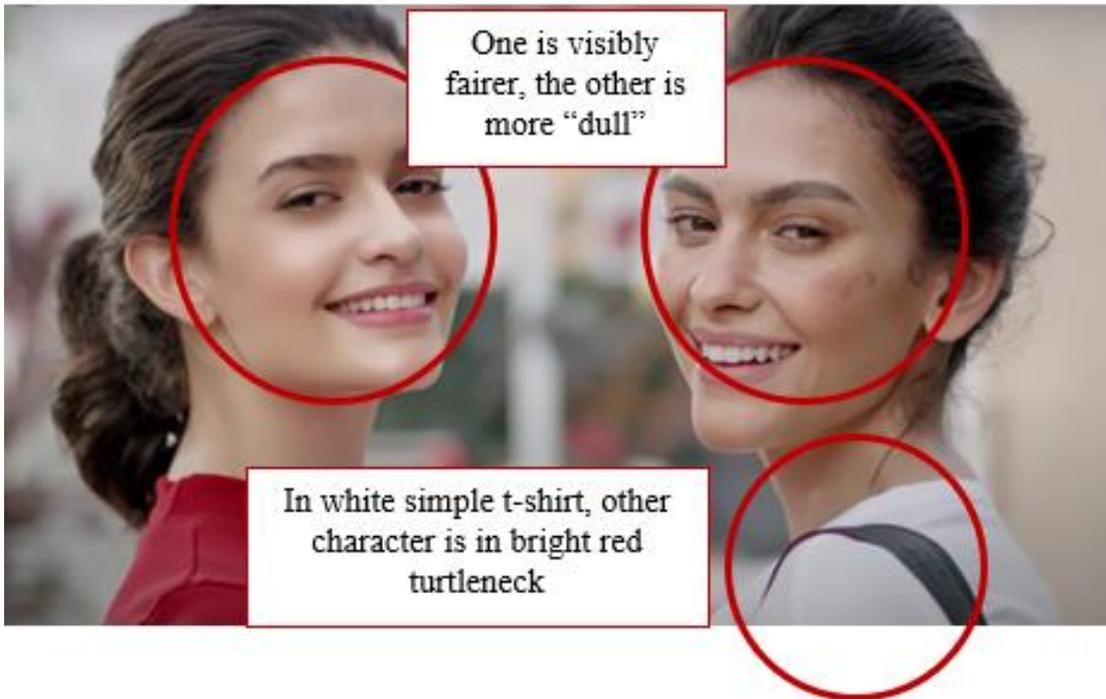
APPENDIX E

Example of translated advert with highlighted patterns

Himalaya advertisement			
Timestamp	Character	Dialogue	Action
0:00-0:0:02	young sibling (Y)	Didi (older sister), what can I do for healthy skin like yours?	Pulls her sister's cheeks
0:02-0:03	Y	Look at this	Points to her pimple
0:03-0:04	older sibling (O)	Is this your first pimple?	
00:05-0:07	Y	Yes, see, everyone is giving different kinds of advice on what to do	Shows her social media feed on phone
0:08-0:11	O	They'll just give advice, but the real pimple expert is this	Takes out the facewash
0:11-0:15	Y	Himalaya purifying neem facewash? How is this the expert?	Takes the prodcut
0:15-0:18	Voiceover	This is clinically proven- it has antibacterial properties because of neem leaves and turmeric	Ingredient infographics
0:19-0:21	Voiceover	It removes pimples, and makes the skin extremely healthy	The young sibling splashes water on her face and pulls her own cheeks while smiling into the camera
0:22-0:24	O	Wow, this is the expert's magic?	Pulls her sister's cheeks again
0:25-0:27	Y	Didi's magic!	They giggle and embrace as the screen blurs
0:27-0:29	Voiceover	Himalaya purifying neem facewash, pimple-free healthy skin's expert	Product shot

Instances of the gaze

Pointing problems

Feedback/ advice/ motivation/ acceptance

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