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## **ENABLING EMPOWERMENT BY ESTABLISHING INDIAN FEMININITY**

**SANSKRITI BHATKOTI**



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## ABSTRACT

*The rise of post feminism has spurred scrutiny of Indian feminist ads that portray an alluring path to neoliberal empowerment entwined with prevailing patriarchal norms. This dissertation considers the recent utilisation of psychological tools such as confidence-culture and resistance to depict empowerment which aims to regulate normative femininities in the context of desired national identity markers, encompassing patriarchal structures. Analysing five Women's Day ads through audio-visual discourse analysis, it uncovers ideological dynamics, empowerment's construction, and the role of semiotic elements in shaping, controlling, and reinforcing it. Rooted in India's sociocultural context and informed by literature on neoliberalism, post feminism, and strategic communication's role in depicting preferred Indian femininities, this research employs representation, discourse, ideology, and intersectionality to expose that advertisements use narratives of empowerment to create a homogenised Indian femininity. Furthermore, they advocate for a non-disruptive femininity that upholds the status quo of patriarchy by selectively catering to Hindu women belonging to specific class, and caste backgrounds.*

## INTRODUCTION

Women have the capacity to conquer any obstacle through determination; they can effectively balance household responsibilities while achieving professional success. Their ambitions are attainable; they simply need to consistently strive for self-improvement and disregard any negativity.

This has been the approach adopted by Indian women's day advertisements up to now. What becomes evident from these instances is a paradox: women must engage in a continuous process of self-governance and self-improvement to attain confidence. Consequently, their confidence perpetually depends on their deliberate and intensive efforts, a cycle described by Micki McGee (2021) as "a cycle where the self is not improved but endlessly be-laboured." Given the intricate nature of the Indian neoliberal context, the need for women to embrace empowerment through consumer participation is expected. This has led to the increased importance of the concept of the consumer citizen (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

While many express reservations about employing these 'postfeminist' discourses and depictions, which juxtapose glaring and ongoing social inequalities with extensive focus on self-empowerment (Gill, 2017; McRobbie, 2009), others commend the departure from conventional, passive stereotypes to portray women as self-assured. Ongoing debates maintain a consistent thread, emphasising a fundamental premise: the 'empowered' woman is characterised by confidence, a positive outlook, and adeptly managing various aspects of life.

By analysing the form of empowerment that is emblematic of Indian contexts, this study illustrates how various experts, programs, and discourses converge to mould a new type of female subject (Brown, 2015) demanded by the Indian ideals. In this framework, confidence functions as a psychological tool, aiming to influence how we perceive ourselves and others. Through an examination of a genre of advertising ostensibly crafted to foster self-esteem and self-assurance, we present a compelling illustration of how a mediated form of neoliberalism seeks to engage our emotional and psychological experiences (Gill & Kanai, 2019, pp.143).

## ENABLING EMPOWERMENT BY ESTABLISHING INDIAN FEMININITY

This study explores the portrayal of women's empowerment in Women's Day ads, aiming to reveal its discursive construction and its interaction with normative femininities in India. I also analyse the impact of visual communication strategies and the specific intersectional power dynamics on the representation and limitations of empowered women in these ads. The theoretical chapter comprising the literature review, comprises of three parts: it first, elaborates on the Indian neoliberal context in the advent of its globalisation and liberalisation policies which elaborates on the formation of middle class and national identities; on questioning the negotiation of empowerment, the second part examines the normative and ubiquitous representation of Indian femininity within the postfeminist framework; the final section bridges the gap between the two and considers the nationalist representational aspects of women in the Indian media texts along the lines of brand activism. Following a comprehensive review of pertinent literature, a conceptual framework rooted in Foucauldian analysis is formulated, finally research aims and questions are formulated. This is followed by the chapter on research design and methodology which justifies the reasoning to focus on feminist advertisements as a genre, explaining the rationale behind choosing AVDA as the specific methodology, sample selection criteria, its limitations and finally, the issues related to ethics and reflexivity. By using elements from the proposed conceptual framework and research design, the analysis and discussion which is divided in two parts, offers an elaborate description of the primary patterns that were identified which include: *creation* of the selective homogenised empowered femininities, *regulation* of empowerment through confidence culture and resilience and *glorification* of Indian femininities which conform to the hegemonic patriarchal structures. This research seeks to offer novel insights to the existing realm of postfeminist critique and feminist studies, providing a unique perspective that acknowledges the intricacies of the Indian context. Finally, the conclusion of this study outlines potential avenues for future research.

## THEORETICAL CHAPTER

### The Neoliberal Indian Milieu

The visibility of women in Indian advertisements is underpinned by three factors: India's new economic policy, the Indian women's movement, and the significance of media in modern-day India (Chaudhuri, 2005). In modern-day India, globalisation has taken shape within the backdrop of distinct economic circumstances linked to the extensive economic reforms undertaken by the Indian government during the later years of the 1980s. This transformative process, often referred to as "liberalisation," pertains to the opening of the Indian market and its integration into the global economy. For the purposes of this study, I define liberalism as:

*"A radicalised form of capitalism based on deregulation and the restriction of state intervention characterised by an opposition to collectivism, a new role for the state, an extreme emphasis on individual responsibility, flexibility, and a promotion of freedom as a means to self-realisation, that disregards any questioning of the economic and social conditions that make such freedom possible"* (Hilgers, 2011, p. 351)

I would like to draw attention to this idea of "freedom," because contemporary advertisements that I analyse later also tend to articulate a vision of freedom for the Indian woman, but one that is very differently anchored aligning with post feminism and neoliberalism (Chaudhary, 2014, pp.145-59). Expanding on the discourse of post feminism within a neoliberal context, Wilson (2015) asserts that this agenda serves to "prolong and intensify gender-based disparities in order to uphold and reinforce the mechanisms of worldwide capital accumulation" (p.1), which is increasingly evident in advertisements. Keeping this in mind, this study emphasises that entrepreneurialism is not just a market-related ethic but has a gendered dimension to it as well—wherein women are exhorted to take responsibility for themselves and to produce themselves as productive citizens, exhibiting initiative to cope with precarious times. Nandini Gooptu (2013) suggests that the ideal neoliberal "enterprising self" is "... one who is optimistic, creative, takes initiatives, embraces opportunities, and above all, is resilient". This analysis uses Gill and Orgad's (2018) idea which emphasises on resilience as a manifestation of the expanding psychological focus

within neoliberalism, amplified by austerity measures, leading to the creation of novel modes of existence via self-perception and self-regulation (pp. 477-95).

Within this framework, the perspective shifts beyond conventional perceptions of neoliberalism solely as a political and economic ideology. Instead, it delves into the ways in which neoliberal concepts permeate and solidify within common understanding, embedding themselves within the intricacies of daily existence (Littler, 2017). This shift in focus highlights an increasing recognition of the necessity to scrutinise neoliberalism as a psychological endeavour (Gill & Orgad, 2018).

### The Indian Middle-Class Identity

The formation of the neoliberal consumer identity in India was moulded by prevailing religious and class perspectives, influenced by the ascendance of Hindu nationalists during the 1980s; indeed, the middle class were and continue to be disproportionately upper caste and Hindu (Oza, 2006, p.13). Both factors were integral in solidifying middle-class identities, and consequently, the consumer culture and what (or rather, who) it catered to. This has, to a significant extent, bolstered existing systemic hierarchies between genders and within the realm of women in India. These hierarchies often correspond to divisions based on religious affiliations, socioeconomic status, and caste distinctions (Chaudhuri, 2001, pp.191-98).

The importance of the Indian middle class's emergence in the dynamics of neoliberal consumption and the reconfiguration of public discourse has been crucial (Singh, 2019, p.182). Although the Indian middle class accounts for a mere 3 percent of the overall population, yet despite this demographic distribution, most neoliberal movements concentrate only on the middle-class population (Yengde, 2019, p. 148). A clear pattern emerges when the majority of the Indian population comprising the economically vulnerable working class is looked at through the lens of caste, revealing that most of them predominantly belong to the lower caste (ibid.). Therefore, neoliberalism taps into the existing social structure of India, attempting to resist selective patriarchal structures which do not threaten the position of the oppressive class, religious and caste identities—thus bringing the exploiter on its side. It has so far not been able to involve women who are Dalits alongside Muslims and other minorities in its fold. (Yengde,

2019, p. 215). It is more than a denial and amounts to an epistemological erasure of marginalised women's narratives (A. Singh, 2019).

### Post feminism, empowerment, and the Indian Woman

The term "post-feminism" holds varied meanings and is debated, encompassing notions of a departure from second-wave feminism, a historical transition, and a regressive standpoint. The interaction between feminism and post feminism is intricate and often described as an "entanglement," wherein feminism is both acknowledged and criticised (Gill, 2016; McRobbie, 2009). Post feminism embodies a simultaneous incorporation, modification, and depoliticization of certain aspects of feminism in systematic manners, which reject feminism as inconsequential and unfavourable (Dejmanee, 2015; Gill, 2016; Goldman, 1992). I adopt the interpretation prevalent in Indian media— a unique sensibility comprising themes like individualism, choice, and empowerment. An associated seam of research has explored how media feminism has aided women's internalising of postfeminist norms under the umbrella of empowerment such as confidence and responsibility (Gill and Orgad, 2015, 2022; McRobbie, 2020).

### The Confidence Dispotif

Confidence consists of strategies that focus internally on cultivating self-belief in women (Gill and Orgad, 2015, p. 330). It acts as an individualising tool fostering self-regulation, reshaping contemporary discussions on social injustices to be framed in individual terms. This places the responsibility, blame, and solutions for pain and injustice on women (Windels et al., 2019). "Confidence emerges as a *gendered technology* of self, directed predominantly at women and requiring their intense labour" (Orgad & Gill, 2022, p.144).The culture of confidence exonerates societal, economic, and political forces from their role in producing and perpetuating inequality. Instead, it emphasises women's self-regulation and the pursuit of solutions within an upgraded form of confident subjectivity (ibid.). Moreover, the proposed solutions to this issue are highly standardised, often presented as prescriptive "steps" involving remarkably similar behavioural changes. These changes are intended to enable the cultivation and enhancement of confidence across a wide range of identities, ages, backgrounds, and circumstances—such as "practising mindfulness" and "maintaining



composure," among others. In this process of shaping a new feminine subject. Women are encouraged to turn inward and engage in self-work and self-governance. This approach encourages them to embrace vulnerability, thereby enhancing their confidence and resilience (ibid. p.145). Furthermore, it simply avoids all the important questions about the relationship between representations and Indian subjectivity, and about how socially constructed, mass-mediated ideals of "Indian" femininities are internalised and made our "own" (Gill, 2007, p.154).

Initial perceptions of post-feminism face a significant limitation in their focus on the experiences of white Western women (Dosekun 2015). Acknowledging the powerful influence of popular culture on shaping beliefs, values, and expectations, it becomes essential to examine how gender-related aspects are presented beyond Western contexts (Spencer et al., 2018, p.3). While highlighting the marginalised, gender cannot be employed exclusively, disregarding its intricate intersections with class and the unique historical contexts of non-Western postcolonial societies. As noted by Clara Nubile (2003), contemporary Indian women continue to navigate challenges tied to nation specific traditions, historical legacies, and the entrenched patriarchal system (p. 27), which intersects with factors like class, caste, and religion. Therefore, this study intentionally shifts its attention away from Western contexts, aiming to understand how post feminism empowers particular forms of urban femininities in India. Rooted in ongoing theoretical discussions encompassing gender, femininity, feminism, and post-feminism; in doing so this research strives to offer a more intricate comprehension of gender and femininity within the Indian setting.

### Women Empowerment in India

Present-day Indian media acknowledges the impact of these feminist concepts on modern Indian female consumers which is often highlighted as signs of women's empowerment, particularly during International Women's Day.

Since the 1990s through to the present, feminist origin stories have resiliently centred the leadership of women who reformed or revived Hindu traditions. In so doing, instead of taking into account Indian patriarchy as a relational and uneven force in the lives of dominant class and caste-oppressed women, it focuses on upper class Brahmanical feminism which fixates

on pluralising feminism. Their encounters are framed to symbolise the ordeals of marginalised individuals in the context of India (Yengde, 2019, p. 217). Academics belonging to oppressed castes, like Chinnaiah Jangam (2016), have noted that the privileged Brahmanical upper classes in India tend to amalgamate concepts like "the subaltern" in a way that exclusively caters to themselves within universally circulating categorisations. Scholars like Devaleena Das (2020) further assert feminism should demonstrate responsiveness to the varied lives of marginalised individuals, encompassing intra-national contexts. However, the current pluralistic approach inadvertently remains ignorant despite plentiful evidence and continues to silence feminism catering to the marginalised religious, caste and class femininities by claiming to represent Indian feminism.

Ultimately, this phenomenon attains prominence as an element within a discourse that addresses power dynamics. It signifies that as specific interpretations of Indian feminism gain ascendancy and come under scrutiny, alternative perspectives and viewpoints naturally diminish in prominence (Banet-Weiser, 2018 as referenced in Lauri & Lauri, 2023, p. 3). Thereby creating an illusion that only a specific women's movement favouring hegemony is representative of all Indian women. While grasping the importance of representations of the emergent nationalist Indian identity remains pivotal, it is essential to emphasise that the project does not advocate a singular perspective or interpretation of this notion. The diverse array of languages, religions, and cultures prevalent within India profoundly influence the immediate and interconnected considerations addressed within this undertaking.

### Representation of Women in Indian Media

In the context of advertising, postfeminist discourse isn't always characterised by a progressive outlook, as Lazar (2006, pp. 505-17) suggests. Instead, it utilises feminist principles to create symbols or representations that lack substantial political meaning (Goldman, 1992). Citizen-consumers have emerged as a product of this neoliberal environment which instead turns purchasing into a political statement (Banet-Weiser & Mukherjee, 2012), as well as a statement of personal identity (Manfredi- Sanchez, 2019). Advertisements increasingly have two purposes—to promote the brand and to be an activist for a social cause. This essay will conceptualise these dual purposes as being part of the neoliberal environment in India, where

the lines between the commercial and socio-political realms are increasingly blurred (Banet-Weiser & Mukherjee, 2012).

Advertisements in India have become so pervasive that culture and branding are now intricately intertwined, that they are now conceptualised as leaders of culture (Gill & Kanai, 2019, p.141). This paper thus views empowerment through the lens of strategic communication (Holzhausen & Zerfass, 2015, p.4), characterised by the growing fusion of social and market value. The primary tension of brand activism revolves around scrutinising the authenticity of a brand's intentions when engaging in feminist endeavours. The contemporary trend of brand advocacy can be seen as a continuation of cause-related marketing. Varadarajan and Menon (1988) elucidate on cause-related marketing as a strategy wherein companies can achieve profitability while also contributing positively, achieved through a fusion of philanthropy and promotional activities. Therefore, backing widely supported social causes can serve to conceal practices that predominantly advantage the corporation and its affiliated socio-political and economic elites (Banet-Weiser & Mukherjee, 2012).

Incorporating feminist causes into market discourse offers a structure for determining when and to what extent to participate in activism. However, a considerable portion of campaigns tends to adopt a mildly progressive yet non-controversial approach (ibid.). This is because, when brands align with more polarised policies, they run the risk of isolating consumers who hold opposing views (Moorman, 2020); this tactic leads to erasure of the representation of the majority femininities which do not conform to the hegemonic norms in India.

### Women in Gender Advertisements in India

With the liberalisation of the economy in the 1990s, the nature of discourse on gender changed rapidly (Singh, 2019). As a result of this convergence, there was a pronounced prominence of gender within an extensively communicated and heavily mediated popular culture. In media, feminism and gender emerge as favoured elements to underpin narratives and visuals, serving to depict both their own essence and the concept of the "global nation" (Chaudhuri, 2005). Finally, this led to a form of reterritorialization which centred around middle-class women's roles (Fernandes, 2000, pp. 611-28). Advertisements centred on women's

empowerment frequently embody an inherent aspirational quality, presenting an idealised image of women that acts as a role model for others to emulate. BJP shifted opposition from economic concerns to a gendered cultural confrontation linked with globalisation (Fernandes, 2000, pp. 624). The nationalist resistance, demonstrated through the BJP's swadeshi strategy, centred on preserving the perceived integrity of 'Indian culture'. This emphasis was underscored by apprehensions about potential threats to the "purity" of women (Ibid, p.624).

### National Identities and Women Empowerment

This evolving perception of Indian womanhood is marked by an ambivalent condition, where women are both held in high esteem and subjected to oppression, venerated, and harassed, possessing the freedom to express themselves across various spheres yet often silenced. Even the educated and privileged young women belonging to the middle class find themselves in this complex state. They navigate a dual existence, simultaneously engaging with tradition, rituals, and customary norms while navigating the contemporary world (Thapan, 2001, pp. 33-34). While an unfortunate dichotomy between modern and traditional does emerge as a result of this, how this manifest in reality is a lot more complex and nuanced. It is these complexities and nuances that this project works to demonstrate through analysing advertisements (Fernandes, 2000, pp. 611-28). Hybridity, a social category which has been a central marker of transnationalism (Bhabha, 1994). Media visuals construct a perception of the Indian nation by idealising the urban middle class and emerging consumption patterns. This portrayal of the "global" is established by cultural symbols interwoven with nationalist storytelling. Additionally, media depictions illustrate India's connection to the global economy by showcasing a blended interaction between the national and the global. Ultimately, the impact of globalisation in India has triggered a process of reterritorialization, enforcing the limits of gender-based societal norms (Fernandes, 2000, p. 612). Depictions of the 'new Indian woman' (Munshi, 1998) endeavour to navigate the inherent contradictions within the framework of globalisation politics. The gender-infused vision of India's future emerges through a paradoxical series of politics.

The media encapsulates images of this 'new Indian woman', one who is tasked with reconciling her national identity and modernity, embodying both her Indian heritage and contemporary attributes (Rajan, 1993, p.132). In this context, gender functions as a socio-

symbolic platform aimed at handling the disruptive contradictions arising from globalisation's impact on the Indian nation. The entwining of nationalist narratives with depictions of global economic and cultural dynamics exists in a strained balance with the broader global power dynamics (Fernandes, 2000, p. 623). While the concept of the 'new Indian woman' promotes the suppression of conflict and the homogenisation of identity into a form of distinct individualism, Sunder Rajan (1994) presents an alternative perspective. She introduces the concept of the 'discomforts of political feminism,' portraying female subjects as both the battleground for ideological clashes and the creators of feminist unity (pp.273-85). Sunder Rajan rejects a uniform definition of 'Indian femininity' just as she discards any straightforward explanatory connection between the psychological and the cultural, or between representation and reality. In line with this perspective, this paper examines media representations of women empowerment as a space of contestation, where both dominant oppression and gendered resistance can exist.

### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK & RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Given India's intricate socio-cultural tapestry with its abundant diversity and intricate history, the concept of *intersectionality* (Crenshaw, 1991) becomes essential as a foundation for this research. Examining how the Women's Day advertisements valorise certain femininities over others. This prompts an exploration of how representations of visibilised identities can intensify symbolic oppression since the majority of discourse surrounding women's empowerment movements in India often focuses on the Western imperial framework as the primary issue by creating a ubiquitous national image of the ideal "Indian" woman (Yengde, 2019, p. 215). A significant amount of work has been done to theorise representations of Indian women in advertisements and inter-national culture however, relatively little has been written on how these representations of "Indianness" intersect with homogeneous positioning of Indian women within the diverse contexts of family, class, religious community, and nation. Reminding us that the burden of a constructivist approach to the identity-category of gender must remain one of political and social change (Rajan, 1994, pp.273-85). Therefore, this paper prioritises the adoption of an 'intersectional way of thinking about the problems of sameness and difference and its relation to patriarchal power structures' (Cho et al., 2013, p.795).

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The analysis further deemed it necessary to capture how disparate ideologies such as post feminism and neoliberalism coalesce in shaping a selfhood that not only glorifies self-enterprise which excludes the intersectionality specific to India, but in doing so, also posits it as women empowerment. A neoliberal context in India provides sufficient background for understanding the ways in which the advertisement's content functions as it demands extensive emotional labour, instituting regimes of self-perfection (Elias & Gill, 2017) throwing light on how the politics of empowerment isn't exclusively focused on gender but is also constitutive of specific dominant discourses the uneven social relations within Indian femininities (Elias *et al.*, 2016, pp.10). Considering the self-optimising empowered woman, these gendered advertisements mobilise the neoliberal perspective, as it promises to give women the "freedom" to "seamlessly" "stay motivated" in reaching their personal and professional goals (Gill & Orgad, 2018). Additionally, it examines the inherent contradictions in postfeminist ideology, in that it maintains that women are fundamentally free, yet invariably beholden to neoliberal, capitalist expectations to achieve maximised productivity and efficiency (Gill, 2008). Together the established norms of post feminism and neoliberalism intricately shape the gendered messaging employed by brands, capitalising on what is termed 'double entanglement,' signifies the simultaneous existence of dominant values alongside liberalised gender politics, which collectively influence women's decision-making, ultimately undermining the pursuit of empowerment (McRobbie, 2004).

Within the existing framework, this study aims to shed light on advertisements employing strategic messaging that renders persuasive neo-liberalised empowerment with Indian (post)femininities; further contextualising brand activism within these pre-existing dynamics of privileging normative 'Indian' femininities (Shankar, 2019, pp.112-19). This research, therefore, addresses a gap in the literature by connecting these domains of scholarship using discursive approaches. While simultaneously, enriching the scarce research in Indian feminist studies that conceptualises intersectional identities concerning mainstream media consumed by the majority. In a time when Indian brands are placing significant emphasis on socially responsible endeavours, and often commercialising important movements like feminism, it becomes crucial to examine how the social issue (in this instance, feminism) is presented in advertisements. Given that power dynamics are inherently embedded within representations (Orgad, 2015, p.62), and these representations exert influence by shaping our understanding

of reality; therefore, building upon the literature review and discourses prevalent in female empowerment advertising, the research question was carefully crafted to actively interact with the complex interplay of power, knowledge construction, and representation, aiming to dissect:

RQ: How and to what extent do women's day commercials in India use the rhetoric of empowerment to regulate the existing patriarchal power structures?

SQ1: In what ways are representations of empowerment constructed while negotiating intersectionality and normative femininities in India?

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This chapter aims to outline the research approach and methods employed to address the previously mentioned research question. The initial part offers a justification for prioritising video advertisements and explains the rationale behind selecting Women's Day campaigns for scrutiny. The following segment elaborates on the research design encompassing the chosen methodologies: audio-visual discourse analysis and the criteria for sampling. The concluding section delves into ethical considerations and the researcher's self-awareness within the study.

### Analysing Video Advertisements

Robert Goldman's observation highlights the commonplace nature of advertisements and the habitual way we interpret them, causing us to overlook the profound societal assumptions they carry. Their role as carriers of ideology often escapes our notice (1992, p.1). Hence, exploring how Women's Day advertisements serve as a focal point of tension for diverse notions of femininity in India was deemed appropriate. Opting for audio-visual content, I deliberately chose this medium over text and images due to studies indicating that the convergence of spoken, auditory, and visual elements in videos have a particularly potent effect on shaping the public's perception (Waters & Jones, 2011, p. 249). Given that my research query investigates brands' dual objectives of neoliberalism and post feminism, delving into

the storytelling within video campaigns yields a more holistic comprehension of how feminist brand activism becomes intertwined with specific patriarchal ideologies.

### Audio Visual Discourse Analysis

The research question's objective is to pinpoint the normative conventions and portrayals featured in Indian Women's Day advertisements, linking these findings to broader discourses about postfeminist culture and neoliberal ideology. A comprehensive examination of these commercials requires an interdisciplinary approach that accounts for a fusion of elements within the moving image, along with its societal context (Rose, 2012; Tonkiss, 1998). Within the framework of visual analysis, utilising AVDA proves fitting, as it enables the revelation of the significance attributed to specific forms of aspirational Indian femininities (Gill, 2000, p. 176). These depictions are meticulously crafted through the arrangement of shots, dialogues, and text, and are intricately intertwined with intricate social dynamics within the Indian subcontinent (Rose, 2012, p. 5). Guided by Tonkiss, the focus shifts to visuality itself as a research subject. Recognising discourses as socially constructed rather than individual creations, this analysis is particularly attentive to the *social modality* of the image (Rose, 2001, p.129), exploring how particular versions of empowerment are “constructed as real, truthful or natural through particular *regimes of truth*” (Foucault, 2012). As Gill (1996, p. 143) emphasises, all discourse is strategically crafted for persuasion. I employ AVDA to investigate how representations of women empowerment employ persuasive techniques that shape dominant postfeminist discourses within the Indian context since discourses wielding societal influence rely on asserting their knowledge as true (Rose, 2001, p.140). This knowledge, according to Foucault (1971) is produced by *discourse*, which is a way of organising information or representative elements to structure our understanding of the social milieu. Foucault (2012, p. 37) describes it as '*systems of dispersion*', which reveals relationships among discourse components when consistent patterns arise (arrangements, associations, transformations). This aids in revealing how elements within the text, which assert truthfulness or mimic natural patterns (Gill, 2000; Rose, 2001), are structured. To gauge the effectiveness of audio-visual analysis, a preliminary investigation involved analysing a single video advertisement related to a pilot study in which the adoption of confidence culture aligned with what Foucault referred to as a *dispositif*– a combination of discursive formation



and knowledge that shapes a new technology of self, giving rise to fresh subjectivities or modes of existence (Foucault, 1980). This process revealed that for a discursive formation to effectively interlink meanings within a particular discourse, there is a necessity of a larger sample size to thoroughly examine *intertextual* elements. This is because the interpretations of any given discursive image or text “rely not only on that specific instance but also on the connotations present in other images and texts” (Rose, 2001, p.136). Consequently, the research methodology for this study has been adapted, as it recognises the significance of a diverse sample in articulating intertextuality within that discourse (Rose, 2001, p.136).

AVDA, in its final aspect, considers that the power of discourse often lies in its *unspoken elements* (Rose, 2012, p.158). This approach facilitates the exploration of hidden depictions and omissions within the text (Gill, 2000, p.180). Analysing both how characters are portrayed and how they aren't can unveil not only the regulation of empowerment but also the reinforcement of it through influential imagery and compelling ideological forces shaping femininity. Given the broad diversity in socio-economic and cultural contexts within the Indian population, examining how characters are visually coded assists in deciphering the intended social groups they symbolise. This, in turn, reveals the favoured femininities over others.

### Notes on other Methods

Research focused on audio-visual advertisements typically involves a semiotic approach. While this approach does raise concerns about the framework through which empowerment is constructed and performed, it may not effectively uncover emerging dominant discursive links. In contrast, Audio Visual Discourse Analysis (AVDA) facilitates the exploration of connections within and between texts to better understand the creation of the discourse itself (Rose, 2001, p. 151).

### Sampling Strategy

Audio Visual Discourse Analysis places greater emphasis on the quality rather than the quantity of visual data collected, underscoring the importance of in-depth examination and representative data collection (Tonkiss, 1998, p. 253). To start, I referred to the Forbes Global 2000 list (Forbes, 2023) and selected the five most successful Indian brands based on their parent companies' prominence in the country. These included Bajaj Allianz insurance (Bajaj

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Finserv Ltd.), Reliance Fresh (Reliance Industries Ltd.), ICICI Lombard (ICICI Bank), PregaNews (Mankind Pharma), and Tanishq (TATA Group). This array ranges from India's largest general insurance services like Bajaj Allianz and ICICI Lombard to Reliance Fresh, the nation's largest retailer. Among them are companies exclusively targeting women through products like pregnancy tests (PregaNews) and jewellery (Tanishq). All these companies cater to middle-class audiences, with considerable influence in the industry and over a significant portion of Indian consumers.

### Video Advertisement selection

Next, I deliberately employed operational construct sampling to choose the 5 video advertisements (as displayed in Table 1) that effectively embodied themes from existing literature, aiming for a comprehensive examination (Eitkan & Musa, 2016; Drauker et al., 2007). Such was the potency of the subject matter in them that I structured my analysis around the prevalent themes each advertisement conveyed with respect to my research query. Moreover, to ensure a contemporary exploration of the discourse on women empowerment in India, I exclusively selected the most recent Women's Day advertisements within the time span of 2018-2023. Lastly, to mitigate confirmation bias, I exclusively chose the highly popular advertisements with views surpassing 1 million. I specifically opted for advertisements with a duration of less than 5 minutes, as research indicates that shorter videos are adept at conveying a compelling narrative (Jones, 2021).

**Table 1: Sampled advertisements**

Brand name	Parent company	Name of video	Year uploaded	Views (As of 25 June)
<b>Bajaj Allianz</b>	Bajaj	Wo sambhal legi	2022	4M
<b>Reliance Fresh</b>	Reliance Industries	Jee le zara	2018	1.5M

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<b>ICICI</b>	ICICI	Fitness ka vaada	2021	1.2M
<b>PregaNews</b>	Mankind Pharma	She can carry both	2022	8.4M
<b>Tanishq</b>	TATA	The superwoman	2023	13M

### Research Design

My framework was influenced by various sources on discourse analysis for audio-visual content. Notably, I incorporated aspects of visual analysis as outlined by Ledin and Machin (2018), which provided a holistic grasp of video narrative structures. This was instrumental in breaking down individual shots and revealing the underlying discourses within them. Within a Feminist-Foucauldian framework, I integrated elements from Rose (2001), Gill (2000) and Van Leeuwen (2001). This comprised of analysis at the level of the semiotic, ideological, and contextual level (Yan and Santos, 2009, pp. 300- 301)

On the semiotic level, interpretations of visual images tend to align with the framework where the meanings of an image originate therefore, we are concerned with the *“image as the site”* (Rose, 2001, p. 16). Here, discerning meanings involves two key steps.

Firstly, identifying what an advertisement portrays, I pay attention to the narrative structure of advertisements (Ledin and Machin, pp. 133-134), simultaneously looking at the specific elements such as dialogue, language, clothes, setting, characters, background music and text. This will enable us to "uncover the prejudices beneath the sleek exterior of aesthetics" (Iversen, 1986, p. 84), allowing for a more profound understanding of how representations of Indian women convey socially constructed meanings, deducing the concepts or values conveyed by the image (Van Leeuwen, 2001).

Second, AVDA proves useful in unravelling the process of reconfiguring ideologies within advertisements. I examine the discursive themes naturalised by the brands by asking: How is the brand’s version of empowerment persuasive in creating the ‘Regime of Truth’? How do the representations of empowerment interact with the Indian patriarchal structures and create

knowledge structures? I examine neoliberal discourses of empowerment from the perspective of binary oppositions by asking: Where does the responsibility of empowerment lie? Which women are portrayed as empowered? What specific behavioural actions are linked to empowerment? How do material elements in the surrounding environment define the empowered individual?

Lastly, we analyse the context in which discourse is produced as it plays a significant role in shaping the intended audience for images and texts. While diverse methods in visual analysis prioritise different modalities, I focus on the contextual aspect, exploring how AVDA operates within the social modality (Rose, 2012) aligning with the goals of this research. This modality delves into the practices surrounding the advertisements, encompassing India's socio-economic and political dynamics that influence their interpretation. To investigate this, I employ visual theories such as individualization, collectivization, genericity, and specificity (Ledin and Machin, 2018), allowing for a deeper exploration of how Indian women are represented in terms of both similarity and difference.

### Ethics and Reflexivity

The research did not raise any major ethical issues since the data sample examined was public information without identifiable people or groups. The research goals and methods were sanctioned by the supervisor, following the ethical guidelines established by the London School of Economics and Political Science. Because individuals' interpretation of advertisements is constructed by their specific "cultural, political, social, linguistic, and economic backgrounds" (Patton, 2015, p. 71), conducting AVDA necessitates a certain level of self-awareness and introspection. To comprehensively grasp the nuances of the audio-visual content, it's crucial to acknowledge and take into account my own predispositions and preconceptions, thereby avoiding the imposition of my personal perspectives onto the analysis. As a researcher, I actively engage in self-reflection on my own positionality to better comprehend how my unique experiences influence my understanding of the chosen sample.

By engaging in self-examination, I understand that academic knowledge, like all types of knowledge, is influenced and limited by its surrounding circumstances (Rose, 2016, p. 180).

Firstly, as a feminist graduate student obtaining a master's degree in media and communications, my interest in this subject is shaped by my personal experiences.

Secondly, as a millennial, my outlook is impacted by research showing high demand for brand activism among my generation (Sanchez, 2021). Thirdly, I recognize my perspective on ads for women's empowerment and my research question itself are influenced by my own dealings with self-confidence and regulation of emotions as a woman in a patriarchal environment. Lastly, I admit my privileged identity as an able-bodied, heterosexual, cisgender, Hindu, upper-caste, upper-class Indian woman may have guided my research path and methodology, potentially limiting the study's range (Munro, 2013).

### Limitations

While AVDA has its advantages, it is noteworthy to know that it does not aim to provide an exhaustive understanding of the true meaning, intention, or reception of the discourse (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Instead, its focus is on the investigation of the sample itself (Gill, 1996, p. 141). As a result, the decision-making process and audience perceptions remain outside its scope. It's important to recognize that AVDA may have the potential to influence social practices, structures, and life, but its impact on society is not guaranteed (Fairclough, 2003, p. 24). Therefore, while we can scrutinise Indian women's day campaigns as outcomes of specific discourses, we cannot analyse how the campaign influences the very discourses of post feminism from which it originates.

### Scope for future research

Despite the constraints, I am confident that AVDA is an appropriate method to tackle the project's purpose. Although not providing conclusive answers, AVDA can provide insightful perspectives on understanding social phenomena. Furthermore, it can enrich ongoing discussions and stimulate additional research. For future investigations, researchers might explore interviews or focus groups that consider the diverse intersectional experiences of Indian women, enhancing the understanding of the advertisements studied in this project.

## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter thoroughly analyses the five chosen advertisements (Table 1) and discusses the identified themes. In the initial segment, the focus lies on the theme of hybridity in connection to the prevailing nationalist hegemonic patriarchal discourse in India. This is explored by delving into how the advertisements employ narratives of confidence culture to construct the homogenisation of the empowered woman through *discursive means*. The following section examines the theme of inequality among Indian women themselves by looking at silences, and (in)visibilities. It reveals the intricate link between neoliberalism, gendered empowerment along with class and caste dynamics in India, thereby producing potent *notions of truth* concerning these empowered normative femininities.

### The Homogenised Indian Woman

Empowerment advertisements do not merely serve as a passive reflector of wider social and cultural processes but instead become a central site in which the Indian patriarchal discourse is re-imagined through the hybridised portrayal of the Indian woman (Fernandes, 2021). Additionally, it becomes the woman's exclusive duty to elevate herself (Gill, 2016) despite challenges, representing a 'conceived' femininity that reaffirms the existing postfeminist narratives in India— wherein the empowered subject is characterised by three main attributes: (1) the positive self, (2) the 'bounce-backable' self, and (3) the injured-self within the makeover paradigm (Gill & Orgad, 2018). As displayed in the literature review, confidence culture becomes a form of a gendered technology that perpetuates normative (in)visibility of particular Indian femininities under the facade of empowerment. This creation of empowerment is manifest in the sampled advertisements consisting of a similar structure and stages, unveiling the direction of the latent discourse they engage with (Iedema, 2003 as cited in Ledin and Machin, 2018, pp. 501-13).

All the advertisements begin by *orienting* the viewers with the initial situation which sets the premise by hailing the audience into the “regular” lives of Indian women. Then, comes a *complication*, wherein the women are shown as grappling with a challenge rooted in the Indian patriarchal society— ranging from handling household chores, balancing work, and children,

managing personal fitness, to facing stereotypes and aiming for “balance” in every sphere of life.

These stages lead to the *resolution* of the commercial where the women are shown overcoming the challenge by making behavioural changes and being as self-confident, self-governing, self-optimised, empowered individuals who can do it all.

In the ultimate *coda* stage, the advertisement hails the ideal Indian woman who has transformed herself and yet maintained harmony in the Indian society, setting an aspirational precedent for the viewers (Analysis available in Appendix A).

Firstly, the advertisements encode empowerment in their titles, displaying a call for action disguised as a seemingly motivating lexicon. All these actions carry with them certain expectations from an ideal empowered Indian woman:

Reliance Fresh (2018): *Jee Le Zara* [Live a little]

CICI Lombard (2021): *Fitness Ka Vaada* [The promise of fitness]

BAJAJ Allianz (2022): *Woh Sambhal Legi* [She will manage]

Prega News (2022): *She Can Carry Both*

Tanishq (2023): *The Superwoman*

All these actions to achieve empowerment are directed towards the woman alone. Moreover, this language of empowerment is advertised as coming naturally to women and is always depicted as being within every woman’s reach, thereby creating powerful *effects of truth*. In the Indian context, all the commercials depict femininities which cater perfectly to *hybridity* (Rajan,1993) as discussed in the literature review. Walking on the tightrope between the national and the global, an “empowered” woman’s identity is always constructed with relation to family (Fernandes, 2000, p. 623). Empowerment gains its discursive influence by strategically assembling fragmented semiotic components, encompassing factors such as character actions, shot, props, attire, background score and dialogues (Gill, 2000, p.180). While all the characters adhere to the hegemonic cultural categorisations (Ledin & Machin, 2018, p.

199) i.e Indian women wearing a combination of traditional Hindu attire such as Indo-Western kurtis and sarees, it's Prega News (2022,1:37-2:38) which depicts an aspirational nationalist imagery by creating a normative femininity through binary oppositions between "Western" and "Indian". A clear juxtaposition is presented between the childless woman donned in dark coloured western clothes– whose behaviour displays the quality of individualism and ambition as she is engrossed in her laptop work, and the woman adorned in a traditional pink Indian saree with a bindi (predominantly worn by Hindu women) whose actions are coded as nurturing as she seeks a solution to soothe her crying baby.

The first way through which we observe a discourse on empowerment centres on resistance– by rejecting adverse emotions in favour of positive sentiments such as optimism (Gill & Orgad, 2018). This is depicted through their contrasting dialogues and actions to further negotiate who is the desirable empowered woman: with the former being pessimistic and interrogative– as she is shown as scoffing and questioning other women's decision to have kids by asking: "ever since this baby entered your life and you became a mother, don't you think it took away your freedom, aspirations and individuality?" Whereas the woman in the saree is calm and caring, displaying a positive 'can- do' girl power attitude, while maintaining a smile throughout; as she embraces the postfeminist sensibility and the liberated autonomy (Gill, 2008, p. 442).

The advertisement concludes by hailing modern nationalist femininity as the traditional woman is revealed to be the Senior Superintendent of Police overseeing the district, portrayed as accountable for both productive and reproductive tasks; the image of the aspiring entrepreneur is thus given feminised qualities (Gill & Kanai, 2019, p.134).

While these challenges the usual associations of motherhood with domesticity, her body, illustrated in Figure 1, conforms to dominant Hindu norms emphasising traditional female responsibilities– the *mise en scene* depicts an empowered woman in the foreground, standing with a content smile and her baby, while the woman behind her gazes in astonishment at her unwavering dedication and accomplishments as a neoliberal individual having connotations of authority.



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The Tanishq (2023, 0:01-0:45) campaign also employs a comparable approach of reconciling familial values with the modern, such narratives borrow from older, historically specific meanings that present a fusion between national tradition and global capitalism (Fernandes, 2000, p.615). In this campaign, the "superwoman" is initially presented as the epitome of Indian womanhood, where the narrator uses dialogue to juxtapose balance between life at work and home: "She manages the office and also the household; she neither forgets her presentation, nor her relatives' birthday presents; she manages to fit in 30 hours of work in just a day, every day; she puts everyone's needs before hers always; she never stops, never tires and shines always." At a discursive level, these roles subtly evoke the rhetoric of Double Entanglement (McRobbie, 2015) wherein the women are allowed to liberate and modernise themselves, all the while upholding patriarchal responsibilities which do not disrupt their relations with their families. An Indian woman who recognizes her cultural heritage and familial relationships is deemed exemplary. The Hindi term "sanskari," encapsulates this concept could be perceived as a prevailing sensibility within Indian femininity today (Fernandes, 2000, pp. 611-28). In particular, such images often invoke *ideologies* of domesticity and family order.



**Figure 1. The empowered Indian woman in PregaNews (See Figure B1)**

The second way we witness the negotiation of empowerment is through the 'bounce-backable' woman, who is expected to swiftly recover from setbacks (Gill & Orgad, 2018), these

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are usually caused due to inequalities between men and women who are positioned against each other; the way to overcome them is by making changes in their behaviour that transform women towards becoming empowered. These changes are positioned as being (supposedly) minor, swift, uncomplicated, and importantly, non- disruptive (ibid.) to the ingrained patriarchal power dynamics, presenting an optimistic interpretation of feminism and equality. (Gill, 2007, p. 145)

This is evident in both BAJAJ Allianz (2022, 0:43-0:59) and Reliance Fresh (2018, 0:06-0:10), where men are depicted as belittling the female protagonist through their actions, placing the burden of achieving independence and surmounting obstacles entirely on the woman. In the BAJAJ Allianz (2022), a woman whose car is involved in an accident is portrayed as purposefully disregarding a group of men who are harassing her on the street by saying: “the car has broken down and this woman wants to take a selfie!” another man says, “she should be driving with a learner’s sign”. Creating this intricate situation, the advertisement utilises dialogues and actions to reinforce the notion of a woman capable of resiliently overcoming the challenge of fixing her car.



**Figure 2. Independent woman (See Figure D1)**

She is shown as directing her focus on seeking assistance using her phone, as evidenced in Figure 2. refusing any man's aid, while simultaneously dismissing their mockery and consistently self-regulating her actions. The traditional ideal of a woman as rooted within

family, is unveiled when the ad concludes by invoking her relationship with her father, as she assures him by saying “don’t worry, I have it under control”. Eliciting the woman's role as a caregiver, both within and beyond the house (Amy-Chinn 2006, p.173). This perspective emphasises that transformation predominantly happens within women's minds, while the capitalist systems and material circumstances influencing them remain unaltered (Orgad & Gill, 2022, p.147).

Where on the one hand we see the woman becoming resilient without the help of men, conversely in Reliance Fresh (2018,0:06-0:10) we witness the. The advertisement mirrors the historical pattern of women engaging in familial and emotional labour within the domestic sphere (Ouellette and Wilson, 2011, pp. 548-565). Although the advertisement breaks the Indian stereotype of domestic work being performed by the woman, yet the duty of teaching the household tasks to the man predominantly falls on the woman.



**Figure 3 Calm demeanour of the wife as she smiles (Figure E2)**

A contrast emerges between the wife's expressions, restricted primarily to smiling and laughing as shown in figure 3, which are associated with care and gentleness. In contrast, the husband's expressions are the opposite—reflecting disapproval and hesitance. The role of the husband is infantilised as she patiently coerces him into performing chores despite his reluctance. The triumph of the empowered Indian woman is intensified with the background music accompanied by the tune of the bansuri (a traditional Indian flute predominantly

associated with Hinduism) and is complemented by a voiceover stating, "You live for him every day. Today, live a little for yourself." While this represents departure from the prevailing patriarchal expectations that confine the wives to the domestic sphere nevertheless, the nature of this freedom stays conditional on them fulfilling their traditional duties with a smile.

The last method of empowerment regulation parallels women's historical involvement in both public and private spheres. In the present, there's a need for an entrepreneurial mentality spanning personal and professional aspects. This trend necessitates the cultivation, management, improvement, and optimisation of oneself. This materialises as the makeover paradigm in advertisements (Gill & Orgad, 2018). The emphasis is on the need to alter oneself and reconstruct one's inner life, including aspects like the body, career, and home, which are portrayed as 'challenges' demanding continuous vigilance and effort (Gill, 2007, p. 155). The first way through which ICICI Lombard (2021) achieves the makeover paradigm is through dramatic editing, wherein there's crosscutting of scenes between four women viewing their lives as inadequate or incomplete, this is immediately followed by scenes where they are subsequently striving to enhance or reshape themselves by adopting altered daily routines with activities (Gill, 2007, p.156) like Karate, Kathak, running and Yoga. However, even though the ad depicts four different women, it homogenised them using collectivisation (Ledin & Machin, 2018) as women are depicted as sharing qualities within a group are generic. They are not presented as distinct individuals, but rather as archetypes within the simulation. Even in close-up shots, their cultural differences are not highlighted; instead, they all represent the dominant Hindu culture via the hobbies such as Kathak and Yoga and their attire as shown in Figure 4.



**Figure 4. Hindu woman embracing her hobby of Kathak (Figure C1)**

The goal—whether about taking breaks, or reclaiming identity— is framed as conquering self-imposed barriers hindering confidence, empowerment, and success. The concepts and methods explored in this section form what Foucault termed a *dispositif*: a combination of discourses, institutions, and regulatory methods that exhibit systematic and structured characteristics. The paths are uniform: from low to high self-esteem, from inadequate to elevated confidence, as seen in the concluding dialogue: “I think I'm getting my edge back”. The remedies are standardised "steps," necessitating similar behaviour modifications to cultivate confidence in diverse women (Orgad & Gill, 2022, p.145). Additionally, the familial, caring femininity is invoked when Simran says: “managing everyone’s routine in the house is my routine”. Non disruption is maintained when she further says “everyone’s routine in the house is the same, but mine is a little different” as she proceeds to do yoga.

### Intersectional Indian Femininity: empowerment across class hierarchies

The earlier segment highlighted the prevalence and frequent invocation of the concepts of women's "choice" and "agency," even as they remain within the boundaries of prevailing patriarchal systems. However, a significant implication of this is the suggestion that women are now free from the constraints of societal inequalities and power dynamics that could hinder their progress (Gill & Kanai, 2019, p.136). This section explores the gendered power

dynamics beneath the sanitised images of the comfort and satisfaction of the Brahmanical middle classes and how the normative empowered identity is structured by class inequalities within Indian women themselves (Oza, 2006, p.13).

An evident class, religion (and caste)-related trait of Indian ads is the frequent use of 'Hinglish'—a fusion of Hindi and English. Fernandes (2000) points out that the scope of this hybridity in 'Hinglish' extends beyond isolated word usage, categorising it as a middle-class phenomenon rather than cross-class (p. 621). Consequently, all analysed ads exhibit this hybrid language, reflecting a class-based cosmopolitanism prevalent in contemporary urban India. Likewise, the urban setting along with the material commodities in the advertisement's gains significance in this context. The material goods such utilised by empowered women also cross paths between hybridised tradition and class, this process goes a step further as they also delve into the realm of empowerment through commodification. As a visual approach, Gill and Orgad (2022, p. 20) argue that empowerment is conveyed through cues like women moving confidently through urban settings. In the analysed advertisements, the portrayal of a confident woman's identity indeed incorporates these elements, reinforced by the resources at her disposal. In Reliance Trends (2018) and Tanishq (2023) the women occupy spacious bungalows; In BAJAJ Allianz (2022) the woman owns a car while having access to a smartphone; Similarly, in PregaNews (2022) and ICICI Lombard (2021) the women are located in cosmopolitan cities. These settings themselves suggest the idea of 'disposable income' and 'independence'. These grand residences, smart-phones, and automobiles not only serve as indicators of middle-class status, but they are also presented as instruments for fostering family unity (Fernandes, 2000, p. 623). In doing so, while notions of empowerment are addressed to new audiences, especially women, it's only the middle-class women, in particular, who are interpellated as possessing the material and psychological resources to actualise resilience, and thus to become successful neoliberal subjects (Gill & Orgad, 2018). The cult of confidence also lays bare three additional significant aspects of confident exhortations to women in the context of work, which resonate with the confidence culture namely: (1) Normalising struggle; (2) Positive affect and the prohibition of negative feelings; and (3) Obligatory vulnerability (Orgad & Gill, 2021). Lastly, at the heart of exploring one's class standing lies examining the act of 'Othering,' which exists both in covert and overt forms (Yengde, 2019, p.44). Therefore, the portrayal of subjects who are marginalised in advertising

prompts us to expand our criticism beyond basic concepts of visibility and invisibility, urging us to inquire about the nature of visibility enabled by this discourse (Gill & Kanai, 2019, pp.142-43).

### Normalising Struggle

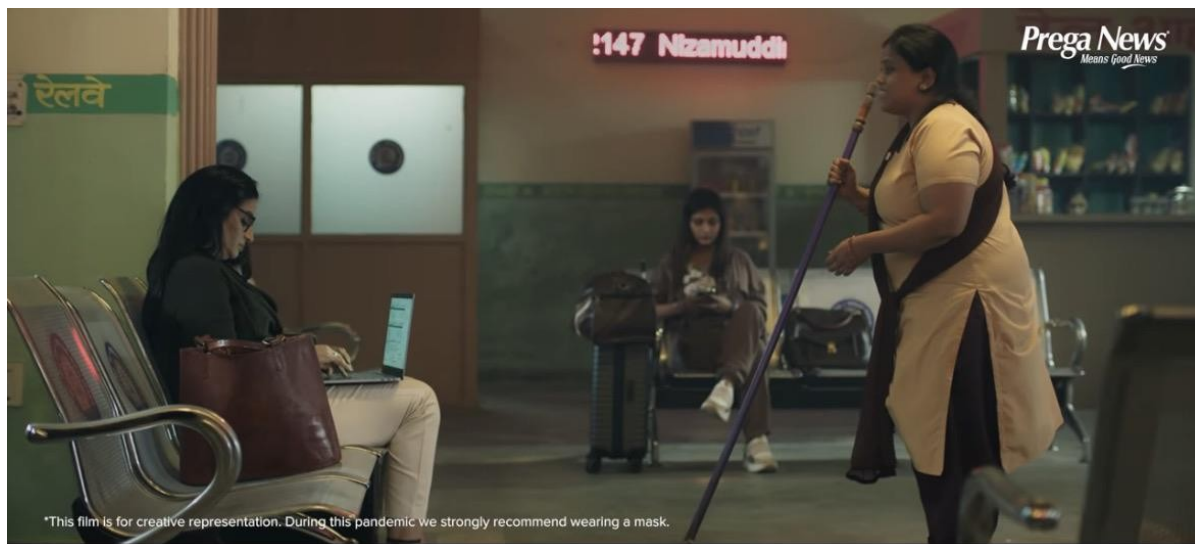
This contrast is particularly conspicuous in the Reliance Fresh (2018, 0:43-0:56) advertisement. While the upper-class female protagonist pauses her household duties to commemorate women's day; the unmentioned presence of the maid becomes apparent through her comment: "set the alarm, the maid will be here at 7am." This emphasises the hidden power dynamics among women, revealing the reality that those of higher social status can afford a respite from their everyday tasks, while those in lower socioeconomic positions are compelled to persist in their routine labour.

PregaNews (2022,1:06-1:23) takes this normalisation of struggle even further, as it advocates for the glorification of underprivileged women who are presented as exemplary embodiments of resilience, possessing the qualities that enable them to overcome challenges posed by adversity and uncertainty. The character of the sweeper holds significance in this context particularly as she is the sole representative from a lower class and supposedly caste background within the power dynamics. Her challenges are valorized, as she asserts, "what's there to manage; after 10 hours of cleaning duty, I do the mother's duty," portraying a dual role. This way of perceiving and existing within the world promotes the endorsement of the current order as the sole feasible arrangement and leverages personal capabilities to navigate neoliberalism with resilience and "courage." Conversely, she is simultaneously criticised for not exhibiting sufficient resilience, often associated with an individualistic "can-do" perspective on resilience, coupled with the transfer of responsibilities to the private domain (Bottrell, 2013). The advertisement disregards her context when the affluent working woman criticises her, implying that she's lagging in life due to managing multiple responsibilities. This shifts the responsibility for her economic circumstances solely onto her actions, rather than questioning the broader Indian neoliberal system that contributes to the challenges faced by individuals—like working long hours and dealing with unstable employment (Orgad & Gill, 2022, p.68). Lower-class women who openly assert their identity or display their caste

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culture often face rejection. They are frequently marginalised when asserting themselves in shared spaces with dominant- caste individuals. This can involve belittling Dalit economic circumstances (Yengde, 2019, p.44). We witness this when the working woman avoids making eye contact with the cleaning lady who belongs to the marginalised class and is associated with a lower caste due to her profession as shown in Figure- 5.

The concept of individualisation (Ledin & Machin, 2018, p. 201) is also intertwined with uniqueness, considering how characters are portrayed as distinct individuals, whether they exhibit specificity or generic qualities. An individual is typically identified by a name, which serves as a marker of their identity. Consequently, by sheer name, the protagonist- Seema Rastogi is designated as unique. In contrast, the sweeping lady remains unnamed, underscoring her lack of significance, thereby projecting only Seema Rastogi as the empowered individual even though both of them balance their work and children. Multiple differences are translated into a homogenous plane so that inequality is rearticulated as one individual difference from the norm—implicitly presented as a challenge—that can be overcome via self-belief, which is positioned as a simple, doable and uniting means through which we can all be empowered (Gill & Kanai, 2019, p.141).



**Figure 5. The upper-class woman refuses to look the maid in the eye. (See Figure B3)**

Julie Wilson and Emily Chivers Yochim (2017) demonstrate how resilience functions as an emotional capability for enduring and navigating the escalating uncertainties of neoliberalism.



In a setting characterised by severe fiscal constraints and expanding disparities, the phrase "resilience" has important meaning. It exhorts people to be flexible, put up with setbacks, and most crucially, make efficient use of scarce resources (Forkert, 2016, p. 10). ICICI Lombard (2021) effectively employs this messaging to lay emphasis on empowering oneself.

### Positive affect and prohibition of negative feelings

ICICI Lombard (2021) acknowledges the existence of inequality between privileged and underprivileged women in its conclusion with the following text:

"To encourage more women in the long run, we even distributed hundreds of fitness hampers to deserving women from less fortunate backgrounds. Let's promise ourselves to make our health a priority." (ICICI Lombard, 1:55-1:58)

Firstly, this portrayal occurs within the context of promoting a neoliberal consumer culture that overlooks historical and structural differences, as well as the immediate structural challenges faced by women from disadvantaged backgrounds beyond just physical fitness. Secondly, the primary spotlight remains on privileged upper-class women who have transformed their lives through continuous self-dedication and attaining empowerment. Meanwhile, the underprivileged women are marginalised, as the advertisement only asserts that the hampers were given to women from underprivileged backgrounds deemed "deserving." The emphasis is placed on the brand's altruistic nature and implies that the main qualities women from underprivileged backgrounds should incorporate to succeed is determination and strength, overshadowing class-based attitudes and material systems that influence individuals' encounters with inequality, which remain unnoticed. Lastly, conflates their existence with that of the privileged women by employing potent combination of positivity, motivation, and optimism is utilised to create messages which are situated within a framework of uniform individuality, wherein all women are understood through their connection to shared ambitions and aspirations (Gill & Kanai, 2019, p. 141). Therefore, ICICI Lombard (2021) uses women's fitness to suggest that "It may be unevenly and unfairly distributed, but is straightforward to acquire," Therefore the interest is not in why "fitness" is unequally and unjustly accessible—let alone what can be done to redress its distribution. Rather, it is the "quick altruistic fixes" that will enable its "straightforward" acquisition.

## Obligatory vulnerability

The implicit yet consistent message conveyed in all the aforementioned examples is the need to overcome insecurities and challenges through confidence, controlled behaviour and a positive attitude. Nevertheless, running parallel to these encouragements, a seemingly contradictory trend has emerged recently—advocating the discourse of vulnerability. This is exemplified by Tanishq (2023, 1:05-2:04), which employs voyeuristic editing, trailing the protagonist as she distances herself from the crowd to steal a moment of solitude. Her expressions swiftly shift from a poised confident smile to a weary frown. Maintaining direct eye contact with the camera, she asks the narrator to give her a break, asserting her own humanity. This attempt seeks to challenge the prevailing narrative of confident culture's unwavering resolve by embracing vulnerability and highlighting insecurities and suffering (Gill & Orgad, 2018, p. 70).

However, there are two aspects to this vulnerability. Firstly, she's permitted to display exhaustion only after being shown as expertly managing both her home and work responsibilities, possessing the means to take a break, while embodying the label of a "superwoman" as concluded via the text at the coda stage that reads "before she's a superhuman, she's human. "Certainly, the shift from the pressure of embodying the flawless and assured "Superwoman" to embracing vulnerability and imperfections also appears to be a realm of privilege. In an era marked by stark inequality, insecurity, and instability, only a handful of individuals can truly afford to display weakness, vulnerability, and a lack of control, consciously rejecting the mandate of confidence (p. 75). While these discussions appear to encompass all women in India, they are distinctly influenced by an upper middle-class and corporate perspective, contributing to the emergence of what Dawn Foster refers to as corporate "1% feminism." Likewise, there is very limited if any discussion of the structural sources of vulnerability, such as women working in poverty—in case of PregaNews (2022); ill health, fitness, and underprivileged women in (ICICI Lombard 2021), and sexism in BAJAJ Allianz (2022), or of the collective and structural solutions needed to address them. Rather, the focus is almost exclusively on how high-powered women overcome these challenges. When we compare the protagonist's portrayal with women from lower class and caste backgrounds in these ads, it's evident that these women are denied the opportunity to express

vulnerability or take a respite. Secondly, despite her upper-class background, as evidenced by her purchase of gold jewellery, the use of a chauffeur to drop her home, and her residence in a spacious house, her moments of vulnerability are still only portrayed when she is alone and unobserved. Therefore, embracing vulnerability becomes an act of visibility. In essence, it's a performance. This tendency is observable when she promptly dismisses her tiredness and puts on a smile when with her family; only permitting herself to be vulnerable when she's alone. As a result, even in instances of unguardedness, the regulation of feminine vulnerability persists meticulously, preventing it from surpassing the acceptable "safe" level. Instead of displaying unguarded vulnerability, the protagonist adopts a deliberate and managed portrayal of vulnerability (ibid. p.73) by practising it through silent passive actions such as being quiet when disappointed and exhausted.

Hence, this emerging norm of embracing vulnerability appears closely intertwined with and supportive of the culture of confidence, class, and caste structures. Primarily, the encouragement to embrace vulnerability ultimately reinforces the necessity of self-introspection and self-improvement. Therefore, the advocacy of postfeminist neoliberalism for empowerment underscores individualistic notions of gender-based advancement and achievement, inherently inseparable from the historical privileging of upper classes, castes, and Hindu ideals in India.

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this dissertation demonstrate that while the portrayal of the empowered woman in women's day advertisements challenges certain patriarchal ideals in India, it remains confined to middle-class aspirations. Therefore, only urban, upper-class Hindu women symbolise Indian femininity, and are thus able to achieve empowerment. This limitation highlights a failure to bridge the class divide between affluent, privileged women who can afford such displays of symbolism and ordinary women who risk severe consequences when defying traditional norms (Das, 2020). Consequently, the pursuit of neoliberal empowerment inadvertently perpetuates problematic assumptions about power hierarchy by conflating dominant class-based femininity norms and assuming their privileged social position represents all women in India.

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While engaging with concepts like confidence culture, I came to recognise that simplifying empowerment to align with a specific conceptual framework wouldn't adequately encompass the complexities of the Indian discourse, particularly the diverse caste identities that form an intrinsic part of the socio-cultural fabric. Although not overtly evident in mainstream advertisements, the depiction of these identities is often subtly hinted at.

Moreover, the traditionally internalised behaviours associated with women, such as patience, calmness, and passivity, as depicted in Indian advertisements, are always exacerbated when marginalised femininities in India strive for empowerment. In this context, I suggest that feminist scholars should go beyond oversimplified dichotomies between a Western and an inherently 'Indian' femininity. Instead, they should examine how these depictions overlook the diverse intersectional aspects of Indian women while constructing the façade of empowerment.

In its essence, this study sought to analyse the central concern of how feminine identities are shaped by empowerment discourses in India. The advertisements discussed in this paper reveal how postfeminist ideologies are becoming more concealed beneath the veneer of emotions and the optimistic language of confidence and resilience discourse. Their strength is further upheld through the self-optimising behaviours that women internalise. Therefore, while the representations of empowerment are not ends in themselves, the significance of representation in mainstream media is both crucial and shouldn't be overlooked. For individuals experiencing what could be labelled as 'visual oppression', representation stands as a fundamental initial step towards achieving liberation.

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