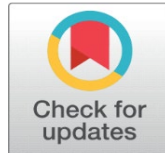
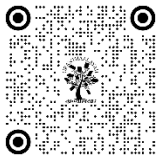


# NEGOTIATING RESPECTABILITY: A TRANSNORMATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS OF TRANSGENDER MOTHERHOOD IN VICKS INDIA'S TOUCH OF CARE ADVERTISEMENT (2017)

R. Baiju Paul <sup>1</sup>, Paul T. Benziker <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of Visual Communication, Nehru Arts and Science College, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor Department of Visual Communication, Nehru Arts and Science College, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India



**Received** 10 July 2024  
**Accepted** 08 August 2025  
**Published** 08 August 2025

**DOI**  
[10.29121/ShodhVichar.v1.i2.2025.38](https://doi.org/10.29121/ShodhVichar.v1.i2.2025.38)

**Funding:** This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

**Copyright:** © 2025 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



## ABSTRACT

This study critically examines the portrayal of transgender motherhood in Vicks India's 2017 #TouchOfCare advertisement through the lens of Transnormativity Theory. Centered on the real-life story of Gauri Sawant, a transgender woman raising an adopted daughter, the advertisement crafts a poignant narrative of care, sacrifice, and maternal love. While the campaign has been lauded for its inclusive messaging, this research interrogates the normative frameworks that shape such representation. Through qualitative content analysis, the study explores the advertisement's visual storytelling, character construction, and emotional tone to uncover how trans identities are positioned within acceptable cultural scripts. The findings indicate that the portrayal conforms to transnormative ideals emphasizing moral respectability, caregiving, and adherence to heteronormative family values. These depictions, although affirming on the surface, risk reinforcing narrow and assimilationist portrayals of transgender lives. The paper argues that such media representations enable a conditional form of acceptance, validating only those identities that align with mainstream ideals of respectability. This analysis contributes to broader conversations on gender representation, media ethics, and the politics of visibility in Indian advertising.

**Keywords:** Transgender Representation, Transnormativity, Indian Advertising, Gender Norms, Corporate Media, Motherhood, Qualitative Content Analysis, Visibility Politics

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary media landscapes, advertising has evolved beyond its conventional function of selling products and services. Increasingly, it acts as a powerful cultural force shaping public discourse, influencing social norms, and constructing identities [Zayer and Coleman \(2015\)](#). Advertisements now engage with issues of gender, sexuality, race, and identity, attempting to reflect and resonate with a more socially conscious audience. Among these developments, the growing visibility of transgender individuals in advertising marks a significant shift in how marginalized communities are represented within mainstream media.

However, this visibility is often fraught with contradictions. While transgender representation in media appears to signal progress, it frequently operates within the restrictive boundaries of **trans normativity** a concept that critiques how only certain kinds of transgender identities gain social acceptance. As theorized by [Tompkins \(2014\)](#) and further expanded by [Johnson \(2016\)](#), trans normativity privileges transgender individuals who conform to traditional gender roles, exhibit "respectable" behaviour, and assimilate into normative familial and societal structures. This conditional inclusion raises critical questions about the politics of representation and the extent to which media genuinely disrupts or merely reinforces dominant ideologies.

One notable example of this complex dynamic is the 2017 Indian advertisement *#TouchOfCare* by Vicks. The ad narrates the real-life story of Gauri Sawant, a transgender woman and activist, who adopts and raises a young girl orphaned by HIV. Framed through a deeply emotional and compassionate lens, the advertisement has been widely acclaimed for presenting a positive and humanizing portrayal of a transgender mother. Yet, beneath its progressive veneer lies a nuanced ideological framework that deserves critical interrogation. By foregrounding themes such as maternal sacrifice, legal recognition, and unconditional care—values traditionally associated with heteronormative motherhood—the ad may inadvertently reinforce the idea that transgender individuals are only acceptable when they align with dominant moral and social expectations.

This study seeks to explore the representation of transgender motherhood in the *#TouchOfCare* advertisement through the lens of Trans normativity Theory. Employing qualitative content analysis, it examines the visual codes, narrative structures, and emotional appeals employed in the ad to understand how transgender identities are constructed and framed. The research questions whether the advertisement truly challenges existing stereotypes or whether it simply showcases a "model" transgender subject palatable to mainstream audiences and thus reinforcing conditional forms of inclusion.

By critically analysing this media text, the study aims to contribute to broader debates around representation, respectability politics, and the role of commercial media in shaping public perception of transgender lives. It interrogates the ideological implications of portraying marginalized identities within normative frameworks and questions whether such portrayals expand or limit the possibilities for genuine inclusion and social justice in advertising.

## 2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

### 2.1. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study aims to explore how transgender motherhood is shown in the [Vicks India #TouchOfCare advertisement \(2017\)](#). The advertisement features a transgender woman as a caring mother, and the study focuses on how her identity is represented. Using Trans normativity Theory, this research has the following objectives:

- 1) To study how the transgender mother is portrayed visually and through the story.
- 2) To examine whether the ad presents her in a way that fits society's idea of a "good" transgender person.
- 3) To understand how the ad uses emotions, care, and family values to show acceptance.

- 4) To find out if the ad challenges or supports society's limited views of transgender people.

The research follows a qualitative method, which means it focuses on meanings, symbols, and ideas rather than numbers. The approach is interpretive, aiming to understand the deeper messages about gender and identity in the ad.

## 2.2. METHOD OF ANALYSIS

### 2.2.1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

This study employs a frame-by-frame content analysis to critically examine the *#TouchOfCare* advertisement by Vicks India. The analysis focuses on multiple elements including visuals (such as clothing, lighting, body language, and camera angles), sound (background music, narration, and emotional tone), narrative structure (the journey of the transgender mother and her bond with the adopted child), symbolic elements (school documents, domestic settings, and legal references), and representations of gender roles (particularly the portrayal of the mother as caring, responsible, and socially integrated). This methodological approach is guided primarily by Trans normativity Theory, which explores how society often accepts only those transgender individuals who conform to dominant ideals—those who are seen as respectable, morally upright, aligned with traditional gender roles, and recognized through legal or social validation. The theory enables a critical inquiry into whether the advertisement offers an inclusive and complex representation of transgender identity or reinforces a limited, socially sanctioned image. Additionally, the study draws upon Media Representation Theory where appropriate, particularly to analyze how media messages are constructed and decoded by audiences, thus enriching the understanding of how such portrayals shape public perception.

### 2.2.2. SAMPLING

The unit of analysis is one advertisement: *Vicks India's #TouchOfCare (2017)*, which is about 2 minutes long. It was chosen using purposive sampling because it was one of the first Indian ads to show a transgender woman as a central and respected character. The ad was shared widely on television and social media and is seen as an important example of transgender representation in Indian advertising.

Data Analysis: Frame-by-Frame Coding Table – Vicks

Frame No.	Scene Description	Visual Elements	Sound / Music	Symbolism	Gender Role Portrayal	Encoded Message	Possible Decodings (Hall)	Notes
1	Teen walks with head down	School uniform, long hair, downcast eyes	Soft piano	Hair = gender cue	Emerging gender dysphoria	Vulnerability, identity struggle	Dominant: empathy Oppositional: isolation	Sets emotional tone
2	Classroom exclusion	Classmates whispering, looking away	Muted ambient sound	Social distance	Rejection of non-conformity	Marginalization of trans youth	Dominant: bullying is wrong Oppositional: reinforcing 'othering'	Implies need for acceptance

3	Narration begins	Close-up of protagonist, slow zoom	Child narrating about her 'mother'	Voice agency	=	Trans motherhood introduced	Redefining motherhood	Dominant: love over biology Negotiated: discomfort with gender roles	Breaks norm of biological motherhood
4	Trans woman mother shown	Saree, bindi, gentle demeanor	Warm background score	Traditional attire = legitimacy	=	Feminine caregiving role	Respectable trans identity	Dominant: care = mother Oppositional: traditional appearance = conformity	Uses transnormativity
5	Flashback: adoption moment	Holding child, official papers	Heartwarming music	Paper legal acceptance	=	Caregiver becomes legal mother	Legitimization through system	Dominant: inspirational Oppositional: idealized	Emotional justification
6	Facing societal rejection	Family alone, stares in public	Tense music	Gaze judgment	=	Stigma of trans parenting	Social barriers still exist	Dominant: sympathy Oppositional: discomfort with deviance	Shows societal friction
7	Teen defends mother	Interview setting, confident tone	Bold shift music	Voice strength	=	Empowered daughter role	Trans family is valid	Dominant: love wins Negotiated: only 'good' trans are accepted	Highlights child's advocacy
8	Vicks tagline screen	"Touch of Care" with brand logo	Music softens, ends	Touch healing, care	=	Brand ally as Vicks supports inclusion		Dominant: brand is inclusive Oppositional: emotional branding tactic	

### 3. ANALYSIS AND THEMATIC INTERPRETATION

The [Vicks India #TouchOfCare \(2017\)](#) advertisement presents a compelling narrative that redefines motherhood through the story of a transgender woman raising an adopted daughter. This article explores how the advertisement uses visual and narrative elements to portray transgender identity, care, and maternal legitimacy, drawing upon Stuart Hall's Representation Theory and the concept of transnormativity to unpack the socio-cultural implications of this representation.

At the heart of the advertisement is the portrayal of a young transgender woman as a loving, responsible mother. Her identity is constructed through culturally resonant markers of femininity such as wearing a saree, applying a bindi, and performing nurturing roles that visually reinforce her place within the framework of conventional gender norms. These cues are strategically deployed to position her as respectable and morally upright, aligning her portrayal with the concept of trans normativity, which privileges transgender individuals who conform to heteronormative standards. By presenting her as composed, sacrificial, and virtuous, the advertisement reinforces the politics of respectability, implying that

societal acceptance for transgender people is conditional upon their alignment with dominant ideals of femininity and caregiving.

Using Stuart Hall (1980), the advertisement encodes a message of inclusivity, compassion, and social acceptance. A dominant reading interprets the ad as progressive, celebrating diversity and challenging traditional notions of motherhood. However, negotiated or oppositional readings highlight the limitations of this portrayal, arguing that it promotes a narrow, idealized image of transgender identity one that is palatable to mainstream audiences because it adheres to existing norms. The absence of the protagonist's struggles related to gender transition, legal challenges, or social exclusion except for a brief moment suggests a sanitized, emotionally curated version of transgender life, tailored to evoke empathy and fit within corporate branding strategies.

The emotional arc of the advertisement culminates in the brand's tagline, "Touch of Care," effectively tying the deeply personal story of transgender motherhood to the identity of Vicks as an inclusive and compassionate brand. This strategy exemplifies emotional branding, where socially sensitive themes are leveraged to build consumer trust and corporate goodwill. While some may view this as a genuine form of commercial allyship, others may critique it as a commodification of transgender narratives—raising ethical questions about authenticity and the use of marginalized identities for profit-driven image enhancement.

The narrative also performs a nuanced redefinition of motherhood. By focusing on legal adoption, emotional labour, and day-to-day caregiving, the advertisement decouples motherhood from biological determinism and promotes a more inclusive vision of parenthood. However, it simultaneously places an unrealistic burden on transgender women to prove their worth as mothers by demonstrating extraordinary compassion, resilience, and moral integrity. This framing reinforces the idea that only exceptional transgender individuals are worthy of recognition and acceptance, a recurring theme in transnormative discourse that limits broader inclusivity.

In summary, the Vicks India #TouchOfCare advertisement is both a landmark in progressive representation and a reflection of the boundaries within which transgender visibility is permitted in Indian media. It subverts certain gender norms by centralizing a transgender figure in a maternal role, yet it also reinforces a narrowly defined ideal of what constitutes an "acceptable" transgender identity. As such, it invites a critical examination of how emotional branding, respectability politics, and transnormative frameworks shape the portrayal and public reception of transgender lives in contemporary advertising.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study critically examined the representation of transgender identity in the Bhima Jewellery advertisement Pure as Love (2021), employing Stuart Hall's Media Representation Theory and incorporating aspects of Transnormativity and Intersectionality. Through a frame-by-frame content analysis, the advertisement was decoded as a layered narrative that challenges traditional gender norms while simultaneously operating within culturally acceptable boundaries.

The visual and narrative construction of the protagonist reinforces a transnormative ideal emphasizing transformation, family acceptance, and traditional femininity. While the ad represents a progressive step in Indian advertising by placing a transgender woman at the center of an emotional and

dignified storyline, it also subtly conforms to societal expectations of respectability and normative gender roles. The use of emotional storytelling, symbolic imagery, and traditional markers like saree, bindi, and jewelry was found to legitimize the transgender character's identity in ways that are palatable to a mainstream audience.

From a representational perspective, the advertisement plays a dual role: it disrupts the silence around transgender identities in Indian media, yet also illustrates the constraints placed on such representations within the advertising industry. The findings suggest that while inclusive advertising can initiate dialogue and foster empathy, it must also move beyond tokenism and transnormative frameworks to portray the diversity and complexity of transgender experiences more authentically.

### **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None.

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

None.

### **REFERENCES**

- An, J., & Kwak, H. (2019). Gender and Racial Diversity in Commercial Brands' Advertising Images on Social Media.
- Bhattacharyya, P. (2022). Alternative Transgender Discourses: A Critical Analysis of an Indian ad Campaign. *Journal of Teaching and Research in English Literature*, JTR150202.
- Campaign India. (2022). Opinion: Breaking the Mould – Diversifying LGBTQ+ Representation in Brand Narratives. Campaign India.
- Choudhary, S. (2024). An Analytical Study on Representation of Transgender in Indian Film Industry. *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(3), 820–824.
- Gefas, U. (2024). Representations of Transgender Characters in Indian and American Media: Stereotyping Versus Empowerment. *ShodhKosh*, 5(5).
- Ghosh, S. (2018). The Changing Face of Advertising in India: A Study of Gender and Inclusivity in Brand Narratives. *Media Watch*, 9(3), 407–417.
- Hall, S. (1980). Encoding/Decoding. In S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe, & P. Willis (Eds.), *Culture, Media, Language* (pp. 128–138). Routledge.
- Hoque, M. N., Fatima, R. E., Mandal, M. K., & Saquib, N. (2017). Evaluating Gender Portrayal in Bangladeshi TV.
- Johnson, A. H. (2016). Transnormativity: A New Concept and its Validation Through Documentary Film about Transgender Men. *Sociological Inquiry*, 86(4), 465–491. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soin.12127>
- Kanter, J. (2018). Emotional Marketing and the Commercial Co-Optation of Social Justice. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 18(2), 180–195. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540516659125>
- Khadilkar, K., KhudaBukhsh, A. R., & Mitchell, T. M. (2021). Gender Bias, Social Bias and Representation: 70 Years of Bollywood.
- Kolkata, D. (2020). Transgender Representation in Mainstream Advertising (Unpublished Thesis). *Transgender Studies Journal*. UNT Digital Library.



- Maxwell, B. M. (2019). Transgender Representation in Mainstream Advertising (Master's Thesis). University of North Texas, Denton, TX.
- Outlook India. (2024, February 7). Gender Trouble: The Misrepresentation of Trans Identities in Indian Cinema. Outlook India.
- Bhattacharyya, P. (2022). Alternative Transgender Discourses: A Critical Analysis of an Indian ad Campaign. *Journal of Teaching and Research in English Literature*, JTREL150202.
- PMC. (n.d.). LGBTQ+ Identities in Indian Audiovisual Advertisements: A Content Analysis. PubMed Central. Retrieved April 2025, from
- Revathy, R., & Hemmige, B. D. (2020). Study on Representation of Gender in Indian Print Media: A Semiotic Analysis of FMCG Advertisements. *Studies of Applied Economics*, 40(S1).
- Sarkar, B. H. (2020, June 24). Why are Trans Women Missing in the Advertising Industry? *Feminism in India*.
- Sender, K. (2004). *Business, Not Politics: The Making of the Gay Market*. Columbia University Press.
- Stephen, H., & Rebello, D. (2021, February 15). The Curious Case of Trans Representation in Media. *Feminism in India*.