The Not-So-Desperate Housewives of India
Ambi M.G. Parameswaran, FCB-Ulka Mumbai, India

With the winds of liberalization blowing through India, the construction of “Indian women” identity is in flux as women are reconstructing shared understandings and common practices. Of particular interest to advertisers and marketers is the challenge of constructing and depicting an “Indian Woman” who resonates across the country. Towards this end FCB-Ulka has commissioned two large scale qualitative research studies to understand the motivations, aspirations, and goals of the new Indian urban woman. This presentation reports on the findings and discusses how they impact the depiction of women in ads.

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SPECIAL SESSION SUMMARY
Negotiating Individuated Identity in the Face of Dominant Ideological Representations: The Role of Advertising and Technology Consumption

Session Chair: Meera Venkatraman, Suffolk University

This session contributes to our understanding of the impact of socio-cultural milieu on identity construction through consumption (Thompson 1996; Holt 1998; Allen 2002). It focuses on three different socio-cultural contexts in which women are presented with dominant idealized representations of Womanhood: mainstream Indian women; Muslim minority women in India; and wives of enlisted men in the US. The session explores the role of advertising in creating and perpetuating ideologies of womanhood, women’s response to these depictions, and their consumption of products and services like technology to construct identities that are consistent with or in opposition to these representations.

In the Indian socio-cultural context the session focuses on the role of advertising in creating, promoting, and validating identity choices. According to a 1995 analysis a majority of television commercials depict Indian women as wives and mothers often with little distinction between the two roles (Roy 1998). While this may not be surprising given that at the time only 27.7% of working-age Indian women participated in the workforce, it must be recognized that of the proliferation of Indian woman identities (Mankekar 1993), advertising constructed and perpetuated a few that appeared to be valid for all Indian women (Roy 1998). Today, as more women are entering the work place at significantly higher rates (Purushothaman 2008) we explore whether there is a shift in the depiction of women in Indian advertising, and if so, how?

The first presentation by Ambi M.G. Parameswaran brings us the Indian advertising industry’s perspective from a prominent insider. It focuses on emerging ideologies of Indian womanhood and her consumption practices and priorities as reflected in major advertising campaigns. The core of the presentation is based on qualitative research data collected by Cognito the consulting division of FCB-Ulka.

In an interesting juxtaposition, the second presentation by Julien Cayla adopts the contrasting perspective of Indian Muslim minority women and focuses on their consumption of advertising. Indian Muslim women are remarkably absent in mainstream Indian advertising which tends to represent Indian women as Hindu. Drawing upon ethnographic research with Muslim women Julien examines their responses to the omnipresent representations of Indians as Hindus: How do they feel about not being represented? Do they relate to the women in the ads?

The third presentation by Venkatraman, Bardhi and Higie Coulter shifts the focus to the wives of enlisted US army men. While these women may on the face of it seem to have very little in common with Indian women, they too are presented with a dominant idealized representation of womanhood: the super mom, wife, partner, home-manager, and hostess. The presentation shows that in the face of this Army wife ideology, women construct individuated identities and bend technology to their own purposes in the process.

To summarize, the main questions this session addresses are:

1. Examining the impact of socio-cultural context on identity formation from the perspective of both the mainstream culture viz., the middle-class Indian woman (in presentation 1) and a minority within the culture viz., Indian Muslim woman (in presentation 2).

2. Exploring how advertisers and copy writers compose and depict symbols and narrative structures around Indian Womanhood in their advertising communications (in presentation 1) and how these advertising are consumed by Indian-Muslim women (in presentation 2).

3. Focusing on the consumption of technology to construct and sustain identities and relationships (Presentations 1 and 3).

4. Providing a forum for cross-fertilization between academic researchers and industry practitioners.

Long Abstracts

The Not-So-Desperate Housewives of India
Ambi M.G. Parameswaran, FCB-Ulka.

India embraced the liberalization mantra in mid 1991 opening the market and its consumers to a plethora of products and services. The liberalization era also brought about challenges on the job and business front with increasing competition and growing opportunities. Qualitative research studies, done over the last seven years among urban Indian women point towards some significant changes wrought by this wave of liberalization.

These changes encompass their overall outlook to life, their relationship with their husbands and his family, a growing obsession with children and their future, and the growing appreciation of the power of technology to change lives. Given the far-reaching consequences of these changes for consumption of goods and services, some of these trends are beginning to be reflected in contemporary advertising as well. This presentation comprises two parts: the first focuses on emerging trends in identity construction and consumption by Indian women; and the second on ad campaigns that incorporate these findings.

We find that Indian women now identify as a “Home manager” and “not just a dumb” housewife. In fact, while a majority of women used to see their primary role as a caregiver and cook, now some even say they do not enjoy cooking anymore. Women see their role as not just to cook and clean the home, but also to be involved in managing the household finances, dealing with the banks, and paying bills. All these were the domain of the husband a decade ago.

Her relationship with her husband too is changing from one of “what can you get me?” to “how can I help you so that you can do better in your business?” To this end she is also not averse to taking up a part time job. Studies done seven years ago pointed towards the fact that at-home housewives felt that they were better mothers/wives compared to a working woman. That is changing based on the latest reports. Given a choice the educated women in India would like to work, and they believe a working woman is
in a better position to provide her children and family with the latest amenities. Never-the-less Indian women do not want to give up symbols of tradition or their religion, but are exploring new ways of combining modern trappings with traditional modes of living. So today she may visit a beauty parlor to prepare for a traditional Indian festival honoring her husband.

The centre of her life continues to be her children; she is living her own dreams through them. She is happy for the growing opportunities that face her children, but at the same time worried that these opportunities may take her children far from her. Just ten years ago her life revolved around her husband and his family; but now she has life revolves around her children. In China researchers have documented the growth of the “Little Emperors” or kids of the 4-2-1 era with four grand parents and two parents fighting over how to spoil 1 kid. In India we do not have those little Emperors, but we do have a lot of little Princes and Princesses.

Technology, in the form of a home computer or a mobile phone, is now at the top of her shopping list. She feels that technology will be a big help for the future prospects of her children, but she is also afraid of the dark sides of the internet/mobile revolution. It is often her children who end up educating her about the latest in technology.

Many of these changes will take greater shape as the country continues on its economic growth path, and more and more wealth is placed in the hands of the urban middle class. These changes present new opportunities to marketers to target and offer specific products and services to Indian women. The second part of this presentation will showcase contemporary Indian advertising campaigns that have started to reflect this growing change in the role of the housewife from that of a cook-caretaker to that of a competent home manager.

**Imagining an Indian Identity: an Ethnography of Muslim Indian Women and Media Reception**

*Julien Cayla, Australian School of Business.*

Marketing executives working in the Indian context have to deal with an extremely diverse and complex market: India is multilingual with at least 15 major languages; it is multi-cultural; and regionally heterogeneous with wide differences in symbols and practices across regions. To develop national campaigns, marketers have to rely on the few things that cut across the country: cricket (Wright 2003); Bollywood (Cayla 2008); and Hinduism.

In the latest Indian census, Hindus represented approximately 80% of the population, while around 13% or around 151 million people identify themselves as Muslim in India. Hence, advertisers heavily borrow from a Hindu religio-ritualistic imagery that most Indians can relate to (Rajagopal 1998).

This paper looks at the way minority groups such as Indian Muslims react to these representations of Indians as Hindus. In her work on the reception of televised serials on the Hindu epics the Ramayana and Mahabharata, Mankekar (1999) reveals that the Sikh women she interviewed felt excluded by these Hindu epics. In contrast Lakha (1999) argues that many Muslim families who watched the series felt a sense of connection to the moral issues depicted in the series. These contradictory findings raise the following issue: how do minority groups view representations of Indians as Hindus?

This paper more specifically investigates the experience of Muslim women in India, their watching of television series, advertisements and their other market experiences. Understanding this relationship between Muslim Indian women and the marketplace is especially pertinent because representations of Muslim women are remarkably absent from the Indian media. A few televised series such as Shaheen and Heena have depicted the lives of Muslim women in India, and popular movies such as Pakeezah or Humraa Jaan often tell the story of the glorious Islamic past in India, when Mughals ruled for more than three hundred years (Dwyer 2004). But Muslim women are generally absent from the Indian media. In contrast, representations of Hindu women abound. Indian nationalists already used the figure of the Hindu woman, in speeches and writings, as the custodian of Indian tradition, the last line of defense against the potential pollution of foreign influences. Today, on Indian television, housewife characters wearing bindis and mangalsutras endow contemporary domestic commodities with the aura of a Hindu-Indian heritage that cuts across most regions and social classes. Because of the differences between Hindu and Muslim culture, traditions, and iconography, it becomes especially interesting and important to study how Muslim women relate to the Indian media. Our research on the experience of Muslim women reveals that while they experience discrimination at many levels—for example in the real estate market, where Muslim families find an increasingly limited number of choices—they do not experience the omnipresent images of Hindu families as a form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). On the contrary, Indian television series and advertisements reflect the tensions of the extended families which many Muslim women experience. This is consistent with previous research describing Muslim communities outside of India, and their love of Indian films (Larkin 1997). Similarly, the Muslim women we talked to related to the motivations of characters in ads and television series, which are often based on family and kinship relations. Contrary to our expectations, they did not see the absence of Muslim families or characters in media representations as oppressive. To their surprise, many of these women, across differences of community and social class, revealed their desire not to be represented because they would rather not be misrepresented. So instead of seeking representation, they are content with a state of affairs where the figure of the Muslim woman remains largely absent.

This paper contributes to our understanding of identity-formation by positioning informants within their socio-cultural context. Ritson and Elliott (1999) point out that most of the research in advertising has been detached from the cultural context of the receiver. With this paper, we are able to enrich the study of advertising and media reception in marketing. Situating the lives of the women we interviewed within their everyday context helps go beyond the idea that they are either resisting or passively accepting the domination of Hindu representations. This research shows women resisting the discrimination they face in some areas of the marketplace, happily accepting the omnipresence of Hindu representations as Indian, while refusing to be represented. It offers a nuanced and highly contextual depiction of the way people resist (or not) the marketplace and the media.

**From Tool to Transformation: Consuming Technology to Negotiate Identity**

*Meera Venkatraman, Suffolk University*

*Fleura Bardhi, Northeastern University*

Robin Higie Coulter, University of Connecticut.

Not withstanding consumer researchers interest in the role of products in sustaining and building identities (Arnould and Thompson 2005), they have with one major exception (Kozinets 2007) ignored the role of technology consumption in this domain. Addressing this lacuna this paper investigates the meanings of technology consumption when it is considered a fundamental
constitutive element of consumers’ lives. Theoretically, in contrast to much of the consumer research on technology, we locate our research in the domestication research (Sorenson 2006) and consumer cultures traditions (Slater 1997) and not in innovation theory (Rogers 1995). In addition, we focus on women who are generally considered to be disadvantaged in the consumption of technology (Dobscha 2004) and not on innovators or early adopters of technology.

The socio-cultural context of our study is the wives of enlisted Army men in the United States living on Army posts at a time when the country is at war on two fronts. These women’s lifestyle can be described as trying to “hold it together” in the face of considerable financial and emotional strains and stress (Alvarez and Sontag 2008). Yet, at the same time they are exhorted to live up to an idealized version of the Army wife who has the “strength of a lion;” is completely independent; possesses the qualities of both father and mother, is a perfect hostess to four or forty with an hour’s notice; can handle emergency imaginable without a manual; be able to carry on cheerfully, even if she’s pregnant and has the flu; and must be willing to move 10 times in 17 years!

In this paper we explore the individuated identity projects that are constructed consistent with and in opposition to this “idealized” representation. We are particularly interested in the technology consumption modalities that will emerge to support these identity projects: how women see it, relate to it, and mould its potential to their own identity projects. Given our focus on discovery we adopted an interpretative research approach using in-depth interviews, metaphor elicitation, home visits, and surveys among 18 army wives living on two army posts in the United States. We found women who defined themselves in relation to the idealized representation of an Army wife were in a minority; as women were pursuing identity projects of independence and defining themselves in relation to their religion, family, and work.

The prevailing predominant logic of technology’s role in women’s lives is that women consume technology as a tool: a functional, practical device that accomplishes tasks and solves problems. We show that this understanding of the meaning of technology is outcome of techno-centric research that focuses on women’s interactions with specific technology products and services. When the focus is broadened to include both the life projects of women and the larger socio-cultural context of their lives, we find that women use technology to enact core values, practices, and maintain and build their identities.

In the process we identify two modalities of engagement with technology: instrument and resource. The consumption of technology as an instrument suggests goals, purposes, tasks, and the efficient execution of these tasks and accomplishment of goals. We discover that women use technology as an instrument to realize critical identity defining dimensions such as their faith, role as a military wife, and home maker. Technology is used instrumentally to accomplish tasks that help them express, affirm, and sustain these identities by structuring their lives (e.g. calling out prayer times); acquiring goods and services (e.g. locating faith appropriate products); engaging in acts of love (e.g. making gifts); making family (e.g. keeping deployed spouses injected in the routines of the home); building a support network (e.g. friends and neighbors on post), and conquering distance and time (e.g. bringing far-flung grandparents into the home for important family rituals).

Women use technology as a resource when technology plays a bigger, more expansive role of broadening their horizons, extending their capabilities, and building self esteem by assisting them in realizing their hopes and aspirations. We find that women enroll in educational programs that are heavily centered on computer technology as an investment in their futures. They spend 4-5 years earning degrees that they hope will get them jobs leading to their financial independence and freedom. For these women, technology has “expansive potential” (Miller and Slater 2000), it allows them to envisage and invest in a novel vision of what they can be. By highlighting the transformative power of technology consumption we are adding to the body of research that looks at the role of consumption in meaningful transformation of the self.

This paper contributes to domestication research by explicating the role of the women as female head of the household in domesticating technology. Acknowledging that women consume technology as a tool, it argues that this view of technology consumption is technology-centric. It contributes to research on consumption and identity by demonstrating that technology consumption can be transformative when women purposefully consume technology as a resource to amplify their lives in ways that are meaningful in their social and cultural context. In this way it examines the meanings of technology consumption from tool to transformation.

REFERENCES


