

# Some Notes on Negotiations around Sexuality and Consumption Practices among Young Women of Delhi

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the construction of female sexual desire in contemporary Indian advertising with a special emphasis on how young women of Delhi negotiate with issues in and around sexuality and consumption practices. Through ethnographic accounts and critical discourse analysis of advertisements this study goes on to address the issues of pleasure and desire in women's lives: how women negotiate with the questions of sexuality, morality, desire and pleasure. The author argues for a continuing engagement with issues of women's sexuality even if they are situated within the discourses of consumerism. This suggests that we need to complicate our understanding of choice and agency especially with reference to articulation of sexual desire and pleasure. This paper will finally argue that we need to widen our lens and take into consideration that sexual desire is culturally produced in our visual culture in order to understand the complex relationships between women, their choices and the production of sexual visual content.

**Keywords:** advertising, sexuality, consumption, desire, public-private, agency, middle-class, morality

This paper is part of a broader study on the construction of female sexual desire in contemporary Indian advertising with a special emphasis on how young women of Delhi negotiate with issues in and around sexuality and consumption practices. For the purpose of this paper I will engage with a specific brand's television commercials which will offer useful points to examine the complex relationship between risqué visual content, consumption of such images and women's negotiation with issues of sexuality, desire, pleasure in their everyday lives.

In the last couple of years there has been a significant amount of visual representation of desire in contemporary Indian advertisements. In recent times, the active, independent and sexually powerful representation is wrapped in discourses of consumerism, choice and empowerment. This paper will critically engage with the forms of address in the discourse of contemporary female active sexual subjectivity in the specific brand's television commercials. This paper will also explore and question the kinds of intimacies and desires that are offered, the spatial and temporal dynamics of those desires, the disruptions in the perceived notions of sexuality, the assumption and curtailment of public and private desires and exclusions in the representation of those desires.

I have made use of multi-pronged methods to carry out the research. These include ethnographic in-depth interviews, focus group discussion and discourse analysis of advertising and select film and television texts. The young women of Delhi discuss and deliberate on how they experience sex in the cultures of lived globalization and how the sexualization of our visual field (advertising in this case) buoyed by globalization, interacts with middle class notions of morality and consumption practices for them. Through

ethnographic accounts and critical discourse analysis of advertisements this study goes on to address the issues of pleasure and desire in women's lives: how women negotiate with the questions of sexuality, morality, desire and pleasure.

Through my arguments in the paper I'd like to make a case for a continuing engagement with issues of women's sexuality even if they are situated within the discourses of consumerism. We cannot problematize women's choices but we should problematize and question the conditions within which they make these choices. This suggests that we need to complicate our understanding of choice and agency especially with reference to articulation of sexual desire and pleasure.

This paper will finally argue that we need to widen our lens and take into consideration that sexual desire is culturally produced in our visual culture in order to understand the complex relationships between women, their choices and the production of sexual visual content. Hence we need to complicate our understanding of choice and agency especially with reference to articulation of sexual desire and pleasure.

### **Introduction:**

We have come a long way from the woman's desire being completely absent in Indian advertisements to her desire being punished and now to certain a ambivalence in the new sexualized representation. One needs to interrogate this apparent agency more closely. This raises pertinent questions regarding representation of the female subject in Indian advertisements, which are central to my research. It also raises questions of the kinds of intimacies and desires that are offered, the spatial and temporal dynamics of those desires, the

disruptions in the perceived notions of sexuality, the assumption and curtailment of public and private desires and exclusions in the representation of those desires. I will make an attempt to answer these concerns and also raise a few questions through my case study of Fastrack advertisements (a brand of accessories for the youth). This case study will include my analysis of advertisements and extracts from the discussions and deliberations of my interviews of young women living in Delhi.

**Case Study:**

*“Comparatively, Delhi is far more hostile a city for couples than any other city I know. Huge moral policing.”*

Twenty-three year-old Anam, an MBA graduate tells me this while sitting in her office sorting her bills while we have tea. She is a young entrepreneur marrying her “interests with social work”. She started a non-profit organization about two years ago and strives to revive cultural traditions, art and craft forms and create sustainable development opportunities for artisans and craftsmen of India. She shares her personal stories of being sneered at by the landlady of her small office when her fiancé who was earlier her boyfriend would come to pick her up late in the night. Since the landlady lived on the floor above, she constantly monitored her movements and asked the most well meaning albeit intrusive questions about her friends, boyfriends, clothes and future marriage plans. Similar stories of being monitored by the women in the locality were echoed by a lot of my interviewees. On winter mornings and afternoons in Delhi, many women sit in the balcony or the verandah and even on the porch outside their houses while peeling peas and carrots, eating peanuts, soaking in the warm sun and exchanging stories. “Winters are the worst! The whole household sits outside, they scan

you from top to bottom, they mentally make a map of where they think you are going and have that all-knowing look on their faces. I remember that I would intentionally carry books in my hands to give the impression that either I'm going to college or going somewhere for serious study!"

While this is not universally true for all houses in Delhi, however most middle-class homes, from my personal experience, observation, and conversations with friends and interviewees does point to the existence of a silent neighborhood watch exercise, undertaken by many women and men equally.

Interestingly some of the Indian advertisements I will be discussing later in this section use the public sphere as a space for articulation of sexual desire, with and without the presence of other publics. I will be specifically looking at a particular brand's advertisements as a case study but will also be constantly referring to other Indian advertisements, films, audio-visual clips on the Internet since all of them speak to each other and don't exist in a vacuum. In this case study I'm specifically looking at television advertisements of Fastrack<sup>1</sup>, which is a brand of accessories that includes bags, watches and sunglasses, primarily for a young audience. In the following sections I will examine selected advertisements of Fastrack and look at how female sexual desire is represented in these ads and raise some questions about what these representations signify. Fastrack as a brand targets young men and women in the age group of 15-25. This age group is reflected through the characters in their advertisements, however it is not to say that younger or older people will not buy or watch these advertisements.

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<sup>1</sup> Fastrack is an accessories brand owned by Titan Industries and was launched in the year 2000 specifically catering to a younger category of customers ranging anywhere from the ages 12-25. In the year 2005 Fastrack was hived off as a separate business unit. The brand is services by Lowe Lintas.

## **Analysis of Advertisements**

For the analysis of advertisements, I will be making use of systematic textual analysis as a part of discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 1983). In order to understand the discourse perpetuated by advertising messages my analysis will be guided but not limited to examining the context of the discourse, analyzing which groups and power relations are involved, looking for apparent exclusions in representation and spelling out the pre-supposed and implied

### **Advertisement 1: Why the World Moved On to Autopilot**

*In the interiors of a cockpit, we see one of the pilots getting up and moving out while an airhostess enters with a smile on her face. She bolts the door from inside and approaches the pilot who's sitting. She suggestively sits on the chair and looks at him coyly. He returns her look with a dismissive shake of the head. She smiles at him and playfully plays with his ear with her hands. He does not respond to her advances and jerks her hand off. She persists and comes closer, takes his tie in her hands and brings him closer on top of her. He leans forward, lowers his sunglasses, looks at her, checks the door and at that moment she pulls him towards her. We then see the insides of the aircraft and the camera jerk and movement suggests that the aircraft has lost balance and may nose-dive.*

*And the text appears: Why the world moved on to autopilot. Fastrack- move on.*

This advertisement is shot in black and white. The background score and vocals of the advertisement go something like this: *You can fly me to heaven/You can make me your angel/'Cause I need satisfaction so give me some action/Fly me to heaven.* This ad and many

other Fastrack ads play on the idea of the woman as the go-getter and lay stress on the irreverence of the youth towards established notions of authority and morality. The major act in the ad is done in the private confines of the cockpit, not visible to the passengers. Other Fastrack ads similarly obscure the presence of a public and its concomitant gazes and censure. When this advertisement was aired on television, it attracted the ire of the airline industry in India. An article in *DNA* “Airline industry takes offence on Genelia D’Souza”<sup>2</sup> and one in the *Hindustan Times*, “Don’t ruin our reputation”<sup>3</sup> illustrates that the people from the industry condemned the ad saying that it portrayed air hostesses in a ‘negative light’ and feeds into the stereotype that airhostesses are just glamorous and that their jobs do not involve responsible deliverables as such. Prahlad Kakkar was quoted as saying that, “Frankly, a majority of our society is not ready for such ads,” In fact the creative director of the ad agency has also been quoted as saying that, “It is a light, flirtatious interlude. This ad is not supposed be taken seriously. We are not saying these things really happen.” There were demands from certain corners to ban the ad, however it continued to be aired on television.<sup>4</sup>

Railway stations and bus stops have always figured visually in Indian advertisements where the Indian middle class is shown in moments of togetherness, joy, and revelry and sometimes,

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<sup>2</sup> Daily News Analysis, published on 7<sup>th</sup> June, 2011 by Soumyadipta Banerjee  
[http://www.dnaindia.com/entertainment/report\\_airline-industry-take-offense-on-genelia-dsouza\\_1552082](http://www.dnaindia.com/entertainment/report_airline-industry-take-offense-on-genelia-dsouza_1552082)  
accessed on 1st September, 2011.

<sup>3</sup>Hindustan Times published on, 4<sup>th</sup> June, 2011 by Namya Sinha.  
<http://www.hindustantimes.com/Don-t-ruin-our-reputation/Article1-705645.aspx> accessed on 1st September, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> This ad is perhaps one of the very few ones, which feature an aircraft as a location within the ad. As an advantage of the economic reforms, the new aviation policy and lure of the robust economy, many aviation companies launched seven private airlines in 1995 (Swaminathan, 2009). In 2002, Indian Airlines in order to attract more passenger traffic slashed its fares up to 64 %, Jet Airways followed suit and in the year 2003, Air Deccan, India’s first low-cost airline began operations, only to merge with Kingfisher after a few years. Ever since 2003, with the entry of low-cost airlines, many middle class consumers have increasingly started traveling by air. The entry of budget airlines, increasing competition, intense price wars, price-linked promotions and schemes have contributed to a considerable population making use of air travel for long and short distances. This segment is wooed by airlines through frequent flier miles and special economy fares.



sexual tension. For instance a Zatak Wild Stone advertisement has a woman dressed in a saree with low cut blouse taking a train journey alone in the night. While she settles with a book, a young man enters her cabin and makes himself comfortable. His presence gets the woman all worked up and she gets up to arrange her luggage and turn her exposed back towards him to catch his attention. She catches him looking at her and before something can happen, the ticket collector comes in and addresses her as ‘Mrs. Kumar’ and asks her for her ticket. She gets embarrassed and the man has a smirk on his face. The ad ends with the text: *Wild Stone. It happens.*

Comparing the Fastrack ads with other ads she has seen before, Hiba, a twenty-three year old child counselor working with an NGO, thinks that it is the first time the woman wasn’t portrayed as a sexual symbol. It was like a ‘normal’ thing we hear about, see and do. For her the airhostess in the ad was overt and active in terms of her expressions and moves. She was being playful and wanting to be playfully intimate. The guy also reciprocates but all we see is the girl, and after the ad ends, its all on our imagination what the boy would have done. She refers to Axe aerosol deodorant spray ads where women are ‘objectified’ and that disgusts her. Fastrack ads on the other hand for her are playful and privilege desires of both men and women. For Anam however, this ad does not break any new ground:

*“It is true that Axe goes about it in a different way. But Fastrack is not really path breaking in terms of the way they portray the guy and the girl. Both are attractive, coming from a certain class. The target may not be the masses but they are consciously not making it for a large population who look a certain way, who are slim, wear certain clothes. The body image etc. there is nothing new that Fastrack has done. It only offers slick packaging. The girl might want*

*to get intimate and actively work for it but he refuses in the beginning and has to be convinced.”*

### **Advertisement 2: Why the World Moved On Answering To Machines**

*The ad begins with a young man and a woman sitting on the sofa in a presumably middle-class or upper-middle class home, trying to get cozy with each other. The phone rings, and the woman looks at the man with pleading eyes, suggesting that he does not go to attend the call. The man goes on to receive the call while the woman waits for him on the sofa. She is seen unbuttoning her cardigan while waiting for him on the sofa. Once she unbuttons it, she suggestively flings it across the room. All this is happening while the man is still on the phone. The woman then takes off her heels and throws it on the floor, all this in an attempt to catch his attention. She gets bored waiting for him, looks around and then looks at her watch. In the next shot we see her standing and the shot cuts to the man on the phone and we hear a loud closing of the door. The man hears this and looks around and sees the empty sofa and realizes that the woman has left the house. He curses himself with the phone still in his hands. And the text appears: Why the World Moved on to Answering Machines.*

The advertisement has no dialogues but a background score and vocals which go like this:  
*Why don't you come here and play?/Please please please please/You got me begging on my knees/My baby boo/I though you loved me too/My baby boooo*

The advertisement has been given a sepia tone and gives a distinct vintage feel. After watching this ad, Stuti, a twenty year-old Psychology graduate, pointed out that it gave her the impression of a young Christian girl losing her sense of morality and sense of how she is

supposed to conduct her self. While there were no apparent markers of religion, she, like a few other interviewees, made certain connections between the ways in which the woman was dressed, her appearance and her gestures that made them attribute the girl to a particular religion.

*“Since it looks so vintage, what kind of women in those times wore a blouse and skirt? Also it gives a very Bombay like feel to me. I haven’t been there but from whatever I have seen, in the ad it looks like the girl is either a Parsi or maybe Christian.”* (Pretika)

I probed Pretika, a twenty year old Journalism graduate further goes on about why she thought the makers of the ad used certain symbols, like the Jim Morisson poster or the locket in her neck or the bow on her head.

*“I am against stereotypes in principle but stereotypes have existing associations and it is the most convenient way to communicate something. In an ad of 45 seconds how do I tell the viewer that this is an ad set in the 70s or 80s and the woman on the couch is rather modern and knows what she wants. It has always been perceived that Christian and Parsi girls are more westernized and forward. I guess that must be the reason...”*

This ad is perhaps an exception. In none of the other ads can one make out any markers of religion or region. The ads completely obscure their background and the characters seem to exist in a vacuum. Like other Fastrack ads, this ad does not make any direct connection of the brand’s products with the narrative. It is about a girl waiting and wanting to have sex and a man on the phone.

*“It’s not about the product here... it is the idea that you can move on in life to anything else if you are not satisfied, it is like, don’t settle for anything less. She wanted to get naughty, he was busy on the phone she tells him to go to hell and walks out. It’s quite new”* (FGD Participant)

Nowhere in the ad does one see the man cajoling the woman to get in bed or the fact that his using a certain product motivates her to fall for him. The subtext is however sublime. Move on. Move on to Fastrack. Move on to something better. Move on to more satisfaction. Move on to us because we have a hand on the pulse of what the youth wants.

### **Advertisement 3: ATM. Fastrack bags**

*The Ad begins with a top angle shot and is made to look as a view from the security camera installed in the ATM. A young man and woman are seen entering the ATM with the woman pushing the man inside. In the next eye-level shot we see the woman holding the man’s T-shirt and pulling him towards herself. Once they come face to face, the man keeps his hand on her waist while the woman has one hand on his upper torso. The woman then comes closer to him and pushes him back to the wall and raises her hand to take support from the wall. They inch closer to each other and the man points at the security camera in the ATM. The woman looks at the camera and in the next second empties all the contents of her Fastrack bag and uses her bag to cover the camera.*

*The screen goes black and the text is: Introducing bags from Fastrack. Move on. Staring from Rs. 495. In the next shot we see the frontal view of the man and the woman. The girl has flung*

*her bag across her shoulders and she rubs against the man's shoulder and winks at him and proceeds to leave the ATM while the man follows her out.*

This ad is bereft of any dialogues and relies solely on facial expressions and gestures. Even though this ad is shown to be located in an ATM, all my interviewees as well as focus group discussion participants thought of it as the elevator.

The girl in the ad plays the go-getter. She pushes the boy inside the ATM and playfully draws him near to her. At this point of time, though the boy is enjoying the attention, he is equally aware of the camera and points in to her, suggesting that they stop.

Interestingly even though the girl is portrayed as someone who actively seeks sexual gratification, she is stopped and sometimes denied that gratification by the man in the ad. This was also evident in the previous autopilot ad discussed before. While I have viewed this as the denial of her desires, Anisha, a twenty-two year-old law graduate thinks that perhaps the man in all the ads is intimidated by the woman's sexuality.

*“Both the boy and the girl are objects of desire in the ad. He is shown to be more pragmatic and she is shown reckless. Like he denies her at some times. He doesn't stop her as such but yes sometimes curtailing her. That slight hesitance is there. Like he is intimidated by her as a sexual being and there is reluctance on his part.”*

#### **Advertisement 4: Hickey. Fastrack Bags**

*The ad opens to a young man looking into the camera and getting dressed. Presumably he is looking in the mirror. He plays with his hair and applies a deodorant spray. In the background we also see a woman in an oversized big white shirt walking in the house. After a*

*point she settles down on the bed with a book. Just when the man is done applying the spray he realizes that he has a hickey mark on his neck. A close-up of his face suggests that he isn't too happy with it. In the next shot he carried a bag with him and diagonally slings it across his body trying to cover the hickey with the strap of the bag. Satisfied with the result he makes his way out of the house. On his way out he says 'Ok Bye' to the girl. The moment he gets out of the house and shuts the door, he sees a young woman standing there. He looks at her, gets stunned and says 'Oh! Hi'. She sighs, come closer to him and re-adjusts the strap of his bag and says 'A new one, huh?' At this point the man looks at her sheepishly.*

In this ad a woman is shown sitting on the bed behind the man, in a long white shirt. She is shown busy reading something. In the frame you can see an unkempt bed. While the man is getting ready in front of the mirror he sees a hickey on his neck. The ad suggests that the man and the woman on the bed have a sexual relationship. Once he is done camouflaging his hickey he nonchalantly leaves the house. The woman on the bed does not ask or say anything. As soon as he steps out, presumably his sister/friend/neighbour or ex-girlfriend sees him and the hickey on his neck. For some reason he is embarrassed that his hickey was visible to this woman. It is not clear from the ad whether the man was in his house or the woman's house.

This ad carries on with the theme of the other ads and leaves it on the viewers to make sense of the nature of relationships playing out in the ad. There is however a larger comment on lifestyle, habits, preferences and attitudes of the youth in contemporary times.

*"The Fastrack bag in the ad is being used as your partner in crime. He uses it to hide the hickey, right? And he seems to be living in a plush apartment. I think there is a comment on the kind of money people have, being young, who can spend money and women being the go-*

*getters and that rhetoric of young people only wanting sex without commitment, especially this ad with the girl out of focus, this easy no strings attached casual sex.” (Stuti)*

### **Reflections on the ‘Move On’ campaign**

The ‘Move On’ campaign, which includes these four television advertisements, makes use of sexual innuendos, sexual acts and references to sex in all the ads. At times, as my respondents shared, the ads ceased to be about Fastrack or its products but about the youth who indulged in sexual activities. None of them viewed these ads as path breaking or remarkable, save for some that these ads suggested newer ways of representing sexual desire. Consistently the ads have focused on the woman seeking pleasure and actively working for it. While many respondents considered sex to be highly overrated in media and ads, others complained about stereotypical ways in which sex has been represented.

Many women chose to call these ads “cute”, “funny” and “fun”. Many were reminded of the ways in which they would manage to sneak in college corridors or parks or toilets for some ‘fun’ with their partners. As Surbhi, a twenty-five year-old assistant manager in a health care organization revealed:

*“These ads show everyday situations, its kind of real. It’s not like those deodorant ads you know, where you spray it and people get horny. These ads don’t say you use this product and you’ll get sex. These people in the Fastrack ad are already having sex; they don’t need the product to get it for them. They in fact remind me of my time in college when I would sneak into the green room with my boyfriend.”*

Fastrack ads don't seem to be suggesting either the use value of the exchange value of its products in this campaign. It is solely working towards creating an image of Fastrack as a brand, which can be associated with today's youth that is carefree, open about sex and quite comfortable with their sexuality. While my thesis is not investigating the image, which Fastrack is creating, I'd like to point that this sexualization of culture (Gill 2009, Porfido 2009, Jackson & Westrupp, 2010) is not entirely unproblematic as Stuti also points out:

*"I'm not saying that its not nice to see the girl taking the initiative... but you know what, these ads somewhat suggest that sex is the only thing on the youth's mind. Can you be cool only if you are cool about sex? I'm not saying I don't want to have sex but can you please not tell me that I am supposed to have it!"*

Two FGD participants shared a similar concern when they argued that they are not sure if sex is the only thing on the youth's mind. They also felt that proliferation of sexual images in ads and films have its own agenda in laying the kind of emphasis they do on sex:

*"I like Fastrack, I own a Fastrack watch but I think these images create pressure on girls or women to be sexy, like you have to be, you know knowledgeable...  
... You need to know how to push the right buttons"*

While I acknowledge these concerns as well as the debates on 'sexualization of culture' and how women negotiate with these messages and pressures in their lives, the paper does not deal with this in-depth. By foregrounding this aspect, I would like to go ahead and take this discussion forward in the section where my interviewees and focus group discussion participants discuss their readings of these advertisements and deliberate on various issues



such as media representation of sexuality, their own dis (comfort) with sexuality, public and private desires and so on.

### **Sex-ing It Up: Reading of Ads and Other Reflections**

Since I conducted unstructured interviews, the discussions and conversations with my interviewees steered towards many directions and themes and included their comments on films, television serials, books, newspaper articles etc. In the course of my interviews I identified some of the recurring themes and now I will proceed to discuss them in this section. Also, some of the themes such as (dis) comfort with sexuality, public and private desires and blurring of regional and religious have been identified on the basis of the interviews and focus group discussion, which I had conducted. These themes reflect some of the concerns that the respondents themselves shared.

#### **(Dis) comfort with sexuality**

While I extensively discussed the topic of moral dilemmas and the concern with sexuality with my interviewees and focus group discussion participants, many of them revealed that while they were personally comfortable with watching sexually suggestive ads or films they would almost always avoid watching such content with their parents. While some would change channels or their parents would, or start an awkward conversation, some would even switch off the television.

What also emerged was that a certain kind of sexuality was acceptable on screen, which they could watch with their parents. The Fastrack ads were considered, “cute”, “funny”, “harmless” and a “little flirty” and not “hardcore”.

*“From earlier representations these Fastrack ads are very different. There is certain acceptability about watching it on television. I’m uncomfortable watching Wild Stone ads and even condom ads with my parents. But these ads have a fun element, the camera is not lingering on the body so I can watch this with mom and dad.”* (Surbhi)

This sentiment is echoed, albeit a little differently by Aakriti, a twenty year-old History graduate, who thinks that the ads are not representing the woman’s body sexually but her mannerisms and her facial expressions. In her opinion they do so by using long shots.

*“A woman who’s horny is desirable and she desires something, her object of desire is sex, not the man in the ad.”*

The threshold of acceptance has considerably gone up since the 1990s. Ads that explicitly suggest sexual activity are no longer frowned upon or protested against.

*“I don’t suffer from moral dilemmas. Sometimes when people look at these ads where women are objectified they demand that these ads should be pulled off but it doesn’t make an inch of difference to what society thinks or what they think constitutes culture or what they think is morally right or wrong. So if certain thing is offensive to someone then deal with it. Censoring or slapping fines does not improve the moral fabric in any way. Nor is there a need to do that.”* (Anam)

While some of my interviewees made their displeasure over sexual ads and the Fastrack ads in particular evident, some considered them “innovative”, “creative” and “privileging a woman who is active and seeks pleasure”. Some are also treading the line between the ‘traditional’ and the ‘modern’ trickily. To be comfortable watching ads that depict a woman’s active sexual desire is one thing but to be comfortable discussing and acknowledging one’s own active sexual desire is quite another thing.

Swati, twenty-five year-old HR Manager in a multi-national firm, reveals how she and perhaps many women like her negotiate with the image of being traditional and modern in very interesting ways:

*“I’m traditional and modern in different ways. I have many guy friends, I have also had multiple boyfriends, I party till wee hours of the morning, and I also drink and smoke. But I don’t want to give the impression that I’m easy, you know what I mean? My self-image and the image I project to others have to be carefully managed.”*

For Anam however the whole binary of modernity and tradition are social constructs. Everybody might set boundaries for certain things:

*“There will always be someone standing there to make some kind of moral judgment on something or the other. Smoke nahi toh prayers nahi ki or u talk to boys, you come late in the night. To make my life simpler I don’t conform to any standards or conventions. I do what I think is best not what the world thinks. In terms of my parents it matters but I have to look after my own interests.”*

While Swati manages her image in front of her parents, her image of her self is enhanced when she indulges in shopping:

*“When I was in college I bought this sleazy red bra from this small outlet in Kamala Nagar, and I would wear it on special occasions only! I had to hide it from my mom because red would be too much for her and she’ll start asking questions. I remember I did not wash it for a couple of months because I did not know where to dry it!”*

Pretika on the other hand had a hard time convincing her mother that she wanted a piercing on her belly button. Her mother refused to allow her on grounds that it was too “forward” and

would not give her a good image. She settled for another piercing in her ear, but vows to get a belly button piercing and a tattoo when she'll go to Goa to bring in the New Year.

*“When it'll be done, it'll be done! I want to get the devil horns kind of a tattoo, I know she'll throw a fit but who cares...”*

Interviewees did display certain discomfort in talking about sexuality and even seeing sexuality on-screen, but attributed a sense of acceptability towards them owing to English sitcoms on channels such as Star World, Zee Café and Comedy Central. Anisha fittingly describes how she and perhaps many like her negotiate between

*“When we watch Friends or The big bang theory or even Two and a half men we laugh at sexist jokes, understand the kind of relationships they show and even use terms like ‘friends with benefits’ or ‘no strings attached’ in our daily life. True, it is one thing to watch these shows or films and enjoy them but yes it's quite another thing to lead a life like that. And even if I lead a life like that, I don't think that the culture I live in or my parents for that matter will allow me to show how comfortable I am with my sexuality. I have to struggle in my own way, maybe hide a few things in order to lead the kind of life I lead. But I will still not be comfortable in acknowledging that publicly!”* (Anisha)

### **Public and Private Desires: Negotiating the city of Delhi**

The Fastrack ATM was considered quite unrealistic by almost all the interviewees and discussion participants. They argued that even before the couple proceeds to kiss, some ‘thulla’ (a colloquial term for a policeman in Delhi) would come to harass them for a bribe or humiliate them in front of other people.

*“See it’s not like we live in France where you can be at it openly. In the ATM ad I think it’s more about the thrill or the fantasy of doing it in public rather than claiming that I have the right to act the way I want even in public.”* (Surbhi)

A few women argued that it was more about fulfilling a fantasy rather than staking a claim to the public sphere. One is not arguing or making a case for allowing people to engage in acts of sex publicly (this aspect has not been explored in my paper, though this is a terrain worth inquiring) but the right of citizens and especially women to be on the streets, hold hands, sit in a park with a male friend or a lover without attracting the censure of the public or the police. These questions led me to think whether there is an existence of other kinds of surveillance other than the ones from the state, the police and the public. One could perhaps also enquire if women in Delhi discipline themselves and internalize the gaze.

*“Even if I do go out in the night and sit in a park with a friend my concerns are manifold. Even if my parents have no objection, I will think in terms of the risk it entails. What is the guarantee that my friend or I won’t be harassed?”* (Swati)

Since there is this element of ‘risk’ involved, the discourse of ‘safety’ and ‘morality’ supersede over the pleasure of articulating hitherto considered ‘private’ desires in the public. In an essay that questions the discourse of safety in public space in Mumbai, Phadke, 2007 makes a case for women to claim the “right to take risks in the public space” rather than appealing for safety as this would take them further in their demands for “... access to public space as citizens.” (Phadke, 2007; 1510) She further argues that the question of women’s safety is tied to the questions of risk and the kind of claim they can make to the public sphere. She suggests that safety is more than just the assurance that one would not be harmed, it also includes “the knowledge” that if one were to be harmed then the woman’s presence in that

space at that point of time should not be the point of question. The lack of this knowledge is perhaps the reason why women have a "...sense of anxiety and lack of safety in public space as much as the fear of assault" (Phadke, 2007; 1511). She further goes on to elaborate on the multiple risks which women potentially face, from physical assault (a risk shared by men as well), the risk to "reputation" and to the risk of being questioned and blamed for being in the space in the first place, and the risk of losing "...the opportunity to engage city spaces and ... the experience of public spaces." (ibid.) She also makes a valid point on how the discourse of safety places much value "respectability", and how women have to "produce" and manufacture respectability to "... protect the "honour" of their families even at the cost of their own safety" (Phadke, 2007; 1512). Hence this stress on women's sexual safety "...actively contributes to not just reducing women's access to public space but compromise their safety when they do access public space... discourse of safety then does not keep women safe in public; it effectively barn them from it." (Ibid.)

There was wide consensus among my interviewees that Delhi is far more hostile for couples in comparison to let's say a city like Mumbai. Mumbai was perceived as a much more free city by many with no apparent problems of police harassment or moral policing. A few respondents who had been to Mumbai or had stayed in Mumbai spoke about the lack of public spaces in Delhi in comparison to Mumbai where in places like Bandstand, Marine Drive, Chowpatty etc. couples can sit together, hold hands, hug and talk without anyone bothering them. Many lamented the lack of such spaces in Delhi. In Delhi, families use a place like India Gate and its adjoining parks as a picnic spot and it also doubles up as a playground for kids. The number of well-lit and maintained parks in Delhi can be counted on fingers. Few

among them can be used by couples or lovers for leisure or recreation. This raises the question over the demarcation of the private and public, and specifically ‘whose’ private and ‘whose’ public. What are the kinds of spaces available for couples, lovers and friends to have fun? What are the kinds of spaces afforded to them, materially and culturally?

Stuti likes going to parks but prefers the two-seater lounge sofas in cinema halls where she can spend quality time with her boyfriend and have some fun. But she also describes the kinds of places Delhi affords to men and women of different classes to spend time together and hangout.

*“Delhi allows for a lot of things as long as long as it’s hidden, like in the cars, or dark alleys, dark bus stops in RK Puram, where I have seen quite a few things happening! I know people who have been told to leave the Metro because they were hugging. Where does one go in Delhi to make out or even just hang out? Parks? Monuments? In cinema halls those couch seats are a rage but it’s a killing Rs 800 per couple. Who can afford that? Those who can, well I’m sure they have other places to go to as well.”*

### ***Becoming Metropolitan: Acts of middle-class and upper-middle-class consumption***

After watching Fastrack ads I would typically ask the same question to everyone: Which city did they think the ad was set in and/or which city did they think the characters belonged to. Almost invariably and not surprisingly, women said either “It has to be a metro like Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore.” Yes it has to be a metro city, and it could only be Delhi, Mumbai or Bangalore. I was intrigued by the various constructions of “this looks like Delhi” or “this can only happen in Mumbai”. Also it is interesting to note that these are the only three cities

which figure in the popular imaginary of 18-25 year old women in Delhi.

The markers of belonging and living in a metropolitan city were “the clothes, the attitude and the language” of the characters. “In these places you have certain dressing styles which I have seen in these cities. Even overall... I’m not stereotyping, but you get to see such a trendy way of dressing, maybe because fashion comes in the cities first. They are young, smartly dressed people.” *Becoming* metropolitan then in outlook, in appearance and the identity of being metropolitan itself hinged on being urban, middle-class and English speaking.

Fastrack’s tagline *Move on* was interpreted in multiple ways, be it moving on to a new boyfriend/girl friend, a new job, a new house, a new bag or a new watch. There was however a broad consensus about the brand calling out to move on to something better, move on to something modern, move on to consuming more.

Commenting on the Fastrack ads in general, and the aspiring middle-class Stuti made a compelling argument when she said:

*“The characters in the ad look decidedly upper-middle class. But the audience that Fastrack is looking at is maybe the middle class. The middle class is expanding and we have the money to spend, for instance in the ATM ad, the ATM does signify fast cash, wealth, and the need to have money. There is a comment on the kind of money people have, on being young, who can spend and women being the go-getters and that rhetoric of young people only wanting sex without commitment, especially the hickey ad with girl out of focus, this easy no strings attached casual sex... Fastrack is affordable for the middle class I think and it is for the aspiring middle class...”*

In self-identifying themselves to a class category, most of my interviewees considered themselves ‘middle-class’ on the basis of as some of them put it, ‘purely in factual economic



terms', 'on the basis of how I spend'. Hiba very remarkably self-identified her self as someone both middle-class and upper-middle class at the same time.

*"I have values of middle class but maybe access to resources could be upper-middle. Like not too much spending and stressing on saving."*

Interviewees who self-identified themselves as middle-class commented on how consumption has become a part of everyday life and the middle class is aspiring to climb up the ladder. In the same breadth they also stress on importance of saving and the stress on 'middle-class values'. On enquiring about these values I gathered that 'middle-class values' relate not just to the spending of money and the stress on frugality but equally applied to 'morals' and 'virtue'.

The interviewees who self-identified themselves as upper-middle class, commented on the expanding middle-class and their indulgence in conspicuous consumption. The 'they' and 'us' divide and the invisible lines of class within class, is evident from statements such as "I don't go mad shopping just because it's a 30% sale like some of my friends do" or "These Fastrack watches are for the middle-class. Why will I buy a Fastrack watch, which looks like a toy, for 1500 bucks when I can buy a better-looking Casio watch for 3000? I'd rather splurge on that!"

Now at 25, Swati thinks she is in better control of what she buys and does not have to ratify her choices from her mother:

*"In my first year of working I bought this corset set from La Senza, it was bloody expensive but so worth it! I looked and felt sexy in it. Also you cannot compare the quality of a Triumph or a La Senza with those cheap Daisy and Sweety<sup>5</sup> type labels!"*

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<sup>5</sup> Here, Swati is referring to local brands, which are available at cheaper rates in comparison to high-end branded lingerie labels such as Lovable, Triumph, La Senza, Enamor etc.

## **Pleasure, Youth and expression of Desire**

*In a mobile phone ad, a salesgirl is shown sitting at the check out counter of a busy supermarket. She has a 'Sexy Secretary Look' with her dark rimmed glasses, heavy eye make-up, and red lipstick, open hair and fitted clothes. While processing orders she runs out of change and starts handing out candies instead of coins as balance. A man comes to the counter, puts his phone on the till and proceeds to pay for his purchase. Seeing his phone with "sharp", "razor" and "masculine" edges, she hands him out two condoms saying, "Sorry no change". The ad ends with the salesgirl looking at him suggestively and the man quite amused with the attention.*

This is a television advertisement, which portrays female desire triggered by the material possession of a mobile phone by a man. The phone here doubles up as a phallic symbol and is described as "sleek, sharp masculine edges". This is perhaps the classic usage of association on which sexual desire is represented visually and especially in advertisements.

The Fastrack commercials on the other hand do not use products as motivation for female sexual desire. The possession of a Fastrack watch or a bag or any other accessory is immaterial. It is the ability to move on in life, which is stressed on. Though it is true that what one is being compelled to move on to could be a Fastrack product, but visually it says otherwise. In fact some of the interviewees displayed confusion with regard to the 'message' of these ads.

*"What are these ads saying? It is only towards the end of the ad that one realizes that it is a Fastrack ad. Nowhere does the product come in the picture. It is for the audience to decide."*

(FGD Participant)

The ads then are playing on and are trying to build these characters on the basis of how they think young urban kids behave or should behave.

*“There are these little things like the Jim Morrison poster, the ATM fast cash, rich kids with plush houses, wearing locket chains and vests. Apart from the semantics of the ad, the entire idea of moving on is about things getting so easy. Everything is being sold by association then, how many people know Jim Morrison? Who idolizes him? What kinds of people?”*

(Stuti)

The interviewees unanimously pointed out that these ads in particular focus on the woman and her desires, egging her to move on if she is not satisfied.

*“There were a lot of facial expressions, hidden contexts and anecdotes. In each ad it is her who is taking the initiative not the guy, she’s more forthcoming, go getter, trying to seduce, they haven’t taken the clichéd route and there was no negative context, very positive I would say.”* (Anisha)

For one of the participants in the focus group discussion the woman in the ad wants sexual attention and at times she throws herself at the man. The woman seems okay with the man having love bites from other women. She seems like she is a person who would avoid a serious relationship.

Surbhi related to some of the ads personally saying that women are not inhibited anymore.

*“In the ad it feels as if it’s just her desire, her need, he at times is reluctant. But he enjoys it that she wants him so much. The idea of female sexual desire comes through though.*

*These ads are about being sexually desirable. She is desirable so she has desire. His body is also sexually desirable. His body is what I desire not what I see desiring something in the ad.*

*In other ads they show women showing reaction and in these ads there is an action from the woman's side."*

During the focus group discussion a lot of interesting points came up. It was felt by majority of the discussants that the ads, in showing how they think the youth behaves, excludes a large strata and hence did not consider this an inclusive ad. Their argument was that everyone is not having sex or wanting to have sex. And more importantly the bodies in the ads are the kind of bodies one has been "told are desirable". Many participants voiced concerns over and debated on 'what is a desirable body?' and where do these notions of a desirable body form.

Eighteen year-old Jayashri a Journalism student, and a focus group discussion participant talked about a Volkswagen ad she had seen, which featured the car Beetle with the copy line saying, 'Curves are back'. The print ad had a model eating pastries and cakes. The discussion then went on to the pressures on being thin and how perhaps a fuller body is gaining acceptance.

Trisha, Jayashri's classmate argued while citing the example of the sit-com *Two and a half men*, that why is it that all the women who sleep with Charlie, the protagonist, are of a certain kind which re-enforces the idea that the main girl is always 'pretty' while the friend is fat and ugly.

One of the discussants also recollected an ad by Tele brands on television, advertising a range of slimming products that always have a girl selling those products. In a particularly funny ad, a discussant remembered that the housewife is talking to the viewers and describing how her husband has lost weight after using the slim and sauna belt by saying that '*Pehle mere husband jab ghar aate the toh Adnan Sami lagte the, ab Swami lagte hain*' (Earlier my husband looked extremely fat, now he looks almost god-like.)

Another print ad recounted by one of the participants was that of a slimming clinic with a girl wearing a tyre around her waist, with the tag line, ‘Say no to tyres: Being slim isn’t enough, go in for a significant change!’”

While all these discussions and examples shared by the discussants demonstrated some of concerns over the kinds of bodies one sees in the media today, there was also a construction of specific kinds of bodies which are perhaps ‘allowed’ to have desires. So while they received the Fastrack advertisements well, they did not approve of the female sexual desire constructed in highly specific ways. They were quick to point out the exclusions in these representations, which included only “slim, toned hunk-like muscled bodies.”

Some of my interviewees also pointed out to other kinds of exclusions as well. The default presence of heterosexual desires and the silent absence of other kinds of desires were pointed out by Saba, a twenty-five year-old Journalist working for a weekly newspaper. She felt that the only time she saw the presence of other kinds of sexualities in Indian ads was when they were being mocked or were being used as a trope within the narrative of the ad.

### **Concluding Notes**

While many of my respondents lauded the representation of an active female sexual desire in these ads some of them were quick to suggest that there is a precarious walk between being ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’. The choices these young women made in their lives had to be negotiated with the diktats of their parents since all my respondents were living with their parents.

The first discomfort with sexuality was the prospect of being viewed “easy” as Swati revealed. So the idea then is to be knowledgeable but not appear knowledgeable and to

carefully manage one's image of being "respectable" but indulge in pleasures of sex, drinking and smoking, albeit clandestinely. While she is conscious of her image, which she portrays to others, her self-image is enhanced when she is able to shop for and wear products that make her feel "sexy". What makes her feel this way is also the fact that she has the power and choice to do so. And even though this choice is articulated through consumption, it is a choice through which she fashions her "sexy" self.

The other discomfort with sexuality was the tightrope walk with their parents. Some respondents shared how they selectively divulged information to their parents depending upon their moral thresholds. For some, revealing that they had boyfriends was easy, for some telling that they hang out with boys was also a problem. These young women however continue to negotiate with these restrictions placed upon them in various ways. Carrying an extra change of clothes for parties, night outs with boyfriends but having fake study sleepovers, going out of the city with friends under the garb of college fests are just some of the ways in which they resist authority of their parents. For Pretika, getting a belly button piercing and a tattoo is her way of challenging and resisting her parent's authority over her body.

For most of my middle-class college going interviewees moral policing in public spaces deters them and denies them spaces for leisure, recreation, fun and expressing love and articulating desire. Some of them continue to find spaces in Metro stations, single screen theaters, green rooms and empty classrooms in college. Some respondents who identified themselves as upper-middle class considered plush two-seater sofas in cinema halls, or the confines of their cars as the ideal places to get some action.

Some of these respondents were also quick to disassociate themselves with Fastrack as a desirable brand, especially since its bags and accessories are available at a very “cheap” Rs 495 onwards. Pretika and Sukriti suggested that this brand is for the “aspiring middle-class” and not for those who can buy better brands such as “Casio, Tissot and Fossil”<sup>6</sup>.

The exercise of choice, to make the decision to wear what one desires to look “sexy”, to engrave one’s body with the tattoo or piercing one wants, to buying tickets for a two-seater love couch in a cinema hall, are just some of the ways in which the young women I have interviewed, display an act of agency. It is true that these acts of agency are limited to the urban middle and upper-middle class women and wrapped in discourses of consumerism. But these acts are perhaps the small beginning for us to explore how women are articulating desires even if in the form of buying a red colored corset for the sheer pleasure of it. While looking for agency within the confines of consumerism is not entirely unproblematic, it is but useful starting point to engage with the young women of Delhi who I have interviewed. These women put an accent on pleasures of buying love, sexiness, confidence and freedom. They don’t see a problem in this. And perhaps to engage with them better, we shouldn’t either.

### **Bio-note**

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<sup>6</sup> These are international brands of watches which can range anywhere from between Rs. 3000 – 10000 and even more in the case of Fossil and Tissot.

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