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WHEN QUEER IS NORMALISED: RECOGNISING REPRESENTATIONS OF HOMONORMATIVITY IN INDIAN AUDIOVISUAL BRAND CAMPAIGNS

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Abstract: *Since the 2010s, LGBTQ+ representation in Indian audiovisual advertising has grown significantly. However, it is crucial to evaluate whether these campaigns exhibit the homonormative patterns previously identified by scholars in Western media. This paper examines how advertisers use homonormative strategies to make LGBTQ+ people acceptable to mainstream audiences while promoting their products. The analysis reveals that these campaigns downplay queer differences and emphasise heteronormative experiences to make LGBTQ+ identities seem ‘normal’. Advertisers employ several common strategies: portraying the familiar plight of wives within relationships, highlighting the transformative power of monogamous love and marriage, incorporating queer individuals into patriarchal rituals, and showcasing patriotism and individual accomplishments as markers of respectable citizenship. By centring these themes, such portrayals inevitably exclude the non-homonormative identities and diverse experiences of gender and sexual minorities. Therefore, for advertising to achieve genuine inclusion, it must move beyond this normative framework and embrace more authentic and diverse representations of LGBTQ+ lives.*

Keywords: *LGBTQ+, homonormativity, popular culture, advertisements, media*

1. Introduction

For years, Western brands have strategically targeted the LGBTQ+¹ market, which Mowlabocus (2021) refers to as “commoditised subjectivity”. This trend began in India in the late 2000s and accelerated through the 2010s. However, as Western scholarship has shown,

¹ This paper uses “queer” and “LGBTQ+” interchangeably as umbrella terms to refer to sexual and gender minorities.

such portrayals often exclude those who do not conform, focusing instead on queer individuals aligned with majority norms (Blair, 2013; Finlay-Jeffrey, 2020).

Few studies have examined this trend in India, which makes such analyses essential. The mere presence of LGBTQ+ characters is significant (Dauw, 2018), but it does not guarantee a challenge to the status quo. Instead, these representations often offer a “sanitised version of queer culture... [that is] sold to the public” (Dauw, 2018, p. 4). This “positive” representation “tames and contains” queer experience (Alan Brooke & Westerfelhaus, 2001, p. 142) by linking happiness to conventional ideals like monogamy and marriage (Goltz, 2010, p. 41).

Scholars have given this phenomenon several names. Ghaziani (2011) calls it “new queer visibility”, which he defines as “the acceptance of a segment of gays and lesbians who are gender-conforming, middle class, [and] upwardly mobile” (p. 104). Conversely, Duggan (2002) defines the underlying political logic as homonormativity: “a neoliberal sexual politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them [in a] privatised, depoliticised gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (p. 179).

This paper analyses 105 Indian audiovisual campaigns (2008-2021) to identify the prevalence of homonormativity in the nation’s advertising landscape. While many have celebrated these campaigns as empowering (Chauhan & Shukla, 2016; Lal & Dutta, 2021), this study offers a critical queer analysis. It argues that these representations are largely confined to community members who fit homonormative ideals: those who are “non-threatening to the prevailing... order” (Lester, 2014, p. 245) and often imagined through a Western lens (Bucar & Enke, 2011, p. 304). By doing so, these adverts marginalise the very community they claim to represent.

This critical examination is crucial, as it exposes the “detrimental role [of these portrayals] in reproducing societal assumptions about ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ ways of differing from the cisgender heterosexual norm” (Vanlee, 2019, p. 531). Ultimately, this paper advocates for a more genuinely inclusive representation of the LGBTQ+ community, one that transcends the confines of heteronormative ideology.

2. Homonormativity: A critical overview

Homonormativity stems from heteronormativity and promotes a version of gay identity that aligns with mainstream societal norms (O'Brien, 2015). As Duggan (2002) argues, this approach reinforces heteronormativity by discouraging challenges to its oppressive structures. Consequently, those who do not conform face even greater marginalisation.

While internal critiques of marriage and monogamy sometimes arise within heteronormativity, homonormativity often silences these discussions in its pursuit of mainstream acceptance. Heteronormativity itself is a “corrupt and exclusionary system” (Goltz, 2010, p. 39) that penalises anyone—heterosexual individuals included—who deviates from its strict framework. Homonormativity marginalises those who do not conform, favouring identities that fit neatly into the gender binary. This is deeply problematic, as it “undermines the expectations of diversity and radical equality that the queer movement set out to achieve” (Tondon, 2017).

Homonormativity offers only selective acceptance, favouring those who conform to its standards while marginalising others within the LGBTQ+ community. Scholars such as Bauman (1990) and Mowlabocus (2021) critique this assimilationist approach, arguing that it perpetuates inequality and discourages solidarity. This can lead to a situation where certain “acceptable” minorities gain mainstream approval by distancing themselves from those who do not fit the normative criteria (Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2016).

By accepting only some LGBTQ+ people, homonormativity reinforces heteronormative ideals. It does not eliminate stigma but merely redirects it from monogamous, gender-conforming gay men and lesbians to those who cannot or will not conform. This narrow promise of respectability ultimately fails the broader LGBTQ+ community (Warner, 2000, p. 60). This dynamic creates a hierarchy in which conforming LGBTQ+ people gain social acceptance whilst others remain excluded. Far from promoting acceptance, homonormativity therefore creates and deepens social hierarchies (Cover, 2015).

Media representations play a key role in this process by homogenising the LGBTQ+ community. They often obscure diversity and create the distorted perception that the community consists mainly of white, affluent, middle-class gay and lesbian individuals (Lester, 2014; Vanlee, 2019). When some gay and lesbian people gain influence, the focus shifts from

changing systems to simple inclusion, weakening the broader challenge to heteronormative structures.

This paper, therefore, analyses the exclusionary aspects of homonormativity that have emerged in Indian LGBTQ+ advertising, arguing that they undermine the very inclusivity these portrayals claim to champion.

3. Queer representation in Indian media

Recent scholarship examines LGBTQ+ representation in Indian media and its complex effects. This research maps the quantitative growth of representation, critically debates its normalising effects, and explores the contexts of digital activism and regional media. For example, Khuman's (2024) content analysis charts this landscape, identifying a surge in campaigns post-2018 and noting distinct thematic patterns: gay and lesbian adverts typically focus on love, while narratives about transgender individuals centre on human rights. This work builds on earlier studies, such as that by Joseph and Arul (2020), which examined audience perceptions of queer representation before the decriminalization of Section 377.

A central debate in the literature concerns the impact of this visibility. While some research suggests that advertising helps "normalise" queer discourse (Pethkar & Karmarkar, 2022), a more critical perspective argues that such inclusion is often conditional. For instance, the analysis of the Bhima Jewellery campaign by Paul and Benziker (2025) contends that even positive portrayals can enforce "respectability politics", where acceptance hinges on conformity to traditional gender norms. This critique is supported by findings from Tilak and Singh (2019), who conclude that media portrayals of the transgender community, while increasing, still lack multi-dimensionality.

Finally, scholarship looks beyond corporate advertising to provide a fuller picture. Research by Nanditha (2020) explores how the queer community uses digital spaces such as Twitter/X to form its own political identity, particularly around Section 377. Similarly, Nair and Francis's (2024) work on South Indian cinema highlights the complexities of audience reception and regional differences. Collectively, this research reveals a rise in queer visibility that is complex and contradictory, caught between corporate "normalisation" and the community's own digital and regional self-fashioning.

4. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach, structured in two key phases—sample selection and thematic analysis—to analyse the representation of LGBTQ+ individuals in Indian advertising.

4.1. Sample selection and criteria

To compile a comprehensive sample, a systematic search was conducted across 16 web resources specialising in Indian media and advertising (Khuman, 2024). These sources included:

1. exchange4media.com
2. medianews4u.com
3. mediasamosa.com
4. campaignsoftheworld.com
5. afaqs.com
6. adgully.com
7. brandinginasia.com
8. campaignindia.in
9. bestmediainfo.com
10. campaignbriefasia.com
11. theviraladverts.com
12. cluttercutters.in
13. mediainfoline.com
14. brandequity.economictimes.indiatimes.com
15. mediabrief.com
16. lgbtqindiaresource.in

This multi-source approach ensured comprehensive coverage and minimised the risk of overlooking relevant campaigns. Advertisements were selected based on two primary criteria:

- The campaign must have been broadcast on television or the internet in India.
- The advertisement had to be audiovisual to enable the analysis of characters, narratives, and settings; print adverts were therefore excluded.

This process yielded a final sample of 105 distinct marketing campaigns featuring LGBTQ+ representation.

4.2. Analytical framework

The final sample of 105 campaigns was analysed using qualitative thematic analysis, a method for systematically identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (or themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach is widely used in media studies because it enables an in-depth, interpretive reading of audiovisual texts to uncover underlying ideological assumptions and representational strategies (Hall, 1997). The goal was not merely to count occurrences but to understand how LGBTQ+ identities were constructed and framed within a homonormative context.

4.3. Defining and coding homonormative tropes

The core of the analysis was defining and coding homonormative tropes. For this study, these tropes are defined as recurring narrative and visual patterns that portray LGBTQ+ individuals in ways that align with and reinforce dominant, heteronormative social values (Bolen, 2024; Duggan, 2002). These patterns prioritise assimilation over difference and present a sanitised, depoliticised version of queer life.

The analysis followed standard thematic analysis stages:

1. Familiarisation: All 105 campaigns were viewed multiple times to develop a deep familiarity with their content, narratives, and visual language.
2. Initial Coding: During repeated viewings, initial codes were generated for recurring elements, such as “character expresses desire for ‘normalcy’”, “patriotic imagery used”, or “focus on romantic love, not sex”.
3. Theme (Trope) Identification: These initial codes were then collated into broader, coherent potential themes. For example, codes related to weddings and monogamy were grouped under the theme of “Glorifying Monogamous Love”.
4. Reviewing and Defining Tropes: The potential themes were then reviewed and refined to become the final homonormative tropes discussed in this paper, such as “The Sacrificing Wife” or “Queer Patriots”.

4.4. Selection of illustrative campaigns

To provide evidence for each identified trope in the discussion section, specific campaigns were selected from the total sample of 105. This selection process is a form of purposive sampling, where examples are chosen to be particularly informative about the topic of study. The rationale was not to discuss every campaign but to use the most illustrative examples based on established qualitative criteria:

1. Clarity: The chosen campaigns serve as exceptionally clear and powerful illustrations of a specific theme. This aligns with the principle of selecting “vivid, compelling” examples that best articulate the core of a theme for the reader (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 35).
2. Typicality: The examples are representative of a common or frequently observed pattern. This follows the logic of “typical case sampling”, where the goal is to illustrate what is normal or average within the dataset (Patton, 2003, p. 6).
3. Significance: The examples showcase a particularly important or unique manifestation of a broader strategy. This involves selecting “critical” or “unique” cases that are especially insightful because they are revelatory, extreme, or central to the study’s argument (Yin, 2018, p. 52).

This qualitative approach ensures that the analysis is grounded in rich, specific examples that best explain the recurring tropes present across the wider advertising landscape.

5. Discussion

5.1 The sacrificing wives of queer partners

This section analyses a specific, recurring pattern identified within the broader sample: the use of the heteronormative trope of the ‘sacrificing wife’ to legitimise a queer male narrative. The campaigns discussed below, “Qaid” and “Khul Ke Baat”, were selected because they are exceptionally clear and powerful illustrations of this theme. While the scenario of a wife reacting to her husband’s queer identity is not the most common plot in the sample, these adverts are highly representative of a broader tendency to frame queer stories in familiar,

patriarchal gender dynamics. They systematically demonstrate how homonormative portrayals, in their quest for mainstream acceptance, often reinforce traditional gender hierarchies by sacrificing female agency to centre a male journey of self-discovery. This makes them crucial case studies for the paper's overarching argument.

In India's heteronormative culture, a wife's role often involves prioritising her husband's happiness above her own, a readiness to sacrifice that is emblematic of prevailing social norms. The media often mirrors a pattern in which women respond to their husbands' distressing actions with a tolerant and accepting demeanour (Patowary, 2014), and it extends to advertisements featuring non-straight couples. For example, in the advertisement "Qaid" [Confinement] (2018), the wife not only accepts her spouse's gender dysphoria but also pledges to remain committed to their marriage.

The opening scene shows the wife's dejection as her spouse appreciates her saree more than her. This is followed by her shock at discovering women's clothing and her spouse wearing lipstick. Despite her inner turmoil, she refrains from voicing her concerns, expressing her anguish only through tears. The narrator remarks:

Who says that the one who looks fulfilled isn't breaking from within? Somewhere within all of us resides a prisoner... screaming to be let out, desperate to taste freedom. But little does it know, even the air outside isn't really free (Qaid, 2018).

These lines poignantly capture the repressed pain of both the wife and her transitioning spouse. While the spouse's journey to self-discovery is highlighted, the wife's inner struggles remain confined by the constraints of heteronormativity. As her partner emerges from the metaphorical closet, the wife remains tethered to the marriage. She carefully gathers her spouse's old male clothing and helps to stow away their former life—portrayed as a dutiful wife adeptly concealing her pain. She assists in their transformation by helping them dress, apply makeup, and even observing fasts for their well-being. With a touch of nostalgia, she looks at a pre-transition photograph of the man she once cherished, yet accepts her discontented marriage. Professing that her spouse remains her "better half, and will always be my best friend. Forever," she intertwines their happiness with her own sense of contentment.

A similar self-sacrificing nature is evident in "Khul Ke Baat" [Speak Freely] (2018). After separating from her gay husband, the wife drives him to the airport to meet his partner.

Fulfilling her wifely duty to the end, she smiles and tells her former husband's new partner, "I have come to see off my best friend". This campaign offers a slightly less regressive portrayal, as she refrains from making perpetual promises of love and removes her wedding rings as the advertisement concludes. The tagline "*rishta wahi, baat nayi*" [same relationship, new matter] suggests that relationship dynamics are unchanged regardless of the gender of the person desired (Paviour-Smith, 2010, p. 178). What also remains unchanged, however, is the gendered expectation of female sacrifice. As these examples illustrate, homonormativity does not necessarily dismantle patriarchal structures; it simply adapts them.

Ultimately, this strategy has garnered substantial criticism. In these homonormative portrayals, women who have already faced challenges within the heteronormative framework continue to experience similar struggles. Their roles are used to make a queer male narrative more palatable and emotionally resonant for a mainstream audience.

5.2. Acceptance when two people fall in love

A central strategy for framing LGBTQ+ experiences in ways that are non-threatening to the heterosexual majority is to focus on monogamous love. One of the most compelling arguments presented for LGBTQ+ acceptance is rooted in the simple notion of love between two individuals. The emphasis on "two" signals monogamy, commitment, and family-building—concepts rooted in heteronormativity. When queer love is presented in this familiar package, there appears to be no valid reason for disapproval.

In the advertisement "The Welcome" (2014), a woman convinces her disapproving grandmother to accept her grandson's same-sex relationship with the following logic: "You might wonder where the old way of living has gone. But who is worried about who likes what? As long as they are in love, two people want to be with each other". After considering this, the grandmother approves of the union. However, this appeal is exclusionary. The phrase "as long as they are in love" dismisses casual relationships, while "two people" erases non-monogamous arrangements. This provides a template for how queer couples can find acceptance: not through a radical understanding of queer identity, but by assimilating into the familiar structures of family and monogamy.

Furthermore, the adverts often portray coming out as an act undertaken by a couple, not an individual. When the gay man in "The Welcome" introduces his partner, the action

communicates that their relationship is just like any other, except for the gender of his partner. A parallel situation unfolds in “The Visit” (2015), where a woman comes out by introducing her parents to her partner. This recurring trope of coming out *through* a relationship is deeply homonormative, as it suggests queer identity is validated not as an intrinsic state of being but through a monogamous partnership.

This appeal to sameness is also central to “Come Out for Your Photo Shoot!” (2016). A mother convinces her husband to accept their lesbian daughter’s relationship by drawing a parallel to their own past struggles as an interfaith couple, reminding him, “They love each other”. This argument becomes the catalyst for the father’s change of heart, which is sealed when he sees a photograph of his daughter’s proposal next to one of his own. The father’s acceptance is predicated on seeing his own heteronormative experience reflected in his daughter’s queer relationship. This is the essence of a homonormative appeal: it seeks validation by erasing differences and emphasising sameness.

The “Times Out and Proud” (2019) campaign highlights the transactional nature of this acceptance. A lesbian comes out to her father by immediately promising him grandchildren, offering the prospect of procreation—a cornerstone of heterosexual marriage—as a homonormative bargaining chip. In the same campaign, a gay man’s partner recalls being accepted by his mother-in-law after she offered him the crockery she had saved for a daughter-in-law. This neat substitution suggests that LGBTQ+ people are acceptable as long as they can seamlessly fill the roles prescribed by the heteronormative family structure.

Ultimately, these campaigns propose a homonormative script for the LGBTQ+ community to follow. They suggest that acceptance from family is most likely when one presents a committed, monogamous partnership that mirrors heteronormative ideals of love and family. This approach erases diverse queer experiences and makes acceptance conditional on conformity. It implies that rights are granted only to those who successfully adopt and reinforce the dominant monogamous structure—the very structure that a more radical queer experience would critique.

5.3. Love fearlessly—but approach sex with caution

A crucial function of homonormativity is to create a “respectable” queer subject by strategically divorcing queer identity from queer sexuality. This process promotes a romantic,

desexualised, and sanitised version of love that is palatable to a mainstream audience, rendering physical intimacy and desire either invisible or problematic. It is a compromise that trades silence about sex for public visibility.

These campaigns consistently portray a non-physical, romantic love while omitting any depiction of sensuality. The “Love Fearlessly” (2018) campaign, for instance, promotes fearless love with a classic Bollywood song that asks, “Why should we be afraid when we have loved?” This lyric, however, raises a question: What if a person is not in love but seeks casual sex? Would that act still be considered fearless? This is the essence of the homonormative compromise: it promotes a sanitised, romantic love acceptable to the mainstream while excluding desire and intimacy that fall outside those norms.

The advert “He Is Not ‘A Gay’” (2015) indirectly addresses this tension. A young man in India discreetly tries to buy a condom while on a video call with his grandmother. After some humorous confusion, he verbalises his request. The grandmother, although initially surprised, quickly responds: “Chalo [anyway], at least you are being cautious”, she says, immediately inviting him to America to find a suitable match. Her attempt to steer his perceived non-normative behaviour (casual sex) toward the respectable outcome of marriage is evident.

As Goltz (2010) notes, “gay sex remains a topic the ‘good gay’ carefully sidesteps” to gain acceptance. This is the core function of homonormativity in these advertisements: it splits the queer subject in two. It creates a “good”, marketable, romantic individual who is worthy of public love, while implicitly rendering the sexual queer person as deviant and unmentionable. This strategy requires the community to remain silent about their desires in return for a fragile and uncertain form of visibility.

5.4. Showcasing same-sex partners among opposite-sex couples to highlight parallels

A primary strategy of homonormativity is to make queer relationships legible and acceptable to a mainstream audience by repeatedly framing them through heterosexual analogy. This approach seeks assimilation by minimising queer difference and arguing that, fundamentally, “love is love”. Advertisements frequently employ this tactic by placing one or two same-sex couples amid a group of heterosexual couples, suggesting their struggles and joys are not just valid but identical.

This pattern is visible across numerous campaigns where queer love is presented as just another variation of love facing universal obstacles. “Love Fearlessly” (2018) depicts straight and queer couples encountering similar societal opposition due to differences in caste, age, or religion. The advertisement “Love Will Find a Way” (2019) features a hesitant lesbian couple alongside heterosexual individuals also expressing their love despite fear. “Happy Valentine’s Day” (2020) includes straight, gay, and lesbian couples whose everyday quarrels are captured in a way that blurs their distinct orientations, while “Free to Love” (2020) highlights the parallel journeys of three couples facing barriers related to caste, age, and sexual orientation.

This strategy continues in other campaigns. “Break the Barrier” (2017) shows three couples—differentiated by sexual orientation, age, and race—confronting societal judgement. “Lovin’ You Back” (2017) depicts diverse couples, including a gay couple, underscoring their shared relationship struggles. Likewise, “First Dates” (2021) situates a gay couple’s date within the familiar context of heterosexual first dates, and “Start Something Epic” (2020) features a straight and a lesbian couple sharing similar positive experiences on a dating app. Placing a token queer couple among many straight ones visually signals homonormativity’s goal: queer love is valid only if it mirrors heterosexual structures and challenges.

While the clear intention is to advocate for acceptance by demonstrating comparability, this approach leads to the “eradication of any distinctive homosexual identity that differs dramatically from heteronormative ideals” (Finlay-Jeffrey, 2020, p. 2), such as being single or engaging in non-monogamous relationships. In this framework, solidarity is mistaken for sameness. The media’s portrayal not only fails to encompass the diversity within the LGBTQ+ community but actively suggests that such diversity must be suppressed to gain entry into the mainstream—a core and damaging tenet of homonormative politics.

5.5. The quest for love to complete oneself

A key function of homonormativity is to channel queer aspirations toward the private, respectful, and depoliticised institution of marriage. By positioning the quest for a monogamous life partner as the ultimate life goal, it aligns queer desires with mainstream values, making them legible and non-threatening. This focus on finding ‘the one’ to achieve wholeness is a persistent theme in advertisements, reflecting a broader strategy of assimilation.

This focus on finding a partner as the key to personal fulfilment recurs across campaigns. In “Times Out and Proud” (2019), for example, a gay man named Vivek Tejuja declares his belief in a soulmate who will complete his life, citing the Bollywood film *Dil Toh Pagal Hai* [The Heart Is Crazy]: “For everyone, there is one person. That’s what Yash Chopra [the film’s director] said, and I believe him completely.” This is a perfect illustration of homonormative influence, where mainstream heterosexual romantic scripts are not just adopted but cherished as universal truths.

The referenced film, which revolves around a fated soulmate for every person, has clearly influenced Tejuja’s perspective, who reinterprets its heteronormative narrative for a queer context (Rawal, 2022). This desire for marriage is also central to the campaign “Legally Yours” (2018). When asked about the next step after the abolishment of Section 377, a queer individual responds, “I want to marry the person I love in a grand ceremony... So, my love, someday, I will be legally yours.” The campaign reinforces this point with statistics: “75% of the gay population is willing to explore adoption or surrogacy to have a child, and 92% would like to get married.”

This focus on marriage in advertising reflects the real-world demands of Indian equality activists following the decriminalisation of Section 377 (Dandona, 2023). However, this intense focus is also a central political outcome of a successful homonormative campaign, which suggests that prioritising love and marriage may overshadow other pertinent issues facing the queer community. As McRuer (2017) argues, “the fight for gay marriage and adoption rights rests on its mainstreaming goals and its erasure of alternative forms of kinship and community” (p. 272). Thus, homonormativity does not just influence personal desires; it actively shapes the political agenda of the entire community, ensuring that the pursuit of assimilation through marriage is seen as the primary—and often only—path to a better quality of life.

5.6. Aspiring to resemble heterosexual individuals

A core objective of homonormativity is to gain social acceptance by minimising queer difference and demonstrating a willingness to assimilate into the mainstream. This strategy encourages queer individuals to seek legitimacy not by celebrating their uniqueness but by striving to perfectly mirror the lives, values, and aspirations of their heterosexual counterparts.

The ultimate goal is to achieve a state of ‘normalcy’, where queerness becomes an invisible, non-disruptive private detail.

Characters in these advertisements often voice this aspiration for normalcy, believing it will grant them respectability and alleviate stigma. For instance, in the “Legally Yours” (2018) campaign, a queer individual discloses, “I want to live a simple life the way my sister is living. When she holds the hands of her husband, nobody stares at them.” Likewise, an activist in “Never Settle for Inequality” (2018) asserts a desire for the “right to express ourselves the same way an ordinary boy or girl would have”. This desire to fit in is also central to “Add Colours to Love” (2019), where a couple emphasises their goal to “be part of the crowd”, not to stand out. The theme culminates in the “Times Out and Proud” (2019) campaign, where a couple expresses gratitude for being made to “feel like a normal couple”, seemingly unaware that this acceptance hinges on their adherence to homonormativity.

These recurring dialogues articulate the central political project of homonormativity: a desire not for liberation on queer terms, but for assimilation into a ‘normal’ life, where safety and respectability come at the cost of erasing difference. As McRuer (2017) astutely observes, “In queer media, characters negotiate their place among society through their willingness to play into the heterosexual matrix” (p. 272). The problem with this constrained acceptance is that it perpetuates “a tragic binary of heterosexual look-alikes or deviant outsiders” (Walters, 2003, p. 123). Ultimately, this homonormative strategy proves detrimental because it does not dismantle the closet; it simply redesigns it with a more comfortable interior. It offers conditional safety to those who can and will conform, while leaving anyone who celebrates their difference outside—reinforcing the very systems of exclusion it claims to overcome

5.7. Appropriating patriarchal rituals

A key strategy of homonormativity is to seek mainstream acceptance by demonstrating conformity to dominant cultural practices. This often involves the uncritical adoption of traditional rituals, even those that are deeply patriarchal and have been criticised for their oppressive impact on women. By depicting queer individuals participating in these ceremonies, advertisements argue for assimilation on the grounds of shared cultural values, effectively sanitising queerness for a traditional audience.

This approach is evident in the advertisement “Joyful Homecomings” (2020), where a Hindu bride performs the *griha pravesha* [house entrance ritual] with her same-sex partner. In this ceremony, a new bride overturns a jar of rice at the threshold of her in-laws’ home. The ritual symbolically transfers responsibility for the entire family to her and designates her as the household manager (Parabrahman & Athavale, 2016). Furthermore, the jar of rice signifies the bride’s expected financial contribution, a notion historically aligned with the traditional dowry system—a practice linked to thousands of dowry-related deaths in India as recently as 2021 despite being outlawed (Oldenburg, 2002; NCRB, 2021). As Jha (2013) remarks on this contradiction, “India is a country where we worship women as goddesses and yet burn them for dowry”. From a homonormative standpoint, having a queer couple participate in this ritual is a powerful statement of assimilation. It frames them as upholders of tradition, seeking legitimacy by adopting a practice deeply embedded in the patriarchal and economic expectations of marriage, regardless of its oppressive history.

Other campaigns appropriate similarly contentious festivals. Several adverts feature queer couples participating in the *Karva Chauth* ritual, where women fast for their husbands’ longevity—a festival criticised by feminists for perpetuating female subordination (Llewellyn, 2006). Examples include the same-sex couple in “Glow with Pride” (2021) and the trans woman fasting for her husband in “Belora Celebrating Womanhood” (2022). By inserting queer couples into this ritual, advertisers deploy a homonormative strategy that aligns queerness with traditional spousal devotion, making it appear less threatening. The “No Conditions Apply” (2018) campaign addresses the *Sindoor Khela* [playing with vermilion] tradition, a celebration of marital fertility that has historically excluded unmarried women, widows, and those from lower castes. While the campaign strives to challenge this norm by featuring a diverse group of women, including a lesbian and a transgender woman, it still operates by seeking inclusion within an inherently patriarchal framework.

Ultimately, integrating queer individuals into such traditions is a hallmark of conservative, homonormative politics. This approach argues for acceptance on the grounds that queer people can participate in the same patriarchal ceremonies as their heterosexual counterparts. Rather than forging new, liberatory traditions, this strategy seeks acceptance within patriarchal traditions. It implies that queer legitimacy is not inherent but must be earned through conformity, effectively trading a radical critique of patriarchy for assimilation into it.

5.8. Queer patriots: The price of national pride

Blending patriotism with LGBTQ+ identities is a well-documented phenomenon in Western media, where an individual's patriotism is often integrated into the process of assimilation. Jasbir Puar (2018) terms this "homonationalism", a convergence of homosexuality and nationalism. In India, the rise of Hindu nationalism has facilitated the emergence of a "neoliberal and Hindu queer subject" who performs homonationalist practices (Sircar, 2017, p. 21). This performance of patriotism is a powerful homonormative strategy, as it seeks acceptance not by challenging the state, but by proving one's worth within its existing nationalist framework.

Advertisements often portray patriotic LGBTQ+ individuals to argue that their dedication to the nation merits equal rights. These campaigns are typically launched on national holidays like Independence Day or Republic Day to maximise their impact. For example, the "Happy Independence Day" (2020) campaign showcases successful transgender patriots, serving as a plea to the mainstream to grant them the same rights as their heterosexual counterparts. Similarly, an advertisement by Lokmat for the National Anthem (2017) features a transgender person singing with the bearing of a dutiful child, their expression reflecting both years of struggle and a profound love for the nation. As the anthem crescendos, the camera focuses on their face, which expresses an impassioned plea for acceptance. This framing suggests a bargain: acceptance is conditional on performing the role of a respectable, patriotic citizen.

Other campaigns directly link the community's liberation to national freedom. "Pyaar Ki Azaadi" [Freedom to Love] (2019) draws a parallel between India's independence from British rule and the decriminalisation of Section 377, showing LGBTQ+ individuals gazing at the Indian flag with reverence. In "The Price of Being Unique" (2019), an intersex person recounts their proudest moment as the time they "made India proud at the United Nations", tying personal achievement directly to national honour. This narrative effectively aligns queer liberation with national pride, a key tenet of homonationalism that depoliticises queer identity by subordinating it to the goals of the nation-state. Rahul Sircar (2017) critiques this patriotic tone, questioning what it means for those who are marginalised by the state itself:

What imaginations of queer belonging does the singing of the national anthem signify, especially for the Muslim/ Adivasi/ Dalit queer? How would she reconcile her experience of alienation as a citizen by the Hindutva Indian state with the feeling of queer solidarity that she seeks at a pride march? (p. 119).

Sircar highlights the profound challenge this poses for queer individuals from minority communities. They are asked to embrace a nationalist sentiment from a state that often alienates them, made to feel like outsiders by Hindu extremists. He concludes that the problem is that “nationalist pride erased all differences and made us realise that, after all, we are all ‘Indians’ first” (p. 119). This issue is not just overlooked by homonormativity; it is a fundamental outcome of it. The homonormative project prioritises securing rights for a select few by creating a “good” queer subject—the respectable patriot—even at the direct expense of those who are marginalised by the state’s nationalist agenda.

5.9. Glorifying monogamous love

A key function of homonormativity is to promote a depoliticised, assimilationist version of queer relationships, one that upholds the dominant social institution of marriage rather than challenging it. This is most apparent in advertisements where monogamous partnerships are presented as the primary pathway to a fulfilling queer life, in stark contrast to non-monogamous arrangements or singlehood.

Within this framework, monogamous love holds the highest degree of respectability. Advertisements frequently portray LGBTQ+ individuals revelling in the fullness of life due to their partnerships, juxtaposed against the conspicuous absence of campaigns featuring contented single queer individuals. In “Lovin’ You Back” (2017), for example, the warmth and ease between same-sex couples and their heterosexual counterparts collectively convey a life enriched by companionship. Similarly, the narrative of “People Not Labels” (2018) recounts the journey of a trans couple, for whom discovering each other was a pivotal “turning point”. Their public displays of affection frame monogamous love as the ideal form of queer love, suggesting that fulfilment and acceptance are achieved primarily through a romantic partnership.

This focus on couplehood is reinforced by framing queer love through traditional, heteronormative milestones. In “First Valentine” (2019), a lesbian couple celebrates their

relationship with roses and a candlelit dinner. “Love Loud and Proud” (2022) portrays a lesbian couple’s wedding, concluding with the declaration, “This isn’t our happy ending; it’s our happy beginning!” This hyperbolic treatment of marriage positions it as the foundation of happiness and a coveted status for LGBTQ+ couples. By centring these milestones, the campaigns imply that monogamous relationships are not just one option for a queer life but the primary way to achieve legitimacy and acceptance, which ultimately marginalises other forms of intimacy. The description of “Celebrating Pride Month” (2020) states, “Love is love. It transcends race, gender, caste...” Yet these advertisements celebrate only the romantic bond between two individuals. These campaigns suggest that love transcends race, caste, or gender, but not couplehood itself.

Overall, these campaigns embody an “uncritical allegiance to cultural norms of couplehood” (Johnson, 2006, p. 116), where “queer relationships and identities continue to be illegible... unless they conform to a heteronormative framework” (Mowlabocus, 2021, pp. 50–51). Consequently, the constant portrayal of happiness being interwoven with couplehood implies that contentment eludes anyone who is single, polyamorous, or in a casual relationship. The clear message is that homonormative, monogamous love is essential to a queer person’s wellbeing. This notion is highly problematic because it erases the vast diversity of queer intimacy, such as polyamory, singlehood, asexuality, open relationships, and ethical non-monogamy.

5.10. Introducing binary division into queer relationships

A core critique of homonormativity is that it seeks mainstream acceptance by promoting a depoliticised and assimilated version of queer identity. This is achieved by supporting media representations that are palatable to a heterosexual status quo. Believing that audiences may look unfavourably at relationships that deviate from the male-female model, advertisers often present queer relationships through a heteronormative lens. In other words, queer couples are shown adhering to a masculine/feminine binary, a strategy that makes their queerness legible within the dominant social framework.

This reliance on a gender binary is evident in numerous campaigns. “Start Something Epic” (2020) spotlights a lesbian couple embodying butch-femme roles: one partner has a pixie cut and rides a boy's bicycle, while the other has long hair and rides a lady’s bicycle. This

pattern is repeated in “Make the First Move” (2020) and “Make Space For All” (2022), where one partner in each couple is consistently coded as masculine in dress and hairstyle, while the other is coded as feminine. In the latter ad, this extends to personality, contrasting the risk-taking partner with her more apprehensive counterpart. This repeated use of the butch-femme binary is a prominent feature of homonormativity. The trope renders the lesbian couple visually familiar and non-threatening, sanitising the relationship of its radical difference to make it more acceptable for mainstream consumption.

This motif extends beyond appearances and into domestic and emotional roles. “A Happy Valentine’s Day” (2020) presents a gay couple where one partner cooks and complains about chores while the other relaxes with a laptop, resembling a traditional husband-wife dynamic. A lesbian couple in the same advert is similarly divided: one is dressed down and content to relax at home, while her partner is dressed up and expresses discontent with their mundane celebration. This strategy presents queerness not as a challenge to traditional domestic roles, but as a slight variation of them, thereby reinforcing existing social hierarchies rather than dismantling it.

This pattern of mapping queer relationships onto homonormative templates is also visible in other adverts. In “The Visit” (2015) and “Love Is... Saying I Love You” (2021), lesbian couples are divided into distinct masculine and feminine roles, both visually and emotionally. Even the seemingly progressive love story in “People Not Labels” (2018) shows a trans man and trans woman conforming closely to traditional gender roles. By doing so, the portrayal assimilates their identities into the very gender binary they could be challenging, making their story one of conformity rather than liberation.

Ultimately, such binary representation reinforces the gender binary rather than dismantles it. It perpetuates the notion that queer relationships are merely “interchangeable, a mere switch of partner” with heterosexual ones (Goltz, 2010, p. 87), further entrenching the binary instead of challenging it. In doing so, these portrayals sacrifice the transformative power of queer politics and fail to represent the experiences of individuals who exist outside this neat, marketable opposition.

5.11. We are like you, so accept us: the homonormative politics of sameness

A common homonormative tactic is to appeal for acceptance based on sameness rather than a celebration of difference. This approach seeks to depoliticise queer identity by reframing it through the lens of universal humanism, suggesting that LGBTQ+ individuals deserve rights because they are fundamentally “just like” the heterosexual, cisgender majority. The campaigns discussed below illustrate this strategy, emphasising pleas for acceptance through direct dialogue.

Several campaigns ground their appeal in shared physical and emotional experiences. In “Beauty in Safety” (2022), the narrator asks to dissolve differences by noticing shared human features like smiles and eyes. The campaign “Eye for an Eye” (2015) makes a similar point about organ donation, asserting, “Men, women, transgender, we are all made the same, filled with the same love, and blessed with the same eyes.” This focus on shared biology and universal love is a classic homonormative tactic designed to render queer bodies and affections as non-threatening and familiar.

Other advertisements shift the focus from biological sameness to shared social values. In Kochi Metro’s “Look at Us as Normal” (2017) campaign, transgender recruits assert, “I also have ambition, hopes, and dreams.” The “Why Don’t You?” (2018) campaign, advocating for blood donation by trans people, highlights their participation in mundane activities and their achievements in prominent positions as “mayor, the principal, the anchor”. It further argues for a shared humanity based on blood—a powerful symbol in Indian popular culture (Chakrabarty & Jha, 2021; Kaur, 2003). This theme is echoed in “The Price of Being Unique” (2019), where an intersex person asserts, “We are as normal and as part of society as you are”, noting the only difference is that “we love differently”. Here, the homonormative appeal is based on shared social aspirations and productivity. The strategy is to present a ‘respectable’ queer subject who contributes to society and whose only deviation is the private matter of love, thereby sidestepping more radical critiques of social norms.

This persistent appeal to shared traits is the very essence of a homonormative compromise. It is a politics of assimilation that sidesteps or suppresses difference in the pursuit of conditional acceptance. The underlying logic is that queer people are worthy of inclusion only to the extent that their distinct experiences can be erased in favour of a shared, “normal”

identity. Such assimilation, which strips away diversity, is futile, as it reinforces heteronormativity as the standard and leaves inequality intact.

6. Conclusion

Indian audiovisual advertisements featuring queer characters are replete with homonormativity. These campaigns employ an array of assimilationist strategies that portray a narrow and normative version of queer life. They consistently present LGBTQ+ couples in blissful, monogamous relationships, while conspicuously omitting depictions of contented single individuals or non-monogamous partnerships. This pattern implicitly endorses monogamy as the only acceptable path to a fulfilled life. Interwoven with this theme, single queer characters are often seen searching for a partner to achieve a sense of wholeness or advocating for marriage rights to legitimise their unions.

To make these relationships more palatable, adverts frequently place queer couples within a framework of heterosexual couples facing similar challenges, implying that the only difference is the gender of the partners. Even this distinction is often minimised, as queer couples are depicted adhering to a strict gender binary, with one partner assigned stereotypically feminine attributes and the other with masculine traits. Furthermore, these characters often express a desire to be considered ‘normal’. Their relationships are portrayed romantically while avoiding explicit sensuality, presumably to avoid offending mainstream audiences. Familial acceptance is often shown as conditional on such conformity, suggesting that relationships mirroring heterosexuality are more likely to be approved.

The harms of homonormativity are particularly evident in its treatment of women and tradition. The adverts often reproduce the trope of the self-sacrificing wife, mirroring the patriarchal dynamics present in heteronormative culture. Regressive patriarchal customs are integrated into LGBTQ+ narratives, presented as traditions that queer individuals willingly adopt to assimilate. When these strategies fail, the adverts appeal for acceptance by stressing similarities in bodies or lifestyles. Finally, they showcase the accomplishments and patriotic fervour of LGBTQ+ individuals as further justifications for their inclusion as citizens.

Prior research has noted that these campaigns have raised public awareness and reaffirmed the importance of inclusivity (Naveen Kumar, 2019, p. 41). However, this inclusivity is often superficial, amounting to “gay subordination to straight interests” (Blair,

2013, p. 19) and fostering the misleading notion that all LGBTQ+ experiences mirror heterosexuality. Those who don't fit this template become invisible. While such representation may secure acceptance for a select few, it leaves many others on the periphery. As Duggan (2002) predicted, the "New World Order!" has arrived "soon to a mainstream near you" (p. 190). This paper concludes that this phenomenon has now permeated India and is establishing its foothold across the subcontinent. The 'sanitised version of queer culture' identified at the outset has indeed been 'sold to the public', but at the cost of authentic representation. Moving forward, advertisers must choose between profitable conformity and genuine inclusion.

7. Recommendations

To move beyond superficial inclusion towards more authentic representation, advertisers should consider the following:

1. Advertisers must diversify their narratives. This can be achieved by showcasing contented single LGBTQ+ individuals thriving in their careers and friendships or by representing "chosen families" and community support systems, which are central to many queer lives. Campaigns should depict fulfilment as a multifaceted experience that comes from self-love and community, not just from "finding the one".
2. Promote gender equity and fluidity by allowing same-sex couples to exist without assigning them "masculine" or "feminine" roles. Grant female characters full agency, avoiding portrayals where they exist solely to support their partners. Instead of uncritically placing queer people in contested patriarchal rituals, show them creating new, inclusive traditions.
3. Celebrate what makes queer experiences distinct rather than erasing difference. Move beyond stories of assimilation to highlight the unique culture, resilience, and specific challenges of the LGBTQ+ community. The goal should be solidarity, not suggesting that queer lives are valid only because they can be compared to straight lives.
4. Normalise queer intimacy. Portray physical affection and desire between queer individuals with the same nuance and respect afforded to heterosexual couples. Acknowledging that queer people are whole beings with sensual lives is crucial to dismantling shame and moving beyond sanitised representations.
5. Campaigns should model unconditional support. Show families, friends, and society accepting LGBTQ+ people for who they are, not for how well they conform to established

norms. True inclusion does not require queer people to prove their worth; it portrays acceptance as a given, not a reward for good behaviour.

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