



De-gendering Motherhood: A Critical Examination of Nissan India's #Spirit of Motherhood Advertisement



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Abstract: *In light of evolving critical perspectives shaped by modern political ideologies, particularly the feminist goal of gender equality, the long-prevailing identities, roles, norms, and several practices within a society have been subject to transformative changes. Media has long been a key vehicle for such transformative change, spreading reformative ideological values through its narrative power and impact. Often regarded as a foundational pillar of popular culture, media encompasses diverse digital forms, including television shows, films, web series, advertisements, and social media applications. This study explores how Indian advertisements have broken gender stereotypes and positively reshaped societal attitudes through strategic narrative techniques and emotionally resonant representations. Using a theoretical framework grounded in Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, this study examines Nissan's #SpiritOfMotherhood (2017) advertisement, which aims to de-gender motherhood by decoupling it from 'womanhood'. Drawing on Sara Ruddick's idea of mothering as a practice, it examines how the advertisement constructs and represents the maternal bond and care. This study emphasises a shifting paradigm of motherhood by redefining 'mothering' as a non-gendered, or gender-neutral, performance that justifies maternal care.*

Keywords: Gender Performativity, Maternal Care, Media, Motherhood, Mothering.

I. INTRODUCTION

Knowledge shapes perception; understanding refines perspectives. Modern ideologies continually refine perspectives, offering a deeper understanding of shared human experiences and social realities. By challenging traditional, rigid, and regressive ideas rooted in a given society, modern ideological beliefs and values cultivate reformative perspectives in individuals, thereby positively shaping their societal attitudes. Feminism, a significant modern socio-political ideology, has played a pivotal role in shaping societal attitudes globally, including in India.

Rooted in its central tenets of gender equality and the recognition of gender as a social construct,

feminist discourse has continually evolved by rethinking, reshaping, and redefining its critical concept of gender. This reconceptualization of gender is closely tied to diverse challenges and needs within specific socio-cultural contexts. The most common challenges are often associated with gender discrimination in relation to fluid gender identities, diverse forms of sexuality, and shifting gender roles.

Feminism, in modern Indian society, is focused on dismantling the deep-rooted patriarchal influence in retaining conventional gender roles within marriage and family dynamics (Evans et al., 2022) [6] and non-inclusive, queerphobic institutional laws and policies, which include the 2026 Transgender Persons Amendment Bill (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, 2026) [13]. This bill, which eliminates one's right to self-identification and replaces it with formal medical evaluation and certification (Ali, 2026) [1], results in limited and unjust legal recognition of genders based on rigid medical criteria, excluding "self-perceived gender identities and sexual orientations" (Brahma, 2026) [2]. These widespread challenges around gender in Indian society expand the critical scope of feminist discourse. This expansion produces evolving perspectives, often facilitated or mediated through several influential forms in contemporary society. One such influential form is 'popular culture', which contributes to the rethinking, recontextualization and reconceptualization of gender through its narrative practices and representational power. It is crucial to discuss popular culture through cultural and sociological lenses.

A. Popular Culture and Advertising

Raymond Williams, a founding figure of cultural studies, has redefined culture through multidimensional views tied to anthropological, Marxist, and historical understandings of society. Williams views culture as 'historical' as it changes over time (1958) [20]; 'Marxist' as it is shaped by economic power structures rather than determined by them (1977) [21]; and 'anthropological' as it represents an "ordinary" "whole way of life" (1958). His inherently democratic definitions of culture as 'ordinary' and 'a whole way of life' project culture as a universal lived experience, thereby disregarding the preconceived notion of culture as limited to elite or socially dominant classes. He also argues that culture is expressed and mediated through creative forms of art. In simple terms, culture, according to Raymond Williams, refers to the lifestyle and experiences of all people in a given society, regardless of class, shaped by dynamic shared practices that constitute their social realities. Williams, who views culture as the way of

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life of a people, defines 'popular culture' as culture produced by the people from below, while distinguishing mass communication as a culture imposed upon the people from above (McGuigan, 1993, p. 163) [12]. In light of this binary opposition, Williams renders a positive connotation to popular culture. However, he also critiques the contemporary use of popular culture as a space of mere entertainment driven by commercial motives and values, with the possibility of economic exploitation and shifts in power dynamics.

Mediated through and manifested in diverse forms, popular culture encompasses language, music, art, entertainment and digital media (Larson, 2024; Crossman, 2025) [4] [10]. Digital media include online articles, television shows, podcasts, advertisements, films, music, and social media (Marville University, 2020) [11]. Among these forms of digital media, Raymond Williams discusses how advertisements shape personal and social values, far beyond merely selling goods. In his essay *Advertising: The Magic System*, first published in 1990 [19], Williams argues that advertising functions as "the official art of contemporary capitalist society" (p. 421), largely because it can influence the masses through illusions disguised as promises, bridging the gap between human emotional and social needs and material aspirations. The purpose of a product or commodity, once limited to practical utility, has shifted drastically with the emergence of modern advertising, through which products acquire symbolic significance within specific sociocultural contexts. Through strategic narratives that incorporate elements of representation and embody emotional ethos, advertising enables products to attain and signify symbolic values, shifting beyond their primary functional use. For instance, a green bar of bathing soap with herbal properties, primarily and functionally associated with body and skin care and overall hygiene, has now evolved into a symbol of female empowerment, safety and maternal care in the Indian context as a result of the brand Hamam's #GoSafeOutside advertising campaign (2017). The brand's first advertisement of the campaign, which portrays a modern mother encouraging her daughter to pursue the martial art of *Silambam* to become physically and mentally strong enough to defend herself in an unsafe world, without attempting to confine her at home, dismantles the conventional archetype of an overly protective Indian mother (Hamam India, 2017, 0:02-1:50) [9]. Through its narrative on women's safety and its portrayal of a healthy, empowering modern mother-daughter relationship, the soap product acquires symbolic value associated with maternal care, protection, and female empowerment, thereby transcending its fundamental role as a hygiene product. It is therefore fair to assert that advertising influences culture, constituting a new form of materialism in which the emotions of the masses are commodified without their direct knowledge or consent, thereby justifying Williams' critique of advertising as a magic system driven internally by capitalist tendencies.

B. The Landscape of Indian Advertising

Advertising in Indian media once relied heavily on celebrity endorsements. However, it has evolved significantly over the years, with ads no longer limited to promoting a product but addressing or relating to contemporary social issues through social awareness-oriented or value-driven narratives.

Through strategic narrative construction and emotional elements, Indian advertisements often challenge conventional gender norms and stereotypes. By doing so, they gain critical acclaim, boosting their brand's visibility and popularity. A notable example is Ralco Tyres' TRANScend initiative, launched in partnership with Humsafar Trust on 2019 Independence Day under the hashtag #FeelTheRoads. The advertisement portrays the struggles of an educated and empowered transgender woman who faces discrimination and prejudice in her daily life. Headed to her workplace, she waits at the bus stop to reach her office, but is denied entry into the bus as the female passengers ask her to board from the other side, while male passengers refuse to let her enter at all (Ralco Tyres, 2019, 0:20-0:30) [15]. Denied entry to the bus, she approaches a cab for a ride; however, the driver humiliates her by offering alms (0:50-1:00). The advertisement's narrative, constructed based on social realities, sheds light on the struggles of a transgender woman due to the deep-rooted stigma and stereotypes. The transgender woman, who has been desperately seeking a lift or ride, is ignored by everyone until a man approaches her on his bike. The man gives her a helmet to ensure her safety before taking her on his bike. Their ride begins as the traffic light turns green, symbolizing hope, progress, and social change (1:05-1:22).

The advertisement concludes with the message, "The wheels of change should not just remain on paper; they should ride the streets too" (1:22-1:25). Through its narrative focusing on the stigma and stereotypes faced by transgender persons, the advertisement, which tackles gender discrimination by promoting inclusivity, also gains public visibility for the brand. The ad reinforces social values through emotional appeal while also promoting brand visibility and growth, a defining characteristic of contemporary Indian advertising. This is one of the main reasons narrative-based, or storytelling, ads aimed at Indian audiences often portray familial relationships, including those between husbands and wives, fathers and daughters, mothers and daughters, brothers and sisters, and grandparents and grandchildren. Advertisers use these narratives because Indians inherently prioritise family values and interpersonal relationships, particularly enduring emotional bonds. It is fair to assert that advertisements, particularly in the Indian context, that create a strong emotional and social impact through carefully crafted family-centred narratives also gain brand visibility, recognition, and popularity. One such Indian advertisement that challenges gender roles through its emotional portrayal of the paternal bond and maternal care is Nissan India's #SpiritOfMotherhood (2017).

II. OBJECTIVES

- To examine the narrative portrayal of maternal care in Nissan India's #SpiritOfMotherhood advertisement (2017).
- To examine the advertisement's narrative through Judith Butler's concept





of 'gender performativity' to reconceptualize motherhood as a performance.

- To discuss the advertisement's representation of motherhood in relation to Sara Ruddick's notion of 'mothering as a practice'.
- To bring together Butler's and Ruddick's theoretical perspectives into dialogue to decouple motherhood from womanhood and thereby offer a de-gendered understanding of motherhood.

III. ANALYSIS

A. Motherhood as a Performance

Launched in 2017 for Mother's Day, Nissan India's #SpiritOfMotherhood, a ninety-second ad, is one of its most critically acclaimed advertisements, known for its narrative and theme. The advertisement begins with a car arriving to pick up a young college girl, with the driver assumed to be her parent. This assumption, established at the very beginning of the advertisement, stems from the girl's immediate occupation of the front passenger seat and her casual inquiry about the person's day, implying a sense of comfort, familiarity, and closeness typically associated with a parent. The advertisement frames the interaction as driven solely by the girl's words, while the parent remains silent and listens attentively. As their ride begins, she interacts in a warm, casual, light-hearted way, comfortably sharing her day, friends, plans, romantic interests, and other mundane concerns. Her interaction with her parent highlights a non-conventional, easy-going, friendly, and unstrained parental bond rather than a strict hierarchical one. She checks whether the groceries and sanitary pads have been bought, compliments the pasta prepared for her lunch, and teasingly asks her parent not to become a "gossip queen" (NissanIndia, 2017, 0:21) [14]. Her jovial and casual talk creates an impression of a warm, affectionate relationship, leading the audience to assume that they are presented with a healthy, modern 'mother-daughter' bond. However, the advertisement's pivotal twist occurs towards the very end. Having reached her destination, the daughter who initially leaves the car bidding goodbye returns briefly and says, "I forgot to tell you something. Happy Mother's Day, Dad" (1:12-1:17). It is only at this moment that the camera shifts to reveal her parent, who is not her mother but her father. Taken aback by the wish, her father responds with a simple smile, showing his happiness and pride. The advertisement concludes with the message, "Nissan celebrates the #SpiritOfMotherhood in each one of us" (1:31).

Through its narrative, the advertisement creates a profound emotional and social impact by challenging gender stereotypes through the strategic use of conventional gendered expectations, which it carefully reinforces and sustains until the final revelation of the parent's identity subverts them. It contributes to the idea of motherhood as a practice defined by care, emotional availability, protection, comfort, and companionship, rather than as an inherent biological identity or strict gendered role. The subversion of gender expectations that constitutes the ad's narrative strategy, and its scope for recontextualising motherhood, can be further examined through the lens of Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity.

Conceptualised by American post-structuralist feminist Judith Butler in her seminal work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), gender performativity is a critical, revolutionary concept that has redefined gender, shifting from biological determinism to social constructivism. Butler (1990) [3] argues that "gender is an act" (p. 187), rather than a 'fixed' or stable identity tied to an individual's biological characteristics. According to her, gender identity is not inherent; it is not something a person is born with or inherently possesses. Rather, gender is constituted through repeated actions and practices performed within society. She states that gender identity is "tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of act" (p. 179). In this regard, if a man undertakes and performs roles that are socially assigned to women, his gender performance may be perceived as 'feminine', despite his biological sex being male and regardless of his sexuality. For example, nurturing and caregiving roles in Indian society are historically and socially attributed to women and are often labelled 'feminine'. If a man chooses nursing as a profession, a field historically associated with women, his performance as a 'male nurse' is perceived as feminine, which results in stigmatizing and unwarranted assumptions about his sexuality (Dev, 2026, pp. 15–20) [5]. It is crucial to understand that he is simply performing a role that Indian society does not conventionally consider 'masculine', and this has no inherent connection to his sexuality. In this case, the notions of masculinity and femininity lose their rigid association with biological sex and sexuality, as a man can perform roles conventionally regarded as feminine. Likewise, a woman can perform roles conventionally regarded as masculine.

Nissan India's #SpiritOfMotherhood advertisement is constructed to lead the audience to rely on traditional gender expectations from the beginning of the narrative and throughout the car ride, until the revelation that the maternal figure is her father. Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity helps explain the domestic, intimate, and semantic aspects of the girl's conversation. In the domestic context, the girl's interaction with her parent, asking whether the groceries have been bought and appreciating the lunch cooked for her, is tied to the domestic sphere. The domestic responsibilities, which include buying groceries and cooking, are socio-culturally and semantically coded as 'feminine', thereby guiding the audience to associate the parental figure with womanhood through gender assumptions. This can also be understood in light of Indian society's conventional cultural positioning of men as primary breadwinners, associated with masculinity, and women in domestic roles, associated with femininity. The advertisement strategically uses these conventional gender norms. It leads the audience to anticipate a mother-daughter relationship, only to subvert it by revealing that the paternal figure the girl interacts with is her father. The advertisement's positioning of the father, the male parental figure, in roles that are socio-culturally attributed to femininity results in the decoupling of femininity from both womanhood and motherhood, exemplifying Butler's idea of gender as a performance rather than an



inherent biological identity or role.

In the intimate aspect, the girl ensures sanitary pads are bought after saying she feels unwell. She says, "I think I am down. Did you get the pads?" (NissanIndia, 2017, 0:53-0:59) [14]. Primarily associated with women's intimate care and hygiene, and further influenced by the prevalent stigma surrounding menstruation as a taboo, sanitary or menstrual pads are often handled discreetly, purchased in concealed packaging, and stored or hidden from others' sight. Within Indian households, conversations regarding menstruation or periods also remain largely confined to the maternal bond between mothers and daughters, as most fathers, influenced by religious and cultural beliefs, limited educational awareness, and generational gaps (Ghosh & Jamir, 2023) [7], choose to remain distant, perceiving menstruation as a 'women's problem' and assuming that their involvement is inappropriate and could lead to awkwardness and embarrassment (Saxena, 2020) [18]. By portraying the father as a maternal figure with whom the girl feels comfortable discussing menstruation and menstrual products, the advertisement reinforces his performance in an intimate maternal role, decoupling femininity from womanhood and thereby supporting Butler's concept of gender performativity. It also contributes to dismantling stigmas surrounding menstruation within Indian socio-cultural and familial dynamics.

In the semantic context, the girl's remark, "Ashi's mom was asking about you again. . I think she loves gossiping with you, but do not become a gossip queen, okay?" (NissanIndia, 2017, 0:13-0:22) [14], leads the audience to rely strongly on conventional gender associations embedded semantically within language. The label "gossip queen" is socio-culturally coded as feminine and conventionally associated with women and womanhood. By positioning the father in a role that qualifies as a 'gossip queen', the advertisement de-genders the term, showing it need not be exclusively associated with female identity or femininity. It extends the term beyond conventional gendered boundaries by associating it with the behaviour or performance of individuals regardless of their biological sex, thereby substantiating Butler's concept of gender performativity.

In light of the critical examination of the Nissan India's #SpiritOfMotherhood advertisement (2017), particularly focusing on domestic, intimate, and semantic aspects of its narrative, it is fair to assert that the advertisement, which breaks gender stereotypes in a multilayered way, contributes to the de-gendering of motherhood by positioning the father to perform the conventional feminine roles attributed to maternal care, thereby substantiating Butler's gender performativity, perfectly aligning with her argument, "gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed" (Butler, 1990, p. 33). The father's performance of roles conventionally considered feminine further illustrates maternal care through his comfort, emotional availability, and companionship. The maternal care, which constitutes motherhood, therefore becomes gender-neutral, resulting in the de-gendering of motherhood by detangling it from womanhood.

B. Mothering as a Practice

The de-gendering of motherhood can be understood through the 'denominal nominalization' or 'verbification'

(Golubovska, 2024, p. 32) [8] of the word 'mother', from a noun to 'to mother', a verb or action, resonating with Sara Ruddick's maternal critical theory. Ruddick, an influential American feminist philosopher, through her seminal works, "Maternal Thinking" (1980) [16] and *Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace* (1990), has contributed significantly to redefining the term mother as a verb or action, thereby establishing 'mothering' as a practice. She views mothering as a sex-neutral practice built on three fundamental demands all children present: preservation, growth, and social acceptability (Rumsey, 1990, pp.125–131). It is crucial to understand that these demands are not limited to women, as they can also be fulfilled by any individual engaged in primary maternal care, regardless of their biological sex or gender identity. As Ruddick describes, preservation involves the fundamental responsibilities of keeping the child alive, safe, and cared for through feeding and sheltering, thereby ensuring the child's existence (p. 727). The demand for growth encompasses the child's physical, emotional, and intellectual development. It connects to the final demand of social acceptability, which involves guiding the child toward becoming a socially competent and responsible individual (Ruddick, 2010, p. 727) [17]. Ruddick describes these demands as "preservative love, nurturance, and training" (2010, p. 727), which collectively constitute mothering.

Nissan India's #SpiritOfMotherhood advertisement portrays the father's caregiving as embodying the three dimensions of maternal care that Ruddick outlines. Without a maternal figure traditionally associated with female identity, the daughter's interaction shows her father as her primary maternal figure, whose caregiving embodies preservative love, nurturance, and training, enabling her to become an emotionally aware and responsible young adult. This is particularly evident in the advertisement's concluding moment, when the daughter wishes, "Happy Mother's Day, Dad" (NissanIndia, 2017, 1:15) [14], acknowledging her father's fulfilment of maternal care practices, thereby justifying Ruddick's idea of mothering as a practice rather than an identity determined by biological characteristics. It is therefore fair to say that Ruddick's critical conceptualisation highlights a paradigm shift toward a gender-neutral understanding of motherhood, which the advertisement appears to affirm. Butler's and Ruddick's theoretical perspectives collectively contribute to a de-gendered understanding of motherhood.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study has briefly explored the significance of media, particularly the role of popular culture in the wide dissemination of modern ideological views. Discussing Raymond Williams's views on popular culture and its forms, it acknowledges advertising as an influential form of popular culture. Critically examining Nissan India's #SpiritOfMotherhood advertisement (2017) through the lens of Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, the study shows that maternal care is not gendered and recontextualises motherhood as a performance rather than an inherent role, fixed identity, or gendered phase. The advertisement shows how the girl's father





challenges conventional gender norms by performing maternal roles traditionally associated with femininity, thereby opening the possibility of decoupling motherhood from womanhood. This interpretation resonates with Sara Ruddick's concept of mothering, according to which mothering can be understood as a verb, a gender-neutral maternal practice. In conclusion, the study establishes a conceptual bridge between Butler's theory of gender performativity and Ruddick's concept of 'mothering', both of which challenge conventional understandings of gender and motherhood and complement each other in contributing to the de-gendered understanding of motherhood.

DECLARATION STATEMENT

Some of the cited references are older and are noted explicitly as [3], [12], [16], [17], [19], [20] and [21]. However, these works remain significant for the current study, as they are pioneering in their fields.

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