EMPOWERMENT FOR SALE: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF NEOLIBERAL FEMINISM IN PANTENE PAKISTAN'S ADVERTISING CAMPAIGNS

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Abstract
This paper will discuss how the language of agency and empowerment attached to neoliberal feminism employed by Pakistani brands (and specifically, the Pantene advertisement) in selling the product to consumers (that is, domestic products). The qualitative case study design involves the use of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in the research to explore the presence of the agency, confidence, independence, and self-determination themes within visual, linguistic, and narrative techniques to address in the chosen television and digital ads. These campaigns are placed in the larger socio-cultural context of Pakistan in which women are still confronted with structural challenges, including limited mobility, discrimination at the workplace, and gendered surveillance. Although the advertisements of Pantene seem to defy traditional, domesticated imagery of women and uplift the spirit of endurance and aspirations, the results show that empowerment is, in many ways, re-positioned as an individual, sellable feature that can be attained by personal initiative and brand devotion. This discursive transformation can be seen as a symptom of the logic of neoliberal feminism, which accepts the unequal distribution of gender but disconnects it from a collective political fight and systemic analysis. It is emphasized in the study that there has been a long-standing conflict between the ideals of feminist representation and the profit motive, and it illustrates how feminist principles are being selectively exploited to benefit the business. This study can add to the critical discourse on the issue of femvertising, monetized feminism, and the moral limits of the feminist branding approach in modern media by considering a Global South setting.
Keywords: *neoliberal feminism, critical discourse analysis, femvertising, Pantene Pakistan, women empowerment, discourse of advertising.*

1. Introduction

Advertising has become a strong locus of the circulation of social values and ideological meanings in the contemporary culture of the media. The advertising agencies reacted to this social change and produced advertisements that involve progressive messages concerning women (Hunt 2017,25; Nölke 2018,232). The image of women in advertisements in Pakistan has been seen to shift in a visibly different way from the traditional, domestic-oriented images of women to one of confidence, ambition, and expression of self. Femvertising is becoming more and more common in the media; a form of advertising where the talent of women is placed in focus, oro-woman messages have been placed at the core, and stereotyping is fought(Akestam, Nina. 2017). This change is related to the feminist trend of global femvertising, where brands are being feminist to attract the contemporary generations. Such change is in line with the increasingly popular global trend in the advertising industry; that is, the focus on women's talents, voices, experiences in advertising, pro-woman ideas, and the explicit challenge of stereotypes

(Sahay, 2017). The practice of femvertising is a product of a wider trend in feminist media whereby brands adopt feminist discourses strategically in order to attract modern consumers with a social conscience, and more specifically, younger consumers (Gill & Elias, 2014; Banet-Weiser, 2018).

Pantene Pakistan can be considered one of the bright representatives of this trend. The paper claims that these representations are indicative of the neoliberal feminism model, which focuses more on individual agency, choice, and self-improvement and does not pay much attention to structural gender inequalities or power relations within the system (Rottenberg, 2014; McRobbie, 2009). Their campaigns are often characterized by strong and confident women challenging stereotypes, but in most cases, the empowerment of women is associated with being beautiful, attentive to their skin and hair, and using the product. This paper contends that these representations are neoliberal feminism, a paradigm that stresses agency and choice on an individual level and overlooks gender inequality in the system. Using the Critical Discourse Analysis, this paper examines the construction of the idea of empowerment, the agents of these discourses, and the things that go unspoken in the advertising discourse in Pantene Pakistan.

2. Literature Review

According to the survey of SheKnows Media 2014, more than half of its consumers reported that they actually purchased because of the role that they played in the way that they represented women in their advertisements and that they killed pro-feminist ads because they felt that it would break the barriers of gender equality and that more than two thirds of consumers believed that brands should be involved in using the advertisement to communicate with women and girls. Brands will be helped by physical and emotional well-being that evokes love and affiliation between consumers and the brand, among others (Reker, 2016).

2.1. Neoliberal Feminism

This paper uses the notion of neoliberal feminism as its central prism. According to Catherine Rottenberg (2014, 2018), neoliberal feminism can be defined as the discourse that acknowledges the existence of gender inequality but at the same time denies the structural and socio-economic forces that make it. In contrast to liberal feminism, which has traditionally aimed at legislative and collective transformation, neoliberal feminism lays the responsibility of the so-called empowerment on the hands of the individual woman. Rottenberg (2018) recognizes the neoliberal feminist subject as an entrepreneurial individual who holds herself to be in charge of her success, well-being, and the so-called work-life balance. With this model, empowers are not a political ambition but an individual initiative with the help of self-optimization and market engagement.

2.2. The Femvertising and Commodification of Empowerment.

Feminist advertising has become a trend in the advertising industry of the World, and studies by Gill and Orgad (2015) propose that the current media facilitates a cult of confidence, in which women are made to believe that their biggest obstacle to equality is their own low self-esteem instead of institutional sexism. This feminist commodity (Goldman, 1992) makes complex political politics the aesthetic decision.

This is characteristic of the Pantene campaigns of Strong is Beautiful and Shine Strong that are conducted worldwide. Research on such campaigns across the globe suggests that they alter the notion of strength as a political ability of the group to that of the consumer as a physical and psychological quality (Varghese & Kumar, 2022). The brand fills the gap between psychological

empowerment and consumption of beauty by associating the brand with internal resilience through the use of healthy and shiny hair.

2.3. The Pakistani Situation: Glocalization and Co-Option.

The advertisement environment has experienced a tremendous change in Pakistan. In the past, Pakistani advertisements either pushed women to home environments (housewife/mother) or female objects (beauty-infatuated) (Qamar et al., 2025). Nonetheless, as digital feminism and activist groups such as the Aurat March have gained momentum, corporations have also started to go global with empowerment discourse by targeting the newly formed urban and professional female audience (Kamal, 2019).

According to critics, this corporate feminism in Pakistan has the effect of depoliticizing radical demands. As an example, where the Aurat March shows the need to change the labor laws and domestic laws, corporate campaigns such as Pantene Hamesha Barho (Always Move Forward) or Chun Liya Maine (I Have Chosen) emphasize the need to change the labor laws and domestic laws based on the principle of individual choice and grit (Ali, 2020). This discussion implies that all that a woman needs to do to break the backlash of a patriarchal society is to have the right attitude and the right hair care products.

2.4. Synthesis and Research Gap

Although the neoliberal feminism literature is rich worldwide, few studies studied the topic with a solid Critical Discourse Analysis of the linguistic and semiotic nuances of Pantene campaigns in Pakistan. The majority of available literature dwells upon the general objectification or stereotyping (Ali, 2018). The study attempts to address that gap by examining the manner in which Pantene Pakistan uses the Urdu language and local cultural metaphors in specifically selling a variant of empowerment that complies with neoliberal values, yet manages to negotiate the contradictions of a conservative patriarchal community.

3. Methodology

Theoretical Model: The Three-Dimensional Model of Fairclough.

We apply the CDA framework by Norman Fairclough in order to determine how shampoo is turned into a symbol of liberty.

3.1.A. The Micro Level: The Analysis of Text (Linguistics and Visuals)

Textual analysis is an examination of the signs in the ad. Pantene makes use of high-modality language (words of certainty such as will, can, and must).

The vocabulary power: Mazboot (Strong), Chamak (Shine), Balon ko urny do (Let your Hair fly), and Yaqeen (Belief): All these words are interchangeably used to refer to either hair or character.

Visual Grammar: The camera layout of Pantene advertisements is humanized by the use of the "Glow." The lighting is constantly soft, but intense to form a halo effect around the protagonist. This implies that a strong woman is a luminous woman- associating her social worth with her beauty perfection.

https://youtu.be/SXO4uU1SPm0?si=5igau6mRfZ__wF50

Pantene Shampoo 🧴	Screen Elements	Signifier	Signified
		Long Shiny Hairs	Confidence and Glamour
		Young Girls	Youth , Passionate
		Girl wearing Pink dress	As a contestant
		Use of Pro-V statement	Build a trust of consumer on the product.
		Pantene Sachet	Introducing Pantene Black Shine
		Girl with Low confidence	Due to Hair Fall
		Girl with calm, smile face	Strong / Full confident
		Oral Slogan (Balon ko urny do)	Full Freedom with Passionate

3.2.B. The Meso Level: The Discursive Practice (Production and Consumption)
The level examines the production of the message. Pantene Pakistan is not working in an empty vacuum it creates advertisements.

The Hijacking of Dissent: By sloganing such things as #BelieveInYourself, the brand is taking advantage of the rebellious nature of women. Nonetheless, they make the rebellion clean. Although the Aurat March would necessitate reforms (policies against domestic violence), the Pantene rebellion begins and ends with a woman standing up in a boardroom or simply walking down a street. The brand is a so-called cultural interpreter that decodes radical demands into safe and marketable bits.

3.3.C. The Macro level: Socio-Cultural Practice (Ideology)
This tier looks at the implications in the larger society. Pantene dispcourse is aimed to the Urban Middle-to-Upper Class in the nation in which the class divide is acute. The Pantene Woman is very careerist, normally bilingual (English/Urdu), and stays in a contemporary flat.

The Erasure of Class: The ads overlook the fact that millions of Pakistani women in the rural or labor-intensive economy are erasing their roles as women by asserting that all women can be strong using this product, and this is not a liberation process, but a luxury.

The Pantene commercial "Labels Against Women" became a viral one that provoked the discussion of gender dualism in workplaces and society all over the world. Although the ad undermined the detrimental linguistic labels, as the model presented by Fairclough, it nevertheless, it perpetuated the notion that empowerment is associated with aesthetics, which may become another factor in forcing women to shine (look perfect) despite the discrimination they experience. Link to Pantene Ad is here:

https://youtu.be/Ay3EXkPRHUs?si=annRxxouq5bZE_ff

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Summary of Fairclough Three Dimensions Model

Dimensions	Focus	Examples
Textual Analysis	Language and Visual inside the Ad	1. Lexical Choices: Fall Free Hair, Strong, Vitamin B, C & E promote strength, health, and prevention. 2. Slogans & Images: Close-ups of shiny hair, confident women smiling. 3. Grammar & Structure: imperative slogans encouraging action (Try Pantene). 4. Visual Semiotics: Shiny smooth hair signifies beauty and success.
Discursive Practice	How the ad is produced and consumed	1. Production: Created by Pantene's marketing team to present hair fall as a problem solved by the product. 2. Distribution: Uploaded on TV and shared on social media . 3. Consumption: Audiences interpret the ad as a solution to hair fall, influence viewers to buy based on aspirations of "beautiful and strong hair".

Social Practice	Cultural and Ideological context	1. Beauty Ideologies: Reinforces societal norms where healthy, abundant hair reflects desirability and confidence. 2. Power & Norms: Pantene shapes ideals of hair beauty linking product usage with personal success. 3. Consumerism: Encourages a beauty standard that promotes product purchase as self-improvement.

4. Case Analysis

4.1.A. Metaphor of Follicular Strength as Psychological Grit.

The discourse of the Strong is Beautiful campaign falsely posits a similarity between biological characteristics and personality.

The Logic: When your hair breaks/falls, visually coded as frail. This way of fixing the hair, Pantene promises to fix the confidence of the woman.

The Neoliberal Turn: This puts the burden of being strong wholly on the woman. In case she is disempowered at work, the advertisement indicates that she has no inner strength (symbolized by her hair). It does not take into consideration the fact that her loss of confidence may be a logical reaction to the patriarchal workplace environment.

4.2.B. BelieveInYourself and the Myth of the Superwoman.

A montage of women (a pilot, a boxer, and a corporate leader) is one of the most noticeable Pantene digital campaigns.

The Humanized Reality: These advertisements are glorifying the exceptional woman. In Pakistan, a female pilot is a rarity who has likely fought immense systemic battles.

The Discourse: Pantene reduces her struggle to a "mindset." The tagline #BelieveInYourself implies that the only thing stopping a woman from becoming a pilot is her own self-doubt. This is a classic neoliberal tactic: responsibilization. It shifts the burden from the state (which should provide safe transport and education) to the individual woman's psychology.

4.3.C. The Professional Gaze: Aesthetic Labor

In ads featuring Mahira Khan, the focus is often on the camera. She is seen behind the scenes, being groomed, and then stepping into the light.

Analysis: This highlights that for a Pakistani woman to be successful in the public eye, she must perform Aesthetic Labor. Her empowerment is conditional upon her looking a certain way. The "shine" of her hair acts as a social passport. In this discourse, a woman with frizzy or unkempt hair is symbolically excluded from the narrative of success.

5. Critical Discussion: The Commodification of the Self

The "Empowerment for Sale" strategy is effective because it feels good. It is aspirational. However, the critical danger lies in depoliticization.

Individualism over Collectivism: Neoliberal feminism doesn't ask women to organize for their rights; it asks them to "invest" in themselves. Whereas grassroots movements, such as the Aurat March, require systemic change, e.g., an end to the 25% to 30% gender pay gap (ILO, 2025) or improved protection against the 90 percent high rate of domestic violence in Pakistan, brands

imply that the main domain of struggle is self-care. It takes the picket line and sets it aside in place of the checkout line.

The Consumer-Citizen: The ads suggest that the primary way to express your "feminism" is through the brands you choose. You "vote" for your empowerment by buying a gold-colored bottle of shampoo. This generates a harmless feminism which will not attract the social repercussions of genuine slogans such as "Mera Jism Meri Marzi" (My Body, My Choice). Although a shampoo commercial is being hailed as the display of a strong woman, a woman on the street who demands control over her body is getting maligned by the law and the whole society.

Sanitized Agency: The agency Pantene offers is "patriarchy-compliant." It allows women to be successful as long as they remain beautiful, groomed, and within the consumerist loop. This Superwoman has to find a balance between work and the conventional standards of beauty, but the advertisements do not consider the fact that Pakistan is 145th among 146 in the Global Gender Gap Index 2024. The gloss of the hair is covering the fact that the participation of female labor force in the work is at the same level as it was in 1970, 23 versus 79.

6. Conclusion

Pantene Pakistan's discourse is a reveling blend of liberation and limitation. While it provides a refreshing break from the "victim" narrative often seen in Pakistani soap operas, it replaces it with an equally taxing "Superwoman" narrative. The issue of empowerment is brought out as a glossy, handleable, and saleable commodity. In order to see gender development in Pakistan, we have to see past the shine, and the truth is that the real strength cannot be sold in bottles, but it takes a structural change that no shampoo can offer. The empowerment that cannot be sold in bottles needs to be broken down, to the extent that there is a 40% wage gap in the informal sector, and to eliminate the structural marginalization of women out of the public and political arena. The reality is that true strength lies in the dirt of structural transformation, which cannot be presented even by the power of shampoo.

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