

## PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN PAKISTANI TELEVISION COMMERCIALS: A MULTIMODAL ANALYSIS

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### Abstract

*As an important mode of communication, television advertisements influence social customs and opinions, particularly those related to gender roles. The study investigates the language used in Pakistani advertisements that portray women in stereotyped positions and stresses how the women are objectified, which limits their perception in more contributing roles. Using the qualitative analysis, the study focuses on visual, verbal, and auditory elements. The Kress theory of multimodality (2009) is applied to Bonus detergent and Lux soap commercials broadcasted on famous Pakistani television channels. The findings demonstrate the domesticity and elevate beauty standards that expose gender stereotypes and objectification of women. Furthermore, the study offers effective techniques that can assist legislators and advertisers in promoting more positive and diverse portrayals of women in advertisements.*

**Keywords:** Gender stereotypes, advertisements, objectification, portrayal of women.

### 1. Introduction

Public opinion is influenced by the considerable presence of advertisements in media which also boosts the number of consumers. However, all the examples in this paper focus on social and electronic media. It is almost a requirement today for there to be women in Pakistan TV ads, as you almost never see them in ads made for Pakistan.

The main purpose of advertisements is to raise awareness of a product or service among customers in order to encourage purchase. To develop an influence on customer, advertisements look up to educate and persuade the target audience about the characteristics, availability, and advantages to increase their sales. Moreover, women have traditionally been taken in advertisements to represent their socially accepted versions and rigid gender norms and stereotypes. Ads during the modern era highlighted how beautiful and idealized women were, which helped spread the notion that women should appear in a certain way in order to win or gain the desired place in society. The study aims to analyze the existing gender stereotypes of women in Pakistani commercials and their perfect glamourized appearance. The paper focuses on investigating the certain elements and ways that are representing gender stereotypes and their ideal appearance. Kress' model of multimodal analysis (2009) is applied to selected Pakistani advertisements. To see the overall effect and intended meanings, each element of the chosen commercials is examined. The elements that are primarily noted are the characters, the setting, the colours and objects used in background, the content and the taglines.

#### 1.1 Objectives of the Study

The following research objectives have been kept in mind:

- To analyze the elements portraying the gender stereotypes of women in Pakistan television commercials.
- To examine the elements portraying the stereotypes of women in terms of their ideal body or appearance.

- To suggest recommendations to advertisers and policy makers to promote the more positive and inclusive representation of women in Pakistan television advertisements.

### **1.2 Research Questions**

The following research questions are formulated:

- What are the elements portraying the gender stereotypes of women in Pakistan television commercials?
- What are elements portraying the stereotypes of women in terms of their ideal body or appearance?
- What strategies can advertisers employ to promote the positive and contributive image of women in Pakistani commercials?

### **1.3 Statement of the Problem**

The representation of women in the media, particularly in television advertisements, has significant linguistic implications that demonstrate an impact on societal gender roles. Several commercials in Pakistan employ language and imagery that reinforces conventional gender stereotypes, typically showcasing women as caretakers or homemakers. The use of language limits the women's perceived roles by shaping societal attitudes and norms about their abilities.

### **1.4 Delimitations:**

This research only focuses on selected commercials based on specific criteria, which may or may not represent the entirety of Pakistani television advertising. Moreover, the analysis only focuses on the specific timeframe that is, 7pm-9pm which may not capture the evolving trends in the portrayal of women.

## **2. Literature Review:**

### **2.1 Gender Stereotypes in Pakistan Television Commercials**

Atiya et al.(2023) posit that gender inequality and conventional gender customs have been shaped in Pakistan through the advertising industry's historical portrayal of women in stereotypical and objectified roles. Advertisers are frequently employing such language that showcases women in Pakistani ads as dependent on men of their homes. Moreover, they frequently objectify women in advertisements, portraying them as no more than objects of desire. On the other hand, it explores how media perpetuates women as an object of want or beauty, which consequently put stress of beauty and perfection on women, particularly young girls. Similarly, Abid et al. (2012) in their study examine how gender roles are portrayed in Pakistani food and non-food television advertisements in order to determine whether gender discrimination exists and how gender is related to various content characteristics. Comparisons and discussions have been made between the representation of gender roles in food and non-food advertisements. In Pakistani television ads, where men predominate and gender prejudice is present. The social and cultural values are thought to be the cause of this occurrence. Compared to non-food ads, food advertisements have a greater masculine dominance which results in their more active and aggressive figures in ads. Thus, both studies highly emphasized the women as a symbol of domesticity. On the other hand, women in Pakistani commercials are shown to follow traditional patriarchal customs which restrict their perception in more productive roles. Lubna et al.(2016) in their study examined 150 commercials to analyze the portrayal of gender roles from various categories that were broadcast on several Pakistani TV channels that were chosen, and they were subsequently subjected to both quantitative and qualitative analysis. The frequency of appearance, the main characters performed, the underlying message, and the gender depiction were examined in ads. The results showed that these advertisements stereotypically depicted gender. Males are shown in connection to their jobs, whereas women are seen in relation to males. These ads

are essentially serving male patriarchal goals by constructing and modifying traditional stereotypical ideas of the female body, mind and soul. Likewise, in Pakistani television advertisements, women are frequently showcased as performing conventional home tasks such as taking care of their family and playing submissive or subservient roles. The ratio of such ads is 73% where women performing stereotypical duties like cooking, cleaning and serving food to family members etc. Moreover, these ads were three times common on TV as compared to non-stereotypical ones that show women in non-stereotypical ways, such as in outdoor activities, appearing independent and self-assured. The study's main goal is to dispel outdated stereotypes about women's roles in society, which are often based on inaccurate impressions that are shown in Pakistani television advertisements. Several studies have been carried out in different countries like Japan, Italy, and US and they pointed out that gender roles is firmly established through advertisements. Such phenomena is also common in Pakistani advertisements. Wafa et al. (2019) analyzed the fifty Pakistani TVCs to determine the stereotyping effects on men and women in those commercials. This study is qualitative in nature and replicates the Italian study by Furnham and Voli (1989). The commercials from different categories were taken such as clothing, mobile networks, Food, drink, cosmetics, electronic appliances and bathroom supplies. The representation and stereotyping of men and women were determined using commercials from these categories. The data was coded and displayed as frequencies and percentages. Remarkably, the only category with notable variations was gender roles, where women are depicted in more submissive ways. Wafa et al. (ibid) Advertisements did not adequately highlight women's accomplishments. Whereas men were shown to as strong members of society, working in high-status positions, women were shown as docile and fragile. Hira et al. (2023) in her study examine the linguistic, ideological and discursive tactics employed in Pakistan awareness programs and commercials. Moreover, she also noted the effects these traditional stereotypes have on consumers' perceptions. The results advised the various strategies that can dispel or break these stereotypes. Moreover, Commercials' persuasive language and imagery affect consumers such as shaping the societal norms and beliefs. Rabia (2024) employed the multimodal discourse analysis on different advertisements being made in Pakistan, to analyze the linguistic and visual affect. The findings showed that gender stereotypes are represented by a variety of social and cultural elements. Women are portrayed as physically appealing or as having an ideal body while performing the household chores. Men performing outside tasks are simultaneously portrayed as self-sufficient and emotionally strong. Thus, compelling language used in commercials to control people's mind.

## **2.2 Objectification of Women in Pakistan Television Commercials**

Pakistani advertisements use language that utterly objectifies the women based on their skin tone and body size and shape, which limits their perception and potential. In Pakistan, the portrayal of women and objectification in Pakistani ads gained attention. Later, it became vital to consider how women are portrayed in different commercials. However, the main goal of the study is to examine how women are objectified as slender with fair complexion and spotless skin as feminine assets, which indicate women as objects rather than humans with emotions. Ullah employed the qualitative research methodology and concluded that natural physical appearances and body exposure must be normalised in the society. Hazir Ullah (2014) asserted that advertisers are promoting the women in an unrealistic framework for their financial benefits. Ali (2018) in his study, analyzed Pakistan's television advertisements, which are exploiting the image of women by objectifying them. Beauty product commercials were chosen for this purpose. He found that advertisements on Pakistani television feature content that violates women's rights and promotes inequality. Advertisers and marketers are exploiting women's image for their own financial interests, and thus, they are playing a

prominent role in societal stereotypes about women and limiting views about their intelligence and potential. Similarly, Waqas et al. (2023) carried out his study on portrayal of women in electronic media advertisements in Pakistan. For this, Barthian semiotic analysis was used for the analysis to examine how advertising gender builds distinct meanings and societal beliefs in culture. Commercials from different Pakistani channels and newspapers were chosen for this purpose to examine the signs, symbols and content to determine the portrayal of women. The findings determine that Pakistani ads strongly emphasize women's bodies and outward looks. The study strongly laid emphasis that compelling language used in these commercial strongly influence the young minds to think that they need slender bodies and fair skin to achieve acceptance from the society. Likewise, Billboard ads portray traditional gendered roles and objectify women as mere objects. In this case, qualitative research was carried out to unfold the multi-layered importance of commercials being made in Pakistan. Therefore, Fair-clough three-dimensional model was employed to analyse 2 billboard advertisements. Resultantly, the data showed that billboard commercials emphasize patriarchal gendered roles and objectification of women as feminine capital. Mushtaq et al. (2021) claim that the rigid perception on objectification of women can cause certain harms. Therefore, Sumaira (2023) explored that language is not mere means of communication but it shapes or constructs meaning in societal contexts. In the study, two Pakistani ads were analysed employing three-dimensional Fair-clough model. The conclusion showed that commercials are primary source of cultural and ideological regarding women in society. Latest trends on fashion are adopted through these advertisements. Moreover, they also act as opinion-maker to mould a woman's physical attributes into what society perceives of her based on cultural and religious beliefs. The study concluded that government and organisation should have a proper check and balance on content creation that could enforce immoral societal norms.

### **3. Research Methodology**

#### **3.1 Nature of Research**

The study falls under the qualitative nature of research, which falls under the descriptive and explanatory patterns to examine the features and elements drawn from the theory of multimodality, proposed by Kress (2009).

#### **3.2 Data Collection**

The data from the current study consists of advertisements broadcasted on Pakistan television. It includes some famous on-air commercials on channels operating in Pakistan. The population consists of all television ads aired on Pakistani channels. However, the sample is selected on the basis of two categories, which highlights the stereotypical representation of women and objectification of women in terms of ideal body and appearance.

#### **3.3 Sample**

Advertisement of Bonus detergent is selected to depict the stereotypical gender roles of women, and Lux soap ad is selected as a sample to depict the objectification of women. Both ads are from 2024.

#### **3.4 Theoretical Framework**

Multimodality is a theory which looks at the many different mediums that people use to communicate with each other and to express themselves. This theory is relevant as an increase in technology tools, and associated access to multimedia composing software, has led to people being able to easily use many modes in art, writing, music, and dance and every-day interactions with each other. A mode is generally defined as a communication channel that a culture recognizes. Examples of modes are writing, gesture, posture, gaze, font choice and color, images, video, and even the interactions between them.

Kress (2009) in multimodality: *A social semiotic approach to contemporary communication* provides the social semiotic theory of multimodality.

A socio-semiotic theory of multimodality, among other things, poses the following questions:

- What meaning is being made in a text?
- How is meaning being made in the text?
- What resources have been used to make the meaning in the text?
- In what social environment is meaning being made?
- Whose agency and interest are involved in the meaning-making process?

It achieves this by taking into account many media, including words, visuals, colour, and facial emotions, as well as the connections between them. It takes into account the modes that are foregrounded, carry essential informational weight, and serve various significant purposes in the text.

In addition to the written word, a multimodal text uses multiple "modes" to express meaning. Linguistic/alphabetic, visual, auditory, gestural, and spatial are the five multimodal modes. In advertisements, a picture can convey a message faster and more efficiently than text. Images may help reader to completely grasp or understand the content and recognise the experience in the way that words alone can find difficult. When assessing or creating multimodal compositions (or what we may refer to as multimedia texts), it is crucial to acknowledge the activity of multiple modes within artifacts. But it's also helpful to think about which mode is most prevalent in any given media. The term "linguistic mode" refers to both spoken and written communication, including elements like word choice, delivery, sentence and paragraph structure, and coherence of ideas and words. The visual mode uses visual information as a primary component and mostly depends on visual cues and features to communicate its message. It is also possible to argue that elements of the spatial mode are incorporated into the visual mode. Numerous elements of sound are included in the auditory mode, such as music, sound effects, background noise, quiet, spoken language tone, volume, emphasis, and accentuation. The interpretation of nonverbal communication, including body language, gestures, facial expressions, and interpersonal interactions, are the core subject of the gestural mode. The spatial mode has to do with the organization of objects in actual space, including the close connection of people and objects to one another. Likewise, modality affects how the viewers respond to and perceive these commercials. When it comes to making rhetorical choices about the kinds of communication people might use when stepping outside of the printed word, writing in the five modes may encourage the audience to think "outside the box."

#### **4. Data and Analysis of Data**

This section comprises an analysis of the sample of this study that is, commercials of Bonus detergent and Lux soap using the model of multimodality of Kress (2009).



#### 4.1 Commercial of 'Bonus'

Figure 1



Figure 2  
Figure 3



Figure 4  
Figure 5

The ad of Bonus Tristar detergent was selected for analysis and was downloaded from youTube. This ad has mainly 2 female characters as signifiers. One is the mother-in-law; other is Daughter -in-law. The setting is traditional bazaar and backyard of the house. All the characters are wearing the traditional clothes that is, “shalwarqameez”. The mother-in- law is concerned about her clothes which were ruined by the mud splashed to her when a car passed

by on the roadside. In that state, she called her daughter in law, who is assigned to wash all the clothes in the house which shows the clear depiction of women as homemakers or care givers.

The colors used in the ad are very suggestive. As we know, it is commonly accepted norm that red is the colour of married women in the context of Pakistan. Daughter-in-law is wearing the red colour which represents her being married in the traditional household of Pakistan where daughter-in-law often plays a significant role in family dynamics and responsibilities. Traditionally, she may be expected to help with household chores, care for children, and maintain family traditions. Moreover, the mother-in-law is wearing a light blue colour, which highlights the importance of maternal figures in Pakistani families, showcasing their influence and role in family dynamics.

In addition, the calling of mother-in-law “baho” (fig 2) when her clothes were ruined highlights that she no longer has her own identity, instead she is perceived solely through her role in that household. Such language highlights the interpersonal relationships, reinforcing the idea that women’s identities are largely shaped by their roles within the family structure, rather than individuals. Moreover, it may highlight the pressure on women to conform to specific roles and expectations within the household.

The facial expressions and body language of daughter-in-law is also worth noticing. She is wearing the confident expressions and is holding the freshly cleaned qameez, (figure 4) and her folded arms with self-assured expressions (fig 5) shows her expertise in her gendered role, asserting her place within the family and society. Her confident demeanor suggests that she takes pride in her responsibilities, emphasizing the importance of domestic tasks while also reflects her expertise in managing them effectively. It challenges the simplistic portrayal of women in advertising where they are depicted in subordinate roles. Moreover, the body language conveys their sense of competence, suggesting that women can excel in domestic responsibilities while being capable and strong individuals. Such representations reflect the evolving dynamics of gendered roles in contemporary Pakistani society.

#### **4.2 Commercial of ‘Lux soap’**



**Figure 1.**





Figure 2



Figure 3



**Figure 4**



**Figure 5**

The ad of lux soap was selected for analysis and downloaded from the YouTube. The ad has only 1 female celebrities as a signifier. That is, the famous Pakistani celebrity, Maya Ali. The setting is modern white-coloured bathroom, and an awards show, where Maya Ali is awarded as the face of the year for the brand called Lux. The portrayal of famous celebrity depicts the objectification of women in the context of Pakistani commercials.

The choice of colour is also very suggestive, as only white colour is used in dominance. Celebrity choice of attire and background in white colour (figure 1) highlights the visuality, which highlights the physical appearance rather than any important message in commercial, suggesting the emphasis on aesthetics rather than substance. Additionally, an envisioned view

of femininity is reinforced by the shining white appearance of the celebrity, which indicates that women ought to try to attain this ideal, consequently promoting the achievement of unrealistic beauty standards.

As far as linguistic mode is concerned, the phrases like “Jo jildkonikhaarayaurnami de” indicate that women can achieve the ideal of smooth and soft skin through soap introduced by the celebrity in the ad. However, the word “Pheli bar” with a minor pause by the celebrity, alerts the audience that some new ingredient and product will be introduced this time. Moreover, the mentioning of “vitamin C and Glycerin” can help convince the audience in the process of buying the soap. The ad maker develops the association of celebrity with moon and uses the tagline of the brand, Lux “chandsaroshanchehra” reveals that women are continuously looking for such products that may provide them sufficient glow while not causing any sort of harm to their skin. The celebrity “Maya Ali” is shown as using the soap, which demonstrates that the other women may relate to her. Thus, the language and representation of the advertisement is giving the impression that customers can reach the ideal of glowing and spotless skin like the moon if they use this soap.

## **5. Results and Findings and Conclusions**

The close semiotic analysis of the Bonus detergent ad highlights the gender roles as homemakers, depicting the gendered stereotypes of women, limiting their contributions in society. Moreover, analysis of the Lux soap commercial presents the women as a symbol of beauty and glamour.

### **5.1 Discussion and summary**

#### **5.1.1 What are the elements portraying the gender stereotypes of women in Pakistan commercials?**

Gender stereotypes of women in Pakistani television commercials have various aspects, portrayed using multimodal analysis. Visual representation is crucial; women are frequently displayed in traditional attire and meant to underline the conventional beauty standards, reinforcing social norms. Their body language often implies passivity or subservience, and they have submissive roles within their households where they are frequently portrayed as homemakers or carers. Linguistically, the language use stresses features linked with femininity, such as nurturing and care, which are frequently passed on through adjectives that describe their roles at home. Voiceovers, thus, affect the portrayal by showing women in the supportive or familial roles rather than as proper individual. Symbolism is quite clear, with pastel hues and domestic items reinforcing conventional femininity. These elements maintain the stereotype of women, primarily, as caretakers or homemakers.

#### **5.1.2 What are elements portraying the stereotypes of women in terms of their ideal body or appearance?**

Several semiotic components are used to portray the stereotypes of women's ideal body appearance. Visual representation is important because it portrays women as having thin, slender bodies that satisfy ideal beauty standards that prioritise fairness and flawless skin. These standards are further strengthened by the widespread utilisation of makeup and stylish clothing, which highlighted the relationship between beauty and social acceptance as enhanced self-worth. Advertisements further employ the persuasive language choices that promote the physical characteristics through adjectives such as “fair skin” and “perfect body

shape”, which restrict a limited concept of beauty. Therefore, the representation of a wide range of body shapes is excluded from the advertisements, which influence the women to achieve unattainable standards of beauty. These representations show the stereotype that a woman's value is mostly determined by her physical characteristics, which strengthened social pressure to blend with an unrealistic idealised image.

### **5.1.3 What strategies can advertisers employ to promote the positive and contributive roles?**

Here are some suggestions for advertisers, policy makers, and celebrities who signed commercials

- Content from advertisements should avoid portraying women as an object to be desired or feared for lust. Their independence and choice should be highlighted in the writing.
- To encourage people to accept themselves, advertising campaigns should show women coming in a wide range of body types, sizes, and shapes.
- The advertising industry should not portray men and women as having only stereotypical roles.
- They could represent women in roles that are mostly found in science and technology to show how capable they are of leading and for inspiration in other areas.
- Organizing the public’s impressions and respecting the opinions of women will make sure that advertisers do not offend anyone with their campaign.

## **5.2 Summary**

Pakistani television commercials reinforce gender stereotypes of women through visual and linguistic elements. Women are often shown in traditional clothing, which reflects conventional beauty and passive body language, which suggests subservience in domestic roles. The stereotypes of women's ideal body and appearance are also conveyed through visual and linguistic elements in advertisements. Women are often depicted with slender bodies and flawless skin, reinforcing narrow beauty standards. The language used praises specific physical attributes, while diverse body types are typically excluded, perpetuating the idea that a woman's worth is based on her appearance and societal pressures to conform to unrealistic ideals. However, these stereotypes can be eliminated if policy makers and advertisers present the women in more contributive and productive roles in society. In addition to this, the diverse representation of women’s body would also be helpful to eliminate the stereotype of women related to their ideal body and appearance.

## **5.3 Educational Implication**

The representation of women in advertisements perpetuates the stereotypes that may influence the formation of identity among viewers. Identifying these perspectives and trends can educate the advertisers or general public about the image of women in society. Additionally, such an image calls for a great duty among policy makers to provide the content that supports positive and diverse representations of women. They can take further additional actions that could reduce the harmful stereotypes in advertising.

## **5.4 Future Recommendations**

The issue requires a lot of effort to be tackled. Researchers can use interview methods to explore how women in Pakistan’s advertising field address gender stereotypes. Additionally, policymakers should think of other ways to market their beauty products instead of using women as an example.

## **5.5 Conclusion**

Every culture includes stereotypes, and some have observed that Pakistani ads apparently promote gender stereotypes. The efforts of women as members of society helping to grow the nation should be acknowledged in the media. It is important to treat women as independent



persons. On top of that, TV ads show women using stereotypes that hold them back from reaching their full potential. It is important for our women to realize there is a difference between the real world and what they see on TV. They should realize that most TV actresses' features are improved with various styling products. Women in Pakistan may deal with anxiety and various psychiatric issues because society often objects to their identity. The media should consider the signals and present females in a variety of different roles in their ads.

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