



The Representation of Women in Pakistani Advertisements

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine Pakistani advertisements that feature various poses and the availability of women. Ten advertisements were collected and analyzed to meet the study's objectives using Hall's (1997) theoretical framework. The study found that these Pakistani advertisements reinforce gender inequity and male dominance by portraying women as dependent on men. The findings also revealed that advertisements in Pakistan typically promote false images, physical attractiveness, family responsibilities, and sexual exploitation, limiting the portrayal of women and reinforcing harmful gender stereotypes. Furthermore, the findings revealed an oppressive representation of female bodies in advertisements, which puts pressure on women to meet unrealistic physical standards and perpetuates harmful views of beauty. These misconceptions harm women's emotional and physical health, as well as their self-esteem. This study contributed to a better understanding of how the media influences social attitudes toward women's empowerment by highlighting harmful gender stereotypes and power imbalances reinforced by these visual representations.

Key Words: Media, Pakistani ads, women representation, stereotype, cultural representation

Introduction

Media is a powerful, dynamic, socializing tool that strengthens individual bonds (Rideout, 2007). As a strong tool, media can play a key role in disseminating information and impacting people's attitudes, beliefs, and ways of life (Jewkes et al., 2011). People's engagement and consistency with media have increased compared to previous years (Kung, Picard & Ruth, 2007). Advertising is a type of communication that usually aims to convince prospective consumers to buy or use more of a specific brand of good or service.

Freedom of expression is evident in all media genres, including print, electronic, and social media. As time passes and societal demands change, various media channels become increasingly popular, and advertising is indeed a creative and innovative communication (Kazmi & Batra, 2009). They inevitably affect our day-to-day existence and play a crucial role in our social lives. Advertisements aim to promote items and products, but nowadays, we constantly see images of people selling products (Khan & Allil, 2010).

Advertisements tend to showcase an idealized and exaggerated version of reality, sometimes in ways that are not entirely positive (Zawisza, 2019). They reinforce the idea that appearance defines worth, subtly influencing people to become more self-conscious about their appearance. Lower self-esteem can come after negative sentiments about oneself, whether regarding appearance or anything else (Furnhum et al., 1998). Furthermore, women are shown in advertising in limited ways because they are rarely seen



in corporate jobs, work environments, or leadership positions (Asemah, Edegoh & Ojih, 2013). Men are typically portrayed as powerful and independent in advertisements, whereas women are limited to domestic duties, motherhood, or caregiving positions where their world revolves around the house (Nagi et al., 2014). This kind of representation influences women to think that they are helpless, weak, and dependent. It also affects men's mindset, which views women as nothing more than objects of sex (Gulati & Srivastava, 2014). So, advertisements portray women negatively and misleadingly, emphasizing their physical appearance over their abilities. This not only reinforces gender stereotypes but also reflects broader societal attitudes toward women, where their worth is often judged by looks rather than skills or intelligence.

Advertisements portray femininity as beautiful and flawless, but since women cannot meet this unattainable level of perfection, feeling inadequate and unsatisfied is now commonplace (Krawczyk & Thompson, 2015). Skin color discrimination is a result of fairness-based advertising in society. Generally, the influence of widespread advertising leads to individuals being duped into purchasing such goods (Gupta et al., 2021). As a result, the advertisements are primarily based on selling products and focus on women's bodies more than the products. Therefore, the current study aims to examine the portrayal of women in Pakistani advertisements and analyze how their representation influences societal perceptions of gender roles and expectations.

Literature Review

Advertisements are recognized as a potent feature of media that spreads ideas worldwide; they are also held accountable for creating unrealistic wants and needs through slogans like power, glamour, and beautification (Collin, 2011). In addition to providing information about a product, ads also convey social representations that reflect the prevailing cultural norms and values (O'Barr, 2015). Advertisements usually convey a powerful message to women, making them realize that their respectable existence depends on having a fair complexion (Reichert & Fosu, 2005). Advertising can be used to educate the public about various concepts and ideas by compelling them to consider that whitish skin tone is essential for social acceptance (Ullah, Shah, & Khan, 2014). White skin texture is often associated with female attractiveness in Pakistan, as seen by many television commercials featuring Fair & Lovely, Skin White, Nisa, Golden Pearl beauty cream, Face Fresh, Hoor beauty soap, etc. Moreover, meeting unrealistic standards of perfection impacts people of all genders and has become a social reality. Media shapes people's perceptions, behaviors, beliefs, and how they respond to and navigate social realities (Barber, 2011).

Kumar et al. (2017) analyzed how people have perceived overt sexuality and the objectification of women in advertisements throughout history. Rajagopal and Gales (2002) carried out a study on women in advertising. They discovered that none of the three roles women usually portray in advertising, such as mother, beauty, or sex symbol



, represent women's diversity.

Showing women as a glamorous object aims to attract the male audience's attention (Dickey et al., 2006). Gender stereotypes are frequently promoted and employed in television advertisements (Shrikhande et al., 2003). Similarly, Cortese et al. (2007) State that the image of attractive women commonly used in print ads is a hollow representation of femininity. They feel that the portrayals of women in commercials are not accurate to life, and they talk about how this affects the confidence of standard female representatives.

Unfortunately, Asian societies are deeply rooted in patriarchal systems, and media is also part of it; the effects of systemic patriarchy on women and all things feminine are already immense (Pallavi et al., 2017). In the 1980s, when television advertising was first introduced, women were stereotyped as caring for their families and caring for the home (Sexton, 2008). Early advertisements in magazines and other media often depicted women in stereotypical roles, portraying them as subordinate and passive, with no decision-making power or importance beyond domestic duties (Baker, 2005). Women are meant to care for the home; they rely on men and want their protection (Amber & S, 2002).

According to Iram et al. (2023), advertising is a potent and effective tool for influencing consumer purchasing decisions. Pakistani commercials frequently portray women as submissive and dependent on men, and advertising often objectifies and sexualizes women, reducing them to mere objects of desire. Jamil and Bellos (2018) assert that the representation of gender in TV commercials serves as an example of the sociocultural trends and patterns that are prevalent in society. The above literature shows that women have been represented differently for different reasons. They have been depicted or introduced negatively, sexually, and deprived. However, the present study attempts to fill this gap by analyzing the advertisements shown in Pakistan.

Research Methodology

This study used qualitative research to explore how women are portrayed in Pakistani advertisements. It focuses on interpretations and exploring the meaning of advertisements. It examines the portrayal of women, and it is essential to analyze the symbolic meanings, themes, images, and cultural norms behind these advertisements. It also looks at the ideologies and societal attitudes toward women embedded in advertisements. The current study is centered on electronic media advertisements. The researchers collected data from picture-based social media advertisements; ten advertisements were collected from different social media platforms. Hall's Representation Theory was chosen as the theoretical framework for the current study. His theory advises against seeing media pictures as mere reflections of reality or reflections of themselves. The main point of Hall (1990) is that Representation goes beyond simply mirroring reality; it actively shapes how people perceive and understand the world around them. In media, particularly in advertisements, women are not just shown—they are portrayed in ways that



influence societal views on gender roles, expectations, and identities. According to Hall (1997), researchers look at the idea of representation within the framework of media studies that is culturally critical.

Analysis

The study examined the portrayal of women in Pakistani advertisements. Ten advertisements were collected and analyzed from different social platforms. These advertisements were divided into two main hunks: (1) domesticity and caregiving, which includes five advertisements depicting women in traditional roles, and (2) objectification of women, which includes five advertisements depicting women as objects of beauty. The table below summarizes the details.

Table 4. 1: Categories of Advertisements Based on Female Roles

S. No	Role	Product
1	Domesticity and caregiving	Meal, products, diapers, service
2	Objectification of women	Soap, beauty, products, slice juice, garments, Nescafe coffee

The analysis examines how women are portrayed in Pakistani commercials, exposing marketers' strategies for grabbing viewers' attention and reinforcing societal norms.

The following five advertisements represent the domesticity and caregiving category, showcasing women in domestic and nurturing roles. These advertisements perpetuate negative gender stereotypes that restrict women's duties to those of caregivers and homemakers. Their widespread usage shapes society's perception of women's duties by upholding patriarchal norms.



Figure 4. 1: A good wife stereotype

The advertisement features the headline 'National' and the phrase 'New thoughts, New taste,' which conveys a meaning or idea, implying that new concepts or viewpoints



can give rise to new experiences or preferences. The image of a woman giving meals to a man in the advertising maintains traditional gender norms and that women are primarily nurturers and caregivers. By depicting the woman in a submissive role, the advertisement perpetuates detrimental gender stereotypes by suggesting that women are obligated to perform household chores like cooking in order to appease their families, especially their husbands. This representation undermines women's autonomy and individuality by upholding the repressive idea that women's primary duty is to serve men's demands.



Figure 4. 2: Woman depiction in traditional role

Another commercial highlighting the title 'National' and the tagline 'Delightful Relaxation' depicts what appears to be a scenario of a woman providing food to a man. The cultural assumption that women ought to emphasize caring tasks and household chores is reinforced by this commercial, which promotes the traditional gender role of women as caregivers and homemakers.

The commercial, which shows a lady serving food to her husband, encourages women to be obedient to their families and only be used for tasks like caring for homes and children. This portrayal of women extends the stereotype that the primary duty is to care for others rather than encourage women to pursue their ambitions.



Figure 4.3: An ideal mother

In order to maintain traditional gender norms, this advertisement features a woman as a mother laughing with her child in a tidy setting. A picture of the mother and child smiling lovingly at each other adds emotional depth, suggesting a caring and loving relationship. The mother emphasizes her caring role by being fully available and involved with her child. The child's calm attitude is remarkable; his carefree face and gaze imply a sense of trust and peace. The absence of a father figure reinforces a gendered division of labor by implying that caring for children is exclusively the responsibility of women. However, it is important that taking care of children is a role that society expects and dictates to women rather than something that women are naturally obligated to do. This depiction obscures the possibility of shared duties and more inclusive parenting models, restricting our awareness of different family dynamics and reinforcing cultural expectations surrounding women's roles in children.

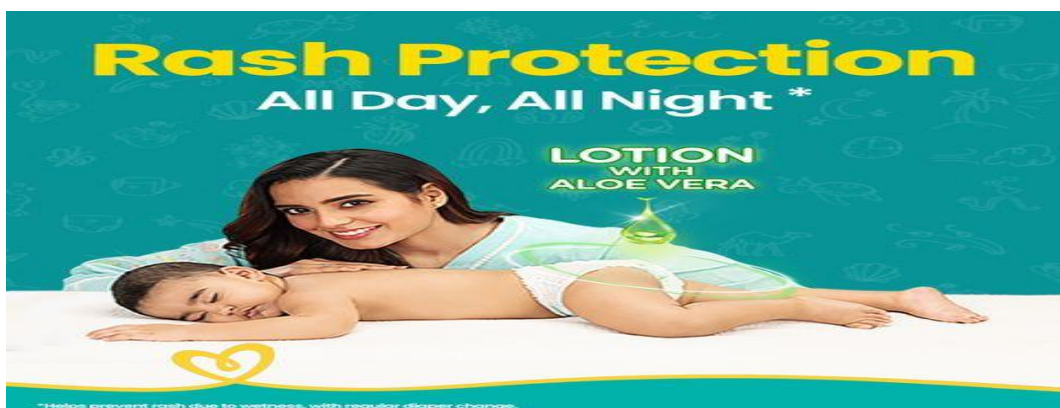


Figure 4.4: A mother stereotype



In this advertisement, a woman is shown smiling at the camera while her child is sleeping in front of her; her smile suggests joy and satisfaction, realizing her baby is safe from rashes, credit to the product. The benefit of the product 'protection from rashes' is emphasized. The tagline 'All Day, All Night, lotion with Aloe Vera' conveys the product's worth. This term highlights the substance's 24-hour protection, combining Aloe Vera's calming qualities to secure and relax the child's skin. The white bedding creates a calming setting that inspires relaxation and peacefulness. White suggests cleanliness, purity, and innocence, emphasizing the importance of a child's safety. The advertisement highlights traditional gender roles by reinforcing cultural expectations that women are primary caregivers and guardians through the portrayal of the mother in this capacity.

Figure 4.5: Traditional mother role



This commercial shows a mother and her child getting ready for school. The mother holds up an empty lunchbox and displays it to the camera as her child prepares to depart for school wearing his school uniform. This advertisement highlights the worth of mom and the traditional. Pakistanis believe that a mother's role is in a child's education. Women are expected to be able to handle childcare duties and domestic activities. Moms are responsible for getting their kids ready for school and making sure they have a healthy meal. The father's role is frequently missing or subordinate to that of the mother, who is responsible for nurturing and supporting her child's progress and growth.

Five additional advertisements fall under the *objectification of women category*, depicting women in stereotypically objectified roles. These advertisements promote conventional gender stereotypes by showing women in dependent and passive roles, sexualized or seductive attitudes, and highlighting physical attractiveness, limiting women to decorative and ornamental objects rather than human beings with freedom and dignity.



Figure 4.6: Woman as an object of desire

The tagline reinforces the misleading perception that light skin is an ideal beauty standard, "Fast Glowing Solution," which suggests that dark skin tones are an issue that needs to be fixed. By presenting the soap as a solution to this alleged problem, the word "solution" reinforces the notion that people with dark skin tones must have it brightened. The abuse of women's bodies in commercials is best illustrated by the usage of a woman's picture on the soapbox; using a woman's naked body to attract attention supports unfair beauty norms, where a woman is not appreciated as a person with her own opinions and perspectives but rather as an object to market a product.

The product's natural and soothing properties are communicated well by the description 'Natural Extract of Aloe Vera & milk,' which appeals to customers looking for moderate, effective skincare treatments. This advertisement effectively promotes a stereotype of white skin tone while also promoting a product, making it very evident to its viewers that you have no place in society if you lack fair skin tone. Ensure you are fair enough if you want life to be beautiful. For this reason, we are here to provide you with a solution in the form of *Easy Fresh Beauty Soap*.



Figure 4.7: Woman as a symbol for objects

This commercial reinforces the damaging stereotype that white skin is attractive. The advertising uses the gorgeous female figure as a marketing technique to promote the item. This advertisement features a model wearing revealing clothing, purposefully exposing various body parts to draw viewers. The model's perfect physique and attractiveness in the advertisement promote destructive beauty standards by suggesting that achievement and contentment depend on having a particular physical look. Red is frequently linked to ardor, love, and allure; her outfit gives the commercial a dynamic edge and increases its eye-catching quality. The commercial adds to the cultural pressure placed on people—women in particular—to meet unattainable beauty standards. In this advertisement, a city denotes riches and power, evoking sentiments of achievement, luxury, and aspiration while positioning the item as an expensive quality.



Figure 4.8: The sex object stereotype



The slice advertising transfers the sexual meaning connected to some pulpy drink like mango juice. The camera's attention on the woman's lips and eyes in the slice mango juice advertisement, along with her seductive attitude, begs the issue of the purpose of the advertisement. The connected and sensitive photography blurs the distinctions with a seductive appeal and a love for mango juice, suggesting a more fascinating theme. This strategy may be interpreted as objectifying the model and exploiting her sexuality for commercial gain instead of just highlighting the juicy attributes.



Figure 4.9: Woman as an object to be viewed

A female model is used in this advertisement to promote garments. The way a woman is portrayed in the advertisement objectifies her body by emphasizing the product with her looks. The advertisement showcases an artificially attractive woman who reveals her skin to draw attention. The diversity and complexity of women in our culture are not adequately portrayed in this way. Instead, it takes advantage of women's bodies for corporate gain, promoting negative perceptions of gender and viewing women like inanimate objects. The eye-catching advertisement shouts savings with an amazing 70% OFF, boldly displayed to attract readers' attention.



Figure 4.10: Woman as an object to be used

This advertisement features a celebrity in an appearance that emphasizes her physical attractiveness rather than the advertised product. She purposefully draws the viewer's attention with her flowing hair and alluring smile, emphasizing the product with an air of attraction. This strategy uses the celebrity's charms to draw attention or readers to the product's qualities and advantages. The jam-colored background draws attention to the coffee's rich taste and connects it to sweetness. In contrast, a softly highlighted background that encircles the female model conveys a sense of peace, freshness, and energy. By putting image over content, the advertisement promotes marketing and a culture where people make quick decisions about what to buy. Furthermore, it encourages a culture of unachievable goals by establishing unreasonable expectations about beauty.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to investigate how women are portrayed in Pakistani advertisements and the ways Pakistani commercials promote the concept of colorism, as well as stereotyped gender norms and values. To examine these advertisements and meet the study's objectives, a qualitative research method was applied, and ten Pakistani advertisements were collected from social media. Furthermore, Hall's representation theory served as the framework for analyzing the collected advertisements, recognizing and evaluating verbal and visual components, and dominating depictions of women. The study's findings show that women's primary duties at home are reinforced by how they are portrayed, mainly involving domestic and caring functions. Pakistani advertisements' portrayals of women support patriarchal standards by objectifying them as attractive symbols. Provocative positions, outfits, or camera angles frequently show female bodies to promote items. The findings also confirm that negative gender stereotypes are reinforced by commercials, which frequently present women in roles that are marginalized,



submissive, and passive. This strengthens the societal argument that women are not important forces behind advancement or change. This study's findings emphasize the need to investigate how women are portrayed in Pakistani advertisements. Future investigations ought to examine worldwide advertisements, look at the ongoing impact of commercials on gender viewpoints, and assess the influence of advertising on empowering women.

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