

## Defying Gendered Stereotypes: A Multimodal Analysis of Pakistani Advertisements

**Abstract:** *This study aims to explore the feministic strands in Pakistani advertisements. The focus of this paper is to analyze the implied meanings of these advertisements, which seem to break the gendered stereotypes and normalize feministic viewpoints about the ideal body, complexion and gender roles. This paper presents the linguistic and visual analysis of the ads, focusing on their breakdown of gender-based stereotypes and their demonstration of feministic messages in the Pakistani cultural context. The interdisciplinary theoretical underpinning for this study includes the visual multimodal of Kress and Leuwen (1996). A close analysis of Pakistani advertisements shows that most of the companies are defying the socio-cultural stereotypes regarding women and are presenting the feministic stances as a new normal. By focusing on the notion of change, this paper argues that this altered approach of the advertisement companies is an attempt to transform the traditional attitude of Pakistani patriarchal society towards social and cultural gender roles of women.*

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**Key Words:** Gendered Stereotypes; Multimodality; Feministic Strands; Advertisement; Gender Roles

### Introduction

Advertisements are the major parts of almost all types of media, whether it's print media, electronic media or social media. The current paper discusses ads with reference to electronic and social media. The existence and participation of women cannot be neglected when it comes to Pakistani advertisements, as there is hardly any commercial where a woman is not seen.

Ads not only aim to sell the products, but they always have a message to deliver, which builds up a particular mindset towards certain

ideas. For a long period of time, women have been used in ads to show their fixed gender rules and their accepted versions in society. The glamoured phase of advertisements exaggerated the beautified and glorified embodiment of women, which promoted the idea of the ideal look of females to win them desired place by people.

This research paper aims to find out the changed narratives of advertisements regarding both the pre-existing narrative of fixed gender roles and perfect appearance. The focus of the paper is to investigate the elements and ways

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which are defying the gender stereotypes of women. To achieve the purpose, 'a multimodal semiotic analysis' is applied to selected Pakistani ads. Each element of the selected commercial is analyzed to see the complete picture and intended meanings; the components mainly observed are the colours and things used in the background, the setting, the characters, the content and the tag lines.

In order to see things deeply, the current study is divided into three dimensions to analyze the advertisements; gender roles, flawless complexion and ideal body type. While seeing and picking the ads, such advertisements are selected for multimodal semiotic analysis, which have content that breaks the norms about specific gender roles, flawless complexion and ideal body type.

"Research suggests that exposure to gender role stereotypes in advertising often influences gender-stereotyped attitudes" (Singorielli, 1989). This paper tries to bring into light the changing streak in the defined and fixed roles associated with females. It identifies and unveils the ads which promote the idea that gender roles are not fixed; it's not mandatory that house chores are to be done by women only, and to deal with the outside world is to be done by men only. Gender roles can not only be supported but can also be switched if needed.

"Advertisements tend to communicate the idea that appearance is all-important and it teaches us to be self-conscious about how we look" (Ali. Shahzad, Shahwar. Deeba, 2011). Another major idea that was spread largely through ads was the ideal body shape and a perfect face with no blemish. This research paper attempts to highlight the commercials which directly or indirectly seem to oppose the ideas. The selected ads seem to support the acceptance of all body types by presenting women of all body types as models for their brand. Similarly, the fairness cream ads emphasize the concept of freshness and dirt-free skin rather than recommending or claiming lighter skin tones.

## Research Questions

The study aims to find the answers to the following research questions:

1. Are advertisements presenting the females with a feministic approach?
2. Are the advertisements defying the stereotypes related to women in terms of domestic gender roles?
3. Are the advertisements defying the stereotypes related to women in terms of complexion?
4. Are the advertisements defying the stereotypes related to women in terms of the ideal body?

## Literature Review

The terms sex and gender are mostly used synonymously. But according to the sociological definition given by Diamond (2002), sex refers to physical differences with which males and females are born, whereas gender is defined as social expectations linked to both sexes. Diamond defines gender roles in the following words:

*Many of the cultural and social differences in behaviour patterns associated with the two genders, man and woman, have come to be accepted and recognized as societal constructs - notions or abstractions which carry with them certain expectations and classifications.* (Diamond, 2002)

Gender roles reveal the socio-cultural norms and traditional values of a society. It is generally believed that gender roles are uniform throughout the world. There are variations in different societies and cultures, but they demonstrate certain common patterns of behaviour and attitudes (Firth 1997). The first exposure to gender discrimination is made in childhood by the parents. Parents treat boys and girls differently, and their expectations of them are also different (Thorne 1993). Sorrel (1983) pointed out four stereotypes of gender roles which are similar across global societies, regardless of their conservative or modern approaches. According to Sorrel, these roles include homemaker, emotional, silly and sex object. Doyle (1985) mentioned three women-specific roles presumed by a society which are cooking, cleaning and caring, whereas males are attributed with the traits of power, success, aggression and self-reliance.

In Pakistani patriarchal society, culturally, women are given the role of homemaker. In the domestic domain, man is regarded as the decision maker and breadwinner. On the contrary, women are less involved in decision-making, and she is expected to take care of cooking, cleaning, and looking after the children (Shah et al.1986). Shah further mentions that females are responsible for the cooking and distribution of food to all family members. If they refuse to do so, they might risk their marital status. According to Shah, the physical mobility of females is also expected to be limited. They are discouraged from moving out of the house alone.

Feminism is not a very old movement in Pakistan. It is striving to flourish in this patriarchal society. In a true sense, feminism is not a movement against men; rather, it presses the need for equality between men and women (Shah 2020). This equality is demanded in personal and professional fields. The domestic gender roles, norms for mobility, the perfect beauty standards—all stereotypes are being questioned. Advertisements, being a mirror of the society, are displaying this fresh wave of feminism in Pakistani society. However, most of the advertisements demonstrate the stereotypical picture of females as Walters (1995) mentioned that before the spread of feminist ideology, women had a stereotypical portrayal of the roles in media. For instance, the ads related to cooking or cleaning present women as the sole responsibility for these duties. King et al. (200) conclude that Australian advertisements depict stereotypical gender roles. Another study carried out by Mallika (2000) in India argued that Women are framed by advertisements as dependent on men with limited domestic roles. Additionally, the ads related to fairness or other beauty products project these products as essentials for women. However, in the recent few years, a change has been visible in the approach of the advertisement companies as far as these gendered stereotypes are concerned.

This paper examines the portrayal of defiance of the socio-cultural stereotypes related to gender. In Pakistani society, voices are being raised for equal gender roles. This fact is evident in media in general and advertisements in specific. For instance, a study conducted by

Muneeba et al. (2020) asserts that most of the current ads on Pakistani media depict women not as traditional but glamorous. She further points out that the male-female relationship shown in the commercials is not in line with the Islamic norms of traditional Pakistani society.

Contemporary advertisements in Pakistan are loaded with the image of modern women. These advertisements break the stereotypes related to the ideal body type. The first wave of feminism presented the image of women as athletic, strong and strident rather than sleek, fragile and docile. Susie Orbach, in her book *fat*, is a feminist issue, explores the Pressures of Weight Reduction and Thin Body Ideals (Orbach 2016). Orbach believes that women's binge eating is a strategy to hide from males' sexual objectification (Orbach 2016). Thus women eat in large proportions to negate the patriarchal beauty standards and to avoid the male gaze.

Think body type is an ideal body type for the patriarchal consumer culture. Fikkan and Rothblum say, "Fat is also a feminist issue because women are held to higher standards of thinness and suffer greater penalties if they fall short" (2012). Thus we see food in women writing as an important theme as it is a feminist concern. The perception of women about the ideal body type is also significant. According to Cunningham, "the girls idealized a body type they referred to as 'thick'. Throughout pop culture, 'thick' has been used to describe a woman's body as well proportioned, curvy, and fuller in places such as the thighs, hips, breasts, and rear but possessing a smaller waist and flatter stomach" (2015). Such a perception is a result of the normalization of patriarchal beauty standards.

To be projected on the screen, a thin woman is an ideal choice. This is the reason we find nil to a bare minimum representation of fat women on screen. "Indeed, one of the main challenges in analyzing the characterization of fat women in the media is that they are largely absent" (Fikkan and Rothblum 2012). However, this trend is changing, and by defying the stereotype of thin women, fat women are projected on the screen. This research focuses on advertisements where fat women are in the limelight.

Naomi Wolf argues in her article *The Beauty Myth* when women left their homes and

went to public spheres, they thought they freed themselves, but in fact, they made their bodies prisons as they paint them regularly to hide ageing as it is considered un-beautiful (2013).

Males are more biased towards fat women rather than thin women. Tracy Royce claims, "some male strangers are not only more likely to become verbally aggressive with a fat [compared to average-size] woman, but also to physically threaten and intimidate her" (Royce 2009). Fikkan and Rothblum adhere to the above-mentioned point of view; they claim, "In employment settings, fat women are less likely to be hired, receive worse treatment on the job and earn less than their non-fat peers" (2012). Fikkan and Rothblum have analyzed the biasedness fat women face around the globe; they say, "The price paid by women as a result of weight-based discrimination is significant, cuts across multiple domains" (2012). Fikkan and Rothblum conclude that fat women suffer in the domain of employment, romantic relationships, matrimonial relations and education and representation in media. However, this research aims to analyze the contemporary Pakistani advertisements that not only break these gendered stereotypes but also normalize the feministic point of view regarding the ideal body type.

The impact of advertisements on the viewer's minds cannot be denied. It's the convincing power of ads and the strategy of showing the content repeatedly which normalizes even the things that appear oddest initially. There are many types of messages enclosed with ads other than the object of selling the product. If you watch ads keenly, you might have noticed that females are more frequently seen than males. You can see the women even in the advertisements for the products which are categorically used by men, like shaving foam or blades. The recurrent appearance of women in commercials developed certain images for them. For decades there were only two main representations of women in advertising, i.e. housewives who are dependent on men and attractive objects (Craig, 1992).

In numerous ads, the image of women is portrayed as "passive, deferential, unintelligent, shy, dreamy, gentle, likely to be manipulated, helpless, and with body language depicting

psychological withdrawal, submissiveness and supplication" (Browne, 1998). According to Shahwar (2013), advertisements are responsible for both versions of stereotypes; the 1st version of submissive house-bound woman and the other version of stereotypes of an attractive object used to sell the products. The second type of stereotype built up an ideal image of women. Completely negating the actual physical existence, it focused on how women should be apparent. "Women are portrayed as tall and thin, with long legs, perfect teeth and hair and skin without blemish in sight" (Shahwar, 2013). The trend of using fairness creams among South Asians has emerged in the last fifty years. This need to be whitish has been exploited by the producers of skin whitening creams (Goon, 2003).

The advertisements for skin whitening cream advocate the idea that a white complexion is inevitable for progress, to achieve the ideal face, perfect partner, welcoming behaviour from society and attention from the opposite sex (Shankar et al., 2006). There are countless Pakistani ads which have been supporting the idea of how a fair complexion can be a successful tool to get a prince charming as a life partner. The ads have been repeating the idea that girls with white skin are easily selected for jobs, and they are happily accepted by society in all possible roles. Even the taglines of skin whitening creams have been claiming that women can change their skin colour as soon as possible. This assertion was repeatedly echoed by various whitening cream ads claiming to attain fair skin in a time frame of fourteen days to fifteen minutes.

Fair complexion is appreciated generally in south Asian countries (Kamran, 2010) and Pakistani advertisements have been promoting and advocating the concepts for decades until a wave of feminism touched the country and initiated the change in narrative. The contemporary feministic approach is to break all the previous versions of stereotypes and to accept women with all gender roles, body types and skin tones. The current research work aims to explore the tinge of this changed narrative in Pakistani advertisements.

### **Research Methodology**

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This research follows the descriptive analysis,

which examines the feministic strands in Pakistani advertisements. This research, by using qualitative methodology, presents the semiotic analysis of the ads, focusing on their breakdown of gender-based stereotypes and their demonstration of feministic messages in the Pakistani cultural context. The data for this study has been taken from scholarly journals and web sources. The focus of this paper is to analyze the implied meanings of these advertisements, which seem to break the gendered stereotypes and normalize feministic viewpoints about the ideal body, complexion and gender roles.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This research will explore feministic strands in Pakistani advertisements under the lens of multimodal theory by Kress and Leuwen. Multimodal discourse analysis provides a new form of communication such as images, colour, text etc. And the selected advertisements are the instrument from which the symbolic representation of the multimodal approach will be analyzed. For this research, a multimodal approach has been selected to be applied to the selected advertisements. For this purpose, three advertisements are considered as the primary text.

### **Findings and Discussion**

#### **Shoop Noodles**

The ad for Shoop Noodles was selected for the analysis. It was downloaded from Youtube on 5th August 2022.



**Figure 2**



**Figure 3**



**Figure 4**



**Figure 5**



**Figure 1**

This ad has two female characters as signifiers.

One is a mother, and the other is a daughter. The setting is a modern kitchen. Mother is wearing a traditional shalwar kameez and dupatta. On the other hand, the daughter is wearing a jeans shirt which gives her a more western look. Mother is concerned about the unavailability of her husband to get .....from the market. On seeing her concern daughter offers her services to go to the market on a bike which is no less than a shock for her mother. This ad shows a clear break from two stereotypes: one, girls cannot go alone to the market, and second, girls do not ride bikes. This ad emphasizes the independence of women in their mundane affairs.

The colours used in the ad are very suggestive. As we know, the commonly accepted norm of the colour, pink is associated with girls and blue with boys. Mother and daughter wear pink dresses, and there are pink and white flowers in the background. The femininity of pink highlights the perception that a kitchen is a place belonging to women only. It is worth noticing that in the frames focusing on the daughter, who is the representation of a modern woman, we see a combination of blue and pink-like blue cups along with the pink ones and the keychain, which has pink and blue colours in it. In addition to this, in Fig 4, when she rides the bike, she wears a blue jacket and a red helmet with a strong determination in her eyes. We can infer from the suggestions made by the colours that modern woman is shown as having the independence of mobility and determination, which were previously usually associated with masculinity. In the last frame, the helmet is in focus, and both female characters are laughing in the blurred background with the punch line writing *trust tou must hai*. The helmet is a symbol of independence. The words strongly endorse the feministic theme of the ad. The ad conveys the message of entrusting women with freedom and independence.

A close semiotic analysis of the commercial exposes the feministic undercurrents. It defies the stereotypes related to gender roles in Pakistani society.

### Glow and Lovely

The second ad selected for analysis is from Glow and Lovely, a leading multinational company

making beauty products. The ad was downloaded from Youtube.com on 5th August 2022.



Figure 1

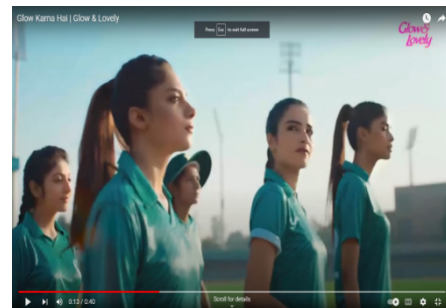


Figure 2

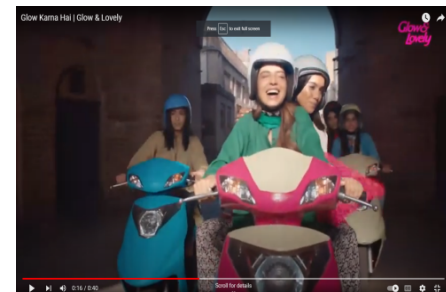


Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

Glow and Lovely is a famous brand in Pakistan that promises glowing skin. It is a company which is regarded as the pioneer in bringing a feministic approach to advertisements. The company has recently changed the name of the brand from FAIR AND LOVELY to GLOW AND LOVELY, stressing the acceptance of all tones of complexions with their slogan *mitti ke sau rang*. In the ad above given, fig 1 displays a girl wearing western clothes, holding a book in her hand with the university building in the background. She throws away the umbrella, letting the sunlight fall on her directly. The tagline says *sayon se chehre azad hogaye. Larkiyan dhoop ka samna karne ko tayyar hain* (*The faces are free of shadows, girls are ready to face the Sun*). The scene strongly depicts the strong and fearless modern Pakistani girl who is ready to take on all the challenges. Sun acts as a symbol of hardships and obstacles faced by the girls. In fig2 the frame displays a women's cricket team coming to the field with a determined look in their eyes. It is against the stereotypical ideology that girls cannot play cricket or other field games. Fig 3 reveals five girls riding three bikes. It displays defiance of the usual stereotype that girls cannot ride bikes. The next scene poses a girl climbing the rock and facing the bright Sun with open arms. Rock is a symbol of difficulties that girls are no more afraid of. The last scene shows a girl clad in western clothes, walking in the bright sunlight. She gazes upwards and smiles. The ad uses very strong words which are pressing the feministic ideology of free, confident and independent girls. The powerful lines like *ye waqt asman mai parwaz karne ka ha sooraj se darne ka nahi* (*This is the time to fly in the sky not to get afraid of the Sun*) and the last line *ab waqt ha confidence ke glow ka* (*Now, this is the*

*time for the glow of confidence*) surely carry feminist approach of women empowerment.

Withstanding stereotypes, the commercial of Glow and Lovely clearly shows an urge to spread the message of women's empowerment and self-assurance.

## Khaadi

The third ad selected for analysis is from Khaadi, a leading clothing brand in Pakistan. The ad was downloaded from Youtube.com on 6th August 2022.

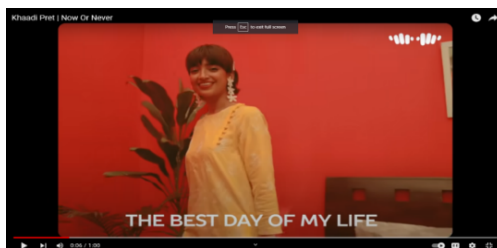


Figure 1

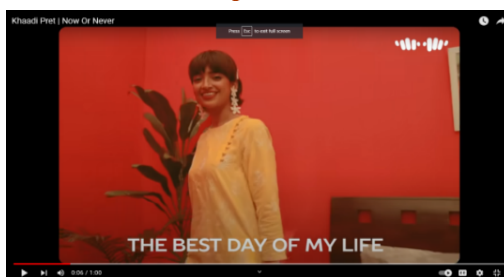


Figure 2

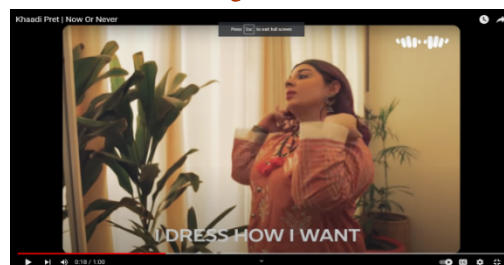


Figure 3

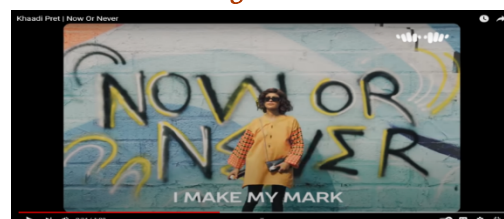


Figure 4

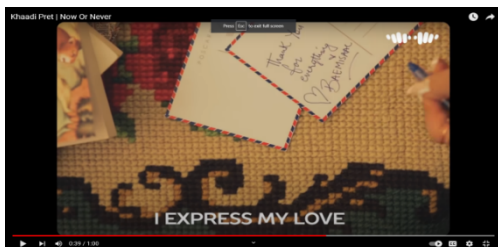


Figure 5



Figure 6

The Ad opened in a room with red painted walls and adorned with big green plants. It gives a very bold and unusual look to the room. The first model is a slim short-haired girl. The tagline appears as: *the best day of my life, I have now or never*. The boldness of the room matches the bold wording. In the next scene, the girl is seen dancing while the words appear on the screen: *today, I live for myself*. These words show defiance of the traditional and stereotypical mindset of Pakistani society, which appreciates women living for others. The ad proceeds by showing a plus-sized model getting ready in front of the mirror. Echoing the feministic ideology, the tagline says, *I wear what I want*. The inclusion of a plus-sized model itself is insolence to society's beauty standards. The next frame contains the slim model who writes on the wall now or never; meanwhile, the words flashing on the screen say, *I make my mark today*. These words and the body language of the model express self-confidence and authority. In the upcoming scenes, a slim model stands in front of the photographs, and the words written on the screen are: *I make my memories*. Furthermore, the Next frame displays both the models lying on the floor and laughing, which is an anomaly from the social norms for women. The tagline, *I laugh till I cry* signifies the happiness in doing atypical things. In the next frame plus sized model appears, writing a card with the tagline. *I express my love*. The camera focuses on the written words on the card. The

signature on the card, *baemisaal* (unique), is highly symbolic. It proclaims a feministic approach to bringing acceptance and appreciation for all women, irrespective of their physical appearance. Moving further, the scene reveals the slim model pushing a bicycle with a third model riding on it. The tagline for this scene is: *Today I learn to fly*. The word *fly* is associated with freedom and aspiration to soar high. This scene leads to the next showing all three models, the plus-sized model on the front and the other two behind her. The last scene contains the third model, leaning on the bed, writing something, showing the tagline *today I appreciate today*. The language, body language of the characters, the setting, and colours– all strive to convey the message of strength and independence.

The ad depicts the message of accepting women with all their shortcomings. Regardless of their body shape and weight, women are beautiful. It also spreads the notion that women must enjoy freedom in their life. This is clear defiance of stereotypes present in Pakistani society, which pressurize women to make their looks according to the conventional beauty standards.

## Conclusion

In the light of above mentioned semiotic analysis of the selected advertisements, it can be said that the change regarding fixed concepts about women domestic, roles, ideal boy type and flawless fair complexion is in the air. Acceptance of the things which were purely associated with men in the past is quite obvious.

Advertisements being the most powerful tool of the media can normalize the usual concepts of society. Showing girls handling the manly tasks successfully is a ray of hope to bring change to a higher level. It is an indication that the new things are breaching the stereotypes where women are completely dependent on men for outdoor tasks. It encourages girls to be self-sufficient for themselves and supportive of their families, which is portrayed in Shoop Noodles' ad.

When the advertisement shows that girls can face the world without taking care of their skin and complexion, it indirectly communicates to allow the women to explore the world without



taking care of their burnt or tanned skin due to Sun as can be seen in Glow and Lovely ad's analysis. Another message can be drawn that all complexions should be accepted and appreciated.

The message behind the Khaadi ad is on the same line where it has been presented that all body types are equally beautiful, therefore, should be treated and appreciated similarly. Bringing all body types as the representative of

the brand defies the stereotype of an ideally perfect body.

This study shows that the fixed mindset of society is on its way to embracing change. Once this change is accepted nationwide, society can work on a better roadmap. It can set more practical goals where women can play their part more substantially.

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