

Semiotics and Gender Representation in Pakistani TVCs: Unraveling the Hidden Messages

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ABSTRACT

This study scrutinizes the portrayal of gender identity in Pakistani television commercials, shedding insight on the intricate process of co-constructed understanding within this context. Leveraging Gillian Dyer's seminal semiotic framework, the research investigates how symbols, visual metaphors, and icons communicate and shape gender realities. Through a qualitative research design, a sample of seven Television commercials, from prominent Pakistani channels has been examined to critically analyze the stereotypical perceptions of gender and traditional narratives. The findings illuminate the transformative potential of these advertisements, as they defy patriarchal ideologies and inspire gender equality. This research not only contributes to the advancement of gender discourse but also provides valuable insights for policymakers and stakeholders seeking to foster an inclusive society that embraces diverse expressions of gender identity. Ultimately, this study showcases the indelible influence of Pakistani television commercials in shaping perceptions of gender and forging a path toward a more enlightened and equitable future.

KEYWORDS

Gender Identity, Semiotics, Social Construction, Pakistani Television Commercials, Patriarchal Ideologies.

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INTRODUCTION

Mass media plays a significant role in shaping the perspectives and attitudes of people all around the world. It disseminates information, connects humans, and highly influences a large number of audiences around the globe. Television commercials are one of those major components of commercial media which directly, attractively target audiences, to grab their attention (Bernbach, 1987). Today advertising as a significant institution of society (Cook, 2012) has become an essential part of developing our natures and shaping how we view life and its different dimensions. Although the concept of "personalization" is not just about catering to individual preferences; it is a strategic tool employed by society to maintain control and conformity (Baudrillard, 1999). Moreover, digital advertising allows targeted and personalized ad delivery (Imseng, 2016), enabling advertisers to reach specific audience segments.

The terms "TV Commercial" and "TV Ad" are often used interchangeably, and both refer to a short video advertisement that is broadcast on television to promote a product, service, or brand; formally or informally (Scott, 1907; Johnson, et al., 1926; Williams, 1958; Reeves, 1961; Burnett, 1961; Ogilvy, 1963; McLuhan, 1964; Hopkins, 1968; Baudrillard, 1970; Bernbach & Levenson 1987). However, there can be a subtle difference in certain contexts such as professional settings in advertising agencies, marketing departments, and media industry discussions. Content is carefully scripted with professional actors or spokespersons as a core component of traditional television advertising. On the other hand "TV ad" is a more casual and colloquial way of referring to a television advertisement with that people are informally familiar and use when talking about the commercials that interrupt their favorite TV shows or appear during breaks. In the context of the present study, both terms have been used.

In promotion marketing, advertisers mostly use different symbols, visuals, semiotics, and texts to effectively portray their specific and hidden messages to their target audiences. They help businesses to create brand awareness and recognition driving potential customers to consider and purchase their offerings. This act significantly impacts sales and revenues through a competitive edge by highlighting unique selling points and differentiating the brand from competitors. According to societal context, advertisements shape the culture, trends, and consumer preferences for economic growth by stimulating demand and driving consumer spending in the advertising and marketing industry (Tsai, et al., 2021). The idea of subjectivity and how we form our sense of self can be further explored in the context of "psychoanalytic feminism" and "cultural criticism" that Hall & Du Gay (1996) have discussed in postmodernism's "performative self".



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Moreover, this medium serves as a means of effective communication to inform consumers about new products, discounts, offers, and upcoming events about the benefits of different brand offerings by establishing and maintaining 'brand identities'. Whereas "identity" recognizes its elusive and multifaceted nature while acknowledging its significance in addressing fundamental questions about human existence and society, embracing its inherent complexities rather than attempting to impose rigid definitions upon it (p. 1). Furthermore, consistent messaging and branding in ads help businesses to build trust and credibility with their target audience which leads to brand loyalty and long-term customer relationships.

As a consumer, we think that commercials impersonate a significant role in our lives by providing a primary source of information about products, services, upcoming deals, or promotions to stay informed about the latest offerings in the market that enable us to make informed purchasing decisions (Shafi, 2021). It is a sort of "molecular landscape" in which what we are accustomed to recognizing as everyday forms turn out to be the result of transitory chemical aggregations and so-called 'things' are only the surface appearance assumed by an underlying network of more elementary units" (Eco, 1975). We would analyze the traffic light as a sign consisting of the signifier (the colored lights) and the signified (the meanings we attribute to those colors) where these meanings are not inherent to the colors themselves; they are socially constructed and agreed upon, allowing us to navigate traffic safely.

Consistent messaging and quality representation in ads contribute to consumer confidence in the brand and trust building that further influences behavior to create desire and aspiration for certain products contouring consumer preferences and buying habits. Moreover, people as customers believe in ads' social and cultural impact in reflecting societal values, cultural norms, and evolving trends contributing to cost-saving opportunities, human needs compatibility with product knowledge, and functionalities that foster an emotional connection with different brands (Fatima & Moin (2023).

The research perspective manifests that advertisements serve as real-life case studies and practical examples to teach marketing, business strategies, and consumer behavior (Shukla et al., 2022). Analysis of successful and unsuccessful ad campaigns can offer valuable insights into the importance of effective communication, and market research. By understanding target audiences students can grasp the impact of visual and linguistic elements in influencing consumer decisions (Dmitrij & Piirainen, 2021). Working as a lens into society's values, beliefs, and aspirations ads can help to understand social norms, stereotypes, and cultural representations that encourage critical thinking, promoting discussions on ethics and responsible marketing practices. Moreover, this media bracket serves as a rich source of communication that can be deconstructed to understand the semiotics, persuasion techniques, and rhetoric used in marketing. Furthermore, the educational realm indicates how advertisers use visuals, language, storytelling, brand positioning, brand personality, and brand equity by analyzing advertisements (Mahmood et al., 2022).

In Pakistan, advertisements are one of the influential media which communicates with the masses to propagate the ideology behind advertisers and consumers. These marketing tools highly influence them and directly penetrate their cultural lives: wants, needs, and interests with language and social messages used in them (Baran, 2014). It is a paid form of openly-persuasive communication to remain informed and persuaded for making purchases and to consume products. Undeniably, over the years, the female gender has played the role of an exhibitionist to entice customers into acquiring marketed necessities (Correa, 2022). This industry is growing as a key selling platform that ultimately grabs the attention of a large number of audiences (Iftikhar et al., 2011).

The current study relies on the semiotic analysis of signs and symbols used in television commercials considering a language of signs that deal with symbols, visual metaphors, and icons which ultimately interpret social reality (Floch, 2000). Advertisers always include perceptions of males and females in advertisements through the visual representation of gender while using existing social norms of society (Alvesson & Billing, 2009). Advertisements have always been a popular topic for research in Asian countries there has been a gap in the semiotic approach to analyzing advertisements on gender identity issues, like semiotic male endorsements (Peng, 2020). This technique of analyzing commercials helps to understand the deep meanings behind texts, visuals, and non-verbal symbols to portray cultural values globally (Shaikh et al., 2015). Previous studies on 'deconstruction of cultural myths' (Roland, 1957); 'unconventional consumer marketing' (Levinson & Godin, 2004); 'consumerism & counterculture' (Frank, 1997); 'influential global advertising' (Tungate, 2007); 'empowerment & sexism' (Gill, 2008) and 'emotional experience in media (Bartsch & Klob., 2019) also paved the path to explore how advertisers interpret specific visuals, ideologies, and texts for the promotion of their products and manipulate the sociocultural values and beliefs of society.

In the unique context of Pakistan, a predominantly Muslim nation where religious and cultural norms significantly influence various aspects of life, governments have had control over television broadcasting (Bignell & Woods, 2022), which established Pakistan Television Corporation (PTC) in 1964. Further, the subsequent introduction of private television networks prompted the formation of the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) to ensure ethical and moral standards in broadcasting. Undoubtedly, gender stereotypes have long been prevalent in Pakistani society where men are traditionally depicted as powerful and superior to women. In the past a lack of studies has been scored on the relationship between gender and advertising (Vestergaard & Schroder, 1985) and limited research has been found on the portrayal of men as compared to

the “victimization” of women in electronic media (Roy, 1998; Shahwar, 2013) in countries like Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, where socio-political insurgencies remain prevalent (Sarwar, et al., 2023).

Research Questions

- Q1:** How does the portrayal of gender in Pakistani television commercials construct gender identity?
Q2: How do semiotics used in television commercials break stereotypes about gender?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Construction of Gender Identity

A French-originated term that means a type of communication used to spread knowledge and information into human minds (Kalsoom & Ali, 2019) has been involved in different strategies that encourage customers to buy and use products, endorsed by celebrities or influencers. Consumers get attracted to ads due to the socioeconomic norms, values, culture, and beliefs portrayed by advertisements (Arnold et al., 2001). A basic definition of advertising can be “any paid type of non-personal demonstration of goods, services, or ideas by a recognized sponsor (advertiser).” (Vakratsas & Ambler, 1999). Advertising experts use a variety of techniques, including humor, self-confidence, and peer pressure. However, employing sexual attraction in advertising is one strategy that is most popular and favored but not considered effective, depending on the type of products being promoted and how we interpret each individual’s biological needs (Gallagher, et al., 2019).

Advertising is a promotional strategy that is used to raise customer awareness of a product that marketers utilize to influence people's opinions, actions, and way of life (Chukwu, et al., 2019). According to (Vargas-Bianchi & Mensa, 2020) advertising plays a social role in society to influence public opinion by proposing possible behaviors, leading to the creation of a better, more equal, and respected society. According to (Sandikci, 1998) women are more critical and sensitive to gender advertising due to their age, social status, and educational background. Although female models’ performances frequently reflect their cultural worldview, they have an impact on a person's perceptions as well as their cognitive evaluation and choices (Goldman, 1992).

The social concepts of masculinity and femininity are implemented in everyday routine life through a variety of social institutions, including print, electronic, social media, sports, and academics while gender is acknowledged as an axis of social order (Clark, et al., 2005; Lorber & Farrell, 1991). Advertising has become an important institute to symbolically portray male and female voices in various ads (Gilbert, 1992). According to (Maccoby, 1998), individual gender identity realization places a strong emphasis on the self, as in “me boy” or “me girl,” whereas collective gender identity categorization functions as a social group or gender group and employs pronouns like “we boy” and “we girls”. From early childhood, the idea of gender realization as male or female is established. According to Martin & Ruble (2004), the process of gender identification starts at the age of 18 to 24 months, and by the time they reach 27 to 30 months, the visual interpretation of gender becomes vivid. They can tell their gender apart from children of the same sex and youngsters of other sexes. The process of forming and consistently developing gender identity involves a few phases. Kohlberg (1966) explained that understanding gender constancy is necessary to understand how gender identity is constructed.

Piaget (1971) defined gender constancy as a development in men’s or women’s cognitive and psychological worldview to achieve the gender consistency that children should experience. Moving ahead, Slaby & Frey (1975) identified three stages: gender identity, stability, and consistency stage. A study by Maccoby (1998) stated that guys are more likely to recognize their collective gender identity in comparison to girls, they see girls as individuals but girls collectively perceive the identity of boys. Later research by Gabriel & Gardner (1999) showed that men’s and women’s self-interpretations are largely based on their interdependent and inter-relational cultural values.

The importance of lifestyle is significant in today’s modern society and includes things like hobbies, activities, likes, and dislikes (Bell & Hollows, 2005). Considering the connection between lifestyle and identity, Johansson and Miegel (1992) proposed that lifestyle places one's self-identification within a social, cultural, and historical context whereas stereotypes and gender identity are related in a parallel way. Institutions like the media, schools, and peer interaction act as the foundation for supporting gender-stereotyped discourse (Maccoby, 2002).

Parenting and exposure to sociocultural influences have a direct impact on children's understanding of their gender identity (Fagot & Leinbach, 1989). Youngsters’ cognitive patterns are mostly influenced by their parents because how they treat different genders has a significant impact on how well children understand gender. Furthermore, (Fagot, et al., 1992) ended their study by arguing that mothers who uphold conventional gender roles and support them in the home are more likely to produce kids who are fully aware of gender labeling from an early age since learning begins on the mother’s lap. Media in general, and television in specific, plays a crucial role in spreading information that shapes young people's thoughts and helps them understand the gender stereotypes that are still present. According to Miller, et al., (2009) despite efforts to lessen this stereotypical representation of gender, media nevertheless reinforces the traditional perspective and brings attention to the stereotyped content. Moreover, Davis (2003) analyzed the commercials as well and concluded that boys and men were

portrayed more frequently in public domains while girls and women were portrayed as being obsessed with home or domestic affairs.

Gender Stereotypes in Pakistani Television Commercials

A gender stereotype is mainly composed of psychological and social beliefs that are characterized by how frequently men and women engage in particular activities. It focuses on mainly negative beliefs that reflect few differences in how gender is treated and quite lesser attempts are made to see the feminine perspective in any important issues (Iqani, 2023). The word “stereotype” has a negative reputation. People constantly worry about being categorized and associated with harmful stereotypes. Smith and White (2002) argue that the impact of stereotype fear can be lessened by educating both males and females about the fact that they may work on equal levels and perform as well. It’s a stereotype that involves a person being reduced to exaggerated, mostly negative character traits (Heathy, 2020).

Lewin (1947) claimed that the industrial revolution led to a clear division of gender roles, with men working in industries and women taking on household duties, creating distinct philosophies and depictions of men and women. The stereotyped depiction of gender in the media was linked to cultural values, showing the root of men’s and women’s authoritative/submissive roles and immediately impacting their lives (Eagly & Steffen, 1984; Spence & Helmreich, 1978). These ‘stereotypical’ depictions can also be called traditional roles/labels in Pakistani society. The representation of female models in television commercials is based on such assumptions that depict the structural position of women in public. (Sharma & Bumb, 2021). These traditional labels portray women in weak roles or positions, bound to their physical appearance, showing them in household activities and supportive roles Muslim community.

The difference is that portrayal has nothing to do with biological factors but with how our culture defines the two genders (Goffman, 1976). Women are generally found at home in commercials looking at baby products, home appliances, cosmetics, and food items. Since the beginning of advertisements, they have been portrayed in stereotypical roles, highlighted as “her place is in the home, she doesn’t make important decisions and dependent on men for everything and regarded by them as a sex object” (Courtney & Lockeretz, 1971). Unluckily, the media is largely involved in painting women as ‘sex objects’ to grab the attention of viewers. The underlining messages of these types of advertisements emphasize sexuality (Nagi, 2014).

Female models in advertisements are often objectified and portrayed as secondary to men, serving as attention-seeking tactics to sell products unrelated to them. Despite improvements in the social position of women, the advertising industry still predominantly perpetuates unrealistic depictions of female models, calling for a need for proper and realistic representation (Kilbourne, 2000; Lindner, 2004; Chatterji, 2006). Das & Sharma (2021) expounded that the stereotypical representation of women in advertising negatively impacts viewers of all genders, especially children influencing gender roles in society. Though sexism remains pervasive in the advertising industry, particularly in South Asian countries, where women are often portrayed provocatively and relegated to traditional and stereotyped roles, perpetuating gender discrimination and inequalities (Moorthi, et al., 2014). Unfortunately, except for a few of those in the industry who are pushing for the empowerment of females in ads (Bower, 2001; Eisend, 2010) for decades advertising industry had specifically set its sights on women to perfect the “ideal” women image they created.

Advertising, as a potent platform in our capitalist society, significantly impacts gender identities by perpetuating stereotypes and reinforcing patriarchal norms. Female models are often confined to domestic or sexual roles, while men's status is upheld through depictions of ambition and business acumen, continuing to reinforce gender inequalities and limiting both men's and women's true potential (Walsh, 1997). Such roles create idealistic expectations from both genders (Zotos, et al., 2018). The biased attitudes towards the female gender in Pakistani culture represent restrictive views about females’ capabilities and their role in society manipulating parents to keep their female children from attending schools ultimately freezing females’ confidence, dreams, and expectations (Appleton & Collier, 1995).

In Pakistan's media industry, television commercials hold significant influence, with the total advertisement spend reaching Rs75.64 billion in 2020-21, and television generating revenue of Rs34 billion from advertising, as reported by Aurora Fact File (2021). Reflecting the patriarchal nature of Pakistani society (Azhar, 2022), these commercials often depict women in traditional stereotypical roles as homemakers, while non-stereotypical portrayals showcase women as independent and confident, challenging social norms for gender equality. Meanwhile, men are frequently depicted as dominant figures, acting as heads of families and responsible for managing finances (Khalid & Asgher, 2022) in these ads, perpetuating gender-based norms and roles.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Theory of Semiotics

The current study has embraced the theory of semiotics as a theoretical framework to investigate and analyze the construction of gender identity in Pakistani television commercials. According to Williamson, 1978; Dyer, 1982 and Leiss, et al., 1990 semiotics is an effective tool to investigate and examine televised content. Initially, the theory of semiotics was developed by Saussure (2011) who was a Swiss linguist and considered the father of modern linguistics. He applied the

principles of semiotics in the form of language. Then Barthes (1957: 1967) utilized this theory and further extended these ideas to word-image relations in advertising mediums.

The main principles put out by Barthes serve as the foundation for semiotics theory. This research relies on the semiotic analytical model developed by (Dyer, 1982) to explain the significance of the denotative and connotative steps contained in the semiotics analysis of the television commercials. According to Chandler (2002: 2007), semiotics is the study of signs, and there isn't a sign in the world that is neutral or free of ideology and impossible to eradicate since they are established in our sociocultural norms and are interlinked.

In addition, Raymond provided three other interpretations of ideology. First, ideology can be described as a collection of particular values and beliefs that are shared by a group or social class. Secondly, it can be described as a collection of accepted standards that can be disproved by scientific research but are not inherently true. On the third level, he continues that ideology promotes concepts and beliefs through indicators that can be decoded in the socio-cultural context. According to Fiske (2010), ideology is spread utilizing signs, and these culturally created signs aim to maintain the dominance of social, political, religious, economic, and cultural myths that exist in a community structure (Ullah, 2016).

According to Dyer every picture in advertising is considered a persuasive source for the development of an ideology. Preferring visual and nonverbal communication over verbal and written communication she continued by describing the steps that should be considered while analyzing any commercial. Denotations, which include descriptions of the advertisements' items, pictures, appearance, manner, activity, colors, and social class, are the initial phase. The second level of analysis should concentrate on the physical description's relevance to its sociocultural setting. It should also explain how such nonverbal cues and gestures link to their cultural significance and support some underlying ideology. Thirdly, when analyzing the content of the commercials, it is important to focus on linguistic and verbal concepts (1982).

The physical description of television commercials is presented at the denotative level of analysis. A thorough visual and non-verbal analysis of commercials has been conducted keeping the following factors in mind:

- Appearance (age, gender, physical make-up, size, and frequency of gender expression)
- Manner (Expression, eye contact, pose, and clothes)
- Activity (Body Movement, Positional Communication, Props, and Environment)

The purpose of the connotative level of analysis is to connect the physical and visual description to the existing sociocultural values. The signifiers recognized at the denotative level indicate the ideological connotations of cultural norms. This level makes an effort to analyze the verbal and linguistic codes used by advertisers to uncover their hidden meanings and interpretations.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To accurately depict the gender relations shown in the television commercials, a descriptive research design was used. Descriptive and explanatory approaches are significant in this study as descriptive (denotative) analysis describes the gender structures in televised content while the purpose of the connotative level of analysis is to connect the physical and visual description to the existing sociocultural values. Likewise, the explanatory level explains if the gender depiction in Pakistani television commercials follows the traditional narrative or whether there are any differences in how men and women are treated. Mouton & Marais (1988) claimed that a descriptive approach used for data analysis in qualitative research provides minute details of the topic being discussed.

Television commercials aired on top-rated Pakistani television channels such as GEO, ARY, PTV, and HUM TV are considered the total population while the target population for the current study includes television commercials that were on-air from 2018 to 2023. Purposive sample (Emerson, 2015) for this study comprises seven television commercials, repeated during prime-time viewership that genuinely reflected the construction of gender identity. TVCs named *Shan Foods*, *Tapal Danedar*, *Shoop Noodles*, *Lemon Max Long Bar*, *Pampers Pants*, *National Spice Mixes*, and *Lifebuoy Shampoo*. All of these ads have portrayed reversed gender roles which ultimately breaks the stereotypical gender narratives and make these commercials more significant than other commercials.

Initially, ten commercials were analyzed but saturation was reached after analyzing seven commercials. An analytical observation has been conducted to analyze the data collected in the form of television commercials. This scrutiny contains the key features adapted from the model recommended by Dyer (1982). According to the factors listed in the framework, the analysis has been explained in two stages. The following flow charts describe the factors that are considered for the analysis of television commercials.

- **Stage 1.** The visual (denotative) analysis of the television commercials is included in Figure. 1. A physical description of the commercial has first been given to identify the use of various semiotic codes and signifiers in the commercials. In addition to the physical description of the commercials, the following aspects help to shape the overall perception of the commercials including appearance, manner, and activity.

Factors are further subdivided into several semiotic codes, which have also been taken into consideration for the analysis purpose. These signifiers are recognized at the denotative level and then evaluated at a higher level to reveal how they shape an ideology within a socio-cultural context.

- Stage 2.** In this stage, the signifiers identified in the denotative analysis are interpreted to analyze the meanings that they produce while being aware of existing cultural norms. Televised content portrays the real image of socially constructed gender identity and the ideologies that these signs convey differ from culture to culture. Cultural knowledge is a prerequisite for analyzing television commercials where denotative is the first level of analysis which further supports analyzing the second level of analysis which is connotative. This is a more advanced level of analysis that involves knowledge of the historical, social, and cultural contexts to reveal the culturally embedded signs used in commercials (Barthes, 1957:1967; Dyer, 1982). This analysis tries to draw attention to gender identity through signs and generates a detailed discussion on how gender identity is constructed in the commercials sometimes supporting or mostly refuting the patriarchal ideology in the context of Pakistan.

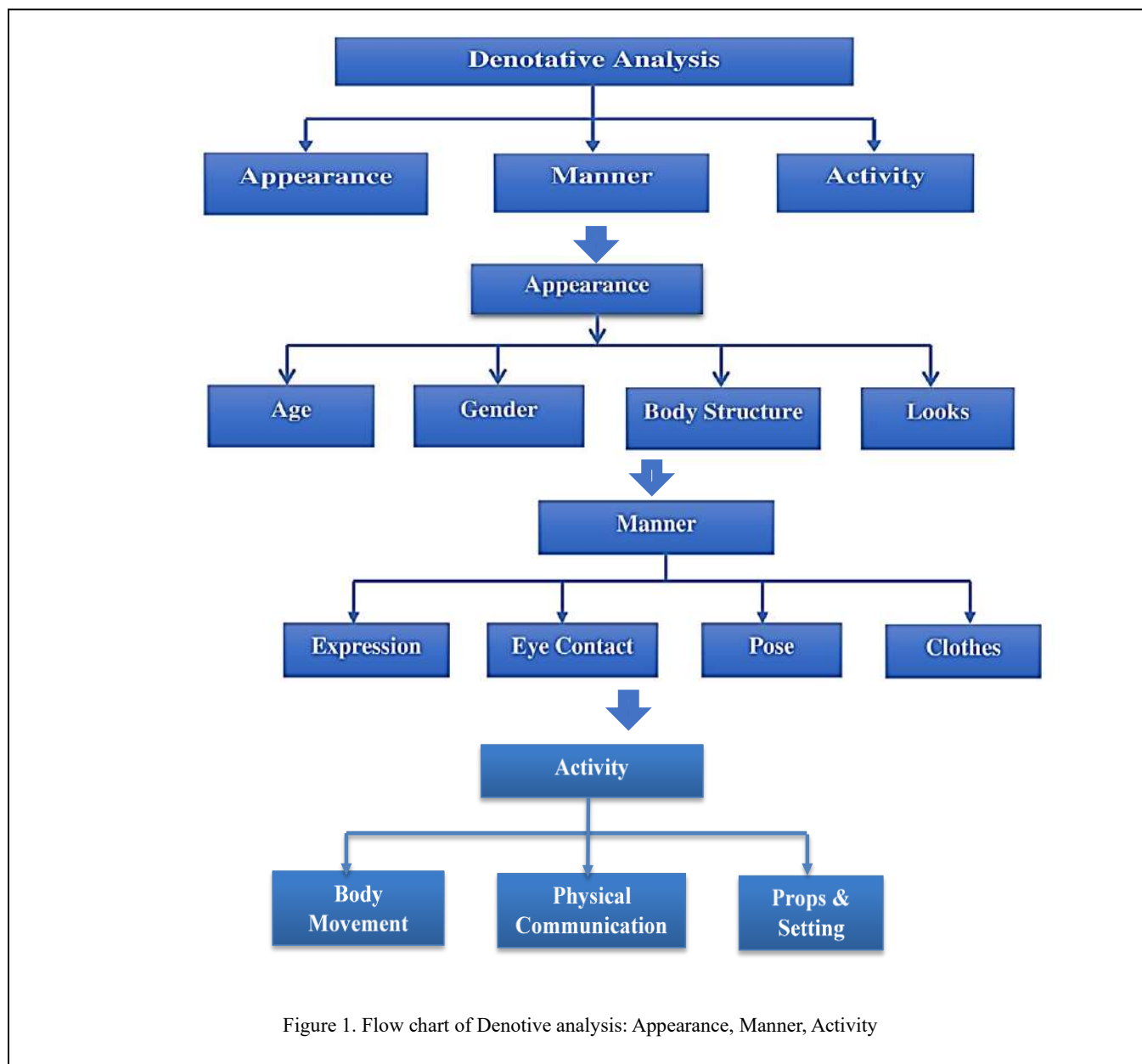


Figure 1. Flow chart of Denotative analysis: Appearance, Manner, Activity

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Shan Foods Commercial #HamSabNeBanaya

Denotative Analysis: The commercial begins with a shot as shown in Figure. 2, establishing a well-furnished kitchen where a lady (housewife) suited in a traditional red dress is placing some dishes on the kitchen shelf by delivering a dialogue that “Be ready on time”. Then another shot begins where a man (husband) with a moustache is sitting on a couch with his teenage children (boy and girl). All of them are sitting in front of a smart LED in a TV lounge where the father is displaying some pictures by connecting his phone with an LED. The daughter seems to use an iPad while sitting with his father on the couch. They are enjoying their picnic memories and making fun of the teenage boy in his funny picnic pictures. The wife also enjoys their company while cutting some tomatoes on the kitchen shelf. Then another shot begins where he plays a mini vlog video in which he is taunting his wife in a funny way that how busy she is on their anniversary too for making food. Then suddenly, he displays some other family gathering pictures on LED and gives wondering expressions during the scrolling of pictures. during this scenario, the wife says that “I am coming back soon just be ready” and leaves the home door while carrying a shoulder bag.



Figure 2. Shan Foods Commercial

Then a shot begins where he finds that his wife is not present in their family pictures and asks his daughter where your mother was on that day. Then a side angle shot begins where the daughter responds to his father that her mother would be busy in the kitchen or doing something else on that day. This response makes him silent for an instant while searching for his wife in those family pictures. Then he stands up and goes to the kitchen where he finds two boxes of Shan spices and picks up a box of ‘Bombay Biryani’ Spices and takes the initiative to cook Biryani by arranging all the ingredients on the kitchen shelf. Both of his children watch his father cook some food while standing in the outside corner of the kitchen. After that, they join their father in the kitchen and help him cook the food. In the next shot, the mother (housewife) enters the home carrying two new hanger dresses packed in transparent cover bags. She finds her husband and children cooking food in the kitchen. She gets astonished and asks them with a wondering expression what are they doing in the kitchen. Does anything happen today? Then in the next shot, the husband comes up and makes her realize how important she is to all of them. Each day makes sense just because of her presence in the home. He makes her realize that she always prioritized her family’s happiness first and they never appreciated and acknowledged her kindness. He makes her realize that those picnic pictures help us to understand your daily efforts and sacrifices for the family. After that, a close-up shot begins in which she gets emotional with a smiling face and tears in her eyes. After this shot, a background song begins to play continuing till other coming shots while praising her efforts. Both of the children hug their mother and the father gets a little bit emotional with a satisfying smiley face.

After that, the next scene starts where all the other family members are gathered at the dining table. Both teenage children (boy & girl) serve them ‘Biryani’ and ‘Korma’ which their father cooks in the kitchen. All family members happily enjoy their meal on the dining table and then the wife picks up an empty dish to fill it again. Her husband stops her and picks up the dish and stands up from the dining table to make her realize that he will go to the kitchen and fill the dish again to serve the food. The commercial ends with a close-up shot of her smiling face continued with the brand logo and tagline of Shan Foods with a background voice over praising it.

Connotative Analysis:

The commercial contains four major characters in all, including a middle age man as a husband & father, teenage children (boy & girl), and a middle age lady as a wife & mother. The background setting of this commercial is shot in a flourished house where a family of four members is shown as an upper-middle-class of society. The commercial includes other characters as well who are considered as join family members sitting at the dining table. The background setting appears natural since it depicts a household furniture arrangement and other things that exist in the domestic sphere.

The Shan Foods commercial, titled #HamSabNeBanaya, showcases the global success of the brand's spice mixes, challenging the traditional gender norms prevalent in Pakistani society. Through its semiotics, the ad communicates a powerful message about breaking away from conventional gender narratives and promoting a more inclusive and progressive understanding of gender identity in our culture. It has portrayed a shift from the traditional roles assigned to men and women instead of depicting women solely as homemakers or caregivers, the commercial has highlighted a wife’s missing presence in every celebration due to fulfilling domestic and family responsibilities. Similarly, a husband or father is not confined to traditional roles of dominance and authority, but instead, he is depicted in supportive and nurturing roles, breaking away from the typical patriarchal stereotypes.

Table 1. Shan Foods Commercial #HamSabNeBanaya

Signifier	Signified
Shan Spice Boxes	A food-related product used for cooking different dishes
Smart LED TV, Mobile Phone	Luxury, Digital technology
Family Pictures	Gathering, Strong Bonding, Memories
Food Dishes (Biryani & korma)	National Dish, Cultural Identity
Smiling while seeing each other	Happy Couple, Husband/Wife Understanding
House	Peace, Luxury, Upper middle class of society
Woman with tearful eyes	Emotional, Caring about her family

By portraying women in positions of power and showcasing men in non-traditional roles, the ad challenges the audience to reconsider their preconceived notions of gender roles and encourages a more open-minded and accepting perspective. Moreover, the use of the hashtag #HamSabNeBanaya reinforces the idea of collective responsibility and inclusivity. It suggests that the transformation of gender norms is a shared effort by society as a whole, emphasizing the importance of breaking free from restrictive gender stereotypes, embracing individuality and diversity. Overall ad has tried to intricate

relationship between Islamic foundation of women’s respect and consumer behavior in society (Shah, et al., 2022) to foster brand loyalty, and enhance consumer engagement.

Overall, Shan Foods' #HamSabNeBanaya commercial is not just about selling spice mixes; it is a powerful statement promoting gender equality and challenging traditional gender narratives in Pakistan as discussed in Table.1.

Tapal Danedar | Tum, Mein Aur Aik Cup Chai
Denotative Analysis.

This commercial begins with a mirror shot in which an office space is shown where a young woman is sitting on a chair and working on her laptop. She is wearing a Pakistani traditional dress and a dupatta on her shoulders with open hair. During typing on a laptop, she receives a phone call from her husband. She informs him that her boss has given her a lot of work and she will be late tonight and apologizes to him for being late. He says alright to her and then she cuts off the phone call. After this, a couple of different shots are displayed in which the tea kettle begins to whistle and the husband is shown making tea. He picks up two branded cups of Tapal Danedar and fills them with tea.

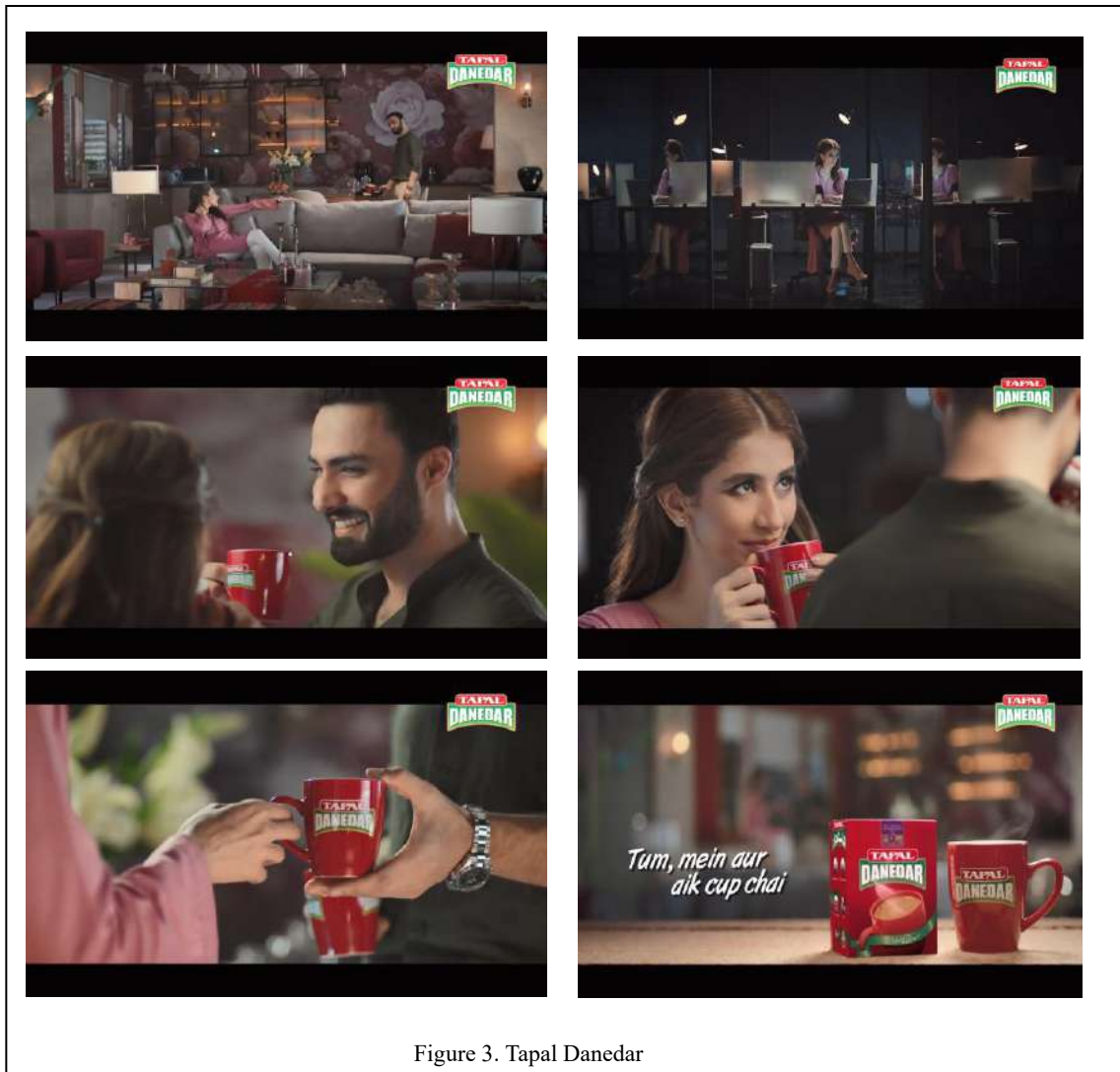


Figure 3. Tapal Danedar

Meanwhile, the house door gets opened and the wife silently enters the home. She closes the door and places her red shoulder bag on the side table next to the door. She seems to be tired and sits on the couch. Meanwhile, the husband asks her about the tea, and then she surprisingly gets up from the couch after listening to her husband’s voice. She gets wondered when seeing her husband waiting for her. Then the husband offers her a cup of tea and admires her daily routine efforts which she does for him. He makes his wife comfortable by giving her a cup of tea and both of them begin to smile while looking at each

other. The commercial ends with a shot displaying branded cup and tea packet of ‘Tapal Danedar’ continuing with its brand tagline with a background blur shot featuring both husband and wife enjoying tea together followed by a male voice-over praising it. This commercial has two characters bound in a relationship of husband and wife. The frequency of the wife’s character occurrence is greater than the husband’s character in this commercial. Both of their age ranges from 25 to 30 years old. The overall appearance of both characters symbolizes that they belong to the upper middle class of society. The background setting of the house is looking natural with well-furnished and modern couches placed in the lounge which ultimately depicts the domestic sphere of an upper-middle-class family as manifested in Figure.3.

Connotative Analysis.

The Tapal Danedar commercial, titled "Tum, Mein Aur Aik Cup Chai," presents a refreshing perspective on gender roles, challenging traditional narratives and promoting a more progressive gender identity in Pakistan. Through its portrayal of women managing household finances and maintaining strong bonds with their spouses, the ad encourages a reverse from the stereotypical gender norms pervasive in society.

The commercial's semiotics plays a crucial role in challenging traditional gender narratives, as exhibited in Table.2. It showcases woman, as a competent and capable individual who can handle budgetary responsibilities and active participation in decision-making within the household that is mostly secured by the husband of a household. Additionally, the ad emphasizes the importance of strong relationships between spouses, suggesting that the sharing of responsibilities and mutual support are essential components of a successful partnership. By showcasing a more balanced and equal partnership (Danish & Riaz, 2022), the ad sends a powerful message about the evolving gender dynamics in modern Pakistani society.

Table 2. Tapal Danedar

Signifier	Signified
Laptop	A gadget used in the office
Mobile phone	A source of connection
Cups of Tea	Husband’s affection toward his wife
Tapal Danedar	Brand name
The couple smiling while looking at each other	The happy couple, Strong love relation
House	Luxury, Peace, Upper middle class
Wife’s facial expressions	Emotional attachment, Care for Husband
Brand tagline “Tum, Mein Aur Aik Cup Chai”	Strong Bonding & understanding between the couple

Pampers Pants TVC # DadsCanChange

Denotative Analysis:

The commercial begins with mid-close-up shots of a man (the father) carrying a baby boy in his arms and playing with him. Then, in the next shot, a woman (the wife) appears on the screen and calls his husband to eat a meal on the table. He handover the baby boy to his wife and starts to take the meal from the dish placed on the table. The wife deeply feels this kind of behavior of her husband. Then the setting gets changed and the night scene begins in which the husband is shown playing with his son while sitting on a couch. Whereas her wife is shown as busy making mathematical graphs on a board paper. The husband makes hugs his son and notices that the son wants to sleep. Then he calls his wife and handovers the baby again to her mother so that he can sleep easily. The wife again notices this act of her husband that is not looking after their son properly.

Then the setting gets changed and a day scene begins in which the husband is shown working on his laptop sitting on the room floor. The son is shown standing in his baby swing. Meanwhile, the wife carrying a shoulder bag leaves the home for some sort of work and tells her husband to look after the baby in her absence. As she leaves the home, the son begins to cry and becomes uncomfortable. The father stands up and uses all kinds of tactics to make his son keep quiet but all in vain. He holds up the baby and puts the feeder in his mouth, showing some toys but he does not stop crying. The father feels helpless until he sees a packet of Pampers lying there in the cupboard. He comes up with the idea that perhaps the baby needs to change his diaper. Then he picks up the Pampers packet and starts to change the baby’s diaper gently with a smiling face. Then he again holds up his baby and plays with him. Then a series of different shots begin to display in which the baby seems comfortable playing and laughing with his father while enjoying his company. A piece of background music continues to play praising the caring behavior of the father. Meanwhile, the door opens and the wife gets to enter the home.

She looks satisfied while seeing that the baby is sleeping in his father’s arms comfortably. Then the father confesses about understanding and realizing his responsibilities being a father. He makes her wife understand that he can change himself for the happiness of the baby. Then the couple smiles while looking at each other and looks at their baby sleeping peacefully

in the swing. And then the commercial ends with the appearance of the brand’s campaign ‘#DadsCanChange’ and pampers pants brand logo as Figure. 4 has expressed.

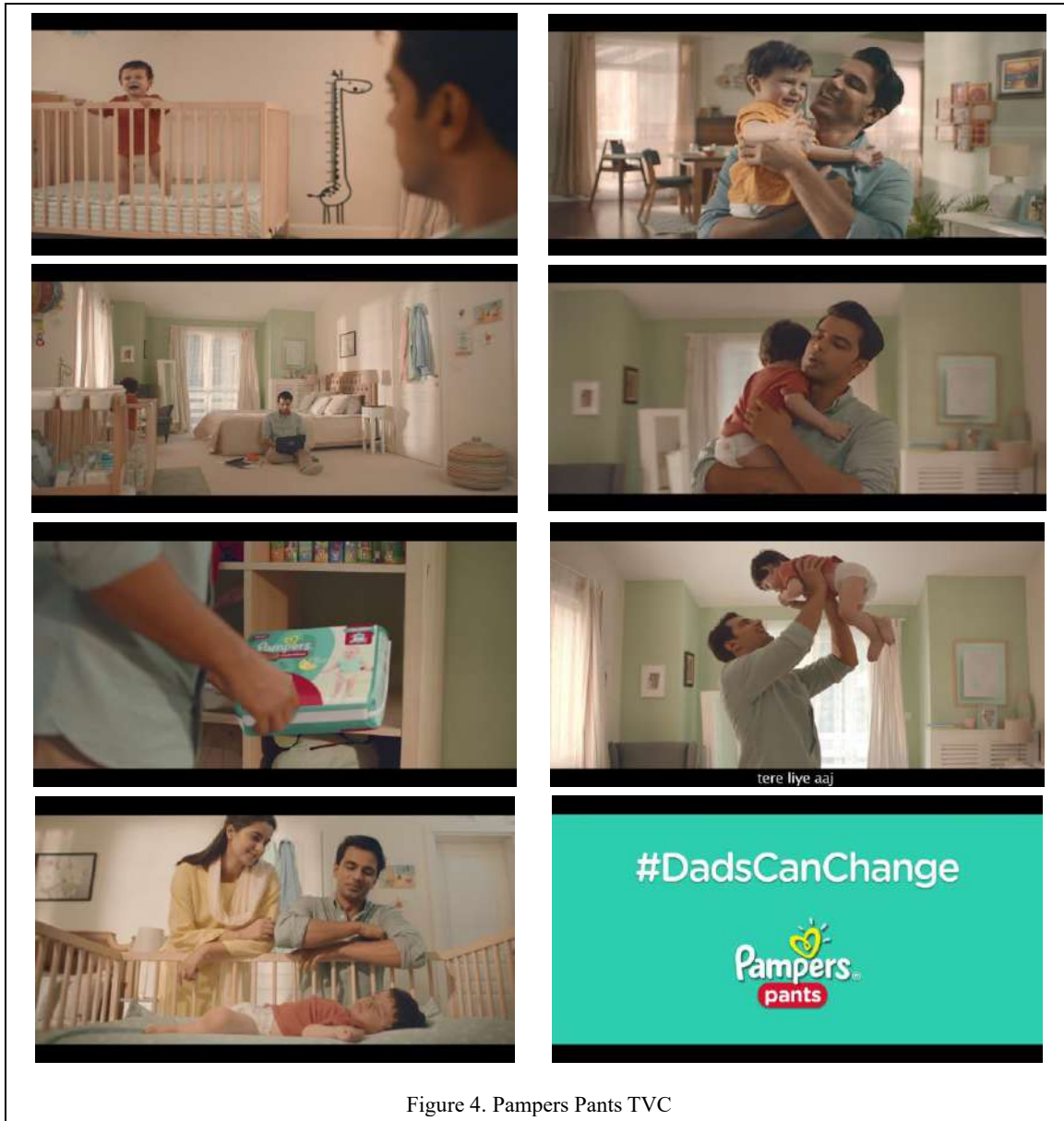


Figure 4. Pampers Pants TVC

This commercial has three characters including a husband, a wife, and their baby boy. The strong bonding between husband and wife is the main soul of this television commercial. The couple’s age ranges from 30 to 35 while the baby’s age may range from 1 to 1.5 years. The family lives in an average house with a modernized look having white curtains and green paint on the walls. The overall setting of the house looks artificial. They seem like a hardworking and enthusiastic couple. The husband is wearing formal dress pants with a plain shirt while the wife is wearing a traditional Pakistani dress.

Connotative Analysis:

The Pampers Pants TVC #DadsCanChange challenges traditional gender norms by portraying a modern and progressive approach to parenting. In this commercial, the brand showcases both the husband and wife actively involved in taking care of their baby son, emphasizing that childcare is a shared responsibility and not solely the domain of mothers. The ad's semiotics, through its compelling visual storytelling and character dynamics (Table.3), breaks away from conventional portrayals of mothers as the primary caregivers and fathers as distant figures in a child's life. Instead, it presents a more inclusive and equal partnership in parenting, where both are depicted as nurturing and attentive to their baby's needs.

By promoting an empowered and involved father figure, the commercial sends a powerful message that they can and should play an equal role in raising their children. It challenges societal expectations and encourages viewers to reconsider their preconceived notions of parenting roles, fostering a more balanced and equitable understanding of childcare. Moreover, in essence, the Pampers Pants TVC #DadsCanChange not only promotes the brand but also contributes to a broader social dialogue on redefining gender roles in parenting (Rasheed et al., 2023).

Through its progressive portrayal of shared responsibility in childcare, the ad advocates for a more inclusive and modern perspective, where both mothers and fathers can actively participate in their children's upbringing, fostering a stronger and more connected family dynamic.

Table 3. Pampers Pants TVC

Signifier	Signified
Wife's facial expressions	Confused, unsatisfied, lonely
Graph paper on the board table	Wife's enthusiasm, education, future dreams
Laptop	A gadget used to perform tasks
Baby crib/Toys	A safe place to play and stand comfortably
The couple peacefully looks at the baby	Love and care for the baby
Brand's campaign tagline "DadsCanChange"	Ideological message/ father's care

Shoop | Trust tou must hai



Figure 5. Shoop

Denotative Analysis:

The commercial begins with an interior scene of a kitchen in which a young girl picks a pair of Shoop noodles packet from the kitchen’s cabin. She seems nice and in a good mood spending some time in the kitchen with her mother. Then another shot displays in which the mother looks worried while carrying out a list of paper pointing out with a lead pencil. The girl asks her mother about the reason for being worried. Then the mother explains to her the reason that a lot of grocery items to buy from the market but her father has still not come back home. Then the girl gently smiles and puts the Shoop noodles packets on the kitchen shelf. She asks her mother to give her the grocery list and tells her mother that I go to the market and purchase all the things.

The mother seems to wonder and asks her how can she go to the market and buy the grocery. Then the girl shows her bike’s key without saying anything and in the next shot she tells her mother to make Shoop noodles and that she will be back soon from the market. Her mother smiles while looking at her daughter. Then an outdoor scene is displayed in which she wearing a red helmet and sits on her black colored bike excitedly. She starts her bike and goes out of the scene with a smiling face. Then after this scene, a series of multiple cinematic shots of the entire process of making Shoop noodles appear while using different vegetables in it. Then the commercial ends with a final shot of both daughter and mother eating Shoop noodles in white-colored bowls while sitting on the chairs. They smile and enjoy its unique taste and flavor. The male voice-over continues to play as background music while following the brand’s oral slogan “*Trust tou must hai*”. The age of the young girl character as daughter ranges from 20-25 whereas the middle-aged woman as mother ranges from 35 to 40 years. Both the daughter and mother live in an upper-middle-class house with a well-furnished kitchen and pink flowers displayed in the background. They are wearing traditional pink colored dresses portraying slightly modernize upper middle-class looks. Both of them seem like sisters and friends because of the strong bonding in their relationship. The overall setting of the house looks peaceful and relaxing as revealed in Figure.5.

Connotative Analysis: The Shoop TV commercial "Trust tou must hai" confronts traditional gender stereotypes by portraying a modern and empowering image of women (Nasir (2022)). In this ad, a young girl and her mother are shown independently and confidently carrying out their daily activities without the presence or reliance on the male gender. This portrayal sends an ideological message that women can be self-reliant and capable of managing their lives on their terms. The ad's semiotics, are indicated in Table.4, effectively showcases women as strong and independent individuals, deserting the conventional portrayal of women being dependent on men for various aspects of life. By highlighting the mother-daughter duo's self-sufficiency (Ahmad, et al. 2023), the commercial challenges societal expectations and fosters a new identity for both male and female genders, promoting the idea of equal and independent roles for all. Overall, the Shoop TV commercial exemplifies the brand's message of trust in its product while simultaneously advocating for a more empowering portrayal of women in society.

Table 4 Shoop

Signifier	Signified
Shoop Noodles	Product
Grocery’s list paper	Dependent, fragile, helpless
Bike key	Independent, she can go outside of the home alone
Red helmet	Safety measures, responsible citizen
Black motorbike	Equality with male gender
Pink flowers in the kitchen	Femininity, gentleness
Brand’s tagline “Trust tou must hai”	Faith, Trusting in the individual’s abilities

Lemon Max Long Bar #ChamChamaCham

Denotative Analysis:

The commercial begins with an establishing shot of a kitchen where the young woman (wife) is standing in front of a heap of utensils. The husband makes his entry from the side corner and joins his wife in the kitchen while singing a song praising her entrance into his life. But she makes him realize that we are not alone here by making a gesture through her elbow. Her mother-in-law was also present there in the kitchen near the fridge noticing their comic actions. Then to cover this act in front of his mother, he picks up the lemon max long bar soap and begins to portray like that I was talking about this product, not about his wife.

Then he starts to wash utensils using lemon max soap in front of his mother. The wife sings that it has the power of thousands of lemons and then an animation effect of circulating lemons appears which cleans all the utensils present there. Then a shot of the calendar displays in which it is shown that the lemon max long bar is enough for the entire month. Then she picks up a cleaned dish in which the clear reflection of the couple can easily be seen. After that, the mother-in-law displays on the screen praising the product and sings that she also trusts in the product. Then all of them appear in the reflection of a cleaned

utensil and the mother-in-law hugs both of them. At the end of the commercial, the brand tagline “One Month, One Bar” appears on the screen with circulating lemons continuing with the background song praising the product as depicted in Figure. 6.

The main characters, husband and wife represent the youth generation while the old age mother-in-law is the representative of the elder generation in this commercial. They belong to a modern family with a liberal school of thought. Both of the female characters are portraying the socio-cultural values of this era. Despite different age groups, both are on the same page to promote gender equality in this commercial. The characters look fresh and charming and their body language seems positive overall. The setting of the house is well-structured and quite lavish. This portrayal of gender constructs a new identity for males and females in this socio-cultural context of Pakistan.



Figure 6. Lemon Max Long Bar

Connotative Analysis:

The ad's semiotics effectively showcases women as strong and independent individuals, desisting the conventional portrayal of women being dependent on men for various aspects of life. By depicting the mother-daughter duo's self-sufficiency, the commercial challenges societal expectations and fosters a new identity for both male and female genders, promoting the idea of equal and independent roles for all. Overall, the Shoop TV commercial exemplifies the brand's message of trust in its product while simultaneously advocating for a more empowering portrayal of women in society. The Lemon Max Long Bar #ChamChamaCham commercial challenges traditional gender roles by presenting a progressive portrayal of a husband helping his wife with household chores. In a society dominated by chauvinist norms, the ad sends an ideological message that men should actively participate in domestic affairs and appreciate their wives' contributions to the household.

Through its semiotics, the commercial defies the conventional gender norms where women are often burdened with household responsibilities while men are expected to be distant from such tasks (Table. 5). The ad promotes the notion of equality and shared responsibilities by showcasing the husband as a supportive and hands-on partner in the kitchen. The

presence of the elderly mother-in-law further highlights the generational shift in perceptions of gender roles that breaking away traditional gender norms. Not only acceptable but also appreciated by older generations, signaling a societal progression towards a more inclusive and equitable understanding of gender dynamics (Mahmood et al., 2022). Overall, the Lemon Max Long Bar #ChamChamaCham commercial not only promotes the product but also contributes to a broader social conversation on redefining gender roles in Pakistan.

Table 5. Lemon Max Long Bar

Signifier	Signified
Oily utensils lying in the kitchen	Traditional responsibility of the wife
Lemon max long-bar soap	Product
The bunch of lemons	Freshness, the resemblance with fresh faces of actors
Calendar turning over dates	Wife’s daily routine to wash utensils, enough for one month
The reflection of the couple in cleaned utensils	Their relationship is as clean and clear as the dishes

Lifebuoy Shampoo #BetiParhaoMazbootBanao
Denotative Analysis:

The commercial begins with an establishing shot of a school classroom where an adolescent girl appears in front of the entire class to recite a poem for practicing purposes. As she has to recite this poem in her school on the annual talent day.

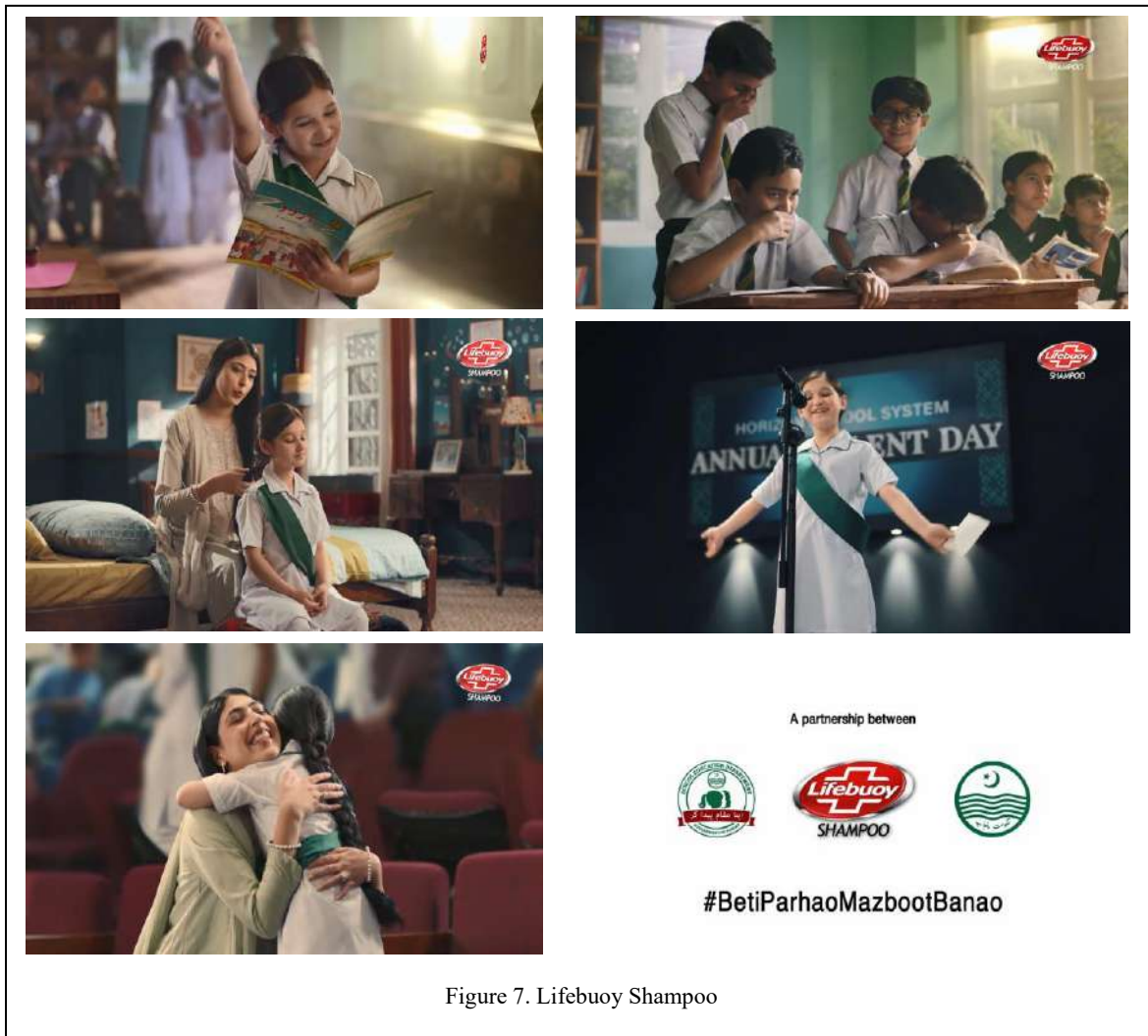


Figure 7. Lifebuoy Shampoo

As she begins to recite the poem excitedly, the boys in the class make fun of her because the poem is male-centric portraying the ambitions of a little boy who wants to achieve big goals in his life. She gets disheartened and sits in her class. Then, the scene gets changed and another shot displays where she seems disappointed and silently comes back home walking toward her mother. Her mother asks her about her disappointment then she explains to her mother that everyone made fun of her in the class as this is a male-centric poem and now she will not recite this poem on the annual talent day. After that, a background voiceover of her mother begins to play and she seems to write a new poem for her daughter late at night. The next morning, the daughter wakes up and gets ready to go to school. Her mother settles her hair and motivates her that she is as strong as her hair and just doesn't worry. After that, another scene begins in an auditorium hall where the mother gives her daughter a new poem.

When she opens the poem in front of the entire audience, she seems happy and looks at her mother sitting in the audience with a gentle smile on her face. Then she starts to recite the new poem given by her mother which is the same poem but with little changes in it. Her mother changes it to a female-centric poem to make her daughter encouraged and motivated. Now her daughter recites the poem which portrays that 'I'm a little girl but will do things bigger and I can fly in the air and climb mountains as well.' Then the next shot displays where the audience claps and appreciates her poem while her mother stands up from her seat and hugs her daughter. Both of them become extremely happy. After that shot, another scene displays in which Shahzad Roy who is a social activist appears on the screen. He talks about the Lifebuoy shampoo's mission of empowering girls and encouraging them to have bigger dreams by providing them with education in Pakistan. Then, at the end of the commercial, his background voice-over plays with the brand tagline #BetiParhaoMazbootBanao followed by its brand logo in it. This commercial has shown in the figure. 7 does smash the conventional narrative about the female gender of accepting male identity as her own gender identity. In this way, this television commercial constructs a new female gender identity by breaking the traditional gender narratives.

Connotative Analysis:

The Lifebuoy Shampoo #BetiParhaoMazbootBanao commercial presents a compelling portrayal of female empowerment in a patriarchal society. Through the depiction of an adolescent girl and her mother, the ad challenges the male-centric nature of the education system, where even the curriculum's poems emphasize male perspectives. It highlights the significance of a girl's individual identity and the need to empower females in a male-dominated society. The commercial's semiotics effectively captures the struggles faced by girls in a society that often undermines their worth and suppresses their voices as mentioned in Table.6. The ad reinforces the message that educating girls is essential for their empowerment and strengthening their position in society by showcasing the mother's support for her daughter's education (Correa, 2022).

In a male-dominated culture, where gender biases persist even in educational content, this commercial advocates for a curriculum that values and represents the experiences and perspectives of girls, fostering a more inclusive learning environment. Through its narrative, the ad questions societal norms that limit female potential and reaffirms the idea that investing in girls' education leads to a stronger and more empowered society. By empowering girls with education, the commercial recommends a future where females can break free from traditional roles and contribute significantly to all aspects of life, from academia to leadership roles.

Table 6. Lifebuoy Shampoo

Signifier	Signified
Male-centric poem read by the girl	Patriarchal male-dominated ideology
The class boys making fun of the girl	Dominance of male gender over female
The girl's hairs	Strong, confident
Mother and daughter hug each other	Emotional attachment, care, love
The brand's tagline #BetiParhaoMazbootBanao	Empowerment, encouraging to have big dreams

National Recipe Mixes - Nayi Soch Ke Naye Zaiqe

Denotative Analysis:

The commercial portrayed in Figure.8, begins with an establishing shot of a well-furnished kitchen where a young lady (wife) looks busy cooking Shami kababs in the kitchen while following online recipes on her mobile phone. Her husband is also in the kitchen helping her make delicious food. Her husband picks up a red chili and puts it on his mustache. She finds this funny and instantly clicks his picture. Then he picks up her phone and tries to delete that picture. Both of them romantically cook the food while doing some funny things in the kitchen. After this, the next scene displays a reflection shot of the second couple on the screen. They are also present in the kitchen where the husband ties an apron and joins his wife in the kitchen. She is cooking food using national korma spices in it. He helps his wife arrange items on the kitchen shelf. During helping his

wife, he mistakenly touches the hot stove. Then the wife shows some care towards him and both of them seem to smile in the scene.

After that, another scene begins in which a third couple of this commercial displays. In this scene, the husband flares the stove and helps in putting and arranging the recipe items on the kitchen shelf. Both of them cook Biryani by using the national biryani recipe mix. After that, she feeds her husband with her hands to show her love and attachment to her husband. And then, a juxtaposition of three shots appears in which three of the couples get displayed one by one on the screen. They seem to spend some quality time together eating food together and expressing their love to each other. The entire commercial has a continuity of background music praising the national recipe mixes. At the end of the commercial, the brand's tagline "Nayi Soch Ke Naye Zaiqe" displays on the screen depicting the brand's ideological message in it. The first two couples featured in the commercial belong to the upper-middle-class whereas the last couple seems like a middle-class family living with their two children. The setting of their house is quite domestic and peaceful. The first two couples are wearing modernize dresses while the last couple is wearing traditional dresses.

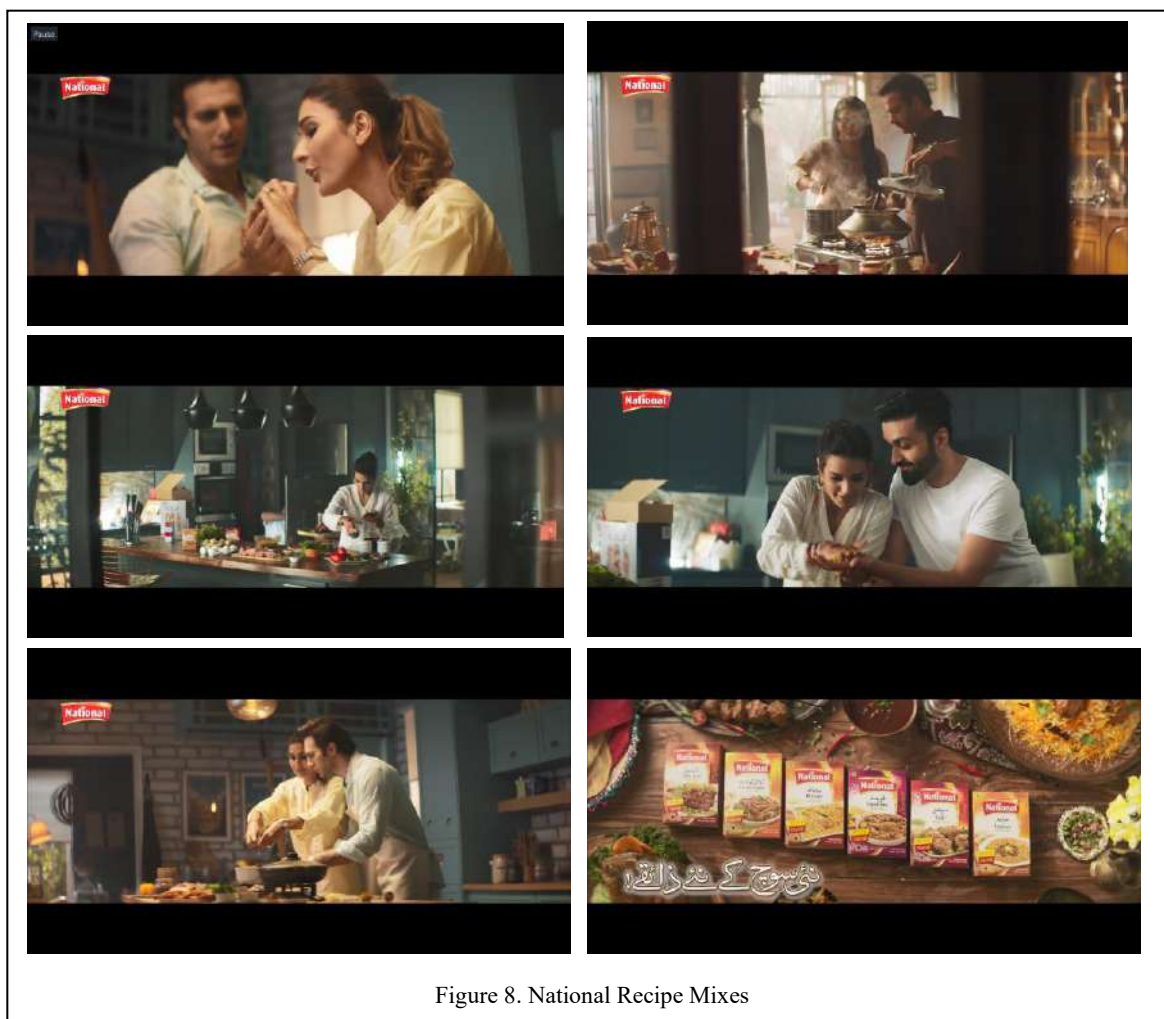


Figure 8. National Recipe Mixes

Connotative Analysis:

The television commercial for National Recipe Mixes - Nayi Soch Ke Naye Zaiqe, produced by the Pakistani multinational food products company, challenges deeply ingrained traditional gender roles assigned to men and women in the socio-cultural context of Pakistan. In this society, men are commonly idealized as rough and tough, expected to suppress emotional attachments towards their spouses. However, this commercial actively subverts these norms by portraying men as sensitive, loving, and caring husbands, thus reconstructing their gender identity and presenting a more progressive and nuanced representation of masculinity (Wang & Feng, 2023). Through its portrayal of three different couples, the ad advocates for a transformative shift in societal perceptions of gender roles, encouraging a broader discourse on gender equality and redefining masculinity within the Pakistani context as discussed in Table. 7.

Table 7. National Recipe Mixes

Signifier	Signified
National recipe mixes	Product of national foods
Facial expressions of the couples	Love, helping, and showing affection to each other
Different food dishes	A source of getting couples close, strong bonding
The brand's tagline "Nayi Soch Ke Naye Zaiqe"	Changes the stereotypical perception of men

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study shed light on the portrayal of gender roles in Pakistani television commercials, revealing a departure from conventional stereotypes. Women are depicted as passionate, enthusiastic, and ambitious individuals, breaking free from the traditional confines of household responsibilities. This challenges narrow-minded norms, brings out women's agency and equal standing in society. Similarly, men are portrayed as sensitive, caring, and supportive characters, challenging the dominant narrative of male authority and hegemony. The commercials analyzed in this research disrupt traditional gender structures and serve as a platform for promoting fusion of gender identity and global representation in normative structure (Buhamdi, et al., 2023). Emphatically, these alternative narratives to influence societal ideologies surrounding gender can foster a path towards greater inclusivity and equity. Overall, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how media representations can challenge and reshape traditional gender norms within the Pakistani context.

CREDIT AUTHOR STATEMENT

Maliha Ameen: Supervision, Conceptualization, Writing- Reviewing and Editing. **Fahad Mustafa:** Methodology, Data Analysis, Writing- Original draft preparation.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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