

Construction of Feminine Identity and Objectification: A Case Study of Advertisements in Pakistani Entertainment Channels

Abstract

The aim of the study is to find out how feminine identity is constructed in Pakistani Television advertisements; to find the roles portrayed by women in different product categories in the advertisements and to analyze advertisement categories that mostly objectify women. The researcher has used content analysis as a research technique for this purpose. Purposive sampling technique has been used to collect samples for this study. Primetime advertisements (8pm-9pm) collected from 3 private television channels i.e. ARY Digital, GEO entertainment and HUM TV have been analyzed on the basis of their popularity among people in Pakistan. The variables of objectification theory of Roberts and Fredrickson (1997) and the stereotypical feminine traits of Himashree Patowary (2014) were observed in advertisements. Results revealed that advertisements on-air in channels contribute a lot in the objectification of women as they were mostly found exposing their body either by tight fitting clothes or revealing clothes. Moreover, their physical beauty, body language, emotional nature and nurturing roles were also found prevalent in constructing feminine identity in different categories of advertisements. It was also concluded that most objectified advertisements were prevalent in the category of 'Soaps/ Shampoo/ Toothpaste/ Cosmetics/ Medicines', followed by 'Food and Beverages' category.

Keywords: *Women, identity construction, portrayal, objectification, television advertisements.*

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INTRODUCTION

Advertisements and TV commercials are considered as one of the most powerful means of social communication. The advertisement campaigns and TV commercials, in recent technologically advanced business environments, are important tools used by the marketers or organizations in order to promote and market their goods, services or ideas to the prospective customers. According to Kotler and Keller (2008), advertising is any paid form of non-personal presentation and promotion of ideas, goods or services by an identified sponsor. Worldwide, women are portrayed and objectified in TV commercials. Female models are often seen in advertisements, dressed up sensually in order to attract and allure more customers towards the products and services offered by the companies. As Barber (2011) said that television commercials use images (bodies) of women as a selling pitch for their intended audience. Construction of feminine identity in advertisements as a marketing approach, such as reduction to body parts, is mostly being used in Pakistani media industry like the rest of the world. It is a critical issue in the public debate. The female models are repeatedly found in advertisements and posters dressed up to promote specific merchandise for the sake of appealing customers even when they do not have anything to do with the actual product. This depiction of women in commercials/advertisements is adversely affecting the image of women in the public eye as a whole. This also degrades them and is hurtful to their dignity.

Objectives of the study

The research objectives are as under:

- To identify the construction of feminine identity in Pakistani television advertisements.
- To find out the roles portrayed by women in different product categories in the advertisements.
- To analyze advertisement product categories that objectify women.

Research Questions

The following research questions have been formulated in accordance with the research objectives:

1. How do television advertisements in Pakistan construct feminine identity?
2. What are the roles portrayed by women in different product categories in the advertisements?
3. Which advertisement categories objectify the women?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Objectification of Women in Commercials

Objectification of women, especially in the television advertisements has been a practice for many years. Women's rights activists have criticized the advertisements that objectify females. Television commercials utilize images of women's bodies to sell products to the consumers. They argue that TV advertisements are not offering items, but are actually selling sex, and due to this they are making women objects of desire and sex instead of individuals with sentiments (Barber 2011; Berberick, 2010; Lewis, 2002). Along with constructing beauty ideals, television commercials also make them socially accepted. Women activists have analyzed female representation in the television commercials and, according to them, advertisements usually portray a narrow and unachievable standard of beauty and associate it with worth based on sex appeal (Szymanski et al., 2011). Barber (2011) states that instead of portraying the female as women, television commercials depict them as an object of desire.

The unnecessary objectification of women has lowered the status of women to an object, or bodies to attract and satisfy the viewers, particularly males (Szymanski et al., 2011). Whenever these objectified messages are conveyed to young girls and women, they become more conscious of the observable body traits rather than concentrating on non-recognizable body traits like internal body health (Ullah & Khan, 2011; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Moradi & Huang, 2008). Numerous mental research studies have demonstrated that there are enormous negative ramifications of regular self-surveillance and self-objectification (McKinley & Hyde, 1996; Fredrickson et al., 1997; Gettman & Roberts, 2004; Tiggeman, & Kuring, 2004). Constant objectified portrayal of women has made this phenomenon culturally acceptable. In addition to the direct impacts on self-image and body consciousness, exposure to such advertisements also has sub-conscious effects on shifting the moral and cultural values of a society (Zimmerman & Dahlberg, 2008; Mittal & Lassar, 2000).

The "Ideal" Woman in Advertising

The fashion industry, advertising and marketing mediums have created a new type of woman. This woman has an ideal beautiful skin with no wrinkles, scars or imperfections on face. Her legs are smooth and impossibly long. Her small waist can make a Barbie doll jealous. She has dazzling bright eyes with silky radiant hairs. Her teeth are beyond white. They are very shiny, perfect, straight and relatively unbelievable (Hidayah & Milal, 2016; Sawang, 2010). Monro & Houn (2005) wrote that when females watch the images that are shown by media, they are persuaded to attain an "ideal body shape". They further added that these media depict images that

give rise to the thought that both the body size and shape are flexible. According to Halprin (1995), women, in an attempt to accomplish the unreal standards of idealized beauty, experience pain to modify their physical features. Wolf (1991) claimed that these depicted beauty images set unachievable standards for females. She further added by saying that this idealized beauty is not real. In a patriarchal society like Pakistan, women are stereotypically portrayed in advertisements. Through a discourse analysis, Shaikh, Bughio, & Kadri (2015) compared the portrayal of men and women in terms of their social roles. They found that women are represented as being fragile, weak, submissive, caregivers and home-makers, in comparison with the males who are mostly represented as strong, dominant, and the bread-earners for the household.

The current research has focused on the portrayal of women in advertising content by looking at how television advertisements in Pakistan construct feminine identity and also, how they idealize particular images of them. Two theories have been adopted in this research.

The first one is the Objectification theory proposed by Barbara Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts in 1997 that provides an essential structure in order to understand, deconstruct and interpret TV advertisements within Pakistan's socio-cultural context. This theory aids in highlighting the present trend in television advertisements of Pakistan that objectifies the female body sexually and relates their value with their body (Szymanski et al 2011). It also acts as a structure in order to provide understanding about how women and girls are exposed to mental health risks due to the sexual objectification. The objectification theory claims that the sexual objectification is linked to anxiety, shame and familiarity with one's internal body.

The other theory includes the stereotypical feminine traits of Himashree Patowary (2014) which include being physically weak, emotional, and dependent as well as being nurturing/helpful etc. Kilbourne (2017) notified that societies have a patriarchal background, and simply sexualize women because advertisers realize that men will react emphatically having extremely appealing ladies in their advertisements. It is not startling that ladies have been sexualized in light of the fact that there are men at the highest point of the chain of command of advertising agencies. In any case, it is extremely disturbing, on the grounds that it shouldn't need to rely upon the sexualization of a gender to sell a product or service, the item ought to have the capacity to stand out.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Content analysis was adopted as a research technique for this purpose. Content analysis is a broadly used qualitative investigation technique. Being a single method, present applications of content analysis have expressed three different approaches: conventional, directed, or summative. All three methods are used to make sense from the content of text data and, follow to the naturalistic pattern. The real contrasts among the methodologies are coding schemes, origins of codes, and threats to trustworthiness. In conventional content analysis coding classifications are gotten straightforwardly from the content information. A directed approach examination begins with a hypothesis or applicable of research discoveries as direction for starting codes. A summative content examination includes tallying and correlations, for the most part of watchwords or substance, trailed by the elucidation of the hidden setting (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The population for this study includes advertisements broadcast on private television channels in Pakistan. Purposive sampling technique was used to collect sample for this study. The advertisements of 8 weeks on ARY digital, HUM TV, GEO entertainment television channels were analyzed. The 3 channels were chosen on the basis of their popularity among people in Pakistan. And prime time was observed in these channels i.e. 8:00 pm – 9:00 pm. The unit of analysis for the current study is the prime-time advertisements i.e. 8pm-9pm and following 7 categories of advertisements are considered:

- Food and Beverages
- Soaps/Shampoo/Toothpaste/Cosmetics/Medicines
- Automobiles and Related Items
- Household Items
- Shoes and clothes
- Mobile Phones and Electronics
- Others

A coding sheet was made for each category.

Operational Definitions

The 7 variables adopted from Objectification Theory were operationalized as follows:

The variable **Body exposure** was analyzed to check whether women wear tight fitting clothes for body exposure and to sell products. **Body language** was analyzed to check whether women use facial expressions and body actions to attract target audience. **Women's looks** were analyzed to check whether women wear heavy makeup that appeals to the target audience. **Dressing / nudity** was whether women dress themselves to make body parts prominent. **Instrumentality** was whether

women were treated as a tool, **Fungibility** was whether women were treated as interchangeable with other objects of the same type and with the objects of other type, **Denial of Subjectivity** was whether women were treated as something whose experience and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account.

The variables adopted for stereotypical feminine traits from Himashree Patowary (2014) were operationalized as follows:

- 1) **Physically Weak** was whether women were treated as weak in using their body strength.
- 2) **Submissive** was whether women were treated as someone obeying another person without questioning his/her authority.
- 3) **Emotional** women were treated as someone showing her negative and positive emotions.
- 4) **Nurturing/ Helpful** was whether women were treated as someone taking care of or supporting another person.
- 5) **Afraid** was whether women were treated as someone who is afraid.
- 6) **Follower** was whether women were treated as someone supporting or admiring someone else or set of ideas.
- 7) **Asks for or accepts advice** was check whether women were treated as someone who needs help or requesting for help from others.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The following table presents a comprehensive overview of the variables observed in different categories of advertisements that were aired during the primetime i.e. 8 pm – 9 pm.

		Advertisement Product Categories							
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
		Food and Beverages	Soaps/ Shampoo/ Toothpaste/ Cosmetics/ Medicines	Automobiles and Related Items	Household Items	Shoes and Clothes	Mobile Phones and Electronics	Others	TOTAL
Objectification	Body Exposure	51	73	1	24	11	23	1	184
	Body Language	62	89	1	33	8	31	3	227
	Women's Looks	62	85	1	31	8	31	2	220
	Dressing / Nudity	16	57	0	0	8	12	0	93
	Instrument	2	3	0	0	0	0	0	5

	ality								
	Fungibility	4	20	0	0	3	0	0	27
	Denial of Subjectivity	4	3	0	0	0	0	0	7
Roles	Physically Weak	6	0	0	3	0	0	0	9
	Submissive	6	0	0	2	0	0	0	8
	Emotional	62	88	1	33	8	31	5	228
	Nurturing/ Helpful	38	22	1	20	8	4	1	94
	Afraid	16	0	0	3	0	0	0	19
	Follower	4	19	0	0	3	0	2	28
	Ashamed	1	3	0	0	0	0	0	4
	Victim	0	3	0	1	0	3	0	7
	Asks for or Accepts Advice	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	2

A category-wise explanation of the aired advertisements is as follows:

Category 1: Food and Beverages

Ads related to this category include different types of food and drinks i.e. frozen, cooked, snacks, juices, water, fizzy drinks etc.

A total of 62 food and beverages ads were aired in the period of 8 weeks. The variables body language, women's looks and emotions are having values of 62. The values greater than 10 are considered as moderate values for objectification in advertisements. Nurturing, dressing/nudity, afraid are on 38, 16, and 16 respectively. The portrayal of women as submissive and physically weak takes values of 6 that is considered very low. And fungibility, denial of subjectivity, follower takes values of 4. the women as described ashamed only take the value of 1. The data clearly shows that feminine identity is mostly constructed through women's looks, body language, emotions, nurturing nature of females and exposing women's body with tight fitting clothes. The ads that were being observed within this category are big apple, magnum ice cream, knockout chips, coca cola and anytime juice. In the ad of magnum ice cream woman was seen wearing tight fitting dress with nude arms, legs and back.

Category 2: Soaps/Shampoo/Toothpaste/Cosmetics/Medicines

Ads related to this category include different products that are used to enhance physical beauty like soap, shampoos and different creams. This category also includes some antibacterial soap and tablets. A total of 66 soaps/shampoo/toothpaste/cosmetics/medicines ads were aired in the period of 8 weeks in Pakistani top entertainment channels. The variables body language takes the highest value that is 89 that is whether women use facial expressions and body actions to attract target audience in soap / shampoo category. Women's looks are on 85 that is also very close to body language, and body exposure is on 73. These three categories of objectification are higher in shampoo and toothpaste advertisements. Whereas nurturing (22) and follower (19) along with fungibility (20) are moderate values. Instrumentality, denial of subjectivity, victim and ashamed have got the value of 3 and 4 respectively. This data clarifies that variables i.e. body language; women looks, emotional, body exposure and dressing/nudity are dominant in constructing the feminine identity. The ads that were being observed within this category are lux body wash, Veet hair removing cream, skin white beauty soap, Selsun blue shampoo, clear shampoo, Olivia hair color, face fresh beauty cream, fair and lovely BB cream, care vanishing cream, medical dental cream, calcium tablets and Panadol. In the ad of Veet hair removing cream, woman was seen wearing revealing dress with nude legs and arms.

Category 3: Automobiles and Related Items

This category includes ads of the products that are used for transport like a car. Other ads were of fuel required for the car to function properly. A total of 5 automobiles and related items ads were aired in the period of 8 weeks. In top Pakistani channels objectification variables like body exposure, body language, women look, emotional and nurturing are dominant with the value of 1 in the construction of feminine identity. Other variables, such as, dressing/nudity, fungibility, instrumentality, denial of subjectivity and physically weak and submissive etc. were not displayed at all. This shows that female characters used in the advertisements in this category have limited depiction as being objectified, however, they are still portrayed with exposed bodies. The ads that were being observed within this category are PSO and Suzuki car. In PSO ad women were seen emotional and nurturing and taking care of home where as men are showed as look after the outdoor house hold activities e.g. car maintenance.

Category 4: Household Items

This category includes paint for decorating home and objects that are required for washing dishes, clothes, toilet and floor. A total of 33 household items ads were

aired in the period of 8 weeks. It was seen that the maximum value of variables body language and emotional which are 33. Women's looks and body exposure whether women wears tight fitting clothes for body exposure and to sell products takes the value of 31 and 24 respectively. It is evident that within this category of house hold items, physically weak, submissive, victim and accepts advice were also seen marginally. Other variables, such as, dressing/nudity, fungibility, instrumentality, denial of subjectivity and physically weak and submissive etc. are not displayed at all in this category. The ads that were being observed within this category are of the products including: Scotch Brite, lemon max bar, Brite washing powder, Express washing powder, Dettol surface cleaner and Dettol anti-septic liquid. In the ad of express washing powder a woman was seen in makeup, wearing tight fitting clothes using body language and body expose.

Category 5: Shoes and Clothes

The category includes the products that are needed to upkeep physical beauty like different clothing and foot-wear brands. In this category, a total of 12 shoes and clothes ads were aired in the period of 8 weeks. The variable body exposure is having the maximum value 11 in three top entertainment channels. Body language, women looks, dressing/nudity, emotional and nurturing are on 8 where as both variables fungibility and follower have scored 3. This data clearly shows that body exposure is the main variable to construct feminine identity within this category. The ads that were being observed within this category include: Satrangi lawn, Sapna sitara cloth, Stylo shoes and Nishat linen Eid collection. In Stylo shoes advertisement women were seen with exposed clothes for selling and attracting consumers by undressed legs.

Category 6: Mobile Phones and Electronics

This category includes the products that function from electricity like refrigerator, AC, WIFI devices and cell phones. A total of 32 mobile phones and electronics ads were aired during the period of 8 weeks. The dominant variables in the construction of feminine identity are body language, women look and emotional with the highest value of 31. Body exposure with value 23, dressing/nudity with value 12 and nurturing with score 4 are constructing feminine identity in Pakistani television advertisements. Qmobile, Samsung mobile, Oppo F7, Zong 4g, PTCL Charji, Jazz 4g WIFI and other electronic AC devices advertisements are being displayed in this category. For example: in Jazz 4g women has showed in western dress with no scarf and exposed as running towards to get first in taking 4g connection. It is being so criticized in social media for exposing women in this way in Pakistani channels.

Category 7: Others

This category included advertisements that did not fit into any of the above divisions.

On ARY, only 6 advertisements of this category were aired in 8 weeks. The variable emotional has the value 5. This is the highest value being observed in the construction of feminine identity. The variable body language, women looks, emotional and follower have got the value 1, 3 and 2 and 3 respectively. Thus, these 4 variables are dominant in the construction of feminine identity. Thus, emotional nature of women contributes mainly in the construction of feminine identity. (See Appendix 1 for sample advertisements).

How do television advertisements in Pakistan construct feminine identity?

The findings of this study suggest that women are mostly objectified and shown in stereotypical feminine roles. Women were mostly found exposing their body either by tight fitting clothes or revealing clothes. Moreover, their physical beauty and looks, as well as sexualized body language was also found in constructing feminine identity. They were largely depicted as being emotional and having a nurturing nature. These results are similar to Maheshwari (2017) which described that women on screen are projected with fair skin tone, perfectly shaped curves, and long-silky hair as an ideal sex icon; which helps promote brands and attracts more customers. On the other hand, variables that contributed less in constructing feminine identity are fungibility, denial of subjectivity, physically weak, submissive, afraid, follower, ashamed, victim, as well as asks for or accepts advice.

What are the roles portrayed by women in different product categories in the advertisements?

The findings from the data collected for 8 weeks from Pakistani entertainment channels indicate that women have been portrayed in different roles in different advertisements. Following is the detailed explanation of these notable roles:

Reduction to Body and An Emotional Person

Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) asserted that women to varying degrees internalize this outsider view and begin to self-objectify by treating themselves as an object to be looked at and evaluated on the basis of appearance. Women in various commercials have appeared in the role of reduction to body and as an emotional person. These roles were dominant in all product categories i.e. highlighted more as compared to others roles. Women through their negative and positive emotions and exposing bodies through tight fitting clothes were mostly seen in the

soaps/shampoo/toothpaste/cosmetics/medicine's advertisement category of all channels.

Reduction to Appearance

This is the second notable role in which women appeared in the advertisements. Women through wearing revealing clothes and through their looks were seen in many advertisement categories but soaps/shampoo/toothpaste/cosmetics/medicines, food and beverages and mobile phones are electronics are notable category.

Helping/Nurturing Person

The third highlighted role of women in advertisements is found, in this study, is nurturing and helpful. Women, in this role, were mostly seen in taking care of their family or supporting their friends. Liss, Erchull, & Ramsey (2011) also conducted a research and found the similar results that women are also presented as nurturing role in many television contents.

Other Roles of Women

Besides all the above mentioned roles women were also seen in the roles of fungibility, denial of subjectivity, physically weak, submissive, afraid, follower, victim, and ashamed. Women in these roles were seen less in contrast to all the above mentioned roles. It is consistent with Ford and La Tour (1996) results that in advertisements, men and women are depicted through different body languages. The research conducted by Brett and Cantore (1998) found similar patterns in commercials that men are generally portrayed as powerful, independent and successful and women are posed as sympathetic, sustaining, softer and dependent. On the one hand, men are active, dominant, superior and are at ruling position. On the contrary, women are dreamy, shy, delicate and subordinate to men.

Which advertisement categories most objectify women?

A category-wise comparison of advertisements is provided in the following table:

		Advertisement Product Categories						
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
		Food and Beverages	Soaps/ Shampoo/ Toothpaste/ Cosmetics/ Medicines	Automobiles and Related Items	House hold Items	Shoes and Clothes	Mobile Phones and Electronics	Others
Objectification	Body Exposure	51	73	1	24	11	23	1
	Body Language	62	89	1	33	8	31	3
	Women Looks	62	85	1	31	8	31	2
	Dressing / Nudity	16	57	0	0	8	12	0
	Instrumentality	2	3	0	0	0	0	0
	Fungibility	4	20	0	0	3	0	0
	Denial of Subjectivity	4	3	0	0	0	0	0
	TOTAL (For each category)	201	330	3	88	38	97	6

Table 2

From the findings, it is evident that various categories presented different levels of women objectification. The variables observed in the category of ‘Soaps/Shampoo/Toothpaste/Cosmetics/Medicines’ have objectified women more than any other classification of advertisements in different TV channels. The second category of advertisements that have excelled in objectified portrayal of the female gender is ‘Food and Beverages’. The third and fourth category closely following each others are ‘Mobile Phone & Electronics’ and ‘Household Items’. However, it was also observed that the advertisement categories of ‘Shoes and Clothes’ displayed lesser content that could be characterized as objectified. Whereas the categories ‘Automobiles and Related Items’ as well as ‘Others’ showed negligible levels of objectified depiction.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that feminine identity is constructed usually through exposing women’s body either by tight fitting clothes or revealing clothes. There is use of sensual body language. Women are treated as objects or things, their physical beauty is highlighted. They are mostly depicted as showing a lot of emotions. They are displayed as nurturing and helpful. These are all the notable roles that women have

played in different categories of advertisements. Women were also scarcely seen in the roles of, denial of subjectivity, physically weak, submissive, afraid, follower, victim and ashamed. The objectification of women is highest in the category soaps/shampoo/toothpaste/cosmetics/medicines advertisements on aired in Pakistani popular entertainment channel whereas food and beverages advertisement category is closely following behind. Thus, this study provides evidence that Pakistani advertisements show the women as an objectified entity.

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Appendix

- **Category 1: Food and Beverages**



- **Category 2: Soap, Shampoo, toothpaste, Cosmetics and Medicines**





- **Category 3: Automobiles and Related Items**



- **Category 4: Household Items**



- **Category 5: Shoes and clothes**



- **Category 6: Mobile Phones and Electronics**



Category 7: Others

