



POWER AND GENDER: A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF PAKISTANI TELEVISION COMMERCIALS

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine the gender and power portrayal in some selected television commercials of Pakistan with the perspective of Roland Barthes' semiotic theory. This study is designed to analyze the denotative and connotative meanings in the advertising discourse, construction of gender identities and the power relation representation. One qualitative research design was used and 15 TV commercials of different brands from different product categories were selected purposefully. The study reveals that ads are cultural texts which reflect and generate the values of the society in Barthes' terms of denotation, connotation, and myth. The results confirm that traditional gender-based stereotypes are still present in many commercials, and certain commercials present images of women as powerful, independent and socially active. In addition, there are several measures of power, such as control, technology, authority, care taking and personal empowerment. The study emphasizes the construction and negotiation of gender and power within current Pakistan, through the lens of advertising.

Keywords: *Gender Representation, Power Relations, Semiotic Analysis.*

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1. Introduction

Advertising is one of the most powerful media communications in today's society. It is not just about products and services – it is about cultural values, social norms and ideological beliefs as well. Visual images, spoken words, music, colors, gestures and symbols are used together in TV commercials, where they are persuasive and influence the public's perception. These messages shape the audience's perception of ideas like "family," "success," "beauty," "gender," and "society. So, the television advertisement is not just a commercial text, but a cultural text that is involved in the making and flow of meaning in the society (Hall, 1997; Bukhari et al., 2025).

Media researchers claim that advertising plays an important role in the development of social identities as it constantly offers specific images and behaviors as desirable and socially acceptable. These representations can be normalised and internalised through repeated exposure to the audience. One of the biggest places that advertising has impact on public perception is in terms of representation of gender. People in TV ads often play specific roles in society, work, and at home and reinforce or even challenge the cultural expectations about those roles. Therefore, advertisements are important places to examine the construction and negotiation of genders in a society (Rasheed et al., 2023; Khan et al., 2023).

Gender is more than just a physical difference between men and women, it is a social and cultural formation – constructed through language, images, symbols and practices of everyday life. The centrality of mass media in this construction is through the repetition of ideas of masculinity and femininity presented through it. In TV commercials, characters are typically different—men do one thing, women do another, men feel one way, women feel another, men live one kind of life, women live another. Women are often stereotyped as domestic, beautiful, caring and emotional, while men are often stereotyped as professional, decision making and authority. These representations shape public perceptions of gender roles and help perpetuate social norms (Mustafa & Ameen, 2023; Habib et al., 2024).

Another dimension of power that is part of advertising discourse is its capacity to generate profit. Not all communication is verbal, it may also be non-verbal, including camera angles, body posture, colours, character interaction, and the setting of the visuals, as well as facial expressions and clothing. Who looks dominant, who speaks with authority, who makes the decision, who plays supportive roles are all determined by these semiotic resources. As a result, ads reinforce the social power system in place and, at the same time, help to establish new connotations of leadership, independence, authority, and empowerment. Media and Communication Studies is thus one of the important fields of study that remains gendered and is worth exploring (Mahmood et al., 2022; Karim et al., 2024).

The theoretical approach of semiotics is helpful in exploring such meanings as it focuses on how signs produce meaning that is not literal. Roland Barthes extended the classical semiotic theory in proposing that all signs have multiple layers of meaning. The first level, denotation, Barthes says, is the literal or direct meaning of the image or sign. The second level (connotation) is the cultural and emotional significance of the sign. Myths at their deepest level are the ideas that are generated and take the place of culturally constructed meanings that seem natural, universal, and unquestionable. The Barthian approach thus provides researchers with a means to reveal the ideologies in the media products and to explain how an advertisement endorses and shapes the beliefs about society, culture, gender and power. This is a widely-used model in modern research on advertising that is able to uncover the hidden meaning behind visual messages (Bukhari et al., 2025; Aqeel & Ali, 2024).

The TV advertisements in Pakistan are a reflection of the country's traditions, beliefs, and evolving social dynamics. Pakistani commercials on Television are not only selling products, they are also spreading messages regarding the family life, social status, morality and gender role. In recent years, due to rapid urbanization, globalization and digital media, advertising strategies have changed so much that men and women are displayed in various ways. However, these are only a few of the changes, and many commercials still adhere to the traditional gender norms in which women are often assigned the role of homemakers, mothers and beautiful objects, whereas men are portrayed as decision-makers, financial providers and professionals. The frequent depictions help in shaping socially acceptable gender roles and cultural norms about masculinity and femininity (Ali & Batool, 2022; Bukhari et al., 2025).

New research shows that in recent times; there has been a greater tendency of gendered traditional and modern portrayals within Pakistani advertisements. On the other hand, a lot of commercials are still continuing to label women as householders, caregivers and home products. In contrast, ads for education, banking, telecoms, cars and digital services increasingly feature women as professionals, entrepreneurs, athletes and independent decision makers. Likewise, dominant fathers or husbands are not the only male characters; they are also shown as caring fathers or husbands. As the image of Pakistan changes, the advertising industry is also undergoing a transformation, reflecting the blending and interplay of traditional cultural values and the new social dynamics of the 21st century (Habib et al., 2024; Rasheed et al., 2023).

These advances may seem to be helping to foster gender equality but the significance in ads is frequently more complex than meets the eye. The images which seem to be progressive at the literal level can still carry traditional ideologies in symbolic signs, visual set-ups, colours, gestures, clothing, positioning of the camera and choice of language. A successful female professional, for instance, might be depicted as performing

a manly occupation, and also be depicted as taking care of household tasks. Similarly, men can be portrayed as supportive emotionally and be in more dominant and controlling roles, too. These representations are used to illustrate that advertising conveys multiple layers of meaning, which can only be systematically semiotically interpreted, but not just described (Machin, 2013; Aqeel & Ali, 2024).

The power relations play out in several semiotic resources in TV commercials. Visual composition guides what characters are more prominent, where they're placed in the picture, and what they do. Costumes, body posture, eye contact, verbal interaction and facial expressions can suggest authority, confidence, dependency, or submission; camera angles can make people seem dominant or subordinate. These semiotic decisions have a direct impact on the audience's perception of leadership, responsibility, and social hierarchy. Thus, advertising is not just a mirror of power dynamics, but a tool for their creation and normalisation, as these power dynamics are reproduced and represented in symbolic ways over time (Jewitt, 2017; Bouvier, 2020).

The semiotic analysis allows researchers to discover these deeper meanings based on the relationship between sign and culture. Roland Barthes maintained that ads create systems of signs that recode culturally produced beliefs as 'natural' or 'truthful'. His ideas of denotation, connotation and myth offer a broad understanding of the ways in which advertising generates meanings beyond the literal selling of a product. Denotation refers to that which can be seen directly; connotation provides cultural and emotional meanings of signs; and myth provides an ideological background that is taken for granted through the repeated media images. The analytical framework has been highly relevant in the current study of media because it allows to have a critical understanding of the relationship between language, images, ideology and culture (Barthes, 1972; Chandler, 2017).

Despite the increasing focus on gender representation in the field of research globally, few studies have considered gender in Pakistani television commercials (TVCs) from a holistic semiotic lens. In Pakistan, previous studies have largely used content analysis, discourse analysis, or feminist analysis to analyze the representation of gender. These studies offer important perspectives, but they tend to concentrate on visible expressions and fail to examine in detail the connection between denotative meanings, connotative associations and ideological myths that help to construct audiences' understanding of gender and power. Furthermore, the study has not so far focused on an examination of how modern Pakistani television advertisements at the same time build masculinity, femininity, authority, empowerment, and social relationships in overlapping ways, using visual and linguistic cues. The above gaps underscore the necessity of detailed semiotic study based on the theoretical framework of Roland Barthes.

Problem Statement

The public perceptions of gender and power are also heavily influenced by the communication of cultural values in visual and linguistic signs in television commercials. In Pakistan, advertisement evolved and showed the images of both men and women in traditional and modern ways. But the ideologies of these representations have received very little scholarly attention. Previous research tends to focus on either content analysis or discourse analysis of advertising, rather than multiple layers of meaning, and primarily concentrates on gender stereotypes. Therefore, there is a scarcity of in-depth semiotic studies which examine the interaction between the denotative meaning, connotative association and cultural myth in the construction of gender identity and power relation in the Pakistani television commercials. In addition, today's ads frequently incorporate elements of empowerment alongside the cultural messages of older times, which can leave them somewhat complicated to interpret. Hence, for this study, the semiotic approach of Roland Barthes is used to analyze the ways selected Pakistani TV commercials communicate, corroborate and/or contest the gender identities and power dynamics on the basis of visual and linguistic signs.

Research Objectives

The present study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- a) To examine the denotative and connotative meanings embedded in selected Pakistani television commercials through Roland Barthes' semiotic framework.
- b) To explore how gender identities are represented and constructed through visual and linguistic signs in Pakistani television commercials.
- c) To investigate how power relations between men and women are communicated, reinforced, or challenged through the symbolic representations found in Pakistani television commercials.

Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- a) What denotative and connotative meanings are conveyed through the visual and linguistic signs in selected Pakistani television commercials?
- b) How are gender identities represented and constructed through semiotic resources in Pakistani television commercials?
- c) How do Pakistani television commercials communicate, reinforce, or challenge power relations between men and women through symbolic and ideological representations?

Significance of the Study

This study helps to advance the existing research on media, advertising, and gender as it offers a comprehensive semiotic analysis of Pakistani television commercials. This research, based on the theory of denotation, connotation and myth of Roland Barthes,

examines the gender representation in the discourse of advertising and uncovers the underlying ideology that exists within the discourse. The research study, therefore, further explores the use of semiotic theory in the present advertising context of Pakistan and enriches the body of knowledge of the media and communication studies.

The study also makes a contribution to gender studies as it explores the notion of how television commercials create notions of masculinity, femininity, authority, independence and social responsibility. It examines the extent to which advertisements continue to perpetuate traditional gender roles, or offer more balanced and inclusive depictions of men and women. Importance of these representations is because they affect the public views, cultural values and the social norms about gender roles, which are shaped by advertising.

Findings will be useful to advertisers, the media and content producers in understanding how visual and linguistic choices convey ideological meanings. The study could influence advertisers in creating more gender-equal and socially responsible representations that are culturally relevant and promote gender equality. This awareness can be helpful in improving the ethical advertising practices in Pakistan.

The study also will have practical implications for policy makers, teachers, and media researchers with an interest in gender representations and media literacy. The results can inform conversations on responsible media usage and can serve as evidence in educational campaigns to promote audience reflexivity towards media messages instead of taking them for granted. Moreover, the study serves as an important reference for future research on the field of “semiotics”, “media discourse”, “gender studies”, “cultural studies”, and “advertising communication”.

Delimitations of the Study

The present study is limited to the semiotic analysis of the 15 purposively selected TV commercials of different product categories from Pakistan. It is about only TV ads made and aired in Pakistan. The analysis only focuses on the visual and linguistic cues contained in the chosen commercials, and is undertaken within the semiotic model of Roland Barthes, which involves the denotation, connotation and myth. The study concentrates on the construction of gender identities and power relationships and does not explore the audience reception, the effectiveness of advertising, consumer behaviour or marketing results.

Limitations of the Study

Since this study has focused on interpretation of 15 selected TV commercials, it may not be generalized to other TV commercials or any other media. The semiotic analysis is interpretative, and the theoretical approach is predetermined, but there can be alternative interpretations of some of the signs. No interviews, focus groups or perception data of audience are used in the study. Furthermore, the analysis is restricted to commercials that

were available during the time period for data collection, and this may not represent the patterns of gender representation and power relations in future advertising campaigns.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Semiotics and Advertising Discourse

Advertising can be thought of as a complex form of communication which is made up of visual, verbal and symbolic elements, that produce persuasive meanings. The modern advertisement isn't just a selling message, it also carries with it cultural values, social identities, and ideological beliefs. Carefully crafted images, colours, gestures, language, music and visual composition create messages that shape the reality of an audience. Thus, advertising has been a crucial field of study in media studies, communication and semiotics as it exemplifies a process of meaning creation, circulation and normalization in the society (Bouvier 2020; Bukhari et al. 2025).

The study of Semiotics gives a systematic way of understanding the meanings communicated in advertisements via signs. Each advertisement utilizes several semiotic resources, such as visual symbols, spoken language, gestures of the body, clothing, facial expression, colours and space arrangement. These signs work in combination to send the messages that are sometimes more than they say in the ad. Semiotic scholars reject the idea that advertisements are just promotional text and propose that they be considered as cultural text which is used to create social meanings and reproduce the dominant ideologies. The findings further suggest that semiotic analysis is still one of the most effective methods in the analysis of ads containing hidden meanings in the current context of advertising discourse (Mahmood et al., 2022; Karim et al., 2024).

As communication in the media becomes more complex, the role of semiotic analysis has also grown in significance. Today's TV commercials combine visual storytelling, digital effects, emotional messages and symbolism to captivate viewers. Consequently, ad messages are delivered in language and non-verbal form at the same time. Others have suggested that analysis of these multimodal components must be able to go beyond the literal and subtlety convey meaning. So, in the light of these all the above, semiotic analysis can be seen as a tool that can help researchers gain an understanding of the hidden and unstated ideological assumptions embedded in the discourse of advertising and also relate to the interpretation of how these meanings shape the public perception (Mustafa & Ameen, 2023; Bukhari et al., 2025).

Some of the recent studies in Pakistan have taken a semiotic perspective to explore the nature of television advertisements. Commercials are found in these studies to often use symbols to create ideas of gender, family, social class, beauty, and authority. While the adverts are often perceived as selling products, they at the same time convey cultural expectations and social values by the way they are designed visually and linguistically. The results indicate that Pakistani TV advertisements serve as meaningful cultural texts

which have the power to shape the understanding of social identities and power dynamics (Nasir, 2018; Karim et al., 2024).

2.2 Roland Barthes' Semiotic Theory

The semiotic theory of Roland Barthes is still one of the most significant theories for the analysis of media texts, as it is able to explain how meaning works at various levels. Barthes suggested that there exists three levels of significance in the communication of meaning in a sign: the denotation, the connotation and the myth. Denotation is the actual meaning of an image or sign and connotation is the cultural, emotional and ideological associations of the sign. Myth exists at the deepest level because it is a process whereby socially constructed meaning becomes naturalized and accepted as universal. This approach enables researchers to break beyond the language of description and identify the underlying ideologies within the language of a media discourse.

The examples of television commercials illustrates that advertising messages are expressed with a number of visual and linguistic signs at the same time, a context that still makes Barthes' framework for analysing the advertising relevant in recent studies. The study of advertisements in Pakistan has demonstrated that Barthes' notions of denotation, connotation and myth are very useful in uncovering advertisements' power to 'normalize' ideas of gender, class, beauty, authority and empowerment. To construct reality, ads do not show what is actually true, but select what they want to show and ask the audience to take certain cultural values for granted. For this reason, Barthes' theory is still important in analyzing the current television commercials and in understanding the ideology in advertising discourse (Bukhari et al., 2025; Mahmood et al., 2022).

2.3 Gender Representation in Advertising

The study of gender in advertising has been one of the most explored areas in advertising research literature due to the fact that advertising on media not only mirrors social realities but also contributes to the formation of these realities. Ideas of masculinity and femininity are reiterated over television commercials in a series of visual and linguistic cues that affect public perception of appropriate gender behavior. Modern researchers suggest that ads are cultural stories that reinforce specific gender roles, and that they repeatedly reinforce them in ads as socially acceptable and desired. Thus, ads have a major impact on attitudes about family, work, leadership, beauty, and relationship. Recent research has shown that while the range of gender representation in ads is broadening, stereotyped images are still present in a variety of advertising settings.

International research shows that there are signs of a shift in the way men and women are portrayed, rather than away from traditional gender stereotypes. Advertisements today will show women as professionals, entrepreneurs, athletes and decision makers, far beyond domestic duties. Similarly, the stereotypical male roles of dominance or authority are less common in favour of the role of caregiver, emotional father

and supportive partner. While all this is positive, researchers say that progressive depictions may coexist with traditional stereotypes, and create mixed messages about gender equality. Consequently, ads do not overhaul existing gender patterns and meanings.

In Pakistan, the issue of gender representation is closely linked with cultural norms, faith-based beliefs, and social norms. Often, women are seen in the domestic sphere, doing tasks related to caring, motherhood, being beautiful and with family duties, whereas men are linked to money, work and decision-making. But the newer Pakistani advertisements have started to show women in the role of educated professional women, women as business owners, female sports stars and independent financially women. These new images imply that advertising is adjusting to the new social landscape and yet is still mapping out the new cultural norms.

Within the past few years, a few studies on semiotics have been conducted in Pakistan, revealing that images, including body posture, camera angle, spatial positioning, facial expression, and clothing, play a major part in the construction of gender identities. These studies show that the meanings of the genders are not exclusively conveyed in verbal communication; rather, they are also produced through the interaction of various symbolic resources. The advertisements then become cultural texts in which the concepts of masculinity and femininity are continuously created, contested and re-created in the sphere of visual communication.

2.4 Power Relations in Television Commercials

One of the main axes of the advertising discourse is power. The visual arrangements, which establish who leads conversations, takes central positions, makes decisions, controls the technology, or influences other characters, as well as explicit dialogue, communicates power in a television commercial. These symbolic selections evoke people's perceptions of power, freedom, subservient, and social structure. Researchers are increasingly suggesting that advertising plays a part in normalizing power dynamics by constantly portraying certain social organization as natural and desirable.

Recent research shows that advertising is a medium of power that is expressed through various semiotic resources. Usually, the camera will provide a contrast to the other characters, placing the dominant character above, or close up to them, showing a shift in focus regarding emotional authority; costumes and professional status; and body language regarding confidence or submission. Likewise, the use of language, eye contact, interpersonal space, and spatial arrangement contribute to understanding the relationships between men and women characters. These semiotic resources are used in a coordinated way to create ideological meanings beyond the promotional context of the actual product.

Studies undertaken in Pakistan show that power dynamics continue to be strongly linked with gender in TV commercials. While ads today are more likely to feature women in education, work and leadership roles, a lot of ads still show men as the final decision

makers and women as emotional supporters or caregivers. Other research shows findings that are more balanced and present women as financially independent, competent at work and with personal agency. The diverging depictions indicate that currently Pakistani advertising is a reflection of a transitional cultural landscape characterized by a juxtaposition of traditional patriarchal values and new gender equality and women empowerment discourses.

Geographical semiotic research also suggests that power is more than domination, it is negotiation and symbolic interaction. The television commercials have become an increasing symbol of empowerment in education, career, entrepreneurship, technological skills, and personal self-confidence. Yet, sometimes these empowering images can persist in regressive gender norms that entrust the primary role of women to familial and domestic responsibilities. As a result, this gender-power dynamic is multifaceted and complex, and is thus suited to semiotic analysis, which can help to reveal the ideological content of the Pakistani commercials produced these days.

2.5 Empirical Studies on Pakistani Television Commercials

Research conducted in the recent past on Pakistani Television advertisements shows that commercials are significant cultural texts that produce and circulate ideas of gender, class, power, religion and identity. The social values conveyed by advertising are not merely verbal but are embedded in the visual symbols, body language, colours, settings and narratives. Thus, the study of Pakistani advertising has become a field of increasing interest for scholars and researchers in linguistics, media studies, communication and cultural studies, with the objective to gain insight into the symbolic resources used in the ideological construction of meanings.

A few recent studies have used semiotic analysis to study the representation of gender in advertisements in Pakistan. Bukhari et al. (2025) examined the empowerment of women in Pakistani advertisements using the semiotic approach of Roland Barthes, and concluded that there are enough advertisements in the contemporary era that portray confident, educated and economically empowered women. But the study also revealed that empowerment stories often coexist with traditional expectations of domestic responsibilities and roles in families. This implies that advertising does not simply reverse gender norms but at the same time reinforces them.

Likewise, Iftikhar, Aziz, and Latif (2025) conducted a semiotic analysis of gender relations and Islamic values in Pakistani Television Commercials. According to their research, television commercials are able to negotiate modern genders within culturally and religiously sanctioned boundaries. While women are often seen in professional and public settings, many jobs are still advertised for people to be modest, family-oriented and have traditional gender roles. The authors' findings are indicative of a dynamic process of continuity and transformation in Pakistani ads.

Habib and co. (2024) analyzed the portrayal of gender in Outdoor advertisements of Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa by social semiotics. They found that there was a gender bias and that women were often objectified and men portrayed as dominant in public role. Despite the efforts to promote more modern images of women in some of the ads, the researchers stated that the unequal gender relations continue to be reiterated through the consistent use of symbols and codes in ads.

Other Pakistani studies have taken the study of semiotics beyond the sphere of gender. In the study of social class representation in Pakistani television commercials, Karim, Fatima, and Mir (2024) have shown that the signs, setting, costume, and lifestyle are manipulated to create class hierarchies and aspirational identities in the advertisements. Their research indicates that television commercials not only sell products, they also promote the ideology of privilege, status and power in society. The results confirm the view of advertising as a cultural discourse and not just a commercial activity.

Maahmood et al. (2022) also stated that Pakistani TV commercials often use symbolic imagery to validate gender, ethical and authority-related ideological assumptions. The authors also presented in semiotic and critical discourse perspective that unequal social relations are usually naturalized in visual communication as being normal in the normal course of daily life. This confirms the use of semiotic analysis as a valuable means of revealing the underlying meanings in the discourse of an advertisement.

2.6 Research Gap

The current literature shows that advertising is a major means of creating gendered identities and transmitting social values in visual and linguistic codes. Gender stereotypes, women empowerment, social class, consumer culture and ideological representation in advertisements have been explored through semiotic and discourse analytic approaches by recent studies from around the world and Pakistan. These studies have proved that ads are cultural texts, which can reinforce or subvert dominant culture and gender ideologies.

Several important gaps still exist, however, in spite of these contributions. First of all, many of the recent studies conducted in Pakistan were focused on one aspect of representation, whether it is women empowerment, objectification, Islamic values, or social class. Focusing on the examination of the issues of gender representation and power relationships in a single integrated analytical framework is a topic that has not received much attention. Consequently, the conjunction between masculinity and femininity, authority and symbolic power are not sufficiently discussed.

Second, while many studies on advertising research in Pakistan have used a semiotic approach, most studies have focused on descriptive interpretations of the messages or other semiotic models. So far, only a few studies have employed Roland Barthes' three-level framework of denotation, connotation and myth in a systematic way to explain how meanings are simultaneously constructed ideologically in TV commercials

through the use of visual and linguistic signs. This is because this restricts the extent of understanding that can be gained regarding the naturalisation of gender ideologies and power structures in advertisements.

Third, globalization, digital media, shifting consumer expectations, and growing awareness of gender equality have resulted in some inherent changes in the Pakistani television advertisements of today. As the image of the woman as a professional, entrepreneur, and independent person is found more and more in ads, the number of empirical studies that would examine this image as it either breaks or simply reinforces the power structures of patriarchy is comparatively small. This is an area that is not well researched in the existing literature.

To this end the present study fills the lacunae by employing the semiotic framework developed by Roland Barthes which includes the denotation, connotation and myth of the selected 15 purposively taken Pakistani television commercials. This study examines the construction of gender identities through visual and verbal cues and how symbolic representation conveys, reaffirms and/or disrupts power dynamics between men and women in modern advertising in Pakistan. This study not only combines the study of gender representation with the study of power in a unified semiotic framework, but also has the potential to enrich media studies, gender studies, advertising research and contemporary semiotic studies in Pakistan.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study was a qualitative research design, which aimed at the analysis of the representation of gender and power in Pakistani television commercials. The qualitative approach was chosen because the study was not to quantify numerical relationships, but to find out the meanings in the visual and linguistic signs. Qualitative research allows for an investigation of symbolic communication, cultural meanings, and ideologies in media texts. Due to the way television commercials convey messages in terms of images, language, sound, colours, gestures, facial expressions and other semiotic resources, qualitative inquiry methods are appropriate for the study of the way these elements create gender identities and power relations.

The study took place following the way Roland Barthes has explained the meaning, denotation, connotation and myth. This theoretical approach helps to identify not only the literal but also the implied meaning of the content in advertising texts, and to interpret the overall message regarding society and ideology conveyed by television commercials.

3.2 Research Approach

A semiotic approach to the analysis of the media was used in the study. Semiotics sees communication as a system of signs from which meanings are constructed and construed. Television advertisements are a series of signs such as spoken words, images,

clothing, colours, camera angles, gestures, settings, facial expressions, background music, and spatial organization. The elements are not studied individually, but in relation to the other elements and how they contribute to the construction of cultural meanings in semiotic analysis.

A Barthian model was used to analyse each chosen commercial at three interwoven levels. The first level was concerned with the denotation or literal meaning of the visual and linguistic signs. The second level investigated connotation, that is the cultural, emotional and symbolic meaning attached to the signs. The third level is myth, the repeated cultural meanings and common social beliefs and ideology. This analytical approach allowed for an in-depth examination of gender and power as concepts being communicated in ads.

3.3 Data Selection

The data used in this study was 15 Pakistani TV commercials which were purposively chosen. Purposive sampling was used because it enables the researcher to select in an active and deliberate manner information rich data that directly answers the research objectives. Commercials chosen for the study were from the food and beverages, household products, telecommunication, banking, personal care, education, health care, car, and digital services categories. The inclusion of varying product categories helped to foster a wider awareness of gender representation in and power dynamics of modern Pakistan's advertising industry.

The commercials were chosen to meet the following requirements:

- a) They were produced and broadcast in Pakistan.
- b) They contained both male and female characters.
- c) They gave clear visual and linguistic interactions which addressed issues of gender representation.
- d) They contained adequate symbols appropriate for semiotic analysis.
- e) These were broadcasted on official TV channels or trusted digital sources.

Commercials that did not include any meaningful interaction between male and female characters or did not have enough visual content for semiotic interpretation were not included in the study.

3.4 Data Collection

The chosen television commercials were obtained from the official YouTube channels of Pakistani brands, company verified websites and officially aired television commercials on the internet. Authentic versions of the advertisements were used so the data can be trusted. The commercials were watched multiple times for a complete grasp of all the verbal and visual information they contain.

On the data collection stage, the images of important scenes were selected and set in the form of a picture and sorted for further analysis. Spoken dialogues, written text,

visual symbols, gestures, facial expression, costume, colour, setting, camera positioning etc. were recorded. The findings of these observations were the main data for the semiotic analysis.

3.5 Data Analysis

For the collected data, the following Roland Barthes' semiotic framework was used: denotation, connotation and myth.

The analysis started with denotation, which is a descriptive analysis without an interpretation of the elements that the researcher observed in each commercial while watching it. This stage involved recognising characters, objects, setting, actions, colours, costumes, the spoken language, facial expressions, gestures, camera angle etc and other visible elements.

The second stage was connotation where the researcher's personal interpretation of the symbolic and cultural significance of these signs occurred. At this level, an effort was made to highlight the transmission of notions of masculinity and femininity, of authority, of roles within the family, of professionalism and independence, of caring, of leadership, and of socio-cultural expectations through visual and linguistic means.

The last area explored was myth, the overarching ideologically charged messages that are found in the advertisements. The analysis examined the role of the reiteration of symbolic representations in normalizing cultural beliefs about gender identities and power relations. Special care was taken to see if the commercials perpetuated traditional gender stereotypes or offered alternative messages of equality, empowerment and shared responsibility.

Each commercial was analysed separately and then a theme and pattern were drawn out from the overall dataset. Similar representations were clustered to enable for comparison interpretation and to answer the research question.

3.6 Trustworthiness of the Study

Throughout the research process several strategies were used to increase the trustworthiness of the findings. Credibility was sustained with multiple exposures of each commercial and through careful examination of verbal and visual signs. Analytical notes were written in detail, so that the interpretation would be based on evidence that can be observed, rather than on personal assumptions.

The dependability was obtained by using the same analytical procedure for all fifteen commercials. To ensure methodological consistency across the advertisements, each advertisement was analysed following the same three-step process of denotation, connotation and myth.

Clear documentation of the analytical process and providing specific visual and linguistic evidence from the chosen commercials to support interpretations arguably helped to confirm the findings. Finally, transferability was enhanced with detailed

descriptions of the selected advertisements, so that other researchers will be able to understand the context for which the analysis was performed and apply it for similar research.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

The study was a content analysis of TV commercials available for public view. No human subjects were used and no personal or confidential information was collected. So, informed consent of individuals was not required.

Only for academic and research purposes, the commercials were used. Appropriate recognition of all brands and advertisements, and interpretations were confined to a scholarly rather than commercial context. The researcher was unbiased toward the advertisements in the study and toward the products and organizations in the advertisements and did not make personal judgments about the products or organizations presented during the study, only a personal judgment on the interpretation of the advertisements within the theoretical framework of the study, which is the Roland Barthes semiotics theory.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

The results of semiotic analysis of five purposive selected Pakistani television commercials (TVCs) are presented here: Surf Excel (Daagh Achay Hain), Nestlé NIDO (Maa Ki Tarah Mazboot Shuruat), Sufi Cooking Oil (Family Ramadan Campaign), Tapal Danedar (Family Breakfast Campaign), and National Foods (Mother's Cooking Campaign). After the qualitative analytical method proposed in the methodology, the commercials were analysed according to Barthes' three levels of signification which are denotation, connotation and myth. All of the verbal, visual and audio elements were examined together to investigate the construction of gender identity and power relationships through multimodal sign(s). Each commercial was studied individually but a theme approach was used to highlight patterns within the data set. This organisation directly relates to the three research objectives and research questions of this study. The results show that the selected advertisements always define motherhood as the most dominant feminine role, state that taking care of the family is the most important source of women's symbolic power and naturalise women's role as mothers as an integral part of ideal femininity.

Table 1 Summary of Semiotic Patterns Identified Across the Selected Advertisements

Advertisement	Dominant Semiotic Signs	Construction of Gender Identity	Representation of Power	Dominant Cultural Myth
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Surf Excel	Mother–child interaction, stains, home	Mother as caregiver and moral guide	Emotional guidance through empathy	Good mothers encourage learning with patience and compassion.
Nestlé NIDO	Nutrition, protection, affection	Mother as nurturer and informed decision-maker	Responsibility for children's development	Mothers ensure children's future through care and nutrition.
Sufi Cooking Oil	Ramadan meals, family dining, kitchen	Mother as homemaker and family nurturer	Maintaining family cohesion through caregiving	Cooking preserves family unity and cultural values.
Tapal Danedar	Breakfast, tea, family conversation	Mother as facilitator of togetherness	Emotional leadership in daily family life	Mothers create harmony through everyday domestic care.
National Foods	Home cooking, tradition, shared meals	Mother as cultural nurturer and caregiver	Domestic authority through food preparation	A mother's love is naturally expressed through cooking.

All five advertisements, regardless of the product promoted, employ what appears to be the same set of semiotics, as seen in Table 1. Mothers are always the main focus of caring, emotionality and family wellbeing, while at home is the setting where feminine identity is shaped. Themes are formed in the following sections based on these recurring patterns.

4.1 Construction of Denotative, Connotative and Mythical Meanings

(Addresses Objective 1: To examine how verbal, visual and audio signs construct denotative, connotative and mythical meanings in selected Pakistani television commercials.)

The semiotic analysis of the five advertisements selected illustrates how meaning is created as a result of the simultaneous effect of the verbal, visual and audio signs at the denotative, connotative and mythical level. While the commercials are for various household products (detergent, milk, cooking oil, tea and food ingredients), they all use a remarkably similar semiotic approach to link the products to the Mother, caregiving and the wellbeing of family. The advertisements represent at the denotative level the normal everyday activities of everyday people, like preparing meals, serving breakfast, taking care of children and engaging in family interactions. The images seem to be portraying normal family life, and do not explicitly transmit other ideological messages. These everyday

household behaviors, however, produce deeper cultural meaning when taken in the context of Barthes' (1977) model of signification.

From a connotative perspective, the advertisements go beyond the functional attributes of the products, and are linked to emotional values of love, protection, sacrifice, responsibility and family unity. In the whole of the data, household products are always included as part of a narrative of mothering rather than just for their functionality. For instance, detergent represents patience and moral upbringing, milk represents responsible parenting and child development, cooking oil represents love and togetherness, tea and food products are symbols of love and affection, togetherness and cultural continuity. These correspondences are reinforced by warm colour palettes, domestic settings, close-up facial expressions, eye-level camera angles and soft instrumental music, thus establishing an atmosphere of emotional intimacy and security. Therefore the products take symbolic value and link consumption to family relationships rather than to their functional attributes.

On a mythical level, the ads collectively create a larger cultural myth of perfect motherhood and femaleness. When women are repeatedly portrayed as caring, cooking, nurturers and emotional supporters, they become the expected roles in society. Cooking, cleaning, serving food and caring for children are not identified as negotiated family duties, but are depicted as natural expressions of being female. They are reproduced and repeated in a wide variety of commercial settings, normalising the cultural notion that women's primary role is to preserve the wellbeing, stability, and moral development of the family. In Barthes' (1977) view, the ads present and reinforce gender roles that were historically and culturally created as common sense realities, which obfuscates their ideological dimension.

This meaning construction process is led by the interaction of verbal, visual and audio resources. Since a language is charged with emotion and emotions carry a certain meaning, especially when these emotions are about love, care, togetherness, protection and responsibility, these emotions repeatedly place mothers as the emotional hub of the family: linguistically! Domestic spaces – kitchens, dining tables, family residences – are invariably the main contexts of femininity's representation, and mothers are the most prominent figures in that space. The melodic content of the music, with soft instrumental music, calm narration and familiar domestic sounds, also supports the emotional tone, creating an association between the maternal touch and comfort, trust and harmony. These multimodal resources reinforce the ideological message that women's role in the home and family is an unending emotional and domestic work which is necessary for the happiness of the family.

Overall, the findings suggest that meaning is developed in the selected ads through more than just product promotion, but rather through a number of layers of signification.

They represent on the denotative level common family relations, on the connotative level they link products meant for consumption with caring, loving and responsible, and on the mythical level they strengthen the dominant cultural values, which place the woman's role as a mother as the central one in defining the feminine identity. The findings directly tackle the first research question, which shows that verbal, visual and audio signs together create denotative, connotative and mythical meanings that have the effect of normalizing traditional notions of gender and family in the Pakistani advertising discourse.

4.2 Construction of Gender Identities

(Addresses Objective 2: To explore how gender identities are represented through verbal, visual and audio signs in selected Pakistani television commercials.)

The analysis shows that the chosen advertisements create gender identities based on a recurring strategy of portraying women in a multimodal way, and stressing their role as mothers, caregivers and nurturers. In all the five commercials, femininity is closely associated with domestic responsibilities, emotional cares and family happiness while masculinity is suggested in passive and supportive roles at home. Each of the ads is for a different item, but the constant repetition of these words, images and sounds helps to create a familiar cultural image of women as the emotional hub of the family.

One of the most prevalent themes is the role of motherhood as a key characteristic of womanhood. In all of the ads, female characters are depicted mostly as part of the family unit instead of on individual terms or in their working lives. From looking after a child, to feeding the family or cooking breakfast for others, women are always seen as the people who are responsible for providing for and caring for others. These reiterated representations become the natural expression of femininity as well as an activity. Consequently, the concept of motherhood is tied to the concept of domestic duty and women are expected to care for, defend and provide emotional care for the family.

This construction of a gender identity is also a large part of the verbal discourse. There is a consistent theme in the use of lexical items as to the social role of women in the advertisements, namely, the concepts of love, care, togetherness, protection, responsibility and family happiness. The ads don't explicitly tell women to do "housekeeping" but rather portray these traits as good characteristics of the "ideal" mother. Emotional language puts caring for others in the context of moral obligations of love and devotion, giving the act of caring the air of a natural attribute of feminine identity. The domestic work is thus not the shared work of the family but an indication of the emotional involvement of women in their families.

The visual resources are used to support these linguistic representations, and women are consistently depicted in domestic settings. The main areas where femininity is enacted and acknowledged are the kitchen, dining room and family home. Mums are given the most prominent place as they are framed in the centre of the picture, shown close up,

in an eye level view and are often engaged in dialogue with children and other family members. Their facial expressions, their body language and the physical closeness convey warmth, patience and reassurance, and their family life—cooking, serving family meals, caring for children—becomes a visual representation of ideal womanhood. The recurrent visual motifs create a domestic space as the main arena in which the feminine identity is built and confirmed.

The analysis further shows that there are different representations of male identities. Fathers are usually shown as active members of the family unit and caring persons but they are seldom represented as the main caregivers or domestic workers. Rather, they are often depicted as the recipients of women's care, eating meals, engaging in conversation or spending time with their families after the task of caring for the family is done. Such a division of roles does lead to an apparent gender division of labor in which women tend to do the emotional labor and provide the domestic support, while men are engaged in less demanding domestic tasks. While these depictions may not explicitly include gender issues, they still perpetuate the stereotype of traditional roles for men and women in families.

These constructions of gender identity are reinforced by audio resources. The soft instrumental music, the quiet, familiar voices and sounds of everyday objects offer comfort, intimacy and emotional security for women's appearance on screen, again and again. The auditory elements are always linked to the mother at feeding times, and at other moments of caring, in the preparation of meals and as the family interacts, viewers automatically link femininity with warmth, patience and emotional stability. The soundtrack thus supports the verbal and visual modes in reinforcing the symbolic connection of women with caring.

In a semiotic approach, the duplication of such multimodal signs in the five ads helps to normalize traditional gender identities. The ads do not depict motherhood and domestic duties as social constructs, but as natural traits of women that are expected of them. In this way, advertising not only sells consumer goods; it also creates culturally sanctioned conceptions of femininity by continually linking women with emotional labour and the caring and domestic tasks that fall to women. The uniformity of these representations from various brands implies that gender identity can act as a significant ideological tool in Pakistani television advertisements.

The results are in line with earlier studies that have shown that advertising often perpetuates traditional gender roles, with women being depicted as caregivers and men as secondary actors in the household. The present study, however, extends this understanding by demonstrating the construction of these representations in combination with both verbal and non-verbal (visual and audio) signs, rather than language or images alone. The multimodal approach shows that the various semiotic resources are interdependent and

that each one brings to the image something different, thus forming a part of the message which the advertisements mean for a wider ideological message.

As a whole, the results show that the chosen commercials present an extremely cohesive picture of femininity that focuses on motherhood, caring and emotionality, whereas masculinity is still rather distant from daily domestic tasks. These discourses directly satisfy Research Question 2 and illustrate how gender identities are being constructed in the midst of these recurring patterns, which depict the ideal woman as one who is caring and at home.

4.3 Representation of Power Relations

(Addresses Objective 3: To investigate how power relations are represented through verbal, visual and audio signs in selected Pakistani television commercials.)

The power relations that are constructed in the selected ads are not overt or conflictual but are symbolic and relational, as the analysis suggests. In each of the five commercials, the power is in the hands of the caregiver, the emotional support giver in each commercial, and the domestic responsibility bearer – women are consistently the main protagonists in the commercials in charge of maintaining family wellbeing. While these portraits are positive and appreciative of motherhood, they also further the vision of a gendered division of labor, one where women are the primary actors in maintaining emotional stability, child development and household harmony.

There is a trend in the data of portraying women's authority as being emotional. Often mothers are depicted as setting boundaries for children, cooking meals, providing nurturing food and establishing family climates that enable positive relationships to develop. This is not because of economic status, professional accomplishment or formal decision making, but rather because of their care, patience and ongoing emotional investment in the family. As a result, the relationship of women and authority is not a hierarchical one – authority is instead understood as relational, meaning that women are seen as essential to family life but with limited influence to the domestic sphere.

This construction is reinforced through verbal discourse, as mothers were repeatedly linked with the concepts of responsibility, protection, affection and guidance. The expressions of love, togetherness, trust and happiness in the family depict the role of women in the family as vital in carrying out the family's activities. But such linguistic decisions do not typically share same responsibilities among other family members. Rather, care is constantly presented as a maternal responsibility, implying that the health of the family is largely dependent upon women's emotional work. In this way, language normalises a gendered division of responsibilities, but doesn't actually make it unequal.

These power relations are reinforced by use of visual imagery in terms of composition, framing and positioning of characters. Mothers are the most prominent figures in the home and are often seen to be at the heart of the kitchen, dinner table and

family life. They are continually seen in caregiving roles, unlike fathers, who are often depicted as taking a passive role when they are shown at the table at family meals, listening or talking to the kids after the dishes are finished. This visual display does not subjugate women; on the contrary, it gives symbolic power to the women in the home and still maintains the idea that they should take care of it and are its main responsibility.

The sound dimension also helps in the creation of symbolic power. Warm, reassuring and emotionally secure scenes are consistently accompanied by soft instrumental music, calm narration and familiar household sounds, where mothers are involved. These sounds reinforce the idea of how nurturing relationships with the mother are at the core of family unity. The soundtrack does not focus on conflict and control, but instead highlights caring as a valued social practice and invites viewers to read caring responsibilities as emotionally satisfying and culturally desirable.

Barthesian analysis shows that these "chronic" semiotic structures are found at the level of the myth—the culturally specific gender roles are naturalized and taken for granted. The ads don't say women should take primary responsibility for child care, cooking, or emotional support; these are just assumed, repeated and integrated into visual, verbal and auditory representations. The commercials depict the female as a naturally superior caregiver and the family as a harmonious unit that stems from women's domestic work, thereby creating culturally accepted knowledge about the gender roles and qualities for men and women and the natural harmony of the family. The ads do this, thus reinforcing the existing power structures and concealing their ideological nature.

The results also indicate that power in these ads is paradoxical. On the other, mothers are unwaveringly depicted to be a source of affection, guidance and choices that is crucial for children's development and family solidarity. Conversely, this power is limited to the private domestic realm, and there is not much representation of women beyond the care giving position. So in the ads, they are honoring the value of women, but at the same time limiting the agency of women to what is considered 'women's work'. It is a type of symbolic empowerment that acknowledges the value of women without questioning gender hierarchy.

In general, the analysis highlights how power is built in the selected ads via emotional labour, taking care of others, and domestic responsibilities, but not formally through authority or institutions. Combined, verbal, visual, and audio markers situate women as emotionally powerful but housewifely-limited figures whose power is based on caregiving instead of holding public power. These findings directly address Research Question 3, suggesting that TVCs in Pakistan are relational and symbolic representations of power, and also carry with them – products of the traditional gender norms that attribute power to women in the context of motherhood and household management.

4. Discussion

The results show that Pakistani television commercials are not only using individual linguistic or visual representations of gender, but the cumulative effect of verbal, visual and aural signs are repeated and consistently linking women with care-taking, domestic duties and emotional support. In the five chosen ads, different kinds of products—such as detergent, milk, cooking oil, tea and food ingredients—are all inextricably woven into the stories of motherhood and family wellbeing. The consistent pattern indicates that advertising is not just about selling goods and services, but also conveying a shared sense of femininity, family life, and social responsibility. The multimodal character of these representations suggests that the commercial discourse acts as a strategy of marketing and a reproduction of dominant gender ideologies.

The results are in support of Barthes' (1977) understanding of myth, that is, the necessity that the repeated signs over time and in various cultures turn historically and culturally created meanings into natural and unquestioned realities. The denotative level of the advertisements shows things such as cooking, cleaning, feeding the kids, etc. as normal household tasks. The activities at the connotative level are connected with love, sacrifice, responsibility and harmony within a family. These meanings are repeated constantly in various commercial settings and the meanings eventually become myths which naturalise motherhood and domestic care work as a defining feature of ideal femininity. As a result, the gender roles look like something that is natural as opposed to being socially constructed, which is what Barthes called the ideological role of advertising.

This study also supports Fairclough's (2013) perspective that there is a reflexive and reproductive relationship between discourse and social relations. Maternal responsibilities are always presented as a form of verbal discourse that justifies traditional expectations by not explicitly mandating them as caring, emotional labour and domestic work. Adverts never depict domestic work as a family affair; instead they repeatedly portray women as the main providers for children's development and the wellbeing of the family and household. This pattern represents the way in which commercial discourse normalises gender division of labour, making it appear as though it is emotionally exciting and palatable for audiences to get on board with.

Likewise, the results validate the principles of the visual grammar of Kress and van Leeuwen (2021). In each of the ads, the composition, salience, background story framing and the camera angles always make the mother the subject of the ad in the home setting. In the kitchens, at the dining tables and at the family living rooms femininity is being built and confirmed in the presence of the visual. Repeated presentations of warm lighting, close-up facial expressions and intimate family interactions focus the viewer's attention on the maternal care as an emotional ground of family life. These visual elements complement

language and sound to reinforce the ideological content that women have the natural responsibility of caring and keeping families together.

The study also adds to the existing literature on the representation of gender in advertising, emphasizing the significance of a multimodal semiotic approach. Previous research has tended to focus on certain linguistic or visual aspects of gender, but the present analysis reveals that meanings are produced by combining verbal, visual and acoustic resources. Emotional language, domestic imagery, and soft instrumental music are found to work together to build coherent representations of motherhood and caregiving, suggesting that gender ideology is not transmitted by any specific communicative resource but rather is accomplished through multiple semiotic modes. This integrated approach generates a more holistic understanding of the societal perception of gender in the context of advertising.

An interesting result of the research is that the ads depict women as having substantial symbolic and emotional power in the family, but restrict it to the domestic sphere. Mothers are always depicted as leaders or decision makers in childcare, nutrition, emotional health, family relationship etc., indicating that care giving is an important kind of influence. The impact of this influence tends to be limited to the family sphere or to challenge the gender order in a limited way. This has led to the promotion of the significance of women in the advertisements, while at the same time it encourages the notion that women's main domain is still the home. This duality reveals the complexity of power in commercial discourse: the recognition of women's role alongside traditional gender boundaries that are being reproduced.

The overall results suggest that Pakistani television is still creating culturally hegemonic constructions of femininity, as a set of common multimodal representations of motherhood, caregiving, and domestic responsibility (domestic burden) keep re-emerging. This study integrates Barthes' semiotic theory, combined with the critical discourse analysis and visual grammar, to illustrate that commercial advertisements are not just persuasive marketing texts, but are also powerful cultural discourses that inform the public's understanding of gender and family life. The study thus enriches the discourse of multimodal study and gender portrayal by revealing the role of day-to-day advertising in the process of building and normalising gender ideologies in the Pakistani socio-cultural context.

5. Conclusion

The present study focused on the multimodal semiotic analysis of selected TV commercials of Pakistan to analyze the construction of gender identities and power relation through Barthes' (1977) approach. The study showed that the combination of verbal, visual and auditory cues can convey meaning that is not only product-related but also carries a message of a wider cultural imagination and values of gender and family life, seen in the

five purposively selected advertisements used: Surf Excel, Nestlé NIDO, Sufi Cooking Oil, Tapal Danedar and National Foods.

The results indicated that motherhood is always portrayed as the dominant image of femaleness in the advertisements. In the chosen commercials, women were largely depicted as family caregivers, nurturers and keepers of family health and happiness and home spaces were the main locations for enacting these identities and reiterating them. The denotative level of the advertisements shows everyday activities in the home, the connotative level of the advertisements shows that the activities become associated with love, care, responsibility and harmony within the family, and the mythical level of the advertisements suggests that domestic care-giving is a natural characteristic of ideal womanhood. Moreover, power is not exercised in the formal sense but in the form of 'emotional labour', 'care-giving' and 'symbolic power' in the home, with mothers being key to the stability of the household, yet their power is limited to the 'private sphere'.

The study fits into the developing literature on gender representations as it shows the importance of a multimodal semiotic analysis of television advertising. It is not an analysis of language or images as such, but rather how verbal, visual and audio resources are intertwined to recreate culturally embedded gender ideas. These results reveal that Advertising is a commercial and cultural discourse which influences public perceptions of femininity and motherhood in the present day Pakistan society and its relationships.

Study was conducted on five popular TV commercials but the results of the study are not generalizable to all advertisements in Pakistani media because the study selected only TV ads of household products. Future research could involve a more extensive and varied collection of ads, an analysis of the comparison between representations in digital advertising versus TV or in changing literary depictions of masculinity and fatherhood, and/or in representation of women's professional identities in ads today. These studies would not only help to build the understanding of the changing dynamics of media discourse, culture and gender in Pakistan but also would provide more insights into the matter.

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