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Advertisements as Agent of Social Change – A Study of

Contemporary Advertising Scene in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

The research paper examines the contemporary advertising scene in Pakistan to trace the evidence regarding advertisements acting as an agent of social change. The research is qualitative in nature. The content analysis of Pakistani TV advertisements aired during 2019-2021 is carried out and 15 advertisements containing a message about any type of social change are listed out. The discourse analysis of the selected advertisement has been conducted to analyze how these ads are fostering social change in the country. The study finds that recently there are many advertising campaigns launched in the country that contain powerful messages supporting change in social structure, order, attitude, and behavior. The research concludes that Pakistani advertisers seem to recognize the importance of advertisement as



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a tool for bringing phenomenal social change in the country. Therefore, advertisements are acting as agents of social change in Pakistan.

Keyword: Advertisement, Social Change, Pakistan. Attitude and Behaviors

Introduction

Advertising is a form of communication that employs a variety of strategies and plans to convey messages intended for the promotion of any brand, product, or service (Roberts, 2016; Pavlovskaya et al, 2021). The advertising messages target the behaviors of potential consumers and influence their buying behaviors, attitudes, and decision-making processes. Daily, an average mass media user is exposed to thousands of advertising messages through various electronic, print, and online communication channels (Jefte, 2015). Therefore, the impact of these advertisements is not merely limited to their buying behavior, but their overall attitude and thinking are also influenced by the messages that they came across through different types of advertisements (Perloff, 2014). As defined by Dahlen and Rosengren (2016) advertising is “brand-initiated communication intent on impacting people”. This definition indicates the broad impact of advertising which is not limited to product purchase decisions but influences the overall attitudes and behavior of people and society.



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Worldwide the advertising scene is often marked with objectification and sexualization on a gender basis (Jeff & Ross, 2019) but communication experts widely believed that in general, mass media advertisements can be used for good as they can convince people to change behavior (De Mooij, 2019). Tomskey (2019) believes that advertising being a highly influential medium of mass communication has a phenomenal impact on society. It possesses the tendency not only to develop but also to invert the social norms, public opinion, and attitudes of individuals as well as society (Jeff & Ross, 2019).

In the contemporary era, the importance of advertising is accepted widely in the construction of social norms, community behaviors, and attitudes. There is a wide range of available literature that shows the importance of advertising in the context of social change promotion, however, studying the impact of advertising on social change is still relevant (Pavlovskaya et al, 2021). especially when Pakistani advertisers seem to recognize the importance of advertising as a tool to bring social change; it is important to systematically evaluate and document these efforts. For a long period, the Pakistani advertising industry has also been playing its role in thickening gender-based stereotypes and reinforcing typical thinking about gender roles, taboos, and social class differences (Mustafa, 2019). It is observed



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that over the decades, taboos were rarely discussed in ads and no prominent voice is raised in Pakistani commercials against negative social behaviors like body shaming, bullying, gender stereotypes, and eliminating social class differences. During the last few years, however, a fresh breath of air has entered the Pakistani advertising scenario. Various creative advertising campaigns based on strong messages about social change are indicating a shift in advertisers' strategy toward conveying meaningful messages having the potential to foster change. This research study examines the contemporary advertising scene and identifies some strong messages that the advertisers in Pakistan are delivering in their campaigns about social change.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Are contemporary Pakistani advertisements acting as an agent of social change?

HYPOTHESIS

H1. Pakistani advertisers are fostering change in society through strong messages about social change



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Literature Review

Conventionally, the general practice of advertising was confined to the selling of products and services only. Weibe (1952) raised the question "Why can't you sell brotherhood like you sell soap? This question implies that conventional advertising is most of the time linked with sales of products and not values and social cause, despite the fact it tends to influence public behavior and attitude in all possible directions. McGinniss's (1969) best-selling book "The Selling of the President 1968" gave an answer to this question and shows that advertisements can sell anything and not just products and services. He gave the example of the US Presidential elections when Nixon used mass media for his campaign and all creative heads joined together to promote him as a 'brand'. It shows that advertisement has the power to build the mindset of people, it can influence their behavior in general and not merely related to a brand.

Das (2014) studied the Indian advertising scene and observed that advertisers including big commercial organizations are gradually shifting towards transmitting strong social messages through the application of marketing and advertising principles. The study shows that there is an upsurge in the trend of creating ads that not merely promote products and services, but they also create awareness among the masses regarding various social values and eventually pave the way for positive social change. The



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study mentions various Indian advertisements that educate people about healthcare, environmental protection, social reforms, social values, and different important issues that were conventionally not focused on in the advertisements of commercial organizations. The researcher believes that this shift in advertisers' strategy is a positive step towards bringing social change and social development in the country.

Hira (2013) observed that advertisers are widely looking for creative ideas to stand against various forms of social problems. The researcher found mounting evidence showing that advertisers have now become socially responsible and create campaigns that convey messages having positive effects on society for a long period. The advertisers in India Tata, Infosys, Amul, Godrej, Maruti, HCL, and Hero Honda are targeting human behaviors and attempting to bring a shift in the conventional thinking about different social problems.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social Change is defined as the 'alteration of mechanisms within the social structure, characterized by changes in cultural symbols, rules of behaviors, social organizations, or value systems (Karl, 1944). Simple speaking, the theory of social change refers to an observable change in the social order of society that ultimately has an impact on the entire social mechanism and



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across all social institutions including family, economy, state, etc. Social change also hints towards the paradigm shift in the socioeconomic structure of the society that eventually enables it to move forward and evolve into a better one (Steven, 1999).

The classic Marxist theory (1904) of social change suggests that when there is an alteration in the production system, it is inevitable to experience a change in the social class system as well. This stance indicates that when the labor market structure goes through a transformation, the social class system is also altered. therefore, a change in the composition of the workforce resulting from the inclusion of more female labor can not only result in a change in the production system but all over the social structure tends to change. Neo-evolutionist theories view social change as a long-term process that gradually occurs within the society and passes through several stages to bring societal change

The Diffusion theory proposed by Everett Rogers (1962) explains social change from a technological perspective and proposes that new ideas are communicated through new communication channels and bring change in society. This theory affirms the role of a communication channel in bringing social change through the transmission of new ideas. The adoption of new ideas does not come abruptly and it takes time for new ideas to be accepted in society, however, the effectiveness of communication makes it possible



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for new ideas to penetrate society and alter the behavior, attitude, and opinion of the members of society.

Rice & Atkin (2013) explains that in a broader sense, social change is associated with a change in a social relation and this change leads to a change in the social structure and processes where the ultimate result is societal change. Social change is contributed by several factors that vary from society to society. widely observed drivers of social change include demographic processes, natural environment, technological innovation, economic progression, induction of new ideas, and social and political movements and processes.

These theories explain that social change is a long-term process and change does not occur instantly in social behavior and social structure. However, the role of communication channels and the transmission of new ideas from these channels is a defining factor in this context. When new ideas are transmitted effectively through new communication channels, the likelihood of social change occurrence becomes higher.

Summary

The following elements are extracted from the review of literature and theories:

- Social change is a gradual change in the social order, social structure, and societal opinion and attitude
- Communication channels inject new ideas into society and pave the way for social change



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Based on this understanding, the Pakistani advertisements during 2018-2021 are reviewed and those advertisements are selected that convey messages regarding the change in the social order, social structure, and change in thinking and attitude of the society.

Research Method

The research is based on **Qualitative Content Analysis**. The analysis of the selected content has been done through the discourse analysis method as it is necessary to see the role of selected advertising in creating awareness about various issues in society. For this purpose, a thorough analysis of the Pakistani Television advertisements aired during 2019-2021 was conducted and 15 advertisements were selected where the social change efforts are visible. The units of analysis for selecting the social change-based advertisement include ‘reverse gender roles, breaking gender stereotypes, discouraging body shaming, promoting social equality, awareness about food wastage, hygiene, national solidarity, and gender equality.

The TVCs were accessed through YouTube. The selected advertisements’ web links are provided in the research report. All videos are downloaded from YouTube and saved in Google Drive to assure their accessibility at any time. The selected TV advertisements were then analyzed using the method of ‘**Discourse Analysis**. Discourse analysis is a research data analysis method that is used for analyzing content in its social context (Hodges, Kuper, and Reeves, 2008). Since this research study is focused on the role of selected advertisements in bringing social change, the analysis of these



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advertisements has been carried out in their social context to understand the need for social change and the anticipated outcome of the selected advertisements. The qualitative analysis of the selected content is carried out to evaluate the contribution of the advertisements in promoting a certain type of change in the behaviors and attitudes of the people in Pakistani society.

Research Findings and Analysis

The content analysis of the Pakistani television advertisements aired during 2019-2021 resulted in the identification of 15 advertising campaigns that convey messages about social change by challenging existing social structure and social order. Those advertisements are selected that rather than reinforcing stereotypes, gender roles, class differences, and negative social behavior, insist upon changing them and adopting alternate opinions. All advertisements are allotted a number to refer to in the discussion. The advertisements selected for the discourse analysis are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: List of Pakistani advertisements containing messages about social change

Ad #	Product name	Ad slogan/theme	Anticipated Change	Social	Video link to the ad
1	Shaan Shoop Noodles	Trust to Must hy	Breaking stereotypes	gender	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W7m6u_tLc7U
2	AdamJee Insurance	Khwabo ko aur zindagi dou	Importance of Education	Girl	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FzArW7J9UUM&ab_cha



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				nnel=BestPakistaniADS
3.	Amreeli Steel	Acha nahi Sahi	Girl Education and Spreading rightfulness	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t9G_3jnXFEI
4.	Shaan Food	Gher chalana aur khana banana kisi aik ka kaam nahi	Altering Gender roles	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t9G_3jnXFEI
5	Dostea - Fauji Foods Limited	Dostea Family	Breaking gender stereotypes	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YIMv4aXrboI
6	Dalda	#MeriAwaz	Raising voice against body shaming	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IIaCjSnLmV0
7	Tapal Family Mixture Tea	Meri Family – Meri Streangth	Giving confidence to family members to embrace their flaws	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ls7T6-B72to
8	Gul Ahmed	Mai Perfect Hoon	Embracing Flaws	https://www.facebook.com/advertistan/videos/gul-ahmed-summer-lawn-mein-perfect-hoon-tvc-2017/1271342159640649/
9	Kisan Cooking Oil	Time to Change	Spreading care for each other	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ea_lK2X6aE&ab_channel=EZFunChannel
10	Keenwood Appliances	Khush Raho	Gender Equality	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ipcaLWSFRDQ
11	Meezan Cooking Oil	Ramzan Ad	Negating typical thinking associated with saas-bahu relation	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3SnT2w0AZzU
12	Dastak Cooking Oil	Split the Plate	Share food rather than wasting	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P1XH_FXLBDk



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13	Jazaa Food	Chakho Naimaton Ka Maza	Sharing and eliminating inequalities	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IYsJZsF-yg0
14	Sincere Sanitary Napkins	Saath her baar – breaking the period taboo	Creating awareness regarding ministration hygiene and eliminating myths	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RET8p4EPznI
15	Tapal Pakistan	Stay Strong in Covid	National solidarity	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S4a2iEAnhhk&feature=emb_logo

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

The theory of social change affirms that when new ideas are transmitted especially through technologically backed communication channels, they gradually get placed in society. Different segments of society view new ideas differently based on their characteristics but over time, the messages or new ideas, if communicated effectively can influence the behavior and attitude of people up to some extent and can also transform the social structure and social order. In this research study, the advertisements of Pakistan are analyzed to examine their role in bringing social change.

It is widely observed that in most societies, advertisements reflect societal values to gain instant acceptance among the masses. Delivery of a message contradicting social norms is often considered a risk and a potential reason for the failure of the communication process. Due to this reason, advertising,



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in general, corresponds to the existing social structure, values, and norms.

However, as soon as the powerfulness of advertisement as a medium of influencing and altering people's attitudes is realized, the advertising landscape has been exhibiting signs of change.

Conventionally, advertisements worldwide and in Pakistan, have most of the time played a role in reinforcing gender stereotypes. In the patriarchal society, advertisers conventionally remain inclined toward the socially established and socially accepted gender roles. For instance, advertisements are commonly used to show girls playing with dolls and boys with cars and airplanes. Similarly, parents are shown worried about saving for daughters' marriages and son education, and women alone are confined to the kitchen responsibilities.

Not only this but the myth about the weakness of women is also strengthened through several advertisements. Women are shown struggling with everyday problems like washing stains from utensils, washrooms, and clothes. Suddenly, a man comes with superpowers (product) and solves their problem in a matter of few minutes (e.g. Ehsan Khan saving the day with Harpic, Wasim Akram aik dhulae challenge, and Feroz Khan as Lemon Max Bar Hero). Similarly, women in several advertisements are shown busy cooking a variety of dishes but remain unconfident about their effort until and unless men approve of the taste of their food. Such advertisements



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reinforce the thinking that women can't survive without men. Even for their daily chores, they need help from men and no matter how much effort they put into doing their tasks, they need men's approval to validate their effort. Contrary to these ideas, the contemporary advertising scene has been showing some positive signs as well. In some recent advertisements, a gradual change has been observed in the messages, and rather than reinforcing stereotypes, the advertisement scene is transiting to the ones that break these stereotypes along with transmitting some other powerful messages regarding social change. Women and girls are now commonly seen as independent, confident, and strong human beings having the capability to handle all sorts of tasks be it their domestic responsibility or any outdoor work. For example, in Ad#1 the girl not only prepares the meal (noodles) but also fixes the problem in the car and surprised her father. In another ad for this product, the girl went out to the grocery rather than waiting for men to come and do this task. This message effectively works for breaking gender stereotypes and transmits the message that women can also perform all types of tasks.

Another powerful message is conveyed in Ad#2. In this ad, first, they show a father happy with the birth of a daughter rather than considering it as a liability. The daughter gets an education and her dream to become an architect is fulfilled, despite the pressure of society. The stereotypical



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thinking of society ruins uncountable dreams daily when someone has been stopped from doing something that he or she like just because it does not match the muscularity/femininity standards decided for their gender by society. But, in this advertisement, they powerfully convey the message that everyone has the right to adopt a career of his/her own choice and there are no reasons, girls could not adopt any particular occupation.

Ad#3 shows a trend that is not common in society i.e. saving and investing for girls abroad education. Mostly, parents save for their daughter's dowry and son's education but in this ad, they show a father who invests his savings in his daughter's education and sends her abroad. The advertisements are giving fresh breath of air as they are transmitting messages about tolerance and acceptance regarding people performing different tasks that may contradict the general perceptions about their gender. For example, Ad#4 shows a man preparing meals in the kitchen for his daughter who comes from the office. In another ad for this product, a woman is shown sharing the financial burden with a man. The Ad#5 advertising campaign contains many messages challenging gender roles. They show the wife as a doctor and the husband as a chef. Also, the ad shows a man playing soft music and the woman knows how to shoot a gun. These advertisements convincingly attempted to normalize working against the preconceived opinions regarding gender and their occupations and interest.



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Ads #6,7 and 8 point out towards a very sensitive and important issue that is not commonly discouraged in ads. These ads condemn body shaming and bullying and impact strong messages to people to stay strong and embrace their flaws. these ads motivate people not to be bothered by social pressure and bullying and to focus on their strengths rather than weaknesses. Men and Women of different characteristics that are considered flaws in society (unfair complexion, overweight, stemming) are shown in these ads, and the message is given that everyone is perfect in his/her way. No one has the right to judge others, nor should one be bothered about others' opinions about them. In these ads, a powerful message to insist people stay confident and strong is delivered very effectively.

Some brands are championing social change by taking bold and creative steps. They go against the decided norms of society and give the audience food for thought that they can also act against the typical thinking of society. For example, Ads #9,10, and 11 portray scenarios where love and care for all family members are promoted. These ads show that the typical Saas-Bahu relationship could be carried out with love and affection when both sides show tolerance and care. The Mother-In-Law cooking for the son and daughter-in-law breaks the stereotype that only the daughter in laws is liable for preparing meals. Similarly, the husband showing care for his wife and



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covering her mistake is another positive message conveyed in these advertisements.

Apart from gender roles and stereotypes, some advertisements are also spreading awareness regarding some very important issues. When many advertisements show huge tables loaded with a variety of dishes, they don't give any message about the importance of every grain of food. But in Ad#12, it is beautifully depicted that for some people even leftover food is very precious. The ad shows the importance of every single grain of food and also encourages to share food with others in a respectable manner. A similar message is delivered in Ad#13, where the mother shares food with the maid and explains the importance of sharing food with her son also. Ad#14 talks about an issue that is not discussed in the advertisement with clarity of message because talking about periods is considered taboo. This ad, however, talks about the myths related to periods and attempts to break those myths by spreading awareness about hygiene. Ad#15 talks about national solidarity and conveys the message that at difficult times, nations need to stand together by overlooking all their differences.

The messages about social change transmitted through these advertisements indicate that the journey towards a gradual change has begun in Pakistan. People are going to start thinking beyond the conventional mindset and will accept differences positively. This change eventually is expected to fuel the



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social progression of society. When people will start accepting women playing a variety of roles across all fields, the overall productivity of society will increase. Furthermore, the participation of women in financial matters will reduce the burden on men. The trend of personal income and saving generation will support the economy as well. The messages spreading awareness regarding the values like sharing and caring for all are very important for every society. When people will start showing care and concern for each other, they will head towards a mentally healthy and relaxed lifestyle. The trend of sharing and caring could make society a progressive one because once such an attitude is developed, people tend to support each other in all facets of life.

CONCLUSION

Social change is not solely about alteration in the personal attitude, behaviors, and opinions of individuals but it also mandates a visible and practical change in the opinion of the public and societal beliefs. These outcomes of this research study show that advertisement is much more than simply pushing products and boosting sales. They do not merely reflect societal trends but also make powerful contributions to shaping those. The research indicates a positive change that the advertisement industry rather than focusing only on promoting products for increasing sales, is also



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working diligently to open minds, challenge paradigms, negate shallow labeling, and break taboos. News ideas and debates are being initiated by the advertisers in Pakistan and people are encouraged to talk about issues they have never spoken about before.



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