

Representation Of Children In Pakistani Television Commercials: A Visio-Semiotics Analysis

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Abstract: Television (TV) commercials in Pakistan nowadays improvise novel ideas in order to build secondary discourse and power relations. Current study probes into the representation of children in Pakistani TV commercials over the past five years. We have selected the images of the children from 2018 to 2022 in Pakistani TV commercials and analyzed under the theoretical framework of Visual Semiotics presented by Roland Barthes. Barthian semiological analysis of evaluating an image on both levels of significance i.e. denotative and connotative was used as analytical framework. The results of the current study demonstrate that the TV commercials are usually inclined towards social stereotypical notions and traditional division of masses as "haves" and "have nots". Moreover, the division amongst the masses on the basis of color and gender is also reflected significantly.

Keywords: Pakistani TV Commercials, Representation, Children, Visual Semiotics.

I. Introduction

In the present world, role of media is quite crucial. A large number of audience is benefited through media in getting information and entertainment simultaneously. Although social media and the availability of internet in every nook and corner of the world has revolutionized modern communication systems yet importance of television on account of its audio and visual quality, authenticity of the communicated data and diversity in wide range of programs can neither be ignored nor denied. This importance and worth of TV gives it a privilege to change or transform the ideologies that may direct the audience to emotional involvement. Apart from its other functions and roles, television is also a source of advertisement. In today's world, in modern societies all over the world, one of the major television genres is advertising (Cook, 2015).

Current study unearths various stereotypes in the representation of children in Pakistani TV commercials through Barthes' theory of Visual Semiotics. According to Aronson (1972) identical aspects are attributed to each member in a particular group through stereotypes without taking into consideration the obvious differences amongst the members of the group. This is a stereotype that the children belonging to upper class are well groomed, well mannered, healthy, physically active and presentable while the children belonging to lower class are unhygienic, dirty and physically not presentable. We wanted to observe the same phenomenon in Pakistani TV commercials. According to our hypothesis, there is stereotypical representation of children in terms of class, color and gender in Pakistani TV commercials. Through the course of a rigorous analysis of TV commercials from this particular perspective, the hypothesis was proven to be

correct and subsequently accepted. The findings of this research may be generalized to other TV commercials in Pakistan.

Fairclough (1992) also believes that these class based binary stereotypes still exist in many modern societies and social organizations which are usually observable in electronic and print media. He also demonstrates that the media attempts to legitimize these stereotypes through different representations of different people belonging to different social groups. So the current research tends to unveil these stereotypes propagated through TV commercials specially in the representation of children. After giving a precise review of previous studies the researchers will proceed to narrate the problem statement of the research. The study in hand will analyze five images of the children broadcasted in Pakistani TV commercials under Barthian Theory of Semiology (BTS) in particular prior to giving a brief overview of research methodology.

2. Research Objectives

BTS has been applied to different media discourses by the different researchers in order to examine the ideologies of discourse producers. Current study aims to explore the representation of children in Pakistani TV commercials. Following are the main objectives of the study:

1. To examine the representation of children in Pakistani TV commercial images.
2. To analyze the stereotypical representation of children in Pakistani TV commercials particularly based on class, color and gender.

3. Research Questions

In Pakistani media, the stereotypes of class, color and gender are projected in dramas, films and commercials. This study, which is specific to the representation of children in Pakistani TV

commercials investigates following research questions.

1. How are the children represented in TV commercials broadcasted in Pakistan?
2. What aspects of the stereotypes of class, color and gender are projected through the images of children in Pakistani TV commercials.
3. To what extent is Roland Barthes' theory of Visual Semiotics helpful to identify these stereotypes?

4. Literature Review

A bulk of literature has been produced on the representation of men, women and children exclusively on print media, social media and electronic media. Shartiely (2005) examined the particular portrayal of men and women in the commercials broadcasted on different TV channels. Although this study lacks the representation of children yet it remarkably disapproves the viewpoints of intelligentsia which are boldly presented in real life situations. Signorelli et al (1991) examining the ads on MTV also proved that these commercial are gender-stereotyped.

Since least work is found on the said topic which exclusively examines the representation of children in Pakistani TV commercials, this research will help the scholars to enhance their sphere of research to this aspect i.e. representation of children in TV commercials. It is quite obvious that on one hand television programs provide the audience considerable entertainment and information but on the other hand these are used to strengthen the stereotypes and to propagate certain ideologies. McLuhan (1964) examined that media discourses and commercials influence the masses as well as shape their ideologies, and change their options and thoughts about certain "social goods".

Kollar (2008) has also examined the impact and projection of color in visual texts whether these are magazines, leaflets or TV commercials. Through the depiction of colors within the framework of the picture or the objects, certain ideology of the text producer is projected. In the current study, we will examine that what ideology of the visual text producers is enacted through the commercials broadcasted on Pakistani TV commercials. Anderson et al. (2015) also probed into the notion of “sleeping beauty” through the application of social semiotics, and concluded that images presented in a particular way are prone to express the ideology of the visual text producer which ultimately influences the ideology of the audience. So in this paper we bring forth what ideology is enacted through commercials on Pakistani TV channels. Although every TV channel has its own ideology that it keeps instilling in the minds of its viewers yet there happens to be common ideology which all TV channels propagate through the means of commercials. Mega corporations in Pakistan are also involved in strengthening the stereotypes.

Maher et al. (2008) analyzed 155 TV commercials at global scale and concluded that there is an obvious slant of racial ethnicity in these commercials. Now, what is this racial ethnicity? Since we are considering Pakistani TV commercials as subject of our study, there are ample examples of this racial ethnicity. If a TV commercial regarding the benefits of the milk of a specific brand projects white children whose complexion is appealing and it doesn't project the children of the lower strata of society whose complexion is comparatively not appealing, there is an obvious racial ethnicity. Though the milk is equally beneficial for all children regardless of their race, class and color but representation of only fascinating children for this purpose calls for serious attention. Larson (2002) is of the view that this sort of practice in TV commercials further aggravates racial ethnicity among the viewers of these commercials. He observed

children and AHANA (black, African and Asian) children on TV commercials and concluded that AHANA children are represented as inferior to other children. They are presented with certain deficiencies like lack of communication and interaction with other people who are around them in the commercials.

5. Research Method and Data Collection

In this section of research methods, first of all we are mentioning our research approach which has been utilized in this study. This is of course, Barthes' Semiological Approach. Roland Barthes is a remarkable figure in French school of structuralism and semiotics. Talking about Visual Semiotics Barthes states two layers of the meaning of an image.

5.1. Denotative meaning:

It states that what is being depicted in the image as well as it answers the question of who i.e. who is being depicted in the image?

5.2. Connotative Meaning:

It suggests the ideas being expressed through the depiction of a particular image. In other words, it points out the ideologies, values and beliefs behind the depiction of a particular image. According to Leeuwen (2001) in what way an object is being represented in an image. Barthes had a belief that through complex semiotic coordination, an image is exposed to ideological and social aspects that we can explain at connotative level.

Barthes methodology is widely practiced as an analytical tool of research in recent media studies. An analysis of visual semiotics helps us unearth the different ideologies and beliefs behind the representation of different objects on television screens. We can learn how TV commercials, serial, cartoons and others caricatures transform the ideologies and strengthen or weaken certain

stereotypes through certain visual representation of men, women and children. In this way the current study reveals hidden aspects and meanings of the images of children presented in Pakistani TV commercials.

Creswell (2007) is in the favor of purposive sampling method in qualitative research so for the current study we have selected five images of the children which are presented in Pakistani TV commercials from the year 2018 to 2022. We have selected these images for analysis because these images demonstrate the stereotypes of class, color and gender. Through these sample images we have analyzed the representation of children in Pakistani TV commercials in the context of the stereotypes mentioned above. As Aiello (2020) suggests sometimes a painting or image or any visual representation is not mere a representation; it expresses certain realities, beliefs, values and ideologies through its depiction of men, women and children in a certain way. The pictures which have been selected for the current study will be analyzed under the theoretical framework of visual semiotics to prove the stereotyped class, color and gender in Pakistani commercials. We have selected five images of the children in Pakistani TV commercials for each year from 2018 to 2022. In our study this choice of ours has helped us a lot to proceed systematically with our analysis observing the change in the representation of children from year to year.

6. Analysis and Results

Although every year commercials on TV channels attempt to improvise innovations for the purpose of advertisement yet fundamental ideology of the text producers remains the same. When we collected the data of Pakistani TV commercials over the span of past five years, we were surprised to observe that despite innovations and improvisations, technological advancements and graphical revolution the stereotypes of class, color and gender have their expression throughout the past five years continuously. We have taken one representative TV commercial from each year and then analyzed them one by one under the theoretical framework of visual semiotics presented by Roland Barthes. Picture number 1.2018 denotes a baby who is taking his breakfast in the commercial of Apple Jacks. Apple Jacks an American brand owned by Kellogg Company operated in different countries of the world. Apple Jacks promises nutritious breakfast full of vitamins, fruit and milk which keeps the masses healthy and energized. Denotative meanings of the image are quite clear that there is baby with a pack of Apple Jacks, engaged in an activity i.e. taking breakfast. If we interpret the image at connotative level in the context of Visual Semiotics, we can explore certain other things from the image which cannot be perceived from the surface level.



Image 1.2018

Stereotypes of class, color and gender are clearly expressed at connotative level through this image. Physical appearance of the baby suggests that he does not belong to a working class or a lower family and so does his dressing. Remember that the commercial was broadcasted in Pakistan in the month of June when there is intense heat all around. Baby is wearing full sleeves T-shirt, which suggests that he is sitting in an air conditioned room. It is another proof that the upper class is projected through the visual discourse since working class and poor people in Pakistan cannot afford the luxury of air conditioned environment at their homes for their kids. Color of the baby in image 1.2018 is white and fair, now the question arises whether Apple Jacks cannot provide nutrition to the babies whose color is not fair and white. If benefits of Apple Jacks are same for all the kids whether they belong to rich class or poor class then why a kid

is not presented in this commercial who belongs to a village, having pastoral and poor family ground. If we understand it from the perspective of the stereotypes of gender, why a female has not been presented in this image. It seems that Apple Jacks brand works and produces the results only if it is used by male babies which is utterly ridiculous. Roland Barthes claim is quite just that visual expressions connote something different to what they apparently denote. And these connotations help the visual text producers to express their own ideology as well to reshape the opinions of the viewers constructing their ideologies in a particular direction. Hence we conclude out of this commercial that high class people, their activities and their life style is projected through this commercial ignoring the lifestyle of poor people; gender difference is also expressed through this image by projecting a male baby in the commercial.



Image 2.2019

Image 2.2019 is a TV commercial of Pakistani motors company Suzuki which was broadcasted in 2019. According to Roland Barthes' notion of denotative meaning of an image, the image 2.2019 demonstrates a seven to eight years' child standing in the background of Suzuki car receiving the gift from another Suzuki car owner. If we analyze the commercial at connotative level, it is quite clear that the kid belongs to poor family and he is receiving charity from the Suzuki car owner. The child is not clad in any brand's wearing, rather he is dressed in ordinary clothes stitched by a cheap tailor. Secondly, the cap on his head is the cap usually used by the tullah of the mosques and other madrassa going children. Many stereotypes are there in this image i.e. 1) religious kids grow up on charity, 2) poor kids are at the service of the rich class, 3) poor kids are not happy and pleased with their lives since we can

see the dismay, discomfort, fear and poverty from the eyes of the kid, 4) kids belonging to lower strata of society are not physically appealing and attractive as we observed in image 1.2018. Stereotyping of class and color is quite clear in this image. As far as gender is concerned, again there is a hidden ideology behind the portrayal of boy in this commercial rather than a girl. It suggests that people belonging to poor class do not permit their daughters to share the burden of the economy of the nation as a whole. They do not consider that girls are worthy enough to do some good for the family so they are imprisoned in the four walls of their home. Hence we can logically conclude out of this TV commercial of Suzuki motors that the text producer has strengthened the stereotypes of class, color and gender through the visual depiction of a child in image 2.2019.



Image 3.2020

Image 3.2020 is the commercial of Surf Excel which is a washing powder. Denotatively, at the surface level the image shows a child with his grandmother and pack of Surf Excel which promises the reward of a car on purchasing a Surf Excel at the price of Rs. 10. When we examine the commercial at connotative level, certain things seem to us ridiculous. Firstly, the place where image of the child has been captured is a luxurious place. The background, the furniture and the decorations in the image connote that the child and his grandmother belong to a wealthy family. The slogan written on the pack is "خریدو اور جیتو" which means "buy and win" but this commercial producer didn't choose the right place to raise this slogan. Child in the image has already all luxuries of life which are quite obvious from the image. This slogan may attract the poor people, mention of Rs. 10 will also attract the poor working class. Now, since this commercial is meant for poor and working class then why there is projection of a child who belongs to upper

class. It shows that the TV commercials are obsessed with class to such an extent that these commercials even project upper class children where logically there is no room for their projection. In this way visual semiotics help us retrieve the hidden ideology of the text producers. "Buy and win" a car which is featured on the upper left corner of packet is a slogan that is advertised to seduce working class. Poor in working class in Pakistan always dream for a house and car of their own which they actually do not have. So both the things are presented here in this commercial for their seduction. Secondly, in this depiction we will not find any child belonging to upper class who is physically weak, ugly or unrepresentable. This again proves that children in Pakistani TV commercials are presented in the background of gender, class and color.



Image 4.2021

Image 4.2021 is TV commercial of a washing powder. It features an elderly lady showing affection to a boy who is clad in filthy nicker and vest. Girl is also there in this shot but the text producer's focus is on the boy. Small packet, containing washing powder, in the lower right corner of the image also features a sports "boy" on its covering. Actually, this is the boy who is the ambassador of the brand, neither the girl nor the elderly lady. The boy is the main focus of the commercial producer. It is the boy who grabs the viewers' attention in this entire commercial. Gender difference is clearly manifested in this commercial. Again, this commercial, too, reinforces the ideology of class distinction. Both, the boy and the girl, are wearing branded outfits which suggests that they belong to upper class. Wearing of the elderly lady is also not the wearing of the poor class ladies. Now, the question arises here is whether Surf Excel washing powder works only on the dresses of the upper class. If it is equally effective for the dresses of the poor people, why are poor people not projected and featured in this commercial?

The children who are depicted in image 4.2021 belong to upper class with cute physical appearance and expensive dressing that can be contrasted with the dressing of the child presented in the commercial of Suzuki in image 2.2019. Visual semiotics of both the images, if compared and contrasted, can help us understand the stereotypes of gender, class and color in these Pakistani TV commercials. If we generalize these findings, it can be concluded that TV commercials in Pakistan deal with upper class. The stereotypes of color, gender and class are being legitimized in these commercials. It shapes and transforms the opinions of the viewers regarding these stereotypes. Rich group of people in a Pakistani society has identical attributes and these attributes are enacted through the representation of children like this. Background of the image, though it is blurred, also testifies the hidden motive of the text producer. Paradoxically, rich class is least concerned with the stuff which is presented in this type of commercials; poor class is addressed in these commercials by featuring the children from the upper class.



Image 5.2022

Image 5.2022 also connotes the same hidden ideology of class based advertising. Although in image 5.2022 there is no considerable projection of gender since we can see two female babies along with one male baby yet the focus is on male baby. Through size, focus and tone of the image female children are backgrounded and male child is foregrounded. Image 5.2022 is the TV commercial of MCB, a private bank in Pakistan. This commercial was made on air at the eve of Independence Day of Pakistan. Buntings in the background and Pakistani flags in the hands of the children denote the patriotic spirit of the children. What this image denotes is utterly different to what it connotes. Only this class, the upper class, is free in Pakistan. This day is meant for these people only. Happiness and felicity on the faces of these children and the spark in their eyes is the result of the money that they have in their pocket and the money that their parents have in the banks. The difference between "haves" and "have nots" is connotatively projected in this

image. Aiello (2020) validated this point that every visual representation is not mere a visual portrayal but foregrounds certain ideologies, beliefs, and realities. Often bitter realities are hard to present directly in visual representations so the text producers often connotatively express their opinions on the social issues.

7. Conclusion

Utilizing Barthian semiological analysis of evaluating an image on both the levels of significance i.e. denotative level and connotative level, above precise analysis prompts us to conclude that representation of children in Pakistani TV commercials is not mere a representation, it is actually the construction of the ideology of widening up the gap between the lifestyle of poor children and the lifestyle of rich children. These commercials are not specific to any particular Pakistani TV channel rather these commercials have been on air on major TV channels of Pakistan during the course of past

five years. The study also concludes that such commercials aggravate the imbalanced class system in Pakistan. Apart from class, fairness of color is considerably highlighted and male children are preferred to female children which projects gender difference. Hence, stereotypical notion of class, color and gender is significantly consolidated through the representation of children in Pakistani TV commercials. However, the research was limited to just a few TV commercials over the span of past 5 years. These images were analyzed under the lenses of one theoretical framework i.e. Roland Barthes' theory of Visual Semiotics. In order to generalize the results there is dire need of extensive analysis of maximum possible Pakistani TV commercials.

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