

ABSTRACT

Representation of Women in the Advertisements of Contemporary Pakistani Magazines

This study investigates the representation of women in the advertisements of contemporary Pakistani magazines. Gender equality in a society demands that women should be perceived as equal citizens of the state. It demands effective legislation on the part of the government for which Pakistani women rights activists have been striving for some decades. However their struggles have failed to achieve the desired results because of the deeply embedded social prejudices against women empowerment and gender equality. It is an established fact that nowadays all forms of media including advertisements are a powerful tool for influencing public opinion which can be used for positive changes in the society or abused to maintain the status quo of injustice and inequality. The focus of this study is going to be the advertisements in contemporary Pakistani magazines because advertisements are a form of persuasive discourse that has a great impact on the social perceptions of the masses. This study will strive to find out the manner in which women are portrayed in these magazines, that is, whether their representation is the kind which coheres with the objectives of Pakistani women's struggle for gender equality. The researcher proposes to explore the issue from a feminist perspective placing it within the context of the Pakistani culture.

The key theoretical concepts running through this work are those of representation, semiotics, discourse and ideology, all of which are interconnected to one another and underline the fact that production of meaning is indeed a complex and powerful process.

The tools of analysis employed in this investigation are primarily those of semiotic analysis and critical discourse analysis because a combination of these two methods exhaustively brings out all the apparent and hidden ideologies of the discourse of advertisements which contains visual images in addition to written texts. Typical samples from different contemporary magazines have been selected and subjected to a detailed analysis using these two methods. This is a multidisciplinary study that is going to venture into the domains of discourse analysis, semiotics, cultural and media studies, and feminism. The study is basically qualitative in nature although some quantitative methods have also been employed to supplement the investigation.

Chapter 1 introduces the topic and builds the theoretical framework of the study in addition to giving a brief overview of issues related to women empowerment. Chapter 2 analyses some advertisement samples in detail to understand what messages about women and femininity are conveyed through them. Chapter 3 discusses a few samples of television commercials as a supplement to the analysis of magazine advertisements. Chapter 4 makes a comparative analysis of the contemporary magazine advertisements with those of the 1980s to explore whether the representation of women had been significantly different a quarter of a century back.

The researcher feels that there was a very strong justification for having undertaken this particular research because, though there have been many studies regarding women's rights in Pakistan, and a few about the portrayal of women in the media, there was no research from within the domain of discourse and semiotic studies to investigate how women were represented in the Pakistani advertisements.

The results of this study show that the advertisements contain layers of meanings which actually promote the ideologies of the patriarchal society by depicting women in stereotyped roles. By perpetuating the status quo of unequal gender relations in the Pakistani society, the portrayal of women in these advertisements detracts from the objectives of gender equality. The study proposes recommendations about changes in this regard so that the advertisements may have a representation of women which is more progressive, and conducive towards the objectives of justice and balance of power between the genders.