Reconstructing Fairness: A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Beauty Standards in Pakistani Social Media Advertisements

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ABSTRACT

The research intends to challenge assumptions regarding fairness in beauty standards in South Asian culture, notably in Pakistan, by exposing how social media platforms promote beauty norms and public views. The study investigates the portrayal of fairness in Pakistani social media advertising on platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube, as well as the cultural norms portrayed in these advertisements. A qualitative research approach was adopted, employing purposive sampling to select advertisements from Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok that either explicitly or implicitly promote fairness as a beauty standard. The study analyzed advertisements from the period 2020–2024 to capture contemporary trends and cultural changes. The primary analytical framework for this research was Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), introduced by Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen (1996). Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring themes, narratives, and cultural values reflected in the advertisements. The data suggested that social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok reinforce or redefine beauty standards, promoting inclusive advertising practices and challenging harmful stereotypes, influencing policymakers, advertisers, and content creators.

Keywords: Fairness, beauty standards, social media, advertisements, multimodal discourse analysis

INTRODUCTION

In recent times, the concept of beauty has undergone significant changes, particularly within the realms of advertising and media. In Pakistan, a society where traditional and modern cultural elements converge, beauty standards are shaped by both local traditions and global influences. Among the most enduring and powerful beauty ideals in Pakistani culture is fairness, which is often portrayed as the ultimate symbol of beauty and desirability. This ideal has become deeply embedded in cultural understandings of attractiveness, frequently associating fair skin with higher social status, success, and even moral superiority. The prominence of fairness in advertisements has notably grown across social media platforms, with brands increasingly using this standard to market products, such as skincare and cosmetics. This trend has raised important questions regarding the formation, reinforcement, and internalization of beauty standards in Pakistani society, particularly through the lens of digital media (Parvez, 2001).

The widespread portrayal of fairness as a beauty standard in Pakistani social media advertisements reflects broader cultural norms that equate lighter skin tones with beauty, privilege, and purity. From television

commercials to influencer campaigns on social platforms like Instagram and Facebook, marketing strategies focused on fairness dominate the media landscape, contributing to a narrow and exclusive definition of beauty. These advertisements not only reflect existing societal biases but also play a crucial role in reinforcing and perpetuating these biases, especially among young, impressionable audiences immersed in digital media (Abere, 2015).

In today's digital age, social media has an unparalleled influence on shaping public perceptions (Blay, 2009). Understanding the role of advertising in molding cultural norms is crucial for promoting a more equitable and inclusive society. The study also underscores the importance of critically examining how beauty standards are constructed and challenged, advocating for a shift toward more diverse and authentic depictions of beauty in Pakistani media (Chung, 2006).

Statement of the Problem

The existing research studies (Batool et al., 2022, and Shah & Saher, 2019) explored fairness as a beauty standard in TV commercials and print media. However, social media advertisements on platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok in this context are under-researched, focusing on how language and visuals are employed to reinforce fairness ideals. The study also explores how cultural norms and ideals are reflected in these advertisements. Moreover, the existing studies (Kalsoom, 2019; Saeed, 2022; Shah, 2019) analyzed the advertisements using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as their framework. This study aims to use Multi Modal Discourse Analysis (MDA) to analyze various communicative modes in advertisements.

Research Objectives

- To examine the portrayal of fairness as a beauty standard in Pakistani social media advertising on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube
- To investigate the cultural norms expressed in these advertisements

Research Questions

1. How fairness is portrayed as a beauty standard in Pakistani social media advertisements on Instagram, TikTok and YouTube?
2. How cultural norms are reflected in Pakistani beauty advertisements on social media?

Significance of the Study

This study explores the role of fairness in Pakistani social media advertisements and its cultural implications. It focuses on the influence of digital marketing on shaping modern beauty standards. The research provides insights into how societal norms are shaped in Pakistan, particularly in the context of social media. The findings can help advertisers, marketers, and media professionals understand the cultural and psychological impact of promoting a single beauty ideal. The study also offers policy recommendations for responsible and ethical advertising practices in Pakistan, aiming to foster a more inclusive media landscape that promotes positive body image and self-acceptance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Petley (2003) viewed advertising as a way through which products and services are showcased to the public. Advertisements of any culture are reflective of the values and norms of that culture. Taylor (1871) advocated that culture consists of beliefs, knowledge, art, law, custom, or habits that a man acquires as a member of society. The connection between culture and advertisements has been debated, as the advertisements across the world vary because they reflect different cultures. Mueller and Caillat (1996) are also of the view that advertisements mirror the local cultural norms. The production as well as reinforcement of societal values and ideologies is explored by Shaikh Bughio and Kadri (2015).

Rosul et al. (2024) explored that various linguistic features are used to attract the consumers. Fairness products claim to change not only skin color but also fate, as, according to them, beauty is synonymous with a better life and success in every walk of life. These advertisements also reflect the stern reality of life where women are judged by their skin tone and physical appearance rather than by their skills and abilities (David et al., 2002). Cahiken (1979) said that it has been observed that involving attractive and fair-skinned communicators is more effective for the promotion of a product, as they easily change the mindset of people as compared to unattractive communicators.

Hunter (2011) argued that the advertisements of skin-bleaching products portray an unsuccessful dark-skinned woman at first, and then they reveal how the woman achieved success in her personal and professional life because she used their product that made her a fair-skinned woman, which ultimately led to her success. Similarly, Magsi (2011) analyzed that in Asia, girls with dark complexions are ridiculed and looked down upon by their peers, and they face many problems in every walk of life, from employment to getting equal recognition and respect as fair-skinned girls in society. Only the presence of a fair-skinned girl is enough to get her respect in a society, while a dark-skinned girl has to strive more to get recognition (Latif et al. 2024).

According to social comparison theory, people consistently evaluate and compare themselves with others (Festinger, 1954). This comparison consists of 'upward comparison' and 'downward comparison.' Downward comparison refers to a criteria of characteristics set by people in which they think others lack. On the contrary, upward comparison means the comparison in the light of those traits in which people find themselves to be lacking (Vonderen and Kinnally, 2012). According to Bailey and Ricciardelli (2010), obsession and body dissatisfaction among diverse-aged women result from 'upward comparison.'

In Pakistani media, a central attribute of beauty is the emphasis on fairness, which is highly problematic as it greatly impacts perceptions and reinforces narrow standards of beauty (Abid et al., 2021; Lazar, 2011). For example, when girls in Pakistan do not come up to the standard of beauty (fair and thin), they are marginalized, and finding a good marriage proposal becomes a challenge (Iqbal, 2021; Malik et al., 2023). Similarly, Samiya Arif, a feminist, also highlighted this matter by writing a book with the title "Brown Girl Ghosted," which reveals how a society ignores brown girls (Das 2020).

Chughtai (2023) explored the "Gora" complex in the media industry of Pakistan, where many actors disclosed that they underwent surgeries to get fairer skin, which leads to great career opportunities. This implies that in Pakistan fairness is akin to beauty. Another study explored Pakistani advertisements to observe the impacts of mediated white beauty on Pakistani girls. The survey method was used with structured questionnaires, and the findings uncover that 'Snow White Syndrome' is dominant in Pakistani culture (Ashfaque et al., 2014). Moreover, a study (Latif et al., 2024) employed qualitative methodology to analyze media, relevant literature, and artistic creation, and the findings revealed that fair-skinned beauty standards are shaped by the colonial ideology of Pakistani society.

Dr. Faisal Mamsa, a famous psychiatrist, also highlighted the obsession of Pakistani girls with fair complexions. He added that he counsels many extraordinary girls who show dissatisfaction with their dark skin because they are rejected by those uneducated people who worship apparent beauty. Media further aggravates the situation by further marginalizing these girls. Fairness has become an epitome of beauty. Social media should launch awareness campaigns highlighting that we cannot change the way we look; rather, we should try to be content with what we have been endowed with by God (Mirza, 2012).

The existing studies (Shah & Saher, 2019; Batool et al., 2022) explored fairness as a beauty standard in TV commercials and print media. However, social media advertisements on platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok in this context are not given a considerable amount of attention. This study seeks to bridge this gap by analyzing the influence of digital platforms in shaping contemporary beauty perceptions. The study also analyzes how cultural norms and ideals are reflected in these advertisements. Moreover, the existing studies examined the advertisements using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as their framework. This study aims to use Multi Modal Discourse Analysis (MDA) to analyze various communicative modes in advertisements.

METHODOLOGY

The researchers employed qualitative methodology to explore how fairness is portrayed as a beauty standard in selected Pakistani social media advertisements. The primary analytical framework for this research is Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), introduced by Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen (1996). It is a suitable framework for this research as it demonstrates that communication is not only limited to one mode. Linguistic, visual, auditory, gestural, and spatial elements are often used to communicate a message. In other words, this framework allows us to analyze both verbal and non-verbal elements to investigate how a message is conveyed by employing these elements collectively. This research utilized two modes of MDA i.e. linguistic and visual to analyze fairness as a beauty standard in selected social media advertisements and how cultural norms are reflected in them. The researchers adopted purposive sampling to choose social media advertisements from the last 5 years (2020-2024) that notably deal with the theme of fairness. The data were assembled from beauty advertisements of POND's BRIGHT BEAUTY FACEWASH, Lux, Stillman's Fairness Cream, Rivaj UK Whitening Cream, and Glow & Lovely face wash on social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. The text and visuals will be analyzed through Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) to explore how these advertisements portray fairness as a beauty standard.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The first objective of the study was to examine the portrayal of fairness as a beauty standard in Pakistani social media advertising on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. The linguistic and visual data on advertisements were analyzed using multimodality.

Figure 1: Visual in POND's advertisement

Figure 1 represents POND'S Bright Beauty FACEWASH, which is advertised to enhance skin brightness. The textual analysis demonstrates that this advertisement uses words like "4x BRIGHTNESS," "ULTIMATE BRIGHT SKIN," and "MIRACLES HAPPEN," which show the inclination towards fairness, and the capitalization of words emphasizes the benefits of the products. A fair-skinned actress, Ayeza Khan, is portrayed in this TikTok advertisement to reinforce fairness as a beauty standard. Here, beauty is associated with a fair complexion that will be accomplished after using this product. She is deliriously happy, as the product claims 4x brightness.

Figure 2: Visual in LUX advertisement

The advertisement of figure 2 is taken from YouTube for analysis. It is LUX soap that claims that it's the best soap for glow. The model in this advertisement receives an Oscar for "Face of the Year." The statement "Thank you, LUX" explicitly suggests that the bright skin achieved after using the product brought ultimate success in that woman's life. This implies that fair skin is a beauty standard and is essential to achieve success. Moreover, the use of simile, "DE CHAND SA ROSHAN CHEHRA," is also incorporated into the advertisement to show that this soap will illuminate your face like the moon. Visual analysis of the advertisement reveals an actress with immaculate and fair skin who is confident and smiling radiantly. This suggests that she received the "Face of the Year" award mainly for her fair skin. Additionally, this also highlights the idea that a woman needs to achieve a fair complexion in order to be successful. This contributes to making fairness a beauty standard that is highly desirable by females in Pakistan.

Figure 3: Visual in Stillman's fairness cream advertisement

Figure 3 is the visual representation of another beauty product, Stillman's Fairness Cream. Firstly, this cream makes claims like "ADVANCE BRIGHTENING FORMULA," "RADIANT SKIN," "SPOT REMOVAL," "MOISTURIZING SKIN," and "FAIRER COMPLEXION," which hint that this cream will definitely help consumers to achieve bright skin. Secondly, the name of the cream itself reveals its focus on fairness. Finally, another claim put forward by this product is "Visible changes in 5-6 days," which manipulates women into buying this product as they yearn for a glow-up within a few days. So, this fairness cream clearly suggests its inclination towards fair skin, which is a dominant beauty standard in Pakistan, and perpetuates cultural norms as well because fair complexion is considered a criterion to label someone as beautiful.

Figure 4: Visual in Rivaj Whitening Cream Advertisement

Rivaj Whitening Cream is another beauty product advertised on YouTube. The traces of fairness as a beauty standard can also be found here. This advertisement considers dullness and dark skin as a hindrance in the way of dreams, as it leads to a lack of confidence. This implies beauty equates fairness, which boosts confidence and paves the way for success. The association of fairness with beauty indicates that light skin is the beauty ideal. Furthermore, a fair-skinned and attractive model is featured in this advertisement to prove this notion. The advertisement under discussion makes use of words like "*spotless and glowing skin*" to highlight the effectiveness of this cream. Moreover, it is also illustrated in the advertisement that the use of this cream would make the skin fair and beautiful in 4 weeks. So, the use of this whitening cream will bring miraculous changes in the lives of those women who want to transform themselves by getting fair skin to conform to societal beauty standards.

Figure 5: Visual in Glow and Lovely advertisement

Glow & Lovely Pakistan is also a renowned beauty brand that promotes fairness. The YouTube advertisement for Glow & Lovely face wash shows that this product is worthwhile to get glowing skin, which is a sign of beauty and happiness. The use of phrases like "*itna sara glow*" and "*vitamins ka bharpoor glow*" also hint that fair skin is considered beautiful and ideal. The transformation in the advertisement from dull to bright skin reveals how this product works wonders and helps achieve a desired level of fairness. Moreover, the visual analysis also shows that radiance and perfection are attached to fair skin. This advertisement does not only perpetuate fairness as a beauty standard but also reflects the cultural expectations. This advertisement features two women, and the supporting character in this advertisement wants to achieve glowing skin like the main model, Sajal Ali, making fair and glowing skin a beauty standard and something that is highly desirable.

The second objective was to analyze cultural norms and ideals reflected in Pakistani social media advertisements on Instagram, YouTube and Tiktok through linguistic and visual modes of Multimodal Discourse Analysis. Pakistan is a culturally rich country that is why culture is valued and appreciated here. Culture plays a significant role in shaping the mindset of people. As far as Pakistani social media advertisements are concerned, they extensively incorporate cultural components. People value the societal practices that is why they end up trying to adjust themselves according to them.

The most prominent cultural norm ingrained in these advertisements is the association of beauty with lighter skin tones. Fairness reflects societal values, as fair-skinned women are venerated in society while dark-skinned girls have to face societal pressure to transform themselves. Sartaj (2015) explores that "still being on the shelf" is due to the disease *Kaala Rang*. She further points out that Pakistani women show their obsession with fair skin while looking for their daughters-in-law. Moreover, women yearn to achieve fair skin as it is considered a gateway to personal and professional development. Getting desirable employment opportunities, marriage proposals, societal acceptance, and confidence are genuinely possible if a woman has a fair complexion. So, these advertisements inject this idea into the minds of Pakistani women that only a fair complexion can help achieve success. 'White Beauty Syndrome' is so dominant that women undergo surgeries and use whitening creams and injections without taking into consideration the drastic consequences of those treatments and products. As far as the women portrayed in the selected advertisements are concerned, they all are fair-skinned, which makes them communicate the message of fairness in a better way. Pakistani society shows an inclination towards whiteness; that is why the advertisements try to appeal to women by ensuring that the use of these products will help them achieve *a chand sa roshan chehra,* as is evident in the LUX soap advertisement.

Moreover, POND'S Bright Beauty Face Wash also lures women into believing that they will become beautiful and fair-skinned like Ayeza Khan. She is presented as an ideal for Pakistani women, clearly resonating with our cultural values and beauty standards. The same is the case with Stillman's Fairness Cream and Rivaj UK Whitening Cream. The aim of these products is even suggested in their names. Their emphasis on whiteness also showcases cultural preferences for lighter skin tones. In addition, societal beauty standards are also rooted in Glow & Lovely Face Wash. The depiction of Sajal Ali as a standard of beauty and the other model's desire to get glowing skin like her demonstrate the societal pressure and a woman's wish to conform to the beauty standards.

The linguistic analysis reveals that the use of the Urdu language in these social advertisements establishes cultural relevance. The employment of native language grabs the attention of the audience as they are familiar with it. Urdu is blended with English to create a sense of modernity. The influence of the advertisements is also enhanced by the use of a dual-lingual approach. *Jild ko nikhary or dey chand sa roshan chehra*, h*amara best soap* and *kyunke khoobsurat hain aap* indicate that these advertisements are tied to Pakistani culture.

The researchers analyzed five Pakistani beauty advertisements on three social media platforms: Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. The findings show that these advertisements strengthen focus on fairness to such an extent that it has become a beauty standard. The representation of perfect women in these advertisements also suggests that Pakistani society worships beauty. A woman's acceptance in society depends on her physical appearance. This social practice generates women's desire to use fairness products to come up to societal expectations. In this way, women are easily manipulated into buying those products that claim fairness within a couple of days, as can be observed in the advertisement for Stillman's Fairness Cream that claims visible changes in 5-6 days. Moreover, these advertisements seem to promote mediated beauty by spotlighting fair-skinned and thin models. The cultural norms and ideals are also integrated in these advertisements, and their presence in advertisements becomes quite obvious when fairness is emphasized, and the communication of messages in Urdu also proves the notion that culture and advertisements are interconnected.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of fairness-focused Pakistani social media advertisements reveals that dominant beauty standards are persistently reinforced in them. The findings show that the selected advertisements actively highlight cultural norms and ideals that associate fairness with success and self-worth. The focus on fairness in these advertisements displays contemporary beauty standards, as the advertisements for analysis were chosen from the past five years. The use of visuals and verbal cues suggests that fairness is mandatory for societal acceptance and personal achievement. These products especially target women as they face societal pressure to follow beauty conventions. In addition, women with darker skin tones have been marginalized by these harmful and exclusionary beauty ideals in advertisements, as only fairness is reinforced as a beauty standard. They also show that dark color is not socially acceptable and confidence, happiness, and success heavily rely on fair skin, making fairness an ultimate goal for Pakistani women. Overall, it becomes evident that fairness is strongly embedded in social media for the advertisements. This study significantly contributes to existing literature, as it provides an updated analysis of fairness-oriented social media advertisements. Moreover, future researchers can comparatively analyze Pakistani traditional and social media advertisements and explore the idea of inclusivity.

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