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The Contemporary Consumerist Discourses of Reflexive Identities and Self-Ethos Women in Pakistan

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Abstract: *The intersection of women and contemporary consumerist discourses regarding self-identity, self-transformation, and self-choice encapsulates cultural ideals of individualism and realizing individual potential. Consumerism, viewed as a "technology of the self," portrays advertisements as agents that urge individuals to embrace liberation. L'Oréal's omnipresent "you're worth it" campaign epitomizes this, linking status and willpower to independence, beauty, and self-direction. However, media advertisements can also confine women within self-imposed boundaries, limiting the development of a reflexive identity. Women become both subjects and objects of consumerism, encouraged to transform themselves in the name of individual choices. This study explores how advertisements subtly constrain women from embracing a self-ethos for genuine self-identity in the contemporary world. The media, by imposing an ethical duty on women to monitor their appearance, maintain a certain body image, and indulge in various cosmetics and treatments, perpetuates a discourse that distances women from genuine individuality. Methodologically, the study employs digital ethnography to scrutinize advertising images as an imagined ideal space of pure choice, where interpretive freedom signifies individuality. Drawing on Giddens' subject-object reciprocity and Foucault's self-technology and self-ethos, the research employs participant observation to analyze the dynamic interplay between social structures and human agency, shaping gendered discourses of consumerism and women's evolving pathways to individuality.*

Key Words: Consumerism, Discourse, Advertisement, Media, Self, Ethics, Women

Introduction

The twentieth century has brought the age of digitalization as the third industrial revolution. We have entered the digital era, and every aspect of life has become digitized to the point where no sector is found without digital technology. The present-day technologies and consumerist market dispersed the reconstructed gender relations in cultural norms through advanced communication. Advertisements and popular culture are reinventing the social roles of individuals and penetrating society as normal. Digital imagery and videography are creating dominant discourses.

Media is a powerful decentralized tool that incentivizes people by designing persuasive architecture. The population that is continuously becoming more radicalized on all sides simultaneously has more powerful tools available to them in an increasingly fragile world. The subject and object of the media are people themselves. The social structure of media and advertisement is a macro-level system shaped by the individuals, affecting the agency at the micro-level. The relationship is reciprocated; the structure uses individuals to subjugate propaganda by objectifying them. Hence, polarizing the population, "we are alike," a concept of we and others generated.

Media creates new systems of information dissemination and knowledge discourses. Media plays a vital role in constructing people's understanding of the world and realities. Brands use certain tools in media advertisements to persuade their subjects and enforce attitudes and choices by radicalizing new dominant

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norms. The subjects of the advertisement are purposely selected, and language, as well as visuals, are created for them, whose minds are more hackable to subjugate their opinions and beliefs.

Throughout history, gender roles have created a dominant discourse. Dichotomous relations of gender are revisited with the evolution of feminist theories (Dimulesc, 2015). The heteronormative identities confined in the meta-narration in modernity, as Lyotard called them, are re-explored and re-analyzed with emerging modernity (Lyotard, 1979). Through media, advertisements fabricate persuasive architecture as a tool to gather attention and target individuals one by one; hence, new meta-narratives are created. However, these narratives are deployed at agencies and shape a structure.

Women in the advertisement are positioned as both the subject and object of consumerism by encouraging self-transformation that validates it in the disguise of individual choices. The objects of media become docile under the invisible power of the structure. However, the individuals are believed to have their own private individual habitus where they practice their free choices. However, isn't the truth far from it? There is an invisible but powerful dogma that differentiates people into the demographic filter, psychographic filter, network filter, and conversational filter (Gauntlett, 2008). In these filters, context is enticed, and content is engaged, which is elevated through dissemination and is exploited as an outcome (Gauntlett, 2008).

Though we feel we are very self-opinionated, we cannot leave the bounds of the Panopticon as we wish. The biggest problem is that we are monitored, surveilled, and examined to be used, but we believe that we are doing it of our own free will. Different catchphrases make us realize self-worth, self-love, uniqueness, and individuality. Ideal shape and body have been so normalized that any shape other than the ideal is stereotyped and is made the focus of critical scrutiny (Zuraidah & Lau, 2016). The concept of individualism in late modernity itself is problematic, as George Simmel stated that "the claim of an individual to preserve autonomy and individuality of his existence in the face of overwhelming social forces, historical heritage, and the external culture of techniques of life is problematic. We can never be individuals in this overly interconnected globalized world". So, when we assume self-determination and have the freedom to express ourselves, we are just moving in the cycle drawn by the advertisements.

Digital evolution, massive consumerism, and global consciousness transform individual identity, power discourse, and subjective realities about truth and knowledge. The study explores the power and truth behind consumerism advocated by media advertisements and the relation with the subject in the contemporary world in the context of Pakistani society. It also explores the technology of self and the freedom-preserving practices that are literary. What seems to be our freedom is also Orwellian.

Methodology

Advertisements are media discourse that involves social interactions and social processes. The concepts of modernity and individuality, etc., gain fertility in Pakistan due to closed interlinks of the global socio-economic and cultural market. Discourse analysis is performed to explore the role of advertising images as an imagined ideal zone of pure choice in which interpretive freedom becomes expressive of individuality through digital ethnography. The relationship between social structure agency that shaped the shifting gendered discourses of consumerism and access to diffusing transformations of women to forms of individuality is also seen through participant observation. Foucault's framework of self-ethos and Giddens's theory of Reflexive identity- subject/object reciprocity are compared to understand the consumerist behavior to attain individuality among the women of Pakistan.

It aims to explore the relationships among consumerism, identity, and self to find out how advertisers persuade women to buy their products. Three brands, i.e., L'Oréal, Lux, and Fair and Lovely, were used for discourse analysis. The slogans, dialogues, and contexts are analyzed by analyzing the language and verbatims used in the advertisements. 59% of the Pakistani population uses beauty bars and whitening creams (Khan, Ullah, Khan, & Khan, 2020). Lux and Fair and Lovely are in the top ten most purchased beauty products. L'Oréal, though a little more expensive than the former, is also the dominant choice for hair care, skincare, and cosmetics in Pakistan. The study aims to explore the new normal of consumerism in Pakistan's contemporary society.

Literature (Batters, 2011) (Bordo, 1959) (Cronin, 2000) (Dimulesc, 2015) (Zuraidah & Lau, 2016) (Gauntlett, 2008) (Giddens, 2008) (Lyotard, 1979) (Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 1997) (Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 1990) (Gill, 2007) was reviewed to conceptualize the use of media advertisement, i.e., mainstream media television ads and social media ads are used to propagate consumerism in women who pursue individuality in the reflexive society. As the literature is based on Western society, it is analyzed to apply to Pakistani society.

Advertisements, Reflexive Identity, Self- Ethos

Anthony Giddens explains the postmodern era as late modernity. Giddens does not dispute the metanarratives of late modernity, such as consumerism, self-consciousness, etc., but believes that the present era is fragmented. The identities of individuals may also be fragmented in the fractured or incomplete era, but Giddens presumes it is reflexive. The self becomes reflexive in post-tradition when lifestyle is adopted from multiple choices (Giddens, 2008). Lifestyle is structuralized by institutional settings that shape individual day-to-day choices (Giddens, 2008). Analyzing the individual does not seem potent if tradition dominates because choices are then prescribed by the traditions. However, in late modernity, societies have become reflexive and are overcoming the barriers of the past by self-options to create a future. It fascinates Giddens how societies are becoming modernized in an institutional sense (Gauntlett, 2008) but carry the traditional torch of surveillance and propagation of consumerism, though the means change from print advertisement to electronic.

The project of self, as Giddens describes, shifted from corporate institutions to shopping opportunities as promoted in advertisements. These advertisements procure individuality, and Giddens finds corruption in the quest for individuality (Gauntlett, 2008). We can see in the contemporary world the representation of women is associated with their beauty, which is a by-product of socio-cultural-political and economic factors. The growing consumerism has reduced women to a bodily property that grows capital through the beauty industry. Through advertisement, the industry redefines female corporeality as the main object and presents it as an approachable and achievable model to all female subjects regardless of their age, race, and color (Dimulesc, 2015).

Social order can be mistaken as natural order. Social order is the collective action of the populace, whereas natural order is an individual act, but in the surge of individuality in collectivism, we can't translate the two orders exclusively. By realizing the limitation of self and individuality in the social order, "ethos", is built. The Greeks called the freedom of self ethos (Batters, 2011). Foucault called it the "technology of the self." It is the continuously evolving mechanisms that are either natural or imposed to define the self that might be perceived by others and create individuality by questioning the routine experience of what we do, say, or intend. Foucault suggests that power exists everywhere, and individuals are consciously or subconsciously oppressed in these power relations. In these power relations, each individual has certain power and freedom according to the habitus, as said by Pierre Bourdieu. If one gains more power over others, then a state of domination is established. Therefore, care of self helps in adjusting control power over oneself (Batters, 2011). But if the technology itself is not natural but social and shapes the world we perceive, then we can say that we are in a state of domination, as said by Foucault and have little freedom over ourselves.

Today, the media is the primary source of establishing and disseminating discourses. Media has tools such as advertisements, idols, and influencers who influence discourses and exercise power through social processes. Individual identities are expressions of individual choices. Advertisements advocate that we hold power over ourselves by consuming the goods and products advertised. We are truly liberated from the social structures by consuming the suggested products. The technology of self is reduced to consumerism. It generates the ethos of self, which tells us how to be a man or a woman. Social interaction informs us what to wear, how much lbs to trim the eyebrows, wax, and use perfume. Consumerism not only promises self-transformation and individuality but also makes it an obligation to follow the ethos of being a woman or man. Media advertisements position women as subjects and objects of consumption. It tells us to be ourselves by portraying an ideal woman with the standard weight, size, shape, and color. These adverts enforce the ethical duties of women to monitor their appearance (fashion, makeup, self-care regimens), shape, and size (diet, proportion). This ethos obligates women to treat themselves better through



consumerism. Adverts radicalize the idea of individualism and self-actualism through the consumption of everything the industry has to offer. As Cronin said, messages like “express yourself” and “be yourself,” integrated through advertisements, impose compulsory individuality, which will estrange women from being individuals (Cronin, 2000). Foucault suggests that we have to establish self-ethics to have endless possibilities that might not always be visible (Gauntlett, 2008). But these natural possibilities are chained in social interactions that define our ethics, individualism, and identity.

Fake Freedom of Individuality

Discourse Analysis of Beauty Brands

Pursuing modernism engendered the ideologies of consumer capitalism, individualization, and self-actualization that crystallized the mass culture of Pakistani society. This dominant culture predicted individual freedom through the technology of self. This imposed care of self rearranged and transformed the understanding of body and identity (Bordo, 1959). Most beauty advertisements target women, so the algorithms are built by using models, celebrities who are standard according to norms, scientific evidence, dermatologists or medical specialists, skin problems, and challenges. Emotions are used for the Paleolithic effect to create a strong relationship between the audience and adverts that always present a positive discourse about the object and subject of the brand. Language is used to influence the community accordingly, to increase production, consumption, and distribution within the female populace.

Language is the main focus of discourse analysis. The vocabulary and the context used in advertisements depict the discourse. Here, L'oreal, Lux Fair, and Lovely will be used as examples for analysis. L'oreal's slogan is “I'm worth it.” The actress explains her worth by declining the verbatims and cultural norms of society, such as her talking behavior, her sitting etiquette, and ‘logo kya kahain gy’ (what will people say). She explains she is worth all the beauty by liberating herself from societal norms. First and second pronouns are used, i.e., I and we inform the audience how unique she is and how different the consumers can be collectively; this creates an identity of L'oreal users who are worthy. However, the liberated uniqueness generated conformity.

Lux is another commonly consumed beauty bar that is known to enchant others with its fragrance. In a luxurious bathtub covered with rose petals and dim candle lights, the actress is using the beauty bar and informs the audience that her beauty starts with lux. Again, she questions societal norms, and the verbatim “log kya kahain gy”, and “logo ka toh kaam hai kehna” are used. First and second pronouns are used to establish familiarity with the audience. “Lux brings out the star in you.” The audience is informed that they can be what the actress is. In another ad for Lux, the model walks down the red carpet and selects a girl. ‘The next is your turn’ makes the audience believe that there is no difference between the model and any other female. They are the same. This enhances consumerism and henceforth creates another conformed identity. Both L'oreal and Lux inform women how they are different, worthy, and beautiful, but they can only achieve materiality or physical beauty by abandoning the social norms. They have to liberate themselves from the collectivism observed in Pakistan to become a worthy, inspired individual in modernity.

Fair and lovely advocates fair skin that promises fairness with every use. Pakistani girls are conscious of their brown skin tone. They face several barriers in their daily life, but fairness and love come into the picture and free the women from their problem of brown skin. “Who says beauty fades over time?” “Ready to take the fairness bet with us?” The use of the pronoun “us” engendered “others,” and the use of “you” intimates the audience. Asking the questions establishes a sense of inequality between producers and consumers. By consuming the product, the inequality can be erased. Positive and negative adjectives are used to make the audience/consumers understand the product. For instance, Fit Me is beautiful forever, anti-aging. These adjectives highlight the strength of the product and convince the consumer that these adjectives can be used to describe them. As mentioned earlier, the human mind is very hackable. Playing one thing again and again makes them believe in the illusion of truth.

A Narcissistic Self- Surveillance

Naomi Wolf (1990) wrote in his book about the tyranny of beauty that functions in every sector of life, in home and office, in media and literature, and in relationships (Wolf, 1990). By beautifying oneself, one can

truly integrate the individual into society with individual identity and self-worth. Beauty is channeled through self-care and self-love by following the regimes of obtaining goods. Under the distinct monitoring and careful surveillance of the media, women's identity is created into the imposed public discourse. The technology of self and self-discipline is called "narcissistic self-surveillance" by Rosalind Gill (Gill, 2007). Women followed the self-ethos that were handed down by the media to become more feminine (Gill, 2007). In the façade of selling liberation, the beauty industry subjugates the claim of letting the women own themselves at the cost of constant need of approval. Approval is given because they are following the ethics or self to fit in the standards of society.

On the one hand, active consumer women idealize individuality and do not concern themselves with society or *log kya kahain guys*, but on the other hand, they always want to look beautiful under the gaze of another. In the advertisements mentioned above, the verbatims and narratives are kept in focus. Women are convinced that the breakage of societal chains and the salvation from collectivism make them unique "them." Women in pursuit of individual identity are lulled into the deluded normative beauty produced by the mass media. They are so enchanted to perceive perfection that the boundary between truth/reality and deception is blurred. The beauty they run after is more precise, explicit, and, hence, more restrictive (Gill, 2007). With this restriction, power of control and authority over popular culture and media shapes the consumerist discourse of choices in women. Contemporary women are suffocated by the restriction of beauty. A panopticon was set over her by the media, and she set a panopticon inside the panopticon through self-regulation and discipline herself to become a better her, to satisfy the gazes of others, and to be desirable.

"The prison acts on the prisoner's body, but it does so by forcing the prisoner to approximate an ideal, a norm of behavior, a model of obedience. (...) he becomes the principle of his subjection. This normative ideal inculcated, as it were, into the prisoner is a kind of psychic identity, or what Foucault would call a soul. Because the soul is an imprisoning effect, Foucault claims that the prisoner is subjected in a more fundamental way than by the spatial captivity of prison, which provides the exterior form or regulatory principle of the prisoner's body (Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 1997)."

Judith Butler said 'what we take to be an internal feature of ourselves is one that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts, at an extreme, a hallucinatory effect of naturalized gesture (Butler, 1990). The contemporary women under her self-surveillance are held captive. She knows she is suffocating but does not acknowledge her imprisonment. She trapped herself in the web of conformity while stalking individuality. Though she is in prison, the bars are invisible, giving the illusion of freedom.

Conclusion

In the contemporary world where mass consumerism is a normative technology of self by disciplining bodies, the power of invisibility resides in the display of agency and free will and the wheeler-dealer in the open hideout. At first glance, our body as a woman is our own. We are self-determined, self-actualized, and individualized about ourselves. Women are disciplined and follow ethics because they want to integrate into the social setting; however, beautifying, slimming, and toning our bodies gives the association with the media. This association gives a robust adversarial relationship to the body. The advertisements copied the identities and fed them into their life as they deemed fit. The women are given the illusion of freedom, and narratives of self are constructed through hacking emotions and creating a binary of us and others. By looking at the glamorous woman as an object in the advertisement, women assume themselves into the frame. Selectively, they choose the positive aspects of the ad and adopt the individual identity. In the incomplete, fragmented postmodern era, the discourse concerning freedom of choice is complex, and so are the identities that are formed under the domination of dominant structures, and personal choices are intangible. True freedom without the influence of the structure is a faraway ideal dream, a mere abstraction.

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