

Reshaping Gender Portrayal, Masculinity, and Empowerment Narratives in Pakistan's Electronic and Digital Media Commercials

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Abstract

Electronic and digital media commercials in Pakistan mirror the traditional social order as well as the cultural transformation that society experiences over the years. The short duration of an advertisement and its repeated, unavoidable broadcast during regular programs makes it an impactful medium because it echoes the viewers' lived experiences, particularly when it reflects gender representation and power dynamics within the country's changing socio-cultural environment. The available literature focuses on the stereotypical gender portrayals showing how women are confined to domestic roles while men are depicted in positions of authority in the public sphere, thereby overlooking the subtle transformations that have recently occurred in Pakistani society. To fill this gap, the study adopts the frameworks of Goffman (1979) and Eisend (2010) and examines changes in gender portrayal in television and digital media commercials that to reflect societal transformation through a qualitative content analysis of a purposive sample of 20 advertisements from 2016 to 2023. The findings reveal that although the content of electronic and digital media commercials today supports and reflects a narrative of women's equal rights to healthcare, education, and employment, the social acceptance of narratives concerning their bodily autonomy remains largely contested.

Keywords: Television Commercials, Advertisements, Women Empowerment, Gender Stereotype, Pakistani Media

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1. INTRODUCTION

Print, electronic, and digital media universally reflect and shape socio-cultural norms and traditions because of their ability to “mirror and mold” (Grau & Zotos, 2016, pp. 762–763). Despite this powerful characteristic of reflecting social order across print, television, and radio media globally, the seen, heard, and spoken content about women accounts for only 26%, and the news stories that challenge gender stereotypes are fewer than 13%. This pattern is also observed in the Asian and Middle Eastern media industry, where women-related content accounts for only 19% (GMMP, 2025). This reflects the media's limited influence in reshaping gender portrayals and masculinity. According to the 2026 report on Pakistan's media, women-related coverage constitutes 11% of news across traditional media (print, television, and radio), and 26% in internet news (Uks Research Center, 2026). This means that, despite its ability to mirror societal trends, the media provides limited space for women's content. This is not simply an issue of

underrepresentation but also reflects gender bias where women are either portrayed in domestic or family roles or framed as victims. Content challenging gender stereotypes or addressing gender inequality accounts for only 1% on traditional platforms, while digital platforms offer slightly better visibility; however, because digital content has a more limited reach, it hardly affects entrenched masculinity and gender biases (Munim, 2026). It is important to note that there are several types of media content, including news, dramas, talk shows, and documentaries, but the most effective and distinctive are commercials, which, due to their short format and repetitive broadcasting, are expected to leave a lasting impression. Given the frequent and unavoidable appearance of commercials during programs, it becomes evident that they occupy a strong and unique position within media content, designed to resonate with viewers. Thus, commercials can serve as an effective tool to reflect gender biases and redefine masculinity.

Since Pakistan's independence in 1947, the advertising industry has evolved through several phases. The first phase of advertising began in print media, with newspapers and magazines being the primary platforms for commercials. At that time, female representation was restricted by a "rigid ideology" and conservative social norms, where women were depicted as symbols of patriotism and to promote national identity to create an emotional connection with the public (Siddiqui, 2016, p. 13). They were presented as beautiful, charming wives and mothers whose primary responsibility was caring for their husbands and children by performing household chores such as cooking, washing, and cleaning. Particularly, in the era "between 1950 and 1970, Pakistan's print media ceased to be an exclusively male civic space" (Rauf & Iftikhar, 2025, p. 262). In those early portrayals, even when women appeared as professionals, such as air hostesses, their roles were largely confined to polite, glamorous caregivers. Such female representation often negatively affects the image of women, as "by largely ignoring women or portraying them in stereotypical roles of victim and/or consumer, the mass media symbolically annihilate women... most media portray women, if at all, in traditional roles: homemaker, mother, or, if they are in the paid workforce, clerical and other 'pink-collar' jobs" (Tuchman, 2000, p. 150). In 1964, Pakistan Television (PTV) was established, and the same pattern was observed in various programs across electronic media, including commercials; it continued to portray the patriarchal culture characterized by male domination and female submissiveness. This trend of normalizing gender stereotypes in electronic media persisted until the early 2000s.

After assuming power in 1999, General Pervez Musharraf permitted private television channels as part of his 2002 media liberalization policy. This was a period when cable and satellite technologies were also expanding. The period between 1999 and 2008 marked a shift in the media industry, creating a multi-channel environment with increased digital presence that led to greater competition and reshaped media content, including commercials, which began incorporating representations of non-traditional gender roles and characters. The result of that development is evident today: the country has approximately

140 licensed satellite television channels, along with their digital presence. This digital presence has experienced rapid growth in viewership due to growing internet adoption; over 110 million people in Pakistan are internet users, and their social media users number approximately 10 million across platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok. This indicates rapid and continuous online content consumption and exposure to media across multiple platforms among a significant percentage of the population over a relatively short period (PEMRA, 2023; Kemp, 2025). Thus, whereas, in the past, gender portrayal was reflected only in print media, it is now also depicted in electronic media and disseminated across digital platforms, including social networking websites, at an unprecedented scale and speed, making these media effective tools not only to highlight the sociocultural composition of society but also to identify emerging societal trends.

In this changing media landscape, it is important to recognize the contributions of women's rights organizations that voice women's concerns, as well as the growing education and employment opportunities for women, which, overall, have raised awareness in society (Awan, 2022, pp. 236–240). Given the rapid growth of media and its influence, this study focuses on the portrayal of gender narratives in Pakistani electronic and digital media commercials⁶. First, it aims to examine the images, behaviors, and characterizations assigned to men and women in advertisements; second, to investigate how these portrayals challenge or reinforce masculinity; third, to evaluate the extent to which the women's empowerment narrative is constructed and promoted through commercials.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing scholarship on gender portrayal in Pakistani media reveal that women in different programs are depicted as embodiments of beauty and charm, and their roles are largely submissive and dependent on male authority, both in public and private domains (Huda & Ali, 2015). In print media, the content of both English and Urdu newspapers is predominantly gender-biased, particularly in news reporting. However, Urdu newspapers appear to emphasize women's subordination and their appearance more frequently than the English-language print media. This does not mean that English newspapers are entirely free of gender-biased content; rather, they offer more nuanced portrayals of gender issues (Ullah et al., 2016; Raza & Liaqat, 2016). Similarly, in Pakistani television dramas, famous in South Asia for their strong storyline, women are mostly portrayed as victims and men as

⁶ Electronic Media is defined as “ways of communicating information that are electronic rather than using paper, for example, television, and the internet”, while the digital media is “a form that can be stored, read, seen, etc. using a computer, such as news websites, social media, electronic books, and digital video, images, or music” (Cambridge University Press, n.d.). This study recognizes that commercials from electronic and digital media platforms often overlap in practice, especially because nearly all television channels have digital presence today and the commercials aired on television are frequently recirculated on their digital and other social networking sites like YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. Therefore, referring to electronic and digital media in this study is considered more appropriate.

oppressors, thus often becoming a tool that reinforces gender-biased sociocultural structures, which “can not only shape but also, at times, distort public opinion and behavior about gender, utilizing words and images” (Zahid et al., 2026).

However, due to societal transformations, there has recently been a shift in the portrayal of female roles, moving away from women's victimhood and toward depicting them as assertive and materialistic characters who pursue money, fame, and power; this sparks a new debate over their characterization, indicating that although dramas may no longer portray women in weak roles, they often cast them as negative characters by placing all social and moral responsibility on them. This shift is discussed in a content analysis study of three popular television dramas *Mere Paas Tum Ho* (I Have You), *Dil Ruba* (Darling), and *Mohabbat Tujhe Alvida* (Goodbye Love) that concludes, “These female characters are stigmatized for being gold-diggers and frail, which can be very harmful to the general thinking of the masses” (Rasool et al., 2022, p. 1156). Another study found that such characterization of women in dramas often presents “commercially motivated discourses that prevent a more substantive critique of the structure” (Fazail et al., 2026). It also means that existing narratives leave little space for women who are excelling in their careers, are resilient survivors of socio-cultural injustices, or stand as autonomous decision-makers in private and public life. Although media coverage of women in politics, employment, and health is usually positive, the reporting on violence against women demonstrates a high level of negative framing where they are presented in a sensational manner with emotionally charged linguistic and para-lingual cues that eventually label women as victims who have no agency (Adnan et al., 2019; Amjad et al., 2021).

Following the same pattern of female representation, Pakistani commercials also show women characters in domestic roles with submissive personality traits, while men are portrayed as authoritative, dominant, and professional figures. Supporting this argument, a study added that although women are now better represented in advertisements because of the growing awareness in society, their stereotypical objectification and sexuality are still reinforced through unrealistic beauty standards, which eventually results in body shaming, harassment, and violence (Iram et al., 2023). This implies that though commercials have now started to highlight women's education and employment issues, such coverage is either limited in volume or not presented effectively. Therefore, domestic roles still account for nearly three-quarters of female representation in Pakistani commercials, indicating that women are underrepresented in public spaces (Jamil, 2018; Ali & Shahwar, 2011).

Another study examining five Pakistani brand advertisements between 2010 and 2020 observed a transformation in male and female gender representations and concluded that these “brands can play a pivotal role in fostering a more equitable and inclusive representation of gender in advertising, contributing to positive societal change” (Ejaz et al., 2024). While highlighting this issue from the perspective of a society that shares many

similarities with Pakistan in the portrayal of women across media, a study based on 118 images of shop signs, posters, billboards, and wall-painted advertisements collected from North India, concludes, "Women are given subjugated roles ...(while) men are portrayed as engineers, managers, pilots, chefs, etc. The billboards and outdoor advertisements act as significant agents modifying our perceptions" (Gogoi & Sinha, 2024, p. 31).

However, the present study argues that the portrayal of women in commercials reflects women's position in society instead of constructing it. If they are portrayed as empowered in commercials while the real situation contradicts such portrayals, it will not have any impact on the audience of that content. According to a study based on analyzing the content of television commercials from 13 Asian, American, and European countries, such portrayals are not attributable solely to prevalent gender inequality in these societies. Instead, "the misrepresentation and temporal lag of evolving societal dynamics" depicted in the commercials are responsible for these gender depictions (Matthes et al., 2016, p. 324). Additionally, the media may at times fail to fully depict societal transformation due to logistical constraints. Here, it is important to understand that the way media of any country portrays its male and female characters reflects gender positioning as well as power dynamics in that country; this aligns with Mulvey's (2006) analysis, which argues that when women in films are portrayed as 'passive raw material' for the 'active male gaze', it reinforces patriarchy. Despite this, the fact remains that regardless of how the media portrays gender, audiences interpret these messages according to their mindsets and the circumstances and challenges they face (Chu et al., 2016).

The above literature largely addresses male and female gender representation in commercials, focusing on how, over time, stereotypical portrayals of both genders reflect transformation in concordance with societal changes. However, the missing debate from the literature is to pinpoint which specific representation in these advertisements reflects the change, and what narrative is still struggling to receive acceptance from society—a gap this research aims to fill. In addition, the study will also highlight how gender portrayals in Pakistani media are influenced by several other factors, including the conservative socio-cultural outlook, the influence of religious orthodoxy, growing debate on gender equality at different forums, easy and affordable access to electronic and digital media, and overall transformation of society in which the trend of female education and employment has increased. In this context, the present study examines the extent to which television and digital media commercials have mirrored gender portrayals, how this narrative challenges patriarchy, redefines masculinity, celebrates women's empowerment, and highlights areas where it is still struggling to reflect change.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study employs qualitative content analysis to examine gender portrayals in Pakistani television and digital media commercials. For this purpose, purposive sampling is used to select 20 commercials, including public service announcements, that were aired from 2016 to 2023 on Pakistani television channels and/or circulated on digital/social media platforms, and that feature explicit or implicit messaging related to transformed gender roles, masculinity, and empowerment. The sample size ensures relevance while maintaining a manageable scope, and the selected time frame is sufficiently broad to capture transformed advertising trends. Advertisements that do not meet this criterion are excluded to ensure the sample directly serves the study objectives. The rationale for selecting this period is the rapid growth of media, accompanied by technological advancements and increased participation of women in public life which contributed to changing societal attitudes toward gender roles which were ultimately reflected in electronic and digital media content. For this study, advertisements that reflect changes in gender representation and are readily available on electronic and/or digital media platforms are included in the sample. In Table 1, the selected commercials are detailed, including the advertisement codes, brand names, product categories, durations, access links, and brief descriptions.

Each commercial served as a single unit of analysis and was viewed multiple times to develop familiarity with its content. Most television commercials feature household products and are also available on various digital platforms; however, only YouTube links are provided in the table to maintain uniformity. Table 1 provides brief descriptions of the listed advertisements, which provide an understanding of each storyline and establish background knowledge before applying a coding framework based on the studies of Goffman (1979) and Eisend (2010), tailored to the Pakistani socio-cultural context. The coding process is conducted by a single researcher; this approach ensures consistency and uniformity in the application of the coding framework across all sampled advertisements. The code of *subordination* and *function positioning* are developed from Goffman's 'Ritualization of Subordination' (defined as the depiction of women signaling submissiveness and reduced social status) and 'Function Ranking' (explained as the pattern where men and women collaborate on a task) categories, respectively. The code of *active agency* and *setting* is developed from Eisend's 'Role Behaviors' and 'Occupational Status', which measures the operationalization of a character in the domestic/private sphere versus public/professional sphere and the type of job or professional standing assigned to them.

Table 1: Description of Television and Digital Media Advertisements (2016–2023)

Ad Code	Brand Name	Product Category	Duration	Link	Brief Description
Ad-1	<i>Lemon Max Long Bar</i>	Kitchen Product	40 second	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZnNi71ZKkWw	Husband and wife are washing dishes while the husband's mother watches them.
Ad-2	<i>Nestlé Every Day</i>	Food/Dairy	1 Min	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uF9vqe8GLUk	Husband and wife prepare tea for each other.
Ad-3	<i>McDonald's Food Trust</i>	Fast Food	50 second	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x_qfVVaPR88	Mother is ordering food from an external vendor.
Ad-4	<i>Colgate</i>	Personal Care/Oral Hygiene	30 second	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OjEtjqm5tvq	Wife plays a video game with her daughter, while the husband serves them food.
Ad-5	<i>Always Sanitary Pads</i>	Personal Hygiene (Sanitary Pads)	47 seconds	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HcloGUeALa0	Successful working women in diverse fields emphasize resilience despite challenging menstrual phases.
Ad-6	<i>Shan Foods</i>	Food/Spices	1 Min, 20 seconds	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t95xshRhZQ4	Husband and mother-in-law support a doctor wife/daughter-in-law by managing all household tasks and childcare responsibilities by themselves.
Ad-7	<i>Eva Cooking Oil</i>	Food/Cooking Oil	1 Min, 30 seconds	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tLqURAhAqxE	Men, as fathers, sons, and husbands cook and serve meals to the women in their families.
Ad-8	<i>Shan Foods</i>	Food/Spices	40 Seconds	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U_5Zt2PQQMI	At an Eid dinner, the husband and mother-in-law defend their doctor wife/ daughter-in-law when relatives criticize her limited involvement in dinner preparations.

Ad-9	<i>Dostea Tea Whitener</i>	Food/Tea Whitener	2 Min, 50 Seconds 2 Min, 47 Sec	<i>Part:1</i> https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vmoFWEZ_XKow <i>Part-2:</i> https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OK61pM893IE	A marriage proposal story that challenges stereotypes associated with marriage, gender roles, and conventional family expectations.
Ad-10	<i>Department of Population Welfare, Government of Punjab</i>	Family Planning	58 Sec	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6cdE21ybUqM	A man explains that maintaining at least a three-year interval between the first and second births is important for the health of both mother and child and ensures a prosperous life.
Ad-11	<i>People's Primary Healthcare Initiative Pakistan</i>	Family Planning	53 Sec	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jtnaw7ysi-sw	A woman explains that family planning is a shared responsibility between husband and wife, emphasizing mutual consent and advocating for at least a three-year gap between the birth of the first and second child.
Ad-12	<i>People's Primary Healthcare Initiative Pakistan</i>	Public Health	44 Sec	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NT9183FrRQA	Grandparents joyfully welcome the birth of a granddaughter, emphasizing that it's everyone's responsibility to pay attention to her medical care.
Ad-13	<i>Brooke Bond Supreme Tea</i>	Tea/Beverage	45 Sec	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gFPiHP6SF3E	To please her daughter-in-law, the mother-in-law invites her daughter-in-law's mother over for tea.
Ad-14	<i>Josh Condoms</i>	Contraceptives	6 Min, 28 Sec	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w9-8wg1r04U	Wife initiates physical intimacy with her husband, asks for protected sex, buys condoms from a shop, and carries them in her bag.

				<i>Note: The link has 10 ads of the same product.</i>	
Ad-15	<i>Ahmed Foods</i>	Food/Spices	3 Min, 14 Sec	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=inYPBgIwzIw	Husband expresses love, respect, and understanding toward his wife who has hearing and speech disabilities.
Ad-16	<i>Pepsi</i>	Beverages/Cold Drinks	3 Min	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z3Q4gPAIwI8&t=3s	Daughter creates lights from inexpensive, environmentally friendly empty bottles and uses them to illuminate her father's path.
Ad-17	<i>Adamjee Insurance Company</i>	House Insurance	4 Min, 6 Sec	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-M3W4hZPFek	Father, despite limited financial resources, struggles to educate his daughter, who eventually becomes an architect.
Ad-18	<i>Shezan Foods</i>	Food/Spices	2 Min, 35 Sec	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oJw2QUstnyg	After the mother's death, a father cooks for their working daughter, who comes home late from work due to her official responsibilities.
Ad-19	<i>Sate Life Insurance Corporation</i>	Insurance	2 Min, 78 Sec	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T39-VRCMfNE	An orphaned boy's education is funded by a woman who bought an insurance policy for this purpose. The boy later becomes a doctor and learns that the woman who funded his education is ill, so he pays her medical bills.
Ad-20	<i>Pampers</i>	Childcare product	2 min, 45 Sec	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VGOrKxsvk0	A father is changing his child's diaper while the mother is busy with other household chores.

Careful understanding of visual cues, including body language, facial expressions, and performed actions in sampled commercials, determined the codes of *subordination* (low or not), *function positioning* (equal, collaborative, or functional reversal), *active agency* (male, female, or both), and *setting* (private or public). *Low subordination* refers to both genders contributing to household responsibilities, while *no subordination* directs females to independently decide their course of action. *Equal and collaborative positioning* indicates that both genders contribute to home-related responsibilities, while *functional reversal* refers to the reversal of traditionally conceived gender roles. *Active agency* refers to either males, females, or the authority of both genders. *Setting* indicates the social environment in which males and females operate.

Following the coding of individual commercials on these four constructs, codes were synthesized to classify primary gender portrayals in four categories: *traditional*, *non-traditional*, *mixed*, and *empowerment*. The commercials are classified as *traditional* when the majority of coded elements reflect female subordination and conventional female function positioning, and men are portrayed as authoritative figures/providers. The commercials classified as *non-traditional* are those in which the majority of coded elements reflect the inverse of these patterns, such as active female agency, challenging stereotypes, reversed male/female role positioning, and public/professional settings. Commercials classified as *mixed* are those in which traditional and non-traditional elements co-exist without a clear domination pattern, but in some cases, a discernible lean towards one orientation was noted and mentioned as Mixed (Lean T) for a lean towards traditional portrayals, or Mixed (Lean NT) for a lean towards non-traditional portrayals. This sub-classification necessarily involved subjective interpretation by the researcher, which is acknowledged as a limitation of the coding process. Finally, *empowerment* refers to the expression of non-traditional gender portrayals that exhibit active female agency, fully reversed gender-function positioning, the complete absence of women's subordination, and a strong message of independence. This code often co-exists with the *non-traditional* code.

4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The analysis process went through several stages. First, familiarity with the content of selected advertisements was developed by repeatedly viewing each sampled commercial to gain an initial understanding, followed by systematic coding using the adopted framework based on Goffman and Eisend. Second, individual codes were synthesized to categorize each commercial's overall gender role orientation across the sample to identify recurring patterns and themes. Third, an interpretative strategy was applied that situated these patterns within the broader theoretical framework allowing researchers to critically assess the sampled commercials that reflect, reinforce, or challenge prevailing gender norms in contemporary Pakistani society. Table

2 below presents cues and coding of sampled commercials and the primary gender portrayal.

Table 2 shows that out of 20 commercials, 12 are coded as low and 8 as showing no subordination of the female gender. The advertisements coded as low female subordination show supportive task performance across both genders, whereas the commercials that show no female subordination mostly exhibit a reversal of function and collaborative task performance between the two genders. Active female agency is evident in 8 advertisements, while 3 depict active male agency. There are 9 commercials that reflect equal agency of both genders. Based on this coding, the primary gender portrayal of the sampled advertisements dominantly reflects non-traditional, mixed, and empowerment narratives regarding female representation.

Table 2: Analysis of Electronic and Digital Media Advertisements

Ad Code	Goffman & Eisend Framework Cues and Coding (Subordination, Positioning, Agency, Setting)	Primary Gender Portrayal
Ad-1	<i>Cues</i>	Mixed (lean NT)
	<i>Coding</i>	
Ad-1	-Wife is cheerful, not submissive; husband is playful and central -Both participate equally in domestic chores -Both are actively washing dishes -Kitchen	-Low subordination -Equal or collaborative positioning -Active agency of both genders -Private setting
Ad-2	-Husband and wife are warm and romantic toward each other -Domestic task performed reciprocally highlights partnership rather than hierarchy -Woman prepares tea for both and later requests her husband to make a cup of tea for her -Kitchen and living room	-Low subordination -Equal or collaborative positioning -Active agency of both genders -Private setting
Ad-3	-Only a happy mother is present with children playing outside -No male figure; choosing to order food rather than cook, making her the sole decision-maker -Practise her choice and autonomy by ordering food -Home and garden	-No subordination -Independent positioning -Active female agency -Private setting
Ad-4	-Woman as a wife and a mother figure is central, confident -Both parents teach their daughter the importance of oral hygiene. The husband sets the food for his wife and daughter -Both parents share active roles, but the wife is playing a video game, while the husband is cooking and serving food. -Kitchen and living room	-Low subordination -Collaborative & function reversal positioning -Active agency of both genders -Private setting
Ad-5	-Women portrayed as confident, central, and empowered. -Women from different professions, shown as ambitious and resilient throughout their menstrual cycle -Women appear as strong and active individuals in all roles, overcoming physical discomfort -Home and public spaces, including workplaces	-No subordination -Independent positioning -Active female agency -Public and private setting
Ad-6	-The female doctor (wife/daughter-in-law) is central, professional, and respected by the in-laws -Husband and mother-in-law together manage cooking/childcare	-Low subordination -Collaborative & function reversal positioning -Active female agency

	-The doctor focuses on her professional role -Home and workplace	<i>-Private and public setting</i>	
Ad-7	-Men as fathers, sons, and husbands are cooking for themselves or for their female family members -Men cook while women either enjoy watching them cook or/and enjoy food at the table -Men prepare and serve food, while women eat without participating in the process -Kitchen	<i>-No subordination</i> <i>-Function reversal positioning</i> <i>-Active female agency</i> <i>-Private setting</i>	NT
Ad-8	-Daughter-in-law is acknowledged in her professional role as a doctor by the in-laws -Cooking is shared by mother-in-law, daughter-in-law, and son, emphasizing that food preparation is a collective effort - With her in-laws' support, the doctor balances professional duties with less domestic contribution -Kitchen	<i>-Low subordination</i> <i>-Collaborative & function reversal positioning</i> <i>-Active agency of both genders</i> <i>-Private setting</i>	NT
Ad-9	-Daughter-in-law-to-be is respected and admired for her individuality (playing a musical instrument) -The non-traditional family setting includes brother as chef, his wife as doctor, mother as markswoman, father as poet -All male and female family members breaking norms and supporting the marriage proposal, highlighting autonomy, diversity, and acceptance of non-traditional roles -Home and restaurant	<i>-Low subordination</i> <i>-Collaborative & function reversal positioning</i> <i>-Active agency of both genders</i> <i>-Private and public setting</i>	NT EMP
Ad-10	-Man is central, openly sharing his decisions regarding family planning in consultation with his wife -Husband and wife jointly decide on having a small family with appropriate gaps between children -Man narrates his decision after consulting his wife -Driving on the road	<i>-Low subordination</i> <i>-Collaborative positioning</i> <i>-Active male agency</i> <i>-Public setting</i>	Mixed (lean T)
Ad-11	-Wife is shown as an equal partner in decision-making, recalling their wedding photo as a symbol of shared choices; the husband's voiceover reinforces equality rather than dominance -Husband and wife jointly decide on birth spacing and methods, emphasizing partnership -Both genders exercise agency—the wife narrates their shared decision, the husband explains family planning options, and together they consult a doctor -Home and clinic	<i>-Low subordination</i> <i>-Collaborative positioning</i> <i>-Active male agency</i> <i>-Private and public setting</i>	NT

Ad-12	-Both grandparents, central to the household, are happy on the birth of their granddaughter -Grandparents listen to and agree with the doctor's advice, showing collaboration between elders and medical professionals -Grandmother proposes, against which the doctor advises, and they agree by stressing the shared family responsibility to care for a newborn -Home	-Low subordination -Collaborative positioning -Active agency of both genders -Private setting	NT
Ad-13	-The daughter-in-law initially offers to make tea, but the mother-in-law takes the lead, showing care and respect rather than hierarchy or submissiveness -Tea making becomes a shared act where the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law's own mother prepare tea together -All females in different relations acknowledge and appreciate each other and engage in conversation, reinforcing harmony and shared responsibility -Home	-No subordination -Collaborative positioning -Active female agency -Private setting	Mixed (Lean T)
Ad-14	-Women are portrayed as confident, equal partners in sexual relationships, expressing desires, carrying condoms, and purchasing them without submission -Women and men are shown as equals in intimacy and decision-making. The portrayal normalizes women's comfort in discussing and negotiating sexual health. -Women initiate conversations about sex, request protection, carry condoms, and buy them openly. Male agency is also present but balanced, reinforcing mutual responsibility in sexual health. -Home, public spaces including restaurants and shops	-No subordination -Collaborative & function reversal positioning -Active male agency -Private and public setting	NT EMP
Ad-15	-Two women gossip about the new couple's non-social nature -The husband does grocery. Both express love openly. -Husband proudly defends his wife, explaining she is an excellent cook but communicates through sign language -Home, neighborhood, and market	-Low subordination -Collaborative & function reversal positioning -Active agency of both genders -Private and public setting	NT
Ad-16	-A young daughter makes lights from empty plastic bottles and places them along the path to the house -When asked by her mother, she explains that she illuminated the path so that her father does not get lost in the darkness while returning from the forest after work	-No subordination -Collaborative positioning -Active female agency -Private and public setting	NT

	-Daughter decided to make and place the lights -Home and jungle		
Ad-17	-At his daughter's birth, the father celebrates while others are sad; he calls her a blessing and gives her an education -Despite meagre resources, he funds her education, supports her professional degree, and ensures she achieves higher education -Daughter becomes an architect, builds her own house, and improves her living standard. -Home, university, and workplace	-No subordination -Supportive positioning -Active agency of both genders -Private and public setting	NT
Ad-18	-The daughter is greeted warmly by her father when she returns from work and then proceeds to cook for him. -She prepares dinner after office for her father, and he cooks for her on her birthday, following his wife's recipe. -Both enjoy the meal together, and the father reflects that if her mother were alive, she would have said cooking is not solely the woman's responsibility. -Home	-Low subordination -Collaborative & function reversal positioning -Active female agency -Private setting	NT
Ad-19	-A woman funds the education of an orphaned child and then disappears -The orphaned child becomes a doctor, recognizes the woman while treating her and pays her bill -Portrays an independent woman who funds the child's education and her hospital admission -Orphanage and hospital	-No subordination -Collaborative & function reversal positioning -Active female agency -Private setting	NT
Ad-20	-The father is shown changing the diaper and putting the baby to sleep just like a mother would -When the mother goes out, he is left to care for the baby. The baby needs a diaper change; after some effort, the father successfully changes the diaper and comforts the child. -Father reflects and realizes childcare is not solely the mother's responsibility -Home	-Low subordination -Collaborative & function reversal positioning -Active agency of both genders -Private setting	NT

Note: The key to gender portrayals is as follows: T (Traditional), NT (Non-Traditional), M (Mixed), EMP (Empowerment).

5. DISCUSSION

There are three interconnected themes identified through the applied coding framework. Several advertisements can be classified in more than one category, indicating that a single commercial may convey multiple messages. For example, a commercial portraying a husband helping his wife with household chores not only challenges patriarchy, which holds that performing household responsibilities like cooking, washing, and even taking care of children is the sole responsibility of a woman, but it also highlights that sharing responsibilities with one's spouse leads to a good relationship between a couple, and thus a healthy family life. This overlap is commonly observed in qualitative content analysis, where a single theme is not exclusive but is intertwined with other identified themes, reflecting a complex, layered social environment and gender positioning within this context (Armborst, 2017).

The first theme examines men versus women in domestic roles. Over the years, Pakistani media commercials have largely followed a pattern where household chores are considered the primary responsibility of women, and professional life and activities outside the home are considered the domain of men. However, the content analysis of commercials in this study indicates that this trend is changing in society; men are increasingly shown in caregiver roles, performing household responsibilities alongside their female family members. For example, portrayals where a husband is shown making tea for his wife (Ad-1), washing dishes along with the wife (Ad-2), serving food at the table to his wife and children (Ad-7), changing an infant's diaper (Ad-20), and cooking for a working daughter (Ad-18) reflect a change in society. These commercials not only mirror the functional reversal of gender and the non-traditional role performance of male family members, but they also highlight changes in social structures by indicating female agency. However, while comprehending this evolved change, we should not overlook the fact that this trend observed in media commercials does not exist in isolation; it is the result of the growing female literacy and employment trends that have made families realize that with more women joining the workforce now, a workable, pleasant family environment is achievable with the cooperation of both genders in sharing household chores. It means these narratives not only question the socio-cultural gender role hierarchy, but at the same time educate people to understand and accept that it is normal to work beside your working daughters, mothers, and wives at home. These portrayals also reflect that the close coordination of both genders in household work is normal; this message was missing in previous gender narratives in advertisements. Here, it is important to note that, despite changes reflected in media commercials, advertisements that portray men working outside the home while women perform household responsibilities outnumber those that depict the equal involvement of both genders in household tasks. This fact indicates that though change is imminent, society is not fully prepared to understand and adapt to the new socioeconomic requirements. The above is aligned with the

findings of a study that mentions that “once this change is accepted nationwide, society can work on a better roadmap” (Murad et al., 2022, p. 9). Another observation in our sample is that advertisements featuring men in nurturing and caregiving roles primarily focus on promoting kitchen-related items; this observation is consistent with the findings from an earlier study (Ejaz et al., 2024). However, this image of men in supportive roles could be considered a first step; in the Pakistani context, where women are confined to household chores predominantly related to the kitchen, it is believed that once the male role is strengthened in this domain, women's participation in other areas of life will become more acceptable.

The second theme studies men versus women in a professional setting. As discussed above, the Pakistani woman's primary focus is her home and the family she cares for, a perception reinforced by our analysis, which implies that a woman's presence in professional life is negligible relative to that of her male counterparts. It is also reflected in the Pakistan Labor Force Survey for 2024–25, which reports female and male labor force participation rates of 22% and 67.7%, respectively (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2025). In this context, media commercials, through their content, attempt to create a narrative that the support of parents and in-laws in helping a working woman in domestic chores is crucial to the woman's professional development. These commercials also create awareness that household work is not solely the woman's responsibility. For example, Ads 6 and 8 depicting a father, husband and mother-in-law supporting a working daughter, wife and daughter-in-law in household responsibilities not only helps the women to pursue professional development, but it also sets an example for the audience to realize that both her own family and her in-laws should appreciate and accommodate her as a working woman. Similarly, a powerful message reached the audience through Ad-17, in which a father, against his family's wishes, supports his daughter's education despite his low income. After obtaining an education, the daughter becomes an architect, builds her own house, and lives in far better conditions than those she experienced as a child. These narratives also reflect that the main hurdle in the way of female education and employment in Pakistan comes from society. In situations where families manage to secure their daughter's education and employment, the difficulties are usually created by the extended family members and/or society, who believe educating a female child is a waste of money. This is because culturally, daughters are perceived to belong to the family they get married into. If the girl is educated and employed, the hurdles often come from her in-laws who sometimes oppose her employment and expect her to confine herself to the exclusive role of wife and mother. This is reflected in a 2023 Gallup survey that reports that 35% of female medical graduates have not entered the workforce, a theme specifically addressed in Ad-6. The role of commercials in delivering gender equity messages through their content is also supported by prior studies, which stress a shift in families' expectations of working women (Bukhari & Azam, 2025).

The third theme concerns male versus female perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH). Pakistani society represents a patriarchal

culture, often supported by a misinterpretations of religion, particularly when it comes to gender roles in society. In this situation, a woman's right to sexual and reproductive health is compromised. As far as reproductive health is concerned, government-sponsored advertisements, as depicted in Ads 10 and 11, align with the changing narratives in family planning by focusing on collective decision-making; this includes the importance of an appropriate interval between births in consultation with a doctor. Such advertisements often portray a husband and wife visiting a doctor together for consultation and then deciding on a suitable contraceptive method that not only helps to establish an interval between births but also promises to safeguard the mother and child's health, along with ensuring that the family's financial situation stays stable. These narratives raise viewers' awareness of the financial benefits of having a small family and an appropriate interval between births. However, commercials showing a wife expressing her sexual desire to her husband and a preference for protected sexual intimacy and her act of purchasing contraceptives from a shop and keeping them in a bag (Ad-14) are off-air since 2013; the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA), heeding the complaints made by religious and conservative sections of society, wrote to broadcasters and referred to these commercials as "indecent, immoral and in sheer disregard to our socio-cultural and religious values" (Dawn, 2013; Mohammed, 2013). These advertisements are still available on various digital media platforms and can be easily accessed. The ban on these commercials on television demonstrates that society is not receptive to discussing the sexual needs of a woman, even in a marital relationship; however, access to these advertisements through other digital platforms is a form of covert media support for women's sexual autonomy and intimacy-related preferences in marriage. This reluctance to openly discuss physical intimacy is a socio-cultural phenomenon in Pakistani society, reflected in different survey-based studies (Faize, 2024; Ali et al., 2025). Because of the socio-religious taboo attached to such conversations, Human Rights Watch (2022) stated in its report that marital sexual relations are widely considered a male prerogative in patriarchal societies like that of Pakistan, often leaving the female partner unheard and unseen. This tendency is also evident in the commercials analyzed in our sample.

Taken together, it can be summarized from these findings that content promoting women's education and employment, along with men's support for household chores, reflects a societal shift toward accepting women's fundamental rights, which the advertisements mirror in their narratives. However, while portraying women on their academic and professional journeys, the advertisements also highlight the socio-cultural barriers they face in their efforts to empower themselves, thereby sensitizing society and strengthening the gender equality narrative. Similarly, commercials that also serve as public service announcements focus on women's reproductive health, reflecting that both males and females should coordinate while making decisions regarding the birth of a child and the appropriate gaps between births for a healthy and manageable family. Nevertheless, when the question

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of women's sexual consent and their right to use contraceptives is discussed—as both are related to their bodily autonomy—society does not accept women's active agency, and advertisements do not reflect such agency. As discussed above, whenever this subject has been highlighted in commercials, it has received severe backlash.

6. CONCLUSION

Overall, the commercials reflect societal change where equal participation of both genders in household chores has been a common theme in advertisements, suggesting that gender equality first begins in the domestic sphere and later extends to public settings. It also indicates that society may be ready to bring changes to women's stereotypical positioning within the domestic environment, but when it comes to a public setting, there are serious socio-cultural handicaps, supported by the orthodox religious elements within society. A final point reached through this research, as seen in advertisements, is that Pakistani society seems prepared to accept active agency for women more in the private domain than in the public sphere. It is also ready to support female education and career development, but when it comes to their consent in sexual matters, there is almost no acceptability. This is confirmed by the fewer advertisements about women's reproductive health and the ban on television commercials that highlight sexual autonomy, demonstrating that such issues are still considered social taboos. Thus, advertisements adopting these themes are not produced or telecast in the first place, and if they are, they receive societal backlash when they are aired on television.

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