

Brand Perceptions of the Middle Class: A study of Stereotypes

Sham Haidar

Air University Islamabad Pakistan

Omama Tanvir, Abeer Zahra and Khoula

Air University Islamabad Pakistan

This study investigates the implicit ideologies which result in the Pakistani middle class society's increasing obsession with clothing brands. Consumerism, neoliberalism and the theory of Commodity Fetishism are used as theoretical framework to interpret the data. The study uses a qualitative method being interpretivist in nature, but also has some embedded quantitative data for further verification. The data is collected through interviews, questionnaires, observations from two markets in the capital city of Pakistan. Along with collected data, some advertisements of the selected brands are also analyzed. The theories of neoliberalism, consumerism and commodity fetishism are used to interpret the data. The findings showed that a) people preferred buying branded clothes despite finding them expensive, b) strategies used by marketers is fueling the consumers' obsession with brands. c) People are creating perception of self and others based on brand choices. The qualitative reasoning behind the statistics obtained yields an insight into the hegemonic control of the marketers on consumers which makes consumers perceive others as well as themselves based on brand choices. This creates a consumer culture where brands become a symbol of prestige.

Keywords: Brand consciousness, brand identity, commodity fetishism, consumerism¹

Introduction

Globalization has brought about a borderless world with more exchanges between entities and regions. This has brought an influx of European products to foreign consumers, and thus increased brand awareness (Ming, 2002). With the easy accessibility to foreign luxury goods, consumers attach values (like prestige) to the branded products, and

¹Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Sham Haidar, Omama Tanvir, Abeer Zahra and Khoula Air University Islamabad Pakistan,
Email address: sham_haidar@yahoo.com

are more prone to buying those (Siddique & Rashidi, 2015). Brand loyalty has become a culture around the world and so forth in Pakistan (Ahmed, et al., 2013). Increased technological and economic revolutions have catapulted Pakistanis into this consumer culture with the result that in addition to reliance on foreign brands, a number of local bands have emerged that shape a similar type of consumer culture within Pakistan (Tariq, 2016). Considerable population of this country is engulfed by this very phenomenon (Zaheer, 2012).

Throughout the last decade consumerism and brands have been studied. These phenomena have mostly been considered as a part of the economic domain. The focus has been on the effect of brands on global economy (Lury, 2004), the role of social media in brand awareness (Siddique & Rashidi, 2015), brand conscious societies (Ahmed, et al., 2013), and impact of branded goods on consumer purchase decisions (Tariq, 2016). Brand Consciousness refers to the degree to which people use brand names to make purchase decisions. It comprises of concepts such as brand awareness and brand loyalty (Alamgir et al., 2010). Brand consciousness and brand loyalty are relatively new concepts with their emergence in the Europeans countries (Briciu, 2016). Apart from that, most of the researches present on brand consciousness among people have been conducted mostly in the United States or in other countries (Ahsan et al., 2017). A number of studies discussing brand loyalty or consumer satisfaction have been conducted on mobile companies, appliances or coffee brands etc., and very little research has been done on this subject area in Pakistan. This study thus is supposed to cover the gap of exploring brand consciousness and middle class Pakistani people.

Brand is a name, symbol, term, or design or a combination of them that identifies the products and services of a seller and differentiates them from those of the others (American Marketing Association, 1960). The concept of a brand emerged as a means of identification (Alamgir, et al., 2003). It recognizes the source of the products and at the same time discerns the source from its competitors (Clifton, 2003; Keller, Parameswaran & Jacob, 2011). With the passage of time, the notion of brand has evolved from that simplistic view and now it stands for a multitude of concepts such as status, quality, privilege, lifestyle and so on (Alamgir, et al., 2010; Blackett, 2003). Since people do not react to the objective reality rather to their perception of it so a brand is considered as an image in the mind of the consumer (Martineau, 1958). The reliance on brands has increased and it gives rise to the consumer culture; where the consumer is more focused on satisfying his/her socially constructed needs.

Thus while purchasing something; brand names play a significant role in choosing between different products.

We use constructivist approach as analytical tools since brand consciousness itself is a social construct. The theories of consumerism and neoliberalism (Chomsky, 1999) and the theory of Commodity Fetishism (Marx, 2015) served as the theoretical framework. Neo-liberalism is based on the idea of a neo-capitalist world where commodification results in a market-centered, consumer-based world. In order to understand the idea of a consumer based world one needs to understand the concept of commodity. A commodity is an object or the product of human want, something that human beings wish to acquire through capital (i.e. money). Thus, it has the quality to 'satisfy' human wishes and at the same time generate capital (Marx, 2015). Henceforth, brand companies use the process of commodification so as to ensure that the buyers are attracted towards their products. This lure towards a commodity is termed as "commodity fetishism" (Marx, 2015). Commodity fetishism is the characteristic of consumers which "attaches itself to the products of labor" and further ensures the "production of commodities" (Marx, 2015, p.34-35). Therefore, it is linked with 'consumerism' and 'consumption'. Since consumer is the economic term for the buyer of the commodity, the idea of consumption is the product use and the fulfillment of 'consumer demand'. This socio-economic chain of commodity, consumer demand and consumption creates "consumer culture" (Firat, Kutucuoğlu, Saltik & Tunçel, 2013). Consumer culture is based on three perspectives: expansion of production, consumer satisfaction of need which is dependent on socially constructed needs (that is the socially created wants), and consumption for the sake of pleasure and excitement rather than need (Featherstone, 1991).

The concept of class status is part of neo-Marxist theory which is directed towards the "arena of class struggle" (Barrow, 1993, p.154). The social structures that govern the classes that become consumer, capitalist or laborers is the focus of 'neo-Marxist class analysis' which is centered on theorizing the social structures in 'contemporary capitalist societies' (Manza & McCarthy, 2011). Henceforth, it explains eagerness for social mobility and status consciousness that results from 'consumer culture' (Manza & McCarthy, 2011). Therefore, these socio-economic concepts are linked to the concept of consumer consciousness. Understanding the psychology of consumer enables us to view the effects of 'commodity fetishism' and 'consumption' on the identities of buyers. In fact, consumption of products can help in defining both the individual as well

as the social identities of individuals in a consumer based world (Zepf, 2010). This research makes use of these concepts or theories to shed some light on the emergence of brands as commodity and the role of the manipulative strategies to turn the need for brands into a 'fetish' by the consumers. This in turn has solidified the use of Brands as a yard stick for measuring class status. The theories of 'Commodity Fetishism' and 'Consumerism' help unearth the implicit agendas behind the over the top reliance on brands.

Rationale of the study

Pakistani society is based on class structure that is traced back to its colonial history and still exists (Gardezi, 1991). Broadly speaking Pakistani society can be divided into upper, middle, and lower classes (Haidar, 2016). The middle class being in complexity feels that they can overcome their status by purchasing branded product since social degradation is one of the main problems of Pakistan (Saeed et al., 2013). People consider appearances as best indicators of class so those who aspire to climb to the upper class turn to commodities such as apparels. Thus, brands take the ongoing narratives and social insecurities to use them for their own benefit. One such narrative is the plight of the women in a Pakistani society. Women especially girls as being a part of patriarchal society, tend to struggle for their rights and there are several movements for women liberation (Bhattacharya, 2014). The Brands often exploit such narratives to create an unhealthy reliance on their products.

The Pakistani middle class consumers are not aware of the role of sneaky underlying ideologies in promoting brand obsession. Chomsky (1999) uncovers the brand franchises' implicit agendas by referring to this process as permitting a handful of private interests to control the social life of individuals in order to maximize their own profit. This type of trade is based on benefiting the wealthy at the expense of common people. It turns people into the consumers of things which are not important. People are made to focus on the fashionable consumption. Such ideals are incorporated in the minds of individuals and their focus is only on satisfying their created wants. The research is significant in the sense that it would identify their increasing obsession with the brands; and how this obsession is manipulated by the hegemonic and implicit marketing strategies which take their rationale from foreign consumerism. The results and the qualitative reasoning behind them would put a mirror in front of the readers in an effort to realize the control of false brand related prestige concepts on their minds. The statistics obtained through this research can

be used to target the appropriate age groups and gender in order to reduce the fixation with brands.

Objectives

- To explore the manipulative strategies used by the brands to develop ‘created wants’ for their economic benefit.
- To trace the connection between over the top reliance on brands and the psyche of buyers

Research Questions/Hypothesis

- How does an underlying ideology affect the buyers and fuels their obsession with brands?
- How does an implicit ideology along with the obsession with branded clothes tend to be triggered by the marketing strategies of brand franchises?

Methods

Research Design

The study analyzes brand consciousness in Pakistani middle class society and the strategies used by producers by using a mixed research design. It mainly employs a qualitative approach followed by a quantitative component. Both qualitative and quantitative data are combined simultaneously for triangulation purposes to make findings trustworthy. The data were collected by observations and semi structured interviews. A tool of quantitative research, i.e. questionnaires (Creswell, 2005) was also distributed among the buyers in order to provide statistical support to the results which were gathered on the basis of interviews. The results are combined under each theme. The behavior of people buying from the outlets was also observed through naturalistic observation. The researchers observed the behavioral pattern of buyers in their natural surroundings without any intervention. They visited the research sites several times for observation. Advertisements of few brands are studied, as they are the very first step of brand construction because they help in making target group aware of the existence of respective brand.

Sampling strategy

Centaurus Mall and Giga Mall Islamabad were selected as research sites. Both these Malls are most popular among the middle class especially upper middle class in the capital city and contain numerous outlets of different clothing brands. The elite class and lower classes usually do not go for shopping to these Malls. We visited research sites for two weeks for about three hours each day. People buying from such outlets were observed. Twenty interviews were also conducted with people who were

buying from stores of leading cloth brands, such as Nishat Linen, Gul Ahmed, Sana Safinas and Alkaram. These people were perceived to belonging to the middle class by the researchers based on their clothes and other their behavior. Fifty questionnaires were distributed to add to the data. Six advertisements of Pakistan's leading brands were analyzed. The advertisements of these brands were selected as they are more repeatedly marketed on social media and they are also emotionally moving. The advertisements were about the winter collection of 2017 and spring collection of 2018.

Procedure

The data was collected through interviews, observations, focus group, and questionnaires along with advertisements. The advertisements play an important role in making buyers aware of the availability of different seasonal collections; therefore, we included advertisement as our data. They incorporated ideas which were relatable to the viewers and emotionally moved them by relating their identities with brands. Focus groups were also used in which we brought together a group of study participants to share their ideas. Semi-structured interviews were conducted as the questioning proceeded according to the response from the participants. Interview enables the participants to "speak in their own voice and express their own thoughts and feelings" (Berg, 2007, p.96). They were asked about the preference of a specific brand, the things they take into consideration such as the quality of the clothes while buying, the frequency of their visiting these stores, their ability in differentiating original and rip offs or replicas, and their reasons for preferring these brands over non branded clothes. Questionnaires were also distributed among the participants. They were based on closed ended questions. They helped in adding objectivity to the interpretation of the data, hence making it more reliable. The observations which were noted down at the time of data collection also helped in backing up the interpretations which were based on the analysis of advertisements and interviews. Ethical considerations were taken into account as participants were informed about the research, its scope and the level of confidentiality of the research data. Participants safety and comfort was ensured. Moreover, there was no potential harm for the research participants.

Results

The research is based on content analysis in order to analyze the interviews and advertisements since the data was collected in the form of words. We used coding to analyze the qualitative data collected in the form of transcripts of interviews, transcripts of focus groups, and field notes and

percentages were calculated. After transcription of data, coding was carried out to develop some main themes discussed in the next section. A multimodal analysis of the advertisements was carried out to analyze the language as well as the images both moving and static.

Findings and Discussions

The first part of the analysis focuses on the consumer psyche (Zepf, 2010) and the resulting behavior of the buyers (Featherstone, 1991) through an examination of the data. Whereas the second part of the analysis explores the underhand ideologies of the marketers propagated through advertisements in order to boost their sales (Barroso & Llobelt, 2012).

Brand Awareness and Social Media

With the help of advertisement and social media the brands owners make people aware of new collections. Therefore, the study participants were aware of the arrival of new collections in the market. Almost all participants stated that they were well aware of the collections of the top clothing franchises. Online catalogue, advertisements, social media, and visiting stores are some of the sources which keep people aware of new collections in the market (Barroso & Llobelt, 2012). One participant stated:

I mean پہ چل جاتا ہے کے کونزے برانڈ کا کبا زیا ڈیزائن آیا ہے۔ جو آن لائن

کریٹا الگ ہوتے ہیں ان سے بھی دیکھ لوئی ہوں۔ پھر سوشل میڈیا پر بھی آتے رہتے ہیں اور خود بھی شاپس کا چکر لگتا رہتا ہے۔

Translation: I mean one comes to know which brand has introduced new designs. I get to see them through online catalogues, then it shows on social media as well and I do get to visit the shops too.

(Interview, Giga Mall, 08/01/2018)

Another one stated: “ہر نئے سیزن کے کپڑوں کا انداز ہوجاتا ہے۔” (Translation: One gets to know about the clothes from every new season) (Interview, Centaurus Mall, 04/30/2018). However, the level of the awareness varied among the people of different age groups and genders. For instance, through these interviews it was noted that women with age above forty seemed to be less aware of the shifting trends in fashion. In contrast the young participants were more conscious about the ongoing changes in dressing styles. When asked about brand preferences and latest trends one of the participant accompanied by her daughter responded:

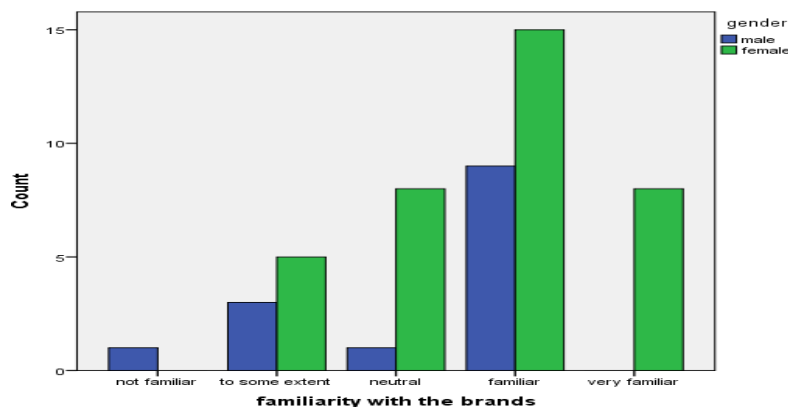
یہ نیشنل ٹریڈنگز کا ٹو بچوں کو ہی زیادہ پتہ ہوتا ہے، ان سے ہی پوچھا جائے۔ ہم تو کچھ بھی عام سا پہن لیتے ہیں۔ مہری بیٹیاں زیادہ کانشیئس ہوتی ہیں، میں اتنی پرواہ نہیں کرتی ان چیزوں کی۔

Translation: Youngsters know better about these fashion trends, they should be asked about these things. We can wear any ordinary

dress. My daughters get more conscious over this; I don't care that much about these things. (Interview, Giga Mall, 08/01/2018)

We further explored this phenomenon of young girls being more conscious of brands while doing the analysis of advertisements as explained later. In fact, in advertisements the brands usually target young girls, as probably they are more vulnerable or made more conscious due these strategies (see also Siddiqui & Rashidi, 2005; Zaheer, 2012). We also observed that middle aged women were mostly accompanying their daughters. They themselves were less interested in shopping rather their daughters were suggesting dresses to their mothers that these designs and colors would have worked better for them.

Similarly, men were less aware of the trends as according to them men's fashion does not alter as much as the trends in women's fashion. We observed that males were with their families either carrying babies or shopping bags. Very few men were shopping for t-shirts from brands having sale offer. One of the male participants specified: مردوں کے ٹریڈز انہیں بدلنے بھی نہیں، یہ "لیڈیز کو ہی ہشکل ہوتی ہیں خیال سے۔ (Translation: I don't think the male trends change that much, these women have more problems [regarding changing trends] I think)" (Interview, Centaurus Mall, 04/30/2018). This trend is shown through graph 1 below, based on the data collected from the questionnaires.



Graph 1: Familiarity with the brand among men and women

This shows that the participants were aware of the new collections of the brands and they expressed that young women and young girls are more conscious to adopt the new fashion as compared to mature women (see also Siddiqui & Rashidi, 2005; Zaheer, 2012).

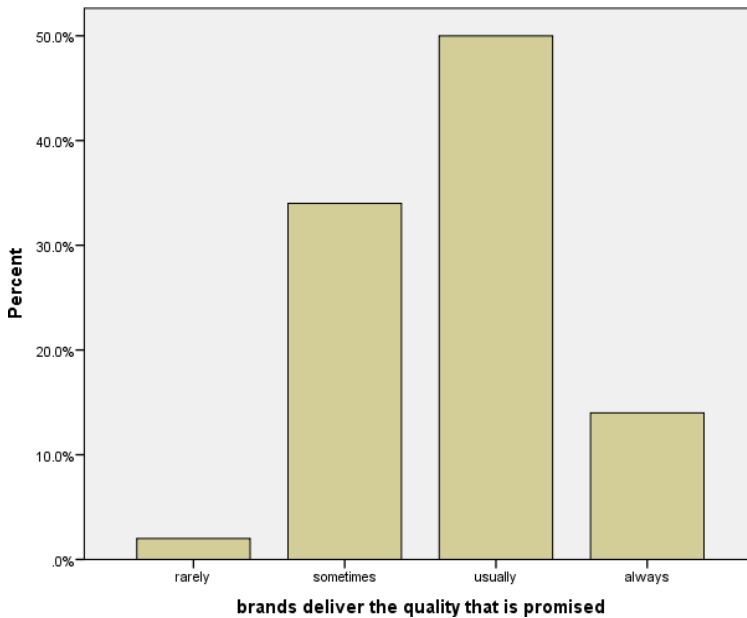
Social media contributes to brand awareness and was acknowledged by almost all the participants. Mass media plays important role in spreading consciousness about particular brands through advertisements, social media pages and billboards. As one of the lady interviewed stated: ”آج کل سب کو پتہ ہوتا ہے ، موبائل کھولو تو نو سبک بھرا ہوتا ہے (Translation: Everyone knows these days, switch on the mobile and [your] Facebook is full of advertisements)” (Interview, Centaurus Mall, 04/30/2018). Similarly another one indicated: ”آن لائن ایڈورٹائزمنٹ پہ سب سے زیادہ ریلٹی کرتے ہوں ، اٹی گیس۔ کیونکہ بندہ فوراً سے تو میٹشہ آ (Online advertisements are what we rely on the most, I guess. That is because one can't just come immediately whenever there are new arrivals)” (Interview, Giga Mall, 08/01/2018). Considering the great appeal and reach of such social media platforms, it is difficult to remain unaware of such trends particularly when they are flashed many times a day in the faces of the consumers as a social ‘stimuli’ (Reed, Forehand, Puntoni, & Warlop, 2012). This also explains why the younger generation is more aware of brands and the various seasonal collections since they use social media.

However, there are also such consumers who are unsure whether they have the awareness of the brand or not although they tend to shop from well-known branded clothing stores. This shows that despite consumption of commodities the consumer is still at times left unsure of product awareness. The process of attracting the consumer towards their product and making the product a consumer need falls under ‘commodity fetishism’ (Marx, 2015) which is the key to the formation of a consumer culture. Thus, people are unconsciously controlled by these trends and thus brands are becoming their needs.

Brands as Symbol of Social Status

After brand awareness, the next thing about psyche of the consumer is brand loyalty. After conducting the interviews it became apparent how the brands have successfully managed to instill socially constructed needs (created wants) (Featherstone, 1991) within the buyers to ensure their continued dependence on the specific merchandise. When asked about the correlation of quality and price of branded clothes, all of the participants acknowledged that the quality of such clothes is superior to others or so they have been wired to believe. Because the responses of the participants suggested that they pay keeping in mind the name of the brand. So it is the name that sells more than quality. As one of the participant mentioned ”ظاہر ہے ایک نام چل رہا ہوتا ہے نا، انہوں نے اپنا مینٹین رکھنا ہوتا ہے نا۔ مطلب کے ایک ” (Translation: Obviously, they (the known brands) have

this name everywhere, they have to maintain it. I mean they have a set standard they follow)” (Interview, Centaurus Mall, 04/30/2018). On similar lines, another one claimed that branded stores were always pricy but added, “کمزور کھ نام دے نا پھر۔” (Translation: Because they have a name after all)’ (Interview, Centaurus Mall, 04/30/2018). This over the top reliance on the name of the brand indicates a deep rooted imprint on the mind of the consumer that buying a dress from a particular brand would make them look good, increase their self-image, as well as the way people view them. That is why people are willing to pay more to buy what they think would help them achieve a nice image and overcome their insecurities. As one of them specified that: “اس لیے اوبویسلی ہم پریفر کرنے میں کے اگر برینڈڈ کپڑے تھوڑے بہت زیادہ میں بھی مل رہے ہیں تو وہ لیے لائے جائیں۔” (Translation: Obviously, this is why we prefer buying branded clothes even if they are a little bit more expensive)” (Interview, Centaurus Mall, 04/30/2018). On a similar tangent one claimed that “بعض اوقات ہوتا ہے کے بہت زیادہ کوئی چیز پسند آجاتی ہے اور وائز سٹیل پریئر کرتے ہیں۔” (Translation: Sometimes it so happens that we just like something so much, and then we have to buy it. Otherwise, we prefer sales)” (Interview, Centaurus Mall, 04/30/2018). The graph 2 below shows the popular opinion regarding the perceived quality of the brands.



Graph 2: Popular opinion on the quality delivered by the brands

The above graph shows that majority of the people believe or are made to believe that the quality of brands is always up to the mark and far superior than any other local shops.

However, majority of the participants relied on sales to purchase clothes but these sales themselves have been turned into a very effective marketing strategy and a source of competition between various brands (Niazi, Siddiqui, Shah & Hunjra, 2012). Nevertheless, sales are a sure way to sell thrice the number of dresses as compared to off sale seasons. For instance, one lady said that, “لوکن سٹل بہ پہنچ جائیں تو پھر ایک ساٹھ چار سے ہانچ“ (Translation: But if we reach the sale [in time], then we end up buying four to five suits)” (Interview, Centaurus Mall, 04/30/2018). Another one was of the view that, “سیلز پہ ڈھیر ساری چیزیں لے لو تو اچھا رہا ہے۔“ (Translation: It’s best if we buy loads of stuff on sales)” (Interview, Giga Mall, 08/01/2018). Still, lack of sales does not discourage the buyers from purchasing what they like. Their purchase decisions are almost always regulated by a need.

The importance of brands in creating a desirable image extends to not only what people think about themselves but also of others and that was determined through inquiry about the concept of replicas or rip offs. Most of the participants were familiar with the concept and detailed that they were able to identify the replicas from the original brands. For instance a participant specified: ریپلیکاز کا بنا چل جاتا ہے، انک ایس کا مہیڈی ریل (Translation: One can tell replicas apart, the material of copied (clothes) is bad so one can know immediately)” (Interview, Centaurus Mall, 04/30/2018). Thus, pointing to the fact that the replicas fail to provide the same level of self-satisfaction which a branded dress is able to provide. As it was clearly mentioned in one comment:

میں آپکو بتاؤں نا، میں نے دو سوٹ لیے تھے، ایک عام سا اور ایک برانڈڈ۔ عام وال پن کرمجھے اپنا آپ اچھا ہی نہیں لگ رہا تھا۔ برانڈڈ کی سٹیچنگ ہی بہت اچھی لگتی ہے۔ وہ لک ہی اور ہونا ہے۔ اصلی بندہ پھر کانشی میں ہوتا ہے۔

Translation: Tell you what, I bought two suits. One was a plain (not branded) suit and the other was branded. I just couldn’t like myself when I wore the plain (non-branded) one. Branded clothes are just so well stitched. That look is just something else. That’s why one does get conscious. (Interview, Centaurus Mall, 04/30/2018)

This shows the sense of self perception and self-consciousness (Alamgir, et al., 2010; Blackett, 2004) that is raised in the consumers’ psyche when they are wearing branded clothes. This is also evident through this comment:

ریپلیکاز کی وہ بات نہیں ہوتی جو برانڈڈ کپڑوں کی ہوتی ہے، اور پھر جب باہر جانا ہوتا ہے
 تو یورینٹو لک گڈ جو صرف کھادی یا کسی اور اچھے برانڈ کے ہی لگتے
 ہیں۔ لوگ بھی بہت جج کرتے اس لیے آئی ہوسٹلای پریئر برانڈز۔

Translation: Replicas just don't have the thing that branded clothes do, and then when you have to go out, you need to look good which can only happen with Khadi and some other brand. People judge a lot too, that's why I mostly prefer brands. (Interview, Giga Mall, 08/01/2018)

Thus reiterating the engraved notion that only branded clothes can provide the self-assurance that one needs to feel good about them and to project the desired image out to the society.

Ideal Woman Image a Tool in Advertisements

The above analysis throws light on the psyche of the middle class consumers in Islamabad. The next part of the analysis investigates how it is constructed. To answer this we explored marketing strategy of the brands. The sources of the products try to instill a certain kind of consumer buying behavior to ensure brand loyalty. For this, these sellers make use of various manipulative strategies that control the minds of the consumers without being overly explicit about it. Propagation of implicit ideologies carrying the sellers' agenda leads to increased reliance on their brands (Zain-ul-Abideen & Saleem, 2011). One way of propagation of such values is through advertisements. Advertisements serve as tool to create product awareness in the mind of the consumer and affect the eventual purchase decision. Thus, brand sellers give considerable attention to the advertisements, their contents and how they are delivered. The aim is to create sort of an emotional appeal to which the consumer can relate and identify themselves with (Upshaw, 1995). This emotional appeal is created by taking on the dominant narrative, needs and aspirations of the consumers and then presenting it in an attractive manner. Bold colors and catchy music is employed. Even the tag lines lend themselves to the hopes and desires of the target consumers. Advertisements and eventually brands then become a major factor which determines or shapes the identity of the consumer (Zepf, 2010).

For this study six advertisements representing the 2017-18 collection of clothing brands were analyzed. The analysis focused on the various psychological triggers embedded in these advertisements that create an emotional appeal for the consumers. The advertisements mostly target the young women belonging to the age group of 18-30. This in itself is a marketing strategy to boost up the sales as adolescents are a large and

rapidly emerging group of consumers in Pakistan. Therefore, the advertisements raise the wants and ambitions of the young generation.

One of the dominant narratives of today is the women entitlement of same rights and privileges, end of women subjugation and acceptance of women as an independent entity. Most of the female clothing brands take on this agenda and use it to sell their clothes. The contents of their advertisements lend themselves easily to the aspirations of the young girls. For instance one advertisement shows a couple of very confident women wearing the branded dresses, exploring the desert alone without any male escort. The voiceover in the ad says: ”مجھے چلتے جانا ہے اس منزل کی طرف“ (I have to keep walking towards that destination where freedom and beginnings are my own. The beginning of my freedom comes from me)” (TVC, Sana Safinaz, 2018). This conveys the idea that a woman herself is the master of her freedom. But indirectly this narration targets the psyche of the consumers and implants the idea that if a person wears a dress of this particular brand, she would feel confident and free. Along the same lines, another ad depicts a confident woman who says: ”کہونکہ برخواب کو بانے کے لیے،“ (Because to achieve every dream all you need to do is believe in yourself)” (TVC, Alkaram, 2017). This belief and confidence in oneself comes only when you are well dressed, in suitable attire from a reputable brand. Some of the brand advertisements use tag lines such as “#NoDarr, NoDarr” meaning, “No fear” (TVC, Gul Ahmed, 2017).

Apparently telling the women to stop being afraid and take charge of their own lives, at the same time covertly associating the branded dresses with such strength and courage. Similarly, an ad by GulAhmed features several celebrities embracing their socially declared flaws such as ”مجھے اچھا لگتا ہے ڈریس کوڈ کا کوڈ توڑنا۔“ (I like breaking the code of dress code)”. All of them proclaim: ”انہی ام ہر فنکشنز کے ساتھ ہر فنکٹ ہونا، مجھے اچھا لگتا ہے۔“ (Being perfect with my imperfections is what I like)”. The tag line of the advertisement says “#MeinPerfec Hoon” (#Iamperfect) (TVC, Gul Ahmed, 2017), telling the girls to accept themselves as they are and turn a deaf ear to all the criticisms that society hurls at them. They should be comfortable in their own skin. At the same time implying that the imperfections can only be masked by a branded suit.

When asked about what attracts them to buying from branded stores, one of the participants stated:

Basically, the advertisements they do... When you see all the pictures of the clothes they are introducing in their new collection,

I feel like that's what makes people more attracted to buy from the proper original brands, instead of waiting for some nice copy of that same design. (Interview, Giga Mall, 08/01/2018)

This shows that through these advertisements the brands are able to send message across and affect the psyche of consumer to accept their narrative.

Another strategy used by the marketers to lure in the customers is by making the content of the advertisement appealing to the eyes. That is done by using well known celebrities, bright hues, exotic locations and catchy music. The celebrities are shown to be having the time of their life clothed in branded attire, at an exotic location. Thus, triggering the consumers' hopes and desires to travel and have fun as one tag line reads “#Chasethefun” (TVC, Nishat Linen, 2018). In the advertisement, the girls are shown to be roaming the streets of Turkey and having fun. The catchy background music is telling them to “Live in the moment”. The colorful clothes and the exotic scenery add to the beauty of the moment. In another advertisement, two very confident girls are shown to be exploring the African jungle, moving among the wild animals without any fear. They are self-reliant and free. The soulful background music adds to the exoticism of the place and makes the girls seem even more fearless. The colors are bold and bright. All of these things combined, trigger the psychological reflexes of the consumers and works as a stimuli creating a desire to be just like the girls shown in such ads and the only thing that can make is possible is by wearing the clothes that they are wearing. Thus, this creates a certain brand image in the mind of the buyers which then positively affects their purchasing decisions.

Conclusion

This research was centered on the Pakistani buyers' obsession with brands. For this purpose it was delimited to the societies of Islamabad and Rawalpindi. The participants belonged to a socioeconomic group with an average monthly income, commonly referred to as 'middle class' where brand consciousness has become more distinct and continues to grow. The researchers analyzed only some selected clothing brands for this study. The study found that middle class is becoming more brand conscious in Islamabad. Social media plays important role in spreading brand consciousness in population. Women and especially younger one are more influenced by advertisements as they are easy target for brands. Brands have become symbol of social status and participants consider branded clothes an integral part of not only their own personality but also a tool to other people social status. Brand advertisements exploit the ideals of young

woman by presenting their products as sources of independence and empowerment.

The study through the analysis of the interviews and advertisements explored the implicit sneaky strategies used by the marketers to fuel consumer obsession with brands by drawing on their social insecurities and establish a consumer culture that ensures commodity fetishism (Marx, 2015). The study unearthed how advertisements and social media play a vital role in triggering their sense of want or desire for the commodity. Another common observation was that most of the participants interviewed prefer buying from brands despite the fact that they find brands to be unreasonably expensive. The participants of all the interviews except one; found the prices of branded clothes to be exceedingly high and considered brands as expensive. This also confirms that they were mostly from middle class. All the participants claimed that purchasing in sales was both reasonable and preferable. Many claimed that they waited for sales so that they could buy more clothes for lesser prices. Therefore, the obsession with wearing brands is quite evident. Most of the participants claimed that they were not brand conscious, they either denied flatly or justified brand consciousness as something natural. This shows the effect of globalization which has resulted in a consumer culture that makes human buyers part of the chain of production and consumption.

Moreover, advertisements analysis show the marketing strategies that are being used by stakeholders for commodification of their product. Their effect on consumer psyche was scrutinized for a better understanding of how these techniques ensure commodity fetishism. By fueling a sense of being better when wearing brands the producers of branded companies through advertisements manipulate the consumers. The consumers start to believe that by wearing those brands they will look better, feel better, and appear better in society. Hence, establishing a perception of self and viewing others based on their brand choices. The responses from the questions supported and substantiated these ideas of control on the consumers psyche through brand awareness and marketing strategies. This research is a step towards helping us understand how people are made conscious about brand, how they fall prey to their created wants and how the concept of brands is being internalized among the ideologies of people. This neo-liberal hegemonic control of the marketers (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 2007; Chomsky, 1999) can be traced in the establishment of a consumer culture (Featherstone, 1991) in today's global world.

Limitations and Implications

The study lacks a representative group of participants from a homogenous Sociodemographic background. The participant characteristics needed to be screened and described to reflect a homogeneity, however, due to logistic limitations, it could not be ensured. However, it facilitates an understanding of the phenomena of neo-liberalism and commodity fetishism spreading in Pakistan. In fact, the use of brands itself is not problematic and everyone has the right to choose according to their choices. However, relying on brands and making it relevant to social prestige as a source of power, judging people from their appearance and products used, can lead to social problems. It may distract the youth from constructive goals and divert their focus to follow the materialistic and superficial trends.

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