

**Sindh Journal of Linguistics (2024)**

Volume 3, Issue 1–pp. 148-161

eISSN: 2957-9309

Published Annually by

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DOI: 10.58921/sjl.v3i1.53

**A Semiotic Analysis of Social Class Representation in Pakistani Television Commercials**

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**Abstract**

Semiotics interprets that how different signs are used in everyday lives to represent different things. Different verbal and non-verbal signs are used to reflect different ideologies and hidden agendas in the field of advertisements. The meanings and hidden agendas of TV commercials can be analysed in a more appropriate and effective way by considering semiotics as an influential tool of investigation. The enterprises of different domains as semiotics, linguistics and sociocultural studies make the current study as a multidisciplinary study. Media being an influential and feasible tool in the diffusion and representation of information and ideas encompasses strength and power to present different ideologies and agendas with the help of different verbal and non-verbal signs. The nature of the study is qualitative. The theory of semiotics proposed by Dyer (1982) in the book *advertising as Communication* is the basis of the theoretical framework of the study. Non probability sampling technique is used to collect the commercials of renowned Pakistani television channels as data of the study, which comprises only those commercials which reflect social class representation. The analysis of the study highlights that different social classes as upper and lower classes are represented in different spheres of lives at symbolic level with the domination and superiority of upper class in the selected advertisements. The images of both upper and lower classes presented in the commercials support ideological beliefs about how social class biased practices are prevailed in the Pakistani society.

**Key words:** Semiotics, Signs, Social class, discriminatory representation, advertisements

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## **Introduction**

In the field of discourse analysis, there is a shift taken by semiotic analysis by taking into consideration the number of modes in the realm of communication such as images, sounds, symbols and words which play an effective and influential role in conveying ideologies and meanings. In media and in the field of advertisements these modes play an important role to convey certain agendas.

With the advancement of science and technology, there has been a number of changes in the use of techniques and strategies of media and advertisements. The signs used in advertisements are replete with social and cultural norms, values and ideologies. According to Van Dijk (2006) ideologies are in fact ideas which reflect the convictions and beliefs of a society. This study investigates the symbolic depiction of social classes in Pakistani advertisements with the help of services and products portrayed in indirect ways in the advertisements. The images of upper and lower classes in the advertisements of Pakistani media reflect the discriminatory and distinctive attitude towards the lower class. These distinctive social practices and power relations are spotlighted in the media and particularly in advertisements. Leeuwen (2006) asserted that discriminatory practices are implicitly conveyed in the media to reflect the social actors with the help of visual images. Reay (1998) implies that class is not just a reflection of social, theoretical and political concepts but class is practiced on daily basis which in turn effect on the behavior and attitude of individuals and groups. The representation of distinctive class practices in the media reflect social construction of the status of different social classes in the society. Leeuwen (2008) states the images representation of different social classes in media the feeling of glamor and domination of upper class while making others to be like 'others' in the social setting. The current study interprets the representation of different social classes in the media with the help of advertisements which are faced by viewers on daily basis.

## **Statement of Problem**

The representation of different social classes in media is replication of prevailing social class system in the Pakistani society. The portrayal of social classes in advertisements, the most popular genre of media mirrors the traditional and associated status of different social classes. This study aims to investigate the representation of upper and lower class in the Pakistani television advertisements. The study intends to examine the representation of social classes from semiotic perspective by doing comprehensive examination of visual and verbal modes used in the advertisements.

## **Research Objectives**

The study aims;

1. To investigate the semiotic representation of social class in Pakistani television advertisements

2. To analyse the limited sphere of lives associated with upper and lower classes in Pakistani television advertisements
3. To highlight the representation of social class roles in Pakistani television advertisements

### **Research Questions**

1. How are social classes represented in Pakistani television advertisements?
2. How are the limited spheres of life associated with upper and lower classes presented in Pakistani television advertisements?

### **Significance of the study**

The current study aims to analyse the representation of different social classes in Pakistani television advertisements. The analysis aims to show the social class representation in the advertisements by keeping in view the social and cultural impacts of society. The study investigates the social class representation by doing comprehensive interpretations at denotative and connotative level. The study investigates each verbal and visual sign used in the advertisements in order to highlight the portrayal of social classes. The significance of study is that it highlights the in depth representation of social classes in Pakistani media by using semiotics interpretative method which makes vivid portrayal of social class power and discriminatory relations in Pakistani society.

### **Delimitations of the study**

The study is limited to only three advertisements of renowned Pakistani television channels. The advertisements related to topic in newspapers, radio and social media are not included but the study is limited to electronic media advertisements. The population of the study comprises social class discriminatory and power relations representation and it excludes other binary practices in the society.

### **Literature Review**

Bignell (2002) states that one of the most effective and influential way of thinking and perceiving media is through semiotics. Dyer (1986) also supports the concept by describing that advertisement is one of the most influential means of depiction and portrayal of meaning and ads constructs and portrays ideologies through the intervention of different signs and symbols that are being practiced in the society. In the same way, Nazafian and Dabaghi (2011) state, it is sign that is responsible for the portrayal of meanings and ideologies in advertisements. They (2001) further mention that it is with the use of different signs and colours that advertisers are better able to get the attention of consumers and convince them to buy the product. The idea is also supported by Nazafian and Dabaghi (2011) that images, sound, words and colours are the most important signs used in the advertisements to portray social and cultural meanings. It is

asserted by Mick (1986) that in the advertisements of televisions, semiotics like signs and symbols are associated with colours, symbols, lighting, words, angle of shots, non-verbal language, musical sounds, jingles, spatiality, images and frame work to transfer different agendas and ideologies. He (1986) further argues that the significance of employed signs and symbols are embedded in the norms, values, ideas and concepts of a culture and society. Furthermore, Bagwell (2002) mentions that different linguistic and visual signs in advertisements are used to highlight ideas and concepts but there is systematic organization of images, sounds and words to convey certain ideologies in the advertisements of television. Hidden ideologies and concepts are not always identical and easy to find, the interpreters do not always find it easy to highlight the hidden agendas and values of the code.

Barthes (1967) asserts the concept of visual representation as images and pictures, the roots of messages although it also consists of the combination of words, labels, sounds and captions. He (1967) further argues that the symbolic and descriptive messages strengthen myths and disseminated ideas of the advertisements. Moreover, the use of schemas, colours, slogans, cultural shades and literal messages are the use of different techniques and strategies in order to persuade the target audience and different ideologies which are not directly stated in the advertisements are intermingled with these different techniques to convince the audience. It is also argued by him (1967) that the symbolic and descriptive messages strengthen myths and disseminated ideas of the advertisements.

The representation of different social classes in the media has been highlighted by numerous studies as Goffman (1979) states that it should be kept in mind by the viewers that how different elements of advertisements are organised to portray a social situation and how they are constructed to reflect the social ideologies. In line with the same concept, Williams (2001) also describes that media tends to portray poverty and social class inequality as legitimate and valid, these social inequalities and differences are framed in the media as legitimate without being concerned as the biased representation of these classes. Moreover, Bullock et al., (2001) states that the development the social class discriminatory practices as effective and appropriate are portrayed in the media with the combination of different elements as who is portrayed, how is portrayed and how the social class structures.

Gamson (1992) declares that media acts as a window through which to see the world and presentation of the social class reality is also constructed through media the world. He further describes that there is not only the case that the poor class is represented in the media but how this presentation is reflected in comparison to the presentation of other classes is of great concern which in turn reflects and constructs the social realities. Bishop (2008) examines that the poor are strictly repressed and under-represented in news stories, television programmes and in even ads. He (2008) further investigates the representation of the upper class as impressively over-represented in the television programmes, shows and in the news stories. Alpher & Leistyan (2005) state that working class is typically outlined as backwards, irresponsible, illiterate and

dependent on state and on other social classes while the middle/upper class is usually outlined as admirable, educated and progressive by portraying the members of lower class at the bottom of the ladder.

According to Leeuwen (2008) the representation of visual images are conveyed with social actors and the representation of different social actors reflect the discriminatory presentation of different social classes. Leeuwen (2008) further asserts that the participants from different social classes in the visual representation are not just participants but social actors who are the representatives of concerned social classes in the media.

Manzor (2018) states the portrayal of lower middle class in the media with typical dress, roles and actions has been portrayed as 'others' in the advertisements and the portrayal of upper class with associated roles and behaviour are presented as significant members of society by representing them as being superior and advanced as compared to the working class. He (2018) further states that the portrayal of class discrimination in the advertisements impacts on the understandings and perception of viewers, they get influenced by the fascination of the upper class in the society and in this way different social classes discriminatory practices prevail in the society.

## **Research Methodology**

The study is qualitative in nature as it attempts to discover the underlying meanings and motives of Pakistani television advertisements. Qualitative research design is used in the study to explore that how different ideologies and agendas are propagated and constructed in the advertisements based on the features drawn from theory of semiotics presented by Gillian Dyer (1982). The study aims to explore that how different social classes are presented in the advertisements with different associated roles and behaviours.

The advertisements are investigated with the help of semiotic method to explore the presentation of different social classes with the help of signs and linguistic features. Semiotic analysis is based on the investigation of different signs used in the text. Signs are used to convey different underlying ideologies and hidden meanings.

## **Data Collection**

The data for this study consists of television advertisement of two renowned Pakistani television channels named as ARY digital and HUM TV. The data taken for study were downloaded from the official advertisement websites in order to have a comprehensive observation of the advertisements. The researcher observed the most viewed Pakistani drama channels to collect the required data.

## **Population**

The population of the study consists of ten advertisements which were collected from the aforementioned television channels.

## **Sample**

The researcher selected three advertisements as a sample of the study. The researcher applied a purposive sampling technique by taking advertisements randomly from the afore-mentioned Pakistani television channels. The advertisements were selected purposely and the researcher selected only those which were related to the social class representation.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework used for the study for the analysis of social class representation in the Pakistani advertisements is based on the theory of semiotics presented by Dyer (1982). The key features of Dyer's (1982) model are based on the Barthes' (1977) essay of *Rhetoric of Image*. Dyer (1982) asserted the significance of semiotics in the way, as a tool for the critical investigation of televised text which improves the legitimacy and acceptability of the employed tool to examine the presented questions in the study. Leeuwen (2008) lays stress on the use of images and words in the commercials which implies that words represent factual information and images are used to interpret different ideologies.

The analytical framework used in this study is proposed by Dyer (1982) to analyse the social class representation in the television commercials. Dyer's (1982) model presents the analysis of advertisements at two levels, denotative and connotative/ideological level. At denotative level the physical description of advertisement is presented which includes the description of manner, setting, props, activity and appearance. At this level there is identification of important signifiers used in the advertisements to convey ideologies. At connotative level there is interpretation of pre identified signifiers in accordance with the socio cultural norms and values. The connotative interpretation highlights certain hidden ideologies in the text.

## **Data Analysis**

The important analytical steps proposed by Dyer (1982) have been inferred for the investigation of the data. These important steps are used for the interpretation of data to highlight the underlying ideologies.

## 1.1 Telenor HD Calling Commercial

Lower Class



Upper class



### Denotative Analysis

This commercial is about network of Telenor HD calling. This commercial starts in an antiquated village where houses are of mud and old fashioned items are presented to portray the poor and lower class of society. There is out-dated furniture, presence of animals in the room and a woman is busy in cooking on stove of old fashioned. All things in the room reflect the deprivation of comforts and absence of advancements of life. In the room a handicapped man is sitting on a charpoy and a woman is busy in doing domestic affairs by covering her face. The man tells her in a local language the disappointment of losing his last chance to perform and show his talent of singing. Both are wearing old fashioned dresses and woman is wearing old fashioned jewellery. The scene then shifts to a modern area where a man wearing fashionable clothes is in a studio and calls to his boss (saeiin) to come but saeiin refuses to come in spite of having all arrangements. The man becomes confuse and worry but after a while smile appears on his smile and he becomes satisfy.

Then afterwards a man of good personality (saeiin) enters in a well-furnished room with a man wearing modern dress. A girl of modern class is standing at door who is busy with her mobile. Then the man who is responsible for arrangements in studio enters and taps on the shoulder of boy to start who is operating the instruments. The boy turns on the music and a melodious voice through advance instruments on a smartphone is raised and everyone listens attentively

The next scene shift to the room of the poor man where the woman is holding mobile phone and the man is singing a song enthusiastically. He looks very happy and optimistic on being listened

by the upper class. Then the shot again shifts to the studio where the people of higher class are enjoying music, a fashionable woman also appears with saeiin who is enjoying and praising the music. The poor man (protagonist) is presented having tears of happiness because of appraisals by the higher class. The commercial ends with the name of network "Teleport 3G".

The commercial consists of six main characters including: a man and a woman of a lower class, Saeiin, a fashionable girl, man who makes arrangements and the boy who operates instruments of music. The poor man is suffering from fracture and sitting on a bed of poor condition with a woman who is wearing old fashioned dress by covering her face. The saeiin, woman with him, organizer and operator are dressed up in modern style and presented as busy in important affairs. The facial expressions of organizer were at first of confusion and anxiety but latter of happiness. Ekman (1979) claimed that there are a number of facial expressions that are innate and they depict that the person making that face is experiencing an emotion. The facial expressions of the poor man at first were of disappointment and anxiety of being helpless but latter were of optimism and happiness. The expressions of saeiin reflect his busy and happy life and the facial expressions of the poor man and woman were of helplessness and of despair.

### **Connotative/ideological Analysis**

Signs help us to highlight the underlying meanings. Key signs used in this commercial are: living areas, dresses, use of technology, physical outlook of characters, health of characters and some items in the use of both classes as furniture, animals in the use of poor family and plantation and greenery in the upper class area.

The items used as signifiers such as the use of modern technology in the shape of smartphone, instruments for music show the advancement and modernisation of upper class while the use of only cell phone by the person who is playing an important role in the activity is depiction of inferiority and regression of lower class. As Leeuwen (2008) asserted that visual images are accompanied with social actors who implicitly convey the meaning of the whole social class. The setting of the commercial for both classes is a clear indication of scarcity of lower class. The upper class is shown as living in purely hygienic environment while the lower class is presented as living in the disease ridden areas. The protagonist who is already suffering from fracture is in disturbed and impoverished environment.

The ways women of both classes as presented reflect the social roles assigned to them and their spheres of life. The woman of upper class is presented in the public domain while the woman of lower class is depicted in the domestic domain. Little opportunities of life for poor class are presented through the protagonist who feels sorry when comes to know that he has lost his last chance of performance but upper class is presented as busy in different affairs having a number of opportunities and affairs.

The distinction between social classes in this analysis is upper/lower class and progression/regression. This distinction highlights the presentation of social classes in Pakistan.



The upper class is shown living a standard life style and busy in comforts of life while the lower class is represented living a life of sufferings, deprived of basic facilities of life and performing their duties in limited sphere of life. The lower class is presented as dependent on the upper class for their advancement and progress. The attitude of upper class towards the poor class and their lack of concern towards them spotlight the powerlessness and dependency of lower class on the upper class. The last chances of the poor class to show talent and make progress are in the hands of powerful groups who are unaware of their problems and miseries. These discriminatory practices are on the base powerlessness of the poor class and authority, supremacy and control in the hands of upper class on daily basis. Reay (1998) emphasized that class is not only a social, political or theoretical concept but class is done through social practices on daily basis which shape attitudes and behaviours.

### Surf Excel



### Denotative Analysis:

This commercial is about 'surf excel' washing powder. The commercial starts in a room of upper class where everything is well furnished and up to dated. A mother and a son are presented as the representatives of the upper class are presented in the well-furnished room. Both of them are wearing fashionable clothes and are happy and fully satisfied. The scene then shifts to outside of the room in a well decorated area where everyone is busy in buying and selling goods. The boy then goes out of the house and meets with his friends of the same age who praises his 'kurta'. The shot then shifts towards an old, weak and poor vender who is pulling cart of samosas and pakoors. He looks very anxious and worried because his cart stuck in a jerk and he was unable to sell his goods. He asks everyone who is passing near him to buy 'hot samosas and hot jalabeies'

but no one was adhering him. Everyone passes just by ignoring him. Everyone one was buying and selling goods in the place of hustle and bustle but the poor man was standing far from them alone in a street by showing his helplessness.

The boy then runs fastly towards him and pulls the wheel of cart from the jerk. He then fills his LAP with samoos and runs towards the gathering. The old man gets more worried on the act of the boy of the upper class because of the attitude of the upper class towards him. The scene then shifts to the place of hustle and bustle and shouts to get the attention of the people who are busy in doing shopping to buy samosas. Meanwhile, the boy was selling samosas and the old man was standing beside him just to pack them. The boy, representative of the upper class was the centre of attention and everyone buys samosas because of him. A couple of an upper class who are having fashionable getup asks the boy for jalabies but not to the old poor man who standing just beside him. The boys of the upper class managed to sell all the goods in a few minutes for which the old man was trying for a long time.

At the end of the commercial the poor man looks happy and satisfied and he is presented by looking at the faces of the boys of upper class because he managed to sell his goods because of them. His happiness and satisfaction is because of the help of the children of upper class.

The commercial consists of five main and other minor characters. The major characters are the boy, his friends, his mother and the old poor man. The poor man is suffering from helplessness and anxiety because he is unable to sell his goods. The boy, his mother and his friends are dresses up in a modern way and are looking happy and satisfied. The facial expressions of the poor man were at first of worriedness and sadness but later of happiness and satisfaction. The facial expressions of the boy and his mother were of happiness and satisfaction which reflect the satisfaction of the upper class.

### **Connotative/ideological Analysis**

Signs are analysed in order to dig out the hidden meanings. Key signs used in this commercial are location of participants, physical outlooks of characters, means of livelihood, dresses of participants and facial expressions of the boy and the old man which shows their attitude, positions and roles both classes in the society.

Signifiers identified in the commercial depict the roles and positions of different social classes in the Pakistani media. The location of the characters of both classes plays an important role in the presentation of both classes. The character of the lower class (the old man) is trying to sell his goods by standing in the street away from the area of hustle and bustle. This distance shows the social distance between two classes in the society. The lower class is kept away from the satisfaction and happiness of upper class.

The presentation of the male actors of both societies also reflect the deprivation and helplessness of the lower class. The male member of upper class are shown by doing shopping with their families and enjoying while the male character of the lower class (the old man) is presented as

striving hard at the end of the day to earn money by selling edibles. This reflects the helplessness of the old man of lower class and enjoyment of upper class. The old man is represented as dependent on the upper class for his livelihood and survival.

The progress, prosperity and happiness of lower class is presented on the mercy of upper class. The old vendor at the start of commercial was worried and nervous because the upper class was not paying attention towards him but at the end when the upper class paid attention to the goods of the old man there were expressions of happiness and satisfaction. This shows that the upper class is responsible for the happiness of lower class. The representative of the lower class (the old man) was about 80 years old who is shown as helpless and deprived of the comforts of life while the representatives of the upper class as young men of thirties and children of about fifteen were represented as having lives of happiness and comfort. The comfort and relaxation of the lower class representative (the old man) is shown as dependent on the mercy of upper class.

### Surf Excel



### Denotative Analysis

This advertisement starts in the bedroom of an elite class where everything is well furnished and up to dated. A mother wakes up her son Shahid to keep roza. The boy was lying on the comfortable bed, he then looks out of the window at an old dark building. The scene then shifts to the living room which was well furnished, updated which reflects the high standard and

comfortable life of the residents. A table in the living rooms was decorated with a number of dishes and drinks. When his mother reminds him of roza he hurriedly takes some things from the table and runs towards the old building and managed to get into the building and enters in the room of an old man who was hearing impaired. The boy asks the man to get up for sehri.

The man was wearing old fashioned clothes and has no food to eat when he checks the box of food. The man then gives him food which he has taken from his house. After seeing the food there were tears of happiness in his eyes. Then the scene again shifts in the well-furnished room of upper class where the mother asks his son to tell the man (Saleem uncle) to come to their home for iftar. The man, representative of lower class has to come to the home of upper class for happiness and enjoyment.

There are three main characters of the advertisement the boy and his mother, the representatives of upper class who are having a life full of comforts and the man (Saleem), the representative of lower class who is deprived of the basic needs of life.

### **Connotative/ideological Analysis**

Different signs used in the advertisement reflect different underlying ideologies. Key signs used in this advertisement are the getup of characters of both classes, food items, items of everyday use, and locations where both classes have to live.

The important signifiers identified in this commercial show the representation of the standards of both upper and lower class. The presentation of buildings where representatives of both classes live reflect the presentation of the spheres of lives of both classes. The building where the representatives of upper class, the boy and his mother live is well furnished and well lighted while the building where the representatives of lower class lives is a dark and old fashioned building which reflects the misery and agony of the lower class.

There are a great number of food items and drinks on the table of the upper class which reflect the comforts and prosperity of the representatives of the upper class while there is nothing to eat in the room of the lower class representative (Saleem). The empty food boxes reflect deprivation and sufferings of the lower class.

The providence of the food from the boy of the upper class to the man of lower class reflects the dependency of lower class on the upper class and the lower class is represented as on the mercy of the upper class for their survival. The words of the woman at the end of advertisement to call uncle Saleem to come to their home for aftari reflects that in order to have good aftari reflects that it is up to the upper class to provide comforts, happiness, pleasures and food to the poor but not on the poor themselves.

## **Conclusion**

The analysis of the above commercials using Dyer's (1982) reveals the discriminatory presentation of social classes in Pakistani television commercials. This analysis depicts that Pakistani television commercials portray variance in presentation of actors from different social classes where upper and lower classes are represented in their different domains of lives, their distinctive social practices, behaviour and their distinctive attitude towards each other is represented through social actors in the advertisements. This media representation of different social classes present the roles, positions and levels of power of both classes. The presentation of social classes in the commercial shows how upper/lower classes are perceived and practiced in Pakistani society. It highlights that how lower class is represented as dependent on the upper class for the survival and development. The analysis concludes that the lower class is represented as on the mercy of upper class for the well-being and for the betterment and improvement in their sphere of life.

## **Recommendation.**

This study has recommendations for future researchers that it has only paid attention only on three advertisements of mass media. This study is limited to only three advertisements of Pakistani television channels. The future researchers may conduct a comparative study to highlight the representation of social classes in different television channels which are constructed to target different audience. The researchers may also conduct research by analysing the portrayal of social classes in print and social media.

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