



A Semiotic Analysis of the Construction of Women Empowerment in Unilever Pakistan's Beauty and Personal Care Advertisements: A Longitudinal Study

Research Article

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Abstract

This study examines the evolution of women's representation in Unilever Pakistan beauty advertisements through Roland Barthes' semiotic framework. While these beauty advertisements are increasingly using the language of empowerment, confidence, and individuality, they continue to reproduce patriarchal myths about femininity, beauty, and social value. By using Barthes' concepts of denotation, connotation, and myth, this qualitative study analyzes selected Unilever Pakistan beauty advertisements from different periods to investigate how visual and linguistic signs construct and transform representations of women over time. A purposive sample of advertisements focused on empowerment narratives was examined through comparative semiotic analysis, focusing on recurring elements such as clothing, gaze, body language, setting, color,



symbolism, textual slogans, and narrative structure. The findings reveal a significant shift from explicit representations of femininity as empowerment towards narratives emphasizing confidence, ambition, and self-expression. However, this transformation appears to be largely superficial, as traditional patriarchal beauty standards continue to operate beneath modern visual and verbal codes. The advertisements frequently repackage existing ideologies and expectations from women through language of choice, career and empowerment while the semiotics of them allow a subtle persistence of same patriarchal standards. This study contributes to existing scholarship by providing a longitudinal Barthesian analysis of Pakistani beauty advertising and demonstrates how commercial media continuously adapts trending ideologies related to feminism and empowerment while advocating dominant standards for femininity and beauty.

Keywords: Barthesian semiotics, women's representation, Unilever Pakistan beauty advertisements, gender representation, beauty standards, ideology

1. Introduction

Advertising has evolved from a primarily commercial activity into a significant site of cultural and ideological meaning-making. Through visual, verbal, and symbolic resources, advertisements construct meanings that shape perceptions of beauty, femininity, and social success (Barthes, 1977). In the beauty and personal-care sector, advertising not only promotes products but also contributes to the construction of feminine identities and ideals of womanhood. It therefore provides a productive site for examining the intersection of language, culture, gender, and ideology.

Women's representation in beauty advertising has also changed substantially. Earlier campaigns often positioned women primarily in relation to physical attractiveness, fairness, youth, and domesticity (Ahmed et al., 2020). Contemporary campaigns increasingly foreground confidence, professional achievement, individuality, resilience, and empowerment (Barrett & Kanoria, 2022). However, this shift does not necessarily indicate an ideological departure from traditional gender norms. Rather, contemporary advertisements may repackage established stereotypes through the discourse of empowerment, thereby aligning feminist ideals with commercial objectives (Songur & Yaman, 2024; Putri & Dewi, 2026).

Recent research further emphasises the multimodal nature of meaning-making. Xi and Li (2026) demonstrate that visual and bodily resources can interact with linguistic and phonetic information to construct and interpret meaning. Although their study focuses on second-language phonetic training, its multimodal perspective is relevant to advertising, where visual and verbal resources operate simultaneously to produce meaning.

Semiotics provides a suitable framework for examining these ideological constructions. Drawing on Barthes (1977), advertisements can be analysed at three levels: denotation, connotation, and myth. Denotation concerns the observable features of an advertisement, including models, clothing, colours, gestures, settings, and slogans. Connotation captures the culturally shared meanings associated with these signs, such as femininity, beauty, confidence, and professionalism. Myth transforms such culturally constructed meanings into seemingly natural or universal truths, thereby reproducing dominant ideologies. A Barthesian approach thus enables the present study to

examine how advertising constructs, normalises, and potentially transforms meanings of women's identity and empowerment.

1.1 Women Representation in Beauty Advertisements

Research across diverse contexts shows that beauty advertising continues to shape women's identities through appearance, gender norms, and culturally specific ideals. In Pakistan, Ahmed et al. (2020) found that advertisements often foreground physical attractiveness over women's intellectual and professional identities, while Khan et al. (2023) showed that multimodal advertising resources reproduce conventional gender expectations despite modern aesthetics. Similarly, Bibi et al. (2025) reported that *Fair & Lovely* and *Glow & Lovely* advertisements have shifted from explicit fairness narratives toward glow, confidence, and success, yet retain underlying ideals of beauty and social acceptance.

Comparable patterns have been identified internationally. Bala (2025) found that Indian fairness advertisements continue to associate lighter skin with confidence and social mobility, sustaining colourist ideologies through progressive marketing discourse. Songur and Yaman (2024) observed that contemporary advertisements combine femininity with narratives of independence, simultaneously challenging and reproducing gender stereotypes. Putri and Dewi (2026) likewise noted a shift from passive to socially active representations of women, although idealised beauty remains central. Barrett and Kanoria (2022) further showed that multinational corporations such as Unilever increasingly promote inclusive representations while maintaining strong commercial orientations.

Recent sociolinguistic research reinforces the importance of viewing representation as culturally and ideologically situated. Matachana López (2026) demonstrated that communicative practices participate in identity construction and the negotiation of language ideologies. This perspective is relevant to advertising, where representations of women as confident, independent, and professionally successful are constructed within culturally specific expectations.

Semiotic research further demonstrates how such representations are encoded through visual and symbolic resources. Ayeshya et al. (2017) found that colour, facial expressions, visual signs, and narrative structures construct idealised femininity and glamour in Lux advertisements. More recent Pakistani studies indicate that empowerment narratives similarly combine progressive representations with traditional expectations. Bukhari et al. (2025) and Syed et al. (2025) found that advertisements increasingly portray women as empowered, confident, and socially active while retaining culturally established ideals of femininity through multimodal semiotic resources.

Overall, the literature indicates a shift from objectification toward empowerment-oriented representations, but this shift does not necessarily constitute ideological transformation. Contemporary beauty advertising increasingly reframes conventional gender and beauty norms through the language of confidence, independence, and achievement, thereby making empowerment compatible with commercialised ideals of femininity.

1.2 Research Gap and Present Study

Despite substantial research on gender representation in advertising, important gaps remain. First, most studies examine individual advertisements or campaigns using cross-sectional designs (Ahmed et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2023; Bukhari et al., 2025), offering limited insight into how representations of women's empowerment change over time. Second, although previous research has addressed fairness, objectification, and empowerment, few studies have applied Barthes' three-level semiotic model to trace longitudinal ideological shifts within a single multinational corporation. Third, Pakistani research has largely employed textual, critical, or multimodal discourse approaches, while longitudinal semiotic analyses of beauty and personal-care advertising remain limited.

Unilever Pakistan provides a relevant context for addressing these gaps. Its major beauty and personal-care brands: Lux, Sunsilk, Glow & Lovely, and Lifebuoy, have contributed to the construction of meanings associated with beauty, confidence, hygiene, and women's social roles through televised advertising campaigns (Lux, 2016; Sunsilk, 2019, 2021; Glow & Lovely, 2023, 2024; Lifebuoy, 2025). Examining advertisements produced between 2016 and 2025 enables a diachronic assessment of whether contemporary empowerment narratives reflect substantive ideological change or reconfigure established gender discourses.

Accordingly, this study employs Barthes' (1977) semiotic framework to analyse six Unilever Pakistan beauty and personal-care advertisements produced between 2016 and 2025. Focusing on denotation, connotation, and myth, the study examines how women's empowerment is constructed and transformed through visual and verbal signs over time. It contributes to research on semiotics, gender, media discourse, and advertising by providing a longitudinal account of the ideological representation of women in Pakistani commercial media.

2. Literature Review

Research on advertising, gender representation, and semiotics has expanded substantially, reflecting growing interest in how commercial media construct and reproduce cultural ideologies. Beauty and personal care advertisements are particularly significant because they promote products while shaping perceptions of femininity, beauty, identity, and women's social roles. Scholars have employed semiotics, social semiotics, critical discourse analysis, and multimodal discourse analysis to examine how visual and linguistic resources construct meaning and reproduce or challenge gender norms (Barthes, 1977; Ahmed et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2023). However, existing research offers differing accounts of whether contemporary empowerment narratives constitute genuine ideological change or represent strategic adaptations of commercial discourse (Barrett & Kanoria, 2022; Songur & Yaman, 2024; Putri & Dewi, 2026). This review therefore synthesizes relevant theoretical and empirical scholarship on semiotic meaning-making, women's representation, and advertising-based empowerment, while identifying the gaps that motivate the present longitudinal analysis of Unilever Pakistan's beauty and personal care advertisements.

2.1 Semiotics and the Construction of Meaning in Advertising

Semiotics provides a framework for examining how advertising constructs meaning through interconnected visual and verbal signs. Drawing on Barthes (1977), this study distinguishes three levels of signification: denotation, connotation, and myth. Denotation concerns the literal representation of signs, whereas connotation refers to their culturally associated meanings. Myth transforms culturally situated meanings into seemingly natural or universal truths, thereby reproducing dominant ideologies. Advertising can therefore be understood not only as commercial communication but also as a site where meanings of gender, beauty, identity, and social values are constructed.

Semiotic analysis considers how images, colours, gestures, facial expressions, settings, typography, and language interact to produce meaning. In beauty advertising, these resources commonly associate products with confidence, success, professionalism, and social mobility (Ayeshya et al., 2017). Arslan and Haroon (2023) similarly demonstrate that colour, clothing, facial expression, and visual composition can convey culturally and socially embedded meanings beyond explicit verbal content. Such findings support the analysis of advertisements as multimodal texts in which meaning emerges through the interaction of multiple semiotic resources.

Verbal elements also contribute to this meaning-making process. Irshad (2022) shows that advertising hashtags can activate contextual assumptions and facilitate both explicit and implicit interpretation. Thus, slogans and other textual elements may interact with visual signs to construct meanings associated with beauty, confidence, achievement, and empowerment. Similarly, Xi and Li (2026) demonstrate that visual and bodily resources can interact with linguistic resources in meaning construction. Although their study focuses on second-language phonetic training, its multimodal perspective is applicable to advertising, where visual, verbal, and embodied resources operate concurrently.

Barthes' framework is therefore particularly appropriate for examining beauty advertising because it enables analysis of how literal representations acquire cultural meanings and become ideological myths. In the present study, this framework is used to examine how visual and verbal signs construct, negotiate, and naturalise representations of women's beauty and empowerment.

2.2 Representation of Women in Beauty and Personal Care Advertisements

The representation of women remains a major concern in advertising research because beauty advertisements shape perceptions of femininity, beauty, and gender identity. Earlier campaigns often portrayed women as passive figures whose social value was tied to physical attractiveness and conformity to dominant beauty standards. Ahmed et al. (2020), for instance, found that Pakistani advertisements foreground women's physical appearance while marginalising their intellectual, social, and professional identities.

Recent advertising narratives, however, increasingly depict women as professionals, entrepreneurs, athletes, leaders, and independent decision-makers. Barrett and Kanoria (2022) observed that multinational corporations such as Unilever have adopted more inclusive representations to challenge conventional gender stereotypes. Similarly, Songur and Yaman (2024) found that

contemporary advertisements combine traditional femininity with narratives of confidence, leadership, and achievement.

Related Pakistani media studies further demonstrate that gender identities are constructed within broader sociocultural and ideological frameworks. Zafar et al. (2022) showed how discourse constructs an empowered female identity while negotiating culturally established domestic and social expectations. Likewise, Akhter and Shah (2024) found that Pakistani English newspapers frame women's rights through culturally and ideologically informed representations of gender equality. Extending this perspective, Matachana López (2026) demonstrates that communicative practices can simultaneously construct identity and negotiate ideological positions. These findings suggest that representations of the "empowered woman" should be examined as culturally situated constructions rather than inherently progressive representations.

Despite this apparent shift, contemporary advertising may reproduce patriarchal ideals through more subtle and commercially appealing forms. Putri and Dewi (2026) found that although women are increasingly represented as active social participants, advertisements continue to privilege youth, physical attractiveness, and idealised beauty. Thus, empowerment may function less as a substantive challenge to gender ideology than as a commercially adaptable discourse that incorporates independence and achievement while retaining established beauty norms.

2.3 Semiotic Perspectives on Women's Empowerment in Pakistani Advertising

Research in Pakistan indicates that representations of women in commercial media are evolving while retaining culturally embedded gender norms. Khan et al. (2023) found that Pakistani television advertisements employ visual, linguistic, and spatial resources to construct gender identities within culturally accepted frameworks. Similarly, Bukhari et al. (2025) reported that advertisements increasingly represent women as confident, educated, and socially active, yet continue to reproduce conventional expectations surrounding femininity and family roles. Bibi et al. (2025) identified a shift from explicit fairness-based appeals in *Fair & Lovely* to discourses of glow, confidence, achievement, and self-development in *Glow & Lovely*; however, underlying ideals of beauty remained largely intact. Likewise, Syed et al. (2025) found that empowerment narratives increasingly portray women as resilient, ambitious, and independent while retaining culturally sanctioned ideals of femininity. Collectively, these studies suggest that empowerment has become an important advertising discourse without necessarily displacing established gender ideologies.

Evidence from broader Pakistani media discourse reinforces this pattern. Shah and Hasnain (2023) showed that selective reporting, deletion, lexical choices, and identity concealment can shape representations of women in news discourse. Such selective processes are also relevant to advertising, where particular female identities, bodies, roles, and experiences are foregrounded while others remain underrepresented or absent. Studies in *Linguistic Forum* further demonstrate that meaning in Pakistani media is constructed through interconnected semiotic, linguistic, and ideological resources. Arslan and Haroon (2023) highlighted the role of colour, clothing, facial expression, and visual composition in constructing cultural meanings, while Irshad (2022) demonstrated how textual resources can guide explicit and implicit interpretation in advertising. Zafar et al. (2022) showed how discourse constructs empowered female identities within Pakistani sociocultural contexts, and Akhter and Shah (2024) demonstrated the ideological framing of

women's rights in Pakistani English newspapers. Together, these studies establish the importance of examining gender representation as a multimodal and ideologically situated process.

However, existing Pakistani studies largely focus on individual advertisements, specific campaigns, or other media genres rather than tracing representational change across successive campaigns. Phan's (2026) diachronic analysis of the Vietnamese perception verb *thấy* demonstrates the value of examining meaning across historical periods, showing that linguistic and discourse functions may change substantially over time. Although Phan's study concerns grammaticalization rather than advertising, its diachronic perspective supports the present study's longitudinal approach to examining changing constructions of women's empowerment in Unilever Pakistan's advertising discourse. Accordingly, the present study addresses the gap by tracing the denotative, connotative, and mythical construction of women's empowerment across Unilever Pakistan's beauty and personal-care advertisements from 2016 to 2025.

2.4 Research Gap

Although previous research has advanced understanding of gender representation in beauty advertising, several gaps remain. First, existing studies largely examine individual advertisements or campaigns using cross-sectional designs (Ahmed et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2023; Bukhari et al., 2025), providing limited insight into how representations of women's empowerment change over time. A diachronic perspective is therefore needed to capture shifts in meaning alongside changing sociocultural contexts. Phan (2026) demonstrates the value of longitudinal analysis for identifying transformations that may remain obscured in synchronic studies, while Matachana López (2026) highlights the role of sociocultural contexts in shaping identity and ideological meanings.

Second, previous studies tend to examine fairness, objectification, beauty standards, or empowerment as separate concerns, offering limited insight into their ideological continuity across successive campaigns. Longitudinal studies tracing such changes remain particularly scarce in the Pakistani context.

Third, although Pakistani advertising has been examined through multimodal discourse analysis, social semiotics, and critical discourse analysis, few studies have systematically applied Barthes' (1977) three-level model of denotation, connotation, and myth to trace the historical construction of women's representation within a single multinational corporation.

Finally, despite Unilever Pakistan's sustained influence on beauty and personal-care advertising through brands such as Lux, Sunsilk, Glow & Lovely, and Lifebuoy, longitudinal semiotic research examining these campaigns across an extended period remains limited (Lux, 2016; Sunsilk, 2019, 2021; Glow & Lovely, 2023, 2024; Lifebuoy, 2025). Consequently, it remains unclear whether contemporary empowerment narratives signal substantive ideological change or represent commercial adaptations of established gender and beauty discourses.

The present study addresses these gaps through a longitudinal Barthesian analysis of six Unilever Pakistan advertisements produced between 2016 and 2025. By examining denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings, it traces how women's empowerment is constructed and transformed across changing advertising discourses.

3. Methodology

This section outlines the methodological framework adopted to investigate the semiotic construction of women's empowerment in Unilever Pakistan's beauty and personal care advertisements. It describes the research design, analytical method, theoretical framework, data source, sampling strategy, data collection procedures, analytical process, and ethical considerations. Guided by Barthes' (1977) theory of semiotics, the methodology is designed to examine how visual and verbal signs construct meanings surrounding beauty, femininity, confidence, and empowerment and how these representations have evolved across a nine-year period (2016–2025).

3.1 Research Design

The present study adopts a qualitative longitudinal research design because its primary objective is to interpret the meanings embedded within visual and verbal representations rather than to quantify observable variables. Qualitative research is particularly appropriate for investigating media texts as it facilitates an in-depth examination of symbolic meanings, cultural values, and ideological constructions communicated through language, images, colours, gestures, settings, and narrative structures (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Within this qualitative paradigm, the study employs a diachronic (longitudinal) perspective to compare advertisements produced at different points in time, enabling an examination of the evolution of women's representation and empowerment narratives across successive advertising campaigns.

3.2 Research Method

This study employs qualitative semiotic analysis as its principal analytical method. Semiotic analysis investigates how signs function within cultural systems to communicate explicit and implicit meanings (Barthes, 1977). Rather than examining advertisements solely as commercial messages, this method treats them as multimodal cultural texts through which ideological beliefs and social values are constructed and disseminated. Previous research has demonstrated the effectiveness of semiotic analysis in investigating gender representation, beauty standards, and advertising discourse across diverse socio-cultural contexts (Ahmed et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2023; Songur & Yaman, 2024; Bala, 2025). Consequently, semiotic analysis provides an appropriate methodological framework for exploring how contemporary beauty advertisements construct and transform narratives of women's empowerment.

3.3 Theoretical Framework

The analytical framework is grounded in Roland Barthes' (1977) theory of semiotics, which conceptualises meaning as operating through three interconnected levels of signification: denotation, connotation, and myth. At the denotative level, the analysis identifies and describes the literal visual and verbal elements presented in each advertisement, including characters, clothing, colours, settings, facial expressions, gestures, objects, written text, camera composition, and slogans. The connotative level examines the symbolic, emotional, and cultural meanings associated with these signs within the Pakistani socio-cultural context. This stage explores how visual and linguistic resources communicate concepts such as beauty, confidence, ambition, professionalism,

femininity, and empowerment. Finally, the mythical level investigates the broader ideological assumptions embedded within the advertisements. Following Barthes (1977), myths are understood as socially constructed beliefs that become naturalised through repeated representation. In the present study, myth analysis focuses on ideological constructions relating to women's beauty, success, confidence, independence, family roles, and gender identity. Collectively, these three levels facilitate a systematic examination of both the explicit and implicit meanings embedded within advertising discourse.

3.4 Data Source and Sample

The primary dataset comprises six official beauty and personal care advertisements produced by Unilever Pakistan between 2016 and 2025. All advertisements were retrieved from the respective official YouTube channels of the selected brands, ensuring authenticity and public accessibility.

The selected advertisements represent four major Unilever Pakistan brands:

- Lux : *New Lux Perfumed Collection* (2016)
- Sunsilk : *Long and Healthy Growth* (2019)
- Sunsilk : *Black Shine—Shaan Sy Shine* (2021)
- Glow & Lovely : *Chehre Aur Kamyabi* (2023)
- Glow & Lovely : *Serum in Cream for 3X Bright Glow* (2024)
- Lifebuoy : *Mazboot Soch, Mazboot Tum* (2025)

The nine-year timeframe enables a longitudinal investigation of ideological continuity and transformation in the semiotic construction of women's empowerment across successive advertising campaigns.

3.5 Sampling Technique

This study employs purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique commonly used in qualitative research to select information-rich cases relevant to the research objectives (Patton, 2015). A longitudinal sampling strategy was adopted to facilitate comparisons across different historical periods.

The advertisements were selected according to the following criteria:

- publication through official Unilever Pakistan digital platforms;
- central representation of female characters;
- explicit engagement with themes of beauty, confidence, identity, empowerment, ambition, resilience, or professional success;
- temporal distribution across the period from 2016 to 2025; and
- representation of multiple beauty and personal care brands within the Unilever portfolio.

These criteria ensured that the selected advertisements were directly aligned with the research objectives while providing sufficient temporal diversity for diachronic analysis.

3.6 Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected from the official YouTube channels of the selected brands. Each advertisement was viewed repeatedly to ensure comprehensive familiarity with both its visual and verbal content.

Systematic documentation included:

- repeated video observations;
- screenshot captures of analytically significant scenes;
- transcription of spoken dialogue, slogans, and written text;
- descriptive notes on visual composition, colour schemes, facial expressions, body language, camera angles, settings, costumes, music, and narrative progression.

These procedures facilitated detailed examination of multimodal semiotic resources employed throughout each advertisement.

3.7 Data Analysis Procedure

The data were analysed using Barthes' (1977) three-level semiotic framework. First, denotative analysis identified the observable visual and verbal elements in each advertisement, including characters, settings, colours, gestures, language, typography, camera composition, and narrative events. Second, connotative analysis examined the cultural and symbolic meanings associated with these signs, particularly those related to beauty, femininity, confidence, professional identity, resilience, and empowerment within the Pakistani sociocultural context. Third, myth analysis examined how recurring signs naturalised broader ideological assumptions about women's beauty, success, self-worth, confidence, and gender roles. Finally, a longitudinal comparison of the six advertisements identified patterns of continuity and change in the semiotic construction of women's empowerment between 2016 and 2025. This procedure enabled systematic interpretation of both explicit meanings and underlying ideological constructions.

3.8 Trustworthiness of the Analysis

To ensure trustworthiness, each advertisement was analysed repeatedly using observational notes, screenshots, and interpretative coding. The analysis was consistently guided by Barthes' (1977) semiotic framework, while cross-advertisement comparisons helped identify recurring patterns and enhanced the credibility and consistency of the findings.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

This study analyses publicly available advertisements from Unilever Pakistan's official digital platforms and does not involve human participants or personal data; therefore, formal ethical approval was not required. Screenshots are used solely for academic analysis, and the advertisements are examined as cultural texts that construct and naturalize meanings related to beauty, femininity, and women's empowerment (Barthes, 1977).

4. Analysis

4.1 Semiotic Analysis of Advertisement "New Lux Perfumed Collection" (2016)

Denotation

The advertisement opens with Mahira Khan smiling while looking into the distance and gently touching her lips. A voice-over asks, *"How was I looking?"* She is dressed in a red evening gown.

Figure 1: Opening scene of advertisement



The scene shifts to Mawra Hocane preparing for an event. She wears an evening gown while assistants arrange her dress. The voice-over asks, *"What was I wearing?"*

Figure 2: Preparation for the event



Figure 3: Looking at Diamonds



Maya Ali then looks into a mirror before admiring the diamond ring on her hand as the voice-over says, *"How much shine was there in my diamonds?"* Throughout the advertisement, the actresses appear with flawless makeup and carefully styled hair.

Mahira Khan is shown running in her flowing red gown while the voice-over says, *"Perhaps it won't be remembered."* The camera focuses on a tear rolling down her cheek as the narration continues, *"What will always be remembered is that one tear."* Maya Ali then performs a graceful hand gesture, followed by Mawra Hocane smiling as the voice-over refers to *"that one gesture"* and *"that one smile."*

The Lux Perfumed Collection is introduced as the actresses smile while holding and using the products.

In the closing sequence, the three actresses arrive at an award ceremony. Cameras flash as they walk towards the venue. A man notices them, smells their fragrance, turns back, and watches them as they pass. The advertisement alternates between close-up shots of their faces and wider shots of their gowns before ending with the slogan, "*Mehko Har Pal.*"

Connotation

The use of Mahira Khan, Mawra Hocane, and Maya Ali signifies beauty, glamour, celebrity status, and social prestige, linking the Lux brand with admiration and success.

The luxurious evening gowns, diamonds, flawless makeup, and styled hair symbolize elegance, wealth, and a Western-inspired ideal of femininity. Although the voice-over suggests that appearance is not what people remember, the repeated focus on clothing, jewellery, mirrors, and beauty reinforces physical appearance as central to feminine identity.

The tear, graceful hand gesture, and smile symbolize emotional depth, elegance, charm, and traditionally feminine qualities. These moments suggest that women are remembered not only for their beauty but also for emotionally expressive and graceful behaviour.

Figure 4: Close-up of a tear



Figure 5: Graceful hand gesture



Figure 6: Smiling facial expression



The award ceremony symbolizes success, prestige, and public recognition, while the flashing cameras reinforce the actresses' celebrity status.

Figure 7: Arrival at the award ceremony



The final scene, in which a man turns back after noticing the actresses, signifies male admiration and validation. His reaction suggests that ideal femininity naturally attracts attention and reinforces beauty, grace, and fragrance as important markers of feminine identity.

Figure 8 & 9: A male character noticing the women



Myth

At the mythic level, the advertisement naturalizes the idea that women are remembered through emotional moments, while positioning conventional beauty as the basis of such recognition. Although the narration downplays clothing, jewellery, and appearance, the visual narrative foregrounds glamorous gowns, diamonds, flawless makeup, and carefully styled appearances.

The advertisement also associates luxury and prestige with Westernized aesthetics, using evening gowns, diamonds, and red-carpet imagery rather than culturally conventional Pakistani dress. Elegance and social success are consequently constructed through a Westernized ideal of femininity.

Female success is framed primarily through emotional expressiveness rather than professional achievement. The tear, graceful gesture, and smile become markers of memorability, reproducing conventional feminine ideals. The concluding male gaze further reinforces this construction by positioning male admiration as symbolic validation of female attractiveness and social recognition.

Ultimately, the advertisement transforms the Lux Perfumed Collection from a hygiene product into a symbol of elegance, confidence, and social recognition. Rather than disrupting conventional beauty norms, it rearticulates them by linking feminine success and social visibility to glamour, male admiration, and fragrance.

4.2 Semiotic Analysis of Advertisement “Sunsilk Long and Healthy Growth!” (2019)

Denotation

The advertisement opens with a young girl training on a basketball court while wearing sportswear. One of her teammates asks whether she is growing her hair, while the other players have short

hairstyles. The coach tells her to focus on basketball instead of her hair and makes a scissor gesture, implying that she should cut it.

The protagonist confidently replies, *"We'll see."* The advertisement then introduces the Sunsilk shampoo and briefly highlights its features. In the next scene, the girl wins the basketball match. After her victory, she unties and lets down her long hair while the coach smiles and nods in approval. The advertisement ends with the slogan, *"Why not both?"*, followed by the display of the Sunsilk product and the closing line, *"Long and Healthy Growth."*

Connotation

The basketball court symbolizes a competitive public space traditionally associated with masculinity. The teammates' short hairstyles contrast with the protagonist's long hair, reinforcing the perceived tension between athletic performance and conventional femininity.

Figure 1: Female athletes in basketball court



The coach's scissor gesture symbolizes the expectation that women should sacrifice long hair to succeed in sports, representing the conflict between femininity and athletic achievement.

Figure 2: Coach Scissor gesture orders cutting hair



In contrast, the protagonist's long, healthy hair signifies conventional beauty and femininity within the Pakistani cultural context. Her refusal to choose between basketball and her hair reflects confidence and determination, suggesting that women can succeed in male-dominated spaces without abandoning feminine identity.

Figure 3: Winning the match



Figure 4: Refusal to choose



The coach's smile and nod at the end symbolize acceptance of both her athletic success and her decision to retain her long hair. The closing slogan, "*Why not both?*", reinforces the coexistence of sporting excellence and conventional femininity.

Figure 5: Resolution of conflict



Figure 6: Closing slogan "Why not Both"



Myth

At the mythic level, the advertisement naturalizes the belief that women can achieve athletic success while maintaining conventional femininity. Through the slogan, *"Why not both?"*, sporting achievement and long, healthy hair are presented as naturally compatible, redefining the modern woman as both competitive and traditionally feminine.

Rather than challenging the assumption that beauty and sport are competing identities, the advertisement resolves this tension by encouraging women to balance both. Empowerment is therefore constructed through adaptation rather than resistance to conventional beauty ideals.

The coach's changing attitude further reinforces this myth. His initial scissor gesture symbolizes institutional expectations that femininity must be sacrificed for sporting success, while his final approval suggests that female achievement gains symbolic validation through male recognition.

The advertisement also reinforces the association between long, healthy hair and ideal femininity. Hair is presented not only as a beauty attribute but also as a symbol of health, confidence, and self-care, making the beauty ideal appear natural and universally desirable.

Ultimately, the advertisement expands women's participation in traditionally masculine spaces while preserving conventional beauty standards. Empowerment is therefore reconstructed as the ability to combine personal ambition with culturally valued femininity rather than challenging existing ideals of beauty.

4.3 Semiotic Analysis of Advertisement *"Sunsilk Black Shine – Shaan Sy Shine"* (2021)

Denotation

The advertisement opens with Zoya addressing a political gathering and asking people to vote for her. Campaign posters displaying *"Vote for Zoya"* indicate that she is contesting an election. She is dressed in modest Eastern clothing while speaking to the audience.

Figure 1: Female Participation in Political Space, background banner showing her as a contestant



As she sits down, a male colleague tells her that they will handle the "dirty politics" while she should focus on taking care of her hair. He warns that the heat, sweat, and election campaign will ruin its shine.

Zoya briefly touches her hair and pauses before confidently replying, *"Safdar Sahab, we will take care of our hair and we will shine with shaan too."* While speaking, she runs her fingers through her hair and smiles confidently.

The advertisement then introduces the Sunsilk product and highlights its benefits for protecting hair from sweat and maintaining its shine.

The following scenes show Zoya actively campaigning, interacting with voters, putting up posters, and participating confidently in election activities.

The advertisement concludes with Zoya looking directly at the camera and repeating, *"We will take care of our hair and we will shine with shaan too,"* followed by the display of the Sunsilk product.

Connotation

The election campaign symbolizes leadership, authority, and women's increasing participation in the political sphere. The *"Vote for Zoya"* posters reinforce her public identity as a political leader rather than merely a supporter.

The male colleague's remark that she should leave the "dirty politics" to others and focus on her hair reflects traditional gender expectations, suggesting that beauty and politics are incompatible.

Figure 2: Male opposition as conflict



Zoya's instinctive gesture of touching her hair signifies the internalization of beauty expectations. However, her confident reply transforms hair from a symbol of limitation into one of confidence and self-assurance, asserting that political ambition and femininity can coexist.

Figure 3: Protagonist conscious gesture



Figure 4: Protagonist asserting control



Running her fingers through her hair symbolizes agency and pride. Rather than abandoning femininity, she embraces it while continuing her political campaign. The subsequent campaign scenes portray her as determined, capable, and actively engaged in public leadership.

Figure 5: Successfully running campaign



The slogan, *"We will take care of our hair and we will shine with shaan too,"* carries a dual meaning. It refers both to healthy, shiny hair and to succeeding in public life with pride, dignity, and confidence. The word *"shaan"* connects beauty with honour and respectable public identity, presenting political ambition and conventional femininity as mutually compatible.

Myth

At the mythic level, the advertisement naturalizes the belief that women can participate in political leadership without sacrificing conventional standards of feminine beauty. By presenting Zoya as both a political candidate and a woman with long, healthy hair, it constructs beauty and ambition as complementary rather than conflicting identities.

However, the advertisement does not challenge the expectation that women in public life will be judged by their appearance. Instead, it accepts this scrutiny as normal and resolves it by suggesting that women can successfully meet both professional and beauty expectations.

Zoya's brief hesitation after the male colleague's remark reflects the internalized pressure of appearance-based judgments. Although she responds confidently, empowerment is represented as the ability to navigate beauty expectations rather than escape them.

The political setting itself remains largely symbolic. Rather than focusing on governance or leadership responsibilities, it serves as a backdrop for demonstrating that women can maintain beautiful hair while occupying positions of authority and challenging male scepticism.

The Sunsilk product is positioned as the means through which this balance is achieved. Instead of questioning conventional beauty standards, the advertisement promises that women can preserve them while pursuing leadership roles. Consequently, empowerment is commercialized, linking confidence, political participation, and public success with healthy, shiny hair.

Figure 6: Closing scene “Shaan Sy Shine”



4.4 Semiotic Analysis of Advertisement “*Chehre aur Kamyabi, Glow & Lovely*” (2023)

Denotation

The advertisement opens with a young woman standing before a mirror while applying Glow & Lovely cream to her face.

Figure 1: Introducing Product

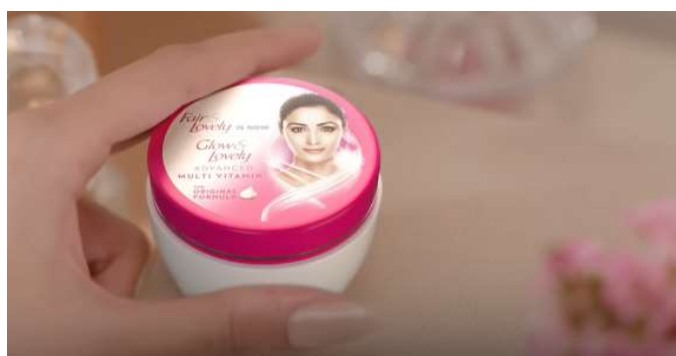


Figure 2: Actor in front of mirror



Her mother enters, adjusts her dupatta, and asks whether she is ready because her paternal aunt and relatives are arriving. The young woman replies that she is ready. The mother notices the glow on her face as the daughter walks out wearing a black lawyer's coat over a traditional Pakistani shalwar kameez and carrying a pink file.

Surprised, the mother asks why she is dressed for court. The daughter explains that she has a court case but confidently adds that her aunt will see both the glow on her face and her success.

The advertisement then introduces the Glow & Lovely product, highlighting its vitamins and benefits for improving skin glow and reducing dark spots.

In the final scene, the paternal aunt, dressed in traditional attire with a white dupatta, proudly says, "*The first lawyer of the Malik family.*" The advertisement ends with the protagonist looking confidently at the camera and saying, "*Chehre aur kamyabi, dono ka glow.*"

Connotation

The opening scene, where the protagonist applies cream while looking into a mirror, signifies beauty, self-preparation, and confidence. By introducing her appearance before her profession, the advertisement places beauty at the centre of the narrative.

The mother's adjustment of the dupatta reflects cultural expectations of presentability, while her compliment about the daughter's glowing face associates feminine beauty with readiness and respectability.

The lawyer's coat worn over a traditional Pakistani shalwar kameez symbolizes the coexistence of professional identity and cultural values, suggesting that women can pursue ambitious careers without abandoning traditional femininity.

Figure 3: mother in pink



Figure 4: Lawyer clothing, pink file



The repeated use of pink in the product packaging, clothing, and file creates a visual code linking femininity with beauty and professional success.

The conversation between mother and daughter reflects the negotiation between family expectations and career responsibilities. While the mother prioritizes family obligations, the daughter confidently balances both, demonstrating that professional ambitions can coexist with family relationships.

Figure 5 & 6: Negotiation between family expectations and professional life



The paternal aunt's recognition of the protagonist as the "*first lawyer of the Malik family*" symbolizes family pride and social acceptance of women's professional achievement.

Figure 7: Recognition within family



The closing slogan, "*Chehre aur kamyabi, dono ka glow,*" links glowing skin with professional success, presenting beauty and career achievement as complementary aspects of the modern Pakistani woman.

Figure 8: "Chehre aur kamyabi, dono ka glow"



Myth

At the mythic level, the advertisement naturalizes the belief that women can achieve professional success while maintaining conventional standards of feminine beauty. Although the protagonist is a lawyer, the narrative introduces her through skincare, the mirror, and facial glow before revealing her profession, positioning beauty as the gateway to professional identity.

The slogan, "*Chehre aur kamyabi, dono ka glow*," further merges beauty with success by suggesting that professional achievement should be accompanied by radiant skin. Rather than separating appearance from competence, the advertisement presents them as inseparable qualities of the ideal career woman.

Although the protagonist is identified as a lawyer, she is never shown practising law. The profession functions primarily as a symbol of achievement that reinforces the commercial message about beauty and confidence.

The advertisement also constructs female solidarity through the support of the mother and paternal aunt. Unlike earlier advertisements where male figures questioned women's ambitions, family women encourage and celebrate the protagonist's success. However, this empowerment remains rooted in family approval, as her achievement is recognized mainly through becoming the "*first lawyer of the Malik family*" rather than through her independent professional identity.

Ultimately, the advertisement reconstructs empowerment by combining career success, family recognition, and conventional beauty into a single ideal. Instead of challenging beauty norms, it integrates them into the image of the modern professional woman, allowing the skincare product to remain central to confidence, success, and feminine identity.

4.5 Semiotic Analysis of Advertisement “Serum in Cream for 3X Bright Glow, Glow & Lovely” (2024)

Denotation

The advertisement opens with Sajal Ali standing before a dressing table in a pink dress. She applies Glow & Lovely cream while looking into a mirror and says, “*Tayyar raho agar karna hai glow*,” as a motivational song begins.

Figure 1: Applying product



Figure 2: Western dress



The advertisement then introduces women from different professions. A female cricketer ties her shoelaces in a locker room, a lawyer puts on her black coat, and a doctor adjusts her white coat over a dupatta. Before leaving, each woman looks into a mirror, while the cricketer gently touches her cheek and the doctor picks up her stethoscope.

Sajal Ali opens a door and steps into bright sunlight. The advertisement introduces the Glow & Lovely product, highlighting its multivitamin formula and sun protection benefits.

The remaining women also open doors and confidently enter their workplaces as the background song encourages women to pursue their goals. In the final sequence, a pilot, a media professional carrying a camera, and a corporate employee join the group as they walk forward together. The advertisement ends with all of them saying, “*Dhoop mein bhi hum hain tayyar*,” followed by the product display.

Connotation

The opening scene, in which Sajal Ali applies the cream while looking into a mirror, signifies beauty, self-preparation, and confidence before entering public life. The mirror symbolizes the importance of appearance as part of professional readiness.

The portrayal of women as a cricketer, lawyer, doctor, pilot, media professional, and corporate employee signifies women's expanding participation in diverse professions traditionally associated with authority and expertise. Their occupations symbolize ambition, competence, and achievement.

Figure 3 & 4: Portrayal of women from multiple professions



The repeated use of mirrors reinforces self-confidence while suggesting that maintaining one's appearance remains an important aspect of entering professional spaces.

Figure 5 & 6: Women looking into mirrors before leaving



The opening of doors and movement into bright sunlight symbolize women's transition from the private to the public sphere. Unlike earlier advertisements, the sun represents the primary challenge, portraying environmental rather than social barriers to women's progress.

Figure 7, 8, 9: Fearlessly going into the sun



The motivational song reinforces determination, resilience, and ambition. Simultaneously, the product demonstration links facial glow with sun protection, presenting skincare as part of women's confidence and professional readiness. Beauty and career are therefore represented as complementary rather than separate identities.

The closing sequence, in which women from different professions walk forward together while declaring, "*Dhoop mein bhi hum hain tayyar*," symbolizes collective empowerment, solidarity, and professional confidence. However, these qualities remain closely associated with glowing skin and conventional beauty.

Figure 10: Closing frame "*Dhoop mein bhi hum hain tayyar*,"



Myth

At the mythic level, the advertisement naturalizes the idea that women can confidently occupy prestigious professions such as doctors, lawyers, pilots, cricketers, media professionals, and corporate employees. Female participation in public life is presented as normal and achievable.

However, empowerment remains closely linked to beauty. The narrative begins with skincare rather than professional work, and every woman prepares her appearance before entering her workplace. Professional confidence is therefore constructed as inseparable from healthy, glowing skin.

The sequence of events reinforces this ideology by introducing mirrors, skincare, and facial glow before professional identity. Beauty is positioned as the gateway to confidence and success. The slogan, "*Dhoop mein bhi hum hain tayyar*," further naturalizes the belief that women should preserve their appearance while pursuing their ambitions.

Unlike the earlier advertisements, social barriers, male authority, and gender stereotypes are replaced by sunlight as the central obstacle. This shift redirects attention from structural inequalities to environmental challenges, redefining empowerment as the ability to maintain one's glow despite external conditions.

Although the advertisement features women in prestigious professions, they are rarely shown performing their actual work. The lawyer is not seen arguing a case, the doctor does not treat

patients, and the pilot is not shown flying. Instead, these professions function primarily as symbols of success that reinforce the commercial message.

Ultimately, the advertisement constructs the modern empowered woman as ambitious, confident, and professionally successful, while simultaneously embedding these qualities within conventional beauty ideals. Rather than challenging beauty standards, it incorporates glowing skin into the very definition of empowerment, allowing the advertised skincare product to remain central to women's confidence and success.

4.6 Semiotic Analysis of Advertisement “Mazboot Soch, Mazboot Tum” (2025)

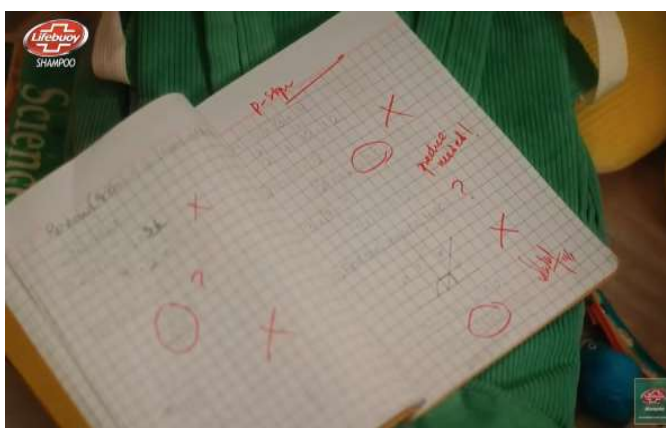
Denotation

The advertisement opens with a young girl sitting on her bed wearing a baby pink shirt. She holds her stomach while schoolbooks lie scattered around the room, indicating discomfort.

Figure 1: Uncomfortable child



Figure 2: Red marks on notebook



Her mother enters, and the girl says, “Mama, pait mein dard. Kal school ki chutti please?” After noticing a test paper marked with red corrections, the girl adds, “Mujh se yeh nahi hoga, Mama. Mera maths bohat weak hai,” while avoiding eye contact.

The mother gently lifts her daughter's chin, asks her to look up, and strokes her long hair. She reminds her that her hair was once weak and rough but has become strong through care and effort.

Figure 3, 4, 5: Mother Encouraging the girl by example of her strong hair



The daughter sits with her back towards her mother as the mother continues stroking her hair and says, *"Tum bhi mehnat karke mazboot ban sakti ho."* They smile together before the advertisement introduces Lifebuoy Shampoo. A voice-over explains that mothers make their daughters strong and that the new Lifebuoy Shampoo, enriched with aloe vera and milk protein, strengthens hair.

In the closing scenes, the mother, dressed in white, helps her daughter study while the daughter, wearing green, confidently solves mathematics problems. They embrace, followed by the slogan, *"Mazboot soch, mazboot tum."*

Connotation

The young girl's posture, lowered gaze, and scattered books symbolize anxiety, self-doubt, and fear of academic failure rather than physical illness. The bedroom setting reinforces the idea that her struggle is private and emotional.

The mother's gentle gestures: lifting her daughter's chin, smiling, and stroking her hair, signify care, reassurance, and emotional guidance. These actions position the mother as the source of confidence and resilience.

The repeated emphasis on the girl's long hair extends beyond physical appearance. Hair becomes a metaphor for growth, perseverance, and inner strength. By comparing previously weak hair with its present strength, the advertisement equates physical transformation with psychological development.

The introduction of Lifebuoy Shampoo links this transformation to the product. Rather than merely promoting hair care, the shampoo is represented as a symbol of strength that supports confidence and determination.

Figure 6: Girl looking into mirror, hair as symbol of confidence



The final study scene signifies the daughter's renewed confidence through maternal encouragement and perseverance. Their embrace symbolizes affection, trust, and emotional support.

Figure 7 & 8: Closing frames “Mazboot soch, Mazboot tum”



The concluding slogan expands the meaning of strength from healthy hair to a strong mindset. By connecting strong hair with strong thinking, the advertisement constructs physical and psychological strength as interconnected qualities nurtured through maternal care and symbolically reinforced by the product.

Myth

At the mythic level, the advertisement naturalizes the belief that a mother's guidance is the primary source of a daughter's confidence, resilience, and success. The statement, "*Ek maa hi banati hai apni beti ko mazboot,*" presents motherhood as the central force behind emotional and intellectual development.

At the same time, the narrative reinforces the traditional expectation that mothers bear primary responsibility for raising confident and successful daughters. Fathers, teachers, educational institutions, and the daughter's independent efforts remain largely absent. Academic success is simplified as the outcome of confidence and positive thinking rather than educational support or structural factors.

The comparison between weak hair and fear of mathematics transforms healthy hair into a metaphor for resilience, determination, and self-belief. Although the daughter's confidence develops through encouragement and consistent study, the narrative repeatedly returns to Lifebuoy Shampoo as the visual symbol of strength. Consequently, emotional resilience and personal growth become symbolically linked to the advertised product.

Unlike the earlier advertisements, this campaign shifts the focus from male validation to the supportive relationship between mother and daughter. It presents empowerment through female care, encouragement, and solidarity rather than external approval. Nevertheless, empowerment continues to be communicated through the symbolism of healthy hair, allowing the beauty product to remain central to the construction of confidence.

Ultimately, the advertisement redefines beauty as a sign of strength rather than appearance alone. However, it continues to embed girls' empowerment within the commercial framework of hair care, naturalizing the idea that confidence, resilience, and success are symbolically expressed through strong, healthy hair promoted by the advertised product.

Table 1: Summary of Semiotic Findings Across the Selected Advertisements

Advertisement	Representation of Women	Dominant Beauty Symbol	Central Myth	Ideological Pattern
Lux Perfumed Collection	Successful actresses and celebrities	Western gowns, diamonds, fragrance, glamour	Women are remembered for emotional femininity rather than appearance, yet beauty remains the foundation of recognition.	Male gaze validates femininity; luxury and success are associated with Western aesthetics; beauty is commercialized through glamour.
Sunsilk Long & Healthy Growth	Female athlete	Long, healthy hair	Women can succeed in sports without sacrificing femininity.	Empowerment is achieved by balancing ambition with conventional beauty rather than rejecting beauty standards. Public leadership is accepted, but beauty remains subject to social judgment.
Sunsilk Black Shine – Shaan Sy Shine	Female politician	Long, shiny hair	Women can participate in politics while maintaining ideal femininity.	Empowerment is presented through adaptation rather than resistance.
Glow & Lovely	Female lawyer	Glowing	Professional	Family support

– Chehre aur Kamyabi		skin	success and feminine beauty naturally coexist.	replaces male opposition, yet empowerment remains closely tied to appearance and family recognition.
Glow & Lovely – Serum in Cream for 3X Bright Glow	Diverse professional women (doctor, lawyer, pilot, athlete, media professional, corporate employee)	Glowing skin	Modern women can pursue every profession while maintaining flawless beauty.	Professional competence is linked with skincare; structural barriers disappear and empowerment becomes individualized and commercialized.
Lifebuoy – Mazboot Soch, Mazboot Tum	Mother and daughter	Strong, healthy hair	Strong hair symbolizes a strong mindset and resilience.	Maternal care becomes the source of empowerment, while confidence continues to be symbolically linked to a beauty product.

4.7 Diachronic Patterns: Evolution and Ideological Continuity

While the preceding analyses examined each advertisement individually, a diachronic reading of the corpus reveals broader patterns of continuity and transformation in the semiotic construction of women's empowerment. Across the six advertisements, women evolve from glamour-oriented representations to portrayals emphasizing professional achievement, confidence, and resilience. However, this evolution is primarily representational rather than ideological, as conventional beauty ideals are reconstructed rather than displaced. Four recurring patterns emerge: the transformation of beauty standards, recurring semiotic symbols, the shift from male authority to female solidarity, and the commercialization of empowerment.

4.7.1 Transformation of Beauty Standards

Although women's social and professional roles expand across the corpus, beauty remains the dominant ideological framework. Rather than disappearing, conventional beauty standards are redefined to accommodate narratives of empowerment.

In New Lux Perfumed Collection (2016), beauty is constructed through glamour and luxury, represented by evening gowns, diamonds, flawless makeup, mirrors, and red-carpet imagery, where visual perfection overshadows professional identity. In the Sunsilk advertisements (2019; 2021), long, healthy hair continues to define femininity even as women appear as a basketball player and a political candidate. Hair evolves from an aesthetic feature into a symbol of confidence and resilience. Similarly, the Glow & Lovely campaigns (2023; 2024) associate glowing skin with

professional competence by portraying lawyers, doctors, pilots, and corporate professionals preparing their appearance before entering workplaces. The slogan "*Chehre aur kamyabi, dono ka glow*" explicitly links physical appearance with achievement. Finally, Mazboot Soch, Mazboot Tum (2025) extends this symbolism by presenting healthy hair as a metaphor for resilience, perseverance, and self-belief.

Viewed diachronically, beauty becomes increasingly flexible rather than less influential. Glamour is redefined as confidence, professionalism, and resilience, yet ideal femininity continues to be represented through long hair, glowing skin, flawless grooming, and youthful appearance. Thus, empowerment is constructed not by rejecting beauty ideals but by integrating them into the identity of the modern professional woman.

4.7.2 Recurring Semiotic Symbols in the Construction of Empowerment

Despite changing narratives, the advertisements employ a stable system of visual symbols that consistently construct femininity and empowerment.

The mirror recurs throughout the Lux and Glow & Lovely advertisements, symbolizing self-awareness, beauty consciousness, and preparation before women enter public or professional spaces. Hair similarly evolves from a marker of conventional beauty into a symbol of confidence and resilience. In the Sunsilk advertisements, it signifies athletic determination and political confidence, while in Mazboot Soch, Mazboot Tum it represents emotional strength and perseverance.

The repeated use of transitional spaces, such as doors, courtrooms, campaign venues, sports arenas, and workplaces, symbolizes women's movement from the private sphere into public life. Likewise, clothing reflects changing representations: New Lux Perfumed Collection associates glamour with Western evening gowns and luxury fashion, whereas later advertisements combine professional uniforms with traditional Pakistani attire, such as lawyers' coats and doctors' uniforms worn over shalwar kameez, linking career success with cultural respectability.

Colour symbolism also remains consistent. Pink signifies femininity and optimism, white represents care and professionalism, and red symbolizes glamour and prestige. Furthermore, recognition gradually shifts from external validation, including male admiration and public attention, to self-confidence, educational achievement, professional competence, and female solidarity. Collectively, these recurring symbols demonstrate that empowerment is communicated through a stable visual language that continually links achievement with culturally desirable femininity.

4.7.3 Negotiating Empowerment: From Male Authority to Female Solidarity

A major diachronic shift concerns the relationships through which empowerment is represented. Earlier advertisements position men as figures of authority and validation, whereas later campaigns increasingly foreground supportive relationships among women.

In New Lux Perfumed Collection, male admiration symbolically confirms feminine desirability. Likewise, the coach in Sunsilk Long and Healthy Growth questions the protagonist's long hair as

incompatible with sport, while the male colleague in Sunsilk Black Shine – Shaan Sy Shine discourages the political candidate from entering politics. These male figures represent external authority that women must resist.

Later advertisements replace these male characters with female support networks. In Chehre aur Kamyabi, the protagonist's ambitions are celebrated by her mother and paternal aunt. Serum in Cream for 3X Bright Glow portrays women collectively entering professional spaces, while Mazboot Soch, Mazboot Tum centres on the encouraging relationship between mother and daughter.

However, this shift does not dismantle conventional beauty ideals. Instead, expectations surrounding glowing skin, healthy hair, and careful grooming become internalized through female relationships. From a Barthesian perspective, patriarchal regulation shifts from external male authority to internalized cultural practice, where beauty standards are reproduced through maternal guidance, female encouragement, and solidarity. Consequently, empowerment evolves narratively, but the ideological regulation of femininity remains intact.

4.7.4 Commercialization of Empowerment

Across all six advertisements, empowerment functions as a commercial strategy that links confidence and success to beauty products.

New Lux Perfumed Collection associates fragrance with glamour, celebrity, and public admiration. The Sunsilk advertisements connect healthy hair with success in sport and politics, while the Glow & Lovely campaigns portray lawyers, doctors, pilots, athletes, and corporate professionals applying skincare or checking their appearance before entering workplaces, positioning glowing skin as part of professional readiness. Similarly, Mazboot Soch, Mazboot Tum connects emotional resilience and academic confidence with healthy hair through the advertised shampoo.

Across the corpus, women become successful professionals, politicians, athletes, or students while simultaneously possessing glowing skin, healthy hair, or luxurious fragrance. Consequently, empowerment is individualized and commercialized, with beauty products presented as essential companions to confidence and achievement rather than merely cosmetic commodities.

Table 2: Comparative Semiotic Patterns across the Advertisement Corpus

Comparative Theme	Pattern Identified Across the Corpus
Women's Representation	Shift from glamorous celebrities to athletes, politicians, professionals, mothers, and students.
Beauty Standards	Beauty standards do not disappear; they evolve and become integrated into empowerment.
Recurring Symbols	Mirrors, hair, glowing skin, fragrance, clothing, colour symbolism, doors, and public spaces repeatedly construct femininity.
Authority and Validation	Shift from male gaze and authority towards female solidarity and family support, while patriarchal beauty norms remain internalized.
Commercial Strategy	Empowerment is repeatedly connected to the consumption of beauty products rather than structural social change.

Major Absences	Diverse body types, darker skin representation, ageing women, disabled women, working-class women, and women who reject beauty practices remain largely absent.
Overall Ideology	Contemporary advertisements modernize women's roles while preserving conventional beauty ideals through increasingly subtle and commercialized myths.

4.8 What the Advertisements Exclude: Patterns of Erasure

Semiotic analysis extends beyond visible signs to examine what remains absent from representation. Across the corpus, recurring omissions reveal the ideological boundaries within which women's empowerment is constructed.

The advertisements consistently privilege a narrow beauty ideal. All protagonists possess glowing skin, long healthy hair, youthful appearances, slim body types, and carefully maintained grooming, while older women, women with disabilities, larger body types, darker or uneven complexions, short hairstyles, and other non-conforming appearances remain largely absent. This reflects the persistence of commercially constructed beauty ideals, where diversity is limited despite claims of inclusivity (Bala, 2025; Songur & Yaman, 2024).

Similarly, every protagonist participates in beauty practices before entering public or professional spaces, whether by applying skincare products, checking a mirror, or caring for her hair. These repeated rituals naturalize beauty maintenance as an essential element of confidence and empowerment rather than a cultural or commercial expectation (Khan et al., 2023).

Structural inequalities are also largely excluded. Although the Sunsilk advertisements briefly introduce gender stereotypes, these challenges are quickly resolved through personal confidence and product use. Later campaigns replace social barriers with individual concerns such as sunlight, self-doubt, or academic anxiety, thereby framing empowerment as a matter of personal resilience while overlooking discrimination, workplace inequality, and institutional bias. This individualization of empowerment reflects broader patterns identified in contemporary advertising (Barrett & Kanoria, 2022; Songur & Yaman, 2024).

Professional identities likewise remain largely symbolic. While women are portrayed as lawyers, doctors, politicians, athletes, pilots, and media professionals, they are rarely shown performing meaningful professional work. Instead, these occupations primarily function as visual markers of success that reinforce the advertisements' commercial messages (Khan et al., 2023).

Such selective visibility is consistent with broader observations in Pakistani media discourse, where representation may be shaped through processes of selection, omission and ideological framing (Shah & Hasnain, 2023).

Finally, the corpus predominantly represents urban, educated, middle-class women while excluding rural communities, economically marginalized groups, and other diverse social realities. Beauty itself is never questioned but presented as an unquestioned characteristic of successful

womanhood. In Barthesian terms, these omissions naturalize dominant beauty ideals as common sense rather than culturally constructed values (Barthes, 1977).

Overall, these patterns demonstrate that the advertisements promote a selective model of empowerment in which ambition and professional success remain closely tied to conventional beauty standards, consumer culture, and social privilege. Consistent with previous research, the ideological power of these campaigns lies not only in what they represent but also in what they systematically exclude (Bala, 2025; Barrett & Kanoria, 2022; Songur & Yaman, 2024).

5. Discussion

The findings indicate a clear evolution in the representation of women in Unilever Pakistan's beauty and personal care advertisements. Earlier campaigns primarily emphasized physical attractiveness and conventional beauty as markers of success and social acceptance, whereas later advertisements increasingly incorporate confidence, professional achievement, and empowerment. However, a Barthesian semiotic analysis suggests that this transformation is largely representational rather than ideological. Although women are portrayed in more diverse and empowered roles, conventional beauty standards remain central to feminine identity.

These findings support Bala (2025), who argues that contemporary beauty advertising replaces explicit fairness narratives with concepts such as *glow* and *radiance* while preserving underlying beauty ideologies. Similarly, Khan et al. (2023) observe that Pakistani advertisements construct gender meanings through visual and verbal signs, a pattern reflected in the consistent use of clothing, body language, and appearance to reinforce ideal femininity.

The results also align with Songur and Yaman (2024), who contend that progressive advertising often reproduces patriarchal values beneath empowerment narratives. Although the advertisements portray women as ambitious and professionally successful, empowerment remains closely linked to attractiveness, elegance, and careful self-presentation. Likewise, Barrett and Kanoria (2022) argue that stereotypes adapt rather than disappear, and the advertisements demonstrate this by modernizing traditional beauty ideals instead of challenging them.

Viewed through Barthes' concept of myth, the evolution in these advertisements represents the reconstruction rather than the dismantling of dominant beauty ideologies. Empowerment is repeatedly presented as compatible with glowing skin, healthy hair, and conventional femininity, allowing beauty standards to appear natural and self-evident. Overall, the findings suggest that Unilever Pakistan has shifted from promoting overt beauty ideals to integrating them into contemporary empowerment narratives, highlighting the continuing relevance of Barthes' theory for understanding how advertising naturalizes gender ideologies.

5.1 Limitations

This study is limited to six Unilever Pakistan advertisements (2016–2025), restricting the generalizability of its findings to the broader Pakistani advertising industry. It examines only YouTube advertisements and excludes television, print, Instagram, TikTok, and other media that may employ different representational strategies. The use of Barthesian semiotic analysis also

involves interpretive subjectivity, despite the systematic analytical framework; different researchers may assign different meanings to the same signs. Moreover, the study analyses media texts without examining audience reception. It therefore cannot establish how Pakistani women across different socio-economic, cultural, or educational backgrounds interpret or negotiate these representations. Finally, although the nine-year period provides a diachronic perspective, it remains relatively limited, and the focus on beauty and personal-care advertising constrains the applicability of the findings to other advertising sectors.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the semiotic construction of women's empowerment in Unilever Pakistan's beauty and personal-care advertisements (2016–2025) using Barthes' (1977) framework. The findings show a shift from glamour and physical attractiveness toward representations of women as confident professionals, athletes, political participants, and students. However, this shift remains largely representational rather than ideological. Conventional beauty standards, including glowing skin, long healthy hair, and careful grooming, continue to underpin the construction of the empowered woman. Rather than challenging traditional femininity, the advertisements reconfigure it by associating beauty with confidence, ambition, and professional success. The findings further show that empowerment is consistently commercialized, with beauty products positioned as resources for confidence, resilience, and achievement. Contemporary advertising therefore responds to changing social expectations while continuing to naturalize culturally preferred ideals of femininity through sophisticated semiotic strategies. This study contributes to research on gender and media representation by providing a longitudinal semiotic analysis of Pakistani beauty advertising. It demonstrates how empowerment discourse can coexist with persistent beauty ideologies, reaffirming the relevance of Barthes' concept of myth in explaining how advertising naturalizes cultural values. Future research should examine other beauty brands and media platforms, incorporate audience-reception studies, and undertake comparative South Asian analyses to further investigate the relationship between beauty, gender, and empowerment.

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