

Exploring the Portrayal of Social Taboos in Bangladeshi TV Advertisements

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[Abstract : This research examines how social taboos are represented in Bangladeshi TV advertisements. Four advertisements, each addressing a different type of social taboo, were selected as samples to reflect societal issues. The study mainly employs critical discourse analysis theory combined with quantitative content analysis methods. The findings show that all the advertisements effectively highlight and introduce the social taboos that exist in our society using different colors, symbols and background music based on taboos. But some of them fail to convey proper message to challenge the taboos and root them out of society. The study also notes a lack of representation of rural areas of the country, while most scenes portray urban settings. Finally, the study suggests a greater focus on solution-oriented advertisements that raise awareness and encourage societal change.]

Keywords : Advertising, Social taboos, Media representation, Discourse analysis, Cultural studies, Gender roles, Sexuality, Religion.

1. Introduction

Media informs us, educates us, entertains us and there are many more purposes that the media serves. Advertisement is an important part of mass media. As a part of mass media, advertisement also plays an important role in serving us in many ways beyond persuading consumers to purchase products or services, ideas or causes. William Stephenson in his book 'The Play Theory of Mass Communication' says that the main purpose of mass media is to provide pleasure, happiness to its audience and to keep the audience away from their daily sufferings (Akinjogbin & Kayode, 2011). Entertainment purpose is the main theme of this theory. As a prominent part of mass media, advertisement also thrives to fulfill this purpose. But this cannot be the sole purpose. Advertisement introduces us with society, aware us with societal problems. Advertising is a reflection of our society. Through advertisement we can learn about the various problems of the society as well as we can learn about the solutions. Social taboo is one of them. The purpose of this research is to highlight the portrayal of social taboos in advertisement and to know the role of advertisement in breaking social taboos.

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2. Definition of Taboo

A taboo is a social or cultural prohibition or restriction that forbids certain actions, behaviors, or discussions due to beliefs about morality, decency, or safety. These prohibitions can stem from religious, social, or legal norms and are often considered too sacred or dangerous to engage with. Violating a taboo can lead to social ostracism, shame, or even legal penalties.

Taboo refers to a certain culture. It alludes to the belief that certain very offensive ideas, statements, or behaviors should be prohibited or restricted. This type of limitation is acquired by almost every culture. These traditions, however, could differ throughout civilizations. However, the belief is universal across all cultures.

In the book *TOTEM AND TABOO*, Sigmund Freud explores the psychological and anthropological roots of taboos in human society. He connects taboos with forbidden desires and unconscious emotions, drawing on examples from primitive cultures and human development. Freud describes taboos as prohibitions that appear to be sacred or untouchable in primitive societies, much like moral laws. However, these prohibitions are not just societal but are tied to deep emotional conflicts. Freud argues that taboos originate from unconscious, repressed desires (Freud, 1913).

Advertising plays significant and multifaceted roles in the consumers' sociocultural lives through the transmission of societal culture (Chowdhury, I. A. 2025).

However, some important and sensitive topics are often avoided because of strong cultural taboos. Issues like mental health, menstruation, sexual health, gender roles, and even showing romantic affection are either not discussed openly or shown in very limited and stereotypical ways. This reluctance to talk about social taboos in ads reflects the wider cultural and social beliefs that affect what people think is okay to talk about in public. Below are some common taboos in Bangladesh-

Mental Health: Discussing mental health issues like depression or anxiety is often avoided, as many people don't understand or accept these problems. According to a recent study, people are more hesitant to disclose that they have a mental illness than to come out as gay, which supports campaigners' concerns that mental illness is still stigmatized in society. (O'Hara, 2009).

Sex Education: Talking about sex or sexual health is often considered inappropriate, especially in public or with family. In Bangladesh, the terms sex and gender evoke opposing reactions. This has hindered the introduction of positive changes and new perspectives (Share-Net Bangladesh, 2023).

Divorce: Divorce is seen as shameful, especially for women, and people hesitate to talk about it openly. Even though divorce is a common issue, divorce is still a taboo in Bangladesh. Divorce is still frowned upon in Bangladesh, despite what the statistics may suggest. The decision to dissolve a marriage is challenging, even for well-educated women from wealthy backgrounds, in part because it is a lonely, complex, and emotionally taxing procedure for all parties (Preetha, 2022).

Menstruation: Menstruation is often seen as a private and shameful topic. Discussing periods openly is avoided, and many women follow traditional practices during menstruation, such as avoiding certain foods or religious activities. Bangladeshi women mostly face a number of restrictions during their menstruation phase. Women are thought to be 'unclean' during their menstruating period (Organic Nutrition, 2022).

Breast Cancer: Many women avoid talking about breast cancer due to embarrassment, which can delay diagnosis and treatment. According to the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) of the World Health Organization, breast cancer ranks third among malignancies in Bangladesh for both men and women and is one of the

most common tumors among Bangladeshi women. Due to the societal shame associated with sexual organs, many women in Bangladesh are completely ignorant that they have breast cancer, despite the fact that it is one of the major causes of mortality in the country (Hasan, 2018).

Body Shaming: Making negative comments about someone's body, whether about weight or appearance, is common, but openly addressing body shaming is often avoided. The issue of body shaming via memes on social media sites, especially Facebook, has attracted notice because of its possible effects on people's self-worth and body perception. In the context of Bangladesh, there were more remarks regarding size, height, masculinity, and skin color. Both girls and boys, as well as transgender individuals, have been identified as targets of body-shaming memes (Mumu & Rashid, 2023).

Ethnic Language and Identity: Minority ethnic groups face challenges in expressing their identity or language openly, as mainstream society may not always accept their cultural differences. Language signifies ethnic identity; serves as a means to convey a unique culture; acts as a foundation for national unity; and functions as a tool for creating a political community. However, the connection between language and ethnonational identity is a debated issue (Safran & Laponse, 2005).

A largely conservative society In Bangladesh, where traditional values often dominate, discussing taboo subjects in media, especially in advertisements, is challenging. Advertisers have to be cautious about cultural sensitivities to avoid negative reactions from consumers, religious groups, or the government.

At the same time, the media's role in addressing these social taboos is becoming more important. As globalization introduces people to different ideas and values, Bangladeshi audiences are slowly becoming more open to progressive messages. However, change in advertising content remains slow and difficult, especially when it involves taboo topics. Historically, Bangladeshi ads have focused on family values, modesty, and religious themes. But in recent years, there have been some bold attempts to address issues like menstruation, women's empowerment, and body image.

Advertisers face a tough challenge when it comes to balancing societal norms. On one side, there's a growing push for more realistic and inclusive portrayals of gender, sexuality, and health in the media. On the other side, advertisers worry about upsetting conservative audiences by addressing sensitive topics. This raises key questions about advertising's role in shaping social views: Should ads reflect current values, or should they try to challenge and change them? How can advertisers handle taboo topics without risking their reputation or profits? Overall, how does advertising reinforce or break down harmful stereotypes and stigmas?

3. Literature Review

Social taboos in advertising refer to sensitive or controversial topics that are often avoided in marketing campaigns because they are considered inappropriate or offensive by society. Some examples of these taboos include discussions around sexuality, menstruation, mental health, or even certain religious and cultural beliefs. However, as times change, some advertisers are beginning to challenge these taboos by addressing them openly, creating a shift in how sensitive issues are portrayed.

Research on social taboos in advertising in Bangladesh and beyond, explores how brands handle these topics and the impact it has on society and consumer behavior. Here's a breakdown of some contemporary research:

A study conducted by Rasheda Rawnak Khan and Rownok Jahan Akhi to analyze sanitary pads advertisements in Bangladesh and its biological representation

of poor women published in early 2024. The study analyzes the sanitary pad advertisements.

An ideology on the class-based usage of sanitary pads is created by the sanitary pad advertising, which depict issues related to the lives of wealthy or middle-class women, who are seen as its target market. Nine sanitary pad ads were chosen, and their surroundings, castings' jobs, lifestyles, and affairs were ascertained by content analysis. The majority of the ads (almost 95%) depict upper middle-class ladies, with 95% of the surroundings depicted as urban areas and 90% of the lifestyles depicted as affluent or luxurious (Khan and Akhi, 2024).

A different study was released concerning the role of media in raising awareness about menstrual hygiene among females living in both rural and urban regions of Bangladesh. This research carried out a survey involving 200 participants from four rural and urban regions of Bangladesh to gather primary data aimed at achieving the goals of this study. Utilizing descriptive (mean) and enter-method regression analysis in SPSS 24.0, the results from rural and urban respondents have been examined independently to determine the primary media channels significantly influencing awareness of female hygiene practices.

The aim of this research was to contrast the understanding and perceptions of urban and rural women regarding their menstrual hygiene practices, to classify the functions and application of various communication methods to inform women about menstrual hygiene and maternal health management, and to recognize the effective media tools that promote social awareness concerning female hygiene practices from the viewpoints of both urban and rural communities in Bangladesh. The result shows that, almost in factors urban women are in better position than rural women. Although the service between rural and urban areas are not same (Rahman et al, 2018).

In another research, TV advertisements were analyzed to explore menstrual hygiene management. The aim of the study was to know how the issue of menstruation is presented on TV advertisement and what roles TV advertisements play in shaping the knowledge, attitude, and practice of girls and their parents on menstruation and menstruation hygiene management. Both content analysis and questionnaire survey have been used to present the realities of the role of TV advertisement in menstrual hygiene management process in Bangladesh.

Results indicate that around 70 percent of girls are motivated to use sanitary napkins by viewing television advertisements. Television commercials play a crucial role in dismantling the stigma surrounding menstruation and also offer important information about menstruation and menstrual hygiene practices. 36.7 percent, 45.6 percent, and 17.8 percent of girls are aged 16, 17, and 18 respectively, indicating that they are in the puberty stage. Girls have the highest occurrence of menstruation at age 13, recorded at 42.2 percent, while the lowest occurrence is noted at 5.6 percent. 55.6 percent of girls experience fear during their first menstrual period, while merely 4.4 percent feel sadness at that time. 74.4 percent of girls initially discuss their menstruation with their mother. Only 2.2 percent initially discuss her menstruation with Grandmother. 61.1 percent of girls acquire accurate information about menstruation, awareness of reproductive tract infections from using regular cloth, and knowledge of staying dry by watching television advertisements. 48.9 percent of respondents acquired knowledge about discussing sensitive topics, attending college or going out during menstruation, removing all menstrual taboos, and receiving free advice from doctors, while 22.2 percent of respondents learned about discussing sensitive topics by watching pad-related TV advertisements. Only 14.4 percent of respondents obtain information regarding the

availability of free doctor consultations. 76.6 percent of girls use sanitary pads directly for hygiene, while 23.3 percent are motivated to uphold menstrual cleanliness and refrain from using cloth after watching a pad-related TV advertisement.

TV advertisement always ends up with menstrual hygiene related psychological suggestion and about 96 percent girls are motivated with this. Pad related TV advertisements change the attitude of girls because about 45 percent of the respondents cited that they watch these with male members in their family and do not feel any hesitation. These findings prove that girls are changing their attitude through TV advertisements because media constitutently influences on adolescent child through their programs (Poly, 2020).

In their article 'The importance of a positive approach to sexuality in sexual health programs for unmarried adolescents in Bangladesh,' Miranda van Reeuwijk and Papreen Nahar examined the gap between the experiences, desires, and needs of unmarried adolescents in Bangladesh concerning their sexuality and what their society provides, adversely affecting their comprehension of sexuality and overall well-being. The results painted a portrait of the sexual emotions, experiences, behaviors, anxieties, and concerns of Bangladeshi adolescents (12–18 years) – especially regarding desire, pleasure, sexual agency, masturbation, virginity, romantic love and dating, as well as arranged marriage – and the impact of sociosexual norms and taboos on these aspects. Based on the results from interviews and focus group discussions, the youths conveyed a range of emotions they associated with sexuality, particularly curiosity, desires and pleasure, along with feelings of insecurity and worries. Girls showed interest in topics such as virginity, menstruation, sexual empowerment, sexually transmitted infections, and homosexuality. Numerous girls voiced concerns and different misunderstandings regarding the concept of virginity and felt uncertain about their capacity to demonstrate their own virginity. A few older girls were curious about methods a girl could use to enhance her sexual appeal to satisfy men. The term “sexual-power” was employed to convey worries or thoughts regarding the capacity to engage in sexual activities and provide/receive pleasure. The girls were intrigued by this since they felt uncertain about their capacity to satisfy their future husbands sexually. They connected this to the fear that if a wife fails to please her husband, he may seek a sex worker or engage in extramarital affairs.

On the contrary, boys expressed a keen interest in the female body and sexual relations. They were interested in masturbation and wet dreams, as well as the size and shape of the penis and the length of intercourse. Several boys expressed their wish to engage in romantic relationships with girls, kiss them, and become more intimate with their bodies. Boys indicated a wish to view women's breasts and genitals and to observe others engaging in sexual activity. The older boys expressed that they experienced an “intense urge” to engage in sexual intercourse. . Expression of this desire was found across the groups from slums to orphans, from rural illiterates to college-going boys. A few older boys said that they even wanted to get married early mainly to experience sex, because there were no obstacles to having sex for married couples. The research team found that the groups of boys from the slums admitted to sexual activities more than any other group. The boys who mentioned experience of sexual intercourse mostly had this experience with sex workers. One group of slum boys mentioned sexual experience through gang rape. Many boys mentioned finding sexual excitement and pleasure through sexually harassing and “eve teasing” girls in public places (Reeuwijk and Nahar, 2013).

Umme Busra Fateha Sultana carried out research named 'Gender and Sexuality in Contraceptive Advertising in Bangladesh (1972-2011) – An Audience Perspective' which examined the viewpoint of a modern trend concerning the depiction of pre/extra marital

sexual relations in condom ads in Bangladesh. Based on the research results from 36 detailed interviews, this paper explores women's reactions to the new-old (non)normative representation of sexuality in these advertisements, spanning three social classes and three generations. The article explores how social class, age, and other identities can influence mediated discussions regarding normativity versus the changing "realities" of sexuality in modern Bangladesh. The results indicate that a majority of women, 55%, view portrayals of pre/extra marital relationships in condom advertisements as concerning: primarily, it provides poor guidance to the youth by promoting immoral sexual behavior. The worries voiced pertain to which attitudes are ethically "correct" and "incorrect" regarding sexuality. The second group of women, comprising 25%, indicates that advertisements can show sexual relations between couples who are not married, but the message needs to be conveyed thoughtfully to avoid promoting "immoral" sexual behaviors. A small group of women, 5 out of 36, argues that given current social dynamics, it is crucial for the advertisements to feature pre/extra marital sexual relationships (Sultana, 2023).

4. Research Objective

This research aims to explore the portrayal of social taboos in advertisements in Bangladesh, focusing on some of the most prevalent and sensitive topics in the country. Through a qualitative analysis of selected advertisements, this study will examine how various taboo subjects such as menstruation, child marriage, body shaming, ethnic language, sex education, and mental health are represented in the media landscape. By analyzing this advertisement this research explores the portrayal of social taboos in Bangladeshi advertisements. The research will assess both the content and context of these advertisements, delving into how they reflect cultural attitudes, societal values, and prevailing stereotypes. By critically analyzing the visual and textual elements of the advertisements, it will uncover the clear and subtle messages communicated about these sensitive issues. Additionally, the study will investigate whether these advertisements are working to challenge or reinforce existing norms surrounding these taboos.

This research will also take into account the historical and socio-political background of these taboos in Bangladesh, providing a deeper understanding of why certain topics remain taboo and how they are evolving in public discourse.

Ultimately, this research seeks to provide valuable insights into how Bangladeshi advertisements are engaging with and addressing social taboos, contributing to the ongoing conversation about representation, awareness, and societal change. The findings could help guide future advertising strategies, social awareness campaigns, and policy decisions aimed at breaking down harmful taboos and promoting more open, inclusive dialogue on these critical issues.

5. Theoretical Framework

Researchers employ critical discourse analysis and social semiotic approaches to examine how advertisements construct and reinforce ideologies, particularly regarding gender representation and power relations (Najafian & Ketabi, 2011; Shaikh et al., 2015). The studies reveal that advertising discourse is not neutral but mediated through linguistic and semiotic resources, often perpetuating gender stereotypes and inequality (Najafian & Ketabi, 2011; Shaikh et al., 2015; Mahmood et al., 2022). Taboos in advertising are addressed through complex strategies, balancing concealment and deliberate references

across multiple modes of communication (Freitas, 2008). In the Pakistani context, researchers found that TV advertisements frequently violate ethical codes and Islamic values, highlighting the need for stricter regulatory measures (Mahmood et al., 2022). These studies demonstrate the power of advertising in shaping social discourses and the importance of critical analysis in uncovering underlying ideologies. This study will be conducted through social constructionism theory described by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in their book 'social construction of reality'. They said, 'Society is a human product. Society is an objective reality. Man is a social product.' (Berger & Luckmann, 1966)

Social Constructionism is a sociological theory that argues that our understanding of reality is not an objective reflection of the world but is constructed through social interactions, language, and cultural practices. It posits that individuals and groups create and perpetuate meanings, categories, and norms that shape our perception of the world.

5.1. Social Constructionism Theory:

Reality is Socially Constructed: According to this theory, much of what we consider to be "reality" is shaped by collective agreements, social institutions, and shared knowledge. Language is seen as the primary tool through which meaning is constructed and communicated. Through language, societies frame how we perceive, categorize, and understand phenomena. Social constructionism emphasizes that knowledge and truth are context-dependent. What might be considered true in one society or time period may not hold the same truth value in another context. Thus, reality is seen as relative and fluid rather than fixed and universal. This theory highlights how certain social groups can influence which versions of reality are accepted as the norm, thus maintaining power dynamics.

5.2. Representation Theory:

Exploring the portrayal of social taboos in Bangladeshi advertisements we can relate the Representation Theory by Stuart Hall. Representation is a process through which social and cultural meanings are created and circulated. According to this theory meaning is not simply inherent in objects or people but is constructed through language, media, and culture. According to Hall, representation involves constructing meaning through signs, symbols, and language. Using Stuart Hall's Representation Theory as a framework allows us to critically analyze how Bangladeshi advertisements construct, challenge, or reinforce social taboos. It helps us understand the complex dynamics of meaning-making, cultural context, and audience reception in relation to sensitive social issues. This theoretical lens reveals that representations in media are not neutral but are shaped by and reflective of broader cultural and ideological struggles.

Representation theory provides insights into how advertisements navigate social taboos. Ads often employ complex strategies to either conceal or highlight taboo elements, utilizing various modes of communication like verbal language, images, and sound (Freitas, 2008). The effectiveness of these strategies depends on personal, interpersonal, and situational factors, with normative social influence playing a crucial role (Sabri, 2012). Advertisements can convey moral values and social messages, as exemplified by the Teh Botol Sosro ad, which represented nine moral values including tolerance and empathy (Sulistyo, 2020). However, the representation of taboos in advertising requires careful consideration of cultural, social, and legal regulations, as well as potential consequences in specific contexts (Angear et al., 2022). Humor and shock tactics are sometimes employed to address taboo topics, but their effectiveness varies

depending on the audience's interpretation and the nature of the taboo (Angear et al., 2022; Freitas, 2008).

In Bangladeshi advertisements, social taboos such as Body Shaming, menstruation, sexuality, gender roles, etc. are often depicted in ways that reflect cultural attitudes and ideologies. Hall argues that representation is deeply rooted in cultural contexts. In our country, where some social taboos remain sensitive topics. Advertisements portray these taboos in a way that either reinforces or challenges existing social norms. For example, an advertisement about menstruation might either reinforce traditional views of shame and privacy or challenge them by promoting open conversations. The way these advertisements represent taboos speaks to larger social dynamics in Bangladeshi culture.

Hall discusses how stereotypes and "othering" are used in representation to maintain power dynamics. Social taboos often arise from societal fears and anxieties. In Bangladeshi advertisements, certain taboo topics represented in ways that sustain stereotypes. For example, stereotypes are encouraged by only featuring female characters in advertisements for cooking appliances or laundry detergents. These advertisements imply that housework is only for women.

According to the Hall's Encoding/Decoding Model producers encode messages with preferred meanings, but audiences may decode them in different ways (dominant, oppositional or negotiated). In the context of Bangladeshi advertisements, the producers encode messages that attempt to challenge social taboos, but the audience decode these messages based on their own cultural or ideological perspectives. For example, a progressive

advertisement challenging gender norms may be interpreted by a more conservative audience often mirror dominant ideologies, such as conservatism or patriarchy which is influencing the public. When Bangladeshi advertisements tackle social taboos, they can either reinforce these dominant ideologies or overpower them to challenge social discrimination.

6. Research Methodology

Narrative analysis and semiotics offer valuable ways to exploring social taboos in advertising. Multimodal narrativity in advertisements can effectively convey social meanings and cultural contexts (Jabeen & Cheong, 2022). Taboos in advertising are complex, often hidden or deliberately foregrounded through various modes of communication (Freitas, 2008). Semiotic studies of advertising have evolved from classical rhetoric to narratological analysis and the exploration of passions and emotions in texts (Bianchi, 2011). The effectiveness of advertisements is increasingly tied to the presentation of sensations associated with products or brands (Bianchi, 2011). Taboo-challenging advertisements can elicit ambivalent emotional reactions, with responses depending on personal, interpersonal, and situational factors (Sabri, 2012). The use of taboo imagery in advertising can lead to contagion effects, impacting both the brand and customers (Sabri, 2012). These approaches provide insights into how advertisers navigate social taboos and cultural norms in their messaging.

6.1. Semiotics:

The semiotic research method is a powerful tool for analyzing how meanings are created and communicated through signs and symbols. In the context of this research topic, "Exploring the portrayal of social taboos in Bangladeshi advertisements", the semiotic method help to uncover the deeper meanings behind visual and textual elements in ads, and how these meanings reflect or challenge societal norms and taboos. Semiotics plays a

crucial role in decoding advertisements and understanding social taboos. Advertisements utilize various semiotic approaches to convey messages, often relying on cultural and ideological symbols (Hal, 2021). The complexity of taboos in advertising is evident in how ads either conceal or highlight taboo elements, employing multiple modes of communication to achieve a balance between obscurity and acceptability (Freitas, 2008). Social semiotic analysis reveals that both verbal and non-verbal signs in advertisements carry ideological assumptions, with image, word, and color serving as key semiotic modes (Najafian & Ketabi, 2011). This approach can uncover hidden messages and social issues within advertisements, as demonstrated in a study of L'ORÉAL's "This is an Ad for Men Campaign," which combined verbal and visual signs to address gender-related social issues while promoting their products (Ariani, 2021). Understanding semiotics in advertising is essential for interpreting the complex interplay between commercial goals and social commentary.

- o **Sign:** In semiotics, a sign is anything that communicates meaning. In an advertisement, signs could be images, words, colors, gestures, or even sounds.
- o **Signifier:** This is the form that the sign takes. For example, a traditional dress or a particular setting in a Bangladeshi ad can act as the signifier.
- o **Signified:** The concept or meaning that the signifier evokes. A woman wearing a saree in a specific color might signify modesty or cultural tradition, or conversely, might be used to critique traditional gender roles.

6.2. Narrative Analysis:

Narrative analysis plays a crucial role in understanding and creating effective advertisements. Advertisers use narratives as a persuasive strategy to stimulate consumer engagement and promote social heritage (Dalamu, 2017). Narrative advertisements can trigger narrative processing in consumers, leading to mental simulation and transportation, which enhance persuasion (Chang, 2012). This approach differs from analytical processing, which focuses on product attributes. Factors influencing narrative processing include brand narratives, advertisement format, and individual differences in processing style (Chang, 2012). Research has explored the potential of automated advertising plot generation based on comprehensive analysis of advertisement videos (Ono et al., 2019). Narrative advertisements often revolve around product consumption or human desires, presenting stories that resonate with audiences (Chang, 2012). By leveraging narrative techniques, advertisers can create more compelling and emotionally engaging advertisements that effectively communicate brand messages and influence consumer behavior.

Through this method, critically analyze how cultural factors influence the portrayal of social taboos in Bangladeshi advertisements, providing insights into both the explicit content and the hidden ideologies behind the ads.

6.3. Research Sample

The study followed purposive sampling, also known as selective sampling which is a non-probability sampling technique where the researcher selects participants based on specific characteristics or criteria. The goal is to focus on particular traits or attributes that are relevant to the research question, ensuring that only individuals who fit these criteria are included in the sample.

Discussing with a group of people to identify the most suitable taboo subjects for analysis, four TV commercials of Bangladesh have been taken as samples. In advertisements, social taboos, presentation, style of presentation, message etc. have been

tried to be shown through this research. This research proceeded by analyzing four Bangladeshi advertisements those are as below-

1. About Regional Language by RFL houseware (2023)
2. Senora Sanitary Napkin (2017)
3. About Body Shaming by Bashundhara Instants Noodles (2020)
4. Sexual harassment and Bullying BRAC (2023)

7. Analysis

7.1. About Regional Language by RFL houseware

This ad was produced by RFL Company. This ad is made about mother tongue keeping in mind 21st February. In YouTube this ad was published in 18 February 2023.

Advertisement Narrative: This advertisement shows two friends, one from Barisal and one from Noakhali. The boy from Barisal is comfortable speaking his regional language, but the boy from Noakhali never lets his regionalism shine through. So, he practices pure Bengali to hide his Noakhali identity. If he speaks Noakhali, everyone will ignore him. Makes fun of it.

So, he tries to hide his regionalism and discourages his Barisal friend from speaking in the regional language. But his friends from Barisal says that he prefers to speak in dialect of Barishal division as his vernacular carries his identity. At the end of the ad two sentences are said in a male voice, "Our identity lives in our language, the regional language is the root of that identity".



7.2. Senora Sanitary Napkin

The Senora Sanitary Napkin advertisement was created by Square Company. The ad was posted on YouTube on June 8, 2017.

Advertisement Narrative: At the beginning of the ad, a teacher enters the class and asks the students, "Which chapter do you have today?" A student bows his head shyly and says, "Chapter four". The teacher then says, "Read this chapter yourself at home".

A female student sneaks into class to read that chapter and her classmates make fun of her. In the second part of the ad, a female student wants to go home because she has her period in class but can't tell her teacher. She goes in front of the teacher and pokes the chair with her fingernails. This is a sign of discomfort.

The teacher realized that she had her period. And, asks her to leave. She misses the exam the next day because of her period. Then the teacher says that she will miss the exam! Then, it is said in the male voice, not only the Exam miss, but also ignorance about the period and use of unsanitary cotton clothes can cause cervicitis or cancer. Not cotton or cloth for a healthy period Senora with



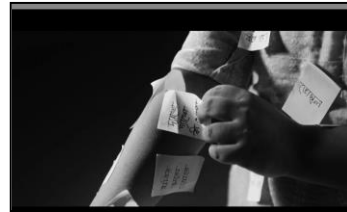
maximum absorbency. Then the teacher says so read chapter four. No more shyness, no more school misses.

7.3. About Body Shaming by Bashundhara Instant Noodles

Advertisement of Bashundhara Instant Noodles is produced by Bashundhara Company. The ad was first aired on YouTube on March 8, 2020

Advertisement Narrative: At the beginning of the advertisement, a fat girl is seen in a dark room in a very depressed state. And various bad comments about her are floating in her ears. For example, look what's the situation, looks like an elephant, can sit in the rickshaw?

Then the girl took out the saree from the closet to commit suicide in depression. After thinking for a while she put the saree on without committing suicide. Then a female voice is heard saying, If you love yourself as you are, your confidence is not your body shape but your real wealth. All appropriate responses to body language are your job. Bashundhara Noodles tribute to all women everywhere today and every day. Stop body shaming.



7.4. About Sexual harassment and Bullying by BRAC

This Advertisement Produced by Brac About Sexual harassment and Bulling. In 2023, March 19 this advertisement was first aired on Youtube.

Advertisement Narrative: At the beginning of the ad, a young woman is seen in depression. her father asks her, 'Hi dear What's going on? The girl said,' Those boys are getting bolder every day. Her mother said, why are they after you? There are so many Other girls. you should maintain decency while walking on the Streets. The girl replied, but mom I haven't done anything. Her mother Said, don't argue. You Don't need to go to School if this is such a huge problem. Stay home and help me with the household chores.

In the second part of the advertisement A fat boy is seen in depression because everyone makes bad comments about his body. When he tells his house, his mother says, Is this all new to you? Just Ignore them. The boy said, but mom I don't like being bullied, they call me fat all day. His Father Said, Ahh...they will eventually get bored and stop... (He ignored his son's words and went out to talk on the phone without finishing the conversation)



Then a male voice is heard saying, every parent needs to create a safe space for their children and provide them emotional support. If your child is experiencing bullying or Sexual harassment raise your voice Against it and notify the authorities.

8. Key Findings

The analysis of four advertisements reveals that they depict societal taboos, with each ad conveying a message aimed at challenging these taboos. However, the ads tend to focus more on showcasing the taboos themselves rather than on efforts to break them. The major observations of the analysis are as below

Advertisements are more about portraying taboos existing in society rather than conveying the message of breaking social taboos.

This finding suggests that many advertisements highlight the persistence of social taboos. These ads may initially present the issue as a reflection of society's current state. While the intention might be to break the taboo by the end of the ad, the larger focus often remains on depicting the problem itself. Advertisements often do this to draw attention, using taboo subjects to spark conversations, though they may not go far enough in showing how to change the mindset.

Shame, discomfort and other issues are expressed through various signs. For example, scratching the chair with nails, keeping the head down, or various facial expressions.

Advertisements tend to use subtle visual cues and body language to express emotions such as shame or discomfort. For instance, a character feeling ashamed might avoid eye contact, keep their head down, or nervously fidget. These non-verbal signs help the audience connect emotionally with the character's struggles, making the ad more relatable. It's a common cinematic technique that visually amplifies the message without direct words.

Slow background music is used while highlighting taboos.

The choice of music plays an essential role in setting the mood. Slow, often somber, background music is employed to emphasize the gravity of the issues being presented, like body shaming, gender roles, or other societal taboos. The music creates an emotional atmosphere that makes the audience more reflective and empathetic towards the subject matter being portrayed.

The use of color is also emphasized in the advertisement. For example, in the advertisement of body shaming, the female character is shown in black and white when she is depressed. Later after breaking the depression-colored frames were used.

Color schemes are used deliberately to reflect the emotional state of the characters and the narrative journey. In the example of body shaming, the black-and-white palette symbolizes the character's emotional low, signaling depression, insecurity, or a sense of being "faded" or unseen. As the narrative progresses and the character overcomes these feelings, the introduction of color symbolizes transformation, hope, and empowerment. The transition in colors aligns with the ad's message of breaking taboos and emerging stronger.

Each advertisements shows urban imagery.

This suggests that the advertisements tend to be set in urban contexts, showcasing city life and modern, contemporary settings. The focus on urban imagery might reflect the target audience (urban dwellers or middle-class individuals) or the perception that taboos are more openly discussed in cities. However, this may also mean that rural areas, where these issues might manifest differently, are underrepresented, limiting the universality of the message.

Pure Bengali language is used in the advertisements. Only The advertisement which is about regional issues, uses regional language along with pure Bengal language.

This indicates that most advertisements use standard or "pure" Bengali, which is considered more formal and widely understood. However, when addressing regional issues or taboos, such as those specific to a particular region, ads incorporate regional dialects to add authenticity and connect with a more local audience. The use of language can serve as a cultural marker, making the advertisement more relatable to its intended demographic.

Taboo presentation in all advertisements is the same. First social taboo is depicted and then message is given to break the taboo.

This structured approach suggests a way of tackling social issues: first, the advertisement shows a scenario where the social taboo is prevalent (for instance, body shaming, rigid gender roles, etc.), and then it concludes with a solution or a call to action to challenge and break that taboo. While this approach can be effective in demonstrating a shift from problem to solution, it might also lack diversity in creative storytelling, as the narrative progression remains similar across different ads.

Social taboo is also depicted in the dialogues used in the advertisements.

The dialogues in these advertisements are crafted to highlight societal taboos. Characters might verbally express stereotypical or limiting beliefs, such as comments about gender roles, body image, or societal expectations. This verbal depiction ensures that the audience recognizes the taboos being challenged, adding a layer of explicit communication to complement the visual storytelling.

Social stereotypes are highlighted in the advertisements. The use of these stereotypes reflects the entrenched beliefs in society regarding gender roles and expectations. Ads often bring these stereotypes to the forefront, portraying them in a way that mirrors societal norms. By doing so, the advertisements can then challenge these assumptions, encouraging the audience to reflect on how these stereotypes impact individuals and society as a whole.

All advertisements are reflecting the picture of our society, but it was ignored to present rural environment in the ads.

While these advertisements capture the essence of the taboos present in society, they largely neglect rural environments. This could be seen as a missed opportunity, as societal issues often manifest differently in rural areas compared to urban settings. By not including rural representations, these ads may not fully capture the diversity of experiences and challenges across the country, potentially alienating a significant portion of the population.

9. Discussion

As can be seen in the findings of four advertisements, the advertisements depict taboos in the society. Each advertisement contains some message to break the taboo. All four ads put more emphasis on highlighting taboos than breaking taboos.

In our society speaking regional language is frowned upon. If someone speaks his regional language, he is made fun of. So many people want to hide their regionality. Practicing pure language in front of everyone. Which is a kind of social taboo. The advertisement tries to highlight the social taboos through two opposite characters. The difficulties faced by speaking the regional language in our society are highlighted in the advertisement. Again, the comfort of speaking one's own regional language is also shown after overcoming those difficulties.

Bangladesh is home to over 54 Indigenous groups, including the Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Tanchangya, Chak, Pankhua, Mro, Bawm, Lushai, Khyang, and Khumi. Around 80% of this Indigenous population, which is close to one million people, live in the flatland areas of the north and southeast, while the rest live in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. In addition to Bengali, the Indigenous peoples of Bangladesh speak at least 35 different languages. These languages, each with their own alphabets and tones, are an important part of the country's cultural heritage. However, many of these languages are declining due to pressure from the dominant culture (The Asia Foundation, 2023).

In the advertisement the tendency to hide his own regional identity is a reflection of our society. By breaking this taboo, the regional language is the root of our identity also highlighted in the advertisement. Apart from showing social taboos, the advertisement also portrays the mentality of breaking out of these taboos.

Talking about periods is not taken for granted in our society. Periods are presented as something shameful or uncomfortable. Which is reflected in the sample advertisement. The advertisement portrays periods as a cause of shame, embarrassment and discomfort. The advertisement portrays taboos such as not talking about periods in public or not teaching a chapter about periods in class. The advertisement also portrays periods as a reason to be late for normal activities such as classes or exams, and mentions the use of Senora sanitary napkins as a way to get rid of these delays. On the contrary, Senora Sanitary Napkin advertisements use various symbols to represent the period as shameful and uncomfortable. For example, a student is unable to talk about her period in front of her teacher and repeatedly pokes her fingernails on the chair, which is shown as a symbol of discomfort and shame.

This advertisement highlights social taboos but does not convey proper message about breaking taboos. In this advertisement about menstruation, there could be some content that can challenge social stereotypes.

Break the Weakness Narrative: Shift from portraying girls as vulnerable or embarrassed during their periods to showing them as strong, active, and capable. Highlight how products support their empowerment, not fix a "problem."

Role Models: Feature relatable figures—young athletes, students, or creatives—who challenge traditional stereotypes and show that menstruation doesn't stop them from achieving their goals.

Visual Representation of Periods: Show period products (like pads or tampons) being used without shame. For example, a girl pulling a pad from her backpack should be as normal as pulling out a pen.

Body shaming is also a common taboo in our society. Talking about fat, thin or dark skin color is not a new thing in our society. The ad shows what kind of abuse a fat girl has to accept in society. In our society beauty means external beauty. Beauty means to be slim and fair. This stereotype of beauty in society is a social taboo. To overcome this taboo, you have to be mentally strong. You have to ignore the criticism of people in the society and move forward equally. You have to love yourself. It is not body shape but self-confidence that can be the real asset. It is possible to prove yourself through your work. Such is the message given in the advertisement. Breaking social taboos like body shaming is said to boost a person's self-confidence.

The advertisement about sexual harassment is shown in two steps. In the first step, the girl who admits to sexual harassment is not supported by her family. Instead, the girl is blamed for the harassment. She is asked to fix her clothes and behavior. If necessary, it is suggested to leave the study and work at home. In the second step, a fat boy confesses to bullying and his family asks him to adapt.

Although the advertisement highlighted taboos like sexual harassment and bullying, there was no family support or protest against breaking taboos. The advertisement does not show the family support needed to break these taboos in our society. Instead, it highlights the lack of family support. The advertisements use color, music and cues based on the taboo. For example, in the advertisement of body shaming, when the character of the girl is depressed, the entire advertisement is shown in black and white. When the girl breaks the taboo and moves forward, ignoring the words of the people around her, the advertisement is shown in a color frame. The background music of the ad is slow and

depressing as the girl is depressed. But when she comes out of this depression, the music changes. Listening to music brings a sense of success.

The presentation of social taboos was the same in four advertisements. In the first step, the advertisement highlighted the social taboos and in the next step, messages were given to break the taboos.

10. Conclusion

Advertisements have a unique potential to influence public opinion because of their wide reach and ability to communicate to the point messages. This research examines how social taboos are represented in Bangladeshi advertisements. The study found both good and bad examples in the advertisements. As mentioned above, the advertisements emphasize introducing taboos rather than offering ways to break them. But creating advertisements should put more emphasis on breaking social taboos, through which it is possible to create social awareness.

To effectively raise social awareness and drive positive changes, advertisements need to do more than just mention these issues. They should tell stories that make people think critically, encourage inclusivity, and challenge traditional beliefs. By presenting taboos as outdated ideas that can and should be questioned, ads can help people better understand these issues and start conversations that break down societal stigmas. By applying these research findings and following the recommendations, more effective advertisements can be produced, contributing to the betterment of society.

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[সার-সংক্ষেপ: সামাজিক ট্যাবু এমন কিছু বিশ্বাস, আচরণ বা চর্চা, যা কোনো নির্দিষ্ট সমাজ বা সংস্কৃতিতে নিষিদ্ধ বা অগ্রহণযোগ্য বলে বিবেচিত হয়। এটি সাধারণত প্রজন্মের পর প্রজন্ম ধরে চলে আসা সংস্কার, ধর্মীয় অনুশাসন বা সামাজিক রীতিনীতির মাধ্যমে গড়ে ওঠে। অনেক সময় সামাজিক ট্যাবুগুলো ব্যক্তির অধিকার ও স্বাধীনতাকে সীমিত করে রাখে এবং কুসংস্কারকে টিকিয়ে রাখে। (Satt Academy. (n.d.). *Taboo definition*.)

বর্তমান প্রযুক্তির যুগে গণমাধ্যমগুলো ট্যাবুকে কীভাবে জনগণের সামনে তুলে ধরে তা নিয়েই মূলত এই গবেষণা। গণমাধ্যমের গুরুত্বপূর্ণ একটি আধেয় হলো বিজ্ঞাপন। বিজ্ঞাপনের মাধ্যমে খুব সহজেই দর্শক শ্রেণির কাছে পৌঁছানো যায়। বিজ্ঞাপনগুলোতে সামাজিক ট্যাবু উপস্থাপনের ধরণ যাচাই করার লক্ষ্যে গবেষণার অংশ হিসেবে শক্তিশালী গণমাধ্যম টেলিভিশনের চারটি বাংলাদেশি বিজ্ঞাপনকে বিশ্লেষণ করা হয়েছে। বিজ্ঞাপনগুলো চারটি ভিন্ন ট্যাবু উপস্থাপন করে। যেমন- স্যানিটারী ন্যাপকিন, ভাষায় আঞ্চলিকতা, বডি সেমিং ও যৌন হয়রানি। এই ট্যাবুগুলোকে বিজ্ঞাপনে কীভাবে তুলে ধরা হয়েছে, এই গবেষণার মাধ্যমে তা যাচাই করা হয়েছে। ট্যাবু সংক্রান্ত চারটি বিজ্ঞাপন বিশ্লেষণ করলে দেখা যায়- বিজ্ঞাপনগুলোতে ট্যাবু ভাঙার চেয়ে ট্যাবুকে উপস্থাপনের দিককে বেশি গুরুত্ব দেওয়া হয়েছে। বিজ্ঞাপনগুলোর শুরুতে ট্যাবুর নেতিবাচক দিক তুলে ধরা হলেও প্রত্যেকটি বিজ্ঞাপনের শেষে সামাজিক সচেতনতা বৃদ্ধির লক্ষ্যে ট্যাবু ভাঙার জন্য বার্তা দেওয়া হয়েছে। সেমিওটিকসের মাধ্যমে বিজ্ঞাপনগুলোতে ব্যবহৃত বিভিন্ন সংকেত, সাউন্ড, কালার ইত্যাদি বিশ্লেষণ করা হয়েছে। প্রত্যেকটি বিজ্ঞাপনে ট্যাবু উপস্থাপনের ক্ষেত্রে ভিন্ন ভিন্ন সংকেত ব্যবহার করা হয়েছে।]