

MANUFACTURING DESIRE: MEDIA COMMERCIALIZATION AND WOMEN'S CONSUMER PRACTICES IN THE CONTEMPORARY DIGITAL MARKETPLACE

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ABSTRACT

The commercialization of media has reorganized modern marketplaces and reshaped consumers' motives, especially among women in emerging economies. This review synthesizes classical scholarship and new empirical work to examine how commercialization mediated through television, social media, influencer platforms (e.g., YouTube, Instagram), and algorithmic advertising transforms buying from necessity to identity-driven desire. Drawing on a detailed case study of women in Karachi (Ghous, 2020) and recent post-pandemic evidence from Pakistan and global contexts, the review maps four core dimensions: (1) the structural expansion of commercial media and e-commerce; (2) psychological mechanisms linking advertising to consumption; (3) digital personalization, privacy, and algorithmic persuasion; and (4) gendered media practices that construct and exploit ideals of beauty, empowerment, and modernity.

The analysis highlights the double-edged nature of digital consumerism: increased access, convenience, and agency on one hand; increased materialism, manipulation, privacy threats, and regulatory gaps on the other. Drawing from the Karachi study which found strong commercial influence on women's buying behavior and concerns about consumer rights and privacy, this paper synthesizes policy recommendations: stronger consumer protection and advertising regulation, media literacy campaigns focused on women, transparency and limits on data-driven personalization, and gender-sensitive ethical advertising guidelines. The review concludes by identifying priority research areas longitudinal studies of digital consumer identity formation, experimental work on algorithmic persuasion, and policy evaluations of consumer protection interventions.

Keywords: commercialization, consumerism, women, advertising, algorithmic personalization, Pakistan, media literacy.

INTRODUCTION

Commercialization has remade media into a marketplace engine: adverts, sponsored content, influencer endorsements, and algorithmic recommendations now form a continuous commercial stream within everyday life. Where media once prioritized information and public service, market logics increasingly prioritize engagement metrics and monetization turning audiences into both consumers and commodities (Ghous, 2020).

This transformation has particular salience for women in urban South Asia. In Karachi, research shows women are heavy consumers of electronic and social media and that exposure to commercial content strongly shapes buying intentions, preferences, and perceptions of necessity (Ghous, 2020). The original study based on a large survey across diverse female groups in Karachi reported that a substantial majority indicated they were influenced by electronic commercials and that

many perceived their consumer and privacy rights to be exploited by advertisers and media outlets.

Three contemporary trends make it necessary to revisit media commercialization in 2025. First, the post-pandemic acceleration of e-commerce and social-platform shopping has embedded purchase opportunities into social feeds, making discovery-to-purchase friction almost zero (Akmal, Bilal, & Wahid, 2024). Second, advertising has moved from mass broadcast to algorithmic personalization: advertisers now use predictive analytics and individual data to tailor persuasive messages (Mo et al., 2023). Third, gendered representations remain influential: media shapes and often reinforces beauty ideals and social roles that in turn mediate women's consumption choices (Adil & Malik, 2021; Khan, Aziz, & Aslam, 2024).

This paper synthesizes classic theory, the Karachi case, and recent empirical studies to trace how media-driven consumerism moves people from purchasing out of necessity to purchasing as identity work and social positioning. It pays particular attention to women as active consumers who are targeted by advertisers and who experience both empowerment and exploitation in digital marketplaces.

Methodology of this Review

This is a narrative, integrative review combining three sources of evidence:

1. **Primary document:** The user-uploaded thesis: *Impact of Commercialization of Media on the Women's Buying Behavior (Karachi)* by Sobia Ghous (2020). This thesis provides detailed quantitative findings, literature synthesis, theoretical framing (cultivation theory, cognitive dissonance), and policy recommendations specific to Pakistan.
2. **Recent Empirical Literature (2020–2024)** selected peer-reviewed articles and reports addressing (a) post-pandemic online buying trends in Pakistan, (b) algorithmic personalization and privacy, (c) sustainable consumption trends, and (d) gendered media representation. Key contemporary sources include *Frontiers*, *MDPI (Sustainability)*, and regional journals. Representative examples cited below were found through focused searches (*Frontiers*, *MDPI*, national journals).
3. **Synthesis and Critique:** integrating older theoretical work (cultivation theory, consumer

behavior models) with new developments (influencer marketing, social commerce, algorithmic advertising). The review highlights where findings align, diverge, or extend the Karachi case.

When referencing content that derives from the uploaded thesis, I include file citations so readers can locate the source material in the uploaded document.

Conceptual and Theoretical Background Commercialization and Media Logics

Commercialization denotes the transformation of media functions under market pressures prioritizing ad revenue, audience engagement, and sponsorships over prior public service roles. The thesis argues commercial media now systematically constructs desires through repeated exposure, celebrity endorsements, and curated imagery thereby affecting consumption norms (Ghous, 2020).

McQuail (2010) and Ritzer (2008) provide macro-theoretical frames: media's "entertainment-plus" orientation and the "McDonaldization" of culture make repetition, standardization, and calculability dominant, which advertising exploits to create mass desires. Ghous (2020) draws on cultivation theory to show how long-term exposure to commercial content alters perceived social reality women internalize marketed ideals as normative.

Consumer Behavior and Identity

Consumer behavior scholarship treats buying as a process: need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase evaluation (Keller, 2009). Advertisements and social media insert themselves at each stage: they create perceived needs, supply information, shape brand salience, and influence post-purchase satisfaction through social proof and reviews (Ghous, 2020).

Importantly, contemporary frameworks emphasize consumption as identity construction people purchase not merely for function but to align with social identities. This is crucial when analyzing women's consumption in urban Pakistan, where brands and media staging of modern lifestyles are used as markers of social mobility and modernity.

Cultivation and Cognitive Mechanisms

Ghous (2020) links cultivation theory and cognitive dissonance to explain why repeated

advert exposures produce internalized desires and purchase rationalizations; cognitive dissonance explains post-purchase justification when choices contradict prior beliefs (e.g., buying costly cosmetics to meet a media-imposed ideal) (Ghous, 2020).

Literature Review

Evidence from Pakistan and Global Trends

Findings from the Karachi case (Ghous, 2020)

Ghous's thesis provides empirical evidence that:

- A large cross-section of women in Karachi reported being influenced by commercials aired on electronic media; many perceived that commercials led to purchases not aligned with actual needs.
- Respondents expressed concerns about consumer rights and privacy, noting insufficient regulatory protection (PEMRA and consumer courts were seen as ineffective).
- The thesis documents the psychological pathways: repeated exposure, celebrity endorsements, and aspirational imagery that link consumption with status and beauty.

These findings provide a local empirical anchor for the broader review confirming that in Karachi the commercial media environment translates directly into changed buying behavior among women.

Post-Pandemic Shifts and Social Commerce

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated online shopping globally and in Pakistan, making social media a central discovery and purchasing channel. A *Frontiers* study of Pakistani consumers found substantial shifts in online buying behavior during the pandemic: perceived usefulness, social influence, and payment mode moderated adoption, and gender played a moderating role. These shifts have persisted into the post-pandemic era, embedding social commerce within everyday media use.

Complementing this, an applied study on fashion brand buying in Pakistan (post-pandemic surveys 2020–2023) shows audiences increasingly use social media product content as a pre-purchase evaluation step, especially for fashion underscoring the role of visual platforms (Instagram, Facebook, TikTok) and influencer content in shaping preferences (Akmal, Bilal, & Wahid, 2024).

Sustainable Consumption and Shifting Values

Some post-pandemic research indicates a rise in sustainability considerations even among luxury consumers, meaning that consumerism is not

uniformly materialistic but also adapting to value-driven preferences. A grounded theory study of luxury consumers in China (*Frontiers*, 2023) documents that post-pandemic purchasers show increased interest in responsible sourcing and brand ethics, suggesting complexity in the consumerism narrative.

Algorithmic Advertising, Personalization, and Privacy

Recent studies illustrate that personalization increases perceived informativeness and engagement but also raises privacy concerns. MDPI's *Sustainability* (2023) found that perceived personalization has a positive path via informativeness but a negative path via privacy concerns; flow experience mediates attitudes. These dynamics mean that algorithmic advertising can both encourage purchases and cause resistance when consumers feel surveilled or manipulated. These findings match Ghous's (2020) observation that electronic and online media often ignore privacy and consumer rights, producing an ethical lacuna in Pakistan's media ecosystem.

How Media Converts Necessity into Desire: Mechanisms and Pathways

This section synthesizes mechanisms drawing on the Karachi case and contemporary literature by which media transforms practical purchasing into desire-driven consumption.

Repetition, Salience, and Cultivation

Repeated exposure to similar messages (ad frequency) increases brand salience and normalizes the advertised lifestyle. Ghous draws on cultivation theory to show that television and social feeds make commercialized images appear as shared social reality (e.g., beauty ideals), which women internalize and then act upon via purchases.

Social Modeling and Celebrity/Influencer Effects

Celebrities and influencers serve as social models; endorsements link products to aspirational identities. Ghous documents both traditional celebrity endorsement effects and the emergent role of YouTubers and social media personalities as authentic voice actors (Ghous, 2020). Audience trust and perceived closeness to influencers increase persuasion.

Recent analyses show social media influencers often outperform traditional celebrities in engagement and perceived authenticity an effect

further amplified by micro-influencers who share demographic proximity with followers. This shift matters because influencer recommendations are more integrated into daily social media flows, increasing impulse purchases and normative comparisons.

Personalization and Algorithmic Nudging

Algorithms select and show users content predicted to motivate engagement and conversion: product posts, “shoppable” tags, and retargeted ads. Personalization increases relevance yet introduces a “filter bubble” where the user sees tailored persuasive content repeatedly intensifying need arousal. Studies find perceived personalization improves informativeness but increases privacy concerns and potential resistance (Mo et al., 2023)

Emotional Appeals, Scarcity Tactics, and Social Proof

Commercial content uses emotional narratives, scarcity messages (limited offers), and social proof (likes, comments, reviews) to drive urgency and conformity. Ghous (2020) describes how these tactics operate in Karachi media ads that combine aspirational imagery with social cues shape immediate purchase impulses.

Structural Affordances: Frictionless Purchase and Mobile Ubiquity

Smartphones and integrated payment gateways reduce friction between desire and purchase. The thesis notes the mobile revolution as critical: women increasingly browse and buy via mobile devices, enabling impulse purchases triggered by media exposure. This structural change amplifies commercialization effects.

Gendered Media Practices and Women’s Consumer Culture

This section deepens the gendered analysis how media uses gendered scripts to create market opportunities and how women negotiate these scripts.

Portrayal of Femininity and Beauty Ideals

Advertising frequently equates female worth with appearance and consumption. Ghous’s literature review and data show that beauty advertising strongly affects women’s self-perceptions, body image, and buying of cosmetic products especially

where media retouching and idealized images are prevalent.

Contemporary content analyses in Pakistan confirm a mixture of traditional and modern portrayals: while some ads show progressive roles for women, many continue to use traditional domestic or appearance-focused tropes (Adil & Malik, 2021).

Consumption as Empowerment vs. Exploitation

Advertisers increasingly frame consumption as empowerment products promise independence, self-care, and status. Ghous notes a paradox: consumption is framed as autonomy while simultaneously reinforcing materialistic ideals and unequal beauty standards.

Recent scholarship echoes this tension: brands co-opt women’s rights narratives for commercial gain while rarely addressing structural inequalities. In Pakistan, media campaigns sometimes showcase empowerment but may be unreflective of broader social realities (Khan, Aziz, & Aslam, 2024).

Differences in Decision Style and Susceptibility

Quantitative research in emerging economies shows gender differences in purchase drivers: women often weigh fashion consciousness, aesthetics, and social influence more heavily; men may emphasize price and functionality (Sharma, Kumar, & Ali, 2023). Advertisers exploit these differences by tailoring messages and creative strategies.

Ghous’s Karachi survey found women more responsive to adverts and more likely to report feeling exploited indicating a gendered vulnerability to commercial messaging in contexts with weak consumer protection.

Ethical, Regulatory, and Consumer Rights Issues

Privacy, data practices, and informed consent
Algorithmic personalization relies on data collection. Studies show personalization increases purchase effectiveness but raises privacy concerns that can produce resistance (Mo et al., 2023). In Pakistan, Ghous identifies a notable regulatory gap: consumers’ privacy and rights are often ignored by advertisers and media outlets (Ghous, 2020).

Policy intervention is necessary around transparency of data use, opt-out mechanisms, and strict limits on behavioral targeting especially for

vulnerable groups (minors, impressionable consumers).

7.2 Misleading claims and product quality

Ghous documents widespread perceptions (and examples) of misleading advertisements and exaggerated claims where product benefits are overstated leading to consumer harm and eroded trust. The thesis calls for stronger advertising standards and enforcement by PEMRA and consumer forums.

Gendered harms and body-image effects

Commercial imagery can cause body dissatisfaction, lowered self-esteem, and subsequent consumption patterns (Tiggemann & McGill, 2004; Grogan, 2016). The Karachi data and other Pakistani studies capture this effect: media portrayals of beauty norms push women to purchase cosmetic and lifestyle products to conform.

Regulatory Capacity: Pakistan's Context

Ghous argues the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) and consumer protection mechanisms are under-equipped to police modern digital advertising; litigation is slow and public awareness low. The thesis makes policy recommendations (awareness campaigns, legal reform, consumer courts access) to build systemic protections.

Complementing Ghous, current international debates highlight the need for cross-platform regulation (including social media platforms) and for requiring influencer disclosures, truth-in-advertising rules, and data protection laws.

Policy Recommendations and Practical Interventions (Adapted for 2025)

Building on the Karachi study and contemporary literature, the following recommendations aim to reduce exploitative commercialization and support informed, autonomous consumption especially for women.

Strengthen consumer protection and advertising standards

Update and enforce advertising regulations to cover digital platforms and influencer marketing (mandatory disclosure of paid promotions, penalties for false claims). Ghous

emphasized this need years ago; it is now urgent given social commerce growth.

Expand data-privacy protections

Legislate clear rules on collection, processing, and retention of consumer data; require opt-in consent for behavioral targeting; create an accessible opt-out registry. Research shows personalization works but privacy concerns grow policy must balance these realities.

Launch targeted media-literacy campaigns for women

Design culturally relevant media-literacy modules for urban and peri-urban women focusing on advertising tactics, influencer disclosures, product claims verification, and privacy hygiene. Ghous argued consumer awareness is a key missing piece in Pakistan.

Regulate influencer marketing and social commerce

Require platform policies that mandate clear labelling of sponsored content, transparent affiliate links, and penalties for deceptive practices. Recent scholarship on influencer impact and social commerce supports this step.

Promote ethical, gender-sensitive advertising

Create industry codes co-developed with women's organizations to limit demeaning or hypersexualized portrayals; reward brands that adopt inclusive, realistic representations. Ghous recommended culturally sensitive advertising to avoid erosion of social ethics.

Discussion

This review confirms and extends Ghous's central findings: media commercialization powerfully shapes women's buying behavior in Karachi and similar urban settings. The thesis's core observations repeated exposure, celebrity influence, privacy neglect, and regulatory weakness remain relevant in 2025.

What has changed is the mechanism scale and immediacy: algorithmic personalization, social commerce features (in-app checkout), and influencer ecosystems have dramatically shortened the path from exposure to purchase (Akmal et al., 2024; Frontiers, 2022).

The literature also nuances the picture: post-pandemic consumers sometimes express

sustainability preferences (Zhang et al., 2023), indicating consumerism is not monolithically materialistic. However, the interplay of aspirational identity work and fast, frictionless purchasing creates stronger impulses that regulatory frameworks must address.

Finally, gendered effects persist: even when advertising frames consumption as empowerment, the underlying commercial motive may reproduce restrictive norms. Thus, interventions must be both regulatory and educative targeting structural data practices and individual media literacies.

Research Gaps and Future Directions

Priority research questions emerging from this review:

1. **Longitudinal studies** tracking how continuous exposure to social commerce changes women's identity, aspirations, and financial well-being over multiple years (building on Ghous's cross-sectional work).
2. **Experimental and field trials** examining the causal effects of algorithmic exposure and personalized ads on impulse buying and financial outcomes. (E.g., randomized exposure to personalized vs. non-personalized ads.)
3. **Evaluation of policy interventions** media literacy programs, disclosure rules for influencers, and data-privacy legislation using mixed methods to assess efficacy. Ghous's policy recommendations were prescient; evaluation is now critical.
4. **Intersectional analysis** that considers class, age, and religious/cultural identity in how women respond to commercial media content (the Karachi study gives a starting point but deeper stratified analysis is needed).

11. Conclusion

The shift from necessity-driven to desire-driven consumption is not merely economic it is cultural, psychological, and technological. Commercial media through repeated messaging, influencers, algorithmic personalization, and frictionless commerce reconfigures how needs are perceived and how identities are performed. The Karachi study (Ghous, 2020) remains a robust local demonstration of these processes and strongly complements contemporary global evidence (Frontiers; MDPI; national studies).

Policy responses must be multi-pronged: strengthen consumer protection and privacy legislation, regulate digital advertising practices

(including influencers), and invest in media literacy targeted at women. Only with combined regulatory and educative strategies can media commercialization be harnessed to expand genuine consumer empowerment rather than reproduce exploitation and materialistic harms.

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