

Changing Representations of Economic Responsibility in Pakistani Television Advertising

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This study examines how economic responsibility is represented in Pakistani television advertising across two broadcast eras. It draws on a qualitative, paired diachronic comparison of four television commercials from the 1980s and the 2010s–2020s, organised into two product domains (toothpaste and life insurance). The analysis focuses on discursive framing to assess whether economic risk is constructed as a structural condition or repositioned as a matter of private anticipation and self-management. The paired design supports analytical generalisation across comparable domains rather than statistical representativeness. Findings indicate a consistent shift across both domains. Earlier advertisements foreground price, affordability, and inflation, positioning thrift as a rational response to visible economic strain. In contrast, contemporary advertisements emphasise planning, composure, and disciplined foresight. Economic responsibility becomes embedded within routine domestic coordination and anticipatory conduct, while explicit reference to structural economic pressure recedes from the narrative foreground. The study contributes to Pakistani media scholarship by demonstrating how commercial discourse participates in reorganising moral expectations of economic behaviour. It extends existing discussions of responsabilisation by showing that, in this context, responsibility is not fully individualised but relationally organised within family life. By offering a diachronic analysis grounded in Pakistan's socio-economic conditions, the article shows how televised advertising recalibrates the visibility of economic strain and normalises anticipatory discipline as a marker of responsible conduct.

Keywords: economic responsibility; moral economy; risk governance; anticipatory planning; Pakistani advertising; middle-class imaginaries

Television advertising in Pakistan has long functioned as more than a commercial instrument. It operates as a routine public text through which ideas of responsibility, security, and aspiration are normalised in everyday life. Advertising is often studied for persuasion and representation. Less attention has been given to how it reshapes the meaning of economic responsibility over time.

During the 1980s, Pakistani television operated within a state-controlled broadcast structure. Commercials from this period frequently addressed economic conditions in direct and explicit terms.

Price visibility, references to rising costs, and appeals to thrift were not peripheral elements; they were central persuasive devices. Inflation was treated as a shared and publicly recognisable condition. The consumer was positioned as someone responding to structural economic pressure. Value was measurable, and affordability was foregrounded as a rational response to economic strain.

In contrast, contemporary advertising rarely speaks the language of inflation directly. Price declarations have largely receded from the centre of televised persuasion. Instead, economic responsibility is increasingly framed through self-care, planning, wellness, and relational coordination. The responsible subject is no longer primarily the thrifty buyer navigating rising prices, but the disciplined individual who manages health, family security, and future risk through everyday choices. Economic uncertainty appears less as a structural condition and more as a matter of personal foresight and competence.

This shift is not only stylistic. It reflects a broader reorganisation of moral economy. When inflation and scarcity are translated into narratives of wellness, preparation, and lifestyle discipline, responsibility is relocated from public conditions to private conduct. Structural vulnerability becomes reframed as a matter of individual management. Advertising does not create economic insecurity, nor does it determine social behaviour. However, as a repetitive and widely consumed form of media, it participates in shaping what appears reasonable, necessary, and morally appropriate in response to uncertainty.

The present study examines this transformation through a focused comparison of selected Pakistani television commercials from the 1980s and from the 2010s–2020s. Rather than analysing advertising form in technical detail, the study asks a more direct social question: How has televised commercial discourse shifted from representing economic anxiety as a shared public condition to presenting risk management as a private responsibility? By tracing how inflation rhetoric gives way to wellness discipline and coordinated planning, the article explores how commercial media contributes to the normalisation of private coping within a volatile economic environment.

Positioning the analysis within Pakistan's socio-economic context allows the argument to remain grounded. Inflation, job insecurity, and middle-class aspiration are not abstract concerns; they are lived realities. When advertisements increasingly depict security as the outcome of correct individual conduct, they reinforce a moral framework in which adaptation is expected and structural critique is marginal. This paper therefore treats advertising not as a mirror of economic change, but as a participant in the moralisation of economic life.

Literature Review

Advertising scholarship has consistently treated commercial texts as social meaning-making rather than mere product promotion. Barthes (1972) showed how ordinary objects are transformed into “naturalised” cultural myths, while Williamson (1978) explained how advertising attaches desirable social qualities to commodities and circulates them as common sense. In this tradition, advertising functions as a cultural narrative that shapes what appears normal, aspirational, and legitimate.

Subsequent scholarship connected advertising more explicitly to economic and political arrangements. Jhally (1990) argued that consumer persuasion often obscures structural economic relations by presenting consumption as personal choice. Goldman (1992) described advertising as a system of social reading through which commodities come to signify stability, identity, and reassurance. Wernick (1991) conceptualised modern society as increasingly shaped by “promotional

culture,” where persuasion becomes routine and embedded in everyday communication. These studies suggest that advertising participates in defining responsible conduct within particular economic conditions.

Moral Economy and the Framing of Responsibility

The present study draws on the concept of moral economy to examine how economic responsibility is culturally organised. Thompson (1971) demonstrated that economic behaviour is evaluated against shared moral expectations rather than through market logic alone. Sayer (2007) later argued that everyday economic actions carry ethical judgement; individuals assess what counts as fair, prudent, and responsible. These perspectives are relevant for understanding how advertising does not simply describe products but positions particular economic behaviours as morally appropriate.

Research on media framing in South Asian contexts has demonstrated how communicative choices foreground certain interpretations while backgrounding others, thereby shaping public understandings of social realities (Devkota & Yonghong, 2025).

When inflation is foregrounded and thrift is praised, responsibility is defined in one way. When planning and self-discipline are emphasised, responsibility takes a different moral form. The shift between these framings is not purely stylistic; it signals a recalibration in how economic conduct is evaluated.

Responsibility, Risk, and the Governance of Conduct

International scholarship on risk and governance provides a useful comparative lens. Beck (1992) argues that late modern societies increasingly organise around anticipatory management of uncertainty. Giddens (1991) similarly notes that reflexive planning becomes central to everyday life under conditions of structural change. Building on this line of inquiry, Rose (1999) describes how contemporary governance operates through the cultivation of responsible, self-regulating subjects.

However, the applicability of these frameworks varies across contexts. In many non-Western societies, anticipatory planning is embedded within familial and relational structures rather than expressed through atomised individual autonomy. The shift identified in Pakistani advertising does not replicate Anglo-American neoliberal individualism in pure form. Instead, responsibilities appear relationally organised, situated within domestic coordination and shared planning rather than solitary self-entrepreneurship.

Economic Volatility and Middle-Class Adjustment in Pakistan

Pakistan’s economic history since the 1980s has been marked by recurrent inflationary cycles, currency devaluation, and periodic fiscal stabilization measures (Government of Pakistan, various years; State Bank of Pakistan, various reports). Urban middle-class households have been particularly sensitive to price instability, given their dependence on salaried income and fixed monthly expenditures. Empirical work on household budgeting and coping strategies in Pakistan indicates that families frequently adjust consumption patterns, defer purchases, and prioritise education and health during periods of inflation (e.g., Raza Cheema & Sial, 2012).

Media representations do not operate outside this context. Advertising narratives interact with existing economic anxieties rather than creating them. When price visibility declines in commercial discourse, this occurs within an environment where inflation remains publicly discussed in news

media and political rhetoric. The shift observed in the present study must therefore be interpreted against the backdrop of sustained economic volatility rather than presumed prosperity.

Inflation and Middle-Class Insecurity in Pakistan

Pakistan's economic trajectory since the 1980s has been marked by recurring inflationary cycles, fiscal stabilisation measures, and currency pressures (Government of Pakistan, 2023; State Bank of Pakistan, 2023; Ahmed & O'Donoghue, 2010). Inflation remains a persistent feature of public debate and media reporting. Official economic surveys document repeated fluctuations in food, fuel, and utility prices affecting household expenditure patterns (Government of Pakistan, 2023).

Scholarly analyses note that middle-income households experience inflation not as abstract macroeconomic fluctuation but as daily budget constraint (Zaidi, 2015). Under such conditions, consumption practices are shaped by caution, substitution, and prioritisation. The visibility of affordability discourse in 1980s advertising must therefore be read within a broader economic environment in which inflation was widely acknowledged. The later decline of explicit price reference does not indicate economic stability; rather, it signals a shift in narrative emphasis.

In more recent decades, Pakistan has experienced media expansion, urbanisation, and growth in aspirational consumer culture. However, economic volatility has persisted. The tension between aspiration and insecurity forms an important background to contemporary advertising. Understanding how commercials navigate this tension requires attention not only to representational patterns but also to economic context.

Media Deregulation and Commercial Expansion (2000–2015)

Pakistan's media landscape changed significantly after deregulation in the early 2000s. The establishment and expansion of private television channels increased competition, diversified content, and expanded advertising volume. The Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) Ordinance (2002) provided a formal regulatory framework for private broadcasting. By the mid-2000s, commercial competition intensified, and brand differentiation became central to televised persuasion.

Scholars have described this period as one of rapid media transformation rather than simple liberalisation (Mezzera & Sial, 2010; Rasul & McDowell, 2012). Increased advertising budgets, celebrity endorsements, and lifestyle-oriented campaigns reflected broader commercial expansion. At the same time, regulatory codes continued to shape acceptable content, reinforcing cultural boundaries.

This institutional shift matters for the present study. The movement from state-dominated broadcasting to competitive private media environments may influence how economic responsibility is narrated. In a competitive advertising market, brands may emphasise aspiration, planning, and lifestyle positioning rather than overt price-based persuasion.

Advertising, Aspiration, and Social Mobility

Post-2000 advertising in Pakistan increasingly reflects aspirational imagery linked to upward mobility. Urban modern interiors, coordinated family life, and professional confidence become recurring motifs (Shahid & Ashfaq, 2021). While these representations signal consumption growth, they also respond to persistent economic volatility.

In emerging and transitional media economies, advertising frequently performs a dual function: affirming narratives of progress while stabilising uncertainty (Goldman, 1992; Wernick, 1991). The representation of calm domestic order and forward planning may therefore be read not only as marketing strategy but as cultural reassurance. Brands position themselves as companions in stability rather than merely suppliers of goods.

Within Pakistan's middle-class context, aspiration and insecurity coexist. Public discourse frequently acknowledges inflation and purchasing pressure, yet advertising narratives increasingly foreground composure and preparedness. This tension shapes how responsibility is framed.

The move toward planning-focused narratives can be read as a response to this condition. Rather than explicitly representing economic strain, advertising repositions responsibility within disciplined anticipation. In this framing, uncertainty is not foregrounded as a shared problem but managed through routine conduct and domestic coordination.

Neoliberal Responsibilisation and Self-Management

Recent international scholarship identifies a broader trend toward individualised responsibility in media discourse. Gill and Orgad (2018) describe how resilience narratives encourage individuals to manage uncertainty through self-regulation. Banet-Weiser (2018) shows how empowerment language often translates into expectations of continuous self-improvement. Rather than denying structural pressures, such discourse reframes them as challenges requiring disciplined personal response.

This does not imply that structural economic factors disappear. Instead, they become background conditions against which individual conduct is evaluated. Responsibility shifts from collective negotiation to private anticipation. Within advertising, this may appear as emphasis on planning, wellness, foresight, and preparation.

The relevance of this literature to Pakistan must be considered carefully. Pakistan's socio-cultural environment retains strong family-centred and relational frameworks. Individual responsibility is frequently embedded within domestic coordination rather than framed as purely autonomous self-enterprise. Therefore, if responsibilisation occurs, it is likely to be mediated through familial and moral idioms.

Pakistan-Focused Advertising Studies

Pakistan-based research on advertising has examined ethical boundaries, cultural sensitivity, and representation. Akhtar, Abbasi, and Umar (2011) analysed ethical issues in Pakistani advertising from an Islamic perspective, highlighting the importance of religious and moral norms in evaluating commercial content. Their work underscores that advertising in Pakistan operates within explicit ethical expectations.

Shahid and Ashfaq (2021) conducted a content analysis of major beverage brands across 2000–2017 and reported shifts in cultural themes, including increased emphasis on lifestyle and family-centred imagery. Although their focus was not economic framing, their findings suggest that persuasive priorities evolve in relation to broader social changes.

Recent discourse-oriented scholarship in *FWU Journal of Social Sciences* has also examined how social roles and identities are discursively constructed within institutional and public texts,

highlighting the continuing relevance of discourse-based approaches to representation and responsibility (Riaz & Ullah, 2025)

CDA-based research in Pakistan has shown how public texts structure responsibility and authority through language. Rahman (1996) and Asghar (2014) indicated how ideological perspectives are encoded in media discourse. Asghar (2021) examined how legal documents distribute obligations and power relations. Policy analysis by Asghar and Ahmad (2022) revealed how educational reforms reorganise expectations of citizenship through textual emphasis. These studies provide methodological grounding for examining how commercial discourse may similarly redistribute responsibility.

Gap in Literature

Despite this body of work, diachronic analysis of economic framing in Pakistani advertising remains limited. Studies have explored ethics, gender, and cultural representation, but fewer have examined how inflation, affordability, and planning are narrated across distinct broadcast eras. Given Pakistan's recurring economic volatility, this omission is notable.

Earlier advertisements often foregrounded price as a central persuasive feature. Contemporary campaigns appear to privilege planning and wellness as signs of responsibility. Whether this represents a broader shift from publicly acknowledged economic strain to privately managed risk requires systematic comparison.

The present study addresses this gap by analysing selected commercials from two eras within comparable product categories. By situating the analysis within Pakistan's economic and media transformations, the study moves beyond thematic description and toward understanding how advertising participates in reorganising moral expectations about economic conduct.

Research Questions

The preceding discussion indicates that advertising should not be treated merely as a reflection of economic change, but as a participant in shaping how economic responsibility is understood. In Pakistan, recurring inflation, currency instability, and middle-class economic pressure form a persistent public backdrop. Yet it remains unclear whether televised advertising continues to frame economic strain as a shared structural condition or whether it increasingly translates uncertainty into narratives of private discipline and foresight.

This study therefore seeks to examine how economic responsibility is constructed across two broadcast eras. Rather than focusing on stylistic or technical features of advertising form, the analysis centres on how economic risk is narrated and morally organised in selected Pakistani television commercials.

The study addresses the following questions:

RQ1: How is economic responsibility represented in Pakistani television advertisements from the 1980s compared to advertisements from the 2010s–2020s?

RQ2: To what extent do contemporary advertisements shift the framing of economic risk from structural conditions (such as inflation and affordability) to individual self-management (such as planning, wellness, and disciplined consumption)?

RQ3: What implicit moral expectations about “responsible conduct” emerge from this shift in framing?

These questions guide a comparative qualitative analysis of selected advertisements from two historical periods. By focusing on how responsibility is narrated rather than on technical stylistic change, the study aims to clarify whether televised advertising in Pakistan contributes to the privatisation and moralisation of economic risk.

Method

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative comparative design to examine how economic responsibility is framed in Pakistani television advertising across two broadcast eras. The objective is interpretive rather than statistical. The study does not seek to measure how often particular themes occur, but to analyse how economic risk is narrated, positioned, and morally organised within selected commercial texts.

A qualitative approach is appropriate for such a framework because the research questions concern framing and moral expectation rather than frequency distribution. Economic responsibility may appear in subtle narrative cues, relational positioning, or the absence of explicit reference. Such features cannot be adequately captured through simple counting procedures. Instead, close textual reading allows examination of how economic strain is foregrounded, backgrounded, or translated into private conduct.

The comparative design enables structured contrast between two historically distinct broadcast environments: the state-dominated television landscape of the 1980s and the commercially expanded media environment of the 2010s–2020s. By placing advertisements from these eras side by side within comparable product domains, the study isolates shifts in framing rather than differences arising from product type or genre.

Corpus Selection

The corpus was selected using a purposive, criterion-based strategy designed to maximise comparability across broadcast eras. Three criteria guided selection: (1) domain continuity, where product categories were required to be present in both the 1980s and contemporary advertising; (2) discursive relevance, where advertisements explicitly or implicitly engaged with themes of economic responsibility, affordability, or planning; and (3) accessibility and circulation, where materials were publicly available and representative of widely broadcast campaigns rather than niche or experimental content. These criteria ensure that the selected advertisements are analytically comparable rather than incidental examples.

The corpus consists of four Pakistani television commercials organised into two product-domain pairs: toothpaste and life insurance. Each domain includes one advertisement from the 1980s and one from the 2010s–2020s, enabling structured diachronic comparison.

The 1980s corpus includes a Colgate toothpaste commercial originally broadcast on Pakistan Television (FotoBliss Photography, 2017) and a State Life Insurance commercial from the same period (Pakipop, 2007b). The contemporary corpus includes a Colgate Pakistan campaign released in 2023 (Colgate Pakistan, 2023) and a State Life Insurance campaign released in 2021 (State Life

Insurance Corporation of Pakistan, 2021). All materials are publicly accessible through broadcast archives or official brand channels.

The 1980s Colgate advertisement features a stylised “toothpaste race” narrative in which English toothpaste symbolically defeats inflation. The price “Rs. 12” appears on screen, and affordability is explicitly emphasised within a celebratory domestic setting. The contemporaneous State Life commercial centres on a young girl who sings and prays for her father’s long life, expressing gratitude for his decision to purchase life insurance.

In contrast, the 2023 Colgate campaign unfolds in a bustling airport before transitioning to an upscale domestic setting, where the father explains oral health using a citrus press analogy and the family affirms strength through a shared apple-biting moment. The 2021 State Life advertisement depicts a young couple celebrating their anniversary; playful dialogue about policy documents unfolds against a family portrait backdrop, subtly underscoring planning within affectionate domestic interaction.

These two product categories were selected for specific reasons. First, both address recurring forms of economic responsibility: routine household expenditure (toothpaste) and long-term financial planning (life insurance). Second, both were prominently advertised in the 1980s and remain active in contemporary commercial media, allowing historically comparable analysis. Third, together they capture complementary dimensions of economic conduct—everyday consumption and anticipatory security—making it possible to examine how responsibility is framed across distinct yet related domains.

The study prioritises analytical depth over numerical breadth. It does not aim to represent the full spectrum of Pakistani advertising; rather, it focuses on structured comparison within carefully selected domains. By comparing like with like across two broadcast eras, the design isolates shifts in economic framing rather than differences attributable to product type or genre.

Although the corpus is limited in size, interpretive claims are grounded in observable textual features and systematic cross-era comparison. A framing shift is treated as analytically significant only when it appears consistently across both product domains. This pairing strategy enables focused examination of how economic responsibility is narrated and moralised within Pakistani television advertising over time.

Justification for Qualitative Sufficiency

The study does not employ frequency counting or large-scale sampling because the research problem concerns framing rather than distribution. A single explicit price reference or planning statement may structure the entire logic of responsibility within an advertisement. Numerical counting would not capture such narrative organisation.

The paired comparative design strengthens internal validity. By examining the same product categories across two eras, the analysis reduces confounding variables and enhances comparability. Changes in toothpaste advertising are assessed against earlier toothpaste advertising; shifts in life insurance framing are examined within the same domain. When similar patterns emerge across both categories, the likelihood that findings reflect isolated brand strategy rather than broader discursive transformation is reduced.

This design therefore supports focused, context-sensitive analysis while maintaining methodological coherence.

Analytical Procedure

The analysis proceeded in four stages.

Stage 1: Viewing and Initial Logging

Each advertisement was viewed repeatedly. Detailed notes were recorded on verbal claims, slogans, dialogue fragments, and on-screen text. Particular attention was paid to references to price, affordability, savings, inflation, planning, foresight, wellness, and security.

Stage 2: Framing Identification

The second stage involved identifying how economic conditions were framed. Advertisements were examined for explicit economic references (e.g., price visibility, cost emphasis) and implicit economic positioning (e.g., planning without naming financial strain). The analysis focused on how the “responsible subject” was constructed in each case.

Stage 3: Within-Pair Comparison

Each 1980s advertisement was compared directly with its contemporary counterpart within the same product domain. The objective was to determine whether responsibility shifted from reactive thrift to proactive planning, or from public economic strain to private discipline.

Stage 4: Cross-Domain Validation

Patterns identified within one pair were considered analytically significant only if similar patterns appeared in at least one additional product category. This cross-domain consistency reduces interpretive overreach and strengthens analytic reliability.

Throughout the process, interpretation remained grounded in observable textual evidence. While visual and auditory elements were noted, they were analysed only insofar as they contributed to economic framing.

By situating advertising within Pakistan’s economic and media transformations, the analysis contributes to a growing body of scholarship examining how everyday texts shape moral expectations. Commercial media do not operate independently of structural realities; however, they participate in translating those realities into narratives of conduct. The relocation of inflation from persuasive foreground to narrative background illustrates how economic life becomes moralised through routine communication.

To enhance analytic transparency, coding focused on three dimensions: (1) explicit economic reference (e.g., price, affordability, inflation), (2) responsibility framing (reactive vs anticipatory), and (3) relational positioning (individual vs family-centred responsibility). Interpretations were validated through repeated viewing and cross-domain comparison to ensure consistency across product categories.

Limitations

The corpus is purposively selected and small. The findings are interpretive and cannot be generalised to all Pakistani television advertising. The study does not include audience reception analysis or interviews with advertisers, which would provide insight into production intent and interpretation.

However, the structured pairing and cross-domain validation enhance internal coherence. The aim is not statistical representativeness but analytic illumination of a specific framing shift within a defined comparative sample. The findings should therefore be read in terms of analytical generalisation rather than statistical generalisation (Yin, 2018). The objective is to refine conceptual understanding of how economic responsibility is discursively organised within comparable cases. The paired design across product domains allows for theoretical transferability, where observed patterns may inform interpretation of similar contexts without claiming universal representativeness.

Results

The comparative analysis reveals a patterned reframing in how economic responsibility is constructed across the two broadcast eras. While the product domains remain comparable—routine household care and long-term financial planning—the representation of economic strain and consumer obligation shifts in consistent and traceable ways. These shifts are observable not only at the level of theme, but also through dialogue, tonal orientation, narrative emphasis, and the presence or absence of explicit economic reference.

From Visible Inflation to Backgrounded Economic Context

In the 1980s advertisements, economic conditions are explicitly named, visually marked, and narratively foregrounded. In the toothpaste commercial from this period, the price appears on screen in bold numerals—“Rs. 12 only” (FotoBliss Photography, 2017)—while the narrator emphasises affordability using phrases such as “haar gayee mehngaayee” (inflation lost the race) and “English toothpaste baara rupaye mein laayee” (purchased English toothpaste only for Rs. 12). The commercial repeatedly directs attention to cost as a decisive factor. The camera focuses on packaging and price display, reinforcing measurable value. Economic strain is neither concealed nor softened; it functions as the persuasive centre of the message.

The 1980s life insurance advertisement frames economic security through devotional gratitude rather than technical financial explanation. A young girl sings and prays for her father’s long life, explicitly linking his decision to purchase insurance with divine blessing and familial protection (Pakipop, 2007b). The father’s reassuring smile reinforces assurance and peace. Economic security is narrated not as abstract policy structure but as moral guardianship grounded in paternal care.

The 2023 toothpaste advertisement begins in a busy airport environment before transitioning to an upscale domestic interior. The father attributes the family’s strength to strong teeth and later, wearing a cooking apron, explains oral health through a citrus press analogy. The family’s shared apple bite becomes a symbolic affirmation of strength. Economic context is not articulated; the product is framed within vitality, familial cohesion, and embodied well-being rather than cost management.

In the contemporary life insurance advertisement (State Life Insurance Corporation of Pakistan, 2021), a young wife prepares afternoon tea and is pleasantly surprised when her husband presents flowers for their anniversary. She jokingly suggests that their son might turn the policy papers into paper planes. The exchange evolves into affectionate banter about the importance of those documents, framed against a family portrait. Planning is embedded within playful domestic interaction rather than framed as solemn precaution. Across both domains, this shift is consistent.

Reframing Responsibility: From Reactive Thrift to Proactive Foresight

In the 1980s corpus, responsibility appears as reactive. Consumers are portrayed as responding to visible inflation and financial constraint through prudent decision-making. The toothpaste advertisement emphasises affordability and price visibility, with the product presented as defeating inflation through accessible cost. Responsibility is defined through careful expenditure under economic pressure.

The 1980s life insurance advertisement frames responsibility through devotional reassurance rather than technical financial explanation. A young girl sings and prays for her father's long life, explicitly connecting his purchase of insurance to divine protection and familial security. The father's calm smile reinforces assurance. Responsibility is thus represented as paternal guardianship grounded in moral duty rather than abstract financial calculation.

In the contemporary life insurance advertisement, the logic changes. Planning is no longer framed as reaction but as anticipation. The couple's discussion unfolds in a calm and cooperative tone. Preparedness is integrated into everyday relational interaction rather than presented as emergency precaution. Responsibility becomes shared and forward-looking rather than singular and protective.

The contemporary toothpaste commercial extends this anticipatory framing. Dental care is positioned not as cost-saving behaviour but as embodied strength linked to confidence and well-being. The repeated emphasis on "rozana dekh bhaal" (daily care) reinforces habit formation. Responsibility is defined through maintenance and foresight rather than visible financial calculation.

In both product domains, responsibility shifts from protecting limited resources to managing future stability. Thrift recedes as a central moral marker, while foresight and disciplined anticipation gain prominence.

Tone and Emotional Register

Tone undergoes transformation across eras. The 1980s advertisements adopt a direct and explanatory style. Narration is authoritative and instructional. The viewer is addressed as a rational decision-maker operating within financial constraints. Even when familial warmth is depicted, the persuasive emphasis remains anchored in cost and protection. Background music is functional and unobtrusive, supporting informational clarity rather than emotional immersion.

In contrast, the contemporary advertisements employ a softer emotional register. Music is ambient and reassuring. Dialogue is conversational and relational. Visual pacing allows moments of shared domestic interaction. The narrative environment suggests stability rather than urgency.

This tonal recalibration reinforces the broader shift from public economic strain to private emotional balance. Earlier commercials assume economic anxiety as a shared starting point; later commercials assume aspiration, coordination, and preparedness as normative conditions.

Domestic Framing and Relational Coordination

Domestic representation further illustrates this shift. In the 1980s life insurance advertisement, responsibility is tied to the male provider role. The economic subject is singular, and protection flows downward from father to dependents. Authority and obligation are concentrated.

In the contemporary life insurance advertisement, responsibility is relational. Both partners participate in discussion. Planning is framed as mutual care rather than unilateral provision. The emphasis falls on coordinated preparation within a stable domestic unit.

The contemporary toothpaste advertisement situates responsibility within embodied vitality rather than instructional routine. The father's analogy using a citrus press and the family's shared apple bite symbolically link dental care to strength and resilience. Economic strain is not referenced; instead, responsibility is framed as maintaining physical robustness and familial cohesion. The product becomes a marker of strength rather than a tool of budget-conscious discipline.

Across both domains, responsibility becomes less about managing visible economic hardship and more about sustaining composure and preparedness within family life.

Cross-Domain Consistency

The observed shifts are not confined to a single product category. In both toothpaste and life insurance advertisements, explicit price references and overt economic language diminish in the contemporary corpus. In their place, vocabulary of planning, confidence, composure, and coordination becomes central. Table 1 summarises the cross-domain patterns identified in the analysis and highlights the recurring shifts across the two broadcast eras.

Absence as Framing: What Is No Longer Said

An important feature of the contemporary corpus concerns absence. In the 1980s advertisements, inflation and affordability function as explicit anchors. Numerical cost, savings claims, and financial protection are articulated directly. Economic vulnerability is visible within the narrative.

In the contemporary advertisements, explicit economic reference largely disappears. None of the later commercials display numeric cost on screen. Affordability is not foregrounded, even in a product category where price competition remains relevant. Instead, emphasis shifts toward emotional reassurance, relational stability, and long-term preparedness.

This absence is not neutral. By removing overt reference to inflation or cost pressure, the advertisement reduces the narrative salience of structural economic strain. Economic conditions remain socially present, but they are repositioned as background assumptions rather than foreground problems.

In the contemporary life insurance advertisement, rising expenses or income instability are not mentioned. Planning is embedded within affectionate everyday interaction rather than framed as reaction to crisis. Economic considerations are presumed but not dramatized.

From a discursive standpoint, silence contributes to framing. When inflation is no longer narrated, responsibility shifts from context to conduct. The economic environment recedes from persuasive foreground, while disciplined behaviour becomes central.

This pattern reinforces the broader finding: contemporary advertising does not deny economic uncertainty but relocates it from explicit articulation to implicit management.

Table 1*Cross-Domain Comparison of Economic Framing Across Eras*

Analytical Dimension	1980s Toothpaste	2010s–2020s Toothpaste	1980s Insurance	2010s–2020s Insurance
Price Visibility	Explicit (“Rs. 12 only”); affordability foregrounded	No price reference	Paternal protection framed through devotional gratitude	No cost reference; focus on planning
Economic Context	Inflation implicitly acknowledged	Economic context backgrounded	Income stability implied	Structural risk unarticulated
Responsibility Model	Reactive thrift; wise spending	Routine self-care; disciplined maintenance	Paternal provision	Shared anticipatory planning
Tone	Direct, instructive, explanatory	Calm, relational, aspirational	Protective, provider-centred	Collaborative, composed
Domestic Framing	Budget-conscious household	Harmonious modern family	Male breadwinner focus	Coordinated couple dynamic
Temporal Orientation	Present cost management	Future-oriented stability	Security against loss	Normalised foresight

Summary of Results

The 1980s advertisements foreground inflation, affordability, and visible financial protection. Responsibility is reactive and explicitly economic.

The 2010s–2020s advertisements background explicit economic strain and foreground planning, composure, and relational coordination. Responsibility becomes normalised preparedness in routine conduct.

Across both domains, economic risk is repositioned from public reference to private management. Stability is narrated not as relief from inflation, but as the outcome of disciplined preparation and everyday foresight.

Discussion

The findings indicate a shift from explicit economic articulation to normalised preparedness. This shift is visible in the movement from price-based persuasion to planning-based narratives across both product domains. In the 1980s advertisements, inflation and affordability were foregrounded as shared structural conditions. In the contemporary corpus, economic strain recedes from narrative centre and responsibility is repositioned within routine domestic planning and relational foresight. The shift partly reflects Beck’s concept of anticipatory risk governance. However, in this case, anticipation is organised within domestic and relational contexts rather than abstract individual autonomy.

This finding aligns with prior work suggesting that advertising discourse increasingly translates structural economic pressures into narratives of individual conduct (Jhally, 1990; Goldman, 1992). However, the present analysis extends this literature by demonstrating that such translation in the Pakistani context is not purely individualising but relationally organised. While studies of neoliberal responsabilisation emphasise autonomous self-management, the data here indicate that responsibility is redistributed within domestic coordination rather than displaced onto isolated individuals. This relational redistribution extends the account of Gill and Orgad (2018) by showing

that responsabilisation does not operate solely through individualisation but may be organised through domestic coordination and shared conduct.

The reduced visibility of price and affordability markers supports Jhally's (1990) argument that advertising discourse obscures structural economic relations by repositioning them within consumption narratives. In this case, inflation is not denied but displaced from explicit articulation to implicit management.

This pattern aligns with broader discussions of risk individualisation in contemporary media discourse. Gill and Orgad (2018) argue that contemporary discourse frequently translates structural pressures into expectations of resilience and self-regulation. Banet-Weiser (2018) similarly observes that empowerment narratives often operate as calls for continuous self-management. The advertisements analysed here reflect a comparable movement, though articulated within culturally specific domestic frameworks rather than overt individualism.

However, the shift observed here does not replicate Anglo-American models of neoliberal autonomy centred on atomised self-enterprise. In the Pakistani context, responsabilisation remains embedded within familial coordination and domestic interdependence. Normalised preparedness is articulated relationally—through couples planning together and parents guiding children—rather than through isolated self-optimisation. The transformation therefore suggests a culturally mediated form of responsabilisation rather than a simple transfer of Western neoliberal individualism

Economic Insecurity and the Middle-Class Imaginary in Pakistan

To understand the implications of this shift, it is necessary to situate it within Pakistan's middle-class condition. Urban middle-class households operate within an environment marked simultaneously by aspiration and instability. Education, healthcare, housing, and savings demand sustained planning, yet inflationary cycles repeatedly disrupt purchasing power. Public discourse—particularly in news media and political debate—frequently centres on rising prices and economic volatility.

Analyses of Pakistan's middle class describe it as simultaneously aspirational and economically cautious (Zaidi, 2015). Educational investment, property acquisition, and professional stability remain central ambitions, yet these unfold within recurring economic instability. Advertising narratives that foreground orderly domestic planning may therefore resonate with this tension. Rather than promising dramatic upward mobility, contemporary campaigns frequently emphasise continuity and preparedness.

Against this backdrop, advertising appears to recalibrate how economic anxiety is narrated. Earlier commercials mirror price consciousness directly, with affordability functioning as a central persuasive element. Contemporary campaigns rarely dramatise inflation. Instead, they construct stable domestic environments in which planning appears normal, achievable, and morally expected.

This shift does not remove economic instability from social reality. Rather, it displaces it from narrative foreground to background assumption. Responsibility is no longer demonstrated through visible thrift but through composure, coordination, and anticipatory conduct within everyday life.

The State Life advertisements make this shift particularly visible. In the 1980s commercial, economic responsibility is concentrated in the male breadwinner figure, who secures financial protection for dependents. Responsibility is protective and unilateral. In the contemporary campaign,

planning is dialogic and shared. The couple engage in playful dialogue about the policy papers during an anniversary moment, situating planning within affectionate domestic exchange. This shift indicates not only a change in tone, but a redistribution of economic responsibility within the household.

This representation corresponds to a middle-class imaginary of order in which composure, continuity, and disciplined planning function as visible markers of economic competence. The home is depicted as calm, organised, and future-oriented. Conversations about insurance or hygiene unfold without visible urgency. Economic instability remains socially real, but it is displaced from narrative foreground. Preparedness becomes the expected moral response to uncertainty.

Respectability reinforces this orientation. In the contemporary toothpaste advertisement, dental care is associated with strength and confident self-presentation. In the life insurance commercial, coordinated planning signals responsible adulthood and relational maturity. Responsibility is thus aligned with composure, discipline, and visible stability. Economic anxiety is not externalised; it is internalised and managed through conduct.

Importantly, contemporary advertisements embed responsibility within family coordination rather than presenting it as purely individualistic. Couples deliberate together. Parents guide children. Responsibility remains relational, yet its content shifts—from managing limited resources toward sustaining orderly anticipation. Economic conduct becomes habitual rather than reactive.

This recalibration may reflect broader socio-economic pressures. In a context where structural volatility persists, overt emphasis on inflation may no longer function as persuasive reassurance. Brands instead position themselves as companions in stability. Planning becomes an ordinary life practice rather than an emergency measure. The commercial message suggests that security results from disciplined continuity rather than episodic response.

Moral Reorganisation

This shift represents more than discursive adjustment. It reflects a recalibration of the standards used to evaluate economic conduct. In the earlier advertisements, thrift functioned as the primary marker of prudence; responsible conduct was indicated through visible cost-awareness. In the contemporary corpus, foresight and disciplined anticipation become the dominant evaluative criteria. As Thompson (1971) and Sayer (2007) argue, economic practices are always morally evaluated. The recalibration observed here shifts moral emphasis from reactive thrift toward anticipatory composure. The shift from visible thrift to anticipatory composure aligns with Arlie Russell Hochschild's broader observation that economic life is increasingly evaluated through emotional and behavioural management rather than material constraint, although here this process is anchored in routine domestic practice.

This recalibration partially supports Sayer's (2007) argument that economic conduct is morally evaluated, but extends it by showing how the evaluative criteria themselves shift historically within media discourse. In earlier advertisements, thrift functions as visible moral compliance; in contemporary campaigns, composure and anticipation become the dominant moral indicators.

Adaptation Rather Than Rupture

It is important not to overstate the transformation. Contemporary advertisements do not abandon collective values. Family cohesion, relational coordination, and domestic continuity remain

central. The shift is adaptive rather than revolutionary. Responsibilisation occurs within culturally familiar frameworks rather than through overt individualism.

What changes is not the presence of family, but the meaning of responsible conduct within it. Public acknowledgement of inflation diminishes, while private anticipation intensifies. Responsibility shifts from visible reaction to normalised preparedness and embodied stability.

Implications for Media and Public Discourse in Pakistan

The implications of this shift extend beyond advertising as a commercial practice. They invite reflection on how economic realities are publicly narrated and privately absorbed within Pakistan's media environment.

Public discourse in Pakistan frequently centres on inflation, rising utility costs, and economic volatility. In contrast, the advertisements analysed here reduce direct reference to price and affordability. Economic strain is not denied, but repositioned as a background condition, while responsibility is articulated through private conduct within domestic life.

This shift has implications for media literacy. Advertising operates not only as product promotion but as a subtle framework for evaluating behaviour. Recognising how responsibility is framed—whether through thrift or anticipatory composure—can strengthen critical awareness of how commercial narratives translate public issues into private expectations.

From a governance perspective, this pattern aligns with broader shifts in how responsibility is communicated in public culture. O'Malley (2004) notes that risk governance increasingly operates by encouraging individuals to anticipate and manage potential instability. In the Pakistani advertising context, such encouragement is embedded within culturally familiar domestic scenes rather than abstract policy language. The commercial narrative does not overtly instruct; it normalises responsibility and renders planning routine.

Culturally, the shift reinforces expectations of preparedness within domestic life. Contemporary advertisements situate responsibility within family coordination. Couples plan together; parents guide children; routine care signals maturity. These portrayals resonate with established values of cohesion and respectability. At the same time, they may intensify moral pressure on households to maintain composure despite structural strain.

Commercial media do not determine economic policy or household decision-making; however, their routine circulation contributes to stabilising particular interpretations of what counts as reasonable and responsible conduct under conditions of uncertainty. The implications, therefore, concern participation rather than causality.

The findings suggest that Pakistani television advertising does not erase economic strain but redistributes how it is publicly recognised. Inflation recedes from explicit articulation, while preparedness, composure, and embodied stability become normative expectations within domestic life. Responsibility is no longer suggested through visible thrift but through disciplined continuity and relational foresight. This recalibration does not dissolve structural volatility; it repositions how its moral response is framed. These findings should therefore be interpreted as indicative patterns within a bounded comparative corpus rather than as claims of universal transformation. In doing so, commercial discourse participates in redefining how economic responsibility is recognised, evaluated, and performed within everyday domestic life in contemporary Pakistan.

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