**The Pernicious Visual Culture**

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Not too long ago, good quality ready-made women’s clothing was sold in what were called boutiques. In Karachi, a few shops dotted a particular street in Clifton and a few existed on Zamzama boulevard.

The concept of brands was little known in Pakistan then. There was one company, which sold high-quality fabric at a premium and other manufacturers offered decent quality at a reasonable price. A brand is a name, design and symbol that distinguishes one seller’s goods or services from those of other sellers. Brands also convey a “promise.”

The promise is that the product you buy will meet the standards the manufacturer seeks to deliver. Brands are intangible reputational assets. In fact, they are the most valuable asset of many corporations.

Advertising is oxygen for brands. Without advertising, there can be no brands as the perception of a product is created through advertising.

In Pakistan, things changed rapidly when all of a sudden the boutiques, shops and top names in fabric manufacturing became known as “brands.”

As brands inundated the market, profit maximization at the expense of quality became the norm. Today you cannot buy lawn, cotton or linen fabric that lasts a long time. Fabric tears easily and expensive ready-made clothing from brands often tears upon the very first wear.

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Brands are kept alive primarily by television programming, where male actors and TV show hosts are often dressed in Sherwanis suitable for grooms on their wedding day. Female show hosts and actresses appear on TV and social media fully decked in bridal attire or expensive semi-formal clothing.

Female audiences admire the over-the-top dressing and makeup of their favourite TV personalities. This has made women covetous about owning clothing. Since women are also working in the workforce in an increasing number, the discretionary income they make is mainly spent on clothing, jewellery, makeup and other lifestyle purchases. This has led to price hikes, where all women-related consumer items are now sold at four to ten times their former prices. Low-cost items are a thing of the past, no matter the category.

Keeping up with the Joneses is now a social necessity. Family weddings create a strain on the extended family when even male cousins of the groom have a social obligation to dress in a fancy sherwani at a Mehndi event. Women are under even greater pressure to buy new shoes, clothing and jewellery for every single event to keep up appearances. Since these items cannot be repeated often, women are increasingly using social media to resell fancy clothing to recover some of the sunk costs. It is not unusual to see women asking for wedding wear donations in anonymous posts for siblings’ weddings.

This new culture of consumption in a tanking economy should send alarm bells ringing to PEMRA authorities. However, they are blissfully unaware of the wave of crime it can potentially lead to. The first signs of it are already manifesting.

A certain media person narrated an incident on his live podcast yesterday that a certain TV crew was attacked by area residents. This happened while shooting a television serial inside a house located in a densely populated lower-middle-class neighbourhood of Karachi.

The mob chanted the rallying battle cry of ‘Allahu Akber’ as they attacked those they deemed to be ungodly men and women pursuing an extravagant and glamorous lifestyle.

This was poverty, misery and deprivation attacking privilege, using the old trope of religion.

Everyone has a God-given right to make their own choices in life. However, Islam stresses upon Muslims to keep their sins private. Advertising sins not only normalizes them but also creates deprived and envious haters who cannot wait to make their move when the opportunity arises.

Our show business is the main driver of the consumer economy.

Israaf or extravagance is forbidden in Islam. Men are forbidden from wearing silk and from wearing finely embroidered cloth. However, there is no dearth of religious people who appear on television wearing silk sherwanis embroidered in gold thread. When Islamic preachers also join the bandwagon of creating clothing brands encashing their fame, the lifestyle which brands uphold becomes religiously approved. Then the have-nots are deprived of the solace of being patient in the hopes of a heavenly reward.

This removes all mitigants to hatred, which then grows as inflation spirals.

The famed public intellectual Naomi Klein authored a book ‘No Logo’ on the heavy social cost of branding. According to her research, in a world dominated by brands, violence is a given – due to personal social envy.

PEMRA needs to tame our media and enforce strict ruling on adopting a sombre and conservative dress code on TV. This is in line with the teachings of Islam. If we keep fueling hatred in an economically tough environment, we would see an alarming rise in the crime rate. The victims would likely not be the protected rich, but the poor and the vulnerable.

The Messenger of Allah (pbuh) said, “Whoever gives up wearing elegant and expensive garments out of humbleness, when he can do so, Allah will call him on the Day of Resurrection, before all of creation, He will give him the choice to wear whichever garment of Iman he would like to wear.” (Al-Tirmidhi 801).

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