

ADVERTISING IN THE ATTENTION ECONOMY: STRATEGIC ADAPTATION IN PAKISTAN'S DIGITAL MEDIA LANDSCAPE

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Abstract

The rise of digital media has transformed how audiences engage with advertising content, prompting significant changes in advertising strategy and production. While many industry professionals attribute these changes to declining audience attention spans, most existing research on the topic originates from Western contexts. This study explores how advertising professionals in Pakistan perceive attention scarcity and how this perception influences their creative and strategic practices. Using qualitative data collected from 25 industry professionals, the study employs Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis to identify four major themes: platform-native production, adaptation to platform affordances, hook-first storytelling and narrative restructuring, and cultural localization in digital advertising. The findings suggest that practitioners increasingly view attention scarcity as a structural challenge associated with platform design, algorithmic visibility, and content abundance rather than solely as a limitation of audience cognition. The results also indicate that strategic compression has become a defining feature of contemporary digital advertising, while culturally resonant content plays an important role in attracting attention and engagement. By extending attention economy theory and platform affordance theory to a developing-market context, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how advertising professionals adapt to increasingly competitive digital media environments.

1. Introduction

In recent years, brands have become more focused on advertising on digital platforms rather than on traditional media (Asif & Sandhu, 2023). This has caused a significant rise in competition amongst brands for audiences' attention, where they have started treating it as a finite resource, which scholars refer to as the 'attention economy' (Simon, 1971; Goldhaber, 1997).

It has been observed that there is a growing intolerance for long-form persuasive content (Jeon et al., 2019), especially considering the rapid growth of platforms like TikTok,

Instagram, and YouTube, where audiences have developed fast-scrolling habits and an overall preference for short-form video content (Manic, 2024).

Beyond the aspect of attention itself, the structural design of digital platforms also shapes how advertisements are produced and what creative strategies are employed (Evans et al., 2017). Most of the research regarding the effects of short-form advertising is mainly concentrated in the developed markets of the West (Ford et al., 2023). The literature in the developing markets, like that of Pakistan, primarily focuses on digital media adoption and usage, rather than

focusing on how local advertising professionals adapt their creative strategies, narrative structures, and platform-specific practices according to the changing online environments (Asif & Sandhu, 2023; Ullah et al., 2023).

Even though Pakistan ranks amongst the top countries in the world for the highest number of internet users, its advertising industry continues to struggle to keep pace (Hamza et al., 2025; Asif & Sandhu, 2023). Furthermore, not only do advertising professionals have to navigate the global trends of short-form content, but they also have to ensure that they are meeting the longstanding cultural expectations for emotionally rich storytelling, while also making sure that the content feels native to the specific digital platform. In order to study these competing demands and how they reshape advertising practice, Pakistan provides a valuable emerging market for this research.

The research questions for the study are stated as follows:

RQ1: How have advertising professionals in Pakistan adapted their creative and production practices for digital media environments?

RQ2: How do platform affordances shape strategic adaptation across digital platforms?

RQ3: How are advertising messages and narrative structures reconfigured in digital advertising practice?

By examining advertising practice within the attention economy theory as well as the platform affordance framework, this study provides a valuable insight into how digital advertising works beyond Western contexts.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Attention as a Cognitive and Economic Resource

Digital spaces have infinite scrolling feeds and a constant flow of notifications. As a result, the filtering process of the brain tends to become overloaded as it tries to differentiate between what to keep and what to ignore (Kozyreva et al., 2020). Aspects like these lead researchers to suggest that the phenomenon we refer to as shrinking attention spans may actually be a reflection of these digital platform features designed to keep people engaged (Rixen et al., 2023). Other studies also reveal how applications use algorithms to create a

continuous stream of content tuned to users' interests so that they stay hooked (Brown et al., 2024).

The concept of the "attention economy" was first proposed by researchers like Herbert Simon (1971) and Michael Goldhaber (1997), who argued that in an information-saturated environment, attention becomes a scarce resource, which Davenport and Beck (2001) characterized as the new currency of business. In this system, visibility itself becomes the primary challenge, creating a high demand for attention-grabbing content that captures user attention before they can scroll on to something else (Yin et al., 2023).

Within this framework, flow attention is considered a finite resource of human attention that is spent in the moment and cannot be saved up for later. Every moment that is spent looking at a screen is an expenditure of this flow currency, but since it cannot be saved up by digital platforms, it is then transformed into calcified attention, through data such as likes, views, follower counts, and subscribers, which later converts to social capital (Heitmayer, 2025).

2.2. Platform Affordances and Algorithmic Mediation

The platform affordances framework suggests that digital platforms do not just host advertisements and content, but rather their structural design shapes how ads are produced and how they are perceived by the viewers (Evans et al., 2017).

An example of this is YouTube's five-second skip option, which forces advertisers to pack their most persuasive messages in that initial time frame before the viewers can opt out (Jeon et al., 2019). Another instance of this is Instagram's use of features like shoppable tags, which allow influencers to seamlessly integrate products in their personal stories and narratives (Lou et al., 2023), essentially blurring the line between content and advertisement (Brown et al., 2024). TikTok's design is also built on the memetic logic, prioritizing imitation and replication of trends, and prompting brands to shift from traditional ad narratives to taking part in the culture of meme marketing (Razzaq et al., 2023). Consequently, the process of creating ads is not only driven by what the audience likes, but is

also led by the platform governance structures, established by operators of the app. Algorithmic sorting on these platforms decides which ads get seen, while the process of datafication turns user clicks and scrolls into data points that inform future ad productions (Poell et al., 2019).

While there is a significant amount of research on how platform-based advertising works in Western countries, the research in other regions is very limited (Abbasi et al., 2022; Ford et al., 2023). In Pakistan, due to budget constraints, lack of technical infrastructure and expertise, smaller businesses fail to launch digital ad campaigns using modern platform-specific strategies (Asif & Sandhu, 2023; Ahmed et al., 2025; Ullah et al., 2023). A further implication of the lower production and distribution costs associated with digital advertising is that organizations can maintain a continuous presence across multiple digital platforms with fewer resources than traditional media typically require (Ahmed et al., 2025; Nazir et al., 2025).

2.3. Narrative Shift in Digital Advertising

Short-form videos have reconfigured storytelling in advertising. While traditional television commercials followed the story arc format, waiting until the end to show the resolution, modern digital ads focus on showing the subject in the beginning instead (Varan et al., 2020). These short-form ads, which usually last for ten seconds or less, use visual hooks like animated titles, brand logos, sound effects, graphical text, and catchy music to capture the viewers' attention right at the start, before they can scroll away (Wang et al., 2020).

While micro-ads have significantly higher click-through rates and engagement metrics (Fossen et al., 2025), this does not mean that long-form narratives in advertising have completely disappeared. Rather, they have been reconfigured and compressed (Varan et al., 2020). This strategic evolution is further evidenced by the rise of meme marketing, which is a multimodal strategy utilizing vernacular creativity, often yielding significantly higher organic interaction than traditional ads (Razzaq et al., 2023).

Although short-form video ads have proven to be effective in building brand recall, they physically lack the time to build complex story

arcs usually found in longer commercials (Wolf & Donato, 2019). As brands increasingly prioritize visibility on digital platforms, they struggle to choose between short-term engagement and long-term brand equity (Varan et al., 2020).

The effectiveness of short-form content is not, however, uniform across all contexts, as Fossen et al. (2025) found that the impact of ad length depends on the objective, as micro-ads were seen to perform well for brand awareness, but less for direct conversions. Similarly, Varan et al. (2020) found that short-form advertisements generated lower brand recall and advertisement liking than longer formats, although viewers' overall perceptions of the brand remained largely unchanged. This contingency perspective remains underexplored, particularly in the context of developing markets.

2.4. Digital Transformation in Emerging Markets: The Case of Pakistan

The advertising industry in Pakistan comprises global agency networks, independent local agencies, and in-house brand teams that make ads for TV, print, and digital media (Faiz et al., 2018; Khan et al., 2024; Nazir et al., 2025). In the last decade, Pakistan has seen a significant increase in smartphone ownership resulting in over 70 million active social media users, accounting for around 30% of the population (Hamza et al., 2025). As a result, platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube have now become central to how brands communicate with their consumers (Ullah et al., 2023).

Despite this growth, the digital transformation within the advertising industry remains uneven, with large multinational corporations having the resources to invest in high-tech tools and data-driven ads, while local businesses are just replicating viral trends or hiring influencers without a systematic way to measure performance effectiveness (Ullah et al., 2023).

In Pakistan, television remains the most impactful medium for audiences, even as digital platforms expand rapidly (Khan et al., 2024). For most of history, local brands have used culturally integrated long-form stories in their ads, with emotionally rich narratives (Jabeen & Cheong, 2024). This creates a notable tension, because while advertisers are required to adapt to global

trends that favor short-form content, Pakistani audiences expect ads that emotionally resonate with them as well, which is extremely difficult to deliver in shorter ad formats (Varan et al., 2020). Furthermore, infrastructure issues like unstable internet and frequent power outages mean that digital marketing is not equally effective across the country (Asif & Sandhu, 2023). This issue is faced by many countries across emerging Asian markets (Fu et al., 2024; Ford et al., 2023), where digital platforms are available long before businesses have the skills and tools to use them effectively (Asif & Sandhu, 2023), making Pakistan a valuable context in examining how advertisers navigate digital transformation under conditions of uneven resources and competing cultural expectations.

2.5. Conceptual Gap and Research Contribution

Three major trends emerge from the existing literature. First, in our digital world, human attention is widely treated as a rare and valuable resource within the industry that companies must compete to earn (Heitmayer, 2025). Second, brief micro-ad formats of a few seconds have demonstrated higher click-through rates and engagement metrics (Fossen et al., 2025), while often scoring lower on brand memory impact (Varan et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020). Third, platform architecture shapes how advertising content is produced, as algorithms and specific interfaces decide what gets seen (Evans et al., 2017; Poell et al., 2019).

Most studies in countries like Pakistan have only looked at the barriers preventing local businesses from using digital advertising tools (Ahmed et al., 2025; Nazir et al., 2025; Ullah et al., 2023), rather than focusing on the advertising practice of creative and narrative decision-making (Jabeen & Cheong, 2024; Razaq et al., 2023).

Varan et al. (2020) identified the trade-off between short-form video engagement, emotional storytelling, and brand recall of longer ads, and Khan et al. (2024) documented how television remains the most attention-grabbing medium for advertising due to the long-form emotional storytelling. However, limited attention has been given to how advertising professionals balance these

competing demands in practice (Jabeen & Cheong, 2024).

This study aims to address these gaps by examining how advertising professionals in Pakistan actively navigate the tension between short-form visibility and long-term brand equity, and how their creative and strategic decisions are shaped by the local and cultural circumstances.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study uses a qualitative interpretivist approach to examine how advertising professionals in Pakistan have adapted their creative and strategic practices in response to evolving digital media spaces. For this purpose, a qualitative design was appropriate given that the research aimed to explore the “how” and “why” behind professional decisions, aspects that closed-ended surveys or lab experiments are not equipped to measure (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.2. Participants and Sampling

To recruit participants with relevant expertise, purposive sampling was employed to identify 25 professionals from Pakistan. In order to ensure that the data quality and relevance were maintained, all respondents had to be currently working in the field with at least three years of experience in a creative or strategic decision-making role.

The sample included advertising professionals across a wide variety of roles, including creatives, client service professionals, social media strategists, in-house marketers, and brand managers. Methodological discussions on qualitative sample adequacy suggest that samples of this size can generate meaningful analytical depth when responses are rich and focused (Mason, 2010; Braun et al., 2021).

3.3. Data Collection

The data for this study were collected between February and April of 2025, using an open-ended written questionnaire hosted on Google Forms (Braun et al., 2021). Given the geographical dispersion of participants across multiple cities, an open-ended online questionnaire provided a practical means of gathering professional reflections while allowing

respondents to contribute at their convenience and in their own words. Additionally, the written format allowed participants to be more focused, providing a level of detail suitable for identifying patterns in professional practice (Braun et al., 2021).

This study adhered to standard ethical principles for social science research involving adult participants, and informed consent was obtained before data collection. Some basic identifying information of the participants was collected solely for the purpose of verification, and all responses were assigned numerical IDs to ensure that no personally identifiable information was retained during or after the analytical process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach to anonymity may allow participants to feel more comfortable sharing candid professional opinions than they might feel in a face-to-face setting (Braun et al., 2021).

The decision to conclude the data collection process was based on the principle of information power, which states that a dataset is sufficient when its scope, specificity, and quality are strong enough to support complex and credible analysis (Malterud et al., 2016).

3.4. Data Analysis and Rigour

This study followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for thematic analysis. A reflexive approach was taken throughout the process, with the researcher serving as the primary interpretive instrument. All responses were coded manually, keeping the interpretive process transparent and traceable.

The coding process was inductive, with categories emerging from participants' actual responses rather than from predetermined frameworks. Initial codes were grouped into broader clusters and then refined into the four final themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To strengthen the trustworthiness of the analysis, peer debriefing was conducted with two colleagues who reviewed the interpretations for plausibility and consistency (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The analysis addressed both the semantic content, which participants stated explicitly, and latent content, involving underlying assumptions and professional logics shaping their responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006). While

written responses varied in length, many participants provided reflective explanations of their professional reasoning, allowing analysis of both explicit statements and the assumptions underlying them. A reflexive memo journal was also maintained throughout the process to manage the researcher's positionality and to minimize the influence of the researcher's prior assumptions on the interpretation of participants' accounts (Patton, 2002). Direct quotes from participants are included in the results to illustrate how the interpretations were grounded in the data.

3.5. Limitations

This study focuses on what advertising professionals believe rather than how consumers actually behave. This is a significant distinction since the articulated answers given in responses often differ from a person's real, emotional, or subconscious reactions. As the study relied on self-reported professional accounts, the findings reflect participants' interpretations of industry practice and may not always correspond directly to observed advertising outcomes.

Additionally, since the participants were primarily located in Pakistan's major urban centers, the findings may not accurately reflect the different advertising practices found in smaller cities or regional markets. The use of the written questionnaire format also precluded follow-up probing, which may limit the depth of some themes.

4. Results

The study identifies four interconnected themes through thematic analysis, showing how advertising professionals in Pakistan have adapted their creative and production practices in response to conditions of the contemporary media landscape. RQ1 is addressed in Theme 1, RQ2 is addressed in Theme 2, and RQ3 is addressed in Themes 3 and 4.

4.1. Shift to Platform-Native Production

Participants consistently described a major shift in advertising practice, with brands moving away from high-budget television commercials and increasingly producing shorter, platform-native content for social media, reflecting the changing media consumption habits of audiences.

Respondent 1 (Client Services) described television-led campaigns and more conventional advertising styles as becoming less central to brand communication, with Respondent 8 (Social Media Strategist) adding that high-budget productions have been replaced by quick, engaging reels and raw, relatable content that feels more authentic to digital audiences. Respondent 12 (Social Media Manager) observed a clear increase in digital media spending compared to traditional advertising, alongside a broader shift toward youth-centric content.

A notable production practice that has emerged from this shift is the creation of multiple digital variants from a single television advertisement:

"Each mainline commercial comes with digital adapts spanning from 45/30/15/6 seconds, along with vertical variants as well, to cater to mobile." (Respondent 6, Social Media Strategist)

This practice suggests that digital platforms now influence how advertisements are produced, rather than simply where they are distributed. The compression of ad duration, the proliferation of format variants, and the prioritization of mobile-first vertical dimensions are all direct responses to the conditions of digital ecosystems where audiences scroll continuously, and content competes for exposure within seconds.

While client-service professionals and social media strategists generally described the transition in positive terms, some participants were more critical. Respondent 7 (In-House Brand Manager), for example, argued that many brands had adopted digital platforms without fully adapting their creative and strategic approaches to the demands of short-form, platform-specific content.

Respondent 4 (Creative) also noted that advertisements have become shorter and more product-focused without a corresponding improvement in creative thinking, concluding that *"product is the only real consideration."* From this perspective, speed and visibility have become priorities, often at the expense of strategic and creative development. Furthermore, Respondent 17 (Creative) observed how brands are rapidly defaulting to cookie-cutter formats and prioritizing speed over originality, favoring trends over long-term

storytelling. This role-based divergence, where client service practitioners assess the transition as substantially complete while creative practitioners question its strategic depth, appeared consistently across participant accounts.

4.2. Platform Affordances and Strategic Adaptation

Advertisers showed a high awareness of platform-specific affordances, which are structural features that shape what can be done within each digital environment (Evans et al., 2017). Advertisers do not simply post the same ad everywhere; they customize the content to fit the specific design of each platform (Poell et al., 2019).

YouTube's skip-ad button is one of the clearest examples of how a single platform feature can restructure advertising strategy. Respondent 19 (Brand Manager) described how scripts are now built around YouTube's five-second skip window, noting how *"those 5 seconds are bothersome to some people enjoying their content,"* which has forced marketers to rethink how advertisements begin and to design openings around the brief window before viewers can skip.

Other platforms require different approaches. TikTok's vertical full-screen format and automatic video play mean that brands must align with trends to gain visibility. Instagram's architecture focuses on personal storytelling by influencers, which brands use to build trust. Respondent 17 (Creative) captured how practitioners navigate platform selection across audiences:

"Platform choice depends on the audience: TikTok and Instagram for younger demographics, fast-paced engagement. Facebook for older age groups, community-driven. YouTube for best long-form storytelling with a broad reach." (Respondent 17, Creative)

However, several respondents resisted the premise that platform design alone determines advertising effectiveness. Respondent 4 (Creative) argued directly:

"Platforms don't determine engagement; content strategy does. Strategy has to be cognizant of the target group, the platform, and the interplay. Locally this effort and approach is greatly lacking. For a brand like

Crumble, memes on Instagram are best, for cosmetics, influencer reviews on YouTube, for a telco, humorous TVCs perhaps." (Respondent 4, Creative)

Respondent 6 (Social Media Strategist) reinforced this, arguing that effectiveness depends less on content format and more on *"the creative and the objective"* set beforehand. This position was more prominent among creative and in-house brand roles, suggesting that those responsible for content development tend to treat platform affordances as context rather than as the primary driver of outcomes.

Taken together, the findings suggest that platform affordances influence strategic adaptation, but practitioners did not view them as determining advertising success on their own. Instead, their effectiveness was seen as dependent on broader creative and strategic objectives.

4.3. Hook-First Storytelling and Narrative Restructuring

Across roles, respondents described a significant restructuring of how advertising narratives are constructed, driven by the need to secure attention before a viewer scrolls on. Rather than building toward a climax, respondents frequently described front-loading key elements of the advertisement, including the brand, core message, or emotional payoff, within the first few seconds (Wolf & Donato, 2019; Fossen et al., 2025). An example of this is how several respondents described advertisers using techniques such as displaying the brand logo in the very first frame or leading with a visual surprise, hooking the audience immediately (Varan et al., 2020; Fossen et al., 2025). Respondent 17 (Creative) described how this translates into creative execution:

"They place the product upfront, craft highly functional messaging, and use bold hooks, whether through striking visuals, impactful soundbites, or direct calls to action." (Respondent 17, Creative)

Respondent 8 (Social Media Strategist) reinforced this, describing the approach as moving the climax of the advertisement to the very beginning, whether that is *"a shocking reveal, a big payoff, or the most exciting moment,"* so the viewer is hooked before they can scroll away. Respondent 19 (Brand Manager) described the underlying structural logic, arguing that an ad

must open with a hook and close with a call to action, so that the viewer is drawn in immediately and is given a clear reason to stay until the end.

Respondent 19 (Brand Manager) also captured why the traditional narrative arc has become ineffective in digital environments: *"the audience has now understood the predictability of the story, so they'd rather scroll than stop and watch."* This observation suggests that practitioners interpret narrative restructuring less as a response to reduced attention spans and more as a response to audiences who quickly disengage from predictable storytelling patterns.

This principle extends to brand identity as well. Respondent 6 (Social Media Strategist) observed that most commercials now open with the brand logo, so it is *"immediately registered in the minds of the consumer,"* increasing the likelihood that even a few seconds of exposure leaves some level of brand recognition.

4.4. Cultural Localization and Relatability

While global short-form video trends shape advertising formats, participants consistently emphasized that successful digital advertising in Pakistan must feel culturally relevant and locally grounded. Respondents frequently referred to the use of memes, local humor, popular trends, and culturally familiar references as ways of making advertising content feel more relatable and native to social media spaces.

Several participants referred to Crumble, a cookie brand based in Islamabad, as an example of culturally resonant digital advertising. Through its use of memes, music, viral trends, and platform-native content, the brand was repeatedly cited as a benchmark for social media engagement. Respondent 8 (Social Media Strategist) captured the industry's response to this:

"Everyone wants to be the next Crumble. Brands are leaning into snackable videos on TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts, making sure to grab attention within seconds." (Respondent 8, Social Media Strategist)

Participants also identified brands such as EasyPaisa as examples of paid content designed to mimic surrounding organic posts, ensuring that the viewing experience is not disrupted. The goal, according to Respondent 19 (Brand

Manager), is to make the ad indistinguishable from a regular post. Respondent 25 (Client Services) reinforced this from a client service perspective, noting that audiences respond most strongly to ads built around recognizable faces and relatable situations, where the brand's presence feels like a personal recommendation rather than a commercial interruption.

However, several respondents warned that replicating viral trends repeatedly leads to diminishing returns. Respondent 17 (Creative) observed that many brands are "adopting cookie-cutter formats, prioritizing speed over originality," while Respondent 14 (Creative) noted that

brands have been abandoning their brand guidelines in the pursuit of virality.

Respondent 11 (Client Services) identified a structural reason behind this pattern, observing that the move to digital platforms has been treated as a cost-cutting opportunity, with organizations reducing creative budgets on the assumption that "it's free to go digital," while disregarding the creative investment that is required to make effective advertisements. Participants frequently associated this cost-cutting approach with content that maintained a digital presence but lacked originality, strategic thinking, or strong creative execution.

Table 1: Summary of Thematic Findings

Theme	Key Pattern	Representative Quote	Participant Types
Shift to Platform-Native Production	Advertising production has shifted from television-led campaigns to continuous platform-native content, requiring shorter formats, multiple adaptations, and mobile-first execution.	"Each mainline commercial comes with digital adapts spanning from 45/30/15/6 seconds, along with vertical variants as well, to cater to mobile." (R6, Social Media Strategist)	Social media strategists, client service professionals, in-house brand managers, creatives
Platform Affordances and Strategic Adaptation	Advertising content is adapted to platform-specific features and audience expectations, with strategic decisions shaped by platform architecture rather than uniform content distribution.	"Platform choice depends on the audience: TikTok and Instagram for younger demographics, fast-paced engagement. Facebook for older age groups, community-driven. YouTube for best long-form storytelling with a broad reach." (R17, Creative)	Brand managers, social media strategists, client service professionals, creatives
Hook-First Storytelling and Narrative Restructuring	Advertisements increasingly front-load brand cues, emotional payoffs, and persuasive messages to secure attention before users disengage, resulting in compressed and restructured narrative formats.	"They place the product upfront, craft highly functional messaging, and use bold hooks, whether through striking visuals, impactful soundbites, or direct calls to action." (R17, Creative)	Creatives, brand managers, social media strategists

Theme	Key Pattern	Representative Quote	Participant Types
Cultural Localization and Relatability	Meme culture, local humor, relatable situations, and platform-native communication styles are used to make branded content feel culturally relevant and less intrusive.	<i>"Everyone wants to be the next Crumble. Brands are leaning into snackable videos on TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts, making sure to grab attention within seconds."</i> (R8, Social Media Strategist)	Creatives, brand managers, client service professionals, media strategists

5. Discussion

The four themes identified in this study collectively suggest that advertising professionals in Pakistan have adapted to digital media spaces through changes in production practices, platform-specific strategies, narrative structures, and culturally resonant content. Together, these findings extend existing understandings of the attention economy and platform affordances framework by demonstrating how attention capture, strategic adaptation, and advertising effectiveness are shaped by platform structures, audience behaviour, and local cultural contexts.

5.1. Attention Scarcity as a Structural Condition of Advertising Practice

While the attention economy theory has linked attention scarcity to limitations in human cognitive capacity (Simon, 1971; Goldhaber, 1997), the findings suggest that Pakistani advertising professionals consider it mainly as a structural challenge associated with platform design and content abundance. Participants frequently described digital landscapes as highly competitive spaces in which advertisements have only a few seconds to attract attention before users move on to other content.

These findings suggest that attention scarcity has become embedded within advertising workflows, influencing production decisions long before advertisements reach audiences. In this sense, attention scarcity shapes not only how advertisements are viewed, but also how they are conceived, produced, and distributed.

On the other hand, the findings also reveal a tension between adaptation and creative quality. While many participants viewed the industry's transition to digital advertising as necessary and

largely successful, creatives were most likely to question whether these changes had improved advertising practice, for instance, Respondent 4 (Creative) and Respondent 17 (Creative) argued that the emphasis on speed, visibility, and trend-driven content for engagement often comes at the expense of originality and brand equity. Their accounts suggest that the digital adaptation may be occurring at the surface level of format and distribution, without being accompanied by deeper creative innovation.

The differing assessments offered by creative and non-creative professionals suggest that perceptions of digital transformation may be shaped by occupational responsibilities and proximity to platform-based tools. Those involved in campaign execution and platform management may evaluate success through engagement and reach, while those involved in the creative process may place greater emphasis on the storytelling and strategy.

5.2. Platform Affordances and Strategic Decision-Making

The findings support platform affordance theory by demonstrating that advertising professionals actively adapt their content to the structural features of different digital platforms.

While many participants acknowledged that different platforms impose different constraints and opportunities, several respondents argued that platform design alone does not determine advertising effectiveness. For instance, Respondent 4 (Creative) argued that engagement is primarily driven by content strategy rather than platform features themselves, while Respondent 6 (Social Media Strategist) similarly argued that effectiveness

depends more on creative execution and campaign objectives than on format alone.

These findings contribute to the platform affordance framework by suggesting that affordances are interpreted through human judgement rather than being applied mechanically. While platform design influences the conditions under which advertising decisions are made, practitioners continue to view creative strategy, audience understanding and campaign objectives as the primary drivers of effectiveness.

5.3. Strategic Compression as Narrative Restructuring

The findings suggest that digital advertising is not merely shortening traditional narratives, but rather reorganizing them. Respondents repeatedly described a pattern in which key persuasive elements such as brand name, product, emotional payoff, or call to action, are moved to the beginning of the advertisement rather than being reserved for later stages. This represents a reversal of the traditional narrative structure commonly associated with television advertising, where stories gradually build toward a climax before revealing the brand message or tagline (Wolf & Donato, 2019; Fossen et al., 2025).

This pattern supports the concept of strategic compression, which is not simply a reduction in duration, but rather a recalibration of narrative priorities. Instead of treating shorter formats as external limitations imposed by digital platforms, advertising practitioners appear to adopt compressed storytelling as a strategic response to audiences' changing behaviour (Jeon et al., 2019; Yin et al., 2023).

However, the findings also reveal a potential tension between immediate visibility and long-term brand building. While compressed narratives may be effective at securing attention, they provide less space for emotional development, character building and extended storytelling. This is particularly significant in the Pakistani context, where many established brands have historically relied on long-form television storytelling to build emotional connections with audiences and reinforce brand identity over time. As a result, the increasing emphasis on immediate engagement may

challenge some of the traditional mechanisms that brands have been using to cultivate long-term consumer relationships.

Using Heitmayer's (2025) distinction between flow attention and calcified attention, these findings suggest that contemporary advertising may be increasingly optimized for momentary engagement rather than sustained brand relationships. Although practitioners described numerous techniques for capturing attention quickly, the extent to which these compressed narrative formats contribute to long-term brand memory, loyalty, and consumer attachment remains uncertain.

5.4. Cultural Resonance as an Attention Strategy

In Pakistan, successfully interrupting a user's scrolling behaviour requires more than just applying global trends into local contexts. Hence, brands are increasingly turning to meme marketing, a strategy that utilizes vernacular creativity, and participatory formats to generate higher levels of engagement than most traditional advertising approaches (Razzaq et al., 2023).

While the foundational framework of the attention economy theory has historically treated attention capture as a result of content volume or technical platform design (Davenport and Beck, 2001; Evans et al., 2017), the Pakistani experience shows that it is also a matter of cultural resonance. Participants repeatedly highlighted the importance of memes, local humor, recognizable personalities, and culturally familiar situations in making advertising content feel authentic and relatable.

Content that uses local humor and recognizable community formats can disrupt a feed in ways that structurally similar but culturally generic content cannot. Essentially, while global trends provide a visual template, locally relevant cultural material determines whether the content actually connects with the audience or not. This suggests that cultural resonance functions as a mediating mechanism through which platform-based content becomes meaningful and engaging for local audiences (Ford et al., 2023).

There is, however, a structural limitation to this approach. When numerous brands attempt to

replicate the same viral trends at the same time, the cultural distinctiveness that made those formats effective vanishes, and the content simply becomes additional noise in the feed.

This problem is compounded by an institutional trend towards creative disinvestment. Since digital advertising is generally perceived as being low-cost, or even free, some participants suggested that organizations reduce creative investment while increasing content output, and by treating platform accessibility as a substitute for strategic rigour, brands default to standardized, cookie-cutter formats, which results in content that occupies space but lacks the originality and strategic development required to build or sustain brand identity over time.

5.5. Theoretical Contributions

Collectively, the findings provide three major theoretical contributions that extend beyond the local Pakistani context and refine existing understandings of attention, platform affordances, and digital adaptation from a developing-market perspective.

First, the findings offer an alternative practitioner-oriented interpretation of attention scarcity. While early scholars like Simon (1971), Goldhaber (1997), and Davenport and Beck (2001) argued that attention is scarce because of the inherent biological limits of the human brain, these findings suggest that practitioners increasingly perceive attention scarcity as a result of structural and algorithmic conditions created by platform design and a massive volume of competing digital content. These conditions influence how advertising is planned, produced, and evaluated.

Second, the study enhances the platform affordance framework by identifying cultural resonance as an important mechanism through which platform-based content becomes meaningful and engaging for local audiences. The findings suggest that technical adaptation alone is insufficient without culturally resonant content.

Third, the study contributes to emerging discussions of digital advertising by suggesting that strategic compression involves more than simply reducing advertisement length. Rather, it reflects a broader reorganization of narrative

priorities in response to conditions of the attention economy.

Consequently, the findings suggest that digital advertising is reshaping not only advertising formats but also the underlying narrative logic through which persuasive messages are communicated.

6. Conclusion

This study explored how advertising professionals in Pakistan perceive attention scarcity and how these perceptions influence their creative and strategic decisions. The findings suggest that practitioners increasingly view attention scarcity as a structural condition shaped by platform design and content abundance rather than solely as a limitation of audience cognition.

Strategic compression was identified as a defining feature of contemporary digital advertising, with practitioners reorganizing narratives to secure attention within a few seconds of exposure. At the same time, participants emphasized that advertising effectiveness depends not only on platform affordances but also on cultural resonance, reliability, and platform-native forms of communication.

The findings further suggest that Pakistan's advertising landscape reflects a hybrid model in which short-form digital content and longer-form storytelling continue to coexist for different strategic purposes. While shorter ad formats are valued for visibility and engagement, practitioners expressed uncertainty regarding their long-term effects on brand memory and consumer relationships.

Future researchers should examine whether hook-first narrative structures produce the levels of brand recall and consumer attachment that practitioners expect, particularly through experimental and audience-based methods.

Further studies should also investigate whether the patterns identified in this research extend to other developing markets experiencing rapid digital growth alongside strong local cultural traditions and resource constraints.

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Informed Consent: All participants provided informed consent before participation. A consent statement was included at the opening of the data collection instrument, informing participants of the study's purpose, their right to withdraw at any time, and the anonymity of their responses. Completion of the form was taken as confirmation of voluntary, informed participation. No personally identifiable information was retained.

Data Availability Statement: The data that support the findings of this study consist of anonymized written responses from professional participants. These are not publicly available due to participant confidentiality and ethical obligations, but are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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