

The Phenomenon of Arab Advertising: A Social and Cultural Perspective

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The article is devoted to the analysis of the phenomenon of Arabic advertising. The study of this phenomenon gives the researcher the opportunity to analyze rich and multi-level material: from advertising we learn about the cultural and everyday characteristics of society, we can assess the political and economic course of the state, as well as the degree of its involvement in solving social problems. The language of advertising can be considered as a separate aspect, paying attention not only to the content, but also to the form. The visual component of advertising offers material for analyzing its artistic value. Arab advertising has its own characteristics, which are dictated by traditions and religious beliefs. At the same time, some Arab countries are more democratic in this matter, while others, on the contrary, subject advertising to strict censorship. Advertising aimed at the Arab market strictly prohibits the display of alcoholic beverages, gaming machines, cigarettes or drugs. The only exception is social advertising. Almost all Arab countries have restrictions on the display of nudity in advertising. In some cases, censors are forced to retouch exposed areas of the body in images that, according to Muslim traditions, should not be left exposed. Images of the traditional east are popular: desert, Bedouin, camel, etc. Sometimes marketers deliberately turn to them in advertising foreign products, wanting to overcome the consumer's possible distrust of the product through familiar images. Well-known brands and logos are also being adapted for local consumers. As a rule, logo rework is limited to its translation into Arabic. Advertising that appeals to the Arab audience during the holy month of Ramadan, the period of fasting, deserves special attention. Advertising during the month of Ramadan actively uses the theme of universal fasting, uniting Muslims. There is one more feature of Arabic advertising related to the language situation. If until recently the use of a dialect was strictly fixed and did not go beyond the scope of everyday communication, now advertising deliberately addresses the consumer in their native dialect.

Keywords: Arab world, advertising, culture, marketing, Arabic language.

Introduction

Nowadays, advertising attracts attention not only as a socio-economic phenomenon, but also as a cultural and linguistic phenomenon. Advertising in the modern world is an integral part of marketing: one cannot imagine the existence of the market without advertising. The study of this phenomenon makes it possible to draw conclusions about internal socio-economic processes, cultural characteristics, linguistic realities, and artistic design options. The material for this study is advertisements shown on television in various Arab countries, on the Internet, and partly on the pages of print publications.

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Fig. 1. Olay's promotional campaign.

Source: Advertising in Arabic. "AdMe.ru". August 20, 2012. *Advis.ru*. Available at: https://advis.ru/php/print_news.php?id=61B14BD6-34DB-C745-8299-2674EA9A03FF (accessed: 11.12.2023).

When analysing Arab advertising, first of all, it should be understood that it is very diverse in its context, since some Arab countries are more democratic in this regard, while others, on the contrary, subject advertising to strict censorship.

In general, it may be said that advertising aimed at consumers in Arab countries has its own characteristics, which are driven by traditions and religious beliefs. For a long time, the most stringent rules applied to products advertised in Saudi Arabia. Censorship was so strong that advertisement creators were careful to avoid using words that might carry hidden sexual connotations, such as "pleasure" or "enjoyment". Moreover, professionals working in the field of media advertising in Arab countries know that the use of the words "the greatest" (أعلى) or "create" (خلق) in advertising should be avoided, since they evoke an association with God and can provoke a mixed reaction.

The advertising aimed at the Arab market strictly prohibits the demonstration of alcoholic beverages, gaming machines, cigarettes or narcotic drugs. The only exception is public service advertising.

Almost all Arab countries have a restriction on showing nudity in advertising. In some cases, censors have to retouch those exposed areas of the body which, according to Muslim traditions, should not be left open [1].

Until relatively recently, in conservative Saudi Arabia, using the images of women in advertising was minimal. Moreover, women were portrayed with their faces covered, which, of course, made it very difficult to promote products aimed at a female audience. Advertisement creators tried to find possible solutions by approaching the issue creatively. For instance, it is known that Olay, one of the well-known companies producing cosmetics for women, announced a contest for the "most beautiful eyes" (Fig. 1). Later, an advertising banner featured a selection of women's eyes with mascara and the company's logo. Thus, all the necessary conditions had been met.

It should be noted that today the situation in the Kingdom has changed a lot: the country, for more than twenty years, has been taking measures to democratize its society. The reforms have largely affected the female population of the country, which, in turn,



Fig. 2. Kudu burger advertisement.

Source: Fast food of the desert. *Sostav.ru*. Available at: <https://www.sostav.ru/news/2009/11/17/zar3/> (accessed: 11.12.2023).



Fig. 3. Khazan burger advertisement.

Source: Arabic Burger. *Behance*. Available at: <https://www.behance.net/gallery/30942027/Arabic-Burger> (accessed: 11.12.2023).

could not but affect the media products. Images of women can be seen on television, typically showcasing products for home and family.

In Arab culture, keeping a pet — a dog or a cat — at home is considered unacceptable, so the number of advertisements showing pet products is extremely low. Furthermore, some animals in the minds of Arabs may evoke well-formed associations. For example, the fish is traditionally considered to be a symbol of Christian faith, and the raven is a symbol of death. All these nuances should by all means be taken into account before launching a particular product on the market.

On the contrary, traditional oriental images are popular: the desert, the Bedouins, and, for example, in Egypt, the pharaohs and the pyramids. The same can be observed in the Russian media market, when marketers try to evoke a feeling of naturalness of the product by exploiting the image of village life or a kind grandmother welcoming her beloved grandchildren with traditional dishes.

Such associations should evoke images familiar to the viewers since childhood. Sometimes marketers deliberately make references to them when advertising foreign products, wishing to overcome possible distrust of the product through familiar images. This is what happened, for example, with the Kudu burger advertisement: in the picture we see a Bedouin in traditional clothing sitting on the sand and warming his hands over a hot burger (Fig. 2). An advertisement of a similar product of the Khazan brand in Kuwait shows three burgers in traditional Arab men's headscarves (Fig. 3).

In Arab countries, consumers encounter two main types of advertising — foreign (Western) and local. While local advertisements are originally created taking into account the mindset and cultural characteristics of the society, Western advertisements are often subjected to significant changes in order to make them more intelligible to the viewers and, consequently, increase sales. That said, there are several examples when ignorance of local specifics led to an absolute failure of the advertising campaign. For example, a European pharmaceutical company decided to supply a new drug to the Arab market. For advertising in Europe, they used three lined up pictures without any explanatory text.



Fig. 4. Advertising of a clothing line aimed at the Arab market.

Source: The best advertising in Muslim countries. Creative. News. *AdIndex.ru*. Available at: <https://adindex.ru/news/creative/2013/02/4/96560.phtml> (accessed: 11.12.2023).

In the first picture, the man was screaming in pain, in the second picture he was taking a painkiller and in the third picture he was healthy. The advertised drug was completely un-sellable in Arab countries, since marketers had not taken into account that a native Arabic speaker “reads” not only the text, but also the pictures in the opposite direction [2, p. 67].

There are also certain differences in the image of women who appear in advertising of a particular product in Western and traditional Arab advertising. While the Western version often emphasises the objectivity of the female image, in Arab advertising women, as a rule, perform clear social roles of wife, mother or housewife. Furthermore, marketers try to use in advertising those types that are more familiar to the viewers: dark eyes and hair, swarthy skin, as the consumers must unconsciously identify with the characters seen in advertising.

Advertisements aimed at a female audience demonstrate the image of a modern yet modest girl (Fig. 4).

Related to this is the issue of advertisement focus. In Russia, commercials are more focused on a female audience, since women are considered the main consumers of goods in the domestic market. In the Middle East region, the situation is not so clear-cut. About half of all advertising products are intended for men.

Goods that are traditionally considered “masculine” include cars, men’s perfumes, watches, etc. Household items, cosmetics, children’s goods, etc. are considered “women’s” goods. Yet, such a division is characteristic not only of advertising aimed at Arab countries, but can be traced everywhere.

The images that are most often found in Arabic advertising itself can be divided into several categories:

- a confident successful man;
- an awkward funny man;
- a male professional;
- a housewife, a guardian of the hearth;
- a young attractive girl;
- a female neighbour.

The image of a successful man is usually used to advertise “high-status” goods — expensive cars, luxury real estate, etc. The second image often appears in advertisements for technical innovations aimed at a male audience. The image of a male specialist may be used, for example, in advertising medicines.

The image of a housewife is usually used to promote household goods or child care items. The image of a young girl is usually used in advertising cosmetics, food, etc. The image of a female neighbour or counsellor can also be used in advertising household goods.

Still, advertisement creators sometimes find interesting options, using standard images to the best effect. For instance, in the Egyptian advertisement for Chevrolet cars, marketers put together several of them: as the story goes, a couple comes to the showroom to choose a car. Once in it, they immediately change their profile and lifestyle, rapidly transforming from a happy family with many children to celebrities on the red carpet, criminals eluding the chase and rappers¹.

It is noted that large companies can afford to invest in creating commercials that have a high artistic value. For example, one of the largest mobile operators, Vodafone, shot a whole series of music videos, with high-quality visuals and sound, with the company’s advertisement seamlessly embedded. The advertisement highlights the long history of the company and its role in providing communication between relatives². The audio track features recordings of songs by well-known artists such as Amr Diab, Muhammad Salih and others. Amr Diab is also the face of the company³. Other large companies, such as the Bank of Egypt, Nike, and We, created similar advertisements⁴.

Marketers who are interested in making advertising attractive and memorable often try to add a vein of humour. For example, a series of commercials for Panda cheese that was broadcast on Egyptian television was so well liked that it instantly went viral on social media and gained popularity in other countries⁵.

Well-known brands and logos are also adapted for the local consumers. Typically, the adjustment of a logo is limited to its translation into Arabic. Nevertheless, in some cases, the creators of advertising seek to make the logo recognizable even in its new form by using similar fonts. The advertising of the Coca-Cola (Fig. 5) beverage illustrates that:

An advertisement that appeals to Arab audiences during the holy month of Ramadan, a period of fasting, deserves special attention. At this time, the absolute majority of Muslim pop-



Fig. 5. Coca Cola’s logo in Arabic.

Source: Coca Cola Arabic Logo. *Crystal PNG*. Available at: <https://crystalpng.com/product/coca-cola-arabic-logo/> (accessed: 11.12.2023).

¹ Chevrolet — Dababa 2. *YouTube*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S7SPeggXES0&t=38s> (accessed: 11.12.2023).

² Vodafone Egypt. *YouTube*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eD70ELGsYOU>; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_fLgknT8Hh0 (accessed: 11.12.2023).

³ Vodafone Egypt. *YouTube*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kPd9c-pt6Rw> (accessed: 11.12.2023).

⁴ National Bank of Egypt. *YouTube*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XsyvbQs6e7I> (accessed: 11.12.2023).

⁵ Top 10 Arabic Commercial Advertisements in the Middle East. Available at: <https://listizada.com/blog/top-10-arabic-commercial-advertisements-in-the-middle-east/> (accessed: 11.12.2023).



Fig. 6. Advertisement of the Vimto beverage.
The inscription reads “Have a blessed Ramadan”.

Source: Pin page. *Pinterest*. Available at: <https://pinterest.com/pin/572097958927579516/> (accessed: 11.12.2023).

Fig. 7. Advertisement of the Pepsi-Cola drink.
The inscription reads “Ramadan united us”.

Source: Pepsi Ramadan Campaign. *YouTube*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OhLgr-xa1eY> (accessed: 28.11.2024).



ulation abstain from eating and drinking water during the daylight hours. With the setting of the sun comes the feasting period, when everyone gathers around a table. At this time, TV channels traditionally release TV novelties, so the cost of advertising aired during this period increases significantly. Advertising during the month of Ramadan actively uses the theme of universal fasting, uniting Muslims. For example, Vimto (Fig. 6) placed traditional greetings on its advertisements, while Pepsi-Cola (Fig. 7) added Ramadan symbols such as flags and lights to the images of its products, alongside the words.

There is another peculiarity of Arab advertising related to the linguistic situation that should be noted. There are two parallel co-existing forms of language in Arab countries — on the one hand, the Arabic literary language, which is used for official purposes, in the media, fiction, and, on the other hand, the dialect, which differs in each Arab country [3, p. 577]. While not so long ago the use of the dialect was strictly limited and did not go beyond everyday communication, today, advertising consciously addresses the consumers in their native dialect [4, pp. 196–197]. The goal of the creators of such advertising is obvious: they seek to make their product more meaningful and closer to the consumers, expecting that the viewers will perceive the advertisement, addressed to them in the dialect, as advice received from a friend, and will feel a greater need for the advertised product [5, p. 601]. For example, Coca-Cola manufacturers chose to promote their products in Egypt with a short and memorable slogan in the dialect: *ليه لا؟* *lēh lā* (“Why not?”)⁶.

The issue of language games used by marketers to promote a product in the Arab market deserves special attention. Experts employ graphic, phonetic, morphological, lexical and other linguistic means [6, p. 165]. For example, an environmental advertisement with the slogan *صرخة وطن* (“Scream of the motherland”), released by the Ministry of Environment of Jordan in April 2017, uses an uneven broken font that mimics the visual representation of sound waves when shouting. The author of the paper “The discourse

⁶ Top 10 Arabic Commercials & Advertisements in the Middle East. *IstiZada*. Available at: <https://istizada.com/blog/top-10-arabic-commercial-advertisements-in-the-middle-east/> (accessed: 11.12.2023).

of Arabic advertising: preliminary investigations” notes the use of alliteration as a technique of language play in advertising texts [7, p. 29]. In an advertisement for a prestigious residential complex in Cairo, marketers used a simple play on words in the slogan: bayut يعني بيوت *buyût ya’ni bayut* (‘Home means Bayut’) (Fig. 8). Bayut is the name of the residential complex, which is the Arabic plural form of the word “home”.

It is also interesting to focus on public service advertising. The share of this type of advertising is quite small compared to other types. However, it certainly merits an in-depth analysis. The analysis of public service advertising makes it possible to assess which problems of society are most relevant. It should be borne in mind that material from various Arab countries should be used to illustrate the study.

The aims and objectives of public service advertising and commercial advertising are different, just as the target audiences are. While commercial advertising is meant to promote a product or service, public service advertising focuses on society as a whole. For example, a public service advertisement released by the Government of Saudi Arabia ahead of the 2022 census draws the citizens’ attention to the need to be serious about the work of census takers, and also emphasizes the importance of the census for the state. Saudi Arabia filmed an entire block of public service advertisements dedicated to this event⁷. One of the videos focuses on the problem of the Saudi national character, namely, their hospitality: in the video, the owner insistently invites a census taker into his house, where the census taker is wined and dined by the house owner for a long time. The public service advertisement urges the viewers not to keep the census takers waiting, as they have a lot of work to do.

Egyptian public service advertising raises one of the most pressing social issues: religious intolerance. The video was shot as simply as possible: the viewers see two hand-drawn characters, one of them is a Muslim while the other is a Christian. Without saying anything, they begin to show each other various symbols of their faith. A laughing child running out in front of them makes both of them calm down and think about what really matters. The slogan that the viewers see at the end reads “We all (live) in the same Egypt. I reject religious strife”.

A series of public service advertisements aimed at maintaining public health was released in Egypt. It appears to have been adequately funded, as the visuals and the sound are of high quality. For example, Bahia reminds women to have timely breast examinations to detect cancer in its early stages⁸.

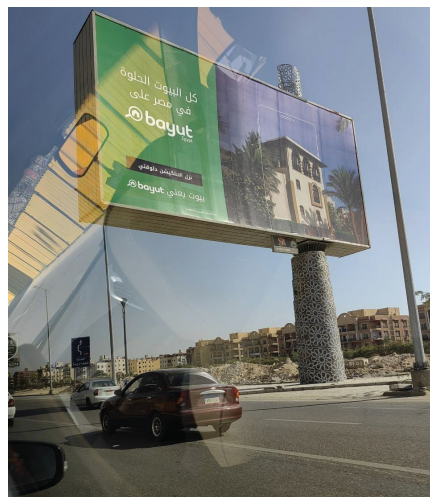


Fig. 8. Advertisement for the Bayut residential complex in Cairo

⁷ Saudi Census Campaign 2022. *YouTube*. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wuj6Ab9WYgg> (accessed: 28.11.2024).

⁸ Top 10 Arabic Commercial Advertisements in the Middle East. *IstiZada*. Available at: <https://isti-zada.com/blog/top-10-arabic-commercial-advertisements-in-the-middle-east/> (accessed: 11.12.2023).

One of the types of public service advertising is environmental advertising. In recent decades, many Arab countries have become seriously concerned about environmental protection. As the authors of the work “Cultural-specific features of environmental advertising in Arabic and Kazakh languages” put it: “...the entire Arab world is faced with the need for building environmental awareness, however, Jordan and the UAE have the largest number of analysed texts” [8, p. 16].

To summarize, it should be noted that advertisement making is a creative process pursuing commercial goals. “An advertised idea is not the identification of the properties of the advertised product needed by the consumer, but an organic combination of them with the needs of the addressee of the advertisement” [9, p. 9].

The study of this phenomenon gives the researchers an opportunity to analyse rich and multifaceted material: from advertising we learn about the cultural and everyday features of society, we can assess the political and economic course of the state, as well as the degree of its involvement in solving social problems. The language of advertising can be considered as a separate aspect, with both content and form being worthy of attention. For specialists, the social-psychological aspect of the phenomenon is interesting: for example, addressing the consumers using positive and negative arguments. The visual component of advertising offers material for analysing its artistic value.

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Феномен арабской рекламы: социокультурная перспектива

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Статья посвящена анализу феномена арабской рекламы. Изучение этого явления дает исследователю возможность для анализа богатого и многоуровневого материала: из рекламы мы узнаем о культурных и бытовых особенностях общества, можем оценить политический и экономический курс государства, а также степень его вовлеченности в решение социальных задач. Язык рекламы можно рассматривать как отдельный аспект, обращая внимание не только на содержание, но и на форму. Визуальная составляющая рекламы предлагает материал для анализа ее художественной ценности. Реклама, направленная на потребителей в арабских странах, имеет свои особенности, которые продиктованы традициями и религиозными представлениями. При этом некоторые арабские страны оказываются в данном вопросе более демократичными, в то время как другие, наоборот, подвергают рекламу жесткой цензуре. В рекламе, рассчитанной на арабский рынок, строго запрещается демонстрация алкогольных напитков, игровых аппаратов, сигарет или наркотических средств. Единственным исключением является социальная реклама. Практически во всех арабских странах существует ограничение на демонстрацию обнаженного тела в рекламе. В некоторых случаях цензоры вынуждены ретушировать на изображениях открытые участки тела, которые, согласно мусульманским традициям, не следует оставлять открытыми. Популярностью пользуются образы традиционного Востока: пустыня, бедуин, верблюд и т. д. Иногда маркетологи намеренно обращаются к ним в рекламе иностранной продукции, желая через знакомые образы преодолеть возможное недоверие потребителя к продукту. Известные бренды и логотипы также подвергаются адаптации для местного потребителя. Как правило, переработка логотипа ограничивается его переводом на арабский язык. Особого внимания заслуживает реклама, которая обращается к арабской аудитории в священный месяц Рамадан — период поста. Реклама в период Рамадана активно использует тему всеобщего поста, объединяющего мусульман. Существует особенность арабской рекламы, связанная с языковой ситуацией. Если еще недавно использование диалекта было строго фиксировано и не выходило за рамки бытового общения, то теперь реклама сознательно обращается к потребителю на родном диалекте.

Ключевые слова: арабский мир, реклама, культура, маркетинг, арабский язык.

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