Gender Depictions in TV Advertising in the Gulf:

Any Sign of Change?

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ABSTRACT

This content analysis examines gender portrayal in advertisements in television advertising in the GCC, and contrasts those depictions with the results of an earlier study of the same region. Analysis revealed that stereotypical depictions of men and women continued to hold, specifically with respect to the association between the central figure's gender and the type of advertised product, as well as in background setting. However, in terms of roles (familial, autonomous) and location (home, occupational setting), as women continued to be depicted mainly in familial roles and at home, men were also increasingly portrayed progressively in familial roles and at home. The findings are discussed in comparison to extant literature and the changes occurring in the Gulf region with regard to gender roles.

KEYWORDS

Arab countries, GCC, Gender portrayal, Gender roles, Gender stereotyping, Gulf region, Middle, television advertisements East

GENDER DEPICTIONS IN TV ADVERTISING IN THE GULF

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Research on gender portrayal in advertising across the world since the 1970s has offered substantial evidence for gender stereotyping (Akestam et al., 2017; Eisend, 2019; Grau & Zotos 2016; Roth-Cohen et al., 2022). Women have primarily been depicted either in the private/domestic sphere as dutiful wife, mother, or daughter or as a symbol of attraction. Although they have also been increasingly portrayed as professionals, these portrayals are limited to so-called caring occupations such as nursing or teaching. However, men are typically depicted as the capable partner, the wiser, maturer, and more authoritative counterpart, regardless of their status or profession (Aramendia-Muneta et al., 2020).

Although stereotypes are not necessarily negative, they become problematic when they reduce the wide range of differences among people to simplistic categories with harmful consequences,

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particularly for women such as body dissatisfaction, reduced self-confidence (Eisend 2010; Zotos & Tsichla, 2014), negative attitudes toward women leaders (Baldner & Pierro, 2019), and dampening women's entrepreneurial aspirations (BarNir, 2021).

However, gender stereotyping in advertising can vary among countries depending on the extent of gender equality, women empowerment, and gender-related values (Ford et al., 1998; Shaw et al., 2014; Eisend, 2019). For instance, recent meta-analyses of literature have found that the extent of stereotyping has decreased slightly over time, attributed to societal changes in mostly high masculinity countries (Eisend, 2019; Grau & Zotos, 2016). Although much research has been conducted on gender stereotyping in advertising across the world, there is little research on the topic in the Middle East. Responding to the call for more research on gender stereotypes across different societies (Eisend, 2019), this study examines gender portrayal in advertising in the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) for the following reasons.

While GCC countries are mostly conservative, patriarchal Muslim nations, countries such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have committed resources to empowering women. The UAE introduced a law in 2020 that ensures equal pay for men and women in the private sector (McKeever, 2020), and Saudi Arabia introduced reforms to boost women's participation in formal work ("Saudi Women," 2022). Emirati women lead in STEM areas and nontraditional roles for women. For instance, the minister of state for advanced technology and chairwoman of the UAE Space Agency, Sarah Al Amiri, was instrumental in leading the UAE mission to Mars in 2021; in addition, UAE had its first female Emirati captain in a commercial airline in 2022. More pertinently, the Advertising Business Group (ABG), a nonprofit organization advocating for responsible advertising and communication with members accounting for more than 70% of the region's advertising spend, released guidelines on gender stereotyping in advertising in the UAE (Serrano, 2021).

However, the first study to examine gender stereotyping in television advertisements in the GCC collected data for analysis in 2018 (Khalil & Dhanesh, 2020). Their study was the first to examine stereotyping in advertising in the GCC and applied a research approach used to study gender stereotyping in other parts of the world (Furnham & Bitar, 1993; Furnham & Farragher, 2000; Manstead & McCulloch, 1981, McArthur & Resko, 1975), which increases comparability of findings. However, since 2018 there have been major changes in the region described above that could have affected gender portrayal in advertising. Hence, this study replicated the study of Khalil and Dhanesh (2020) to assess changes in gender portrayal, if any, after four years.

GENDER STEREOTYPES AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES

Stereotypes are simple, acquired, often inaccurate, fixed, preconceived beliefs and expectations based on exaggerated and oversimplified generalizations about the supposedly inherent traits of an entire social group, and are often resistant to change (Gudykunst & Kim, 2002). Stereotypes are typically acquired through the process of socialization and through culturally dominant representations reflected in mass media texts, such as stereotypes portrayed in movies and advertising. They may be based on a range of social characteristics such as race, family structure, occupation, attractiveness, and/or gender (Baxter et al., 2016; Gudykunst & Kim, 2002).

Gender stereotypes are personal beliefs that certain attributes differentiate men from women, including physical characteristics (men are taller than women), roles (women as caregivers and men as providers), activity preferences (women like to shop; men like to do sports), and personality traits (men are independent and women dependent) (Chandler & Munday, 2016; Ellemers, 2018). According to Deaux and Lewis (1984), gender stereotypes have four components: trait descriptors (e.g., self-assertion, concern for others), physical characteristics (e.g., hair length, body height), role behaviors (e.g., leader, taking care of children), and occupational status (e.g., truck driver, housewife). Every component has a masculine and feminine version, strongly associated with males and females, respectively.

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