



Global Standards and Local Manifestations: Investigating Universal Arguments in Children's Advertising within the Arab Media Landscape

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Abstract:

This study is concerned with an in-depth investigation into the manifestations of cultural values contained in a sample of television advertisements for global products targeting children on the Arab satellite channels, using semiotic analysis.

Among the researcher's findings is that advertisers rely on employing themes that are considered universal arguments, unifying concepts regardless of cultural differences. Furthermore, television advertisements targeting children in the Arab region represent fertile ground for shaping cultural values and exporting them according to global standards

Keywords: Television Advertising, Childhood, Cultural Values, Semiotics.

I. INTRODUCTION

Values are one of the most important components of culture. They constitute a system that distinguishes societies from one another and gives them a referential specificity. Given the importance of this value system, the active institutions in communities, which are responsible for socialization, work on teaching these values and establishing them in individuals' minds to achieve belonging to their society. This process starts from childhood, as it is the first stage of shaping the individual's personality and laying foundations for better life understanding in the future.

In the past, the socialisation task was entrusted to the family, the clergy, the community and later on the school. Today, the societies, and under the quick development of communication technologies, witness a major and effective partner in performing this activity which is the media, mainly television.

This attractive means has occupied an important status for the audience especially children. This is due to the Advanced technical use of motion, sound and image that give the television a unique ability to transmit ideas, messages and information.

Television has earned a high social value since it affects standards, knowledge and behavioural attitudes of children. Knowing that there is a large percentage of children who are exposed to the TV regularly and for a long time.⁽¹⁾

The television acquired a stronger presence with the appearance of satellites and the spread of the several satellite channels. That presence has touched the Arab society families, to which those channels(open and crypted) have entered without permission, and the pioneering ones were MBC satellite channels group.

This group was founded in 1991 in London to become the first TV channels group in the Arab world. Along 34 years, MBC channels has become an international media group that enriches the life of millions of audiences.

One of the most prominent channels in this group is MBC1 channel for family intertainment in the Arab society⁽²⁾.

Therefore, we decided to make the latter the subject of our study in order to shed light on the specificity of the advertisements broadcasted targeting the Arab child, as advertising is the lifeline of the television institution, as confirmed by the Chairman of MBC Group.

Although the primary goal of advertising is purely commercial, it has become a social and cultural manifestation, where cultural values are reflected through the elements of the advertising discourse that serve the goals and principles of the producing companies. This is done by relying on innovative strategies that embody advertising stories centred on real-life situations that children live with their parents, peers or schoolmates, everyday, aiming to build a strong relationship between the child and the advertised brand or product, thus influencing parents' decisions.

The messages and ideas conveyed by TV advertisements can sculpt and guide children's future behaviours, opinions and attitudes through the values they reflect. With the adoption of international marketing strategies that ensure standardisation and a greater spread worldwide, needs and desires will be unified.

Therefore, we are asking the following questions:

- What are the cultural values contained in MBC1's child-orientated television advertising discourse?

In order to elaborate and research more on the variables of the study we are about to accomplish, we can ask the following sub-questions:

- What are the creative strategies and methods used to implement advertising ideas that target children?

- What are the mechanisms used to produce meanings and shape the semantic system that leads to cultural values in the child-oriented TV advertising message?

- Do the cultural values contained in mbc1's child-orientated TV commercials conform to the values prevailing in Arab society?

1- Key Concepts:

1-1- Childhood:

Is that stage where young children get to learn about themselves, about developing good habits that will shape their future and be good human beings. Moreover, a child's childhood is that period of their lifetime when they get to develop their personalities⁽³⁾. They must be exposed to a variety of situations to develop into responsible people, many of these are included in the TV adverts that children are exposed to daily.

1-2- Advertising:

Defining advertising comprehensively has been a persistent challenge within marketing. Here, we explore three key perspectives:

- **Philip Kotler (2007):** Advertising is the art of assisting both producers in defining their offerings for consumers, and consumers in recognizing their needs and how products can fulfill them.⁽⁴⁾
- **The American Marketing Association (AMA)** defines advertising as the non-personal communication of ideas and the promotion of goods and services by an identified sponsor who pays for the message.
- **Bernard Cathelat as cited In his famous book "Advertising and Society":** Advertising encompasses tools and techniques employed by commercial entities (private or public) to remotely influence a large audience without direct seller interaction. The ultimate goal is customer acquisition, either through brand introduction or product or service sales.⁽⁵⁾

Advertising extends beyond mere product promotion. It serves as a cultural carrier, reflecting and shaping various aspects. Advertisements embody the source culture of the product as well as the cultures of the advertiser and manufacturer⁽⁶⁾. Furthermore, advertising is considered as an integral component of culture itself.⁽⁷⁾

McLuhan defines advertisements as "the richest and most credible daily ideas on the comprehensive scale of cultural activities", while Schudson regards the advertising process as a window to a specific culture and a mirror reflecting culture.⁽⁸⁾

1-3- Children's Advertising:

Television Commercials are short videos produced specifically for television broadcast, typically lasting **under 60 seconds**. Regulations often limit the total commercial airtime within a program. These concise presentations resemble **advertisements** more than short stories, focusing on promoting a product or service⁽⁹⁾.

Children-targeted advertising refers to commercials promoting products, goods, or services primarily intended for children, either as the sole users or the main consumer group. The language, visuals, and overall presentation are designed to appeal specifically to children.⁽¹⁰⁾ These commercials often feature child characters to capture the attention of young viewers and generate interest in the advertised product. The presence of children can also add a social and familial element, potentially influencing parental decisions through emotional appeal.

Television advertising remains influential due to its ability to engage multiple senses simultaneously. Research suggests that sight and hearing are our dominant sensory channels, contributing to 90% and 8% of information intake, respectively. Combining visuals and sound can further enhance comprehension by 35% and information retention by 55%⁽¹¹⁾.

Television advertising directed at children encompasses all paid audiovisual messages broadcasted on television that utilize persuasive language and feature children as central characters. These commercials aim to convince viewers—children, parents, or both—to purchase a product designed for children's use or shared use with adults. The ultimate goal is to cultivate brand loyalty and secure long-term customers. These advertisements can air during programs intended for children or even during programs geared towards adults.

1-4- Cultural values:

According to various dictionaries such as Al-Mawrid, Lissan Al-Arab, Al-Qamus Al-Muhit, and Al-Qamus Al-Arabi Al-Arabi, values are the religious, moral, and social virtues upon which human society is based (Almaany). This is evident in the Quranic verses:

”قُلْ إِنِّي هَدَانِي رَبِّي إِلَى صِرَاطٍ مُسْتَقِيمٍ دِينًا قَبِيلاً مِلَّةَ إِبْرَاهِيمَ حَنِيفًا ۚ وَمَا كَانَ مِنَ الْمُشْرِكِينَ ﴿١٦١﴾ (سورة الأنعام).

“Say Indeed, my Lord has guided me to a straight path - a correct religion - the way of Abraham, inclining toward truth. And he was not among those who associated others with Allāh.”⁽¹²⁾ (Surah Al-An'am, 6:161).

”فَأَقِمْ وَجْهَكَ لِلدِّينِ حَنِيفًا ۚ فِطْرَتَ اللَّهِ الَّتِي فَطَرَ النَّاسَ عَلَيْهَا لَا تَبْدِيلَ لِخَلْقِ اللَّهِ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ الدِّينُ الْقَيِّمُ وَلَكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ النَّاسِ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٣٠﴾ (سورة الروم)

Also, "So direct your face toward the religion, inclining toward truth. [Adhere to] the fitrah of Allah upon which He has created [all] people. No change should there be in the creation of Allah. That is the correct religion, but most of the people do not know"⁽¹³⁾ (Surah Ar-Rum, 30:30).

"Correct religion" means a religion that is upright, stable, and without deviation.

Values are considered fundamental components of culture. According to Ibn Khaldun, they are the manners of people regarding their diverse livelihoods and dealings in worldly matters⁽¹⁴⁾.

They are the beliefs that individuals adhere to regarding the preferred type of behavior. They serve as a source of criteria, standards, means, goals, and preferred forms of behavior and are concerned with organizing social relationships. They may either integrate or conflict and change as situations and relationships change.

According to Kluckhohn and Alexander (1953), a value is "an explicit or implicit distinctive representation for an individual or group of the desirable that influences the choice among the available patterns, means, and objectives of behaviors.

For Hofstede, value are "inclinations to prefer one state of affairs over another. It is a directed feeling, sometimes positive, sometimes negative."

Pollay states that values determine all types of behavior, from simple purchasing processes to religious ideologies⁽¹⁵⁾.

Advertising messages can present two types of contradictory statements about values. De Mooij recorded the presence of paradoxical values in many cultures in 1998, and these value paradoxes are often present in advertisements. The researcher focused on distinguishing between what is "desired," which relates to individual choices, and what is "desirable," which is closely related to social norms.⁽¹⁶⁾

II. Methods and Materials:

1- Descriptive Method: In this study, the researcher will rely on the descriptive method due to the nature of the subject under study. It involves "a set of research procedures that integrate to describe the subject or phenomenon based on collecting, classifying, processing, and analyzing facts and data thoroughly and accurately to extract their meanings and draw conclusions or generalizations about the phenomenon or subject under study"⁽¹⁷⁾.

2- Semiological Analysis Method: Since the research involves analyzing the cultural values embedded in television advertisements directed at children, it requires analyzing both the explicit and implicit aspects, as well as the connotations and implications carried by its components concerning those values. Hence, the researcher has opted for the semiological analysis method, which is one of the most significant qualitative research methods that is fundamentally linked to the structural heritage adopted by various humanities disciplines (anthropology, psychology, sociology, literature, etc.).

Semiotic analysis is the most suitable method for shedding light on the mechanisms through which meanings are produced within semantic structures. It reveals the internal relationships of

pattern elements, then reshapes the meaning system to uncover, analyze, and critique meaning within a specific system.

Semiological analysis, according to Roland Barthes, represents "a form of meticulous research into the deep levels of iconic or linguistic messages, where the researcher maintains neutrality towards the message on the one hand and seeks integration on the other hand by addressing other psychological, social, and cultural aspects that can support this analysis in one way or another"⁽¹⁸⁾

Sign systems forming the components of advertising flashes, whether visual, linguistic, or musical, consider each sign as a node in an underlying network of potential relationships, according to Umberto Eco, who spoke of a network with distinctive characteristics forming the field of the overall meaning, and defines it as a sign or a set of signs that are associated with an infinite array of interpretations. This leads to the existence of a symmetrical relationship between the concepts of "**semiotic network**" and "**cognitive network**".

The relationships between the vocabulary that delineates the semiotic network are relationships of logical order, where this order does not imply "before and after," but rather "combination" and "conditioning"⁽¹⁹⁾.

The methodological steps for Semiotic Analysis of TV Advertising Messages at the study site can be summarized as follows:

- **Semiotic analysis of the image:**

The elements of Barthesian theory can be summarized as follows⁽²⁰⁾:

- Roland Barthes adopted from de Saussure the "theory related to the signifier and the signified, in addition to the dual concept of language and speech."
- Barthes adopted the concepts of designation and inclusion from Hjelmslev and worked on crystallizing them.

The designation and inclusion levels, embodied in the Barthesian approach, are specialized in the semiological reading of the image, while the advertising image also contains a linguistic message accompanying it, including both written and spoken elements. Barthes emphasizes the use of the linguistic message accompanying the advertising image to distinguish between what is descriptive and what is connotative.

- **Semiotic analysis of the linguistic message:**

Below is a presentation of the methodological steps for semiotic analysis of linguistic messages⁽²¹⁾:

- **Linguistic Approach:** This involves analyzing the linguistic system at its phonetic, morphological, lexical, and syntactic levels, as well as the meanings resulting from these levels.
- **Psychological Approach:** the linguistic text in advertising focuses on the recipient, enticing and captivating them by appealing to their susceptible sensitivity. It manipulates the recipient's emotions, tantalizes them, tickles their emotions, and prompts them to engage with the advertised subject.
- **Sociolinguistic Approach:** It carries various societal views and cultures, as advertising is a social linguistic production that highlights different social relationships. The advertiser attempts to reinforce, convince, or expose them to the public.
- **Discourse Approach:** Discourse studies focus on the concept of the context in which speeches occur, the relationship between linguistic and non-linguistic signs with their users and interpreters, and the situation from which they emerge, including language and culture.

- **Semiotic analysis of the music signs:**

A deep reading of the meanings contained in the **Musical Signs** accompanying television advertising messages requires us to refer to the principles of musical semiotics, which are considered subfields of semiotics.

According to Molino, in his study of "General Musicology and Semiotics", the semiotic triad is associated with three levels for analyzing symbolic forms⁽²²⁾.

- the neutral (essential) level which concerns human action manifested in its material form.
 - The poetic level which deals with production strategies, focusing on the conditions of artistic work creation, the author's intentions and objectives, the nature of the materials anused techniques and the meanings conveyed by the subject matter.
 - The sensory level which relates to reception strategies, consisting of a set of perceptual processes. Specifically, Nattiez stated that the sensory level describes the cognitive behaviors associated with the artwork in a given society .
- (This study does not focus on the sensory level as it is studying musical material or symbolic work rather than the receiving audience.).

3- Study Sample:

Our research community consists of a set of commercial advertisements broadcast on the MBC1 channel. These were recorded by the researcher over a period of six months, daily from 5:00 PM to 8:00 PM Algerian time, this timing is suitable for the break period for both children and parents after a long day of study or work.

A total of 150 advertising breaks were counted, comprising 890 advertising segments targeting various demographics, including 275 advertising messages aimed at children (taking into account repetition). Of these, 32 advertising segments feature children in prominent roles, but only 19 of them promote products specifically for children.

Comprising five segments as follows:

- The first segment features Panadol Baby & Infant (pain and fever reliever),
- The second segment features Signal Complete 8 toothpaste,
- The third segment features the "No Tangles from Johnson for Kids" set,
- The fourth segment features Downy fabric softener (Valley Dew and Summer Bloom),
- The fifth advertising segment is for DETTOL hand sanitizer and hand wash.

Their selection was based on the factor of repetition, they were the most frequently repeated during the recording period, appearing daily, even in every advertising break. The repetition is the main element in the mechanisms of advertising communication, facilitating memorization and recall. Furthermore, the link between memorization, recall, and the learning process in children was considered.

4- Results and discussion :

- The rules of cinematic grammar are clearly respected in all adverts (visual continuity: continuity of position, gaze continuity, sequential linking techniques between shots, transition speed between shots, lighting, camera angles, indoor and outdoor space...) to ensure a logical sequence and continuity in the sequence of the basic building blocks of the shots (frames) to ensure a logical sequence and flow of basic units in constructing shots (frames).

Thereby avoiding disruptions in the storytelling of advertisements, thus the meanings are conveyed completely and with flexibility that makes the receiving child and others (parents or the rest of the family members) enjoy watching a series of events, wich create

An emotional connection with the watching child and simplifying his cognitive experience, so that what he watches is close to the lived reality, or it is the ideal reality that every Arab family wants to provide for its children.

- Children play a fundamental role in advertisements targeting their peers, presented as main protagonists, aiming to give the advertised product a familial and social dimension.

That make it a behavioral reference for viewing children and encouraging them to be in the position they wish to be in, justifying consumption to their parents, and facilitating manipulation of parental emotions.

- The ages of children in the Ads under study range from five (05) years, as in the Panadol Baby & Infant product advertisement, to thirteen (13) years, as in the Signal Complete 8 toothpaste advertisement, and school age for the rest of the advertisements.

Achieving early relationship building with children, as 75% of the recognized (discovered) marks before the age of fifteen (15) remain preferred during adulthood.

- To influence the target audience, the appropriate strategy was adopted for each advertising message:
 - The "common influence strategy" or "simultaneous appeal to parents and children together" was adopted to present the necessary arguments that amplify the desire of children: enjoying their childhood, appearing as heroes in their surroundings and with their peers, while addressing the fears of adults (parents) through the safety, health, stability, and happiness provided by the advertised product.
 - The strategy of "enticing parents to purchase for their children" was used, focusing primarily on mothers to introduce the brand or product to their children, who become more influenced and receptive to the advertised message, which revolves around the love relationship between the mother and her child.
- The advertisements presented in this study exemplify the model of the ideal child: smart, handsome, kind-hearted, heroic, small in features but big in behavior, in addition to portraying the image of a healthy child.

Aiming to support the concept of "The king child" "L'Enfant Roi" directly associated with the advertised products. This establishes a new status for the child within the Arab family and society by associating these qualities with consumerism.

- The happiness, joy, and fun provided by the advertised products and brands represent warmth and luxury, often lacking in a child's reality. Through imaginative discourse captivating children's minds, adults are led to believe in the advertisement despite not necessarily believing in the products themselves.
- The innovative advertising strategy combines emotional and rational elements. Emotional strategies, demonstrated through dramatic narratives depicting children's daily lives with their mothers in most ads, humor, and entertainment, highlight the product's role as the ideal solution to children's and mothers' problems. This evokes emotional connections between viewers and ad details, such as feelings of motherhood, health, joy, freedom, independence, and self-confidence.

Rational strategies provide scientific and logical evidence for the effectiveness of the advertised products, convincing recipients, especially parents, of their merits and enhancing their loyalty and trust in the promoted brands.

- To execute innovative ideas in advertising flashes and ensure effective communication, designers and directors adhere to various standards:
 - **balancing** the elements within each flash through their distribution on the screen, focusing on specific elements to attract viewers' attention.
 - **Harmony** is achieved through clear coordination between different elements forming the overall pattern of each ad, both within each partial system (color palette, shapes, decor, physical traits of characters, verbal message, music, etc.) and between partial systems.
 - Precise consideration is given to **eye movement**, ensuring that transitions between scenes or elements occur smoothly, facilitating their retention and recall in children's minds without overwhelming details.
 - **Simplicity and unity** are emphasized through coherence and cohesion between different units of the advertising flashes and their elements. Real-life stories narrated in the ads and the presentation of scientific and logical information in a simple manner compatible with children's cognitive abilities.

Ensure that the idea conveyed in each advertising message is delivered smoothly and clearly without tedious details that may alienate audiences. This application aligns with theories of memory (Piaget and Inhelder), as the simplicity and clarity of the presented information enable children to interpret and adapt it to their acquired ideas at this developmental stage.

- Advertisers capitalize on children's rapid information processing of television content within the first few seconds of viewing, employing it to aid children in memorizing and recalling the advertised product or brand. Ensuring their presence in the initial seconds of each flash secures their storage in children's short-term memory. Through a series of scenes and shots depicting real-life situations of children with their surroundings, the conveyed meaning remains in the child's long-term memory.

This meaning revolves around the advertised product as the source of happiness, love, uniting children and their mothers. It becomes the sole hero possessing the magical charm that helps mothers overcome all difficulties and threats facing their children, protecting them from harm and ensuring a childhood filled with safety, health, joy, freedom, and excellence.

This imbues the product with a soul, making it appear lifelike, within the context of producers shaping the brand image and disseminating it through advertisements. This enables companies to convey values through their products and instill them in consumers' minds.

- The verbal message in all advertisements came in two forms: **spoken** and **written**. The advertising text, with all its components, performs specific functions that work in harmony with the accompanying visual imagery: directing the recipient towards a specific meaning because the image can carry multiple meanings; a consolidating function that guides the recipient towards image-specific connotations to establish a finite series of meanings and limit its infinite references; in addition to a substitutive function by providing necessary explanations and clarifications that the image alone cannot convey; and a reminder function to reinforce the product and brand in the minds of the recipients.

The advertising text fulfills these functions through persuasive techniques that enhance the effectiveness of the advertising message as a whole, such as: definition, praise, metaphor and tone, poetry, narrative, argumentation, and suggestion, along with employing the feature of "global advertising texts" that do not require these texts to adhere to language rules, as most of them appear in multiple languages and dialects, except for the Dettol product advertisement, where its verbal message was in proper Arabic, except for the product name "Dettol" as it is a brand name.

- The absence of children's voices in most advertisements, despite the crucial role they play in every advertising flash (except for the Dettol hand cleaning product advertisement and the advertisement for Johnson's baby products), negatively affects the right construction of the child's linguistic repertoire, limiting their cognitive and expressive abilities.

- All the artistic and semiotic elements comprising the advertisements—the subject of study—and the techniques employed in their design work to present the advertised product as a living entity, entirely devoid of any explicit purchasing action exploiting the recipient, thus rendering it redundant. Additionally, the image of the brand, constructed by a set of values and reflected in the advertising messages, prompts the targeted audience (children and parents) to engage in consumption based on their influence and conviction that the advertised product is the most suitable solution and ideal companion for confronting daily life difficulties. It becomes the source of happiness and security, an essential part of their daily lives that cannot be relinquished.

- Promoting materialistic values by urging children and their parents to consume, while completely neglecting to encourage production, sacrifices a range of social values and ethics to strengthen the idea of consumption as an "ideal value." The semiotic network in each advertisement works to establish the idea that "you must own to be happy" in the minds of children, making them materialistic by teaching them—as is the case with adults—that what they buy and use represents them, defines them, and makes them unique.

- Advertisers relied on employing themes deemed universal arguments, unifying concepts regardless of cultural differences, such as child and motherhood, health, education, joy, and cleanliness. These themes were adopted by manufacturing companies to transcend national boundaries, surpassing their local cultures, as they represent universally acceptable arguments. Consequently, these advertisements are acceptable for broadcasting on television channels primarily targeting the Arab community, which is characterized by its cultural specificity.
- Although the series of meanings reflect some Arab values, whether derived from Islamic religion, lifestyle, or fundamental Arab cultural values, in the studied advertisements such as kindness, parental piety, honesty, participation, belonging, membership, cooperation, collective unity, compliance, commitment, and adherence to traditional cultural heritage, as well as openness to other civilizations... The primary purpose is to attract the Arab audience's attention to the advertisement itself and to assert the positioning of the brand and the promoted product in Arab society, not to reinforce or advocate for them, as it quickly becomes evident that they are merely bait that turns into a definite invitation to values that distinguish them, notably reflecting aspects of a modern, contemporary culture.
- Brand systems promote a modern lifestyle that may not align with Arab Islamic culture, yet they create new needs for both Arab children and women, which may be false but will find a place in their psyche due to the emotional appeals employed. Especially as Arab women today are in a phase of asserting their independence and liberation from male dominance, they appear in most advertisements shouldering the responsibility of their families alone in the absence of the father, and likewise, the child is no longer the naive being who accepts everything dictated by adults.

5- Conclusion:

It becomes evident that advertisers and producing institutions are well aware that understanding cultural differences is a crucial element for the success of international advertising, as evidenced by the presence of contradictory values in all advertisements. Despite being directed towards the Arab community, characterized by its cultural and social specificity, the presence of value paradoxes and the call for what is desired (individual choices) through universal modern values are more pronounced than what is desirable (associated with social norms) that traditional and local values could reflect.

In conclusion, it is evident that television advertisements targeting children in the Arab region are fertile ground for shaping cultural values and exporting them with unified and patterned global standards, especially since Arab culture has long been characterized by a struggle between tradition and modernity, the old and the new, the past and the future, despite its close ties to Islamic religion being considered the dividing line in this conflict. Therefore, socialisation institutions must take the necessary measures and actions to protect this vulnerable group (children) from various hidden messages conveyed by advertising discourse that threaten their security on several levels: health, social and cultural.

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