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The Future of Creativity: A Textual Analysis of a Mug Coffee House Commercial

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Abstract. This paper aimed to analyze a Mug Café House commercial that reached a high viewership and generated debate in the Arabian world. The commercial was examined based on Stuart Hall's "encoding/decoding" theory; therefore, three levels of analysis have been discussed: the preferred level, the negotiated level, and the oppositional level. The analysis explained the reasons behind criticizing the commercial and fighting creativity generally in the Arabian countries. Also, it reveals the negative impact of religious hegemony and educational systems that do not give priority to teaching art and encourage critical thinking. The paper provides many ideas to encourage creativity and support commercials that show Arabian producers' abilities to compete in the global world.

Keywords. Textual analysis, fighting creativity, religious hegemony, encoding and decoding, A Mug Cafe House

Companies utilize creative methods to advertise their products in ways that surprise and shock their audiences. This was recently demonstrated by Mug Coffee House Company, a new company selling coffee in Kuwait. As part of its goal to compete with global companies, Mug Coffee House Company chose to set itself apart from its competitors, though apparently thinking outside the box is regarded as fighting in the Arab world. In this essay, a Mug Coffee House Company commercial will be analyzed according to Stuart Hall's "encoding/decoding" theory. Ideological criticism explains the reaction to this commercial, while semiotics explains the meaning of some signs in light of culture.

By the end of this paper, the reader will have an understanding of how the social and educational Arabian system sometimes obstructs the acceptance of new ideas and moves society backwards. Additionally, the reader will note how religious misunderstanding becomes a reason to fight any new idea, even if it does not oppose Islamic traditions. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the reasons for the strong opposition to the commercial – opposition which has stifled the future of creativity and art. The paper also seeks to encourage the reader to think about ways to support imaginative people.

What Do the Commercial and the Agency Stand For?

The Mug Coffee House Company commercial was produced by MB Vision. MB Vision was established in 2009 as a startup business by Manal Al Gharabally. The company serves the Arabian countries in terms of providing graphic design and production services. In a short period

of time, the company proved its reputation by cooperating with big-name companies in Kuwait, such as KOC and KPC. The company gained the customer's trust as a result of providing reliable services (MB Vision, 2016).

In 2013, an important event happened: Soud Al Anezi became a partner in the company.

After this addition, a new sector was developed, which was the animation sector and that expansion contributed to increasing the provided services targeting new segments. One of the new projects involved was working in the Kuwaiti cinematic scene by doing 3D and VFX work (MB Vision, 2016).

The commercial was released on YouTube in May 2018 during Ramadan, the traditional season during which Muslims fast and spend time watching new TV productions – both dramas and commercials. This tradition has become more habitual as Arabian people have become more interested in and aware of productions. The commercial's duration was approximately one minute and four seconds. As of the time of this writing, the commercial had 9.3 million views (Mug Coffee House, 2018). The commercial incorporates surrealistic art. It could be defined as an art movement "aimed at expressing imaginative dreams and visions free from conscious rational control" (Surrealism, 2015).

The ingenuity of this commercial stems from two main elements: the music and the visual scenes. They serve the commercial's theme, transferring the customer to a scary world with unique creatures. The commercial incorporates ideas adapted from Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). It shows that a customer will get lost in a world of real coffee, like Alice who was lost in a world of great things (BBC Arabic News, 2018). The commercial's geography depends on magic. It includes pyramids because the company is trying to speak to the larger Arab world (which includes Egypt, home of the pyramids), and not specifically to the Arabian Peninsula. Besides the scary theme, enjoyment is an essential component. The commercial has short shots of green, purple, and yellow hands as well as clapping moths and colorful hearts. The production appeals to people's brains by letting them think deeply.

The Framework

Semiotics is the science of signs and meaning-making-- a sophisticated way to analyze messages and culture (Branston & Stafford, 2003). Any sign is composed of three elements: signifier (the object itself), signified (the meaning linked to the signifier), and a code (Saussure, 1959). The ideological criticism deals with analyzing the content within the system (Zhou & Sloan, 2015). Semiotics helps in explaining the meaning of some signs and ideological criticism explains why the people refused the commercial.

Karl Marx has excellent insight into ideology and class relations. According to Marx's theory, a society consists of two main related components: the base and superstructure. The base is composed of "production forces" and the relations between people to exchange and produce goods. The base sets the superstructure's entities and concepts regarding its societal institutions, government, religion, education, media, and rituals. The base and superstructure influence each other, but most of the time the base influences the superstructure. The ruling class that owns the material force controls the intellectual aspects, too. The control over technology and resources limits and determines what people can do. Problems resulted when unethical capitalists maximized personal profits by exploiting workers (Storey, 1998).

Power in the hands of those people who are in positions of power reflects the reason why the Kuwaiti ministry determines the laws and the types of productions that can be launched (Freedom of expression and media in Kuwait, 2018). This idea is indicated by Marx, who says

that any society is a mixture of base and structure, and that people who have power influence the ideology of the people admitted to it (Storey, 1998).

Religious hegemony is another framework that determines the negative response to the commercial. Gramsci (2009) used hegemony to refer to a process in which a ruling class does not only control the society but guides people in regard to intercultural aspects. In Arabian countries, fanatic religious people try to control other people's minds. They failed in their studies and have made religion into a business. Their task is made easier when most of the people are not educated and do not have opportunities to work (Dreamtveg., 2018).

Young people in Arabian countries have suffered from unemployment throughout the years. In 2010, during the Arabic revolutions, unemployment rates among youths were very high and reached 10% or 27% in many countries (The Economist, 2016). This bad situation applies to the illiteracy percentage as well. Among fourteen Arab countries, illiteracy ranges from 45% to 80% and from 28% to 35% in six others (Hammoud, 2005). Under these conditions, people strongly commit to Islam in an incorrect way; it becomes a means of ensuring a good life in heaven; although, Islam opposes this idea. Islam encourages people to perform excellent work in life. Additionally, Islam respects people's freedom even if they do not believe in Allah. The Quran points out that there will always be non-believers and that it is for God, not for people, to deal with them (Crabtree, 2013).

The sciences and taste in art were represented as high priorities at the beginning of Islam.

The Islamic world was credited for contributing to enriching this knowledge (Lackey, 2013). Furthermore, it is estimated that Islamic art dates back one thousand years from the establishment of Islam in the seventh century when the Ottoman Empire and the Safavid Empire reached their apogee. Islam is not represented by a particular set of religious pictures, as could be found in Christian or Buddhist art. Instead, Islamic art has few fully religious symbols. The term "Islamic art" refers to any art produced in Muslim countries (Brenner, 2016).

One theory explains the meaning of hidden messages in the commercial. The British author, Stuart Hall (1980), established the mass communication model of encoding and decoding. Hall proposes that the sender tries to deliver a specific message, but the receiver decodes it differently based on his or her knowledge, experiences, and social context.

Understanding and misunderstanding are determined largely by the degree of "symmetry/asymmetry" between the producer and receiver positions in the communication process (Hall, 1997).

Hall suggests three positions for the reader of a text: preferred (denotative level), negotiated, and oppositional (connotative level). In the preferred reading position, the reader decodes the messages in a way that a sender does and accepts the preferred reading. In the negotiated reading position, the reader accepts the preferred reading to a large extent. However, a reader tries to modify some of the meaning to be consistent with his or her knowledge or interest. Unlike the preferred reading position, in the oppositional position, the receiver rejects the entire idea and receives it negatively (Chandler, 2002).

Preferred Reading: Creativity and Popular Culture

At this level, the message that the company intends to deliver is transparent. The company wants to look different and stand out from its competition. Other coffee companies simply reinforce the idea that you need your coffee in the morning or use a theme of refreshment or awareness.

I believe that the music, the meaning of some signs, and the theme serve the scary world. Based on this preferred level, the main character is a person who does not have a specific shape

because the company does not want the audience to focus on that person. Another sign is a black man who appears to be the antagonist. He prevents people from entering Mug Coffee House.

Another scene shows a person split into two parts, and it is revealed that his heart is actually a coffee bean. This bean is filling a cup of coffee which is held by a scary-looking woman.

Some scenes are very expressive and reinforce the commercial's creative theme. The opening scene shows many people standing in lines and drinking coffee. Then their heads are transformed into large coffee mugs. This is not just a scene; it is intended to tell the audience that the coffee will change their moods completely. Another scene shows many people falling from a hill and landing in a mug, one by one. This indicates that the viewer will forget all the people and put his or her focus on the coffee.

The climactic scene that reflects the company's goal is one in which guards appear on two sides, and one woman tries to cut off the head of the Starbucks mascot (the slogan of Starbucks). This reflects the idea that the cafe provides high-quality coffee and reinforces its ability to enter this highly competitive market. The company wants the customers to demonstrate more patriotism and support the Kuwaiti economy. It makes an important point that companies, in general, are afraid of competing with global businesses. Mug Coffee House is clever enough to avoid including the competition's name so as to avoid facing legal punishment. Instead, it includes only the competition's mascot.

The rap music in the commercial represents another preferred meaning. The music was produced by Queen G, a popular rap producer. It mixes Arabic and English words in a harmonious way. For example, the artist sings "I need" in English and then "my coffee" in Arabic. This mixture is consistent with popular culture in Kuwait; as Storey (1998) defines it, "popular culture is the culture that originates from the people. It takes issues with any approach that suggests that it is something imposed on the people" (p.9). Additionally, people write in the Arabic language while simultaneously using some English letters as a way to look cool (Riyadh, 2012). This reflects an integration of both Western and Eastern cultures. Similarly, it speaks to those Kuwaiti students who have been exposed to Western consumerism while either studying or traveling abroad. Additionally, many new songs use English words.

Negotiated Reading: Unfair Competition Stands Behind Creativity

The commercial is successful advertising. However, I believe the company could improve its marketing by fixing some signs that may be understood negatively. The first issue is that the company tries to compete with a foreign company – specifically, Starbucks. This is the top coffee-selling company in the world. Its fans are extremely loyal to the brand. The problem is that, in general, people are more loyal to American companies than they are to national companies. Arabs assume that foreign companies produce higher quality products.

Lackey (2013) claims that there are many reasons behind the lack of development of the Arabic economies. Currently in a number of Islamic countries, religious courses are more important than scientific ones. Arabians who like to get a good education enroll in schools located in the West. Other factors impeding investment are wars and the status of chaos within Arabian countries that create that kind of fear of investment. Lastly, many Arabian people think their lives will end soon, so they decide to enjoy their lives rather than thinking of the future.

Having this high level of fatalism does not encourage free enterprise (Lackey, 2013).

Even under these circumstances, I believe that we need more trust in our Arabian products, but once we did not achieve the same standard of global companies, a company can pick another national company at the beginning. Then they can move to represent this strong

competition. Therefore, people loyal to Starbucks did not accept the competition. They consider the act of cutting the slogan to be an insult of their favorite brand.

On the other hand, conflict exists between Israeli and Palestinian Arabs over who gets what land and how it is controlled. There is a common thought that Starbucks supports Israel and that Arabs should stop buying from companies (like Starbucks) that financially support Israel.

This thought has been widespread since the second Intifada in 2002. Even if it is not true, it is still on the minds of many Arabs, and no one can ignore the notion that the company wants to specifically target people who prefer national companies over global ones that support Israel's economy. However, on its website, Starbucks clearly declares that it does not support any religious group:

Starbucks has been and remains a non-political organization. We do not support any political or religious cause. Additionally, neither Starbucks nor the company's chairman, president and CEO Howard Schultz provide financial support to the Israeli government and/or the Israeli Army in any way (Facts about Starbucks in the Middle East, 2015).

Oppositional Reading: Masonic and Violent

This commercial was criticized for many reasons, including the presentation of a violent scene. The problem with Starbucks' inclusion in the commercial is not necessarily the fact that Mug Coffee House used its competition's mascot; rather, the problem is with the context of its use: cutting off the head of the female mascot. Violence is not appropriate, especially at this time when Muslim radicals are suspected of being terrorists and being affiliated with ISIS. Since 2011, ISIS has been engaging in more aggressive insurgent tactics after losing territory in Syria and Iraq (Country Reports, 2017). The Muslim community has become more worried about violence in the name of Allah and Prophet Mohammed in different regions. Though, the majority believe their own community is not supportive of extremism, while the general public is opposed to it (Abdo, 2017).

Other people say that violence is not acceptable in the advertising world, even if it does not target children. The company wants to take advantage of the fact that advertisers prefer scenes with violent acts because such scenes improve ratings. Scholars argue that this is a money grab that comes at the cost of children's mental and emotional health (Russell, 2012).

Another problem stems from the use of some symbols. Like many new ideas, the commercial has been met with resistance. Mug Coffee House announced that it wanted to create this kind of chaos, but it must be careful when choosing symbols that represent the company.

Some symbols are considered as opposing Islam and the culture, like the single eye and the skull, which are symbols of freemasonry. Because surrealistic art is not popular in Arabian countries, viewers made a connection between these symbols and freemasonry instead of regarding the symbols as serving the scary theme that this commercial seeks to convey.

Even if the company depended on surrealism, it would be better to avoid these types of signs because they are similar to the symbols of freemasonry, and because they create controversy among Arab people, whose behaviors are controlled by religious hegemony.

The Freemasonry movement started as a guild for stonemasons in medieval Europe, but it was converted into a social organization (Inside the Secret World, 2014). Freemasonry is still most popular in the British Isles and some countries in the British empire because the movement spread by the advance of the British Empire. The number of Freemasons increased quickly in the 21st century. Affiliates by this time varied between two million to more than six million

(Britannica, 2018). The organization's ideas opposed Islamic rules. According to Islam Online (2015),

a Muslim should never affiliate himself with any organization that works for the destruction of his religion; rather, he should regard the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) as sources of his conduct. The Mug Coffee House commercial could have portrayed the same scary theme while using different creatures that are less offensive and controversial to Arab people.

People's Reactions to The Commercial: Analyzing #MugcoffeeHouse Hashtag

Within 10 days after this commercial aired, it began trending on Twitter under the hashtag #MugcoffeeHouse. This trending analysis reflects the audience's reaction to the hashtag and reveals an extensive amount of criticism, as well as a few admirers, in addition to the social and economic system. Few people were supportive of the commercial. Some people were so attached to the music, they no longer considered their surroundings in the cafe or thought about the unique creatures. Some examples of tweets are: "I am attached to the music, and I did not taste the coffee until this moment," which indicates an unintended effect. Also, the music became popular at weddings, where people danced to it.

A few companies were curious about whether customers liked this type of commercial.

These companies surveyed people on Twitter, asking if they going to try Mug House coffee. Another unintended effect of the controversy was an increase in the number of searches for information about freemasonry.

Citizens were not the only ones who criticized the commercial. A BBC Arabic presenter spoke out against the commercial; the anchor spoke to the director of the company and asked parents to keep their children away when the commercial aired because it contains a violent scene. She did not show any appreciation for the company's efforts. The backlash led a Kuwaiti channel to refuse to air the commercial.

Freedom of Speech and Refusing to Air the Commercial

No one can ignore the fact that commercials require creativity and imagination. Jhally (2006) states that "the function of this new industry would be to recruit the best creative talent of the society and to create a culture in which desire and identity would be fused with commodities to make the dead world of things come alive with human and social possibilities" (p.100).

According to the producer of the commercial, Manal Algharabi, after the commercial aired on YouTube, the Kuwaiti ministry refused to air it, and did not provide a clear reason why. The producer indicated, in an interview, that no one had spoken with her to address the ideas that the commercial presents, or to at least provide a particular reason for the refusal to air the commercial (BBC Arabic News, 2018).

In regards to art production, Kuwait has many creative production agencies and is considered the most supportive Gulf country. A refusal to air the commercial confirms the idea that Herman and Chomsky (1988) state: "the levers of power are in the hands of a state bureaucracy, the monopolistic control over the media often supplemented by official censorship." Rejection is opposed to the constitution of Kuwait, which upholds the right to one's opinion and guarantees "freedom of expression, freedom of press, and freedom of communication." Article 36 states: "A person will have the right to express his opinion by speaking or writing or otherwise" (Freedom of expression and media in Kuwait, 2018).

Why Did People Receive This Commercial Negatively?

The negative public opinion toward this commercial reflects the fact that Kuwaiti society has a high cultural homogeneity based on tribal and Islamic affiliations. I believe that many people who spoke out about the commercial did not actually see it. They simply repeated what they heard from others. A Kuwaiti writer, Eptihal Alkateeb, announced in her interview with Wafaa Alkilani that, unlike Western societies, we prefer to hear information rather than look for it.

Some people did not indicate any reason for their rejection of the commercial. They simply expressed curiosity on Twitter about whether the company has another good idea. Most people are affected by other people's opinions, especially in Arabian countries, where social groups have a great effect on people. Social groups are often influenced by religious hegemony, which relates to how the elite use religion as a tool to achieve their goals and impose their perspectives. In the Arab world, fanatic religious people can easily achieve their goals when there is a lack of education and jobs.

Some people liked the commercial but did not admit this in public. The spiral of silence theory explains this fear. The theory states that individuals have a fear of being isolated from those around them; therefore, they hesitate to share their opinions with others in public (Noelle, Neumann, 1984). A second reason regards the mental process. Elaboration likelihood theory indicates that people do not consider all of the elements of advertising. Instead, they consider only what comes easily to their minds (Baran & Davis, 2011), and symbols related to freemasonry come easily.

History of Criticize Art in Arabian Countries and Religious Hegemony

Fighting artistic work and shaming people for betraying Islam and their culture is not limited to this commercial. For example, comic festivals in Jeddah have been criticized; some people have lied to the public about what happens at these festivals in order to stir more anger and controversy. On Twitter, some claimed, "Comic-Con is the devil worshippers' party in Jeddah." Another claim states: "Comic Con is an event that goes against Sharia and Islamic values and the General Authority for Entertainment plans to go ahead with it in a few days time in Jeddah" (Moore, 2017).

Another example is the fact that producers of an Omar episode about the life of a companion of the Prophet Muhammad were criticized because they presented it as a drama in a series. After it was aired, a representative from Al-Azhar (a religious institution) claims that the production company did not try to contact Al-Azhar to get their approval. Even if the company did, they will not be given that approval.

It should be clear today that if there is no law opposed something, it is fine to do. Some fanatic religious people are still promoting their misunderstanding of The Quran. For example, the people of Islam are forbidden from drawing people based on some perspectives. The drawing of beings with souls is prohibited unless the artist makes a division between the head and the rest of the body (Noor & Baaz, 2003).

What Is the Next After Refusing to Air the Commercial?

One can argue that the new commercials will be identical to those that are spreading across the Arabian countries. No creative advertising will be produced where no support exists for advertising that takes great time and effort. The dependence on public figures, a new trend in advertising in the Arab world, will increase because companies can rest assured that they will

not have trouble with censorship. In addition, people will be satisfied with this type of advertising.

Additionally, MarketWatch reports that a brands' dependence on a celebrity will contribute to increase profits by an average of four percent (Selling, 2018). One study found that over half of participants trusted the products mentioned on celebrities' social media profiles and decided to buy those products, which indicates that this strategy is effective (Rawas, 2017).

As the use of public figures in advertising increases, creativity is killed, even if we do not notice this happening. Herman and Chomsky (1988) indicate that "the ability to produce flak, and especially flak that is costly and threatening, is related to power" (p. 26). Power is represented in the Kuwaiti ministry which controls the media.

How to Accept New Ideas in Arabian world?

Producers can create more creative commercials and overcome difficulties by first changing people's ideas, according to cognitive dissonance theory. This theory indicates that attitudes can be changed if new ideas are disseminated gradually (McLeod, 2014). One way to encourage the acceptance of creative commercials that do not correspond to familiar concepts is to make educational reforms in the Arab world, which will influence how people use and experience the art. Bychkov (2018) argues that art is utilized in all subjects to achieve a specific goal. Art serves to elevate an activity, promote agendas, or enhance the religious practice.

Therefore, art has a powerful impact on society. Teaching art and its importance is as essential as teaching the sciences. They are interconnected and together help society make progress.

Practicing critiques in schools and teaching critical thinking in different subjects are other ways to promote the acceptance of new ideas. Nawal Alsawdawi (2016), an Egyptian intellectual, confirms that Arabian people learn obedience – not critical thinking – in school, and says that it is time to teach children how to argue with others. Abu Muhammed (2012) states that teaching philosophy, political science, anthropology, and sociology leads to an increase in critical thinking and common sense. He argues that in the Gulf states, critical thinking is limited to memorizing rules and applying them without question. Kline (2018) discusses the same issue by indicating the differences between obedience and responsibility, although they are used interchangeably. He points out that if a teacher wants to increase the capacity of students' learning, they should have opportunities to make decisions. Responsibility is taught when teachers give students a chance to try and make mistakes and discuss these mistakes with them.

Conclusion

This Mug Coffee House Company commercial is a milestone in the advertising world in Arabian countries because it is different in content and performance. Dependence on celebrities and common themes eliminates creativity. Although supporting the producers' abilities, there are some critical notes on some scenes. Nonetheless, I am against fighting freedom of creativity. It is the right for people to like or dislike this commercial, or even criticize it, because criticism is proof that people using their minds. In this way, societies are changing.

The biggest concern is not the coffee sales, because the company can prove high quality in the long run, but one should think about opposition of art, creativity, and accusing people of being non-Muslims and the future of art in the Arabian world as well. Changing people's minds and making some educational reforms, like teaching critical thinking and different kinds of art is the first step to ensure the promotion of critical thinking. While technology is always followed

by social change, which contributes to raise the awareness of concepts and being open minded to the world, a great change will happen in the future.

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