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Faculty of Women for Arts, Science and Education
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**The Representation of Gender Identity in Television Advertisements:
A Cultural and Visual Analysis**

A Thesis Submitted to

**The Department of English Language and Literature
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Abstract

Television advertisements could cause an uproar in media and society, making them a rich field for studying social and cultural values. They also greatly impact people's perception of gender identities through their repetitive representation of certain male and female figures. This makes the study of television advertisements an academically rewarding endeavor. This thesis examines the representation of gender identity in selected television advertisements in Egypt. The theoretical framework derives from two fields of study: gender studies, particularly views on gender identity and theories of popular culture, which explain the interplay of hegemony, patriarchy, and capitalism. In this respect, the thesis also uses methodologies derived from the fields of semiotics and visuality studies to decode the characters, dialogue, verbal, and non-verbal signs, as well as the cinematic techniques used in television advertisements. The research analyzes the selected Egyptian television advertisements as divided into four categories: 'Man-up', 'The Domesticated Woman', 'Objectification of Men and Women', and 'Breaking Gender Roles.'

Keywords: Egyptian television advertisements, Gender identity, Male gaze, Semiotics, Visual culture, Visual techniques, Popular culture, Butler, Mulvey, Strinati, Fiske.

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Dedication

To my mom.

Table of contents:

1- Abstract.....	2
2- Acknowledgments and Dedication.....	3-4
3- List of Images.....	6
4- Introduction.....	7
5- Chapter One: Conceptual and Methodological Frameworks.....	14
6- Chapter Two: “Man-up” and “The Domesticated Woman”.....	65
7- Chapter Three: Case Study: Objectification of Men and Women and Breaking Gender Roles’ Categories.....	111
8- Conclusion.....	169
9- Works Cited.....	175

List of Images

1- Birell at the Barbershop.....	68
2- Birell at the Office.	77
3- Chipsy Extra	89
4- Melody New Uniform	122
5- Melody Main Heroes	128

Introduction

Television advertisements are not the creator of gender identities. They, rather, shed light on constructs that already exist and reproduce them in an appealing way that makes imitating them desirable. Also, their repetition has another prevailing effect. As Dominic Strinati comments, the media does not construct women's identities as an instance, however, their marginalized position exists in the culture where media consolidate it through its representation (185). In addition, the media is a vehicle for maintaining and securing the capitalist society's power; advertising propagates for an ideology that "reinforce(s) the existing power structures while denying the right of existence to alternative and oppositional ideologies" (Correa 5).

Furthermore, Jean Kilbourne argues that advertising is an extremely powerful social force that should be taken seriously (qtd. in Cortese 14). Advertisements have a powerful effect on people, as individuals are subjected to them everywhere. In particular, the appealing language of advertisements unobtrusively convinces people of the ideological constructs behind them as "they sell moral values and cultural images, such as concepts of success, love, and sexuality" (Cortese 14). One of the reasons advertisements are dominant is that they toy with people's desire to convince them to buy a product. Douglas Kellner points out that,

Not only do advertising images try to sell a product by associating it with particular socially efficacious characteristics, but also they sell nothing less than an expansive worldview, a lifestyle, and system of values consistent with the imperatives of consumer capitalism (Kellner qtd. in Cortese 12).

Within this context, capitalist enterprises go to great lengths to sell their products by creating desirable identities in television advertisements that people internalize and practice. Therefore, for people to enhance their lifestyles and feel that society accepts them, they purchase the product. Strinati concludes that there is a powerful link between popular culture and consumption, since some popular cultural productions, such as television advertisements, determine what people will buy (212).

Anthony J. Cortese refers to the reason that Erving Goffman focuses on and analyzes advertisements in his book named *Gender Advertisement* (1987) by arguing that,

Ads tell us a lot about ourselves, about the link between fashioned image and "natural behavior." Ads tell us about the way self-image is developed and socially determined. Advertisements affirm existing social arrangements. In a social or

public setting, the minutest behavior has meaning. Gesture, expression, and posture not only expose how we feel about ourselves but also construct a scene that embodies cultural values (1976). Goffman's focus on gesture, expression, and posture ideally suits advertising analysis (qtd. in Cortese 13).

Another reason Goffman analyzes advertisements is because "advertisements try to tell us who we are and who we should be" (qtd. in Cortese 13). This urge to inculcate and influence society needs to be studied. In particular, the way advertisements construct, frame, and confine gender identities cause many problems. For instance, it limits the freedom of people to choose their own gender and act in the way they desire

This study aims at examining the representation of gender identity (male and female) in selected television advertisements, through examining the following: the values the advertisements attach to "femininity" and "masculinity", the role models for women and men in television advertisements, and the way the social hegemony of capitalism reinforces social gender roles in television advertisements. To that end, the study examines the use of dialogue and language in presenting gender identity, the use of nonverbal signs to reflect/construct gender identity, and the use of characters/actors as signs in a manner that both reflects and constructs gender identity.

According to Strinati, advertisements are about style, playfulness, superficial exercise, surface, and jokes (213). They lack authenticity, integrity, intellectual depth, and seriousness (213). Strinati's features occur in the majority of television advertisements. For instance, in "the Dundū" television advertisement (the Dundū advertisement is fully analyzed in Chapter Three under the category of "Objectification of Men and Women") about bottled milk, the storyline claims that the company's bottled milk is superior to breast milk. The child actor mocks and shames another child who has not been weaned off breast milk and who does not drink the company's bottled milk. The company's bottled milk is, therefore, associated with masculinity and becoming a grown-up man. Moreover, the lack of intellectual depth and seriousness occurs when the idea of being "macho" or masculine is haphazardly related to stopping breast milk and starting to drink bottled milk.

Another dimension to consider is that for capitalist corporations to sell their products and generate profit, they must associate them with an appealing characteristic. It is also interesting to note that when the Consumer Protection Authority in Egypt banned "the Dundū" advertisement,

it was not for its influence on conceptions of femininity and masculinity, but its breach of "public morals" and its negative use of "children". As Egyptian Streets news website states,

One of this year's most applauded Ramadan television advertisements, Juhayana's 'El- Dondoo,' has been banned in Egypt by the Consumer Protection Authority along with three others for disrespecting public morals, customs, and traditions and for using children. The advertisements by Juhayna, Al-Ahram Beverages Company, Cottonil, and Dice were seen as breaching public morality and promoting harassment. (2016)

Visual literacy is the key to decoding the hidden messages behind the advertisements. For that reason, Dwight Macdonald describes the average television audience as a recipient of messages "Mass culture is imposed from above. It is fabricated by technicians hired by businessmen; its audiences are passive consumers, their participation limited to the choice between buying and not buying" (Macdonald qtd. in Strinati 7). Because of their strong alliance with capitalist ideology, advertisements merge their main purpose of selling the product itself into selling values and lifestyles (Strinati 225). This merging is subtle and far-reaching, and it is important for the continuation of the consumerist cycle. Moreover, it is considered natural and valid. It is an effect of the capitalist society that "for all intents and purposes produces commodities, making commodities seem natural is becoming at the heart of the ideological practice. We come to understand our desires in terms of the commodities" (Correa 16).

Furthermore, there are two key topics regarding gender in advertisements. Cortese argues that "First, ads tell us that there is a big distinction between appropriate behavior for men or boys and that for women or girls. Second, advertising and other mass media reinforce the notion that men are dominant and that women are passive and subordinate" (13). This applies to the construction of gender by attempting to sell a product by making it attractive through associating it with a fancy or an appealing gender characteristic. For instance, if one buys this product, it will make them manlier, even if being a man is entirely unrelated to the product. Thus, advertisements sell "nothing less than an expensive worldview, a lifestyle, and a system of values consistent with the imperatives of consumer capitalism" (Kellner qtd. in Cortese 12).

Matt Ridley provides another thought-provoking point that is similar to the mainstream's opinion about physical differences between women and men and how they lead to their different characters and desires. He illustrates that,

Men's bodies evolved to meet the demands of competition within a male hierarchy, fighting over women, and providing food and shelter for their family. For the same reason, men and women also have different minds. Sexually, these differences make men competitive and powerful, controlling wealth and seeking fame(qtd. in Cortese 31-32).

Additionally, he explains the aims of women as “over time, women who chose rich and powerful men left more descendants, and, therefore, the urge to mate with wealthy, powerful men influences even some of today's women” (Cortese 31-32). Kilbourne negates these stereotypes for harming women and men.

The damage that men suffer is due to the expectations of society from them. The above quotation demonstrates that men are expected to be wealthy and strong, as many assume that these are the characteristics of the “ideal man”,since they enable him to provide protection for women. The goals women supposedly aspire for manifested in the previous quotation show the vulnerability, passivity, and dependence of women. While the man is competitive and seeking his fortune, the woman is 'looking for the man who will achieve for her the success, protection and shelter'(Cortese 31-32). It stereotypes women and constructs this passive identity for them until they start to internalize that it is not their role to seek their own fortune by attempting to protect themselves through job-seeking. Women are encouraged to look for the man who accomplishes these tasks for them, which creates and constructs a dependent identity that lacks self-sufficiency.

Furthermore, this can be reflected in advertisements through body language, as Kilbourne points out:

The body language of women and girls remain (passive, submissive, vulnerable) and very different from the language of men and boys. Probably the best way to illustrate that is to put a man in a traditionally feminine pose, it becomes obviously trivializing and absurd. (09:22-09:38)

Kilbourne illustrates that it is not only women that are objectified and portrayed in a provocative harmful method in advertisements, but men too as “[t]here are stereotypes that harm men... Men are objectified more than they used to be...Men's body dismembered in ads turning men into sex objects” (00:08:44-57). However, Kilbourne contends that women suffer more from these

stereotypes since “Men do not live in a world in which they are likely raped, harassed or beaten” (00:08:58-09:19).

One of the reasons for using gender studies, in this and similar studies, is believing that men and women equally suffer from the weight of the patriarchy. This idea contrasts with feminist views that adopt a binary oppositional perspective through which women are the victims, and men are to be blamed. Sarah Gamble defines feminism as,

the belief that women, purely and simply because they are women, are treated inequitably within a society which is organised to prioritise male viewpoints and concerns...men are regarded as strong, women are weak; where men are rational, they are emotional; where men are active, they are passive; and so on. (vii)

Thus, the thesis builds upon this idea by not adopting an accusatory tone against a certain gender, but realizing that patriarchy adversely affects both women and men. The theories of Judith Butler illustrate this stance. This collides with W. K. Kottiswari's definition of feminism that “[i]t challenges authority, stereotypes, icons and sexist values” (2-3) and is not biased against men. It negates the constructed gender binarism and fixed roles due to the existence of various genders such as queer, transgender and so on.

Judith Butler argues that there should not be a common universal identity for women or men (12). Moreover, she claims that femininity or masculinity, strongly align with a number of presumed behaviors and actions that are imposed upon or expected from each individual. The main determiner of this identity is the body. As Butler states, “‘the body’ appears as a passive medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed or as the instrument through which an appropriative and interpretive will determine a cultural meaning for itself. In either case, the body is figured as a mere *instrument or medium* for which a set of cultural meanings are only externally related” (12-13). Where one does not choose his/her identity, it becomes a natural consequence of the body's actions.

Most of the selected television advertisements are screened by satellite television since lately private channels are becoming more ubiquitous, popular, and intriguing than terrestrial channels. According to Mohamed EL-Fateh Hamdy, the viewership of satellite television has increased hugely due to the remarkable diversity of programs, musical channels as well as the appearance of the commercial channels that screen a great number of television series and movies (45). This paves the way for the second reason; since people watch satellite television

more than terrestrial television, “[a]dvertisers had completely walked away from terrestrial channels” (qtd. in *The Report: Egypt* 2011). In other words, nowadays, most Egyptians watch satellite television more than terrestrial television.

The reason behind examining television advertisements in Egypt is because, as A. Roy puts it, “There is a deficiency of research regarding the role of the media in the construction of gender identity in developing countries” (qtd. in Correa11). This is particularly true in Egypt: advertising has been tackled in Europe and other countries such as the USA by Dr. Jean Kilbourne (2014), Europe by Roland Barthes (1973) and Anthony J. Cortese (2008), and in India by Deodrin Maria Correa (2009). The reflection of gender identity in television advertisements is rarely examined in Egypt, particularly through the application of literary theories that the researcher will utilize.

As private television's launching runs parallel to television advertisements' bombardment, they depend on each other for success. The reason behind choosing the selected television advertisements during the time span from 2008 till 2016 is that this is roughly the beginning of Egypt's private television (*The Report Egypt*, 196). A few years after 2001, private channels started to flourish, increase, become mainstream, and more competitive.

This study will tackle the advertisements from 2008 till 2016 due to their ubiquitousness, popularism, and the influential notions they promote. They are divided into four categories: (Man-up, The Domesticated Woman, The Objectification of Men and Women, and Breaking the Gender Roles). Each category has a theme. Under each category, a set of advertisements that strongly reflect aspects of the category are examined. This thesis is an attempt to analyze the representation of gender identities in the selected Egyptian television advertisements.

Chapter One is concerned with the theoretical framework. It explains television advertisements from a popular culturalperspective, and links them to the theory of gender and performativity. Outlining the theoretical framework here focuses on cultural contextualization and the manipulation and politicization of the body by imposing meaning over it is utilized and the appropriation of marketplace language in relation to gender. The chapter also outlines the methodological tools used to study the television advertisements, such as semiotics and visual tools. The Egyptian television advertisements are categorized into four categories: Chapter Two analyzes the first two categories: (Man-up and The Domesticated woman). The main aspects of the analysis are the stereotypes and the gender roles drawn and manifested in the chosen

television advertisements. However, the focus inChapter Three is on how gender is used in a sensual text to sell products.The chapter also shows one of the attempts to break the gender stereotypes in advertisements. Chapter Three deals with the other two categories: Objectification of Men and Women and Breaking Gender Roles.Finally, the conclusion sums up the findings of the thesis and offers recommendations for future research.

Chapter One
Conceptual and Methodological Frameworks