A Cross-Cultural Study of the Representation of Women in Instagram Cosmetic Advertisements

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Abstract

Beauty advertisements have long been the focus of feminists as the promotion of idealised beauty standards is seen as oppressive and even demeaning to women. The overwhelming majority of research in this topic has concluded that traditional advertising tends to represent stereotyped images of women in which they are often portrayed as submissive and vulnerable. However, as there is now a pronounced shift towards online advertising, possible changes in the portrayal of women in a non-traditional medium such as social media are investigated in this study as the portrayal of women in social media is still a relatively unexplored area of investigation. In this study, the visual representation of women on the Instagram posts of two cosmetic companies, a multi-national US-based company (*Maybelline*) and a Middle-Eastern based independent company (*Huda Beauty*) are examined. The images of women in sixty posts from the two Instagram accounts of both companies were analyzed using Goffman's (1979) and Kang's (1997) frameworks of gender display in advertisements. The results show that despite the popular perception of social media as the 'great equalizer' in terms of the creation and depiction of content, the vast majority of the images analyzed still depict women in the categories that are associated with disempowerment. Surprisingly, however, the images that depict independence and self-assertiveness by both companies feature women wearing the Muslim veil.

Keywords: Beauty advertisements, Social media, Representation of women, Cross-cultural advertising

1. Introduction

Most people are exposed to hundreds of advertisements that encourage them to purchase certain products on a daily basis. These advertisements are seen as "socializing agents" that construct people's ideologies and standards. Beauty advertisements, in particular, are seen to have a powerful effect on shaping the standards of beauty and attractiveness (Kang1997).They are also viewed as having an influential economic power that manipulates and define those beauty standards (Jones2008).

Although beauty standards have varied over the years, historically, women have undergone several transformations in order to meet the cultural standards and requirements of femininity (Banner1983). These requirements are often reinforced by the beauty industry. The promotion of idealized beauty standards in beauty advertisements has also attracted the ire of feminists for creating a "cult of unrealizable beauty" (Lakoff and Scherr 1984). Although the feminists' theory of beauty has changed from an oppression model to a discourse model (Davis, 1991, p. 28),diversity in the representation of women is very much a central tenet of feminist thoughts. Many feminists criticize the media for perpetuating their beliefs on how women should look, thus reinforcing the patriarchal control that women have been subjected to since millennia. Courtney and Lockeretz's (1971) study was one of the earliest that analyzed the representation of women in magazine advertisements. They find that gender stereotypes were prevalent as women were generally portrayed as home-makers and often assigned to decorative roles. Similar findings were found by Belkaoui and Belkaoui in 1976.

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They conclude that the portrayal of women in advertising does not match the true roles of women in society as "mass media, as expressed by advertisements, have not adequately matched this manifestation of social change and, with few exceptions, tend to portray women in unrealistic settings, and in under-representative numbers" (p. 172).

The most significant study on the portrayal of women in advertising is, perhaps, Erving Goffman's (1979) study.He found six main categories that control the depiction of women in advertising. Goffman argues that the portrayals of women as dependent and submissive, and men as independent and confident do not necessarily reflect the reality, but rather with how most cultures perceive both genders. His (1979) framework has been widely used by other scholars to examine the portrayal of women in advertisements, for example, Kang (1997) who examined advertisements in women's magazines. She concludes that there seems to be superficial changes in the portrayal of women as the common ideologies and stereotypes found by Goffman almost two decades earlier are still depicted in the advertisements she studied. Lindner (2004) also utilized Goffman's (1979) and Kang's (1997) categories to study and compare the portrayal of women in two magazines from two different genres; *Vogue* and *Time*. She finds that even though women are no longer portrayed in the traditional housewives' role, but there are other stereotypical notions that have taken place to portray women as submissive and vulnerable.

All of the studies cited above on the representation of women in beauty advertisements are on print media. There appears to be a distinct paucity of research on the same subject matter in online advertisements. One of these is by Plakoyiannaki, Mathioudaki, Dimitratos, and Zotos (2008) which studied the portrayal of women in advertisements on online web pages. They point out that although few non-stereotypical roles are prevalent; the majority of online advertisements still depict women either in decorative roles or as dependent on men. They add that sexism is more prevalent in the female-audience web pages than in other web pages directed to both genders.

Cross-cultural studies on visual representations of women in advertisements are also relatively under-represented in the literature. Jones (2008) states that globalization has had significant impacts on the beauty industry. It has, for instance, led to the promotion of stereotyped beauty standards across cultures. Thus, it is imperative that more cross-cultural comparative studies be conducted to understand these impacts better. One such study by Frith, Shaw and Cheng (2005) is on advertisements in local women's magazines in Singapore, Taiwan and the United States. Their analysis was based on the categories developed by Englis, Solomon and Ashmore (1994) on beauty types prevalent in beauty advertisements. Frith et al. find that Caucasian models are often found to be portrayed as sex objects while Asian models are more likely to be portrayed in a girlish way.

In this present study, we wish to investigate the visual representation of women on the Instagram posts of two cosmetic brands. One is produced by a multinational company from the U.S. (*Maybelline*) while the other is from a Middle-Eastern based independent company (*Huda Beauty*). Independent beauty brands are privately owned and established businesses that generally offer a limited product range. Beauty advertisements in the Middle East context have received little scholarly attention despite the fact that the beauty industry in this region is considered as one of the world's fastest growing (Staples 2016). Thus, we wish to investigate if there are differences in the representation of women in advertisements posted on Instagram by a multinational Western-based cosmetic company compared to an independent label Middle-Eastern based company. In light of the findings of previous studies on print beauty advertisements, we also wish to study if there are changes in the representation of women on Instagram, given the fact that social media is often viewed as the 'great equalizer' in the creation and depiction of content. As stated above, studies on the representation of women on social media advertisements, especially those produced by independent beauty brands are relatively scarce. According to Garcia (2017), independent beauty brands have reached an average growth rate of 19.6% from 2013 to 2014 in the United States. Despite the exponential growth of these so-called 'indie' make-up brands in recent years, very little scholarly research has yet to be conducted on them. The focus on beauty advertisements on social media by an independent cosmetic company from the Middle East is thus, a novelty. Thus, we believe that our findings can contribute some knowledge in these relatively unexplored areas.

2. Research Methodology

Research design

Goffman's (1979) and Kang's (1997) frameworks of gender display in advertisements were utilized to analyze the images of the advertisements in this study.

Klassen, Jasper and Schwartz (1993) mention two advantages of using Goffman's categorizations of gender display to analyze advertisements: First, it allows the researcher to explore the subtle elements in advertisements, and second, it provides an insight into the portrayal of both sexes and the roles they occupy in the society.

Goffman's portrayal of both genders in advertisements is summarized into the following six categories.

1. Feminine Touch
In this category, women are posing while their finger(s) is touching their face or body, giving the impression that women are fragile and soft. This pose can also be interpreted as sexually inviting. Men are seldom found posing in the same way in advertisements, which again indicates a stereotypical impression towards women.

2. Function Ranking
This category raises questions about the social hierarchy of both men and women. Men are often represented in the leading role while women, on the other hand, are portrayed in a supporting role.

3. Ritualization of Subordination
This is where women's physical body is lowered in some form or other of prostration, thus indicating a subordinate position.

4. Relative Size
Here, women are usually depicted as smaller and weaker as compared to men who are often shown as tall, strong and fit.

5. Licensed Withdrawal
In this category, women are seen as usually removed psychologically from the scene and they appear in advertisements looking down as in a state of withdrawal. This pose gives the impression that women are not aware of their surrounding as if they are always dreaming.

6. Family
The family is often depicted in advertisements as a symbolization of social norms. Advertisements often emphasize on depicting the special bond between the mother and daughter, and the father and son.

In this study, we also used the two categories introduced by Kang (1997) to examine the overall representation of women in advertisements. These two categories are:

1. Body Display
This category is used to examine the level of nudity represented in advertisements.

2. Independence and Self-assertiveness
This category was introduced to examine the overall representation of women, in terms of their portrayal as independent and self-confident beings.

3. Data collection and analysis

The collection of the data took place in the first four months of 2018. This time frame has been set to ensure that all the posts are up to date and have been uploaded within this time frame only. Thirty posts were selected from each of the two Instagram accounts (@maybelline and @hudabeauty) during this period. The criteria of choosing the posts are that each post must comprise a still image that features a female or male model and not the product only. As the second phase of our investigation includes analyzing the textual elements of these advertisements, we also selected posts containing captions of at least five words excluding the hashtags. However, the focus of this paper is ona content analysis of the visual images in the Instagram posts of these two companies only.

To ensure reliability, the two researchers and a colleague analyzed the images separately and then compared the results of our initial analysis together. Based on the results, it was agreed that some categories, primarily Goffman's categories, 'Function Ranking', 'Family', 'Relative Size', and 'Ritualization of Subordination', should be excluded from the present analysis as these categories, as defined by Goffman, do not appear to be relevant to an analysis of cosmetic advertisements as this particular type of advertisements generally feature only one gender in their images and they are mostly close-up shots. In addition, a new category which we labeled 'Half Gaze', was added to reflect the findings of the visual analyses in our study.

This type of gaze is different from Kang's (1997) 'Independence and Self-assertiveness' category in which a direct gaze is depicted as only a 'Half Gaze' is visible due to the other half of the gaze being obstructed by an object, primarily the model's hair. It is also different from Goffman's 'Licensed Withdrawal' as there is no visible evidence of being disassociated from the scene as in looking away from the camera.

Table 1 below provides an explanation of the definitions and coding rules of each of the categories that were used to analyze the images of these posts (adapted from Goffman, 1979 & Kang, 1997).

Table 1. Definition of categories and coding rules

Category	Definition	Coding Rules
Feminine Touch	Self-touching: The ritualistic self-touching is often associated with women which indicates that the body is delicate or precious. Fingers or hands touching an object/product: The hands cradling an object or a product. This ritualistic touching is to be distinguished from the utilitarian kind that grasps, manipulates, or holds (Goffman, 1979, p. 29).	At least one aspect of the definition must be seen in order for an advertisement to be included in the 'Feminine Touch' category.
Licensed Withdrawal	Head/eye aversion: the lowering of the head indicates absence from the scene. Expansive smile Phone conversation Withdrawal gaze: looking away from the scene. Finger to mouth (covering the face with hands): indicates anxiety, fear or disengagement from the scene. For example: biting the finger. Finger to finger position: carries the same self-disassociated communication expression and indicates withdrawal from the scene.	At least one aspect of the definition must be seen in order for an advertisement to be included in the 'Licensed Withdrawal' category.
Body Display	Nudity/body revealing clothes. 'Close-up shots where the shoulders of the models are bare are considered as nudity' (Kang, 1997, p. 985).	The image must reveal at least one bare shoulder to be included in this category.
Independence and Self-assertiveness	Evaluating the overall representation of women in advertisements. For example, directly gazing at the camera	The model is depicted with both eyes looking directly at the camera/viewer.
Half Gaze	Looking directly at the camera, but with half of the face covered either with the model's hair or is cropped out of the photo. In addition, in some advertisements, the model is depicted in a sideways pose, hence only half of the face is visible.	The model is depicted as looking directly at the camera/viewer but with only one eye as part of the face is covered with either the model's hair, is cropped out of the photo or in a sideways pose.

Each post was analysed according to the coding rules above. If an image was found to include elements of more than one category, then it would be included under all these categories.

4. Findings

Table 2 below presents a summary of the findings of the analysis of visual images on *Maybelline's* Instagram posts, according to the categories defined in the previous section:

Table 2. Summary of findings for Maybelline's visual analysis

Category	Licensed Withdrawal	Feminine Touch	Independence and Self-assertiveness	Body Display	Half Gaze
Number of posts	18	20	10	8	3

The findings show that the majority of the cosmetic posts in *Maybelline* are included in more than one category with the vast majority of the posts being in the categories of 'Feminine Touch' and 'Licensed Withdrawal'. Kang's (1997) category of 'Body Display' was seen in eight posts while her 'Independence and Self-assertiveness' category which is expressed through a direct gaze with both eyes looking at the camera or viewer is depicted in ten posts only. This category represents images of women that depict independence and confidence, as defined by the 'Direct Gaze' in this study. The other posts that are included in this category in the *Maybelline* advertisements, featured images that were included in other categories, namely, 'Licensed Withdrawal' and 'Feminine Touch', which are regarded as categories in which women are represented as fragile and disengaged, not as independent and confident beings. Thus, there seems to be a contradiction in the images that are presented in some of the posts.

With regard to the new category developed by this study, 'Half Gaze', only three posts of *Maybelline* portrayed women gazing directly at the camera but with only one eye as half of their face is covered, cropped out from the photo or in a sideways pose (refer to Image 1below).

Image 1: Half Gaze category (*Maybelline*)

Image 2: Independence and Self-assertiveness category (*Maybelline*)

This category was introduced to highlight a new situation that is different from both the direct gaze and the withdrawal gaze. This new category appears to be a middle level between these two opposing situations. The act of covering half of the face while looking directly at the camera can be interpreted as reflecting an underlying desire for confidence and independence. However, this desire is seen as still bound to the conventional representations of women in advertisements, as discussed previously. It is also interesting to note that out of the 10 posts that were included in the 'Independence and Self-assertiveness' category, only one post depicted the model in that category only and no other, which incidentally is an image of a woman in a Muslim headgear or *hijab* who has both eyes looking directly at the camera in a decidedly confident pose(refer to Image 2 below).

Table 3 below presents a summary of the findings for *Huda Beauty's* Instagram posts:

Table 3. Summary of findings for Huda Beauty's visual analysis

Category	Licensed Withdrawal	Feminine Touch	Independence and Self-assertiveness	Body Display	Half Gaze
Number of posts	23	12	9	3	3

The results from Table 3 above show that 'Licensed Withdrawal' has the highest number of representations in *Huda Beauty*'s posts followed by 'Feminine Touch'. This is similar to the findings obtained from *Maybelline*, as stated in the previous section. 'Independence and Self-assertiveness' or 'Direct Gaze' was seen in approximately 9 posts. 'Body Display' and 'Half-Gaze' appeared in three posts respectively. Although the majority of the posts are included in more than one category, as in *Maybelline*, such posts are actually fewer in number for *Huda Beauty* (19 out of 30 posts for*Huda Beauty*compared to 25 out of 30 posts for *Maybelline*). In addition, another interesting finding to emerge from the visual analysis of *Huda Beauty's* posts is the fact that unlike *Maybelline* which had only one post that was solely represented in the 'Independence and Self-assertiveness' category, as stated in the previous section, three posts from this company depicted the model in that category only, thus clearly marking it as representing independence and confidence.

Coincidentally, similar to Maybelline, two of these show women with veils looking directly at the camera (refer to Image 3 and Image 4 below). No aspects of 'Feminine Touch' or 'Licensed Withdrawal' are visible in these images. 'Body Display' is not seen either. Therefore, these images clearly convey independence and confidence.

Image 3: Independence and self-assertiveness category (*Huda Beauty*)

Image 4: Independence and self-assertiveness category (*Huda Beauty*)

5. Discussion of findings

Some of our findings resonate with the findings of Goffman's (1979) analysis. For example, 'Licensed Withdrawal' and 'Feminine Touch' were the most frequently represented categories in both companies. In *Maybelline*, 'Feminine Touch' was the most prevalent category while the analysis of *Huda Beauty*'s posts showed that 'Licensed Withdrawal' made up the largest number of posts. This finding is consistent with Kang's (1997) study which showed an increase of the stereotyping of women in the category of 'Licensed Withdrawal' from Goffman's time. Both categories reflect vulnerability and weakness, thus these findings indicate that the stereotypical images of women have not changed much since Goffman's (1979) analysis. The traditional stereotypes of women being vulnerable and fragile are still maintained in the majority of online cosmetic posts and sexualized images of women are still prevalent on social media.

However, our results contradict Frith et al. (2005) findings in terms of female gaze in Western and Asian beauty advertisements as the majority of the advertisements they analyzed depicted women looking directly at the camera. The researchers suggest that industrialized societies, such as Singapore, Taiwan and the United States share similar standards in terms of how women should express themselves in front of the camera. According to them, '…as countries develop, Western conventions embedded in advertising production are affecting cultural change as a perhaps unintended outcome of globalization' (p. 59). The study of Lindner (2004), also found that the portrayal of women in the category of 'Feminine Touch' is decreasing. However, other categories such as 'Licensed Withdrawal' have remained prevalent depictions over the years.

Another finding that emerged from this analysis is the amount of skin shown in the cosmetic posts. Kang's (1997) category of 'Body Display' was only seen in three posts of *Huda Beauty* and eight posts of *Maybelline*, thus the number of posts that showed bare skin or 'nudity' is relatively higher in *Maybelline* than in *Huda Beauty*. As *Huda Beauty* is targeted mainly towards Middle Eastern consumers as well as Muslims from other parts of the world, this finding is not unexpected as cultural sensitivities and norms of their target markets would obviously be considered by any

company. Overall, out of 60 posts from both companies, there are only 11 posts that depicted 'nudity' and thus, in contrast with Kang's (1997) findings, the depiction of nude models or bare skin appear to be decreasing in beauty advertisements. However, it must be pointed out that in this particular type of advertisements, the focus of the images is mainly on close-up shots of the face and to a lesser extent, the head and shoulder of the models. Thus, the result as to whether the depiction of nudity in beauty advertisements is decreasing or otherwise is inconclusive at the moment.

Although there are 10 posts that depicted 'Independence and Self-assertiveness' or 'Direct Gaze' in *Maybelline* and 9 posts in *Huda Beauty*, the vast majority of these posts did not depict true independence and confidence. In both companies, most of the posts represented more than one category such as: 'Direct Gaze with Feminine Touch' or 'Direct Gaze with Licensed Withdrawal'. In order to confirm independence, the post must not show any other aspects that could be related to the rest of the categories. Therefore, posts that showed a contradiction in the body language were considered as not fully independent in terms of showing full female empowerment. Interestingly, the results show that there is only one image that reflects true 'Independence and Self-assertiveness' in the Instagram posts of *Maybelline* compared to three such images in *Huda Beauty's* posts.

Although women of the Middle East and Muslim world are often perceived as being repressed and submissive, it is rather ironic that *Huda Beauty* which represents the Middle Eastern context has a higher representation of images of independent women than *Maybelline*, a U.S. based company. In relation to this, our analysis also reveals that the only *Maybelline* post that depicted a solely 'Independence and Self-assertiveness' image features a veiled woman looking directly at the audience (refer to Image 2 above). Coincidentally, two of the three images of 'Independence and Self-assertiveness' in *Huda Beauty* also feature women wearing the veil (see Image 3 & Image4 above). It must be noted that despite the fact that *Huda Beauty* is a Middle Eastern- based cosmetic company, most of its posts do not feature veiled women. It is thus, surprising that when these two companies choose to depict models wearing veils or the *hijabs*, they are represented solely in the category of 'Independence and Self-assertiveness'.

The emerging trend of portraying veiled women is expected as many media articles have reported that one of the fastest growing consumer markets in the world today is the 1.6 billion Muslim market. Muslim consumer's spending on fashion and on cosmetics is estimated to be worth a respective $464 billion and $73 billion globally by 2019 (Janmohamed, 2016). Hence, this explains why even Western-based cosmetic brands such as *Maybelline* is taking a tentative step in targeting Muslim consumers by featuring veiled women in their Instagram posts. The fact that both companies chose to represent their veiled models in poses that are categorized as denoting independence and confidence can perhaps be attributed to a desire on the part of these companies to make a social statement on Muslim women and their so-called submissive status in society.

With regard to the new category, 'Half Gaze', only three posts are depicted under this category by both companies. Although it does not appear as frequently as the other categories, we feel that this category is significant as it represents the middle level between confidence and anxiety. Perhaps it can be viewed as an attempt by advertisers and beauty companies to gradually break the mold of images of 'Licensed Withdrawal' and 'Feminine Touch' which still forms the bulk of images on advertisements by cosmetic companies even on social media, as discussed earlier.

In addition, our analysis reveals that the representation of models in cosmetic advertisements is more diverse nowadays than ever. For instance, many of*Maybelline's* posts feature models from different cultural backgrounds and ethnicities.However, *Huda Beauty*'s posts mainly show Middle Eastern women only. Despite the fact that *Huda Beauty* has now become an international brand, the majority of their models have the common features of Middle Eastern women. It is also observed that these women all have fair to medium skin tone. None can be considered as dark-skinned despite the fact that the Middle East is a vast region consisting of various ethnicities with varying skin color.

Image 5: A male model featured in a 'ritualistic touching' pose (*Maybelline*)

Hence, there is less diversity in the images portrayed by *Huda Beauty* compared to *Maybelline* as perhaps consumers in the Middle East, who form the bulk of *Huda Beauty*'s market base, have fixed ideals of beauty standards compared to *Maybelline* consumers who are more receptive to diverse beauty standards.

It is also observed that the type of celebrities featured in *Maybelline* and *Huda Beauty* are models, beauty bloggers and social media influencers rather than actresses and singers as in traditional advertising. In the world of social media, make-up artists and beauty bloggers are now seen as the new celebrities. They are perceived as having more influence on consumers than celebrities which explains why cosmetic companies feature them in their advertisements (Bianchi, 2017). Some of the social media celebrities featured on Instagram cosmetic advertisements are men. For example, Manny Gutierrez,a famous social media influencer and beauty blogger, has teamed up with *Maybelline* to give beauty tips to men and women. Gutierrez is featured in two of the images in our data. As observed by Grau &Zotos, companies are now beginning to devote more attention to a once largely ignored segment of society- the LGBT community.

Noticeably, the images of Gutierrez in our data were included in the categories that were solely developed to study the portrayal of women, that is, 'Feminine Touch' and 'Licensed Withdrawal'. In one of the images, he is shown gently holding a tube of *Maybelline*'s Mascara. This "ritualistic touching" is defined by Goffman as gently holding or tracing a product in order to make it look appealing to the consumers. According to Goffman, ritualistic touching is reserved for the portrayal of women in advertising while utilitarian touching is prevalent in men's advertisements (see Image 5 below).

In another *Maybelline* post in our data, Gutierrez is portrayed as gently touching his face which also conveys the idea that the body is delicate (see Image 6 below).

Image 6: A male model in a 'Feminine Touch' pose (Maybelline)

Goffman states that 'Feminine Touch' conveys a message that the body is delicate and precious. It is somewhat ironic that categories such as 'Licensed Withdrawal' and 'Feminine Touch' which are often used to represent women in advertisements are now used to represent men. On the other hand, no male models are featured in *Huda Beauty's* posts as the portrayal of male or transgender models in cosmetic advertisements would be deemed as provocative and inappropriate in the Middle Eastern context, given the strict laws against homosexuality in this society.

6. Conclusion

The findings of this study clearly demonstrate that the overall representation of women as depicted on cosmetic advertisements on Instagram does not reflect major changes in the current portrayal of women in the media. Although the sample size is admittedly small, the results do show that stereotyped images of women prevalent in print media remain the norm in advertisements on Instagram. Indeed, Macdonald as cited in Gauntlett (2008) believes that the advertising world is seen as more resistant to change compared to other forms of media. "Advertisers generally lagged behind women's magazines in the cultivation of new modes of address, even when the evidence suggested that commercial advantages could be gained from modernizing their approach" (p.75). However, there seem to be some changes in how Middle Eastern or Muslim women are typically portrayed in the media and popular culture, as discussed above. This is an interesting phenomenon that needs to be studied further.

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