

Gender Preferences for Men and Women Advertising Models in Saudi Arabia

Kamran Siddiqui¹

Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University, Saudi Arabia

Marwah Adnan Alahmadi

Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University, Saudi Arabia

Abstract

Purpose: This research aims to examine gender preferences for men and women advertising models in Saudi advertisements. Saudi Arabia is known as one of the most gender-segregated society in the world, and it has gender-specific roles, characteristics, and behaviors that are undesirable for the other gender.

Methodology: The questionnaire was developed with the help of earlier studies on perceptions towards advertising models and validated by a jury of experts and focus groups. The gender preferences for ten product categories (including automobiles, baby care products, cigarettes, cosmetics for women, fashion, food & beverages, motorcycles, personal care for men, personal care for women, sporting goods) were examined for men and women models. Similarly, three personal preferences characteristics for both genders (face beauty, voice quality, and Islamic dress), two characteristics for women models (body shape, femininity), and two characteristics for men models (height-weight balance, masculinity) were examined for men and women models separately. Finally, a survey was conducted to solicit responses from respondents (N=412).

Findings: Results indicated significant gender preferences for gender-specific product categories and typical gender stereotypes in advertising models. Men models were preferred in men-specific products, and women models were required in women-

¹ All correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr Kamran Siddiqui at the College of Business Administration, (CBA), Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University, King Faisal Street, Dammam, 1982, Saudi Arabia or by email at KASiddiqui@iau.edu.sa.

specific products. Some product categories (including personal care for men and sporting goods) were ranked higher for men advertising models, while for women advertising models, other product categories (including personal care for women and cosmetics for women) were ranked higher. Masculinity was ranked highest as the preferred personal characteristic for men advertising models, while voice quality was highest for women advertising models. Finally, there is a significant difference between the preferred personal characteristic for men and women advertising models for three characteristics, including face beauty, Islamic dress, and masculinity and femininity.

Implications: Saudi Arabia is a unique society with predominantly unique cultural dominance. Consequently, local culture greatly influences advertisements. It has stereotyped gender roles even in advertisements. This study will establish a baseline for further research on the subject area.

Keywords: gender preferences, gender stereotypes, Saudi Arabia, advertisement

Saudi Arabia is a predominantly Muslim country and hosts the two holiest cities in Islam, namely, Makkah and Medina. Saudi culture is highly influenced by religion and has a gender-segregated society. It makes the study more interesting as gender segregation has translated a social and cultural norm to preferences in TV commercials.

Like any other country globally, advertising plays an essential part in the Saudi consumer market, but few academic studies have been conducted about advertising in Saudi Arabia or even in the Middle East. One critical cause of this lack of knowledge is the public perception of advertisements as foreign phenomena. Due to conservative thinking, most advertisers create advertisements outside Saudi Arabia (KSA) and later translate them into Arabic and use them in local media and markets. Therefore, it makes the KSA a compelling case study about public perception towards advertising models. Even though several studies have addressed advertising in Saudi Arabia, the general public's perception of advertising has not been explored. Therefore, this study investigates previously undiscovered public opinions towards advertising models (both men and women) in Saudi Arabia.

Literature Review

A stereotype depicts a social group that emphasizes one or more features, portraying a stereotyped image of that group that is neither true nor false (Kotzaivazoglou et al., 2018). Gender stereotyping in advertising is a global concept, and earlier studies have replicated this phenomenon in different countries such as Belgium (Verhellen, et al., 2016), Brazil (Paek et al., 2011; Antoniou, & Akrivos, 2020), Canada (Paek et al., 2011), China (Zhang, et al., 2009; Paek et al., 2011; Cheng, 1997), Germany (Paek et al., 2011; Knoll et al., 2011), Hong Kong (Prieler et al., 2015), India (Kathpalia, 2019; Griffin et al., 1994), Japan (Prieler et al., 2015; Ford et al., 1998), Malaysia (Tan et al., 2002), Middle East (Khalil, & Dhanesh, 2020), Poland (Griffin et al., 1994), Romania (Frunza et al., 2016), Saudi Arabia (Perry & Motley, 2010), Singapore (Tan et al., 2002), South Africa (Griffin et al., 1994), South Korea (Paek et al., 2011; Prieler et al., 2015; Nam et al., 2011; Kim, & Lowry, 2005), Thailand (Zhang et al., 2009; Paek et al., 2011), Ukraine (Kitsa & Mudra, 2019), United Arab Emirates (Slak Valek & Picherit-Duthler, 2020), United Kingdom (Griffin et al., 1994), United States (Zhang et al., 2009; Perry & Motley, 2010; Paek et al., 2011; Nam et al., 2011; Griffin et al., 1994; Cheng, 1997).

Gender-neutral branding and advertising are becoming increasingly significant since genders are classified in contemporary cultures in a more complicated way. As a result, advertising agencies and experts must look deeper into and obtain insights into the most relevant developing megatrends (Stavrianea et al., 2021). Marketers and advertisers might benefit from using a more thoughtful perspective on gender depictions in ads. Gender portrayals have a negative effect on brand-related effects and participant gender stereotypes (Åkestam et al., 2021).

Antoniou and Akrivos (2020) argued that the distribution of women's representation in advertisements is inconsistent with its women population in a country. Their research also supports the notion that advertising should promote women's well-being and not reinforce gendered roles and standards (Antoniou & Akrivos, 2020). However, masculine countries encourage gender stereotypes by using men to represent authority roles, whereas women carry supportive duties (Paul & Ahmed, 2021).

Even where there is equal opportunity in business, gender stereotyping continues. Certain elements, such as changes in familial/non-familial and home/workplace roles that affect women's careers have gently reduced traditional stereotypes by representing women in non-familial roles and job-related settings. Additionally, linking the gender and product type would strengthen traditional stereotypes (Khalil & Dhanesh, 2020). Another study provided three new women's roles (i.e., empowered, ornamental, and subaltern) based on the representations of women in magazines (Shinoda et al., 2021). The study results revealed that women have been depicted as career-oriented, flexible, and equal to men in various non-traditional activities over the years.

Scholars have explored the influence of culture in predicting the amount and type of traditional gender roles employed in advertisements (Paul & Ahmed, 2021). Culture refers to a unique way of life embraced by a population as a comprehensive guide to living (Soares et al., 2007). Culture comprises a unique set of beliefs, attitudes, values, habits, and behaviors of a distinct group. Culture has a massive influence on lifestyles. It may shape its follower's personality and actions, the style of speech, manner of thought, and the functioning of the economic system. Even the products consumed by consumers and how they are purchased are affected by culture. The culture of Saudi Arabia is based on the conventional approach of attitudes, values, and relationships, and most importantly religion (Bajaber, 2020).

Saudi society depends on the family and religious institutions to protect and preserve the values or beliefs of its people. The family structure in the KSA is based on the elements of customs, culture, and traditions derived from Islam. However, the economy has changed since discovering oil seven decades ago. Nevertheless, Saudi society has managed to maintain the status quo (Gause, 2011).

However, the traditional advertisement in Middle Eastern countries shows a couple wearing the traditional clothes, which for women is the abaya (a simple, loose over-garment, essentially a robe-like dress, worn by women in Saudi Arabia; also called cloak) and a scarf called a hijab. Men's white long robes are called thawb. Moreover, these traditional clothes can help viewers recognize where these people are from in Saudi Arabia. Additionally, the viewers without background knowledge of the

Middle Eastern countries can easily recognize an Arab culture. Therefore, all the cultural components presented to the viewers can create a perception of the regional culture (Sarmiento, 2019).

Saudi women spend more of their time at home compared to men. It means they likely watch more television than men and become more influenced by television advertising. With the new information about products and their benefits, Saudi women play the role of decision maker by determining what to purchase and from where, leaving the role of buyer for men who buy the items chosen by the decision maker. When it comes to purchasing power, Saudi women have almost double the control of men (Khraim, 2011). The primary explanation for the substantial influence of women is that the primary responsibility of Saudi women is domestic housekeeping and duties. Another study found that most representations of Saudi women in the ads were in the home (69%) (Abdul Cader, 2015). Although Saudi Arabia is a men-dominated society, women are the primary target market for television advertising aired on local Saudi channels, whether created in other countries or locally. The largest single customer segment in Saudi Arabia is women, representing 37% of the possible buyers of goods advertised on Saudi TV (Coutinho & Karankal, 2013).

The Preferences of Men/Women Models for Different Product Categories

Women advertising models have better ad recall than men advertising models (Prieler et al., 2015). In addition, models tend to become more gorgeous and attractive due to utilizing a particular product, and they are rewarded with respect, achievement, and admiration (Prieler, 2016).

While describing the typical gender stereotypes in TV commercials across three countries including Hong Kong, Japan, and South Korea, women were portrayed as major characters in advertisements for household products (Prieler et al., 2015). It was further argued that product type reinforced traditional stereotypes (Khalil & Dhanesh, 2020).

Another interesting study has linked the gender stereotypes in advertisements for politicians. It has been argued that women are more competent at dealing with "compassion" issues such as poverty, education, medical care, child-raising, and family

concerns. In contrast, men are better suited to "tougher" matters such as protection, foreign policy, military, business, and offense (Kotzaivazoglou et al., 2018).

Previous studies found that women are perceived as more likely to be at home. Based on such perceptions, consumers may form expectations about which gender is expected in which place and connect those expectations with the usual behaviors and products connected with those places. This knowledge may influence their future decisions (Prieler, 2016). The gendering of product categories toward target consumers has been discovered through research, both in masculinity and femininity. According to Baxter et al. (2016), compared to women, men are more likely to be shown outside in ads, professional jobs in business clothes, and in sports than in the home or in domestic settings. Advertising depicts men in public spaces when they contribute to domestic duties and women in home-based tasks and as principal consumers of household products. Model gender, content, and ad style are all influenced by the targeted product consumer's gender (Aley & Thomas, 2021).

Preferred Characteristics for Men/Women Advertising Models

Academic literature and advertisements propose some preferred characteristics for men/women advertising models. These characteristics are about their height, weight, and voice quality. Women who are obese, non-white, and over 40 have a hard time drawing attention due to their visual appearance which restricts their appearances in advertising (Antoniou, & Akrivos, 2020).

Literature suggests that women tend to use photos of themselves dressing in suggestive and exposing clothing on online dating websites, which makes them more preferable (Paul & Ahmed, 2021). This standard of women's body presentation on dating sites is similar to the prevalent use of suggestively clothed women in ads. In addition, the dating web reported that women prefer a tall man with muscles, while men prefer a beautiful face, sexy body, and an attractive woman. Because of that, men use profile photos to highlight themselves as strong, while women use profile photos to present themselves as feminine. Manliness and womanhood are socially determined and dynamic, meaning they are subject to change and adjustment over time. According to Kotzaivazoglou et al., (2018), masculinity results from historical, social, and cultural

dimensions and reacts to altering feminine roles. The new masculinity desires a less rigid, intellectual, dynamic, powerful politician who is handsome, emotional, kind, pleasant, honest, and sensitive.

On the other hand, in some website's advertisements, women appear more frequently than men. For instance, online dating sites present women as younger, shorter, having a feminine look, a perfect body shape, making seductive eye contact, and a close distance from the ad's viewers compared to men (Bharadwaj & Mehta, 2017). Most research conducted in the United States found that women were depicted as younger than men in advertising. The audience might infer each gender's "appropriate age" from such images (Prieler, 2016).

Advertising, according to experts, has the power to influence viewers' thoughts, habits, and attitudes. However, advertising and the media teach both genders about proper conduct, duties, and characteristics. As a result, it is critical to understand the nature of portrayals and stereotypes in ads (Prieler, 2016).

Methodology

The target population for this study was men and women, exposed to the local advertisements in Saudi Arabia. The data was collected from major cities in Saudi Arabia, such as Dammam, Riyadh, and Jeddah. Most respondents were business school students, faculty, and staff, advertising agencies staff, marketing professionals, and other professionals.

The questionnaire was developed based on earlier studies such as Siddiqui and Ahmad (2013). It has two sections: (a) gender preferences for product categories (Prieler et al., 2015; Khalil, & Dhanesh, 2020); and (b) preferences for men/women models (Antoniou, & Akrivos, 2020). A total of 30 items were selected for the questionnaire after a validation process by subject matter experts. All items used a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 5=*most desirable*, 4=*somewhat desirable*, 3=*neither desirable nor undesirable*, 2=*somewhat undesirable*, 1=*most undesirable*. Additionally, two demographic items were included: age and gender. The purpose of this research is to examine gender preferences in Saudi advertisements. Therefore, it is imperative

to use a gender-balanced quota sampling technique. Data was collected in several rounds. At the end of each round questionnaires were counted based on the respondent's gender. All efforts were made to make both genders equal in the sample. All items in the questionnaire are in English, with an Arabic translation for each item. The questionnaire was hosted on an online repository. Potential respondents were contacted through email/WhatsApp in multiple waves. Data was checked and cleaned after each round to remove any incomplete responses or responses with no variability (e.g., all questions were answered with the response category 3) and finally combined for analysis. During the first two weeks of January 2021, we collected 162 valid responses (men = 152; women = 10). In the next two week we collected another 89 valid responses (men = 40; women = 49). After that round, we had collected 206 valid responses from men and 45 valid responses from women. Since it was important for our sample to be 50% women, we opened our survey for another round, this time only accepting responses from women this time until we reached a total of 206 valid responses from women. Altogether, we received 533 questionnaires, 121 of which were discarded in data cleaning. The sample size was found adequate as per the guidelines given in the scientific literature for similar studies (Siddiqui, 2013; Siddiqui et al., 2016). The statistical analyses in this research were conducted using SPSS version 25.

Analysis and Findings

Table 1 shows preferences for men/women models in different product categories. Respondents indicated that there are significant gender preferences for men/women advertising models in gender-specific product categories. Thus, it supports typical gender stereotypes.

For instance, women models were preferred for cosmetics for women, personal care for women, baby care products, and fashion products. The overall mean score of preferences for the men models was 3.4, while the preferences score for women models was 3.2, on a 5-point Likert scale where 5=*most desirable* and 1=*most undesirable*. It shows that Saudis prefer to see men models rather than women models in different types of advertisements. Paired sample tests indicate statically significant

differences between men and women advertising models and their gender preferences for all ten product categories considered for this study.

Table 1

Preferences of Men/Women Advertising Models for Product Categories.

Product Categories	Preferences of men models		Preferences of women models		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Automobiles	3.99	1.13	3.18	1.16	10.85	411	.000
Baby care product	2.89	1.36	3.96	1.07	-12.54	411	.000
Cigarettes	3.09	1.60	2.10	1.15	10.66	411	.000
Cosmetics for women	2.13	1.44	4.10	1.16	-20.63	411	.000
Food and beverages	3.78	1.03	3.53	1.01	4.14	411	.000
Fashion	3.59	1.18	3.95	1.10	-4.88	411	.000
Motorcycles	3.94	1.21	2.36	1.10	19.37	411	.000
Personal care for men	4.40	0.98	2.20	1.25	26.83	411	.000
Personal care for women	2.21	1.50	4.05	1.19	-18.96	411	.000
Sporting Goods	4.16	0.91	3.41	1.07	12.76	411	.000

1=Least desirable; 5=Most desirable

Shaded=Preference for women models

Table 2 shows mean scores for preferred characteristics for both men and women advertising models. Personal characteristics such as face beauty and Islamic dress were ranked higher for women models as preferred characteristics. Men models were ranked higher on their masculinity. Both genders have scored almost equal on two characteristics: voice quality and body shape. Paired sample tests indicate a statically significant difference between men and women advertising models in their preferred personal characteristics for three product categories, that is, face beauty, Islamic dress, and masculinity/femininity. The other two categories, including voice

quality and body shape/balance, have minor differences and are not statistically significant.

Table 2

Preferred Characteristics in Men and Women Advertising Models

Preferred characteristics	For men models		For women models		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Face beauty	3.61	0.98	3.85	1.01	5.765	411	.000
Islamic dress	3.55	1.08	3.79	1.03	5.334	411	.000
Masculinity/ Femininity	3.97	1.02	3.75	1.10	-4.423	411	.000
Voice quality	3.85	1.01	3.86	0.99	0.477	411	.639
Body shape/Balance	3.87	1.01	3.85	1.10	-0.319	411	.752

Conclusion

This research aims to examine gender stereotypes and gender preferences for various product categories in Saudi advertisements. Saudi Arabia is known as one of the most gender-segregated society in the world. This society has gender-specific roles, characteristics, and behaviors that are prohibited or undesirable for another gender. This makes Saudi Arabia a compelling case for studying the public perception towards gender preferences and gender stereotypes for advertising models.

A survey was conducted with 206 men and 206 women (*N*=412). Data were analyzed using means and standard deviations and paired sample tests. Statistics were used to explain the differences in gender preference concepts in Saudi Arabia.

The results reflect that Saudi society is highly gender-segregated and demonstrates that typical gender stereotypes are present in advertising. For example, participants prefer to see men models in some categories of advertisements such as personal care for men, sporting goods, automobiles, motorcycles, food & beverage, fashion, and cigarettes rather than women models. On the other hand, Saudi people

desire to limit women's models to cosmetics, baby care products, and personal care for women advertisements.

Implications

This study addressed perceptions towards advertising and advertising models in Saudi Arabia. It focused on which gender survey participants prefer to see in advertisements for different categories of products and the most desirable qualities for men and women models in advertisements. Moreover, it adds ideas that relate to the marketing communications area.

The research is beneficial for advertising agencies because it may be helpful to them to consider the gender preferences highlighted in this study. Moreover, they would better understand the acceptable and unacceptable ads in terms of Saudi thinking.

Limitations

One of the most prevalent problems with surveys is that sometimes the perceived ideal answers are given, while the respondent's actual attitude could be different (Bajaber, 2020). Furthermore, the results of this study should not be applied to other countries due to the distinctness of Saudi's religion and cultural values. Additionally, even inside the KSA, the results may not apply to non-Muslim people because they were not included in this study. Finally, due to the sampling method, the respondents of this survey may not be representative of the country as a whole, particularly since they tended to be more likely to have a business or marketing background than the general population.

Further research

This research is an initial approach to shape the advertisements in Saudi Arabia. It mapped out a path for further research to follow. Other studies could provide considerably better results if they looked at a broader and more diverse national sample. Research using quantitative techniques like factor or cluster analyses could provide more support for the findings. Further research would enhance and make this study a role model for advertising in Saudi Arabia.

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Biographical Notes

Dr. Kamran Ahmed Siddiqui works at Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University as an Associate Professor of Marketing & Entrepreneurship. He received his PhD in Business Administration from Manchester Business School, UK, and his master's degree is in marketing from the University of Bradford, UK. He also holds an MBA-MIS from IBA, Karachi, Pakistan. He has more than 30 years of experience in the corporate

and academic sectors. He is also member of American Marketing Association, USA and Project Management Institute, USA.

He can be reached at the College of Business Administration, (CBA), Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University, King Faisal Street, Dammam, 1982, Saudi Arabia or by email at KASiddiqui@iau.edu.sa.

Marwah Adnan Alahmadi has earned her MBA from Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University with distinction and her master's thesis title was *Perceptions Towards Advertising in Saudi Arabia*. She speaks in local and international conferences on Saudi women, advertising in Saudi Arabia, advertising models, and relevant areas.

He can be reached at email address marwahadnana@gmail.com.

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