

IDEOLOGIES AND STEREOTYPES OF ARAB CULTURE IN THE MEDIA: AN ANALYSIS OF COKE'S 2013 SUPER BOWL COMMERCIAL

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ABSTRACT

Coca-Cola distributed a total of one minute and one-second commercial that produced during the 2013 Super Bowl. This commercial has caused a lot of criticism because Arabs were portrayed as backward and foolish Camel Jockeys, and they have no chance to win in the world. This textual analysis asks if companies like Coca-Cola, Walt Disney, and other huge media corporations truly represented minorities. This analysis provides a further understanding of the media representation of Arabs and Arab-Muslims. The implication of the critical race theory (CRT) is used to better understand the ideologies and stereotypes of Arab culture in the U.S media.

Keywords: Arab-Muslims Representation; Coca-Cola; Critical Race Theory; Minorities.

INTRODUCTION

In the total of one minute and one second produced during the 2013 Super Bowl, the annual championship game of the National Football League (NFL), Coca-Cola distributed the commercial that caused and provoked public outrage, creating a storm of criticism against the company. Coke's Viral Super Bowl Ad went global that year because it had been designed to coincide with the year of the "go viral or go home" Super Bowl commercial. Consequently, Coca-Cola was embroiled due to this commercial for going too far in the desert, which has moral and myth value to Arabians. The soda giant's cowboys vs. showgirls vs. badlanders "choose your own adventure" style ad was being criticized and condemned by Arab-American groups because of what has been considered as a "racist" depiction of Arabs, Sue Zeidler of Reuters reports. The commercial begins with a wide shot followed by several shots depicting an Arabic guy walking with his camel and with visible signs of tiredness and thirst. Suddenly, there are cars, a motorbike, and a horse coming after him in order to reach a gigantic bottle of Coke. The shots are as following: The Guy in Arabic dress is shot by a wide shot, then extreme close shot in order to reflect that he is thirsty. Then, a Tilt-up shot for a gigantic bottle of Coke was shown, and this kind of shot is used to reflect the greatness of something. After that, the same guy appears with a medium shot again. Then, the other groups (Cowboys, a bike, and a truck full of showgirls and mad max group) appear in several different cuts while racing to reach the bottle of Coke in the middle of the desert.

A week before airing the commercial, Coca-Cola aired excerpts from the commercial on the Internet, in which a man wearing the Eastern dress appeared walking in the desert

representing the Arabic culture, and then other groups appeared behind the man representing cowboys, pretty girls and the characters in the movie "*Mad Max*" racing each other in order to reach a huge Coca-Cola bottle. By the end of the excerpts, Coca-Cola asked audiences to vote for the expected winner by going to the company's website but the options do not include voting for the man representing the Arabic character. Coke's one minute and one second Super Bowl commercial was filmed by the giant company Wieden+Kennedy in Portland, Oregon. This commercial aimed to provide and reflect the idea of the Super Bowl game by representing three random groups racing each other in order to reach a giant bottle of Coca-Cola.

This commercial has caused a lot of criticism because when you go to the website, the man and his camel were excluded from the race. In addition to the stereotypical portrayal of Arabs and the way that Coca Cola has represented the guy acting the Arabic character, Reuters has reported about a number of leaders in the Arab-American community who have raised complaints against the company.

In this textual analysis, I will ask if companies like Coca-Cola, Walt Disney, and other huge media corporations truly represented minorities. This analysis will provide an in-depth understanding of the media representation of Arabs and Arab-Muslims and this goal will be reached through the analysis of the one minute and one second produced during the 2013 Super Bowl produced by Coca-Cola that caused and provoked public outrage and creating a global storm of criticism against the company. The implication of the critical race theory (CRT) will guide to understand the ideologies and stereotypes of Arab culture in the U.S media. Campbell (2019) argues that critical race theory (CRT) is a useful tool in examining contemporary racism in the media. This theory, according to Campbell, positions "*the notion of Whiteness (and White privilege) at the center of discussions about race*". CRT shows that racism functions institutionally, and part of our skins' colors would not represent all we have and do.

Racial Discrimination between the Trap of Control and the Exploitation

It is basically known that the main goal of commercial advertisements is to buy a commodity or use a service. Noting the ever-increasing commercial advertisements spread across the media, I found commercials with a clear goal to buy a commodity or use a service. On the other hand, other commercial advertisements contain hidden meanings that depict racist materials, which cause severe crises, bring sharp criticism, and hurt people's feelings. I have usually seen some commercials for famous brands that caused major crises where they faced accusations of racism. Thus, they were forced to stop and share their apologies due to the harsh criticism they faced.

Huge media corporations play a primary role in creating a spirit of hostility in Western people towards minorities generally, and particularly against the Arab culture and Islamic world countries.

I noticed that even if this hostility is based on what has been practiced by other terrorist groups with mainly Arabic and Islamic origins, the Western media institutions, with their capabilities and power to influence, work to direct the media discourse and make it a consumed mass material that affects audiences with its message. The viewer or the Western audience is affected by it, which creates a negative impression and a misperception of the Eastern communities.

I am an Arab scholar and I thought it was a very amusing commercial that aims to reach all groups around the world and distribute the message that a bottle of Coke is made for

everyone. If it's true that this bottle is for everyone, then why has the Arab guy been portrayed in this way, and why has he been excluded from the race? By going to the website, he is not listed among the candidates.

Noam Chomsky is an American linguist, philosopher, who has repeatedly warned the U.S. and the world about disastrous policies related to the media. Noam Chomsky has provided 10 strategies/policies those countries all over the world and political agencies use. As an Arabian citizen, I consider the "*distraction policy*" as the most important one out of the ten. This policy is based on the trap of control and the exploitation practiced from the one who has the power and easy control over the trade market (Chomsky, 2017). There is no doubt that the power of media comes through determining the type of media attention any society gets. It is the real control of societies' consumption sources. Related to structuring media outlets as money-making business enterprises that interact with our democratic and cultural interests, there was a huge phase competition that occurred and allowed Comcast Company to buy the NBC Universal for \$16.7 billion in 2013. Comcast today gains the bulk of its income from television, internet, and digital phone services offered in forty states with eighteen million subscribers (Campbell et al., 2014). Thus, 167 media corporations are working based on three types of industry structures: Monopoly (domination by a single company), Oligopoly (domination by a few-usually four to seven-big corporations), and Competition (many companies vying in the marketplace).

There are many scholars who showed great interest in the history of capitalism. Scholars have also sought to explain why this trend emerged when it first emerged. Elmore (2013) argued that new financial markets helped corporations to accrue profits through trading assets rather than developing the operating efficiencies of acquired subsidiaries. Elmore continued to call the Coca-Cola system for making money "*Coca-Cola capitalism*."

Scholars argue that journalists played a vital and central role in making comprehensive histories of Coca-Cola to date. Journalists have argued that advertising is considered as the key role in Coke's success. Coca-Cola spends "*about \$3.3 billion each year promoting its beverage portfolio, a sum that represents 33.6 percent of net profits*" (Elmore, 2013). Today, Coca-Cola is considered one of the largest advertising budgets in the world.

Racial discrimination has existed since the early beginnings of media production. Over the last century, the screens of Hollywood, U.S television, and the news generally depicted Arab and Muslim men as romantic Sheiks, rich oil Sheiks, and most notably terrorists. Arab females, on the other hand, have been represented as sultry belly dancers, harem girls, and oppressed women. The comedian Aziz Ansari played this exact role in his Netflix show when he tried to represent himself as an American-Indian who was not personally religious, but instead he tried to act as a model Muslim-American. He tried to create a part of the overall balance between his religious status as a Muslim and his desire to eat pork and drink alcohol. Imam Ali Siddiqui, the president of the Muslim Institute for Interfaith Studies, reported that the Coke commercial for the Super Ball portrayed Arabs as backward and foolish Camel Jockeys, and they have no chance to win in the world, and this racist commercial should give a lesson to Coke to have a better understanding of the market they are sharing. Another clear evidence of framing and maintaining the racial content on media is what what's been reflected by Campbell et al. (2014). Male heroism, female dependency, heterosexual norms, and the power of whites in society are various forms of dominant ideologies through Walt Disney Company films (Campbell et al., 2014). Close to this regard, Alsultany (2016) emphasizes that Arabs and Muslims have been stereotypically represented for over a century, and 9/11 was just an opportune moment for further stereotyping. Alsultany (2016) continued to illustrate that the negative representation of

Arabs and Muslim groups led to a new kind of racism, which is reflected through the projects' antiracism and multiculturalism on the surface. However, these projects simultaneously produce the logic and effects necessary to legitimize racist policies and practices.

Critical Race Theory and the Arabian Racial Paradox

Critical race theory (CRT) depicts that racial paradox and situations of inequality emerge from the social, economic, and legal differences. Thus, white groups create between “*races*” in order to maintain the elite the interests of whites either in labor markets or politics, and this led to rising poverty and criminality in many minority communities (Curry, 2016).

This theory belongs to a broad social scientific approach that examines issues related to race, racism, and society. With the (CRT) theory, we will be able to understand the exaggeration and racial prejudice existed against the Arabic and Islamic culture within the U.S media. A shred of clear evidence towards the implication of this theory is what Corbin (2017) posed in her article “*Terrorists are always Muslim but never whites: At the Intersection of Critical Race Theory and Propaganda.*” Corbin moves further to draw the real picture that the U.S media depicts Muslims and Arab culture. She wonders about the pictures we draw when we first hear terms such as (terrorists, Muslims, Arabs, or even Islamic Radicalism).

According to Corbin (2017), the U.S media instills a specific image of the term terrorists. It has always reflected the Muslim groups but never white groups. She continued to illustrate that the U.S media drew the meanings of the concept “*terrorism*” as always (brown) Muslims.

The sociologist, Victor Ray, whose work draws on critical race theory, wrote to the Washington Post an article titled “*Trump calls critical race theory ‘un-American.’ Let’s review.*” In his article, Ray argued that critical race theory, based on the principle of explaining the reasons for the continuation of racism and the need for the academic analysis of the causes and consequences of racial injustice, has become more important than before. Ray continued to depict that Trump's conduct and behavior reflects an attack against the critical race theory which occurred through a hodgepodge of concepts such as Trump's refusal to denounce his white supremacist supporters, his encouragement of voter intimidation, and his support of America's continuing racial inequality. It is both somewhat humorous and dreadful to find that Trump's administration banned “*racial sensitivity training*” for federal contractors. However, it might be funny to watch President Trump denounce an intellectual movement in his usual garbled and misleading style.

There is a mistaken belief that “*white people are not terrorists results in security blind spots that make the United States less safe*” (Corbin, 2017). When stereotypes take hold, the negative pictures can be so strong that we, as consumers, may “*remember*” stereotype-consistent actions that never occurred. Clear evidence of this cognitive error can be inferred in the way that the White House Spokesperson Kellyanne Conway cited the Bowling Green massacre by two Iraqi refugees while this incident existed only in the imagination of Kellyanne Conway (Evans, 2018).

ARAB-AMERICANS RACIAL PARADOX

Alsultany (2016) mentioned that the Arab-Americans racial paradox was constructed before the 9/11 attack through classifying them based on a religious paradox (standing against Islam), or political paradox (Israeli and Palestinian conflict). Alsultany continued to claim that

the United States government considers the Arab-Americans as a minority group who is not legally recognized and unable to fit into the racial and ethnic categories such as black, white, Asian, Native, and Hispanic-Arabs have not been legally “*raced*” and are, therefore “*outside of the boxes*” and *presumably white*” (Samhan, 1999).

The media is one of the most dangerous institutions that contribute to creating a spirit of hostility in the Western world towards Islam, even if this hostility is based on what has been produced by other sources and institutions. Thus, the media institutions with their capabilities, and ability to influence, work to direct the media discourse, and make it a mass material that interacts with it. The viewer or the Western audience is affected by it, which creates a negative impression, and a false perception of the Islamic East.

Again, there is a complicated relationship between the media and the public, and because of media, people’s ability to distinguish between fiction and reality became more complex. However, the distinction between the two has become less and less important (Storey, 2019). Fiske (1994) provided that the “*postmodern media is no longer provide secondary representations of reality; they affect and produce the reality that they mediate*” (xv).

Commercial producers are relying on the language that is “*a system of signs that express ideas and is therefore comparable to a system of writing, the alphabet of deaf-mutes, symbolic rites, polite formulas, military signals, etc*” (Storey, 2019). In this regard, Barthes (1973) suggests that myth has . . . a double function: it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes it on us”. Thus, the image producers are working hard on producing connotations that activate the audience's cultural repertoire.

Although commercial campaigns certainly contribute to instilling consumer loyalty to the Coke brand, the company could not rely on advertising alone. The company's success is based on their ability to place a real and tangible product on retail shelves across the globe.

In this regard, I asked myself since when did public health on mass activity find a place in the lap of large soft drinks companies? Thus, how can selling such products be tied with a goal to reduce obesity? I can argue that Coca-Cola clearly wants to associate its brand with the anti-obesity zeitgeist. However, if Coca-Cola wanted to do something with an aim of reducing obesity, it could cut the amount of sugar in its products. In this regard, the answers to these questions vary from one scholar to another. McCartney (2014) argues that a can of sugar-sweetened Coke contains 139 calories that would require 30 minutes of walking to dispose. By the middle of the 20th century, Coca-Cola was “*the single largest buyer of sugar in the world, the biggest importer of licit coca leaves in the United States, the largest consumer of processed caffeine on the planet, and one of the biggest consumers of aluminum cans and plastic containers*” (Elmore, 2013).

CULTURAL, POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC ANALYTICAL ASPECTS

In order to show the interaction between cultural and economic aspects, we should highly consider the classical Marxist approach to popular culture, which would above all else insist that to understand and explain a text or practice it must always be situated in its historical moment of production and analyzed in terms of the historical conditions that produced it (Storey, 2019). Thus, cultural analysis can easily collapse into economic analysis. In other words, cultural perspectives become a passive reflection of the economic system. This analysis is exactly what Coca-Cola followed when producing the commercial of 2013. The article “*Global Trauma and the Cinematic Network Society*” written by Narine (2010) is a supportive source that depicts a

clear vision of the role of “*global network*” films and envisions the network society as a complex landscape of enduring inequality. This article moves further to focus on the films of social problems, economic guilt, and city films of the past, and how networks can link us in unwanted representations. Hence, huge media corporations like Walt Disney and other large media organizations frame some identities in a way that serves their policies and agenda. It is extremely important to support the Marxists' claim that economists directed their visions on the concentration of ownership and considered this concentration as the monopoly of capitalism (Campbell et al., 2014). At this point, there is a link between the word capitalism and globalization in a very dirty role.

It seems that the company had spent massive amounts of expenditure on this commercial. Although the Coca-Cola commercial reflects the spirit of competition and various groups of people from around the United States enjoying themselves, it also depicts and reflects several other meanings of ignorance, backwardness, or reactionary ideas about Arabians and their culture.

But, it is not just the Coca-Cola commercial's reflection of prejudice and discrimination against the Arab culture; other huge media corporations have sought since the very beginnings to cultivate negative portrayals of Arabs in popular culture. Even innocuous films seem to be sometimes problematic issues. Wingfield and Karaman (1995) argued that although in many ways the imagery of Disney's Arabian Nights fantasy film Aladdin is "*charming, artistically impressive, and one of the few American films to feature an Arab hero or heroine, a closer look reveals some disturbing features*". These disturbing features, according to Wingfield and Karaman (1995), are clearly seen among the way that Aladdin and Jasmine appeared as light-skinned lead characters, while the other characters appeared as "*dark-skinned, swarthy and villainous, cruel palace guards, or greedy merchants with Arabic accents and grotesque facial features*". In this regard, Aladdin's opening song with the negative words that mention the caravan camels roam as a way of reflecting meanings brutality and barbarism against Arabian culture, and the Arab world as a place of deserts and camels:

Oh, I come from a land
From a faraway place
Where the caravan camels roam,
Where they cut off your ear
If they don't like your face.
It's barbaric, but hey, it's home.

Arti (2007) deliberated the political motives behind the stereotypical image of Arabs among Hollywood production in the period before 9/11. The author illustrated that Hollywood has always provided a propagandist, as well as a limited, vision about the American imperial project, especially, in the Middle East. Arti's article shows that Hollywood's presentation of Arabs went through a distinctive lens, which allows America to present the Middle East as "*alien*," and this representation helps to make it an acceptable ground for reflecting the American power. Some of these representations appear on the screen as "*foreign devils*," "*comic villains*," the creation of Israel, the Iranian Islamic revolution, or the demise of the Soviet Union.

With an in-depth look at the symbolism of the dress of which the man represented by the oriental dress appeared, as well as the symbolism of the camel in Arabian culture, and the revelations in which the various shots of the Arab character are depicted in the commercial, I shall proceed along with my judgment and analysis of this commercial. The man who wears the Eastern dress appears late in the race to reach the place where the Coca-Cola bottle is. Based on the commercial, the man's lateness is attributed to the man's dependence on camels. Thus, the

attempt to link riding the camel with meanings of backwardness may contain and reflect a racial paradox. Meanwhile, sinking further into the symbolism of camels in Arabian culture is an interesting and worthwhile matter.

The symbolism of camels is one of the most important elements that contributed to shaping the structure of ancient Arab culture. Perhaps, the prevalence of the attributes of reverence for this animal, or his ascension to the point of (deification) in human societies, might be associated with mythical facts striking in the depths of history. Thus, this animal may have special importance in some religious stories that do not doubt its presence in Heavenly books. Camel's symbolism helps in identifying the mythical features, beliefs, and folk legacies associated with camels in the Arab culture. Besides venerating and blessing the camel in Arab culture, we can also find that there is a huge echo in Arab folk art. This animal also derives his holiness from the story of Prophet Mohammed's migration story from Mecca to Taibah riding his camel known as "*Al-Qaswaa*".

The only justification provided by Coca-Cola was that the company tried to reach all groups across the world through the commercial. Coca-Cola spokeswoman Lauren Thompson told Reuters that the company had taken a "*cinematic*" approach in the ad and hired the characters in reference to old films. Judging the content of this commercial varies from one person to another. However, I constructed my judgment based on the many historical data and scenes full of prejudice and discrimination of the U.S mass media's representation of minorities, not only Arabs and their culture.

According to Storey (2019), popular music works in a kind of blurred dialectic. Its usage demands inattention and distraction, "*whilst its consumption produces in the consumer inattention and distraction*". Back to the Coca-Cola commercial, there is Eastern music mixing along with a piece of Western motivating music considered as enthusiastic music. Thus, the company has not used sounds in this commercial except the music. However, there are two kinds of music; the soft Eastern music of the soundtrack in addition to the Western motivating music. Their usage of music contains within itself various intentions. Adorno (2009) pointed out that popular music is considered as "*social cement*." Adorno continued to emphasize that the socio-psychological function of popular music is to achieve in the consumers of popular music psychical adjustment to the gratifications of the prevailing structure of power. This adjustment is clearly seen through two major socio-psychological types of mass behavior; the "*rhythmically*" obedient and the "*emotional*." The first type depicts dances in distraction to the rhythm of the audience's own exploitation and oppression, while the second type is created in sentimental misery, or oblivious to the real conditions of existence.

ARABIAN CULTURAL STEREOTYPICAL IMAGE

From an Arabian perspective, commercial stereotypes are beliefs, impressions, or perceptions of an individual or group about other individuals or groups (nations, cultures, unions, etc.) that appear in advertisements. Stereotypes are based on ignorance of the other's culture and, in general, are often incorrect images about others. Warren David, president of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC), was wondering about the way that Arabs are always shown as either oil-rich sheiks or terrorists or belly dancers. An example of the stereotype is that a woman should work in the house, cook and take care of children. Over the years, advertising has used stereotypes to reinforce behaviors present in society, to act as a mirror of culture. In the same way, some studies show that stereotypes not only reflect behavior, but

people can act differently when observing the behavior of actors in commercials. In any case, many commercials use stereotypes to send a clear and strong message that the audience may not accept, but will understand. Diverse stereotypes might be used in advertising, highlighting gender, skin color, and culture.

Blogger, Osama Bdrany claims that messages in commercials are devoid of social and cultural content, and are limited to the physical aspect that only addresses the instincts of the audience that these ads attract. However, he notices that the cultural images are really important but Arabian advertisers adopt the traditional cultural address through media outlets as it has presented its material. Bdrany continued to argue that the commercial producers design their commercials in a form that attracts attention through the elements of excitement and suspense as these factors exercise profits and have a great role in producing advertisements. In this regard, most of the advertisement contributed to reinforcing the rigid stereotype of women, which is a distortion of the Arab woman's body. Meanwhile, this violates the woman's right in terms of her appearance in its natural form as it tries to commodify her body in an offensive way because it negatively shows it to achieve its consumer goals regardless of the negative values promoted by advertisement in the Arab society.

According to Storey (2019), the real and imaginary meaning of the term "*ideology*" is in the way we practice our relationship to the real conditions of existence in terms of the way we represent each other. These representations are like myths, concepts, ideas, images, discourses. In other words, we have real conditions and we also have ways to represent these conditions to ourselves and to others.

Back to the main point of this paper, the U.S. mass media's distorted representations of Arab men and women are well-depicted and presented. Arab women are usually represented in the harem (females) and they are belly-dancing. They are also shown as they are victims of men's violence wearing the hijab and they are so persecuted (Bing-Canar & Zerkel, 1998). In the same regard, young Arab-American women are experiencing the double jeopardy of racism and various levels of discrimination of the broader culture and invisibility within their own community, which exists because they are young and female.

Day (1996) reflects that Arabs from Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Palestine came to the South Side of Chicago before the turn of the century and established small residential clusters. They worked in the wholesale and retail trades and easily engaged in the community and resisted assimilation. Cainkar continued to emphasize that "*40% of the estimated 150,000 Arab-Americans in Chicago are of Palestinian origin*".

CONCLUSION

One could argue that Coca-Cola gained more attention because the controversy that the commercial has sparked. Jeremy Tylor, an Internet based writer for the past seven years, posed three main reasons about why Coke made the commercial; "*to show that the patriotism and love for the United States doesn't have to be confined to English-speaking people; two, to show that Coca-Cola is a soda any person of any heritage can enjoy; and three, that 'America the Beautiful' is a breathtaking, patriotic song regardless of what language it is in and who sings it (hence the name of the commercial).*" Although we may accept these reasons in a way to excuse Coca-Cola, the president of the Muslim Institute for Interfaith studies Imam Ali Siddiqui mentioned that "*the Coke commercial for the Super Bowl is racist, portraying Arabs as backward and foolish Camel Jockeys, and they have no chance to win in the world.*" However,

the controversy was continued further than the one-minute spot. The controversy continued to include the exclusion of the group with the camels because they were excluded from the race.

Coca-Cola on Friday, June 2020 announced that the company will be pausing its advertising on all social media platforms for no less than 30 days. James Quincy, Chairman, and CEO of Coca-Cola announced that the company will not join the official social media boycott, but instead will pause advertising. He called for more "*accountability and transparency*" from social media companies. It is surprising James Quincy announced that there is no place for racism neither in the world nor on social media. The Coca-Cola announcement came after Facebook stated that it would place special tags on potentially harmful, hateful, or misleading posts but would leave them (without deleting) for their news value.

To sum up, the tide of anger and retribution that Coke have faced due to the 2013 Super Bowl commercial forced the company to distribute a justification. Spokeswoman Laura Thompson reported that the commercial's characters represent archetypes related to old movies, and they appeared through a "*cinematic*" approach. However, other groups were represented normally. The complaints and the ensuing outrage over Coke's commercial have taken a while to generate. The Coca-Cola deleted the commercial from the company's official website as well as deleting all sensitive information related to this commercial.

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