

Gender Depictions in TV Advertising in the Gulf: Any Sign of Change?

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ABSTRACT

This content analysis examines gender portrayal in advertisements in television advertising in the GCC, and contrasts those depictions with the results of an earlier study of the same region. Analysis revealed that stereotypical depictions of men and women continued to hold, specifically with respect to the association between the central figure's gender and the type of advertised product, as well as in background setting. However, in terms of roles (familial, autonomous) and location (home, occupational setting), as women continued to be depicted mainly in familial roles and at home, men were also increasingly portrayed progressively in familial roles and at home. The findings are discussed in comparison to extant literature and the changes occurring in the Gulf region with regard to gender roles.

KEYWORDS

Arab countries, GCC, Gender portrayal, Gender roles, Gender stereotyping, Gulf region, Middle, television advertisements East

GENDER DEPICTIONS IN TV ADVERTISING IN THE GULF

Any Sign of Change?

Research on gender portrayal in advertising across the world since the 1970s has offered substantial evidence for gender stereotyping (Akestam et al., 2017; Eisend, 2019; Grau & Zotos 2016; Roth-Cohen et al., 2022). Women have primarily been depicted either in the private/domestic sphere as dutiful wife, mother, or daughter or as a symbol of attraction. Although they have also been increasingly portrayed as professionals, these portrayals are limited to so-called caring occupations such as nursing or teaching. However, men are typically depicted as the capable partner, the wiser, maturer, and more authoritative counterpart, regardless of their status or profession (Aramendia-Muneta et al., 2020).

Although stereotypes are not necessarily negative, they become problematic when they reduce the wide range of differences among people to simplistic categories with harmful consequences,

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particularly for women such as body dissatisfaction, reduced self-confidence (Eisend 2010; Zotos & Tsihla, 2014), negative attitudes toward women leaders (Baldner & Pierro, 2019), and dampening women's entrepreneurial aspirations (BarNir, 2021).

However, gender stereotyping in advertising can vary among countries depending on the extent of gender equality, women empowerment, and gender-related values (Ford et al., 1998; Shaw et al., 2014; Eisend, 2019). For instance, recent meta-analyses of literature have found that the extent of stereotyping has decreased slightly over time, attributed to societal changes in mostly high masculinity countries (Eisend, 2019; Grau & Zotos, 2016). Although much research has been conducted on gender stereotyping in advertising across the world, there is little research on the topic in the Middle East. Responding to the call for more research on gender stereotypes across different societies (Eisend, 2019), this study examines gender portrayal in advertising in the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) for the following reasons.

While GCC countries are mostly conservative, patriarchal Muslim nations, countries such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have committed resources to empowering women. The UAE introduced a law in 2020 that ensures equal pay for men and women in the private sector (McKeever, 2020), and Saudi Arabia introduced reforms to boost women's participation in formal work ("Saudi Women," 2022). Emirati women lead in STEM areas and nontraditional roles for women. For instance, the minister of state for advanced technology and chairwoman of the UAE Space Agency, Sarah Al Amiri, was instrumental in leading the UAE mission to Mars in 2021; in addition, UAE had its first female Emirati captain in a commercial airline in 2022. More pertinently, the Advertising Business Group (ABG), a nonprofit organization advocating for responsible advertising and communication with members accounting for more than 70% of the region's advertising spend, released guidelines on gender stereotyping in advertising in the UAE (Serrano, 2021).

However, the first study to examine gender stereotyping in television advertisements in the GCC collected data for analysis in 2018 (Khalil & Dhanesh, 2020). Their study was the first to examine stereotyping in advertising in the GCC and applied a research approach used to study gender stereotyping in other parts of the world (Furnham & Bitar, 1993; Furnham & Farragher, 2000; Manstead & McCulloch, 1981, McArthur & Resko, 1975), which increases comparability of findings. However, since 2018 there have been major changes in the region described above that could have affected gender portrayal in advertising. Hence, this study replicated the study of Khalil and Dhanesh (2020) to assess changes in gender portrayal, if any, after four years.

GENDER STEREOTYPES AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES

Stereotypes are simple, acquired, often inaccurate, fixed, preconceived beliefs and expectations based on exaggerated and oversimplified generalizations about the supposedly inherent traits of an entire social group, and are often resistant to change (Gudykunst & Kim, 2002). Stereotypes are typically acquired through the process of socialization and through culturally dominant representations reflected in mass media texts, such as stereotypes portrayed in movies and advertising. They may be based on a range of social characteristics such as race, family structure, occupation, attractiveness, and/or gender (Baxter et al., 2016; Gudykunst & Kim, 2002).

Gender stereotypes are personal beliefs that certain attributes differentiate men from women, including physical characteristics (men are taller than women), roles (women as caregivers and men as providers), activity preferences (women like to shop; men like to do sports), and personality traits (men are independent and women dependent) (Chandler & Munday, 2016; Ellemers, 2018). According to Deaux and Lewis (1984), gender stereotypes have four components: trait descriptors (e.g., self-assertion, concern for others), physical characteristics (e.g., hair length, body height), role behaviors (e.g., leader, taking care of children), and occupational status (e.g., truck driver, housewife). Every component has a masculine and feminine version, strongly associated with males and females, respectively.

Stereotypes can be quite useful, especially to ease information processing and reduce cognitive demands on the receiver (Bodenhausen et al., 1994). They also offer simple, heuristic cues when one has little information about an unfamiliar social group. Although stereotypes are not necessarily negative, they become harmful when they reduce the wide range of differences among people to simplistic categories and transform these categories into imagined realities (Gudykunst & Kim, 2002).

Each gender stereotyping component could lead to negative consequences, particularly for women. For instance, stereotyping of physical characteristics such as beauty ideals for women can lead to reduced self-dignity, self-confidence, and body dissatisfaction, while stereotyping of role behaviors of women as caregivers and men as providers may lead to restricted opportunities for personal and professional self-development (Eisend, 2010; Zotos & Tsihla, 2014). A mismatch of stereotypes, such as that women are warm and communal while leaders are assertive and competent, can lead to negative attitudes toward women leaders in the workplace (Baldner & Pierro, 2019). Gender stereotypes related to math attitudes can undermine girls' interest and performance in STEM domains (McGuire et al., 2022), and gender stereotyping can dampen women's entrepreneurial aspirations (BarNir, 2021). One of the ways in which gender stereotypes are propagated and reinforced is through mass media texts, specifically advertising.

Gender Stereotyping in Advertising

A thorough and extensive review of literature on gender stereotyping in advertisements across advertising and marketing literature showed that there has been an overwhelming amount of research since the 1970s. The studies by Dominick and Rauch (1972) and McArthur and Resko (1975) are generally considered the foundational studies on gender roles in television commercials that sparked a robust body of research over five decades. Recent meta-analyses of literature have found substantial evidence for gender stereotyping and that the extent of stereotyping seems to have decreased slightly over time (Eisend, 2019; 2010; Grau & Zotos, 2016). In a review of research on gender stereotyping in advertising and marketing communication journals from 2010 to 2015, Grau and Zotos (2016) found that, although gender has been depicted in stereotypical ways, there has been a trend of women and men being portrayed in more positive and egalitarian roles, respectively. Similarly, Eisend (2010), in a meta-analysis of research on gender roles in TV and radio advertising based on 64 primary studies, found that although gender stereotyping is most prevalent in depictions of occupational status, gender stereotyping in advertising has decreased over the years, a shift the author attributes to developments in high masculinity countries.

Most of the research on gender portrayal has been content analyses of advertisements including comparative designs (e.g., Matthes et al., 2016) and on various formats such as print advertisements (Ford et al., 2013; Shinoda et al., 2021; Tartaglia & Rollero, 2015) television advertisements (Fowler & Thomas, 2015; Furnham & Farragher, 2000; Kang & Hust, 2022; Kitsa & Mudra, 2020; Knoll et al., 2011; Paek, Nelson & Vilela, 2011; Verhellen Dens & de Pelsmacker, 2014), and to a lesser extent on video games (Summers & Miller, 2014), online advertisements (Aramendia-Muneta et al., 2020; Plakoyiannaki et al., 2008; Roth-Cohen et al., 2022), films (Harriger et al., 2021; Shawcroft et al., 2022), animated GIFs (Alvarez et al., 2021), and social media (Doring et al., 2016; Van Oosten et al., 2017).

This study focuses on analysing gender portrayal in television advertisements in the GCC, because there is hardly any recent research on the topic in the region and because television remains one of the most popular media in the region (Dennis et al., 2019). Better situating this study is a review of existing work on gender portrayal in television advertisements.

Gender Stereotyping in Television Advertisements

A thorough and extensive review of the literature revealed that there have been mixed findings. While Hatzithomas et al. (2016), in a 20-year longitudinal analysis of the changing roles of gender in Super Bowl commercials, found that traditional gender depictions are changing, with women more frequently

represented in nontraditional activities in advertisements after the millennium, Fowler and Thomas (2015) content analysed male roles in TV advertisements in 2003 and 2008 from the four major U.S. broadcasting networks (ABC, NBC, CBS, and FOX) and found that while some aspects of male role portrayals in advertising are counter to the changing gender roles occurring in society, other aspects are reflective of changes in society.

However, most studies have found that there were hardly any changes in stereotypical depictions. For instance, Verhellen et al. (2014) conducted a longitudinal content analysis of gender role portrayal in Belgian television advertising and found that women are usually depicted as younger and portrayed more often in dependent roles, as caregiving parents, housewife, or sexual objects, than men. They found that, despite social and regulatory changes, there was hardly any change in gender role portrayals in Belgian television advertising between 2002-2003 and 2009-2010. Similarly, Knoll et al. (2011) compared gender stereotyping in advertisements on public and private TV channels in Germany and found that despite changes in the roles of men and women, gender stereotyping in advertising in both public and private channels persists. Paek et al. (2011) got similar findings when they examined gender-role portrayals in television advertising across Brazil, Canada, China, Germany, South Korea, Thailand, and the United States. They found that, while cultural and country factors predicted that the gender of the voiceover and product type consistently conformed to the gender of the prominent character, overall, females were portrayed in stereotypical ways. Kim and Lowry (2005) analysed gender role stereotypes in Korean television advertising and compared the results with previous studies in other countries and found that, although Korean society had changed much, the images did not reflect these changes. Findings confirmed that women in Korean television advertising were portrayed stereotypically as in other countries as young, dependent, nurturing and, usually, at home. Women in Ukrainian TV commercials were mainly portrayed as households, nurses, guardians, servants, or as decoration to powerful men, although the roles of women in society have changed (Kitsa & Mudra, 2020). Most recently, stereotypical gender portrayals have been found to persist even in television programming aimed at babies and toddlers (Kang & Hust, 2022). Although research has focused substantially on content analyses of gender role portrayal in advertisements across countries, there is hardly any research on the topic in the context of the Middle East. This is important to examine as gender stereotyping varies across countries, and most of the changing representations have been due to societal changes in high masculinity countries (Eisend, 2019).

Gender Stereotyping in Advertisements in the Middle East/GCC

Scholars have consistently called for more research on advertising from the Middle East (Chun et al., 2015; Kalliny, 2012; Sobh et al., 2018). The sparse research on advertising from the region has largely conducted comparative analyses of Arab and U.S. cultural values and made recommendations on localizing advertising to Arab consumers (Chun et al., 2015; Kalliny & Gentry, 2007; Kalliny et al., 2011; Sobh et al., 2018). Compared to U.S. ad agencies, agencies in the Middle East tend to portray women in a more modest fashion (Kalliny & Ghanem, 2009). Women are shown as wearing long dresses more in Arabic than U.S. magazine advertisements (Al-Olayan & Karande, 2000), and the focus on women's beauty enhancement is less in Arab newspaper advertising compared to the U.S. (Kalliny, 2012; Kalliny & Gentry, 2007). In one of the few studies to content analyse gender representation in television advertisements in the Middle East, Nassif and Gunter (2008) found that although men and women were visually represented equally as lead characters in TV advertisements in Saudi Arabia and the U.S., male voiceovers dominated Saudi advertisements. Other studies have found that television advertisements in the Arabian Gulf region (Khalil & Dhanesh 2020) and social media advertisements in the UAE continued to perpetuate traditional gender role stereotypes (Slak Valek & Pitcherit-Duthler, 2021).

However, there have been changes in the region since these studies were conducted. For instance, in 2020 the UAE introduced a law that ensures equal pay for men and women in the private sector (McKeever, 2020). The 2019 government directive to increase the representation of women on

the Federal National Council to 50% has had time to take effect. The Advertising Business Group (ABG), a non-profit organization advocating for responsible advertising and communication with members accounting for more than 70% of the region's advertising spend, released guidelines on gender stereotyping in advertising in the UAE (Serrano, 2021). Given the members' regional reach, this could have had broader ramifications on gender portrayal. Reforms have been introduced in Saudi Arabia to incentivize women to work, including, for example, prohibiting discrimination based on gender in employment and access to credit ("Saudi Women," 2022). Since these recent changes could have affected gender portrayal in advertising, the following research question is posited to guide this study:

RQ: How is gender depicted through visual central figures in TV advertising in the GCC region?

METHOD

This study followed the methodology used by Khalil and Dhanesh (2020) to facilitate the comparison with their findings, so a similar sample of advertisements from the same pan-Arab channel that they studied was collected. This was followed by a quantitative content analysis of television commercials aired over one full week on Dubai-based MBC1 channel. This channel was chosen because MBC network is one of few networks that are regional in their focus. MBC1 was the first free-to-air Arab satellite channel when it was launched from London in 1991. We have collected advertisements aired during one week in September 2022. There were a total of 85 distinct advertisements that had a visual central figure (VCF), out of 2,870 advertisements (including repetitions) played in one week. All the advertisements were in Arabic. Two Arabic-speaking coders, a male and a female, including one of the authors, coded the advertisements. The analysis focused on the portrayal of men and women through the roles played by central figures. The study followed the methodology used by Khalil and Dhanesh (2020), which was based on Furnham and Farragher (2000). According to this methodology, any adult portrayed in a central role could be considered a central figure. The portrayal could be vocal, visual, or both. The voiceover main character was selected for separate coding, and up to two VCFs were chosen for subsequent coding. If there were more than two adult figures appearing in the advertisement, the main two who appeared for at least three seconds, or had at least one line of dialogue, were counted, as done by Schneider and Schneider (1979). The analysis later focused on the first VCF.

Coding Procedure

Following Khalil and Dhanesh (2020), for visual central figures, coders examined the association between the gender of the VCF and the product type, as well as the mode of presentation, role played by central figures, their location, the setting they appeared in, the arguments they made, their credibility, and age. The variables of product price, humor, reward, and end comment, which were used in the past by Furnham and Farragher (2000), were left out.

Inter-Coder Reliability

Two Arabic-speaking coders, a male and a female, coded the first 13% of the distinct advertisements. Overall, Cohen's Kappa intercoder reliability was 0.89. An interrater agreement between 0.81 and 1 is considered almost perfect agreement (McHugh, 2012) Agreement for the separate variables, according to Cohen's Kappa interrater measure, was as follows: 1.0 on the type of product, 1.0 agreement on the presence of a voiceover, 0.82 agreement on the gender of the voiceover, 0.84 agreement on the argument of the voiceover, 1.0 agreement on the presence of VCF, 1.0 agreement on the gender of the VCF, 1.0 agreement on the mode of presentation of the VCF, 0.82 agreement on the age of the VCF, 1.0 agreement on the credibility of the VCF, 0.68 agreement on the role of the VCF, 0.65 agreement

Table 1. Coding classifications for the portrayals of visual central figures in TV advertisements ¹

Variable	Portrayal of visual central figure	Studies that have applied the coding
Credibility	<i>Authority/expert on the product</i> <i>User of the product</i>	<i>Furnham and Bitar, 1993</i> <i>Manstead and McCulloch, 1981</i>
Role	<i>Familial (spouse, parent, home-maker, dependent)</i> <i>Autonomous (worker, professional, celebrity)</i> <i>Other</i>	<i>Furnham and Farragher, 2000</i>
Location	<i>Home, Occupational setting, Leisure, Other</i>	<i>McArthur, L. Z., and Resko, B. G., 1975</i> <i>Furnham and Farragher, 2000</i> <i>Roth-Cohen, O., Kanevska, H. S., and Eisend, M., 2022</i>
Argument	<i>Factual (information about the product)</i> <i>Opinion (no facts)</i> <i>None</i>	<i>Furnham and Bitar, 1993</i> <i>Furnham and Farragher, 2000</i> <i>Roth-Cohen, O., Kanevska, H. S., and Eisend, M., 2022</i>
Product Type	<i>Home products (excluding appliances)</i> <i>Food</i> <i>Body</i> <i>Appliances, clothing, cars, e-commerce, electronics, entertainment, financial services, medical services, transportation and other (all coded separately)</i>	<i>Modified version of Furnham and Bitar, 1993;</i> <i>Furnham and Farragher, 2000</i>
Background	<i>Mostly male, Mostly female, Mixed, Mostly children</i> <i>None.</i>	<i>Furnham and Bitar, 1993; Furnham and Farragher, 2000</i>
Age	<i>Young (under 35)</i> <i>Middle-aged (35 - 65)</i> <i>Senior (above 65)</i>	<i>Furnham, A., and Mak, T.,1999</i> <i>Matthes, J., Prieler, M., and Adam, K., 2016</i>

on the location of the VCF, 1.0 agreement on the background of the VCF and 0.77 agreement on the argument of the VCF. Divergence in coding the variables of argument, location, and role have been reported in earlier studies, according to Furnham and Farragher (2000). Differences between the coders over each advertisement were discussed and resolved, and the rest of the advertisements were coded by either of the two.

RESULTS

Chi-squares were calculated for gender differences within each coding category, as was done by Khalil and Dhanesh (2020), and in earlier studies (Furnham & Bitar, 1993; Furnham & Farragher, 2000; Furnham & Mak,1999; Manstead & McCulloch, 1981; McArthur & Resko, 1975). The author analyzed 85 distinct advertisements that had at least one VCF. The research question had asked how gender is depicted through visual central figures in TV advertising in the GCC region.

Coding for Visual Central Figure Portrayals

Women represented the majority of VCFs in advertisements. This finding agrees with the result of the Khalil and Dhanesh (2020) study. Of the 85 advertisements that had a clear visual central figure, 76.5% had female central figures (65 advertisements), compared to 23.5% male central figures (20 advertisements). In the earlier study, 74.4% of advertisements had a female VCF (67 advertisements) compared to 25.6% having male VCF (23 advertisements).

Table 2. List of variables by gender of VCF: Longitudinal comparison between two studies

		2022			2018				
Variable	Category	Male % (n=20)	Female % (n=65)	Total % (n =85)	X ²	Male % (n=23)	Female % (n=67)	Total % (n= 90)	X2
Credibility	Authority	15	3.1	5.9	10.997*	22	10	13	1.889
	User	75	96.9	91.8		78	90	87	
	Other	10	0	2.4		0	0		
Role	Familial	40	49.2	40	0.523	13	49	40nb	19.653*
	Autonomous	60	50.8	52.9		87	51	60	
Location	Home	35	66.2	58.8	6.997*	9	57	44	19.653*
	Occupational	15	12.3	12.9		48	13	22	
	Leisure + other	50	21.5	28.2		43	29	34	
Argument	Factual	10	10.8	10.6	4.127	17	6	9	5.170
	Opinion	10	32.3	27.1		9	27	22	
	None	80	56.9	62.4		74	67	69	
Product Type ^[1]	Home product	0	100.0	9.4 ^[2]	9.035*	14	86	16	9.467
	Food	25	75	37.6		26	74	26	
	Body	17.6	82.4	40.0		18	82	43	
	Other ^[3]	54.5	45.5	12.9		57	43	16	
Background	Mostly female	15	24.6	22.4	17.063*	0	16	12	31.742*
	Mostly male	15	1.5	4.7		35	0	9	
	Children	10	33.8	28.2		9	34	28	
	Mixed	30	6.2	11.8		13	8	9	
	None	30	33.8	32.9		44	42	42	
Age	Young	55	78.5	72.9	7.201*	65	85	80	5.937
	Middle aged	45	16.9	23.5		30	15	19	
	Not clear	0	04.6	3.5					

* p<.001

Product Type

Chi-square overall analysis found significant association between the product type and the gender of the VCF ($X^2 = 9.035$, $df = 3$, $P < .029$). Subsequent breakdown after collapsing categories to create 2x2 contingency tables revealed no significant association between gender and product type in the main categories of body, food, and home products. However, it is worth noting that 75% of advertisements for food products had a female VCF while all of home products advertisements had female VCF. Of all body product advertisements, more than 82% also had female VCF, but this could be explained by the nature of products that are for women. All home products featured female VCFs. Similarly, although the earlier study had revealed no significant association between gender and product type, it showed a prevailing stereotyping as 86% of home product advertisements and 74% of advertisements for food products had female VCFs.

Role

Analysis also revealed no significant association between gender and role ($X^2 = .745$, $df = 2$, NS). In total 49.2% of female VCFs were depicted in familial roles, compared to 50.8% in autonomous

roles. However, 40% of men were depicted in familial roles compared to 60% in autonomous roles. This represented a change compared to the earlier study that had revealed a significant association between gender and the role of the VCF, when only 13% of advertisements had shown male VCFs in familial roles.

Location

Analysis revealed significant association between gender and location ($X^2 = 6.997$, $df = 2$, $P < .030$). A total of 66.2% of female VCFs appeared at home, compared to just over 12.3% in an occupational setting. But, interestingly, 35% of male VCFs appeared at home as well, compared to 15% in occupational settings. This result agreed with the earlier study in showing significant association between the genders of the VCFs and the locations they are portrayed in. But interestingly, the depiction of males in home locations increased significantly from 9% to 35%.

Background

Analysis found a significant association between gender and background ($X^2 = 17.063$, $df = 4$, $p < .002$). Further collapsing of cells into children in the background and other backgrounds combined also found significant association ($X^2 = 4.292$, $df = 1$, $p < .038$) with females more likely to have children in the background. Almost all advertisements that had children in the background had female VCFs (91.7%). Of all female VCFs, 33.8% had children in the background, compared to 10% of male VCFs. This finding reflects the stereotype that taking care of children is the responsibility of women. The results were almost identical to the earlier study in showing more female VCFs with children in the background. In addition to the significant association between gender and the background, the earlier study showed that 92% of advertisements that had children in the background did feature a female VCF.

Argument

There was no significant association between argument and gender ($X^2 = 4.127$, $df = 2$, NS). Only around 10% of each of male and female VCFs made factual arguments about the products, but more women were portrayed expressing opinion (32.3% compared to 10% men.) The largest proportion of both genders were portrayed without making any argument (80% of males, 56.9% of females.) The results for the argument variable corroborated with that of the earlier study that also showed no significant association.

Credibility

Initial Chi-Square analysis revealed a statistically significant association between gender and credibility where the central figure is depicted as either an expert or a user of a product ($X^2 = 10.997$, $df = 2$, $P < .004$). Both men and women central figures appeared mainly as users (96.9% compared to 75% respectively). The percentage of males appearing as authority was higher (15% of males compared to 3.5% of females.) But analysis using Fisher's Exact Test, conducted due to having two cells with expected count less than five, revealed no significant association (0.082). Results in the earlier study had also not shown significant association between gender and the credibility of the VCF, with most male and female characters appearing as users, not experts. However, males were also portrayed more as experts compared to women (22% compared to 10%).

Age

There was also statistically significant association between gender and age ($X^2 = 7.201$, $df = 2$, $P < .027$), with more women than men visual characters depicted young (55% of males and 78.5% of females). Men were more likely to be depicted as middle-aged (45%) compared to women (16.9%). Further analysis after collapsing categories in young and else due to small cell count also revealed

a statistically significant association ($X^2 = 4.265$, $df = 1$, $P < .039$). Although the earlier study did not reveal a significant association between gender and age, the representations of age groups were close between the two studies, with most characters appearing mainly as young.

DISCUSSION

Popular advertisements such as Nike's *What will they say about you?*, which addressed the social and community pressure faced by women in the Middle East as they pursued their passion for sports, and award-winning campaigns such as Nissan's *#SheDrives*, celebrating Saudi Arabia's decision to allow women to drive, could give the impression that advertising in the Middle East is defying traditional gender stereotypes. However, findings from this study revealed that men and women are portrayed differently in contemporary advertising and that most of these portrayals continue to mirror traditional gender stereotypes, while a handful of advertisements engage in non-traditional portrayals of men and women. Female characters represented 76.5% of visual central figures, compared to 23.5% males. Female characters also represented the majority of voiceover readers at 62.4%. While earlier studies had shown that male characters dominated as central figures, both in voice and visuals (Das, 2010; Furnham & Farragher, 2000; Gilly, 1988; Hatzithomas Boutsouki & Ziamou, 2016; Manstead & McCulloch, 1981; McArthur & Resko, 1975), more recent studies have reported a departure from this tradition, citing a nontraditional approach that reflects increasing equality in gender portrayal (Matthes et al., 2016). The earlier Khalil and Dhanesh (2020) study had revealed a breakaway from the tradition in favor of a higher presence for females as central figures. Our study has matched this finding. However, in both studies, this high representation of female central figures could be due to the high percentage of advertisements for body products, in addition to products that are traditionally stereotyped by being associated with women, such as food and home products. The analysis of visual central figures revealed that women were still much more likely to appear in advertisements for food or home products (75% and 100% respectively). Therefore, the rise in the presence of female central figures could be interpreted in the GCC advertisements context as a reflection of the perpetuation of stereotypical gender-role portrayals.

One positive finding from this study is that 40% of men appeared in familial roles, which is close to the percentage of female characters depicted in familial roles (49.2%). Men and women almost equally appeared in autonomous roles, too (30% and 29.2% respectively). Increasing portrayals of men in familial roles represents a departure from the traditional depiction of men away from those roles, to appear more either as professionals or in leisure, or any other nonfamilial roles. This finding represents also a change compared to the earlier study of GCC advertisements by Khalil and Dhanesh (2020), which revealed that men were rarely portrayed in familial roles (13%). This finding deviates from much older research findings that had shown men portrayed more in autonomous roles, while women were portrayed more in familial roles (Gilly, 1988; Harris & Stobart, 1986; Manstead & McCulloch, 1981).

Consistent with previous findings that have highlighted the traditional tendency for more women than men to be depicted in home settings (Dominick & Rauch, 1972; Furnham & Voli, 1989; Verhellen et al., 2014), our study revealed that the majority of female central characters appeared at home, not at work (66.2% versus 12.3% in occupational settings.) But it was noticeable that having more than a third of male central figures (35%) depicted in home settings represents a remarkable increase from Khalil and Dhanesh (2020). This rise happened as the representation of men in occupational settings also resembled the women's modest share, standing at 15% only. The drop in portrayals of both genders in the workplace could be also a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which had nurtured at the time the culture of working from home at the expense of office work. Nevertheless, this finding indicates that traditional associations between gender and roles are holding up for women's depictions in home settings but are gradually improving in

showing men more in similar settings. Although the gender gap in labor force participation in GCC countries remains wide compared to advanced economies, exceeding 49% in Saudi Arabia and 41% in the UAE (“The Gender Gap,” 2022), in the two largest Arab economies (“GDP,” 2023), for example, women’s participation in the workforce is on the rise in the region. In the UAE, 46.5% of working-age women were employed, with this ratio going up to 47.4 and 57.2 in Kuwait and Qatar, respectively. This participation drops in the case of Saudi Arabian women to 30.9% compared to 80.1% for men (“The Gender Gap,” 2022), but the conservative kingdom’s participation of women in work nearly doubled in five years (“Advert for Women Train Drivers,” 2022), as the country pushes forward with opening up more opportunities for women’s employment. The kingdom’s Vision 2030 aims to increase women’s participation in the total workforce from 22 to 30% (“Saudi Vision 2030,” 2016). Therefore, although traditional stereotyped portrayals could be reflecting the imbalanced gender representation in the workforce, and prevailing conventional roles at home and at work, these depictions need to match the changing realities as women assume bigger roles outside their households.

Reinforcing traditional stereotypes, when the background of the advertisement was mostly children, the main character was mostly a female (91.7% of such advertisements.) This finding corroborates the findings and previous research of Khalil and Dhanesh (2020), which have confirmed a traditional stereotyping approach to background (Furnham & Bitar, 1993; Furnham & Mak, 1999; Harris & Stobart, 1986).

The age groups of central figures in our study also reflected bias toward depicting women mainly as young, almost the same as in the study of Khalil and Dhanesh (2020). In that study 78.5% of main female characters appeared young, compared to 85% in the earlier study. Middle-aged male central figures had a higher representation compared to their female counterparts in our study and in the earlier study, at 45% and 30% respectively, compared to around 15% for middle-aged women. The high representation of young central figures, in general, could reflect the demographics of the GCC countries, where the population is relatively young with a median age of 31.4 in 2021, and even a lower median age for females at 27.4 years (“GCC-STAT,” 2022). Only 3% of the population is above 65. In Saudi Arabia, home to 60.5% of the GCC population (“GCC-STAT,” 2022), two thirds of the people are under 35 (Godinho, 2020).

The overall results of this study on gender portrayal in advertising in the GCC are in line with those of other countries, where strong stereotypes continue to hold ground, especially with reference to product types and background. However, as Matthes et al. (2016) have found, while some variables continue to be portrayed traditionally, certain variables are demonstrating a shift toward more balanced depiction. In the context of the GCC countries, this applies mostly to the role and location in which male characters are depicted.

The findings of this study could provide input for policy makers and advertising regulatory bodies in the region. However, it also poses a quandary for advertisers. While some governments might want to promote women’s empowerment, given the predominant patriarchal cultures in the region (Seikaly et al., 2014), consumers who hold traditional beliefs about gender roles might not be receptive to more progressive changes in society or in depictions in advertising. Advertisers might have to tread delicately as they navigate these opposing forces, caught between their social responsibility to promote women’s empowerment and to appeal to consumers who might hold onto traditional beliefs (Eisend, 2019).

Although this study has provided some much-needed empirical data on gender portrayals in television advertising in the Arabian Gulf, the study is not without limitations. One limitation of the study is that it does not examine gender portrayals in advertisements produced for the region versus advertisements that are produced elsewhere and dubbed in Arabic. Future research should analyze differences in gender portrayals between these two types of advertisements to ascertain gender depiction that is more targeted at the region’s consumers. Finally, future research could also examine differences in television advertising across the relatively more conservative and

liberal Arab countries. Future research also needs to examine the effects of these portrayals on consumers' attitudes toward the advertisements and their gender role beliefs, etc. In a region where there is variation across countries in the importance given to improving the status of women, it is imperative to further our understanding of gender role portrayals in advertising and their impact on consumers and society.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ This coding classification is adopted from Khalil and Dhanesh (2020).