

Saudi Retail Firms' Attitudes Towards Social Responsibility in Advertising: A Comparison with Western Firms

Khald S Alatawy Fahad A Alqahtani

Correspondence: Saudi Arabia, College of Administrative Sciences,
Najran University, PO box 1988, 11001 Najran.

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to determine the attitudes of Saudi retail firms towards social responsibility in advertising, in comparison with western firms. In order to meet this objective, a qualitative research method is employed, using interviews as the primary source of information. The study finds that Saudi retail firms expect advertising to be socially responsible, in order to safeguard both them and their consumers, as well as society in general. They believe that social responsibility involves being mindful of society, and being equipped with values such as fairness and honesty that they consider will protect the interests of society. The limitation involved in this study is that only a small sample group is interviewed, although the interviewees represent the strongest stakeholders in the sector concerned. This study is significant as it enhances the understanding of the importance of social responsibility, and determines the factors that hinder its implementation.

Keywords: social responsibility, developing countries, developed countries, advertisement, Saudi Arabia.

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1.0 Introduction

Retailing refers to the process of selling goods and services to consumers via a range of possible distribution channels, in order to make a profit. Market demand for a product is identified through the supply chain, and is then satisfied by the retailer. Retail firms in Saudi Arabia have grown and evolved over a long period of time, commencing as early as 2,000 years ago, when the city of Mecca was established as a trading centre that attracted traders from across the Middle East, who visited the city and engaged in commercial activities, buying and selling goods (Kokku and Al-Aali, 2015). Nowadays, retail firms in Saudi are very profitable, and the Arab News (2018) reported that the sector grew by 10% between 2013 and 2014. This growth can be attributed to the increase in the number of customers served by such firms. Saudi Arabia has a strong base of domestic consumers that is enhanced by the increasing population of young people, and the increase in the amount of disposal income among their customers. Retail growth in the country can also be attributed to the high number of international brands that are present, together with the mall developers who have invested in Saudi, in order to supply services and products to the country's consumers. The arrival of large foreign retailers on the Saudi market in the late 2000s engendered a significant consolidation in the retail arena in the country (Deloitte, 2012).

Meanwhile, advertising refers to the practice of making the products and services offered by a firm known to the public who are their potential customers. Examples of modes of advertising include social networks, emails, magazines, newspapers, the internet, billboards, and leaflets. According to Osama, et al. (2013), advertising is a paid form of the non-personal promotion or presentation of goods, ideas, or services by a sponsor who is able to disseminate information regarding the service, idea, or product. This can be affected via a number of different methods, including both visual and non-visual vehicles. Visual means include print media, and the use of screens, while print advertising involves the use of written information describing the products and services offered by a firm. The use of screens involves the audio and visual description of a product, and the employment of graphics to ensure that the communication is appealing and convincing for the potential buyers (Graafland, 2017). Meanwhile, the emergence of digital advertising forums, such as the social media platforms of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, along with emails, has engendered the rapid dissemination of information to a wider audience than previously, which attracts a greater number of customers to the products and services advertised.

1.1 Problem statement

Businesses are primarily concerned with the delivery of products and services to consumers, and the identification of new customers is a key factor in determining the success of a business. This can be achieved using advertising, whereby both current and potential customers are approached and persuaded that the firm's products and services will meet their needs and satisfaction requirements. In order to achieve this, advertisements employ a wide range of languages, and competition is the key driver, with firms competing to attract customers. As a result of this competition, firms employ a range of means to convince potential customers of the attractiveness of their products or services, including the use of celebrities. This is one reason for the need for advertising regulation to ensure that certain standards are met, and that advertisements do not negatively impinge on economic, social, cultural, and environmental considerations (Anastacia, 2015). Some of the approaches taken in advertising can cause cultural

decadence in certain countries whose culture is vulnerable to erosion. For instance, most firms have adopted western culture, in order to lure customers, mainly among the youth, who are attracted by the culture, and this has caused cultural erosion in some countries. Therefore, it is important that the messages employed in advertising are not damaging to the image of a society, and they should not employ sexist stereotypes, or imply irresponsible parenting that encourages inappropriate sexual behaviour, or the use of alcohol (Lesley and David, 2009). Many current advertisements include such potentially damaging messages that that should not be displayed to minors, such as adverts for alcoholic drinks produced by Guinness, and other brands (Tang, 2018). In addition, contraceptives, such as condoms, are often displayed in adverts, without consideration for the minors who might see them.

Additional inappropriate behaviours of advertisers, such as the use of semi-nude, or nude images, are common in developing countries, and the cultural erosion of these countries is often attributed to this cultural exchange with the west that promotes irresponsible behaviours, such as drug abuse, due to the legality of certain drugs in developed countries that are illegal in developing countries, and the subsequent emergence of drug trafficking, prostitution, and terrorism (Anastacia, 2015). Meanwhile, other damaging effects of advertising include environmental pollution caused by the noise and materials that are employed irresponsibly in the name of product promotion. Therefore, it is important that the advertising undertaken by retail firms should be socially responsible, in terms of a country's society, and of the country more widely.

1.2 Objectives of the study

This study seeks to address the following objectives:

- i. To determine the attitudes of Saudi retail firms regarding social responsibility in advertising;
- ii. To determine the extent of the consideration for social responsibility in advertising in developed and developing countries;
- iii. To demine the role of social responsibility in advertising;
- iv. To establish the effects of the failure to consider social responsibility in advertising.

2.0 Literature review

The use of advertising has grown over time, and it now exerts considerable influence everywhere, primarily through its use in the media, which is powerful and pervasive in shaping the behaviours and attitudes of the modern world (Laczniak and Murphy, 2012), because it is omnipresent, and accessible by everyone, including minors. Advertising has a major impact on people's understanding of their lives, themselves, and the world in which they live, especially regarding their life values and choices (Bell, 2010). Due to the increase in competition, and in the need to advertise, people are exposed to a wide range of commercial messages in different forms of media, which increases the inherent responsibility of firms to be socially responsible for their actions, and the need for an increased responsiveness to social concerns (Kozar and Connell, 2017).

2.1 Aspects of socially responsible marketing

According to Coors and Winegarden (2005), socially responsible marketing encompasses two philosophies: responsibility and mindfulness. These philosophies involve the concept that the practices undertaken by marketing firms should be rooted in innovative ideas and ensuring consumer satisfaction by promoting products that offer long term benefit and value (Doda and Durres, 2015). Meanwhile, there are a number of core aspects of a socially responsible marketing, including firstly ensuring innovation in the improvement of services and products, in order that the experience of their users is enhanced. According to Porter and Kramer (2006), the on-going improvement of marketing policies and strategies, and of the personality of a brand, ensures that a company is positioned as one that provides an innovative experience. The second core aspect of socially responsible marketing is that it is consumer oriented, and a practice that is socially responsible ensures that a firm bases its operations and policies on the expectations and beliefs of their consumers, and marketers are expected to approach the products as if they themselves were the users (Nakano and Tsuge, 2018). The third core aspect is the effect on a society. The focus of traditional marketing was to lower costs and increase profit. However, marketers who are socially responsible focus more on the provision of the goods and services required by consumers, heeding feedback from their consumers regarding areas for improvement, and subsequently providing a society with what it requires in order to grow (Porter and Kramer, 2006). The final core aspect is a sense of mission, and socially responsible adverts favour the firm's corporate mission and vision, plans, practices, and goals, over their profits, which engenders an increase in the number of consumers willing to buy their products (Ertz, et al., 2018).

2.2 Saudi's attitudes towards social responsibility

A study conducted by Murphy, et al. (2016) found out individuals who attended Saudi higher learning institutions possessed a greater expectation of corporate social responsibility that should be replicated in the supply chain, and in society more widely, than those who did not. This concurred with the findings of Graafland, (2017) that there

was a higher expectation of social responsibility among the Saudi population employed in business, and that these groups expected there to be cooperation among firms in supporting societal development, and ensuring that poverty is alleviated. Meanwhile, Abbas and Abdulrahman (2012) found that Saudi females, and especially those who attended a higher level of education, tended to hold corporations more responsible for social issues than males, demonstrating that both gender and the level of education were potential factors that influence attitudes towards social responsibility.

Furthermore, a study conducted by Raguž and Matić (2016) established that Saudis' expectations regarding social responsibility on the part of firms and corporations is high, finding that Saudis expect businesses to demonstrate their socially responsible by helping society to solve problems, such as poverty, crime, and the lack of education. Therefore, advertisements for products and services should be slanted towards addressing such societal problems. Moreover, Saudis also expect businesses to be environmentally responsible by ensuring their environmental sustainability, and safeguarding the environment from harm caused by their operations (Hertog, 2014). Therefore, their adverts should also promote environmental sustainability.

Additional expectations of retail firms by Saudis include ensuring that they are sustainable by increasing their economic stability globally, supporting charity and community projects, and practicing equality by treating their employees and job applicants equally, regardless of their race, gender, sexuality, and religion (Hollier, et al., 2013). There was also found to be an expectation that firms will seek to reduce human rights abuse globally, avoid exploitation in terms of prices, and be honest about their products and services. Advertising plays a critical role in depicting the ways in which firms address these expectations, as they are the key agents for selling the policies and agendas of a firm (Yadlapalli, et al., 2018), and they should therefore include socially responsible content. However, as a result of cultural exchange, and the appearance of new business ventures in Saudi caused by globalization, some adverts are not socially responsible, because of the differences in cultural belief that cause the cultural erosion discussed previously. In the Saudi context, this erosion is evident primarily in terms of dress code, caused by the adverts of foreign investors, since cultures that are foreign to Saudis are prevalent in advertising in a range of media, which has eroded the traditional Saudi dress code, as people have adopted western styles, due to the influence of the advertisements employed by retailers, such as those involved in fashion (Naquibur, 2015). This is an example of a lack of social responsibility, as such adverts have contributed to a cultural erosion by foreigners. In addition, according to the study conducted by Hertog (2013), the import of cheap labor by businesses has resulted in a sense of cultural entitlement among business people, and has undermined the fiduciary responsibility of Saudi businesses for their primary and derivative stakeholders.

2.3 The importance of socially responsible advertising

Social responsibility for marketers means that they should seek not only to appear to be 'good', but also to do good by focusing on this responsibility in terms of how their firms can truly assist the local society, and the country more widely. In addition, they should ensure that their customers, and all viewers of their advertisements, are impressed by their content (Czubala, 2016). This ensures that both the country, and the society at large, benefit from the products and services being advertised.

Socially responsible marketers are also expected to be vocal about the policies of a firm that do not reflect an ethical image, and should voice any concerns of potentially unethical practices. By so doing, they ensure that society is protected against potentially harmful products, and any other behaviours that may prove harmful (Marinova, 2013). Similarly, as previously noted, socially responsible marketing also seeks to protect the environment by engaging in environmentally responsible activities, and the prevention of activities that might cause environmental destruction or pollution. In addition, socially responsible marketing can also act as a moral marketing compass, ensuring that marketing is legal by reducing the possibility of it willfully ignoring vices. It also ensures that marketing practices involve a mutually beneficial strategy whereby the value of the consumer is the focus, which in turn raises the value of a firm (Khurshid, et al., 2013). Socially responsible marketing is also beneficial to the firm itself, as it ensures the strong reputation of a company, and promotes goodwill towards it among its associates and clients, which reassures consumers that the firm genuinely cares for them (Czubala, 2016), and that they associate the firm's brand with a positive experience, and hence recommend it to others.

3.0 Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research methodology, an approach that involves the scientific use of observation for gathering non-numerical data. This data can then be interpreted to facilitate the understanding of the concepts involved in the topic concerned (Brannen, 2017). The data collection stage targets a certain population, who are deemed suitable for providing relevant data. This approach to research has long been used, due to its appealing nature for social scientists, as it allows researchers to investigate the meanings attributed by the participants in a study to their actions, behaviours, and interactions. A qualitative methodology gathers information directly from the participants on the ground, employing a range of methods, including direct observation, whereby a researcher studies the population concerned directly, as they go about daily lives, without partaking or interfering

in their activities. Open ended surveys can also be employed, which are designed in such a way that open-ended questions are asked of the participants that produce qualitative data for analysis and interpretation (Ashley Crossman, 2018). Data can also be collected through interviews, using structured interview questions that the participants respond to in person, or via email. For the purposes of the present study, the data was collected using structured interviews with stakeholders in the marketing sector.

3.1 Selection of the participants

The participants interviewed in this study included representatives from digital marketing firms, the business community, a human rights department, a film classification board, and a civil society group. This population was selected because of their awareness of the role of advertising and consumer behaviour. A total of seventeenth individuals were approached to take part in the interviews, but only fifteenth responded positively. Fortunately, however, all of the groups selected for interview were represented, as there were interviewees from digital marketing, a civil society, a human rights group, and a film classification board. A consideration of cost, the availability of information, the ease of access to the site, and its nature, and the type of data required for the study were all factors that were considered when selecting the participants, and the means of interviewing them. Consequently, the structured interview questions were emailed to the participants. Before sending the respondents the interview questions, they were supplied with a request form, in order to ensure that the research process was compliant with legalities and regulations, and to inform the participants of the aims of the study, together with its schedule. Participants were provided with sufficient time to complete the interview questions, and were able to submit their responses at their convenience. This was important, as it ensured that the participants were able to consult with their colleagues, and to therefore provide comprehensive responses.

The responses received from the participants were then categorized according to key terms, and the subsequent data analysis was conducted using interpretive techniques, recursive abstraction, and coding. An interpretive methodology involves the use of coding in which meaningful ideas are associated with the data of interest. Therefore, the responses that included meaningful ideas and particular key terms of relevance to the research questions were categorized and interpreted. This study demonstrated the skill of critical thinking by analyzing the existing problem, and interpreting the interview responses in a way that addressed them according to the research questions. A qualitative methodology was chosen for this study because it was suitable for revealing the experiences of individuals in the field, and for addressing the issues involved in depth. In addition, this approach enabled the study to be conducted in an economical manner.

3.2 Ethical considerations and limitations of the study

The ethical consideration involved in this research study was the fact that it used human subjects in the voluntary participation of the interviewees during the data collection stage. Therefore, it was necessary that they provided their informed consent to partake in the study before the questionnaires and interviews were conducted. In addition, personal questions were avoided during the questionnaire and interview process, and the confidentiality of the information provided by the respondents was guaranteed. The limitations of this study were the time and financial constraints that dictated the size of the sample, and the scope of the research. Due to these financial and time constraints, it was not possible to recruit a sample size sufficient to represent the whole population.

4.0 Findings

This study found out that the participants defined social responsibility as a mindfulness, and an awareness of the needs of a society, including both its social and environmental aspects. They also believed that social responsibility co-exists with values such as respect, honesty, fairness, and being just. In other words, social responsibility was considered to imply not only being good, but also doing good in society, R4: *“Social responsibility involves being mindful of people’s welfare, environment, culture, and other things. You know, social responsibility actually means being conscious of your surroundings, according to my understanding. So when it comes to advertising, [it should] be mindful of the society and environment at large”*.

The respondents believed that socially responsible advertising is important not only to retail firms, but also to consumers, and should therefore include honest, correct information about products and services that are appropriate for meeting their needs as mentioned by R11: *“Yes, it is very, very important. As I said earlier, it results in positive outcomes in society. It protects the rights and freedoms in society, protects the environment, protects consumers, and everybody in the society. It is important. Society will grow with values like honesty, respect, and fairness”*.

The participants considered that developed countries take social responsibility seriously, and that beyond the regulatory bodies and associations, the citizens themselves are socially responsible, and will not tolerate irresponsible activity, R3: *“Developed countries don’t take lightly any deal that seems unclear to the public. They prefer to be fair in their dealings, to be forthright, and to be just and honest. The general society is based on values that aim to care for the overall population, without discrimination”*.

Meanwhile, the participants believed that developing countries do not take matters of social responsibility as seriously, due to their low level of economic development that means that developed countries take advantage of the situation to introduce new cultures. Moreover, they considered that the majority of people are so concerned with meeting their daily needs that they do not consider the wider values of society, and therefore give matters of social responsibility little thought, although there is a degree of control over the content of advertisements to which they are exposed as stated by R9: *“Remember that developing countries are still fight hard to sustain their economy. They therefore pay little heed to certain activities, like the cultural erosion brought about by some ads. They don’t consider the effects of western culture, since they require it for their development. Therefore, poverty contributes significantly to the cultural erosion caused by some ads”*.

Moreover, the interviewees argued that retail firms expect advertisements to be socially responsible, as such adverts benefit not only consumers, but also the retailers. They also believed that advertisement that are honest, just, sustainable, and valuable to a society, ensure that the products and services advertised reach a wider market, which also benefits the retailers, R12: *“In my capacity as a business person, I expect advertising agencies to be truthful at all costs. Remember, we are the ones in touch with consumers. When falsehoods are present in an advert, and consumers recognize it, we are the one to suffer; I tell you, we will suffer a lot. You might end up losing customers [as the result of] a false advert that misleads them. So, we expect advertisements to be socially responsible, and to care for both the sellers and the buyers”*

The respondents noted that there is difference in the level of commitment among advertisers to ensuring that their adverts observe social responsibility, because of the differences in the values of various societies, R2: *“In western countries, mainly the US [United States], people grow up with such values as honesty, fairness, and so on, and they are shaped by such values. Due to the values induced in students in Saudi, it is easy for them to engage in unlawful or irresponsible behaviours for personal gain. In western countries, what is wrong is wrong, even if it benefits you. So ads. that are less responsible are present in Saudi that benefit an individual without considering the general public”*.

Furthermore, the interviewees claimed that a society that does not observe social responsibility in advertising engenders dishonest deals, unfair situations, and other negative activities that can affect consumers, the environment, and society in general, and that this occurs due to the increase in irresponsible behaviour resulting from a lack of values in the society as mentioned by R12: *“In the absence of social responsibility in advertising, ads. lack values, and anything can be passed to the consumers using any language. Consumers can easily be duped by the content and purpose of certain products and services, and a lack of fairness and immoral behaviour [is present in] advertising, including the use of vulgar and abusive language, among other vices”*.

The participants therefore recommended that certain strategies should be implemented to ensure that advertising observes social responsibility, in order to advocate positive values in society, to promote involvement in societal activities, and to enhance comprehension of what is acceptable, and what is not, believing that the introduction of strong regulatory bodies policing advertising content should control what is conveyed to the consumers, R7: *“I think a strong regulatory body should be set up to control the content of ads. Stiff fines should be introduced to any ad. that misleads society, or violates the norms and culture of the intended audience”*
“I think a culture of values should be cultivated in the society, so that the fight against any irresponsible behaviour is not left to be fought by the government or regulatory bodies, but also by the citizens. People should not value money more than the values in the society. A single organization that fights such vices is not sufficient to root out such irresponsible behaviour on their own”.

5.0 Discussion

According to Ertz, et al. (2018) developing countries are characterized by a high level of poverty, hunger, disease, a high mortality rate, a low level of education, inequality in opportunities, an unhealthy environment, and a high level of corruption and other vices. There are therefore numerous challenges to implementing social responsibility in such contexts. However, some such countries strive to meet societal demands by including ethical practices in school curriculums to educate their youth about the necessity of social responsibility (Bageac, Furrer and Reynaud, 2011). Focusing on socially responsible advertising in developing countries is important because such countries represent the most rapidly expanding economies, and are therefore the most lucrative growth market for businesses (Dobers and Halme, 2009). As a result, developed countries can exploit the opportunities available in such countries, resulting in little consideration of social responsibility by retailers, due to the high demand for their services for economic growth (Han and Stoel, 2017). Moreover, Margolis, Elfenbein and Walsh (2009) argued that developing countries present a distinctive set of socially responsible agenda challenges that collectively differ significantly from those faced in developed countries, and Desta (2010) observed that there is a notable difference in the level of consideration given to social responsibility between developing and developed countries, arguing that developing countries are where globalization, investment, economic growth, and business activity are likely to have the most dramatic social and environmental impacts, both positive and negative. Meanwhile, King and Mackinnon (2017) claimed that developing countries experience environmental and social crises that have an

impact on the wider world, and it is therefore necessary to draw attention to the required level of social responsibility in such countries. Due to the degree of morality in the country, Saudi Arabia has introduced training courses that address ethical practices, in order to improve the ethical practices and values present in the country (Nakano and Tsuge, 2018).

5.1 Social responsibility in Canada

Some developed countries have regulatory bodies and associations that control the content of advertisements and marketing, in order to ensure that social responsibility is upheld. For instance, in Canada, the Canadian Marketing Association (CMA) developed a code of ethics and standards as self-regulatory guidelines for the content of marketing materials that are required to be upheld by the country's marketers (Ralph and Madhav, 2010). The CMA's code of ethics includes such principles as the protection of personal information (Graafland, 2017), which defines how personal information should be protected, and the penalties that are applied in cases that fail to abide by such regulations. The code also includes the principle of truthfulness, demanding that marketers represent their products accurately, and the principle of campaign limitation, which encompasses non-involvement in practices that can engender exploitative or disparaging behavior, ensuring the protection of vulnerable consumer groups, such as teenagers, children, the elderly, and people with disabilities (Anastacia, 2015). These Canadian regulations provide an example of a strategy that should be adopted by developing countries, in order to improve the degree of social responsibility in their advertising.

5.2 Social responsibility in the US

In the US, the American Marketing Association (AMA) produced regulations and guidelines intended to govern the operations and actions of marketers. In a statement, the AMA said that the values the guidelines contain represent a collection of conducts that are morally correct, and an idea that is desirable. The document outlined certain values that constitute standards by which individuals can measure their own actions, as well as those of others, including marketers. These values ensure that best practice is upheld when firms transact business with the public, and with any others involved in their course of work (Anastacia, 2015).

In the US, marketers are expected to uphold ethical values, such as honesty, to be forthright when dealing with the public, and to offer integrity and value to society. As a result, the society possesses generally positive attitudes towards the social responsibility conveyed by the marketers, believing that they advertise genuine products and services. Additionally, marketers are expected to be responsible, to accept the consequences of the practices involved in marketing, and to serve the requirements of customers of all types (Yadlapalli, et al., 2018). They are also expected to be stewards of the environment in their dealings, in a way that is socially responsible to the customer, as well as to the environment, and to always be fair by balancing the needs and interests of both the seller and the buyer, in order to avoid manipulation in all forms, and to protect the consumer's personal information.

Hence, marketers are expected to be socially responsible to both the buyer and the seller in the US, where respect is the most important value expected of them. They should acknowledge the basic human dignity of everyone who seeks to communicate with them, make ensure the clear comprehension of the products and services for sale, and the appropriate distribution of the products and services to their customers (Marinova, 2013). Furthermore, marketers in the US are expected to be transparent in their dealings. They should create a spirit of openness in how they practice marketing through communication, action, constructive criticism, and disclosure to their customers of the content and impacts of their products and services. Finally, they are expected to embody the value of citizenship (Kearney, 2014), and are required to fulfill all of the economic, legal, societal, and philanthropic responsibilities of every stakeholder, giving back to the community, and ensuring that the ecological environment is protected (Kozar and Connell, 2017). Therefore, marketers in the US are required to uphold social responsibility in their advertisements, and are expected to be socially responsible towards both society and the environment.

6.0 Conclusion

The concept of social responsibility requires both organizations and individuals to behave in a manner that is ethical and sensitive to cultural, social, environmental, and economic issues. Therefore, social responsibility in an advertising context requires an awareness of the social, economic, environmental, and cultural issues of a country or community (Anastacia, 2015). Advertisements for products or services should therefore ensure that the norms or culture of a country is not impinged upon, should be aware of environmental matters, such as the need to avoid polluting the environment, in terms of noise or materials, and should not interfere with the economic activities of a country. This study found that there is a clear influence of western culture on developing countries, which can be attributed to the challenges facing such countries, including the need to boost their economic development by attracting foreign investment. Meanwhile, cultural factors, including religious practices, can impact the effectiveness of social responsibility in developing countries, due to the influence of western culture in such countries affecting their awareness of the need to be socially responsible, in order to protect the environment and

society at large. Some of the social responsibilities of advertisements include being truthful about the products and services advertised; observing ethical responsibilities, such as adopting codes of governance and ethics; observing legal responsibilities, such as ensuring a good relationship with government officials; embracing philanthropic responsibilities, including earmarking funds for corporate social or community projects; and observing economic responsibilities, such as the provision of investment, the creation of jobs, and the payment of taxes (Yadlapalli, et al., 2018). Further studies are required regarding how socially responsible advertising can be improved in developing countries, and to determine the factors that influence such advertising in developing countries, such as the culture, the internet, and religion, and how these can be addressed.

7.0 References

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