

From Religion to Chicken Cannibalism: American Fast Food Ads in Kuwait

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This article is an exploration of the genre differences between American and Kuwaiti fast-food advertisements, where I discuss how cultural differences impact genre conventions. I conclude with some implications for writers.

I've moved around a lot in my life—mostly back and forth between Kuwait and America. Moving between the two cultures, I've noticed not only cultural differences and similarities, but also lots of cultural borrowing. Since Kuwait is made up of only 3.5 million people and is smaller than New Jersey, it is almost always the borrower. After the Gulf War, the number of Americans coming into Kuwait grew, and so did the number of American fast food restaurants in Kuwait.

When typical fast food advertisement information (texts, images, and ideas) moves from American culture to Kuwaiti culture, that information changes to fit a Kuwaiti audience's needs and expectations. When creating ads, fast food franchises in Kuwait make choices about what to change and how to change it, but these choices are *really* made by the people's demands; they are made based on the way the Kuwaiti people interpret and use the features of the genre of American fast food advertisements.

Contrasting Genre Features in Visual Fast Food Ads

Figure 1 and Figure 2 demonstrate how texts and images look different in each culture. The McChicken advertisement is from McDonald's and the flyer is from Naif Chicken, a popular restaurant in Kuwait. On the right side of the Naif Chicken flyer is a sesame bun, and on the left is the more traditionally Middle Eastern pita bread. The



Figure 1: McChicken Advertisement in America (2008)chode



Figure 2: Naif Chicken Advertisement in Kuwait
(Paper Dump)

Pepsi on the right is juxtaposed with labaan, an Arabic yoghurt drink, on the left. The traditionally American coleslaw has not been transposed to something else on this menu, but at the restaurant it's possible to order side items like hummus and other Middle Eastern foods. Kuwaitis generally love French fries, and so they are featured as a side item along with each of the varieties of chicken. This love of French fries is influenced by their popularity in the American fast food industry.

The chicken burger in Figure 1 is an example of the kind of image found in a typical American fast food ad. The bread and the chicken are smooth, symmetrical, and almost perfect. In American culture, people typically don't like to think about eating dead animals, so the food is made to not look like dead animal parts. The chicken burger in Figure 2, however, doesn't match what is usually on fast food menus in America; it's lumpy and looks less processed than a typical American chicken burger. That the chicken doesn't look as processed as American fast food reflects cultural attitudes towards food and food production that help show the difference between the genres of American and Kuwaiti fast food and their texts and images. In America, meat is generally served without any bones in it as often as possible (fried chicken is a common exception, as are pork chops and some fish). In Kuwait, almost no one cares about bones in their meat. There are bones in the spatchcocked (spread-eagle) chicken on the left side of the flyer in

Figure 2. A more drastic example of attitudes toward what Americans may view as gory aspects of food and food images is the way my dad casually sucks the eyeballs and brains out of fish on a typical Friday afternoon at a Kuwaiti lunch table.

The chicken on the Naif Chicken box is holding a knife and fork. Um, what? Does the chicken want to eat chicken? Gross. This probably wouldn't happen in America because Americans don't want to think about chicken eating chicken, especially at the same time as they're eating chicken themselves. It's difficult to figure out exactly what it is in Kuwaiti culture that makes this image happen, but I'd guess that it has to do with the culture not being as put off by such images as American culture is as a whole. An animal eating itself would be horrifying in American culture. I'm thinking of societies America has that Kuwait doesn't, like The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. Americans have many cultural messages and ideologies about animal rights that are lacking in Kuwait. It's hard to imagine a KFC box, for example, featuring a chicken chowing down on chicken (or implying that it's about to chow down on some chicken) making it past the Food and Drug Administration's advertisement approval panel.

Advertising Textual Differences

In Figure 2, we can see subtle textual details like the phone number, which is six digits long instead of seven like most American numbers (not including the area code). This six-digit format is unique to fast food restaurants in Kuwait. Because the country is so small, it traditionally had only one area code, but there are so many fast food restaurants now that new six-digit numbers have been created. There is also free twenty-four-hour home delivery mentioned in the bottom right corner of the Naif flyer. There are few fast food places left in Kuwait that aren't open twenty-four hours and that don't provide home delivery service. Fewer places in America are open so many hours or offer delivery, especially not twenty-four-hour delivery. Taco Bell, for example, boasts about staying open late for a "FourthMeal," but it's got nothing on Naif Chicken.

In English, people read from left to right, but in Arabic, people read from right to left. So, in Figure 2, the Kuwaiti audience first looks at the typical American fast food on the right and then they look at the typical Kuwaiti fast food on the left. This Kuwaiti reading shows that emphasis is placed on the typical American fast food items, with the Kuwaiti foods taking less prominence. It's important to consider what specific audiences may do with



Figure 3: Cola Advertisement Made by Americans for Kuwaitis (Charania)

texts, especially when people are trying to sell a text and/or image to people who perceive the world differently, like people from an unfamiliar culture. The advertisement in Figure 3 came to me in an email forward a couple of years ago, accompanied by text stating that it was created by Americans and marketed to an Arabic audience.

Apparently, the creators didn't know how to read Arabic, so they used images to get their point across instead. There's a problem with this ad, however, from an Arabic perspective. In English, this sequence of images makes sense. The sequence suggests that a person is thirsty, so they drink some cola, and then feel energized enough to run. Since people read from right to left in Arabic, to a Kuwaiti reader, this series of images would convey that when a person is feeling good and has energy, they had better not drink cola, otherwise they'll end up flat on their back in the desert. That's what I'd call a writing researcher fail.

Religious Differences in Kuwaiti Advertising

Figure 4 is a take-out box from Naif Chicken posted by a Kuwaiti blogger who noticed and disliked the reminder to pray before eating (what the arrow is pointing at). This kind of reminder is much less likely to come up in America because of separation of church and state. Kuwait is a self-proclaimed Islamic country, however, and religion and government are not separate at all.

The prayer on the Naif Chicken box leads to another important part of fast food advertising in Kuwait. Because the customers are mostly Muslim, the advertisers have to make sure they address the Islamic diet. Muslims are forbidden from eating or drinking anything made from pork or alcohol, and all meat consumed by Muslims must be labeled "halal," meaning that the animal it came from was killed according Islamic law. In the top left corner of the flyer from Naif Chicken (Figure 2), there's a piece of Arabic text that guarantees that all meat served at the restaurant is 100% halal Kuwaiti



Figure 4: Naif Chicken Take-out Box (Danderma)

chicken. This message is next to large, attention-grabbing letters and has a double underline to make sure potential customers recognize that this company will accommodate their diet restrictions. Almost all Middle Eastern food ads have this same halal guarantee. According to a study on advertising in the Middle East conducted by Rice and Al-Mossawi, many major American fast food companies like Burger King, McDonald's, Hardee's, and Dairy Queen include halal guarantees on their advertisements and menu boards. Cultural differences about food preparation and production, as well as cultural differences about behavior around eating, are visible in the genre of advertisements. Cultural differences can prevent certain genre conventions from transferring across cultures successfully.

Thinking about Audience

Companies are focused on selling to their own immediate audience, but it would be to their advantage to think carefully about how their messages are taken in and taken up in other countries so that their international branches are able to generate profit. This is why thinking carefully about rhetorical choices such as the order of images are important.

Examples like the cola ad show me that, as a writer, if I'm aware of my audience and I try to think about who it is on every level, I have a better chance of getting my message across well. Writing and effectiveness with audiences depend on the culturally contextualized genre. I wouldn't use the cannibal chicken image here in America if I were pitching an ad to Popeye's Chicken,

and I wouldn't use the freakishly smooth McDonald's burger if I were pitching an ad idea to Naif Chicken, although I imagine they'd have less of a problem with that image than Popeye's would have with the cannibal chicken.

It's not only important to be aware of audience and intention as a writer, but it's also important for readers. As a reader, if I'm aware that the creator of a particular text may not understand who I am, where I'm coming from, and how I think and read, it's easier for me to see past weirdness and confusion (cannibal chickens and such) so I can be more comfortable with the unexpected. Each writing situation is different, impacted by author, audience, time, place, and lots of other factors. But if I slow down and really (and I mean *really*) think about what I'm creating in each different writing situation, and if I also think about what I'm seeing, I can get a better handle on writing, understanding, and cannibal chickens.

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Summer Qabazard is a Jedi.

