

# Billboards and the Politics of Gender Representation in Morocco

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## Abstract

This study examines gender representation in Moroccan billboard advertisements, focusing on how visual and textual strategies construct and normalize gender roles through a multimodal semiotic framework. Based on a qualitative analysis of selected billboard ads, the paper demonstrates that women are frequently depicted through reductive and stereotypical images, including confinement to domestic roles such as cooking, cleaning, and childcare, as well as through the fragmentation and sexualization of the female body. The study shows that the selective focus on women's body parts reduces them to objects of visual consumption and produces a gaze structured by "to-be-looked-at-ness." In many cases, women are portrayed as passive subjects, dependent on men or valued primarily for their physical appearance. Overall, the paper argues that billboard advertising contributes to the reinforcement of unequal gender relations and the reproduction of dominant cultural ideologies of femininity and masculinity in contemporary Moroccan society.

**Keywords:** advertisement, billboards, gender, representation, gender roles, consumer culture

## 1. Introduction

Advertising has become a central force in modern society, shaping not only economic activity but also cultural values and individual identities. Its influence permeates everyday life, often operating at a subconscious level through images and representations that guide how people think, behave, and perceive themselves (Adum, 2005). In this sense, advertising has evolved

beyond a mere commercial tool into a powerful social institution that sustains consumer culture, aligning with the notion of the culture industry. As Sinclair (2015) observes, “Advertising is cultural in various respects. Its brands and logos pervade everyday life and social communication, as well as the fabric of material culture surrounding us in our homes and the streets of our cities— it gives capitalist modernity its very look and feel.” It is therefore reasonable to argue that advertising functions as a key agent of socialization, shaping and reinforcing social constructs such as gender (Kamen, 2006).

With the rise of globalization and the digital age, advertising now operates across multiple platforms, influencing how individuals perceive norms and identities. From television commercials to online pop-up ads, these forms share a common goal: to shape consumer attitudes and behaviors, encouraging specific actions and choices. Importantly, advertising is no longer confined to private spaces; it has expanded into the public sphere through outdoor advertising. Unlike the more private formats of magazines and television, outdoor advertising occupies public spaces, making it highly visible and difficult to avoid (Rosewarne, 2005). Moreover, while broadcast media can be costly and time-limited, outdoor advertising, particularly billboards, offers continuous exposure, operating 24 hours a day without interruption. It cannot be turned off or ignored, and its visual nature ensures accessibility across different educational levels. Its scale and persistence have led Arens (2006) to describe it as the “last medium.”

Billboard advertising, in particular, is highly effective due to its constant visibility and strategic placement in high-traffic areas, ensuring repeated exposure to a broad audience. Its large format and strong visual design enable quick comprehension and lasting memorability. Accordingly, advertising firms use billboards for four main factors: visibility, local responsiveness, media efficiency, and their capacity to generate immediate and tangible responses. In the words of Davidson (2001), “there are vast masses of people who do not have access to television nor do they buy or read newspapers and magazines . . . they are exposed to outdoor advertising at their local trading stores in the rural areas and at shopping complexes in the townships.” Additionally, there have been significant developments in the design of different types of billboards. Many are now enhanced with electronic technologies to display various products, while others are constructed in the physical shape of the items they advertise or made from materials that closely resemble the real products. These innovations make it difficult for billboard advertisements to go unnoticed. Not only are they seen, but their messages are also retained in viewers’ memories and recalled when needed. These elements help explain the enduring relevance of billboard advertising. Moreover, their effectiveness can be further understood through theoretical frameworks such as retail gravity models, selective perception theory, and recency planning, which highlight how audiences engage with and respond to advertising messages (Taylor et al., 2006).

Central to billboard effectiveness are image and language. Visual elements in advertising go beyond aesthetics; they enhance communication and simplify message delivery (Armstrong, 2010). Furthermore, images are rich in layered meanings, allowing audiences to interpret and relate to the ideas being conveyed (Messaris, 1997; Kayode and Afolami, 2013; Edegoh, Asemah, and Okpanachi, 2013). One key dimension that further explains the persistence and

effectiveness of billboard advertising is its strategic use of gender representation. Among the most recurrent motifs in billboard advertising is the deployment of the female body as a visual and symbolic resource. In this context, gender is not merely represented but actively constructed and circulated through carefully curated images that aim to attract attention, evoke desire, and reinforce particular consumer identities. The prominence of the female body in billboard ads reflects broader dynamics within advertising culture, where femininity is often commodified and aligned with ideals of beauty, desirability, and consumption. This visual strategy enhances the visibility and memorability of billboards, thereby reinforcing their media efficiency and tangible impact. At the same time, it draws on psychological mechanisms such as selective perception, where audiences are more likely to notice and retain images that resonate with socially embedded norms and expectations surrounding gender.

## 2. Literature Review

There is a substantial body of literature on gender representation in advertising, particularly over the past few decades, a period marked by the rapid expansion of commodity culture. One of the early influential contributions is *Photography: A Critical Introduction* by Liz Wells, which, although not exclusively focused on advertising, critically examines how images, especially of women, circulate within consumer culture. Wells highlights how the female body is frequently deployed in advertising as a visual strategy to attract attention and animate commodities. In this process, women are often reduced to objects of desire or fetishized figures, with varying degrees of nudity and sexual suggestiveness used to evoke erotic responses. She critiques this practice as a form of objectification, whereby women are transformed into passive entities designed for the male gaze, a logic that is particularly visible in billboard advertising.

Subsequent scholarship has further consolidated the link between advertising and gendered representations. A foundational study by Paul Rutherford in *The New Icons? The Art of Television Advertising* reveals the deeply androcentric portrayal of women in televised advertising. Similarly, Pryor and Nelson argue that advertising plays a crucial role in perpetuating socially constructed norms of masculinity and femininity, reinforcing gender stereotypes that shape societal expectations and behaviors.

However, much of this research remains broad in scope, addressing gender representation across multiple advertising platforms, including print, television, and digital media. More focused attention on billboard advertising emerges in the work of Scott Lukas through his *Gendered Billboard Project*, which specifically interrogates how gender is constructed in this medium. Lukas demonstrates that billboard advertisements actively participate in the reproduction of unequal gender relations. He identifies several recurring patterns: the structuring of male–female relations along lines of dominance and subordination; the objectification of the female body through sexually suggestive imagery; and the clear differentiation in how men and women are positioned. Men are typically portrayed as strong, autonomous, and authoritative, while women are depicted as passive, dependent, and subordinate. Furthermore, billboard ads frequently reinforce stereotypical associations of

women with domestic roles, such as caregiving, housework, and consumption-oriented activities.

More recent studies continue to confirm and extend these findings. Research shows that billboard advertisements construct meaning through gendered roles, with men predominantly associated with public and professional spheres, while women are more frequently confined to domestic settings or reduced to decorative figures, often with little or no connection to the advertised product (Ojiakor-Umenze, Onebunne, & Ekezie, 2019). In a similar vein, thematic discourse analyses reveal that billboard advertisements are embedded with layered meanings that reinforce gender objectification, stereotypical female portrayals, and dominant cultural norms (Hussain, Qandeel, Arif, & Saleem, 2021). More broadly, studies on gender in advertising indicate a persistent dichotomy in representation: men are typically constructed as competent, assertive, and achievement-oriented, whereas women are more often depicted as dependent, sociable, and primarily valued for their physical attractiveness (Kniazian, n.d.).

While the literature on gender and billboard advertising is extensive, particularly in Western contexts, research on this issue in Morocco remains relatively scarce. Moreover, existing studies tend to focus predominantly on print and television advertising, leaving billboard advertising comparatively underexplored. This paper, therefore, seeks to fill this gap by examining how gender is represented in billboard advertisements, contributing to a more context-specific understanding of advertising practices and their cultural implications.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

This study is grounded in multimodal discourse analysis, which explains how meaning is constructed through the interaction of multiple semiotic resources such as language, image, colour, layout, and typography (Kress, 2012; van Leeuwen, 2015). In this perspective, communication is not limited to written or spoken language but is understood as the combination of different modes that work together to produce meaning in advertising texts. Each mode contributes a specific function: written language conveys verbal information, images attract attention and illustrate meaning, colour highlights emotional and ideological tones, while layout and typography organize visual hierarchy and guide interpretation.

The study further draws on the idea that meaning in billboard advertisements is produced through the integration of these semiotic resources into a coherent multimodal ensemble. The interaction of modes shapes how audiences interpret messages and construct understanding based on cultural knowledge and social context (Kress, 2012). Billboards are, therefore, treated as multimodal texts where persuasive meaning is created through the strategic arrangement of visual and verbal elements. This framework enables the analysis of how advertisements across different sectors, such as property and construction, food, furniture, and Telecommunications, use multimodal strategies to communicate ideologies and influence viewers (van Leeuwen, 2015).

### **4. Research Methodology**

This study adopted a descriptive research design, which focuses on systematically describing and interpreting the observable characteristics of selected data. The aim is to analyse how

meaning is constructed through multimodal elements in billboard advertising in Morocco. A total of six billboard advertisements were purposively selected from different parts of Morocco. The selected billboards represent diverse sectors, including property and construction, food and beverage advertising, furniture, and telecommunications. This variation allows for a broader understanding of how different industries use multimodal strategies to communicate with audiences.

The analysis of the data is conducted using a multimodal semiotic framework, drawing on van Leeuwen's (2015) approach to multimodality and Kress's (2012) theory of multimodal discourse. This approach examines how language, image, colour, layout, and typography interact to produce meaning. It also considers how these modes work together to create coherence, persuade audiences, and convey ideological messages embedded in the advertisements.

#### *4.1 Research Questions*

The study is guided by the three main research questions:

- How do billboard advertisements represent and objectify women?
- In what ways do billboard advertisements perpetuate gender stereotypes?
- How do billboard advertisements influence the construction of women's roles and identities in society?

### **5. Objectification of the Female Body**

The use of women in billboard advertising has become one of the most effective strategies employed by advertising companies to capture the attention of potential consumers and maximize profit. A brief observation of billboards across Moroccan cities reveals the prominent presence of female figures, regardless of the nature of the advertised product. However, this widespread use of women and the ways in which they are represented often contribute to the reinforcement of traditional gender roles that sustain patriarchal cultural norms, in which women are positioned as subordinate to men. In many cases, billboard advertisements go beyond the construction of gender roles to focus explicitly on the female body itself. Women are frequently portrayed in ways that objectify their physical appearance, presenting them as visual objects designed to attract and retain the viewer's attention. This is achieved through visual strategies such as partial nudity, suggestive poses, or the deliberate emphasis on specific body parts, all of which work to transform the female figure into a tool for visual appeal and consumer attraction, as portrayed in the following figure.



Figure 1. Billboard ad for INWI (Moroccan telecommunication firm)

At first glance, the ad appears to promote an improvement in the telecommunications services offered by the INWI company. A closer examination of the billboard reveals how various visual and linguistic elements are strategically combined to effectively mediate the product. The ad employs both Arabic and French, while visually emphasizing a specific human feature, the mouth, which is directly associated with the advertised service, namely HD voice quality.

However, this seemingly straightforward promotional strategy becomes more complex when considering the medium through which it is conveyed, particularly the representation of the female body. Through the use of close-up photographic techniques, the viewer's attention is directed almost exclusively toward a single element of the woman's body: her mouth. The female subject is thus fragmented, with the rest of her body blurred and visually suppressed, effectively reducing her presence to a partial and isolated image. The mouth is further intensified through a tightly framed inset within the larger composition, making it unavoidable and visually dominant. The overall structure of the image functions like a visual target, guiding the viewer's gaze toward this specific focal point.

Beyond this process of reduction, the advertisement also constructs a layer of sexual suggestiveness. The close-up emphasis on the lips, enhanced by the use of red lipstick, accentuates their visibility and transforms them into the central object of visual attention. In the words of Laura Mulvey, this connotes the erotic female to-be-looked-at-ness. She states, "In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looted-at-ness*" (Mulvey, 1975). In addition, the photograph occupies a substantial portion of the billboard space, resembling a portrait in its composition. Were it not for the company logo and minimal textual elements, the image could easily stand as a standalone visual. This highlights the dominance of the visual over the verbal in advertising communication, as images often exert a stronger immediate impact than text. At the same time, this visual immediacy makes photographs highly accessible but also open to

manipulation, particularly in their representation of women.

In this case, the advertisement exemplifies how selective framing and photographic techniques can fragment the female body, reducing it to isolated parts that function primarily as visual stimuli, or as Mulvey (1975) would like to call it, “erotic spectacle”. The result is a form of representation in which the woman is not presented as a complete subject, but rather as a set of aesthetic fragments designed for visual consumption. Sometimes, the overemphasis on the female body often blurs the motif of the ad, as in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Billboard ad for M Avenue- Construction Site in Marrakech

Only a few would immediately assume that the billboard in question advertises estate development, as it is in fact promoting *M Avenue*, a newly launched development project in Marrakech rather than beauty products. At first sight, the advertisement creates the impression of a cosmetics campaign; however, as the viewer's gaze shifts to the right-hand side and engages with the accompanying text, the actual purpose of the ad becomes clear.

This initial ambiguity is largely produced by the dominant visual presence on the left side of the billboard. The image of a partially nude woman captures immediate attention and overshadows the textual information. In effect, the advertisement deliberately employs the female body as a visual hook to attract viewers. Her semi-nude presentation functions as a strategic device designed to draw the gaze, stimulate fantasy, and evoke desire, particularly among male viewers. In this sense, the female body is transformed into a public spectacle, positioned for consumption under a distinctly voyeuristic gaze. From a psychoanalytic perspective, this visual dynamic can be related to the concept of scopophilia, which refers to the pleasure derived from looking at bodies as objects of visual desire. In his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), Sigmund Freud associates scopophilia with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to our active in the hope of achieving sexual satisfaction.

Additionally, the advertisement is doubly objectifying. On the one hand, it fragments the female body by isolating specific parts such as the lips, neck, and facial features, thereby reducing the woman to partial visual elements rather than a complete human being. On the other hand, it constructs an explicitly sexualized representation through posture, exposure, and seductive facial expression, reinforcing the association between femininity and erotic appeal.

Furthermore, the woman is denied the capacity to return the gaze. She is presented as an object to be looked at rather than a subject who looks back, reinforcing a one-directional visual relationship between viewer and image. This absence of agency intensifies the asymmetry of representation, positioning the female figure as passive and consumable within the visual field. Such forms of visual erasure and fragmentation resonate with broader patterns of representational reduction that have historically been linked to objectifying visual regimes, where bodies are stripped of subjectivity and rendered as sites for interpretation and desire. Even if a woman is given significant space in the billboard ad (figure 3), her existence and value are measured by the extent of influence she can exert on passersby. In other words, her presence is functional and conditioned on the surplus value her body contributes to the whole advertising business. It is then safe to point out that women displayed in such a way have been the leitmotif of the politics of representations within Moroccan billboards.



Figure 3. Billboard ad for estate and property management Atlas

In the figure above, the female model appears to occupy a relatively balanced and proportionate space within the billboard composition. However, this apparent visual centrality should not be interpreted as a form of recognition or tribute to women's social role. Rather, the representation functions primarily as a strategic device designed to attract the attention of passers-by and drivers, positioning the female figure as a tool of visual capture within the advertising message.

The most immediately striking element of the advertisement is the woman herself, particularly her tight-fitting, sleeveless dress, which is visually emphasized through framing

and composition. Her direct gaze further intensifies this effect by establishing an immediate, although carefully constructed, sense of engagement with the viewer. However, this apparent spontaneity is in fact highly mediated and deliberately staged. It is only after the initial visual encounter with the model that secondary elements of the advertisement, such as textual information, location, and pricing, become noticeable. While the presence of the female figure clearly enhances the commercial effectiveness of the advertisement by facilitating attention and recall, this profit-driven strategy often comes at the expense of more complex representations of women. It contributes to the ongoing difficulty women face in constructing identities beyond androcentric frameworks that reduce them to bodily appearance rather than recognizing them as fully developed social subjects capable of agency beyond visual consumption.

From the perspective of John Berger's theory of the male gaze, the advertisement can also be understood as doubly objectifying. It not only addresses male viewers; it also implicates female viewers in the act of looking. Women observing the advertisement may engage with the model through culturally shaped standards of beauty, focusing on features such as glossy hair, fair skin, and facial aesthetics, thereby reinforcing a fragmented perception of the female body. In this sense, women are not only objects of representation but also participants in the reproduction of objectifying visual practices.

Consequently, this dynamic contributes to the internalization of gendered standards of appearance and influences how women perceive both themselves and other women. Over time, such representations play a role in shaping gendered identity, reinforcing visual regimes in which femininity is continuously evaluated through appearance-based criteria rather than subjectivity or agency.

## **6. Perpetuating Gender Roles**

One of the key by-products of advertising in general is the reinforcement and maintenance of gender roles. Indeed, reductive advertising practices contribute to the shaping and reshaping of social patterns of behavior by influencing perceptions of what it means to be a man or a woman, and thus shaping broader understandings of gender identity. In this sense, billboard advertising is no exception; it forms part of the wider socialization process through which individuals construct self-images in relation to culturally established gender binaries. Early on, individuals are exposed to differentiated expectations: girls are often socialized toward domestic roles associated with caregiving and motherhood, while boys are encouraged to pursue paid employment and public-facing roles. Accordingly, Judith Butler, a well-known American gender theorist, critiques the assumption that biological sex predetermines gender identity. She instead argues that gender is continually constituted through repeated social performances within a regulatory framework (Butler, 1993). She further explains, "Gender performativity is not a matter of choosing which gender one will be today. Performativity is a matter of reiterating or repeating the norm which one is constituted" (1999). In the light of Butler's conceptualization of gender and how it is performed through stylized acts, one comes to the conclusion that gender is not a fixed biological essence but rather a socially and culturally constructed category, shaped and reinforced through traditions, norms, and

everyday representations; chief among these representations are mediated through different media outlets, such as billboard advertisements, as a case in point.

In this context, billboard advertisements can be understood as what Pierre Bourdieu (1977) terms “structured structures predisposed to serve as structuring structures”, as they actively participate in the reproduction of ideological systems that sustain existing social relations. Through repetitive visual and symbolic messages, billboards contribute to the normalization of gender hierarchies, thereby playing a significant role in affirming and maintaining conventional gender roles within society.



Figure 4. Billboard ad for KITEA

The billboard ad above can be interpreted in multiple ways, although none of these readings ultimately serve to exonerate the representation of women or effectively challenge established gender stereotypes. It depicts a woman in a wedding dress who appears to be chasing her husband and dragging him toward a KITEA furniture store, a well-known home furnishing retailer. From a cultural perspective, the idea of a bride “chasing” her husband is often perceived as demeaning to women within Moroccan social norms, as it reverses conventional expectations of marital roles in a way that may reinforce stereotypical or reductive imagery.

The advertisement thus appears to problematize the notion of marriage by constructing a symbolic reversal in which the woman is positioned as the “hunter” and the man as the “prey”. While such imagery may have drawn on motifs present in popular culture at a certain historical moment, contemporary understandings of marriage have evolved significantly. In light of legal and social reforms, particularly those associated with the Moroccan Family Code (Mudawana), marriage is increasingly framed as a partnership between equals who share mutual rights and responsibilities within the household.

Against this backdrop, the implication that women are eager to be married or must actively pursue marriage appears outdated, especially given that many women today exercise greater autonomy in deciding whether or not to marry. In addition, the advertisement risks reinforcing negative stereotypes about men by suggesting that they are reluctant to furnish or

invest in the home, thereby shifting domestic responsibility onto women in a one-sided manner.

Furthermore, the visual metaphor of chasing and dragging introduces a pejorative undertone through its association with force and coercion, which may evoke animalistic imagery and reduce the complexity of marital relations to a simplified and somewhat caricatured scenario. Overall, the advertisement illustrates how humour and exaggeration in billboard ads can nonetheless reproduce gendered stereotypes and culturally loaded assumptions about marriage, masculinity, and femininity, as can be seen in subsequent figures.



Figure 5. Billboard ad for DARI Couscous (A well-known food brand in Morocco)

One of the most recurrent gender roles reproduced in billboard advertising is the association of women with the domestic sphere, particularly the figure of the housewife. This stereotype is deeply rooted in patriarchal social structures, where women have historically been confined to private spaces and assigned roles linked to household labor. In such contexts, women were predominantly expected to act as caregivers, cooks, mothers, and loyal wives responsible for maintaining the home and raising children.

Within this framework, female value was often measured through competence in domestic tasks, especially cooking, an idea that is still reflected in many cultural expressions and popular sayings that praise women for their culinary skills (*hdaga*) in Moroccan vernacular. However, contemporary billboard advertisements continue to reproduce and circulate these same traditional representations by visually fixing women within domestic settings. In the advertisement under analysis, the female figure is explicitly positioned in the kitchen, fully engaged in household chores. Through repetition and normalization, such visual narratives contribute to the reinforcement of gender roles, transforming advertising into a subtle ideological mechanism that sustains conventional expectations about femininity and domesticity.

What is particularly intriguing about the ad above is the constructed facial expression of happiness, which suggests that the woman is not only satisfied with the advertised product

but also content in her role as a housewife. This portrayal naturalizes domestic labor as a source of fulfilment, thereby reinforcing rather than questioning gendered divisions of space and responsibility. Interestingly enough, this representation is not restricted to firms or companies that deploy the female body and gender roles to maximize profits; it can also be found in female-only radio programs whose mission is to give tips to women to improve their lives, as in the one below.



Figure 6. Billboard Ad of a Radio Program Called Lalla Fatema

This advertisement promotes a program broadcast on the Moroccan radio station MFM called *Lalla Fatema*, a show dedicated to providing advice and guidance on women's and family-related issues, as its name suggests. While the program is explicitly centered on women's issues, one might expect its promotional imagery to reflect more progressive or empowering representations of women that move beyond conventional gender expectations. However, rather than challenging outdated gender roles, the advertisement instead reproduces them through its visual composition. It depicts two women holding a hairdryer and a cooking pan—objects that symbolically link femininity to beauty practices and domestic responsibilities. In doing so, the ad reinforces the long-standing association between women, household labor, and physical appearance.

This representation once again confines women to a narrowly defined social space in which their value is primarily constructed through their relation to domesticity and aesthetic care. Rather than portraying women as autonomous individuals with diverse roles and identities, the advertisement contributes to the freezing of female identity within traditional frameworks, where adherence to established gender roles becomes the primary measure of their social presence and worth.

## 7. Conclusion

This paper has highlighted several forms of misrepresentation of women in Moroccan billboard advertisements through the use of a multimodal semiotic framework, which allows for the analysis of how meaning is constructed across visual and textual modes. It shows that

women are frequently sexualized through the selective focus on specific parts of their bodies, a representational strategy that reduces them to objects of visual consumption and produces a gaze structured by “to-be-looked-at-ness” and scopophilia. This objectifying visual logic positions women primarily as sights for consumption rather than as fully agentic subjects.

Building on this, the analysis of a range of billboard stands and panels identifies dominant representational patterns through which advertising contributes to the reinforcement of traditional gender roles. The findings show that women are frequently portrayed as housewives engaged in domestic tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and childcare, thereby restricting their representation to the domestic sphere and reinforcing long-standing stereotypes that confine female identity to domesticity. Such depictions also echo broader orientalist clichés that construct the “Oriental female” as confined and immobile, limited by socially prescribed boundaries. That said, the analysis demonstrates that billboard advertising does not merely reflect existing gender hierarchies but actively participates in their reproduction by normalizing female subordination and naturalizing male dominance within visual culture.

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