## Imagining Identities: Television Advertising and the
## Reconciliation of the Lebanese Conflict

The Middle East has seen much social change in recent decades of turmoil. On one hand, some communities have embraced Westernness as part of an inevitable path to development and modernization. On the other hand, other communities have resisted global trends mainly dominated by the West. The latter deemed influences from the West as a threat to native cultures, religious values and local traditions. This has made the Arab world a ground for constant redefinition of identity.

Of the countries in the region undergoing a turbulent debate over what constitutes a national identity, Lebanon serves as a unique example. Ever since its independence, Lebanon has been a nation-state with no sense of nationality to unite its people. Some communities saw themselves as more francophone than Arab, while others felt a close connection to a pan-Arab nation. Arguably, the Lebanese people found themselves in tension between the two poles. Defining one's identity required negotiation between the two extremes. Not only did this negotiation demand a thorough investigation of one's beliefs, social networks, and history, but it also necessitated a diligent 'performance' of identity. An individual represented her identity by habits and expressions that she associated with that particular identity.

The study at hand is an exploration of the relationship between identity and consumption in Lebanese society. Taking television advertising as a site of inquiry, this paper proposes to find out how commercial advertisers have constructed a "new" cosmopolitan identity for the Lebanese. The Lebanese cosmopolitan transcends the ideological and religious differences that hinder progress. This paper argues that the

construction of a sterilized cosmopolitan identity utilizes consumption as the marker of difference. Applying theories of globalization, postcolonial studies, and consumption, this study focuses on television advertising as a manifestation of the ambivalence in identity. It investigates how producers of television commercials associate attitudes, behaviors, and social status with the featured products.

**<u>Historical Context:</u>**

This paper does not claim that media products have been the cause of controversy in defining the national and cultural identity of the Lebanese. This work will, however, build on the premise that the dispute over identity has existed since the early years of the country's inception. In fact, the contention over defining this identity finds its roots in colonial times.

For many centuries the rugged mountainous terrain of Lebanon provided a safe haven for an array of exiled religious communities. Maronite Christians inhabited the areas of northern Lebanon fearing the wrath of Justinian II in 694. Numerous dissident Muslim groups, exiled and persecuted, took refuge in south Lebanon. One of the latter was the Druze community that came to play a major role in Lebanese history (Hitti, 1965, p. 257). According to Richard van Leeuwen (1994), the Maronite population increased significantly in the 16th and 17th centuries. With this growth emerged the Maronite migration from areas such as Bsharri (in the north) to areas in Mount Lebanon. This encouraged economic interaction between the Druze inhabitants of these areas and the recent Maronite dwellers (van Leeuwen, 1994, p.101).

Maronites have always seen themselves as victims of persecution by the ruling empires that prevailed through the centuries. Philip Hitti (1957) writes that during the

Mamluke era, Maronites were the victims of pillage and destruction. This forced them to draw south into Druze areas which they penetrated deeply from the 16th century through the 18th century. Hitti (1957) argues that the coexistence of Maronites and Druze in the same areas eventually fueled the confrontations that led to the sectarian conflicts of the 19th century. Seventeenth-century Maronite Patriarch Istfan Doueihy said the Maronite community's history was fraught with struggle for a religious identity during times of Sunni Muslim domination (Gilmore, 1983, p.75).

However, the Druze and the Nusayriyah Shiites were in the same weak position as the Maronites during the rule of the Ottomans and the Mamlukes before them (Abu Abd Allah, 1997). In fact, many historians contend that it was subjection to similar pressures that brought these communities together. For example, Michael House (1989) and Samir Khalaf (1979) describe the relationship between the various religious communities of Lebanon as one of harmonious coexistence. The religious minorities lived in accord and in fact became dependent on each other to survive the overwhelming Sunni hegemony. Kamal Salibi (1988) states that Maronites living in Druze regions were under Druze protection. Abd Allah Abu Abd Allah (1997) says it was the Druze and the Shiite lords that invited the Maronites to their territories to work the fields or even to provide monetary and financial services. This communal cohesiveness can best be demonstrated through the personal friendship that developed between the Druze Emir Ahmad Maan of the Shuf and Maronite Patriarch Doueihy (Salibi, 1988).

If any divisions existed in society, these divisions remained within the ruling feudal families. Followers, whether Christians or Druze, pledged allegiance to the feudal lords they served. While the lords and their families lived safely and comfortably in their castles overseeing the fiefdoms, external intervention - whether Ottoman or European -

aimed at striking a balance between the various sheikhs in power; a balance that was soon to take a sectarian form.

The Ottomans required a steady flow of taxation from their subjects and later sought to establish their authority in the region. European powers also had various interests. Khalaf (1979) believes that European intervention, specifically French and British, heavily influenced how the Ottoman Porte ruled the Lebanese territory. Eventually, the power-play between them was somewhat resolved by separating the mountains and dividing them into two administrative entities (qa'immaqamates) -- one Christian and one Druze.

European intervention came not only in political form, but also through charitable organizations and educational institutions. Interestingly, the investment in development and education appeared to take sectarian forms. While the Maronites and the Druze were cohesive to the extent that they still signed joint declarations as late as 1840, foreign powers were already planting missionaries sponsoring different religious communities. Gilmore (1983) indicates that Jesuits, Capuchins, and Franciscans built their own schools and institutions and advised the Maronite patriarch on various issues. While the patriarch gained many benefits from this relationship, in exchange for support from the Roman Catholic Church the Maronite church recognized the Pope and required its bishops to wear mitres.

Foreign powers supporting religious factions created an air of ill-will among the relatively harmonious groups. According to Antun Daher Al-Aqiqi, conflict eventually broke out not because of ideological or religious reasons, but rather because the feudal families found their authority challenged. Local people and peasants harbored animosity toward their sheikhs under the prevailing feudal system (Abu Abd Allah, 1997). The

feudal families competed for titles, land, and power, while subjecting their peasants to extreme exploitation. Eventually the peasants, particularly the Maronites, sought the help of their religious leaders.

These conditions were soon coupled with major economic and social changes. The global economy and the growing foreign demand for local goods impacted the lives of many peasants and farmers (Gilmore, 1983). Maronites who were once peasants at the mercy of their landlords could now seek relative independence by establishing small-scale businesses exporting their produce and raw materials. Foreign trade strengthened the ties between Maronite dwellers in Lebanon and the European community. As the discrepancy grew between the various communities and their affiliation with their foreign sponsors, so did the sectarian differences. With the shifting socio-economic conditions, feudal lords resorted to religious identity to maintain their position in the social order and prevent their subjects from revolting against them. Janet Hancock (1987) asserts that the ruling elite saw an opportunity in foreign protection even if the foreign support came on the basis of sectarianism and helped to generate conflict.

Foreign intervention in Lebanese affairs started as early as the 1800s, creating a major divide in how the Lebanese perceive themselves and see their future. This was accentuated as the Ottoman rule reached its demise in the first decades of the 20th century. During this period, as Europe thrived through industrial modernization, European colonies spread throughout the southern hemisphere. As in many regions in the Middle East and North Africa, the French imposed a mandate over Lebanon. European influence and intrusion – mainly French – continued even after the newly established Republic of Lebanon gained independence from France (Salibi, 1988). In postcolonial times, Lebanon saw much interference from the global superpowers that had economic

and military interests in the region. The West left cultural footprints that have become a part of Lebanese daily life. Such cultural impressions contributed to the ideological conflicts that plagued the country for much of the twentieth century (Khalaf, 2002, p. 234). Political and religious factions contested one another's ideals for a common identity. The disparity of views over this identity was grave and became a key ingredient that ignited a 15-year civil war.

**Lebanon and Cultural Memory:**

The Lebanese, like most people, have always aspired to peace and social cohesion. But they have not always agreed on a roadmap to achieve those ideals. In post-war Lebanon, people have entrusted successive governments with the task of redeveloping the country. These governments have focused on economic development and urban reconstruction but they have failed to address the dire social need to overcome the collective war-trauma.

Saree Makdisi (2006) says the government's approach was to simply brush the past 'under the rug' and 'start a new page'. The public policy was to avoid engaging the trauma or revisiting the issues that originated the conflict. This approach constituted an "unconscious defense mechanism" (Madkisi, 2006, p. 204).  The effort to forgive and forget took a physical dimension. The government (headed then by Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri) made a concerted effort to create a symbol of Lebanese unity and success by the rapid reconstruction of the downtown area of the capital city, Beirut, an area which was reduced to rubble during the war. But it has been completely rebuilt and sterilized of remnants of the conflict.

Caroline Nagel (2000) argues that this feat attempted to separate post-war Lebanon from the history of sectarian violence. Hence, downtown Beirut took a neutral

character with a Phoenician connection. Nagel (2000) explains that highlighting the Phoenician identity was "an attempt to foster an allegiance to 'Lebanon' that supersedes narrow sectarian affiliations […] address[ing] the Lebanese people not as Muslim, Christian, or Druze, but as part of a more ancient 'race' of people, whose character has been shaped by Lebanon's position as an entrepot between East and West" (p. 226). This process is what Dominique LaCapra (1999) referred to as "avoidance of anxiety".

LaCapra (1999) maintains that assigning an object of blame allows victims of trauma to regain the state of wholeness and security that was lost during the traumatic event. What he refers to as "scapegoating or sacrificial scenarios" create a common image of the culprit (p. 707). Accordingly, to regain the sense of unity that was lost, one must eliminate the cause of trauma: the "sinful other in oneself" (LaCapra, 1999, p.707). The "sinful other in oneself", in this case, was the Lebanese citizen confined by religious affiliation, sectarian prejudice and discrimination. The "sinful other in oneself" was simply the display of religious affiliation. The "sinful other in oneself" was whatever marker of religious identity separated one from a 'Lebanese self' common to all members of this national community.

The Cedar Revolution is a clear demonstration of the case. Immediately after the assassination of Hariri on February 14, 2005, Beirut saw what can best be described as a patriotic frenzy. People from all over the country took to the streets and converged on the Beirut downtown area. What is of interest in this particular event is the reaction exhibited by people from all religious backgrounds. The bomb blast that took Hariri's life reminded the Lebanese of the horrors of the civil war. The magnitude of this event shook the core of Lebanese society. Fears of returning to the dark days of the war pushed the Lebanese to assert their unity with fervor. Samir Khalaf (2006) observed that "Christians and

Muslims [were] praying in unison or bearing cross-religious placards as they observed moments of silence over Hariri's gravesite" (p. 16).

The unity demonstrated was in the form of participants shedding their religious differences. For some, this public outcry became the venue for their creative abilities in forging cliché images of multi-religiosity. Colorful T-shirts bearing symbols of all faiths spoke louder than words. Cross-and-crescent pendants (symbols of different faiths welded into one piece) hanging on demonstrators' chests exhibited their longing for cohesiveness. With an imaginative collection of paraphernalia, protesters not only made a political declaration, but also created a fashion-statement.

The public demonstration stood as an event in itself. Khalaf compared what he called a "'mélange' of inconsistencies" to "a Woodstock or a Hyde Park", or even a "triumphal post-World Cup rally" that resembled "a carnival, a rock concert, a 'be-in' or some other rejectionist manifestation of early-1970s 'counterculture'" (2006, p. 15). Arguably, therefore, the Cedar Revolution emerged as a fusion of somber grief with a pop-culture celebration heralding Lebanon's triumph over petty religious differences.

Rebecca Saunders and Kamran Aghaie (2005) say that cultural constructions of a trauma require catalysts to set the process in motion. They maintain that these catalysts are agents such as mass media as well as other social institutions. Furthermore, the authors argue that the role of these agents is to mediate the experience of collective trauma. They "establish the relation of the trauma to those who experience it […] and assign responsibility [for it]" (Saunders & Aghaie, 2005, p. 18).

Television stations in Lebanon, particularly LBCI and Future TV, dedicated a significant portion of their airtime to live coverage of the demonstrations in the downtown area. These stations were crucial in shaping the events taking place on the

street. While programs, coverage, and newscasts played an integral role, television advertisements also soon emerged as a mediation of the public dialogue.

**<u>Post-War Media</u>**

Shortly after the Lebanese conflict erupted in 1975, warring factions established illegal broadcast media to promote their agendas (Dajani, 1992). Marwan Kraidy (1998) notes that Lebanese broadcast media were unique in their structure. The warring factions created these stations in a bottom-up model unlike the top-down structure of media in the rest of the Arab world (Kraidy, 1998, p. 278). It was the civil strife during the war in Lebanon, as Kraidy (1998) points out, that is behind the privatization of media. As radio stations found commercial success, local television stations became increasingly abundant in the mid eighties to the early nineties (Kraidy, 1999).

Thus, media in Lebanon thrived because of their advertising revenue, which proved vital in a highly competitive market. To achieve a sizeable share of the audience, programming had to follow the latest trends in production formats and aesthetics. Importing media content from the US, the UK, and France, and emulating their formats, were key factors in staying ahead of the competition. There were no defined goals to serve national interests (Boyd, 1999, p. 11).

The priority had always been for profit over the public's welfare. The notion of viewership revolved around satiating the audience with entertainment shows. Programming was predominantly foreign and bore "little or no attention to its social implications and responsibilities" (Dajani, 2001, p. 2). Content and production standards were at a high level. Within this context, the advertising industry followed suit. The standards of television entertainment were now being applied to short commercial clips with the sole purpose of influencing the viewer's behavior: buy the product advertised.

Considering the complexities of identity in postcolonial Lebanon, there is a noticeable trend towards advertising operating on the social level. Such commercials suggest – whether directly or indirectly – that consuming the advertised product generates a feeling of belonging to a particular social status. This consumer, for example, may feel as if s/he were a global or a cosmopolitan individual. Watching a commercial advertisement on Lebanese television, the viewer may see images that do not particularly fit a specific culture with a specific Lebanese character or a local persona. Rather, the advertisement places the audience in a "culturally sterile" sphere. The characters presented on screen use this product as part of a cosmopolitan global lifestyle befitting the 21st century.

The advertising industry quickly progressed with the development of new technologies and the spread of transnational advertising corporations. The public has become acculturated to new forms by which advertisements appeal to their audiences. The public has come to require "higher" quality advertisements in order to be tempted to buy the products. This meant that local advertising companies and production houses had to compete with foreign ads. These companies were soon to follow the advertising aesthetics and the high production standards that the transnational firms set in the market.

The high-standard approach that Lebanese advertisers followed yielded an eclectic collection of commercial ads that address the viewer's anxieties and aspirations. Not only was the production quality of a superior caliber, but in many cases these messages provided complex texts that hit core issues reflecting daily struggles. These 30-second intervals provided a space where advertisers presented solutions to a community to which they themselves belong. Upon taking a close look at the way television advertisements are created, we see how producers frame their target audience, construct

an ideal image of their society, and present their products as an embodiment of that ideal. Advertising practices soon became a fundamental part of an underlying struggle in Lebanese society. Advertisers soon tackled the Lebanese collective trauma that reemerged when the Cedar Revolution brought to light continuing polarization of opinion on the street. Not only did these commercials delve into sensitive topics regarding politics, economy, and the country's haunting past, but they also offered insights on how to resolve these issues.

The advertising industry in Lebanon devoted effort and resources to constructing an environment in which the advertised products are positioned in a non-Arab or at least culturally ambiguous context. The images presented in Lebanese television advertisements are set in a cosmopolitan space. These images provide an array of possibilities by which a viewer can imagine her/his own identity. The cosmopolitan space they present contributes to the tension between Arabness and cosmopolitanism as the viewer interprets the usage of the advertised product as a tool for attaining social status. While dropping the Arabness of one's own identity is virtually impossible for the viewer, the accumulation of the goods advertised acts as compensation. It gives the consumer the illusion that consumption *is* what elevates one's status in society. It would create an ideal identity of the cosmopolitan Arab.

In order to understand how advertising has come to play an important role in successfully creating images of cosmopolitanism, it is important to understand current advertising trends in Lebanon. Whether in Lebanon and the Arab world, the 'art' of advertising has flourished rapidly as new technologies developed and transnational advertising corporations emerged. Andrew Hammond (2001) explains that the Arab viewer's exposure to "foreign ads accompanied by the spread of satellite services and

hence, foreign channels, creates heightened expectations of the quality of programming and advertising among viewers" (p. 266).

The intention is not to claim that globalization is the sole factor that has transformed the advertising scene in Lebanon. On the contrary, a conscious effort to westernize advertising standards and aesthetics has played a significant role in the process. Advertising producers have incorporated transnational advertising tools and applied them locally. Timothy Havens (2006) holds that local media producers act as cultural intermediaries. Havens describes these intermediaries as the individuals who facilitate interactions between viewers and global media exporters. Intermediaries play the role of gatekeepers and promoters of cultural products as well as values of style and popular culture. The issues with which we are concerned relate to the aesthetic and textual choices that these cultural intermediaries make, resulting in the array of cultural texts their commercials offer.

**Identity beyond Differences: Case Studies**

Coinciding with the Cedar Revolution, an ad entitled *The Lebanese Flag* aired on Lebanese television, comparing citizens from all over the world. In a montage showcasing individuals each before his/her country's flag, each of them proudly announce their nationalities in their mother tongue: "I am French," "I am Omani," "We are Serbs," "I am South African"… etc. The music suddenly subsides. With a Lebanese flag as a backdrop, a young man pompously declares "I am Sunni!" followed by others, each saying: "I am Druze!" "I am a Maronite!" "I am a Shiite!"  The music which now transforms into a version of the Lebanese national anthem becomes gravely melancholic.

As the lights dim on the scene, a caption appears: "When are we ever going to be Lebanese?"

The *Lebanese Flag* ad was yet another forum that brought the discourse of Lebanese identity from the street into the Lebanese home. This advertisement may not promote a certain product, but it certainly advocates the 'Lebanese identity brand' as imagined by the ad's producers. The message is clear. The ad questions the viewer's values and juxtaposes the Lebanese citizen with individuals from other places in the world who, unlike the Lebanese, seem to pride themselves on their national identity. The juxtaposition mirrors an unflattering image of the Lebanese citizen who claims a religious identity before a national one. Once all Lebanese individuals declare their religious identity, the flag backdrop slowly falls as a passage from the Lebanese national anthem is eerily played off-key. The scene symbolizes the downfall of the country at the hands of the Sunni, the Shiite, the Druze, and the Maronite communities (the major religious communities in the country), who are unwilling to drop their religious affiliation in favor of national unity. In other words, the ad preaches the slogan: "United, we stand. Divided, we fall!"

As admirable a patriotic message as this PSA is, one must still question the motives that lie behind an advertisement promoting a national identity over a religious one. It is important at this point to note that the *Lebanese Flag* PSA aired along with commercial advertisements. Accordingly, we should regard this message within the context of the flow – to borrow Raymond Williams's (1975) term – of commercial messages.

Because of the turmoil and public unrest, the economic cycle was temporarily halted until normalcy was restored. It would not have made much sense to advertise

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commercial products in isolation from the events taking place. For a start, in a time of uncertainty, consumers were worried about the future of the country and the repercussions for financial stability. Buying any non-essential items in times of crisis is not wise. PSAs such the *Lebanese Flag* emerged to create a patriotic link between the commercial industry and the Lebanese public (i.e. the consumer). Hence, a wave of PSAs aired on Lebanese television hailing the rebirth of a new Lebanon. Have commercial advertisements come to venerate consumption as a basis for identity formation? Do the products that one consumes create a common identity for the Lebanese in lieu of identities of religious differentiation? How do commercial ads feature their products on the spectrum of identity?

Terrestrial Lebanese television stations have presented an array of commercials that are eclectic in style and content. Among them are a set of ads that address social concerns in post-war Lebanon. The following examples will illustrate the advertising industry's role in shaping the discourse of identity.

The Johnnie Walker ad presents the story of the world renowned fashion designer, Elie Saab. In this commercial, Saab tells his success story; his journey from his war-torn country, Lebanon, to Europe where he became one of the most sought-after designers around the world. The message opens with Saab walking on a red carpet away from mounted stage-lights and a backdrop of snow-capped mountains. As he walks down the carpet, Saab recounts his experience as a child during the civil war in Lebanon. Addressing the viewer in English, he describes his formative years as a boy enamored with style and beauty. However, his family was displaced due to the war.

In a somber voice with an interrupted tone that resembles Morse-code encryption playing in the background, Saab states: "I promised myself I would create a better

future." These words are accompanied by a reenactment of the scene. In faint color akin to 70s film stock, the young Elie Saab rushes out of an apartment with his mother with whatever belongings she can carry. His mother grabs his hand and frantically rushes with him down a hallway. In the back of the hallway, a light flickers and loses power as if a bomb fell nearby causing a power failure. The sequence cuts to an exterior shot where a terrified father frantically checks for safety, rushes into a car, and drives off with his wife and Elie sitting in the rear seat. The car drives away as the young Elie looks back from the back window as if it were his last look at the neighborhood.

The adult Elie Saab walking on the red carpet remembers his determination from his childhood: "I was a schoolboy by day, a designer by night!" In this scene, a short and quick montage shows the young Saab working on a sewing machine, falling asleep by his machine, and working as an apprentice in a textile shop. The music subtly changes and becomes more upbeat. The setting presents Saab in a well-lit environment and a roomier space than that of the preceding sequence. Saab declares that by then he had sold his first dress, owned his first workshop, and bought a house. Saab proudly confesses that his ambitions went far beyond this stage. The visuals present images from Elie Saab's current and more glamorous fashion world. Saab states that his designs "graced" the catwalks all over the fashion centers of the world. Saab closes the message with his statement: "Believe in your dream, you'll make it happen!" Finally, the Johnnie Walker trademark symbol appears on the lower right-hand corner of the screen showing a silhouette of a man walking and a print below it that reads "Keep Walking."

The Johnnie Walker commercial presents the journey of Elie Saab not only as a success story but also as a triumph over hardships during the war. This is an experience that the Lebanese people share collectively. This message is a clear reminder of a painful

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past to Lebanese viewers. More so, it exalts the Lebanese perseverance over conflict and suffering. The connection between Johnnie Walker's 'walking' is associated with Saab's walking away from a past of challenges and obstacles (visually symbolized by the steep and ominous mountains) toward a future filled with possibilities (as he walks on a long velvety red carpet that leads to a spacious smooth terrain). In turn, Saab's journey exemplifies the path to progress and development. The message that transpires from this ad is that Johnnie Walker is the change and the brighter beginning that the viewer wishes to see in oneself. The ad gives the product a personality of its own. Thus, Johnnie Walker emerges as an active character (as opposed to an inanimate consumable object) that propels its consumer to reach her/his potential.

Furthermore, the Johnnie Walker/Elie Saab Journey advertisement treats the conditions through which Saab lived as external and non-consequential. The images present Saab's family rushing into a car and running for their lives from the war. While there is no remnant of violence in the visual text, the viewer understands the situation through a number of cues. Such images have become far too familiar in the Lebanese daily life during the conflict. The scenes where the hallway light goes off as panic strikes the faces of those on screen relays the intensity of a life-threatening event. It is a reminder of the sheer terror during episodes of shelling and shooting.

While these images evoke memories of the civil war, the ad does not make a direct reference to the conflict, its causes, those involved in it, or how the violence ended. Rather the commercial simplifies the context of the war by focusing on the causal relationship between Saab's hard work and his triumph over the conflict. The ad's preoccupation with the individual success story presents a problematic discourse. It exalts hard work and personal development as a means to overcome civil strife. It also obscures

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the war trauma by idolizing individual success. It is important to note the distinction. Civil strife is not one individual's problem. It is a conflict that is common to all members of the Lebanese society. The war occurred along religious lines and affected all people, albeit in varying degrees. Yet, the ad portrays the conflict as a neutral occurrence that was overcome by one's dreams, ambition fulfillment, and 'living the Johnnie Walker life'. Johnnie Walker's endorsement of Saab's journey offers the Lebanese viewer a formula to transcend the war trauma. It presents individual success – of course, associated with the consumption of the product – rather than civic engagement as a solution to address a collective social issue.

The Johnnie Walker ad is an example that speaks to the Lebanese conflict by providing a glimpse on a personal success story. However, other ads that air on Lebanese television do not necessarily tackle the war directly. Rather they subtly target character and attitude associated with the product. Such ads provide consumption as a lifestyle. Consumption of a particular product appears as a form of behavior associated with a unique group of individuals – a group that is not necessarily bound by state borders but transcends them to a more global community of people who share the same tastes and values.

The Midas advertisement offers an interesting example. The message opens with a lighthearted accordion and piano tune playing as a jovial, young and attractive couple welcomes a new couch into their living room. As soon as the delivery men drop off the couch and exit, the couple engages in a playful competitive semi two-step dance as each of the individuals attempts to trick the other to get to the new couch first. Finally, with a tricky move, the man succeeds in landing on the couch first while his woman adversary gracefully tumbles onto the seat across. The ad ends with a black screen and the Midas

slogan printed and accompanied with a Lebanese-Arabic voice over: "Live the life of Midas."

While the interaction between the two main characters in the Midas ad is significant, the setting in which the action ad takes place reveals much about these characters. The living room is very spacious. Three of its walls have large windows that give the impression that the location is a large cabin nestled in a mountain overlooking a vista. The room has a high ceiling and a stairwell that connects it to the upper level of the house. The living room itself is very well-lit, as the large windows provide much sunlight. The space is stylishly decorated with art work and designer furniture pieces. These images paint this young couple in a financially well-off and cosmopolitan frame.

However, the action takes place in a culturally sterile environment. It is hard for the viewer to discern whether these people are in a local Lebanese setting, in a European cabin, or any other place in the world. In fact, had it not been for the closing Arabic voice-over and on-screen print, there is virtually no information that indicates a national or a geographical connection. The overarching theme this ad communicates is character: youthful, fashionable, and cosmopolitan in lifestyle. Thus, the advertised product speaks not to the quality of the service offered but rather to the quality and the type of the person who uses the service.

The ad suggests that Midas clients are 'hip', 'modern', young people. As the ad addresses a Lebanese audience (through a voice-over in the Lebanese dialect), it targets viewers' aspirations. It invites consumers to embrace the product as an act of supplanting a 'local' identity by subscribing to a much larger community of global cosmopolitan individuals. The multitude of religious communities and political affiliations in Lebanon has always posed a challenge in agreeing on a common national identity. Hence, by

mirroring an image of the consumer within a cosmopolitan context, the product acts as a

marker of identity. Accordingly, the discourse of identity changes from the boundaries of

the Christian, Sunni, Shiite, or Druze definitions. The transformation is in the emergence

of locating the consumer's self-definition along the axis of cosmopolitan/local. In this

sense, the cosmopolitan flavor offers an escape from the local identity that has been

marred by religious affiliation; a scope through which the Lebanese individual continues

to be viewed even after the civil war.

In retrospect, both the Midas and the Johnnie Walker commercials offer their

products as a form of attitude embraced by the successful, global, cosmopolitan

individual. Such advertisements do not state the high quality delivered by the products

themselves, but rather portray a lifestyle that accompanies their use. In essence, these

instances present the value of these products in the lifestyle with which they are labeled:

a individual self that supersedes the petty differences in Lebanese society and brings

access to membership of a larger global and 'modern' community.

**"Cosmopolitanising" the Postcolonial Identity**

Traditionally, citizens of the Arab world have always valued piety, humility,

moderation, and modesty. Excessive consumption was not as common in Arab societies

as it is now with the rise of transnational media flows. In many Muslim societies,

however, the elites have adopted some of the views and habits of the "dominant models

of modernization" while taking on neo-liberal ideals in hopes of belonging to a

transnational community of elites (Karim, 2002, p. 37). Postcolonial theoretical

discussions suggest a number of perspectives on how habits and norms in the

postcolonial world have been influenced by colonialism. These theoretical discussions

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illuminate our understanding of how consumption has come to be highly venerated in Lebanon.

Many scholars have studied the relationship between cultural products and audiences' adoption of values by which they construct and negotiate their identities (Al-Azmeh, 1993; Ashcroft, 2001; Featherstone, 2001; Hall, 1997; Kraidy, 2001; Said, 1994). A common argument throughout their work is that there is an engrained consciousness of "Self" and "Other" in constructing a postcolonial identity. These concepts are paralleled with notions of "superior", "civilized", and "modern" associated with the West. On the other end of the spectrum, the colonized world was framed within a "backward", "unrefined" and "traditional" image. Imagining one's identity involved a clear differentiation between the colonized and the colonizer. More importantly, the deluge of hegemonic messages from the West facilitated new forms and signs of "cultural refinement" to be adopted by the colonial subject. Imagining one's identity was limited to definitions along the axes of "superior," "civilized," and "modern" established by the West. Those who had internalized an "inferior self" took on symbolic features of cosmopolitanism. Unable to become European or Western themselves, the only means available for them was to shape their daily behavior and habits to resemble the colonizer. This performance of identity is what Homi Bhabha (1994) refers to as "mimicry". To Bhabha (1994), "mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry is thus the sign of a double articulation, a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes the power" (Bhabha, p. 86).

Mimicry comes about through the acting-out of what is thought of as exemplary to the West. The body and the space it occupies become the site of discourse. It is the

body and individual appearance that form the language of status. According to Nestor Garcia-Canclini (2001), the mere act of purchasing and accumulating objects such as clothing and decorative items, serves a particular purpose in the social order. Canclini notes that individuals value such items because they utilize them as tools for communication with others. He maintains that they are resources that allow an individual to "think of one's own body, the unstable social order, and uncertain interaction with others" (Canclini, p. 42). Consumption of specific products becomes a determinant for a consumer's identity. Products that are positioned within a particular lifestyle become imperative in the process of identity construction.

Postcolonial subjects respond to the sense of imperfection and marginality by fixating on external appearances and paraphernalia. The obsession with spending and accumulation becomes a space for negotiation. Within the tension created between the local and the non-local, the postcolonial citizen carves out an individual identity within the collective identity. It is a process to demarcate oneself as different from and more progressive than the common local folk – more of a 'cosmopolitan'. Ulf Hannerz (1996) regards the cosmopolitan as a person who incorporates foreign items and behavior into the local culture. He draws our attention to the readiness of the cosmopolitan to take on foreign cultures. This is a state of mind that requires a certain cultural dexterity and ability to internalize aspects of the Other. Hannerz maintains that cosmopolitanism is often narcissistic. The cosmopolitan, he explains, identifies himself "in the space where cultures mirror one another" (1996, p. 104). In essence, the cosmopolitan strives to view the 'self' as similar to, if not the same as, other cosmopolitans in other cultures.

To compensate for the sense of inferiority associated with being 'a local', consumption serves as a tool to display one's belonging to the exclusive global

cosmopolitan community. This is where the advertising machine intervenes. Advertising presents images and forms of behavior that serve as references for the aspiring cosmopolitan. The images associated with the advertised products create a currency of symbols and meanings; a currency that is inseparable from the products they advertise. Accordingly, understanding how television advertising works is crucial to better understanding how consumption is integral to imagining oneself as a cosmopolitan.

As watching television has increasingly become a habit integral to daily life in Lebanon, one must investigate the messages with which this medium presents its viewers. The contention of this study is that advertising posits the consumer between the "self", which, in reality, is situated in a local sphere, and the desire to be part of a cosmopolitan culture. In order for commercial advertisements to reach and impact their niche target group, these commercials cater to viewers through appealing to their fantasies. The commercial advertisement, therefore, presents the illusion that by consuming the advertised product one can become the ideal individual seen on screen. The question to ask at this juncture is how consumption relates to the understanding of social status. The argument that consumption 'elevates one's status' is grounded in the negotiation of the postcolonial identity.

Jonathan Friedman (1990) asserts that consumption is closely associated with the construction of one's identity. He maintains that "consumption within the bounds of the world system is always a consumption of identity canalized by a negotiation between self-definition and the array of possibilities offered by the capitalist market" (Friedman, 1990, 314). William O'Barr (1994) goes farther by drawing a link between advertising and its role in consumption behavior. O'Barr (1994, p. 3) argues that advertising creates a

space for "idealized images" of people by which the viewer can connect interactions and forms of behavior to particular positions in the social hierarchy.

Furthermore, Robert Goldman (1992) asserts that advertisements offer a forum where commodities have the power to define social structures. There is a deep connection between society and "commodity relations". The latter form a basis for social interactions. In fact, according to William Leiss, Stephen Kline, and Sut Jhally (1990) material objects have become symbols integral to everyday life. Material objects signify social status. Products are no longer consumed only to satisfy immediate needs. Rather, they become signifiers for "interpersonal distinctions" (Leiss et. al., 1990, p. 50). Determining one's position in the social hierarchy, therefore, is dependent on what one wears, eats, and uses in daily life.

Prior to the explosion in media messages and advertising, people took their social cues from their immediate environment such as family and work (Grossberg et. al. 1998). At that time, individuals desired to belong and conform to the collective norms set by society. With the advent of media, individuals became less concerned with the sense of group identity and tended to focus more on their individual uniqueness (Grossberg et. al., 1998). As a result we see an arising need to establish individual autonomy within a society.

As a manifestation of the unique individual identity, people started adopting particular lifestyle patterns. These patterns are what Leiss et. al. (1990) refer to as "totemic operators" (p. 344). Totemic operators are the displays that serve to differentiate various groups in society. Leiss et. al. explain that "today's totems (product images) themselves are the badges of group membership, which also entails self-administered codes of authority for dress, appearance, popular entertainment, customary places of

assembly, behavior rituals, and role stereotyping (for example, 'macho' versus 'non-macho' subgroups)" (Leiss et. al., 1990, p. 344).

In order for objects to carry social symbolism, a complex process is required to transform commodities as items of utility into visual signifiers. Goldman (1992) describes this process as a "semiotic reductionism". The process entails labor of two kinds. The first takes place on the media level where marketers and advertisers assign meaning to a product and thus create a "commodity-sign value". The second form of labor occurs with audiences. Goldman maintains that audiences actively read and interpret advertisements. The interpretation itself is a form of audience labor that adds value to the products featured in advertisements.

The power of communication lies in its ability to produce surplus value. Surplus value is created by media that create symbols and give these symbols meaning. This is the process by which media can shape consciousness; hence their value for advertisers. Hypothetically, transforming a product into a symbol and framing it within a comprehensible context for the viewer, a product is assigned its value in the social hierarchy. Using this product carries a meaning for its user and manifests a user's social standing in a community.

This concept is better explained in Steven Kemper's (2001) observations of advertising practices and consumption habits in Sri Lanka. According to Kemper (2001), advertising is a site for the postcolonial citizen to imagine oneself beyond the boundaries of the nation. The consumption of the advertised product allows the consumer to be part of a global community. Partaking in "virtual communities of consumption" relies heavily on media, whereby advertising shows a "deterritorialized world of commodities" that

creates a connection and a sense of belonging to a larger community (Kemper, 2001, p. 2).

**<u>Conclusion:</u>**

Consumption emerges as a form of resistance for the people of Lebanon to the direction in which their country is heading: further conflict and turmoil. Accumulating items, such clothing, cars…etc., which gives us the illusion of living in a cosmopolitan sphere, is the only vehicle to overcome the forces that hinder our development and unity as a nation. Displaying these items to others serves to communicate status and makes a social statement. Television advertising suggests that our consumption habits allow us to belong to a select group that is above domestic conflicts. By our consumption behaviors we are drawing a line between ourselves in the past and actively participating in voicing who we are as individuals within a larger society. Consumption, as these ads claim, is the answer to our problems.

Finally, as commercial advertising attempts to posit consumption as a basis for redefining the Lebanese individual's identity in place of religion, one must ask: how long can a society sustain itself if what defines its members is increasingly shifting to totemic displays? The situation is critical. In the absence of an effective government policy to address issues of identity, a crisis is bound to occur sooner or later. Instead of taking an initiative to revisit the causes behind the civil war, those in power have chosen to focus solely on economic development. With no tangible policy in place to correct the course in which the country is heading, the Lebanese people will always find alternative ways to adjust to the situation and to redefine themselves even, sadly, if such a redefinition means adopting new identities as the expense of sharing a common vision of what it means to a Lebanese.

Links:

http://www.vipfilms.com/movies/Lebanese%20Flag.mov

http://www.vipfilms.com/movies/Johnnie%20Walker%20Elie%20Saab.mov

http://www.vipfilms.com/movies/Midas%20furniture%20delivery.mov

*__Biography__*
Assem Nasr is a PhD candidate at the Department of Radio-Television-Film in the University of Texas at Austin. Shortly after completing his Bachelor of Arts degree at The American University of Beirut, he worked in radio and television in Lebanon for several years. He completed his Master of Fine Arts in film and electronic media at American University, Washington D.C.; an experience that broadened his interests to understand the workings of media on a global scale. He has scholarly work on Al-Manar Television, the representation of conflict in postwar Lebanon, as well as the history of Lebanese pirate radio stations. Currently he is pursuing his interests in media and policy in the Arab world, advertising trends in the Middle East, and cultural memory in Arab media. In August 2010, Assem will be joining the Indiana University – Purdue University Fort Wayne faculty as an Assistant Professor of Media and Communication.

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