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Casting the customer: Persona and audience representation in local ads. case study: Beirut beer versus Almaza

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Abstract

Advertising, as part of Integrated Marketing Communications, is a crucial practice that connects the brand to its customers. When brands aim to reach their target audience effectively and try to retain customer loyalty, their advertisements need to reflect and mirror valuable aspects of the viewers. In the Lebanese context, many companies merge elements that resonate with their target audience or a category of people to try to strengthen their customer retention such as identification characteristics that might seem unnoticed to viewers. Beirut Beer, which directly competes with famous and similar companies in the Lebanese beer market, uses identification elements in its advertisements to try and resonate with a specific category of people that it aims to target and retain. This study analyzes and studies identification elements and practices that are included in Beirut Beer ads, examines why they were chosen, and how they affect the viewers' choice in light of the VALS Theory, Identification Theory, and Persuasion Techniques. Our findings show that the identification elements used by Beirut Beer are chosen by taking into consideration their direct competitor and specifically choosing the opposite target audience. Therefore, instead of riskily trying to compete with older and more important companies in the Lebanese beer market and putting itself at risk, Beirut Beer's main strategy is to target its competitor's opposite audience.

Keywords: Advertising, Audience Representation, Identification, Integrated Marketing Communication, Lebanon, Persona.

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1. Introduction

In the field of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC), and particularly within advertising, the ability of brands to connect with their audiences on a deeper, more personal level is essential. Successful campaigns are no longer limited to simply showcasing a product's features or benefits; rather, they must reflect the identities, values, and aspirations of the consumers they aim to reach. When audiences are represented in the ads through strategic casting, they are more likely to trust the brand and develop a lasting emotional connection to it. In increasingly saturated markets where consumers face a

constant stream of choices, advertising that mirrors the physique, ideas, beliefs, values, and lifestyles of the brand's target audience becomes a powerful strategic asset. It transforms the brand message into a tailored message that captures its viewer, building a strong connection between the brand and its consumers.

Modern advertising practices rely heavily on the use of narrative and casting decisions to build these connections. Through careful representation of characters in the cast, lifestyle aspirations, and social signals, brands construct audience personas that foster identification, emotional engagement, and ultimately, loyalty. This is especially relevant in countries like Lebanon, where the cultural landscape is richly diverse and shaped by a complex social history. Within such contexts, advertisements often function as cultural texts—reflecting societal values, class distinctions, and national identity, while simultaneously shaping public perception.

Brasserie Almaza [1] first beer brewery, founded in 1933, is a strong example of how heritage and national pride can be woven into a brand's identity. Almaza has long been more than just a beverage; it has served as a cultural touchstone, representing Lebanese craftsmanship and tradition. The name 'Almaza'—meaning 'diamond' in Arabic—along with its iconic logo, reinforces its symbolic status in the market. For many Lebanese consumers, Almaza evokes nostalgia and familiarity, contributing to its lasting popularity and emotional significance.

In contrast, Beirut Beer emerged in 2014 under Kassatly Chtaura, a company with its own history of success in the Lebanese beverage market. Though newer, Beirut Beer quickly made a name for itself through bold digital campaigns and fresh, creative advertisements. Its arrival disrupted the local beer scene, challenging Almaza's long-standing dominance and appealing to a younger, more socially engaged demographic. What set Beirut Beer apart was its ability to build an online identity that felt current, daring, and distinctly Lebanese, offering an alternative form of identification to a new generation of drinkers.

Together, these two brands illustrate how identity-based advertising in Lebanon is not just about selling a product—it's about speaking to people's sense of belonging, pride, and cultural affiliation. Whether through heritage or innovation, both Almaza and Beirut Beer demonstrate how emotional resonance and cultural familiarity remain at the heart of effective brand communication.

2. Hypothesis

This study hypothesizes that Beirut Beer and Almaza construct divergent audience personas through contrasting casting and narrative strategies, each reflecting and reinforcing distinct cultural identities within Lebanese society. Beirut Beer is positioned to appeal primarily to a younger, liberated, and up-to-date demographic through the use of bold, mainstream imagery and casting that emphasizes a shift in tradition and customs. In contrast, Almaza is hypothesized to target a more cosmopolitan, older, and nostalgic audience through character development, humor, and culturally resonant symbolism. These representational strategies are not merely stylistic choices, but rather deliberate constructions rooted in the social and psychological dynamics of Lebanese consumer culture. Not only is the choice of cast members relevant to identifying how it mirrors the target audience, but the discourse, the way they talk, their mindset, and their interactions with other cast members further strengthen these differences.

3. Literature Review

In contemporary advertising practice, the role of identification has become central to the effectiveness of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC) strategies. Kenneth Burke's theory of identification emphasizes that persuasion arises from the alignment between the communicator and audience, creating a shared sense of identity and values. Burke [2] described identification as a rhetorical process whereby individuals feel connected due to perceived similarities or common interests [3]. This is particularly crucial in competitive markets where consumers are flooded with brand choices and need deeper reasons to relate to one brand over another.

The concept of identification has expanded beyond interpersonal rhetoric to include brand-consumer relationships. Halliday and Kuenzel [4] argue that 'brand identification' allows customers to establish psychological connections with brands through symbolic value, leading to enhanced loyalty and engagement. These connections are often forged through brand messaging and visual storytelling that resonates with the consumer's social identity. Tajfel and Turner [5] support this by asserting that people categorize themselves into groups to derive self-esteem and meaning, responding favorably to stimuli that reflect their in-group characteristics. Beirut Beer's use of characters, language, and behaviors that mirror its audience's youth culture and values can be seen as a calculated identification strategy aimed at strengthening this group dynamic.

Bartholomew [6] reinforces the notion that advertising does not merely inform but also constitutes cultural meaning. Advertising, through semiotic cues, constructs and reinforces social identities, allowing consumers to express who they are or aspire to be. In the Lebanese context, where cultural identity is often intertwined with political and generational values, advertising that aligns with a viewer's worldview can be more persuasive. This is particularly evident in brand rivalry campaigns like that of Beirut Beer and Almaza, where audience segmentation becomes a battleground for loyalty. These campaigns often depict different value systems, intentionally casting consumers into one ideological category or another.

According to Torres and Briggs [7] identification in advertising elicits stronger emotional and cognitive responses, particularly when the individual perceives congruence between the ad's characters and their personal values or experiences. Their findings show that individuals with higher involvement in the advertised subject matter exhibit more pronounced identification effects. This has direct implications for local Lebanese advertising, where brand loyalty can be closely tied to cultural affiliation. Beirut Beer's advertisements often employ urban, youthful, rebellious personas that directly contrast Almaza's more traditional and nostalgic imagery. This is a classic example of what Sierra, et al. [8] describe as 'ethnic or

cultural cueing'—when ads feature models or scenarios that reflect the apparent ethnicity, culture, or social behavior of the target audience to stimulate positive brand association.

Moreover, research on consumer socialization [9] emphasizes the long-term effects of media and peer influence in shaping consumer attitudes, especially among youth. In the case of Beirut Beer, the advertisements strategically leverage peer dynamics and humor to enhance relatability. When youth audiences recognize themselves in the ad's narrative or visuals, they are more likely to develop favorable brand attitudes. As the beer industry is highly reliant on branding and emotional appeal, such identification mechanisms are vital.

Read-Bullock [10] also expands the discourse by examining how social identity and phenotypic prototypicality—such as the ethnicity or physical features of ad models—can influence ad reception. The study suggests that ads using models who are perceived as 'one of us' are more cognitively engaging and persuasive, further reinforcing the identification effect. Beirut Beer's casting practices often reflect a carefully chosen demographic—urban, Westernized Lebanese youth—to maintain a specific brand identity distinct from its competitors.

In summary, the literature confirms that identification is not a passive result of ad exposure but a strategic and deliberate practice that integrates elements of audience persona, social identity, and emotional resonance. This makes it a particularly effective tool in competitive advertising, especially in culturally layered markets like Lebanon. As this study shows, Beirut Beer's success in reaching its intended audience is not incidental, but the result of a precise alignment between persona representation and identification theory in advertising practice.

4. Theoretical Frameworks

4.1. Target Audience Analysis

In advertising, effective audience representation involves reflecting the brand's target demographic through carefully chosen casts. This mirroring technique allows viewers to see themselves in the personas depicted, fostering identification with the brand. For this strategy to be successful, brands must first gain a clear understanding of their target audience and then select a cast that authentically represents them. Niefield [11] expands on SRI International's VALS (Values and Lifestyles) typology, offering a psychographic framework that segments consumers into distinct groups based on psychological traits and values, helping brands define and reach their intended audiences.

According to Niefield [11] the Survivors are typically older individuals with limited income and minimal social engagement. Sustainers are part of the lower-middle class and are often characterized by frustration and resentment. Belongers are conventional and sentimental, placing high value on family, stability, and nationalism. Emulators are younger individuals who are ambitious and driven by a desire for upward mobility. Achievers, on the other hand, are affluent, goal-oriented, confident, and often hold leadership roles. The I-Am-Me's are highly individualistic, self-expressive, and often exhibit dramatic or unconventional behavior. Experimentals are creative, youthful, and motivated by personal growth and direct experience. The Societally Conscious group, while also affluent like the Achievers, are more mature and socially aware, often concerned with broader societal issues. Finally, the Integrateds represent a synthesis of the Achievers' success and the Societally Conscious' wisdom, embodying tolerance, understanding, and a well-rounded, mature worldview.

This segmentation helps advertisers align their messaging and casting choices with the values and aspirations of different consumer profiles, ultimately enhancing audience identification and engagement.

4.2. Identification Theory

Kenneth Burke's Identification Theory posits that communication is fundamentally a process of bridging the gap between division and unity. Burke [2] argues that persuasion is most effective when it involves a shared sense of identity between the sender and the receiver of a message. In this light, identification is not simply about agreement but about alignment—"a psychological or emotional connection that moves individuals toward feeling part of a group or narrative" [12].

In advertising, this concept translates into a sense of belonging or recognition that audiences feel when they see themselves reflected in the ad, whether through the portrayed characters, situations, lifestyles, or values. This psychological mirroring makes the message more persuasive by reducing the distance between the viewer and the brand. When integrated with framing theory, which focuses on how messages are shaped and presented to influence perception, identification becomes a powerful tool in decoding how audiences relate to media content. Together, these theories uncover how message construction and emotional connection work synergistically to capture audience attention and loyalty by aligning the advertisement's narrative with the viewer's self-concept [12].

In today's communication landscape, particularly through Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC), identification practices are consciously designed to resonate with specific target demographics. As Jackson [3] notes, advertisers aim to "persuade a target audience" and "connect with that audience on some level," and this connection is often built through relatable, emotionally engaging portrayals (p. 6). In highly competitive advertising environments, especially in markets with strong brand rivalry, such as the local beer market in Lebanon, identification becomes an essential rhetorical strategy. It creates a feeling of empathy, shared values, or a sense of community between the brand and its audience, potentially influencing both attitudes and behaviors [3].

Several empirical studies support the effectiveness of identification in advertising. For instance, Algesheimer, et al. [13] found that strong identification with a brand community increases consumers' emotional engagement, trust, and likelihood of purchase. Similarly, Bagozzi and Dholakia [14] and Adjei, et al. [15] explored how communication and participation in brand communities are closely tied to identification levels. On digital platforms, Goh, et al. [16] observed

that “identification strategies” significantly affect the degree of consumer engagement and even the economic impact of brand communities on social media (p. 88). These studies collectively emphasize that identification fosters loyalty and consumer involvement, particularly when audiences perceive a brand as a representation of their own values and identity.

In the context of our study, identification theory provides a critical lens for analyzing how both brands construct relatable personas to appeal to Lebanese consumers. The focus is on how casting choices, narrative voice, and symbolic elements in local advertisements attempt to reflect the values, struggles, and aspirations of their audience. The question at the heart of this analysis becomes: which brand better represents its consumer base, and how does this identification translate into audience preference, brand engagement, or even purchase behavior in the face of direct competitive advertising?

By applying Burke’s theory to this case, we aim to explore how identification not only enhances the persuasive power of advertising but also becomes a strategic asset in brand positioning. Particularly in the cultural context of Lebanon, where identity, tradition, modernity, and nationalism often intersect in media representation, the use of identification strategies can offer deeper insight into how brands attempt to cast their consumers and win over their loyalty through carefully crafted personas.

4.3. Techniques of Persuasion

The theory of persuasive communication is a foundational framework to analyze how advertisements shape public opinion, behavior, and consumer identity, especially in the context of the Lebanese market. Rooted in both classical rhetoric and modern media studies, persuasion in advertising is understood not merely as message delivery but as a strategic construction of meaning, emotion, and audience alignment.

The persuasive process involves multiple rhetorical strategies, each designed to appeal to the *logos* (logic), *pathos* (emotion), or *ethos* (credibility) of the target audience. These techniques are often deployed in advertising to achieve specific goals: instilling a belief, promoting a product, modifying an attitude, or stimulating behavior. According to Wilcox and Cameron [17] persuasive communication is “message-centered”, meaning that advertisers carefully construct messages based on the intended audience, desired outcomes, and the medium of transmission (p. 226)

In the context of media and advertising, persuasion can be either overt or covert. Overt persuasion includes direct appeals such as slogans, discount offers, and testimonials. Covert persuasion, on the other hand, relies on subtle cues, including body language, tone, visual symbolism, and cultural reference—all of which are central to Beirut Beer’s advertising strategy.

Wilcox and Cameron [17] categorize these techniques into:

- Repetition: reinforcing brand recall and message familiarity.
- Association: linking products with desirable emotions, lifestyles, or values.
- Appeal to authority: using celebrities, experts, or culturally respected figures to validate the message.
- Social proof (bandwagon): suggesting that ‘everyone is doing it’ to pressure conformity.
- Fear or Humor: eliciting strong emotions to make messages more memorable and impactful.
- Contrast and opposition: emphasizing brand differentiation by framing a competitor in opposition.

In cultural contexts such as Lebanon, Wilcox and Cameron [17] note that persuasive messages also shape public opinion by reinforcing group identity and shaping perception of norms. Beirut Beer’s strategic advertising relates to this by presenting itself not only as a product but as a social identity marker—a cultural statement that distinguishes its drinkers from those of Almaza.

This study also draws upon established models of persuasion theory to understand the advertising strategies used by Beirut Beer in targeting its audience. Two principal frameworks support this analysis: the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) and the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM). These models provide critical insights into how persuasive messages are processed by audiences and how advertising strategies can be designed to influence consumer behavior.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model [18] proposes two routes to persuasion: the central route and the peripheral route. The central route involves high involvement and cognitive effort, where the audience critically engages with the content of the message. In contrast, the peripheral route relies on superficial cues such as humor, celebrity endorsement, or emotional appeal. In low-involvement scenarios, audiences are more likely to respond to peripheral cues than to logical arguments. Beirut Beer’s use of humor, everyday Lebanese slang, and casual social settings in its advertisements likely engages its targeted audience through the peripheral route [19].

Complementing this is the Persuasion Knowledge Model (PKM), developed by Friestad and Wright [20] which emphasizes the active role of the consumer in recognizing and interpreting persuasive attempts. According to PKM, audiences possess agent knowledge (about the advertiser), topic knowledge (about the product), and persuasion knowledge (about the strategy being used). When consumers perceive a brand’s attempt to influence them, their response depends on how appropriate or credible they perceive the strategy to be. In the case of Beirut Beer, this can be observed in how the brand uses cultural references and relatable characters to foster authenticity, thereby reducing resistance to persuasion [21].

These theoretical models are particularly relevant in the Lebanese context, where advertising is often shaped by cultural codes, generational identity, and brand rivalry. As Beirut Beer aims to differentiate itself from Almaza by targeting a more youthful and progressive demographic, it employs persuasive techniques aligned with identification, humor, and distinct persona representation. These tactics not only enhance audience recall but also foster emotional engagement and brand loyalty [7].

In sum, the techniques of persuasion employed in Beirut Beer advertisements are guided by the dual-processing perspective of ELM and the audience-awareness perspective of PKM. Together, these frameworks offer a comprehensive foundation for analyzing how identification strategies and message construction affect audience reception and competitive brand positioning.

5. Methods

To examine the different representations of the audience persona through the ads of each company, this study will make use of a target audience analysis focusing on the psychographics of each of the companies' audience and analyze audience representation in a qualitative approach to their TV ads that can be found on YouTube. Five main TV ads that witnessed great engagement by the Lebanese audience will be analyzed. The study will look at the cast, the discourse, and the interaction between the two opposing views (that mirrors the difference in value between Beirut Beer and Almaza). Since Almaza doesn't usually portray two contrasting personas in their ads but rather one that mirrors the brand's image (because it has been present long before Beirut Beer), the study will focus on five Beirut Beer ads where the advertisement's cast and script directly suggest a difference in the brand's value in comparison with its direct competitor's.

6. Analysis and Findings

Almaza is positioned within the Lebanese market as a symbol of heritage, tradition, and national pride. It is heavily centered around cultural heritage, shared rituals, and collective nostalgia. The brand's demographic target audience mainly consists of individuals aged 35/40 to 60, who tend to value social conformity, cultural continuity, and product legacy – belongers, belongers plus, and societally conscious psychographics. Their psychography aligns with collectivist values and a preference for traditional branding.

In contrast, Beirut Beer adopts a challenger brand identity. Its marketing appeals to a more youthful demographic, particularly individuals aged 18 to 35. This audience segment includes young metropolitan consumers such as students and liberal thinkers who prioritize individual expression, humor, and cultural rebellion – emulators, experientials, and I-Am-Me's. Beirut Beer's tone is light-hearted, ironic, and designed to reflect a liberated, modern lifestyle. These contrasting audience categories (conservative traditionalists versus culturally expressive youth) frame the competitive branding strategies employed in the advertisements analyzed.

In one of their main ads titled "Chou kil yom mjadra?" (Mjadra being a traditional Lebanese dish that is commonly made in every Lebanese household), Beirut Beer shows the importance of Mjadra, yet suggests that it is time for something new, something better, and something different. In this ad, Almaza is portrayed as Mjadra and the 'something new' as Beirut Beer. Additionally, the cast in this ad is made up of younger people. We can see a change in the main character's outfit from when he used to eat Mjadra and after he tried this new lifestyle and adopted it. At the beginning, he was seen wearing a long-sleeved blouse with dull colors, then shifted to a bright-colored T-shirt, showing the change from tradition to modern, from the values of Almaza to the values of Beirut Beer.

In another ad titled "Beirut Beer - Beware of Imitations", Beirut Beer also makes use of the Mjadra metaphor to differentiate itself from Almaza. Although the ad is a direct attack on Almaza for copying their mini-sized bottle, the visual elements used by Beirut Beer reinforce the difference in target audience. The ad features the two CEOs of both Almaza and Beirut Beer. However, their representation is dichotomous. The Almaza CEO, like any other, is well-dressed, wearing glasses, a suit and tie, with clean and fixed hair. However, the Beirut Beer CEO is the stark opposite, wearing sunglasses, having a long beard and hair tied in a man-bun, wearing a normal jacket, which he then changes into a basic suit and loosened tie. These differences in persona show the different branding of Beirut Beer and Almaza and contrast between the representation of each target audience – a traditional versus a more modern one.

In "Beirut Beer - When Your Mom Calls You to Greet Someone", the mother and older woman sitting down, talking, and reminiscing about old times directly mirror Almaza's branding – traditional and nostalgic. The ad, however, features a younger boy who shows a rejection of these norms, zoning out whenever they are talking to him and not wanting to join their conversation. His physical appearance, young, wearing casual clothes, and having a big nose, is a representation of the Lebanese youth, hence Beirut Beer's demographic. At the end, he is seen drinking Beirut Beer with friends his age and having fun, a contrasting state from his initial one with two older and different (physically and intellectually) cast members from him. This representation, portrayed in Beirut Beer's ad, shows the difference in experience – being young, outgoing, and having fun is associated with drinking Beirut Beer, whereas the older and stay-at-home type prefers Almaza.

"Beirut Beer - Mhandis Sot" (sound engineer) features a young man talking to his father and old friend about his profession, sound engineer. The dad is fixated on calling his son an engineer only – a stereotypical profession that the Lebanese older generation usually imposes on their children. The young man has a man bun and is wearing a casual T-shirt, while the two other older cast members are wearing a shirt and a polo, more formal attire. The young man laughs at his father's outdated comment and shows his disagreement with what the father and his friend are arguing about. This ad is part of a series where the young man is also asked and judged by the father and his friend about his physical appearance, such as his hair. This also symbolizes the difference in representation between Beirut Beer and Almaza and illustrates the disparity between each target audience.

The narrative structure of the advertisements reveals a recurring symbolic opposition between older, tradition-bound figures and younger, socially liberal individuals. The older characters, often portrayed with exaggerated rigidity or outdated characteristics, function as a representation of Almaza's brand persona. Conversely, younger characters are depicted in relaxed, humorous, and expressive settings, symbolizing Beirut Beer's audience.

From the lens of identification theory, such portrayals serve to reinforce in-group and out-group boundaries. Younger audiences are likely to identify with the expressive characters, perceiving them as representative of their generational values and cultural views. The old-fashioned antagonist, often a father figure or an old-school judgmental elder, represents a set of values that the modern youth may seek to differentiate from or resist. When the viewer associates the former with Beirut Beer and the latter with Almaza, Beirut Beer succeeds in making its target audience identify with the brand's value. Through this contrast, the ads allow viewers to project their self-concept onto the preferred group.

Techniques of persuasion observed in the ads include the following:

- Bandwagon Appeals: suggesting Beirut Beer is the preferred choice of Lebanon's youth.
- Humor: used to make the message engaging and not aggressive or provoking Almaza.
- Visual Contrast and Persona Juxtaposition: explicitly differentiating Beirut Beer from Almaza by assigning symbolic attributes (liberation vs. tradition) to respective user profiles and cast members.

These techniques function not only to increase message memorability but also to construct a brand narrative rooted in cultural defiance. Rather than direct comparative advertising, Beirut Beer positions itself as a cultural alternative, employing rhetorical strategies that elevate its consumers as modern, fun, and open-minded. The repeated symbolic rejection of conservative values, conveyed through the elder characters, underscores the brand's implicit ideological positioning.

7. Conclusion

While Beirut Beer's ads (that show two contrasting personas referencing the brand itself and its direct competitor) could be considered as advertising attacks on Almaza, they also highlight an alternative way of branding themselves. Beirut Beer recognizes the cultural importance of Almaza, and, instead of competing in the same category and targeting the same audience, Beirut Beer is addressing a new audience – a youthful and liberal audience who seeks change by using visual elements to target its audience. By building these personas in its ads, Beirut Beer represents a specific Lebanese demographic (youth) and psychographics (experientials and I am me's), and persuades them to adopt its beer because it resonates with their values, therefore allowing them to identify with the brand and not its competitor. Through strategic use of identification theory and persuasive advertising techniques, Beirut Beer successfully positions and brands itself as the beer of choice for Lebanon's younger, modern demographic. By contrasting its brand image with the traditional branding of Almaza, Beirut Beer appeals to consumers seeking to express their individuality and embrace contemporary values. Beirut Beer effectively employs identification and rhetorical contrast to position itself as the beer of the Lebanese youth. Because it casts traditional values symbolically in opposition to modern consumer identities, the brand builds an emotional connection with its audience through persona representation (including physical and intellectual), humor, bandwagon rhetoric, and symbolic liberation. Based on this case study, we can finally conclude that targeting a new audience, different from that of the direct competitor, through the use of audience representation in advertisements is a successful advertising strategy that allows a brand to grow when trying to compete with powerful competitors, attracting its own audience and building a sense of identification between the brand and its audience which then strengthens brand loyalty.

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Appendix

- "Chou kil yom mjadra?" ad: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QZj3NtAbliU&ab_channel=BeirutBeer
- "Beirut Beer - Beware of Imitations" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hm2pEGCUIvA&ab_channel=BeirutBeer
- "Beirut Beer - When Your Mom Calls You to Greet Someone"
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NFFAVxCaxv8&ab_channel=BeirutBeer
- "Beirut Beer - Mhandis Sot." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2bIDIjWgXjw&ab_channel=BeirutBeer