

## Towards a Transformative" Image of Arab Women in Anti-Violence Adverts: Semiotics Analysis of Arab Social Media Adverts

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This paper aims to provide an in-depth investigation of the role of social media images in conveying the meaning of "power" and "empowerment" in public anti-violence campaigns that aim to empower women in the Middle East. The research raises three qualitative questions of the way anti-violence adverts have represented Arab women in the social media; the way Arab societal culture affects the image of women represented in the adverts; and the extent to which these social adverts have empowered women to transfer their realities against domestic violence. The researcher uses a purposeful sample of six social campaigns that addressed women violence organized by six non-profit and governmental entities in different Arab countries in the period between 2013 and 2018. The paper used the theoretical framework offered by Cohen-Eliya and Hammer (2004) to analyze the extent to which these social media adverts have "empowered" women against domestic violence. The input of this framework is that it studies how visual adverts have constructed relationships of power regarding the stereotypes of women in the Middle East. The paper finds that although these social media adverts aim to fight domestic violence, they enhance traditional stereotype of weak women and fall short of addressing the concept of "empowerment" through focusing on stereotypical images of powerless women. The paper highlights the need for new social media communication that would utilize the opportunities provided by social media to establish a new "transformative" image of the Arab woman about her cultural context. Moreover, the paper suggests that the concept of "empowerment" should be addressed at both individual and cultural levels through cooperating with governmental and non-profit organizations using social media communication to provide women with access to resources.

**Keywords:** Social media, violence against women, public communication, empowerment, stereotypical, transformative images

World Health Organization [WHO] (2013) reported "partner violence against women" to be one of the most significant health problems all over the world. Many women all over the world suffer from partner violence, which results in major problems in society (Ali & Naylor, 2013; Wong, Tiwari, Fong, & Bullock, 2016). However, there is little statistics that have registered accurate numbers of domestic violence in Arab countries as the topic is still considered sensitive and private for many families.

Donovan, Jalleh, Fielder, and Ouschan (2009) emphasized that "The economic costs of violence against women—including medical and counseling costs, lost productivity, women's refuges, and justice system costs, run into the billions of dollars (WHO, 2002),

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while the emotional, psychological and quality of life costs for women and children exposed to such violence are immeasurable" (p. 5). Dutton, James, Langhorne, and Kelley (2015) stressed that partner violence "affects women's physical and mental health through direct pathways, such as injury, and indirect pathways, such as a prolonged stress response that leads to chronic health problems" (p. 30). Therefore, this paper aims to offer an in-depth analysis of the use of the concept of "empowerment" in social campaigns that aim to empower women against domestic violence in the Middle East.

## **Literature Review**

### **The Use of Social Media in Public Campaigns**

In the past literature, several campaigns used traditional media to target women victims to break the silence and to speak up, while other campaigns aim to target judicial systems (Donovan & Vlais, 2005). Nowadays, non-profit and governmental entities used social media to approach women and help them to break the silence. Lariscy, Avery, Sweetser, and Howes (2009) defined social media as "online practices that utilize technology and enable people to share content, opinions, experiences, insights, and media themselves" (p.314). Waters, Burnett, Lamm, and Lucas (2009) similarly stressed, "Relationships are the foundation for social networking sites" (p. 102). Kennedy and Sommerfeldt (2015) argued that "scholarship has assumed social media can be used to foster and maintain "relationships," when in actuality such relationships have been articulated in terms of information acquisition and dissemination" (p. 32). This argument stressed the role of social media in establishing a mutual relationship with the target audience. However, it is questionable the extent to which women were empowered through the use of anti-violence advertising social media.

### **Limited "Stereotyping" of Arab Women**

Before analyzing the images displayed in social media adverts, it is important to understand the stereotypical images of Arab women in the past literature. Gomaa and Raymond (2014) explained that US college students usually associated Arab women with references to "oppression", "abuse", and "discrimination" where they "treat the veil as a central symbol of this oppression, a convenient trope that invokes mystery, eroticism, and a need for rescue by American—rather than Arab—men" (p. 37). Akbarzadeh and Smith (2005) explained that "women are depicted in various ways which may demonize Islam or generate sympathy for Muslims depending on the context of the story." This might be because most of gender studies in public communication studies were limited to the Western context and to Western organizational culture (AlSaqer, 2018, p. 302). Gomaa and Raymond (2014, p. 38) argued that recent developments in the Middle East demonstrate that "women wearing the veil, contrary to pedestrian, trivial stereotypes, can play prominent, effective roles in public life."

Koblitz (2016) argued that "Images of Middle Eastern women in the Western media often tend toward the exotic, erotic, or abject" (p. 107). She explained that "women are often styled as the victims of patriarchal institutions and depicted as in need of being saved by their supposedly more enlightened Western sisters" (Koblitz, 2016, p.107). Mishra (2007) argued that American media "imposed its interpretation of the veil as a symbol of oppression ignoring the fact that the veil has different meanings in different cultural and social contexts" (p. 2).

Read (2002) claimed that "Cultural influences on Arab women's social positions are dynamic and multifaceted, and future research would benefit by focusing on the cultural processes that influence women's attitudes and behaviors" (p. 31). Therefore, this research aims to study the extent to which public adverts succeed to introduce a new image of Arab "empowered" women through utilizing the public sphere offered by social media.

## **Methodology and Theoretical Framework**

Based on the past literature, the researcher raises three qualitative questions as follow:

**RQ1:** How do anti-violence adverts represent Arab women in social media?

**RQ2:** How does Arab societal culture affect the image of women represented in the adverts?

**RQ3:** To what extent have social media adverts empowered women to transfer their realities against domestic violence?

To answer these questions, the researcher used a purposeful sample of six public adverts organized by Arab non-profit and governmental entities in the period between 2013 and 2018 that aim to stop domestic violence against women through encouraging women to break the silence and speak up. The paper used semiotics analysis approach to analyze these adverts by using the theoretical framework offered by Cohen-Eliya and Hammer (2004) to analyze the extent to which these social media adverts have "empowered" women against domestic violence. Cohen-Eliya and Hammer (2004, p. 168) claimed, "Under the semiotic theory, visual imagery is a picture that represents and suggests a particular meaning, idea, or conception." Cohen-Eliya and Hammer (2004) distinguished two types of images shown in advertisements: "transformative images" and "stereotypical images." They argued that "transformative images" aim to "reshape viewers' value systems and personalities," while "stereotypical images" aim to reflect "accepted social meanings of belonging to gender or racial groups" (Cohen-Eliya & Hammer, 2004, p. 169). They argued that the stereotype images "are not aimed at altering viewers' attitudes or redefining their values" (Cohen-Eliya & Hammer, 2004, p. 170). The problem with "stereotypical images" in this context is the extent to which these images of beaten women would enhance the image of woman as powerless, fragile creature. This is stressed by Cohen-Eliya and Hammer (2004, p. 170) who claimed that conservative stereotypical images are "problematic in terms of the role they play in forming prejudices." They suggested that "the use of *transformative images* represents an attempt on the part of the advertiser to change the attitudes and values of those exposed to the advertisements" (p. 170).

Therefore, this paper raises the argument that showing the stereotypical image of powerless weak women is no longer the best way to encourage them to break the silence. There is a need for a transfer from a "stereotypical image" toward a "transformative image" of an empowered woman who can fight violence and has the resources to change. The shift towards a transformative image of woman goes along with postmodernism that stresses the significance of understanding power conflicts to analyze social phenomena. Kennedy and Sommerfeldt (2015) explained that postmodernists raised the question of power through looking for "underlying processes of power and discourse that shape social reality and lead us to form consensuses about what we consider "knowledge" while marginalizing voices that disagree with the dominant consensus" (p. 35). To achieve a better understanding of power relationships constructed through social media adverts, the researcher related Cohen-Eliya and Hammer's (2004) concept of transformative and stereotypical images to the semiotics analysis of visual images.

## Semiotics Analysis of Visual Images of Women in Social Media

### Advert1: "*Because I am a human being*" campaign (Social Marketing, 2018)

The first advert shows two scenarios of the story of the same woman. The first scenario starts in the darkness where the advert uses close up shot of beaten, swollen face of a sad, powerless woman, where negative phrases appear in the background "You have to be patient, he is your husband", "You have to keep quiet", "Hide your face", "You're weak". These negative phrases represent the stereotypical image of a woman presented by society's cultural expectations. Then the screen's colour transfers to a lighter colour where it is written: "Because I'm a human, I stand up again", where the face of the woman becomes smiling with new phrases appearing on the screen: "Giving", "New life of hope", "Because I'm a human being, I'll break the humility". This advert is one of the few adverts that combine both stereotypical and transformative images. However, it does not provide any tips on how such a transfer can be achieved. The use of frontal close-up shots makes the audience interact and be involved as part of a woman's stories.

### Advert 2: "*Your Silence wouldn't stop the violence*" (Sceen TV, 2013)

The advert starts with a stereotypical image of a woman as a housewife who irons her husband traditional clothes. The close-up shot focused on the woman's burned hand while ironing the clothes with a voice-over of the woman who tells us her story without showing her face: "I got this burn when I baked a cake for the first time." The camera moves to a flashback memory scene showing us a ten-year-old girl who looked happy while backing cake and suddenly burnt her hand. The close-up camera shows us another wound in the woman's hand, while she is narrating her story: "I had this wound since the first time I rode a bike and fell!" Then the camera shows a very close-up shot on the woman's swollen beaten face with her voice saying, "I got these wounds recently when I forgot to iron my husband's clothes!" The sad music becomes louder, and the viewer can see the silent tears very closely in the woman's eyes with a slogan on the screen "Your silence wouldn't stop the violence" accompanied with an aid telephone number for women who suffer from domestic violence. The advert uses strong emotional appeal through narrating the story by the woman herself and triggering childhood memories to involve the target audience. However, the advert was limited to the use of the stereotypical image of a woman without providing the target women with resources to transfer their status. Although the advert offered women with aid telephone number, it fell short of addressing the cultural barrier that would prevent women from seeking help.

### Advert 3: "*The household's accidents*" (Eithar, 2018)

The advert starts with a young woman narrating the story of household's accidents, saying: "The household's accidents never end!" Then the camera moves to another scene where the woman fell on the house's carpet saying ironically: "Goash, I love this carpet. But it always trips me up!" Then the advert shows us a story of a second woman cooking with a swollen face and burned hand saying, "Oh no, the oil burned me! Honestly, I'm not a good cook, and I hate the kitchen". Then, the advert shows another story of a third woman who fell down the stairs and her arms were red and swollen, and she said: "You know, they always say I'm

so beat up!" The second woman appears in another scene and said, "They always say the way to your man's heart is through his stomach." But by the end of the advert, the viewer would realize the real causes of women's injuries. One of the women said, "I'm not beat up as they said." The second woman said sadly, "Everything I love turns against me. Lord, what the solution?" The third woman raised the question, "Do all women have this problem or are it just me?" Then, a male narrator commented: "Do you fall for it? Just because you hear something, it doesn't mean it's true! Violence is everywhere, protect the ones you love."

The advert used a creative scenario that raises curiosity about the fake stories of three women who do not speak up about domestic violence in an ironic way. However, the use of a male narrator implies that women cannot solve their problems themselves. Interestingly, the advert shows indirectly that Arab culture might be the reason that causes women to keep silent and pretend that they suffered from the house's accidents rather than confessing that they have undergone domestic violence. The advert was limited to the use of stereotypical images of silent, helpless women without empowering women to change their situations.

#### **Advert 4: "*Your silence is a sign of satisfaction!*" (Alwaleed Philanthropies, 2018)**

The advert starts with a close-up focus on the face of a conservative woman who wears black clothes and head veil with a black background. Suddenly, the viewer can hear the sound of the door closing loudly and can see the fear in the woman's eyes. Then, the viewer can hear a slap and can see the woman moving her face with red fingers on her cheek. In the background, the viewer can hear the woman's husband shouting at her, saying, "You're an idiot; you don't know anything; you're an ugly creature!" The viewer keeps hearing the voice of beating with new wounds appearing on the woman's face in a symbolic way that shows the continuity of domestic violence. The use of very close-up shot of woman's face without showing the man aims to make the viewer focus on a woman's feelings and tragedy. However, the advert was again limited to stereotypical images of the powerless conservative woman. The use of a veiled woman was used to represent a stereotypical image of the Saudi woman. The advert ends with the slogan, "Your silence is a sign of satisfaction!" This advert raises an important ethical issue as it implies clear blame of women who do not speak up, while it does not address cultural and financial circumstances that drive women to keep silent.

#### **Advert 5: "*Hide your wounds with makeup!*" (Mawdoo3, 2017)**

The advert starts with a display of a routine day in a couple's house. We can see a stereotypical image of a woman who cleans and tidy up her house with a voice-over of her friends telling her, "You are lucky; your house is very nice." Then, we can hear her mother's voice advising her, "Don't talk loudly with your husband, always say "yes" like me!" Then the viewer can see the woman cleaning the dishes with her mother's voice over telling her, "Are you mad! You want to go to court and bring shame to the family. Keep silent!" Then she heard her friend's voice saying, "How come you're still silent? You have to speak up!" These two inner conversations show the inner conflict woman goes through when she suffers from domestic violence in conservative societies. It is interesting at the beginning of the advert that the viewer can see the wounds in the woman's body without seeing her face to show that this story can be the story of any woman who suffers from domestic violence. By the end of the advert, we can see the wounded face of the woman full of fear, tears, and

blood. In the end, we can hear her mother's voice in the background, telling her to wear makeup to be attractive to her husband. The advert ends in an ironic scene where the woman's makeup is mixed with tears and blood on her wounded face. This scene was symbolic to show that many women in conservative societies cover their wounds by makeup and prefer to keep silent. The advert addresses the culture of silence in some societies where many families encourage woman to keep silence as talking about domestic violence is considered as a taboo. The advert ends with the statistics that "one woman among every three women in the world has encountered domestic violence; while in the Middle East the statistics are inaccurate as many women prefer to keep silent." The advert addresses the cultural restrictions that face women in the Middle East, but again, it does not offer solutions and still limited to conservative images of powerless woman.

### **Advert 6: "No for violence against women" (National Women Council, 2013)**

The advert starts with a close-up focus on a beaten woman with swollen face addressing other women with direct eye contact. The woman says, "Today I want to talk to other women who are beaten by their husbands and teach them how to hide the bruises caused by their husbands' violence, you can use cream powder, and no one can notice! If you want to hide the wounds on your neck, just put on a scarf as it is fashionable! And if you have a swollen eye, you can easily wear a black sunglass". The advert uses an ironic way to show the pain and the conflict of women who undergo domestic violence. The advert ended with the woman's fear when she heard her husband knocking; she extends her hand to seek the help of the audience. The advert shows the woman as powerless and submissive to cultural values of silence. At the end of the advert, we can hear the voice of a male narrator who says, "Woman is a human being that shouldn't be humiliated. Don't be afraid and don't be silent. No for violence". Again, the advert was limited to stereotypical images and did not provide any transformative scenarios or solutions. The fact that the advice comes from a male narrator stresses the stereotypical image of a masculine society where a woman is guided by man's rules.

## **Discussions**

After discussing the semiotic analysis of the adverts, this section aims to relate the findings to the research questions to bring new theoretical understanding.

### **RQ1: How do anti-violence adverts represent Arab women in social media?**

*Social identification of women in the adverts:* Based on post-modernism, social media adverts were designed to imply key concepts of power and empowerment of women. Thus, it is significant to analyze how women are "identified" through the visuals. Potter, Moynihan, and Stapleton (2011) defined the term "social self-identification" as "an individual's ability to see himself or herself and a familiar context in the social marketer's message" (p. 975). In the adverts, women represent the real women who suffer from violence as they wear traditional Arabic clothes and transfer the real pain and sufferings of these women. Kress and Leeuwen (1996) divided this identification to be either "offer" visuals where women images are offered to target audience or "demand" visuals where women in the adverts interact with the target audience. In several images "offer" visuals were used to stress the stereotypical image of a weak, powerless woman where the target audience find it difficult

to infer any change in her status. The offer of conservative self-identification of women is based on the argument that "When we see ourselves in an advertising image, and as the reflection of our social self and surroundings in the portrayed context, we are likely to pay greater attention to the advertised image" (Potter, Moynihan, & Stapleton, 2011, p. 975). However, the limitation of stereotypical images of Arab women makes it difficult to empower them to change their realities.

In some adverts, "demand" visuals were used heavily where the beaten women looked to the viewers in a visual "you" in close-up shots and "demanded" their interaction to help them. Most of the visuals use stereotypical identification of women who lack power and demand the viewer's help. The adverts show that the represented women cannot fight for their rights and need outside help. This representation fails to empower women to stop the violence themselves, as they are shown in these adverts powerless and helpless.

Although some adverts use empowering phrases such as "stop the violence" or "your silence wouldn't stop the violence," the visuals imprisoned women in powerless state by using "stereotypical images." Interestingly, the target audience of these adverts is women themselves who are expected to stop violence using their power. Ironically, these adverts promote the stereotypical image of women as powerless victims of domestic violence, while there is an implied blaming of a woman because of their silence. However, although women were blamed, no tips were provided to help them to stop violence, which might risk victim blaming.

All the adverts have displayed sad stories that end with the weakness of women, torture their husbands, and their failure to stop the violence. By the end of each story or advert, women are shown sad and helpless with swollen faces. The use of "stereotypical image" of powerless women to convey the stories of domestic violence aims to make many target women assign themselves to their situations. However, the use of sad endings in these adverts shows the failure of most of these adverts to empower women to transfer their realities.

In one of the adverts, the advertiser showed the target audience two different stories of the same woman: the first image is of a happy, successful woman, and the second image is of a beaten powerless woman. Both "stereotypical" and "transformative" images are displayed to the target audience. The advert conveys the message that strong woman who says "no" to violence ends in a happy life, while a powerless woman who keeps silent will have a sad ending. This advert aims to provide the target women with two choices for their lives on the same screen and asks them to take their decision, which would empower them. However, the advert falls short of offering women with solutions or access to help.

Moreover, some "Stop violence" adverts use high fear appeals where the target audiences are exposed to shocking violence scenes without providing resources to encourage women to stop violence, which raises the issue of ethics (Backer, Rogers and Sopory, 1992). Although the adverts encourage women to speak up to overcome their fear, they ignore the cultural restrictions and do not afford access to community empowerment. The adverts are restricted to criticizing violence without "empowering" women to take action, which might end up blaming the victims. For instance, women who suffered from domestic violence might blame themselves for not acquiring "power" and "resources" that would enable them to transfer their realities. Besides, another ethical issue raised by the use of violent images is the risk of adverse effects (Henley and Donovan, 1999, p.176) through enhancing the stereotype of weak, helpless women who might be more afraid to change their status after watching these adverts.

**RQ2:** How does Arab societal culture affect the image of women represented in the adverts?

*The influence of societal culture on the image of women in anti-violence adverts:* The adverts represent the cultural conflict women go through in Arab society when they suffer from domestic violence. Issue of domestic violence is still considered a taboo in the Middle East as women are always concerned about their social and cultural image. The stereotypical Arab culture encourages women to keep silent when they go through domestic violence; thus, many women prefer to suffer from violence rather than smarting under social rejection when they go to court or get divorced. This inner conflict is represented in the adverts where women hear two voices inside themselves: "stereotypical" voice – that encourages them to keep silent- and "transformative" voice- that urges them to speak up. This can be attributed to the nature of the Arab "collective" culture where women care about their societal image and adhere to their cultural values and traditions. Hofstede (1994) explained that "Collectivism pertains to societies in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty" (p.51). However, the adverts do not utilize the open nature of social media to introduce women to different scenarios and provide beneficial interaction with the target women of different cultures. This raises the next question of the extent to which "power" and "empowerment" are established by social media adverts, which will be discussed in the next section.

**RQ3:** To what extent these social adverts have empowered women to transfer their realities against domestic violence?

*The concept of "power" established by social media adverts:* The focus on "stereotypical images" rather than "transformative images" in anti-violence adverts raises the question of the extent to which these adverts utilize the free, interactive space offered by social media to facilitate change. Kennedy and Sommerfeldt (2015) explained that "Postmodernists have theorized power as both dominations—controlling, regulatory, and disciplinary—and as resistance—constructive, empowering, revolutionary, and subversive" (p.35).

Although the use of social media suggests providing an open space for involvement and interaction with the target audience, authoritative phrases were used, such as "stop the violence" and "It's time to speak up." Thus, the target women are preserved as patients who should follow the instructions of the adverts; which shows the limitation of these adverts in empowering women to speak up. The male narrator of the slogans acts as a powerful figure that constructs what women should do and blames them for not speaking up. The adverts fall short of using interactive language and scenarios to involve the audience through social media. The failure of social media adverts to empower the target audiences and provide them with access to resources raises significant ethical issues. First, these adverts should move from "victim-blaming" towards empowering women with access to resources through cooperating with specialized non-profit and governmental bodies. Second, the scenarios of these adverts should move from the traditional "stereotype" of the week, powerless crying women –enhanced by these adverts- to transformative images of strong, powerful women. Dutton, James, Langhorne, and Kelley (2015) argued, "Successfully addressing the complex issue of IPV[Intimate partner violence]requires multiple prevention efforts that target specific risk and protective factors across individual, interpersonal, institutional, community, and societal levels" (p. 80).

## Conclusion

### *The need to move towards a transformative image of the Arab woman in social adverts*

The research highlights the limitation of the stereotypical image of the Arab woman in social media adverts. It goes along with the past literature that has stressed the danger of associating Arab woman with the stereotypical image of "oppression," "abuse," and "discrimination" (Gomaa & Raymond, 2014; Akbarzadeh & Smith, 2005; Koblitz, 2016; Read, 2015). The findings of this paper have stressed the need for the shift from a stereotypical image towards a transformative image of the Arab woman in social media anti-violence adverts. Cohen-Eliya and Hammer (2004) explained that "Stereotypes in advertisements are problematic in two respects: first, in terms of the role they play in forming prejudices among those exposed to them; second, in terms of the damage that is caused by the existence of prejudices of this type" (p. 170). Thus, the research argues that the shift towards a new image of "strong," "empowered" woman who can decide in difficult situations would "empower" Arab woman, especially when it is accompanied with offering solutions and alternatives at the societal level.

### *Establishing a supportive societal culture against domestic violence*

The past literature has highlighted the significance of cooperation with non-profit and governmental entities to fight domestic violence. It is even more crucial to establish such cooperation in "collective societies," where the individuals show high loyalty to their societal culture and traditional values (Hofstede, 1994). The research highlights the cultural conflict women go through in Arab society when they suffer from domestic violence. The nature of the Arab "collective" culture where women adhere to their cultural values results in an inner conflict, which makes various women prefer to keep silence. Therefore, "individual empowerment" of women should start from "collective empowerment" through providing support from society. Thus, empowering women through social adverts should start at the societal level. Social media adverts should establish partnerships with specialized bodies that would support women at the community level.

### *Opportunities to build relationships with the target women through social media*

The paper argues that the interactive nature of social media can open a wide space for the re-defining the image of the Arab woman in anti-violence adverts. The open sphere of social media can represent the new transformative image of Arab women and offer interactive scenarios that would facilitate change. The contribution of this paper is that it applies Cohen-Eliya and Hammer's (2004) framework on social media adverts that are used in public communication campaigns. Moreover, it relates this framework to a new cultural context of the Middle East. The findings go along with Cohen-Eliya and Hammer's argument that "restricting stereotypical messages in advertisements inappropriately violate the freedom of expression of advertisers, and particularly that of the viewers" (2004, p. 167).

Social media allows the communicators to be more courageous to challenge the conservative image of Arab woman to promote the new image of a strong, powerful woman who can alter her reality. Kennedy and Sommerfeldt (2015) explained that "social media present a popular set of tools that allow public relations practitioners additional opportunities to establish and cultivate relationships [emphasis added] and engage their

publics" (p. 33). Besides, social media could provide interactive tools to empower women to participate in social change. Thus, social media plays a critical role in building interactive relationships with the target women, where specialized entities could interact directly with women and provide them with appropriate consultation. This goes along with past literature that has stressed the role of social media in building an interactive relationship with the target audience (Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009; Kennedy & Sommerfeldt, 2015). Building interactive relationships through social media would help the target women to interact more freely to solve their problems.

To sum up, the paper highlights the need for innovative social media communication that would utilize the opportunities provided by this platform to establish a new "transformative" image of the Arab woman about her cultural context. Moreover, the paper suggests that the concept of "empowerment" should be addressed at both individual and cultural levels through cooperation with governmental and non-profit organizations using social media communication to provide a woman with access to resources. Future research should take these findings further to analyze the role of new social media in empowering women and establishing a "transformative" image of women in the Arab culture through building interactive relationships with them.

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