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Subvertising Activism in Turkey

Exploring a Critical Alternative

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***Abstract*—This paper analyzes the act of subvertising in Turkey with a focus on a recent anti-consumerist campaign led by activists against a national brand. The act of subvertising has been evaluated as a critical activism under the general label of "culture jamming", which aims to challenge the hegemonic meanings conveyed by media messages. Particularly, advertising and branding have been the facilities that were targeted by culture jammers and advertisers due to their potentials of carrying out hegemonic discourses of class, gender and ethnicity. With an analysis of a recent advertising campaign by Doğadan, an herbal tea company that caused the outrage of women due to the sexist messages that it conveys, this paper will draw attention to the ways in which subvertising is establishing itself as a critical practice in Turkey's contemporary visual landscape.**

***Keywords*—advertising, subvertising, Turkey, visual culture, branding, gender, culture jamming.**

I. Introduction

The rise of consumer cultures across the globe has been one of the most important developments of the 20th century. Societies which increasingly got affected with this development has socially and culturally been integrated to consumer societies in addition to the existing economic adjustments. Non-Western societies like Turkey too have been effected by the rise of consumer cultures. Particularly with the 1980s, Turkey began to integrate its economy to global neoliberal order, which in turn paved the way for the enlargement of national market as well as establishment of a consumer society. Advertisements, in this sense, have been major tools of consumerist ideology to spread the messages of the companies in a mass scale. In addition to their informative function, advertisements have further been criticized as ideological apparatuses, capable of disseminating hegemonic messages to the public.

The advent of consumerism across worldwide as well as in local contexts further resulted in particular counter-hegemonic movements to emerge. As a response to advertising image, activists aimed to counter the messages conveyed by advertising discourse with the alterations of the original advertisements; an activity of dissent coined as subvertising. Subvertising aimed to challenge the meanings conveyed by advertisements, particularly shedding light on the processes of discourse construction with regard to gender, ethnicity and class. Categorized under the general label of culture jamming, subvertising have been a critical activism to counter the hegemonic meanings encoded in the advertising discourse. Subvertising have also been introduced in Turkey's contemporary popular/cultural landscape, especially from a gendered perspective in order to challenge the sexist tone of advertising discourses. Accordingly, this paper undertakes an analysis of a subvertising act against an advertising campaign by Doğadan, an herbal tea company, and analyze the counter hegemonic challenge of subvertising in Turkey's contemporary cultural, political and social landscape.

II. Literature Review

A. *Advertising: A Critical Approach*

The transformation of production-oriented society and the emergence of consumer cultures with the advent of post-Fordist era signaled the significance of the market with its cultural ramifications. In this regard, advertising proved itself to be a useful medium through which producers can provide their goods to their consumers with symbolic, cultural and ideological meanings attached, paving the way for different modes of identification. The "visual turn" of culture especially characterized as the postmodern era further increased the importance of advertising as a mediating agent in the construction of meaning and consolidation of consumerism. In the meantime, advertising has gained cultural, political and ideological significance, in addition to its traditional purpose at sustaining commercial activities. Eventually, advertising managed to fulfill its potential in terms of its capability not only to represent what is out there in society, but also to construct alternative versions of reality.

Various scholars were engaged to the critical study of the ideological functions of advertising. Jhally (1990) argues that advertising is one of the most powerful tools of mass media which is capable of triggering the mechanisms of subjectification. Advertising has been evaluated as a crucial medium which manages to reproduce hegemonic meanings rather than merely manipulating the audiences (Leiss, Kline, & Jhally, 1990). Dyer (1992) approaches the notion of advertising as a discourse, which is capable of constructing social reality. From a cultural studies perspective, advertising has been likened to "magic" of ancient times, which aims to turn products into magical signifiers to mystify the process of consumption as well as to hide the processes of production that entails the exploitation of labor (Williams, 1999). The analysis of advertisements therefore necessitates critical readings with social and cultural implications, ranging from semiotics to discourse analysis, in order to expose the cultural processes in which an advertisement is constructed (Goldman, 1992). In sum, the effects of advertising have critically been evaluated as an ideology, which shapes individual subjectivities and generates social realities (Williamson, 1978; Wernick, 1991).

Gender, in this regard occupy a crucial position in the reproduction of social norms via advertising images. With its discourses that normalizes gender differences, advertising has been accused of "ritualizing" gendered forms of subordination (Leiss, Kline, & Jhally, 1990: 214). Based on his critical research of gender advertisements throughout the 1970s, Goffman observes that advertisements represent women as smaller than men and as childish characters, ritualizing women's subordination (1979: 43); thus establishing the traditional stereotypes of women in advertising discourse (Lazar, 2014: 206). Furthermore, with

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a continuous emphasis on "lack" (Berger, 1990), the discourse of advertising particularly treats women's body both as an object of male gaze and as a subject of an idealized discourse on beauty as well as perfection by calling women for consumption to fulfill what they are told to have been missing. Advertisements that targets women seem to offer emancipatory meanings for their own will, however, this rather refers to the processes of subjectification where women assume that they are being offered emancipation by the advertisements, but actually got more acquainted with gender ideology (Gill, 2007). Also conceptualized as an ideological apparatus (Williamson, 1978), advertising has traditionally been an oppressive cultural artifact, which was held responsible for reproducing the existing relations of social hierarchies, particularly gender inequalities.

Turkey's cultural context necessitates the study of advertising from critical perspectives particularly with regard to gender issues. Turkey's patriarchal cultural dynamics are reflected in advertising discourse, which are predominantly sexist and gendered in terms of the representations that it conveys, as I previously discussed elsewhere with regard to cleaning product advertisements and other gendered representations (Nas, 2015a; Nas, 2015b). Patriarchal representations in Turkey is obviously linked to social and political processes that increased gender inequality over the past decade. From 2002 to 2009, femicide rate in Turkey increased by 1.4 percent. A 2014 research shows that 37,5% of married women experience domestic violence from their husbands. According to the official numbers, 298 women were murdered by men in 2014 and thousands of women are victims of sexual assault, rape and domestic violence (Azor, 2015). The numbers are not exact since women usually do not tend to apply for the police and the court to file complaints about their bad treatment since most of them fear that no precautions will be taken against men by the male-dominating justice system. The patriarchal culture is strongly felt in the formation of gender roles, as women mostly in rural areas but also in cities and metropolitan settings, are pressured to be housewives instead of seeking professional careers for themselves. According to the official records, 9,4% of women are illiterate and only 10% of women have undergraduate or higher degrees. Only 27,1% of women participate to the workforce, which indicates that women's gender roles are assigned as housewives and that most of them are not independent in terms of their economic gains (İstatistiklerle Kadın, 2014 (Women in Statistics, 2014) 2015). In addition to the numbers, there are hegemonic political discourses by male politicians in government, which suggest that, "women are not equal to men due to their nature" (Azor, 2015). As a result, patriarchal oppression reflects onto various fields within culture, especially the advertising discourse. Eventually, subvertising becomes an available tool for the possibility of a counter-hegemonic struggle against the dominant codes of advertising imagery, which is a crucial tool for normalizing and legitimizing gendered forms of oppression.

B. *Subvertising*

Subvertising has been known as an attempt to challenge the messages of advertisements by inciting a critical attention. Subvertising attempts have been popularized by the activist group, Adbusters, that have been active since late 1980s in USA and Canada. The aim of Adbusters have been to turn the messages of advertisements upside down in order to facilitate a critique of consumerist ideology (Harold, 2004: 189). Subvertisers have been analyzed under the general banner of culture jammers, group of activists that target consumer culture from all respects, from advertisements to media images or political representations (Lasn, 1999). The act of jamming has been defined as "semiological warfare" by Umberto Eco, who drew attention to the practices of subvertising of meanings that have been semiotically encoded in advertisements and media images (1986: 35). The roots of culture jamming dates back to the Situationist movement that was active since the 1950s, Marxist critique of consumer culture that aimed to demystify the media images in terms of class (Wettergren, 2009: 2). In the later decades, Punk music movement and American Yippies have been considered as culture jammers, in the sense that they challenged the normative foundations of society (Klein, 1999: 282–283).

Subvertising have been an important tool for culture jammers to incite a critical distance in consumers towards products and the messages that come along with them. In this regard, culture jamming has been analyzed as a consciousness-raising activity, which paved the way for consumers to observe the realities behind the brands that are systematically being concealed (Carducci, 2006: 122). Philosophically, culture jamming and subvertising have been considered as postmodern tools to counter hegemonic narratives of modernity. Subvertising is a manifestation of a fragmented self, characterizing the contemporary conditions of postmodern thought and is further articulated as a local-narrative that sheds light on the ways in which individuals tend to question the ways in which they are subjectified by consumer culture (Rumbo, 2002: 130). The emergence of the "postmodern consumer" is critical in the spread of subvertising activities since the postmodern consumer refuses the idea that brands and advertisements define the reality for themselves; and rather tend to define their own interpretations of reality and wish to project them on the "symbols and signs of consumption" (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995: 252). Eventually, the acts of subvertising have attracted the attention of marketing specialists, who became aware of the obstacles posed by the complexity of dynamics behind the emergence of the postmodern consumer (Rumbo, 2002: 132). Gender, in this regard, has been one of the crucial categories that subvertisers worked on since it is one of the most widespread discourse that advertisements and brands employ as ideological instruments. The ways in which gendered discourses are challenged by subvertisers in Turkey paves the way for an analysis of Turkey's contemporary cultural landscape.

C. *Methodology*

This article will discuss the manifestation of post-feminist sensibility in advertising based on "feminist critical discourse analysis" (Feminist CDA) (Lazar, 2005). While CDA applies a critical stance towards social injustices and inequalities for the analysis of texts or visual materials from the discourse perspective, feminist CDA specifies the focus of critique to an emphasis on feminist praxis (Lazar, 2005: 6). Feminist CDA methodologically sets forth a political perspective on gender with an attempt to demystify the interrelations of gender, power and ideology that are

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discursively constituted (Lazar, 2005: 5). Aiming to expose the ways in which power operates in deeper structures of cultural texts including the visuals, feminist CDA is concerned with how gendered relations of power is "(re)produced, negotiated and contested in representations of social practices" (Lazar, 2005: 11). The contemporary understanding on gender issues originating from West forefronts that there is an important amount of gender equality that has been established and that feminist activism is no longer necessary. Feminist CDA however underscores that gender is still an important category to debate social inequalities between the sexes or sexual orientations that are culturally reproduced in a regime of "gender relationality". In this sense, feminist CDA approaches a text in two ways: Discursive constructions of how to be a woman or a man in a given society and hierarchies of power established in gender relations which are also evident in social representations (Lazar, 2005: 12). With a critical analysis of gender relationality, feminist CDA further aims to provide visibility to the phenomenon of resistance put forth by women against hierarchies of oppression. In sum, feminist CDA aims to transform the academic space into a site of feminist activism with the potential to set up an "analytical resistance" (van Dijk, 1991) via the analysis of discourse for an emancipatory agenda. This research undertakes a feminist critical discourse analysis towards the advertising discourses and its responses from a feminist standpoint. In so doing, the research aims to point out the possible venues of resistances that can be developed vis subvertising strategies.

III. Subvertising Activism

"What do women want?" Neither a slogan of feminist activism nor a question addressing women's rights issues; this particular phrase is the title of an advertisement. Turkey's one of the leading herbal tea companies, Doğadan's commercial aired on television on Late-April met the resistance of feminist activism. The activist website, Erktolia.org[1] initiated the protests against the company so that the ad would be cancelled and Doğadan would apologize from women for the ad's sexist remarks. In a week's period of time, feminist activists managed to gather over 20.000 signatures for the cause. Eventually, Doğadan apologized from women and declared that the campaign was cancelled. Further, the advertising agency, Plasenta, also admitted that they have made a mistake and apologized.

Activism for the cancellation of the advertising campaign is a significant event in terms of the progress that feminist activism achieved so far in Turkey. In recent years, feminist activism in Turkey managed to attain an important amount of visibility by means of online activism especially through the social media. The #direnkahkaha (resist laughter) activism during July 2014, which was mobilized on twitter against Turkish Government's Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Arinc's statement asserting that women should not laugh aloud in public, was an important attempt for women to challenge male hegemony (Akyel, 2014). During this period, feminist organizations initiated a protest against the high rates of femicide through social media by stating that #KadınKatliamiVar (There is a massacre of women) (Altınay, 2014). In the following months, Ozgecan Aslan, a 20 years old female university student was murdered and burned to death by a male minibus driver who attempted to rape her on February 11, 2015. Feminist activism after this terrifying event of male violence increased the popular attention towards women's issues. During this period, #sendeanlat (you too tell) hashtag was employed by women in social media to narrate their experiences of male violence.

The growing energy of feminist activism in Turkey was extended to the field of media, particularly advertising imagery, with the protests against Doğadan advertisement campaign on Late-April 2015. The video entitled "What do women want" lasts 1 minute 12 seconds, consisting of a series of statements rapidly uttered by a male protagonist:

"What do women want? She wants love like in the movies, high-heel shoes with heels unbroken, an ideal body, wants to eat pastries but not gaining weight, she wants a diet but she can't, then she wishes cellulite becomes fashionable, she doesn't want anyone to know her age after she is 20, she wants shoes, bags, she wants everything, wants perfect man, she likes if her man buys her a bag, she wants sports clothes, sports shoes, empty parking lot, an automobile that parks itself, she wants to be healthy, well-groomed, beautiful and attractive, she wants chocolate, flowers, and again shoes, she wants green tea, she wants it with a soft taste... Oh, now we can take a breath. Because we already have it, here is Doğadan soft taste green tea..."

Feminist critical analysis of the discourse in the ad shows that the narrative is mainly based on the artificially reproduced "expectations" of women under the ideology of consumerism. The narration is divided into many sub-narrations, each making a precise statement on women's perceived demands. The narrative, from the perspective of a male protagonist, has an authoritarian tone in the sense that it does not refer to the possibilities that women might demand; it rather draws upon a concrete female identity defined in relation to consumer items. Besides, remarks such as a woman demanding an automobile that can park itself are openly discriminating as it reproduces the gender stereotypes. The figure of woman portrayed in the advertising discourse is a perfect illustration of an "ideal" type of women under consumerism and patriarchy, who insistently demands consumption and internalizes the gender roles assigned to her. Furthermore, from a feminist critical discourse analysis point of view, what is being stressed by the advertising discourse is a particular stereotype which claims that woman is an ever-demanding entity who is not powerful enough to put an end to her demands and continue her life in a consistent manner. While the discourse, which suggests that women want to own almost everything in the market is an important apparatus for the ideology of consumerism; it also confines women to a certain role of not being able to fulfill her existence as opposed to men do in a rational manner. Represented within such incompleteness, woman is narrated by a male protagonist, who is "complete"

[1] The feminist activist website, Erktolia.org is the Turkey branch of Macholand.org founded in France in October 2014 as a network of anti-sexist digital platform to struggle against sexism.

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and "all knowing". Doğadan advertisement is an explicit example for the ways in which advertising imagery is an instrument of male hegemony that carefully utilizes the medium of commercial advertising to reproduce sexism and gendered stereotypes. In this sense, the advertising discourse serves as a hegemonic narrative that conveys an ideological message to the audiences to generate and reproduce individual subjectivities on a patriarchal basis.

While anti-ad activism was underway, a subvertising video prepared by feminist activists as a response to Doğadan ad well illustrates the ways in which women acquire the medium of advertising as a counter-hegemonic site of their own. A reworking of the original video, activists changed the narrations of the male protagonist into a female protagonist telling the audience "this is what women really want!" Prepared by feminist activists as a reworking of Doğadan ad where the hegemonic messages of the original ad were turned upside down as an act of culture jamming, "Here is what women really want!" is a remarkable example of culture jamming, which undertakes a deconstruction of womanhood as hegemonically defined by the discourse of advertising. The narration goes as follows:

"She doesn't want anyone to intervene her way of clothing and style of body. She doesn't want to see gender stereotypes in movies. She wants to get out of the kitchen and be free in the streets. She wants to drink raki as much as she wants. She wants to have sex as much as she wants in her 30's, 40's and 50's. She doesn't want her rapist to be freed just because a condom was found in her bag during the incident. She doesn't want to be sexually assaulted at the streets, workplaces and online. She wants to be able to live alone. She doesn't want anyone to harass her while making sports. She wants to be the way she wants. She doesn't want some brands to define womanhood for herself. And she wants Doğadan to apologize for the ad."

The subvertising video openly reject the gender norms imposed on women. The counter campaign underscores that while there are various events of subordination that target women in Turkish society, the way in which Doğadan advertisement narrates the events is an act of naturalizing and legitimizing women's subordination. The subvertising act therefore becomes a tool for them to reclaim a space of their own against the ideological inclinations of the original ad as representative of hegemonic-patriarchal culture. Subvertising the sexist ad, feminist activists further initiated an online activism on social media, with the hashtag of #DoğadanÖzürDilesin (Doğadan should apologize). With the slogan "Women do not want such ads Doğadan!" Erktolia.org provided women with the necessary digital means to publish instant Facebook posts and tweets via the activism website, by mentioning Doğadan's official social media accounts[2]. Moreover, Doğadan was also petitioned at Change.org[3]. With the support of several feminist activist organizations, the cause managed to attract the attention of many people who contributed to the protest by online activism. In only three days of time period, the activism managed to attain serious visibility and achieved 21.695 signatures. At April 28, Doğadan released published a tweet declaring that they were "deeply sorry to see protesting messages in social media"; further stating "We sincerely did not have such an aim while starting this campaign. We understand the sensitivity that our dear consumers have and announce that we cancelled our advertising campaign." Consequently, Doğadan removed the advertising content on its social media accounts. Feminist activism however did not finalize since activists demanded an apology from the company. At April 29, Doğadan once again tweeted: "We apologize from women". On the same day, Plasenta advertising agency also apologized from women, by stating the following: "We couldn't foresee the outcomes of what we have done. We realized our mistake and learned from it. We are deeply sorry and we apologize." The cause ended in success by the recognition of sexism both by the firm and the advertising agency, which pointed at a remarkable achievement of feminist resistance against advertising.

It is the first time in Turkey, a predominantly conservative society where it is difficult to express women's problems due to male hegemony; an advertising campaign is cancelled as a result of women's mobilization. The activism paved the way for the concepts of "sexism" and "gender" to be heard and recognized by a wider community. It further directed the audience attention towards advertising discourse and provided the necessary ground for women to critically negotiate their relations with brands and their products. Additionally, this particular event also pointed out that individuals, particularly women, are not passive subjects of consumerist ideology; they rather engage to critical interrogation of the images that tend to represent them, they challenge them, unite, form a mobilization, spread the word about their cause on a national scale and overcome the messages of consumerism that are conveyed to them. Therefore, the field of marketing too, has many lessons to grasp form feminist activism against advertising, since the cause showed that brands should not impose certain roles on consumers. Rather than defining consumers on their behalf, brands should let consumers to come up with their own definitions and realize themselves the way they wish. Today, several feminist groups continue to call for action against other sexist advertisement campaigns prepared for "Mother's Day", expecting further cancellations and apologies from a variety of brands[4]. It is certain that the criticism of the advertising discourse will continue to remain on the agenda of feminist activism as a newly emerging terrain for feminist struggle in Turkey. Subvertising and

[2] "Kadınlar böyle reklamları istemez Doğadan Çay!" (Women do not want these ads Doğadan!) Retrieved on May 10, 2015 at http://erktolia.org/kadinlar-boyle-reklamlari-istemez-dogadan-cay/

[3] Online Petition by Feminist Activists, Retrieved on May 10, 2015 at https://www.change.org/p/dogadan-cay-kadınlar-ne-ister-adlı-cinsiyetçi-reklamınız-için-özür-dileyin?lang=en-US

[4] In addition to Erktolia.org, Cinsomedya.org and moreklam.tumblr.com are other important initiatives that undertake critique of advertising and media from a feminist point of view.

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culture jamming in this respect provides a useful opportunity for counter-hegemonic groups to tackle the metanarratives of gender and others. In sum, subvertising paves the way for the subordinated groups in society to express themselves clearly by establishing a place of their own within the realms of visual / popular culture. Eventually, subvertising gains an important role in a conservative society like Turkey to counter the hegemonic foundations of social norms in various respects.

IV. Conclusion

Advertising has long been criticized for reproducing gender norms, rather than offering a transformative potential. It has been critically evaluated as a perfect instrument to sustain the existing power relations by constantly regulating and disciplining women's bodies. Advertisements popularize the portrayal of women as subjects of gendered relations of power to the global community. The recent subvertising campaign in Turkey show that women are not the passive audiences of advertising messages. They rather show the potential to critically counter the hegemonic meanings conveyed by advertisements. Furthermore, consumers engage in acts of subvertising to rework on the hegemonic messages conveyed by advertisements and to turn them upside down by underscoring their concerns, values and ambitions. The recent subvertising campaign in Turkey signals the emergence of culture jamming activities with regard to advertisements from a gendered lens, which has the potential to spread in other areas of popular culture in the near future. The subvertising act shows that the postmodern consumer, who challenges the metanarratives of advertising and branding industry, is becoming more visible in Turkey's contemporary economic and cultural landscape. This particular development shows that the advertising language should be adjusted for the newly emerging consumer that manages to develop a critical distance from the traditional sense of publicity. The subvertising act points out that culture jamming provides underrepresented groups with the opportunity to reclaim their own spaces within the hegemonic realms of popular / visual culture. Eventually, marketing specialists and advertisers will need to take into consideration this new phenomenon and try to rethink of their perceptions in constructing and conveying messages to the wider audiences.

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