

## Poverty porn in charity advertising: A multimodal comparative analysis of Bait Al-Zakat Al-Masry's advertisements in 2017 and 2023

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### Abstract:

In Ramadan 2017, the advertisement of Bait Al-Zakat Al-Masry received an intense backlash for its poverty porn approach, which used disturbing images that invaded the privacy of the poor, pictured them in vulnerable situations, and depicted them as helpless individuals whose survival depends entirely on donations. As a result, the charity changed its advertising strategy for its Ramadan 2023 campaign, incorporating positive images, songs, actors, and public places. While the new ad successfully avoided poverty porn, some criticized it for not portraying the challenges faced by the poor and the strenuous efforts of Bait Al-Zakat Al-Masry. This study examines the linguistic and visual differences between the 2017 and 2023 ads, analyzes audience attitudes toward them, and discusses how charity advertisers can portray the plight of those in need without resorting to poverty porn. The study aims to guide charity advertisers in creating ethical ads while effectively raising funds and encourages further research on the ethics of charity advertising in Egypt.

**Keywords:** multimodality; charity advertising; poverty porn; systemic functional grammar; the grammar of visual design

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## 1. Introduction

According to Plewes and Stuart (2009), poverty porn is a term introduced in the 1980s by development practitioners in Europe, Canada, and the United States to describe the derogatory practices used by nongovernmental organizations in their charity campaigns. This involves using extremely negative poverty imagery, such as photos of children with swollen abdomens covered with flies, violating the privacy of the poor by exposing their faces and revealing identifying information, and depicting their vulnerable moments, like scavenging for food in a garbage can. These campaigns often portray the wealthy as the sole saviors and oversimplify poverty as just a lack of material resources. While this approach effectively solicits donations from the rich, it has often been criticized as unethical.

Researchers, development practitioners, human rights activists, and journalists have strongly criticized poverty porn. Middendorp (2015, para. 4) describes it as “an unacceptable invasion of privacy.” Clough et al. (2023) and Roenigk (2014) argue that it fails to empower the poor as it portrays them as helpless individuals whose survival relies solely on donations. Lentfer (2018) adds that it oversimplifies poverty as a lack of material resources and disregards its root causes like corruption, illiteracy, nepotism, and war. Rosenthal (2015, p.1) views it as an ethical dilemma since it is both pejorative and effective in fundraising. Despite these criticisms, nongovernmental organizations still find it tempting to use poverty porn because it is fundraising effective, as seen in successful campaigns like the American campaign of “We Are the World” in 1985 and the Canadian nongovernmental organizations’ efforts in 2004, which raised hundreds of millions of dollars (Bendtsen, 2015; Stuart, 2009).

During Ramadan, charity advertising reaches its peak in the Middle East because most Muslims are likely to donate more during this holy month. According to Elsheniti (2016), Middle Eastern nongovernmental organizations collect 75% to 80% of their targeted donations during Ramadan. This is evidenced by the hundreds of charity advertisements aired during the month, such as the 400 ads aired on Middle Eastern Arabic channels in Ramadan 2015, accounting for about 50% of the total new ads for the month (Zidan & Salah, 2015). One of the nongovernmental organizations that broadcast charity ads every Ramadan is Bait Al-Zakat Al-Masry (Egyptian Alms House), which was established in 2014 and is managed by Al-Azhar (the oldest and most prestigious university of Islamic and Arabic studies in the Middle East). The organization raises funds to support various charity projects and is primarily financed by Muslims' zakat (alms) and ṣadaqāt (charity).

In Ramadan 2017, the charity ad of Bait Al-Zakat Al-Masry received an intense backlash for its poverty porn approach. The ad aimed to raise funds to provide clean drinking water to impoverished Egyptian villages. It featured a celebrity actress, Dalaal Abdulaziz, visiting a mother of six children in her home to inquire about her water supply. The mother shared her name and the name of her village before being filmed filling jerry cans with dirty water from a canal and using it to wash her toddler's face. In response, the actress said, "allah yikūn fī 'ūnik, ma'lish" (May God help you! It is okay), which is an inappropriate response to someone's suffering in Egyptian culture. The Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Sheikh Ahmed El-Tayeb, eventually canceled the ad due to public backlash (Alnilin, 2017; Nour, 2017; Saad, 2017; Saleh, 2017). Al-Arab (2017) described the advertisement as an invasion of privacy, exploitation of the poor, and defamation of Egypt. Deyaa (2017, para. 3) wrote, "In the last couple of years, the social campaign ads have turned into a depressing panel with heartbreaking stories about people who have given up on life because of poverty." Digital Boom (2017, para. 7) agrees with Deyaa that "pain, misery, and suffering have always been synonymous with charitable ads in Ramadan to gain viewer's empathy and increase donations."

After facing criticism for following a poverty porn approach, Bait Al-Zakat Al-Masry changed its advertising approach. Its Ramadan 2023 ad featured a song, non-famous actors, and positive imagery in public places. However, despite this effort, the ad was criticized for being too vague and uninformative. According to Deyaa (2018), ads that rely on music and songs are glamorous, out-of-context shows that do not accurately depict the struggles of those in need or explain how donations are used. Therefore, this study aims to address the issue of how charity ads can effectively showcase the struggles of those in need and clarify how donations are utilized without resorting to poverty porn tactics. To accomplish this goal, the study first compares the 2017 and 2023 ads linguistically and visually to show how poverty porn manifested in the first ad was avoided in the second. The linguistic analysis uses Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) field, tenor, and mode, while the visual analysis draws on Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) grammar of visual design, which analyzes images in three dimensions: representational, interactional, and compositional. Second, the study surveys Egyptian viewers' attitudes towards the two ads to find if they agree with the criticism written about the ads in Egyptian newspapers and news websites. Finally, the study discusses how charity advertisers can accurately portray the suffering of the needy to motivate viewers to donate while avoiding poverty porn, using examples from the literature.

## 2. Literature Review

Charity advertising is explored from various perspectives: sociology, psychology, marketing, media, and linguistics. Given the scope of this study, this section will focus on linguistic research on charity advertising in Egypt (subsection 2.1) and linguistic research focusing on the relationship between charity advertising and poverty porn (subsection 2.2). However, interested readers can consult the following systematic literature reviews on other perspectives and topics: Alferova (2022), Bhati and Hansen (2019), Wymer and Gross (2021), Yousef et al. (2021), and Zheng (2020).

### 2.1. Linguistic Research on Charity Advertising in Egypt

In a study by Sherra (2017), six Egyptian charity ads from 2011 to 2016 were analyzed using Tversky and Kahneman's (1981) gain and loss framing theory. The study found that gain framing, which focuses on positive outcomes, such as "with your help, an unfortunate child can have an opportunity for a bright future," was more commonly used than loss framing, such as "without your help, an unfortunate child continues to live in the dark" (Sherra, 2017, p. 13). The ads featured children (because they are the most vulnerable) and were endorsed by celebrities to increase credibility. Additionally, all of the ads appealed to viewers' emotions of guilt. Shafik (2018) criticized these ads, claiming they emotionally manipulate the upper and middle classes into feeling guilty for their privileged lifestyles while others suffer.

Similar to Sherra (2017), Kassab (2019) used Tversky and Kahneman's (1981) gain and loss framing theory to examine which frame is used more frequently in Children Cancer Hospital Egypt 57357 charity ads. Like Sherra, Kassab found that the gain frame was used most frequently as it motivates viewers more to donate and is less depressing. However, both frames portray viewers as the sole saviors of the poor, a main characteristic of poverty porn, as mentioned in Section 1. Ideally, according to Roenigk (2014), good charity ads should call for socioeconomic structural changes that lead to sustainable solutions to poverty, not just donations.

In a study by Abdelghany (2019), the endorsements of celebrities in charity ads for the Children Cancer Hospital Egypt 57357 were analyzed using the transitivity system of Halliday and Matthiessen (2014). This system categorizes processes expressed by predicates as material, mental, relational, existential, behavioral, or verbal. Material processes (i.e., action verbs such as build, donate, and come) were found to be the most common. The celebrities were also found to be the Actors in these material processes. As a result, Abdelghany argues that the discourse of charity advertising in 2019 differed from that of the charity ads analyzed by Sherra (2017). Instead of inducing guilt in viewers for living

well while others suffer, 2019 charity ads motivate viewers to donate by using celebrities as role models.

## 2.2. Linguistic Research on Charity Advertising and Poverty Porn

Nathanson (2013) compared the charity ads of Canadian child sponsorship organizations in 2005 and 2011. The study revealed that both sets of ads failed to allow poor children to speak directly to the audience. In the 2005 ads, a Western narrator provided information about the children and their families instead of allowing them to express themselves. In the 2011 ads, the children were allowed to speak, but their voices were dubbed over in English. Additionally, both sets of ads neglected to address the socioeconomic causes of poverty and focused only on the benefits of donations, such as providing food, shelter, and education. Coulter (1989, as cited in Nathanson, 2013) suggests that overly complex explanations of poverty do not engage donors emotionally and that what matters is to elicit as much sympathy, pity, and guilt as possible to motivate viewers to donate. Nathanson argues that omitting the voice of those in need reinforces a barrier between them and the audience, depicting them as helpless individuals. Furthermore, by decontextualizing poverty, the ads trivialize efforts to address it and fail to promote sustainable solutions beyond donations.

Nimishakavi (2018) discussed using person-first versus identity-first language in English charity ads. Person-first language defines individuals first as people and then adds a characteristic, such as “a person with a disability.” On the contrary, identity-first language identifies individuals by their characteristics, such as “a disabled person.” Nimishakavi argues that most English charity ads use identity-first language, which can portray those in need as helpless individuals defined solely by their neediness. Therefore, Nimishakavi suggests that nonprofit charities should adopt person-first language more often.

## 3. Methods

### 3.1. Data

As stated in Section 1, the data analyzed in this study includes two charity ads from Bait Al-Zakat Al-Masry. The first was aired in Ramadan 2017 and is 1.26 minutes long. The second was aired in Ramadan 2023 and is 1.23 minutes long. Both ads are available on YouTube<sup>1,2</sup>. The scripts of both ads are included in the Appendix.

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<sup>1</sup> 2017: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1iC\\_gMZZ4eM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1iC_gMZZ4eM)

<sup>2</sup> 2023: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-FxF\\_L\\_5gOPQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-FxF_L_5gOPQ)

### 3.2. Model of Linguistic Analysis

The linguistic analysis of the ads' scripts draws on Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) field, tenor, and mode. These are sets of related variables with contrasting values. Together, they "define a multi-dimensional semiotic space – the environment of meanings in which language, other semiotic systems, and social systems operate." (p. 34). In this study, each set is defined as follows:

- Field describes the main topic or the subject matter of each ad
- Tenor describes the roles played by the participants in each ad, including the actors, the poor mother and her children, and the viewers. More specifically, it describes
  - o status roles (i.e., power, either equal or unequal)
  - o contact roles (i.e., familiarity, ranging from strangers to intimates)
  - o sociometric roles (i.e., affect, either neutral or charges, positively or negatively)
- Mode describes the roles played by language and other semiotic systems (i.e., images and music) in each ad. More specifically, it describes
  - o the division of labor between language and other semiotic systems (i.e., how long the language component lasts in each advertisement)
  - o the rhetorical mode (e.g., informative, didactic, explanatory, or explicatory)
  - o tenor (e.g., exhortatory, polemic)
  - o turn: dialogic or monologic
  - o medium: written or spoken
  - o channel: phonic or graphic

As Halliday (1978) and Halliday and Hassan (1985) explain, field values resonate with ideational meanings, tenor values resonate with interpersonal meanings, and mode values resonate with textual meanings. Ideational meanings construct our experiences with the internal (mental) and external (social and physical) worlds. Interpersonal meanings denote the social relations between language users. Textual meanings relate to how the language used in the communicative context is organized to convey ideational and interpersonal meanings.

### 3.3. Model of Visual Analysis

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) based their grammar of visual design on the same premises as Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) systemic functional grammar. They argue that visual design is a systemic process that involves stratified sets of variables with contrasting values. They also argue that the choices made are both functional and social, meaning that choices are made based on the function

that a particular image serves in a particular social context. Ultimately, they analyze images based on three dimensions: representational, interactional, and compositional.

The representational dimension – which aligns with Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) ideational meaning – describes the participants, circumstances, and processes depicted in an image. The participants are the people and things depicted in the image. The circumstances refer to the place where the image is taken. The processes denote the actions performed by the participants.

Processes – referred to as vectors by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) – are either narrative or conceptual. On the one hand, narrative processes are dynamic and showcase actions, events, and changes as they occur. Conceptual processes are static and represent the fundamental essence of participants in terms of class, structure, or meaning.

There are two types of narrative processes: action and reactional. Action processes involve three participants - Actors (those who initiate the action), Goals (those transformed as a result of the action), and Recipients (those toward whom or to which the action is directed). Action processes can be transactional (involving at least one Actor and one Goal or Recipient) or non-transactional (involving only Actors). Non-transactional action processes are “analogous to the intransitive verb in language” (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 63).

Reactional processes “are formed by an eyeline, by the direction of the glance of one or more of the represented participants” (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 67). Put simply, these processes refer to looking and observing. The participant who looks or observes is the Reacter, and it has to be “a creature with visible eyes that have distinct pupils, and capable of facial expression” (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 67). The Phenomenon, on the other hand, is the participant being looked at or observed. It can be a human, object, or action.

The interactional dimension – which corresponds to Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) interpersonal meaning – describes the relationship between the participants within the images on the one hand and the participants and the viewers on the other. These relationships are analyzed in terms of gaze, frame, and angle. In terms of gaze, participants can either look at the viewers or turn away from the viewers. When participants look at the viewers, Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) refer to it as a demand image, where participants ask viewers to do something. The nature of the demand depends on participants' facial expressions and gestures. For example, participants may “demand deference, by unblinkingly looking down on the viewers, or pity, by pleadingly looking up at them” (Jewitt & Oyama, 2011, p. 165). Smiling may prompt viewers to “enter into social affinity with the participants” (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 118). However, when participants avert their gaze from viewers, it is

referred to as an offer image, where participants are presented as “items of information, objects of contemplation, impersonally, as though they were specimens in a display case” (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 119).

The size of the frame determines the social relationship between the participants and the viewers. Table 1, adapted from Ly and Jung (2015) based on the work of Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) and Hall (1982), outlines the different frame sizes and what they convey about the social relationship between participants and viewers. Generally, the rule of thumb is that the smaller the frame, the closer the relationship. For instance, an extreme close-up of a participant's face invites viewers to examine the features and potentially find similarities with their own, fostering empathy toward the ad. Conversely, a wide shot that places the participants in the background shifts the focus to their environment.

**Table 1:** The correspondence between frame size and the participants-viewers social relationships

<b>Frame Size</b>	<b>Relationship</b>
only the face (i.e., extreme close-up)	intimate
head and shoulders (i.e., close-up)	intimate
head to waist (i.e., medium shot)	far personal
the whole figure (i.e., a wide shot)	impersonal
the whole figure and the space around (i.e., a longer shot)	formal & impersonal
the torsos of at least four or five people (i.e., an extremely long shot)	strangers

According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), the angle at which an image is taken can affect the viewer's level of involvement and perception of power. A horizontal image taken from a frontal eye-level angle encourages viewers to engage with the world within the image. As the frame size increases, viewers become more involved with the details of the image. However, if the image is taken from an oblique angle (i.e., less than or more than 90 degrees), it may not effectively immerse viewers in the depicted world.

When it comes to vertical angles, there exist three potential scenarios to consider. Firstly, if the viewers look down upon the participants, the viewers hold a stronger social position (e.g., greater financial security, higher education level, or occupation in a higher rank). Secondly, if the viewers look up to the participants, it signifies that the participants hold the more influential side of the relationship. Lastly, the power dynamic is equal when participants and viewers are at the same eye level.



Like Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) textual meaning, the compositional dimension relates to how the participants are positioned in an image. Such arrangements are analyzed for information value, salience, and framing. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) describe three information value structures: given-new, ideal-real, and central-marginal. Typically, in a given-new structure, participants on the left provide given (i.e., old) information, while those on the right offer new information to which viewers should pay attention. An ideal-real layout places participants on the top as ideal and those on the bottom as real. In a central-marginal arrangement, the participants placed in the center of the image are the most salient.

Salient participants are made to attract viewers' attention. Salience is realized by several factors such as "placement in the foreground or background, relative size, contrasts in tonal value (or color), differences in sharpness" (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 177). Meanwhile, framing pertains to the presence or absence of framing devices like dividing lines, connecting or disconnecting the participants in the image. A connecting frame implies that the participants belong together, while a dividing frame suggests otherwise.

### 3.4. The Attitudinal Survey

While the newspaper articles referenced in Section 1 provide insight into public opinion regarding the ads analyzed in this study, gathering feedback directly from individuals through fieldwork is crucial. To that end, I created a survey of four questions about Bait Al-Zakat Al-Masry's 2017 and 2023 ads. The survey's layout is outlined in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Attitudinal questions and choices

<b>Part 1: Watch the 2017 ad and then answer the following three questions</b>	
<b>Questions</b>	<b>Choices</b>
<p><b>Q1:</b> Do you believe the ad violated privacy by revealing the mother's identity and residence and featuring her and her children's faces? Or was this essential to establish credibility?</p>	<p>) Yes! The ad infringes on the family's privacy. It would have been more appropriate to use actors or devise an alternative idea that doesn't expose the identities of the vulnerable family members.</p> <p>) No! The ad doesn't infringe on the privacy of the family. It was necessary to disclose their identities for the sake of credibility.</p>
<p><b>Q2:</b> Do the scenes of filling empty water</p>	<p>) Yes! It is quite distressing to witness the</p>

bottles with seawater, a child drinking contaminated water, and wiping another child's face with the same water cause distress, anger, or any other negative feelings to viewers? Are these scenes considered psychologically harmful?

(You can choose more than one answer)

scenes, especially those involving children. It would have been preferable to avoid them altogether.

) Yes! Although the scenes may be distressing, they are essential in accurately conveying the situation to the audience.

) No! I don't find the scenes upsetting; they are necessary to clarify the situation to viewers.

**Q3:** Is Dalal Abdel Aziz's statement of "God be with you! It's all right" indicative of indifference and a lack of common sense?

) Yes! It would have been better if the actress had shown more empathy, and it was the director's responsibility to guide her.

) No! I believe it was a spontaneous expression and not intended to mock or belittle the mother's problem.

**Part 2: Watch the 2023 advertisement and then answer the following three questions**

**Q4:** Does the 2017 ad do a better job encouraging viewers to donate than the 2023 ad? (You can choose more than one answer)

) Yes! I believe the 2017 ad holds more impact as it portrays the true story of a family in dire need. This adds authenticity to Bait Al-Zakat Al-Masry's efforts and highlights their unwavering dedication to their cause.

) Yes! Using songs and music to represent an entity associated with Al-Azhar is inappropriate.

) No! I find the 2017 ad to be disturbing and offensive to families struggling with financial difficulties. It also invades their privacy.

) No! The 2023 ad has a more positive and

The survey was deployed on Google Forms and shared on Facebook in Arabic. No data was collected on the age, gender, or nationality of the respondents. However, considering the survey was shared on Egyptian Facebook profiles, it is likely that most, if not all, respondents were Egyptian.

## **4. Results**

### **4.1. Linguistic differences**

Both ads had charitable causes, but each had a specific field (i.e., topic or subject matter). The 2017 ad was centered on the issue of families lacking access to clean water, hence the frequent use of the word “water.” On the other hand, the 2023 ad covered various hardships that individuals may experience, including financial, health, and family crises. There was no specific problem highlighted.

The two ads have distinct tones and modes. The 2017 ad utilized a dialogue-based approach with a celebrity actress portrayed as socially dominant over the mother and her daughters. The actress took charge of the conversation and always directed questions toward the mother. Additionally, she was the only one to directly address the audience, whereas the mother and her daughters did not have the opportunity to speak directly to the camera.

In the 2017 ad, viewers were depicted as strangers who required enlightenment on the mother's and her family's living conditions. The actress adopted the persona of an informant who inquired about the mother's identity, location, and income. She elaborated on the mother's predicament and revealed that she and her family had to travel far to obtain contaminated water. The actress also candidly disclosed the expenses of providing clean water to the mother and others in a similar situation. The ad utilized an informative rhetorical mode, resulting in a lengthy script of 145 words.

The 2017 ad portrays the mother and her family as helpless individuals with no source of income and no other options besides waiting for donations. Using three tactics, the ad aims to motivate viewers to donate and appeals to them as the sole saviors. Firstly, the actress reassured the mother that her problem would be solved during Ramadan (the holy month), which reminds viewers to donate to get closer to God. Secondly, the actress straightforwardly mentioned that the total cost was 2000 Egyptian pounds, which is affordable for many upper-middle-class Egyptians to donate. Finally, the narrator reminded the audience that zakat (almsgiving) is a pillar of Islam that brings blessings to a person's life, appealing to viewers' sense of religious duty.

In short, the 2017 ad exhibits all poverty porn traits by creating a divide between the impoverished and the donors. It portrays the poor as helpless and reliant on the donors as their only

saviors. Moreover, it discloses sensitive information about impoverished individuals, including their names and locations, while disregarding minors' privacy. It also employs negative messaging to elicit pity and encourage donations. In contrast, the 2023 ad avoids many of these unethical features.

The 2023 ad has a monologic mode, featuring a song in the first-person pronoun. The singer pleads to God to safeguard them from looming crises that could turn their life upside down. The song's purpose is to convey the message that those in need are no different from the audience, who are potential donors. Poverty is not a result of laziness or helplessness but rather an outcome of life-altering situations that can happen to anyone. The song fosters intimacy between the viewers and those in need, enabling viewers to empathize with them.

The song in the 2023 ad has a slightly negative tone as it expresses the fear of drastic changes in one's life. However, the music used in the advertisement helps to balance out the negativity. The advertisement is brief and contains only 50 words, without pressure on viewers to donate. The narrator addresses the audience only once at the end of the advertisement, using a prayer that includes all viewers, regardless of their financial status. In the second part, the narrator briefly reminds viewers that giving zakat (almsgiving) brings blessings to one's life. The 2023 ad has considered the criticisms of the previous 2017 ad and, therefore, carefully avoids all features of poverty porn.

## 4.2. Visual differences

The 2017 ad uses visuals and language to highlight the mother's and her family's vulnerability, creating a divide between them and the audience while revealing intimate details of their home. Most of the shots depict narrative processes, in which the actress is the Actor asking questions, while the mother and her daughters are the Recipients of the inquiries (Figure 1). Throughout the advertisement, the mother and daughters are presented as offer images, not directly engaging with the viewers (Figures 1 and 2). Using long horizontal shots – like Figure 2 – further estranges the family from the viewers, portraying them as strangers to be impersonally contemplated. This technique allows for a detailed portrayal of their poor world but at the cost of completely exposing their privacy.

**Figure 1:** The mother and her daughter answering the actress's questions without looking at the viewers



**Figure 2:** The mother and her family appear in a long horizontal shot without direct eye contact with the viewers.



In the 2017 ad, there were depictions of reactional processes, such as the one in Figure 3, where the actress is portrayed as the observer (Reacter) while the mother fills water jerry cans (Phenomenon). It is worth noting the use of a vertical angle in this scene. Both the viewers and the actress see the mother from above, which implies a sense of superiority and power over the mother, as discussed in Section 3.3.

**Figure 3:** The actress and viewers watching the mother from a top vertical angle



Figures 4 and 5 used the same top vertical angle but from a greater distance to capture a wider view of the mother's living conditions. The actress's facial expressions of surprise and disgust, her pointing finger at the dirty water jerry cans, and the body language of both the actress and the mother, who are moving in opposite directions, create a sense of alienation between the actress and the mother, on the one hand, and the mother and the viewers, on the other. These factors likely influenced the survey participants in this study, as discussed in Section 4.3, to vote against the actress's comment, "May God be with you! It's okay," deeming it inappropriate and inconsiderate.

**Figure 4:** A wide top angle, with a surprised/disgusted facial expression, and a pointing finger at the dirty water



**Figure 5:** A top angle showing the actress and the mother going in separate directions



In Figure 6, there is one last image that deserves analysis. Although it is a conceptual image without any action being performed by the mother or her daughters, it is intriguing for various reasons. Firstly, the daughters are more salient as they are positioned in the foreground while the mother is at the back. Typically, children evoke more empathy, so they are placed at the forefront. Secondly, neither the mother nor her daughters look directly at the camera; instead, they gaze upwards toward the filming crew or the actress, as seen in Figures 1 and 2. This highlights their vulnerable social status and powerlessness. Finally, using the door and the house as a frame connects and encompasses this family, as if poverty surrounds them and they are a part of it.

**Figure 6:** A conceptual image of the mother and her daughters framed by their humble home



The images in the 2023 ad are noticeably distinct from those in the previous ad. Firstly, many narrative processes in the new images are non-transactional, featuring Actors without any clear Goals or Recipients, such as a man praying or a woman reading (Figure 7). Secondly, transactional narrative processes depict daily acts of kindness that anyone, regardless of social class, can perform, like helping an old woman cross the street or reading to children (Figure 8). There are no shocking or disturbing images. Thirdly, all the images are set in public places the rich and poor use, such as mosques or streets (Figure 9). Lastly, the vertical angle is the most noticeable visual difference between the 2017 and 2023 ads. While the 2017 ad had mostly top-angle images, providing viewers with a sense of superiority over the participants, the images in the 2023 ad are mostly taken from an eye-level angle, creating a feeling of equality between viewers and participants (Figures 7, 8, and 9). The goal of the 2023 ad is to eliminate boundaries between viewers and the poor. It promotes the idea that anyone can become poor due to unexpected events; thus, we should always lend a helping hand. This message was conveyed linguistically, as discussed in Section 4.1, and visually as discussed here.

**Figure 7:** Examples of non-transactional narrative processes represented in the 2023 advertisement



**Figure 8:** Examples of acts of kindness depicted in the 2023 advertisement



**Figure 9:** Examples of the settings used in the 2023 advertisement

The 2023 advertisement features conceptual images showcasing Islamic spiritual places rather than human participants, such as Figure 10. These images are captured from an oblique angle (90+) which, according to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) mentioned in Section 3.3, may not fully immerse viewers into the depicted world. However, I respectfully disagree in the case of the 2023 ad. Despite the oblique angle, the intricate Islamic architecture and motifs on the mosque ceilings hold immense spiritual significance for Muslims. When entering a mosque, it is customary for Muslims to look up, reflect on the motifs, and pray as if they are communicating directly with Allah (God). Therefore, I believe the oblique angle was intentionally used to create a world of spirituality and to remind viewers of the significance of these worship places.

**Figure 10:** Conceptual images from an oblique angle in the 2023 ad

### 4.3. Attitudinal Difference

One hundred thirty-four respondents took part in the survey. Among them, 63.4% believed that the 2017 ad infringed upon the privacy of the mother and her daughters. Additionally, 52.2% found the actress's comment to be insensitive, while 86.6% thought that the images in the ad were unsettling. However, 58.2% of participants agreed that using such disturbing images was necessary to depict the harsh realities underprivileged families face.



Most respondents concurred that the 2017 ad was more successful in stimulating donations and evoking empathy from the audience albeit its unsettling nature. The ad's authenticity, as it showcased an actual case in need of assistance, made it more believable and highlighted the diligent efforts of Bait Al-Zakat Al-Masry. Additionally, approximately 25.4% of the participants felt that incorporating music and songs in the 2023 ad, deemed haram by many Muslims, was unsuitable for an ad representing an institution associated with Al-Azhar.

## 5. Discussion

The charity campaign of 2017 exhibited all the traits of a poverty porn campaign, both visually and linguistically. It portrayed the poor as helpless and infringed on their privacy. The campaign used vulnerable moments of the poor and disturbing images to evoke guilt in viewers. It also created a divide between the poor and the financially capable viewers, who were represented as the only solution to poverty. However, the 2023 campaign avoided poverty porn and created a sense of equality and intimacy between the viewers and those in need by using eye-level images and a monologue that conveyed the idea that anyone could face life's challenges and need help. Despite viewers being upset with the 2017 campaign, the attitudinal survey showed that most believed it to be more effective in encouraging donations than the 2023 campaign because the latter did not showcase the real struggles of those in need and used inappropriate music. The question now is how to strike a balance between presenting the real hardships of those in need while avoiding poverty porn in charity campaigns.

A possible answer can be found in the awareness campaign by the Egyptian Chapter of the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) launched in Ramadan 2015. The campaign called *ḥikāyāt warā' al'arqām (Lives Beyond Figures)* was an online book that shared the real-life stories of 24 Egyptians who survived difficult living conditions such as poverty, domestic violence, child labor, child marriage, illiteracy, and female genital mutilation. The stories received an overwhelming response from the public, with over nine million empathetic reactions. Many people even offered to donate and volunteer for UNICEF, despite the campaign not originally designed for that purpose (Younis, 2015).

A study conducted by Al-Sabbagh (2022) analyzed the *Lives Beyond Figures* campaign through linguistic and visual methods, using the same models as this study. The analysis aimed to identify how the campaign elicited empathetic reactions without receiving the typical criticism similar campaigns often do. The study found that the key to achieving this balance was to respect the privacy of those in need. The book refrained from providing names or showing identifying facial features and avoided depicting individuals in humiliating situations. Furthermore, the book used eye-level images and

stories written in first-person singular pronouns in Egyptian Arabic to establish a direct connection with readers. Most significantly, the campaign portrayed the poor and needy as heroes of their stories, overcoming their challenging living conditions through perseverance and hard work. This crucial element was missing in Bait Al-Zakat Al-Masry's ads. According to Jin et al. (2021), showcasing those in need as individuals trying to help themselves before seeking external aid is typically a better strategy for charity campaigns because it encourages empathy and inspires people to help.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study aimed to examine the use of poverty porn in charity advertising and offer suggestions on eliciting sympathy without resorting to such an approach. Two ads from Bait Al-Zakat Al-Masry were analyzed using a multimodal approach. The first ad, which included elements of poverty porn, was heavily criticized on social media and in Egyptian newspapers when it aired during Ramadan 2017. The majority of respondents in the attitudinal survey also found it distressing. The second ad, broadcast during Ramadan 2023, avoided poverty porn but received criticism for being vague and uninformative. Providing enough detail about the poor's challenges while still portraying them as capable individuals is essential to create effective charity ads. Additionally, respecting their privacy and avoiding degrading or humiliating scenes is crucial. This study guides ethical charity advertising in Egypt and calls for further research in this field.

## المستخلص

استغلال الفقر في الإعلانات الخيرية: تحليل مقارنة متعدد الوسائط لإعلانات بيت الزكاة المصري في

عامي 2017 و 2023

رانيا الصباغ

في رمضان 2017، تلقى إعلان بيت الزكاة المصري ردود فعل عنيفة بسبب نهج استغلال الفقر الذي اتبعه، حيث استخدم صوراً مقلقة تنتهك خصوصية الفقراء وتصورهم في أوضاع ضعيفة وتصورهم على أنهم أفراد عاجزون يعتمد بقاءهم على الحياة بالكامل على التبرعات. نتيجة لذلك، غيرت الجمعية الخيرية استراتيجيتها الإعلانية لحملة رمضان 2023، حيث تضمنت صوراً إيجابية وأغاني وممثلين وأماكن عامة. في حين نجح الإعلان الجديد في تجنب استغلال الفقر، انتقد البعض عدم تصويره للتحديات التي يواجهها الفقراء والجهود المضنية التي يبذلها بيت الزكاة المصري. تدرس هذه الدراسة الاختلافات اللغوية والبصرية بين إعلاني 2017 و 2023، وتحلل مواقف الجمهور تجاههما، وتناقش كيف يمكن للمعلنين الخيريين تصوير محنة المحتاجين دون اللجوء إلى استغلال الفقر. تهدف الدراسة إلى توجيه المعلنين الخيريين في إنشاء إعلانات أخلاقية مع جمع الأموال بشكل فعال وتشجع على إجراء مزيد من الأبحاث حول أخلاقيات الإعلانات الخيرية في مصر.

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## Appendix: The scripts of the 2017 and 2023 ads of Bait Al-Zakat Al-Masry

**The 2017 script:** a dialogue between Dalaal Abdulaziz, a celebrity actress, Afaaf, a poor mother of six, and one of the latter's daughters

Arabic	Translation
دلال: إزيك يا عفاف؟	Dalaal: How are you, Afaaf?
عفاف: أهلا وسهلا	Afaaf: Oh, good! Welcome!
دلال: أنت البلد بتاعتك دي اسمها إيه؟	Dalaal: What's the name of the village where you live?
عفاف: كفر ناصر	Afaaf: Kafr Nasir
دلال: أنت عندك ما شاء الله كله بنات؟	Dalaal: Wow, you only have daughters, no sons?
عفاف: اه	Afaaf: Yes!
دلال: عايشن إزاي؟ دخلكو منين؟	Dalaal: How're you doing? What do you live on?
عفاف: على باب الله، ولا دخل ولا قبض ولا أيتوها حاجة	Afaaf: It depends. We have no income, no salary or anything.
بنت عفاف: المية مش لاقيين برضو نشرب	Afaaf's daughter: We don't even have drinking water.
دلال: أمال بتشربوا إيه؟	Dalaal: What do you drink then?
بنت عفاف: بنروح نملى من البحر وخلص. بنمشي كتير اوي على مانجيب المية	Afaaf's daughter: We fill canisters from the sea (river) and that's it. We walk long distances to get the water.
بنت عفاف: طعمها متلح كده، مش حلو. وبنطبخ برضو بالمية دي	Afaaf's daughter: It tastes funny, not good. We cook with it too.
دلال: وريني المية	Dalaal: Show me the water.
دلال: هي الإزارة دي اللي بتمليها؟	Dalaal: Is that the canister you're using?
عفاف: ايوة هي دي. ودي اللي هاأخذها معايا. وهي دي اللي بنملاها ونشرب منها ونغسل منها	Afaaf: Yes, it is. I'll take it, fill it up and use it for drinking and washing.
دلال: اه	Dalaal: Oh!
عفاف: بس هي دي	Afaaf: That's it.
دلال: بالالا اللي يكون في عونك يا حبيبتي معلش	Dalaal: Good! May God be with you, my dear! It's okay.
دلال: إن شاء الله كل شيء هيتحل	Dalaal: I'm confident that everything will work out.
عفاف: يارب يخليكي	Afaaf: Thank you very much.

دلال: علشان احنا في أيام مفترجة	Dalaal: Because it's Ramadan and this is a holy month.
عفاف: اه كل سنة وأنتم طيبين	Afaaf: Yes, I wish you a good return.
عفاف: وأنت طيبة يا حبيبتي	Dalaal: All the best to you, my dear.
دلال (للمشاهدين): توصيلة المية لبيت زي بيت عفاف واللي زيها حنتكف حوالي ألفين جنيه	Dalaal (to the audience): A drinking water supply for Afaaf's house and people like her will cost about two thousand Egyptian pounds.
الراوي: ما تأجلش زكاتك في بيت الزكاة لأن زكاتك هي بركة حياتك	Narrator: Don't forget to pay your alms so that God will bless your life.

### The 2023 script: a song by a non-celebrity singer

Arabic	Translation
يارب	Oh, Lord!
يارب ما تبتليني لا في مالي ولا جسدي ولا أهلي ولا ديني	Lord! Please protect my money, my body, my family, and my religion!
وفي ضعفي قويني	When weak, please give me strength!
لا حياتي تشغلني ولا دنيا تلهيني	Don't make me so busy with wordily gains.
يارب اغنيني بحلالك عن حرامك	Lord, grant me enough of what you make lawful so that I may dispense with what you make unlawful.
يارب غفرانك	Lord, forgive me!
الراوي: يارب اكرمنا واسترنا واغفر ذنوبنا بفضلك وبكرمك. ما تأجلش زكاتك وصدقاتك وأدفعها في بيت الزكاة والصدقات لأن زكاتك سر حياتك	The narrator: Lord, bless us, forgive us. Don't forget to pay your alms so that God will bless your life