

Black vs. White: Referring to Black Friday in Jordan

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Abstract—This study investigates how retailers in Jordan refer to Black Friday when they advertise their discounted products during the end-of-year sales. Black Friday is a culturally loaded term as it is the day following Thanksgiving, and it is semantically loaded with negative connotations historically rooted in superstition. The data were collected from various retailer stores in Jordan which started advertising discounted products around the last week of November of 2022. The sample was randomly collected and consisted of 115 advertisements. Further, semi-structured interviews provided complementary qualitative data. The sample was linguistically scrutinised seeking various terms used to refer to Black Friday. The main focus was on whether or not retailers in Jordan kept the phrase ‘Black Friday’ or changed it to suit the target Muslim Arab locale. The terms were classified into various categories and analysed linguistically trying to find the different factors playing roles in choosing alternative names for Black Friday. The results show that 58% of the sample retailer stores used alternative names for ‘Black Friday’ in order to appeal to the local target potential buyers whose culture neither celebrate Thanksgiving nor consider Fridays to be black or unlucky. In other words, most retailers in Jordan replaced ‘Black Friday’, which is historically loaded with negative connotations, with more positive terms, such as ‘White Friday’, ‘Blessed Friday’ and ‘Smart Friday’. The results also show that English was the dominant language in the sample advertisements as 45% appeared in English only, 25% in Arabic only and 45% in both.

Index Terms—Black Friday, White Friday, ideology, linguistic referring, Jordan

I. INTRODUCTION

Black Friday is the day following the celebration of Thanksgiving in the USA which takes place on the third Thursday of November. For sellers and buyers, it marks the beginning of the holiday discounted shopping season. Shoppers all over the world wait impatiently for this occasion that often starts on the first Friday after Thanksgiving and lasts for days or weeks. Retailers do their best to attract potential buyers by advertising their discounted goods in stores, websites and various social media platforms. Falling between Thanksgiving and Christmas, Black Friday has become a social and shopping occasion, perhaps, not less important than the two sacred holidays. Interestingly, “sales tactics, combined with the consumers’ desires to save money and perhaps start (or even finish) their Christmas shopping, has resulted in Black Friday becoming a celebrated consumption ritual almost as important as Thanksgiving Day” (Thomas & Peters, 2011, p. 523). Indeed, the excitement, anticipation and chaos that accompany Black Friday each year prove that it has become more than a simple shopping day. People line up in long queues waiting and praying to be able to beat all the others and get the desired discounted products. When they succeed in their mission, they go back to their homes happy, satisfied and thankful because they are convinced that they have saved money not spent it!

A. Black Friday History

The origin of the term is more speculated than known. In 1965, Philadelphia traffic police used the term to refer to the chaos created in the city centre by shoppers and tourists on Friday following Thanksgiving. The huge number of bargain hunters meant longer shifts for the traffic police staff; therefore, they negatively referred to the day as Black Friday (Apfelbaum, 1966). Black Friday can also be linked to the accounting practice that appeared in the 1980s when accountants started scoring profits with ‘black ink’ and losses with ‘red ink’ (Morrison, 2008). From the viewpoint of retailers, “Black Friday refers to the day of the year when retailers hope to go from being in the “red” (i.e. losing money) to being in the “black” (i.e. making money)” (Thomas & Peters, 2011, p. 522). In fact, the history of Black Friday can be further traced back to 1869 when Jay Gould and Jim Fisk attempted to send prices high by buying as much gold as they could, but on Friday 24, September, the president at the time (Ulysses S. Grant) intervened and blocked their attempt. Consequently, the stock market collapsed and many people went bankrupt, hence the name Black Friday (Vaughan, 2022).

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Regardless of its origin, Black Friday is “a global retail phenomenon thanks largely to the internet and the media. The sales extravaganza was originally conceived as a one-day bargain bonanza in shops ... Today it is no longer a 24-hour national sprint, but a multi-day international marathon” (Denison, 2017, p. 2). It started in the US and then spread to Canada in 2009, the UK in 2010, Australia in 2011, and Russia in 2013. It kept spreading until it became a global discounted shopping phenomenon both in physical and virtual retailer stores all over the world (Denison, 2017).

Historically, the term ‘Black Friday’ comes with some negative connotations. For example, if we embrace the 1869 origin, it comes with a negative collapse of the stock market and subsequent bankruptcy of many people. If, however, we embrace the 1965 Philadelphia Police origin, it comes with negative chaos resulting from many people being in one place at the same time. Furthermore, each word in the two-word name ‘Black Friday’ has a history of its own in ancient superstition. The black colour is often associated with evil and bad omens. For example, the “Romans marked their lucky days with a piece of chalk, their unlucky days with charcoal. From this custom of marking unlucky days with charcoal a rose the phrase ‘Black-letter day’” (Brokaw, 1932, p. 4). Similarly, “the fear of Friday is quite as old as the fear of the number thirteen” (Brokaw, 1932, p. 4). Perhaps, the origin of the unlucky Friday has to do with two evil incidents thought to have occurred on a Friday: the crucifixion of Christ and Adam and Eve eating from the forbidden fruit (Brokaw, 1932).

Because of this negative history of Black Friday, there has been attempts to change the name into a more positive or neutral one. The merchants of Philadelphia, for instance, suggested ‘Big Friday’ and ‘Big Saturday’ (see Vaughan, 2022), but these names did not gain the anticipated popularity and were forgotten. Instead, more negative alternative names gained popularity, such as ‘Black and Blue Friday’ in the UK and ‘Black Fraud Day’ in Brazil. The former refers to the stampede and violence that often occurs in the UK by shoppers who force their ways into stores to get the discounted goods, some of whom return with blue bruises. The latter refer to the day when shoppers in Brazil were defrauded as they were offered unreal and phony sales (Denison, 2017).

B. *Black Friday in the Arab World*

Like the rest of the world, the Arab World has adopted the idea of Black Friday since 2014, but changes have been made to suit the Arab Muslim locale. In the majority of Arab countries, Black Friday, the shopping discounted frenzy, takes place one or two weeks earlier than the date in the USA (Jordan News Agency, 2019). This shift is more ideological than commercial, but it is built upon religious misinformation. Islam, in general, forbids Muslims of imitating the non-Muslims in their unique acts of worship, festivals and customs. Thus, more often than not, we see Muslims celebrating their birthdays a day or two before or after their birthdates to avoid imitating non-Muslim cultures. Al-Aql (1996) explains the rationale behind such a prohibition by arguing that within the game of imitation, the imitator often develops a sense of admiration towards the imitated; this leads to eager attraction and “commonality of speech and deeds” (p. 8) which negatively impacts the imitator’s faith, culture and identity. Although Thanksgiving is a secular festival, a large number of Christians and non-Christians wrongly think it is a religious one. Perhaps, this misconception has led some retailers in Muslim countries to change the date in which the discounted shopping season starts. In fact, in 1939 Franklin Delano Roosevelt tried to move the date of Thanksgiving and Black Friday one week back in the calendar, but he did so for commercial reasons rather than religious ones. He wanted to aid retailers by extending the Christmas shopping season, but the idea did not work that in 1941 he “signed into law a congressional resolution fixing Thanksgiving Day on the fourth Thursday of November” (Chessman, 1990, para. 1).

In the West, Black Friday is not an official holiday although many do not work during it to give themselves time to rest and hunt for shopping bargains (Thomas & Peters, 2011). Meanwhile, in the majority of Muslim Arab countries, Friday marks the beginning of the weekend during which people rest and go to mosques to perform the Friday prayer. This prayer should be performed in congregation (not individually) at mosques (not at home) seeking forgiveness and spiritual rewards. Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) urged Muslims to take a bath, wear the best clothes and attend the Friday prayer early in order to reap a spiritual reward worth an entire year of praying and fasting (see Aslan, 2019). The Arabic word for Friday is *jumu'ah* (/dʒomoʕa/) which comes from the trilateral Arabic root *jama'a* (/dʒamaʕa/) which means ‘to gather’. So, *jumu'ah* literally means a ‘gathering’.

In other words, while Friday in the West carries unlucky negative connotations, it carries positive connotations in the Muslim Arab World, as it is the day where people perform their weekly ritual congregational prayer and are promised huge spiritual rewards, i.e., complete forgiveness of sins committed during the week. Hence, referring to Friday as unlucky (Black) does not fit the Muslim Arab locale. Perhaps, this is why most Arabs refer to ‘Black Friday’ as ‘White Friday’. In fact, other alternative names do exist and can be seen displayed on the front windows of stores all around the Arab World.

C. *The Aim of the Study*

The present study aims to investigate how Black Friday is referred to by retailers in Jordan when they advertise their discounted products to potential Muslim Arab shoppers. Specifically, it tries to answer the following research questions: 1) “How do retailer stores in Jordan refer to Black Friday when they advertise their discounted products during the end-of-year sales?,” 2) “What are the most frequent terms used to refer to Black Friday in Jordan?” and 3) “What is the dominant language in advertising Black Friday sales in Jordan?.”

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Sample and Data Collection

The sample consisted of 115 Black Friday advertisements used by retailer stores in Jordan to advertise their end-of-year sales. The data were randomly collected from various retailer stores in Jordan which started advertising discounted products around the last week of November of 2022. Data collection was conducted by the authors themselves and lasted approximately two weeks. They window-shopped in the major malls and busy commercial streets in Amman, the capital city of Jordan, and Irbid, the second largest city in Jordan. Using the cameras on their mobile phones, they took photos of retailers' front windows displaying end-of-year sales (Black Friday) advertisements. Offline retail advertising is a marketing strategy used by retailer stores to expand their reach and "drive more foot traffic and convert visitors into customers ... Through advertising, a retailer attempts to influence their audience to take a specific action" (Darstaru, 2021, paras. 6-7). To complement our main data collection method, short semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 retail employees who accepted to be part of the qualitative sample. The first author interviewed 10 female employees and the second author interviewed 5 male employees. Each interview lasted between 10 to 15 minutes. It was not easy to convince employees to participate in the study although we assured them that their names would not be disclosed and that the data would be only used for academic research purposes. As the first author was well-acquainted with one employee at one of the malls, she employed the social network procedure set by Milroy and Milroy (1978) to gather participants, i.e., she approached the employees as a friend or as a 'friend of a friend'.

B. Data Analysis

The collected photos of Black Friday sales advertisements were downloaded on a laptop to make them easier to view and analyse. The data for each phrase used by retailers to refer to Black Friday sales were entered into an excel spreadsheet. This data included the name of the store (in English and Arabic, if available) and the phrases (in English and Arabic, if available) used to refer to Black Friday sales. Some retailers had multiple stores in different locations; for those, only one token was included in the final analysis unless the advertisements were different. The phrases used to refer to Black Friday were analysed and classified according to whether or not retailers in Jordan kept the phrase 'Black Friday' or changed it to suit the target Muslim Arab locale. Terminological frequencies were generated and percentages were calculated in order to have a statistical picture of the issue under investigation. Moreover, the qualitative data generated from the semi-structured interviews were used to uncover the different factors, if any, playing roles in choosing alternative names for Black Friday in Jordan. In other words, phrases referring to Black Friday were semantically analysed for nuances in meaning and cultural connotations in relation to source and target cultures.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section unveils the main findings of the present study. Choices of words or phrases referring to Black Friday in Jordan were calculated in terms of frequency and percentages with the aim of uncovering linguistic and cultural nuances amongst the source and target cultures. Additionally, the semi-structured interviews provided needed qualitative data to supplement the numerical analysis. The key findings of the present study are as follows:

A. Findings Related to the First Research Question

Data collected from Black Friday advertisements of 115 retailer stores in Jordan revealed that more stores in Jordan used alternative phrases to refer to Black Friday (62 tokens; 54%) than those that did use the foreign term (48 tokens; 42%). Few retailer stores were neutral and used both in the same advertisements (5 tokens; 4%). Table 1 displays the statistical results in a more efficient mode.

TABLE 1
REFERRING TO BLACK FRIDAY WITH SOURCE, ALTERNATIVE OR NEUTRAL PHRASES

Type of Referring Expression	Token	Percentage
Source Phrase	48	42%
Alternative Phrase	62	54%
Neutral Phrase	5	4%
Total	115	100%

The results demonstrate that even importing one cultural term from a source language to a target language is not an easy task as it involves more than a mere translation of the term. This is amplified when the two cultures do not have a lot in common (see Darwish & Sayaheen, 2018). In the case of importing the concept of Black Friday, choosing a term is not a mere linguistic choice, but rather a social, cultural, and religious decision. Therefore, one can claim that such terms are better 'localised' than 'translated'. Localisation in the general sense refers to the process of adapting a foreign product or item to a rather different target locale (Sandrini, 2005; Sayaheen & Darwish, in press). However, the results in Table 1 show that although more retailer stores chose to localise the term 'Black Friday' into more appropriate terms that fit the Muslim Arab culture, 42% of the retailer stores chose to keep the source term as it is and either: 1) borrow and transliterate it using the Arabic script (i.e., Arabisation *البيلاك فرايدي*) or 2) literally translate each word in the phrase 'Black Friday' (*jumu'ah sawdaa*). The latter process is often referred to in the field of translation studies as 'loan

translation' or 'calque' which is "a special kind of borrowing whereby a language borrows an expression form of another, but then translates literally each of its elements" (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1958, 1995, p. 32).

Twain (1888) emphasised that "the difference between the *almost right* word and the *right* word is really a large matter—'tis the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning" (pp. 87-88). Indeed, referring to Black Friday in the Arab World represents choosing between the almost right word and the right one as there appear to be two competing forces at play. The first force pushes towards keeping the foreign concept 'Black Friday' by either writing it in English, transliterating it using Arabic script, or translating each word in the phrase, i.e., calquing the term. The second force, on the other hand, pushes towards taking the concept of the end-of-year sales and giving it alternative localised terminology that better suits the target market, i.e., localising the concept. As mentioned previously both forces are at play in Jordan, but statistics in Table 1 show that the latter force is marginally dominating the linguistic marketing scene.

B. Findings Related to the Second Research Question

The source term 'Black Friday' occurs in 48 (42%) advertisements of a total of 115. Alternative terminology appears in 62 advertisements (54%). Black Friday was substituted with White Friday 43 times in the sample advertisements. In other words, White Friday is the dominant alternative term (70% of a total of 62 alternative terms). Further to the previous argument, retailer stores in Jordan are caught up in the middle of marketing, linguistic and cultural dilemmas. Those who chose to keep the source term and use 'Black Friday' in their advertisements appear to believe in globalisation and that the world has become a global village. No one can deny the impact of the internet and the international culture dominating different social media platforms. On the other hand, those who chose to localise the term and use alternative phrases to refer to Black Friday in their advertisements appear to believe that each culture has its own subtleties, i.e., language and culture cannot be dealt with in a one-size-fits-all approach. Cultural-specific terms always pose problems to translators and localisers as they involve more than the linguistic sign. In their discussion of the difficulties involved in translating book titles, Darwish and Sayaheen (2019) argue that "religious, economic (marketing), political, social and cultural reasons are always unavoidable when it comes to rendering new publications ... publishers and translators do not need to gamble with a risky target title that violates any religious, political and social norms in the receiving culture" (pp. 244-245). The concept 'Black Friday' is a foreign concept in Jordan, a relatively conservative Muslim Arab country, and carries various negative linguistic, historical and cultural connotations. In this case, it would be interesting to see what type of alternative names were used by those retailer stores who opted for changing the term 'Black Friday' with other localised terms.

A further meticulous analysis of the data revealed that the alternative names used to refer to Black Friday fall under three major categories: Store Name Associations, Store Sale Tags and Culture Positive References. In the first category, some retailer stores in Jordan used alternative phrases to refer to Black Friday derived from the store names. To illustrate, a shoe store called *Dahab* 'Gold' used the phrase *Dahab Friday*, a carpet company called *Ward* 'flower' used the phrase *Ward Friday* and the telecommunication company *Orange Jordan* used the phrase *Orange Friday*. Apparently, most of these linguistic alternations were done to avoid using the source phrase which is loaded with negative linguistic and cultural connotations. In the second category, some retailer stores decided to refer to the colour of the sale price tags. For instance, a store that sells household products called *Abdeen* 'a proper name in Arabic which originally means worshippers' used *Blue Friday* as they marked each discounted item with a blue sale tag; other stores followed suit and used *Purple Friday*, *Green Friday* and *Pink Friday*. In the third category, *White Friday*, *White Week* and *White Month* were the most frequent choices of retailer stores in Jordan because swapping *Black* with *White* in the phrase shows a mature understanding of the target customers who celebrate Friday by performing a weekly congregational prayer hoping for spiritual rewards. Other positive alternative phrases in this category included *Blessed Friday* and *Unbelievable Friday*.

C. Findings Related to the Third Research Question

The issue under investigation can be viewed as a marketing negotiation between the East and the West. This negotiation involves religious, cultural and linguistic factors. It illustrates how the West is prevailing globally and how its customs, cultures and languages are spreading at a fast tempo. No one can deny the dominance of the English language in the global scene in almost all aspects of life, especially in politics, trade, diplomacy, science, technology and academic research (Xue & Zuo, 2013). As "language is the carrier of culture ... [and] users can gain a sense of cultural identity and social belongings through language" (Xue & Zuo, 2013, p. 2262), it would be interesting to find out the dominant language used in our sample Black Friday advertisements.

TABLE 2
REFERRING TO BLACK FRIDAY IN ARABIC, ENGLISH OR BOTH

Language	Token	Percentage
Arabic	29	25%
English	52	45%
Both Arabic and English	34	30%
Total	115	100%

Table 2 shows that 45% of the sample advertisements appeared ‘only in English’ although the sample was collected from retailer stores in Jordan, a Muslim Arab country. On the other hand, 25% of the advertisements appeared ‘only in Arabic’, and 30% were written in ‘both English and Arabic’. These results emphasise the status of English in Jordan as a dominant language not only in science, technology and academic research but also in retail marketing. History presents constant evidence that dominant civilisations often provide power to their languages to become ‘lingua francas’, i.e., the cross-cultural means of communication. Before the Iron Age, Akkadian was the lingua franca in the East, then “Greek and Latin served a similar role” (Woll, 2022, para. 3). Since the seventeenth century, English has been considered the de facto global language dominating communication the world over as a consequence of the dominance of the British Empire and the role of the United States of America as a global power. Bacon (2017) refers to the constant spread of English as the “snowballing global dominance of English” (p. 425). Lee Brown et al. (2019) use the notions of ‘hegemony of language’ (Gramsci, 1971) and ‘linguistic capital’ (Bourdieu, 1986) to interpret why English language competence is often treated as a global valuable commodity. At present, “English language is the leading foreign language enjoying a prestigious position in many countries. Jordan is no exception where English is neither a national nor an official language, but it is the most widely taught foreign language in the country” (Al-Saidat, 2009, p. 155). Indeed, it is perhaps paradoxical that most retailer stores in Jordan feel the need to localise ‘Black Friday’, but they do so principally using English not Arabic!

D. Findings Related to the Qualitative Interviews

The semi-structured interviews offered little information about the factors playing roles in whether to use the phrase ‘Black Friday’ or other alternatives, such as ‘White Friday’ or ‘Blessed Friday’. Most of the participants agreed that, as mere employees, they did not have access to decision making and that they often receive the advertisements printed and ready to display. However, two female employees who occasionally participate in decision making provided some valuable information. One of them claimed that her bosses believed that White Friday was more appropriate for Jordan as using Black Friday might offend some religious customers. The other claimed that using alternative names for Black Friday in their stores is driven by a fear of being criticised by social media influencers and by the nature of their products, i.e., they target female customers with *Hijab* ‘a head covering worn on public’. Those two, however, failed to justify why their advertisements were written only in English. When reminded of the apparent contradiction of opting for White Friday, but, at the same time, opting for English instead of Arabic, they both laughed and made some nonverbal gestures denoting ‘bedlam’ and ‘confusion’. The other thirteen employees offered some speculative explanations for either keeping the foreign term or altering it. Their speculations revolved around three main themes: culturally-loaded foreign terms should be localised, religiously-loaded foreign terms should be avoided and non-Muslim cultures should not be imitated. Nevertheless, they all admitted that today the world has become a global village, and it is very hard to isolate any markets from the Western global cultures, languages and markets.

IV. CONCLUSION

Although the focus of this study is on how one marketing phrase is rendered into Arabic by retailer stores in Jordan, it reflects various cultural competing forces. When retailer stores in Jordan decide to retain the culture-specific term (i.e., Black Friday) when advertising the end-of-year sales, this decision reflects a global view that sees the world as a small global village sharing one global culture. On the other hand, those who decide to alter the foreign term and substitute it with more culturally-appropriate terms reflect a notion of resistance against the global and in favour of the local. In Jordan, the data show that both views are realised with varying frequency. The local force (54%) slightly commands the marketing practices during the end-of-season sales. However, the global force (42%) is not far behind. Interestingly, the data show that both forces are hegemonised by one global means of communication, i.e., English. Using English to signify both local and global ideologies might seem paradoxical, but the issue is more complicated than that as it involves linguistic power, reach and prestige. With English as the de facto lingua franca of the world, retailer stores have better chances to reach wider sectors of potential customers by using English over Arabic. In Jordan, English stands for modernity, cultural sophistication and social prestige. Future researchers can uncover more facets of the issue under investigation via investigating the relationship between the type of stores and the linguistic marketing choices. Furthermore, access to marketing decision makers would provide deeper explanations of the powerful cultural and linguistic forces at stake.

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