

GENDER STEREOTYPES IN ADVERTISING

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***Abstract:** The paper examines some gender stereotypes in advertising which reflect the traditional views of the two genders. Addressed are certain common gender stereotypes across the world. The main thrust of the paper is the power of (gender) advertising.*

***Key words:** gender, advertising, stereotypes, identities*

Gender, sex, and sexuality

Before any discussion of gender in advertising, it is essential to outline briefly the disparities between *gender* and *sex*, and *sex* and *sexuality*. Some languages (e.g. Bulgarian) do not have separate words for *gender* and *sex*. Hence, the difficulty in delineating the subtle differences that set them apart.

In simple words, the differences can be highlighted in the following way. *Sex* denotes a person's biological sex, i.e. whether they are born male or female. *Sexuality* indicates a person's sexual preference, i.e. whether they are hetero-, homo-, or bisexual. *Gender* connotes the role or behaviors that a person has acquired in the process of their socialization in accordance with their sex – feminine or masculine. According to Alvesson and Billing (1997) gender is the social and cultural meanings associated with maleness and femaleness imposed and expected by society.

Of the three notions, the most static as a human characteristic is sex – people are born either male or female, with very few exceptions. Sexuality is less static than sex since people's sexuality sometimes changes within a lifetime. Gender is the least static of all three because it is determined by society, and not only. Any changes in society can affect the common understanding of gender and the attributes that are by and large associated with femininity and masculinity. Gender roles and behaviors change over time, and are bound by religion, ethnicity, social status, geographical region, etc. Contemporary views of appropriate manifestations of masculinity and femininity are very different from what they used to be even a couple of decades ago.

Being judgmental about gender specificities across cultures is, among other issues, a stumbling block for cross-cultural understanding and dialogical communication. Similarly, the commonly accepted gender roles, attitudes and behaviors in a single society can be a matter of heated debates, conflicting views, and attempts at reforming people's mentality.

Traditional views of the two genders

Despite the fluid nature of gender attributes, it can be claimed with some certainty that society has a fairly stable general idea about what men and women should be like, what is most

appropriate for them to do, say, feel or like. Society tends to create and sustain frameworks within which the majority of men and women fit regardless of their specific personal traits. Or else, society creates and sustains certain gender stereotypes, which differ across cultures considerably, but are more or less common for the majority of people in a particular part of the world. Chandler (2008) claims that gender roles are “socially constructed. Most of the behavior associated with gender is learned rather than innate”.

With a large degree of generalization, traditionally men can be said to be, or are expected to be masculine, strong, aggressive, dominant, rational, and active. Women are believed to be feminine, weak, submissive, emotional, and passive. Men are generally associated with technology, drinking and promiscuity, while women are associated with household chores and shopping, social drinking with friends, and stable sexual commitments.

We do not have to look far to realize that, maybe, we do not fit at all in the above picture. If we just look at ourselves and our partners, we will see how exaggerated or utterly false the stereotypical picture of males and females is. Within a single culture masculinity and femininity may acquire different dimensions and manifestations depending on ethnicity, age, social class and sexuality. This is why it is hard to say that there is a single masculinity or femininity. There are rather multiple masculinities and femininities. Not all men possess leadership qualities, a knack for technology, or aggressiveness. And not all women are gentle, emotional, submissive, or loving. Such qualities can be found in most people in varying degrees. Too much reliance on certain stereotypical masculine or feminine features can create tension and result in disappointment and frustration.

Common gender stereotypes across the world

The fast rate of globalization and the flow of cultures, idols, role models, material and spiritual influences have resulted in a considerable unification of gender stereotypes and marginalisation of culture-specific gender characteristics. Social trends such as women’s emancipation, feminism, human rights movements, etc. have changed people’s mindset throughout most of the world. Globalization of politics, economies, cultures, and the media has led to the creation of similar gender stereotypes in most parts of the world.

In less personal terms, gender stereotypes provide some stability in the perception of masculinity and femininity. Media advertising contributes to the awareness that there exist two different prevailing gender types and that people’s relationships to them can be foreseen based on predictable behaviors, likes, and dislikes.

Stereotypes exist to a large extent because they are easier to get to know than getting to know every man and woman. They facilitate people’s choices of behavior when communicating with males and females because there are sets of expected learnable behavioral patterns that are normally acceptable to men and women.

The power of (gender) advertising

Advertising has the power to manipulate people and turn them into obsessed consumers while they continue to believe that they can never be affected by the advertising messages and can preserve their right to freedom of choice. Even the most unexciting advertising idea can affect us by the hidden power of the image it promotes. We model ourselves by certain archetypes and it is no exaggeration to say that we buy advertising rather than products. It is not about experiencing the same positive effect suggested in the advertisement but about associating ourselves with images of success and expensive life style, and acquiring a new self-definition through that.

What advertising exploits best is femininity and masculinity, i.e. the most obvious manifestations of gender. Being one of the most popular demographic segmentation variables, gender is widely exploited in advertising. It is convenient to use as a segmentation strategy because gender segments meet several criteria for successful implementation. They are:

- Easy to identify;
- Accessible;
- Measurable;
- Large and profitable. (Darley and Smith, 1995)

On the one hand, advertising plays a significant role in the development and perpetuation of gender-role stereotypes. On the other, it is a reflection of the realities at a particular point in time. Based on an analysis of advertisements by Goffman (1976), Jones (1991) highlights some instances of subtle stereotyping such as:

- Family - mothers depicted as the 'home-makers', closer to the children and especially relating to their daughters, while fathers are depicted breadwinners and physically distant from their families.
- Functional ranking – men are primarily depicted in executive roles with higher social status.
- Relative size – men are usually depicted as taller, larger, and stronger.
- The feminine touch and the masculine stamina – women are depicted as caressing things, touching the surface of objects with their fingers, and appreciating the feeling of gentleness. Conversely, men are depicted as enjoying tough sports and activities, and engaging in dangerous experiences.
- Ritualization of subordination – excessive portrayal of women lying on floors and beds, or depicted as objects of men's make-believe attacks.

The question that remains to be answered is: "What is the impact of such advertising stereotypes on the effect of the success of advertising campaigns employing them?" It can be claimed with some certainty that in the 21st century people's tastes and mindset have changed considerably, if not radically. It is not surprising that a large portion of the research examining gender issues in advertising focuses on the portrayal of women rather than men. The reason is that traditionally women have been depicted as passive, gentle, easy to manipulate, often unintelligent, and as having only a few major concerns in their lives – their looks, the cleanliness of their homes, and the well-being of their children and husbands. Contemporary women have become more sensitive to the unequal, subordinate and unfavorable representation they receive in advertising. And while they have not abandoned their traditional roles, they have also successfully been performing new ones. For the majority of them emancipation is no longer an issue. Depicting men as constructive, powerful, dominant, and resourceful should be counterbalanced with an equal depiction of women since both genders are equally involved in almost all social roles. The biologically determined role for women to be mothers adds an extra burden on them and they manage to cope with many more responsibilities than most men.

Gender is not easy to employ effectively when advertisers want to communicate on a par with male and female audiences. The shifting gender roles create difficulties for advertisers who need to reexamine constantly not only the societal parameters of gender but also the individual's understanding of what it implies to be male or female in the contemporary world. The problem is aggravated by the fact that gender identity can vary within sex and culture, and across time and space. Advertising gender stereotypes has been a much researched and discussed area since the 1970s when women's roles and positions in society started changing significantly with the burgeoning number of women getting college degrees and employment. It is also linked to the changed familial roles and the legal and public pressures as

an outcome of feminist movements. Gender role stereotyping still exists but, as research suggests (Allan and Coltrane, 1996; Bartsch, Burnett, Diller, and Rankin-Williams, 2000; Furnham and Thomson, 1999) it is decreasing over time. Having said that, it cannot be denied that gender continues to be an issue in advertising despite the sophisticated and informed interpretations of the differences between men and women and the questionable importance of these differences when marketing the majority of goods and services. There is also the risk of perpetuating gender inequality if there is too much preoccupation with studies in gender role stereotypes.

The importance of gender for developing a company's marketing strategy is not universally accepted. Some businesses understand that it is a key to marketing success. Others rank it below other segmentation variables such as age, education, and income (Pinkerton, 1995; Rickard, 1995; Marketing, 1998). Despite the split opinions about the role of gender in advertising, the efforts of advertisers to create new gender images, which relate to the everyday experiences of contemporary women, are a fact. The change in female attitudes and perceptions is reflected in the advertising strategies of many companies, traditionally considered to manufacture goods and offer services mainly for male customers. Pinkerton (1995) observes that IBM has started to advertise in women's magazines. A lot of high-tech and car manufacturers have followed suit.

There are products and services which are generally believed to have a gender-neutral appeal. Among them are most medicines, life insurance, holidays, etc. Some life insurance companies used to have gender-specific approach to their consumers which turned out to be rather ineffective (Burton, 1995). Women may have a positive attitude to good role-models in advertisements but they are often irritated by "women only" tactics. (Pinkerton, 1995)

Flexibility of identities and the decline of tradition

Identity in post-modern society is seen as more fluid and transformable than ever before. This is a consequence of the increasing number of various ways in which popular ideas about the self in society have changed and are perpetuated by the media and high-tech, low-cost communications. Twenty or thirty years ago, researchers of popular media often came to the conclusion that conventional culture was resistant to social change and tried to confine people to traditional roles and categories. Today, the media should be given credit for being, *within limits*, a force for change, betterment, and empowerment. The traditional view of women as housewives, unqualified and low-paid workers has been replaced by the high-powered, determined and successful women icons. Meanwhile, man has ceased to be the absolute epitome of toughness, willful self-reliance, and masculine stamina. Traditional gender categories have not been entirely destroyed. However, the emergence of new ideas and images has made possible the shifting of gender roles and the surfacing of diverse identities.

Advertising has little respect for tradition. It fosters the desire to create new modes of life, new role models, and even new gender images. It generates favourable conditions for the emergence of a greater variety of identities. In post-modern societies everyone wants to 'live their own life', which is, 'an experimental life' (Beck, 2002: 26). Advertising contains myriad suggestions of ways of living. The social world is no longer confident in its traditions and "inherited recipes for living and role stereotypes fail to function" (ibid). This gives people the freedom to model their own new patterns of being, enrich and modify their identities. The impact of advertising on the construction of new identities is undeniable. Women in advertisements have become increasingly assertive and successful, and triumphant in all roles – traditional and new. Men are said to be uneasy and confused about what their role is today.

Failure to generate a masculine image and effect is turned into a source of humour in advertising. Since masculinity is a socially constructed performance and women these days expect more of men than just the essentialist idea of a traditional real man as biology and destiny, images of caring, gentle, generous and good-humoured men have inhabited a lot of advertisements in recent years.

Conclusion

The media will continue to bombard people with exciting or insipid advertisements featuring sophisticated or blatantly naïve gender stereotypes. The quest for gender equity in advertising, as anywhere else, requires a new awakening that incites critical thinking skills and the ability to make personal choice in line with our self-esteem. Advertisers will continue to make, what many would consider adverse, use of gender as a way of marketing goods and services. The pursuit of gender equality is inseparable from the battle against consumerism which can be won through, among other things, a dedication to creating authentic people, relationships, and attitudes in advertising. This might seem to be an ambitious task but it is achievable if only we focus on what and who we are rather than on what other people want us to be.

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