Is it a WoMan's World? Gender Stereotypes and Social Role Inequalities in Advertisements

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Abstract: Gender representation is a very complex system, which, according to a wide body of research, is never static, but rather ever-changing, due to the mediated visual artefacts channelled through advertisements. Research has shown that marketers most often prefer to show females as desirable creatures in decorative roles, while men are typically featured as authoritarian and independent (Reichert & Carpenter, 2004). A growing interest in 'non-stereotypical gender role representation' placed gender under a different light (Chu et al., 2016). The intention of the present paper is to contribute to the enrichment of the identified gap by identifying the expected gender inequalities, the illusional visual portrayals, and the possible negative effects that can come into existence in society. Therefore, the present research aims to explore the changing frequency of male and female presence and the gender role representation with a special focus on the various trait descriptors, physical characteristics, and clothing styles, all of which either strengthen or break stereotypes. Focusing on the interval between 2015 and 2019, the aim is to contrast two main pillars: the first pillar represents six randomly selected commercial advertisements of different international product brands (Audi car, Ariel detergent, Johnson and Johnson's Baby products, Activia yoghurt, Nike sports accessories and Advil painkiller medicine), while the second pillar is based on the five latest Epica Award-winning Grand Prix Films, juried by two hundred international journalists. The research hypothesis suggests that mass-targeted commercial advertisements are more likely to be stereotype-consistent, while jury-targeted commercials, which compete for a professional creative prize, are rather stereotype-inconsistent. The proper operationalization of the collected data required a descriptive method, which offered enough room for the characterization of actions, stylistic features and body language featured in the commercials. Therefore, the qualitative research is built on Charteris-Black's (2019) visual rhetorical content analysis. Results indicate that while the award-winning commercials are more likely to be stereotype-inconsistent, those commercials that are presented for the mass are rather stereotype-consistent.

Keywords: stereotype; gender role; advertising; visual representation; rhetoric

1. Introduction

Although media products can be consumed in various forms due to the vast number of platforms, there is one main unifying trait for all forms, and that is visuality. "We learn who we are as private individuals and public citizens by seeing ourselves in reflected images, and we learn who we can become by transporting ourselves into images" (Helmers & Hill, 2004, p.1). As suggested by Helmers and Hill (2004), visual representations offered to media consumers embrace not only the thin layer of raising attention by making the products of media colourful, attractive, and easily remembered for the viewer, but the power of a visual opens the door for a multidimensional thinking making the viewer engage, process, and become crucial part of the saga of media.

As we become integrated citizens of our society, all the individuals and the surrounding environment is shaping with us. One of these enormously influential factors is the media, which can be the mirror of a society. Although numerous fields of media content have been explored since the 1970s (Kim & Lowry, 2005), scholars have paid a special attention to the understanding of social roles as well as gender stereotype processing in media consumption. "We live in a society that is not only saturated with media but also with stereotypes that are cultivated through the media that we consume" (Goodall, 2012, p. 160). Our society's media exposure is an inherent pressure on societal norms, self-image and behavior pattern, and such biased consequences can be found in social categorizations, associations and most importantly, in gender stereotypes. Wood (2011) noted that "(…) the media have provided the audience with "models of what it means to be male or female, or in a relationship" as well as images "of what men and women are and should be" (pp. 257-262). Therefore, the purpose of the present paper is to observe gender stereotypes and social role inequalities in commercial advertisements.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Persuasive communication and advertising rhetoric

Historically speaking, rhetoric was born under Greek democracy in the fifth century BC as a systematic practice of persuasive communication strategy and was defined as the art of effective speaking as well as of persuasion through words (Ilie, 2018). Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (350 BC) is considered to hold the biggest influence on the creation of persuasive communication. The Aristotelian view suggests that in case of simple communication we can be straightforward without any persuasive manner; however, when one is faced with a public audience, it is impossible not to imply rhetorical tools to teach them. Aczél mentioned, that audience members are prone to misunderstand rhetoric, thinking that "(...) rhetoric can also be about „the manipulative use of language to coerce people to believe and do what they would otherwise not believe or do" (2019, p. 41). Yet, with the era of the pictorial turn, a new rhetoric, or more specifically, a deep rhetoric has been placed in the spotlight. Hill reported, that "representational images tend to prompt emotional reactions" (2004, p. 26), thus the appeal to emotion is one of the most significant and useful tools for producers of visual artefacts. The human mind represents reality by translating objects into pictures through a process of representation, known as *pictorial convention* (Scott, 1994). It is clear, that communication as a persuasive art can be the catalyst of rhetorical maneuverers, yet questions might arise, when persuasion is approached from a marketing perspective.

"The ads sell a great deal more than products. (…) They tell us who we are and who we should be (…)" (Kilbourne, 1993, p. 161). Generally, advertising can be viewed as an industry, which plays a crucial role in the marketing of consumer goods and aims to manufacture cultural products in the forms of advertisements and commercials (Schudson, 1993). Dahlen and Rosengren (2016) believe that the meaning of advertising conveys a communicative intent, meaning that the brand itself is the starting point of communication in an advertisement. Satisfying everybody's needs and successfully attracting the members of a global audience can be a grand challenge for advertisers.

2.2 Stereotype processing and gender representation

We organize our knowledge by building on previously experienced events, which might seem to be an unruly chaos in our minds, yet it is perfectly trimmed into a vast number of mental representations. Such representation is the creation of stereotypes, which comes into existence first as a linguistic concept and only then it is possible to be applied to imagery (Wigboldus & Douglas, 2007).

Originally, the term stereotype was first articulated by Walter Lippmann (1992) and refers to the "beliefs about a social category, especially those that differentiate gender" (Ashmore & Del Boca, 1981). A stereotype, conceptualized as a specific cognitive structure, embodies information relevant to the categorization of a specific group of people (Blumentritt & Heredia, 2005). From a linguistic point of view, stereotype processing involves several idealized cognitive models, such as metonymy and metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), scripts (Schank & Abelson, 1977), schemas (Rumelhart, 1975), and prototypes (Rosch, 1978). Stereotype processing has deep roots in the mental conceptualization of the world and when we are exposed to recurring advertising images of certain genders, those visuals become typical and at the same time, influential to the perception.

Advertising research often uses the terms gender stereotypes and gender roles to describe the phenomenon of differentiating men and women by certain attributes. Zhang, Srisupandit and Cartwright (2009) reported that applying gender role stereotyping is a welcomed strategy in marketing by portraying men in a specific employment status and women in a decorative sex role. Generally, stereotypes become problematic when their usage makes the opportunities impossible for another social group or when they lead to negative expectations (Ashmore & Del Boca, 1981). Such attributes may include physical characteristics, trait descriptors, occupational statuses, or role behaviors (Deaux & Lewis, 1984).

2.3 Previous research on gender portrayal in advertisements

Since an ad can reach millions of individuals daily, "it has become targets for heavy scrutiny by researchers interested in the effects of the women's movement on the media" (Kang, 1997, p.981). A wide array of study has shown that a female image in magazine advertisements is mainly characterised as weak, subordinate, and irrational (Kang, 1997). Courtney and Lockeretz (1979) analysed female images in magazine ads and concluded that women are featured as sex objects and most frequently shown in ads for clothing, beauty products, and

cleaning products. In addition, numerous analyses have reported that women are more likely to be featured in the context of home, family, and romantic interests, moreover, women tend to be presented as young, thin, and unmarried (Kilbourne, 1993; Knoll *et al.*, 2011). Schnurr (2017) used an experimental design and reported that women are often hedonically positioned in ads representing the enjoyable, experiential dimensions of the product, whereas males are rather functionally positioned in visuals, representing the problem-solving and instrumental dimensions of the product.

Advertising exists in an altering societal and cultural system, which holds the idea that gender role stereotyping does not live in a vacuum, in fact, they are continuously shaped and modified by external factors of social change (Kang, 1997; Lindner, 2004). For example, similarly to this paper's interval, Thomas and Fowler (2015) conducted a content analysis on television advertisements between 2003 and 2008, and concluded that there have been changes in the portrayal of men and women. While most research investigated a content analytic study, other research focused on how consumers feel about novel portrayals of femininity and masculinity. Most importantly, Chu, Lee and Kim (2016) analysed 'non-stereotypical gender role representation' (NSGR) and found that the recipient sees this phenomenon in a positive light. „NSGR is used to achieve marketing objectives like increasing attention, gaining interest and increasing sales" (Chu, Lee & Kim, 2016, p. 768). Therefore, unexpected as well as unusual gender portrayals are presumed to evoke a positive attitude and perception in individuals. While on the contrary, an individual's perception of a visual artefact is not one-dimensional at all, in fact, depending on the consumed product and on the type of audience this may vary due to altering schemas. Since an individual does not process and store all the perceived information, an abstract knowledge structure is required, which helps to guide attention to what is new or unexpected. Schemas are dynamic structures, which are constantly updated by new expectations (abstractions or stereotypes) (Mendelson, 2001, p. 121). Gender schema theorists Bem, Martin and Halverson (1985) have found that although information distortion can likely occur, the model affects which kind of information is going to be noticed, encoded, and remembered - consistent information processes and inconsistent being overlooked. It also helps the individuals to match the perceived behaviour with the behaviour they believe is appropriate for their own gender (Martin & Daniella, 2001).

2.4   Research questions and hypothesis development

As mentioned in the previous section, research on gender roles has been predominantly focusing on three main areas – the occurrence of gender roles, the social effects of gender roles on the society and advertising effectiveness of gender roles. Yet little is known about the stereotypical dimensions of gender in motion picture, more specifically in commercial advertisements (Eisend, 2019).

The purpose of this research paper is to discuss the level of gender stereotypes and the representation of social roles as well as traits in commercial advertisements from the year of 2015 until 2019 (until the outburst of COVID-19) - all the perceived visuals observed and analysed from a visual rhetorical point of view. The paper aims to thoroughly explore the level of presence (or absence) of male and female gender role representations, specifically focusing on the various trait descriptors, physical characteristics, occupational statuses, and clothing style applied in the chosen advertisements. The research examines two different kinds of commercial advertisements: on the one hand, six global brands that target the mass audience by featuring a product with the use of a particular gender, while on the other hand, five Epica-Award winning commercials, which target a group of juries, and have been awarded as being an outstandingly creative and innovative commercial advertisement. The present paper aims to answer three main research questions:

> *RQ1: Is there a significant difference concerning gender representation in each production group?*

> *RQ2: Does the level of applying gender stereotypes change (increase/decrease) throughout time?*

> *RQ3: Is the level of stereotype representation different if the advertisement competes for a professional prize?*

Considering the research questions in the given order, they ask about the product-based differentiating aspects, the time-based variable measurements, and the target-based difference between viewer as the mass, and viewer as the jury.

In Schudson's prominent and influential book called *Advertising, The Uneasy Persuasion: It's dubious impact on American Society* (1993), he claims that advertising promotes "consumption as a way of life', and that it

exclusively features typical images, which are relevant in the world of mass marketing. Therefore, the following hypothesis is predicted:

H: A mass-targeted commercial advertisement is more likely to be stereotype-consistent, while a jury-targeted commercial, which competes for a professional creative prize, is rather stereotype-inconsistent.

3. Method

3.1 Sample of advertisements

The sampling phase is an essential part of the qualitative research, thus special attention has been paid to adequately select the brands as well as the commercials. Important to note that each selected brand represents a gender-neutral product category, meaning that both men and women consume and use it, and do not have any limitations or restrictions to the product. This was important to clearly distinguish the gender-neutral products from the gendered (feminine or masculine) products. For this reason, six international brands have been selected from the areas of food, vehicle, clothing, medicine, skin care and cleaning product. The six international brands are the following*: Audi car, Ariel detergent, Nike sport accessories, Activia yoghurt, Advil painkiller and Johnson* and *Johnson's Baby Products*. While on the other hand, since only one Grand Prix Film could win an Epica Award in a particular year, there was no possibility to randomly select, therefore, the five winning commercials have been analysed. The five winning Grand prix Films of the Epica Awards are the following: *The Watts of Tokyio Inc. "High School Girl?"* (makeup brand), *Kenzo Parfums "Kenzo World"* (perfume brand)*, BBDO New York "Evan"* (Sandy Hook promise campaign), *Shiseido "The Party Bus"* (makeup brand), *Daimler AG "Mercedes-Benz Bertha-Benz"* (car brand).

To ensure the impartiality as well as the quota system of the creative prize, an e-mail has been sent to the operations director of the Epica Awards in which the person in charge assured us that there is no gender quota that would manipulate or alter the incoming commercial advertisements.

One commercial has been randomly selected per year, in the interval of 2015 and 2019, and the only factor that has been considered is the high number of views of a commercial. No commercial has been excluded, moreover, the entire plot and each character presented has been mentioned and examined in the analysis.

3.2 Analysing procedure

Based on both cognitive and emotional aspects, important notions of rhetorical sensitivity include attention, self-observation, norms, and differences. (Aczél, 2017). The present paper intends to apply a methodology, which emphasizes a strong rhetorical viewpoint - this method is called rhetorical content analysis, or with other words, rhetorical criticism.

Rhetorical criticism has been first applied to the analysis of political speeches introduced by Jonathan Charteris-Black in his book *Analyzing Political Speeches: Rhetoric, Discourse and Metaphor* (2014, second edition). Such rhetorical critical discourse analysis assumes that the researcher can only approach a social context if he maps the correspondences between purposes, intentions, and possible explanations of those choices. Doing such a mapping, involves the identification of the speaker's choices, purposes, and intentions - all connected with the context in which the speech has been made. Visual rhetorical criticism is built on the following three main pillars:

- Analysis of speech circumstances - involves the observation of situation circumstances, or the speech setting (speaker, location, date, occasion), cognitive circumstances, such as the speaker's and audience's beliefs, and nevertheless process circumstances, which refers to the norms and interaction between the speaker and audience.

- Identification and analysis of features - built around various visual elements, stereotype, stylistic features, bodily appearance (e.g., hairstyle, eyes), bodily performance (posture, hand gesture) voice tone, and dress (formal, informal).

- Interpretation and explanation - defines which elements of the event are the most prominent, whether the visual representation is abstract or concrete, and whether they are in an order and have a conclusion.

Concerning the analyzing procedure, each commercial has been critically analyzed, commented, and described, highlighting the gender differences, appearance, occupational status, tone of voice, attitude, clothing style and

color, and the number of men and women appeared in the commercial. The criticism has been conducted twice. First, the six gender-neutral brands have been described, secondly, the Epica-Awards Grand Prix Films have been reflected on. The two visual rhetorical criticisms have been executed in a total of twenty-two pages, touching upon all factors of the three pillars listed above.

4. Results

The considerably connotative and all-embracing rhetorical criticist analysis carried out on the randomly selected commercial advertisements of six different product brands, and on the five latest Grand Prix Films of Epica Awards in the interval of 2015-2019, denoted several significant as well as unexpected findings with a special focus on gender role representation and stereotyping on screen.

The first research question of this present paper sounds as follows: Is there a significant difference concerning gender representation in each production group? The answer is yes. In case of the Ariel detergent brand, twenty-four women and only nine men have been associated with the selling of detergent, while in the case of Activia yoghurt brand fifty-eight women and only five men have been stereotyped with digestive problems. In this latter brand, three out of six commercials even completely lacked male presence. Thus, the brands of Ariel and Activia are both being strongly stereotyped with women. On the other hand, in case of the Audi car brand, twenty men and only seven women can be observed in the commercials, and five times out of the six cases we can see exclusively a male driver and only once a female (who is a child, and she is driving only as a game). Furthermore, in the commercials of Advil painkiller medicine, twenty-two times we see a man having headache, while only eight times do women feel pain. Therefore, Audi and Advil both prioritize male presence, hence create a considerably strong male stereotyping. Finally, the Nike sports accessories brand and the Johnson and Johnson's Baby products brand brought surprising and rather unexpected results. The Nike commercials included seventy-eight females and only thirty-six males, meaning that female presence is more than double, which is mainly due to the launch of gender equality campaigns with the aim of showing women as independent, strong, and skilful individuals. On the other hand, the other stereotype-inconsistent representation can be observed in the Johnson and Johnson's Baby products, in which forty-four males and forty-three females have been featured, showing life-like scenarios with the presence of both parents and as such, male role representation as father, nurturer and caregiver did a big step towards male portrayal on screen.

The second research question is the following: Does the level of gender stereotypes change (increase/decrease) throughout time? The content analysis suggested that although the occurrence of gender stereotyping changes in terms of brand, the average frequency of gender stereotyping is the very same in all five years: in each year, four out of six commercials have used stereotype-consistent representation, which means that in terms of an average use of stereotypes there is no change in time. While in case of the Epica Awards short films, four out of five Grand Prix Films have been identified to break stereotypes, hence, being stereotype inconsistent. Overall, there are indeed minor changes and difference in the level of stereotyping, no drastic alteration could be observed. In case of Epica Awards, apart from the Sandy Hook Promise campaign, each product commercial is built on non-stereotypical representation, which results the lack of alteration throughout time. The very same perception can be claimed for the six brands, but on the contrary, with the use of stereotypes.

The third research question of this paper is as follows: Is the level of stereotype representation different if the advertisement competes for a professional prize? The answer is a very clean-cut, unambiguous yes. Considering the percentage of stereotype frequency, 66.6% of the six product advertisements are stereotype-consistent throughout the five years, while 80% of the five Grand Prix Films of Epica Awards are against stereotypes, hence they are stereotype-inconsistent throughout the same five years interval. With other words, the jury of the Epica Awards is strict on evaluating the ads to be explicitly creativity-driven and indeed, the rhetorical content analysis concludes that creative commercial advertisements are honoured with a special award if they tend to be novel, unusual, and consistency-breaking, while everyday TV commercials prefer to create a solid ground for easy identification with 'non-risky' images and typical gender portrayal for the consumers of mass media. Overall, the hypothesis has been proven to be true, meaning that a mass-targeted commercial advertisement is more likely to be stereotype-consistent, while a jury-targeted commercial, which competes for a professional creative prize, is rather stereotype-inconsistent.

5. Discussion

The purpose of this paper was to observe the level of gender stereotypes and social role inequalities in commercial advertisements between 2015 and 2019 (until the outburst of the COVID-19 pandemic) - all the perceived visuals analysed from a visual rhetorical perspective. We predicted that mass-targeted commercial advertisements of the selected six gender neutral brands are more likely to be stereotype-consistent, while jury-targeted commercials competing for a professional prize are rather stereotype-inconsistent. Based on the results, the outlined hypothesis has proven to be true, since 66.6% of the six brands' commercials are stereotypical and 80% of the Epica Awards Grand Prix Films are non-stereotypical.

Even though the hypothesis offered a solid underpinning to the idea that a clear division exists in the objective of a commercial, there are some other considerably important observations that shall be taken into consideration. Chu, Lee and Kim's (2016) examination of perception and theory of 'non-stereotypical gender role representation' (NSGR), plays a key in the conclusion of our investigation, since the understanding of the results can be viewed from a reversed perspective as well. More specifically, if the jury of the Epica Awards has awarded the commercials that have been mainly breaking the stereotypes, it leads us to the idea that those non-stereotypical motion pictures evoked positive feelings and reactions from the members of the jury. Since we positively react to a visual argumentation, such attitude can be in line with awarding it as well – this comprehension might provide a possible explanation to the operation of the Epica Awards-winning competition, from implicit consumer psychological perspective. Therefore, it can be presumed that the more a commercial contains non-stereotypical gender role representations, the more likely it will generate positive reactions and hence, will be awarded. Remaining on the horizon of perception, the NSGR is not the only theory concerning visual perception, in fact, it is challenged by other notions as well. While the NSGR stands on the side of novelty and stereotype-inconsistency, the gender schema theory (Bem, Martin & Halverson, 1985) marks quite the opposite. Contrasting the idea of positively reacting to non-stereotypical visuals, the gender schema denotes that an individual is more likely to remember, recall and identify with those kind of information that match his or her perceived behaviour. Therefore, the gender schema theory may offer a reasonable explanation for the marketing psychology of the six gender-neutral brands, which are mainly broadcasted in television and is viewed by a wide audience. The easier it is to recall and remember a piece of information, the more those kind of images will become conventional for advertisers.

In addition, an essentially novel observation concerns the role of women and men and their transformation in portrayal. One of the most striking result emerged from brand Nike, which showed an unexpectedly high number of female characters, while brand Johnson and Johnson's Baby marked a similarly remarkable result by containing the same number of males and females in the commercials. Uncertainty may arise, whether the distribution of gender is not something coincidental, but rather a marketing maneuverer. Since the brand Nike is a world-wide known sports brand, which highlights strength, determination, and power – all the attributes that are descriptive traits of masculinity – a possible strategy would be to represent women with masculine attributes, which would not only promote female empowerment, but would also increase profit for targeting both men and women. Thus, Nike does not give up on encapsulating its conventional masculine values, but instead, assigns them to women. Whereas brand Johnson and Johnson's Baby increases masculine presence and features an almost equal amount of male and female characters in its commercials. Baby products do in fact target mothers, who give birth to the new-born, yet featuring a high number of father may refer to the idea that while mothers stay at home and nurture the baby, fathers may be responsible for shopping and buying the essential products for the newcomer. Thus, marketing purposes seem to be an organizing principle in both cases of Nike and Johnson and Johnson's Baby.

6. Conclusion

As a matter of fact, gender stereotypes and social role inequalities do in fact show a variety of portrayal types and challenge the viewer to encode the transmitted information. As previous sections outlined, stereotypes do not live in a vacuum, furthermore, they are an ever-changing phenomenon, which depends on societal values, marketing objectives, changing socio-cultural values and perceptions. The present study challenged the notion, whether masculine and feminine social roles tend to show a changing culture in gender portrayal. Yet, research shows that mass-targeted commercial advertisements are more likely to be stereotype-consistent and stay in line with the gender schema theory, while jury-targeted commercial advertisements are more likely to break with conventional gender portrayal and are rather stereotype-inconsistent. Overall, a moderately changing trend could be observed in the investigated research, however, femininity continues to be encapsulated in a

rather conventional, traditional representation, whether it is a detergent, a medicine, or a sports brand, whereas masculinity remains on the line of demonstrating authority, power, and masculine strength.

Although the present paper intended to contribute to the research gap existing in the literature of advertising rhetoric, brand management, and gender role portrayal, the academic literature is still widely open for future research questions and suggestions. Further research directions may be investigated in the digital sphere of gender stereotypes, the portrayal of gender in film theory and on social media platform, or the identification of visual rhetorical devices of outstanding megabrands.

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