

# WOMEN'S ROLE STEREOTYPES IN MAGAZINE ADS: A 25 YEAR PERSPECTIVE - FROM SUBURBIA THROUGH THE FEMININE MYSTIQUE TO LIBERATION

Jay D. Lindquist, Western Michigan University  
Kimberly A. Steinfeldt, Western Michigan University  
Joseph J. Belonax, Jr., Western Michigan University

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## ABSTRACT

This paper contains a summary and analysis of the findings of a number of scholars concerning the trends in female role stereotype portrayal in magazine advertising over the

period from 1958 through 1983. The findings were mixed but tend toward positive change in women's portrayal.

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## INTRODUCTION

This paper is a summary and analysis of the findings of the works of a number of scholars published from the late 1950's through the early 1980's. The focus of the piece is on four stereotypical roles attributed to women in the magazine advertising of the period. This time frame was chosen because of the shifting roles of women in the U.S. as they moved from the suburban dream of the 1950's through the great protests and new found freedom of choice of the late 1960's and early 1970's to the wider role opportunities of the late 1970's and early 1980's.

One could argue that advertising plays a vital role in reflecting and/or perpetuating lifestyles, values and stereotypes in American Society. When these stereotypes reflect or portray a negative or limited image range of options for a group -- this may be seen as offensive by members of the group. Further, advertising has become, according to Barthel (1988), one of the means through which people develop a sense of self. That is, individuals begin to use their stereotypical group image as the image against which they compare themselves. In an earlier study, Betty Friedan found women to be comparing their image to stereotypical group images in the early 1960's and, concurrently, analyzed the content of a number of magazines. She noted that there was discrepancy between the reality of women's lives and the "ideal" image portrayed in the magazines of the day (1963). Friedan call this discrepancy, the "Feminine Mystique."

Courtney and Lockeretz (1971) were among the first to examine advertising in magazines to see if feminist criticism of as negative stereotypical portrayal of women was justified. Their focus was on what they viewed as "limited" or "negative" role portrayal. They concluded that four limited or negative female role stereotypes were indeed present. These were 1) a woman's place is in the home, 2) women are dependent on men and need men's protection, 3) women do not make important decisions or do important things, and 4) men regard women primarily as sexual objects; they are not interested in women as people.

## FINDINGS

The first stereotype suggested by Courtney and Lockeretz (1971) was "**a woman's place is in the home.**" A number of other studies were found to have reported results that could be translated into this particular dimension (Belkaoui and Belkaoui 1976, Kerin, Lundstrom and Sciglimpaglia 1977, Pingree et al. 1976, Sexton and Haberman 1974, Sullivan and O'Connor 1988, Venkatesan and Losco 1975, Wagner and Banos 1973, and Weinburger, Petroschius and Westin 1979). Most of these studies were conducted to see whether or not a woman was portrayed in a working role outside of the home.

In 1958 most of the women were shown in situations other than working outside of the home. It is of interest to note that only 13 percent were portrayed as working and when this was the case it was often made clear in the

ads that they were not enjoying their activities (Belkaoui and Belkaoui 1976). Also, one-half of the men in the ads studied were shown in working roles. Courtney and Lockeretz (1971) found about 9 percent of their sample showed women working. This did not proportionally represent the 33 percent of women who were full time employed in the U.S. Wagner and Banos (1973) replicated the Courtney and Lockeretz effort and found about 21 percent of the women were working, an increase of 12 percentage points over the twenty month period between studies. Venkatesan and Losco (1975) conducted a series of three content analyses from 1959-1971. They found that women were portrayed less in home settings and more in the work force from the beginning to the end of period. In 1978 Weinburger, Petroschius and Westin (1979) found that the share of females portrayed in occupational roles was 12 percent. This apparent decrease can be attributed to the more narrowly defined "occupational roles" compared to "working roles" in the earlier work.

Pingree et al. (1976), reporting on the 1973-74 time period, found that women were most often portrayed as either "sex objects" or engaged in traditional activities mainly associated with the home. In the 1988 piece by Sullivan and O'Connor women in magazine ads were shown working away from home in 23 percent of the cases in 1983.

In 1958 the share of ads studied where women were depicted in nonworking roles was 24 percent. It declined to 23 percent and 19.3 percent in 1970 and 1972, respectively (Weinburger, Petroschius and Westin 1979). Interestingly, there was a slight decline in men being portrayed in family roles over the same three measurement years.

The second stereotype theorized by Courtney and Lockeretz (1971) was described as "**women are dependent on men and need men's protection.**" These authors further went on to say that, "the advertisements suggest that there are certain businesses and social activities which are still inappropriate for women to perform on their own." Women were more likely than men to be shown in the company of one or more members of the opposite sex. In addition, when women were portrayed alone or with other women, 90 percent were in nonworking roles. On the other hand,

of the men depicted alone or with other men, 63 percent were working.

In the situation where both sexes were pictured in an ad, only 29 percent of the men were shown working with women. Also in these both-sex magazine ads, the most common nonworking role was recreational. When women were shown alone, they were often taking care of themselves or their homes. Venkatesan and Losco (1975) used the same two criteria as Courtney and Lockeretz and had reasonably consistent results where about one fourth of the ads over the 12 year span reinforced the stereotype.

In the study by Belkaoui and Belkaoui (1976) the conclusions reached were that women were almost always shown isolated. Interestingly, their findings were that 74.5 percent of women in the magazine ads studied in 1958 were in nonworking, decorative roles alone, or with other women and that this share increased to 95 percent by 1972.

**"Women do not make important decisions or do important things,"** was the third stereotype put forth by Courtney and Lockeretz (1971). They positioned women against this stereotype on the bases of the occupational and nonworking roles portrayed in the ads. They found that women were most often portrayed using or selecting cleaning products, food products, over the counter drugs, clothing and home appliances. And that the magazine ads for major decisions products, such as appliances and furniture, showed women joined by a man. Also, important business and societal institutions did not feature them very often in their ads. In the 1972 replication no significant changes in the portrayal of women were found (Belkaoui and Belkaoui 1976).

A study by Sullivan and O'Connor (1988) in 1983 led them to conclude that change had occurred though they offered no empirical proof. Their justification was based on findings that 1) there had been an increase in the share of women portrayed in working roles--especially in the areas of women as professionals, business executives, salespersons and mid-level managers and 2) they asserted that "work is not the sole meaningful and important pursuit in life."

The fourth and final stereotype that Courtney and Lockeretz suggested was "**men**

regard women primarily as sexual objects; they are not interested in women as people." Ads were evaluated on this dimension by identifying whether women were portrayed in nonworking, decorative (or inactive) roles. In about half of the ads where women were present, but no men were, the women were assessed to be in a decorative role. When women were in magazine ads either alone or with other women, 90 percent were in nonworking roles. Of those in nonworking roles, 70 percent were portrayed in a decorative manner.

Belkaoui and Belkaoui (1976) found in 1958 that 47 percent of the ads involving women placed them as decorative. By 1972 the share had increased to 56 percent. Sexton and Haberman (1974) concluded that there were substantial increases in the proportion of ads where women were serving in decorative roles.

In 1975, a study was published that showed the frequency of sex object role portrayal had decreased from 44 percent in the 1959-1963 time frame to 33 percent in the 1969-1971 period (Venkatesan and Losco). However, Belkaoui and Belkaoui (1976) asserted that the share was 70 percent in 1970 and 94 percent in 1972. Also these authors found that the percentages of women shown with men in purely decorative situations increased from about 13 percent in 1958 to 32 percent in 1972. Others have also reported the increase in females being portrayed in decorative roles over the 25 year historical period of the study (Kerin, Lundstrom and Sciglimpaglia 1979; Pingree et al. 1976; Sullivan and O'Connor 1988; Weinburger, Petroschius and Westin 1979).

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This review of selected research on female role stereotypes in magazine ads over the quarter century from 1958 through 1983 is of interest because of the changing social fabric for women in the U.S. during that period.

It appears that the advertisers, after realizing that some of the negative stereotypes proposed by feminists and others were evident, have responded. There is still room for improvement, but there was a change for the better in the way women were portrayed over the 1958-1983 time frame. What appears to have happened is that as women's roles (and men's

roles) change, advertising reflects these changes.

There is the need for sensitivity to a broad spectrum of views on the part of women as to what roles are appropriate and fulfilling for them. Further, understanding how a product or service fits into a woman's life style, what criteria she uses to choose it from among alternatives and what the connection is between her self-image and the product/service itself, all point toward the kinds of advertising executions that are appropriate and acceptable.

We must be cautious as researchers and scholars that we look at things with the "eyes of the respondents" or group being studied, rather than from our personal, subjective frame of reference. A number of the studies considered over the 25 year period gave evidence of the use of the latter position over the former. As Kuhn (1970) observed, "understanding a paradigm different from one's own is a difficult task because it requires seeing the world from a new perspective." Here there are basic assumptions by the researchers that are really not put to empirical testing, but are treated as "unquestionable givens." also there is a question as to whether the researcher should or should not use the existential-phenomenological view where one does not try to study individuals as separated from their environments or the interaction of the two. Its a study of human beings in their world setting (Thompson, Locander and Pollio (1989).

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