

SEX-ROLE STEREOTYPING IN ADVERTISEMENTS:
A RE-EXAMINATION

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Abstract

This article provides an updated empirical analysis of sex-role stereotyping in magazine advertisements. The study compares the relative use of female stereotypes from 1974-5 to 1979-80. The results suggest that some moderation in sex-role stereotyping has occurred, yet stereotyping persists in magazine advertisements.

Introduction

Advertising has been accused of depicting women as mere sex objects or as servile agents responding to men's needs. Prior research studies have established the fact that "sexism" has been ubiquitous in advertising. However, since magazine advertisements often mirror contemporary society, one would expect the sexist portrayal of women to have moderated in the past few years. It is likely, however, that a cultural lag exists such that women are still portrayed in traditional roles. Given that the most recent research conducted in this domain was in 1974, the purpose of this study is to provide an updated empirical view of sexism in magazine advertising.

Background

The notion that women are stereotyped in the media has been given ample empirical support. However, the frequency and meaning of these stereotypes has been subject to frequent and considerable debate. Growing from this debate have been several research studies that have attempted to clearly substantiate the extent to which women are portrayed stereotypically in the media. Most of these studies employed content analysis to examine the portrayal of women's roles in commercial advertising. Kerin, Lundstrom and Sciglimpaglia (6) suggest that the main issue raised is whether advertising accurately reflects contemporary women's roles or depicts stereotyped roles for women.

One of the first studies by Courtney and Lockertz (2) found that April 1970 advertisements in general interest magazines depicted women in stereotypical roles according to four basic categories: (1) women are dependent and need men's protection, (2) the women's proper place is in the home, (3) women are regarded as sex objects by men, and (4) women do not make important decisions. Another study by Wagner and Banos (20) used this stereotypical classification identified by Courtney and Lockertz to examine advertising 20 months after the Courtney and Lockertz study. This study concluded that women's portrayals in advertisements had improved.

Sexton and Haberman (16) enlarged the scope of examining female sex stereotypes in advertisements. Almost 2000 advertisements were evaluated for the periods 1950-51, 1960-61, and 1970-71 for several product classes. The researchers failed to detect a notable difference over the two decades; women continued to be shown as domestic, in predictable environments, as alluring, and decorative. Although the number of women in working situations had increased, their jobs were traditionally female. There was, however, a significant decrease in ads portraying a woman as a housewife

or mother. Belkaoui and Belkaoui (1) compared 1958 advertisements with 1970 and 1972 advertisements in general interest magazines to determine if a noticeable shift occurred from the late 1950's to the early 1970's. Their results confirmed previous studies; the stereotyped nature of women remained basically intact from 1958 to the early 1970's.

Venkatesan and Losco (19) studied women's roles in 14,000 advertisements in male, female, and general audience magazines for the period 1959-1971. This study concluded that the portrayal of women as sex objects decreased considerably since 1961; in general, however, no dramatic shifts in other role portrayals occurred over the 1959-1971 period. Poe (13) in addition observed no shifts in sex role stereotyping for the years 1928, 1956 and 1972. One of the most recent studies by Pingree *et. al.* (12) examined magazine advertisements from July 1973 to June 1974 and concluded that advertisements reflected women most frequently in traditional roles of wife and mother.

In addition to studies of print advertisements, other investigations confirmed stereotypes in TV commercials; [Silverstein and Silverstein (17); McArthur and Resko (8)] and in pharmaceutical advertisements [McKee, Corder and Taizlup (9); Mosher (10); Prather and Fidell (15)]. Paradoxically no recent studies have examined the ways in which men are depicted in the media. Since men's roles are undergoing some shift as the family role structure changes, one would expect men's portrayals to have changed.

Research Questions

The following research questions capture the nature of this study:

1. What types of role portrayals are used to depict women in magazine advertisements? How do 1974-5 portrayals compare with those in 1979-80?
2. How do general audience, men's and women's magazines vary in female stereotypes? Has the relative use of these stereotypes changed from 1974-75 to 1979-80?

Methodology

A sample total of 22 magazines were examined to answer the research questions. These magazines were grouped into 3 basic categories (i.e., men, women, general audience) according to their general readership. The classification from Standard Rate and Data Service was used to classify individual magazines into the specific audience appeal. **Table 1** presents these categories and groupings by audience appeal. Only *Ms. Magazine* was used for professional women as no other professional women's magazine with a significant number of advertisements could be found.

Advertisements were content analyzed for two periods: July 1974 to June 1975 and July 1979 to June 1980. These periods extend the last reported research in 1974: and the 5-year span between the periods provided the opportunity to detect any shifting in stereotyping. The total sample of advertisements with at least half a

Table 1

MAGAZINES EXAMINEDMAGAZINE TYPEI. GENERAL AUDIENCE MAGAZINES

Reader's Digest
Time
Saturday Review
New Yorker

II. WOMEN'S MAGAZINES

For fashion-oriented women:

Vogue
Harper's Bazaar
Cosmopolitan

For home-oriented women:

Better Homes
Good Housekeeping
Ladies Home Journal

For young married women:

Redbook
Parents

For professional women:

Ms.

III. MEN'S MAGAZINES

For sports and outdoor inclined men:

Mechanix Illustrated
Sports Illustrated
Field and Stream
Road and Track

For contemporary men:

Esquire
Gentlemen's Quarterly

For professional men:

Forbes
Business Week
Fortune

Table 2

CATEGORIES FOR WOMEN STEREOTYPESDEPENDENCY

Dependent on male's protection.
In need of reassurance.
Making unimportant decisions.

HOUSEWIFE

Women's place is in the home.
Primary role is to be a good housewife.
Concerned with tasks of housekeeping.

WOMEN CONCERNED WITH PHYSICAL ATTRACTIVENESS

To appear more appealing (e.g., youthful).
Concerned with cosmetics and jewelry products.
Concerned with fashion.

WOMEN AS A SEX OBJECT

Sex is related to product.
Sex is unrelated to product.

WOMEN IN NON-TRADITIONAL ACTIVITIES

Engaged in activities outside the home (e.g., buying a car).
Engaged in sports (e.g., golf, tennis, skiing).

CAREER ORIENTED

Professional Occupations.
Entertainer.
Non-professional (e.g., clerical, bankteller).
Blue collar.

VOICE OF AUTHORITY

The expert.

NEUTRAL

Woman shown as equal to man.

NONE OF THE ABOVE CATEGORIES

page in size were selected for analysis. One issue was chosen randomly per month. Monthly magazines were not randomized.

To content analyze the advertisements, coding categories were developed to reflect the stereotypes most frequently used in advertisements as presented in [Table 2](#). The women's stereotypical categories were based upon previous studies and the author's own design for content analysis of advertisements.

Two coders were trained to content analyze the advertisements by product category. When an advertisement presented both a man and woman on an equality basis, the advertisement was given a neutral rating for the women's coding categories. To assure the reliability of the coding by the raters, they were sensitized to the nature of the categories used to stereotype advertisements. Moreover, they practiced content analysis of 100 advertisements to learn how to use the system. When the raters content analyzed a subsample of 500 advertisements prior to the main study, the inter-reliability of their coding was approximately 83%. Analysis of the data was done by testing for statistical differences between proportions.

Results

[Table 3](#) presents the total frequencies for women stereotypes in the magazines examined. The results suggest that changes have transpired. For example, the theme of dependency waned from 12.6% in 1974-75 to 7.3% in 1979-80. The role of a woman as a housewife and as a person concerned with physical attractiveness showed no statistically significant changes. Women as sex objects appeared in 3% of the ads and was constant over this time span. Statistically significant increases were noted for women in non-traditional activities and in career oriented roles. Advertisers apparently are accommodating somewhat to women's changing social roles. Interestingly, the use of the voice of authority and neutral role portrayals declined between the two time periods studied.

Table 3

| WOMEN STEREOTYPES | FREQUENCY OF ROLES PORTRAYED BY WOMEN | |
|---|---------------------------------------|---------------------|
| | YEARS | |
| | 1974-75 (N=2810) | 1979-80 (N=2698) |
| DEPENDENCY | 12.6% | 7.3% * |
| HOUSEWIFE | 12.7 | 12.7 |
| WOMEN CONCERNED WITH PHYSICAL ATTRACTIVENESS | 40.1 | 40.5 |
| WOMEN AS A SEX OBJECT | 3.1 | 2.8 |
| WOMEN IN NON-TRADITIONAL ACTIVITIES | 2.0 | 7.9 * |
| CAREER-ORIENTED WOMEN | 3.0 | 10.3 * |
| VOICE OF AUTHORITY | 8.0 | 2.8 * |
| NEUTRAL | 10.2 | 7.5 * |
| NONE OF THESE CATEGORIES | 8.3 | 7.2 |

* Indicates a difference significant at the .001 level

Table 4 provides an expanded view of the women stereotypes for the three categories of magazines in the study. Variations can be seen for each category. For example, in general audience magazines, the reduction is from 33.6% in 1974-75 to 19.6% in 1979-80. One, therefore, may conclude that most types of magazines are depicting women as less dependent relative to their former frequent portrayal as needing reassurance, making unimportant decisions, and needing protection from males. Clearly, however, the dependent role still occurs, but to a lesser extent.

The stereotype of housewife shows a significant change only for general audience magazines where there is a decline from 19.2% in 1974-75 to 11.1% for 1979-80. Men's magazines seldom provide this image while women's magazines continue to reflect this portrayal at virtually unchanged levels. Women as concerned with physical attractiveness shows no significant statistical decline for any of the categories.

The stereotype of women as sex objects shows only slight changes for the 3 categories of magazines, but none of these are statistically significant. Men's magazines seem to increasingly use this stereotype as the change is from 12.2% in 1974-75 to 14.9% in 1979-80. Regarding a woman's portrayal in non-traditional activities, a clear increase has occurred. All the magazines show at least a 3% increase in the use of this image.

Paralleling this finding, the depiction of women as career oriented shows a definite upward shift only for women's and men's magazines. The obvious conclusion from this result is that women's increased participation in the work force is being reflected in advertising. Nonetheless, when one examines the voice of authority portrayal, there is a decline in women's magazines from 8.7% (1974-75) to 1.1% (1979-80), while the other categories reveal no significant changes.

The results for the neutral category where men and women appear as equals registered significant shifts; general audience magazines had a greater occurrence of this category in 1979-80 (16.6%) than 1974-75 (5.2%), but women's magazines had a decline (9.0% to 5.9%). Therefore, it seems that women are being depicted on a more equal basis with men in advertisements occurring in general audience magazines vis-a-vis women's magazines. Men's magazines use of this theme remains unchanged at about 18%.

Implications and Conclusions

The results show that advertisement's role portrayals have undergone some metamorphoses from 1974-75 to 1979-80, although these shifts were not dramatic in all cases. In general, women appear less frequently as dependent upon men. Advertisements have also responded to the changing careers and roles of women by portraying women more frequently as career oriented and in non-traditional activities. Nonetheless, negative images of women persist in advertisements.

Table 4

| WOMEN STEREOTYPES | PERCENTAGE OF WOMEN STEREOTYPES BY MAGAZINE CLASSIFICATION AND FOR TIME PERIODS | | | | | |
|---|---|--------------------|---------------------|---------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| | GENERAL AUDIENCE MAGAZINES | | WOMEN'S MAGAZINES | | MEN'S MAGAZINES | |
| | (N=271) 1974-75 | (N=260) 1979-80 | (N=1990) 1974-75 | (N=2022) 1979-80 | (N=549) 1974-75 | (N=416) 1979-80 |
| DEPENDENCY | 33.6% | 19.6%** | 2.7% | 0.9%** | 37.9% | 30.1%** |
| HOUSEWIFE | 19.2 | 11.1* | 15.3 | 15.4 | 0.0 | 1.0 |
| WOMEN CONCERNED WITH PHYSICAL ATTRACTIVENESS | 27.3 | 22.7 | 48.2 | 48.7 | 16.9 | 13.7 |
| WOMEN AS A SEX OBJECT | 4.4 | 3.5 | 0.4 | 0.5 | 12.2 | 14.9 |
| WOMEN IN NON-TRADITIONAL ACTIVITIES | 1.1 | 6.1** | 2.5 | 6.4** | 1.1 | 4.1** |
| CAREER ORIENTED WOMEN | 6.3 | 7.7 | 1.5 | 9.9** | 7.1 | 11.5* |
| VOICE OF AUTHORITY | 2.9 | 5.0 | 8.7 | 1.1** | 7.7 | 6.7 |
| NEUTRAL | 5.2 | 16.6** | 9.0 | 5.9** | 17.1 | 18.0 |
| NONE OF THESE CATEGORIES | 0.0 | 7.7** | 11.7 | 11.2 | 0.0 | 0.0 |

* Indicates a difference significant at the .05 level
**Indicates a difference significant at the .001 level

Even though some stereotype categories declined, women continue to be portrayed as housewives and as concerned with physical attractiveness. The physical attractiveness stereotype, in particular, remained very high at about 40%. Moreover, the dependency and sex object themes continue to be used. One can speculate that there may be declines in these stereotypes as women increasingly become more integrated into professional areas.

Using women and men in a sexist tone in advertisements has other more profound social implications. If the media do mold expectations, opinions, and attitudes, then the audience of these ads may accept the way women are depicted as reality. The subsequent behaviors of the audience may reflect their acceptance of these stereotyped roles. These symbolic messages in advertisements, therefore, may lead to false images implanted in people's minds, resulting in undesirable consequences. Some critics suggest that sexist advertisements may even perpetuate the existing inequality between men and women.

Unless advertisers are sensitive to the evolving status of women in society, they may ignore the new roles women are assuming. It is likely that feminist buyers and their associates may refuse to buy products that reinforce the homemaker/dependent stereotype image. If women are depicted in a derogatory or demeaning way, some women may be offended and react negatively to the company. Moreover, inaccurate or degrading portrayals of women may interfere with the ability of women to identify with advertisements. The fact that a growing segment of women have large discretionary incomes should make these caveats especially important to advertisers.

What is needed is the portrayal of women and men in roles which actually reflect their positive attributes and their individuality. This study reveals that some progress has taken place in depicting women more accurately and less negatively, yet further changes may be required. Hence, one may conclude that the changing role of women in advertising is both fact and fiction.

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