

SEX ROLES IN ADVERTISING: ADDITIONAL EVIDENCE

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Abstract

The present study used a feminine role orientation scale as a measure of 151 women's beliefs on their role in society. Women were then grouped according to traditional and liberal values and their attitudes towards advertising and sex roles in advertising were analyzed. The results proved contrary to an earlier study by Duker and Tucker.

Introduction

In a recent research study by Duker and Tucker (1977), they have contributed to the growing inventory of research focusing on role portrayals in advertisements. Unlike the vast majority of prior investigations (Belkaoui and Belkaoui, 1976; Courtney and Lockeretz, 1971; Sexton and Haberman, 1974; Venkatesan and Losco, 1975; and Wagner and Banos, 1973) which were content analyses of advertisements and, therefore, dependent on the researchers' subjective evaluations, these authors studied the preferences of women toward role portrayals in actual advertisements. Duker and Tucker's research tested the hypothesis that women who are strongly oriented toward the women's liberation movement will not differ from those with weak orientations in their perceptions of advertisements showing women in various roles. Accordingly, the thrust of their article was to determine the relationship between profeminist predispositions and the perceptions of women's role portrayals in ads.

With some modifications, Duker and Tucker basically employed an approach used earlier by Wortzel and Frisbie, (1974). This earlier research required respondents to "construct" ads from portfolios consisting of illustrations of various products and of women in different roles, and to respond to attitudinal questions for purposes of categorizing subjects as pro or con towards the women's liberation movement. Duker and Tucker took the Wortzel-Frisbie methodology a stage further by including a personality trait, independence of judgment, as a moderator variable for profeminist attitudes. Rather than "construct" ads, their sample of 104 college women (ages 18-21) were shown ads portraying a woman as: mother, sex object, glamour girl, housewife, working mother, modern woman, and professional. A questionnaire elicited the respondents' structured and nonstructured responses to each of the ads; these reactions being then interpreted as profeminist or not. Thereafter, the subjects completed a profeminist attitudinal scale (consisting of 22 statements on feminist issues), measuring predispositions to the women's liberation movement, and also took the Barron Test of Independence (Barron, 1963) comprising 20 forced choice items. Based on this data, individuals were classified as profeminists or traditionalists, and differences in their perceptions of women's role portrayals in the ads were analyzed.

Statistical results led to acceptance of the null hypothesis that there was no significant differences between profeminist and traditionalist women with respect to their evaluations of women's role portrayals in ads. The authors note that related research (Epstein and Bronzaft, 1975; Orcutt, 1975) reinforce their conclu-

sions and that the findings, therefore, "obviate the necessity for channeling different advertisements into different media to accommodate what otherwise might be perceived as differently motivated consumers for the same product" (Duker and Tucker, 1977). It should be noted, however, that these conclusions, as well as those of the quoted supportive research (Epstein and Bronzaft, 1975; Orcutt, 1975), are based on college populations. Results from a sample of women consumers from a general population in a large metropolitan area would provide either additional support or different insights to feminine role orientation and sex role portrayals in advertisements issue. These findings are presented in this paper.

The Study

In the present study, 300 women consumers were contacted by telephone and asked to participate in an opinion survey regarding advertising practices. Of these, 151 completed a self administered questionnaire. This instrument contained a seven item, attitudes toward advertising scale, a seventeen item, attitudes toward sex role portrayal scale, a ten item, feminine role orientation scale, and various demographic questions. The attitudes toward advertising scale was used as an overall measure of the respondent's attitude toward contemporary advertising and was designed specifically for this study. The scale measuring sex role portrayals was adapted from one used previously by Lundstrom and Sciglimpaglia (1977). Developed by Arnott (1972), the feminine role orientation scale measures a woman's predisposition toward women's role in society. It has been used elsewhere to study the relationship between a wife's role orientation and her family's purchasing decisions (Green and Cunningham, 1975).

Similar to Duker and Tucker (1977), who used opinions concerning feminist issues to classify their subjects as profeminists, traditionalists or neutrals, the present study used the feminine role orientation scale as a measure of each woman's beliefs concerning the "proper place" for females in society. In this respect, the underlying cognitive domain which was used to classify respondents is somewhat broader and more inclusive than profeminist beliefs. Based on the role orientation scores, two extreme groups, labeled "modern" (n = 40) and "traditional" (n = 36) women, were identified as representing the approximate upper and lower quartiles. As seen in Table 1, the modern group was found to be younger, better educated, more likely to be employed, and from a slightly lower economic strata.

Attitudes toward advertising in general and towards sex role portrayals in advertising were compared between these two groups. With respect to their attitudes toward advertising, the two groups did not differ significantly on the summated attitude mean scores. Concerning sex role portrayals, however, the opinions expressed by the two groups differed greatly. The summated attitudes toward role portrayals mean scores showed highly significant differences ($t = 5.21$, 74 d.f., $p < 0.001$). The modern women was more critical of role portrayal practices than the traditional. In addition, the two groups differed on ten of the seventeen indi-

vidual items which made up the scale. These items, together with the mean values for all women in the sample and for these two groups, are shown in Table 2. While not significantly more critical of advertising in general than her traditional counterpart, the modern woman appears to harbor much more strident beliefs concerning role portrayals of both men and women. The modern woman more critically expresses the belief that neither men nor women are accurately depicted by advertising; that women are shown as dependent on men; and, that women are shown as not doing important things or making important decisions. Compared to the traditional woman, the modern group is more sensitive to the portrayal of women in advertising and generally finds the results more personally offensive.

Conclusions

The studies of Wortzel and Frisbie (1974) and of Duker and Tucker (1977) appear to indicate that the holding of profeminist attitudes by women has little effect on the evaluation of roles portrayed by women in print advertisements. The research reported here, however, offers different and divergent evidence. Modern women, defined by their attitudes toward the role of women in society, were not found to be more critical of advertising in a general sense than were traditional women. Their views on sex role portrayals were found to be greatly divergent, however, with the modern women more critical than those holding traditional views. These results indicate that women with different views regarding women's place in society vary markedly in their attitudes toward advertising's portrayal of the social and occupational roles of both men and women.

The implications for these two different findings are widely divergent for marketing management and the task of matching the advertising to the views of the marketplace. If the proposition that women's orientations do not influence their perceptions of role portrayals in advertising, then the advertiser can rest easy that any form of advertising - sexist or not - may be employed without fear of backlash. However, if the second finding is true and role orientation is a moderator variable in fomenting criticism of sexist advertising, then there is increasing task complexity for the marketer. The complexity arises in that there are two audiences that must be courted and, hopefully, with minimal overlap between the two. For the modern woman (and potential critic), the advertising must reflect nonsexist advertising with actors portraying a variety of "modern" roles, i.e., career woman at the office, husband assisting in household chores, etc. However, the "traditional" woman may not identify with these changing roles and consequently believe that the product or service is not intended for her use. In the latter case, the marketer is faced with an unintended demarketing by the ad. Thus the marketer may wish to develop two series of ads for each audience and carefully place them in mediums where there is a higher proportion of one segment of a particular viewer or reader. Once again, there is a potential problem that the ad will be seen by the inappropriate audience and hence rejected.

Until such time as this state of uncertainty can be resolved, the marketer will face the problem of should I, or should I not develop one or more types of advertisements. Additionally, one would have to ask what are the correct media in which to place these ads to meet the target audience requirements (orientations). Faced with this dilemma and given the conflicting research results presented in this paper, the marketer can only use his or her best guess until further research is undertaken on a larger scale and across diverse populations to answer these questions.

TABLE 1
SAMPLE COMPOSITION: ALL WOMEN, MODERN AND TRADITIONAL WOMEN

Demographic Characteristic	All Women (n = 131)	Modern Women (n = 40)	Traditional Women (n = 91)
Age (mean years)	30.0	28.4	34.4
Education (mean years)	14.5	14.8	13.7
Employment (percent employed full or part-time)	74.8	80.0	55.5
Household Income (mean in thousands)	20.65	21.1	22.2

TABLE 2
SIGNIFICANT ATTITUDINAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MODERN AND TRADITIONAL WOMEN ($P \leq 0.05$)

	All Women \bar{X} (s)	Modern Women \bar{X}	Traditional Women \bar{X}
Advertisements suggest that a woman's place is in the home.	4.73 (1.72)	5.20	4.17
Ads which I see (don't) show women as they really are.*	5.39 (1.63)	5.95	4.78
Advertisements suggest that women are fundamentally dependent on men.	4.50 (1.67)	4.88	3.69
Ads which I see (don't) show men as they really are.*	5.21 (1.44)	5.58	4.58
Ads which I see (don't) accurately portray women in most of their daily activities.*	5.05 (1.52)	5.43	4.47
Advertisements (don't) suggest that women make important decisions.*	5.10 (1.50)	5.68	4.39
Ads which I see (don't) accurately portray men in most of their daily activities.*	4.86 (1.53)	5.03	4.22
Advertisements suggest that women don't do important things.	4.62 (1.51)	5.20	3.94
I'm more sensitive to the portrayal of women in advertising than I used to be.	4.90 (1.41)	5.85	3.86
I find the portrayal of women in advertising to be offensive.	4.42 (1.58)	5.30	3.58
Sumated role portrayal attitudes	4.77 (1.11)	5.35	4.14

(*) Reversed items.

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