Images of Women in Online Advertisements of Global Products: Does Sexism Exist?

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ABSTRACT. Research on female stereotypes in online advertisements is particularly scant, and thus, we lack evidence on whether women are depicted in derogatory (stereotypical) terms on the Internet or not. This theme has significant ethical implications. Hence, the objectives of this study are: (1) to provide evidence on female role portrayals in online advertisements of global products, and (2) to explore female role portrayals across web pages for different audience types. The results indicate that women are generally portrayed in a stereotypical way, supporting the notion that sexism is prevalent in online advertisements worldwide. Portrayal of women across web pages varies considerably, with female-audience web pages embracing "decorative" female images; male-audience web pages promoting polarizing depictions of women in "dependent" or "non-traditional" roles; and general-audience web pages using portrayals of women as housewives or equal to men. Overall, the findings suggest that "traditional" or "decorative" stereotypes are largely evident in all three audience types, although some "non-traditional" roles may occur. Implications and future research directions are discussed.

KEY WORDS: online advertisements, female role stereotypes, sexism, global products

Introduction

The surge of information technology has promoted the use of electronic media, notably the Internet as a fast-growing and user-friendly medium for advertising. According to the Internet Advertising Bureau, advertising revenues of firms that employ advertising online totaled over $12.5 billion in 2005, exhibiting an increase of 30% over 2004 (IAB, 2006). Online advertising serves a variety of purposes including offering worldwide coverage of advertising messages and projecting corporate images. It is produced and "consumed" by thousands or even millions of individuals in multiple locations and institutions internationally, facilitating the globalization process of firms (Economist, 2006; Hine, 2000).

Online advertising relies on the use of images to convey messages to the audience and offers "opportunities for individuals and groups to provide alternatives to the existing set of dominant ideas about women and men" (Gauntlett, 2002, p. 65). According to Rose (2001), images featuring in Internet advertising and web-based pictorial elements may act as agents that reinforce and reshape societal norms and beliefs regarding gender equity and depiction of sexuality. This claim corroborates suggestions in the relevant literature that online advertising provides consumers with an identity by communicating role stereotypes of women and constitutes an influential source of gender information (Knupfer, 1998).

Women are increasingly exposed to online advertising as shopping online becomes quite common, especially in the USA and Europe. To illustrate, in the USA about 50% of Internet shoppers are female; while in the UK, 61.5% of women who have children go shopping online (Kim and Kim, 2004). Despite the penetration of Internet in our everyday lives, little research has been undertaken to explore female role portrayal in this new medium (Wiles et al., 1995; Wolin, 2003). Hence, further research is required to provide empirical evidence on the types of female role portrayal in online advertising.

These stereotypes are also a matter of discourse in advertising in traditional media such as TV and print ads. Research has indicated that advertising in these media has rendered distorted body image ideals as

valid and acceptable, contributing to gender inequality and the promotion of "sexism." Sexism refers to the portrayal of women in an inferior way relative to their capabilities and potential, and is manifested in the depiction of women in clichéd traditional and decorative roles in advertising (Lysonski, 1985; Pollay, 1986). In other words, "advertising as a cultural form, displays a preoccupation with gender that is hardly matched in any other genre" (Jhally, 1990, p. 136). It would be interesting to investigate whether Internet advertising perpetuates sexism (as it is often observed in the case of traditional media) or not. This is a theme that has important ethical aspects. The current study builds upon recommendations of scholars (Gustavsson and Czanrniawska, 2004; Wolin, 2003), who suggest that evidence in other contemporary media is required to enrich the picture concerning female role portrayals. Internet advertisements of global products attain worldwide coverage and female portrayals may become rapidly internationalized, thus aggravating the likely sexism effect (cf. Argandoňa, 2003; Hughes, 2000).

The Internet and the associated world wide web form the information backbone of the global economy. The internet can not only serve as an advertising channel between the firm and its customers worldwide, but it may also provide product catalogs and information on inventory availability, act as an online sales outlet through order entry, offer real-time customized service through tailored online access, and supply the firm customer feedback through web surveys (Porter, 2001). This considerable "interactivity" between the firm and its customers internationally (Hoffman and Novak, 1996) provides both parties opportunity domains through enhanced selling process, increased buying experience, negotiation of customer requirements, and construction of customer options (Feeny, 2001). With the assistance of the Internet, customers at a global level can be leveraged as coproducers through "customerization" (Wind and Mahajan, 2001). The role of online advertising is thus crucial since it can both serve significant marketing functions and mold societal attitudes internationally.

Consequently, there are two objectives in this paper. First, we seek to provide empirical evidence on how women are portrayed in online advertising by drawing insights from a sample of Internet advertisements. The literature examining female depictions concentrates largely on the study of advertisements in *traditional* media (Bartsch et al., 2000; Belkaoui and Belkaoui, 1976; Courtney and Lockeretz, 1971; Lysonski, 1983; Milner and Collins, 2000). Besides, we investigate web pages of solely *global products*, and therefore, the findings can potentially apply to female images worldwide.

Second, we examine whether female role portrayals in online advertisements vary, if at all, across web pages developed for different audience categories. Such categories can be female, male, or general (mixed). In doing so, we explore the recommendation of Hirschman and Thompson (1997), who posit that the types of female images in advertising are likely to be entwined with different audience categories. For instance, it may be that male-audience web pages seek to sustain sexism through projecting advertisements in traditional or decorative female role stereotypes. Therefore, the current study also examines the extent of sexism in online advertisements for each of the three categories of audience.

The paper is structured as follows. It continues with a literature review on female role stereotypes and the development of four research propositions. After a discussion of the methodology adopted in this study, its findings are presented and discussed. The paper concludes with a synopsis, implications, as well as directions for further research.

Background to female role stereotypes

Gender stereotypes are general beliefs about sex-linked traits and roles, psychological characteristics, and behaviors describing women and men (Browne, 1998). Gender theory has facilitated the discussion of the social and ethical implications of advertising associated with communication of female role stereotypes. It suggests that advertising in popular media is a primary means for introducing female role stereotypes and promoting sexism, calling attention for systematic investigation into this area. According to the relevant literature (Foucault, 1998; Giddens, 1991; Wolf, 1991), gender identities are socially constructed, and advertising proposes lifestyles and forms of self-presentation that individuals use to define their roles in the society. Giddens (1991) notes that the relationships of human beings with

themselves, their bodies, and partners are also influenced by advertising that prescribes desired behavior for women and men. The main themes of gender theory provide a basis for academic research in the marketing field in an attempt to explore the degree to which advertising accurately reflects contemporary roles of women rather than depiction of women in a stereotypical way (Kerin et al., 1979).

Research evidence in the area of female role stereotypes in traditional media, such as TV and print, has to some extent been contradictory. To illustrate, most studies suggest the prevalence of sexism through the depiction of women in derogatory ways in advertising (Belkaoui and Belkaoui, 1976; Ferguson et al., 1990; Sexton and Haberman, 1974; Soley and Kurzbard, 1986), whereas some other studies suggest that female role stereotyping seems to be decreasing over time (Allan and Coltrane, 1996; Kerin et al., 1979; Klassen et al., 1993). Moreover, authors approach sexism as a multidimensional construct that encompasses the notions of hostile and benevolent sexism, which are manifested in categories of female role stereotypes in advertising (Glick and Fiske, 1996, 1997). The first form of sexism, hostile sexism, characterizes women as unfit to make important decisions and presents females as easily manipulated, vulnerable, and weak. As the term implies, the central aspect of this form of sexism relates to unpleasant and negative criticism that is directed to women who do not conform to traditional role models. The second form of sexism, benevolent sexism, is more subtle and elicits feelings of protectiveness and affection toward females, which are based on perceptions of their inferiority and inadequacy. This form of sexism promotes traditional subservient female roles and the depiction of women concerned with physical attractiveness in advertisements (Glick and Fiske, 1996, 1997).

In order to investigate images of women in advertisements, researchers have classified female role stereotypes into various categories ranging from those depicting women in clichéd roles to those projecting egalitarian images (Belkaoui and Belkaoui, 1976; Courtney and Lockeretz, 1971; Lysonski, 1983; Poe, 1976; Sexton and Haberman, 1974; Wiles et al., 1995). In our attempt to investigate this theme in the context of online advertising, in the current study we classify female role stereotypes under four broader categories: women in *traditional* roles

(dependent and housewives), women in *decorative* roles (concerned with physical attractiveness and sex objects), women in *non-traditional* roles (non-traditional activities, career-oriented women and voices of authority), and women in *neutral* roles (portrayed as equal to men). The first two category roles (traditional and decorative) can be associated with (hostile or benevolent) sexism, unlike the last two (cf. Ferguson et al., 1990). This classification of female stereotypes in the four themes presented in Table I is based on prior categorizations of images of women in media advertising encountered in the literature (Belkaoui and Belkaoui, 1976; Lysonski, 1985; Mitchell and Taylor, 1990; Zotos and Lysonski, 1994).

Types of female role portrayals: first research objective

Limited research has been undertaken to explore the use of female role stereotypes on the Internet. This evidence suggests the existence of sexism through the portrayal of women in subservient roles, or their depiction as the "weaker" sex confined in making unimportant decisions. Knupfer (1998) suggests that internet advertisements depict females in submissive or helping roles that tend to emphasize sexuality, attractiveness, and dependency upon male protection. The same author notes that online advertisements of high-technology goods tend to use images of females in supportive or even helpless roles, while males are shown to use technological devices in productive ways that benefit their careers. Indeed women are seldom depicted in high-level professional roles, and when shown in the same or corresponding types of advertisements with those of men, they are associated with supportive and subordinate roles (Knupfer, 1998).

A similar study investigating female service assistants in a virtual setting shows that the web appears to perpetuate gender discrimination by constructing "ideal" images of women that combine sexuality and good looks (Gustansson and Czarniawska, 2004). This trend is also reflected on many traditional media female advertising studies conducted in the USA and Europe, which illustrate an increase in the use of traditional and decorative themes, and a decrease in the use of non-traditional roles (Bartsch et al., 2000; Milner and Collins, 2000; Piron and Young, 1996;

TABLE I

Categories of female role stereotypes

Category	Description
Women in traditional roles	
1. Dependency	Dependent on male's protection; In need of reassurance; Making unimportant decisions
2. Housewife	Women's place is at home; Primary role is to be a good wife; Concerned with tasks of housekeeping
Women in decorative roles	
3. Women concerned with physical attractiveness	Women in pursuit of beauty and physical attractiveness (e.g. youthful)
4. Women as sex objects	Sex is related to product; Sex is unrelated to product
Women in non-traditional roles	
5. Women in non-traditional activities	Engaged in activities outside home (e.g. extreme sports) or in masculine activities such as house construction
6. Career-oriented women	Professional occupations; Entertainer; Non-Professional; Blue Collar
7. Voice of authority	The expert
Women portrayed as equal to men	
8. Neutral	Women shown as equal to men

Sources: Belkaoui and Belkaoui (1976), Mitchell and Taylor (1990), Lysonski (1985), Zotos and Lysonski (1994).

Wiles et al., 1995; Zotos and Lysonski, 1994). Thus, we posit that:

Proposition 1 (P1): Females are likely to be depicted in online advertisements in traditional and decorative roles supporting sexism.

Female role portrayals across web audiences: second research objective

The content of web pages is developed to appeal and provide information to specific groups of Internet users (Chandon et al., 2003). The examination of depiction of women across the three categories of web audiences (female, male, and general) has implications to business ethics and marketing practice as advertisers wish to make sure that they target their audiences projecting the appropriate images. Nonetheless, the limited literature in the area of female role stereotypes on the Internet has not examined this link between online advertising and audience of web pages. Therefore, we draw inferences from the evidence that exists in print advertisements.

Such research reports specific female portrayals to be related to certain types of magazines. Analytically,

the literature focusing on female representations in female-oriented publications shows that these magazines tend to promote forms of sexism through the projection of decorative roles (Abernethy and Franke, 1996; Ferguson et al., 1990; Mitchell and Taylor, 1990). Ferguson et al. (1990) report that advertising in female-audience magazines cultivates sexism through the depiction of women pursuing beauty and being unable to cope with complicated tasks at professional settings. Similarly, Franzoi (2001) posits that sexism is associated with female-audience magazines, which is manifested in decorative roles linked to increased use of cosmetics and greater concern for physical attractiveness. All these results may be surprising given that one could expect that female magazines are likely to be associated with more egalitarian female roles. However, it may be that these advertisements project the images of attractive women, which although linked to decorative roles, can be welcomed by female readers as role models (Forbes et al., 2004).

This rather paradoxical evidence is further corroborated by findings showing that in male-audience magazines women are primarily depicted in non-traditional roles, including career-oriented women and women as

experts (Lysonski, 1985; Zotos and Lysonski, 1994; Zotos et al., 1996). This can be attributed to the fact that advertisers in these publications seek compelling recall of their ads in consumer minds through projecting such "revolutionary" roles. Moreover, the evidence regarding general-audience magazines is particularly scarce. Lysonski (1985) proposed that general-audience magazines frequently portray women as equal to men in an attempt to appeal to their mixed readership audiences. Based on the above, we advance the following three research propositions:

Proposition 2 (P2): Female-audience web pages are likely to portray female models in decorative roles supporting sexism.

Proposition 3 (P3): Male-audience web pages are likely to portray female models in non-traditional roles opposing sexism.

Proposition 4 (P4): General-audience web pages are likely to portray female as equal to men opposing sexism.

Methodology

To address the research propositions of the study we used content analysis. This method was chosen because it is best suited for providing "a scientific, quantitative and generalizable description of communications content" (Kassarjian, 1977, p. 10). To elaborate, for analyzing online advertising communication we applied the integrative approach to content analysis (Naccarato and Neuendorf, 1998). This approach combines *message-related variables* (categories of female role stereotypes) with *audience-centered variables* (categories of web audiences).

The current study paid particular attention to content analysis standards that refer to the sampling procedure and the subsequent coding process (cf. Naccarato and Neuendorf, 1998). Specifically, the sampling frame for this research consisted of a list of high-traffic web pages compiled using popular search engines (Yahoo and Google) and Nielsen Internet ratings of 2005 (www.nielsen–netra tings.com). 1,050 web pages were included in our sampling frame. All web pages in our sampling frame were accessed during a four-month period (February–May 2006). The criteria for inclusion of online advertisements in this study required that: (1) the product advertised was global as captured through its international reputation (e.g. L'Oreal) or its wide international market presence, as described in its web site, and (2) the web page was written in English (apart from possibly other languages).

The unit of analysis was rectangular banner advertisements embedded in the web page of a firm. Such rectangles constitute images that have clearly recognizable borders from other elements of the web page. The size and high image quality of rectangles facilitate the study of pictorial symbols such as gender stereotypes featuring in online advertisements (cf. Barrett, 1997). Rectangles constitute the bulk of online advertising and are used by almost all advertising agencies and corporations employing electronic media (Chandon et al., 2003).

To facilitate the comparison of female role stereotypes across web pages with different audiences, 200 web pages were examined for each of the three audience categories. Analytically, out of the 1,050 web pages in our sampling frame, a total of 600 rectangular online advertisements were *randomly* selected and subsequently coded according to (a) female role stereotypes and (b) intended audiences of web pages. Two coders (one male and one female) were trained to content analyze the online advertisements into the categories of female role stereotypes shown in Table I.

During these training sessions we clearly explained to the coders the key concepts and categories of the study. We also allocated codebooks and coding forms including guidelines, definitions, and tables for data input linked to the content analysis of online advertisements. To ensure the reliability of the coding process, the coders practiced this content analysis examining 100 online advertisements prior to the main study so as to learn how to use the instrument (cf. Weber, 1990). Such pilot coding assisted to significantly reduce differences in the interpretation of conceptual categories and promote consensus between coders. The coding in the main phase of the research was conducted by each coder individually. Specifically, the coders worked independently on the investigated advertisements ($n = 600$) and classified them by categories of female stereotypes and audience types. If an advertisement featured more than one stereotype, it was recorded according to its dominant stereotype.

Perreault and Liegh's (1989) reliability index was calculated for both coders. The operational range of values for this index was from 0.0 (no reliability) to 1.0 (perfect reliability). The reliability of this study was 0.93 for female stereotypes and 0.97 for web page audiences. Both these figures show that the reliability of the coding process is very high. Examined web pages referred to a wide variety of products including recreation and travel, auto and related products, jewelry, high-tech devices, apparel, cosmetics, movies and entertainment, food and drinks, household items (e.g. detergents), personal hygiene, financial services, and home appliances (see frequencies in Table II). Apparel items constitute the largest part (15%) of analyzed web sites, whereas household items the smallest part (2.67%). This classification of product categories was based on previous studies that examined female role stereotypes in advertising (Belkaoui and Belkaoui, 1976; Courtney and Lockertz, 1971; Ferguson et al., 1990).

Findings and discussion

Types of female role portrayals: first research objective

Table III provides the frequencies for role portrayals of women in investigated online advertisements. The examination of these data suggests that women are

TABLE II

Summary of product categories

Product categories	Absolute value (n = 600)	Frequency (%) (n = 600)
1. Recreation and travel	45	7.50
2. Auto and related products	76	12.68
3. Jewelry	19	3.17
4. High-tech devices	53	8.80
5. Apparel	90	15.00
6. Cosmetics	70	11.67
7. Movies and entertainment	22	3.68
8. Food and drinks	26	4.33
9. Household items	16	2.67
10. Personal hygiene	78	13.00
11. Financial services	69	11.50
12. Home appliances	36	6.00
Total	600	100.00

TABLE III

Frequencies of female role stereotypes

Category of Stereotype	Absolute value (n = 600)	Frequency (%)
Women in traditional roles		
1. Dependency	17	2.84
2. Housewife	91	15.16
Women in decorative roles		
3. Women concerned with physical attractiveness	198	33.00
4. Women as sex objects	105	17.50
Women in non-traditional roles		
5. Women in non-traditional activities	69	11.50
6. Career-oriented women	76	12.66
7. Voice of authority	3	0.50
Women portrayed as equal to men		
8. *Neutral*	41	6.83
Total	600	100.00

primarily portrayed in decorative roles, notably those "concerned with physical attractiveness" (33.00%) and as "sex objects" (17.50%). In total, these images of women in decorative roles refer to slightly more than half of the sample of advertisements (50.5%). In light of this evidence, the ideals of femininity communicated in online advertisements can be linked to the notion of "perfect provocateur" (Cortese, 1999, p. 54), namely images of women that display physical attractiveness and sexual seductiveness servicing needs of others. The evidence from the current study also appears to be at par with that documenting the increased use of decorative images of women in traditional media of TV and print advertisements (Bartsch et al., 2000; Milner and Collins, 2000; Piron and Young, 1996; Wiles et al., 1995; Zotos and Lysonski, 1994; Zotos et al., 1996).

Similarly, women are projected in traditional roles in 18% of the advertisements of the sample, notably in dependency roles in 2.84% and as housewives in 15.16%. This result reinforces the observations of Knupfer (1998), who suggests that women in online advertisements may appear as low-value product (e.g. cleaning detergents) users performing in-house tasks. Generally, almost 70% (68.5) of the sample presents women in roles linked to the notions of

hostile and benevolence sexism, notably traditional or decorative roles. Consequently, Proposition 1, which presumed that females were depicted in online advertisements through these stereotypical images reinforcing sexism, is supported.

The frequency of appearance of women in traditional roles in online advertisements (18%) seems to be higher than the respective percentages in print media (Wiles et al., 1995; Zotos and Lysonski, 1994). This suggests that advertisers on the Internet may perceive some merit in using family values to appeal to female audiences, especially working mothers who increasingly invest their discretionary incomes in online shopping (Kim and Kim, 2004). However, even if this is indeed the case, it still backs sexist values in societies worldwide.

In terms of portrayals of women in non-traditional roles, the results show that such innovative role stereotypes account for almost a quarter (24.66%) of the investigated online advertisements. Specifically, women in non-traditional activities appear in 11.5% of the advertisements, career-oriented women in 12.66%, and women as voices of authority in 0.5%. Also, as shown in Table III, the portrayal of women as equal to men represents a very small fraction of the sample (6.83%), a finding that bears similarity with evidence drawn from traditional media (Lysonski, 1985).

Female role portrayals across web audiences: second research objective

To investigate the second research objective (Propositions P2–P4), we conducted cross-tabulation analysis and estimated the respective Pearson chi-square values. The findings suggest that there are statistically significant differences in the way women are depicted in female-, male-, and general-audience web pages. Table IV presents these results for the three categories of web page audiences investigated in this study. The Pearson chi-square value illustrates that there is an association between female role stereotypes and web pages of different audiences ($\chi^2 = 158.031$, $p < 0.0005$). We examined the adjusted residuals, which represent the differences between the observed and expected counts for each cell. We searched for figures below −2 or above +2 (cf. SPSS, 2005) to identify values that markedly depart from the model of independence (italicized values in Table IV).

Proposition P2 suggested that female-audience web pages were likely to portray female models in decorative roles supporting sexism. The results of adjusted residuals indeed present a tendency toward embracing decorative female role stereotypes, especially those of women concerned with physical attractiveness (+9.6) compared with male or general internet audiences. In relation to the other decorative role, the depiction of women as sex objects did not present significant differences between female and male audiences (it lacked (−2.3) in the general audience type). Therefore, inasmuch as decorative roles in female-audience web pages of global products are prevalent, P2 is generally supported and sexist values seem to dominate online advertisements for the female audience. The evidence also suggests that female-audience web pages are less likely to portray women in non-traditional activities (−2.6), as career-oriented (−3.0), or equal to men (−2.6). These insights further corroborate the role of female-audience web pages in cultivating sexist representations of women as derogatory objects in pursuit of beauty. This finding is in accordance with evidence of studies that suggests that advertising in female-audience publications plays a part in creating and reinforcing a preoccupation with physical attractiveness (Ferguson et al., 1990; Lysonski, 1985; Taylor et al., 2005; Zotos and Lysonski, 1994). The result that female-audience web pages are less likely to show women as housewives (−5.2) is encouraging, although it only partially seems to ameliorate the overall sexism picture. On the whole, female-oriented web pages appear to create and exploit anxiety of women to meet frequently unrealistic beauty standards set by online advertisements of global products.

Proposition P3 predicted an association between male-audience web pages and the depiction of women in non-traditional roles. The results for web pages regarding this audience demonstrate polarizing trends in the depiction of women in online advertisements partially supporting P3. On the one hand, advertisements encountered in male-audience web pages include innovative depictions of females engaged in non-traditional activities (+4.5) and professional tasks (+4.1). As stated, this could be associated with the intended recall effect that

TABLE IV

Female role stereotypes across web page audiences

Web page audience	Female	Male	General	Total
Female role stereotype				
Women in traditional roles				
Dependency (%)	11.8	58.8	29.4	100.0
Adjusted residual	−1.9	*2.3*	−0.3	
Housewife (%)	9.8	41.3	48.9	100.0
Adjusted residual	*−5.2*	1.8	*3.4*	
Women in decorative roles				
Women concerned with physical attractiveness (%)	59.6	7.6	32.8	100.0
Adjusted residual	*9.6*	*−9.4*	−0.2	
Women as sex object (%)	36.2	40.0	23.8	100.0
Adjusted residual	0.7	1.6	*−2.3*	
Women in non-traditional roles				
Women in non-traditional activities (%)	19.1	57.4	23.5	100.0
Adjusted residual	*−2.6*	*4.5*	−1.8	
Career-oriented women (%)	18.4	53.9	27.6	100.0
Adjusted residual	*−3.0*	*4.1*	−1.1	
Voice of authority (%)	0.0	33.3	66.7	100.0
Adjusted residual	−1.2	0.0	1.2	
Women portrayed as equal to men				
Neutral (%)	14.6	34.1	51.2	100.0
Adjusted residual	*−2.6*	0.1	*2.5*	
Total (%)	33.3	33.3	33.3	100.0

Pearson chi-square value = 158.031, df = 14, Asymp. Sig. (2-sided) = 0.000.

advertisers seek to pursue in these web pages. Further, it can be that advertisers in male-audience web pages wish to project sophisticated images of women to match the equally stylish male reader audience. On the other hand, male-audience web pages of global products also promote a sexist representation of women by including online advertisements that portray women in dependency roles (+2.3). Based on these results, the evidence from the current study is consistent with findings of Mitchell and Taylor (1990) in favor of a dual pattern in images of women in advertising in male-oriented magazines: one toward progressive representations of women in non-traditional and career-oriented roles, and another backing sexist portrayals of women in traditional dependency images.

Proposition P4 supported the notion that general-audience web pages were likely to portray females as equal to males opposing sexism. Again the findings

provide a twofold picture partially supporting P4. Specifically, the results show that internet advertisements embedded in general-audience web pages are more likely to use the theme ''neutral'' (+2.5) compared with female- and male-oriented web pages. The use of these egalitarian stereotypes may be explained if one takes into account the effort of advertisers in general-audience web pages to attract visitors from both genders. The same contention can explain the finding that general-audience web pages are less likely to use sexist cues (−2.3) to portray women.

Nonetheless, the results also show that the appearance of the ''housewife'' stereotype is highly prevalent (+3.4), supporting sexism. This finding may be explained by observations of MacDonald (2003), who postulates that advertising increasingly promotes female portrayals in domestic chores such as decorating and interior designing, gardening, and

preparing healthy meals. According to the same author, such a relaxing alternative to work outside the home projected in general-type audiences could be an attempt to highlight the importance of family norms. However, such a practice could also be associated with sexist values, inasmuch as women are shown performing alternative activities for satisfying or servicing their family members rather than their personal development.

Conclusion

Summary

The two objectives in this study were: (1) to provide evidence on the content of female role portrayals in online advertisements, and (2) to investigate the levels of female stereotyping across web pages developed for different audience types. To the best of our knowledge, such an endeavor investigating female role stereotypes in Internet advertisements for global products does not exist in prior literature.

The findings indicated, first, that women in online advertisements were mainly portrayed in traditional or decorative roles, although some progress was made in the use of non-traditional and egalitarian cues to depict females. This evidence adds to the body of literature that documents the form of (hostile and benevolent) sexism in female roles in traditional media (Belkaoui and Belkaoui, 1976; Ferguson et al., 1990; Sexton and Haberman, 1974; Soley and Kurzbard, 1986). Second, the results showed a tendency of female-audience web pages toward embracing decorative female images, particularly depictions of women in pursuit of physical attractiveness. Hence, sexism is largely prevailing in these female-audience web pages. Nevertheless, the same seems to hold to a large extent in both male and general-type audiences, although innovative stereotypes also exist in them. Particularly, in male-oriented websites, females are represented in dependent (or non-traditional) roles; whereas in general-audience types, women are shown as housewives (or equal to men). All these findings are likely to influence female stereotypes internationally because the examined advertisements concern global products and so are accessed by customers worldwide.

Implications

This study has significant ethical and marketing practice implications. Analytically, the results of this study raise ethical concerns regarding the portrayal of women in online advertising. Generally, the evidence suggests that online advertising appears to emphasize decorative roles of women and promote an unattainable ideal of beauty. Viewed in this light, happiness and self-enhancement of women may depend on material standards of living and purchases of products that promise eternal beauty. This stereotypical representation of females in online advertisements (and especially in female-audience web pages) could negatively affect the self-confidence of women, and hence, limit their future aspirations and expectations for equity in compensation. According to Kilbourne (1999), decorative images of women in advertising have afflicted females with a range of problems including low self-esteem, eating disorders, and binging, which arise from an attempt of women to adapt to a false self to become more "feminine."

Internet advertising appears to show to a considerable degree females in traditional and submissive roles, suggesting that women are constantly in need of reassurance from their male counterparts. According to Cohan (2001), women who identify with the stereotypes of being defenseless and in need of help make up the most susceptible targets for the advertising industry. Based on the above, the portrayal of women in traditional and decorative roles treats women "as a commodity, as a means to something else, rather than ends to themselves" (Cohan, 2001, p. 329). This is an important finding since Klassen et al. (1993) suggest that the way women are depicted in advertisements will continue to shape societal values regarding the "appropriate" roles they undertake in the society. This is particularly the case given that examined products achieve a global coverage affecting a large number of societies worldwide.

Consequently, the advertising industry would better adopt a new paradigm encompassing an improved representation of women in advertising and reflecting their egalitarian roles in the society internationally. The Internet may have a colossal effect as it significantly facilitates firms to build global recognition (Prashantham, 2003; Yip, 2000). It could

serve as a medium raising awareness of consumers regarding female manipulation in advertising. Online advertisements of global products achieving a worldwide coverage may potentially resist sexism and promote the image of a woman in innovative roles. Internet advertising of global brands can be a powerful means to change minds of people and advance open "international societies" (cf. Houston, 2003).

Future research

This study faces potential limitations that could suggest directions for further research. An unexplored issue in the current study is linked to the fact that a negative or sexist depiction of women in advertising may have an adverse effect on the image of firms that choose such an approach to promote their products, and potentially, on their sales. The fact that a growing segment of women worldwide has a large discretionary income emphasizes the importance of such a conjecture. Literature suggests that modern women tend to be more critical of advertisements that are inconsistent with their role orientation (Ford et al., 1991, 1997). Further, a relevant study (Ford et al., 1991) conducted on a sample of upscale women demonstrates that 63% of the respondents express their intent to discontinue using a product associated with demeaning sexual stereotypes. This same study illustrates that women are alert to female role portrayals in advertising and this attitude influences their purchasing decisions. Based on the above, it may be inferred that a paradigm shift in the online advertising industry can disregard stereotypes outdated by social change as well as assist global firms accomplish increased sales, and thus, improve advertising effectiveness (cf. Cohan, 2001). Future research could shed some light into these untested propositions.

Apart from this, the current study has investigated online banner advertisements to generate insights regarding the depiction of females in online advertisements. Researchers can also consider additional forms of online advertising, such as interstitials, advertorials, and e-mails, which incorporate animation and video to acquire a comprehensive picture on the degree to which sexist female role stereotypes dominate the Internet. Future studies can also be complemented by longitudinal research that may illuminate whether and how portrayals of women in online advertising have changed *over time*. In addition, cross-national comparisons of audience perceptions toward online advertisements of global products would be illuminating in finding out whether the internet indeed affects consumer minds of the "global society" similarly or whether individual country differences occur.

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