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This is the author's manuscript

Original Citation:

Availability:

This version is available <http://hdl.handle.net/2318/1523816> since 2015-09-03T14:10:34Z

Published version:

DOI:10.1177/0022022115597068

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UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI TORINO

This is an author version of the contribution published on:

Questa è la versione dell'autore dell'opera:

Gender Stereotyping in Newspaper Advertisements A Cross-Cultural Study.

Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 46(8), 1103-1109. DOI:

10.1177/0022022115597068

The definitive version is available at:

La versione definitiva è disponibile alla URL:

us.sagepub.com

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Gender stereotyping in newspapers advertisements: a cross-cultural study

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Gender stereotyping in newspapers advertisements: a cross-cultural study

Abstract

The objective of the present study was to investigate the presence of gender stereotypes concerning occupational roles and sexualization in newspapers advertisements of two European countries very different for cultural values and gender equality, i.e. Italy and The Netherlands. The top three newspapers by circulation in each country were selected. We included all the issues of these newspapers published in one month. We selected all the advertisements of a quarter a page in size or larger containing at least one adult human. Using content analysis, 1666 characters depicted in the selected advertisements were coded by independent judges. Results demonstrated that men were primarily featured in playing professional roles, whereas women were more frequently presented as decorative. Compared to males, female characters were also more frequently sexualized and this phenomenon was stronger in the more gender unequal country, i.e. Italy. Because of the role of advertising in shaping the cultural values, policy makers and cultural promoters should try to further with some kind of incentives a more equalitarian representation of genders in advertisements.

Keywords : Gender stereotypes, Advertising, Mass Media, Sexualization, Gender roles.

Gender stereotypes are set of beliefs concerning attributes that are supposed to differentiate women and men. Like other stereotypical beliefs, gender stereotypes are consensual and exist as ideology that is socially built and shared (Rollero, Glick, & Tartaglia, 2014). According to the Role Congruity Theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) gender stereotypes specify which social and professional roles are appropriate for each gender. Indeed, power and leadership roles are perceived as congruent with men, whereas care and relational roles are perceived as congruent with women (Rollero & Tartaglia, 2013). A specific aspect of gender stereotypes pertains to sexual objectification of women. The objectification perspective (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) underlines that women are

largely objectified in Western societies, as they are seen as a sexualized object, separate from nonphysical characteristics. Sexual objectification implies “valuing people primarily for their sex appeal, and setting sexiness as a standard of physical attractiveness” (Nowatski & Morry, 2009, p. 95). In respect to men, women are more often presented or conceived as sex objects, available for visual inspection, evaluation, and the pleasure of others (Moradi & Huang, 2008). Yet, although physical attractiveness is a noteworthy advantage for both genders, human culture values attractiveness more in women than in men and more frequently women are evaluated on the basis of their physical appearance (Langlois et al., 2000).

Advertising and gender stereotypes

Scholars consider advertising to be more than bare communication about products: it is also a conveyor of cultural values (Lamoreaux & Morling, 2012). Two opposite positions characterize the debate about advertising’s consequences for society: the “mirror” perspective assumes that advertising reflects values that already exist (Holbrook, 1987), whereas the “mold” argument states that advertising can shape the target’s values (Davies, Spencer, Quinn, & Gerhardstein, 2002; Pollay, 1986). Scholars across different fields have examined gender portrayals in advertising and generally agree that women are still being depicted in negative and stereotypical ways despite changes in their societal roles (Davies et al., 2002; Mager & Helgeson, 2011; Plakoyiannaki & Zotos, 2009), although a meta-analysis suggests that gender stereotyping seems to be decreasing over the years (Eisend, 2010). Of all dimensions, occupational status and sexualization are the components with the highest degree of stereotyping in advertising. Men are more often depicted in advertising and are primarily featured in playing important occupational roles, whereas women are more frequently presented as subordinate to men and are used as decorations or sex objects more often than men (Eisend, 2010; Odekerken-Schroder, De Wulf, & Hofstee, 2002).

The cultural context: Italy and The Netherlands from a gender perspective

About a dozen of cross-cultural content-analytic studies has shown that the portrayals of women and men's roles in advertising differ by culture. Where sex roles are more fluid there tends to be less gender differences in advertising's portrayals, whereas in societies where sex roles are differential there tends to be a dissimilarity between men and women's depictions (An & Kim, 2007; Odekerken-Schroder et al., 2002). Most cross-cultural research on advertising is based on Hofstede's (1984) measurement of Masculinity (i.e. preference in society for achievement, heroism, assertiveness and material rewards for success) versus Femininity (i.e. preference for cooperation, modesty, and caring for the weak) cultural values (MAS). In the Hofstede's (1991) study The Netherlands (MAS score: 14) is one of the most feminine European countries, whereas Italy is the second most masculine European country (MAS score: 70). Considering other relevant country-level indexes of gender equality (UNDP, 2007), The Netherlands is the sixth more equalitarian nation in the world and Italy is one of the less equalitarian European countries (i.e. a rank of 21st among 91 world nations).

Previous studies analyzed gender stereotyping in Dutch advertising, comparing The Netherlands with more masculine countries (i.e. the UK and the US). The results showed that magazine advertisements in the UK portrayed women less in a working role and more as sex objects than commercials in The Netherlands (Odekerken-Schroder et al., 2002). Similarly, Wiles and colleagues (1995) found that US advertising shows stronger gender biases and stereotypes than Dutch advertising. Surprisingly, at best of our knowledge no comparative study on gender stereotypes in advertising has considered neither Italy nor other southern Europe countries, which are usually more masculine oriented.

Aims and hypotheses

The objective of the present study was to investigate the presence of gender stereotypes in newspapers advertisements of two European countries very different for MAS cultural values and for gender equality, i.e. Italy and The Netherlands. Since occupational status and sexualization are

the components with the highest degree of gender stereotyping in advertising, the presence of such stereotypes was the specific focus of our study. Concerning roles, we expected that, compared to women, men would be more often depicted in working roles (H1), whereas women would be more often portrayed in non-working recreational roles (H2) and decorative roles (H3) than men. Concerning sexualization, we hypothesized that, compared to males, female characters would be more often objectified (H4), would be more attractive (H5), and would wear more often a seductive type of dress (H6). We posited that all the above-supposed differences should be stronger in Italy than in The Netherlands, being Italy a more masculine and gender-unequal country (H7).

Method

Sampling and coding procedure

Following Odekerken-Schroder and colleagues (2002), we made a content analysis to assess gender stereotyping in printed advertisements. We used three Italian and three Dutch daily newspapers, selecting the top three newspapers by circulation in each country. The Italian newspapers were *Corriere della Sera* (average daily circulation of 462444¹), *La Repubblica* (418424), and *La Stampa* (295876), the Dutch ones were *De Telegraaf* (452390), *Algemeen Dagblad* (349614), and *De Volkskrant* (219.303). We included in the analysis all the issues of these newspapers published from June 3 to July 2 2014. Based on Odekerken-Schroder et al.'s procedure (2002), we selected all the advertisements of a quarter a page in size or larger containing at least one adult human (N=1164). In the selected period the Italian newspapers published more advertisements (N = 887) than the Dutch ones (N = 277). This can be partially due to the fact that the Dutch newspapers are published six days per week, whereas in Italy newspapers are published each day of the week. When the same advertisements appeared more than once in the selected period, they were all included in the sample, in order to reflect the real exposure of the readers. The central characters of the advertisements were

¹ The Italian newspapers circulation has been retrieved from the website of the Italian Federation of Newspapers Publishers (www.fieg.it). The Dutch newspapers circulation has been retrieved from <http://marketingtribune.nl/media/nieuws/2014/09/hoi-cijfers-digitale-groei-kan-daling-print-oplage-dagbladen-niet-stuiten/index.xml>

coded limiting the analysis to no more than two characters for any advertisement. “A character was classified as a central character when the focus of the advertising was on the body and/or activities of that person.” (Odekerken-Schroder et al. 2002, p. 413). On the whole, 1666 characters were analyzed, 1228 (740 males and 488 females) in the Italian advertisings and 438 (236 males and 202 females) in the Dutch ones.

Based on the classification scheme of Odekerken-Schroder and colleagues (2002), beside the characters’ gender (0 = male; 1 = female), we examined three dichotomous variables referring to the depicted role and three dichotomous variables concerning the degree of sexualization of the character analyzed. The variables were: working role (0 = no; 1 = yes); recreational role (0 = no; 1 = yes), i.e. the character was depicted in a non-working leisure activity (e.g. watching TV, jogging, ...); decorative role (0 = no; 1 = yes), i.e. the character played a passive and non-functional role; objectification (0 = no; 1 = yes), i.e. the character drew the viewer’s attention mainly to the body or to body parts; attractiveness (0 = no; 1 = yes); seductive dress (0 = no; 1 = yes). The attractiveness was assessed looking at the face of the character (if visible) and avoiding any reference to other features (i.e. dress, makeup, position). Given the known preference for attractive people in advertising we considered attractive only the characters particularly beautiful. In addition, we coded the kind of working roles played by the characters (9 categories). Two researchers, one male and one female, coded independently the first 100 characters to test the reliability of the coding procedure. In almost all the cases, the resulting classification was identical. Then the classification scheme was applied to the entire sample. The coders were both Italians, but one of them lived in The Netherlands.

Results

Table 1 reports the frequencies and percentages of characters having each characteristic investigated. Table 2 reports the percentages of characters having the above presented characteristics, divided by gender and country where the advertising was published. Following

Plakoyiannaki and Zotos (2009), we performed two-way ANOVAs to determine the effects of the country of publication and of the character's gender on the percentage of various characteristics classified. Concerning roles, there were significant main effects of country and gender of the character but there was no interaction effect. In Italy, there were more characters with decorative roles, whereas in The Netherlands working and recreational roles were more frequent. Men played more frequently working roles whereas women the recreational and decorative ones.

Objectification and attractiveness were influenced in the same way by country, gender, and both variables in interaction. There were more objectified and attractive characters among Italians and females and in Italy the effect of gender was larger than in The Netherlands. Finally, gender had an effect also on the probability of wearing a seductive dress and the interaction effect was significant too. Compared to males, a greater proportion of female characters wore seductive dress and this gender difference was significantly larger in Italy.

Table 3 reports the frequency and percentages of characters playing the different working roles.

Testing the effects of country of publication and gender of the character (see Table 4), we found that four roles were more frequent among males (i.e. Artist/sportsman, Driver, Hand labourer, and Policeman/soldier) and two were more frequent in the Dutch advertisings (i.e. Artist/sportsman and Employee). All the characters playing the role of Driver and Policeman/soldier were males. There was no interaction effect between gender and country.

Discussion

All the hypotheses about gender differences were confirmed. Men played more working roles than women (H1), whereas women played more recreational and decorative roles (H2 and H3). These results are consistent with literature demonstrating that men are primarily featured in playing professional roles, whereas women are more frequently presented as decorative (Eisend, 2010; Odekerken-Schroder et al., 2002; Plakoyiannaki & Zotos, 2009). Following the Role Congruity Theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), we can argue that such depictions address and reinforce gender

stereotypes concerning the social and professional roles appropriate for each gender. Examining the kind of working role there are four jobs associated more frequently with male characters whereas none with females. Concerning sexualization, in line with previous literature (Rollero, 2013) and our hypotheses, female characters were more frequently objectified (H4), were more attractive (H5), and wore more often seductive dresses (H6) than males. The hypothesis that all the gender effects should be stronger in Italy (H7), being a more masculine and gender-unequal country, was confirmed for sexualization but not for the roles. As suggested by previous studies (Milner & Collins, 2000; Odekerken-Schroder et al., 2002), in societies where sex roles are clearly differential there are larger dissimilarity between men and women's depictions. Actually, in Italian advertisings the female characters were more often objectified, were more attractive, and more frequently dressed in a sexualized way than in Dutch advertisings. The "mirror" conception of advertising could be useful to explain such cultural differences, as Italian versus Dutch advertising could reflect values that are present in society. We should express caution with regard to the lower attractiveness of Dutch characters because both coders were Italian (although one of them lived in The Netherlands). Anyway, the results concerning attractiveness are consistent with those regarding sexualization.

This study presents limitations, which suggest directions for future research. Future research may need to make a cross-media comparison to see if the difference is generalizable across different media types. Moreover, additional countries should be analyzed. A larger variety of countries differing in terms of masculinity and gender equality would strengthen present results and permit stronger cross-cultural comparison.

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TABLES

Table 1. Description of the central characters of the advertisings: frequency and percentages.

	Frequency	Percentage
Working role	418	25.1
Recreational role	265	15.9
Decorative role	940	56.4
Objectified	262	15.7
Attractive	573	34.4
Seductive dress	140	8.4

Table 2. Characters depiction across Genders and Countries: Percentages and ANOVA results.

	Italy		The Netherlands		Country	Character's	Interaction
	%		%			Gender	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	F	F	F
<i>Working role</i>	29.2	15.6	37.3	18.8	5.60*	44.85**	1.03
<i>Recreational role</i>	9.1	14.1	26.7	32.7	81.96**	7.67**	.05
<i>Decorative role</i>	60.8	68.7	28.0	44.1	114.99**	19.96**	2.38
<i>Objectified</i>	3.7	39.1	3.0	18.3	34.06**	190.36**	29.87**
<i>Attractive</i>	25.4	59.0	16.5	28.7	61.03**	83.37**	18.24**
<i>Seductive dress</i>	0.4	20.3	2.5	15.8	.61	126.75**	4.99*

** p<.01; * p<.05

Table 3. Working role played by the central characters of the advertisings: frequency and percentages.

	Frequency	Percentage
Medicine doctor	22	1.3
Manager	60	3.6
Restaurant & Bar (cook, waiter ...)	22	1.3
Artist/Sportsman	129	7.6
Driver	13	0.8
Hand labourer	56	3.3
Policeman/Soldier	37	2.2
Employee	60	3.6
Other	27	1.6

Table 4. Characters working role across Genders and Countries: Percentages and ANOVA results.

	Italy		The Netherlands		Country	Character's	Interaction
	%		%			Gender	between Country and Gender
	Male	Female	Male	Female	F	F	F
<i>Medicine doctor</i>	1.4	1.2	1.7	1.0	.01	.42	.21
<i>Manager</i>	3.2	3.7	5.1	3.0	.59	.43	.22
<i>Restaurant & Bar</i>	1.5	1.0	0.4	1.9	.01	.76	2.60
<i>Artist/Sportsman</i>	10.0	2.5	14.4	4.5	4.67*	34.82**	.66
<i>Driver</i>	1.0	0.0	2.5	0.0	2.63	12.57**	2.63
<i>Hand labourer</i>	4.4	2.9	3.8	0.0	3.03	7.17**	1.21
<i>Policeman/Soldier</i>	4.1	0.0	2.9	0.0	.44	18.29**	.44
<i>Employee</i>	1.6	2.7	6.8	9.4	33.04**	3.14	.59

** p<.01; * p<.05