

GENDER-RELATED ISSUES IN ROMANIAN PRINT ADVERTISING

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Abstract: *This paper aims to analyze print advertisements in Romania today to see how gender roles are portrayed. The paper applies an empirical research method to the study of gender-related issues in advertisements in women and men's magazines. It also applies the semantic differential on a group of 100 respondents to verify the hypothesis according to which the capitalist society of our days still discriminates women by presenting stereotypes specific to late 20th century.*

Key words: *gender, advertisements, stereotypes*

1. INTRODUCTION

The topic of gender has been of great interest for a longer time than most people would imagine. Deprived of the knowledge we have today, people used their imagination to explain the existence of the two sexes and their permanent attraction, thus creating wonderful myths that do not cease to enchant us. Such is Plato's androgyny myth with the two separated halves that are in constant search for each other. Psychologists have gone beyond the physical relationship claiming that the male/female opposites are the two constituent parts of the human psyche. According to Jung (1997) there is a feminine side of the male's unconscious mind, which he called anima containing a subconscious imprint of feminine characteristics. Similarly, women have an animus in their psyche, this being a set of unconscious masculine attributes and potentials. This explains why we perceive the opposite sex as we do. Our impressions are not actually based on our personal observations but rely deeply on the model imprinted in our collective unconscious. They represent the expectations that we have of one sex or another, also called stereotypes. Gender stereotypes relate to the appropriate roles of males and females within various cultures and societies. They refer to the assignment of traits and tasks on a gender basis: thus women seem to be more often associated with the domestic area while men tend to be related to external activities. Scientists agree on biological and physical differences between men and women, which can be both genetic and hormonal, but the differences in men and women heavily rely on a complex interaction between physical and social factors, with the latter having perhaps a greater influence than the former. Thus, the assignment of sex-roles greatly depends on the various expectations a society has for men and women. Therefore, male-associated items will have connotations such as activity and strength while female related items will have passivity and weakness as connotations (Williams and Best, 1990).

Advertisements are considered to be glimpses of the society within which they occur; therefore their study should reveal social attitudes, beliefs, therefore stereotypes as well. The study of gender stereotypes in advertising should be relevant for the culture that produces them. Researchers such as Goffman (1988) identified various instances of gender stereotyping in advertisements as follows: functional ranking, relative size, ritualization of subordination, the feminine touch

and licensed withdrawal. Other researchers included themes that presented women as mothers and housewives and men as strong independent leaders involved in activities outside the home (Courtney & Whipple, 1983).

In 1997 Kang replicates Goffman's theory adding two more categories: (1) body display; (2) independence and self-assertiveness. Overwhelmingly, these researchers conclude that women are traditionally portrayed, that their place is rather at home than in the workforce, that women depend on men for protection, that they are sex objects or just beautiful decorations.

This paper intends to show that instances of traditional stereotypes are still found in Romanian print advertisements today, despite women's new position as equal to men in our society. Aiming to go beyond an empirical study, which shows that advertisements still present traditional gender stereotypes, a group of 100 male and female respondents at Dimitrie Cantemir University of Tg.Mures, Romania was selected to verify their perception of gender stereotypes in print advertising. They were first given a questionnaire to find out what magazines they read. The semantic differential method was further applied emphasizing on both modern and traditional gender characteristics. The results were processed by means of the SPSS statistics program. In order to investigate significant differences regarding gender perception by male and female respondents, a paired sampled test was also applied. The results showed that women continue to be seen as sex objects, less independent and active than men. Moreover, men's portrayal has not changed either: they still abide to traditional stereotypes that present them as strong and independent.

By applying the semantic differential method, this paper verifies the extent to which aspects of traditional gender stereotypes in advertisements are reflected back to the society that produces them thus raising awareness on the power of deeply rooted stereotypes.

2. INFORMATION

The paper analyzes Romanian print advertising in an attempt to show that the communist regime of late 20th century has deeply marked the perception of gender roles for many years. The study focuses on the portrayal of women in traditional roles and as sexual objects. Romanian culture has traditionally promoted the patriarchal model according to which women are assigned to the private area and are mostly seen as submissive, dependent mothers and housewives while men are assigned roles in the public area, being seen as strong, hardworking and independent. The communist period extended these representations by imposing the idea of a working mother and housewife. Women were expected to be equal to men by joining them in the workforce. In a previous study we analyzed advertisements in a Romanian women magazine of the 1970, when communism was in full swing. Women were indeed portrayed as expected (30% of

advertisements showed working women) while a percentage of 60% showed women as consumers, which is quite surprising considering that the communist regime did not encourage consumerism.

One decade after the fall of communism, there are no advertisements to remind of her preoccupations as mother and housewife while the rest of the percentages remain similar to those of the 1970s (33% working women and 67% consumers) despite the other changes women have gone through in their real life such as being more confident and independent. Kang (1997) also observed that few changes have occurred in the representation of women from the 1979 to 1991. This is just another proof that changes in social attitudes and beliefs do not occur overnight. Moreover, traditional sex-roles for men have not altered much either, since they are still connected to work as they have always been. They still represent power and strength whether they are involved in physical work or office work, at home or at work. Men are still seen as seducers, strong and rebellious while women are to be seduced.

It seems that the dominant cultural model is very strong and changing it requires people to be aware of it. Lazier and Kendrick (1993) argue that stereotyping of portrayals of women are still inaccurate since they do not reflect the significant changes women have gone through in the last years. They consider that advertisements still use outdated stereotypes thus ignoring the new life of independent powerful women in our society today. In the magazines of 2010, there are advertisements where women seem to be in control of their body, sexuality and social status, even dominating men. This could be the image of the new woman, assuming her new status, confident to show that nakedness can be perceived just as it is, natural and beautiful, and not as an erotic appeal.

This paper studies gender stereotypes in Romanian print advertising, namely in men and women magazines of the year 2010 to acknowledge gender perception in the younger generation. A number of 100 male and female respondents were selected, aged between 18 and 25, students at Dimitrie Cantemir University of Tg.Mures, Romania. After applying a questionnaire as to the magazines they read, the semantic differential (Osgood,1975) was applied to verify their perception of gender characteristics reflected in advertising. The students were instructed to state their opinion on the image of women and men in Romanian print advertising on a binary scale from 1 to 5 as shown in the table (tab. 1). The adjectives chosen were meant to reflect major gender characteristics of traditional men and women, following the categories identified by Courtney and Whipple (1983), Goffman (1988) and Kang (1997).

The results were processed by means of the SPSS statistics program. In order to investigate significant differences regarding gender perception by male and female respondents, a paired sample test was applied, the results being summarized in the table below (tab. 2)

	1	2	3	4	5	
passive			x			active
delicate				x		strong
successful			x			unsuccessful
submissive		x				rebellious
dependent			x			independent
natural			x			sophisticated
sexually aggressive				x		sexually non aggressive
sexual objects				x		non sexual objects
discriminated			x			not discriminated

Tab. 1 Table on semantic differential applied to participants

Descriptors	Paired sample test (t)	Significance level
Passive-active	-4.304	.000
Delicate-strong	-8.296	.000
Dependent-independent	-2.061	.042
Natural-Sophisticated	2.026	.045
Discrimination - non-discrimination	-.023	.034

Tab. 2. Table on paired sample test

As the table highlights, the following features have been identified as statistically relevant regarding the stereotypical perception of men and women:

- Passive-active: men are perceived to be more active than women (t=-4,304, p=.000)
- Delicate-strong: men are perceived to be stronger than women (t=-8,296, p=.000)
- Dependent-Independent: both sexes perceive men to be more independent than women (t=-2.062, p=.042)
- Natural-Sophisticated: women are perceived to be more sophisticated than men (t=2.026, p=.045)
- Discrimination-non-discrimination: women are perceived to be discriminated against, in comparison with men (t=-2.149, p=.034)

According to the data obtained, women seem to have gained characteristics that might eventually help them break the traditional stereotype imposed by a patriarchal society. They may have managed to equal men in real life but this is not reflected in advertising, where men still dominate.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Traditional gender roles are still present in Romanian advertising, but there are significant changes in the portrayal of women. Women are generally portrayed as strong, independent and active, but still less strong, independent and active than men. Moreover, they are still discriminated against by being treated as sexual objects while men have generally kept their traditional position as powerful and independent. Changing traditional stereotypes deeply imprinted in men's anima may seem impossible; however, taking a stand and trying to raise men awareness on the new woman, equally strong and independent, seems to have already made a difference. Further studies might show that eventually advertisers will stop using outdated stereotypes or they will risk offending the most important consumers they address: women.

4. REFERENCES

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