

Rodni stereotipi i moć marketinga zasnovanog na spolu

Perica, Iva

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UNIVERSITY OF ZAGREB
FACULTY OF CROATIAN STUDIES

Student: Iva Perica

**GENDER STEREOTYPES AND THE
POWER OF GENDERED MARKETING**

BACHELOR'S THESIS

Zagreb, September, 2020

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Mentor: Spomenka Bogdanić, Lecturer

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1. Introduction

"There is scarcely a home, in a city or hamlet, where some human being is not doing what [advertising companies] demand. The good advertising man comes pretty close to being an absolute czar." Claude Hopkins (Lears, 1984:359) according to James Twitchell (1996: 14).

Ads are everywhere. This quote from 1909 clearly demonstrates the generally accepted perception of the power of advertisement more than a hundred years ago, and not much has changed today. The human brain is an undeniably powerful machine, capable of many amazing feats we know of, and likely some we don't. However, its very capacity for incredible data input and retention makes it vulnerable to targeted messages. Nobody likes admitting that commercials have an influence on them, always pointing fingers at their neighbours while claiming to be immune themselves. The fact is, it has been rigorously tested and unquestionably proven that advertisements affect us much more than we may realize. Ad companies invest a lot of time, effort and money into doing what they do best – sell a certain version of reality.

How much their reality coincides with the real world has always been questionable and under scrutiny, because reality is all about perception. And as such, it affects different people in very different ways. Is the created reality we consume through the media a true reflection of the state of society? And if not, what effects can and do commercials have on a population faced with advertisement at every turn? Do we change our opinions, behaviours or habits based on the products and services advertisers try to convince us are essential? It seems we do. Advertisers wouldn't spend centuries playing a losing game, so they must have sufficient returns for their investments.

In this paper, I will present the common gender stereotypes in ads for both women and men, compare some unnecessarily gendered products and attempt to dissect the effect they have and their role in perpetuating harmful and out-dated gender roles.

In the first part of this paper, I will focus on two of the most common negative women's stereotypes, while in the second part I will cover the one male stereotype which gathered the most backlash from men. Lastly, in the third part, I will write about gendered marketing, the discriminatory Pink tax and the influence ads have on consumers and society as a whole.

2. Stereotypes of women in advertising content

Nobody knows whether general gender stereotypes originated in advertising or whether ads are simply reacting to societal cues, says Brooke Erin Duffy, an assistant professor of communication at Cornell University, in an interview with Kaitlyn Tiffany for the Vox. Whatever the case, commercials have always leaned strongly on gender stereotypes to make sales. That *status quo* appears to be finally, slowly, changing. Great Britain's Advertising Standards Authority announced and implemented a ban on using harmful gender stereotypes in ads in 2019. The decision was made after a series of outcries over offensive television ads, particularly the one where, fed by the same baby formula, a boy grew up to become a mathematician, while the girl became a ballerina, says Tiffany.

Shortly before the announcement, the Advertising Standards Authority published a 64-page report claiming how "gender stereotypes in ads can lead to unequal gender outcomes in public and private aspects of people's lives." (K. Tiffany, 2019)

Until such bans become the norm, advertisers everywhere will continue using an effective age-old formula. Women in advertisements are overwhelmingly shown as one of two ways - wife/mother/homemaker and sex object. Both enforce typical gender roles, and neither is empowering for women. Below, I will describe the common composition of such ads and analyse the negative messages they carry.

2.1. The "Sex object" stereotype

What is sexual objectification? It's a term used since the seventies to describe the ever more prevalent image of women in the media and according to Caroline Heldman (Sexual Objectification (Part 1): What is It?, 2012), sexual objectification is the process of representing or treating a person like a sex object, one that serves another's sexual pleasure. So, why are women being subjected to such a practice?

"Sex sells" is probably the primary and most often used reasoning behind the objectification of women in advertising. The female body is used to sell everything from beer to cars and even vacations. Such commercials are also almost never targeted towards

women, though they are inevitably exposed to them. Commercials that objectify women have several easily recognizable characteristics (C. Heldman, 2012), such as:

1. The image shows only part(s) of a sexualized person's body. Headless women or women shown from behind are very common, erasing the individuality communicated through faces, eyes, and eye contact.

2. The image presents a sexualized person as a stand-in for an object. She is reduced to an inanimate, useful tool for the assumed heterosexual male viewer. Or sometimes objects themselves are made to look like women, like urinals shaped like women's bodies and mouths in public bathrooms.

3. The image shows a sexualized person as interchangeable. It's a common advertising theme that reinforces the idea that women, like objects, are fungible. And like objects, "more is better".

4. The image affirms the idea of violating the bodily integrity of a sexualized person that can't consent. Common are ads that show an incapacitated woman in a sexualized position with a man holding her down. It glamorizes the possibility that she was attacked and defeated.

5. The image suggests that sexual availability is the defining characteristic of the person. Various poses with spread legs and open mouths, implying the woman is here "for sex".

6. The image shows a sexualized person as a commodity (something that can be bought and sold). Some images portray women as everyday commodities, including conflating women with food or even shown inside actual vending machines.

7. The image treats a sexualized person's body as a canvas. Naked women can be presented as a canvas that is marked up or drawn upon. (C. Heldman, 2012)

It is clear from these examples that the objectification of women is widespread and increasingly common. Advertising companies see nothing controversial in using (parts of) women's bodies and often women themselves for the purpose of appealing to the male gaze. The practice is especially prevalent in the food sector. Such images could not have sent a clearer message had they tried; women are passive and solely for a man's

pleasure. The composition of these adverts implies the presence of sex, almost as if, by buying the advertised products, the woman becomes available, too.

"The damage caused by widespread female objectification in popular culture is not just theoretical. We now have over ten years of research showing that living in an objectifying society is highly toxic for girls and women." (C. Heldman, 2012)

Heldman continues by saying that results of that research linked internalized sexual objectification in women and girls with mental health problems (e.g., clinical depression, "habitual body monitoring"), eating disorders, body shame, self-worth and life satisfaction, cognitive functioning, motor functioning, sexual dysfunction, access to leadership, and political efficacy.

Media has been instrumental in creating the perception that only one body type (thin, light-skinned, with large breasts) is desirable and beautiful. Society has accepted that and imposed those standards of beauty on all girls and women; any deviation from the script is punishable by public shame and ostracism.

This is especially damaging to teenage girls. They internalize those impossible beauty standards and consider themselves flawed and not good enough when they can't measure up. They are aware that those models have a lot of make-up, Photoshop and sometimes even plastic surgery, to look the way they do, but it doesn't stop them from making comparisons.

Several celebrities are trying to combat the growing problem. They protest the heavy use of Photoshop on their pictures, releasing the non-airbrushed versions to raise awareness. They urge their fans not to give into pressure, to think themselves beautiful just as they are.

"I don't even look like this" said Gina Shkeda, a popular Canadian YouTuber, when a fan expressed a wish to look like Gina in a posed and edited photo.

As Lubina and Klimpak (2014) point out, the position of women in the media is directly linked with their position in our still patriarchal and male dominated society. Girls learn very early on that their bodies are objects of lust, successfully used by the advertising industry to snare attention and sell goods.

2.2. *The "Happy homemaker" stereotype*

Alongside viewing women as sex objects, ads tend to convey the message that a woman's place is in the home, taking care of children.

"If women's liberationists have helped raise consciousness and generate role behaviour changes among modern women, this phenomenon is not reflected in the commercial messages disseminated by mass media. In spite of much criticism, the media continue to picture women in cliched roles, especially in advertising messages" (James T. Lull, Catherine A. Hanson, Michael J. Marx, 1977: 153).

Even though this quote dates to a little over forty years ago, the situation hasn't changed as much as one would think. Debbie Grattan (2015) claims that women are still predominantly cast in adverts for cleaning products and household appliances, but even then, they're not always shown as completely in control of their "sphere of influence". Small changes are happening every day, but it's still not uncommon to have a male voice-over for a television commercial aimed towards women with a female lead. Some studies claim the reason for that is people's reflexive assumption of male competence and expertise on any given subject. However, Grattan wrote that a University of Glasgow psychologist, Phil McAleer, recorded 64 different voices saying the word "hello", then had 320 different people listen. Listeners found the lowest-pitched voices of the males the least trustworthy and the female and higher-pitched male voices the most trustworthy.

Still, one can't watch television for any length of time without coming across a detergent commercial with an overwhelmed woman struggling with a laundry basket, only for a man's voice to promise her a new miracle product to make her life easier.

The image of The Happy Homemaker can be quite baffling when you remember that, throughout human history, women have worked just as hard as men. Especially since the stereotype emerged in the US only a handful of years after the Civil War. With men on the battlefields, women stepped up and filled every gap in the workforce, keeping the country running smoothly where it would have collapsed otherwise. So, why relegate them to the house in the immediate aftermath? It appears the advertising industry is to blame.

CBCradio wrote (2011) that advertisers noticed women did most of the shopping after the fighting stopped. People were desperate to indulge themselves after years of hard living due to the war. There were thousands of household products on the market, the only thing advertisers needed was a consumer. So, they created one.

"The imagery of the Happy Homemaker was carefully chosen, showing women in domestic housekeeping roles with big smiles and frilly aprons, using the most up-to-date appliances and products to keep a spotless home. That image of the Happy Homemaker had one major goal: To encourage women to stay at home and consume household goods." (CBCradio, 2011)

The Happy Homemaker was first perpetuated by print, then the radio, before moving onto television screens in ads, TV shows and movies. "At the turn of the 20th century, Happy Homemaker imagery and articles began appearing in magazines like Ladies Home Journal magazine." (CBCradio, 2011)

The stereotype received a popularity boost after each of the two World Wars, making the Happy Homemaker the most popular image of a woman between the 1920s and the 1950s, says CBCradio.

"It's remarkable to think that in Madison Avenue's pursuit to create a lucrative market, it developed highly influential imagery and reinforced stereotypes that would eventually contribute to limiting women's choices in life." (CBCradio, 2011)

When they're bombarded with the Happy Homemaker stereotype from every corner, people start internalizing the image. "People memorize slogans and absorb images without questioning them. More importantly, people do it without thinking. This is what Gerbner, Gross, Morgan and Signorieli (1980) called the cultivation effect. "The effect of all this exposure to the same messages produces what has been called cultivation, or teaching of a common worldview, common roles and common values" (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorieli, 1980, p.10)." (Vaishali Shrikhande, thesis, 2003:1)

"For just as this stereotype has the power to convince people that the advertisers' message about the product has value, it also has the power to convince them that the stereotype itself has value and that it is real and somehow "right" (Geis, Brown, Jennings & Porter, 1984)." (Vaishali Shrikhande, thesis, 2003:2)

Stereotypes have value because we give them value, we put stock in them and, like a self-fulfilling prophecy, they become real to us. Stereotypes are a part of life, but they can do severe damage. Today, women face distrust and doubt, their skills and abilities questioned because of these two stereotypes.

Attitudes are slowly changing. The Housewife image is retiring and every year there are more women in positions of power. However, there is more objectification of female bodies than ever before. Still, people are becoming more aware of the problem and working to correct those issues.

3. Stereotypes of men in advertising content

"When men and women appear in ads together, the women are often depicted as weaker than the male, either through composition of the ad or particular situations in the scene. When females appear in ads alone, we again note the stereotype of the female as sexual, unintelligent and fragile. Males, conversely, appear as strong and cultured. Particular roles and gender constructs are also evident in male ads. Males are told to act tough, hide their emotions, and compete at all costs (Thompson 1993:146-7)." (Scott A. Lukas, The Gender Ads Project, 2015)

Ads often show men as stronger, smarter and more competent than women. They are the voice of reason, the ones with a great idea, the saviours with a plan or a miracle solution to a problem. Women are then thrust into the background, to stare with awe and sing their praises.

However, men are not without harmful stereotypes themselves. Toxic masculinity has been revealed as the cause to quite a few societal problems lately, a cause the advertising industry is doing very little to combat. Additionally, toxic masculinity has marked anything "girly" as something undesirable, even forbidden. Childcare has long been considered a woman's job. Fathers were not expected to devote themselves to it or even take on half of the responsibility. The father brought food to the table and never changed a diaper or prepared a baby bottle.

That picture of fatherhood started shifting some time ago, but especially in the 21st century. Though it seems the advertising industry still hasn't received the memo.

3.1. *The "Doofus dad" stereotype*

"Ad after ad makes doltish Dad the butt of all jokes. He's outwitted by his children. He's the target of condescending eye rolls from his wife. He's a dumb, incompetent, sometimes even selfish oaf — but his family loves him anyway." (Seth Stevenson, *The Reign of the Doltish Dad*, 2012)

Commercials with incompetent dads are all over television. They can't make a bowl of pasta or change a diaper; everything is more interesting to them than their kids. They either sit on the couch with a beer and don't make a move to help their wife with any of the housework or they stand, overwhelmed, holding a food covered baby by the ankle.

As Stevenson points out, the Doofus Dad trope has been around forever. From Fred Flintstone to Homer Simpson, a clumsy, lazy dad makes for great entertainment.

"As a comedic formula, it works. And what works in a 30-minute show will inevitably get used in a 30-second ad." (S. Stevenson, 2012)

Stevenson continues by saying that he never considered this stereotype offensive; we all know a dad just like that. However, in early 2012, a company called Huggies released an ad which showed dads as inattentive and more interested in a football game than in taking care of their kids. It called dads "the ultimate test" for their wipes and diapers.

The commercial caused quite an outcry from dads.

"The assumption that dads can't take care of their own children was offensive to one man in particular. Chris Routley of Breinigsville, Penn., is a stay-at-home dad who decided to take action" (Sarah Petersen, *Dumbing down Dad: How media present husbands, fathers as useless*, 2013).

Routley started a petition to have the ad changed. He gathered 1300 signatures with the question: "Why not find a way to celebrate dads in a way that doesn't minimize, stereotype and judge us as — at best — well-meaning but second-class parents?"

He was successful, and the offensive ad was replaced by one that said: "To prove Huggies wipes can handle anything, we asked real dads to put them to the test, with their own babies, on spaghetti night."

But why did Huggies think it was a good idea to alienate one half of the population?

Stevenson says that, according to Lisa Belkin of the Huffington Post, Huggies noticed 75 percent of diaper sales are to women, 20 percent are joint buys, and only 5 percent of diapers are bought by men alone. So, why not exclusively target the no-doubt exasperated mothers?

Stevenson presents two reasons:

1. Ads like this one cement a retrograde idea that dads are no good around the house, and thus shouldn't even be asked to chip in with domestic chores.

2. It's just bad marketing. There's no reason to alienate half the population, even if that half is not currently the central customer for your product. That can change.

The Doofus Dad stereotype, while entertaining in small doses and on the screen, might create just such husbands and fathers. At the earliest age we learn by imitating and children soak up new information like sponges. What effect might incompetent, messy, too-busy-for-his-kids dads on every show a child watches have on them and their family dynamic?

At his core, the Doofus Dad is lovable but ultimately useless and unnecessary. It's teaching boys that that's what a father and husband is like, and it's teaching girls that that's all they can expect from them. And it's teaching all kids that fathers are not really needed in a family.

4. Gendered marketing

"They use it to sell more products. They use it to personalize products. But they also use it to reinforce lucrative stereotypes." (CBCradio, 2017)

If you ask advertisers, the world isn't black and white, it's pink and blue. Gendered marketing has been around for a very long time. CBCradio (2017) writes that even the very first department stores in the early 1800s had pink and blue children's aisles. Only, back then, pink was for boys and blue was for girls. Pink was considered a stronger colour, more fitting for boys. Blue was considered delicate, more feminine.

Such a divide is very hard to imagine today, but it does highlight the absurd notion of the existence of boy colours and girl colours. The gendered colour palette shifted after WWII and it's still mostly the same today. As CBCradio warns, the blue/pink decision could have gone either way. It was completely arbitrary. But it definitely had a lasting effect.

Why separate everything by gender? CBCradio blames market segmentation. Divide and conquer is the name of the game. Marketers found that dividing the population by our biggest perceived difference, gender, sold more products. Everyone likes to think ads are talking directly to them, and the easiest way to personalize a product was to assign it a gender. Another theory, says CBCradio, was that pink and blue products made it harder for parents to use items as hand-me-downs. Before the advent of department stores children mostly wore white for the first few years of their lives. That decision was entirely practical, as white clothing was the easiest to bleach. Then, however, the pink and blue divide started. Advertisers emphasised the need for a child to “fit in” and appropriate clothes were essential for achieving that goal. Suddenly, it was strongly discouraged to dress your new-born son into his older sister's pink shorts. This created a big increase in sales, says CBCradio.

"Pink and blue colour coding was added to almost every product, from sleepers, cribs and sheets to strollers and wallpaper. Kids have a colour assigned to them at birth, or even before. In 1980s, with the possibility of ultrasounds, the game changed. Parents were now able to learn the sex of their unborn baby – then went out shopping for clothing, toys and paint colours in pink or blue." (CBCradio, 2017)

Around the same time, American president Ronald Reagan lifted restrictions on the number of advertising messages permitted during a children's program. The number of shows featuring a toy character increased by up to 300%. And those shows were not shy nor subtle about reinforcing gender stereotypes, says CBCradio.

"In a recent TED talk, sociologist Elizabeth Sweet stated that toys are more gendered than ever. The problem with that, Sweet explains, is that gender stereotypes affect task performance in children. They shape aspirations and affect confidence levels. Toys marketed by gender influence what kids aspire to be. If girls see an overwhelming projection of domesticity and inferior career possibilities, it can skew their goals in life. When boys only see aggression and action in their worlds, they are eventually underrepresented in caring professions. Gender marketing reinforces limitations." (CBCradio, 2017)

Today, there is more gendered marketing than possibly ever before, especially for children's items. It's a challenge to find a common household product that doesn't have a clearly marked "For him" or "For her" label. Still, some cases, as shown by CBCradio, are even more extreme and unnecessary than others, such as Bic pens, gummy candy, ear plugs, cotton swabs, electronics or glue sticks.

Out of all these and many more examples, the most offensive one is probably the ePad Femme. It's a tablet distributed by the Eurostar Group and, as Casey Johnston wrote in her 2013 article "Finally, a tablet simple enough for a woman to use </sarcasm>", it comes pre-loaded with apps concerning yoga, grocery shopping, cooking, weight loss, pregnancy and a clothing size converter. Eurostar's vice president of marketing, Mani Nair, said the ePad Femme "makes a perfect gadget for a woman who might find difficulties in terms of downloading these applications and it is a quick reference." (C, Johnston, 2013)

4.1. The "Pink tax"

You cannot, nor should you, hold a conversation about gendered marketing without mentioning the Pink tax.

It's a well-documented phenomenon that pink packaging costs more money. Completely identical products aimed at men and women are often priced differently. CBCradio warns that we have been conditioned to think that men's products are the standard, and that women's products are specialty items.

"Studies have shown that girls' toys cost more than boys' toys 55% of the time. Girl clothing cost more than boy clothing 26% of the time. Women's clothing costs more

than men's clothing over 40% of the time. And even senior home health care for women costs more 45% of the time. Women routinely pay over 25% more for haircuts than men – even though both take the same amount of labour. The New York City Department of Consumer Affairs compared nearly 800 products with male and female versions. In virtually every category, women paid substantially more for the identical item." (CBCradio, 2017)

Products	Percentage of Pink tax
Toys and accessories	7%
Children's clothing	4%
Adult clothing	8%
Personal care products	13%
Senior/home health care products	8%

Candice Elliott, with Listen, Money Matters, broke down these categories and gave a detailed report on exactly what those prices were. Below are the differences in men and women's adult clothing and personal care products. Higher prices for men's products were found in only 2 of the chosen 14 fields.

Adult clothing category with products like dress pants and shirts, sweaters, jeans and socks:

Products	Number of Products*	Women's Average	Men's Average	Price Difference	Percent Difference
Dress Pants	40	\$75.66	\$71.71	\$3.95	6%
Dress Shirts	40	\$58.11	\$51.46	\$6.65	13%
Sweaters	42	\$63.19	\$59.45	\$3.74	6%
Jeans	50	\$62.75	\$57.09	\$5.66	10%
Shirts	40	\$29.23	\$25.51	\$3.72	15%
Socks	40	\$9.98	\$9.73	\$0.25	3%
Underwear	40	\$8.46	\$10.90	(\$2.44)	29%
Total	292	\$307.38	\$285.85	\$21.53	8%

Personal care products category with products like shampoo, conditioner, razors, lotion and deodorant:

Products	Number of Products*	Women's Average	Men's Average	Price Difference	Percent Difference
Shampoo and Conditioner (Hair Care)	16	\$8.39	\$5.68	\$2.71	48%
Razor Cartridges	18	\$17.30	\$15.61	\$1.69	11%
Razors	20	\$8.90	\$7.99	\$0.91	11%
Lotion	10	\$8.25	\$7.43	\$0.82	11%
Deodorant	20	\$4.91	\$4.75	\$0.16	3%
Body Wash	18	\$5.70	\$5.40	\$0.30	6%
Shaving Cream	20	\$3.73	\$3.89	(\$0.16)	4%
Total	122	\$57.18	\$50.75	\$6.43	13%

That's a big difference. "...because these items are purchased at a higher frequency than other consumer products it translates into a significant financial burden for women – because they earn less on average and pay more." (CBCradio, 2017)

Another thing women must deal with, that men don't, are periods. According to Elliott, women pay about \$1,351 of pink tax a year. But they also pay upwards of \$3000 on pads and tampons throughout life. In many countries, period products are listed as luxury items and taxed even more. Any attempts to have them made free or even just remove the luxury tax has received heavy backlash.

5. Conclusion

We are surrounded by ads every moment of every day. Whether we're reading the newspaper, listening to the radio, watching television, surfing the Web or just walking down a billboard-filled street, we can't escape them. And advertisers know how to take advantage of that.

Women are shown as either housebound or bedroom-bound. Looking no farther than ads for socks, we can conclude that women's position in society is still not equal to men's. It's a serious problem that not many people seem to think needs addressing. The cultivation theory warns us that the overwhelming number of similar media messages will

have a very real effect on the consumer. And when those messages promote the use of women as sex objects or smiling domestic help, it impacts our whole society. Both men and women internalize those stereotypes, and it's been proven to change opinions and even behaviour.

The Doofus Dad makes dads seem funny but unnecessary, lovable but a nuisance. Do we want generations of kids growing up with no respect for adult men in their lives? It's also a stereotype that allows men to dodge housework and childcare, live with no expectations of contributing in the home. Children who have never seen a father in a child-rearing role in the content they consume might not approach their own father with problems or needs, placing even more of the burden on the mother.

All those stereotypes are harmful and perpetuate gender roles that have not been the true reflection of reality for a very long time, if ever. In some ways, women are being punished for the crime of being women. In addition to the wage gap, women must contend with the pink and tampon taxes, they earn less and spend more, and live under enormous pressure of impossible beauty standards. Men are treated as second-class parents, as useless in the house. Messages like that teach boys not to bother learning important life skills, potentially leaving them unprepared for life after leaving the nest. Even though in 2020 the situation is better than ever, we shouldn't let that stop us from making further improvements.

Advertisers have a lot of influence and power over shaping people's perceptions. They should be better regulated, and their audience better educated on their effects. Advertising works, it wouldn't be a billion-dollar industry otherwise. But people are still largely convinced they aren't affected by the constant bombardment. All we can do is monitor what we hear every day and recognize if we're getting lost in the forest of bright colours trying to sell us something.

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