The Study of Whether Media Representations of Gender are Stereotyped: Critical Assessment by Focusing on Advertisements

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Abstract: Gender stereotypes are prevalent in advertising-mediated media. This article critically analyses gender representations in the media, using advertising as a medium, and summarises gender representations in advertising by discussing the characteristics of advertising and gender representations in the media. The ideal image of men and women in advertising can be concluded in four parts. First, regarding descriptor traits, women are more caring, and men are more self-conscious. Then, in physical characteristics, male and female appearances in the advertisements are more pronounced, gender-ambiguous models are rarely shown, and they are portrayed as having good bodies. Moreover, the advertisements show men in leadership roles as the family's breadwinners, while women are more likely to take on household and childcare responsibilities in behaviors. Thus, men have a higher occupational status than women in the advertisements, with women likely to be homemakers and men playing the powerhouse or corporate executives. Then, images of the LGBT community will be discussed, showing that they reflect and reinforce gender stereotypes to some extent. Finally, the essay will point out how stereotypes have changed. As different cultures influence gender identity, the article will narrow down to Western countries and discuss gender identity in the media in a Western context. It is hoped that this study can provide some reference for the media's reporting.

1. Introduction

The media represents people's understanding of the world and, in the same way, it influences our perception of it. Sexuality and gender are central to how we think about our identity, and representations of gender in the media reflect the public understanding and perception of gender in reality on the one hand but also have a direct and immediate impact on the audience [1].

Gender differs from sex, which refers to the biological sex biologically determined by chromosomes. Gender is taken from a cultural perspective. It refers to masculinity and femininity. Therefore, there may be differences in how people express masculinity and femininity depending on their culture or background [2]. Besides, they [3] argued that media representations enhance understanding and learning about gender. Representations are not direct maps of the world and society but are constructed and encoded with specific meanings. When representations are highly generalized, they become stereotypes, a social classification of a specific group based on generalized traits and characteristics [4]. Gender stereotypes categorize certain people into groups and associate them with specific traits. And this impression somehow means that they are underrepresented and biased. More specifically, Deaux and Lewis laid out four components of gender stereotypes which are trait descriptors, physical characteristics, role behaviors, and occupational status [5]. Critics argue that there are representations of gender stereotypes in the media [1], which is also the topic of this essay.

This article will critically analyze gender representations in the media, using advertising as a medium. It will summarise gender representations in advertising by discussing the characteristics of advertising and gender representations in the media. Through literature research, examples in advertising, and semiotics, the paper will demonstrate that media representations of gender are stereotypical. It will first examine the construction of masculinity and femininity in advertising and how they construct stereotypes through different symbols. Then, images of the LGBT community

will be discussed, showing that they reflect and reinforce gender stereotypes to some extent. Finally, the essay will highlight how stereotypes have changed over the past years. As gender identity is influenced by different cultures, the article will narrow down to Western countries and discuss gender identity in the media in a Western context. In the end, a brief overview of gender stereotypes in the media of other countries.

2. The Characteristics of Advertising

Advertising can reflect people's lifestyles and perceptions and, as an essential part of the media, can also reflect the perception of gender representations in the mass media. Advertising is one of the most important cultural factors that shape and reflect our lives today [6]. Advertising is simply a transparent vehicle that conveys meaning through symbols. Therefore, in analyzing advertising, this essay mainly uses semiotics to discuss the images used to portray the different genders. Traditionally, semiotics has been concerned with symbols that are defined as representing something, including pictures and words, the most commonly used tools for conveying meaning in adverts [7]. Besides, gender stereotypes in advertising have been studied for over fifty years Grau and Gauntlett pointed out that it often fails to keep up with the changing times [8].

3. Femininity and Masculinity in Advertising

To better explain the representation of gender in the media, the article will discuss masculinity and femininity separately. Because gender in the mainstream media is still primarily understood as a dichotomy [9].

The stereotyping of female roles in the media stems from traditional gender hierarchies and the traditional role division within the family. In the early to mid-nineteenth century, the image of the virtuous woman was considered a newly constructed residual ideology. The mid-Victorian era saw the triumph of a new hyper-feminine and domestic ideology [10]. However, due to the backwardness of advertising, to this day, many advertisements to this day still portray women as family-centered. An analysis of the content of early television commercials in the 1970s found that three-quarters of all commercials featuring women were about kitchen and bathroom products [11]. Besides, some researchers have described the portrayal of women in the mass media as 'symbolic annihilation'. When they appear as people who work, they are 'condemned' [12]. Thus, professional women appear far less frequently. Few women are shown professionally, including senior managers, decision-makers, and entrepreneurs [12].

Women are primarily presented in the media as passive figures. Tsichla stated that women are often disadvantaged and passive [13]. Many women portrayed in the advertisements need to appear dependent on men.

Gender stereotypes are widely used because of their ability to communicate messages quickly, engage consumers, and convey brand and product information concisely. Thus, women in the advertisements tend to appear as beautiful and healthy. Some feminists have also criticized this romantic image of femininity as a constraint on women. Because this perfection of femininity is not something that women naturally possess but requires effort and is a biological trait of only a few.

Meanwhile, the portrayal of women in the media can be divided into two categories: images of women and women as images. The former is a stereotype of women, which has been mentioned before, and the latter is an image of women when they are the object of the gaze. The latter relates to the male gaze, as proposed by Laura Mulvey. He believes that women are portrayed on screen for a male audience.

Men project their fantasies onto the corresponding style of female figures. Women are simultaneously gazed at and displayed as sexual objects. Such images of women also exist in advertising and other media [14]. Women are portrayed in sexually attractive and decorative roles, and according to research, more and more female models are playing such roles [15]. An elegant yet sensual image of a woman can be seen above in Coopered Tot. She has a kind smile and is dressed in a revealing manner, showing a sexy backside that is not directly related to the product but more as an

ornament to make the image more attractive.

In contrast to women, representations of masculinity in the media reflect a patriarchal culture that is not oppressed by social culture. They show how men are represented in a position of privilege [16]. Masculinity is expressed in an active, positive dichotomous with femininity. As an example, the violence in the advertisements happens mostly to men. This is because it is seen as a sign of manliness, and boys will demean feminine boys, thus asserting their masculinity.

Furthermore, masculinity is also often expressed through bare muscles. This stereotype is not harmful or demeaning, but it is unrealistic. Muscularity was seen as a symbol of strength and wrongly considered a sign of masculinity.

On the one hand, the tendency to portray men as authoritative and wise seems to persist. On the other hand, Gentry & Harrison argued that advertising rarely portrays men in domestic settings and family roles [16]. According to their study of 1,392 sports coverage ads in 2010, only two showed men doing indoor chores. And only 7 of the 225 children's TV commercials analyzed for content were about fathers, none of which featured fathers in a parenting role. Sometimes the father figures in commercials even have the stereotype of the "doofus dad".

4. The LGBT Community in Advertising

Unlike the dichotomous qualities of masculinity and femininity, the LGBT community's representation blends the two and differs from the traditional. They face similar but more specific stereotypes in advertising and the media.

In the past, the LGBT community was stigmatized because they were considered a manifestation of deviant behavior and differed from traditional gender stereotypes. Women and men are mainly presented as heterosexual, and homosexual advertising is resisted. IKEA, for example, received a bomb threat in 1994 for releasing an advertisement featuring gay men [17]. This resistance has led to few advertisements addressing the gay community, with heterosexual gender stereotypes remaining mainstream. In recent decades, there has been an exponential growth in gay-related content in the media. Still, in advertising, they mainly present stereotypes to attract dream customers, namely white gay men, because of their high income and strong spending power [10]. Gay men in advertising mostly appear as young, fit, muscular, and bare-chested, as those shown in the reference. The two men in the photo are healthy, handsome, and caring. They own a townhouse and prepare for a holiday, demonstrating that they have the financial wherewithal to fund a comfortable way of life and can afford to get away on regular breaks [14].

In addition, advertisements depicting lesbians tend to stereotype them as assigning heterosexual forms of femininity as a tool to attract the attention of heterosexual men [9]. Also, transgender people in advertisements tend to think that they are male to female. They want a typical female appearance and gender identity, which is used to reconfirm female stereotypes and does not reflect the diversity of different transgender people [14]. In the ads, LGBT images are presented on a heterosexual basis, still using male and female stereotypes to portray different groups, which Kates [18] calls the hetero-sexualization of homosexuality. They use symbols that symbolize male and female stereotypes to express the characteristics of different people in this community. For example, the car ad assumed the man on the left of the picture to be a woman presenting the familiar stereotype of heterosexuality. People aspire to a vibrant and wealthy life, and the woman kneels, suggesting stereotypical subordination [12].

5. The Changes in Recent Years

Moreover, as society progresses, the roles of men and women in the media are being redefined to accommodate social change, often at odds with traditional stereotypes. Some studies have shown that gender stereotyping in advertising has decreased over the years [9].

There has been a shift in the stereotypes of women driven by feminism. Women are now rebelling against the demands of perfect appearance in the media, and more and more advertisements show authentic femininity. What is now referred to as the new man as the response to the feminist political

movement reflects a change in male stereotypes in the media. Although he is a traditionally male figure, he has a softer side, more caring and sharing in the household chores.

6. Gender Stereotypes in Advertising in Different Countries

Gender stereotypes can be seen in advertising worldwide, although they differ in nature according to different cultural preferences. Matthes et al. analyzed gender role stereotypes and found that in China, Germany, and Korea, primary female roles are more vital than primary male roles in the home environment [19]. There were no significant effects for France, Japan, and the UK. Regarding the dominant portrayal of primary male roles in the work environment, there is a significant association in Germany, France, Japan, and the UK, but no significant effect for Korea and China. As the above is based on Western countries, the difference in stereotypes is better seen by understanding Eastern countries, represented by China. In China, women are portrayed as shyer and reserved [20]. Chinese masculinity, as influenced by Confucianism, is 'softer' than the muscular Western image of manhood. Advertisements in China are more likely to portray a man married to a beautiful woman and owning his own house and car, showing his masculinity and charisma, which also constitutes a male stereotype [20].

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, gender stereotypes are prevalent in advertising-mediated media. According to the composition of gender stereotypes proposed by Deaux and Lewis, the ideal image of men and women in advertising can be summarised in four parts. Firstly, regarding descriptor traits, women are more caring, and men are more self-conscious. Then, in physical characteristics, male and female appearances in the advertisements are more pronounced, gender-ambiguous models are rarely shown, and they are portrayed as having good bodies, for example, men with muscles and women with beautiful faces. Moreover, the advertisements show men in leadership roles as the family's breadwinners, while women are more likely to take on household and childcare responsibilities in behaviors. Thus, men also have a higher occupational status than women in the advertisements, with women likely to be homemakers and men playing the powerhouse or corporate executives. Besides, both sides tend to appear in advertisements with a heterosexual sexual orientation, and the LGBT community is often portrayed based on stereotypes of heterosexual men and women.

It can also be concluded that gender stereotypes in advertising exist worldwide. In Chinese advertising, the stereotypical image of women is gentler and more conservative than in the West, and men are less muscular. And as society progresses and stereotypes diminish, increasingly more affluent characters are gradually being portrayed. It can be inferred that gender stereotypes in the media will decrease in the future but will still be present.

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