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# The Effect of Advertising on Gender Roles within American Marriages

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**Victoria J. Browall**

## **ABSTRACT**

*The following literature review is designed to explore existing scholarly literature addressing the effect of advertising on marriages in American society. Marriage is an ever-present, ever-evolving social structure, and as such, it is an important topic for sociological research and analysis. Background information about traditional definitions of marriage and contemporary definitions will be discussed in the body of the paper. Gender roles are examined, specifically in terms of household labor distribution, and how the portrayal of gender roles in advertisements is reviewed. The literature points to an evolution of expectations about marriage structure and corresponding gender roles. Advertisements present married couples in gender roles that do not necessarily correspond with contemporary marriages. There is also a general consensus that marriages and long-term partnerships resembling marriages have positive effects on children raised within these unions.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

According to the US Census Bureau, the percentage of American women aged 20 to 24 years who had ever been married in 1975 was 62.5. This same percentage drops sharply to 38.5 by 1990 (Norton and Miller 1992). Looking at this statistic, we may ask ourselves if this change is a signal of the decreasing value of traditional marriage in American society. Consequently, this leads to the main research questions of the literature review: Is the advertising industry encouraging marriage? What is the wife's role as prescribed by advertisements? What is the husband's role? Do these depictions align with marriage norms in everyday life? To investigate these questions, I will first research literature focusing on the traditional structure of marriage and gender roles within marriage. I will then move into contemporary gender roles within marriage and finally, I will examine marriage roles as they are portrayed in advertisements. Through the existing literature, I intend to illustrate the way American advertisements portray gender roles within marriages.

## **TRADITIONAL MARRIAGE STRUCTURE**

An article written by researchers Sherif Girgis, Robert P. George, and Ryan T. Anderson presents two definitions of marriage, and then contrasts the ideas in the context of how marriage is viewed in American society. Conjugal marriage is a union for the sake of

reproduction and thus must be heterosexual, while revisionist marriage is based on an emotional connection between two people of any gender (Girgis, George and Anderson 2011). As evident from the researchers' definition, conjugal marriage is the traditionally accepted marriage model in American society. The authors frequently mention a "healthy marriage culture" and suggest that all marriages, whether conjugal or revisionist, contribute to an ideal social environment (Girgis et al. 2011). One critique of this article is that the researchers do not formally define what they mean by a "healthy marriage culture;" they simply suggest a healthy marriage culture is an environment comprised of love and respect.

Another study conducted by Paul Amato (2011) also splits the concept of marriage into two categories: definitions based on marriage as a system, and those based on marriage as a partnership. Amato's core argument is that, "Children raised by two happily and continuously married parents have the best chance of developing into competent and successful adults" (Amato 2011). One of Amato's research questions was whether or not it is a good idea for governments to create pro-marriage policies. He examines statistics gathered by other studies and states that evidence shows children raised by parents who were married and happy together grew up to be more stable adults than children without this experience. Amato suggests that gay and lesbian marriages also supply children with this ideal environment. To conclude, he outlines a few options for policies which he feels would support married couples and make it more likely for them to stay together. Amato states that governments should create policies to increase the rate at which married couples foster healthy environments for their children. He gives examples including funding for marriage counseling and parenting courses to help marriages that might be struggling.

## **CONTEMPORARY MARRIAGE STRUCTURE**

With a basic understanding of traditional definitions of a marriage, we can proceed to examining the changes that have developed in recent years. Marriage roles are evolving since two-income families are becoming the social norm. Traditionally, the husband worked full-time and the wife took care of the home and children (Bartley, Blanton and Gilliard 2005). Subjects from five different workplaces filled out four surveys about marriage, decision making, and gender roles within their marriages. To be able to participate in the survey, the subjects had to be heterosexual and married, live with their spouse, have one child or more, and be in a double income household. The first hypothesis was that differences would exist between genders regarding the topics discussed in the surveys, such as their perceptions about decision making in the family. The researchers' major finding was that wives were a little bit more likely to perform traditional homemaking chores and do more of them than their husbands (Bartley et al. 2005). Another finding was that the women in the study spent more time doing these home chores than the men do. A second hypothesis stated that the way husbands and wives thought about marriage roles and gender equality would predict the way this actually panned out in their own marriages (Bartley et al. 2005). The survey results supported this hypothesis, although there was some variance in the sample. The researchers utilized a regression model

and found that, “The model accounted for 9.4% of the variance in perceptions of marital equity” (Bartley et al. 2005).

Data gathered from a survey about the division of household tasks between husband and wife provides information about marriage norms (Krausz 1986). The subjects who took the survey were married women between the ages of 23 and 42, and they each had at least one child enrolled in a preschool in Staten Island, New Jersey. About half of the women who responded were working mothers, and 46 percent of those working mothers worked more than 30 hours each week (Krausz 1986). The major results of the survey suggest that most households follow the expected gender norms. Chores traditionally assigned to females were found to be done by the wives more often than the husbands. The survey also noted that childcare was most often provided by the wives.

More specifically, less than one out of nine “traditionally female tasks” was equally shared in the families questioned (Krausz 1986). Another interesting observation was that the more hours worked by the wife, the more variation in which partner performed which chores appeared. As the wife’s work hours increased, so did the number of male-designated tasks she performed, such as household repairs and financial responsibilities. The husband simultaneously performed more female-designated tasks, including childcare and meal preparation (Krausz 1986).

In summary, examination of the survey information leads to the conclusion that the degree to which traditional gender roles are followed in a marriage correlates with the employment status of the wife. One criticism of this study is its small sample size. A sample of 130 individuals is not necessarily enough to truly represent society as an aggregate. Additionally, the fact that the sample is from a single geographical location and was facilitated through schools attended by the children of the subjects is questionable. Variability in terms of geography and financial status may yield different results if this study were to be repeated. It would be interesting to see an updated version of this study since it was conducted 25 years ago.

Marriage is where a person’s tendency towards one gender role or the other comes out the strongest (Lucier-Greer and Adler-Baeder 2011). Researchers conducted a longitudinal study from 1980 to 2000 to gather data for their hypothesis. The goal was to compare the way subjects perceived marriage roles based on what type of relationship they were in at each respective point in the study. Interviews were conducted with married individuals chosen from a random national sample. Three major sets of interviews were done; first in 1980, then in 1988, and finally in 2000. This longitudinal approach helped to observe whether or not there were changes in the subjects’ perceptions over time. The most significant finding of the study is that the data shows a trend towards equality in marriages. (Lucier-Green and Adler-Baeder 2011). The most interesting part of the study is the connection made between a person’s beliefs about marriage equality and gender roles, and his or her own relationship status. It is

particularly useful that the study was longitudinal and conducted over a 20 year time period with the same participants.

## **MARRIAGE ROLES AS PORTRAYED IN ADVERTISING**

Through a meta-analysis, Martin Eisend (2009) establishes that the advertising industry has perpetuated gender roles for approximately 40 years. The following quote stood out the most in his analysis: “Although advertising systematically under-represents several aspects in life while making other aspects more important, changes in advertising content are more likely to correspond to changes in society than vice versa” (Eisend 2009). To synthesize, Eisend believes that advertisers alter their marketing methods to keep up with evolving societal norms.

As we focus on how marriage roles are portrayed in advertising it becomes useful to ask research questions specific to different types of advertising. One such question is whether or not advertising in print magazines is keeping up with the changes in a woman’s role in a marriage (Robinson and Hunter 2008). Specifically, the researchers wondered about the portrayal of chores around the house and what the advertisements were showing in terms of getting these chores done. To gather data, popular women’s magazines were chosen and their advertisements were examined using content analysis methods. The advertisements were categorized based on the content of the photos, and then the actual words were categorized based on who they were “speaking” to. In other words, the analyzers scanned for target audiences and then looked at the messages about marriage roles being sent to the target audiences through the advertisements. These results were then compared to precedents set by previous literature discussed in the study. The findings of the content analysis study showed a change in language so that the target audience was broader, not just directed towards wives and mothers (Robinson and Hunter 2008). The advertisements steered away from only addressing one gender, which supported the researchers’ hypothesis that a woman’s marriage role has changed over time.

An article by Gayle Kaufman (1999) looks at the other side of the coin, so to speak, by examining the role of the father in a marriage and family, and how fathers are portrayed in television advertising. The article also looks at what products are advertised during shows or specials that target one gender over the other. Content analysis techniques were used to evaluate the advertisements. Major findings include messages in the advertisements that suggest mothers have more childcare responsibilities than fathers, and that fathers are supposed to instruct their children on how to perform tasks more often than mothers. Another interesting finding was that men are more likely to be pictured eating with children on television commercials than women. The article suggests that even though many television advertisements rely on the traditional marriage roles and are projected towards one gender, a gradual shift is occurring and more gender equality is being presented through advertisements. Kaufman provided a different perspective on this topic because her study focused on husbands and fathers instead of wives and mothers.

One last important focus is the ways in which gender roles are portrayed in advertising. Existing content analysis not only shows differences in the types of domestic responsibilities taken on by men and women, but in the ability to fulfill these responsibilities (Scharrer et al. 2006). Scharrer et al. examined television commercials and noticed that husbands and/or fathers are typically shown as unable to accomplish household tasks, especially in comparison to their female counterparts (Scharrer et al. 2006). The researchers also made note of the way this male failure is received during the advertisement. Roughly 23 percent of the husbands and/or fathers in analyzed commercials who are unsuccessful in their attempts at a chore were met with laughter, and then presented with a product that either saved them from their “difficult” task or made it easier for their wives to take charge of the chore (Scharrer et al. 2006). This humor-based picture of a husband’s lack of domestic capabilities reinforces the hypothesis that gender roles in marriage are often scripted by advertisements.

The final idea examined is whether or not young children who see advertisements that prescribe certain gender roles to parents are influenced by these portrayals. Presumably, adults watching television commercials are able to understand that the marriage structures being portrayed are not to be taken seriously. Pamela Cheles-Miller (1975) asks if children have the same sense of discernment. Cheles-Miller’s observations suggest a real possibility that children viewing these types of advertisements can internalize the portrayals of husband and wife, and expect the stereotypes to be true and applicable in their adult lives (1975). Cheles-Miller’s article was based on data collected in another study (Blatt et al. 1972). The original study was conducted from a set of statements summarizing the traits of an advertised husband and an advertised wife. 276 children in either fourth or fifth grade were asked to choose which statements they believed to be accurate. The children then took a questionnaire based on the Piers-Harris Children’s Self-Concept Scale in order to find out about each child’s perception of himself or herself (Cheles-Miller 1975). The major finding of the Blatt et al. study was that “a child scoring high on the stereotype acceptance test would have a relatively low self-concept” (Cheles-Miller 1975). This would suggest that there is a relationship between a child’s knowledge of advertised marriage roles and his or her self image (Cheles-Miller 1975). A follow-up study to examine how these results might have changed since 1975 would be valuable.

## **CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this paper was to examine the relationship between advertising and the structure of American marriages. The literature reviewed in this paper is interconnected; each article focuses on gender roles within marriage and the relatively recent shift from traditional expectations to a more balanced approach. The research is significant because in order to understand any effect advertising has on marriage roles, there must be a baseline for what’s happening to these roles out of the advertising context. All of the articles’ main findings concluded on a similar point: that what used to be expected in terms of gender roles in marriage is now something different, or at least is becoming something different.

The articles directly addressing advertisements and their portrayals of marriage roles were also all similar in their findings. The studies conducted by Robinson and Hunter (2008), Kaufman (1999), and Scharrer et al. (2006) suggest that the once-standard picture of the respective tasks of a husband and a wife have changed, and that advertising is changing to reflect this cultural shift. One inference is that over the last few decades, the scripts of husband and wife have changed, and the lines separating the once-distinct roles have become blurred. Another suggestion is that the American advertising industry is attempting to keep up with the changes occurring in marriage structure by portraying more two-income families who share some of the household responsibilities formerly left only to wives. No matter the conclusion drawn from the literature, the connections among these variables should not be ignored.

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