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# Gender in Print Advertisements: A Snapshot of Representations from Around the World

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# Gender in Print Advertisements: A Snapshot of Representations From Around the World

By Pamela K. Morris

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What is it like to be a man or woman? Most everyone considers gender, the socially constructed concept, for his or her own wellbeing and to construct appropriate behaviors for relating with others. Like all relationships, there are inequities, and those between men and women are of particularly powerful consequence. Depictions of masculinity and femininity in media, including advertisements, may not tell us how *we* actually behave, but they tell us how *we should* act and more importantly think *others* should look and act. Images provide ideals, both conscious and unconscious, for how we perceive ourselves and manage our own actions. Outcomes give us cultural values with women often taking subordinate roles.

Most cross-cultural research describing differences in advertising messages typically compare the United States and one other. For example, the United States and Brazil (Tansey, et al., 1990), the United States and China (Cheng & Schweitzer, 1996; Zhang & Gelb, 1996), the United States and Japan (Maynard, et al., 1999; Sengupta, 1995), the United States and Korea (Cho, et al., 1999; Kim, 1998), the United States and Singapore (Karrh, et al. 2001) and the United States and Sweden (Wiles, et al., 1996). Much more rare is the attempt to compare more than two countries, such as comparisons of the United States with Australia and Mexico (Gilly, 1988) and the United States with the Arab World (Al-Olayan & Karande, 2000).

Past studies focusing on advertising content, but very limited in scope, find gender stereotypes. In

contrast, my research takes a worldview to investigate whether or not stereotyped images exist all over the globe. A theoretical framework using anthropological, sociological and communication theories is built to explain the influence of culture, especially the media, on gender in everyday lives and how stereotypes seem to slip from nation to nation, leveling differences between nations. The research uses a content analysis of magazine advertisements in 108 countries.

## Literature review

Culture is all around us; we create it with our lives. Descriptions of culture have included a set of rules for behavior (Radcliffe-Brown, 1937) and both the lens through which we view the world as well as the blueprint for how we function in it (McCracken, 1986).

Culture and mass media are entwined. Content, from entertainment programming to advertising, is borrowed from culture to ensure that it is relevant and meaningful for audiences. Practical business theory holds that for messages to be understood, advertisements must reflect social norms and cultural values (Belk & Pollay, 1985; de Mooij, 1998; Cheng, 1996; Frith & Sengupta, 1991; Frith, Shaw, & Cheng, 2005; Lin, 1993).

**Social Construction of Gender.** As part of culture, gender is created through on-going social interactions. It results in constructed ideas of masculinity and femininity. At an early age males and females are socialized to prepare for their different roles in life. Adult behavior continues along its childhood track. For example, larger groups and competitive activities train boys in how to gain attention, status and power. This social culling leads directly to forceful, competitive and independent traits in men – characteristics prized in the public world of government and business. In modest contrast, girls play games organized to be cooperative and their relations are arranged by closeness, commitment and intimacy. As a result, women are socialized to be nurturing, tender and cooperative – attributes associated with the home, community and public service industries.

## Research In Depth

Some theorists suggest masculinity is assigned higher value throughout the world. Rosaldo (1974) named this "universal asymmetry for evaluation of culture." Differences are based on a traditional scenario where women stay home to care for children while men are free to go into the public to build political and economic ties that control resources – valuable positions in society. Chodorow (1974) also emphasized private and public space in theorizing gender differences. From a developmental perspective, mothers model feminine roles for young girls within the home, while boys learn to be masculine by being forced to cut domestic ties and forging into the public where they learn to create an identity and win status.

Other theorists argue men and women highlight different attributes in social relations. Tannen (1996) developed a model of conversation styles to show that men use language to gain prestige and power, whereas women use language to forge relationships. Maltz and Borker (1982) offered a "Two Cultural Models" thesis, contending that men and women bring different understandings and missions to conversations: men see them as contests, while women use conversations to build relationships. Similarly, Brown and Levinson (1987) proposed that boys focus on negative face to gain higher rank giving them freedom and independence while girls attend to positive face needs to be close to others. While distinctly different, each study in its own way draws the same conclusion – boys dominate, girls cooperate.

Not all scholars agree that men are superior to women; for example, Leacock, (1978) and Sherzer (1987) suggested the groups are complementary – separate, but equal (Foley, 1997). Even so, male public activities are often associated with greater prestige (Foley, 1997).

### *Gender in Advertising*

Media's influence on society is a hot topic of study. Although much of the vast literature comes from research done among television viewing of children and adolescents, findings can and have been applied to other media types and audiences. Television content has been shown to provide adolescents with scripts for how to behave as an adult, including ways to form and maintain relationships with the opposite sex (Strasburger, 1995, pp. 7-8). Closely related is modeling, when behavior mimics portrayals

seen on television (Strasburger, 1995, p. 8). Young and old alike borrow images from media, often modeling behavior, dress and attitudes of favorite television characters. All pictures and images, including those from advertisements, help people form opinions and identities. And why not? Where else can we look? What else can we see?

Mainstreaming, or some media's tendency to present a "fairly uniform set of social messages," may result in viewers developing a particular schema about gender (Strasburger, 1995, pp. 10-11). For example, a study of more than 200 television programs found standardized portrayals of teenage girls: they tend to be passive, obsessed with shopping, grooming and dating, and have little or no interest in academics or careers (Steenland, 1988; in Strasburger, 1995, p. 11). From the narrow and simplistic roles presented in mass media, people base their identities and perceptions of others. Is there any wonder that we are what we see?

Many studies have identified advertisements as a prime source of gender stereotype images. The emphasis is on the dominant ideology that maintains and perpetuates certain ideals of gender, specifically that men dominate (Barthel, 1988; Frith, 1997; Goffman, 1979).

Specific to my study is research that illustrates that men are featured more often and in more valuable positions than women. In studies of television commercials, for example, male voice-overs were heard more often than women's (Gilly, 1988; Marecek et al., 1978; O'Donnell & O'Donnell, 1978). As a result, researchers generally concluded that advertisers consider the male voice more authoritative, bolstering the theory that men are more listened to and valued.

Other studies showed that men and women are depicted in traditional situations – occupational settings for men and domestic surroundings for women (Furnham & Bitar, 1993; Gilly, 1988; Mwangi, 1996; Sengupta, 1995). A review of spokesperson roles showed that women are used less often than men, generally because women are shown more as product users rather than authorities (O'Donnell & O'Donnell, 1978). However, Gilly (1988) found no difference in the use of men or women as spokespersons, but attributed the result to the credibility variations of spokespeople among the countries in the study – Australia, Mexico and the United States.

Pioneering investigations of advertisements

showed men as more physically active than women (Poe, 1976; Silverstein & Silverstein, 1974). In more recent research, Wiles, et al. (1996) found men in more leisure activities than women in both American and Swedish magazine advertisements.

Many studies have found that women are more likely to be shown as sex objects or as decoration in advertisements (Craig, 1992; Sengupta, 1995). Goffman (1979) suggested that advertisements depict men in more serious roles than women. And, even when women are depicted in professional roles, an expression or other detail presents them as less serious. Goffman labeled this "body clowning" (p. 50).

### Hypotheses

The literature shows that gender is a socially constructed concept and, just like culture, should differ from nation to nation. However, looking across cultures it seems that men and women are socialized largely based along public and private lines, and in the dichotomy, men are assigned more value. As time capsules of culture, advertisements provide a view of men and women at a particular place and time. In my study they are used to investigate whether or not gender stereotypes exist worldwide. The following hypotheses were created:

- H1:** Across all countries, there are more
  - (a) magazine advertisements with images of men than of women.
  - (b) images of men in magazine advertisements than of women.
- H2:** Across all countries, there are more
  - (a) magazine ads with images of women in domestic situations than men.
  - (b) women shown in domestic situations than men.
  - (c) women shown with children than men shown with children.
- H3:** Across all countries, there are more
  - (a) magazine advertisements with images of men in occupational and spokesperson situations than of women.
  - (b) men shown in occupational and

spokesperson situations than women.

- H4:** Across all countries, there are more
  - (a) magazine ads with images of men in leisure activities than of women.
  - (a) men shown in leisure activities than women.
- H5:** Across all countries, there are more
  - (a) magazine advertisements with images of women in modeling and ambiguous or decorative roles than of men.
  - (b) women shown in modeling and ambiguous or decorative roles than men.

### Method

Advertisements from popular general-interest magazines selected to represent each country were the basis for a content analysis. Countries were selected from the 191 United Nations member states. Each country was reviewed and eliminated if a publication could not be obtained. Magazines, the sampling unit, and their advertisements, the recording units, were studied. One issue of the most appropriate title was used to represent each country. The intent was to get a snapshot of what average adults might see in reading for pleasure or information.

**Publication Sampling.** Magazines were chosen for their rich imagery and ability to provide an enhanced picture of a country's society. Similar to other international content analyses using print advertisements (Al-Olayan & Karande, 2000; Albers-Miller & Gelb, 1996; Ford, et al., 1998; Kim, 1998; Lysonski, 1985; Maynard & Taylor, 1999; Tansey, et al., 1990; Wiles, et al., 1996), magazines were purposively selected based on editorial content and readership. Publications were chosen to match as closely as possible with *Time*, *Newsweek* or *People*, magazines that are written to be accessible and relevant to most everyone – males, females, young, old, rich and poor.

Even so, the definition of *magazine* is broadly interpreted to allow flexibility in obtaining appropriate vehicles throughout different cultures. With the characteristics described above as the goal, newspapers were substituted for magazines in some coun-

## Research In Depth

tries, especially those that are poor with low education and literacy rates.

I took over a year to find and select appropriate magazines. Publications were located from press associations, publishers, libraries, consulates, newsstands and other sources. When there were several options, the magazine with the highest circulation or editorial content and format closest to the examples was selected. Magazines were from 2000 to 2004, a time long enough to secure publications from countries where communication is often disrupted for years.

**Coding Procedures.** Advertisements, by definition "paid nonpersonal communication from an identified sponsor using mass media to persuade or influence an audience" (Wells, et al., 2003, p. 567), were reviewed. For this portion of the study, only advertisements with people were considered and coded in two general

areas: number of advertisements with people in various portrayals and situations and number of people's images in these scenarios. Six groups were included: occupations, spokespersons, domestic, leisure, model and decoration or ambiguous (see Appendix for operational definitions).

The author coded the entire sample. To assess intercoder reliability, a second coder reviewed 15 percent purposively selected for a wide variation of countries. The second coder, a multicultural university professor, was trained for the project over two weeks. Practice exercises included coding a separate sample of more than a dozen foreign magazines. Ambiguities and controversies were discussed and agreements reached to help refine the Instructions to Coders.

Scores of the primary variables were compared from both coders using Pearson's as the test of

**Table 1. Countries included in the study.**

|                        |                    |                     |                     |
|------------------------|--------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Albania                | Denmark            | Lebanon             | Romania             |
| Algeria                | Djibouti           | Lesotho             | Russia              |
| Angola                 | Dominican Republic | Lithuania           | Saudi Arabia        |
| Argentina              | Ecuador            | Madagascar          | Senegal             |
| Australia              | Egypt              | Malawi              | Serbia & Montenegro |
| Austria                | Estonia            | Malaysia            | Sierra Leone        |
| Bahrain                | Ethiopia           | Mali                | Singapore           |
| Bangladesh             | Fiji               | Mexico              | Slovakia            |
| Belarus                | Finland            | Mongolia            | Slovenia            |
| Belgium                | France             | Morocco             | South Africa        |
| Belize                 | Georgia            | Mozambique          | Spain               |
| Bolivia                | Germany            | Nepal               | Sudan               |
| Bosnia & Herzegovina   | Greece             | Netherlands         | Swaziland           |
| Botswana               | Guatemala          | New Zealand         | Sweden              |
| Brazil                 | Hungary            | Nicaragua           | Switzerland         |
| Bulgaria (Republic of) | Iceland            | Niger               | Syria               |
| Cambodia               | India              | Nigeria             | Thailand            |
| Cameroon               | Indonesia          | Norway              | Tunisia             |
| Canada                 | Iran               | Oman                | Turkey              |
| Chad                   | Ireland            | Pakistan            | Uganda              |
| Chile                  | Israel             | Paraguay            | Ukraine             |
| China                  | Italy              | Peru                | United Kingdom      |
| Colombia               | Japan              | Philippines         | United States       |
| Costa Rica             | Jordan             | Poland              | Uruguay             |
| Croatia                | Kenya              | Portugal            | Vietnam             |
| Cyprus                 | Korea (South)      | Qatar               | Yemen               |
| Czech Republic         | Latvia             | Republic of Moldova | Zambia              |

intercoder agreement. Neuendorf's (2002) review of reliability coefficients suggested that outcomes of .80 or greater are acceptable (p. 143) and here the range from .71 to 1, a perfect correlation, resulted. Although some were slightly below the desired criteria, under the conditions, the level of agreement was considered satisfactory.

## Results

A total of 108 countries were studied (Table 1), representing 56 percent of the United Nations member states (United Nations, 2003), and most, if not all, regions, sizes, economies, government types, religions and locations in the world. Magazines were the primary source; although in some cases, newspapers were used if they were the only printed media available and read by a large representative of people in a country. Botswana, the Dominican Republic, Mali, Sierra Leone, Sudan and Yemen were examples where newspapers were employed. Hypotheses used correlated t-tests to compare means of two groups: images of men and women.

The first hypothesis, reviewing the generalization that across countries there are more images of men than of women, was only partially supported. Although all measurements found men outnumbered women, only one relationship was statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ) – images of men dominated women, 13 to 9 per magazine. Advertisements with only men or women (3.36 and 2.74) and with men or women in general (6.31 and 5.67) were not statistically significant.

The next compound hypothesis reviewed images relating to private space and suggested that women were shown in more domestic situations. The hypothesis was mainly supported with two of the three measurements reaching statistical significance. Women were shown in more advertisements with domestic situations (.66 and .37 per magazine) and more often than men (.76 and .44). However, a more specific test of the number of advertisements showing each gender with children was not supported.

Men were shown more often than women in occupational situations and as spokespersons, supporting Hypothesis 3. Advertisements depicting men in occupations were more than twice as frequent than those showing women (2.13 versus .83). The difference was even more extreme for the number of occupational images (4.86 versus 1.26). Findings for

spokesperson roles were similar. All relationships were statistically significant.

Men were also more often shown in leisure activities, supporting Hypothesis 4. Hypothesis 5, suggesting there are more images of women in modeling and ambiguous or decorative roles, in both number of advertisements and images, was supported. All relationships were statistically significant.

## Discussion

The purpose of this research was to investigate how men and women are portrayed in advertisements from popular general-interest magazines around the world. Evidence shows that stereotypes are universal. Women are portrayed more in domestic scenes, as models and in decorative or ambiguous roles, while men are depicted in occupations, as spokespersons or at leisure. One stereotype not found – women with children. My results maintain anthropological and sociological positions in a variety of specializations proposing that men and women are socialized differently – based on private and public space. As part of culture, childhood play apes and reflects adult values and actions (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Chodorow, 1974; Maltz & Borker, 1982; Tannen, 1996). Above all, my findings support Rosaldo's (1974) universal asymmetry hypothesis: men are assigned more value and prestige than women.

Within a specific culture, men and women may be more equal and ideas of masculinity and femininity less conspicuous. However, in commercial visuals a culture's subtleties may be eclipsed by typical gender stereotypes.

We all know images are powerful influencers that reinforce certain values and not others. As people come to accept mainstream ideas through visuals, advertisements help guide thinking, action and behavior. The most crucial of these ideas is what it means to be a man or a woman. Ideas about how to feel, dress, look and behave, and how to interact with other men and women, are the bedrock of the culture we live in. Many of these codes of conduct come straight from advertisements, which are key to legitimizing and perpetuating them. As a society, we agree that stereotyping is wrong and unethical, but in that agreement lies a strong contradiction because in practice, gender stereotyping exists, and is blatantly obvious, not only in the United States, but also throughout the world. Here it seems that theory and

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practice don't agree.

Why do there seem to be universal portrayals of common stereotypes in the most otherwise disparate of countries? Is it systemic in advertising? The business of advertising was invented and developed fully in Europe and the United States and that is where the rest of the world learned it. Like culture, advertising is learned. Students of advertising come from abroad to intern at American or European agencies or study in one of the many professional schools that provide business-like experience. At the same time most books and trade journals catering to advertising or practicing it are primarily published in the west. Furthermore, like other global industries, the advertising industry has followed the multinational corporate trend and centered in Europe and the United States, home to such global agency networks like Omnicom, Interpublic, WPP and Publicis. From their western bases, directions for campaign strategies are provided to satellite offices located in small and big countries alike.

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*By stimulating materialistic urges and wants, advertisements create demand, which in turn influence cultural values.*

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The advertising industry is a vital economic engine, developing commerce for nations. It is through advertising that a nation keeps its standard of living afloat and improves it. As economies have grown so has advertising and along with it – stereotypes. By stimulating materialistic urges and wants, advertisements create demand, which in turn influence cultural values. Perceived globally as a successful strategy, other nations are only too eager to try it out, further fueling the need for American-inspired visuals documenting how Americans look and live. In this way, stereotypes serve a purpose in the global economy.

There are limitations to this study. Publication sampling is a concern. Using a single title and issue for each country is a small sample from which to draw conclusions, but the main difficulty was availability of

publications – many countries have none or, at best, only one and then published with irregularity. However, because the study attempts to expand on an existing rich base of literature about gender stereotypes, although confined to western nations, this sample seems sufficient to provide directions and key indicators about stereotypical images worldwide. In this sense, it is an exploratory study.

Another matter may be the sampling frame: magazines most like *Time*, *Newsweek* or *People* in the United States. Although widely and broadly circulated, these magazines may be considered upscale in some nations and they obviously contain seemingly storybook portrayals that are largely based on western themes. However, readers of these types of publications are likely the controlling power in society and advertising images simultaneously influence their ideals and are drawn from their ideals. Other print genres can expand on this study and help ensure that various levels of society are represented.

More analyses of men and women's portrayals can help complete the picture and assess other differences within cultures. Advertisements can be coded in more ways than I suggested and stronger statistics using multivariate analyses, such as controlling for region, population and other aspects of culture, can help identify and explain the relationship of culture to images. Qualitative analysis can explore variations and richness of gender portrayals by culture.

Overall, gender roles rule and remain tethered to consumerism. A western gender bias feeds perfectly well the pursuit of commerce. We all probably agree that women shouldn't be suppressed, but when there is a product to sell, the suppression of women comes in handy. It's hard to change habits sharply, and so why not continue to reinforce the status quo? And, advertisement's visuals perform multiple tasks at multiple levels as they both suggest and reinforce values, behaviors, looks and actions – a symbiotic relationship. If gender stereotypes are systemic in advertisement visuals, then what will become of societies that have different gender qualities as they are folded into the world economy? Or, are we more the same than we say we are?

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## APPENDIX

### Summarized Content Category Operational Definitions

**Occupation:** Represented with dress such as uniforms, laborer or business attire; or with locations, such as at construction sites, offices or labs. Generally, occupation is outside the home, except a home office, which is considered an occupation scene if the adult is at or near a desk and participating in work. For a home office situation, children may not be present.

**Spokesperson:** An image that is identified by name or quote; or if the person is widely known, such as Tom Cruise, and is acting as a spokesperson for the product in the advertisement.

**Domestic:** Space in or around a house, yard or a family gathering, such as at a picnic.

**Leisure:** Activities, including sports or hobbies, that are done alone or with others, such as golf, tennis, biking or playing computer games. The activity is not with family members, for example, children, as that is considered a domestic scene. However, it could be in the domestic setting or workplace if the leisure activity is the primary focus and not in the presence of children.

**Model:** A person that is using, interacting or wearing the product. This category differs from people in messages who are identified as spokespersons, described in the prior group.

**Decorative or ambiguous:** An image that is not clear and can be removed. Portrayals do not fit into one of the above groups or are inserted into a visual for decoration, they are not touching or using the product, not famous, not dressed relative to the product and can be eliminated.