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Femvertising and COVID-19—What Did Brand Owners Broadcast during the Lockdown?

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Abstract: The aim of this study was to analyze, from a gender perspective, advertising broadcasts during a time of crisis. A holistic perspective of the stereotypes, roles, professions, and gender relations represented is offered by utilizing a content analysis of all the advertisements and their corresponding images during broadcast. Methods: a content analysis of 20 variables was conducted; of these, 7 variables were obtained from under the gender perspective of 1.350 images, corresponding to 71 audiovisual spots on YouTube that were broadcasted during the lockdown. Results: this analysis showed the special sensitivity of advertisers when balancing male and female presences, and in projecting an equitable and co-responsible vision between both genders, with special emphasis on gender professions, teleworking, and childcare. Corporate advertising predominates over commercial advertising, which may explain why the discourse and images blur inequalities and imbalances with respect to official statistics. Conclusions: advertisers seem to have noticed the strategic role of introducing gender perspectives into advertising, thus assuming a more social function that better connects them with today's society while also supporting the advances and challenges of equal opportunities.

Keywords: gender approach; advertising; femvertising; women's representation; YouTube; gender roles; digital media



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1. Introduction

The world witnessed an unprecedented crisis in terms of intensity, as well as universally, experiencing the problems and speed of the virus. The periods of lockdown have posed a challenge for people, and even brand owners have dealt with this situation by transforming their communication. Furthermore, it has become evident that advertising has adopted a social function [1]. This new reality invites reflection in terms of gender due to the fact that the home is the main backdrop of where lives develop. The strict measures adopted by the Spanish government forced citizens to stay at home from 14 March until 4 May 2020, and it was only on the 21 June 2020 that the restrictions started to gradually relax. Thus far, advertising during the COVID-19 period has not been a major topic in the literature [2], and even less is known with regard to focusing on women and advertising. However, the representation of women and their treatment in advertising has generally been widely developed in the literature, especially from the 1950s onwards [3–5], which coincided with a period of a more effective entry of women into the labor market. Interest in the topic is still maintained in the scientific community today [6–9].

The contribution of this research is found in the combination of the COVID-19 analysis from a different approach, which includes the effect of lockdown on audiovisual communication of brand owners from a gender perspective. The choice of the Spanish case is supported by the number of people directly and indirectly affected by the disease [10].

The main contribution of this work is the recognition of the change in discourse and imagery of the brand owners in situations of special social transcendence, such as the pandemic—specifically during the lockdown—which motivate the replacement of the merely commercial function for a social function, and, in this case, showing a special sensitivity and empathy in their treatment of gender roles, stereotypes, and the representation of gender in the context of developed advertising.

1.1. Representation of Women in Advertising

The scientific debate surrounding the representation of women in advertising dates back to the early 1950s, and has gradually increased as female participation in the workforce has developed [4,11]. Moreover, the topic continues to attract attention today and more recent research papers have attempted to analyze gender stereotypes over time [12–16], and have also introduced an international comparison [8,17]. Furthermore, reviews regarding how the issue has been addressed have been conducted [7,18,19].

The literature agrees that there has been a remarkable evolution, and, currently, there is a more balanced representation that includes a holistic and modern view of women [8,13,16,20]. It is, in fact, so much the case that today, in advertising as a whole, the use of women as objects of desire or representing submission to men, directly or indirectly in the sexual or domestic sphere, is practically nonexistent [7]. Even gender relationships, which are traditionally represented unequally by showing men as the dominant gender [21], are today shown with more parity [12]. There are several authors who have tried to identify those relations that are categorized as masculine and dominant or equal/parity [4]. Furthermore, these authors have also worked to show how gender norms are influenced by this representation in the field of advertising [8,16] and media [9]. Likewise, advertising shows the evolution of women in the labor market, despite the fact that gender bias persists in many professions [21,22] and contributes to the challenge of co-responsibility due to the fact that men are now more often shown as sharing in domestic work and childcare [12,23]. Regardless, it should be noted that there are still studies being conducted, such as in the works of Tschila [24] or Montes [21], that warn of the persistence of the stereotypical female role. In fact, it is more typical for women to be portrayed in inferior roles and to be more associated with domestic issues. In fact, there are several references to advertising serving as a mirror to society [25,26], depicting the values, stereotypes, and social structures, which, consequently, tend to maintain current economic and social models [6,21,27,28].

Certain authors, such as Rumbo [29] and Zotos and Tschila [16], have advised that advertising reflects society by exaggerating certain aspects of everyday life and that this practice can favor the persistence of certain roles or, on the contrary, can facilitate significant changes in the established order. As a result, Hirschman and Thompson [30] have already assigned to advertising the ability to inspire and promote significant social changes, especially with regard to gender equality. In particular, Kates and Shaw-Garlock [31] open a debate on the ability of advertisements to foster women's empowerment, which has been very significant within society in recent years [15,32,33]. However, even the less recent literature has shown this connection [5]. Thus, Grau and Zotos [7] identify this issue in the conclusions of the studies that they reviewed; furthermore, they even note that femvertising is a priority line of future research. This phenomenon, coined by Bahadur [34], consists of advertising that celebrates women's achievements and promotes their empowerment. More recent research work has begun to explore this phenomenon [12,35]. Accordingly, Naisbayeva et al. [15] and Champlin et al. [36] explain how brand owners can adopt this type of representation and discourse in order to better connect with the audience.

1.2. Advertising in Times of Crisis through a Gender Perspective

All of the above should be considered, as this will promote reflection on female representation in advertising in such an unprecedented historical moment as the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic. The health measures adopted forced the Spanish population to stay at home, and it is precisely in the domestic sphere where gender differences are the most persistent [37,38].

While the period of lockdown implies staying at home for everyone, families with dependents who also work (i.e., away from home or from home) were among the most affected, and it was particularly the burden on women that appeared to possess a differentiated effect [39]. In general terms, the mental burden borne by women during lockdown was greater [40]. Consequently, this resulted in a more negative psychological cost in the case of women [39,41].

However, the role of brand owners through their advertising has been poorly developed [42], even though they have adopted a social function and a key role in preventing and helping people to overcome the pressure to stay at home [1,43]. In addition, the demand for greater involvement, commitment, and contribution to solve problems comes from people [44–47]. Therefore, even advertising has been obliged to modify discourse and imagery [2] in order to engage with more sensitive demographics during the pandemic [46,48].

Advertising is used to represent the daily life, desires, and aspirations of society [46,48], and lockdown was a challenge for brand owners because certain economic activities were limited and citizens' concerns were not as focused on conventional consumption. In fact, their entire target group stayed at home and their daily lives changed radically. Likewise, statistics show that exposure to information and audiovisual content increased significantly in that period [49]. It is also possible to detect differences between gender portrayal in advertising before and during the pandemic by comparing the evidence in the work presented here with the results of previous research. Consequently, there is currently a gap in terms of obtaining information on how brand owners represent everyday life in the home in isolation, as during an atypical and unknown circumstance for everyone. The central research question that arises is thus the following:

- RQ1. How have the situations experienced during the COVID-19 crisis, specifically during lockdown, influenced the representation of women in advertising?

After an overview of the challenges that were derived from COVID-19 and were reflected through advertising, a gender approach is necessary. However, the analysis of COVID-19 in this line of thought leads us to identify research papers that relate the pandemic to the fact of being a woman or a man. In fact, the most holistic contribution to the gender dimension of COVID-19 is provided by de Paz et al. [50]. They address the issue by differentiating the following themes of gender implications: (1) Health; (2) Education; (3) Economic conditions; and (4) Agency-related gender-based violence.

Thus, such an event means that everyone faces the same problem, i.e., the pandemic, but they may appreciate different implications that are strictly related to gender. For example, Sevilla and Smith [51] explain that gender differences are due to the fact that childcare has fallen mainly on women.

In this sense, the National Institute of Statistics of Spain [38] shows, in figures, that the total number of hours assumed by women for the care of children (4.7 vs. 3.1)—and of those closest to children in terms of care, i.e., elderly people—is higher. Likewise, female scientists have seen a decrease in their research and publication rates, affecting the development of their careers due to these unusual circumstances [52]. In addition, the adaptation of the working day and even teleworking, which is when a company allows both modalities, are mostly adopted by women. Several women's platforms have even announced that the lack of leave in the case of quarantine for sick children widens the gender gap in the labor market [53].

Considering all of the above, advertising could be an interesting cultural manifestation of today's society. For this purpose, stereotypes, roles, scenarios, professions, and daily

life at home, with special attention being directed to co-responsibility (childcare and housework), are represented in advertisements and are the basis of the analysis. This objective poses a challenge due to the gap in the literature. Although the literature focusing on advertising in the times of COVID-19 is scarce, the analysis of its visual imagery and discourse through a gender approach has not as of yet been conducted. Therefore, as derived from RQ1, this study aims to specify the following issues:

- RQ2. What stereotypes, roles, and gender relations are represented in audiovisual advertising for women and for men, which were broadcasted during lockdown?
- RQ3. Is co-responsibility in the domestic sphere a recurrent creative resource through which the reality of households while staying at home is shown?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Measurements and Instruments

The considerations of this study motivated the choice of a mixed method approach. All the audiovisual advertising spots (71) and all of their corresponding images (1350) that were broadcasted during the period of lockdown in Spain were the basis of the analysis. The sample of 71 spots was the total number of adverts that specifically fit in with the criteria of subjects, ideas, and messages related to COVID-19 within brand advertising during the lockdown period. On the one hand, a content analysis of the advertisements was carried out, and, on the other hand, with a quantitative approach, significant statistics were collected. Both allow for a holistic view and are significantly different with respect to previous studies in this field. While the content analysis of advertising delves into roles, stereotypes, and gender relations, the relationships of visual images, discourse, and the creative axis were explored in order to identify the common patterns among brand owners during lockdown.

The messages, both the general and focused frames in each spot, and even the music and voice used in the ads were used to assess the gender focus of the brand owners during the outbreak.

The analysis sheet is based on the work of several authors, highlighting the theoretical framework that is related to gender dimensions in advertising [3,4,16,22,30,31]. The variables are shown, in detail, in Table 1.

Table 1. Content sheet of the analysis.

Variables	Categories and Values
Media and communications	YouTube
Duration of the advertisement	Seconds
Brand	Product brand
Sector of activity	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Food 2. Beverages 3. Distribution 4. Energy and recycling 5. Automobiles 6. Telephony 7. Hygiene and beauty 8. Banking and finance 9. Insurance and security 10. Tourism destination or territory brand 11. Media, entertainment, and gambling 12. Appliances 13. Construction and materials 14. Transportation

Table 1. Cont.

Variables	Categories and Values
Type of message	1. Corporate and institutional or image 2. Product 3. Hybrid
Advertising slogan	The slogan or claim is registered
Full text of the announcement	The complete text is recorded
Tone	Very positive Positive Realistic Negative Very negative
Emotional burden	Very touching Emotional Unemotional More emotional Not emotional
Voiceover	Text overprinting Woman Man Girl or boy Older person
Scenarios	Home Outdoor Business Limbo Working at home Places of leisure Combination Others
Characters	Young woman Young Young couple Youth and pets Female <40 Couple <40 Elderly person Girl Boy Nuclear family Family with grandparents Friends Workers No character of the people Infographics/animations Neighborhood
Main character	Woman Man Both
Attending characters	Women Men Both

Table 1. Cont.

Variables	Categories and Values
Professions	Health professionals Scientists and researchers Security forces Cashiers, waiters, and stackers Technologists, engineers, and entrepreneurs Industrial and factory workers Urban cleaning services Couriers/truckers/logistic operators/suppliers Vendors/traders Delivery drivers Agricultural or fishing workers Artists and athletes Journalists, cameramen, etc. Others Teleworker
Female stereotype	Housewife Mother and caregiver Symbol of beauty Wife and partner Employee and housewife Dependent and professional Independent and professional Technologically capable woman Young and modern woman Brand image Friend Mother and educator
The role of women	Domestic work Professional work Personal life
Role of men	Domestic work Professional work Personal life
Co-responsibility	Yes/No
Gender relations	Peer Non-peer

There were three types of variables: ordinal variables, such as advertising duration; five-point Likert scale variables for tone and emotional charge; and, finally, nominal variables for gender-related issues.

Five researchers were involved in this study and all of them reviewed the code in order to optimize the qualitative analysis and to minimize research bias. Two additional mechanisms were applied to ensure reliability. At the end of the first coding phase, a random choice of ads was made, in two steps, and distributed among the researchers to recheck the assigned values and categories [54]. In addition, cases that raised doubts or mismatches between them were subject to a random crossover entry.

2.2. Sample

All the advertising spots were broadcasted during the period of lockdown in Spain, and serve as the basis of the analysis. In total, there were 71 audiovisual ads of brand owners and 1350 frames. It should be noted that most of the campaigns were also broadcasted on other digital platforms, such as—in particular—YouTube. The two reasons that support the specific approach are as follows: (1) They are all commercial communications developed in an unprecedented moment for both society and brand owners; and (2) The lockdown

posed a special social challenge in a domestic environment; precisely the place that can best identify certain gender imbalances. Government communication was excluded unless there was a promotion for tourist destinations.

In the first phase of the study, all the spots were compiled and then grouped by sector in order to ensure that all these sectors were represented. The methodological choice of taking an inventory of the total number of spots helps to check the similarities and differences between them on a case-by-case basis and provides more accurate results [55].

2.3. Data Collection

Data collection took place over 8 weeks, which is precisely the duration of the period of the strictest lockdown in Spain, and was from 14 March to 4 May 2020. From the end of that period, the process of de-escalation of the outbreak began, which was called the new normal. Furthermore, this period preceded the peaks of the crisis, which are excluded from this study as they will be considered in the future. The focus on advertising during lockdown, as was explained previously, results from the possible link between “staying at home” as a compulsory requirement with creativity and advertising imagery.

2.4. Validity and Reliability

In terms of validity and reliability, it is important to highlight the soundness of a methodological design that includes all the advertisements that were aired in the previously specified period. This study only analyzes accepted results that show common patterns as reliable evidence on the communication strategies that were utilized through a gendered approach. Therefore, the robustness and explanatory power are assured.

3. Results

3.1. Gender Representation in Advertising during the COVID-19 Lockdown

To address this issue, it is useful to pay attention to the characters that are most represented in audiovisual advertisements, as well as to the environment and places because they can reflect lifestyle and social norms, even when the unprecedented global measure of staying at home (due to the lockdown) could characterize the period of analysis.

Each and every one of the characters that appeared in the spots were identified by gender and age. During lockdown, the brand owners launched their messages with almost no segmentation by socio-demographic issues, given that almost all the advertising that was broadcasted was corporate and non-commercial, which motivates a wider representation of people by gender, age, lifestyle, income level, etc. (Figure 1).

In the case of the gender, it was necessary to include the representation of people caring for children and the elderly (Figure 2). Furthermore, 5.8% of all the frames presented a woman between 40 and 64 years of age with one or more children, as opposed to 3.2% of advertisements showing men of the same age. It is significant that it is only in this age range that women or men with children are shown. At no time are a woman and a man shown at the same time caring for an elderly person. It seems that advertisers leave this aspect to the family nucleus. In this case, mother, father, and children are accompanied by the grandparents, which serves as the nuclear family, with the two grandparents being the most representative. Although there are percentage differences in the representation by gender in the care of children and the elderly, the gap between the two is reduced. Finally, it should be noted that no spot showed a family unit that was formed of same-sex couples with children.

Figure 3 shows the profiles of the characters by the sector that have advertised the most brands. In all of them, women were either represented as much as men or represented more than men. Women with children were represented in the domains of distribution; telephony; banking and finance; and insurance and security; meanwhile, men were only represented in banking and finance, and insurance and security. Telephony was the sector that showed the greatest range of characters.

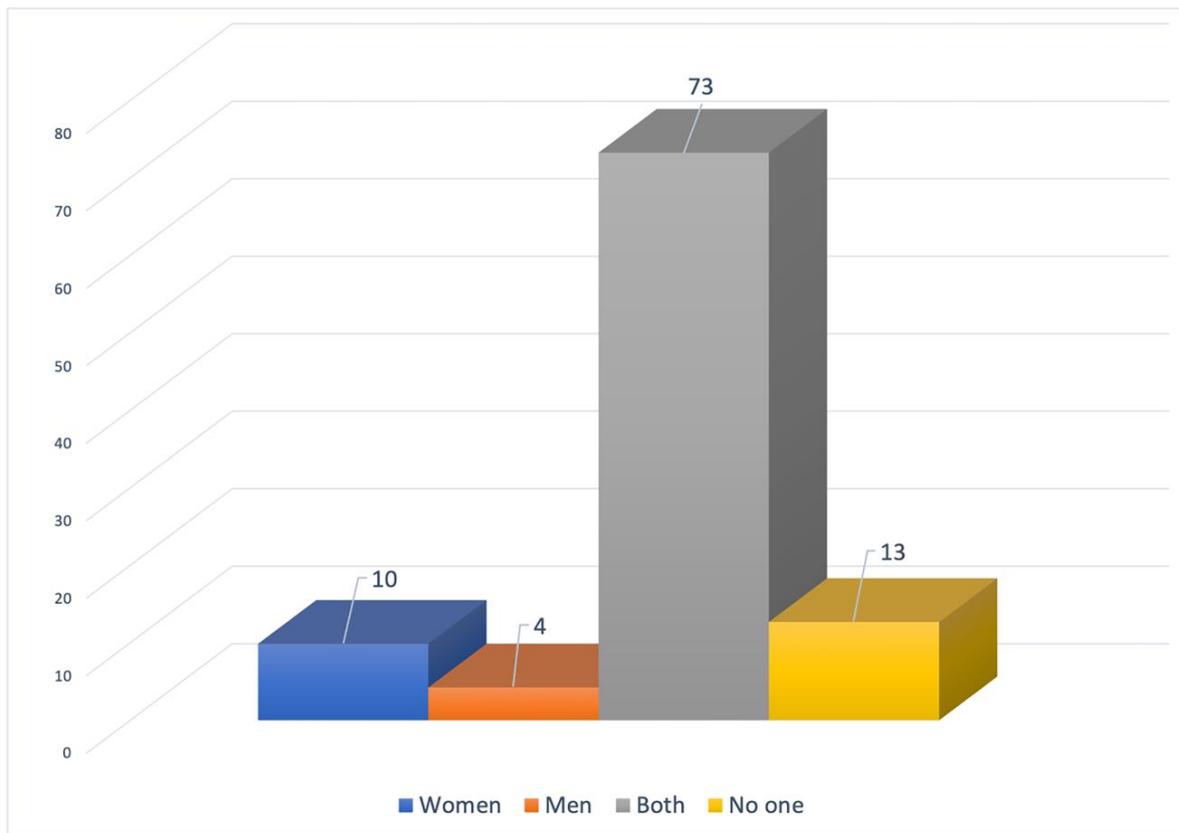


Figure 1. Characters by gender.

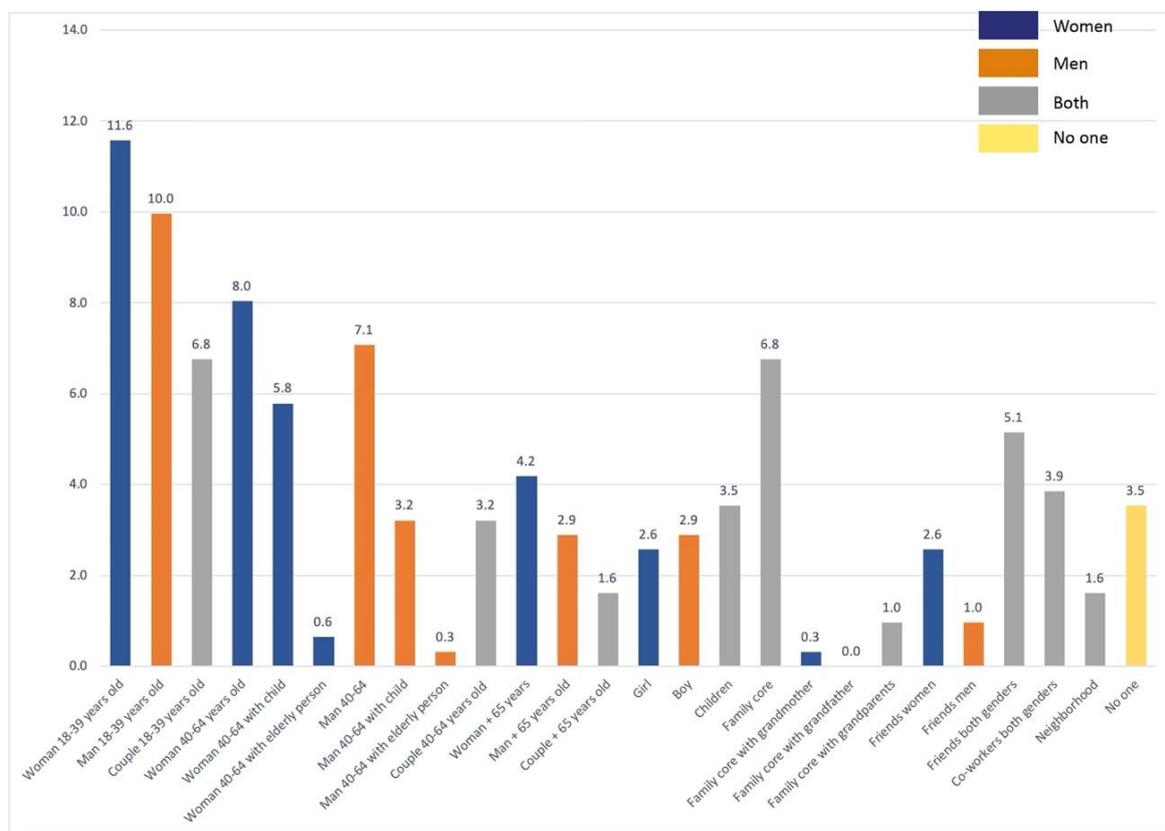


Figure 2. Characters divided by gender.

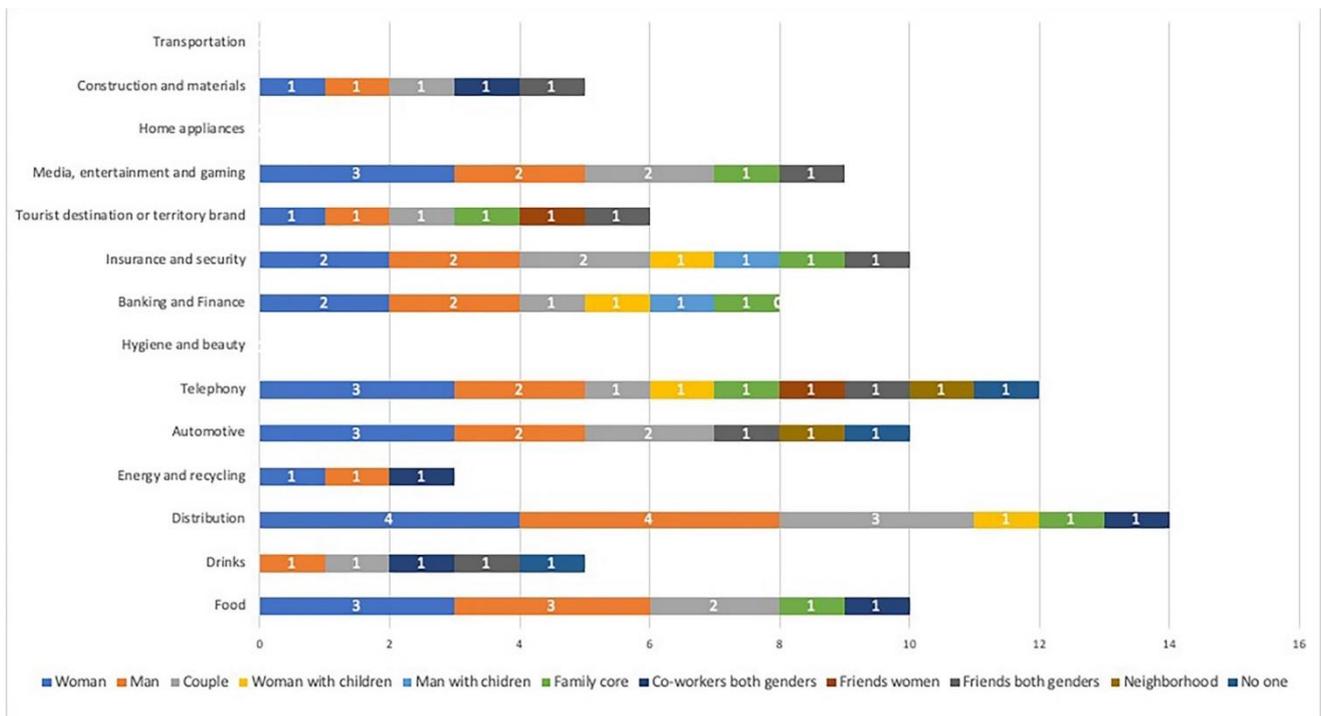


Figure 3. Profiles most represented by activity sectors (flat).

Secondly, the audiovisual advertising produced during this period reflects the daily life of the population in their relevant locations. The obligation to stay at home, the nostalgia of the outside, pre-pandemic leisure, and free time influenced the visual element in terms of location. Thus, 13.3% of the frames showed activities within the home, and 11.2% showed nature, the beach, mountains, and heritage with a clear commitment to resilience; these are clear messages regarding the desire to return to these locations. In addition, 10.8% showed the world from a window, which, at that moment, was the perspective through which we viewed the world. In them, many people are seen looking out of their windows with the only horizon that they allow us to see, but looking as if they desire to return to daily life. Historical images of empty streets were showing in 10.4% of the frames. Being in the living room with family and children, and teleworking and sharing among all those who were present was showed in 8.4% of the frames. The visual representation of people on their balconies applauding health or essential workers was shown in 7.2% of the frames. Hospital and bar ads, being so different in concept, accounted for 5.2% of the frames. The first of all of these was healthcare workers requesting citizens stay at home to avoid going to the hospital. The frames highlight the great work of health workers, but also the danger of death from the disease. In the second case, the frames highlight the hope of returning to bars and being able to share moments with family and friends.

If we conduct a combined analysis of all the scenarios representing those staying at home in different places (see Figure 4) we can list the following locations: the living room, bathroom, bedroom, balcony, and terrace. The percentage of these scenarios reaches 50.3% of the frames. This reflects the importance given by the brand owners to empathize with the public with the reality they were experiencing due to the restrictions of the lockdown. In this case, a positive correlation of 0.005 was identified between the frames showing the home and the emotional charge. However, it has not been possible to determine whether the emotional burden was higher in women or men.

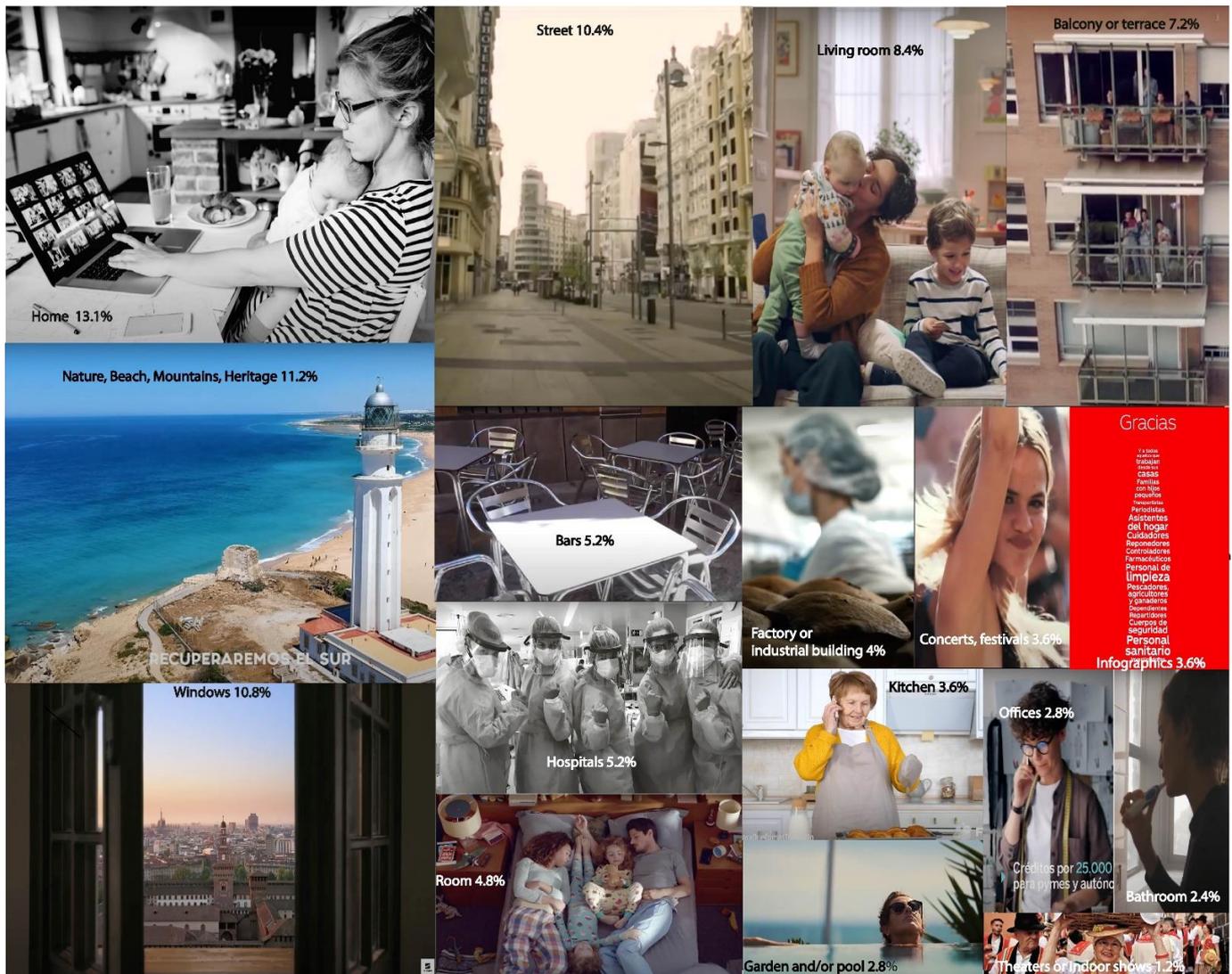


Figure 4. Places.

3.2. Stereotypes, Roles, and Gender Relations Portrayed

Figure 5 shows that women share their life at home and are teleworking; they are also shown caring for children and their elders. There are also multiple frames of their family life, where they engage in group activities, such as games.

It is notable that the image of the beauty symbol, as a representation of women, has been discarded (0%). The image that appears most often is independent and professional women, followed by young and modern women with 19%. Therefore, both items account for 42% of the frames, thereby representing an independent woman of the 21st century with her own style. Similarly, if the technological women variable is taken into account with 6%, this total instead amounts to 48% of the frames with a purely professional and innovative character. However, a woman is still a mother and caregiver in 18% of the frames. As mentioned above, the image that brand owners have of a woman who cares for her children and the elderly is once again confirmed. If we add to this figure the image of the mother and teacher of children with 3%, we can identify the image of the mother with educational and caring tasks for her children with 21%. Another variable to highlight is the friend variable, with 7%, where solidarity and friendship are established.

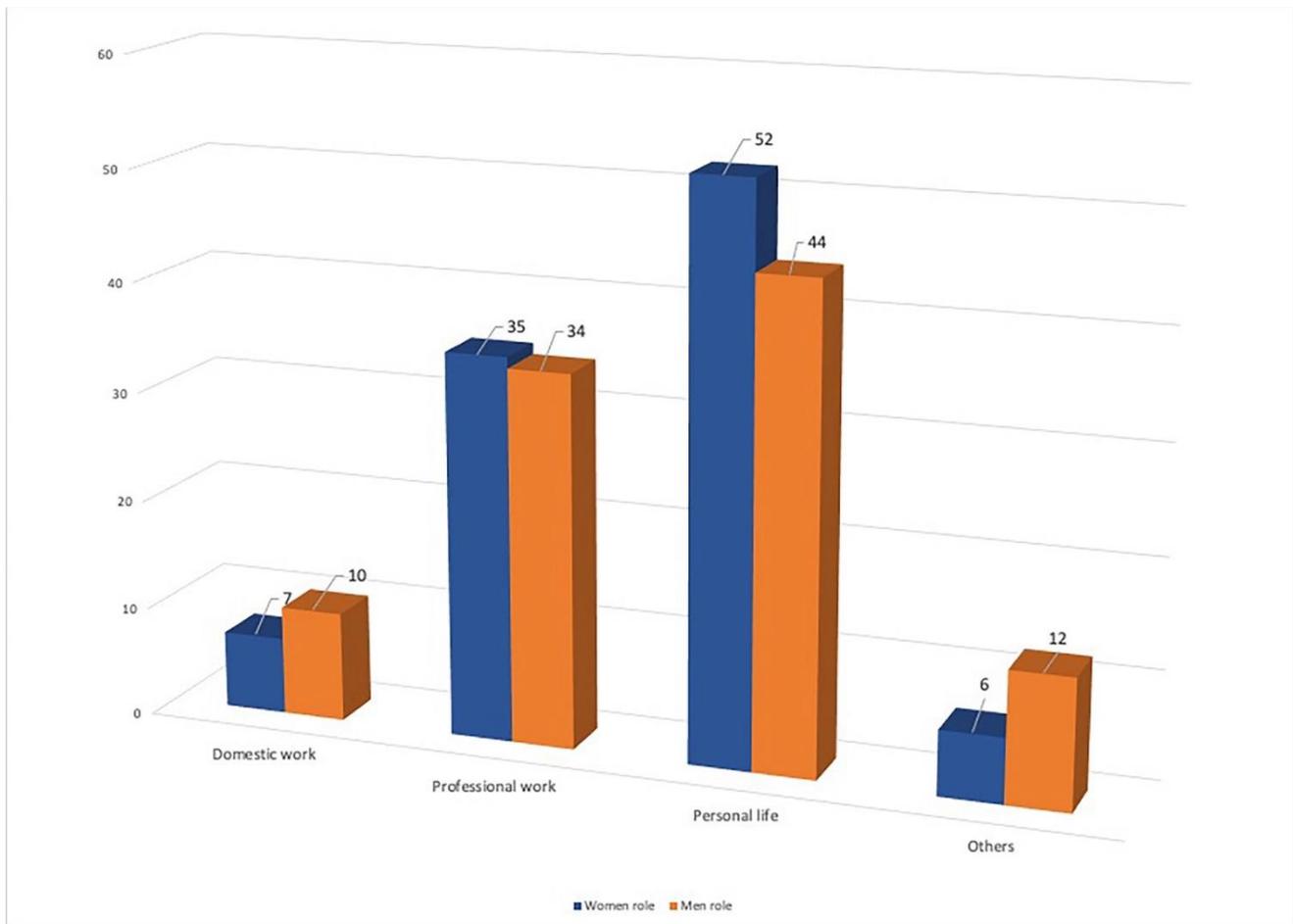


Figure 5. Roles.

Visual representation, such as an employee and housewife; housewife or dependent; and professional remain marginal with 1%, 3%, or 3%, respectively (Figure 6). In any case, the most recurrent domestic task in advertising was found to be cooking, and this was mostly carried out by men or older women. However, it is worth noting that there are hardly any frames of cleaning in the home, ironing, etc.

The analysis of professions is another identifying aspect of gender representation (Figure 7). There are more women represented as teleworkers, scientists, researchers, and in professions related to healthcare than men, at 10% compared to 5% for men, as well as 9% compared to 5% and 3% when compared to 1% of men, respectively. In short, with respect to the professions in the audiovisual advertising designed by the brand owners, women outnumber men in the professions with the greatest representation in the advertising broadcast.

In closing, of the three issues related in RQ2, the focus is on gender relations. At this point we have established a typology with two possible relationships: parity or dominant [4]. After the study, it was detected that 84.5% of the analyzed frames show a parity relationship where there is equality between women and men. It should be noted that more than 60% of the frames represent a contextually equal relationship between genders, which is to say that this was deduced from the frames without the need to resort to visual, sound, or verbal resources that make the parity explicit. In 22.5% of the frames, both visual elements and words were used to offer a vision of balance between both genders, explicitly stating that there is an agreement between the parties. Only in 1.4% of the frames was there a dominant relationship represented, but this was not performed in an obvious way and was manifested in the structure of the message. However, this imbalance between

the genders was not only residual, but it was represented with a dominant and a submissive figure, or with a submissive relationship. The remaining percentage (14.1%) were frames without people.

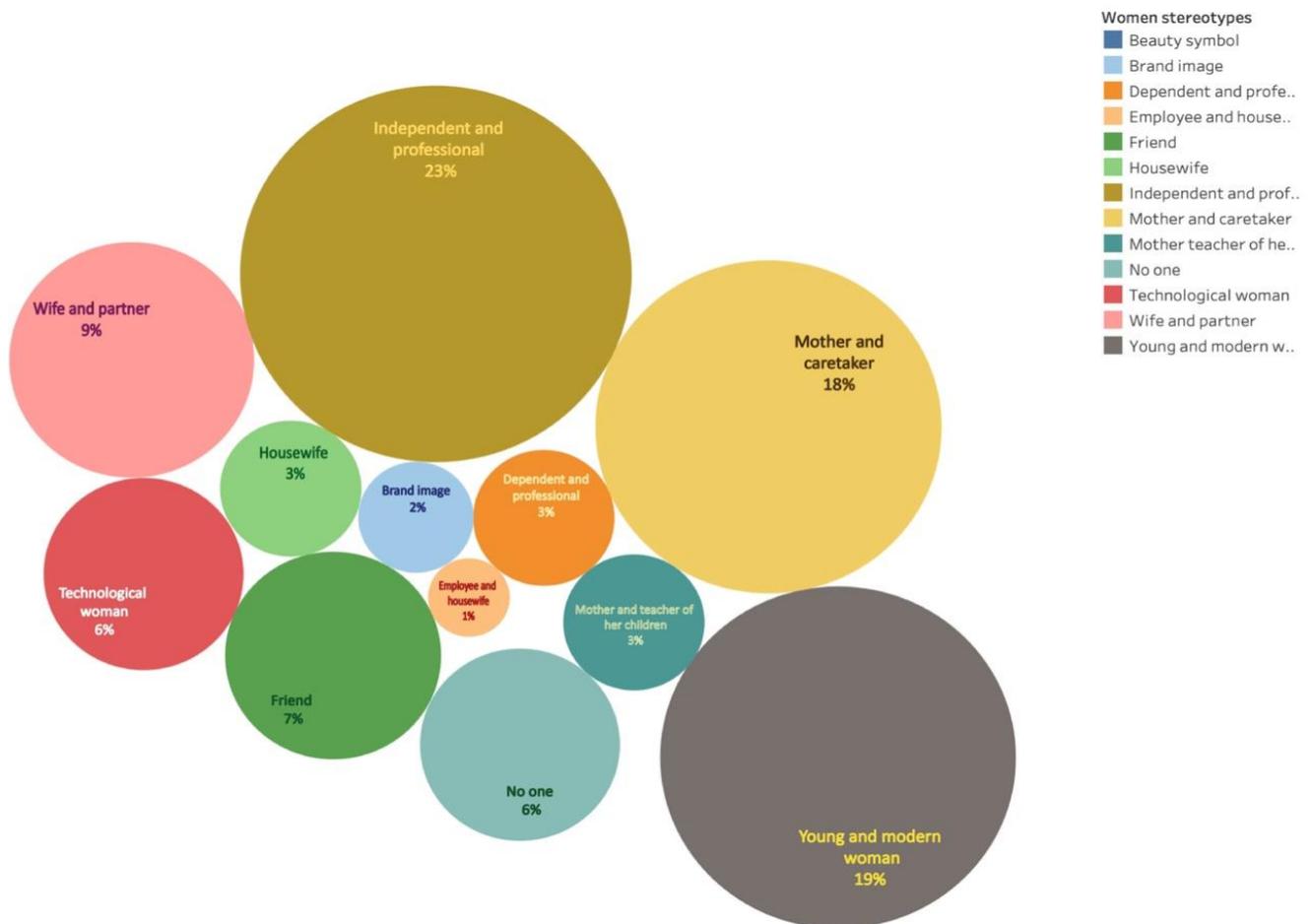


Figure 6. Female stereotypes.

3.3. Analysis of Co-Responsibility in the Domestic Environment as a Creative Resource in Images and Discourse

The analysis shows that in 68% of the images the characters show behaviors of co-responsibility. This reinforces what was observed in the previous section on stereotypical roles and professions, where the classic role of the woman as a housewife or at the service of her husband was modified with a co-responsibility between the two. However, it should be noted that in most of the advertisements the brand owners idealize the people, who presented as being of a medium-high-to-high social level and are almost always happy. At no time do the ads depict a family or people with economic problems or social conflicts. The only case people with illnesses are shown is when they are suffering from COVID-19, and this was to emphasize the importance of staying at home.

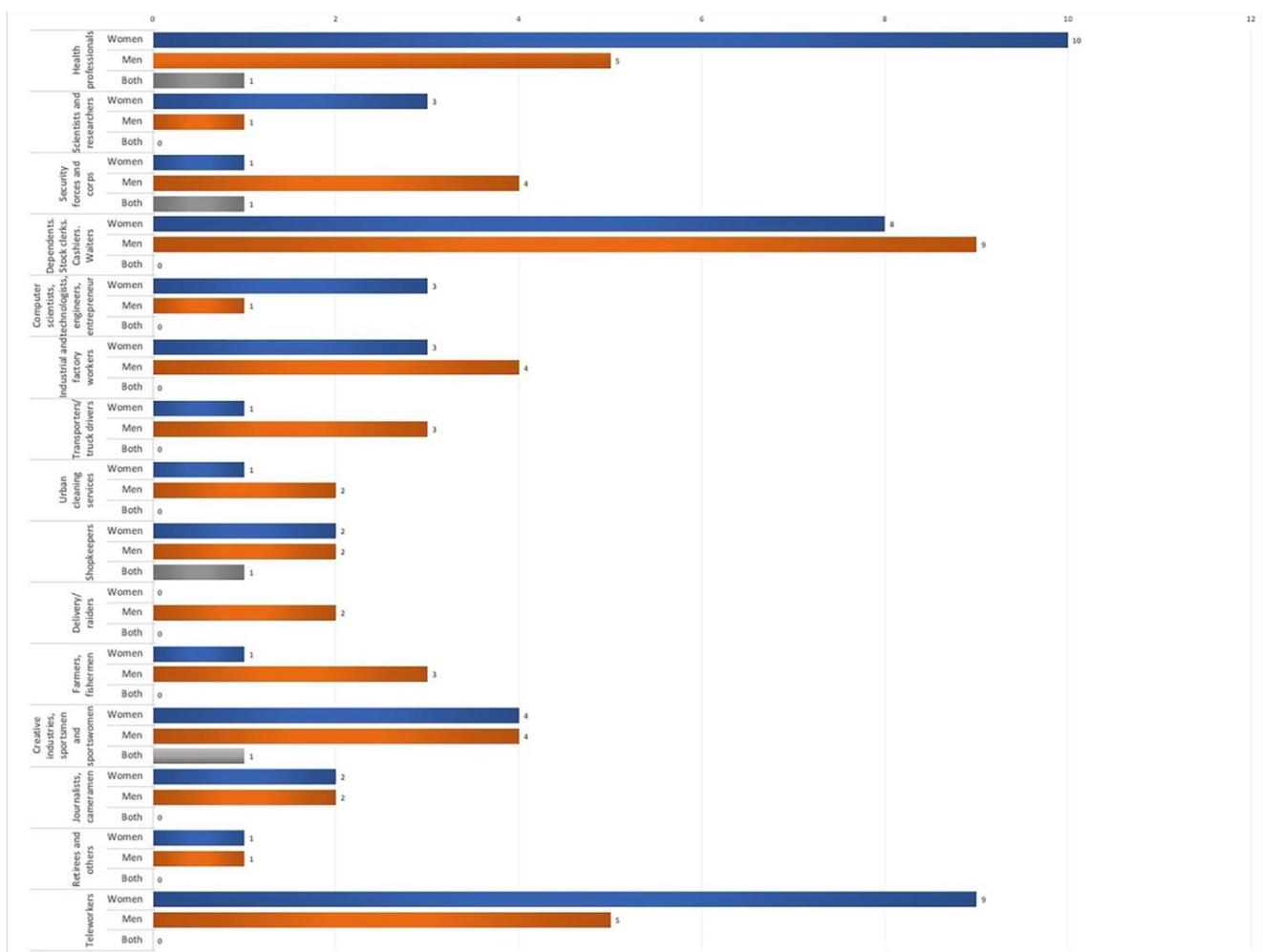


Figure 7. Professions by sector.

4. Discussion

In view of the results, it is possible to answer RQ1 by stating that the restriction requiring people to stay at home influenced the representation of women in advertising. There were common creative resources and coding that showed a fairly balanced treatment between genders. In fact, this study corroborates that in the advertising imagery during lockdown, women were represented as multifaceted, independent, and hardworking, and that men also perform domestic work and childcare. Moreover, it should be noted that there is a wide range of characters that try to portray all sections of the population. In a way, this reflects that the effects of the pandemic and the consequences of lockdown exclude no one and that all segments of the population, regardless of gender or age, were affected.

Nevertheless, this may be the result of conditioning due to the predominance of corporate advertising as opposed to commercial advertising during this period, as well as to the nature of the brands that were advertised and whose target audience, in general, included both men and women.

In previous research, such as in the work of Kates and Shaw-Garlock [31] or Zotos and Tschila [16], there is a relationship between the representation of men and women and the associated uses of the advertised product. The sectors where these visual differences are most evident, such as in fashion or perfumes, have appeared little or not at all in lockdown advertising. Thus, this issue becomes one of the main contributions of this work.

In addition, the advertisements: (1) Have shown a balance between male and female relationships; (2) Represented women in their most professional version. In fact, it is worth highlighting that over-representation did occur in visual imagery with respect to

men in all professions, even in those in which men statistically predominate [38]. This, in relation to professions, contrasts the repetition of the majority of the activity patterns that manifest according to gender and are represented in advertising—which were identified by studies such as McArthur and Resko [11], or in other more recent studies, such as Begeny et al. [22]; (3) Work–life balance in the home was found to be especially significant in advertising, given the frames that depicted the home because of the imperative to stay there and because of the choice of the brand owners to represent the situation that was being experienced by society. These three issues allow us to answer RQ2 and RQ3. Daily life is mainly focused on staying at home due to the lockdown, and advertising subverts gender roles and stereotypes that were more rigid in the pre-crisis audiovisual spots, as Montes [21] concludes in his research. It should be specifically emphasized that gender relations were also balanced in advertising during the analysis period and that there was a respectful and progressive treatment of this topic. Furthermore, co-responsibility became a common theme in spots. It could be understood as a perfect home framework during this unprecedented situation for Spanish society and for brand owners who resorted to more balanced tasks and responsibilities in the home environment.

However, it is also true that, again, studies on the social reality of the distribution of domestic and family burdens, as well as of work–life balance during the lockdown reflect a greater burden on women [51,56]—especially in relation to childcare [40]; (4) With respect to resources, the scenarios represented had no directly attributable relationship to gender. This is notable, given that, in general, the distribution of characters and the centrality of men and women was very balanced. In this sense, there is a difference compared with previous studies that analyze many ads, evidencing that the probability of appearance of certain scenarios is related to the target audience of the brand or product [7,14–16,31,36]. Even beyond advertising, there are certain similarities with [9], that states that the media contributes to the reproduction of gendered norms. In any case, it was necessary to insist that the choice of the brand owners during the lockdown was to opt for a more corporate commercial communication, which could explain this difference with respect to the previous literature.

In fact, the representation of men in the home assuming roles that are traditionally represented by women is significant, which also supports studies such as that of Fowler and Thomas [23], who conclude that advertising echoes the new realities and roles in the family and social sphere [7,12,16,24]. Moreover, the alignment with these socially challenging gender roles from advertising during lockdown is consistent with the commitment and contribution to problems through these companies' corporate social responsibility, as Schaefer et al. [48] note. Likewise, He and Harris [43], as well as Xifra [46], reinforce this topic in the field of advertising, going so far as to even undergo profound changes in advertising imagery and its creative resources [2]. Furthermore, the social role that brands adopt in a special situation such as the pandemic, as Olivares-Delgado et al. [1] conclude, is highlighted by the evidence found in this research work.

Likewise, in agreement with Rumbo [29], or Zotos and Tschila [16], advertising tends to represent aspects of everyday life but may exaggerate them or mark them in favor of significant changes over what is traditionally accepted. In the analysis, both women and men were mostly shown as active, dynamic people with their dual status as professionals and mothers/fathers. However, certain biases still persist, such as women exclusively being represented as helping their children with homework, while men engage in fun activities with their children. Additionally, it was worth mentioning that the representation of teleworking, a scenario that is shared by men and women, demonstrated a noteworthy nuance. Women appear teleworking in the presence of a minor in more frames, while men appear developing their professional activities without the interference of a child.

This study, as it was focused on lockdown advertising, agrees with recent studies that analyze a wide sample of advertising. In addition, this study even includes an international comparison on the coexistence of gender representation and stereotypes, as well as of more traditional and more up-to-date and progressive representations in current

advertising [12,13,15]. Therefore, traditional social standards for jobs, household chores, childcare, and even beauty standards or expectations are disaggregated/disassociated with one gender or another and continue to be represented by several brands. By contrast, the number of brands that challenge archetypal gender images and reduce the interminable opposition of the male and female toward effective gender equality is increasing. It is precisely in this creative axis that practically all the advertisements released during lockdown are positioned. It remains to be seen if the main reason is the high representation of the domestic sphere in advertising or in the greater sensitivity of brands in times of crisis. These questions are especially necessary because there are certain authors, such as Matthes et al. [17] or Montes [21], who insist on negative female stereotypes and the portrayal of women in traditional social roles, jobs, etc., as prevailing in advertising. It should be highlighted that stereotypes in advertising can be found around the world. Furthermore, there is not a positive relationship between gender stereotypes among those countries with better gender equality indices [17]. Therefore, a new line of discussion is opened and, consequently, further analysis of a crisis such as COVID-19 enhances the social commitment with these gender challenges in the field of advertising in order to contrast such differences in the conclusions.

There is a double possibility that advertising reflects social reality (i.e., the mirror theory introduced by Baudrillard [25]), and is also widely contrasted in the literature [6,12,17,27,28]. Meanwhile, its positive impact on social changes and, specifically, on gender equality [7,13,30] corresponds to what was extracted in this work. Of particular weight is the idea of femvertising, which was introduced by Bahadur [34] and was analyzed by Åkestam et al. [35] or Tschla [24]. This concept has helped lead the debate on the active role of advertising in the empowerment of women [32,33].

This paper offers important insights regarding the capacity of brand owners as intermediaries or facilitators of social advances, as well as, in this case, in terms of gender through their creations and advertising discourses, thereby giving special coverage to the phenomenon of femvertising and to the contribution to female empowerment. Additionally, this work extends the line initiated in the literature on the treatment of gender in advertising, thus contrasting the conclusions of numerous works that reiterate the persistence of stereotypes [8,16,21,22,36] in favor of the adoption of a dynamic and responsible role that allows the evolution toward a more balanced and fair society.

Finally, while it is true that this study contrasts this strategic positioning of advertising in such an atypical moment at a global level, given the health crisis, the analysis does not allow us to answer whether this type of discourse is the result of a greater representation of corporate spots as opposed to their usual commercial purpose. Another possible explanation could be the current majority representation of women in the advertising profession in Spain, who, due to their empathy, promote this type of discourse and creative imagery, or—as Champlin et al. [36] advises—it could be that it is a formula to better connect with the public through more awareness.

4.1. Limitations and Future Lines of Research

This analysis allowed us to identify the treatment of gender by the brand owners from a holistic perspective. However, the use of the qualitative component does not allow us to determine whether the correlations and relationships identified between the variables are generalizable without repeating this with a larger sample. The inclusion of audiovisual spots from other countries, as well as from spots from the post-lockdown stage is suggested for future studies. This is important as contrasting the commercial or corporate approach of the ads could explain this greater gender balance, as well as help provide a more careful perspective regarding roles, stereotypes, etc. Consequently, the context of the analysis within the pandemic requires an extending of this research, through which the results will be generalized using a longitudinal study.

4.2. Practical Implications

Brand owners should be aware of their strategic capacity to represent and influence society's perception on different issues through advertising, specifically with respect to roles, stereotypes, empowerment, and co-responsibility linked to women. Furthermore, they should act accordingly by opting for visual, oral, and written creative axes that introduce this perspective, as well as ones that favor and support advances in equality.

In addition to assuming that this line of action can connect positively with sensitive targets that are involved in the reality of gender equity, it also reinforces the double dimension of advertising, thereby defending that its commercial purposes do not have to contradict its social function in order to be exercised. Companies must internalize this mission and take advantage of the opportunity it offers them by highlighting and positioning themselves as energizers of change.

5. Conclusions

This work comprises research on gender and advertising during lockdown, which was a situation that has inevitably negatively affected our reality; we focused the analysis on the most socially drastic moment of the crisis—the lockdown. In this sense, it is a pioneering study, not because of the focus, but because of the special context of the selected analysis, given that it has addressed audiovisual advertising in a general way.

It is concluded that audiovisual advertising in Spain during the lockdown has tried to reflect, raise awareness, and accelerate the pace of the challenges in terms of the equality that is being faced by today's society. The analysis of advertising has portrayed more balance between male and female relationships and has depicted women in their most professional, independent, and modern representations. These results confirm the trend of change in gender roles. It can be affirmed that traditional gender stereotypes are blurred, and that a greater balance and equality is shown in all areas and spheres of the lives of women and men. This was specifically noted in the performance of personal roles, such as being partners or being in professional roles. The representation of the relationship between the genders in lockdown advertising was found to be one of conciliation and co-responsibility, even normalizing and idealizing the advances towards equality between men and women, thus assuming a work of sensitivity and support for social changes. Femvertising was especially reflected in the audiovisual advertising that was analyzed. Thus, the contribution is noting how the brand owners have assumed their social function by advocating for a more balanced society, which is based on imagery and discourse that are especially sensitive from a gender perspective. This paper offers important insights regarding the capacity of brand owners as intermediaries or facilitators of social advances. Furthermore, in this case, insights are provided in terms of gender through their creations and advertising discourses, thus giving special coverage to the phenomenon of femvertising and to the contribution of female empowerment. Additionally, this work extends the line initiated in the literature on the treatment of gender in advertising in favor of the adoption of a more dynamic and responsible role that allows the evolution toward a more balanced and fair society.

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